EDITED BY JAMES L. MACHOR AND PHILIP GOLDSTEIN

RECEPTION STUDY

FROM LITERARY THEORY TO CULTURAL STUDIES

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PREFACE

This book is the result of an extensive collaborative effort that both of us have appreciated. As joint editors, we have been equally responsible for the design, the introductory sections, and the bibliographical scholarship of this volume and, thus, take equal credit and blame for its merits and shortcomings. We would like to thank the University of Delaware and Kansas State University for their financial support toward the completion and publication of this volume. We would also like to thank Steven Mailloux for suggesting that we undertake this project in the first place, as well as Julien Devereux, Nick Syrett, and Damien Treffs at Routledge for their editorial assistance at various stages of the work.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1992 Robert Holub complained that reception theory, remarkably successful in Germany, was "still an optional and marginal theoretical tendency in the United States" (23). However truly such a claim may describe the American reception of German reception theory, it does not assess very accurately reception theory and practice as a whole. Since the mid-1980s collections and casebooks have reexamined the reception of *Hamlet, Huckleberry Finn, Pride and Prejudice,* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* to mention just a few titles, and major works, including Steven Mailloux's *Rhetorical Power* and *Reception Histories,* Gary Taylor's *Reinventing Shakespeare,* Jane Tompkins's *Sensational Designs,* and Peter Widdowson's *Hardy in History,* have contributed markedly to Anglo-American reception criticism. Add to this work the reception studies in cultural studies—from Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* and Tony Bennett and Janet Wollacott's *Bond and Beyond* to Michael Bérubé's *Public Access*—as well as work in the history of the book, and it becomes apparent that reception study has been anything but marginal. Indeed, over the last ten years the number of British and American articles, book chapters, and full-length works in reception study has marked a virtual explosion in the field.[1]

These new reception studies divide into modern and postmodern types. Both types reconstruct the historical method that Anglo-American formal criticism, first established in the 1940s and 1950s, had so severely discredited; however, while the modern preserves traditional notions of textual autonomy, the postmodern challenges such aesthetic "foundations."

Initially, scholars treated reception only as an aspect of the author's development. Since an author's work often responds to commentary provided by friends, reviewers, or critics, scholars assumed that the study of these responses would help explain how and why the style, ideas, aims, or forms of a writer evolved. As Jerome McGann says in *The Beauty of Inflections,* a work's "critical history . . . dates from the first responses and reviews it receives. These reactions . . . modify the author's purposes and intentions, sometimes drastically, and they remain part of the processive life" of the work "as it passes on to future readers" (24).

McGann goes on to suggest that a work has "two interlocking histories, one that derives from the author's expressed decisions and purposes, and the other that derives from the critical reactions of the . . . various readers" (24). Traditional literary historians adopt the contrary view: to attribute meaning to a text is to engage in an impersonal act independent of the reader's expectations. For example, E. D.

Hirsch, Jr., argues that since "meaning" is a "constant, unchanging pole" of the "relationship" binding the text and the reader, the critic must establish a text's "objective" meaning before he or she assesses its subjective "significance" (8). Similarly, traditional Marxists believe that objective, public "understanding" precedes and transcends "interpretation"; however, while Hirsch considers the author's intention an autonomous, universally binding norm, the Marxists, who expect understanding to overcome the historical and institutional changes alienating the reader from the author, maintain that an objective account of the author's social conditions reveals the historical import of the author's meaning.

It is not surprising that these historians incisively explained the emergence of realism, naturalism, modernism, and other literary movements and genres; at the same time, these historians neglected the impact of the artist's and the reader's productive activities (see Macherey, 18–19). Because of such difficulties, the formal critics, who came to dominate Anglo-American literary study after World War II, discredited the historical method. Raymond Williams points out that during the 1940s and 1950s American New Critics and British Leavisites considered Historical Marxism the worst culprit because it reduced the work to an expression of the author's socioeconomic context, but they severely condemned all historical analyses because, instead of attending to the text itself, they described a work's causes or influences and an author's development (197). As McGann says, "[A] text-only approach has been so vigorously promoted during the last thirty years that most historical critics have been driven from the field" (17).

In response, some traditional literary historians simply dismissed the formal critiques, while others sought more subtle, complex accounts of a writer's style. McGann argues, for example, that, to overcome the "disciplinary crisis" resulting from the historians' defeat, critics should "integrate the entire range of sociohistorical and philological methods with an aesthetic and ideological criticism of individual works" (3). Similarly, in *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, Terry Eagleton claims that, to explain a poem like "The Waste Land" "as a poem which springs from a crisis of bourgeois ideology," one does not reduce the poem "to the state of contemporary capitalism"—rather, "Marxist criticism looks for the unique conjuncture" of such elements as "the author's class-position, ideological forms and their relation to literary forms, 'spirituality' and philosophy, techniques of literary production, aesthetic theory" (15–16; see also Jameson, 10).

The reception study of Hans Robert Jauss also reconstructs the historical method discredited by formalism; however, since he rejects what Hans-Georg Gadamer terms the Enlightenment's prejudice against prejudice, Jauss faults both the historians' neutral objectivity and the formal critics' figural indeterminacy. In the influential essay "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," he argues that traditional historians rightly emphasize art's social insight but ignore their own subjective involvement; as he says, they set themselves "outside of history and beyond the errors of . . . the historical reception" (9). Formalist critics, by contrast, ignore the author's original audience but emphasize their values and their methods. These critics evaluate texts and canons, overturn old traditions, and introduce new ones, but dismiss such factors as a genre's history and a writer's life and era (16–18).

Jauss maintains, in addition, that the reader's constructive activity, which brings together the author's historical context and the reader's models, paradigms, beliefs, and values, overcomes the destructive opposition between historical truth and formal methods. While the traditional defense of the historical method preserves the

autonomy of the critic or the inherent identity of the text, Jauss's reception study emphasizes the reader's constructive activity, which grasps both the author's historical context or "other" and the reader's own models, paradigms, beliefs, and values. By examining readers' changing horizons and sociohistorical contexts, reception study reveals literature's historical influence, what Jauss terms the "coherence of literature as an event" (22).

Modern reception study, which accepts Jauss's assumption that as positive constructive influences the prejudices of the reader establish his or her subjective horizon and divide it from the historical other, examines the changing horizons of a text's many readers. Consider, for example, the reception of *Hamlet*. The many works that examine the reception of this play acknowledge that formal, authorial, Derridean, feminist, Marxist, New Historical, and other interpretations pursue very different ends and aims, but, far from examining their historical development or their diverse historical contexts, these studies demand that the critic transcend his or her school by accepting the common view or the rational truth.[2] These studies admit that divergent schools of interpretation produce equally divergent readings but still consider the quest for a rational consensus desirable and even obligatory; however, such studies fail to acknowledge the diverse institutional positions, literary methods, and social, sexual, and ideological beliefs that inform the play's formal, authorial, historical, psychoanalytic, and poststructuralist readings.

For instance, the traditional Marxist reading of *Hamlet* claims that, upset by Gertrude's "o'erhasty" marriage and the ghost's disturbing revelations, Hamlet discovers that a shocking corruption and brutal inhumanity pervade the Danish court. In Victor Kiernan's terms, "Sins of individuals open his eyes to deep faults in the society he has hitherto taken for granted" (68; see also Kettle, 238; Kernan, 1979, 93; Margolies, 66–67; and Siegel). As a consequence, Hamlet tries but fails to reform Claudius, Gertrude, the court, and even the theater. For example, he directs the play within the play to "catch the conscience of the king" (2.2.561–62), sets up a spiritual "glass" to show Gertrude her "inmost part" (3.4.19–20), and recommends a nunnery to Ophelia to save her from "calumny" (3.1.134). That is, in an idealist fashion he imagines that the glass, the play, and his other "deep plots" will reform the court and even the times; as he says, "The Time is out of joint. O cursèd sprite that ever I was born to set it right" (1.5.187–88). In act 5, when he returns to Denmark, he admits that his "deep plots" did "pall," and he abandons his idealist tactics. Taking concrete action, he declares his love of Ophelia, reconciles the angry Laertes, avenges his poisoned father, and preserves his princely name and the royal succession.

Hence, for Marxists, the play depicts the dilemmas of the Renaissance and even the modern intellectual idealist. Besides offering its own reading, however, the conventional Marxist view takes to task interpretations in which a melancholy, repressed, or speculative Hamlet proves incapable of decisive action. For instance, an interpretation that is authorial because it appreciates Hamlet's analytical mind, Shakespeare's autonomous imagination, or tragedy's generic features claims that Hamlet believes the ghost and wants to take revenge, but, because of the world's evils, his speculative mind, his melancholy nature, or his mother's unseemly sexual appetite, he grows too depressed to do anything. This view began in the Romantic era when, to defend middle-class English literature against the aristocratic classical tradition, critics construed the play as the overflowing expression of Shakespeare's genius. In the Victorian and early modern era, when criticism

entered the university and assimilated the classical tradition, scholars such as A. C. Bradley construed Hamlet as a tragic hero whose melancholy state of mind, not his inability to act, brings about his downfall.

The authorial account made the play accessible to the nineteenth century's new middle-class reading public and "disinterested" academic humanists. Similarly, the development of specialized fields and independent professional associations justify the formal or textual account, which denies that Hamlet takes meaningful action, occupies a world of his own, or experiences a disabling disgust with life, because it is the play's images of poison, disease, corruption, and death that unify the work. Other institutional grounds support the Derridean or poststructuralist account, which also denies that Hamlet takes meaningful action and experiences a disabling disgust, but which goes on to show that the play's figural language undermines the language's literal import, the text's unity, the play's generic conventions, and even the traditional critics' methodology. Still other grounds support historical criticism, which claims that the religious beliefs of the Elizabethans, the conventions of revenge tragedy, or the ideals of Senecan stoicism, not the evils of nascent Renaissance capitalism nor the indecision of the analytical intellectual, explain why Hamlet hesitates. While the Marxist seeks to refute these diverse views, reception study maintains that these divergent readings of the play, radically incommensurable, reveal the sociohistorical grounds and the divided state of modern literary study, not the confused views of elitist, withdrawn critics. Indeed, these differences indicate the play's rich import and criticism's evolving practices and changing contexts.

As the case of *Hamlet* suggests, modern reception study limits the governing powers of theory and undertakes the historical analysis of changing interpretive practices. Jane Tompkins rightly says that

> classic texts, while they may or may not have originally been written by geniuses, have certainly been written and rewritten by the generations of professors and critics who make their living by them. . . . Rather than being the repository of eternal truths, they embody the changing interests and beliefs of those people whose place in the cultural hierarchy empowers them to decide which works deserve the name of classic and which do not (37).

Because it recognizes that the traditional canon embodies the "changing interests and beliefs" of authoritative readers or critics, reception study examines the sociohistorical contexts of interpretive practice.

Reception study also has within it a postmodern turn. That is, in its postmodern form, reception study adopts the philosophical assumption that, to justify particular claims of knowledge, it must reject grand narratives or philosophical ideals in favor of local histories (see Bertens, 6–8; Fairlamb, 57; and Lyotard, 37–41). This reception study may be neopragmatic, in which case it assumes that the epistemological critique of foundational theory reveals the biases or local interests that have always governed criticism. As Richard Rorty points out in *Consequences of Pragmatism,* the epistemological norms of traditional philosophy seek but fail to escape the philosopher's determinate historical context or "vocabularies." Philosophers who recognize their epistemological limits would not seek an irrefutable argument or defend the scientific method; they would redescribe the vocabularies of others. This reception study may also be post-Marxist, in which

case it presupposes that the reader's interpretive practices articulate the established methods of "hegemonic" literary discourse. As Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe argue, since hegemonic ideological practices fail to construct a full identity, the antagonisms and conflicts of diverse social contexts matter more than the systematic contradictions and predetermined stages of the Marxist "grand narrative" (97–105).

The Foucauldian or New Historical approach, which construes historical knowledge as anonymous, dispersed discourses organizing society as well as the body, also critiques the foundational norms of traditional theory; however, instead of explaining the historical contexts of readers' interpretive activities, this approach preserves the complexity of the literary text, which may assert both subversive and dominant discourses, and the autonomy of the critic, who may freely "affiliate" with established or with oppositional institutions (see Horwitz, 799–800). As Claire Colebrook says, the New Historicism considers "the cultural/aesthetic domain . . . an area of contestation where various forces (aesthetic, political, historical, economic, etc.) circulate" (24), yet the New Historicism also defends the traditional notion that historical texts are referential or that, as "self-fashioning," representation is fundamental to human experience (226–27). Thus, Stephen Greenblatt argues that Shakespeare's text constructs alien, subversive outlooks that anticipate but resist modern views, doctrines, and beliefs. As he says, "It was true that I could only hear my own voice, but my own voice was the voice of the dead" (1).

To reconstruct the historical method, both New Historicism and (post)modern reception study deny the transcendent status or transformative power of figural or theoretical ideals; however, instead of preserving the text's intrinsic complexity or the critic's autonomy, reception study undertakes the historical analysis of the changing conditions and reading practices through which texts are constructed in the process of being received. Both modern and postmodern reception study defend the historical against the purely formal approach, undertake the historical study of a text's diverse readings, and repudiate the autonomous norms and values of traditional theory; however, postmodern reception study also adopts the poststructuralist critique of "foundational" theory. Moreover, more fully than modern reception study, postmodern reception study examines women's, African-American, and multicultural literatures, popular culture, the ordinary reader, the history of the book, and so on. That is, modern reception study critiques the norms of theory but still assumes that canonical texts produce what Jauss terms the "emancipation of mankind from its natural, religious, and social bonds" (25), whereas, instead of defending canonical literature or preserving a utopian autonomy, postmodern reception study explores the rhetoric, politics, and/or interpretive communities of the traditional canon and the excluded literatures and culture.

Of course, cultural theorists of all sorts also repudiate the conventional distinction between high art and nontraditional literatures, popular culture, or ordinary readers' practices. Many cultural theorists have demonstrated that such literatures and practices do not always conform to established doctrines and views, nor does high art invariably subvert them (see, for example, Collins, 7–16; Easthope, 79; Polan; and Gendron); however, while these theorists reject the privileged status of canonical art, they do not question the universal values or objective truth of traditional aesthetics, even though this aesthetics justifies the privileged status of canonical art.[3] John Frow, who rejects not only that privileged status but also the absolute complexity of formal methods, claims, by contrast, that incompatible

"regimes of value" govern the reception of high and popular texts. Instead of reflecting or representing an exterior social group or an institutional hierarchy, these regimes of value establish their own hierarchy of values and methods (146; see also Bennett and Woollacott). In other words, even though many traditional and postmodern critics reject the privileged status of high art, they preserve an illusory hierarchy of uniformity. Reception theorists like Frow maintain, however, that the differences between high and popular culture reveal their equally diverse regimes of value or, as other reception theorists say, "interpretive communities," "rhetorical practices," or "reading formations."

Although the final section of this collection discusses objections to and critiques of reception study, we would like to mention here the widespread concern that the study of such diverse regimes of value cannot establish a consensus, engage in rational debate, or reform the profession or society. Some traditional and radical scholars argue that abandoning the Arnoldian faith in rational, objective truth opens literary and historical study to transient fashions, sectarian politics, and ethical relativism.[4] Reception study maintains, however, that abandoning this Arnoldian faith changes nothing because our local gender, class, and racial biases have always influenced interpretive practices. As Rorty and others maintain, philosophical critiques of foundational truth do not alter the everyday business of philosophy, history, or criticism; these critiques simply prepare the way for an examination of what was always taking place. In the past decade, when poststructuralist theory has established itself in English departments and when unfriendly legislatures and increased public opposition and political scrutiny threaten the careers of worthy students and faculty and the survival of many university programs, reception study may be the wiser option—it moves beyond theoretical critique and acknowledges, explains, and justifies the very different interests, contexts, and interpretive communities that compose our pluralistic society.

Initially a way of explaining an author's development, reception study has become an important mode of historical inquiry because to rehabilitate the historical method discredited by formalist criticism, reception study limits or rejects the transformative force of theoretical ideals and examines the changing "reading formations" or "interpretive communities" governing readers' practices. To illustrate this new importance, the sections of this collection present the various forms that reception study has taken in major disciplinary and interdisciplinary fields. In the first section, the four readings set forth the main theoretical trajectories in reception study, which range from Jauss's traditional, modern form to Bennett's radical, poststructuralist approach. In section II, the readings demonstrate some of the ways reception study has been put into practice in literary-critical studies. Essays discussing methodology and exemplifying the shape of reception work in the field of the "history of the book" comprise section III. Since attention to reception has been a significant component of work in cultural studies as well as media and mass-communication studies, the essays in section IV exemplify and address important versions of that work. To provide a different perspective, the readings in the last section enunciate the major challenges and objections that have been raised against reception theory and its practice. Lastly, for reference and further reading, a bibliography lists works in the following categories of reception study: general theoretical works; studies treating particular authors, texts, and/or historical contexts; books and articles on reception and the history of the book; and books and articles on reception within mass communication and popular culture.

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NOTES

1. The MLA *Bibliography* provides a telling index to this explosion, listing more than 3,900 items under "reception study" published during the last ten years.
2. For example, C. S. Lewis grants that the play has had many contrary readings, but they embarrass him because he fears that absurdities and weaknesses in the play must explain them. To avoid this damaging conclusion, he suggests that we examine "the poetry and the situation," not the main character (175). A. L. French also says that critics should not confuse the play and the main character, but he readily blames the many readings on the play's lapses, incoherence, and failures. In *HAMLET and the Philosophy of Criticism,* Morris Weitz admits that "there is no true, best, correct, or right explanation, reading, interpretation, or understanding of *Hamlet*, nor can there be" (258), but he still expects critics to overcome their differences and arrive at a consensus. Similarly, in *The Meanings of HAMLET,* Paul Gottshalk says that "no interpretation can explain *Hamlet* utterly" but then argues that many interpretations "may be coordinate. . . . [T]he possibilities of cooperation [among critical schools] are great and the impediments less than many seem to feel" (131). More recently in *HAMLET's Perfection* (1994), William Kerrigan grants that a "finite number" of conceptual frameworks explain the play's many readings (2) but denies that these frameworks justify our abandoning the pursuit of a "coherent understanding" (3). He even calls the play's post-structuralist critics "decadent" because their "new methods and concerns" give these critics "no way to solve the mysteries and unravel the cruxes" of the play(3).
3. For instance, Anthony Easthope complains that in the Frankfurt school's account, popular culture dupes ordinary readers into enjoying it (79), but he still says that his postmodern juxtaposition of high and popular art confirms the school's critique of modernity (1991, 100). In *Crusoe's Footprints,* Patrick Brantlinger admits that Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of Enlightenment science is too negative and despairing (185) and even that "art or high culture is no more radical or liberating in and of itself than is commodified mass culture" (196); at the same time, he dismisses the "status quo" functionalism of postmodern theory and defends the mimetic realism and the utopian potential with which humanist Marxism and the Frankfurt School endow canonical art.
4. For example, in "Authors as Rentiers," Alvin Kernan complains that in American literature departments "criticism's power grab" has expressed itself

   > as a variety of aggressive social causes such as feminism, racial tolerance, moral relativism, ethnicity, and sexual freedom, all rejecting traditional forms of authority, intellectual and social, and demanding that literature be used to further their own social and political programs (1990, 83).

   Paul Bové, opposes reception study on grounds that are radical but comparable: "Critical intelligence involves a demystification of intellectuals' sense of their independence, a constant genealogical self-criticism, and research into specific discourses and institutions as part of the struggle against oppressive power" (47; see also O'Hara, 7; Dasenbrock, 182; and Sprinker, 155).

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I

THEORETICAL ACCOUNTS OF RECEPTION

For the most part, reception theorists, who include Tony Bennett, Stanley Fish, Hans Robert Jauss, and Steven Mailloux, claim that the interpretive activities of readers—formal, historical, authorial, Derridean, feminist, Marxist, and so on—explain a text's significance and aesthetic value. The most traditional, Jauss emphasizes the reader's "horizon of expectations" but takes the author's intention to ground the text's historical "other" and to preserve its capacity to critique social life and transform readers. More radical, Bennett, Fish, and Mailloux claim that the activity of diverse readers addresses equally diverse interpretive communities or "reading formations" whose norms and values determine the validity of the interpretation. In doing so, Fish preserves the disciplinary limits of literary study; Mailloux posits a broad, cultural notion of rhetoric; and Bennett argues that the institutional practices or reading formations establish the norms and ideals of the literary subject.

A. THE HERMENEUTICS OF HANS ROBERT JAUSS

In "The Identity of the Poetic Text in the Changing Horizon of Understanding," Jauss maintains that the evolution of the audience, not the historical period of the author, explains the history of a literary text. He grants that the author's original audience establishes the intended meaning, but he argues that this historical meaning and the modern meaning are radically incommensurate. To describe the author's life or era, critics must not assume that they have privileged access to a text or ignore their subjective involvement with it; rather, to preserve what Jauss terms the "hermeneutic difference of self and other," they open themselves to the historical or cultural other presented by a text. In a platonic fashion, literary hermeneutics fosters an unending dialogue of self and other.

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