Interpretive Conventions

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It has been said of Boehme that his books are like a picnic to which the author brings the words and the reader the meaning. The remark may have been intended as a sneer at Boehme, but it is an exact description of c Works of literary art without exception.

—Northrop Frye, Fearsome Symmetry

Writing is not the communication of a message which starts from the author and proceeds to the reader; it is specifically the voice of reading itself: in the text, only the reader speaks.

—Roland Barthes, """"S/Z"

Unlike psychological reader-response theories, social models of reading do provide both an intersubjective base and an account of literary communication. I use "social" here in the narrow sense of "tied to conditions specified by a society." Social accounts of reading employ models based on intersubjective categories and strategies shared by members of a group. Of course, social reading models differ radically from psychological models in that the former build their explanations on reading communities rather than individual readers. In the previous chapter, I showed how Fish's "sociological" account correlated with Holland's and Bleich's psychological models, and the present chapter will stress the social or intersubjective aspects of Wolfgang Iser's and Jonathan Culler's reader-oriented theories.

It is perhaps misleading to call these reading theories “sociological,” primarily because they each ignore elements traditionally included in sociological explanations. Indeed, the social reading models of Fish, Iser, and Culler have been specifically criticized for neglecting economic and political factors in their accounts. Such critiques make a valid point, for reading certainly does not take place in a social vacuum independent of economic and political forces. For example, economic factors determine the availability of books and the material circumstances in which they are read; political structures condition motives for and effects of reading; and larger social forces (class, gender, and so on) influence audience interest and literary taste. A complete sociological model of reading would have to take all these factors into account. However, such an observation does not negate the value of the more limited progress begun by Fish, Iser, and Culler. Their social or intersubjective models describe the reading process whose exact details are relatively unaffected by broader economic and political conditions once the process is in motion. That is, the institutional conventions governing reading may be greatly determined by economic, political, and larger social structures; but once the conventions are in place, these extratextual forces do not affect the specific dynamics of interpretation in reading. Therefore, Fish, Iser, and Culler can safely focus on the intersubjective categories and shared conventions of reading literature while bracketing more general sociological considerations. In just this way, their socially oriented theories provide the intersubjective foundation and communication model required by American literary study but...
For instance, Jonathan Culler's structuralist poetics convincingly explains the communication between author and reader (and agreement among readers) by positing a shared system of reading conventions. He writes that to "intend a meaning is to postulate reactions of an imagined reader who has assimilated the relevant conventions." In his structuralist approach, inter-subjectivity depends on a shared recognition of intertextuality.

"A text can be a poem only because certain possibilities exist within the tradition; it is written in relation to other poems. A sentence of English can have meaning only by virtue of its relations to other sentences within the conventions of the language. The communicative intention presupposes listeners who know the language. And similarly, a poem presupposes conventions of reading which the author may work against, which he can transform, but which are the conditions of possibility of his discourse." The author makes use of these conventions in his writing and his intended readers use them to understand his text.

Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological theory also presents a communication model of reading. For Iser, "a text must create intersubjectively verifiable instructions for meaning-production." His reading model emphasizes not a message extracted from a text, but a meaning assembled and experienced by a reader. The strategies he uses suggest the reader's search for the intention underlying the author's selection and combinations of conventions, and the "communicatory function" of literature ensures "that the reaction of text to world will trigger a matching response in the reader." A close examination of Iser's theory will show exactly how this communicative process works.

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not available in the psychological accounts of Bleich and Hollander.


2. Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 25, 61, 99. All page citations in the text of the following section refer to this book. In ch. 3 of his study, Iser employs the convention-based model of communication developed in the speech act theory of J. L. Austin and John Searle. However, his adaptation of this social model is open to criticism (Ch. 6, pp. 157-58) and adds little to his account of reading.
Phenomenological Criticism

Phenomenology forms the philosophical center of the reader-response schema in Chapter 1. Iser's phenomenological criticism emphasizes the epistemological assumption of all reader-oriented approaches: the object of knowledge can never be separated from the knower; the perceived object can never be separated from perception by a perceiver. For literary criticism, this means that discussion of the literary work must focus on the reader's response to that work. Bleich calls this response "subjective recreation," while Holland talks of a "transaction" and Iser refers to the "interaction of text and reader." Fish's affective stylistics is "a method of analysis which takes the reader, as an actively mediating presence, fully into account." 

Though sharing a phenomenological assumption, reader-response critics diverge in following out its consequences. As we have seen, this divergence is particularly clear in the formulation of the text's status within their theories. Bleich makes everything subjective and therefore "solves" the problem of an intersubjective text by denying its existence as a problem. Fish's latest solution is that interpretive strategies constitute the text. Holland tends to agree with Fish, substituting individual identity themes for interpretive communities as the source of interpretive strategies, but in trying to answer the question that sou
troubles Fish (what are interpretations interpretations?); Holl-
land inconsistently assumes some notion of a fixed text (raw materials, constraints, or elements of a text) that precludes on
response but goes further than Holland; he explicitly posits a
prevailing text which interacts with the reader and in that in-
teraction restricts the reader's interpretations. Of the reader-
response approaches considered in this book, Iser's theory is
the closest to the traditional objective position that most reader-
centered criticism denies, and his shared assumptions with that
position form the basis for his potential persuasiveness within
American critical theory.

Though Iser does assume a stable text of some kind, his
theories emphasize the creative role of the reader: "a text can
only come to life when it is read, and if it is no be examined, it
must therefore be studied through the eyes of the reader." Re-
ading involves a hermeneutic process: "meanings in literary
texts are mainly generated in the act of reading; they are the
product of a rather difficult interaction between text and reader
and not qualities hidden in the text." In The Act of Reading
(1978) he presents his fullest account of this difficult interac-
tion. In The Act of Reading, a theoretical companion to The Implied
Reader (1974), offers contemporary American criticism a de-
tailed model of aesthetic response by describing the reading
process and the effects of that process. This account of reading
begins with a functionalist model of the literary text, which
focuses on two interrelated areas, the intersection between text
and social reality and the interaction between text and reader.

Iser argues that "literature supplies those possibilities which
have been excluded by the prevalent thought system" of the
work's historical period (p. 75). Literature accomplishes this,
however, not by formulating these possibilities in the text but by
calling the reader to formulate them for himself. According to
her, the author extracts social and historical norms (and refer-
ences to past literature) from their original contexts and places
them together to form the "repertoire of the text" (p. 6). In 4

4 Iser, "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction," in As-
pects of Narrative, ed. J. Hillis Miller (New York: Columbia University Press,
novel, these "depragmatized" norms are distributed among various textual "perspectives"—the narrator, the characters, the plot, and the fictitious reader—and the system of perspectives they form outlines the author’s view without stating it and provides the potential structure for the reader to actualize. The connections among the various perspectives emerge during the reading process, "in the course of which the reader's role is to occupy shifting vantage points that are geared to a prestructured activity and to fit the diverse perspectives into a gradually evolving pattern" that forms the "configurative meaning" of the text.

By presenting familiar norms in unfamiliar arrangements, the literary text points up the deficiencies of those norms and manipulates the reader into formulating a reaction to those deficiencies. For instance, Fielding presents Allworthy as a representative of perfect Christian benevolence, but then he juxtaposes the Allworthy perspective to Blifil, whom the reader comes to see as the embodiment of hypocritical piety. But why does Allworthy trust Blifil? The reader soon draws the conclusion that Allworthy is naive and impractical in that his "perfection is simply incapable of conceiving a mere pretense of idealism." Fielding has forced the reader to this conclusion though he has not stated it in the text itself. The reader combines the various perspectives—Allworthy, Blifil, and the plot—into a "consistent gestalt" which resolves the tensions that resulted from the juxtaposition of the perspectives. But, again, "this gestalt is not explicit in the text—it emerges from a projection of the reader, which is guided to so far as it arises out of the identification of the connections between the signs" (p. 121).

In Iser’s model of reading, interpretation becomes the reader's production of this gestalt or configurative meaning. Such consistency-building during the reading process can be further analyzed in terms of holistic and sequential interpretive acts performed by the reader. Holland emphasizes holistic interpretation in his model of reading: a reader interprets the text...
In finding a coherent and satisfying unity among its elements, similarly, Iser's model describes how the reader groups "together all the different aspects of a text to form the consistency that the reader will always be in search of." As with Holland's "unity," Iser's "consistency" is created by individual readers: "This 'gestalt' must inevitably be colored by our own characteristic selection process. For it is not given by the text itself; it arises from the meeting between the written text and the individual mind of the reader with its own particular history of experience, its own consciousness, its own outlook." However, The Act of Reading does not emphasize the individuality of response, its subjectivity; rather it focuses instead on the intersubjective nature of the time-flow of reading and the textual perspectives that guide the consistency-building and put restrictions on the range of configurative meanings.

Closely related to holistic consistency are sequential connections. Such sequential interpretations must precede or accompany holistic interpretations. "In every text there is a potential time-sequence which the reader must inevitably realize, as it is impossible to absorb even a short text in a single moment." Reading, then, is a temporal process of anticipation and retrospection. Iser describes the content of that process: "We look forward, we look back, we decide, we change our decisions, we form expectations, we are shocked by their nonfulfillment, we question, we muse, we accept, we reject; this is the dynamic process of recreation. Iser's description of the "time-flow" of the reading process (pp. 109-11) resembles Fish's "structure of the reader's experience." It is an emphasis on this temporal interaction of reader and text that characterizes Fish's practical criticism, "an analysis of the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time. The basis of the method is a consideration of the temporal flow of the reads

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12. And sequential interpretations often consist of the reader's attempts to make holistic sense prematurely, i.e., before the entire text is read.

reading experience, and it is assumed that the reader responds in terms of that flow and not to the whole utterance. Fish describes the content of the reading experience as a "succession of deliberative acts": the making and revising of assumptions, the rendering and regretting of judgments, the coming to and abandoning of conclusions, the giving and withdrawing of approval, the specifying of causes, the asking of questions, the supplying of answers, the solving of puzzles. Fish includes all these activities in his descriptions of the temporal reading process and thus gives value to responses usually neglected in traditional holistic explications.

Though similar in its focus on sequential interpretations and effects, Fish's practical criticism is much more microscopic than Iser's, but is primarily concerned with the larger units of the text marked by the perspectives, whereas Fish often describes sentence-by-sentence, clause-by-clause, even word-by-word reading experiences. In his brief discussion of Fish in The Act of Reading (pp. 31-32), Iser focuses on the transformational linguistic model that sometimes underlies Fish's microscopic analyses. He argues that the problems Fish has with his concept of the informed reader are due to the inadequate linguistic model that is in use. This critique of the "informed reader" is only one of many such attacks on Fish's early theory, attacks that ultimately led Fish to give up the descriptive claims of his affective style. Though he does not discuss Fish's revised position, Iser obviously would not agree with it. Fish now denies the priority of the independent text and has rejected the descriptive function of the informed reader; while for him the independent text maintains its priority as the "artistic pole" of the literary work and the "implied reader" continues to function for him in a way similar to Fish's obsolete "informed reader." For example,

14. Fish, "Literature in the Reader," p. 27; and see Fish, "Facts and Fictions: A Reply to Ralph Rader," Critical Inquiry, 1 (1975), rpt. in Is There a Text in This Classé, pp. 136-46.
affective stylistics claimed to describe the reading experience of the informed reader, that person most capable of having the experience the text provides. Similarly, Fish's practical criticism analyzes the text's "implied reader," a term that "incorporates both the prestructuring of the potential meaning by the text, and the reader's actualization of this potential through the reading process." Fish no longer claims to describe the reading process; but this descriptive focus continues to be the goal of Fish's phenomenology.

Iser incorporates the short- and long-term effects of reading literature into his descriptive model. For Iser, reading is not a one-way process in which the passive reader merely internalizes the structures in the text; rather, it is a "dynamic interaction" in which the active reader is constantly responding to the meanings he produces in this interaction. Consistency-building and image-making are continual reading activities guided by the text; the configurative meaning must be assembled by the reader, who in turn, is affected by what he has assembled. The result of this literary effect involves a restructuring of the reader's experience, a phenomenon which occurs most forcibly in the reading of those texts that incorporate the norms the reader already holds. Here the deficiencies that the text forces the reader to locate and resolve are deficiencies in the reader's own structuring of experience. A reader open to the text and its effects will have to reformulate his system of norms in order to accommodate the meaning the text has led him to assemble.

Thus, the act of reading literature provides "an experience which entails the reader constituting himself by constituting a reality hitherto unfamiliar" (p. 151). It is in this way that literature significantly changes its readers.

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17. Fish, The Irony of Realism, p. 141. The act of reading, p. 34: the implied reader...predispositions necessary for a literary work to... "does not, therefore, limit the effectiveness of the implied..." see "Interview: Wolfgang Iser," ed. Rudolf E. Kuenzli, Diacritics, 10, No. 2 (1980), 72-73, for comments by Iser that support my claims about his probable view of Fish's revised theory.

18. For a critique, see E. D. Hirsch, The Interpretation of Literary Tradition, and contrast his..."p. 141." It is in this way that literature significantly changes its readers.
which is implied by the aspects contained in the text and which must be assembled in the course of reading. Significance is the reader's absorption of the meaning into his own existence" (p. 151). Iser accounts for differing interpretations (meanings) of the same text and for different applications (significances) of the meanings assembled. But his phenomenology of reading is concerned primarily with describing the general structure of response and not the specific, historical actualizations of that structure. Thus, he correctly distinguishes his theory of response (with its account of the implied reader) from a related aesthetics and history of reception (which deals with actual readers and their documented responses). Similarly, he is more interested in the structure of potential applications than in the actual ways literary meanings have been applied in the experiences of historical readers or groups of readers. Because of these emphases in The Act of Reading, there are, he design, few examples of conflicting interpretations of the same text and few specific examples of significant changes produced in actual readers by literature. I find this exclusion disappointing because, by constantly refusing to discuss conflicting responses and actual examples of change, he talks about potential, prestructured effects on readers in a way that at times closely resembles the traditional discussions of texts in isolation. As we will see in a moment, this disguised talk of texts becomes an aspect of his persuasiveness within American critical discourse.

Nevertheless, Iser's account of the reading process and literary effects does offer much of real value to contemporary critical theory and its emerging concern with the reader's response to literature. This is one reason The Act of Reading has been welcomed by several American critics and theorists. In fact, among the theoretical models of reading now being promoted in this country, Iser's may have a good chance of persuading the most people to adopt its specifications. Such a predication owes less to the present interest in readers than to the critical tradition that now numbers this interest. Put simply, Iser's book will persuade

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*Literary Theory and Social Reading Models*
not only because of what it says about readers but even more decisively because of what it does (and doesn’t) say about texts.

The Act of Reading and the American critical tradition share some basic assumptions about literary texts, and these common assumptions constitute the main source of Iser’s persuasive power for American criticism. However, these shared premises are often concealed by Iser’s rhetoric of reading and his critique of influential forces in recent American theory. A close look at his direct attack on American New Criticism reveals much about Iser’s hidden agreement with aspects of the hegemonic position he is attacking.

Iser’s critique of New Criticism occurs within his more general attack on the “classical norm of interpretation,” which he characterizes as an outdated mode of referential analysis as searching for an extractable meaning in the text (instead of a meaning experienced by the reader). This extractable meaning is at the service of a mimetic truth and manifests itself in the text as a harmonized totality of balance, order, and completeness. Iser writes that New Criticism marked “a turning point in literary interpretation” in the sense that it rejected “the vital elements of the classical norm, namely, that the work is an object containing the hidden meaning of a prevailing truth.” In place of the search for the hidden message and representational meaning, New Criticism was concerned with “the elements of the work and their interaction,” with the forces operating within the text. But Iser points out that despite this important revision in the critical tradition, New Criticism still preserved the classical norm of harmony, which took on “a value of its own, whereas in the past it was subordinated to the appearance of truth.” This harmonizing of textual elements with its discovery and eventual removal of ambiguities was “the unacknowledged debt of New Critics to the classical norm of interpretation” and it was here that New Critics set and reached its limits. New Critics attempted to define the functions of the literary text through the same interpretive norm—harmony—used to uncover representational meaning. But “a function is not a meaning—it brings about an effect, and this effect cannot be measured by the same criteria as are used in evaluating the appearance of truth” (pp. 15-16). But Iser’s functionalist model of the text and his phenomenology of read-
ing attempt to move beyond New Critical limitations. His theory's relationship to New Criticism, however, is similar to the complementarity relation he describes between New Criticism and the classical norm of interpretation: New Critics rejected the classical norm while preserving its value of harmony; Iser rejects New Criticism while preserving its assumption of a prior and independent text. Iser's continued valorization of the text affects his theory just as crucially as the preservation of harmony limited the New Criticism.

It is not simply the general valorization of the text that signals a disguised continuity between Iser's functionalist theory and the critical tradition that New Criticism represents. A more surprising link is the role played by Polish philosopher Roman Ingarden and his phenomenology of the literary work. René Wellek and Austin Warren's 1949 study, *Theory of Literature*, crystallized the American movement toward intrinsic criticism, a movement dominated by New Criticism. Wellek made acknowledged use of Ingarden in his central chapter, "The Analysis of the Literary Work of Art," in which he defined a poem as a "system of norms" consisting of "several strata, each implying its own subordinate group." Ingarden had outlined these strata in section 8 of *The Literary Work of Art*.15 Ingarden's stratified view of the literary work thus formed the foundation of Wellek and Warren's theory of intrinsic criticism, and *Theory of Literature*, in turn, became one of the most influential theoretical statements of the dominant force in American criticism.

while Wellek used only the model of the work presented in Ingarden's earlier book, The Literary Work of Art. Furthermore, Iser criticizes Ingarden's account and considerably revises it. For example, he praises Ingarden for proposing the idea of concretization but rejects its development in Ingarden's theory, where "concretization was just the actualization of the potential elements of the work—it was not an interaction between text and reader; this is why [Ingarden's] 'places of indeterminacy' lead only to an endless completion, as opposed to a dynamic process" in which the reader is made to switch textual perspectives and establish connections between them (p. 178).

But Iser's second criticism of Ingarden signals a more subtle relation to the latter's theory and ultimately a closer connection to the critical tradition Wellek and Warren represent. Iser lists as one of the major drawbacks of Ingarden's account the fact that Ingarden cannot accept the possibility that a work may be concretized in different, equally valid, ways (p. 178). Wellek's use of Ingarden was motivated by the very characteristic that Iser seems to be rejecting here. Wellek wrote that "we can distinguish between right and wrong readings of a poem, or between a recognition or a distortion of the norms implicit in a work of art, by acts of comparison, by a study of different false or incomplete realizations... A hierarchy of viewpoints, a criticism of the grasp of norms, is implied in the concept of the adequacy of interpretation." Adequacy, or validity, in interpretation represents an overriding concern for the American critical tradition. This concern has grown in recent years because of the challenge from reader-response and post-structuralist theories. In a 1978 essay in Critical Inquiry, Wellek responded to these new onslaughts against interpretive adequacy, characterizing them as "the new anarchy which allows a complete liberty of interpretative conventions."


In a recent issue of The Sewanee Review, Cleanth Brooks, another respected advocate of intrinsic criticism, has more colorfully communicated the continuing fear of "what can happen when there is a lack of theoretical restraints": "Literary interpretation becomes a game of tennis played without a net and on a court with no backlines."

But does Iser's critique of Ingarden indicate a rejection of validity in interpretation? This does not seem to be the case; here is rejecting only the notion that each text offers just one valid concretization, one correct meaning. For Iser, there is a pre-structured range of meanings that the reader can validly assemble from the same text: "the structure of the text allows for different ways of fulfillment" (p. 37). Here's a stand is simply a reader-oriented version of the critical pluralism quite respectable within traditional American literary theory (as most recently demonstrated by Wayne Booth's Critical Understanding). But what is not acceptable in this tradition is a critical pluralism without limits—note Booth's subtitle, The Powers and Limits of Pluralism, and the extended discussion in Critical Inquiry among Booth, M. H. Abrams, E. R. H. Miller, and others over "The Limits of Pluralism." In American theory, validity in interpretation has been guaranteed most often by constraints in the literary text that limit the range of permissible meanings to


Still, all these pluralisms, including Iser's, assume that it is the text (its multiple structures, potential meanings, etc.) that makes pluralism possible. The limits Booth proposes are quite complex, but they do include the "demands" of the text, which he admits can (and sometimes should) be violated after they have been recognized—see Booth, Critical Understanding, pp. 238-59. For "The Limits of Pluralism" debate, see Critical Inquiry, 3 (1977), 405-47, and the "Critical Response" sections of subsequent issues.
be derived from the text. Iser's account of reading supplies just the kind of textual constraints that make most critics comfortable. These constraints are the manipulative devices for ensuring that the reader is directed appropriately: "Although the reader must participate in the assembly of meaning by realizing the structure inherent in the text, it must not be forgotten that he stands outside the text. His position must therefore be manipulated by the text in his viewpoint is properly guided" (p. 152).

For Iser, the text's arrangement of perspectives guides the reader as he attempts to project a consistent pattern resolving the tensions among the various norms distributed among the perspectives. "The interaction fails if ... the reader's projections superimpose themselves unimpeded upon the text" (p. 167). How exactly does the arrangement of perspectives guide the reader's activities and impede his projections? Between and within the textual perspectives, there are blanks, which are vacancies in the overall system of the text. "They indicate that the different segments of the text are to be connected, even though the text itself does not say so. They are the unseen parts of the text, and as they mark off schemata and textual perspectives from one another, they simultaneously trigger acts of ideation (image-building) on the reader's part" (pp. 214-83). The blanks "function virtually as instructions" (p. 214) in the "theme-and-horizon structure" of the reading process. As the reader moves through the text, he constantly shifts from one perspective to another. The perspective he assumes at any one moment becomes the "theme" that is read against the "horizon" of the previous perspectives in which he had been situated (p. 97). In the Tom Jones example given above, the Allworthy perspective is first a theme, then part of the horizon for judging the Blifil perspective, and then a theme again but this time one that is interpreted against the changed horizon that now contains the perspective of Blifil. The reader fills the blanks between perspectives according to the theme-and-horizon structure, which guides him to negate or modify each thematic perspective in light of the accumulated horizon of previous perspectives. The perspectives, blanks, and theme-and-horizon structure constitute the constraints that Iser's account places on the reader's interpretation of the whole text.
It might in the end seem a bit odd to say that Iser promotes
the notion of an independent text, even in the complex way I
have described. After all, his is a phenomenological theory of
reading, and he continually emphasizes how the subject-object
division is destroyed during the reading process. But these
claims must be examined closely. For in her's account, it is the
literary work and not the text that is dependent on the reader
for its existence: "The literary work has two poles, which we
might call the artistic and the aesthetic: the artistic pole is the
author's text and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by
the reader. In view of this polarity, it is clear that the work itself
cannot be identical with the text or with the conscientization, but
must be situated somewhere between the two" (p. 21). The text
remains independent and prior to the reader's activities as it
initiates, guides, and corrects the reader's conscientization of the
literary work. I would argue, then, that despite his critiques of
New Criticism and Ingarden, her ultimately demonstrates that
she shares with Wellek, Brooks, and Booth a belief in interpretive
validity guaranteed by constraints in a prior and independent
text; and these shared assumptions make her's detailed account
of reading extremely attractive to traditional literary theorists in
America.55

Unfortunately, by presenting a reading model that is easily
adapted to the American critical tradition, her is in danger of
undercutting one of his purposes for writing *The Act of Reading:*
in his preface he suggests that the "anthropological side of liter-
ary criticism" deserves more attention, and he hopes that some
hints in his book might encourage concern for the "actual func-
tion of literature in the overall make-up of man" (p. xi). Within
today's critical discourse, these are admirable goals, and indeed
many of her's discussions do direct our attention to how litera-
ture functions in this humanistic way. His account of literary
effect, of how literature changes its readers, certainly moves in

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55. See, for example, her review of her's *Act of Reading* by one author of the
prohibition against the Affective Fallacy. He writes that among reader-response
theorists, "her is notable for the phenomenological subtlety of his account of
what goes on in the reader's mind and for his sensitivity to the implicit demands
by which the text exercises supervision over those goings-on"— Monroe
this direction. But this fine attempt may be erased because of the text-centered theory of reading that is its foundation. The emphasis on textual constraints and the prestructuring of effect, combined with the lack of examples of differing interpretations and significant changes in readers, will make it quite easy for Iser's theory to be grafted onto the American critical tradition without really affecting the text-centered, often a-rhetorical criticism and theory that tradition fosters.

Thus, while it actually contains the seeds of a radically social and rhetorical approach, *The Act of Reading* is persuasive because it appears to be safe: it gives the American critic just enough of the reader but not too much. More exactly, it provides an acceptable model of the text partially disguised as an innovative account of reading. Very economically, then, it fulfills both needs of current American theory: it incorporates the reader into a theory of literature while it maintains the traditional American valorization of the autonomous text, but allows American theorists to have their text and reader too.

Structuralist Poetics

The reading model proposed by Jonathan Culler fills an important gap in reader-response theory. It provides the consistent intersubjective base missing from Bleich's and Holland's psychological models, while it refuses to be easily incorporated into the a-rhetorical critical tradition the way Iser's model might be. Culler argues that "the task of literary theory or poetics...is to make explicit the procedures and conventions of reading, to offer a comprehensive theory of the ways in which we go..."
about making sense of various kinds of texts. In Structuralist Poetics (1975), Culler uses structuralism as a heuristic to generate a description of "literary competence," implicit knowledge of reading conventions. Culler's reading conventions resemble Fish's interpretive strategies in that both make interpretation possible, and the two reading models suggest that a "poem be thought of as an utterance that has meaning only with respect to a system of conventions which the reader has assimilated." Furthermore, in contrast to Holland and Bleich, Fish would agree with Culler's statement that "meaning is not an individual creation but the result of applying to the text operations and conventions which constitute the institution of literature." In reference to the schema of reader response criticism in Chapter 1, we have, then, a continuum that moves from Holland's and Bleich's psychological reading models that emphasize unique responses, through Iser's phenomenological model that includes subjective and intersubjective readings, to the social models that stress shared response (Fish's early informed reader, Culler's reading conventions, and Fish's later interpretive communities).

29. Though reminiscent to its character, Culler's theory of reading conventions are complexly structured to accommodate insights or emphases for example in Fish's "The Righting of the Reader," p. 19, and in Culler's "The Pursuit of Signs," p. 125.
31. Culler, "Stanley Fish," p. 127; see also Diacritics, 5, No. 1 (1975); Culler's revision of Fish's work includes his psychological reading models as well as Fish's early informed reader and Fish's interpretive communities. Holland's Reader Reading is contrasted with Fish's psychological reading model in Fish's "The Righting of the Reader," p. 19.
32. The most influential reader-oriented approaches not discussed here are the semiotic theories of such critics as Umberto Eco, Michael Riffaterre, and Gerald Prince. However, Culler's structuralism exemplifies the semiotic emphasis of these approaches, and in his theory he shows the reader-centeredness that Fish's essays of the late 1960s and 1970s stressed. B. Culler, "Riffaterre and the Semiotics of Poetry," in The Pursuit of Signs, pp. 80-99.
In Culler's model, "reading poetry is a rule-governed process of producing meanings; the poem offers a structure which must be filled up and one therefore attempts to invent something, guided by a series of formal rules derived from one's experience of reading poetry, which both make possible invention and impose limits on it." The limits come not from the text but from the reader's literary competence; indeed, the structure of the text is a creation by the reader. Culler views reading as a structuring activity, essentially a process of naturalization: "to naturalize a text is to bring it into relation with a type of discourse or model which is already, in some sense, natural and yielded. That is, to assimilate or interpret something is to bring it within the modes of order which culture makes available." Such naturalization can be understood as a type of holism, interpretation, something like Holland's "transformation toward a unity" and Iser's "consistency-building," but with a structuralist difference. Holland's and Iser's interpreters relate the various textual elements intrinsically to an overall unity or configurative meaning; whereas Culler's interpreters regard the elements Interpreting Conventions

which are customary under "reader-oriented" interpretative criticism, especially in American versions. It recognizes that discussions of the whole make no cognitive sense for readers, who must understand the text's meaning in terms of the rules of the whole. Hence, Culler views reading as a structuring activity, essentially a process of naturalization: "to naturalize a text is to bring it into relation with a type of discourse or model which is already, in some sense, natural and yielded. That is, to assimilate or interpret something is to bring it within the modes of order which culture makes available." Such naturalization can be understood as a type of holism, interpretation, something like Holland's "transformation toward a unity" and Iser's "consistency-building," but with a structuralist difference. Holland's and Iser's interpreters relate the various textual elements intrinsically to an overall unity or configurative meaning; whereas Culler's interpreters regard the elements

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extrinsically—intertextually—to established codes or cultural forms. Thus, in explaining how a reader naturalizes three apparently unrelated lines of poetry, Culler cites a reading convention that uses available extraverbal models to organize the text. The most basic models would seem to be the binary opposition, the dialectical resolution of a binary opposition, the displacement of an unresolved opposition by a third term, the four-term homology, the series united by a common denominator, and the series with a transcendent or summarizing final term. Such structural descriptions distinguish Culler’s account of holistic interpretation from those of Holland and Iser. Another difference is also crucial: Holland emphasizes and Iser acknowledges that holistic interpretation can be individual and therefore idiosyncratic, whereas Culler claims it is communal, determined by shared reading conventions. And, finally, while both bases the intersubjectivity of reading primarily on the textual perspectives, Culler locates it in the socially given literary competence of readers.

On the level of critical exchange, Culler’s theory resembles Fish’s later account in that his social model for reading also serves to explain criticism. For Culler, “the possibility of critical argument depends on shared notions of the acceptable and the unacceptable, a common ground which is neither other than the procedures of reading.” Like Fish, Culler ties critical consensus to reading conventions, which limit acceptable interpretations: “The claim is not that competent readers would agree on an interpretation but only that certain expectations about poetry and ways of reading guide the interpretive process and impose severe limitations on the set of acceptable or plausible readings.” Both Fish and Culler agree that the reading conventions which constitute the “set of acceptable or plausible readings” are always evolving. And Culler has recently ex-
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plained that his theory of literary competence does allow for the presence of different interpretive communities existing simultaneously or that contemporaneous groups with literary competencies embodying radically different notions of interpretive acceptability.38

In attacking Culler's competence model as too "inflexible," Bové (p. 283, n. 16) cites Paul de Man's treatment of all reading as misreading. Indeed, de Man's recent Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) appears to be the most serious challenge not only to Culler's theory but to all social reading models (including the one I will propose). However, a closer examination of de Man's arguments indicates that this is actually a counterproposal that either is incommensurate with reader-response theories or that subsumes their social reading models. First of all, Allegories of Reading is not about how readers read; it is about how certain texts "represent" how readers read. That is, de Man does not describe the reading process, he thematizes it. This thematization is then elaborated through deconstructive readings that focus on the play of figuration in the text. Such a focus makes reading into an unreadable trope: a narrative like Proust's or Rousseau's is an allegory of reading, and "reading is the metaphor of writing" (de Man, p. 68). Like the texts he deconstructs, de Man's rhetorization of reading (reading as trope) is initially readable; but again like those texts, this readability, when questioned, turns out to be a disguise for a more radical indeterminacy. For example, the statement that "reading is the metaphor of writing" can at first be understood as a substitute for the following claim: "the moment that marks the passage from 'life' to writing corresponds to an act of reading that separates from the undifferentiated mass of facts and events, the distinctive elements susceptible of entering into the composition of a text" (p. 57). Most reader-response critics could accept this descriptive claim (which de Man attributes to Georges Poulet). But de Man's deconstructive project does not allow such claims to remain unproblematic. In creating the reading of writing as metaphor, after the composition of a text, the distinction between 'life' and writing is further blurred: instead of an act of reading that separates the undifferentiated mass of facts and events, the "originary" elements susceptible of entering into the composition of a text, de Man's project is premised on the indeterminacy of all texts with reader-response models. Thus, in this way, one key to characterizes the relation of Allegories of Reading to reader-response criticism: from the perspective of de Man's deconstructive project, reader reading...
In terms of his interpretive theory, Culler stops short of Fish's present position. Both agree that the "real world" is the "socially given" (Culler) or the "standard story" (Fish). This position would seem to commit both theorists to Fish's claim that "no use of language matches reality but that all uses of language are interpretations of reality." For Fish, "the rules and conventions under which speakers and hearers 'normally' operate don't demand that language be faithful to the facts; rather, they specify the shape of that fidelity... creating it, rather than enforcing it." Fish writes further: "I am not denying that what will and will not be accepted as true is determined by the standard story. I am only position that its being (or failing to) amounts to the same thing the truth is not a matter of a special relationship it bears to the world the world does not impose it on us, but of a special relationship it bears to its users." Culler seems to back off from conclusions similar to these (though his exact position is unclear). In one place he describes the first type of "vraisemblance" (naturalization) as relating to a discourse which requires no justification because it seems to derive directly from the structure of the world. He then quickly adds: "Recognition of this first level of "vraisemblance" need not depend on the claim that reality is a convention produced by language. Indeed, the danger of that position is that it may be interpreted in too sweeping a fashion." Thus, Julia Kristeva argues that anything expressed in a grammatical sentence becomes "vraisemblable" since language is constitutive of the world. Culler would likely accuse Fish of a similar distortion of the relation between language and reality. Ultimately, the difference between their hermeneutic theories is that Culler refuses to give up the descriptive claims

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world" to truly produce the interpretive, resulting interpretations de Man then dismantles. His rhetorical readings demonstrate how the reader's production of sense or unity for a text must always be a misreading because it ignores the figural play that undermines the coherent meaning the reader produces. Thus de Man does not so much reject reader-centered models as move beyond them to reveal the disruptive play of figures they necessarily neglect or minimize. Culler, of course, would likely view such an emphasis as a "sweeping" distortion of the relation between language and reality. Ultimately, the difference between their hermeneutic theories is that Culler refuses to give up the descriptive claims

40. Culler, Structuralist Poetics, p. 140; Fish, "How To Do Things with Austin and Searle," p. 239.
41. Fish, "How To Do Things with Austin and Searle," p. 243.
42. Ibid., pp. 238, 241.
43. Culler, Structuralist Poetics, pp. 140-41.
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Fish now rejects. Culler believes it is possible to describe and explain the specific forms of reading; Fish believes that all such accounts produce the facts they claim to describe. Still, Fish's present theory of interpretation has closer affinities to Culler's than to that of any other reader-response critic we have examined. Fish is no longer guilty of the deficiency Culler noted in his review of Self-Cannibalizing Artifacts: "here Fish's theoretical enterprise quite abruptly vanishes; to the question, how does the reader create meaning, he has no general reply to make." Fish's social concept of interpretive strategies now fills this explanatory void. Though Culler's theory is descriptive and Fish's creative, both would agree that any change in interpretive strategies can proceed only step by step, relying on the procedures which readers actually use. It is Culler's goal to describe the procedures readers actually use, while Fish has given up this exclusively description focus. Rather than restoring or recovering text, I am in the business of making texts and of teaching others to make them by adding to their repertory of strategies.

For rather different reasons, neither Fish nor Culler supplies an important part of a reader-response critical theory: the needed link between a social model of reading and a practical criticism based on that model. Fish still uses his affective stylistics in his literary analyses, but his revised theory of interpretation is only indirectly connected with it. Just as he began to elaborate an account of the informed reader's literary competence to justify his practical criticism, Fish jettisoned the whole concept of the informed reader and the descriptive claims of his affective style.

44. Culler's most recent comments on deconstruction indicate that he still maintains the possibility of describing and explaining determinate facts, though he now admits limitations on the consistency of descriptive theories and on the stability of the described object. See Culler, "In Pursuit of Signs," Daedalus, 106, No. 4 (1977), revised in The Pursuit of Signs, pp. 39-43; and "Structuralism and Grammatology," boundary 2, 8, No. 1 (1979), 75-85.
45. Culler, "Stanley Fish," p. 125; also see Culler, "Beyond Interpretation: The Prospects of Contemporary Criticism," Comparative Literature, 28 (1976), 252.
47. Fish, "Interpreting 'Interpreting the Variorum,'" in Is There a Text in This Class?
tics. This is a bold move to be sure, but a move that leaves his
temporal reading model and his reader-response criticism with
no theoretical foundation. In fact, by denying that any approach
captures or reflects its descriptive object, Fish has rejected the
possibility of justifying any critical procedures. According to
him, all practical criticism—formalist or reader-response—
constitutes what it claims to describe, and therefore no metacri-
tical theory can establish the priority of a critical methodology by
claiming it captures what is really there in the text or reading
experience. For Fish, "what is really there" is always produced by
the procedures used to describe it. This theory of interpreta-
tion is both revolutionary and inconsequential. It is revo-
lutionary because it completely changes the way we understand
the activities of literary study. But it is inconsequential in that it
actually changes nothing in critical practice: critics will continue
to use their habitual interpretive strategies in practical criticism
(as Fish himself has done) and will continue to erect metacritical
justifications for their criticism. As Fish recognizes, his revised
hermeneutics simply accounts (in a new way) for how literary
criticism functions and does not prescribe how it should func-
tion. His present theory does not argue for any one way to
describe literature or reading experience. In fact, on principle it
cannot do so, and therefore it no longer provides a justification
for specifically reader-oriented approaches to practical criticism.
A further complication makes Fish's present hermeneutic
theory even less useful as a rationale for criticism. His rejection
of descriptive claims also means that his theoretical account of
interpretive strategies (in reading and criticism) is itself an in-
terpretation masquerading as neutral description. To be consis-
tent, Fish has to say that his theoretical discourse produces the
"facts" of criticism in the same way that his critical discourse
(affective stylistics) produced the "facts" of reading. Thus, if on
hermeneutic principle Fish's criticism cannot neutrally reflect a
prominent reading experience, then his literary theory cannot
reflect the preexistent situation of criticism. In any case,
whether Fish's hermeneutics denies the traditional descriptive capacity of criticism or of criticism and theory, it certainly provides no metacritical foundation for a specific reader-response approach to literary study.

Culler's structuralist poetics also excludes a connection between his theory and a specific approach to doing criticism, but for reasons very different from Fish's. As a general principle, Culler rejects the explication of individual texts as the central activity of literary study. He argues that "the most important and insidious legacy of the New Criticism is the widespread and unquestioning acceptance of the notion that the critic's job is to interpret literary works." Culler prefers a poetics of literature to explications of texts. "To engage in the study of literature is not to produce yet another interpretation of King Lear but to advance one's understanding of the conventions and operations of an institution, a mode of discourse." Culler's argument justifies the writing of Structuralist Poetics, but, like Fish's revised theory, it offers no rationale for employing a reader-response approach in practical criticism.

I can now refocus this survey and critique of current reader-response criticism by asking: What version of reader-oriented theory has the most to offer the institutional study of American fiction? All of the reading theories have their deficiencies in light of this purpose. Holland's and Bleich's psychological models of reading and criticism are too difficult to adapt in any form to the traditional study of literature, primarily because they lack the intersubjective base assumed by the discipline and necessary for the kind of practical criticism that dominates American literary study. Iser's phenomenological model provides the intersubjective base assumed by the discipline and necessary for the kind of practical criticism that dominates American literary study. Iser's phenomenological model provides the intersubjective base assumed by the discipline and necessary for the kind of practical criticism that dominates American literary study. But, like Fish's revised theory, it offers no rationale for employing a reader-response approach in practical criticism.

Culler, "Beyond Interpretation," p. 246. See also Culler, "The Critical Assumption," S C E Reports, No. 6 (1979), pp. 77-84; and the revised version of "Beyond Interpretation" in The Pursuit of Signs, pp. 18-23, 258-259. Structuralist Poetics, pp. 128, 258-259.
the temporal dimension of reading (a dimension that is also included, though less centrally, in Iser's model). However, Fish's later theory of interpretation explains only how practical criticism works and does not provide a metacritical justification for what approach to use. Culler's theory of conventions is more specific about the details of how readers read, and it proposes a convincing social reading model that not only provides an intersubjective foundation for criticism but also presents a theory that is neither too hard nor too easy to incorporate into American literary study. Still, Culler does not make a connection between his theory of reading conventions and the needs of practical criticism; in fact, he rejects practical criticism as a desirable activity within literary study. What we have left, then, is a useful reader-centered program for practical criticism in Fish's and Iser's work without an adequate theoretical base; Fish moved on to his present theory of interpretive communities before he provided such a base, and Iser's theoretical proposals do not present a viable alternative to the objectivist traditions in literary theory. And we have Culler's theory of reading conventions, which does provide a strong theoretical base for a reader-response approach, but Culler refuses to connect this base to practical criticism. What we need, therefore, is an intersubjective model of reading and criticism that takes the best from the work of Fish, Iser, and Culler and supplies what is missing: a social model of reading that supports a reader-response approach to literary criticism. In the chapters that follow, I will supply this missing account by proposing a temporal and convention-based reading model for the study of American fiction.