

Up to this point in the poem only females have been called “emanations”; now males are too. The effect is to make “Man” lose much of its masculine coloring. “Humanity” would be a synonym, not “men.”

Is it possible, in the catastrophe of *Jerusalem*, that Blake in his intensity, or Los in his victory, abandons male supremacy? If self-annihilation is a Blakean irony for the fierce contentions of art and mental war, personal enlightenment and some kind of socioeconomic transcendence are not precluded.

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### The Ideal Reader

To the Editor:

Robert DeMaria, Jr., concludes his essay “The Ideal Reader: A Critical Fiction” (*PMLA*, 93 [1978], 463–74) with two related observations: “what we have gained in critical perspicuity we have inevitably lost in the literary form of critical writing” and “the sheer volume of material devoted to analyzing readers and demonstrating their value argues their essential formal importance in the total language of criticism.” Each statement is, in itself, valid, as DeMaria’s article suggests; taken together, however, they may define more closely the nature and limitations of a critical approach that concentrates on the responses and competence of “the” reader.

Underlying DeMaria’s investigation of the criticism of Dryden, Johnson, and Coleridge is an essential tautology: Dryden’s reader is a composite of Dryden’s tastes and prejudices, Johnson’s reader is Johnson’s idealized self-conception, and Coleridge’s, naturally, is Coleridge. That all three men are creative writers, as well as critics, reinforces our awareness of their postulated readers as fictionally reflexive standards of judgment. There is, of course, no such thing as an “ideal” reader—each reader, critic, and author tends to create consciously or not “the” reader in his or her own image. For Dryden, Johnson, and Coleridge, “the” reader is both a logical outgrowth of a critical perspective and a fictional figure sympathetic to his pronouncements. We might say, in this respect, that the “literary” quality of *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* or *Lives of the Poets* lies in Dryden’s or Johnson’s organic, as opposed to prescriptive, conceptions of their readers. What distinguishes Dryden’s criticism from, say, Rymer’s is not its sense of “objectivity” or universality in abstracting “the” reader from personal responses but its intelligence in *not* justifying subjective reactions

by reference to a static conception of the ideal reader.

One wonders, then, what to make of Frye’s criticism, which inverts the Joycean or Poundian notion of the artist as hero and makes the reader—or critic—the hero of the process of reading the text. Frye’s reader is, of course, as much an alter ego as Dryden’s or Coleridge’s, but the transition from poet-as-critic to critic-as-reader is not necessarily a smooth one. Contemporary theories of reading—especially as they are based on a linguistic model—tend to break with the older, organic tradition of reader criticism by diminishing the relative importance of the text. The absolute becomes the notion of the reader, and the effort to assess value becomes, at least for many structuralists, an attempt to fix meaning. In practice, this kind of “criticism of criticism” operates at a further remove from the text and becomes an essentially theoretical discipline, with pretensions, one suspects, to autonomy or some form of metaphysical union with perceptual psychology. Such a methodology of reading is of questionable practicality. Ironically, the more criticism sets up and accepts “the” reader as an absolute standard, the more self-referential and subjective criticism in general may become and the less original and interesting our perceptions of individual works. We might well ask, then, what advantages we can find in a body of criticism that sacrifices literary quality for “explicitness” in defining the reader as a formal construct. To postulate a decline in the literary quality of contemporary criticism necessarily involves our asking questions about its assumptions, methods, and ends. In losing its suggestiveness and sense of idiosyncrasy, contemporary criticism may be losing whatever it is that makes it inherently valuable. At its worst, much reader-oriented criticism merely reformulates (often in overly abstract language) the familiar problems posed by the abstractions “the writer” and “the author’s intention.” To rephrase what is already generally known under the guise of a theoretical consideration of “the” reader makes literary criticism little more than a low-grade philosophical infection. And the more complex the outward show of this critical approach becomes, the more likely it is to accept uncritically several dubious propositions not directly connected with “the” reader, among them the fiction of the “central theme” of a given work.

The basis of reading is inherently intuitive, and the strength of criticism such as Dryden’s, Johnson’s, or T. S. Eliot’s is that the fictions of objectivity and the ideal reader are recognized for what they are. If most characterizations of “the” reader—including my denial of his existence—seem unsatis-

factory, we are perhaps best left with the fiction of individual response. That such a conception of the reading process requires much practical and theoretical elaboration goes without saying, but such qualification needs to be both flexible and reasonable, avoiding the pitfalls of a complex prescriptivism.

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*Mr. DeMaria replies:*

I am sure I do not know what the basis of reading is. It may very well be intuitive or, as T. S. Eliot suggests, a sort of unconscious "immersion." Whatever it is, the remarks one formulates on the basis of reading are another matter. The ideal reader is one of many conventional critical formulations available to readers who want to express their intuitions or give form to their experiences of immersion. It is just as much a form as, say, an evaluative statement that links descriptive phrases with a conjunction like "but." Johnson employs this form when he says that Addison's "page is always luminous, but never blazes in unexpected splendour." The ideal reader is a dramatic rather than a syntactic form; it is a construction in language that shows the man (to recall Seneca) in a more literal sense than his grammar; it is a literary device that will carry a great many of the critic's assumptions and perceptions. It will not, however, carry them all, and the relationship between the critic and his ideal reader is analogical rather than tautological. The ideal reader is a vehicle for a critic's perceptions and, like any literary character, can be seen as distinct from the critic himself; in fact, the literary quality of the ideal reader is the surety of its difference from the critic. The absence of this surety is, perhaps, an indictment of some contemporary reader criticism. But Dryden's reader is more than just "a composite of Dryden's tastes and prejudices"; he also represents a class of intellectuals and has an intangible aesthetic life that is communal or, in a limited sense, public; in reading Dryden we feel a distinction between this societal understanding and the critic's "individual response." With Dryden the distinction is not

always obvious. As Earl Miner has said, Dryden is characteristically "most highly personal when most public." In Johnson's criticism, however, the distinction between personal response and the sentiments of the ideal reader is often striking. In the famous passage at the end of the "Life of Gray" in which Johnson rejoices "to concur with the common reader," he indicates his separation from the archetypal everyman for whom he often speaks. Johnson's reader is not simply "Johnson's idealized self-conception." Johnson recognizes his difference from his literary construction as surely as he would recognize the difference between a play and real life, whether or not the playwright observed the unities of time and place. Robert Markley's inclination to see the relationship between critic and ideal reader as tautological is evidence of the decisiveness of Coleridge's influence on our critical tradition. To distinguish some of his formulations from tautology and to help validate the general operation of identification, Coleridge put together the word "tautegorical." This word might best describe the relationship between Coleridge and his ideal reader. Coleridge's ideal reader, however, identifies himself with every author he reads; this leaves some doubt about the reality of his own identity, and it leads us to distinguish the ideal reader from Coleridge himself, who was anything but genial in his remarks on Johnson.

I could not be more sympathetic with Robert Markley's main concern, and I think it is worth repeating that very often the current emphasis on the reader is a merely formal change from the old emphasis on the text. The force of a critical work cannot be determined solely on the basis of the form it employs. One wants to see the form and the experiences that fill, overfill, or even dismantle the form. My article is not evaluative, but I hope it provides the sort of illumination that makes evaluation possible. I meant to throw light on the life of a conventional critical formulation that is currently at a climax in its development. Once the form is clearly seen (and it cannot be clearly seen apart from its past), the business of seeing where it is full and where it is empty of meaning should be easier.

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