

LITERARY CRITICISM AND THE IDEAL READER†

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There is a tendency in contemporary criticism to emphasize the role of the reader and possibly to exclude, and even to an avowed extinction, the author and literary objects. I think this is wrong. The writer, the critic and the reader should be viewed from the same vantage point and they should be seen *pari-passu* to be performing if not the same, then almost the same function. We must accept, on a first premise, that the phenomenology, the poetics, the aesthetics, the erotics and the prudery of reading are among the current theoretical concerns of criticism.

In criticism, the role of the reader is more prominent than the creation of the writer or the independent harmony of the text. Thus it is very difficult to pin-point the function and role of the reader, the critic or the interpreter. Most critics find it appropriate to speak about themselves in order to elucidate the role of the reader. Recently interest in the reader has nourished but its history is as old as criticism itself.² Reader, writer and work are very essential in literary thinking and the evolution of their configuration is an important aspect of the history of criticism. In literary critical texts, reader, writer and work are structural elements because their qualities tell us something directly about the literary nature of the works in which they appear. Bodies of criticism comprise fictions about literature and one of the heroes or characters in these fictions is the ideal reader. His identity as a hero is representative of the formal qualities of the criticism within which he exists.

For Dr. Johnson, the ideal reader is far removed from authors and texts. But Dr. Johnson does not clearly define his ideal reader but says, instead, a great deal about what he is not and what he cannot be expected to know. Johnson's reader has not necessarily read Horace or Pope and he is not impressed by the Metaphysical poets. Johnson's ideal reader must be "uncontaminated with literary prejudices".³ The writer who pursues lasting fame in Johnson's critical world cannot assume that his reader knows the particulars of any profession, occupation, or branch of learning. Johnson does not expect his ideal reader to know critical terminologies and denies him even a familiarity with argot.

Johnson's ideal reader has not particular interests and he does not inhabit a provincial time or place, he is a citizen untouched by modes or fads, he sheds whatever is current. Criticism should appeal to the common reader and not the learned men. But Johnson's ordinary man is also the perfect

representative of all mankind. He believes that no real individual or class of individuals understands things precisely as the common reader does. Thus, the public is another name for his ideal reader, and public opinion is the final judge of literary merit. To make literary judgements, in Johnson's conception, is to refer finally to nature, and general nature is found in the understanding of the abstract common man, the public. Even knowledge of literary tradition is a sectarian corruption in Johnson's ideal reader. His ideal reader is thus an archetypal figure. Dryden's ideal reader is also a representative of mankind, but in a less general sense; he belongs to a particular class and he represents the best of men. Dryden thinks that the intellectual upper class is the most judicious because readers of this class are cultivated enough to learn from conversation; they are open and skeptical rather than positive of magisterial. His reader must be willing to converse and possess a skeptical reluctance to rely solely on one's own perspective. Dryden locates his ideal reader in a group of readers, and he often implies that truth persists in a communal understanding, rather than in an individual or a public one. Thus Dryden prefers to present himself as the spokesman for a group.

In the preface to his *Aeneis* (1697), Dryden identifies three kinds or classes of readers. The first are "mob readers", the second are "a middle sort of readers such as have a farther insight than the former, yet have not the capacity of judging right." Last, there is the class of readers whom Dryden is "ambitious of pleasing."⁴ Thus the division of readers into classes is part of the overall dramatic structure of Dryden's criticism. This structure distinguishes Dryden's work radically from Johnson's criticism, which tends, with its focus on an archetypal man as ideal reader, to be epic in form.

Whereas Johnson builds his criticism around objective, abstract standards, such as man mature, and truth, Dryden makes his work depend upon a certain class of men, particular conceptions of nature, and an authoritative though not universal, community of judgements.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in his own case, rejects Johnson's abstraction and exaltation of the public. Coleridge distinguishes four types of readers: "sponges", "sand glasses", "straining bags" and the "Great Moul's diamond".⁵ Although Coleridge prefers separating readers into various sorts, he does not create an ideal reader with a class existence. Coleridge's criticism sounds lyrical in its dependence upon single, personal vice, and it is structurally lyrical in the way it tends to collect

three important critical elements — reader, writer, and work-into one unit.

Coleridge posits a close proximity, often approaching identity, between the reader and the writer. His reader is an individual, usually a tautology for the author himself. The Coleridgean reader participates in the creation of what he reads. What is known of a book and therefore what the book is persists in an interpenetration of created work and creating reader. The Coleridgean reader is involved in what he perceives, and as he grows intellectually or spiritually, the literature he reads expands and evolves. This is especially true of works that can never be out-grown: preeminently the Bible and Shakespeare. Unlike Dryden, Coleridge usually speaks of his own ideal reader and unlike Johnson, he represents a personal and particular, other than a general, sensibility when he speaks for his ideal. Coleridge's criticism tends to be about himself; sometimes it is all too literally so.

Coleridge finds reflection of self in everything, and the general validity of his work depends upon his assumption that "self" provides at least "a diagram of the genus".⁶ For Johnson, the ideal reader is abstract, timeless and judgemental, for Dryden, ideal readers belong to a circle of cultivated men. Coleridge's ideal reader surrenders his right to evaluate as he enters into a kind of collaboration with the poet.

For Northrop Frye too, reader and writer are not united, it is no longer the poet but rather the reader who is to be judged. As Frye puts it in the *Anatomy*; There is no reason why a great poet should be a wise and good man, or even a tolerable human being, but there is every reason why his reader should be improved in his humanity as a result of reading him. Hence while the production of culture may be, like ritual, a half-involuntary imitation of organic rhythms or processes the response to culture is like myth, a revolutionary act of consciousness.⁷

In *Fearful Symmetry*, Frye provides an image of co-operation between reader and writer:

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 all works of literary art without exception. ⁸

Thua, Frye's ideal reader enters literature and participates in the process of creation. For most criticisms, the end of reading or listening is the beginning of critical understanding, and nothing that we call criticism can begin until the whole of what it is striving to comprehend has been presented to it. Criticism must point beyond itself and be iconoclastic about itself in order to succeed. Frye's reader is as creative and as heroic as any writer in the literature of criticism.

In contemporary criticism, the reader who is so conspicuous on the contemporary scene is usually the critic himself, idealized or characterized as 'learned', 'sensible', 'mature', 'informed' or 'competent'.⁹ Henry James pleads for a reader who is capable of rising above involvement in the mere 'story' to an analytical appreciation of 'the story of one's story itself'.¹⁰ What James requires is intelligence, discrimination, and analytical interest. Ortega Y Gasset believes that true art is based on impulses that are "not of a generically human kind". It is not "for men in general but for a special class of men who may not be better but who evidently are different".¹¹

One would however expect a sort of synthesis between the work itself, the author and the reader. All three should be married and fused into one, but of course with each component part having its own structural and anatomical differences. For example, the work itself is expected to be real or true to life, to be intensely alive. It is expected to be clean of impurities and of the inartistic. It should have vividness, conviction, sincerity, pure form and intensity of illusion.

Once that has been fulfilled, then the author himself should aim towards objectivity, dispassionateness and impartiality. Of course, some expect of the author to be involved or engaged. There should be no problem if he possesses these qualities but he must make his work convincing and intense. The reader's role on the other hand varies depending on his level of preparation and aesthetic perception, he could, for example, be ironic, objective or even committed. He could be the sort of reader who would readily provide questions for the author's answers. He must be prepared to regard any work as inconclusive, regard everything as ambiguous and reject a nebulous vision and his critical intelligence. Thus, criteria for works, authors and readers are closely related even though they are clearly distinct. It would therefore not be appropriate to regard the reader as a tyrant. ¹²

If we consider the phenomenological theory of art posited by Roman Ingarden and Merleau-Ponty, a work of art has to be concretized (konkretisiert) on the artistic and aesthetic poles, where the artistic refers to the work and author and the aesthetic to the reader and the realization he brings into the work. A literary text must be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader's imagination in the task of working things out for himself. The manner in which the reader experiences the text will reflect his own disposition — he is forced to reveal aspects of himself in order to experience a reality which is different from his own.¹³ The reader undergoes a kind of transformation such as Booth has described in connection with fiction in general:

The author creates, in short, an image of himself and another image of his reader; he makes his reader, as he makes his second self, and the most successful reading is one in which the created selves, author and reader, find complete agreement. 14

The reader must be made to feel for himself the new meaning of the work. He must participate in bringing out this meaning and this participation is an essential precondition for communication between the author and the reader. The participation of the reader could not be stimulated if everything were laid out in front of him. The formulated text must shade off into a text that is unformulated though nonetheless intended. Only in this way can the reader's imagination be given the scope it needs; the written text furnishes it with indications which enable it to conjure up what the text does not reveal. His reactions pre-structured by the written text, bring out the meaning of the work since it does not exist per se.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Roland Barthes, "The death of the author", in *The Discontinuous Universe*, ed. Sears and Lord, N.Y., 1972, pp. 7 — 12; Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader*, John Hopkins U.P., Baltimore, 1974; and Geoffrey Hartman, "The interpreter: A self-analysis", in *New Literary History*, Vol. 4, (1972 - 72) pp. 213 - 227.
2. Interest in the reader dates back to Aristotle's *Poetics* especially the notion of catharsis.
3. G.B. Hill, ed. *Lives of the English Poets* in 3 Vols. Oxford, Clarendon, 1905. Vol.3, p. 441.

4. An essay of dramatic poesy, ed. George Watson, 2 Vols. Dent, London 1962. See, Vol. II, P. 243.
5. Shakesperian Criticism, ed. T.M. Raysor, 2 Vols., DEnt, London, 1960, Vol. I. pp. 220-221.
6. Anima Poetae, ed, E.H Coleridge, Cambridge, Mass., Houghton, 1895, p. 168.
7. N. Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, Princeton U.P., 1957, p. 344.
8. Fearful Symmentry, Beacon, Boston, 1962, pp. 427 — 428.
9. Michael Riffaterre, "Interpretation and descriptive poetry" in folew Literary History, Vol. 4, op. cit., pp. 229 — 256.
10. See, Preface to the Ambassadors, in The Art of the novel, ed, R.P. Backmur, N.Y., 1937, p. 313.
11. Ortega Y Gaset, The dehumanization of art, Madrid, 1925, pp. 5 — 8.
12. Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction, U. of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1961, p. 91.
13. See, M. Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, Colin Smith, N.Y., 1962, pp. 219 — 221.; and Roman Ingarden, Vom Erkennen des literarischen Kunstwerks, Tubingen, 1968, pp. 29 — 32.
14. Wayne C. Booth, op. cit., p, 138.