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Interpretive Conventions

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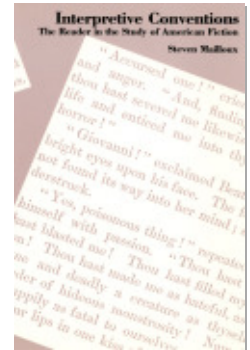
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Preface

Readers approach prefaces expecting to find out how authors want their texts to be read. Such expectations and readings are what this book is all about. The following chapters present a general introduction to current reader-response criticism, a critical perspective that makes the reading experience the central concern in talk about literature. These chapters also propose a specific reader-oriented approach to the study of American fiction. I develop this approach while examining the activities making up the discipline: literary theory, practical criticism, textual scholarship, and literary history.

Chapters 1 and 2 analyze five influential theories of the literary reading process: those of Stanley Fish, Norman Holland, David Bleich, Wolfgang Iser, and Jonathan Culler. It turns out that none of these literary theorists provides the kind of reader-oriented approach most useful for studying American fiction. Only a reader-response criticism based on a consistent social model of reading can supply the required approach. Social reading models are based on sociological categories such as communities and conventions rather than psychological categories such as individual selves and unique identities. Chapters 3 through 7 develop such a social reading model, which owes more to the theories of Fish, Iser, and Culler than to the psychological reader criticism of Holland and Bleich.

Chapter 3 moves the discussion from theory to practice. A reader-response analysis of a Hawthorne short story tries to demonstrate the consequences of taking the reader's interaction with the text as the primary focus of practical criticism. The most

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important aspect of this interaction is its temporal dimension. In the Hawthorne interpretation, I describe the temporal structure of the reader's response using a combination of Fish's affective stylistics, Iser's phenomenological criticism, and Roland Barthes's concept of readerly codes.

But an emphasis on the temporal reading process is only part of the reader-oriented approach I wish to develop. Of equal importance is what produces and constrains the reader's response at any particular moment in the time-flow of reading. Focusing on this question, Chapter 4 emphasizes the social foundation of reading by developing accounts of authorial intention and communicative convention. The account of convention is preliminary, sufficient only to solve a specific problem in American textual scholarship: the definition and application of the concept of "author's final intention." This phrase has been left virtually unexamined even though it has been the governing slogan in the editing of American fiction during the last thirty years. Chapter 4 first defines "inferred intention" by using Culler's theory of reading conventions and the speech act philosophy of H. P. Grice and J. L. Austin. Then "author's final intention" becomes defined in terms of the intended structure of the reader's experience. I demonstrate the usefulness of these new definitions by examining textual problems in the fiction of Hawthorne, Melville, James, Norris, and others.

By the end of Chapter 4, I have developed a reading model that is temporal and convention-based and have applied the critical approach derived from this model to practical criticism and textual scholarship; but before the approach can be applied to American literary history, a more detailed account of convention must be given in order to focus more precisely on the interpretive work involved in reading and criticism. To develop this account, Chapter 5 builds on recent philosophy of language to present a general typology of conventions: traditional conventions that recognize past regularities in action and belief; regulative conventions that prescribe future actions; and constitutive conventions that describe conditions making present meaning possible. I apply this typology to the use of the term "convention" in literary study to get ready for my discussion of literary interpretation.

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Chapter 6 begins with an examination of the ongoing debate over the nature of the interpretive process, which prepares the way for a working definition of "interpretation." This definition together with Chapter 5's typology forms the basis of a proposed theory of interpretive conventions. Chapter 6 defines "interpretive conventions" as shared ways of making sense of texts; they are group-licensed strategies for constructing meaning, describable in terms of conditions for intelligibility. My theory of interpretive conventions posits that traditional and regulative conventions become constitutive in interpretation, an assumption that is more fully explained through a discussion of related concepts in recent speech act philosophy.

With this account of interpretive conventions, I proceed to discuss American literary history in Chapter 7. I begin with an examination of how Stephen Crane used and modified traditional genre conventions, an examination that illustrates the established discourse of American literary history. This discourse is based on a production model of literature that usually ignores the important role played by the reading audience. German reception aesthetics, especially the work of Hans Robert Jauss, has recently presented an alternative model for doing literary history, one that is consistent with the reader-oriented approach I have been developing. Like traditional literary history, however, *Rezeptionsästhetik* tends to cover over the interpretive work of readers and critics that underlies all literary history. To uncover this interpretive work, I use the theory of interpretive conventions developed in the previous two chapters. A discussion of the contemporary reception of *Moby-Dick* demonstrates how traditional (genre) conventions became prescriptive and how this fact accounts for one difference between the American and the British evaluations of Melville's novel. In a second example of reception, the critical history of the Appleton *Red Badge of Courage* illustrates how traditional (genre, modal, and authorial) conventions became constitutive. *Red Badge* criticism is an especially clear example of disguised interpretive work because the published text was heavily expurgated and obviously had to be supplemented by its readers before its meaning could be discovered.

Throughout *Interpretive Conventions* I try to construct a spe-

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cific reader-response approach to literature at the same time that I illustrate what a focus on the reader can do in the context of American literary study. Thus, each chapter adds to the developing model of reading as it attempts to demonstrate further the use of reader-oriented criticism in solving problems and achieving goals in the different activities making up the study of American fiction. The final chapter examines the status of reader-response criticism's discourse on "the reader," while an appendix shows how reader-oriented approaches might bring together literary study and composition teaching, the two tasks assigned to most American departments of English.

A word about the subtext paralleling the main: The footnotes are of two kinds, reflecting two types of readers whom this book addresses. For the specialist in American literature who is not familiar with all the recent activity in critical theory, textual scholarship, or the philosophy of language, I have included basic explanations and bibliographical references for the technical concepts used in the main text. For specialists in these three areas, I have footnoted discussions that develop technical points glossed over in the main text. These two kinds of footnotes allow the main text to be aimed at both types of readers as well as a more general audience. The ideal reader for this book is simply one interested in the different activities constituting the contemporary study of literature.

My attitude toward the American critical community remains two-sided throughout most of *Interpretive Conventions*. On the one hand, I attack the critical tradition for neglecting the reader in its practical criticism and literary theory. On the other hand, the specific proposals I make for using the reader are made from *within* the traditional assumptions of American literary study. For example, I propose reader-response criticism as a useful corrective to the formalist interpretations dominating practical criticism, but I do not call the activity of explication itself into question. And I elaborate a new definition of authorial intention grounded in a convention-based reading model, but I do not reject reconstruction of the intended text as the proper goal for textual editing. My purpose then is primarily to show how a reader-oriented perspective can be used in performing the traditional activities of American literary study. I hope the

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achievement of this purpose will lead to a better understanding of both reader-response criticism and the framework for the study of American fiction. The next step is a thorough reexamination of that framework.

I begin to lay the groundwork for this reexamination in my Conclusion, where I attend to the institutional status of critical and theoretical discourse. The Conclusion focuses on a fact implicit in everything that has gone before: “the reader” is an interpretive (not a natural) category that functions (like “the text” or “the author’s intention”) as a hermeneutic device in practical criticism and the other areas of literary study. In one sense, then, the Conclusion provides a way of reading my book different from what I have just been suggesting. Most of this Preface asks that the book be read as an attempt to promote reader-response criticism as *the* most useful perspective for literary study and that the various chapters be seen as demonstrating the objective validity of this claim. In contrast, the Conclusion suggests that the book’s descriptive claims be viewed as interpretations and that the various chapters be taken as persuasive attempts to illustrate how these interpretive constructs can affect institutional practices, practices that are always based on interpretive assumptions and strategies rather than on some bedrock of uninterpreted reality. The Conclusion does not reject the claims of earlier chapters but “undoes” them; it does not so much contradict the preceding claims as change their status from objective statements to persuasive interpretations—a new status that the Conclusion gives all practical and theoretical discourse, not just my own reader-response analyses and theory. Furthermore, I frame the Conclusion’s “constitutive hermeneutics” as a series of questions that all reader-response critics should face by the inevitable logic of their arguments rather than as my definitive answers to all such questions. I believe finally that the questions and answers involved in a “constitutive hermeneutics” can prepare the way for a more general reexamination of American literary studies as an institution.

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