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AMERICAN STUDIES, READER THEORY, AND THE LITERARY TEXT: FROM THE STUDY OF MATERIAL OBJECTS TO THE STUDY OF SOCIAL PROCESSES

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A book is not a thing like other things. When we hold it in our hands all we hold is the paper: The book is elsewhere.

Robert Escarpit, *The Book Revolution* (1)

If the [literary] signifier is indubitably material, signification is not.

Terry Eagleton, "Ideology, Fiction, Narrative" (2)

Terry Eagleton made his observation about the curious intangibility of literary signification nearly fifteen years after Robert Escarpit remarked that the essence of a book cannot be found on or in the pages from which it is made. It was necessary for Eagleton to make his point, in part, because Escarpit's crucial insight went unheeded in a critical climate dominated by theorists intent on penetrating to the essential structure of literary texts. Despite their quarrels with the New Critics, many structuralists of the 1960's and 1970's were still locked within the premises of formalism and so continued to treat the text as a fixed and finished object. (3) While a glance at the more recent work of reader-response critics such as Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, and Stanley Fish might
suggest that this assertion about the text's inescapable elusiveness has at last gained a measure of critical visibility and respect, a more careful look at the ongoing practice of literary investigation reveals that this essential insight has not yet had the fundamental impact it can and should have. (4)

If that insight is ever taken seriously, it has the potential to alter virtually all forms of literary study. Indeed, within American Studies, if reader theory's central critical proposition about the nature and location of the text is accorded the attention it deserves, then those of us interested in literature will find it necessary to relinquish our traditional preoccupation with texts alone in order to turn our attention to questions of social process. American Studies, in short, will have to look more closely and more systematically at the activity of reading. It will also be essential for us to expand the discipline's range of vision as well by placing the reading of literary texts within the proper context, that is, within the social and cultural practice of literacy.

I want to make it clear here that I am not suggesting, as Jane Tompkins and Jonathan Culler have, that literary scholars should abandon the practice of textual interpretation altogether. (5) Their suggestions are interesting and provocative especially for those situated in English departments who are charged with the task of preserving and teaching the human literary heritage as such. But for those of us in American Studies who conceive of our task somewhat differently as the reconstruction and explanation of American culture, literary interpretation must remain a basic tool of our methodological repertoire simply because literary texts continue to be one of our most readily available forms of evidence. Therefore, I would, like to suggest that even if we continue to believe that American Studies ought to interpret the texts presented to us by American culture for what they can tell us about that culture, then reader response theory, especially as it has been formulated by Stanley Fish, will force us to go beyond interpretation alone, at least as it has been previously conceived. Indeed, if we take the full measure of Fish's argument, we will find it necessary to redefine interpretation entirely and to investigate the operation of something I would like to call the literary institution.

The development of American Studies as a formal discipline was, of course, closely connected with the practice of a certain kind of literary criticism. (6) This criticism, christened the myth symbol approach after Henry Nash Smith's book, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, demonstrated enough coherence as a method that it suggested that a new way of studying American culture had been found. (7) Although the individual scholars practicing this method, such as Smith, Leo Marx, Alan Trachtenberg, and R.W.B. Lewis, did not think of themselves as a school, their origin in the same one or two graduate programs insured their common purpose and approach. (8) Although it will not be possible to trace the undeniable subtleties and complexities of myth symbol practice here, I would like to note that its various examples were characterized by certain fundamental assumptions about American culture, about texts themselves, and about the act of critical interpretation because it is precisely this set of assumptions that reader theory asks us to question.

To begin with, the myth symbol scholars began with the assumption that the special physical and social characteristics of life in a new world produced a uniquely American mind. That mind, they assumed, could be found in any American, but it was developed most fully in the country's "leading" thinkers, authors, and artists. As Gene Wise has observed, despite the group's professed interest in the "popular" culture of the American majority, most of its members believed that the realities of American life were revealed most comprehensively in the "great" works of American literature. (9) Those texts, they further assumed, are more valuable to a cultural historian precisely because they contain more of the national life than products created by inferior, less imaginative American minds. In effect, the myth symbol scholars took the established literary canon for granted as their basic body of evidence.

It was not this assumption alone, however, that enabled the myth symbol scholars to produce their confident readings of *The Deerslayer*, *Moby Dick*, and *The Scarlet Letter* and then to hold them up as evidence about the reality of American life and the attitudes and beliefs of the American populace. That practice was also grounded upon certain assumptions about the coercive power of the literary text, about the equivalence of American readers, and about the basic commensurability of temporally distinct readings. In his un-
official defense and explication of the method, Leo Marx has asserted, for instance, that a "large part of the meaning ... [of a literary text] resides in the inherent emotional power of the work." (10) Marx judiciously qualifies this assessment by noting further that because textual meaning should not be identified with simple paraphrasable content, it is essential "to get at those feelings [produced in a reader by the text], to sort them out, to name them, and to make their function explicit." (11) Although he thus acknowledges the rhetorical quality of literature, he never goes on to admit that different readers might be affected differently by particular rhetorical strategies. Marx cannot make such an observation precisely because he assumes that the text is fixed from the start and has the power to determine all good readers' responses.

This becomes particularly clear when one notices how Marx confronts the difficult problems of textual ambiguity and multiple interpretations. Because he tends to identify interpretation with the simple act of naming effects necessarily produced by a text's linguistic devices, Marx expects that different readings will tend to be similar. He admits, however, that difficulties sometimes arise, resulting in conflicting interpretations. But he reassures his reader that the final success of the naming process is guaranteed by "a reliable scholarly consensus" because "the impersonal process of critical scholarship ... will correct or eliminate invalid observations, and ... will incorporate valid insights into the living body of knowledge." (12)

In making such a statement, Marx is obviously assuming, first, that verbal symbols contain both meaning and their potential effects. Texts are therefore capable of asserting their objective reality and of forcing a reader to see what they mean. Conflicting interpretations are the consequence of faulty vision or incomplete comprehension; the disparity can be cleared up gradually by subsequent, "better" readings. Marx is also assuming that scholarly investigation is unaffected by the context within which it occurs. It is disinterested, one presumes, because objective scholars are seeking the truth rather than pursuing self-interest in any significant way. This seems a curious assumption for any student of culture but particularly for one so preoccupied with the unique qualities of an American mind and their origin in the special situation of "the new world." Nonetheless, the assumption is crucial for Marx because it permits him to dismiss the disturbing possibility that literary scholars might read texts idiosyncratically.

Because he further posits similarity between an author's Model Reader, actual readers in the past and present, and the disinterested scholarly critic, Marx broadly assumes that texts will function identically for different readers if they are read correctly. Although he admits that a literary work's complex, multileveled meaning may be revealed only gradually in the process of sequential readings, he never directly addresses the question of how a text's meaning, elaborated only recently, can nonetheless stand as an account of its historical or cultural meaning. (13) Indeed, Marx never doubts that there is one complete set of meanings to be ever more fully elaborated. Nor does he doubt that each progressive revelation of that meaning is simply a more complete version of its historical meaning regardless of whether that meaning was or could have been perceived in the past. Marx thus posits a reading process based on a simple transmission-reception model of communication. The historical meaning of a literary text, he seems to claim, resides within the text and is therefore conveyed, even if only unconsciously, to any and every reader who reads sensitively and correctly.

There are several problems with this set of unquestioned assumptions and the critical practice that is their result. To begin with, myth-symbol scholarship is remarkably unselfconscious about its status as history and/or cultural explanation. To my knowledge, none of its most prominent practitioners has ever directly addressed the theoretical question of what a literary text constitutes evidence for, nor have they attempted to specify what it means to seek the historical meaning of a work of literature. The first question was made moot by their assumption that American culture is organic or holistic, like the human organism it resembles. It therefore necessarily exhibits fundamental, continuously elaborated concerns and themes. As Cecil Tate has observed, the early American Studies scholars grounded their entire critical practice on an analogy between a culture's style and the human personality. (14) Just as personality is revealed in all human gestures and acts, so a culture's style, they thought, is expressed through all of its institutions and practices, in-
cluding its literary art. That art, then, when preserved through time, becomes evidence for that unitary cultural style. For the traditional American Studies scholar, it does not matter who produced the literature, how it was conceived, or who read it. As a "pure" expression of the American spirit, it can be read as a representative work of the culture.

Such an assumption ignores the fact that the creation of literary works is, in reality, both a material and a social process. It involves real people who are educated in markedly different ways, people who contract with very different publishers to reach widely varying audiences, people whose books are marketed and distributed by quite separate systems; it also involves people who choose and evaluate their reading matter on the basis of varying criteria and models. If one acknowledges the validity of these differences and marks the fact of their occurrence as significant, it then seems necessary to redefine the status of literature as a cultural document. In effect, it becomes necessary to link any literary work with the particular constellation of people involved in its creation, production, and reception. In this view, the text can no longer testify to the state of American culture as a whole but rather must be taken as a specific social process of communication between identifiable groups of people. Its historical meaning and significance, then, are intimately bound up with the social and material context within which it appeared, was used, and was understood.

This alternate account of how one should go about studying literature historically bears important similarities to certain general methodological suggestions made by Murray Murphey in his theoretical volume on the character of historical knowledge. (15) Murphey argues there that the principal goal of any cultural historian is the formulation of an answer to the question, "Why is it as it is?" where "it" refers to some sort of data pertaining to the past but surviving in the present. In effect, Murphey argues, historical and cultural study must always begin with the actual evidence that is present to us. Then, to construct a historical theory capable of explaining the artifact's present appearance, the historian must provide a likely account of why it was created the way it was. Such an account, of course, will entail an assessment of how that artifact was to be used, but it will also require a careful account of what it actually meant for its creators and users, regardless of whether it was a cotton gin, a diary, or a copy of The Wide, Wide World. Murphey's simple but important point is that we don't want to know what we think of the gin or The Wide, Wide World; what we want to know is how they were viewed in the worlds that gave rise to them and what sort of an impact they had on those worlds.

Murphey's stipulations are especially useful to cultural historians because they remind us to take constant note of the fact that all data can be construed differently by different individuals. He reminds us that while historical investigation is essentially and unavoidably an interpretive enterprise, we must nevertheless try not to impose our own readings upon events and artifacts that might have been viewed differently in the past. History's special goal, quite simply, is the interpretive reconstruction of the way certain data were produced and construed in the past by real individuals closely associated with their appearance and their use.

Murphey's question is also useful, however, because its syntactic vagueness forces us to be clear about certain important issues when we are asking the question about a literary work. If I posit his query, "Why is it as it is?" about a copy of The Gates Ajar, for instance, or about Moby Dick, it is not at all clear whether the pronoun refers to the material object I hold in my hand or to the meanings that might be said to constitute the novel contained therein. The ambiguity is helpful, then, because it reminds us that books are not only texts but also objects produced by people within material processes. Although people read for meaning, they do so by looking at lexical inscriptions found upon collections of bound pages. Those collections do not always look the same, nor were they produced in the same way for the same purpose. Neither were they always purchased for the same reasons or used in an identical manner. Thus, to do justice to Murphey's question, to explain why any book exists and looks as it does in the present, we must direct our attention to the larger process of literary production. We must first understand who produced books, how they did so, and for whom before we can specify with any certainty why a given nineteenth-century novel exists for us in three gilt-edge, hard-bound volumes, while another is present in the yellowed pages of Godey's Lady's Book or Brother
Jonathan. Only after explaining how and why such a difference occurred can we say how either volume was viewed by its readers and what they believed themselves to be doing in picking it up to be read. Murphey's question has the ultimate effect, then, of directing our attention beyond the book alone to those social and material processes within which it was conceived, produced, distributed, and read.

The "it" in the question, however, can also obviously refer to the actual literary text, that is, to the aesthetic object, The Blithedale Romance or Portrait of a Lady. In that case, what the historical or cultural interpreter seeks is not the meaning of the work as it might legitimately be construed by an imaginative contemporary critic but the meaning of the text as it was understood in the past by those individuals involved in its creation, production, and consumption. (16) This will not appear to be a problematic task if one conceives of the text as a permanently fixed and finished object. Indeed, if one believes that the literary work contains its meaning in the sense that it is concealed within the verbal devices of which it is made, it will be a simple matter of excavating and describing that meaning as fully as possible. Historical critics need not adopt any particular interpretive mode or stance; all they need do is surrender to the text and let it tell them what it, in fact, says. But, as Escarit, Eagleton, and now Fish have demonstrated, literary texts are not simply material objects. Nor are they objectively existing collections of meaning. They are social constructions that are produced by readers on the basis of previously understood cultural codes in conjunction with a set of lexical transcriptions.

In turning to Stanley Fish's particular formulation of this argument, I want to note that I do so because I believe his theory, among all the others proposed by reader response critics, has the most radical and far-reaching implications for American Studies work with literature. The most comprehensive formulation of Fish's current position can be found in the four essays comprising the second half of Is There a Text in This Class? (17) Although I suspect Fish might resist my characterization of his work, it seems to me that the theory of the text he sets forth implicitly in those essays is essentially a semiotic one. He works, furthermore, with a different model of communication than do other reader critics. Fish's model does not posit a relationship between two preexisting, objectively different and distinct entities, a reader and a text. Indeed, Fish does not think of communication as a simple process of transmission and reception. He is, in effect, no longer a reader response critic.

Fish conceives of the text instead as a collection of material signifiers. These are the lexical transcriptions of the text, the only material that can rightly be thought of as fixed. In semiotics, it is argued that although the signifier is material, the process of signification is not. Signification occurs only when a materially present signifier, such as a sound or inscription, is taken as a sign by a listener or a reader. (18) To take a signifier as a sign is to understand that the signifier stands for or represents some other absent signified on the basis of a conventionally accepted correlation. Signification, then, is actually accomplished by the receiver of a message who construes its meaning on the basis of previously learned interpretive procedures and signifying conventions. To understand is, in effect, to create meaning on the basis of what one believes the speaker could possibly be intending by employing such familiar signifiers. Those signifiers, then, rather than controlling or directing interpretation, act more as a limit or constraint, a horizon, if you will, within which interpretation proceeds.

Although Fish himself never discusses interpretation at this elementary level, it is clear that this sort of conception underlies his theory, for he argues similarly that the literary features of a text are not the origin of an interpretation but its product. While he is referring here to more complex entities such as characters, events, and rhetorical devices, Fish's point is exactly consonant with the semiotic argument that all signs function as signs only when they are taken as such by a receiver. Thus, those textual features, as meaningful literate devices, cannot be said to preexist the reader or to direct his or her interpretation. Rather, by approaching the text on the basis of certain assumptions about what constitutes literature and what a literary device is, the reader construes the text's inscriptions in such a way that characters, events, and devices come into view along with their conventional significances and functions. As Fish puts it, "acts of recognition, rather than being triggered by formal character-
istics, are their source. It is not that the presence of poetic [read "literary"] qualities compels a certain kind of attention but that the paying of a certain kind of attention results in the emergence of poetic qualities." (19) As he notes more fully at another point, "communication occurs within situations and ... to be in a situation is already to be in possession of (or to be possessed by) a structure of assumptions, of practices understood to be relevant in relation to purposes and goals that are already in place; and it is within the assumption of these purposes and goals that any utterance is immediately heard." (20)

It should be pointed out, however, that even though a writer may intend to be understood on the basis of certain culturally available codes, there is nothing in the act of combining signifiers in the text produced as a result which necessitates that the reader decode the signifiers present on the page according to the same codes assumed by the writer of the message. As Umberto Eco has observed, "The multiplicity of codes, contexts, and circumstances shows us that the same message can be decoded from different points of view and by reference to diverse systems of convention." (21) Communication, then, results from a complex, dual-direction interaction between two active creators, rather than from a simple, unidirectional process of transmission by a creator to a passive receiver.

Fish himself has provided a marvelous demonstration of this in the essay "How to Recognize a Poem When You See One," where he recounts his experiences with the students in a class on seventeenth-century poetry. Told by Fish that a certain inscription on the blackboard was a poem of the kind they had been learning to "interpret," they produced a remarkably coherent and ingenious religious reading of what had originally been intended by Fish to be a linguistics assignment for another class. His point, like Eco's, is that there is nothing in any verbal text capable of coercing a reader to "take it" as the author intended it to be taken.

Simple enough as it is, this assertion has radical implications for the cultural and historical study of literature. It suggests that literary meaning is always contingent upon an interaction between a verbal text and a reader who may or may not succeed in attempting to duplicate the codes that governed the writer's original act of sign combination. While textual inscriptions are always potentially significant, the susceptibility of the act of communicating those meanings to all sorts of transformative effects implies that a text's inscriptions may not always be made to signify in an identical manner. In sum, then, the significations of any text are as contingent upon the identity of the interpreter and the codes underlying his or her act of interpretation as they are on the formal string of material signifiers itself.

This is precisely the point Fish wishes to make in his discussion of interpretive communities. He argues, in effect, that literary critics never operate alone, but proceed as members of previously existing interpretive groups constituted by their commonly pursued goals, purposes, and interpretive strategies. As a consequence, they approach any text with a set of assumptions about what a text is, what its relation to them might be, how it should be read, and what it could possibly mean. Those assumptions, then, direct their operations upon the text and are responsible for what they make of the lexical inscriptions that are undeniably there on the page. As Fish notes, texts are actually written by readers in the sense that the formal features of the text, the authorial intentions they are normally taken to represent, and the reader's interpretive strategies are mutually interdependent. He argues, finally, that "meanings are the property neither of fixed and stable texts nor of free and independent readers but of interpretive communities that are responsible both for the shape of the reader's activities and for the texts those activities produce." (22)

Fish limits his discussion of interpretive communities to its relevance to literary criticism, but it is worth noting here that his argument is merely a special case of the semiotic theory that all senders and addressees are members of variously constituted interpretive groups. As a result, they all come to messages and texts with certain assumptions about what one could possibly do with them as well as with certain procedures and methods for making them mean. Just as two literary critics educated within different traditions might read differently and thus produce two different interpretations of a single set of textual inscriptions, so might a literary critic read differently from an untrained reader or one who was
educated at a different historical moment. Because all are members of interpretive communities, all produce the texts they confront according to assumptions and strategies that they have accepted as given by virtue of their membership within their respective group. Their readings, then, are a consequence and function of the interpretive groups to which they belong.

Clearly, this notion of reading and interpretation as radically contextual acts has important consequences if the critic is attempting to understand and explain a text as a historical or cultural document. To begin with, by relocating meaning in the reader and in his or her interpretive group's strategies, Fish's theory calls for an important reconceptualization of the "it" in Murphey's question. Because a text must always be read if it is to mean, critics seeking the historical or cultural meaning of a text must realize that the subject of their search can never be the simple object of the text, the text-taken-alone. Rather, what they must search for is the text-as-read. Obviously, they can and must choose to read that text themselves. But given Fish's theoretical argument, it seems clear that American Studies critics must be extraordinarily careful not to assume that their reading of the text is necessarily identical to the way it was or is read by its typical audiences. They must realize that they are "in situation" just as the author or actual audience was. American Studies critics must make some effort to determine, then, whether their interpretive assumptions coincide wholly or in part with those brought to bear upon the text in the past.

To give an example from my own work with contemporary romances, a good deal of ingenious criticism of romance fiction has been published in recent years by sophisticated readers trained in the procedures of contemporary literary criticism. (23) These individuals have approached the texts in question as unproblematic entities, read them as if the meanings they found within them were indubitably there before they approached the text, and then maintained that those meanings are also inevitably "discovered" by the typical reader of romances. Their theories about the cultural significance of the popular romance are thus based on their reading of the text. In fact, most have never asked how the typical romance reader "sees" or understands the literature she loves. In actuality, she comprehends the romance in a very different way. As a result, many of the complicated theories of why romances appear as they do are based on accounts of the romance that bear only the remotest relationship to the romance as it is actually read by its greatest fans. The theory explains an entity that does not exist for the population the critics are trying to understand.

To avoid such a mistake, it seems clear that the historically or culturally oriented critic must realize that the subject of the study is not only a material object, the book, and the text it embodies, but also a reader who constitutes the text over time on the basis of previously learned aesthetic and cultural codes as well as already mastered interpretive procedures. Thus, to describe the "it" in Murphey's question, to specify the historical or cultural meaning of a literary work, the critic must always indicate, first, whom he or she takes to be reading. Critical practice in American Studies after Fish and reader theory entails not only a description of textual meaning but also, and perhaps more importantly, a description of the reader who is the real producer or source of the meaning later attributed by the critic to the text. This, in turn, entails description of the reader's interpretive community and its situation within the larger literary institution.

In deliberately trying to conceive of textual meaning as the product of an interaction between a verbal matrix and a real reader, American Studies scholars can adopt one of several strategies. If their object of interest is a text produced in the past, they can connect that text with its author or with the individuals who were its likely purchasers or readers. In the first case, they can choose to discuss the author's text, which is to say, his or her sense of how the text was to be read. This is really only another way of saying that the critic can attempt to reconstruct authorial assumptions and intentions. But to do that, as literary critics have known for some time, is not an easy task.

Obviously, literary authors have conscious intentions in composing a text. Not only do they intend to communicate particular messages but they also have notions of who their intended readers are, what their past experience with literature might be, and what interpretive assumptions they might bring to the text. Given enough extratextual research into the
authors's biography and relationship to the literary institution of production and consumption, it seems likely that the analyst will be able to infer with some certainty how a given author expected a reader to construct his or her text's devices, characters, and plot. In producing this "authorial" reading of the text, the critic will then have connected the literary work's perceptions with the author alone. What this means is that the text can be taken as evidence of the author's beliefs and, perhaps, given an attempt to place the author in the context of social class and demographic group, as evidence of that group's beliefs and attitudes as well. But unless the critics conduct research into actual readers and can prove that those readers not only read the text as the author intended but assented to the ideas thus produced, they will not be able to treat that text as evidence for anyone else's belief. The text simply cannot stand as evidence for some homogeneous American spirit.

Even if this stipulation is fulfilled we still have the difficult problem of unintended consequences and unconscious meanings. Obviously, we do not want to equate the meaning of a literary work with an author's conscious intentions alone. Indeed, there are very good reasons for not doing so. As members of a culture and of particular interpretive communities, authors are socially constituted by all sorts of assumptions and interpretive strategies of which they are unaware. Those assumptions provide the ground for their writing, as they do for all their behavior. That writing, then, like the behavior, bears the stamp of those assumptions despite the fact that the individuals involved may not consciously perceive all that is communicated by their texts or behavior. Furthermore, if the reader of the text is a member of the same community and therefore holds the very same assumptions and utilizes the same strategies and procedures, albeit unconsciously, it is very likely that those tacit intentions may well be communicated successfully to that individual, though still unconsciously. In such a case, then, it would seem that these meanings ought to be considered part of the author's complex intention.

Given the covery of so much of culture and ideology, the obvious difficulty for interpreters working with historical or culturally alien texts is that they cannot turn to the author's conscious pronouncements for evidence of belief or intention. They are reduced, then, to inferring that such meanings were tacitly intended and unconsciously perceived on the basis of their own readings of the text and of the culture within which the writer was situated. The problem, clearly, is that we are once again working with interpreters' construals of the text and have no simple way of verifying whether their readings of its covert messages are merely plausible fictions or accurate accounts of its and the writer's cultural unconscious. We are left with the question of how to evaluate the validity of empirical evidence when that evidence is understood to be the result of unacknowledged behavior, assumptions, or belief.

The dilemma is a very real and difficult one, one that I suspect can only be addressed individually with respect to each special case. Indeed, I doubt very much whether a single method or procedure can be mapped out to be applied to all texts simply because there is probably no single valid position from which to view the various "undergrounds" of different historical states and alien cultures. The problem must be acknowledged nonetheless and grappled with if, following Fish, we want to connect textual meaning with reading and yet do not want to limit any such reading to what is consciously produced as its consequences.

The other option for a critic working with historical texts is the more difficult one of trying to specify how actual readers in the past constructed the texts in question. Once again, we are directed beyond the text itself into the larger realm of the literary institution. We are asked to make a prior determination about the composition of an actual reading audience. Because little interest has been expressed in readership over the years, however, few concrete details are available about who read what texts. It is true that we have formal reviews of some texts, but unfortunately such reviews are available only for those that were defined by the literary establishment as "literature." The vast majority of books turned out by American printing establishments, while available to us as books, have been effectively lost to us as completed texts. Some popular books were reviewed in the nineteenth century, of course, but there is good reason to believe that the reviewers were probably not representative of
the readers they were trying to inform. Thus, it is likely that such a review can tell us very little about how the popular audience for such a text actually understood it. (24)

Given the dearth of available information, does this mean we can make no attempt to describe what Uncle Tom's Cabin or Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio meant in the nineteenth century or to explain why they appeared? Obviously I don't want to suggest that reader theory has rendered our critical activity pointless. We can and must go on trying to make such determinations by attempting to uncover as much information as we can about actual readership. Then, through a general historical review of the characteristics of such a population, we can hypothesize about how and when individual readers read, what they thought of their reading activities, how they might have treated texts in general. After additional investigation of how such readers might have viewed the issues presented as the content of the book, we might be able to offer a reading of the text that we think approximates what its actual readers did with it. Clearly, this is a complicated process involving extensive extratextual investigation. But it is little different from what good historians have done for years when confronted by a document or artifact. The only difference, here, is that the historian's procedures, canons of judgment, and stipulations about evidentiary validity must now be applied to the interpretation of literary works. (25)

If literary critics are working with contemporary texts, they have, in effect, the same two options. They can make an effort to connect the text with the author's intention that it be read in such a way. In this case, the interpretation they produce of the text-as-read becomes evidence for the author's particular perspective on contemporary life and literature.

In lieu of dealing with the author's text, however, the critic might also attempt to connect it with those individuals who have been or are members of its actual reading audience. This is perhaps the most exciting possibility opened up by Fish's insistence on the importance of the reader to textual meaning. There is little precedent in literary studies, however, for investigation of the ways real readers read. People like Culler and Tompkins are only just beginning to ask questions about how literary critics read and fewer still are interested in finding out how the audience for popular fiction, say, actually chooses, constructs, and uses the texts they rely on for entertainment. Still, there are precedents in cognate disciplines we might fruitfully follow.

Some work has been done, for instance, in the field of education where theorists such as Scollon and Scollon and Scribner and Cole have begun using ethnographic methods to find out how actual groups of Americans use books and literacy in the 1980s. (26) Although most of them do not cite reader response theory, they are engaged in the very project that Fish's work cannot help but urge on the American Studies scholar. They are attempting to ask such elementary questions as who reads, what do they read, how do they read, how do they perceive and use the act of reading?

Most of this work is carried on ethnographically, that is, in situ, by observing and interviewing informants about their own self-perception and comprehension of reading activity. My own experience with just such a study can perhaps be useful here as a way of highlighting some of the new directions American Studies might take after reader theory. (27) My project was initially designed to show that ethnographic methods could be used to investigate how real people read. The resulting study, which is based on interviews and questionnaire responses of a group of self-confessed "compulsive" romance readers, attempts to provide both a description of how real romance readers understand romantic fiction and an explanation for why they choose to spend their leisure time reading vast quantities of it. The questionnaires were structured so as to elicit the women's conscious understanding of their reading activity. They were asked questions about reading habits and history, present book selection and evaluation procedures, preferences in plot structure and fictional details, as well as questions about personal demographic background. This latter material, supplemented by commentary and information supplied in the wide-ranging interviews, was then used to build a picture of my informants' daily lives. Once I had formulated what I hoped was an accurate portrait of that life as it was lived, both consciously and unconsciously, I was able to connect the women's preferences and interpretations of romantic texts with needs and demands produced by such an existence. I attempted such a move initially because the women themselves indicated they were dependent on these
books and because they claimed their reading supplied them with benefits they needed to get through the day. I offered an explanation of the romance's meaning and use, finally, on the basis of the correlation I perceived between the women's duties as wives and mothers, the psychological demands made upon them by their duties, and the inferred effect of a story that depicted a woman's acquisition of a perfectly nurturant and protective spouse who not only validated her worth as a woman but also concerned himself attentively with her emotional needs.

My explanation of why romantic texts appear as they do thus began with descriptions and interpretations of those texts as they were constituted by the women who actually read them. However, in the process of trying to account for their constructions of the texts, I was immediately led beyond the texts themselves to the conditions of the women's lives. In placing their reading activities contextually, I was forced to ask and answer questions about how the activity itself fit within the texture of their day. Thus, having begun with Fish's argument that people make texts mean, I found myself explaining not only a text as it was perceived by a given audience, but also the act of reading that text as well. In effect, what I ended up doing was explaining the place and use of books and reading generally and romance reading specifically in the cultural life of my informants. I explained, in short, the meaning and use of literacy for this very special interpretive community. Such a project, I think, is the inevitable result of attending to Stanley Fish's theories and his assertion that "there is no single way of reading that is correct or natural, only 'ways' of reading that are extensions of community perspectives." (28)

This is an especially important and useful assertion to keep in mind because its ultimate effect is to relativize even our own assumptions about books and reading. Indeed, Fish's emphasis on reading as a culturally bound and contextually inflected activity cannot help but make us aware that our contention that good books are "serious," critical of American culture, complex, and difficult is nothing more than an assumption peculiar to our interpretive community of literary academics. Once we have recognized that, it should not be difficult to accept the fact that others can and do read texts differently or to acknowledge the wisdom of looking beyond the canon of "great" books enshrined by the accumulated judgments of our peers.

Perhaps the most important effect of Fish's theory of the text-reader conjunction will be found, then, in its tacit charge that we relinquish our old subject, the literary text, in order to take on a new one, the socially and culturally determined activity of reading. For in jettisoning that old subject, we will also be giving up the correlative values and norms that went along with it and guided our selection of texts for interpretation. Once we have accepted the theoretical argument that others can read differently, we will want to know who does so and how they manage it. To answer that question, we will have to look at the reading behavior and activities of those who have been of little interest to the literary academy in the past, readers of popular fiction, ethnic literature, women, and so forth. Such a task, then, will force us to attend to contemporary texts we would otherwise be inclined to dismiss and to search for and salvage those from the past that were produced and used by American culture but which, for varied reasons, have been temporarily lost or suppressed. To accept Fish's theory, finally, is to accept a greatly enlarged body of literary evidence that can be used to study American culture. To increase and broaden the range of evidence is to create the potential for greatly changed accounts of the American cultural past and present.

Endnotes


3. For a discussion of the formalism in structuralist analysis, see Jane P. Tompkins, "The Reader in History: The Changing Shape of Literary Response,"


11. Ibid., p. 82 (emphasis added).

12. Ibid., p. 81.

13. For a discussion of a similar tendency in intellectual history to discover intentions in documents that a historical actor could never have had, see Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," History and Theory 8 no. 1 (1969), pp. 3-53.


17. It is well known, of course, that Fish's views on the interaction between texts and readers have undergone considerable evolution since their first early formation in Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost (New York: St. Martin's 1967). Fish himself has acknowledged as much in the introduction to Is There a Text in This Class?, where he makes the observation that "What interests me about many of the essays collected here is the fact that I could not write them today ... because both the form of their arguments and the form of the problems those arguments address are a function of assumptions I no longer hold." Fish goes on in the introduction to summarize a series of objections made by numerous
critics of his extremely influential essay, "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics." Although he would not have conceded his critics' points at the time he wrote the essay, Fish now admits the force of their charge that despite his ostensible focus on the temporal process of reading, his theory never managed to escape the fundamental assumptions of formalism.


19. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* p. 326; see also pp. 10-11.


22. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, p. 322.


28. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, p. 16.