Births, Deaths and Reincarnations of Reception Theory

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> The 1993 ACLA report on the state of the discipline, later published with annexes as *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, describes "comparative literature in the new millennium" as a field of fields, drawn to boundaries as opportunities for boundary-crossing.
>
> – Haun Saussy

"Theory is dead" is still a popular phrase heard around the Comparative Literature campfire. I remember being shocked and dismayed when I first heard it after moving to Canada to begin my Master's degree at The University of Toronto in 2004. At that time, Gayatri Spivak's latest critique of my chosen field of study – *Death of a Discipline* (2003) – gave me a startling glimpse of the bureaucratic perils facing comparatists in North American universities and in 2003, Haun Saussy, head of the American Comparative Literature Association's ten year review, named his draft for the forthcoming report: "Exquisite Cadavers Stitched from Fresh Nightmares." So, as a new scholar and a new arrival to the academic scene, I quickly developed an obsession with death. You could call it a theoretical complex. But as Saussy's title suggests, my morbid fascination with the status of theory became less about its death as the comparatist's primary *raison d'être*, and more about the afterlives of theory. What does it mean to say that a literary theory has passed its prime? How does a theory die? Where is it buried and who goes to the funeral?

Certainly these questions regarding intellectual life span are motivated by institutional debates, their prominent thinkers, and the academic polemics which ensue, but they also engage the crossing of three main sets of boundaries. The births, deaths, and renamings of reader-response or reception theory, my chosen case study of theoretical reincarnation in this article, result from transgressions and travels between national, disciplinary and media frontiers beginning in the early 1960s and continuing in the late 2000s.

I. Births – *Rezeptionsästhetik*, The Emancipation of the Reader, and the Text as Event

It is impossible to discuss *Rezeptionsästhetik* – reader-response or reception – without citing the founding contributions of the University of Konstanz (in Southern Germany) and the group of literary scholars most prominently represented by H.R. Jauss. His work meets with high regard in France (as revealed by his numerous bibliographical citations in theoretical manuals such as *Méthodes du texte*).[1] He has also had a significant impact at the University of Toronto (where he published *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*) and upon studies of comparative literature in North America in general. Therefore, Jauss and his manifesto for a new literary history and an understanding of subjective aesthetic experience are a point of origin or a touchstone for what the words 'reader-response' indicate. Let it be noted that his approach, as suggested by the *-ästhetik* suffix of the German term, is primarily concerned with the aesthetic reception (and production) of the text – not in its immediate political or social influence. This last characteristic of the

1 See F. Schuerewegen's mapping, in 1987, of relevant criticism from a French perspective in "Théories de la réception," which includes Jauss, Iser, Austin, Genette, Barthes, Eco and many of their contemporaries as a comparison to later surveys of reader-response.

Konstanz school's original brand of thought – its attempted detachment from social reality and material means of production despite its Marxist inspirations – will be criticized by both Jane T. Tompkins (in 1980) and other American theorists insisting upon the need for politically effective and pragmatic criticism. I argue that aesthetic and socio-political spheres are never completely separate and that announcing and analyzing the point at which this boundary dissolves is part of the textual critic's responsibility. Jauss, despite his focus upon aesthetic purity, enfranchises the subjective reader as at least an equally important participant in the production of textual meaning during the reception process.

In, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," Jauss's infamous attack upon the outmoded, nationalistic, and dangerously universalizing 'literary histories' of his day (that is, what were touted definitive and canonical collections of 'classic' German literature), he calls for a new, reader-oriented history to acknowledge the social praxis of textual production. Inspired, in 1969, by the focus on social relationships offered by Marxist and Formalist schools of thought, Jauss proposes seven theses dedicated to the foundational concept of 'the horizon of expectations' and its capacity to write literary history anew.[2] This concept's revolutionary focus upon the reader's role was quickly adopted and applied by other scholars in both Germany and the United States.

Shortly after Jauss's call to arms, Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish published articles dedicated to the reader's reception of a text's sentences. In harmony with Jauss's privileging of meaning as something that is not inherent to a 'sacred' text but created through a reader's expectations and

2 Gadamer's hermeneutic practice – specifically his concepts of horizon fusion and "historically effected consciousness" – also had an undeniable influence upon Jauss and his personal twist on the horizon of expectations. See the final afterword written for *Truth and Method* for Gadamer's personal reflections on this connection (578-579).

3 Unless noted otherwise, all quotations in the original are cited from Roland Barthes' *Oeuvres complètes I-III* (1942-1980) and all English translations are mine.

participation, two of his colleagues' earliest contributions focus on a new way of seeing the aesthetic act of reading. In "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," Iser employs Roman Ingarden's concept of *Satzkorrelate* (intentional sentence correlatives) to "examine the way in which sequent sentences act upon one another." (52) His discussion examines how the reader's either smooth or interrupted reception of the sentence in literary prose allows for a dynamic creation of the text based on two poles: the artistic (the text created by the author) and the aesthetic (the text received and in turn created by the reader).

"Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics," which was first printed in *New Literary History 2* (1970), shares Iser's aesthetic approach and marks Stanley Fish's first significant contribution to reader-response theory. This article also discusses one of the most basic concepts, the existence of what Iser calls *blanks* (holes or gaps), which is foundational to reader-response theory. Fish's argument for a more subjective, reader-based analysis of texts is made through close readings of mostly single sentences and their temporal reception within the reader's mind (as the phrase is read and received from left to right). Sentences that are logically counterintuitive (containing double-negatives or contradictory clauses) are used to analyze how the reader reacts to such ambiguity: "what the sentence does is give the reader something and then take it away, drawing him on with the unredeemed promise of its return." (72) These sentences encourage readers to either do an immediate double take, forcing them to reread, or they escape the readers' immediate attention and cause them to miss or to misremember details.

In Roland Barthes' *S/Z*, also published in 1970, these tricky phrases are called *scriptible* (writerly) rather than *lisible* (readerly). (558) They are writerly because they force the reader to engage their unconventional difficulty or ambiguity. The sentence's break with the normal, declarative convention of a clause or statement, the convention of making grammatical and logical sense, opens up the same interpretive gaps (Fish calls them "dummy" slots) that Michael Riffaterre often uses to describe intertextual functions in his work. Barthes describes these holes as intrinsic to reading as forgetting: "c'est précisément parce que j'oublie que je lis" (it is precisely because I forget that I read).[3] (562) Riffaterre, Fish, Barthes, and Iser, during the same period, all focus on the blank spaces left open by the reader's misunderstanding of unusual syntax or unfamiliar intertexts as an act of reading occurs (whether it consists of one sentence, one poem, or an entire book).

In fact, Fish's "Affective Stylistics" directly engages Riffaterre's early stylistic methods of reader-oriented analysis and praises the theorist for reading the poem as an *event*. Fish claims that a line of text (or a text itself) "is no longer an object, a thing-in-itself, but an event, something that happens to, and with the participation of, the reader." (72) Both Fish and Riffaterre, in 1970, resist other New Critics' denials of any attempt to focus on the psychological or aesthetic effects of, for example, a poem as literary artifact. His article concludes by insisting that universal meaning or definitive stylistic value judgments are not the purpose of reader-response theory; rather, its practice is an exercise in "self-sharpening and what it sharpens is you." (98) Early on, Fish demands that the field ask not the question – what does that *mean*? – but the question what does it (the text) or that (the sentence) *do*? In short, because reader-response theory is so critically aware of the personal bias or the conventional assumptions made by a reader, it becomes a didactic approach. By this, I mean that a reader-response approach forces individuals to question what a sentence in a particular work does in the terms made famous by J. L. Austin – what are its illocutory (affective) and perlocutory (contract-forming) effects upon you as a subjective reader reading within a particular social context? What things are done by the words in a sentence? This is quite different than having readers ask the question typically posed by New Criticism: what does that sentence mean?

The interactions of Jauss, Iser, Fish, and Riffaterre establish early ties between Europe and North American theories and between concepts used by both reader-response and intertextuality studies. The horizon of expectations, gaps, *Satzkorrelate* (intentional sentence correlatives), and the text received and experienced by the reader as an event, are representative of *Rezeptionsästhetik* and some of its most important foundational concepts. However, these early accomplishments, including the formalist and structuralist methods used to achieve them, did not satisfy the political concerns of the following generation.

II. Deaths – Post-Structuralism, Polemics and Passing Away

In 1980, post-structuralism had gained momentum and attacks on 'national' literary canons, in Germany, France, Canada and the United States had been quite successful. One decade after Jauss's "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," literary theory had, quite simply, changed; as concepts, the author and the sacred text as the primary makers of meaning were dead, or at least dying, and the importance of the reader had rapidly grown. Reader-response had won its primary battle and now began to come under fire for not being

revolutionary enough. Therefore, a critique made by Jane P. Tompkins makes her the next significant figure in this genealogical mapping of reception theories.

The essay "The Reader in History: The Changing Shape of Literary Response," serves as an unexpected conclusion to Tompkins's truly extensive survey of reader-response criticism and her meticulous collection of bibliographical resources. Her argument claims that reader-response critics have not revolutionized literary theory, but have "merely transposed formalist principles into a new key." (201) She stresses that although New Criticism (meaning is in the text) and reader-response criticism (meaning is in the reader) are diametrically opposed regarding the particular locus of textual production, the two approaches are both predicated upon interpretation's ability to find and define meaning. Despite their differences, she sees both of these schools of thought as institutional efforts to position literary studies as outside of and justifiably separate from the scientific realms of the academy. In 1980, Tompkins posits the reader-response movement (beginning in the 1960s and 1970s) at the end of an extremely broad framework of literary periods. Indeed, her essay's sections are titled "The Classical Period," "The Renaissance," "The Augustan Age," "The Advent of Formalism," and, lastly, "Formalism and Beyond." (201-232) Although her framing is broad, grandiose and at times fallaciously reductive, Tompkins does provide a lucid and even-handed analysis of the academic and theoretical developments leading to a reader-oriented school of critical theory.

Tompkins, up until her last paragraph, mourns the loss of the Classical and Renaissance conceptions of the literary text as a truly effective, poetic and political weapon. Her work is noteworthy not only as a snapshot of reception theory's perceived importance and flaws in the 1980s, but also for her two great questions: "What makes one set of perceptual strategies or literary conventions win out over another?" and "if the world is the product of interpretation, then who or what determines which interpretive system will prevail?". (226) These difficult questions are, in part, answered by the influence of 'speech act' theories upon reader-response critics and the institutional polemics that help to make or break academic trends within critical theory communities at large.

Beginning in the 1980s, however, reader-response theory begins to decline just as deconstructionist, feminist, post-colonialist and other fields of criticism begin to rise. By the 1990s, reader-response criticism is dead as a movement in literary studies. A 2004 polemic by Michael Bérubé, which plays a check-point role similar to Jane P. Tompkins's 1980

critique, states that by 1990, "any informed observer of the academic scene would have to have wondered where in the world reader-response criticism had gone." (12) From roughly 1990 to 2000, the field, which experienced a slight death and rebirth after Tompkins and her complaints, disappears from the scholarly radar screen. In his critique of a critique, Bérubé claims that Stanley Fish "killed" reader-response "the day he published his *Diacritics* review of Iser's *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* under the title 'Why No One's Afraid of Wolfgang Iser'."(13) This polemic is a sad exchange where Iser makes a few logical blunders and is ruthlessly held accountable by Fish. In short, the approach to the field championed by Iser is eliminated from North American criticism and 'interpretive communities' are all that officially remain – *et tu, Fish*? What are we to make of this intellectual stab? What happens when one of the great forefathers and one of the main branches of a critical field are cut down?

Bérubé's assertion, that this polemic attack altered the genealogy of reader-response criticism, is substantiated by Iser's interdisciplinary move from psychological and phenomenological theories of literature to anthropological ones. In an interview with Richard van Oort (in 2005), Iser discussed one of his later books *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, and his shift from a dyadic model of reading fiction (his original text-to-reader model) to a new triadic model based on: "the real, the fictive, and the imaginary." (2) His later work is more concerned with the 'felicity' – the truths and lies – of speech-acts and the way that fiction's literary conventions engage the social spheres of performance and linguistic communication.

As noted in a recent French survey of literary theory, Jauss, the great founder of the Konstanz school, similarly removed himself from reception theory's intellectual genealogy at the end of his career and before his death in 1997. In 1995, the section titled "Théories de la réception," from *Méthodes du texte*, stated that "la pensée de Jauss s'est constamment transformée et déplacée, à un point tel que ce dont l'auteur s'occupe aujourd'hui ne semble plus avoir qu'un rapport assez lointain avec ses prémisses de 1970" ("the thought of Jauss has so constantly transformed and repositioned itself that what the author focuses on today only has a distant relation to his premises of 1970"). (Schuerewegen 325) But are the deaths of certain schools of theoretical thought, of their founders, or of theoretical movements such as reader-response so finite? I argue that when an approach to the study of literature like reader-response casts off its initial mortal coil(s) and passes away what occurs is an illusory, superficial death. The spirits of groundbreaking ideas and of theoreticians do not die so easily. Instead, they reincarnate – perhaps the ultimate boundary crossing – to new locations, disciplines and media.

III. Reincarnations – Intertextuality, Theatre Semiotics and Performance Studies

> A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb 'to be,' but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, and . . . and . . . and . . .
> – Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

Despite the name of reader-response dying out in literary criticism, I submit that its spirit and key concepts began crossing disciplinary and media borders by way of speech-act theory into the fields of theatre semiotics and performance studies. I therefore conclude with a brief sketching of some incarnations of reader-response as it has moved through the linguistic turn in literary studies to become spectator-response. These tracings provide one of what could be many answers to Michael Bérubé's question: where had reader-response criticism gone to by 1990?

The foundations for what becomes a flourishing of spectator-response theory in the 1990s began as early as 1962 with the publication of J.L. Austin's *How To Do Things With Words* and his theorizing of the performative speech act. I have already made reference to moments in Stanley Fish's work when the study of illocutory (affect-inducing) and perlocutory (contract-forming) responses experienced by subjective readers begins to trump the locutory (meaning-producing) study of literature encouraged by the new critics. From that point forward, scholars of literature and theatre begin to play with the concepts of interpretive communities, the contract between sender and receiver created by performative speech acts, and the difference between how one receives when reading, when watching a play, or when engaging in the performance of a social ritual in everyday life.

Marvin Carlson proposes one of the most interesting semiotic approaches for reception-based readings of theatrical performance. In "Invisible Presences – Performance Intertextuality," he draws upon the Prague School (specifically Michael Quinn) and its three-part model for analyzing acting: "actor, character, and stage figure, where the stage figure was the product created by the actor, the character that figure as interpreted by the audience." (111) Carlson pushes the limits of this triadic model in order to focus on the previously neglected importance of the 'figure' and the work done by the audience to read, write, and create this figure. Though Carlson's other work makes further connections between reader-response and spectator-response principles, this article's focus on

hidden or invisible past performances – those embodied by the actor, not the character, and remembered, re-read, and re-viewed by the informed audience member – is especially useful for comparing the literary event vis-à-vis the dramatic event. His larger work, *The Haunted Stage* also traces the creation of one of the academy's newer disciplines, Performance Studies, as well as the work of Richard Schechner, Susan Bennett and others.

In 1990, Bennett published the first extensive North American synthesis of reader-response theory as applied to theatre. In her conclusion, she describes her book *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* as "a testimony to the contemporary emancipation of the spectator." (212) In it, she has combined and adapted the thoughts of Jauss, Iser, Fish, Holland, Schechner and others to create a new schematic of the dramatic text's mechanics. The only limitation I see in Bennett's theorizing is that it tends to privilege traditional conceptions of the theatre and the spectator. Therefore, the more radical definition of performance found in Richard Schechner's avant-garde experiments with environmental theatre or in Diana Taylor's work on embodiment, in her book *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003), are indispensible tools for continually pushing the reader-response / spectator-response boundary and the social implications of subjective reception. In one of Schechner's early essays, "Towards a Poetics of Performance" (1975), he presents a radically creative study of the theatrical space, and the spectator's reception of performances as influenced by those spaces. That article is a combination of anthropology, drama studies and concepts of reader-response. It has been translated into French, and published in *La rélation théâtrale* (*The Theatrical Relationship*) (1980), as part of a collaborative exchange with Anne Ubersfeld and others whose criticism similarly crosses interdisciplinary boundaries to theorize spectator-response.

Though the seeds of these new academic endeavors were only planted in the mid 1970s, new concepts and new departments began to spring forth throughout the 1980s and 1990s during reader-response's supposed death. Performance Studies has (since the 1980s in North America) become an established school of thought that intersects with the work on reception theory (whether that reception be reader- or spectator-based) to which every scholar mentioned in this article, whether they are living or dead, has contributed. I do not know what other changes the future will bring to critical theory. I would like to suggest with this case study, however, that in addition to thinking about the often illusory births and deaths of theoretical movements we also examine the ways in which their concepts reincarnate.

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SUMMARY

After an overview of Reader Response theory's major disciplinary permutations, I discuss its current role in the work of Marvin Carlson, Susan Bennette, Richard Schechner and scholars of the new field known as performance studies. I undertake this experimental mapping of a theory of yesterday and its current status today to expose the cyclic nature of literary theories, which breach and break disciplinary boundaries through a series of deaths and rebirths. As a young cultural critic, I see part of my task as understanding how reading methodologies generated within our various disciplines continue to be reincarnated within other fields.

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