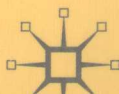


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Formalist Criticism and Reader-Response Theory

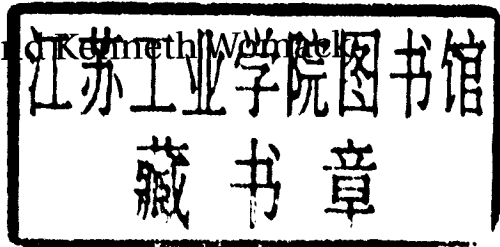
*Todd F. Davis
& Kenneth Womack*



transitions

Formalist Criticism and Reader-Response Theory

Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack



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First published 2002 by

PALGRAVE

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010

Companies and representatives throughout the world

PALGRAVE is the new global academic imprint of
St. Martin's Press LLC Scholarly and Reference Division and
Palgrave Publishers Ltd (formerly Macmillan Press Ltd).

ISBN 0-333-76531-1 hardback

ISBN 0-333-76532-X paperback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and
made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Davis, Todd F., 1965-

Formalist criticism and reader-response theory/Todd F. Davis
and Kenneth Womack.

p. cm. - (Transitions)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-333-76531-1 - ISBN 0-333-76532-X (pbk.)

1. Formalism (Literary analysis) 2. Reader-response criticism.

I. Womack, Kenneth. II. Title. III. Transitions (Palgrave (Firm))

PN98.F6 D38 2000

801'.95-dc21

2001058649

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

11 10 09 08 07 06 05 04 03 02

Printed in China

Formalist Criticism and Reader-Response Theory

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General Editor: Julian Wolfreys

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General Editor's Preface

Transitions: *transition-em*, n. of action. 1. A passing or passage from one condition, action or (rarely) place, to another. 2. Passage in thought, speech, or writing, from one subject to another. 3. a. The passing from one note to another b. The passing from one key to another, modulation. 4. The passage from an earlier to a later stage of development or formation . . . change from an earlier style to a later; a style of intermediate or mixed character . . . the historical passage of language from one well-defined stage to another.

The aim of *Transitions* is to explore passages and movements in critical thought, and in the development of literary and cultural interpretation. This series also seeks to examine the possibilities for reading, analysis, and other critical engagements which the very idea of transition makes possible. The writers in this series unfold the movements and modulations of critical thinking over the last generation, from the first emergences of what is now recognised as literary theory. They examine as well how the transitional nature of theoretical and critical thinking is still very much in operation, guaranteed by the hybridity and heterogeneity of the field of literary studies. The authors in the series share the common understanding that, now more than ever, critical thought is both in a state of transition and can best be defined by developing for the student reader an understanding of this protean quality.

This series desires, then, to enable the reader to transform her/his own reading and writing transactions by comprehending past developments. Each book in the series offers a guide to the poetics and politics of interpretative paradigms, schools, and bodies of thought, while transforming these, if not into tools or methodologies, then into conduits for directing and channelling thought. As well as transforming the critical past by interpreting it from the perspective of the present day, each study enacts transitional readings of a number of well-known literary texts, all of which are themselves conceivable as

having been transitional texts at the moments of their first appearance. The readings offered in these books seek, through close critical reading and theoretical engagement, to demonstrate certain possibilities in critical thinking to the student reader.

It is hoped that the student will find this series liberating because rigid methodologies are not being put into place. As all the dictionary definitions of the idea of transition above suggest, what is important is the action, the passage: of thought, of analysis, of critical response. Rather than seeking to help you locate yourself in relation to any particular school or discipline, this series aims to put you into action, as readers and writers, travellers between positions, where the movement between poles comes to be seen as of more importance than the locations themselves.

Julian Wolfreys

Acknowledgements

Special thanks are due to Julian Wolfreys, the *Transitions* series editor, for his steadfast encouragement, abundance of generosity, and general goodwill. We are also grateful to Margaret Bartley, Felicity Noble, and Anna Sandeman for their efforts on behalf of this volume, as well as to James Decker, Dinty Moore, and Gary Weisel for their friendship and advice. As always, we owe particular debts of gratitude to our wives, Shelly Davis and Neneng Womack, for their kindness, tolerance, and support as we saw this volume through to its completion.

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Introduction: Moving beyond the Politics of Interpretation

What, beyond reinforcing status, is the function of criticism?

(Paul Lauter, *Canons and Contexts*)

Issues of value and evaluation tend to recur whenever literature, art, and other forms of cultural activity become a focus of discussion, whether in informal or institutional contexts.

(Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value*)

Literary studies have not yet found a way to institutionalize the lesson of recent criticism that no text is an island, that every work of literature is a rejoinder in a conversation or dialogue that it presupposes but may or may not mention explicitly.

(Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature*)

In *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (1987), Gerald Graff contends that 'no text is an island' (10). We might add that no form of theory or act of criticism is an island either. What critic or theorist can claim to lounge comfortably upon the unblemished sands of some uncharted isle sipping fresh guava juice, somehow untainted and untouched by the interpretive activity of past centuries? Indeed, all theory and criticism must claim its place in an ever-growing family tree. Over the course of the twentieth century – and sadly it appears to have continued into the twenty-first – critics and theorists alike have repeatedly ignored or done battle with their precursors, sometimes to the scholarly equivalent of death. How much richer and, perhaps, more valid might our reading strategies and the various readings they produce be if, instead of ridiculing our theoretical predecessors, we actually listen and examine how their legacy plays a role, albeit a subtle one, in our various acts of interpretation. It may be difficult for

some progeny to sit at the feet of their ancestors, listening as the elderly speak lovingly and nostalgically about the good old days when criticism actually made sense. But the desire for another generation to recall longingly how at one time criticism heeded the formal detail of a given literary work, offering a close reading and an appraisal of it, or how in yesteryear criticism actually believed there was a connection between the text and the world beyond the text, suggesting that the teaching of literary works might actually impact how we live beyond their bookish margins, should not be interpreted as a sign of critical dementia. Regardless of our level of comfort, we surely would gain a greater appreciation for the work that preceded us and the manner in which that work informs our own acts of interpretation if we would take a moment to listen to such voices, engaging with them in a dialogue that seeks to better understand the other, rather than attacking the other with an aggressive monologue designed to drown out competing voices.

Perhaps the most famous – and maybe the most ridiculous – theoretical example of this kind of academic jousting between parent and child may be found in the oedipally driven theory of Harold Bloom. While no one can contest that the *Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973) represents a landmark work of criticism in the twentieth-century book of letters, its own influence and ensuing damage to the profession of criticism should be noted. The violence at the root of Bloom's theoretical perspective – that somehow the child must kill the parent to advance artistically – seems to have found a comfortable home in an academy where graduate students are encouraged to publish while they are in school in hopes that they might compete in an ever-challenging job market, where young professors may be expected to publish at least two books within their first few years on the job if they hope to be granted tenure. Yes, an artist or critic must in some way find his or her own voice, moving beyond the merely derivative.¹ But does such a move necessitate an act of aggression? Perhaps one reason for the success of Bloom's theory is that it fits well within a capitalistic economic framework. In order to determine ownership of a work of art, shouldn't the artist have to demonstrate how his or her work is radically different than other art that has come before? If an artist were to emphasize instead how the new painting or sculpture or novel was derived from or influenced by other artists or teachers, regardless of the competency of the technique and the overall success of the composition, in the current cultural climate that

artist would be assured of failure. Similarly, the professionalization of English studies over the course of the past century appears to have been heavily influenced by capitalism. Such a system demands that critics and artists alike understand originality – the creation of new knowledge – as more about explaining how others are wrong and less about describing what is right in previous criticism or art and then building upon it.² Sadly, in far too many instances, originality is defined as a breaking with the past, a movement forward that attempts to demonstrate that those who came before had it all wrong. The trouble with such a system – outside of its arrogance and ignorance – is that the cycle of intellectual violence must be perpetuated if the system is to continue to exist. Such a system of knowledge demands that intellectual violence be passed from generation to generation. A note to those who will very soon step into the arena: We who attempt to usurp the critical throne must inevitably become critical fathers or mothers ourselves, and thus face the prospect of death at the hands of our own academic children. If such a picture proves unseemly and absurd, what, then, are the alternatives?

Perhaps we should begin by revisiting Bloom's use of the Oedipus story as a metaphor for artistic and critical formation. The most important aspect of Sophocles's tale – and its main function within the religious festival when it was first staged – has far less to do with the belatedly appended Freudian notion about sons and fathers and their fated clash over mothers and far more to do with Oedipus's tragic mistake. The hubris out of which Oedipus acts leads to his downfall, and it is hubris that the viewers of this play may avoid if they attend to Sophocles's counsel. We have no control over our fate, Sophocles suggests. The gods will do with us as they please. But we do have the ability to control our own responses to that fate, to act with humility. We would do well as critics to heed Tiresias's warning and move forward with some degree of modesty and respect for the lessons of the past. By doing so, we may avoid hurting others or ourselves with criticism's current language of conquest and violence. We are not arguing, however, for the end of argument. The academy would lose its integrity if we did not demand that the work of our intellectual ancestors be examined and tested, that the validity of their theories and readings be scrutinized. If new knowledge is to be made, the makers cannot simply accept the lessons of the past without reflection and care; to do so would be tantamount to stagnation, an intellectual death of another sort. Yet something has been lost

over the course of the past century. In a system – perhaps industry is the more appropriate word – that demands more and more intellectual product from its members, it is inevitable that instead of regarding seriously the rich inheritance of the past – stopping to analyze how we continue to use principles and methods from this inheritance – we disparage it, relegating it to some academic nether region for the outdated and unfashionable. While we admit that all acts of criticism are political, that no interpretative performance exists outside the hermeneutic circle of power, we would suggest that a healthier approach to the act of literary criticism might involve the notion of theoretical collaboration.³

As Graff has already established, no book stands alone. In fact, the very book you hold in your hands is connected to myriad other texts, including the texts that comprise the *Transitions* series to which it belongs. Indeed, the series' nomenclature itself points toward the idea of the kind of collaboration that is of most interest to us. To be in transition is to move from one place to another; in that movement, however, one always brings part of the place one leaves to the new place where one has just arrived. In this way, criticism might be compared to the houses we have lived in and the neighborhoods where we have played. While we may never see those neighborhoods or live in those houses again – likely not even knowing who lived or played there before us – they nonetheless continue to shape who we are in the present moment.⁴ Correspondingly, those who have lived in the homes we inhabit leave part of who they are behind when they start on their journey toward a new destination. Our life is joined to their life – even if we never meet them – because of the artifacts they leave behind: the color of paint on the walls, the built-in bookshelf in the corner. In other words, who we are and how we think and act is always a collaboration with the past, a creation that represents a transition from one thing to another. How many critics have begun their careers living in one theoretical neighborhood only to move to another in mid-life? A fine example at present is the celebrated critic Susan Gubar. With the publication of such works as *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) and *No Man's Land* (1988-94) with Sandra M. Gilbert, Gubar established herself as a feminist critic of great influence and scholarly depth. Since that time she has gone on to write about the issues of race in *Racechanges* (1997) and is currently exploring ethnicity and suffering in terms of the Holocaust and Jewish identity. Not surprisingly, with each transition Gubar has not abandoned

her past. Instead, at every turn her past interests and discoveries inform her present thought. Thus, gender and race issues impact her present work on the Holocaust, allowing for the production of a rich and variegated criticism that helps us to see how her range of concerns are interrelated, not separate or distinct issues. In other words, transition allows us to see more holistically – a healthy idea for a world that grows smaller by the day due to technological advances. At this point in history, we cannot afford to build ideological and theoretical walls within our criticism; it should not be our goal to isolate ourselves from other critics and their interpretative strategies. Rather, if we have any hope for healthy growth in our discipline, we should seek to communicate openly with one another despite our differences, exchanging ideas and building upon the insights that each may bring.

Language is also in flux at all times, as is the criticism created from that language. We may attempt to capture language by producing dictionaries and grammars and other static instruments that offer the illusion of control and consistency, but those who use language to tell new stories of our experience inevitably find fresh and inventive ways to employ words, circumventing all of the tools that seek to harness them. As with language, criticism and theory must be in flux, in transition, in order to maintain its health. As Ralph Waldo Emerson contends, 'He in whom the love of truth predominates will keep himself aloof from all the moorings, and afloat. He will abstain from dogmatism, and recognize all the opposite negations between which, as walls, his being is swung' (21). Without transition – the state that Emerson refers to as 'repose' – we are left with nothing more than the mechanical, the rote; no new thought will lead us into a more profound wonder of our condition and the art that represents it. Without the ability to move, to remain unattached, we can do little to protect ourselves from the critical pundits who rise up, espousing some singular, controlling school of thought. At the root of transition is the idea that we might have the ability to transcend our limitations, our finite condition as humans, by moving from one idea to another, and the most productive and viable manner to make such a move is through collaboration, a joining with the Other who may help us to see what we have never even imagined. From decade to decade, the critical vogue that determines what most readers focus upon in the act of reading undergoes a series of transformations, often in dramatic and provocative ways. Such transformations are not the

only shifts, however. Even within a given decade, transitions and negotiations occur as critics engage in scholarly dialogue. Sadly, over the last several decades, less and less dialogue appears to be occurring. A critical climate in which critics of a like mind gather at the same meetings or read exclusively one another's texts, never encountering critics of different and diverse persuasions who might actually disagree with their thoughts, is an unhealthy one. No collaboration or transition can take place in such an atmosphere, and, as a result, the academy suffers in terms of the kinds of knowledge that it might create.

Think of the potentially fruitful conversations that might occur between a New Historicist and a Formalist as they examine a work by John Irving, for instance. Each critic brings a particular strength to a reading of Irving's *The World According to Garp* (1978) but, as is often the case, each has difficulty seeing what the other sees. Whether the critic ignores certain aspects of the work intentionally or simply cannot see them as a result of years of training and practice is irrelevant. Without some kind of collaboration, potential knowledge is lost. In lectures, the evolutionary biologist and celebrated paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould often points toward the ways other disciplines offer the key to unlock the doors to problems that have left certain narrowly focused, disciplinary thinkers dumbfounded. The inescapable result of wearing the 'glasses' of only one discipline or critical theory is that one can see only what such glasses reveal. The New Historicist, if he or she is unwilling to cross theoretical boundaries in order to learn from the Formalist, will perceive only the ways the 1970s cultural and political scene impacts Irving, leading him to include such themes in his novel as feminism, gender formation and transformation, the changing family structures of the period, and the political climate of post-Vietnam America. The Formalist, needless to say, will fare no better. Instead of understanding the role history and culture plays in the creation of Irving's fictional world, he or she likely will focus exclusively upon Irving's use of a Dickensian narrative style, his textual argument with postmodern fiction and the metafictional forms it uses, and the symmetry and balance of his novel, which concludes with a final chapter, 'Life After Garp,' that offers fictional resolution. Needless to say, if the two critics can engage one another in a critical conversation, their understanding of the work will be far more comprehensive, and as they continue to write criticism in the future, they will be forced to consider the principles of the other's