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Reception Theory: The Object, Range and Goals of Research. A Commentary to the Title and Postscript

DOI: 10.18318/td.2016.en.2.3

Most disputes in literature result not from the differences in reception
but from the differences in understanding reception.

Stanley Fish

Discussing reception theory means accepting at least three assumptions: that we can find a satisfactory description of the concept of “reception” and distinguish it from others such as “reading,” “response,” “communication,” “interpretation,” “hermeneutics,” etc.; that we know what constitutes “literature,” in other words, agree on what constitutes the object of reception (since researching reception involves investigating reception, but also constructing that which is supposed to be its object – a work or a text; frankly, it is unclear which of these acts happens first); finally, that we are certain that investigating reception can be referred to as “research” (a question directly related to the previous one: if reception theory constructs its object and if there exist many reception theories, to what extent can we still talk about “research”?). In short, there are three assumptions and each of them has been disputed.

With regard to the first issue, the debate about the concepts above suggests that particular reception theories (even if they shun such a label, preferring to be called “erotics of reading,” “politics of interpretation” or

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“pragmatics of reading”) only seemingly use the same vocabulary and describe the same experience. Thus, unification of the research field seems unlikely.¹ Reception theory did not receive a clearly outlined field to cultivate and discussions about its extent and nature, even its existence, devour substantial amounts of the “researchers’” energies. Responses to the issues above also vary dramatically; some say literature exists only in reception, granting the reader almost unlimited freedom; others say that reception is a factor to be considered in literary research but the actions of the reader are limited in several ways, a position represented by Umberto Eco who distinguishes three elements of interpretation: the linear manifestation of the text, the reader and the cultural encyclopedia containing the language as well as the collection of all earlier interpretations of a given text. Eco believes that interpreting a text means discovering “a strategy intended to produce a model reader.”²

But the problem has several other sources. On the one hand, reflection on reading is an integral component of numerous methodologies and philosophical directions, such as neopragmatism or deconstructivism, but on the other, ideas developed by scholars initially interested in reception have developed divergently, meaning that reception theory again lost its autonomous character (Jauss, as we know, moved in the direction of hermeneutics, and Iser toward the anthropology of culture). The notion of “reading” is fundamental also to the theory of interpretation which appears to stretch across all divisions into methodological directions and orientations, and theory of communication adds to the discussion its own claims about reception and claims of universality.

The second issue is related to the doubt concerning “literature” as the name for the object of “reception.” It seems that we have one thing in mind when we talk about the activity of the readers in the context of their reception of a “literary work” and another when we refer to “literature,” and something yet different when we assume “literature” to be synonymous to “text.” This is apparent in Roland Barthes where the movement from “a work to text” is closely related to the concept of “the pleasure of the text.” As a side note, it is possible that having moved from the “reception of the work” to the “reception of the text” we now have begun to go back. Or that we have moved from “the

1 Such hopes were expressed by editors Janusz Sławiński and Tadeusz Bujnicki in the introduction to *Problem odbioru i odbiorcy* [*The Questions of Reception and the Receiver*] (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1977).

2 I am referring to the remarks included in Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* [Polish edition – *Interpretacja i nadinterpretacja*], ed. Stefan Collini, trans. Tomasz Bieroń (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 1996), 65.

reception of the work” to the “reception of the text” and then simply to “reception” (which would correspond to the sequence of Ingarden – Barthes – Fish).

This is not only about Barthes’s case, of course, nor about the fact that reception scholars must describe practices as diverse as literary criticism, pedagogy or – to borrow from Janusz Sławiński – “expert reading;” it is not even about the fact that “reception of literature” must include also everything that is done with or to literature by philosophers, anthropologists, ethnologists and other representatives of professions beyond literary criticism. All of these issues are important but they are also secondary to the fundamental question which may be phrased as follows: did reception theory (or rather, reception theories) cause an increase of issues to be solved or rather are we dealing with an increase in the number of languages used to reformulate and paraphrase issues already known (mostly from the structuralist tradition)? I think that old problems described in a new language cease to be old problems. Reception theory not only changed structuralism but also contributed to its destruction.

In the 1971 article entitled *Perspektywy poetyki odbioru* [*Perspectives of Reception Poetics*] Edward Balcerzan argued: “Each element of the work can be seen as a task for the reader. Each element can be described as an appeal to perform a semiotic operation assumed in it.”³ The category of a virtual reader and the resulting understanding of reception create in the system of theoretical poetics “a certain, relatively separate, subsystem – a poetic considering the receiver, a theory of work oriented at reception.”⁴ A few years later, in 1979, Janusz Sławiński writes in a similar vein but he already thinks differently: “the category of virtual reader is without any doubt destructive for the structuralist model of literary work: it results in a confusion within a stratified order because it cannot be attributed to any level of the work’s organization and, most importantly, removes its fundamental feature – its closed character.”⁵ In a 1987 article *Od metod zewnętrznych i wewnętrznych do komunikacji literackiej* [*From External and Internal Methods to Literary Communication*] Michał Głowiński will argue that the contradiction between the internal order of the work and all that which is external (social, historical, psychological) can be reconciled in a theory of literary communication. But this comes at a price of “dethroning” reception theory, which becomes incorporated into theory of communication and coexists on equal footing with the “theory of rhetorical

3 Edward Balcerzan, “Pespektywy poetyki odbioru,” in *Problemy socjologii literatury*, ed. Janusz Sławiński (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1971), 86.

4 *Ibid.*, 83.

5 Janusz Sławiński, “Odbiór i odbiorca w procesie historycznoliterackim,” in *Próby teoretycznoliterackie* (Kraków: Universitas, 2000), 102.

structure,” sociolinguistics and speech act theory.⁶ Notably, already in the 1960s in a response to Lévi-Strauss, Umberto Eco admitted that – according to the criteria set by the author of *Structural Anthropology* – the concept of the “open work” has nothing to do with structuralism as it does not reconstruct the presumed objective structure of works, but the structure of a perceptual relation.⁷ At the same time, Eco rejected the notion of Lévi-Strauss’s being the only possible version of structuralism (as evidenced by the remarks in *La struttura assente* [The absent structure], especially by the distinction between methodological and ontological structuralism).

The third issue concerns the word “research” (eagerly discarded today, perhaps a bit too recklessly). There is no doubt that, considering their own postulates, not all reception theories can be referred to as “research” (and perhaps, this is also when they cease to be “theories”), but the word can surely be applied to German *Rezeptionsästhetik*. Its central notion of *Erwartungshorizon* was meant to result in an “objectivization” of reception, even if one of Jauss’s goals was to move away from the “superstition” of objectivism. The horizon of expectations, as we know, is assumed to have its own structure and is determined by a pre-understanding of the genre, the form and themes of already familiar works, and the opposition between the poetic and practical language.⁸ Reception is meant to be a guided process whose tangible determinants can be found in the linguistics of the text. For Jauss, the text is a “musical score,” which is frequently the case in reception theory.⁹

Jauss’s argumentation aimed to prove that the horizon inscribed in the work soon exposed its weakness (Jauss claimed, for instance, that the horizon reveals itself in the text because its author can also be a receiver). The work was becoming less determinate, but gained context. Jauss’s historicism allowed for thinking that the text has no sense on its own, as there is no timeless sense; that reception is a process of inscribing the text continuously with new meanings, and as such it is not a process of discovery, but a creation of meaning; that research must be limited to describing historical changeability of reading norms. The work is not a fact, but an act of reading and individual

6 Michał Głowiński, “Od metod zewnętrznych i wewnętrznych do komunikacji literackiej,” in *Poetyka i okolice* (Warszawa: PWN, 1992), 17-23 and elsewhere.

7 Umberto Eco, *Dzieło otwarte. Forma i nieokreśloność w poetykach współczesnych*, trans. Jadwiga Gałuszko et al. (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo WAB, 1994), 14.

8 Hans Robert Jauss, “Historia literatury jako prowokacja dla nauki o literaturze,” in *Historia nauki jako prowokacja*, trans. Małgorzata Łukasiewicz (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL, 1999), 145.

9 Ibid., 143.

acts of reading are incomparable as they contribute to the text rather than extract something from it.

This brings me to the fourth issue, one which has not been mentioned so far. This is also where my commentary to the article's title ends, and where the postscript begins.

It seems that reception theory was always at a risk of sliding into relativism. Initially, psychologism seemed likely to become its vulgar form. Although a strong anti-psychological tendency can be found already in Ingarden (a feature characteristic for phenomenology as such, and one connecting Ingarden to Husserl), the methods devised by Ingarden for the purpose of limiting the freedom of concretization also raise doubts.¹⁰ To avoid the specter of relativism, reception scholars ceaselessly emphasized that they aim to discover not the principles of an individual act of reading but more general principles, ones which have a social dimension; that it is not individuals and their acts of reading, but "large and massive wholes"¹¹ which constitute the units of reception theory; that, in fact, it is not the reader, but the work which has remained the object of research, except that it is now framed by a certain theoretical model of communication.¹²

10 To tell the truth, Ingarden himself was filled with doubt. *The Literary Work of Art* contains an interesting passage revealing his optimism. Opposing relativism, which threatened concretization, Ingarden ensures that it is enough to turn directly to what is crucial to a given work and exclude various random traits of individual concretizations to leave the hopeless state of extreme subjectivism, and claims that the extremely subjectivist position of literary criticism proves only certain naiveté, see *O dziele literackim. Badania z pogranicza ontologii, teorii języka i filozofii literatury*, trans. Maria Turowicz (Warszawa: PWN, 1988), 420 footnote 1. This is very telling: naiveté characterizes not those who believe in the phenomenologist's "directness" and the possibility to exclude (basing on this very directness) various random features of concretization, but those who emphasize the relativist consequences of reading theory. On the other hand, in "The Literary Work and its Concretizations" published [in Polish] in *Szkice z filozofii literatury*, with an introduction by Władysław Stróżewski (Kraków: Znak, 2000), on page 71 in footnote 2, Ingarden admits that while it may be easy to introduce the concept of "correct concretization," it is extremely difficult to provide reliable criteria allowing to distinguish between "correct" and "incorrect" concretizations.

11 Sławiński, „Odbiór,” 113.

12 Ryszard Handke notes: "Despite what terminology [reception theory] may seem to suggest when treated superficially, it does not encourage focusing on the reader and analyzing the content and mechanisms of his experiences. On the contrary, it focuses on the work except – by placing it within the *realia* of a communicative situation – it reveals the multitude of codes used to formulate it as an utterance and constituting a part in the act of its reception." "Dialektyka komunikacji literackiej," in *Marksizm, Kultura, Literatura*, ed. Bogdan Owczarek and Krzysztof Rutkowski (Warszawa: PIW, 1982), 91.

However, relativism arrived from a different direction, not from the “outside,” but from the “inside.” According to some versions of deconstructivism (although, perhaps, not according to Derrida), the meaning, endlessly postponed in the movement of *différance*, results in the text not having any sense but always postponing one. The text is revealed as empty. Whatever we find in it is what we had earlier put into it. This is, someone could say, a very convenient theory as it relieves us of the obligation to read; regardless of what we read from now on, we always read the same. Consequently, the theory of reading transforms into its opposite and the process takes place precisely when it culminates, in other words, when it places all power in the hands of the receiver.

I am interested in the anti-relativist arguments appearing in the contemporary theoretical thought. They return very often, especially today after the so-called “ethical turn.” In fact, anti-relativist pursuits can be found also in deconstruction itself, despite it being frequently charged with relativism: I am talking about Hillis Miller’s “ethics of reading,” Derrida’s reflection on the paradoxes of gift and law, and hospitality, and deconstruction as resisting the frame of the performative-constative opposition, and production-discovery axis; I am also talking about Lévinas (highly influential today and of great importance to deconstruction) and his claims of not being interested in ethics itself, but in the sense of ethics, and his search for non-transcendental and at the same time universally binding principles which establish ethics.

A similar effort – to avoid transcendental solutions and save rationality – is undertaken by Richard Rorty. Similarly, Rorty moves toward ethics. His liberal utopia can be described as a community rooted not in metaphysics and epistemology, but precisely in ethics, and at the same time as a vision of society where the charge of relativism could lose validity. What Rorty says about the macho philosopher¹³ or the strong misreader who simply beats the text into a shape to serve his own purpose¹⁴ may be deceptive. One must not be fooled by the declarations that the only consequence of pragmatism in literary research is contained in the suggestion that we are not to “be afraid of subjectivity nor anxious for methodology, but simply proceed to praise our heroes and damn our villains by making invidious comparisons.”¹⁵ If we do that, we

13 Richard Rorty, “Deconstruction and Circumvention,” in *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 86.

14 Richard Rorty, “Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism,” *The Monist* 64, no.2 (1981): 155-174.

15 Richard Rorty, „Texts and Lumps,” in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991), 79.

give in to the temptation of what Rorty himself calls “silly relativism”¹⁶ based on “the bad inference from «no epistemological difference» to «no objective criterion of choice».”¹⁷ And this concerns also the criterion of choice between various readings. The actions of a strong misreader are justified by the fact that the text has no distinguished context as there exist no unrelational properties and all properties can be captured only institutionally as elements of social practice. However, if we discard what can be referred to as “silly relativism,” it turns out that strong misreading is neither an anarchist practice (as it is regulated by communities), nor a reductionist one (it does not involve reducing all context to a single one). The crux of the question is whether there exist epistemologically privileged contexts (not according to Rorty) and not whether they should be distinguished from one another.

If this is how the neo-pragmatic project of reading is to be understood, Rorty is right to suggest that there is no fundamental difference between himself and Stanley Fish.¹⁸ This would concern mainly what Fish refers to as model of critical activity based on persuasion, juxtaposed against the essentialist mode of inference, the model “where interpretations are either confirmed or disconfirmed by facts that are independently specified” and where the critic “must be purged of all [...] prejudices and presuppositions.”¹⁹ But does anyone believe today in “models of inference”? The real question is what makes Fish’s project of “interpretive communities” better than some version of hermeneutic speculation. It would appear that, although Fish’s vision does without the idea of “the fusion of horizons,” it is rather immune to the risk of relativism.

Fish does not claim that there exists no context capable of supporting the act of reading, but that we always already are in some kind of context (even by questioning it, since this very act happens within the context’s frame and not outside of it). The text does not have to possess a universal, core sense which would restrict the freedom of reading and constitute protection from relativism because the text always appears in a certain context which allows to distinguish between “deviational” and “normal” interpretations. The text may have several literal meanings (basic ones) dependent on the point of reference but they can be distinguished because they are anchored in some sort of an environment. We may – without falling into contradiction – insist

16 *Ibid.*, 89.

17 *Ibid.*, 89.

18 In an interview with Joshua Knob, Rorty says that his and Fish’s proposals are in fact the same. “A Talent for Bricolage. An Interview with Richard Rorty,” *The Dualist* 2 (1995): 56–71.

19 Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class. The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 365.

on the validity of our reading as change takes place within contexts of equal epistemological validity.

Fish's project seems attractive also because it competes successfully with various versions of hermeneutics. Instead of unearthing the sense and asking what a text means, we must observe the way the text works because its meaning is its action. Perhaps this is how one could describe what reception of literature, or simply reception, is today.

Translation: Anna Warso