

Contemporary Fiction and the Ethics of Modern Culture



By Jeffrey Karnicky





CONTEMPORARY FICTION AND THE ETHICS OF MODERN CULTURE

Jeffrey Karnicky

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For Megan



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INTRODUCTION: ASSEMBLING AN ETHICS OF READING

I want to start with two related claims, neither of which may be true: (1) nobody reads literature anymore; (2) nobody conceptualizes reading anymore. My first claim exaggerates a line of argument that holds that during the 1980s the disparate practices that continue to be grouped under the rubric of the English department shifted away from literature and toward theory. I consider my second claim to be an effect of the first. That is, as focus shifted from literature to theory—and theory can be defined here as the study of the production of subjectivities—reading first became a subject of an intense theoretical debate that eventually dissipated so much that *reading* is no longer considered a useful term. Reading, as a site of theoretical investigation, now seems hopelessly retrograde at best, and politically naive at worst. For many, reading has come to serve as a synonym for a kind of close textual attention that is oblivious to the social, historical, and material conditions of literary production. In short, reading is no longer hip. Worse, mentions of such concepts as “response” and “ethics of reading” may throw up warning signs for many a reader fearful of a nostalgic return to such 1980s horrors as asymmetrical haircuts and “reader-response” criticism. Nevertheless, in what follows I argue that a reformulated concept of reading—focused on an ethics of response that is not just literary—can be a focal point for considering the role that literature plays in the production of subjectivities both inside and outside the academic world.

My path to an ethics of reading leads not, as might be expected, through the textual studies of Paul de Man and the “Yale school” of deconstruction, but through both the philosophical work of Maurice Blanchot, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari and the concerns of contemporary fiction. My use of “ethics” differs decidedly, in ways that I will describe below, from much work on ethics and reading. Likewise, the ways in which I employ the concepts of “reading” and “response” have little to

do with reader-response criticism. I say this not to stake a claim for the originality of my position. Rather, I want to highlight my ignorance (until starting this project, that is) of the fairly recent concerns of literary theory. For a student beginning graduate studies in 1995, as I did, any knowledge of the theoretical debates surrounding reader-response criticism would have to come from archival work. That is, few graduate seminars in the mid- to late 1990s were concerned with any theoretical questions surrounding “reading.” The thousands of pages devoted to such concerns in the 1980s, primarily in *Diacritics* and *New Literary History*, appear to have been forgotten by the mid-1990s.

What happened? Many would say that the advent of cultural studies and its attention to extraliterary artifacts marked the decline of literary theory, and for that matter, literature, within English departments. To make such a claim would provide a neat linear narrative of recent institutional history. Of course, that is precisely the problem of such a claim: it is just too neat and clean. The actual story of what happened as reading has moved from the center to the periphery of academic interest would certainly prove to be a much messier affair.

Rather than adapting the wide scope of inquiry that would be necessary to produce a dense institutional history of reading that might be capable of answering such a question, I want to narrow my focus here to a single question: How has the conceptualization of reading, over the past twenty-five years or so, affected the present day practice of English? I consider this question a genealogical one, in the sense that Foucault identifies the goal of genealogy:

to identify the accidents, the minute deviations—or conversely, the complete reversals—the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that give birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us; it is to discover that truth or being do not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents. (Foucault 146)

That is, in considering the question of reading, I am not searching for a single point in time where I can say, “Here is the moment where reading lost its centrality.” Nor do I seek a totalizing narrative that would ground the present in the past. I will not argue that reading has moved in a straight line from primary

concern to tangential issue as time has passed. I say, in the first sentence of this introduction, that neither of my claims “may be true” for precisely this reason. To mourn the death of reading, to say that reading has reached the end of the line, would be profoundly useless. At the same time, I *do* want to argue that a rigorous conception of reading, although of seemingly little concern these days, can become a tool for both literary and cultural theorists.

In considering the role that reading has played, I want to map the movements of two tangled lines that cut through the recent history of the concept in various ways: (1) the (false) movement of centrality from reader to text to interpretive community; (2) the place of ethics in relation to reading. Working with these two lines will certainly not provide an exhaustive historical overview of reading. At the same time, I hope that close attention to them will allow me to map some of the effects that the recent history of reading has on the present. These lines overlap, mutate, die out, and leap around in various ways, but they indisputably have an effect on what counts as theory and criticism today. Following the intersections of these dead ends and lines of escape, I hope to create a line that leads toward an ethics of reading, toward a space where ethics, reading, and life mutually infect one another.

First Line: Text–Reader–Interpretive Community

The title of Jane Tompkins’s 1980 edited collection, *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, neatly summarizes her main argument that, as literary theory moved from New Criticism to reader-response criticism, critical attention shifted from the text to the reader and finally to the “interpretive community.” Tompkins notes in her introduction that “the later reader-response critics” (xxv) moved away from purely textual concerns by “relocating meaning first in the reader’s self and then in the interpretive strategies that constitute it” (xxv). In this narrative, reader-response criticism finds its roots in a reversal of W. K. Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe Beardsley’s “The Affective Fallacy,” which claims that a “confusion between the poem and its results . . . ends in impressionism and relativism” (qtd. in Tompkins ix). Reader-response criticism begins in just such a shift, from a text to the effects it produces in its readers. While

various critics see different implications in this shift, one implication invariably holds true. Tompkins writes that “instead of being seen as instrumental to the understanding of the text, the reader’s activity is declared to be *identical with* the text and therefore itself becomes the source of all literary value” (xvi). As the reader’s experience becomes central, the kinds of questions that literary theory must ask undergo a sea change.

Reading, rather than being a search for inherent meaning, now asks, “How do readers make meaning?” (xvii). Such a question leads to another shift, away from individual readers’ responses to texts, to the conventions and social systems that readers internalize. Stanley Fish’s *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, published the same year as Tompkins’s book, is a marker of this shift. Fish’s overview of the movement from text to reader to interpretive community is strikingly similar to Tompkins’s narrative, except that for Fish the narrative is a “personal history” (17) rather than an institutional one. Starting with a refutation of the affective fallacy, Fish writes, “I substituted the structure of the reader’s experience for the formal structures of the text” (2). This substitution leads directly to the shift from reader to interpretive community. Fish writes that “the crucial step will be to see that the claims of neither the text nor the reader can be upheld, because neither has the independent status that would make its claims possible” (12). In other words, both texts and readers are part of a larger interpretive community that informs the creation of meaning. Fish writes that “since the thoughts an individual can think and the mental operations he can perform have their source in some or other interpretive community, he is as much a product of that community (acting as an extension of it) as the meanings it enables him to produce” (14). Of this shift, Tompkins succinctly writes, “The self as an independent entity vanishes” (xxvi). And again, this shift creates a new area of inquiry.

The social and linguistic structures that are constitutive of both texts and selves take center stage here, so that “meaning is a consequence of being in a particular situation in the world” (Tompkins xxv). This final shift, then, breaks literary theory wide open. No longer limited to purely textual considerations, reader-response criticism becomes interested in the “perception of language as a form of power” (Tompkins 226). For Tompkins, writing in 1980, such a perception “promises the

most for criticism's future" (226). This perception, in a sense, *is* criticism's future in 1980. If language is considered as a form of power, every usage of language becomes a possible area of inquiry. Fish writes that criticism, considered as a form of "persuasion" (Fish 17)—that is, as a means of effecting change through language—must "account" for "everything": "texts, authors, periods, genres, canons, standards, agreements, disputes, values, changes and so on" (17). In other words, the line that moves from text to reader to interpretive community is a line of *proliferation* and *expansion*. More accounting leads to more and more meanings.

Such a line explains how "English" has moved from being a marker of close textual study to a marker of an ever-expanding field of extratextual considerations. In his 1998 *Reception Histories: Rhetoric, Pragmatism, and American Cultural Politics*, Steven Mailloux discusses the proliferating effects of reader-response criticism. He writes, "In the 1980s . . . pressured by various feminist, Marxist, New Historicist, and other sociopolitical criticisms, reader-oriented theory and practice turned more and more to the historical context and the political aspects of readers reading" (76). Here again, we have the same story of a movement from inside (the text) to outside (context). Such a movement seems to be the dominant narrative of the recent history of English. Of course, this narrative is somewhat simplified.¹ My goal here is not to complicate this narrative, or even to question its validity.

Rather than focusing on charges of oversimplification or truth or validity, I want to consider this narrative's use. Even the brief retracing that I have just done points toward the value of this narrative line: to move from the inside to the outside is to become a better reader; to account for "everything" that goes into the production of meaning seems to give a fuller, more accurate account of the ways that power works through language. In other words, it is just plain useful to pay attention to context. Tompkins notes that "reader-response critics have extended the power and usefulness of the interpretive model that they inherited from formalism" (211). Mailloux expands on just what this use might be when he discusses the now common understanding of

how reading is historically contingent, politically situated, institutionally imbedded, and materially conditioned; of how reading

any text, literary or non-literary, relates to a larger cultural politics that goes well beyond some hypothetical private interaction between an autonomous reader and an independent text; and of how our particular views of reading relate to the liberatory potential of literacy and the transformative power of education. (78)

In this model, reading, as it expands its range from text to context, moves toward liberation and an understanding of the workings of power. What remains unquestioned here is the seemingly commonsensical progress inherent in the movement from the textual to the extratextual. It is precisely at this point that the second line I want to pursue—the dead-end line of a de Manian ethics of reading—intersects with and perhaps cuts off the proliferation of the text–reader–interpretive community line.

Second Line: Ethics of Reading

If the first line I discuss is one of *proliferation* and *expansion* leading toward understanding, the second is one of *involution* and *stoppage* leading toward a breakdown. Right at the beginning of his 1979 book *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust*, de Man gets at the problem of the kinds of historical narratives I consider above. The first lines of his preface state that

Allegories of Reading started out as a historical study and ended up as a theory of reading. I began to read Rousseau seriously in preparation for a historical reflection on Romanticism and found myself unable to progress beyond local difficulties of interpretation. In trying to cope with this, I had to shift from historical definition to the problematics of reading. (ix)

Why does de Man start by detailing this shift in focus? He could just as easily have started by saying, “*Allegories of Reading* is a theory of reading.” Something about this shift must be important, but de Man notes that it is “of more interest in its results than in its causes” (ix). In other words, he is not interested in historicizing his shift in thought. Nor am I. What I find to be crucial here is the interruption of one line of thought, the historical, by another, the local, as if these two lines cannot exist simultaneously, as if the local cuts off access to the historical.

For de Man, this disjunction between the historical and the local is perhaps the key question for literary studies. *Allegories of Reading* dwells within this opposition as a means of deconstructing it. That is, de Man continually argues that this disjunction—whether formulated as historical/local, as I do here, or as outside/inside, rhetoric/grammar, or meaning/form, as de Man variously does—cannot ever be fully reconciled. It is this impossibility of reconciliation that prevents de Man from writing a historical study. He argues that reading can never fully and completely move from the inside of a text to the outside of its context. He writes,

Behind the assurance that valid interpretation is possible, behind the recent interest in writing and reading as potentially effective speech acts, stands a highly respectable moral imperative that strives to reconcile the internal, formal, private structures of literary language with their external, referential, and public effects. (3)

For de Man this “striv[ing] to reconcile” always remains impossible precisely because “assurance that valid interpretation is possible” relies too heavily on a model that moves all too quickly toward a reconciliation of irreconcilable terms. Thus, for de Man, the ethical becomes an interruption of the drive toward understanding. In terms of the first line I discuss above, the line of ethics disrupts the movement from text to interpretive community, from inside to outside, by asserting that such a movement remains beholden to an unquestioned formalist system. De Man writes that “the recurrent debate opposing intrinsic to extrinsic criticism stands under the aegis of an inside/outside metaphor that is never being seriously questioned” (5). Not questioning this metaphor, for de Man, leads to groundless assumptions about the work that literary criticism can do. Any reading based on such groundless assumptions would be an unethical reading. An ethical reading practice, on the other hand, would “seriously question” any and all grounding metaphors. In fact, a de Manian ethical reading may never get past this kind of questioning.

In other words, de Man’s deconstructive reading² endlessly short-circuits interpretation by claiming that reading is impossible when it seeks a complete understanding or “valid interpretation” of the movement from text to context, of the movement from a

work of literature to a critical understanding of that work. He writes that “the attraction of reconciliation [of form and meaning, of text and context] . . . accounts for the metaphorical model of literature as a kind of box that separates an inside from an outside, and the reader or critic as the person who opens the lid in order to release in the open what was secreted but inaccessible inside” (5). Reading, for de Man, can never reach this reconciliation. Thus, reading becomes a series of endless reversals that lead not toward truth or understanding, but toward a space where it is “impossible to give an answer” that would ground any reading. In a sense, it is impossible to read de Man here. One would have to cite his readings at length to illustrate the constant undermining of interpretation by the very terms that interpretation employs. What is important for this discussion is where all readings lead for de Man.

He ends his reading of Proust³ by stating that “*A la recherche du temps perdu* narrates the flight of meaning, but this does not prevent its own meaning from being, incessantly, in flight” (78). That is, the flight of meaning that de Man finds in Proust cannot be said to be the meaning of the work, because such an assertion would rest on an unjustified ground of meaning. This incessant flight leads a reader of de Man to a question: Where do we end up if we read ethically, if we continually question the metaphors that ground our readings? De Man argues that

we end up . . . in the same state of suspended ignorance. Any question about the rhetorical mode of a literary text is always a rhetorical question which does not even know whether it is really questioning. The resulting pathos is an anxiety (or bliss, depending on one’s momentary mood or individual temperament) of ignorance. (19)

We end up in ignorance or bliss, depending on our reaction to the impossibility of reading, on how we react to de Man’s claim that no reading can ever ground itself in the truth. In other words, reading never reaches a point where “truth” can fully trump “ignorance.” De Man’s ethical line of reading continually doubles back on itself as it continually fails to reconcile the metaphors that it continually takes for granted. De Man cannot produce a historical study because “the problematics of reading” can never be rendered unproblematic. A de Manian reading “is condemned (or privileged) to be forever the most rigorous and,

consequently, the most unreliable language in terms of which man names and transforms the world” (19).

In a sense, then, ethics for de Man is all about a continual acknowledgment that a reading can never be finalized in an interpretation. In the case of my brief discussion of reading, an ethical de Manian reading would have to constantly assert that the second line of ethics continually undermines any claims that the first line of movement from text to interpretive community would make. Any reading that would make a claim to understanding via a route from inside to outside would be groundless and unethical. I wish to make no such claims. I do, however want to dwell on this de Manian impasse and attempt to map some of its effects. That is, if one of the consequences of following the de Manian line of ethics is the constant interruption of the line that moves from inside to outside, I want to ask the following questions: How has this impasse affected the concept of reading? What has been produced by the movement away from text (the self-contained work) to context (the historical and political events surrounding the text) and by the very questioning of this movement as it is happening?

The Literary Studies/Cultural Studies Divide, and Ethics

Just as the movement from self-contained text to material context often gets portrayed as liberatory, so does the purported movement from literary studies to cultural studies. Herbert Benítez Pezzolano, in his essay “Resistance to Literature,” offers a succinct description of the literary studies/cultural studies divide: “To speak about literature within the field of Cultural Studies, or worse, to delineate an object of study that would be literature as an aesthetic discourse (according to which there would still be a need to propose something like literary studies) have become activities that fall under suspicion of idealism” (95). Such a critique is well documented, and few would argue with the productive power of pointing out the elitist, “exclusive and overspecialized” (Miklitsch 258) nature of the category “literature.” To speak of “literature” without quotation marks naturalizes the material conditions and history of the concept and hearkens back to an age of literary criticism marked by close textual attention to literary texts that have no connection to the