

# The New Imperative in Literary Criticism

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The purpose of this paper is in the first instance to situate the relative importance of the reader and the text in contemporary literary criticism. The basic tenets of the New Criticism are explored and illustrated, and the doctrine of the reader response criticism which has followed it is examined through the work of two of its leading proponents, Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser. It is argued that the decline of the New Criticism and the rise of reader response criticism can be explained in terms of a diminished notion of public verse and the ascendancy of a countervailing notion of private verse. Reader response criticism is then assessed in terms of its contribution to an understanding of the process of reading literature. It is concluded that there is a need for a new imperative in literary criticism which conceives literary understanding in terms of a communication process in which both text and reader are granted importance.

In 1918 T. S. Eliot felt compelled to write that "there ought to be honourable vacancies for men who like to write about literature without themselves having a 'method' to deliver" (p. 111). If ever such vacancies occurred, which in light of what was to follow is unlikely, they must have been filled by those who looked back to Leslie Stephen's (1892) *Hours in the Library* and the comfortable tradition of late nineteenth-century criticism which Stephen represented, rather than forward to the next decades of the twentieth century which Eliot himself was to influence so profoundly. For it was during the thirties and, with gathering momentum, into the sixties that what Randall Jarrall (1955) called "an age of criticism" (p. 63) evolved. During this time the New Criticism emerged and dominated literary studies in all their facets. If Denis Donoghue (1981) is right in his contention that "theory begins to matter only when it determines practice" (p. xiii), then the New Criticism certainly mattered since its "method," to return to Eliot's complaint, held sway over three decades of critical practice.

It has been conventionally argued that the New Criticism was initially a reaction against historicism, the approach to criticism exemplified by John Livingstone Lowes' *Road to Xanadu* (1927), and various contemporaries of the New Critics at the University of

Chicago. Typical of this view is George Watson's (1962) comment that, when the New Critics assumed teaching posts at major American universities, their "anti-historical manifestoes become fashionable" (p. 221). There is clear evidence to support this view in Cleanth Brooks' (1947) famous statement in his introduction to *The Well Wrought Urn* that "I have been anxious to see what residuum, if any, is left after we have referred the poem to its cultural matrix" (p. x),<sup>1</sup> and Rene Wellek and Austin Warren's (1956) admonition in their *Theory of Literature* that "the identification of literature with the history of civilization is a denial of the specific field and the specific methods of literary study" (p. 20).

Yet, with the perspective provided by what now appears to be the certain demise of the New Criticism,<sup>2</sup> the view that its chief methodological characteristic was a reaction against historical criticism can be questioned. This is not because of what it was seen to be during the period of its ascendancy, but rather because of what has come to replace it and react against it today. While the New Criticism may have been initiated by a dissatisfaction with historical criticism, what emerged as its major critical tenet, while consistent with this dissatisfaction and to some degree evolving out of it, was not anti-historicism, but an insistence on the primacy of the text over the individual response of the reader as the legitimate determiner of literary understanding and value.

It is against this belief that contemporary criticism has reacted. And what has come to replace the New Criticism is not a revival of historical criticism, but an assertion of the role of the reader and the relationship of the reader to the text in the process of literary understanding. The common basis of contemporary literary theory — as wide ranging in its specific orientation as reception aesthetics, Geneva criticism, and neo-Freudian psychoanalytic criticism<sup>3</sup> — is the central importance of the reader's response in the process of comprehending literature.

Why this shift has taken place is a question which has received less attention than have the particular canons of New Criticism and contemporary reader response criticism. Yet it is important to understand our present critical orthodoxy in terms of the orthodoxy of the past if for no other reason than to test the wisdom of our current rejection of New Critical doctrine. In this paper an attempt will be made to situate the tenets of the New Criticism in terms of reader response theory. The fundamental statements of the New Criticism will first be analyzed, and this analysis will then be followed by an examination of the work of two contemporary reader response critics, Stanley Fish and

Wolfgang Iser, who, while by no means representing the full range of reader response criticism, represent an influential North American and European perspective. It will then be argued that the process which led to the decline of the New Criticism and the rise of reader response theory can be described in terms of a diminished notion of public verse and the ascendancy of a countervailing notion of private verse. The final part of the paper assesses reader response theory in terms of this dichotomy. Specifically, the question will be raised whether we have gained in our conception of literature and literary understanding through our current preoccupation with reader response criticism and our concomitant rejection of New Critical doctrine, or, put another way, whether our current absorption with private as opposed to public verse makes a significant contribution to our understanding of how literature is read.

### **The New Criticism**

One of the anomalies of the New Criticism is that it was at once social in its outlook yet exclusive in its attitude. That it could be both was due largely to its educative impulse. For the New Critics the reading of literature was to be undertaken on the basis of a refined analytic capability. As Wimsatt and Beardsley (1954) stated in *The Verbal Icon*, the function of literary studies was to educate readers to a "full realization of poems themselves and hence to know good poems and distinguish them from bad poems" (p. 83). This education was to result from a deliberate learning process during which, according to Wellek and Warren (1956) in their *Theory of Literature*, the student of literature was to "translate his experience of literature into intellectual terms, assimilate it to a coherent scheme which must be rational if it is to be knowledge" (p. 15). The process of literary education was therefore seen to be one through which increasingly explicit, defensible, and sophisticated formulations of the meanings to be found in literary works could be acquired.

The belief that the process of proper reading could be learned and that correct readings could be distinguished from incorrect ones brought Wellek and Warren (1956) to describe literature in terms of "a super personal tradition, as a growing body of knowledge, insights, and judgements" (p. 19). Given this tradition, this external situating of the literary text with reference to the reader, it followed that, for the New Critics, a poem became, in the words of Wimsatt and Beardsley (1954), something which "belongs to the public. It is embodied in language, the peculiar possession of the public, and it is about human beings, an object of public knowledge" (p. 5). The liter-

ary object was therefore an external one, its meaning accessible to all who were educated in the methods through which this meaning could be revealed.

The critical process was public as well. As critics worked in public with public objects, the results of their work — the critical texts they produced — were themselves public objects, ones which were accessible to the scrutiny and judgment of others. Just as many of the New Critics saw themselves as public men engaged with the public concerns of their times,<sup>4</sup> so their criticism was a public criticism, something like the literary texts they sought to explain, standing outside themselves, detached and objective, as much the verbal icons and well wrought urns of their critical enterprise as were the literary works upon which their criticism was based.

All of this served to raise questions about the nature of literature, literary experience, and the meaning of literature. It was to these questions that the New Critics directed much of their energy and ingenuity. Definitions of literature abound in New Critical writings, and while they demonstrate varying degrees of opacity, collectively they illustrate a consistent view of literature, one which provided the necessary theoretical basis for their critical practice and pedagogical program. The common element in New Critical notions of literature was the fusion of form and content. In his essay, "What Does Poetry Communicate?" (1947), Cleanth Brooks stated that "the poem is not only the linguistic vehicle which conveys the thing communicated most 'poetically', but . . . it is also the sole linguistic vehicle which conveys the thing communicated accurately" (p. 74). Thus literature lay beyond a distinction between form and content in a new cohesion which defied division. Typically, Wellek and Warren (1956) contended that "'structure' is a concept including both content and form so far as they are organized for aesthetic purposes" (p. 141). It was in this structure, the ideational and stylistic fusion which literature exhibited, that its meaning was to be found.

In this vein Wimsatt and Beardsley (1954) wrote, "through its meaning or meanings the poem *is*. It has an iconic solidarity" (p. 23). The poem was a verbal icon, "a concrete universal" (p. 77), that which "illustrates the principle of structure and harmonious tension" (p. 239). It followed that the poem, as Alan Tate (1959) put it, "is its own knower" (p. 250), an unassailable unity, one which defied the logic of science. In the same way Brooks (1947) could pronounce "the heresy of paraphrase," since, in the end, "to refer the structure of the poem to what is finally a paraphrase of the poem is to refer it to something outside the poem" (p. 201). The meaning of literary works

was therefore seen to reside exclusively within the works themselves, inaccessible by any logic other than the logic established by their own structure.

Because of this emphasis on structure as meaning, the language and devices of literature took on particular importance. Literature was seen to be "hyperverbal," its "concreteness" resulting from "the interrelational density of words" (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1954, p. 23). Not only was literary language somehow more verbal than ordinary language, but it was also different. For this reason Tate (1959) observed that "the poet is constantly forced to remake language" (p. 210). Through this remade language the unity of a literary work was forged, the icon was shaped. And it was shaped not only by the language itself, but more importantly, by the ways the full resources of language were marshalled to convey meaning. For example, Wimsatt and Beardsley (1954) maintained that the "value principle" of literature was "variety in unity or the reconciliation of opposites" (p. 51) and that this was to be obtained through the principles of ambiguity, polysemy, paradox, and irony. Similarly, Brooks (1947) wrote, "the conclusion of the poem is the working out of the various tensions — set up by whatever means — by propositions, metaphors, symbols" (p. 207). Of all these devices, the most basic was metaphor since it was through metaphor that the ideational and stylistic fusion of literature was achieved, and it was within the metaphoric framework that literary meaning resided. Typically, Wimsatt and Beardsley (1954) argued that the meaning of literature could be learned "by examination of metaphor — the structure most characteristic of concentrated poetry" (p. 79).

The meaning of literature was in this way driven progressively further into the text. If a knowledge of literature was to be gained, if judiciously derived (which was to say externally defensible) readings of literature were to be obtained, they were to be obtained by an examination of the ideational architecture of the literary work as revealed through its language and constructional devices. Extratextual excursions in search of meaning were *ultra vires*. From this arose Wimsatt and Beardsley's (1954) famous admonition against "the intentional fallacy," historical source-hunting for influences upon the author which might explain the meaning of the text. The meaning of the text was to be found within the text and nowhere else. As Wimsatt and Beardsley unequivocally put it, "the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a literary work of art" (p. 3). In this same manner Wellek and Warren (1956) contended that "the meaning of a work of art is not

exhausted by, or even equivalent to, its intention. As a system of values it leads an independent life" (p. 42).

And where was the reader in all of this? The most immediate answer in New Critical doctrine is in Wimsatt and Beardsley's (1954) famous statement of the "affective fallacy." They described this fallacy as "a confusion between the poem and its *results* (what it *is* and what it *does*) . . . It begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism" (p. 21). Just as the intent of the author was to be denied as a valid source of meaning, so was the affective response of the reader. Wellek and Warren (1956) warned that "anarchy, scepticism, a complete confusion of values is the result of every psychological theory, as it must be unrelated either to the structure or the quality of a poem" (p. 147). And because these affective responses lacked objectivity, they were inaccessible to evaluation: "Definition in terms of states of mind fails because it cannot account for the normative character of the genuine poem, for the simple fact that it might be experienced correctly or incorrectly" (Wellek & Warren, 1954, p. 150). If it became impossible to distinguish between correct and incorrect readings, the educative function of criticism would be lost since every reading would have equal worth. It would be impossible to educate the reader to more correct readings since the basis for evaluating these readings — the individual reader's response — would not remain public but would become private. What a poem said as a public entity would be replaced by what it felt like as a private experience.

It can be seen that the affective fallacy represented a fundamental challenge to the New Criticism. But the New Critics did not exclude the reader entirely; rather, they recognized the role of the reader but limited this role to a cognitive response. Their repeated recurrence to cognition and the intellect as the mechanisms of literary understanding gives ample evidence of this. That the reader's response could be cognitive only precluded any affective "contamination" from entering into literary understanding or literary criticism. Thus the critical enterprise could be maintained as a public activity with the reader's cognitive response remaining accessible to rational report and dispassionate analysis. But the cognitive activity of the reader, mapped in his explication of the text, was always a response to the text, in terms of the text. This was the vital consideration. The text remained the public object to be known; the reader's role was to gain access to this knowledge. But, while the direction of literary communication was from the text to the reader, the reader's presence remained vital. Without the reader, the text, while "being," would fail

to communicate, and communicating the public knowledge of the text was for the New Critics the primary function of literature.

### **From Public Verse to Private Response**

Given the pervasiveness and intellectual rigor of the New Criticism, one is left to wonder why its authority waned. Answers to this question can be found in influences both within and outside the New Criticism. To begin with internal causes, it is evident in retrospect that the New Criticism fell from the weight of its own programmatic and pedagogical edifice. It was almost too demanding in the conceptualizations and procedures which it formulated. In its belief in exactitude and the external visibility and verification of the critical process, it invited attack from those who came to resent its pre-scriptiveness and dogmatic insistence on various "fallacies," "tensions," "heresies," and the rest of the paraphernalia of critical correctness which grew up around it.

Not only was it overly pedantic, it was also too restrictive in the literature it accommodated. In their emphasis on analyzing "modern" and metaphysical poetry, the New Critics were too intent upon finding literature which suited their critical theory rather than deriving critical theory which accommodated the general body of English literature. And finally, by remaining uncompromisingly text-based, by insisting on a synonymy of textual explication and critical practice that denied the validity of external sources of meaning (whether historical, authorial, or personal), the New Critics imposed too confining a program for the conceptualization of literature and literary meaning. Once the rigors of the method were mastered there seemed little else to do, especially given the demonstrable correctness — in theory, at least — of the "correct" reading of poems. Therefore, in the ultimate realization of the New Criticism lay its demise: As a method, its end resided within itself, and once this was recognized, either consciously or unconsciously by the critical establishment, its power declined and its pervasive influence expired.

Yet these internal flaws may not in themselves have been sufficient to bring down the New Criticism had they not become increasingly apparent during a period when public verse and public criticism were becoming antithetical to the increasingly introspective, relativistic spirit of the times. In philosophy Husserl's phenomenology dismissed the preoccupations of logical positivism and postulated new ways of knowing and structuring reality through exploring man's subjective, inner life. In psychology the security of behaviorism, which had been the predominant model of human activity during the period of the

New Critical ascendancy, was being challenged by the work of Jerome Bruner and others who were explaining man's behavior in terms of cognitively constructed models of reality, rather than the simple mechanism of the behaviorist's S—R paradigm. In linguistics Chomsky repudiated the behavioristic formulations of Skinner and set up in their place a model of human language which placed the mind at the center, thereby reducing in importance the visual and oral forms of language as the focus of linguistic study. And, finally, even the tenets of scientific method were questioned by the work of Kuhn who argued that scientific theory based on empirically derived "facts" was actually founded on a highly subjective empiricism, an empiricism based not on strict objectivity, but rather on broad conceptual outlines formed by prevailing climates of opinion.

So it was that the world seemed less certain. The philosophical reality of logical positivism, the psychological certainty of behaviorism, the linguistic "common sense" of sensorially received language, and even the unassailable objectivity of scientific method all fell before competing movements in their respective disciplines, movements which had in common an appeal to the inner consciousness of man as the determiner of relative meaning, rather than an appeal to external, observable, analyzable phenomena as the determiners of an objective reality. And as though this were not enough, what Christopher Lasch (1979) has called "the culture of narcissism" came into full flower at this time, and with it a discontent with all that was not personal, individual, and, some would say, self-indulgent. If for no other reason than the external conditions which surrounded it, the New Criticism was not sustainable. It was born of an age and of a constellation of common assumptions which were increasingly incompatible with the prevailing intellectual and cultural climate of the late 1950s and 1960s. While it had once worn, almost proudly, the mantle of conservatism and elitism, it could no longer appeal to an age whose collective sensibility had turned to the privacy of the self.

## Reader Response Criticism

### *Stanley Fish and Literature in the Reader*

If the development of critical theory is to be interpreted in terms of reactions against prevailing orthodoxies, the work of Stanley Fish must be seen as a frontal attack on New Critical doctrine. Rather than maintaining the objectivity of the text and insisting on the separate reality of a literary work, Fish, in one of his earliest and most influential essays in 1970 wrote that "the objectivity of a text is an

illusion" (p. 140). Moreover, in his preface to the paperback edition of *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (1971), published a year later, he wrote, "making the work disappear into the reader's experience of it is precisely what should happen in our criticism, because it is what happens when we read" (p. ix). When Fish is compared with the New Critics, the relationship between text and reader is reversed: while the New Critics insisted on the primacy of the text as the center of meaning and condemned the reader's affective response as a fallacy, Fish embraces the affective fallacy and places the reader's response at the nexus of meaning.

Fish (1973) further maintains that the determination of meaning is not a consequence of the act of reading but a concomitant: "Meaning is not the property of a timeless formalism but something acquired in the context of an activity" (p. 89). Focussing on "the *temporal* flow of the reading experience," Fish would describe the nature of this activity through "*an analysis of the developing responses of the reader in relation to the work as they succeed one another in time*" (1970, pp. 126-127). It is during the development of these responses, and not in some holistic reflective interpretation after reading has ended, that meaning is conceived: "It is the experience of an utterance — *all* of it and not anything that could be said about it, including anything I could say — that *is* the meaning" (1970, p. 131). If meaning is to be formulated during and not after reading, the question follows, "When does the true meaning become clear?" Fish's answer is that it never does since to conceive meaning in this way is to acknowledge that there is some final and essentially context-bound meaning to be taken from a literary work. Therefore, Fish's critical method has no end while the reader is engaged with the text: It "has no point of termination; it is a process; it talks about experience and is an experience; its focus is effects and its result is an effect" (1970, p. 161).

The charge of radical relativism which Fish's doctrine seemingly permits — that all readings are valid since the interpretations they make are specific to the individual and can therefore never be challenged — Fish meets with his notion of "interpretive communities." This concept underlies some of his earlier formulations and becomes explicit in the final section of his "Interpreting the *Variorum*" (1976). His notion of an interpretive community is basically that of a group of readers who share a set of preconceptions about literature which permits only certain readings. This is not the externally derived, conscious prescriptiveness of the New Criticism, but rather the result of a community's internalization of certain assumptions about literature which predispose its members to bring similar

interpretive strategies to the text. Members of an interpretive community do not subscribe to some overt rule book which differentiates legal from illegal readings; they share similar conceptual frameworks about the nature of literature which predispose them to interpret texts in a similar manner. Their orthodoxy is an internalized one which, while shared, remains private. The notion of interpretive communities does not therefore eliminate the charge of radical relativism. What it does is to replace the private response of the individual with the collective yet still essentially private response of a group of like-minded individuals.

Fish provides an example of the workings of interpretive communities in a more recent essay which explores interpretations of irony in Swift's "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift" (1983). He argues that irony, like any formal feature of literature, is not a matter of objective fact to be mined from the text, but rather a function of the assumptions of the interpretive community which reads the text. In this way, irony, like any literary device, "is neither the property of works, nor the creation of an unfettered imagination, but a way of reading, an interpretive strategy that produces the object of its attention, an object that will be perspicuous to those who share or have been persuaded to share the same strategy" (p. 189). Thus a literary text is made by the interpretive community which reads it, and the literary facts which are brought forward as evidence to support a given interpretation are those which the community has tacitly agreed to notice before and during the process of reading. As Fish puts it in his essay, "How to Recognize a Poem When You See One" (1980), "it is not that the presence of poetic qualities compels a certain kind of attention but that the paying of a certain kind of attention results in the emergence of poetic qualities" (p. 326).

There might seem to be the suggestion in Fish's doctrine that the literary critic will disappear and that the formal enterprise of criticism will end. But this is not to be. In the first instance, as Fish himself repeatedly demonstrates, the function of the critic is to make explicit the private experience of the reader. Through this activity the critic "brings texts into being and makes them available for analysis and appreciation" (1980, p. 368). However, there is more to it than this. Fish unabashedly acknowledges the role of the critic as a propagandist, but a propagandist of a particular type. While interpretive communities are in place, their limits are to be constantly tested. It is the role of the critic "to alter the conditions of seeing" (1983, p. 185) — to reformulate responses to literature so as to persuade others of his way of reading and thereby to create new interpretive

communities by straining the interpretive strategies of the old.

That the critical process is always available for exploration and that its procedures are constantly ripe for challenge provides the arena for much of the critic's work. But these conditions also provide the basis of the critic's responsibility since no longer is the critic simply describing the public literary objects before him; he is now in the business of persuading others to construct private meanings using his own interpretive strategies. Fish (1980) describes the critic as one who, "rather than being merely a player in the game . . . is a maker and unmaker of its rules" (p. 367). It is in this activity that Fish would see not only all critics engage, but all readers as well, since, in the end, critics are distinguishable from "ordinary" readers, if at all, only in the degree of their persuasiveness rather than in the kind of their interpretive activity. His critic is in the first instance a reader and only then an arbiter of the reading of others. And even as arbiter, other readers are free to reject his readings if they are not acceptable to their own interpretive strategies.

Gone is the public verse and public criticism of the New Criticism. These have been replaced by private response, albeit governed by the prevailing assumptions of the interpretive communities to which readers may belong. But membership in interpretive communities is both individual and voluntary and the communities themselves are constantly having their tenets tested by competing readings and readers who, as critics themselves, are in the process of persuading others to accept their new readings which is to say new formulations of their private responses.

### *Wolfgang Iser and the Act of Reading*

Where Fish has the reader construct meaning through interpretive strategies brought to the text, Wolfgang Iser conceives comprehension as resulting from an interaction between the reader and the text. In the most fully developed statement of his critical doctrine, *The Act of Reading*, published in 1978, Iser writes in his preface, "the poles of text and reader, together with the interaction that occurs between them, form the ground-plan on which a theory of literary communication may be built" (p. ix). It is in the space between these two poles that Iser sees the process of literary understanding taking place. While he denies the dominance of the text, and therefore rejects the New Critical position (1978, p. 15), he does not entirely reject the text as a factor independent of the reader in determining meaning. Iser conceives the text as "a frame within which the reader must construct for himself the aesthetic object" (1978, p. 107). In this way the text

guides the reader's private response. Referring to what he designates as the "verbal aspect" (the text) and the "affective aspect" (the reader), Iser maintains that "effects and responses are properties neither of the text nor the reader; the text represents a potential effect that is realized in the reading process" (1978, p. ix).

With respect to the text itself, Iser is concerned with the extent to which it guides the response of the reader. He argues that the text is suggestive rather than prescriptive in the response it shapes. Although the text may be instructive, it can never take over the reader or exclude him. Rather, it provides a context into which the reader brings his preexisting knowledge and within which he interacts to produce meaning:

The text mobilizes the subjective knowledge present in all kinds of readers and directs it to one particular end. However varied this knowledge may be, the reader's subjective contribution is controlled by the given framework. It is as if the schema were a hollow form into which the reader is invited to pour his own store of knowledge. (1978, p. 143)

The manner by which the text guides the reader's response is through what Iser terms its "degrees of indeterminacy." Iser contends that "the literary text performs its function, not through a ruinous comparison with reality, but by communicating a reality which it has organized itself" (1978, p. 181). He argues that the text provides certain perspectives which excite an interaction with the reader. But this interaction does not result so much from these perspectives themselves as from the "blanks" (1978, p. 195) or empty spaces which they reveal in the ideational fabric of the text. The text, then, is not seen as a separate object possessing a meaning to be explicated by the reader as it was by the New Critics, nor is it seen as a verbal entity to which the reader brings an interpretive strategy as argued by Fish. Rather, it is seen as a network of indeterminacies revealing conceptual spaces which demand filling by the reader; through filling these spaces the reader interacts with the text to give it coherence. In this way the text directs the reader, but how the blanks are filled — how the text is ultimately realized — remains the private activity of the reader.

The process by which the reader interacts with the text is more complex than simply filling in blanks, however. In order to explain the reader's role more fully, Iser introduces the concept of the "wandering viewpoint" (1978, p. 108), the activity of the reader's mind as it moves through the text. Since the text is never complete in the sense that it never provides a totally coherent and predictable reality in itself, Iser argues that the function of the reader's wandering viewpoint is "consistency building." He maintains that "consistency building is the indispensable basis for all acts of comprehension" (1978, p. 125). It is

through imposing consistency on the text by filling in its blanks and by accommodating to the perspectives revealed in the text that the reader's wandering viewpoint engages in an active process of constructing meaning. Thus Iser (1978) concludes that the act of reading is an "event" (p. 68): Reading is not a process of passive reception but rather an active search after a meaning which the reader determines through his ideational interaction with the indeterminacies of the text.

The question remains as to what meaning is produced through the reader's participation in the text. Iser implicitly answers this question in describing the role of the wandering viewpoint. He argues that meaning can be defined as what is privately experienced: "The meaning of a literary text is not a definable entity, but, if anything, a dynamic happening" (1978, p. 22). The production of meaning is therefore characterized as a "performance" (1978, p. 27). The reader acts on the text, but in doing so, enters into the text to undergo a dynamic experience of perspective shifting through which meaning is constructed. Thus, according to Iser, "we comprehend a fictional text through the experience it makes us undergo" (1978, p. 189).

Iser's concept of literary meaning provides the basis for his notion of literary criticism. He does not conceive the critic as a determiner of meaning, but rather, like Fish, as a determiner of how meaning is produced — one who analyzes and articulates the dynamic happenings which give rise to meaning. He contends that "what is important to readers, critics, and authors is what literature *does* and not what it *means*" (1978, p. 53). It is the process of constructing literary meaning — the interaction of the reader with the text — that should be the focus of the critic's attention, and not the result of this process. Since the meaning of a work is generated during reading, any search for meaning which ignores what literature does to the reader during the private experience of reading can only be arbitrary, incomplete, and lacking in a recognition of the temporal reality of literary understanding. Thus, the objective of the critic should not be to explicate the meaning of a literary work, but "to reveal the conditions that bring about its various possible effects" (1978, p. 18).

### **The New Imperative**

Taken together, the criticism of Fish and Iser destroys the notion of the primacy of the text and with it any vestige of public verse. In the case of Fish, meaning evolves from the interpretive strategy the reader brings to his encounter with the text. The text has nothing to say in all of this; it is the reader who speaks to the text and the text obeys.

For Iser, however, the text plays a part in determining meaning. In setting up his polarity between the reader and the text, Iser points to the indeterminacies of the text as elements which at once excite and constrain the meaning the reader constructs. While he agrees with Fish that meaning occurs during an encounter between reader and text, he maintains that the text provides a framework for this meaning. Therefore, while Fish would exclude the text as a determiner of meaning, Iser admits it as a framework within which the reader constructs a meaning which remains in the end private. So it is that for both these critics, and for the reader response criticism which they represent, public verse and all that can be said to be autonomous in the meaning of the text, falls before private interpretation.

But is it as simple as this, or with the dismissal of the New Criticism and its emphasis on the text, have we thrown out one orthodoxy and replaced it with another equally limiting? Have we lost our legitimacy as readers in our pursuit of a radical relativism from which we cannot escape and within which we are left to read with growing tedium reflections of what must remain a condition of critical stasis relating to nothing more interesting than the repeated playing of ourselves? This would seem to be the danger which we face if we are to continue to read literature exclusively as private verse.

One thing is clear, and that is there can never be a return to the New Criticism. The reasons for its demise given above remain as valid today as they were a decade ago. It is equally clear that our current self-absorption with private verse emerged from a cultural and social milieu which was peculiar to the 1960s and early 1970s. It is as though literary criticism during this period allowed itself to be captured by movements in politics and mass culture which have disappeared almost as quickly as they arose. What has been left as a cultural artifact is a criticism in search of an object, a criticism predicated on the importance of the self but lacking in a recognition of the socially and culturally derived (which is to say public) nature of the texts it seeks to interpret.

While the dominance of the text should never assume the proportions it did under the New Criticism, the denial of the text as a condition of meaning, however this meaning might be manipulated and ultimately construed by the participating reader, eliminates an important element in a necessary equation between public texts and private readers. It is the nature of this equation and the balance it implies, and not a preoccupation with either side of it, that would seem to be the legitimate object of literary criticism and the necessary focus for future explorations of how we read literature.

One way of reformulating this equation is in terms of the communicative function of literature. The dominance of the New Criticism and reader response criticism has resulted in the loss of a sense of literature as communication — the notion that literary understanding results from the intentional communication of something beyond the reader by an author through a text. This notion is firmly established in the tradition of English literature. For example, writing in the "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads," Wordsworth (1800/1952) described the poet as "a man speaking to men" (p. 339), and in our century, T. S. Eliot (1942/1953), in "The Music of Poetry," says of poetry, "it remains . . . one person talking to another" (p. 55). However, when the New Critics<sup>5</sup> declared the intentional fallacy, they eliminated the author as the initiating force behind literary communication, and when they declared the affective fallacy they granted the text ascendancy over the reader as the legitimate source of meaning. But when reader response critics discount the text and return meaning to the reader, they do so at the expense of limiting literary understanding to the reader. While the reader is reclaimed, the text is largely lost, the author remains forgotten, and the communicative function of literature remains forfeit.

This sort of one-sided theory building denies the mutual dependence of the text as an authorially contrived system of language conventions independent of the reader, and the response of the reader as the necessary factor in actualizing these conventions to give the text meaning. This is not to suggest the idea of a one-way communication by the text to the reader as demanded by the New Critics, nor is it the private communication with the self through the text as proposed by reader response critics. Rather, it is a notion of literary communication which recognizes the text as the linguistic and ideational embodiment of an intended communication, and conceives the reader as one who actively integrates this communication to give it meaning. The notion of literary communication being posited here, therefore, is an interactive one combining the author's intention, the configuration of meaning in the text, and the reader as a conscious and independent agent in constructing meaning. A recognition of the relative importance of these elements in the process of literary communication is necessary to further our understanding of how literature is read. It is clear that the New Criticism and reader response criticism have from their different perspectives inexorably led us into the current confinement of the reader. It is from this confinement that literary criticism must escape if it is not to become moribund and ultimately irrelevant as a means of exploring the process of understanding literary texts.

1. The term "poem" was used with considerable latitude by the New Critics, as it is in the writings of reader response critics today, to include any literary work, not only those arranged in verse form. Support for this notion can be found in William Butler Yeats' arrangement of Walter Pater's prose description of the Mona Lisa in free verse, and his inclusion of it in his edition of the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936). More recent support is provided by Louise Rosenblatt's (1978) use of the term "poetry" to designate "the whole category of aesthetic transactions between readers and texts without implying the greater or lesser 'poeticity' of any specific genre" (p. 12).

2. Any doubt concerning the demise of the New Criticism as a force in contemporary literary criticism is dispelled by the titles of several recent books including Frank Lentricchia's (1980) *After the New Criticism* and Iain McGilchrist's (1982) *Against Criticism*.

3. For an indication of the range and variety of contemporary reader response criticism, see Suleiman and Crosman (1980) and Tompkins (1980).

4. In this regard, see, for example, John Crowe Ransom (1936), *Who Owns America*, and Allen Tate (1936), *The Man of Letters in the Modern World*.

5. While it is true that the New Critics emphasized literature as communication, their notion of communication was a unidimensional one in which the text contained a meaning which was to be extracted by the reader.

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