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The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation [Review]

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Shorter Reviews

The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation, edited by Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman; vii & 441 pp. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980, \$30.00 cloth, \$9.95 paper.

The Reader in the Text is a useful collection of essays on an important topic in contemporary criticism—the role of readers in interpreting literary works. Contributors include some of the most widely-read writers on the subject (Jonathan Culler, Wolfgang Iser, Gerald Prince, Norman Holland) as well as several critics less familiar to American readers (Jacques Leenhardt and Karlheinz Stierle, among many others). Susan Suleiman adds a helpful introduction on the “varieties of audience-oriented criticism” and Inge Crosman provides an annotated bibliography.

Although reader-response criticism is important, it is not the earth-shaking challenge to conventional or traditional criticism that some of the contributors make it out to be. Like others vying for attention in the crowded academic marketplace, a few of the contributors exaggerate their departures from the presumably naive past, when critics, in Suleiman’s words, relegated reader and audience “to the status of the unproblematic and obvious” (p. 3). The novelty of some of these essays consists in unnecessary neologisms, contrived distinctions, and appeals to fashionable authorities who surround commonplaces with a gnomic aura. Instead of poems and novels, we have pseudoreferential, autoreferential, referential, noncoreferential, and genotexts, processed by overdetermined, underdetermined, and nondetermined, implied, inscribed, and encoded readers, who narrativize and modelize the fictions they do not deterritorialize. Jacques Lacan’s obfuscating influence is nearly everywhere: his distinction between *organisation intellectuelle* and *organisation passionnelle* helps Pierre Maranda uncover the “internalization and inertia of semantic charters,” the fact that “formal schooling structures the rational-response mechanisms of the young” (p. 188). What oft was thought has seldom been so pretentiously expressed.

Despite these critics’ fascination with jargon, they do have provocative things to say, especially about why readers disagree and whether some readings are better than others. On the one hand, Robert Crosman argues that “a poem really means whatever any reader seriously believes it to mean” (p. 154). Calling one interpretation right and another wrong is a totalitarian act “unsuited to a modern democracy” (p. 160) but appropriate to the hierarchy of contemporary

academic life. Instead of "the easy equality of friends" (p. 160), those on top in our profession repress their inferiors because their mistaken views deserve "correction or ridicule." Disarmed of the illusion that truth exists, we will renounce "coercion" for "mutual tolerance and respect for differences of opinion" (p. 161). Naomi Schor adds a feminist slant to Crosman's subjectivism, suggesting that the reader who pretends to clarify a text succumbs "to (masculine) forms of aggression and mastery: rape and imperialism" (p. 182). Instead of dominating texts and other readers, we should recover our "humility, which is somehow bound up with a recognition of [our] femininity" (p. 182). Finally, along similar lines, Norman Holland suggests that readings differ because readers do: my "unique identity" shapes what I perceive. When I discuss literature with others, I should be asking whether my experience enriches theirs. They, of course, have the right to say no. Instead of interpreting texts, we should try to accumulate readings: "to add response to response, to multiply possibilities, and to enrich the whole experience" for everyone (p. 370).

This equation of objectivity with imperialism, or correction with ridicule, seems to me sentimental and even dangerous, and I am glad to say that not all the contributors endorse it (see especially the essays by Culler and Leenhardt). We respect the opinions of others when we feel that we can learn from them—when correction, agreement, and disagreement are possible. Opposition, as Blake said, is true friendship. Crosman, to be sure, rightly objects to the elitism and competitiveness that mar our profession. But tyrannical, abusive professors are irrational—more in love with themselves than with the complex truth. Dispensing with standards of correctness only intensifies the power struggle that Crosman and others want to stop—"the war of all against all" that disfigures academic life.

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Nature and Culture in D. H. Lawrence, by Aidan Burns; xi & 137 pp. Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1981, \$19.50.

This is a bold and often absorbing book. But before the champagne with Rocky Mountain oysters, grilled à la Mellors, three complaints. First, Aidan Burns wants to rescue D. H. Lawrence from charges of savagery and from seeming obstacles to his novels' ideals of personal growth. Burns thinks that Friedrich Waismann's notion of *open texture*, like the later Wittgenstein's ways of talking about ordinary language, will help us to assess Lawrence more fairly. Talk of this aim runs through the book, but Burns bizarrely delays explaining these "technical matters" at all adequately until the last, hurried chapter. Second, it is disappointing that a professional philosopher should know Lawrence's confusing texts so well, but not spend more time on the disambiguation of cru-