Introduction: Mapping the Terrain

John Kelleher, who taught Irish literature at Harvard for many years, reports the sequence of experiences he had as a reader of James Joyce’s novel A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man:

I remember that when I first encountered Stephen Daedalus I was twenty and I wondered how Joyce could have known so much about me… Perhaps about the third reading it dawned on me that Stephen was, after all, a bit of a prig; and to that extent I no longer identified myself with him. (How could I?) Quite a while later I perceived that Joyce knew that Stephen was a prig; that, indeed, he looked on Stephen with quite an ironic eye. So then I understood. At least I did until I had to observe that the author’s glance was not one of unmixed irony. There was compassion in it too, as well as a sort of tender, humorous pride. (1958, 83)

Kelleher presents these responses as successive discoveries about Joyce’s novel. We might equally well interpret them as changes in Kelleher himself as a reader. Changes over time – not just in the content of one’s response to a story, but in the kind of response itself – require an account of how one develops as a reader. That is the subject of this book.

This topic became interesting to me a few years ago, when I discovered that most of the college students I was teaching used literature for purposes that my classroom canons of interpretation (not to mention the even stricter theories of contemporary critics) had obliged me to disavow. I wanted them to think about how books and poems were structured and how they worked, what values they implied, how they reflected or criticized the culture in which they were produced. The students seemed to want to discover messages about the meaning of their lives, to find interesting characters they could identify with in their fantasies, or to use the ideas of the author to bolster their own beliefs and prejudices. This discrepancy began to puzzle me more and more.

It is a truism of the teacher of literature, of course, that there are many
useful critical approaches to a text, but the problem seemed to be that many of my students’ responses were uncritical or at best precritical. Nonetheless, they were spontaneous and, even worse, they bore a discomfiting resemblance to uses that I myself make of literature in off-duty moments – lying in bed at night with a detective story or interrogating my own experiences alongside those of an Updike character. Further, I had the occasional feeling that if the students’ responses were uncritical, my classroom agenda was too critical. Is it possible, I wondered, that there are common ways of reading that a teacher of literature has to disapprove of because his or her theory excludes them as inferior and inadequate? Or could a comprehensive theory be formulated that will allow them some standing as legitimate responses to literature?

I began keeping track of the comments students made in class and in papers that revealed clues about why they responded the way they did to what they read. I asked them to write histories of their reading. I interviewed some sixty or so people who ranged from thirteen to eighty-two years old – high school students from a largely working-class suburb of Boston, middle-class students from the university where I teach, adults from varying backgrounds – about what they read, why they liked or disliked it, and how they changed as readers as they got older. And, of course, I tried to find answers from literary critics, philosophers, and psychologists.

The puzzle became less mysterious as I discovered that it was possible to set the question of how readers respond to literature within the framework of how they develop psychologically and how the culture teaches them to read. I began to see that whatever their individual differences of personality and background, there is a somewhat regular sequence of attitudes readers go through as they mature that affects how they experience stories. The child, for instance, who at age three scarcely distinguishes the world of fantasy play from the world of actual experience, has discovered by age ten or eleven that identifying with the heroes and heroines of adventure tales is a satisfying and instructive alternative to the demands of the pragmatic world. This same reader is likely at seventeen, however, to have become a rather critical seeker of the truth about the world in the stories he or she reads, then at twenty may be further transformed into the English major who can if necessary talk about structure and point of view and tone and the problematic nature of interpretation. In middle age, though, this reader may discover that the keenest pleasure of reading now lies less in understanding how books work than in seeing the ironies of one’s own experience mandantly reflected in the predicaments of fictional characters.

Each response (I have by no means exhausted the possibilities) seems to require the development of a set of attitudes toward a story that is
INTRODUCTION

qualitatively different from the previous response. If the sequence could be worked out and described, I thought, it would be possible to account for the predominance of certain ways of reading stories at different ages as we develop as readers, and for the puzzling fact that we sometimes seem to regress to earlier ways of reading.

This book, therefore, is about reading and how people become readers. It focuses on the transaction that occurs between reader and text, and particularly on the changes in the reader that shape that transaction. Many factors form the sensibility of a particular reader – individual traits, personal history, educational background, the values of the social group in which one grows up, the cultural moment – but underlying these concrete circumstances there seems to be a set of capacities and expectations that develops according to a fairly orderly pattern and influences the way one reads as one grows from childhood to adulthood. At least that is the hypothesis of this book, that this pattern exists and can be described and to some extent explained and that understanding how it works will help us make sense out of our experience as readers and provide a useful framework for thinking about how we teach literature.

Though I began this study focusing on high school and college students, I discovered that I had to move backward to childhood to make sense of the changes that older readers undergo. The first two chapters, therefore, lay an indispensable groundwork for what follows, because the roots of our responses to what we read lie deep in our first experiences of books and of the imagined world. These chapters deal with younger children and school-age children, with their characteristic responses to what they read, and with studies of cognitive and social development that suggest ways of understanding these responses and ways of thinking about the literary-theoretical issues that these kinds of response raise.

The last three chapters carry the analysis forward to adolescents, college-age students, and adults, but with one difference. There is considerable data in psychological and educational studies that is at least of indirect use to someone trying to understand young children’s responses to reading; there is much less evidence in print to suggest how older students and adults read fiction. The interviews I have done myself have focused on these older readers to fill in this gap. The resulting information pretends to no quantitative reliability; its value is that it illustrates some hypotheses that have been made about how we respond to stories and suggests others. If these hypotheses are persuasive, it will be because they confirm the reader’s own experience as teacher or as reader.

This sketchy outline of intentions needs filling in. Any book joins an ongoing discussion. The discussion I am interested in, of course, is about how we read. But much of that discussion concerns general competence and performance in decoding written or printed text, skills most of us
associate with schooling. That is not the area this book deals with, though some of that material has been extremely suggestive, especially the description Jeanne Chall has given of the process children go through in learning to understand written language and Margaret Meek’s discussion of the emergence of literacy at each age of the young child’s development. Nor, except to draw attention to the general thrust of their work, do I take any special account of those, such as Meek, Marie Clay, Kenneth Goodman, and Frank Smith, who challenge the conventional view that reading is a specialized perceptual skill that has to be taught systematically to children when they are ready to learn it at about age 5 or 6, and argue instead that achieving “literacy” in both reading and writing is a social process that is part of the child’s active search for meaning in the environment and that is well advanced long before they go to school. My focus here is rather on how we read fictional stories. Of course, to read a fictional work by oneself presupposes the general ability to read, but the fact is that we are told stories and have very likely been read to long before we can manage to read by ourselves, so that our primary attitudes toward fiction are formed well before we acquire the skill of decoding or constructing meaning out of printed or written language. Nor is it a matter of reading skill only, but of our childhood attitudes toward the whole world of fantasy and imagination. In several ways, then, the realm of fiction is prior to and more extensive than the territory that the ability to read, important as it is, opens up to us.

Of course the domain of fiction includes poetry and drama, but they are beyond the scope of this book. Although the argument I make here about stories probably offers useful analogies for thinking about these other fictional forms (and indeed about how we write), they are not analogies I intend to pursue here. Again, though the elements of poetry and drama may have certain kinds of primacy in our psychic and cultural history (Northrop Frye, for one, has argued this in *The Educated Imagination* and elsewhere), stories (whether in books, on television, or in films or the theater) form our central literary experience, the one most likely to remain a part of our lives from childhood to old age.

**READER-ORIENTED THEORY**

To focus on fiction and how we read it is to locate this book in the territory only a short while ago marked out as “reader-oriented” critical theory. In a sense this theory and the criticism associated with it have an ancient pedigree in the pragmatic conception of rhetoric as the study of how to produce effects in an audience. This view – summarized in the verbs “instruct,” “entertain,” or simply “move” – was, as M. H.
INTRODUCTION

Abrams points out, the principal aesthetic attitude of the West from the time of Horace through the eighteenth century, when it began to be supplanted by the Romantics’ attention to the psychology of the artist and to the work of literature as an expression of the creative imagination (Abrams 1953, 15–21). But this classical conception of rhetoric had less to do with actual readers than with texts and textual strategies for affecting readers, and it encompassed all kinds of discourse, not just fiction. The more recent interest in audience shifts attention in various ways directly onto the reader of fictive texts: onto the process of interaction with a text, the responses of actual readers, and the historical and social conditions in which reading occurs.

I. A. Richards’s *Practical Criticism: A Study in Literary Judgment* (1929) was one of the first signposts in this new territory. His intention was to give the study of literature in the university a new empirical basis drawn explicitly from psychology. His detailed examination of students’ written responses to sample poems enabled him to catalogue and describe the mental processes readers used in reading and misreading texts and, of course, to demonstrate that the antidote to careless reading was careful analysis of the minutest details of the text. More than fifty years later his book is still in print, testifying to its exemplary impact. Two somewhat different groups of theorists took up his ideas and adapted them to their purposes.

One group was educationists in teacher-training faculties in Britain and the United States, who were trying to understand how to teach children to read. Much of their work was necessarily concerned with general reading competence and performance, but out of it also came important studies of the process of reading imaginative literature by theorists such as Louise Rosenblatt in the United States (who as early as 1938 offered a description of the transaction between reader and text that anticipated in many ways what Wolfgang Iser and others would propose in the 1970s) and James Britton in England. This vein of interest in reader-oriented theory has continued in numerous studies by researchers in education faculties and by psychologists of child development on learning processes and pedagogical techniques.¹

The other group for whom Richards’s work was important was the poets and literary theorists in U.S. and British universities who in the 1930s and 1940s came to be known collectively as the New Critics. In their determination to disengage the study of literature from philology and history and the biographies of writers on the one hand and from impressionistic interpretation on the other, they found in Richards’s work strong support for their program of focusing students’ attention on the empirical analysis of the text. It was not an accident that the poetry of
their chosen mentors – Eliot, Pound, Yeats, Stevens, and Williams, for example – lent itself to and indeed often required the kind of close scrutiny these critics championed.

Reading, in the sense of careful analysis of features of the text that were thought of as objective — semantic meaning, connotation, implication, syntax, formal features of verse structure, verbal tropes, metaphor, and so forth — flourished under the New Criticism. Actual readers, though, became something of a problem; their responses, as Richards had discovered, tended to interfere with the proper reading of the text. Indeed as New Critical attitudes became the academic mainstream in the 1940s and 1950s, at least in this country if less so in England or elsewhere, the doctrine of the text’s autonomy became such an absolute that the notion that a reader’s responses to a poem or story might be pertinent to understanding it was labeled a “fallacy” in an influential essay by Wimsatt and Beardsley (1954).

A price was paid for focusing so rigorously on text and excluding everything that functions as context. Such a point of view allowed little to be said about the unconscious processes at work in writing and reading literature, about the social and political conditions under which texts are written and read, about the status of literature as language or as one of a number of cultural sign-systems, about the historicity of meaning and interpretation. In the 1920s and 1930s these issues became increasingly central in the work of influential philosophers, linguists, anthropologists, psychologists, and political and social scientists. A common note in their approaches, Susan Suleiman points out, was to shift the focus of inquiry from the observed — the text, psyche, society, or language in question — to the interaction between observed and observer (Suleiman and Croson 1980, 4). Thus, when questions were posed from outside literature for which a formalist critical theory was inadequate, and critics began to pay attention to the context in which texts exist, the reader of literature was in the foreground of many of these inquiries. By mapping briefly the reader-oriented theories that have resulted, I hope to locate the ground occupied by this book.

Contemporary reader-oriented theories all have to deal with the same three ingredients of the reading equation — reader, text, and the interaction between the two — but they often emphasize one part of this equation over the others. For example, some theories that invoke the notion of a reader are oriented more to texts than to actual readers. Here belong the various discussions of the hypothetical reader who is discovered to be implied or encoded or inscribed in a specific text and who therefore functions as a central clue to how the text is meant to be or can be read. Closely related are structuralist approaches that analyze the codes and semiotic systems that determine how a text functions or that govern its
readability for an audience. One might also locate here poststructuralist or deconstructionist notions of the gaps and indeterminacies in a text that subvert both the author’s intention and the reader’s impulse to see it as a unified whole and that entail that every reading is always radically subjective, historically conditioned, and endlessly revisable.

Most contemporary theories of reading, however, focus more explicitly on the process of interaction between reader and text, a view pioneered by Rosenblatt. An influential example is Iser’s phenomenological description of how meaning and significance originate in the encounter of reader with text. For Iser, a text is a system of response-inviting structures, organized by reference to a repertory of social systems and literary traditions (that author and reader share) and by means of specific narrative strategies and techniques (that, of course, must be accessible to the reader). But its meaning is only potential until it is actualized by a reader. In dynamic involvement with the text, the reader continually focuses and defocuses expectations and memories, building more consistent and meaningful connections as the interacting structures of the text are traversed from beginning to end. Thus, both the constitutive role of the text and the active participation of a reader in producing the meaning are preserved in this kind of theory of the reading process. Recently Holland has proposed a more elaborate model based on cognitive science and brain physiology that pictures this interaction of reader, text, and world in terms of a hierarchy of feedback loops.

There is scarcely a contemporary philosophical or literary perspective that cannot be enlisted in the discussion of how the reader engages a text and what the result is. In particular, all the theories of interpretation that can be sheltered under the term hermeneutics could be located on this part of the map, both the kind that views meaning as a textual reality that can ultimately be elucidated by one or another interpretive strategy and the kind that demonstrates the regression of meaning into cultural codes and systems of discourse and hence its fundamental undecidability.

The reader being talked about in these theories is still a shadowy entity, however, either an idealized good reader or simply a label for the abstract agent who occupies one end of the reader-text equation. To fill out this picture of reader-oriented theories, we have to look at those that make claims directly about the reader. Some of these deal with actual readers, either individuals or identifiable reading publics, historical or contempor. An example of the former is Norman Holland’s extension of his earlier psychoanalytic theory of reading to studies of how individual students’ readings of sample stories and poems were influenced by their unique personality structures. Of the latter there are sociological critics and literary historians who describe particular reading publics, the conditions that formed them, the value-systems implied by how they read,
and their influence on the production of literature. There are also rather
generalized and abstract notions of the reader, like the concept that occurs
in the works of critics who deal with the problem of subjective-versus-
objective interpretation by postulating the regulative influence of
interpretive communities, groups of readers constituted by particular ex-
periences and values (for example, a specific cultural community, a class-
room, or the literary profession), who in a sense validate and legitimize
particular interpretations of texts by a process of negotiation and synthesis
among their members.

All these theories of reading fill in a blank space in the map of literary
relationships previously devoted almost wholly to author and text. Each
of them says something useful about the reader’s role, and even the ones
whose central insights are stated in absolute terms and carried to extreme
ideological positions seem to have their core of truth. It is salutary, for
example, to be reminded (by structuralists and semioticians) that lan-
guage and literary structures are sign-systems embodying cultural values
that transcend particular uses of those sign-systems, or (by rhetorical
critics) that texts are always shaped by assumptions about the audiences
to whom they are addressed, or (by sociological and hermeneutical the-
orists) that responding to textual structures is always a historically sit-
uated act, and (by the phenomenologists) a complex one psychologically,
or (by deconstructionists) that our critical assumptions may dispose us
to find more unity in texts than they have, or (by psychoanalytic critics)
that the sources of our most deeply felt responses to what we read may
be hidden most of all from ourselves.

But even a shrewd eclecticism that wants to fill out literary theory
with the insights of linguistics, psychology, social science, and philo-
sophical hermeneutics will find something incomplete in this picture of
the reader. Because, apart from the psychoanalytically oriented critics
who talk about actual people and those critics who describe groups of
readers historically and sociologically, the reader in these theories is still
no more than a generic construct, a hypothetical experience of the text,
or a name for the place where the reading event occurs. This sketchy
notion of a reader does not help us understand the question we started
with, namely. Why do we respond differently to what we read as we
mature and become more experienced and skilled as readers? To do so
we need to fill in this picture of the reader by finding more differentiated
ways of picturing how readers do in fact read. We need, I suggest, to
think not of one act of reading, but of several distinct kinds of response
that change significantly from our first childhood experiences of stories
to those of ripe old age. We need a developmental view of reading.

Given the wide interest in theories of development over the past fifty
years or so, particularly theories of the development of the cognitive and
affective capacities that might be thought to underlie the experience of literature, it is surprising that literary critics have not tried to describe reading from this point of view. Child psychologists and educational researchers do so to some extent, but even in these areas the only attempt to offer a coherent description of a reader’s development across a span of time is Arthur N. Applebee’s ground-breaking work *The Child’s Concept of Story*, which studies the pattern of children’s responses from ages 2 to 17 in terms of Jean Piaget’s stages.\(^1\) Reading specialists have taken Piagetian approaches to their subject (for example, Jeanne Chall and Margaret Meek) and specialists in children’s literature have occasionally organized analyses of the books children read or of particular genres among these books from this point of view,\(^2\) but no one has addressed the psychological development that readers undergo across the whole life span from a literary point of view. This neglect is not easy to understand. It can hardly be due merely to indifference or resistance to psychology; more likely it is a consequence of the hegemony of text-oriented criticism in past decades and therefore the general lack of any attention to the role of the reader until quite recently.

**READING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT**

Granted then that it would be useful to have an account of how readers change as they mature, how can we construct such an account? Which theories of development offer us help? I shall summarize here the argument that weaves its way through the main chapters of this book.

I assume as a starting point an interactional or transactional view of reading such as might be assembled from the works of Iser, Rosenblatt, and Holland. Around some imaginary seminar table these theorists could probably carry on a long discussion about the precise differences among them, but I find a useful convergence in the main lines of their ideas. From this point of view the act of reading is primarily an encounter between a particular reader and a particular text in a particular time and place, an encounter that brings into existence the story, poem, or work in question. The story is not the same as the text on the page, nor is it simply the reader’s uniquely personal response to the text. Rather the story is an event that has roots both in the text and in the personality and history that the reader brings to the reading. The text is a system of response-inviting structures that the author has organized by reference to a repertory of social and literary codes shared by author and reader. But it does not simply cause or limit the reader’s response, nor does the reader passively digest the text. Rather, reader and text interact in a feedback loop. The reader brings expectations derived from a literary and life experience to bear on the text, and the text feeds back these
expectations or it does not. The reader filters this feedback through characteristic defenses, imbues them with fantasies, and transforms the event into an experience of moral, intellectual, social, and aesthetic coherence (Iser 1978; Rosenblatt 1978; Holland 1985, 1988).

If we try to understand how this model works in young children’s experience of stories, we discover that some of the characteristic features of their responses – the magical, imagistic, concrete, and intermittent way they participate in a tale – can be fairly well explained by a theory of cognitive development such as Jean Piaget’s.15 In his view, to know is to construct meaning out of our interaction with the world of experience, using the cognitive structures at our disposal. From infancy onward, these structures develop and change as our experience grows and our physiological capacities unfold. We acquire new cognitive schemas, combine simpler ones into larger and more adequate ones for dealing with our experience, and internalize this knowledge in increasingly abstract forms.

Piaget’s distinctive contribution to the epistemology of development was to divide this progress into stages – periods of equilibrium in the learning process when thinking is characterized by stable structures that are qualitatively different from those of the stages that precede and follow it – and to argue that these stages unfold according to an innate groundplan, that they are therefore universal in human beings, and that they are irreversible, because each one fundamentally transforms the accomplishment of the previous one.

It is tempting to try to explain the pattern of development that readers undergo by recourse to this concept of structurally distinct cognitive developmental stages that unfold according to an innate blueprint. Piaget’s schema has, after all, been an influential model for thinking about human growth and learning in a variety of areas (it underlies the work of Lawrence Kohlberg on the stages of moral reasoning, for example, and of James Fowler on faith development). It is not without its problems as a model for reading development, however. The very concept of distinct cognitive stages is under revision among developmental psychologists generally,16 but even if this were not the case it provides too narrow a framework for thinking about reading. Though cognitive development may be a necessary mechanism for significant change in the way we read as we mature, there are other kinds of development; in addition, cultural influences, as well as the social functions of reading and, especially, the kind of education we get, would also seem to be crucial ingredients of any adequate account of how we respond to stories.

Another limitation of Piaget’s theory as a basis for an account of reading is that in his view the kind of thinking that develops is increasingly logical and scientific. This emphasis obliges him to regard the fantasy