

POSSIBLE TYPES OF READERS AND WRITERS

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The following notes concentrate on readers of fiction, poetry, philosophy, journalism (both higher and lower), and belles lettres. Most reading, like all writing, springs from discontent, so technical manuals, and scientific texts are excluded here because they are a macaronic mix of language and the more abstract sign system of mathematics, where most of the exceptions to the principle of discontent are found. The principles discussed below may apply to such writings, but I will not vouch for it.

It should also be recognised that while it is possible that some readers might pass all their time in one of the categories sketched below, it is much more likely that they will move from one to another and back again. Some categories will tend to have special relationships with others, and may operate in groups, the reader passing from one to another in cycles. Overlaps are to be expected as the norm.

1. There are several types of possible readers. For example, those who co-operate with a book or a writer because it voices or articulates something on their behalf.

1.1. Those who read for confirmation of their own views, and need nothing more than an echo, or reflection. Such people are sampling the atmosphere to see if it is hospitable. They derive satisfaction, or not, in proportion to the comfort afforded them by the environment (in very hostile environments such readers will adjust so that they can derive satisfaction from being on their own.) Such people can be said to admire themselves in the mirror offered by a text. The verbal icon becomes merely the literary *eikon*.

1.2 Those who adopt an author and use him as the means of configuring and confirming their own not dissimilar views. They adjust their dress in the mirror. This is close to the Ricardian view of poetry's function.

1.3 Those who read in search of views which they dare not articulate for fear of social shame. This may be very common indeed.

1.4 Those who read in search of views they may not articulate without fear of legal punishment. This is not applicable in the UK in anything but a feeble sense that demeans those in other parts of the world where people are under greater threat. However, the libel laws in England are strict and it could easily be that writers are encouraged to overstep the bounds of the law, thus fulfilling the public's desire to destroy its own laws.)

1.5 Those who read in search of views which they wish to see articulated so that they can oppose them. This kind is related to 1.1 above, except that 1.5 type readers need opponents, whereas 1.1 readers are driven to taking joy in having opponents.

1.51 Readers who delight in scaring themselves with the prospect of the program of the author being put into action:

‘Kill John Bull with Art!’ I shouted. And John and Mrs. Bull leapt for joy, in a cynical convulsion. For they felt as safe as houses. So did I.¹

There are deep superstitions at work in this belief, which hopes to ward off the event by undergoing a simulacrum.

1.6 Those looking for views which they scorn publicly, but hold privately, and can indulge in the secrecy of reading. Such readers will show only on the balance sheet of publishers, in the borrowing registers of libraries, and perhaps in correspondence. These silent admirers choose not to publish anything about their author though having many opportunities to do so.

1.7 A form closely related to 1.6, except that they reprocess material from an unacceptable ideology, and publish it as their own. These readers cannot be called admirers, nor can they be called thieves. Such readers are most often writers; but it is conceivable that a conversationalist might behave in this way.

¹ Wyndham Lewis, *Blasting and Bombardiering* (Eyre & Spottiswoode: London, 1937), 40.

1.8 Those looking for views which they scorn publicly and privately, but are drawn to by a secret longing, perhaps almost entirely hidden from themselves. Many readers of Wyndham Lewis fall into this category. Poundians also.

1.9 Those who read simply to give marks, like examiners. Formalist analysis is the most suitable for this since it can be executed with rapidity. (All other methods require lengthy introspection, and a tiresome judgemental procedure, which ends in an admittedly personal remark. Formal analysis has the great attraction of being rapid and like maths in being absolutely true (but as Richards said, this just means that the propositions of maths are very very general). Such readers are related to reviewers, though the latter will probably use simple forms of the complicated analysis, whereas 1.9 type readers will use highly complicated forms of what is at root a very simple process.

1.10 Those who read as professionals, and therefore choose works which are suitable for class study, or illustrative of the prevalent theory of reading (theories of reading and language are not, I should suggest, generated by the experience of reading so much as the political context of the theorizer. I here assume that any theory is an expression of the *will to power*, and that since no theory of language is likely to produce more power over language than an internalization of the grammatical rules governing it, the material to be dominated probably lies elsewhere, in this case in social relationships. Of particular importance are the local politics of the university, and the promotional system which operates there.

1.11 Readers who are seeking a blueprint for action. Such readers are most likely to be in search of a political programme, but it is possible that some might use fiction to govern their private lives. Readers in this category are less numerous than we would like to think, most falling into the following subcategory.

1.111 Readers who wish to satisfy their consciences that necessary action is being taken and find that they can do so by reading a book about why it is necessary to act. This is usually the closest they get to the action, and is not at all strange, since reading is in some way sublimated action.

1.12 Readers, like the above, who would take some action were it not illegal, or socially unacceptable. It is very important to recognise that authors will leave their

open to this use, as an opportunistic device, even if they disapprove of the actions involved. An anti-war book, thus, might be better reading for a homicide, or a sadist, because more detailed (it would also give the reader the sense of outraging the writer). A pro-war text, on the other hand, would too uncomfortably confront the reader with his own desires.

1.13 Readers who are searching for someone else to do their work. – It is easier to run a configuration system program than write one. – It is easier to pay a priest to say prayers for your soul than live a good life. Even on the Ricardian theory readers are lazy people looking for a better mental outfit than the one they can knock up for themselves, though one should note immediately that it is from the stored meanings of language that he expects significance to arise, not from the individual poet, whose genius consists in being able to realize potentials in language rather than live the good life and then express it.

1.14 Readers who are looking for distraction. This type of reader is very common, and all readers certainly pass some of their time in this category. The need is perpetual, but distraction texts are in great demand during wars (see Paul Fussell's account in *Wartime* (Oxford University Press: New York and Oxford, 1989), 228-251).

1.15 Readers who are looking for strength to counterbalance their weakness.

1.16 Readers who are seeking those who can undertake by proxy what the reader cannot. Erotic narratives fall, I suspect, into this category, and much satire. Kingsmill famously lamented that the only anthology that continued to sell was the most mean-spirited, his book of *Invective and Abuse* (1929).

1.17. Readers who are seeking evidence that any number of groups to which they belong (nationality, race, linguistic community, and so on) have special abilities. The reading of Shakespeare has probably consoled more nationalist Britons than Churchill's *History of the English Speaking Peoples*. It is worth saying that reading could even be said to satisfy species vanity. What a clever lot we are.

1.18 Readers who are simply trying on mental outfits, one after another, and for whom literature is just the dressing-up box.

1.181 Those driven by the totalitarian love of knowledge. (Yet another form of the will to power.) They are tourists of the mental wardrobe.

1.182 Those in search of something to cover their nakedness. The poor are not only always but everywhere with us. Compulsive reading is a disease of the mind.

1.183 Those who want some elegant robe to wear.

1.19 Readers looking for patches and rags to cobble together like the larvae of the caddis fly.

1.20 Readers searching for armour. Note that 1.18–1.19 concern themselves with retaining heat within the body, while 1.20 is looking for defence. Now it is possible that the exoskeleton also has insulating properties, and that the insulators are not ineffective armour, but that is not their point. Just as tightness in clothes gives the wearer the feeling of invulnerability, if the beliefs are severe, constricting, and so on, then believer will tend to be thus reassured.

1.21 Readers looking for a blazed trail on which they won't have to meet too many wild beasts.

1.22 Readers who want precedents and excuses for a course of action, a way of life, or an idea.

1.23 Readers who want to observe enactment by proxy.

1.24 Readers seeking leadership and a map, especially the sense of conquest it gives. "I read Lewis; Lewis has conquered Joyce; I have conquered Joyce".

1.25 Readers seeking fantasy, particularly the fantasy of intellectual distinction, which is quite different from the the sort of satisfactions available for the fantasist from fiction. In the latter case the fantasist projects their self into the enactment of the narrative's events, while in the writings of many satirists, for example, he is invited to project himself into the person of the author. It is important to realize this when studying Wyndham Lewis's fiction, where the lack of positives puzzles some readers. The hero of every one of his fictions, without exception, is the author, and none of the so-called characters manages to make a serious challenge to this tyranny.

1.26 Tourists. A great deal of reading is undertaken simply for a change of scene.

2. There are several types of possible reviewers, who are a subspecies of reader. The importance of the reviewer has declined dramatically in the post-war world, and without affecting book sales. How is this? The reviewer is perhaps not a reader at all, existing at a stage that actually precedes reading, or more properly speaking, an early stage of a population-wide reading of a text. Note: not a culture's reading of a text; we cannot properly make an abstraction behave as if it is a person. However much we may want to point out that every person is constituted in large part by his culture, cultures don't read books, individuals do. It is only appropriate to the historian, who needs to abstract, generalize and finally totalize (partly for stylistic reasons; we become bored with lists of individual cases, and tired of qualifications). The fault is ours for wanting writers to give us all embracing formulae. – This is another manifestation of the will to power.

In general, reviewers operate like T-cells in the blood, identifying or marking intruders so that they can be caught by the phagocytes and killer cells. But there are specific types, as follows:

2.1 Those who co-operate in the book racket, and derive satisfaction from toadying more or less indiscriminately. Such reviewers are guaranteed of success, since when rubbish becomes a best-seller they can say "Can seven million readers be wrong?"; and when a book fails they can claim to be part of the discriminating minority.

2.2 The habitual rubbisher. This reviewer uses a book to establish a contract between critic and reader, a sort of board of medical enquiry. The author is under investigation. This can take highbrow as well as lowbrow forms.

2.3 *Describers* are reviewers who refrain from comment, preferring to summarise the contents. Such people are hedging, but the end result of their reviews is, of course, favourable to the author. How could it be otherwise?

3.1 The writer's motivation is obscure. From the writer's point of view the readership is a medium as well as a market.

3.11 Market, a place to sell books and earn.

3.12 Medium, a means of transmitting and disseminating formulae (ideas). Thus readers are, from the writer's point of view, in the same group as paper, ink, etc. They are meme carriers, not the meme.

3.2. In order to make use of most media a writer merely has to obtain it and bring it under his physical control. But readers are more difficult. They must first be persuaded to obtain and process the writer's product. Fortunately for the writer there are many writers, and quite a few readers, who will connive in this process. Reviewing certainly used to be one of the most important ways in which people could be persuaded to read. It should be noted at once that many inducements have been built into our customs, and that the reviewer operates within a previously established framework where it is already granted that books are worth reading.

3.3 The value of books in general has been established in our custom, and has never been seriously challenged, even the efforts of McLuhan blowing up in his face by becoming a bestseller. With this basis a writer has merely to persuade a reader that this book in particular is worth reading.

3.4 There are three stages in this process of persuasion.

3.41 First the reader must be encouraged to pick the book up. This is the responsibility of the reviewer, and the jacket designer; but also benefits from other considerations such as the title chosen by the author, and of course their previous reputation.

3.42 Secondly the reader must be induced to continue past the initial stages of induction. Beginnings are important in all books. Suspense (narrative and intellectual) will be an essential element, especially in a first book. A popular author may be able dispense with attractive beginnings, relying on the basis of his reputation alone to carry the reader over the vital limit. Once engaged, as people say "into", a book, the reader can be bored to tears without much risk of losing their attention. This is due firstly to the fact that a reader who has invested so much time already into a book will be unwilling to lose his labor by aborting a reading. Secondly there is a general feeling that to fail in reading a book is a sign of weakness in the reader, even if the book is thought to be of very little interest.

3.43 Thirdly the reader must be offered some pay-off for the labor of processing a lengthy meme or set of memes like a novel, or a knotted (*arc*-ed might one say?) meme like a poem. This subjective payoff is carefully calculated to draw the reader on, until in the last pages some kind of resolution is offered. However, no writer would wish a reader to leave his pages happy (the need for books might decline), so the resolution is always a melancholy one. Basically this is arranged by picturing a scene which the reader regrets leaving because there is work still to be done to render the closure a happy one, or one which the reader will miss because it is so much more idyllic than the unassisted consciousness to which the reader must now return. Such endings are inevitably time-conscious. Some endings, such as that in Wyndham Lewis's *Tarr*, where the next few years are telescoped into a few paragraphs, repel the reader by offering a sad close which trails off into a situation to which one is not attached, and in which one has no interest in a resolution. The choice is perplexing, since there were several options available to Lewis. He might have left us feeling that *Tarr* had found the proper mate; he could have arranged a reunion with Bertha; he could have used a physical catastrophe to bring it all to an end. Why did he choose the least attractive ending for readers? Because he was not interested in narrative, and in fact located his subjective pay-off in the non-narrative aspects of the book. His strategy is to attract readers who are prepared to forego the conventional narrative satisfactions for another kind, those of stasis. Payoffs occur at many levels in a text, with phrases, sentences, paragraphs, pages, chapters, and the cumulative effect, all offering their varieties of satisfaction. Nearly all writers use these payoffs, but Lewis is rare in concentrating nearly all his energies on those that occur at levels lower than the "book" level (Some of his critics would say that he is incapable of constructing a pay-off at a higher level than the paragraph.) It is not surprising that Lewis's own "Taxi Driver Test" for quality in fiction, in *Men Without Art* (1934) is designed to sort out writers who do not pay attention to these lower levels of satisfaction; and when commenting on Hemingway Lewis is drawn to the fact that these are books whose "cumulative effect" (Lewis's phrase) pays off but whose lower levels do not. Lewis exhibited what E. K. Chambers called a "painful effort at phrasemaking". A question that it would be worth asking in relation to Lewis is why this choice has doomed him to have few but fervent admirers.

3.44 The relationship described above can also be articulated in terms of democratic politics. When canvassing, the politician makes promises in order to secure the support (co-operation) of his voters. In order to be elected again he must ensure that some sort of pay-off, or illusion of pay-off, satisfies the voters. Reading is very like that. The writer is looking for voters, those who will attend to his discourse and finance his reputation. Furthermore, the lines of relationship running from reader to writer, voter to democratic politician, resemble each other in being both exercises and abdications of power. An author cannot become influential without the co-operation of readers any more than a democratic politician can, though both have many techniques aside from direct argument to gain adherents. But once this co-operation has been given the author's power is in practice unlimited; and the objection that a critical intelligence may resist a thesis is untenable because in doing so the intelligence fulfills the author's desire by internalizing and retaining aspects of the thesis. (To put this in computer terms: the virus or program is indifferent, of course, as to whether you load it in order to run it for its payoffs or examine it and give it a bad review. In either case the code has gained another foothold.) Reading, like voting, is an exercise and a relinquishing of power.

4.1 Authorial vanity comes in several flavours, but should be discussed in relation both the author and the reader, not separately, but can analysed thus:

4.12 Conscious fame (known to large numbers of people) during the lifetime of the author.

4.13 Conscious fame (known to large numbers of people) after death.

4.14 Influence, acknowledged or not, over the minds of the men of the future. In other words the perpetuation of the text.

4.15 Authors are inclined to over-rate the first two, and to be very hot about chasing them up, but in fact they would quite happy with 4.14, which is in the end the most important of them all. It is important to notice that it is not important in terms of the number of readers (five readers a year for the rest of human history is better than five million for one year and then never more); and it is better to be read by one Plato, who may perpetuate your texts within his own, like the sayings of

Socrates, than by a dozen dumb readers. However, as with genes, the smaller the meme-pool the more vulnerable to destruction the meme is. The more copies there are extant, and in the cases of memes this must be taken to encompass both printed copies and the number of readers in a given period of time, plus some estimation of the spread of the meme as it is contained in the writings of others. The originality of authors has assumed a high place in our critical scheme simply because writers are so worried about 4.12 and 4.13 that they are always insisting upon their uniqueness. However, as has just been noticed, writers spend a lot of effort in collaborating with pre-existent meme forms. This is advisable because it ensures a rapid spread through a population of readers, who will be familiar with the older memes and therefore will accept them and take the newer components on trust. A meme creator could strike out on his own with total originality, but this would be a book that no one could read and which would therefore die. All writers therefore calculate their risks, playing off originality (which may be safer in the long run) against safety (which may be less safe in the long run).

Conclusion

The above paragraphs lead me to what I shall call the “Conspiracy Theory of Writing and Reading”. In this theory it is axiomatic that the benefits to the reader are a secondary consideration in the design of a piece of writing (a book, a poem, a sentence, a short story, a paragraph; the boundaries of a meme or memotype are not easily defined, and it seems best to avoid the problem altogether by terming the replication device simply “work”). The work survives in at least two forms. On the printed page, and in the minds of human beings, having copied itself, perhaps only fragmentarily, there during reading. The benefits it showers upon the reader are an inducement but not its purpose, any more than the flower’s life is devoted to the production of nectar for bees. To benefit a reader is merely one way of ensuring survival, and it is only uncertainly the best way, although the massive spread of university departments of literature would seem to suggest that it is indeed a very successful policy. Some works may facilitate their survival through means which do not require the happy co-operation of a subject, for instance through ingenious adaptation to the memory structures of the human brain. An example of this latter type would be advertising jingles, or slogans. It is important to realize that literature,

the class of works which gives benefit to the subject during the experience of reading, also uses these techniques of mnemonic adaptation, and it might therefore be expected that even jingles have some kind of benefit to the reader. Pure forms of either strategy are probably not to be found.

My primary concern here is with pay-offs made by literature, but brief mention should be made of works which make their pay-off in an objective form. (Again this distinction is a theoretical one only.) Such works, which come under the headings of science and technology, benefit the reader by enabling him to manipulate the external world to his satisfaction. It is immediately evident from well known works of science that they also have considerable subjective pay-offs as well. It is these, for example, that have made Einstein famous, not the technological power of his theory, of which the vast majority of people are intellectually ignorant, though they may benefit from it every day, as they benefit from Quine's logic in their mobile phones and other computers.

A Retrospect on Reading

Superficial the reading of grown men must ever be; it is only once in a lifetime that we can know the passionate reading youth.²

It would be comforting for a schematizer to place himself in the system once it is constructed; but honesty has to prevail. System builders are implicitly at the centre of any classificatory arrangement, sharing in all the sins yet tainted by none.

In order to spread the character of his thought a writer can gain the assent of a reader by argument, or he can leave the makings of thought throughout a book in the knowledge that they may recombine unexpectedly in the consciousness of the reader. The lack of demonstration relieves the load on the reader and makes them less suspicious.

² Walter Bagehot, *Literary Studies*, 1879, quoted in John Gross, ed., *The Oxford Book of Literary Anecdotes* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1983), 289.