

# THE PRACTICE OF READING

Interpreting the Novel

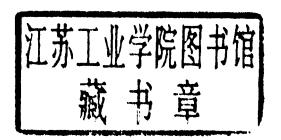
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Interpreting the Novel

Derek Alsop and Chris Walsh





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### For Angela and Linden with love

However much thou art read in theory, if thou hast no practice thou art ignorant.

Muslih-al-Din Sheikh Sa'adi, Gulistan (1258), trans. James Ross

This book is not directed to academics, because only a small remnant of them still read for the love of reading.

Harold Bloom, The Western Canon (1994)

What I have been saying is that whatever they do, it will only be interpretation in another guise because, like it or not, interpretation is the only game in town.

Stanley Fish, Is There a Text in This Class? (1980)

A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, I think, that in each of the parts there is something of each of the other parts.

Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction' (1884)

#### Preface

A preface is a good place to tell readers what to expect – and what not to expect – in a book. Although, in this book, the challenging and flouting of expectations are shown to be an important part of the novel-reading experience, it would be a trifle perverse were we to require our readers to proceed to the following chapters in uncertain anticipation of their contents. So what kind of book is *The Practice of Reading: Interpreting the Novel?* And what kind of book is it not?

First, this book is not an introductory survey or synopsis of established theoretical and critical approaches. Neither does it attempt to help readers catch up with the latest developments in accounts of the reader in current literary theory. The present proliferation of introductory books is partly the response to a certain feeling of helplessness we all experience when faced with so many new, and often complex, theoretical books. Geoffrey Bennington has aptly acknowledged the shared 'recognition of the need to "gain time" . . . allowling readers to make conversation . . . about thinkers whose work there has not been time to read'. 1 The Practice of Reading, in this sense, will not save readers much (if any) time. In our references to influential critical thinkers of the late twentieth century, we do not attempt to provide a concise survey of their achievements, or a broad outline of their careers and summaries of their contributions to current thinking. Although we do hope that readers will find many informed points of departure for their own further reading of criticism, the main aim of our book is to encourage a return to the close reading of novels. Our use of theory in the pages that follow is eclectic; our aim is always the elucidation of the experience of reading the novels selected, and the revelation of the problems – and pleasures! – which reading entails. Therefore, there is no single favoured critical discourse: we are interested in all theories which offer insights into reading novels. Far from offering a short-cut, we aim to celebrate the pleasures of careful, detailed attention, and if this volume belongs to

x Preface

any tradition it might be best placed alongside those texts (whatever their critical persuasion) which demonstrate a commitment to close reading. However, this is not to say that this book has no introductory qualities: those unfamiliar with theories of reading will find a range of approaches explained and applied. We do not assume previous intensive critical reading on the part of our readers, and so do not take for granted complex technical issues. Our aim is to be lucid about the helpfulness of certain ideas and perspectives in defining the importance of the reader's role in the production of meaning. To do this we must at times simplify, but we aim not to oversimplify; we use terminology when it is helpful, not because it is fashionable. This book is not written as a reaction against theory: we do not, for instance, lament the excesses of postmodernism. Neither do we wish to provide a critique aimed at exposing the weaknesses of particular theoretical approaches. But nor do we pay lip-service to current critical orthodoxies. Ultimately, we are much more interested in readings of novels than in the use of novels to validate preferred theories.

The Practice of Reading has a few, simple premises; that reading novels demands the skills of careful textual analysis; that no thoroughgoing analysis of the novel can ignore those theoretical developments, from reception aesthetics to poststructuralism and beyond, which have placed the activity of reading at the centre of critical debate; and that the best way to examine theoretical concepts is through the practice of reading. Most importantly, behind every claim made in the following pages is the governing idea that reading is a creative, interpretational activity with profound and transforming implications. We hope this book conveys our sense of the urgency and the intensity of the reading experience. As we will see, though, what we call 'the experience of reading' is infinitely complex. We will not be suggesting that there is some simple 'experience' to be valued above and beyond more sophisticated reflections on reading. It is the nature and quality of the experience which matters, not the mere fact that when we read we inevitably have some kind of experience. Our aim is to return the reader to the practice of close reading in the light of the various issues and questions which any detailed consideration of reading inevitably raises. With its emphasis on practice, the book explores acts of interpretation in terms of the dynamics of the reading process.

It is no accident, though, that the book opens and closes by referring to the thrill of reading, as expressed by commentators as different

Preface xi

as Richard Rorty and A. S. Byatt. We agree with Rorty (and his critical practice never oversimplifies the matter) that 'books should make a difference', and our treasured memories of the experience of reading are, like Byatt's, those which 'make the hairs on the neck... stand on end'. It is worth stressing here that wherever critics express their commitment to reading there is likely to be some virtue. To take an example from Chapter 2: although we have reservations about Melvyn New's view of *Tristram Shandy*, his idea that 'our interpretations are our lives' suggests that we have more in common with his approach than with the approaches of others for whom criticism has nothing to do with values.

We ought, perhaps, in this preface, to remark on the method which takes one major novel per chapter (or, in the case of Chapter 7, a major trilogy of novels) to illustrate particular aspects of the reading process. Most important, here, is the assumption throughout that reading is an intertextual activity. To read Tristram Shandy is to be told (explicitly, by Tristram) to 'read, read', and no close attention to Sterne's novel could leave the reader without the strongest sense that the novel owes much of its textual existence to the writings of others, and that its indebtedness has a convoluted intertextual history. According to Derek Attridge, in a statement with which we entirely agree, we can never read Joyce for the first time: his texts intersect with all aspects of our reading culture. Similarly, Byatt's novel Possession, with which we end our discussion, has the final word on the intertextual nature of the reading experience, with its impressive collection of interpolated texts, merging a fictional recreation of the past with the threads of actual literary history. The range of novels we have chosen to discuss exemplifies the diverse nature of textual relations and interrelations.

We have also chosen these novels because they are themselves books which highlight the *significance* of reading: they offer plenty of particular instances of reading proper (for example, Elizabeth Bennet's crucial reading of Darcy's letter, or Pip's profoundly self-conscious reading of a note telling him to 'Please read this, here'); and they are more generally suggestive about the formative connections between reading and other experiences.

The novels selected allow us to introduce a range of complex issues arising from our overarching emphasis on the practice of reading. The choice of novels allows us to differentiate between the various kinds of issues which reading experiences raise, and the individual works xii Preface

allow us to find continuity and coherence in their acknowledgement of the central role of reading. At the same time the chronological ordering of the chapters serves to give some sense of the historical development of novelistic assumptions about reading.

It is not our aim to enter into debate about the legitimacy of different ideas of the literary canon, and we do not wish to proclaim some great new tradition. Generally, we have chosen novelists whose work is likely to be reasonably familiar to students of literature. Admittedly, such students are more likely to be familiar with Beckett's plays than with his Trilogy – if so, they will recognize some of Beckett's preoccupations discussed in these pages. In taking a relatively recent novel there is more uncertainty about readership, but the choice of Possession, as a Booker Prize-winner, at least ensures the fairly widespread reading associated with literary bestsellers. It is an assumption vital to the success of this book that the approaches and insights which can be applied to reading these novels can certainly be applied to reading other novels. But we find that these novels give us a particular flexibility in examining the role of the reader, and provoke in profound and compelling ways crucial questions about the nature of the practice of reading.

And here, for the first time, surfaces one of the paradoxes of this book, which some will welcome and others perhaps will condemn. Though it is our aim always to emphasize the creative, constitutive role of the reader, and though we believe that literature is an experience and that reading novels creates them as they thereafter come to be known, nevertheless we often discuss the novels as if they invited the responses we give. And, worse undoubtedly in some eyes, we continue to celebrate the texts themselves, as if they were responsible for our experiences. However, our understanding of the problems attendant upon such a view of texts is throughout a central issue in this book, as we acknowledge the complexities of the hermeneutic circle which takes us from subject to object and back again.

Finally, it might be asked why we wish to concentrate on the novel in our account of the practice of reading. In a sense the answers are simple. We are interested in the particular kinds of reading that novel-reading entails. It might fairly be urged that some of the claims about what happens when we read this or that novel are equally relevant to poems, plays, biographies, essays, or indeed any other texts; but, as we argue below, we have specific kinds of reading agenda when we come to read novels. We enter, as it were, 'novel-reading mode', and

Preface xiii

this leads to a different experience from, for instance, reading lyric poetry or dramatic tragedy. We would not wish to be exclusive in this claim - indeed, in some of the discussions which follow we make use of poetic and dramatic comparisons where we feel they are interesting – but we do aim at a coherence which would otherwise be impossible were we to try to over-generalize about what is involved in the practice(s) of reading. Broadly, and not surprisingly, the features which distinguish novel-reading from other kinds of reading have to do with narration, plot, time, point of view and the complex interactions between such features. Wherever, in the chapters that follow, we discuss such topics as the temporal aspect of the reading experience. the processes of anticipation and retrospection; the reader's shifting expectations of narrative development, the reader's relationship with the narrator, and the reader's self-conscious role as reader, we are raising issues which have a special application to the novel, and which it would not be possible to raise in quite the same way were we to attempt to deal also with the conventions which circumscribe the reading of poetry, drama, and other kinds of prose. Put another way, the reader of the novel encounters such issues in a context which has its own special implications and makes its own special demands, and this book aims to deal with that context.

As practising teachers, we believe that the issues considered in this book will be of relevance to all students of the novel. The choice of novels reflects as broadly as possible the field of study normally open to such students through numerous university and college courses. For this reason, we hope this book will not only stimulate reading and thought, but will be useful.

Derek Alsop Chris Walsh 23 April 1998

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Chris Walsh would like to thank: Glyn Turton for his kindly interest in the project since its inception; and Michael Wheeler, whose guidance, support and encouragement over a quarter of a century have been invaluable.

Any faults in the book are ours.

#### List of editions used

All quotations from, and page references to, the main novels discussed in this study are to the following editions, unless otherwise specified.

- Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. Vivien Jones (London: Penguin, 1996).
- Samuel Beckett, *Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: John Calder, 1994).
- A. S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance* (London: Vintage, 1991).
- Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. Charlotte Mitchell (London: Penguin, 1996).
- George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Terence Cave (London: Penguin, 1995).
- James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. Seamus Deane (London: Penguin, 1992).
- Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. Melvyn New and Joan New (London: Penguin, 1997).

#### Contents

Preface	ix
Acknowledgements	xiv
List of editions used	XV
1 Reading and Interpretation	1
2 The Role of the Reader: Tristram Shandy	28
3 The Process of Reading: Pride and Prejudice	51
4 The Experience of Reading: Great Expectations	76
5 Deconstruction and Reading: Daniel Deronda	96
6 Reading as Revelation: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man	119
7 Reading the Self: Beckett's <i>Trilogy – Molloy</i> ; <i>Malone Dies</i> ; <i>The Unnamable</i>	140
8 Postmodernist Readings: <i>Possession</i>	163
Conclusion	184
Notes	192
Select Bibliography	207
Index	216

#### I Reading and Interpretation

What happens when someone reads a novel? What do novel-readers actually do? Is it really possible to generalize about 'the role of the reader' and 'the experience of reading'? How is meaning produced? How far does meaning depend on the reader, and how far on the text of the novel itself? To what extent – if any – should the novelist's stated intentions be taken into account in discussing the process of reading? How important are language and context to reading practices? How significant are various modern developments in literary theory and criticism for our understanding of what is involved in the process of reading novels?

These and other related questions will be explored in the chapters which follow. In this introductory chapter, however, the focus will be on the nature of reading and interpretation, and the relationship between them, in the context of recent critical and theoretical discussions. It is often the practice, in those books which aim to examine and apply the insights of theory to the description of reading, to attempt a kind of catalogue of critical approaches. But if the motive for trying to provide an inclusive, balanced and exhaustive summary of positions is understandable, the result can too easily be an utterly routine and predictable orthodoxy – the re-establishment of the current canon of acceptable theories, rather than an engagement with the realities of the process of reading and understanding literary texts. Our experience might well echo Richard Rorty's feeling when he came to 'slog through' a 'methodical' anthology of readings on Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness (1902):

. . . one psychoanalytic reading, one reader-response reading, one feminist reading, one deconstructionist reading, and one new historicist reading. None of the readers had, as far as I could see, been enraptured or destabilized by *Heart of Darkness*. I got no sense that

the book had made a big difference to them, that they cared much about Kurtz or Marlow or the woman 'with helmeted head and tawny cheeks' whom Marlow sees on the bank of the river. These people, and that book, had no more changed these readers' purposes than the specimen under the microscope changes the purpose of the histologist.<sup>1</sup>

Rorty's claim needs qualifying, perhaps: the nature of the specimen will certainly affect the conclusions the histologist draws. (An 'histologist' is someone who examines the minute structures of biological tissues.) But the key word above is purpose. We shall argue later that every reading of a novel has its own history, and its own context; and that these histories and contexts are locatable in a wider, shared historical context. There is, however, a risk here of emphasizing the general context at the expense of the personal situation of the reader. For all readers read with purpose (with design, with intention). This is so basic a notion that it is easy (even for critics!) to overlook it: it is fundamental - the very ground on which we stand. We read on purpose, as the idiom has it. And the purposes of no two readers are quite the same, precisely because of the personal element. Only persons can read. Individual readers read on the basis of different personal motives and, unsurprisingly, different particular readings result. This is what makes the critical discussion of alternative readings interesting: otherwise we would find ourselves not only reading the same texts in the same contexts, we would be producing readings which could only be differentiated on the basis of their ideological positions and associated critical methodologies. And the result would be the kind of bland monotony Rorty describes.

We identify, then, with Rorty's assumption that the critical properly includes the personal, that reading books should, somehow, *make a difference*. We intend to convey, in the chapters which follow, a sense both of the rapture and the rupture that reading entails. Though a range of methods is employed in critically discussing the novels in *The Practice of Reading*, we aim not to be methodical in the tedious sense described by Rorty. Our approach is consistently eclectic. Whatever approaches to reading are useful to describe the practice of reading particular novels, we use. You will not find a monolithic new historicist, psychoanalytical, or feminist 'reading' in this volume, though you will find insights related to each of these broad and overlapping theoretical discourses. But, though we are eclectic, we are not

neutral. We agree, for instance, with Matei Calinescu's observation on politicized readings:

Our relationship to texts that have acquired a personal significance for us – texts that have once occasioned moments of self-revelation or otherwise memorable reading experiences – cannot be erased in one act of one-dimensional political rereading.<sup>2</sup>

Retrospectively, if we wanted to, we could choose which theoretical or critical label to apply to our reading of a text, but no label would summarize adequately our total personal response to that text. In the passage just quoted, Calinescu has just been considering certain feminist accounts of the reading experience, having cited Patrocinio Schweickart's argument that 'the feminist inquiry into the activity of reading begins with the realisation that the literary canon is androcentric' (in other words, male-centred). Schweickart herself offers an excellent example of the immediacy and excitement of a memorable reading experience. Though, ostensibly, she uses the experience to support a theoretical agenda (the full title of her essay is 'Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading'), her account actually bears witness to the intensity of personal conviction which attends good reading. The sense of engagement remains vivid despite, rather than because of, the theoretical claims. Schweickart's paradigm for the 'feminist story' is Adrienne Rich's account of visiting the nineteenth-century American poet Emily Dickinson's home. At times, here, Rich's experience is universalized to serve Schweickart's theoretical agenda, but the claims are less convincing as part of a feminist manifesto than they are as testimony to the importance of a personal response. To illustrate our point, here are three extracts from Schweickart's essay:

The metaphor of visiting points to another feature of feminist readings of women's writing, namely, the tendency to construe the text not as an object, but as the manifestation of the subjectivity of the absent author – the 'voice' of another woman.<sup>4</sup>

Rich's metaphors together with her use of the personal voice indicate some key issues underlying feminist readings of female texts. On the one hand, reading is necessarily subjective. On the other hand, it must not be wholly so. One must respect the autonomy of the text. The reader is a visitor and, as such, must observe the necessary courtesies.<sup>5</sup>

In the feminist story, the key to the problem is the awareness of the double context of reading and writing. Rich's essay is wonderfully illustrative. To avoid imposing an alien perspective on Dickinson's poetry, Rich informs her reading with the knowledge of the circumstances in which Dickinson lived and worked.<sup>6</sup>

In literary-critical terms each of these claims could be said to be highly traditional: the first involves a sense of the author's 'presence' and communication with the reader; the second advocates a deferential respect for the text; the third endorses the connection between imaginative biography and criticism. In the history of literary criticism these are amongst the commonest of all critical stances, and, in that they have often served a critical canon as androcentric as the literary one, it is questionable how useful they can be in developing a specifically feminist theory of reading. Schweickart goes on to suggest that feminists should not choose what she calls the 'deconstructive plot' because it is important, politically, not 'to be overly enamored with the theme of impossibility': 'Instead, we should strive to redeem the claim that it is possible for a woman, reading as a woman, to read literature written by women.'7 According to this argument, we could simply side-step the implications of those theories which seriously challenge models of identity and presence, were we to favour a feminist agenda which asserts the importance of 'real' women readers and writers. Thus, Roland Barthes's announcement of 'the death of the author' would not be helpful to those wishing to recover the achievements of female authors. Responding to the following passage from Rich's essay, Schweickart celebrates its attempt to 'connect' with the author (choosing rather to ignore the ease of the claim that there were 'two mid-nineteenth century American geniuses'):

I am traveling at the speed of time, along the Massachusetts Turnpike . . . 'Home is not where the heart is', she wrote in a letter, 'but the house and adjacent buildings' . . . I am traveling at the speed of time, in the direction of the house and buildings . . . For years, I have been not so much envisioning Emily Dickinson as trying to visit, to enter her mind through her poems and letters, and through my own intimations of what it could have meant to be one of the two mid-nine-teenth century American geniuses, and a woman, living in Amherst, Massachusetts.<sup>8</sup>