

I

Provocation

The Point of Reception Theory

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All meaning is constituted or actualized at the point of reception.¹ This, the founding claim of reception study, seems hardly contestable. After all, what meaning is there that is not already a received meaning? As a result, reception study can include perspectives as diverse as those of the editors of this volume: the one finds in reception theory both the enrichment of meaning by the reception of the past and the liberation of meaning for the individual reader in the present;² the other finds in the practical history of Virgil's reception a distortion of Virgil's original vision and brings historicist and methodological tools to bear on that reception in order to correct our understanding.³ Both approaches, however, seem to me to share a strong commitment to the subjectivity of the reader. Whether we are correcting the omissions and suppressions of readers like Goebbels and Dryden or imagining the redemption of the text in a reader who accepts her historicity, commits herself to the text, and finds the "Love that moves the sun and the other stars,"⁴ we seem to have assumed something about reading and reception that can bear further discussion, and what we have assumed is the point of reception. And in doing this the project has, I believe, often betrayed the point of reception theory. In other words, the project has become yet another effort to place ourselves above rather than in the complexity of reading and writing.

My interest in reception theory, then, is in the point of reception and how we might think about it within the same postmodern discourses that have directed our attention away from the *mens auctoris* and the "text itself" toward the historicity and biases that constitute our being in the world and our access to understanding. I can only offer a brief outline of some of the considerations that

1 Martindale (1993) 3.

2 Martindale (1993).

3 Thomas (2001).

4 Martindale (1993) 106.

are part of my thinking about this, a thinking that is still in process. Like all texts this is a pastiche of other texts in words that are not my own.⁵

I begin with the linguisticity of the world which takes us back to Heidegger and Gadamer. "Language is the fundamental mode of our being-in-the-world and the all-embracing form of the constitution of the world." ". . . [W]ords and language are not wrappings in which things are packed for the commerce of those who write and speak. It is in words and language that things first come into being and are."⁶ This means that in terms of our consciousness, language precedes the world. It is the medium into which we are born and it carries with it values and meanings that reach as far back into the past as they do into the future. This is possible because from within language meaning is not arbitrary; metaphor is connected to metaphor, metonymy to metonymy and the briefcase has long ceased to carry the lawyer's briefs while the word still does. This does not, of course, mean that the "briefcase" essentially carries "underpants" or "legal briefs," only that you cannot get the "briefs" out of the "briefcase." Any symbolic system carries with it its history, its future and play. "We can only speak and think in and through a particular language that we did not create, so that we are always thinking and speaking in a medium that is structured for us (historically) without its being mapped to the world in such a way that reveals the world without a point of view or with a *universal* point of view."⁷

But, while language from within language is not arbitrary, it is not fixed either; it is filled with play, like the play of a door on its hinge, and this play facilitates the self-renewing give and take of the game of meaning.⁸ It is in this play that the child comes to language and to consciousness. She plays with the play of language. Like adolescents who play with social roles and future identities; like the clever slave who plays with the plot. And this play is an act of world construction and of self-construction, one that proceeds in part from mimesis and in part from figuration: it is always a play with difference, but it is also the play that allows difference to become part of identity: the child plays with the heft, the value and force of "ma ma" or of "I love you," she plays with the counter-move those moves precipitate.

5 In fact, this essay was written for oral presentation and was not so much the product of research and investigation as the result of reflection on the work of Heidegger, Gadamer, Bakhtin, Barthes, Derrida, Kristeva, and others whom I have read over the years. No attempt has been made to fill out the huge secondary bibliography, and individual quotes are sometimes more the result of whom I happened to be reading at the time of writing than they are indicative of the most influential or important thinkers on the particular topic.

6 Heidegger (2000) 15.

7 Hahn (2002) 51.

8 See, further, Gadamer (1998) 101–34; (1976) 66.

The process of coming to language and coming to consciousness combines what Kristeva referred to as the semiotic pulse of drive and desire⁹ with the logical and syntactic organization of linguistic signification. It includes the operations of the imaginary, the identification strategies (introjection and projection) that are necessary for the subject to come forth and to make use of other processes like condensation and displacement.¹⁰ Consciousness, then, is not only linguistic and symbolic, but to a large degree precipitated by the unconscious (which, as we know from Freud and Lacan is not only structured like a language but structured by language). Consciousness, then, is structured by the drives and desires we suppress for the sake of the images and mirages we identify with. Among these drives and passions we should never underestimate the passion for ignorance, a passion that seems to support and underwrite the other great passions of love and hatred. But, “When does the child become master of language?,” Gadamer asks. The answer is clearly, “Never.” The gathering of meaning is “the ongoing game in which the being-with-others of men occurs”¹¹ – and not only that but it is the game in which the being-with-self occurs.

But this process of coming to language is not merely a kind of permeation of consciousness with language as if it were a dye: in your teal and magenta world you become teal and magenta. We are always shaping and being shaped by the questions we are asking; we are always, as Heidegger likes to say, “underway.” But, if our consciousness takes place in a language that precedes us in a world into which we are thrown, how can our own difference, our own meaning take place? Language and mimesis bring with them two powerful tools. First, there it is an entailment of mimesis and iterability that the imitation is not in the same place as the exemplar. This has two implications. Words always mean differently: if I want you to understand my words, I want you to understand them from your position. I want you to understand differently. But, by the same token, my words, words which are never mine to begin with, are also always only mine: that is, what I say here and now, in this place and time, can never be said again, not by me or by you, not even if we repeat these words. The event will always be different. For Bakhtin, this is the ground of responsibility and it creates the nature of the event of self.¹² As a result, in repetition and in play, language acquisition, which includes hearing our own words in the mouth of another, which includes our inner dialogue, is always an act of mimesis and appropriation, always both similar and different. In the event, we receive and give back to the common world, and what is most personal is paradoxically and simultaneously most public and common. Second, the acquisition of language is not just the acquisition of words or narratives, of images and prejudices and interpretive protocols. It is the

9 See Kristeva (1984) 19–106; (1996) 19–27.

10 See Kristeva (1995) 103–106.

11 Gadamer (1976) 56.

12 See Bakhtin (1993).

acquisition of figures, of ways to use and abuse language, of lies and irony and metaphor and metonymy. This means that, wherever consciousness goes, language has already been. This means that part of the heft of learning to say “I love you” is learning to write those words in the wind and the water. In fact, these three words, the most intimate and desired of words, can help summarize our being in language: they are words that have been in and out of the mouths of countless lovers and countless liars, and we want them in our mouths and in our ears; they are shifty words made with shifters, and always understood from the other person’s point of view, that complex point of reception where semiosis and symbol, projection and repression intersect. (We have already suppressed much of what we do not know.) And so, if language is consciousness and language never stops, then “heterogeneity within signification points to heterogeneity within the speaking subject; if language is a dynamic process then the subject is a dynamic process.”¹³

Reading then is the complex act of hearing the words of another, which is the complex act of making them fit within the linguistic structure and context (that is, history and genetics) of our own consciousness – it brings new contexts and analogies that are understood by virtue of old contexts and figures. It may uncover ideas that were already ours but of which we were ignorant; it may bring the familiar into unforeseen combinations. It may require the invention of new metaphors or new blindnesses just as it can stir old passions and refigure forgotten stories.

The point of reception conceived in this way, is not some thing-like point “within” the consciousness of the objective Thing-like reader; it is not some organic entity (like “brain”) that precedes the text; it cannot be isolated or stopped any more than identity is isolated within me or language can be stopped and placed under “my” control. The point of reception is the ephemeral interface of the text; it occurs where the text and the reader meet and is simultaneously constitutive of both. (“The house was quiet and the world was calm . . . The words were spoken as if there was no book” (Wallace Stevens¹⁴.) At the point of reception the text comes alive as the consciousness of the reader. In this way, “to understand what the work of art says to us is . . . a self-encounter.”¹⁵ We lose ourselves in the horizon of the other (that is, in the words that are the traces of that otherness). We play the other as we did as a child. But in representing the other, we play ourselves. In the theatre of plurality we find the fiction of identity. That is because we cannot understand what we do not understand, and so, when we come to understanding (of any thing, of the other) we come to self-understanding. But the “Other makes the subject other to itself.”¹⁶ And so we find the uncanny at

13 Kristeva (2002) xviii.

14 Stevens (1972) 279.

15 Gadamer (1976) 101.

16 Kristeva (2002) xviii.

the heart of the familiar. “Meaning is constituted through an embodied relation with another person . . . it is constituted in relation to an other and it is beyond any individual subjectivity.”¹⁷

This process has important implications. Just as the pattern of language is already found within the body, so the social relation inhabits the psyche: the logic of alterity, then, is already found in consciousness. Reading, then, like geopolitics,¹⁸ requires that we learn to live with the return of the repressed other within our own psyches, to experience ourselves as subjects in process, subjects on trial, to experience the repressed other within. This is how we learn to live with others who are not merely other, and this is how we articulate an ethical relationship between conscious and unconscious, self and other, citizen and foreigner, identity and difference; this is how we live with ourselves – not as the reader and his book that are one in the quiet of night, but as the reader and his book that are both same and different, that meet at the point of reception.

If the point of reception is this merger of the poet’s words and my own, the point where the neoteric tri-kolon crescendo reverberates in our imagination of Cicero’s own reading,¹⁹ “quot sunt, quotque fuere, Marce Tulli / quotque post aliis erunt in annis” (“as many as are and as many as have been, Marcus Tullius, and as many as will be in years to come”), we can see, I think, how our reading always changes the text and how the text always changes us. And so, it is not a contradiction to say, on the one hand, that all understanding is self-understanding, made possible only by the foreknowledge and prejudices of our being in the world, and, on the other, that a text can change one’s life. “For self-understanding only realizes itself in the understanding of a subject matter”²⁰ – that is, it has the structure of alterity – and that “The self that we are does not possess itself”²¹ – that is, we are what happens. “One must take up into himself what is said to him in such fashion that it speaks and finds an answer in the words of his own language.”²² – that is in words inhabited by the reader’s prejudices, desires, blindnesses, and imaginary. “When it does begin to speak, however, it does not simply speak its word, always the same, in lifeless rigidity, but gives ever new answers to the person who questions it and poses ever new questions to him who answers it.”²³ The text like the reader is always changing, always the same.

Now, if it is right to think of understanding and self in this way, then we are, as Bakhtin already said, an event, a project thrown into the world and caught between the imperfect of our past and the future perfect of our present (our desire).

17 Kristeva (2002) xviii.

18 Kristeva (1991) 169–92.

19 See Batstone (2002) 116–17.

20 Gadamer (1976) 55.

21 Gadamer (1976) 55.

22 Gadamer (1976) 57.

23 Gadamer (1976) 57.

This is the point of reception: where words, not my words, not your words, intersected with the past (memory, tradition, even individual history, and, of course, the unconscious) and the future (desire, chance, and ideology) are repeated in the future perfect of the present. The iterability of the text insures that it always eludes (plays out and out-plays) the maker; but it always eludes the receiver as well. When I have changed – and I will – it will be there and a new “I” will make it flicker with presence and absence or with the fulness of being, a sublime or an abjected object.

So, what are the consequences or implications of this view? First of all, if it is true to say that while the material text remains the same, the received text always changes, then the text is never redeemed – or, perhaps better, it is always being converted. If reading like the self is always open, if it is always an act of self-understanding (which cannot *not* be a mirage) and of world construction (which cannot *not* be political), we may always ask, “Why stop here?” It would seem that every reading is, as Nietzsche said in 1880, a will to power.²⁴ When done publicly, not only does it add to the possible voices of meaning (to the figures and language in the theatre of plurality), but it establishes a curriculum and projects a future. Goebbels was right, and that is why Thomas believes in the suppression of Goebbels’ reading. And this is also true of the practical suggestions made by *Redeeming the Text*.

The claim, “What else indeed could (say) ‘Virgil’ be other than what readers have made of him over the centuries?”²⁵ is itself subject to both its own historicity and its political ambition. In other words, it is an effort to change the point of reception. This is true, first of all, at the *curricular* level, where we can note that many of the readers that concern Thomas’s book are strikingly absent from *Redeeming the Text*. How might Goebbels or Mussolini or even Stauffenberg figure within the claim that Virgil can only be what readers have made of him? These readers require an oppositional reading, a reading that suppresses their ambitions. And, secondly, since history, like reception, is always open, it is up to us to determine not just what the importance of Dryden’s reading is, but what Dryden means. The past is still before us and we must always write the history of reception.

Another aspect of the politics of reception appears in the pleasure of the text that Martindale imagines: namely, *the reader* who finds in dialogue with the text the Love that moves the sun and other stars. As fetching and powerful as this image is, we might hesitate before its autoerotic implications. We might recognize that other readers construct their texts to fill other desires: the *fetishistic* reader who reads the divided text, the text of stiletto heels and tongues and the curve of phrase; the *obsessive* reader who gives himself to the secondary codes and the metalanguages of his text; the *paranoic* reader who constructs and consumes the complicated and devious secrets of the text; and the *hysteric* who throws himself

24 Nietzsche (1980) 487, borrowed by Barthes (1975) 62.

25 Martindale (1993) 10.

across the body of the text and is ravished.²⁶ And to this list we could add the intellectual pleasures of mimesis, the diversionary pleasures of escapism, the kathartic pleasures of Aristotelian tragedy, and the hectoring pleasures of a puritan sermon.

Finally (and I am not pretending to be complete), reception theory positions us to question every will to power that stops the meaning of the text or the history of reception. I mean by this more than philological interrogation (although there are many questions to be raised). I have in mind something a little more elusive, but related. If all understanding is self-understanding and if the self is always a project caught between an imperfect past and the future perfect desire of the present, then within the language of consciousness and understanding something is always suppressed and always revised. It is, after all, how we construct a psyche, how we imagine an identity, how we live with ourselves as we make promises and create worlds. And, it is how we read and understand. This means that the very trope according to which the Augustan reading is optimistic pamphleteering in contrast to an ambivalent reading is itself not only an asymmetrical construction of alternatives, but itself a suppression. Why could there not be an ambivalent-Augustan reading? Or a redemptive-Augustan reading? If Goebbels' Virgil amid the plans for the Holocaust is anathema, what about the Confederate Virgil – Turnus defending the institution of slavery from the imperialistic *Libertas* of the Roman North? And why should our ambivalence not make us ambivalent about ambivalence? Sometimes it is the time for action and ambivalence is an indulgent and destructive luxury. But, no matter where you turn something is suppressed, and, whatever it is, it is you. And that is not really all that bad. For, as Lacan liked to point out, the suppressions of the unconscious not only mean that we are worse than we believe, but also that we are better than we know.

So reception theory, it seems to me, opens up the political discussion. It raises important questions about text, reading, meaning, and understanding, questions that I think need to be considered in terms of the point of reception: what Heidegger called *Dasein*. But reception theory cannot itself provide normative answers regarding reception because the past is always imperfect, always awaiting tomorrow to become what it will have been. The point of reception theory, then, is to return reception and the point of reception to its important work of self-understanding and world construction, to the important work of changing the point of reception.

26 See Barthes (1975) 62–3.