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Conceptual Inter-relations between Reading Theory and Reader-Response Criticism

العلائق المفاهيمية بين نظرية القراءة ونقد استجابة القارئ

Kechiche hachemi¹

université Abbas Leghrour . Khenchela/algeria

‘kechiche@univ-khenchela.dz¹

Abstract:

This paper explores the expansive conceptual interrelations between Reading Theory and Reader-Response Criticism by shedding light on the points of convergence/similarities and divergence/differences. Both frameworks are considered advanced forms of reader-centered literary interaction, considering the reader as the third necessary element in the creative process alongside the author (creator) and the text. The study frames both approaches as part of an evolving critical awareness that prioritizes the role of the reader, especially in this era that is shaped by diverse critical legacies and interpretive perspectives. This exploration aims to stimulate the critical debate surrounding the duality of Reading Theory and Reader-Response Criticism and the conceptual overlap that has enriched literary theory with evolving modes of reading

shaped by the culturally informed reader and collective readership. The paper focuses on a fundamental question: Do the terms reading theory and reader-response criticism refer to a single unified theory differentiated by terminological variation? Or do they constitute distinct theoretical frameworks with different and separate principles, foundations, and key figures?

Keywords: (Text, Reader, Reader-Response Criticism, Reception Theory, Conceptual Interrelations)

KECHICHE/HACHEMI; kechiche@univ-khenchela.dz

1. Introduction

The examiner of modern and postmodern literary criticism will surely perceive a relationship/inter-relation between the diversity of textual meanings and the reader. This interaction forms a “dynamic relationship between the textual stimuli and the mental schema/cognitive framework of the reader, including their expectations, desires, and reactions.”¹ The exchange is bi-directional: from the reader to the text and from the text to the reader, forming a reciprocal process. “This dynamic specifically has prevented aesthetics of reception from becoming a pure theory of reception or influence, or one focused solely on the text or the reader. Rather, it emerges from both, seeking to capture the interplay between text and audience between the

literary effect and its reception”². This marked a turning point in literary theory, challenging the supremacy of the author and the inherent link between a text and its creator. This shift placed renewed emphasis on the literary text as a site of perpetual presence, where the reader does not merely consume meaning but participates in its generation. In this light, reading becomes a form of rewriting³. As Al-Ghathami puts it, understanding the text requires deciphering the author’s life and unraveling the constellation of signals within the text.

Thus, reading becomes an act of re-writing and re-creation; a text only exists in relation to its being read. Reading Theory and Reader-Response Criticism entered the field of modern literary studies with the aim of interrogating texts, uncovering latent meanings, and engaging critically with them. This paper attempts to explore whether these two fields represent the same theoretical model under different terminologies or they are fundamentally distinct, with their own principles, foundations, and intellectual lineages.

2. Reading Theory

Reading Theory (often synonymous with Reception Theory) emerged prominently within the German critical tradition during the late 1960s and early 1970s. It gained traction through the efforts of leading scholars from the University of Konstanz. Rooted in Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology, this

theory posits that the essence of a thing is not in itself but emerges through its engagement with human consciousness⁴ particularly the consciousness of the reader/the receiver.

Further, Reading Theory places the reader/the receiver at the center of the literary process, seeing them as equally important as the author or the text. The reader is the one who bestows meaning upon the text, and such meaning varies depending on the reader's background, gender, age, education, and cultural background. It must be noted that this approach opposes earlier structuralist approaches that prioritized the text over the reader/receiver.

A central principle of Reading Theory is that the meaning of a text is not fixed. It advocates a range of interpretations based on the variety of readers and contexts. Meaning is not particular or close-ended; instead, texts can be interpreted differently through endless readings and re-readings, depending on the mode of reading, explanation, or commentary. In other words, if reading is understood as an answer to the question posed by the act of writing, then each of us offers a unique response one shaped by our own history, language, and freedom. Since history, language, and freedom are in a constant and infinite state of change, the reader's response to the writer or creator is equally infinite. Thus, we never cease responding; we are always writing outside of any definitive answer. The

limitless nature of textual meaning, therefore, gives rise to an equally limitless array of readings, interpretations, and reflections.⁵

Reading Theory is often referred to as Aesthetics of Reception, a label popularized by the Konstanz School, notably through the work of Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser. Jauss, in particular, sought to unify literary and historical approaches by re-reading/re-considering German literature from a new perspective, as Hans Robert Jauss questioned the effectiveness of classical German literary conventions in particular. This led him to propose unification between textual history and aesthetic reception. From his point of view, engaging with a literary text requires two inseparable standards: the aesthetic perception of the reader and the experiential knowledge evoked at the moment.⁶

2.1 Key Figures in Reading Theory

Jauss was primarily interested in the interaction between literature and history. In his theoretical work, particularly in its early stages, he focused on the disrepute into of the literary history, and on the ways it could be reformed. Jauss argues that the essence of the literary work lies in its historicity, that is, in the effect it produces through an ongoing dialogue with its audience. Experience has shown that there is no universally valid or absolute reading; rather, each era tends to produce its

own interpretation. In this sense, we can speak of multiple, diverse, and even conflicting modes of reading and reception. This perspective allows for the integration of literature with history and affirms the historical nature of literary events, not only in relation to their immediate context, but also to broader historical development.⁷

Wolfgang Iser, on the other hand, viewed reading as a dialectical activity between the text and the reader. He emphasized the idea of "gaps" or "blanks" in the text that request the reader to complete meaning through own interpretation by engaging in various interpretive acts, acts that are not based on external references, but rather emerge from the interactive relationship between the structure of the text and the reader's understanding⁸. In this context, he authored a critical work on reading entitled *The Act of Reading*, in which he argued that: "A creative text cannot carry meaning unless it comes into contact with reading." For Iser, the literary process consists of two axes: the artistic and the aesthetic. The artistic refers to the author's text, while the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader. Focusing solely on the psychology of the writer or the reader is of limited value when it comes to the actual reading process⁹. Iser's theoretical foundation lies in the act of reading carried out by the recipient, through connecting the various textual levels in an effort to close the gaps and uncover what is

left unsaid. His model of reading begins with a fundamental concept: the ‘implied reader’, a figure embedded within the text itself, representing the minimum level of awareness and experience required to enact the reading process in full. Through this construct, Iser seeks to grant the reader the ability to bestow coherence and compatibility upon the text, not as a textual given, but as a cognitive structure the reader possesses and actively constructs. In doing so, the reader is intentionally called upon to realize a response and participate in the aesthetic interaction with the text.

2-2 Summary

From the foregoing discussion, it becomes evident that there has been a growing interest in re-reading German literature from a new and different perspective. Jauss, in his approach to the literary text, relied on two essential criteria: the reader’s aesthetic perception and their prior experiential knowledge. His colleague Wolfgang Iser, on the other hand, proposed a model based on two dimensions, one artistic and the other aesthetic, centered on reader’s impact. As scholars have noted, the concept of aesthetic of reception does not refer to a unified theory, but rather encompasses two distinct yet complementary strands: Reception Theory and Effect Theory.¹¹

The Constance School of German literary criticism, led by Jauss, witnessed and marked the formal emergence of this

integrated approach to reading. Iser's theoretical contributions serve as a complement to Jauss's framework, particularly through concepts such as the implied reader. Thus, while Jauss introduced the idea of the horizon of expectations, Iser emphasized the internal structuring of the text to address a reader embedded within it. This critical movement sought to "liberate" the text and the artistic message from their formal confines. Indeed, it aimed to reconsider the role of the author while placing renewed focus on the reader as the central agent in the construction of meaning. Although the theory remains complex and its foundations difficult to pin down due to its multifaceted nature, we may agree with most scholars that any literary criticism concerned with the reader and the act of reading falls within its scope¹². In this view, the turn toward the reader seems almost inevitable, a necessary shift following a long tradition of sidelining the reader's role as an active participant in generating the meanings embedded within literary text.

3. Reader-Response Criticism

The school of thought known as Reader-Response Criticism centers on the reader or audience as the fundamental axis in both the theoretical and practical dimensions of literary interpretation. As a specialized movement within literary theory, it diverges significantly from other schools and critical

approaches that privilege the author or focus predominantly on the form and content of the literary work itself. Reader-Response Criticism emerged in direct opposition to these traditions and sought to dismantle the residual authority of the text. While Deconstruction represents a broad philosophical method in which reading is merely one facet of its critical strategies, Reader-Response Criticism established a singular, central mission: to affirm the active role of reading and to elevate the reader as a key participant within the literary discourse¹³.

This approach gained traction during the 1960s and 1970s, giving rise to multiple strands that do not constitute a unified or homogeneous movement in terms of principles, methodologies, or critical tools. Nonetheless, these diverse strands share a common objection to the notion that meaning resides solely within the literary text. Instead, they emphasize that meaning is generated by the reader, who is seen as the true creator of interpretation¹⁴.

Although literary theory had long marginalized the reader's role in shaping meaning and literary experience, Reader-Response Criticism whether through the works of American scholars or the Constance School in Germany, brought the reader to the forefront. Key figures in this intellectual movement include Norman Holland, Stanley Fish, Louise Rosenblatt, Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, and Roland Barthes, among others.

The theory recognizes the reader as an essential, active agent in the realization of a text. It holds that a literary work does not merely disclose its potential; it also reveals the reader's own capacities, since the reader brings to the text a vast array of interpretive tools, analytical frameworks, and systems of meaning-making. Through this interaction, the reader does not merely decode the text but rather completes its meaning through the act of reading and interpretation¹⁵.

Reader-Response Criticism also asserts that literature should be viewed as a performative art, in which each reader enacts their own unique performance of the text. This position stands in stark contrast to Formalism and New Criticism, both of which neglect the reader's role in reconfiguring the literary experience. New Criticism, in particular, limited meaning strictly to the boundaries of the text itself and refused to engage with questions about the author's intention, the reader's subjectivity, or even the psychological processes of reception¹⁶.

3.1 Notable Contributors

a- Hans Robert Jauss & Wolfgang Iser

Hans Robert Jauss focuses on the role of the reader in determining the meaning of a text and its development throughout history, whereas Wolfgang Iser views the text as an invitation for the reader to participate in the realization of its meaning. According to Iser, the literary work consists of "two

poles: the artistic pole and the aesthetic pole. The artistic pole refers to the text created by the author, while the aesthetic pole concerns the realization accomplished by the reader.”¹⁷

Jauss highlights a linguistic and conceptual issue with the term reception/response in three European languages: German, French, and English. He observes that in both French and English, the term tends to carry connotations related to hotel reception, whereas in German, the term uniquely conveys aesthetic significance. Thus, while reception refers to the initial act performed by the reader upon encountering a literary work, response denotes the subsequent reactions, reflecting the reader’s interpretive and affective engagement.

b- Louise Rosenblatt

Rosenblatt argues that there are three key elements involved in the reader’s response: the reader, the text, and the context. She insists that reading is not a passive act. Rather, when readers engage with a literary text, they bring their own experiences and cultural background to the process. Since there is no single “correct” interpretation, the reader emerges as the active producer of responses. Readers reconstruct the text in their own ways, offering personal interpretations shaped by their beliefs and expectations. Thus, the reader constructs meaning from the text in accordance with their own cultural frameworks, rather

than merely uncovering an intended meaning pre-established by the author.

Reader-response criticism is a dynamic interaction between reader and text. Rosenblatt defines interaction as the specific relationship that unfolds between the reader and the text during the reading process. This interaction involves mutual influence, enabling the reader to summon a particular experience or construct meaning from the text. For this reading process to occur effectively, the literary work must be understandable and within the reader's developmental range. Additionally, the reader must be motivated; lack of attention hinders interpretive engagement. For instance, younger children's responses tend to be more literal, while older readers are more inclined to interpret and reflect.

Rosenblatt, a pioneer in reader-response theory, also explains that readers oscillate between aesthetic and efferent responses. Aesthetic reading involves emotional and imaginative engagement, where the reader creates personal meaning by responding to their own thoughts and feelings evoked by the literary work. Through such involvement, readers build alternative worlds, envision textual components, and construct vivid mental imagery

3-2 Summary

It should be noted, that the term Reader-Response Criticism is far more commonly used in Anglo-American dictionaries than the term Reception Theory or Theory of Reading. The former has exerted a more significant influence within contemporary Anglo-American critical culture and has developed a specific trajectory within it. The preference for, and frequent usage of, the term Reader-Response Criticism over Reception Theory stems from the fact that the latter has a particular status in the German language and academic tradition. It only gained substantial attention and consideration in the American academy after it was translated from German into Anglo-American discourse¹⁹

A reader familiar with recent trends in American criticism might wonder about the relationship between Reception Theory and what has become widely known as Reader-Response Criticism. The answer to such a question lies within the framework of Reader-Response Criticism itself. Just as Reception Theory (or *Reader-Response Criticism*) has come to serve as a reformative umbrella encompassing various interpretive frameworks, such as Norman Holland's Transformational Criticism, Jonathan Culler's Structuralist Poetics, and Stanley Fish's Affective Stylistics, it also signifies a general shift of focus from the author of the literary work to the reader as the central axis of textual meaning.

Indeed, Wolfgang Iser, who is seen as one of the key pioneers of Reception Theory, has also been regarded as one of the most prominent figures associated with Reader-Response Criticism²⁰

4- Reader-Response Criticism and Reception Theory: Between Convergence and Divergence

A review of various critical texts reveals that the terms Reception Theory *and* Reader-Response Criticism are often used interchangeably in Western literary criticism. However, the distinction between them lies in their origins: Reception Theory emerged in Germany through the Constance School, while Reader-Response Criticism was an extension of the New Criticism movement within American literary studies. Yet, this view remains imprecise. As Hans Robert Jauss notes in his book *Reception Aesthetics*, “It is ultimately possible to distinguish between Reception Theory and Reader-Response Criticism on the grounds that mutual influence between the two is lacking. Apart from Iser, whose writings were enthusiastically received by both camps, there was no real contact between the two groups. In fact, if marginal annotations are any indication of influence, then actual exchange between them did not occur... If we are to combine the two under the shared interest in the reader/response, then the similarities are ultimately very superficial and abstract.”²¹

Thus, while Wolfgang Iser is considered one of the founders of Reception Theory in Germany and a professor at the University of Constance, he is simultaneously regarded as a leading figure in Reader-Response Criticism. This dual attribution blurs the lines between the two movements, a point many scholars have noted. In this regard, the terms Reception Theory and Reader-Response Criticism may be seen, by way of approximation, as different labels for a shared underlying concern, especially in the absence of strictly defined boundaries. The difference also lies in the fact that *Reception Theory* represented a cohesive and theoretically unified direction within the German critical school, specifically in Constance, under the leadership of Jauss and Iser, whereas Reader-Response Criticism was characterized by the dispersed efforts of various critics and scholars worldwide. These contributors were not part of a unified school or theoretical framework. Rather, their work often appeared in scattered newspaper articles that reflected individualistic views and personal interpretations. As a result, their efforts lacked systematization, unlike the German school, which embodied collective awareness and institutional commitment.

“If we aim to distinguish between the American term Reader-Response Criticism and Reception Theory, we find that the former lacks the traits of a coherent theory. Instead, it is a

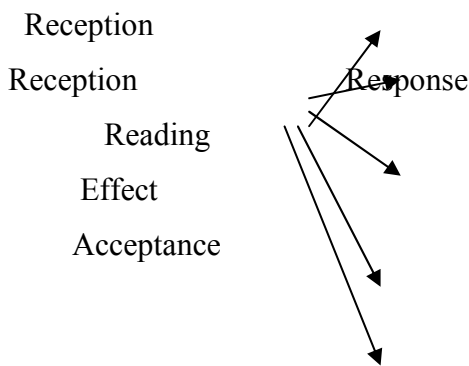
loosely defined field shaped by critics scattered across the globe, publishing in different venues, often without organized cooperation. Their contributions reflect personal initiative and individual skill. On the other hand, Reception Theory represents a collective, coherent response to the socio-intellectual and literary developments of 1960s West Germany. Many of its advocates are directly affiliated with the University of Constance, either as faculty, alumni, or regular participants in its biannual conferences.”²²

Several factors further differentiate the two approaches. First, the very concept of “meaning” does not serve as a unifying principle among Reader-Response critics. In fact, pre- and post-theoretical contexts of key figures show minimal interaction or mutual influence. These theorists did not participate in any shared critical movement; they responded to different intellectual traditions and contexts.²³ Additionally, they were scattered geographically, studying in different institutions, and rarely met. Even their publications were fragmented and not part of common academic journals. They did not attend the same conferences either. As such, “if Reader-Response Criticism has indeed become a critical force, as some suggest, it is due to the brilliance of individual efforts, not collective initiative.”²⁴□

Another point of separation lies in the absence of reciprocal influence. While conceptual overlaps may exist between

Reception Theory and Reader-Response Criticism, these are largely superficial. “If footnotes are any indication of conceptual reinforcement, then no real exchange took place. Given all these considerations, it seems that focusing on West German theorists allows for more cohesion. For readers of English who are less familiar with these traditions, the general critical similarities between Reader-Response Criticism and Reception Theory remain merely apparent and abstract.”²□

Nonetheless, the reader (or receiver), the act of reading, and the notion of response remain central concepts in both paradigms. While Reader-Response Criticism, in the context of American academia and Anglo-American critical culture, does not constitute a unified critical theory, it is a term associated with the works of critics who use terms such as *reader*, *reading process*, and *response* to define a distinct domain of knowledge.²□ In contrast, Reception Theory binds these concepts together in a coherent theoretical framework, as illustrated in the following diagram:



These are the key theoretical and operational concepts at the heart of both approaches, Reader-Response Criticism and Reception Theory, which have placed the reader, reading, and response at the center of literary interpretation. As has been noted, “Poststructuralist trends such as deconstruction, hermeneutics, semiotics, reading, and reception have all contributed to the shift toward reader-centered criticism, where the act of reading became the central concern”²⁷

5- Conclusion

The scholar studying Reception Theory is confronted with two central issues. The first concerns terminological ambiguity and multiplicity, due to variations in translation and differing intellectual traditions. The second revolves around the theory itself: whether it comprises multiple theories of a single concept, or a single theory composed of multiple concepts. Various terms have been used to denote reception, such as response, reception, effect, reading, acceptance, and perception, all of which fall under the broader notion of reception, and among which drawing precise boundaries is often difficult.

Another major distinction between Reception Theory and Reader-Response Criticism lies in their origins and structure. Reception/Reading Theory emerged as a coherent and unified intellectual project within the German Constance School, chiefly represented by Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser. In

contrast, Reader-Response Criticism reflects a scattered array of individual contributions from critics and scholars across the globe, lacking a unified theoretical framework. Their views are often loosely organized, manifesting in articles published in various periodicals that reflect individual subjectivity and personal critical vision.

What differentiates the American model of Reader-Response Criticism from the German model of Reception/Reading Theory, especially that of Iser and the Constance School, is that the former did not arise from a concerted institutional effort to formulate a structured reading theory. Rather, it appeared as diverse, isolated individual efforts within the broader field of literary criticism. Conversely, the German school was the result of a coordinated intellectual movement, which sought not only to build a theory but also to monitor and refine its hypotheses through practical applications in order to test their validity and effectiveness.

Although, at first glance, many critical texts may suggest that the terms Reading Theory and Reader-Response Criticism refer to the same school of thought in Western criticism, the differences in their origin and development make this assumption problematic. Reading Theory arose in Germany through the work of the Constance School, while Reader-Response Criticism extended from the American New Criticism.

Even so, this distinction remains somewhat ambiguous and imprecise.

Ultimately, the reader/receiver, reading, and response remain central axes in both paradigms: the Anglo-American tradition of Reader-Response Criticism and the Continental tradition of Reception/Reading Theory.

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