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The Point of Reception Theory

Reception Theory raises important questions about text, reading and meaning, but it tends to be under-theorized in terms of the point of reception. The death of the author has been requited by the birth of the reader, but the reader we find in reception theory is an unproblematic interpreter. The self-conscious subjectivity that was rejected in the case of the "Author" and his self-present intention as a guide to meaning merely reappears as the romantic, reified, self-conscious subjectivity of the reader (see Martindale's *Redeeming the Text*): "for some reader, somewhere, one day, it will prove to be the Love that moves the sun and the other stars."

I would like to ask what is "the point of reception". I claim that it is not within the brain of the reader; it is a mutually constitutive point of contact between reader and text. Taking a Gadamerian view of interpretation as a kind of "play"- the play (give and take) of the text and the reader's play with it- we can see "understanding" as a self-defining activity like play in which the "loss of self" (you forget who you are and take the play seriously) is rewarded with self-understanding. Since our consciousness comes into being as language (not just words and narratives, but the ways those words and narratives are embedded with affect and effect and value), our consciousness can be and always is intersected with the narratives and words of others. Our consciousness is community and community is where meaning happens. In understanding we encounter the horizon of the "other"- but the horizon of the other is always constituted within our own horizon; it is the uncanny at the heart of the familiar. It is the voice of others that already inhabits our self-understanding.

Reception theory asks us to be aware that the voices of others inhabit the text as the text speaks within our consciousness. It allows the text and our readings of it to be intersected with ever more voices. This is a political goal - which I support - but which is not disinterested. In the first place, a history of reception is as elusive and positioned by its own temporality as any other form of reading. It can never be as innocent as its descriptive tag seems: "All meaning is constituted at the point of reception". Or as generous as its acknowledgment of the reader suggests. The reading subject is always intersected by more discourses and more resources of language than interpretation can comprehend. Not only do words already bear meanings that always remain unexplored, but our horizon of understanding and the operations of the symbolic always obscure from us who we are and what we know. Consequently, any "history" of reception is already an effort to shape the history of reception. We are told what voices constitute the reception of a text. But do we hear the voices that elude the canon? The voices that have been silent? And can those voices speak within the traditionalist's view of reception? If we ask, "What is the point of reception theory?", we must, I think, answer that it is as precarious and political as that of any other theory, and its point is to change the point of reception.