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Student Response Criticism: Any Influence in the Literatures Class?[1]

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Abstract

Unlike some other academic disciplines in the field of humanities solidly backed up by a theoretical and practical teaching corpus (i. e., language teaching), literature teaching has not developed as such, for all discussions to this respect are primarily focused on theory, without any type of practical concern. Taking the changes developed within the discipline itself and within society as a starting point, this paper sets out to describe the potentials of a particular literary theory —*Reader Response Criticism*— as a valid and adequate framework from which a practical application in the literature class could be inferred.

Key words: Literature teaching at university level, Reader Response Theory.

Like many other language teachers concerned with offering their students as broad a view as possible of the various aspects related to the culture (or cultures) of the countries where the target language is spoken, I have tried to follow a recent trend in second language teaching focused on incorporating into the teaching of a language —English, in my case— the use of literary texts (Brumfit 1985; Brumfit and Carter, eds. 1986; Hill 1986; Collie and Slater 1987; Murdoch 1992). My interest somehow overwhelmed me, in the sense that, as a result of this pedagogical strategy, I suddenly became fascinated by what seemed to be a side effect of my initial interest: I mean the teaching of literature itself.

My way of tackling the study of language teaching methods is based on the scheme proposed by Richards and Rodgers (1986: 28). According to these scholars, we can study a method by establishing three levels of conceptualiza-

1. This title is taken from Reader Response Theory, which puts forward the view that the full weight of the interpretation of a text lies with the reader. As a useful guide for literature teachers, the author has recommended the following practice-oriented text, published after she completed the present article: R. Beach (1993). *A Teacher's Introduction to Reader-Response Theories.* Urbana, Ill: National Council of Teachers of English.

tion: *approach*, which refers to theories about the nature of language and language learning that serve as a source of practices and principles in language teaching; *design*, which is the level where we consider issues related to syllabus and roles played by teachers, students and materials; and *procedures*, dealing with classroom techniques, practices and behaviours observed when the method is used. Driven by my background as a language teacher, I wondered then to what extent it would be possible to describe a literature teaching method on the basis of such a model, always keeping in mind that at the first level —approach— we should change the term *language* for *literature*, that is, we should speak of theories about the nature of *literature* and *literature learning*. In other words, just as a language teacher chooses a particular method or a combination of several assuming a particular conception of language and language learning, any comment a literature teacher makes on a literary text, no matter how intuitive or spontaneous it sounds, does presuppose a theoretical conception of what literature is or should be, which aspects of a work should be emphasized, and how a text should be approached. The result of our reading does not depend on what we read but on *how* we read it, this being a question which also affects the way we teach it: «...if texts do not fully interpret themselves, they do not teach themselves either. *How they are taught will depend on theoretical choices*» (Graff 1989: 250; my emphasis).

The conclusion I have come up with after my readings on this topic can be very briefly summarized: the precise and exhaustive description of language teaching methods that we know and can use for our pedagogical purposes does not have a counterpart in literature teaching, as all discussions to this respect cease at the first level, namely, *approach*, and even here there is only place for the theory of literature, rather than for the theory of literature learning or teaching. B. Bergonzi points out that the university teacher of literature is in a peculiar position in relation to his colleagues in other departments: Philosophy Departments produce philosophy, Sociology Departments produce sociology, and so on. For these academics, teaching and research are two aspects of a unified activity. The situation happens to be very different in literature departments, where they produce criticism and scholarship, instead of literature: «If the academy cannot itself produce literature, and if even criticism can be written outside by novelists, poets, and literary journalists, then what it, and only it, *can* produce is theory» (Bergonzi, 1990: 168-169), to such an extent that in practice literary and critical theory have become autonomous subjects. In other words, we can say with Bergonzi that «theory becomes literature» (ibid., 168-169).

The current situation can be partly the result of the deep changes developed within the discipline itself, on the one hand, and within society, on the other. The weakening of the traditional values —nationalistic, religious, ethical, aesthetic and rhetorical— once attributed to literature in Britain (Bergonzi 1990: 28), runs parallel to the decline of the intrinsic reading method advocated by the so-called *New Criticism* in the United States. Such transformations have given way to a new conception of humanistic learning based on a scientific

model of learning, a knowledge which is «progressive, rendering earlier versions of it obsolete, and it circulates quickly and visibly through the accepted professional channels, like journals and conference papers. It is also subject to quantifiable assessment, in terms of volume of publication, frequency of citation, amounts of research funding, and the calibre of referees» (Bergonzi 1990: 166). Hence the proliferation of critical approaches —sometimes incompatible[2]—, and the speed with which they have followed one another: structuralist, poststructuralist, semiotic, deconstructionist, feminist, Marxist, Lacanian, New Historicist, dialogic, and Reader-Response Criticism: «When a multitude of conflicting critical theories call for attention (...) and when in addition there is confusion over the canons and the curricula of literature, as at the present time, then literary theory, rather than being something that can more or less be taken for granted, becomes overt, exigent, even, some would say, strident» (Hillis Miller 1988: 88).

The changes within society (and by society I mean the context in which literature studies take place, where we include students, parents, school boards, media, etc.) can be exemplified by mentioning the result of an experiment carried out at two American university centres a decade ago: surprisingly, first-year students could not distinguish the *narrative voice* in a poem produced by a human being from that in a poem produced by a computer (Strenski and Esposito 1980: 149). M. Godlin describes the situation in more radical terms:

> While we may create classes that seem to voice our values and our standards of judgement in our preferred language, what we are often creating is only an extremely cynical pragmatism, students who do not think of their work at university as a serious exploration of ideas and values but who see it as a manipulation of teachers. They give us what we want. In return for an A, they will say whatever we wish them to about everything from their own lives to Shakespeare's (1987: 916).

Students are less and less prepared, not only in literature but also in any type of basic language skills, this being a phenomenon which is taking place both in Anglo-American universities and in the Western academic world by and large. Hillis Miller (1988: 91) brings to our attention the demand made by American society that schools and colleges do something about the inability of young people to read and write, whereas Bergonzi warns about the current general decline in cultural literacy, and in skill and practice in reading (Bergonzi, 1990: 155). In a more general sense, it could be said that we live at a time when the pre-conceived and accepted values of nineteenth century rationalism have given rise to an «ever-flowing, metamorphic, open, ambiguous, synthetic sociality, instead of a classical, linear, closed, transparent, analytical one»

2. «...it is impossible to combine them eclectically, taking a bit from one and a bit from another, unless one is willing to settle for a large measure of incoherence in one's thinking about literature and one's teaching of it». (Hillis Miller, 1988: 92).

(Vidal Claramonte, 1991: 105). No doubt, the breaking-down of these values affects the field of humanities, producing what Hillis Miller calls *shaking of the canon,* that is, a breakdown of the assumption that humanistic education is primarily aesthetic (has to do with pleasure) and thematic (has to do with values). This does not mean, however, that we must stop reading the classics (canonical works):

> ...surely they (the classics) are read differently now, partly as a result of new ways of reading which have shown that they are far more problematic than perhaps they once seemed, far less the secure and stable repositories of the values and ideas of our cultural tradition than some defenders of the canon still seem to think they are... canonical works are read differently now because they are read in a different context, by students brought up on television, cinema, and popular pop music, for example, or in courses in which they are set side by side with non canonical works (1989: 110).

The solution Hillis Miller proposes is a return to the teaching of reading, that is, he considers that in the present context of our multilingual, multiracial society, a society whose cultural traditions are shaped by the mass media, courses in the literature department should focus on training in reading the great works of literature, and writing about them. We must not forget, though, that our students are children of our time, children of the context we have just described, which means we must teach them to read with a much broader notion of the canon, «... and along with that training in reading all the signs: paintings, movies, television, the newspaper, historical data, the data of material culture. An educated people these days, an informed electorate, is a people who can read, who can read all the signs, no easy thing to learn» (ibid., 111).

R. Barthes, a critic who holds a key position in the transformation of contemporary literary theories, devotes a considerable part of his work to determining the role of the reader in the act of reading. So far the author has been regarded as the eternal owner of the work, whereas readers have been mere profiteers. We have tried for a long time to establish what the author meant, always ignoring the reader's role. Barthes presents the reader not as consumer of the text but also as producer (1987: 49). A very different position is that of New Criticism, whose members, far however from a general consensus in their ideas[3], are usually associated with doctrines of the text's objectivity, its self-sufficiency and 'organic unity', with a formalist intrinsic approach to the text, with a resistance to paraphrase and to the separation of form and content, and, particularly, with the technique of *close reading,* a mode of exegesis that pays scrupulous attention to the rich complexity of textual meaning. They believe that literature tells its own truths, that the literary object should be understood

3. The term New Criticism is commonly used to refer to the literary theory and criticism that began with the work of I.A. Richards and T.S. Eliot before the Second World War in England, and was continued by scholars such as John Crowe Ransom, W.K. Wimsatt, Clean Brooks and Allen Tate in the United States during the forties, fifties and sixties.

neutrally, and that interpretation should appeal neither to the writer's intention nor to a reader response but to a description of the thing itself.

Despite the pedagogical success of this method, if we believe with Hillis Miller in the necessity to re-teach our students how to read, we obviously need a theory of reading. Although Barthes did not seem to be aware of the existence of such a theory, it is my opinion that one of the contemporary theories mentioned above could be of some pedagogical help to this respect, particularly those studies centered on the role of the reader. I refer to *Reader-Response Criticism*, which has moved away from the positivistic assumptions of Formalism and New Criticism with respect to the objectivity and self-sufficiency of the literary text. It seems to me that a deeper knowledge of the act of reading (questions such as: Why do we read? What are the deepest sources of our engagement with literature? What does reading have to do with the life of the psyche, or the imagination, or our linguistic habits? What happens —consciously or unconsciously, cognitively or psychologically— during the reading process?) could guide teachers in the process of *re-teaching* our reader/students how to read.

The term *Reader-Response Criticism* is almost as broad and diverse as the concept of literary theory, in the sense that under such a heading we can find a wide variety of approaches, and each of them, in its turn, presents several trends. As a matter of fact, almost all the movements that have been mentioned above are characterized by a greater concern for the reader, to such an extent that in E. Freund's opinion even New Criticism still hides «a supressed and acknowledged reader-oriented criticism» (1987: 42)[4].

All tendencies considered here are focused not on the autonomy of the text itself, but on the recognition of the relevance of context. This relevance, however, can be defined in different terms. Two of them concentrate on describing techniques of persuasion, narrative or thematic structures, that is, those aspects of literature that are rather related to textual analysis. The first of these approaches would be the *rhetorical* approach, according to which a text is a form of communication. The transmission and reception of any message depend on one or more shared codes of communication between sender and receiver. Reading is, therefore, a process of decoding which tries to study the means by which authors attempt to communicate certain intended meanings or to produce certain intended effects. This movement focuses mainly on the ethical and ideological content of the message. Two concepts that can be attributed to W. Booth are keys to this theory: the *implied author*, an ideal writer responsible for all values and beliefs that determine the meaning of the work, and whose image is constructed in the act of reading, and which has a counterpart

4. According to this scholar, both Richards and Empson, for instance, do not hold a clear position as to whether the phenomenon of ambiguity is a property of language or of response: «Despite its ostensible endeavours to hypostatize the objectivity or autonomy of the literary work, the ghostly presence of "readers" enacts a continuing resistance to its own dicta from within the project itself» (ibid).

in the *implied reader*, the work's ideal interpreter. A successful reading would be that in which both find an agreement in order to enjoy, understand and appreciate the work.

A second tendency within this first approach would be the *semiotic* and *structuralist* approach, which attempts to read texts not with the intention of interpreting or assigning a meaning, but with the aim of analysing the codes and conventions that make possible a text's readability, that uncover a text's system. Some of the questions on which this approach tries to focus refer to the codes by which the audience is inscribed within the system of a text; to the way the inscribed audience contribute to the work's readability; or to the aspects of the work, whether formal or thematic, which determine readability or intelligibility. Some important names that could be included under this term are structural semanticians such as Greimas (1966, 1970) or Coquet (1973), structural stylisticians, such as Riffaterre (1978, 1990), or Barthes (in his early works). A final question —the codes and conventions, whether aesthetic or cultural, to which actual readers refer in trying to make sense of texts, and to which actual authors refer in facilitating, complicating or even frustrating, the reader's sense-making activity— is addressed by scholars such as Bakhtin (1989), U. Eco (1979, 1990), S. Fish (1980a, 1980b, 1980c, 1989), J. Culler (1980, 1982) and the latest works of Barthes (1980, 1987). An important concept related to this issue is that of *interpretive strategy*, which can be only understood as a collective phenomenon, a set of shared conventions within a community of readers, that is, within a particular *interpretive community*, in Fish's words.

A trend centered on the question of aesthetic perception is the *phenomenological* approach, of which W. Iser is an outstanding representative. This approach tries to account for the mental processes that occur as a reader advances through a text, and derives from it a pattern. The act of reading is, therefore, a sense-making activity through which a reader appropriates the work of art and realizes, *concretizes* it. In other words, the convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence. The act of reading consists of complementary activities such as selection and organization, anticipation and retrospection, and the formulation and modification of expectations. The text, however, resists our synthesizing activities with gaps or indeterminacies (omission of information, ambiguous wording, sentences which modify preceding ones, contradictions and conflicts, etc.) that hinder the reader's act of comprehension. These activities are different from reader to reader, that being the reason why there is a wide spectrum of acceptable realizations for any one text. Yet, it is here where S. Suleiman (1980: 23) points out a certain contradiction inherent in this approach, as Iser also claims that it is ultimately the text itself which directs the reader's realization of it. Furthermore, he considers some realizations of it more complete, more true to the intentions of the text than others. Although he tries to describe the experience of the individual reading subject, he is actually referring to an abstract and generalized reader.

That is precisely the gap that a fourth approach, *subjective* and *psychoanalytic* criticism, has come to fill, as it focuses on the actual reading experiences and responses of *specific individuals* to specific works. After Lacan's thorough revision of Freud's texts, this type of criticism offers an explicit pedagogical contribution to literature teaching. The critics associated with this approach —among which we can mention D. Bleich and N. Holland— are mainly interested in the influence of personality and personal history on literary interpretation, and in the potential application on their theories to the classroom. The traditional role assigned to the teacher, as the subject who is supposed to *know,* is openly questioned. As long as the student *knows* by virtue of identification with the position of the teacher, there is no knowing in any productive sense. Like the analyst, who tries to disclose the patient's unconscious, to change the patient's reading of himself in order to alter his relation to the production of his symptoms, utterances and behaviours, the teacher must bring to discourse the student's unconscious thoughts. The teacher does not know the content of this unconscious, but helps to articulate it. Pedagogy should aim to undo the subject of certainty, including both the teacher and student's subjective positions. We are then teaching the *partiality* of knowledge, its incompleteness and its dependancy on values: «Education becomes subjective in the sense that the student experiences his or her existence as being subjected to various discourses, including that of the teacher (...) Like psychoanalysis, education can only begin with self-doubt, and its disciplinary self-analyses should be interminable» (Jay, 1987: 790).

Whereas the determining factor of this approach is the individual personal history, the *sociological-historical* variety of reader-oriented criticism regards reading as a collective phenomenon, which means its focus of inquiry is essentially the relationship between specific reading publics (varying with time, place and circumstances), and specific works or genres that belong to the artistic tradition of a particular society. In other words, it seeks to investigate the reasons why membership in a given social group influences one's reading habits and tastes. That is the aim that characterizes a group of German critics whose activities are referred to as *Rezeptionsgeschichte* or *Rezeptionsästhetik,* and among which we can mention H. R. Jauss (1971, 1986, 1987), H. Weinrich (1971), W. Iser (1978, 1980, 1989) and K. Stierle (1980, 1987). A notion essential to this approach is that of *horizon of expectations,* which Jauss defines as «the set of cultural, ethical and literary (generic, stylistic, thematic) expectations of a work's readers in the historical moment of its appearance» (Suleiman 1980: 35). This notion allows for a systematic study of the history of reception, as it examines the historical conditions and changes in the way a writer is understood, changes which are the result of literary, cultural, political and social evolution which, in turn, transform the readers' horizon of expectations. This concept is also useful in order to analyse the relationship between works that appear simultaneously, but are received differently. Finally, it allows us to set up evaluative categories, in the sense that the distance between the familiarity of previous aesthetic experiences and the horizon change required by the response

to new works determines the artistic nature of a literary work. That helps to understand why some masterpieces may be ignored, as their distance from the horizon of expectations of a given time is so great that it may take decades or even centuries before they are incorporated into the literary canon.

The last approach considered here is the *hermeneutic* variety, which deals with the very nature and possibilities of reading and interpretation itself, when criticism turns to reflect on its own intentions, assumptions and positions. We can understand hermeneutics in two senses, one traditional, the other modern. The first one (Dilthey (1968), Betti (1962) and Hirsch (1967, 1976)) aims at establishing the notion of universally, objectively valid interpretation, as the basis of all historical certainty. Modern hermeneutics, on the other hand, (Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer) takes as a starting point the assumption that the very notion of a universally valid interpretation is untenable, that all theories which claim to speak the truth should be distrusted, that being the reason why they focus on those aspects of a text that reveal the vulnerability of any absolute statement about its meaning, and why they turn the impossibility of a single interpretation into the main subject of criticism. The issues at stake are therefore the determinacy of meaning, the privilege of authority and the ontological status of understanding, in an debate that still occupies the most acute critical minds of our time.

In this brief account of some of the most outstanding tendencies within Reader-Response Criticism, three conceptions of the figure of the reader can be distinguished: an ideal or abstract reader (rhetorical and phenomenological approches), the reader as subject (subjective and psychoanalytic criticism), and the reader as a member of a given social community (sociological-historical variety). When applying these theoretical frameworks to the classroom, we may feel forced to choose one of these standpoints. And some attempts have actually been made in this sense. J. Rouse (1983: 535-548), for instance, describes the teaching techniques of three well known scholars —N. Holland (1970, 1977, 1980), D. Bleich (1975, 1976) and L. Rosenblatt (1978, 1983, 1993) — who have tried to enhance a psychoanalytic type of reading in the literature class. They three consider that any kind of preceptorial relationship requires an erotic ingredient for its success, an impulse that urges an individual to reach out to a challenge. Holland and Bleich guide their students analytically to externalize their inner reactions to a text, and in both cases the reading experience is essentially retrospective: students relate the text to their past experiences; Rosenblatt, however, does not regard the individual as finished, completed, but as still in the process of evolving, becoming. Her goal is, therefore, to discover the changes that a person goes through during the reading process. In all three cases, the underlying principle is the relationship between reader and text as the basis of literary meaning. N. A. Greco (1990: 33-40), on the other hand, proposes some writing techniques based on W. Iser's work, all leading to the interruption of the reading process —writing to explore points of view, to reflect upon silences, to explore one's reading process, cloze procedure, etc.—, so that both teachers and students can come up with

some conclusions about their interaction with the text, in order to modify or enrich it. Finally, P. A. Muldoon (1990: 34-40) suggests an activity aimed at sharing the different viewpoints that students have on a particular work. During or after the reading process, students are requested to write down the questions arising from the text that they are unable to answer, questions that will be discussed with the rest of the class later on. The objective of this technique is three-fold: to foster in students the ability to hold and examine various points of view; to improve the critical skill towards other students' comments; and to increase the degree of tolerance for a text's ambiguity or lack of definite meaning.

However, I quite agree with S. Suleiman when she points out that «The vitality of audience-oriented criticism depends (...) on the realization that various dimensions of analysis or interpretation are possible and that a combination of approaches is not a negative eclecticism but a positive necessity» (Suleiman 1980: 7). If our goal is to re-teach our students to read in a new context, we are regarding them as members of a particular social group who live at a particular historical time. Their subjective reactions to the texts they read are bound to be influenced by the era in which they live, a time when the mere concept of authority in many aspects of life is being challenged, a time when within a new hermeneutical framework we are beginning to accept that different viewpoints generate different interpretations of an event, and that making sense of something is not the same as finding what it means in any definite sense. Maybe the concept of *interpretive community* is at the the bottom of these statements, as Suleiman suggests when she claims that it is around this topic that a «most fruitful combination of critical approaches to reading and interpretation can be realized» (1980: 21).

My intention through these pages has not been to design a methodological framework based on *Reader-Response Criticism,* but rather to offer a general description of the various trends that today integrate this theory, and to suggest some of the lines that the literature teacher could follow on the basis of such an approach. The next stage of the study should focus precisely on the two interrelated stages of a literature teaching method where discusions have not reached, that is, *design* and *procedure,* those moments of the academic activity directly related to students and class techniques. It is my opinion, however, that such a study should be preceded by some kind of empirical assessment of the effect that those tendencies have had in the literature classroom, if any. This starting point would be, to my mind, a much more useful contribution to the still new field of literature teaching than a theoretical methodological proposal without any realistic basis.

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