

**For a More Dialogic Literature Classroom:
Some Pedagogical Implications of Reader-Response Criticism.**

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El artículo «For a More Dialogic Literature Classroom: Some Pedagogical Implications of Reader-Response Criticism,» revisa la obra de varios críticos y teóricos de la literatura en un intento de discernir de qué manera sus ideas habrían de influir sobre la dinámica de la pedagogía de la literatura. Partiendo de una metáfora, en la que el profesor se transforma en el texto por antonomasia y sus alumnos en sus asiduos lectores, se investigan en profundidad tanto las diferencias como las similitudes entre el proceso de lectura de un texto literario y los modelos educativos de los que nos valemos para diseminar nuestros conocimientos en este campo de la literatura.

But I was not a good reader. Merely bookish,
I lacked a point of view when I read. Rather, I read in order to
acquire a point of view. I vacuumed books for epigrams, scraps of
information, ideas, themes— anything to make me fill the hollow within
me and make me feel educated.

Richard Rodríguez, *Hunger of Memory: An Autobiography*

Introduction

I should like to begin my paper by introducing a metaphor that in my opinion reflects quite accurately the habitual situation in most of our literature classrooms. I do not believe we would be stretching reality very much if we argued that the teacher becomes in this context a kind of text from which students — our readers — try to extract and accumulate as much knowledge as possible. However, as a living text, the teacher presents a set of specific features that complicate her status and which, I

believe, should be subjected to a close analysis in order to gain awareness of and improve our pedagogical practices. To begin with, and contrary to a text in the «literal» sense of the word, the teacher-text has the (dis)advantage of being able to check and correct her students' interpretations and evaluations at different stages of the reading process, this fact fencing them up within a particular hermeneutic circle and giving little allowance to their creative potentials. My experience as an instructor tells me that much can be learnt from the essays and examination papers that students submit at the end of each term. Paradoxically, however, one comes progressively to realize that if any identity emerges behind all those pages, it is not that of a class compounded of very diverse individuals, but rather that of a teacher with all her inevitable favouritisms, prejudices and, what is worse, one-dimensional views. To any pedagogue with a minimal degree of professional concern this untimely mirror-stage¹ becomes embarrassing — if not totally demoralizing. Unfortunately, however, it seems that cases of Narcissus complexes are still numerous in our Departments. There are two alternative conclusions which can be drawn from this panorama: either we are closed texts, i.e., we fail to spur imaginative and original responses from our students, or our pupils do not show enough literary competence to read us as open works². In any event, the blame should not be apportioned to anybody else but the teacher, at least primarily, for what is unquestionable is that her readers respond to the patterns she has been promoting in her classes. It is at this level that I believe the contributions of reader-response theorists can be enlightening and, eventually, pull us out of a vicious dynamics in which voices are merely echoed and reechoed, and a productive dialogue is hardly ever accomplished.

I should give a brief account of what is meant by reader-response criticism before we move onto the more particular issues that interest me in this paper. Historically, the figure of the reader was repeatedly discarded until the mid-1960s as a prodigal son in the hermeneutic enterprise who was plagued by all too intuitive and unscientific reactions to the literary text or by what the New Critics liked to refer to as the «affective fallacy»³. Furthermore, the prevalence of an objective paradigm based on a Cartesian conception of the universe in our approach to all sciences aggravated the reader's plight as she seemed unable to escape the pit of her subjectivity. A Copernican turn in our understanding of human experience was needed to bring the reader to a foreground position in the scheme of literary communication. Curiously, this change of perspective found its seminal sources not so much in the humanities as it did in the world of science

where revolutionary theories by key historical figures such as Darwin, Einstein, Bohr and Freud made evident that what were before believed to be objective and ‘natural’ laws, were indeed nothing but conveniently human-devised constructs to explain the otherwise ineffable and to insure our survival as a species. David Bleich in an attempt to summarize T.S.Kuhn’s revision of some of these theories in his treatise *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, writes:

Each of these formulations makes sense as a manifestation of the subjective paradigm, because in each case the role of the observer is paramount. An observer is a subject, and his means of perception defines the essence of the object and even its existence to begin with. An object is circumscribed and delimited by a subject’s motives, curiosities, and above all, his language. Under the subjective paradigm new truth is created by a new use of language and a new structure of thought⁴.

It does not take much of an effort to see how this new paradigm or worldview should affect deeply the field of literary studies. The almighty stance that the text had acquired in previous periods, and even its very existence begin to be questioned in the absence of a consciousness activating it. But reader-response scholars tend to push this issue further by stressing the role of the reader as the true and ultimate creator of texts. This new acceptance of the reader-text rapport turns upside down the Flaubertian creed of the author as a God in his works to make of the recipient the authentic divinity in his recreation of the text almost at will. The impact of these relatively recent conceptions has reached an immense variety of schools of criticism ranging from Roland Barthes’ post-structuralism in France and Wolfgang Iser’s *Rezeptions-ästhetik* in Germany, to the more radical ideas of Stanley Fish’s affective stylistics or the above mentioned David Bleich’s subjective criticism in the United States. Obviously, depending on their respective backgrounds, these critics draw a different picture of the reader-text interactions and the importance granted to each of the elements varies a great deal from one to the next⁵. Nevertheless, this whole spectrum of knowledgeable voices seems to coincide in having taken up the common task of delineating what Jonathan Culler has called a ‘poetics of reading’, that is,

[to] cease thinking that [their] goal is to specify the properties of objects in a corpus and concentrate instead on the task of formulating the internalized competence which enables objects to have the properties they do for those

who have mastered the system. To discover and characterize structures one must analyze the system which assigns structural descriptions to the objects in question, and thus a literary taxonomy should be grounded on a theory of reading⁶.

Going back to the metaphor that opened my essay, some important consequences may be derived from this new light falling upon literary analysis that could greatly ameliorate our teaching as a whole. There is little doubt that the challenge is a colossal one as it will imply such drastic revisions as a debunking of the teacher-text from her central and paradigmatic role in the classroom, much more active thinking and participation on the part of the student-readers and a hyper-reflective attitude which should try to elucidate each part's assumptions and presuppositions in every reading act. I intend to demonstrate here how it is only by subverting previous pedagogical paradigms and by starting to read teachers in a different way that generations to come can ever hope to refashion the rather stringent façade that our universities have displayed in recent times.

I

The teacher as a living text. One wonders, however, if the epithet does justice to our methods in the classroom. How often do we open ourselves to fresh interpretations and evaluations or, what is the same thing, how often do we rethink and revise our notes from term to term? How often do we offer gaps for the reader to fill up or, similarly, how often do we take down and try to analyze our students' contributions in class? To make a long story short, how often do we look upon ourselves as texts to be understood and enjoyed by a specific audience? I would argue that there is a common answer to this set of questions: seldom, if ever. And there is a reason — albeit not a 'good' one — for such an answer. Undoubtedly, to become a dynamic and open text one needs to put much more into one's teaching than if one remains within the fortress of a so-called objective and authoritative knowledge⁷. To begin with, the teacher loses much of her parent-figure halo and shows a vulnerable status in which her opinions, illuminating as they may be, are always susceptible to being rebuffed and possibly modified in the end. Not that our readers have not had their doubts and counter-arguments to our

discussions before; they surely have. Yet, being always on the defensive, their objections have remained mostly unvoiced, as they thought of us, teacher-texts, as overdetermining artifacts allowing little flexibility in their responses. Who has never heard a student comment that ‘such or such professor prefers an analysis of this or that kind?’ Certainly, there might be a significant dose of utopia in any attempt to make these statements vanish altogether from our highly-crowded campus corridors and yet, I believe that establishing this as our ultimate aim may have unexpectedly positive side-effects. I will proceed now to examine in more detail the above questions, which although already suggesting some implicit answers may gain new impetus if supported by some theoretical considerations.

Few are the critics that still maintain that a work of literature subsumes a correct and single meaning. As a matter of fact, there is almost complete agreement in proclaiming that the richness of a text increases in direct proportion to the variety of interpretations and responses it triggers in different readers⁸. This variety of interpretations is invariably linked to the texts’ mastery in simultaneously showing and hiding. As Wolfgang Iser states in *The Implied Reader*: ‘no author worth his salt will attempt to set the *whole* picture before his readers’ eyes. If he does, he will very quickly lose his reader, for it is only by activating the reader’s imagination that the author can hope to involve him and so realize the intentions of his text.’⁹ [italics his own] A teacher-text that binds its readers to move within very rigid interpretative margins will eventually stifle their creativity and lose their attention. A rewarding technique to avoid such a fossilizing model might be for the teacher to take up, every other class, the role of a dilettante with shifting perspectives so that the reader would always have to check her ground before feeling safe enough to accept the judgments and explanations being presented. In this new context, it is certain that our students will find good motives to ask themselves and us such fundamental questions as: What are your assumptions in producing these interpretations? Are you reading this work as a man or as a woman? Are the parameters you are using in your evaluation canonical? To whom: to a structuralist, a deconstructionist, a marxist critic? Are they adequate to the work itself? Do I read this text differently? Why? This battery of questions, which I am sure will sound much too simplistic, and even irreverent to many, are in fact the very key to open a more dialogic practice in our literature classrooms. If a text fails to stimulate and provoke the reader into inquiries of this type, one can hardly talk of it as a living entity.

Of course, one can hardly expect these radical changes in our conception of the dynamics of a literature classroom to take place overnight. Teachers who have given long years to their profession react, in general, rather skeptically to any innovative pedagogical move involving a higher degree of the student-readers' participation. They tend to argue basically that the creation of indeterminacies will encounter nothing but a negative attitude and an unwillingness to work them out on the part of the students who repeatedly allege a dearth of competence and confidence to avoid writing strong statements on the works of art they read. That this sense of insecurity is present in every reader facing new challenges, nobody can deny. Now, one wonders if the use of univocal patterns of discussion and the presentation of well-delimited structures and meanings in the texts does anything to promote a more committed, personal and, in the last analysis, consistent response. There may be some truth in the belief that students feel more comfortable when they confront a text that in its lineality grants a sense of unity and solidity, facilitating their comprehension and subsequent commentaries. Nevertheless, as literature itself has constantly proved, it is that book that unsettles our expectations and unravels an intricate private experience that is more likely to remain in our minds for a long time¹⁰. The Russian Formalists, and more particularly Viktor Shklovsky, referred to this notion as the «defamiliarization» effect, due to the critical revision that it calls for in every reading act¹¹. As Stanley Fish makes clear in his affective approach to the literary artifact, a sentence in it

...is no longer an object, a thing-in-itself, but an *event*, something that *happens to*, and with the participation of, the reader. And it is this event, this happening -all of it and not anything that could be said about it or any information that could be said about it- that is, I would argue, the *meaning* or the sentence¹². [italics his own]

This new understanding of the teacher-text utterly undermines all traditional views in which meanings are presented and handed down to the reader in a unidirectional and often quite dictatorial manner. The act of reading and interpreting a text becomes now, on the contrary, a transactional (phenomenological) exchange in which both parts need to be giving and taking actively from each other for the two figures to acquire their highest stature. According to Mary Louise Rosenblatt, «'Transaction' designates, then, an ongoing process in which the elements or factors are, one might say, aspects of a total situation, each conditioned

by and conditioning the other¹³». A question comes here immediately to mind: How often do we let our student-readers condition our understanding of ourselves, both as informing texts and as human beings? Perhaps it would be good to remind ourselves every once in a while that, the same as a book without a reader is effectively a non-book, a teacher without his audience becomes a non-teacher. The preposition «without» here, of course, has little to do with the physical presence of a(n) (im)personal readership; what will count rather is the skill each of the two parts shows in recreating itself and the other in the process. Wolfgang Iser stresses the necessity of an active involvement on both sides in order to make the interaction a productive one: «A literary text must therefore be conceived in such a way that it will engage the readers' imagination in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative¹⁴». This far, then, it appears evident that the reader-student should be considered not as a mere depositary of knowledge, but rather as somebody with the potential to become a source of knowledge herself¹⁵.

As I have explicitly stated above, this new awareness underlines the essential importance of both elements, reader and text, in any reading event. If we look back on the relevance historically awarded to each of the parts, it would be easy for a suspicious observer to fall into deducing that these current perspectives provide teachers with an *á propos* excuse to shrug off their backs a little of the traditional burden the educational system has constantly forced upon them. Nevertheless, as I also hope to have suggested, what becomes clear once this praxis is put into motion is that apart from the already familiar specialized knowledge required from every scholar, an additional responsibility looms in her future in-class performances. That is, reader-responsists would never think of their analyses as dwindling in any measure the paramount importance of the teacher-text, for as Rosenblatt assertively concludes: «Research in reading, no matter what else it has demonstrated, has found the teacher to be a most important — perhaps *the* most important — factor in the educational process¹⁶». [*italics her own*] However, quite on the contrary, the role of the teacher-text reveals itself as much more fundamental for, in addition to her function as knowledge-inseminator, she will need to self-scrutinize herself at every step to make sure that her working hypotheses are in accordance with her interlocutors' aesthetic values and their basic reading capacities. In short, it no longer seems to be enough to acquiesce to the maxim «know thyself,» but knowing «the other» will be as important, if not more so. In this transactive and dialogic scheme, one discovers that as decisive as showing an internal coherence and a well-

developed argumentation may be in a teacher-text, if she fails to make her renderings open and accessible, the nexus with her interlocutors in the act of communication will be broken. There is no need to repeat that much of the success deriving from this circle will also depend on how provoking our exposition of the problems may be and on our ability to foster responses from a wide variety of personalities. For long years, I would argue, educators have thought of their pupils-readers «*en masse*,» disregarding not only the often diverging needs of the individuals but, what is worse, not knowing how to benefit from the way they were disseminating and becoming different texts (persons) in their hands. Norman Holland, in his primarily psychological depiction of the reading act, deals with the possibility of a mutual regeneration of personalities:

The point in this crucial phase of response is that any individual shapes the materials the literary work offers him — including its author — to give him what he characteristically wishes and fears, and that he also constructs his characteristic way of achieving what he wishes and defeating what he fears¹⁷.

Therefore, it seems that we should rethink ourselves as texts everytime we are being read by different audiences. It is only normal that due to our idiosyncratic beliefs and ideology, we tend to highlight those features we estimate more noteworthy and valuable, while backgrounding those others we view as obvious or irrelevant. Nevertheless, this fact should never blind us to the incalculable possibilities that the materials in hand offer in terms of interpretations. Failing to realize that each reader does invariably read a work of literature and the teacher herself in a different way is not only unrealistic, but can be extremely harmful to the development of the individual's personality.

II

The student as a reader. One of the crucial battles every literature teacher has to fight at the beginning of each new academic year is trying to raise her students' self-esteem and making them feel that their work deserves as much consideration and praise as that produced in any other specialized profession, since the disciples we receive from secondary schools enter our institutions in the belief that literary studies have an

extremely restricted applicability¹⁸. This feeling seems based on the understanding that every human being is able to develop quite readily her skills in reading and writing in the very first stages of her education. One often finds one's classes — one's readership — reticent to accept the label of «readers» as the most adequate one to describe individuals whose primary task is to improve their linguistic, interpretative and critical abilities. As in any other field, however, the degrees of mastery with which a person may read a text or the world itself and write about it vary widely. A change in terminology is often enough here to inject some confidence and self-assurance in students who would be analysts, translators or critics rather than mere «readers.» Nevertheless, I would argue against this deceiving nominalism that may tend only to distract our pupils from those targets that should be their most specific and primary objectives. Furthermore, if we bring about a mental dialectics in them between reading and those other supposedly more sophisticated activities, we will be fostering unconsciously a difficult-to-bridge chasm between those who belong to the academic *intelligentsia* and, thus, possess the «canonized» discursive qualifications and those others on their way towards acquiring them¹⁹. Readers will find their true confidence in teacher-texts that present themselves, not as hermetic systems to be painfully deciphered, but rather as another voice with which they can connect dialogically without much effort and which will encourage them to bring in their opinions and feelings so as to accomplish eventually a personal and solidly-established knowledge of the subject.

As I have hinted above, the sentiment that prevails in a great majority of our student-readers when they have to confront for the first time a something or a somebody that has made it through the academic tunnel they are just stepping into is that of paralyzing fear. They have been incubating for long years a sacrosanct respect for their teacher-texts whom they come to see as donors of the knowledge that will in the end relieve them of their ignorance. Of course, there is little doubt that this is in fact one of the essential objectives of any educator, but the error here derives from the false idea that this is an all-give-and-take process. Students may be deficient in many of the arts involved in our critical enterprise, but what they never lack is an experiential richness that oftimes we do not help them to profit from. Literature, as we understand it nowadays, is a personal experience that among other things should help us to configure our personality²⁰. Now, if by way of a very heavy theoretical edifice or by interpretations that surpass the scope of their logical understanding, we blind them to their own potentials in terms of

producing responses to the pieces they read and to us, we will keep on producing automatons rather than good readers. The theory, the abundance of possible approaches to the text, and even the use of an idiosyncratic discourse can be procrastinated for a while if that would mean a higher level of synchronicity between teacher-text and student-reader. As David Bleich argues in his *Readings and Feelings*:

Since our normal task is to stimulate motivation, not to rely on its presence beforehand, it is far more important to demonstrate the function of emotional response than to articulate it... Our initial and most important aim is to produce an *awareness* of one's own personality; the explanation of it comes later²¹. [italics, his own]

Perhaps Professor Bleich tends to give too much weight to the subjective component in literary analysis and to overemphasize the importance of the teacher as motivator, yet it is highly probable that if a teacher-text fails to awaken some personal feelings in her public, she will not enjoy any relevant accomplishments in their commentaries. Let us, however, not be misunderstood. Certainly, it is the teacher that needs to generate that first spark of interest and self-awareness, but it is the student-reader who will have to open her mind and let herself be partially reshaped by this otherness helping somehow to a new colouring of her identity. If, due to its almost utter absence from our classrooms, we have repeatedly yearned for a more receptive attitude on the part of the teacher-text, it is also important that the audience of student-readers should let themselves be conducted, at least until they become familiarized with the general rules of the game. We are all subject to a general frame of authorized literary terms and principles that have to be respected if we do not want an early breakdown in the communicative process²². All these rules, evidently, take some time to learn, but if the student-reader shows a willingness to accept them as broad margins within which everything else is permitted, we would be already on the right track. Walker Gibson, in a germinal reader-responsist article written in 1950, referred with insistence to this duty of the reader to prove compliant to the minimal requirements that the text inevitably asks for:

Subject to the degree of our literary sensibility, we are recreated by the language. We assume, for the sake of the experience, that set of attitudes and qualities which the language asks us to assume, and, if we cannot assume them, we throw the book away!²³

As a matter of fact, a successful student-reader is one who is able to find an equilibrium between, on the one hand, her commitment to her own personal views and, on the other, the receptivity that she has to show in order to expand her knowledge and to maintain a fluent conversation with the *corpus* of scholars in the same field.

All reader-responsists coincide in stressing the importance of letting the recipients show their intuitive reactions to the text spontaneously as a first step towards a more elaborate description of their reception. The teacher-text should not expect, then, a high degree of analytic accuracy in these first attempts to define their position with respect to their object of study. Rather, she should try to move at the same level of response, adding only sporadic comments to start gently herding her student-readers' ideas towards the common strategies we habitually use. The learning process becomes much more natural in this model as the students are not forced to accept interpretations that they very often find alien to their own personality and understanding of the world. They themselves will progressively realize which parts of their first impressions were too subjective or maladroit to be included in their final commentary on the text. As Fish rightly suggests:

...after a while they begin to see the value of considering effects and begin to be able to think of language as an experience rather than as a repository of extractable meaning.. And as they experience more and more varieties of effect and subject them to analysis, they also learn how to recognize and discount what is idiosyncratic in their own response²⁴.

Furthermore, I would suggest that there is an even more substantial reason for supporting this way of bringing our classes forward. If we encourage our student-readers to depart in their analyses from their own raw experience of the text and, subsequently, of ourselves, there is little doubt that the spectrum of responses generated will be much richer and more likely to foster discussions on the questions we are interested in. If, on the other hand, students feel that the teacher-text they are reading is making it compulsory for them to look at reality from a very fixed perspective, they will immediately abandon any other possible positionings with respect to the subject. It is in this sense that I think it is much easier to survive in an authoritarian classroom than in one where the principles of democracy oblige us not only to listen and assimilate the others' points of view, but also to contribute and defend our own points²⁵. It is the effort, very often an uncomfortable one, of approaching the text

on our own and producing personal and original responses that will prove valuable in the long run, as everything else will merely add a nice veneer to our knowledge but will not permeate deep into us if our affections have not been previously stimulated. Variety in response is, I would argue, at the very roots of a rich and successful literature classroom.

Finally, if, as does Wolfgang Iser, we come to realize that

...the manner in which the reader experiences the text will reflect his own disposition and in this respect the literary text acts as a kind of mirror; but, at the same time, the reality which this process helps to create is one that will be different from his own²⁶.

we will be able to start anew in our assault against the traditional pedagogical models that favour a notorious detachment of the reader from the teacher-text. One of the most conspicuous advantages of this innovative understanding of the interaction between teacher-text and student-reader is that both parts will be benefiting from each other's (re)creations of the materials. Before this understanding, they seemed to be living in different worlds as their interests were never engaged in the same questions. Face-to-face contact in class was only a convenient fallacy for as soon as the participants stepped out of the classrooms, they felt free again to proceed with their «more important» academic challenges. Margolina Salvatori claims in one of her articles on the teaching of literature that «we need a theory of reading that can bridge the gap between the possibilities for interpretation open to a select group of highly trained literary critics and the actual performance of inexperienced readers²⁷». It has been the teacher's crime in many cases to conceive her classes at one level and, then, to dedicate most of her energies to the superior standards required by her research in more specific areas and for more specialized audiences. Nor have student-readers been totally innocent, since they have seldom found the poise to try to convince teacher-texts of the immense possibilities of their original responses. We return here again to the vicious circle we were referring to at the beginning of our discussion. If there is one important way in which reader-response theory can help us to integrate the work of teachers and students into a more productive whole, that is by making us aware of the necessity of turning the classroom into «a scene of *expansion* of ideas rather than *repression* of ideas²⁸» [italics her own] Student-readers have the responsibility of bringing to the fore their reception of the works as well as the aspects that they find interesting or particularly intriguing in it and

that of others. Only in this manner will the teacher-text find herself enriched and stirred to tackle new questions that might have escaped her attention before. Furthermore, the inevitable variety of responses will encourage her to introduce a wider range of approaches and solutions to the problems posed by her student-readers. As Kathleen McCormick points out:

To use response statements in these ways is to make them more than records of subjective reactions; it is to devise ways of integrating more traditional historical or philosophical material as well as more contemporary issues of literary theory into the classroom without sacrificing the spontaneity of students' initial responses and without reifying the text or the reader²⁹.

In this way, by combining the responses and the knowledge of the parties, the ebbing and flowing of meanings in the literature classroom will prove much more fertile and the teacher-text and the student-readers will raise their particular expectations in view of the serviceability of their meetings.

Conclusions

It has been my first aim in this paper to show how the reader-response current of literary criticism can help us in very interesting ways to make our literature classes much more experiential and enriching. In my opinion, there are good reasons to suppose that if we — teachers and scholars — do not start applying our insights into theoretical questions to our daily educational responsibilities, our field will remain too limited in its scope and, eventually, become obsolete to the needs of a contemporary society. One could argue that the recent changes in our university curricula are already a positive sign pointing towards a more varied and open offer in education. However, this apparent expansion in the choices available to our students will be of little value if the dynamics of our teaching do not move at the same pace. If the undoubtable progress in the field of literary theory and criticism is not paralleled by reformulations as to how that knowledge should be served to those who are to give continuity to this field of studies, our contribution will certainly be somewhat barren.

I hope to have made clear in my discussion that more truly relevant than the technical advances in our research that this new school of

criticism may bring about, are the transformations it may effect in the ways in which knowledge is circulated. The new paradigm that reader-responists claim to have opened in literary studies should not be restricted in its application to the analysis of works of art. Instead, this fresh way of «reading the world» should show some implications for all the areas of knowledge in which acts of communication are involved in one fashion or another. In our case, and given the notorious narrative features that our classes have traditionally exhibited³⁰, it has not been difficult to decide on the aspects of our pedagogical practices that could benefit from these reader-centered investigations. In this sense, I believe that if all the innovative ideas in our treatment of literary texts do not find echo in parallel modifications in our methodological habits in the classroom, a great deal of this heuristic progress in the field will be wasted. Reaching higher degrees of awareness as to how authors, texts and readers are interconnected will be of little significance if those revelations do not help us to unearth and study those other connections that are everpresent in our lives.

The number of shortcomings that the few ideas discussed above reveal in the former pedagogical model can be overwhelming if our critical eye is able to transgress the limits that the system itself imposes on our ways of seeing³¹. To begin with, the teacher-text would realize that her knowledge of the subject is not something «sacred» and inalterable. Rather, she will start to understand her notes and references as simple tools to activate and provoke discussions among the student-readers. Her principal job will be to establish intellectual sites or frames into which the students can easily pour their ideas, rather than her pouring her ideas into them³². Student-readers will soon find out in this context that knowledge can never be acquired without an active participation and an effort to reshape it many times according to their own needs. If all the participants in a classroom begin to sense that their ideas are being subjected to a close analysis and, on many occasions, improved by other contributions, they will find themselves much more motivated and will be eager to help the class in defining their emerging canons. Teachers and students alike will find in this new dynamic good reason to become better-informed readers and to step into the classroom with a much more thoughtful and reflective attitude.

To end my discussion, I wish to make a final point in favour of the teaching-learning model herein presented. In a university in which interdisciplinary syllabi will become our daily bread, it would be utterly counterproductive not to let the voices of differing interests and positions express their views concerning the subject. The impoverishing effect of an education such as we have had up to now is evident in graduates who

leave our institutions hardly knowing how to make the contents they have learnt a marketable product. One of the most interesting advantages of a reader-centered classroom is that students will become very soon aware of their strong and weak points, thus being able to profit intensively from the former and knowing exactly where to aim their efforts to raise their standards in the latter. Furthermore, from a broader sociological and political viewpoint, all the interlocutors in the classroom will realize that together with the rights they have in this new model, the number of responsibilities will also increase proportionally. Before, it was easy for the student-reader to hide her individual integrity — or her lack of it — behind the homogeneous mass of the class, but now the cards will be on the table all the time and everyone will win or lose depending only on her skills in the game. The age of the mechanical player (reader) is over, and the thinking player (reader) has made her appearance on the stage.

NOTES

1. My use of the term here coincides broadly with Jacques Lacan's in his «The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience», compiled in his *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York and London: W.W.Norton and Company, 1977). «The *mirror stage*,» Lacan argues, «is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation -and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spacial identification, the procession of phantasies that extends from fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic- and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of the alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development.» (p.4) [italics his own]
2. For a detailed discussion on the concept of open/closed text, see Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989) as well as his *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1979).
3. The most specific essay dealing with the affective fallacy and the one more often quoted is W.K.Wimsatt and M.C.Beardsley's «The Affective Fallacy» in W.K.Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington, Ken.: The University of Kentucky Press, 1954). Their definition goes: «The Affective Fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its *results* (what it *is* and what it *does*), a special case of epistemological skepticism,

- though usually advanced as if it had far stronger claims than the overall forms of skepticism.» (p.21) [*italics their own*]
4. David Bleich, *Subjective Criticism* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p.18.
 5. Elisabeth Freund in her *The Return of the Reader: Reader- Response Criticism* (London and New York: Methuen, 1987) is well aware of the multifariousness in the field when she says that it «at first glance seems to partake of the tumult of Babel. To characterize reader-response criticism as a new order or a monolith of any sort would be a flagrant distortion of the plurality of the voices and approaches, of the theoretical and methodological heterogeneity, and of the ideological divergences which shelter under the umbrella of this appellation.» (p.6)
 6. Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), p.120.
 7. David Bleich comments several times in his *Subjective Criticism* on the difficulties that a change of paradigm may bring about. He states that a new «view of knowledge is so alien to traditional ways of thinking that it challenges the rationality of those who try to define the context of modern science without changing its epistemological presuppositions.» (p.18) Thus, their reluctance to see their knowledge evolving with the times.
 8. For an accurate study of the most recent hermeneutic schools, refer to William Ray, *Literary Meaning* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984). Professor Ray coincides with most of his fellow-critics in assuming that: «If every meaning is at every moment and place another (an other) event and structure, then its identity cannot be stabilized, and no person or group of persons can claim it as their creation or possession. In this scenario the meaning of a text becomes not just the privilege of every reader, but its plight. Authority cannot persist where history and canon lose their invulnerability.» (p.107)
 9. Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p.282.
 10. Roland Barthes' definition of the «text of bliss» seems unavoidable at this point. «Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language.» (p.14) For further descriptions, see Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975).
 11. For a good selection of Viktor Shklovsky's essays, see *Texte der russischen Formalisten*, eds. Jurij S. Wiedten and Wolf-Dieter Stempel (Munich: Fink, 1969), especially interesting is his discussion of Tolstoy.

12. Stanley Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1972), p.386.
13. Mary Louise Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (Carbondale, Il.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), p.17.
14. Iser, *The Implied Reader*, (p.275).
15. For an intelligent and enlightening argumentation on the metaphor of students as depositaries, see Paolo Freire, «The «Banking» Concept of Education» in *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers*, eds. David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1990), pp.206-219. Freire writes: «It is not surprising that the banking concept of education regards men as adaptable, manageable beings. The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend to adapt to the world as it is and the fragmented view of reality deposited in them.» (p.209)
16. Mary Louise Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration* (New York: Noble, 1968), p.XI.
17. Norman N. Holland, «Unity Identity Text Self» in *Reader- Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), p.125
18. Margolina Salvatori in her «The Pedagogical Implications of Reader Response Theory», forthcoming in *Reader*, says: «The majority of students in these courses are openly skeptical about the usefulness of the time spent reading and writing about a literary text, since they tend to see «usefulness» in terms of the immediate applicability rather than in terms of the gradual acquisition of habits of reflective questioning which can foster their growth as critical thinkers.» (p.1)
19. Evidently, this dialectic is hardly avoidable when even reader-response criticism, supposedly the approach to the text which is closer to that of the «common reader», uses its own language. Steven Mailloux in «Learning to Read: Interpretation and Reader-Response Criticism», *Studies in Literary Imagination*, 12 (1979) says: «It is true that reader-response criticism claims to approximate closely the content of reading experiences that are always presumed to pre-exist the critical performance. But what in fact takes place is quite different: the critical performance fills those reading experiences with its own interpretative moves. Like all critical approaches, reader-response criticism is a set of interpretative conventions that constitute what it claims to describe.» (p.107)

20. Norman N. Holland's psychoanalytic contributions are among the most illuminating ones in this respect. See, particularly, his, *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968, rept. 1989). Holland claims that: «Literature transforms our primitive wishes and fears into significance and coherence, and this transformation gives us pleasure. It is this transformation of deep personal feelings that Freud called «the innermost secret,» «the essential *ars poetica*» in which the writer «softens the egotistical character of daydream.» (p.30) [italics his own]
21. David Bleich, *Readings and Feelings: An Introduction to Subjective Criticism* (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1975), p.5.
22. The kind of general rules I am referring to here overlap broadly with Culler's reading conventions and Fish's interpretative strategies. But perhaps it has been Steven Mailloux who has best defined these overall patterns that we inevitably need to follow in *Interpretative Conventions: The Reader in the Study of American Fiction* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1982). Mailloux writes: «The most important hermeneutic constraints are what I call «interpretative conventions»: shared ways of making sense of reality. They are communal procedures for making intelligible the world, behaviour, communication, and literary texts.» (p.149)
23. Walker Gibson, «Authors, Speakers, Readers and Mock Readers», in *Reader-Response Criticism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins, (p.1)
24. Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, (p.426).
25. Cf. David Bleich, *Readings and Feelings*. This is an exemplary book in its presentation of what a teacher should expect from her students and of how to make the best of their contributions.
26. Iser, *The Implied Reader*, (p.281).
27. Salvatori, «The Pedagogical Implications...», (p.4).
28. Kathleen McCormick, «Theory in the Reader: Bleich, Holland and Beyond», *College English*, 47 (December 1985), p.849.
29. *Ibid.*, (p.834).
30. Cf. Freire, «The «Banking» Concept of Education,» (pp.207-8).
31. A reference to Michel Foucault's contributions clarifying how institutions have historically homogenized and reified the perspectives and behaviours of individuals seems inevitable here. Particularly interesting in this respect are his *Madness and Civilisation. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. R. Howard (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965) and *The Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M.Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).
32. My views on the text coincide here with those held by most deconstructive critics. See, for instance, G. Douglas Atkins, *Reading Deconstruction, Deconstructive Reading* (Lexington, Ken.: The University of Kentucky Press, 1983).

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