

The Reading Process: An Intertextual Approach



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1 Reader Response Theories: From Ingarden to Iser

In the long history of interconnectedness between philosophy and literature, the twentieth century was marked, to a large extent, by significant developments in the exploration of ties between phenomenology and theories of reader response and reception. In addition, novel philosophical ideas about time, subjectivity, and consciousness influenced many early- and mid-twentieth century authors, whose innovative and experimental works posed newfangled challenges to readers. Understanding and enjoyment of the experimental texts they produced hinged upon a series of cognitive processes that were considerably more complex than what the nineteenth century literary works used to require.

Directly or indirectly, Husserl's thoughts on the structures of consciousness found an enthusiastic literary corollary in the development of the interior monologue and of similar techniques during the heyday of modernism, with authors such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner (among many others) focusing their work on depicting not reality itself (the lofty but dated goal of nineteenth-century realism) but, rather, how their characters perceived it in complex subjective mental processes that modernist narratives struggled to reproduce in detail.

Upon encountering for the first time the opening lines of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, for example, readers are confronted with the evocation of a scene that is not descriptive in the traditional sense (that is, rendered understandable to them by a narrator that processes and delivers phenomenological information) but

My title is intended as a critical homage to Wolfgang Iser's 1972 seminal essay "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach."

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experiential: what the reader encounters are the seemingly unmediated thoughts of a character who is not introduced by name or in any other manner but who shares his perception of things as they appear to him:

Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting. They were coming toward where the flag was and I went along the fence. Luster was hunting in the grass by the flower tree. They took the flag out, and they were hitting. Then they put the flag back and they went to the table, and he hit and the other hit. (Faulkner, 2016, 3)

What in this scene is self-apparent to the speaking character remains (at least in part) a mystery to the reader. What flag? Who are those people? What are they hitting? We have little trouble imagining a flower tree that may or may not be exactly like the one the character sees near Luster, but we just cannot come up that easily with a proper ideation of the flag. What type of flag? What purpose does it serve? In this famous opening, readers are forced to see the landscape through Benjy's impaired mind, and it is only much later in the novel that they realize that Luster and Benjy are outside a golf course that was built on land that used to belong to Benjy's formerly wealthy family.

As narrative developments like this became dominant in both prose and poetry, literary critics and scholars found in hermeneutics and phenomenology some useful vocabulary and theoretical approaches to begin conceptualizing the role of a reader who now was confronted with higher degrees of indeterminacy than ever, even if their analyses extended further back into much earlier periods in the history of literature, acknowledging the role of gaps and incomplete information in works from previous centuries, such as Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, a rather experimental novel in that regard.

Influenced by Husserl's ideas on intentionality, Roman Ingarden was among the first to bolster the role of the reader in the literary process, suggesting that works of literature should be treated as intentional objects, that is, as entities that resulted from the articulation of a reader's intentionality working on the schematic codification of an author's previous intentionality (Ingarden, 1973, 14). As such an intersubjective object, the text could no longer be controlled by the mind of the author who produced it, but the reader would not be at liberty to realize its words in complete independence either, since the reader's experience of the text would be governed by the linguistic materiality of the text.¹

Central to Ingarden's understanding of the intersubjective nature of the literary text was the concept of places of indeterminacy, i.e., unrealized aspects of the text that the reader would "fill" by concretizations arising from the reader's previous experiences (whether in literature or in life). In principle, for example, a reader familiarized with the world of golf would be in a better position to imagine what the flag and the hitting are (in Faulkner's quote above) than that of someone unfamiliar with the sport. By the same token, imagination of the undefined flower tree in that same quote would depend on what types of blooming trees are part of a reader's

¹Due to space constraints, I cannot do justice to this and other complex arguments below. For a more detailed analysis of Ingarden's intersubjective object, see Çelik (2016, 43ff).

experience, painting a different actual image of the plant in each reader's mind. This form of ideation is one of the key elements of the act of reading, eloquently summarized by Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges in an anecdote told by Alberto Manguel, who used to read to Borges when the latter was already blind:

Stopping me after a line he found side-splitting in Stevenson's *New Arabian Nights* ("dressed and painted to represent a person connected with the Press in reduced circumstances"—"How can someone be dressed like that, eh? What do you think Stevenson had in mind? Being impossibly precise? Eh?"), he [Borges] proceeded to analyse the stylistic device that, while appearing to be exact, forces the reader to make up a personal definition. (Manguel, 1996, 17)

Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics focused, precisely, on the problems that result from such a manner of evoking phenomena through language, in particular considering that language is a means for intersubjective communication, what he terms *I-lessness*, or the fact that "[t]o speak means to speak *to* someone" (Gadamer, 1976, 65, original emphasis). From Aristotle to St. Augustine, and on to Gadamer's days and to our own present, the function that writing plays so "that we might be able to converse also with the absent" (Augustine, 1948, 846) enables the possibility to inquire how that conversation is even possible, as Borges's question to Manguel also wondered. The hermeneutic activity of the reader, according to Gadamer, negotiates the process of connecting the alien or unknown with the familiar, the latter serving as necessary support to understand the former (Gadamer, 1976, 15). The ensuing task of filling places of indeterminacy and making personal definitions in the literary communication between subjects hinges upon the reader's ability to ideate phenomena that the reader (in this sense as blind as Borges) cannot possibly see directly but only through the textual conversation with the absent author.

Building somewhat on Husserl, but much more on Gadamer and Ingarden, Wolfgang Iser's attempts to understand and analyze the act of reading resulted in one of the most influential theories of reader response and sense building to date. To develop his own interpretative model, Iser inevitably had to challenge some of the tenets of his predecessors. His critique of Ingarden, for example, revolved in part about questions that are central to a reader's ability to construct meaning out of a text. According to Iser, Ingarden's dissatisfaction with contemporary texts was based on what the latter perceived to be deliberate or programmatic incomprehensibilities (which the Faulkner example above may illustrate), since Ingarden was still operating under the assumption that texts should be understood to have a normative or preferred concretization that aligned the reader's interpretation with the author's intentions,² something the more experimental texts of the twentieth century apparently refused to do. Iser, on the other hand, advocated for the possibility that "a work may be concretized in different, equally valid, ways" (1987, 178), thereby approaching "difficult" texts not so much as potential communicative failures but as

²In this regard, Iser quotes a self-acknowledged banal example offered by Ingarden to explain why, if no other options are offered to the reader, the reader should understand that a character described as very old should be imagined as having gray hair (Iser, 1987, 176).

works that intentionally opened up the range of potential interpretations.³ As he would later clarify in his study of negativity in Samuel Beckett's prose, "negativity can be regarded here as a structure of bringing forth—at least potentially—infinite possibilities" (Iser, 1993, 141).

In consequence, Iser's model highly bolstered the role of the reader beyond what Ingarden and even Gadamer had proposed (though not to the extreme positions advocated by other theorists like Stanley Fish),⁴ and it saw the act of reading as that which creates meaning when readers interact with texts, not with authors. In order to study that interaction, Iser proposed several important concepts, on which I will also rely for part of my argumentation, including those of the *strategies* and the *repertoire*. According to Iser, strategies "organize both the material of the text and the conditions under which that material is to be communicated" (1987, 86). In that sense, the strategies offer readers the possibility of formulating whatever arrangements of the text materials they consider effective or viable, rather than presenting them with an already fixed structure. Faulkner's example above may, once again, be of use to clarify this concept, and it should be apparent that the disjointed, disorganized structure of his text not only serves to codify his writing in a certain manner, but also to lay out a basis for communicating with readers, one in which the reader must be willing to interact with a polyphony of un/identified voices, a disorderly sense of time, repetitions of topoi from multiple points of view and, in sum, a seemingly chaotic narrative that requires constant syntheses and self-correction in the minds of the readers. This is the type of communicative situation that, while somewhat alienating Ingarden, attracted Iser for its potential for addressing the process of reading as a sense-building operation. Because reading is sequential (in both time and space), and because the text can never be apprehended at one time, "[t]he 'object' of the text can only be imagined by way of different consecutive phases of reading" (Iser, 1987, 109), which means that the relation between reader and text cannot be that of an observer in front of an object. Rather, Iser claims, "instead of a subject-object relationship, there is a moving viewpoint that travels along *inside* that which has to be apprehended," a defining quality that he considers unique to literature (1987, 109, original emphasis). It is the process of reading which constitutes the literary object, then, and no existence of that object prior to the act of reading can be acknowledged.

The repertoire, in turn, "consists of all the familiar territory within the text. This may be in the form of references to earlier works, or to social and historical norms, or to the whole culture from which the text has emerged" (Iser, 1987, 69); but Iser emphasizes that familiarity cannot be reduced to identity or reproduction of that which the reader already knows. On the contrary, he argues, what makes the familiar territory interesting to readers is not the fact that it is known to them already, but rather that it leads in an unaccustomed direction by virtue of its appearing

³For an early summary of Iser's critique of Ingarden's intentionality theories, see Brinker (1980).

⁴For Fish, interpretive strategies are not put at the service of making sense of the text; rather, "they give texts their shape, making them rather than, as is usually assumed, arising from them" (1980, 13).

reformulated in an unfamiliar context (1987, 70), which enables readers “to see what they cannot normally see in the ordinary process of day-to-day living” (1987, 74).

To further explain these and other elements of the act of reading, Iser also relied on an additional pair of key concepts, those of *blanks*, which I will address immediately below, and *negations*, to which I will return after a brief consideration of the literary repertoire. As Iser explained these two terms,

Blanks and negations both control the process of communication in their own different ways: the blanks leave open the connections between perspectives in the text, and so spur the reader into coordinating these perspectives—in other words they induce the reader to perform basic operations *within* the text. The various types of negation invoke familiar or determinate elements only to cancel them out. What is canceled, however, remains in view, and this brings about modifications in the reader’s attitude toward what is familiar or determinate—in other words, he is guided to adopt a position *in relation* to the text.” (1987, 169, original emphases)

The blank as a concept sounds so similar to Ingarden’s places of indeterminacy that Iser was forced to explain the difference by stressing that blanks operate by fostering not *completion* but *combination* of elements to address indeterminacies in the text, an essential aspect to explain why readers understand texts differently instead of arriving to the same conclusions as all other readers. According to Iser, a reader does not negotiate blanks by simply supplying missing information but by concretizing connections that the blank disrupted. In doing so, the reader creates an idiosyncratic synthesis of textual materials that reflects her or his own reading at that particular reading instance, which may be different from syntheses made by other readers (or by the same reader at different times in her/his life). Such divergences in interpretation (from reader to reader, and from reading to reading) explain why the blank is not an informational gap that can be filled with missing data, but a relational imbalance that requires the reader’s sense-making intervention.

2 Negotiating Literary References

For my purposes in this chapter, the most important aspect of Iser’s model concerns his understanding of the literary repertoire, that is, the un/familiar presence of previous literary works or genres in the text being read, but I will approach its study by connecting the repertoire to both blanks and negations. For Iser, the literary repertoire plays a double function during the act of reading: “it reshapes familiar schemata to form a background for the process of communication, and it provides a general framework within which the message or meaning of the text can be organized” (1987, 81). If we think of a well-known literary text like Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, it should be easy to see the ways in which that double function works. In the first sense, readers should have relatively little trouble to see behind Cervantes’s novel other literary schemata that had been popularized before 1605, including—of course—the chivalric romances that Don Quixote loves to read

and that the novel is said to parody, but also the conventions of road-oriented narratives, as in the so-called picaresque novel. In Cervantes's reshaping of the norms of the novels of adventure, in turn, readers of *Don Quixote* encounter a springboard for organizing their own sense-making activities, which are then free to pursue rather divergent and even unexpected courses. Considering the notion of the quest, for example, a reader may wonder why would Don Quixote want to become a knight errant at that particular juncture in time instead of enlisting to participate in the still active exploration and colonization of the Americas; through that and/or similar speculations some readers may raise mental questions about social and political norms that other readers might not entertain.

The effectiveness of Iser's method, as far as the literary repertoire is concerned, seems to hinge on the reader's preexisting familiarity with those earlier literary conventions and presences that the text invokes and rephrases. When that is the case, I find his model rather useful and convincing. It is obvious, however, that different readers bring to the act of reading diverse sets of cultural capital and social backgrounds, which means that while some of them would have no trouble finding in *Don Quixote* the rephrased schemata of the chivalric romances, others will be unlikely to do so. This raises an intriguing set of research questions, some of which I intend to explore in the rest of this chapter. In particular, I want to reflect on the issue of how to negotiate explicit intertextual references, meaning those moments in which a literary text mentions or references in unambiguous terms another. What happens when the reader is not familiar with the referenced text? How does a reader deal with different forms of citation or allusion? When does it become necessary for readers to familiarize themselves (as much as they can) with the mentioned text, and when and how do they decide to ignore a particular reference and simply continue with the text they are reading?

At the bottom of these questions lies precisely the Iserian notion by which texts can be described as reformulations of an already formulated reality, in which whatever blanks a reader encounters may be negotiated through the kind of ideation that would permit readers to navigate unfamiliar territory in the text by appealing to what they already know, the basics of Gadamerian hermeneutics, as well. When we read a description of a city or a landscape that is unfamiliar to us, we can still make inferences from the words in the description to construct a mental image of the place, as in the case of Faulkner's blooming tree cited above. As Charles A. Hill further suggests, discussing visual images, "[e]ven if the viewer has never seen a real, unmediated cow, the viewer understands that such creatures exist, and that they have particular traits and associations that the creator of the image would like to bring to the forefront of the viewer's consciousness" (2003, 129). If we could transpose those images from the visual to the written arts, Merleau-Ponty's views on the visible/invisible in painting might be of help to further explore what Iser terms *reformulation*.⁵ Written words, in that sense, would serve as the visible that makes

⁵According to Merleau-Ponty, painting "gives visible existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible" (1964, 166).

present the invisible, even if they do so as arbitrary, non-representational signs. In such an absence of visual images, a reader who encounters an unknown linguistic term (“chabudai,” for example) could look it up in a dictionary or, if s/he so chooses, s/he could skip that operation and simply form a mental image of that object using contextual clues that may suggest the idea of a short-legged table, then supplementing the image—as needed—with his/her own knowledge of different types of furniture. The blank, in that case, is negotiated not only by making the unintelligible understandable but also by coordinating perspectives within the text (pondering why is a somewhat uncommon word like *chabudai* used or what does that usage say about characters, narrators, setting, and the like). Beth Hernandez-Jason’s contribution to *With a Book in Their Hands: Chicano/a Readers and Readerships Across the Centuries* offers a good, empirical example of this type of reader activity. Revisiting and rereading as a 26 year old the Nancy Drew books that she loved as a child, Hernandez-Jason explains the re-reading process:

As I continue to read, I am surprised by the vocabulary words—“unscrupulous,” “exonerate,” “insoluble,” “titan.” I do not even know what “titan blond” means, and I surely did not know then. However, if in other books her hair was described as strawberry blonde, I must have simply guessed what “titan” meant at the time. (2014, 90)

Though Iser would have expected a reference to the famous Venetian School painter to be easily understood by an ideal reader, the particular real reader I am citing, unfamiliar with Titian’s iconic palette, negotiated the blank in the text through inference and contextual clues.

But, what happens when the reader encounters a reference in the text not to “reality” but to another text? In the studies of narratology and intertextuality the citing text is known as the hypertext and the cited text is called the hypotext, following Gérard Genette’s influential nomenclature (1982, 11–12). Iser almost takes it for granted that the readers of a hypertext would be familiar with the cited hypotext(s), and that they would use that familiarity to make sense of the citation, but—as mentioned—such an understanding of the communicatory structure of the literary text requires a number of assumptions about cultural capital that disregard patterns of access (or lack thereof) to education, exposure in certain regions and cultures to certain texts and not to others, and the like, which seriously compromise an actual (versus an ideal) reader’s ability to negotiate intertextuality. Even the most well-read individual is bound to find references to unknown hypotexts that would have to be either negotiated or dismissed as the reader advances through the hypertext.

Paraphrasing Iser, who claimed that the text is “a formulation of an already formulated reality” (1987, x), one could argue that the main challenge in making sense of intertextual references or citations is that the reader needs to deal not with textual passages that refer to an already formulated reality but to an already formulated *formulation* of reality, one that challenges the reader in ways that the text s/he is reading cannot always satisfy through contextual clues. Two examples from Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions* may serve to illustrate (and differentiate) some of the challenges involved in making sense of intertextuality. In the first and easier to handle of the two, Rousseau reflects on problems he had experienced in the past

with the printing and the reception of his books (especially with the banning of some of them), just as a wealthy patron has proposed to take charge of a new publication of his, which Rousseau fears will be banned as well:

Elle trouva le moyen de faire entrer dans ses vues M. de Malesherbes, qui m'écrivit à ce sujet une longue lettre toute de sa main, pour me prouver que la *Profession de foi du vicaire savoyard* était précisément une pièce faite pour avoir partout l'approbation du genre humain, et celle de la cour dans la circonstance. Je fus surpris de voir ce magistrat, toujours si craintif, devenir si coulant dans cette affaire. (1824, 420)⁶

Rousseau's *Émile* (the hypotext in this example) was banned in Paris and Geneva because of its section entitled "Savoyard's Vicar's Profession of Faith." A reader not familiar with that circumstance can easily look it up online nowadays, or in a reference book, and make *some* sense of that particular intertextual citation, since what is needed to negotiate this intertextual blank is mostly factual information, and not a deeper knowledge of the contents of the "Profession" itself (even though such a knowledge would doubtless result in a more meaningful reading experience). The reader may not know yet the entire relevance of the citation, but upon learning of the Paris/Geneva ban most readers would probably feel that they have enough information to go on reading the *Confessions*, even if they had never read the "Profession" themselves.

Unlike the previous example, which we could categorize as a case of *referential citation*, the following one (which we might call *phenomenological citation*) will prove to be somewhat more challenging for the purposes of sense-making:

Je trouvai dans son souris je ne sais quoi de sardonique, qui changea totalement sa physionomie à mes yeux, et qui m'est souvent revenu depuis lors dans la mémoire. Je ne peux pas mieux comparer ce souris qu'à celui de Panurge achetant les moutons de Dindenault. (Rousseau, 1824, 372)⁷

The mention, in this case, is not of another text *qua* text, but of a particular trait in a particular character's countenance in a hypotext. This type of intertextual linkage does not remit the reader to a previous authority invoked as such; rather, it forces the reader to come up with an ideation of a previous ideation of an unseen phenomenon. Why would Panurge smile as he was purchasing those sheep? Once again, a reader not familiar with Panurge or Dindenault could look them up online or in a print reference book. Such a search is likely to furnish an explanation that more or less properly describes Panurge's purchase of Dindenault's sheep in François Rabelais's *Fourth Book of Pantagruel*. But how does one form an image of the sardonic smile

⁶"She managed to bring M. de Malesherbes into her view, who wrote me a long letter on the subject in his own hand, proving the 'Savoyard's Vicar's Profession of Faith' was just the piece to receive the universal approbation of mankind, and of the court, too, under the circumstances. I was surprised to see this magistrate, usually so timorous, become so free and easy in this matter" (Rousseau, 1856, 281).

⁷"There was an indescribable sardonic smile on his countenance, while saying this that, to my eye quite altered his physiognomy, and which has often occurred to my mind since. I can compare it to nothing but the expression on Panurge's countenance while buying the sheep of Dindenaut" (1856, 249–250, original punctuation and spelling).

that Rousseau is trying to depict by resorting to his ideation of Panurge's smile as found by him in the Rabelaisian text? This is not an image of the more or less generic or abstract cow described by Hill (above) but almost its opposite, a description so precise that it can only leave the reader as confounded as Borges was by Stevenson's *New Arabian Nights*. Moreover, since not all readers would negotiate the blanks in the story of Panurge's purchase in the same manner, the reader of the *Confessions* cannot help but be at Rousseau's sense-making and ideation mercy if s/he is not familiar with Rabelais's text. In the quote above, the reader encounters not the *Confessions's* formulation of an already formulated reality but the *Confessions's* formulation of the *Fourth Book of Pantagruel's* formulation of an already formulated reality.

To further complicate matters, for these type of "phenomenological" citations, looking up information on the hypotext would be of limited utility for a different reason: since any description of the hypotext would be conditioned by the particular understanding of that book by the person who wrote the description, such information may not be applicable at all to the conditions under which a different reader is encountering the intertextual reference. For instance, the Wikipedia entrance on "Panurge" explains the episode of the purchase of the sheep (and even quotes part of the text from Rabelais) but it includes no mention whatsoever of Panurge smiling, sardonically or in any other manner, which would not help the reader of my Rousseau example.

In fact, if we were to look up the original episode in Rabelais's text we might be surprised to find out that there is no mention in it of Panurge smiling. The episode of Dindenault's sheep begins in chapter VI of the *Fourth Book of Pantagruel*, continues in chapter VII, as the merchant tries to drive a hard bargain by praising his sheep without restraint, and it ends in chapter VIII when, after paying a good sum of money for a ram, Panurge throws it overboard the vessel that carries all of them, which results in all of the other sheep following the ram off the ship onto their deaths, with the last one of them carrying into the water Dindenault himself, who was frantically trying to hold on to it, in order to save his last living animal. The closest Rabelais gets to suggesting the possibility of a smile in Panurge's face is at the very end of chapter VIII, with a reference in Latin to the concept of retribution: "Mihi vindictam & caetera. Matiere de breuiaire" (Rabelais, 1552, 18), an abbreviated biblical citation from Romans 12:19 (loosely translated as "vengeance is mine, I will repay," followed in Rabelais's text by the narratorial note that identifies the quote as extracted from a breviary). That is close to suggesting a (potential) smile, but not close enough. Except for the unlikely possibility that Rousseau might have read an edition of *Pantagruel* with an alternative text from the original, we cannot help but conclude that Panurge's smile is the result of Rousseau's (not Rabelais's) ideation.

What we do find in Rabelais's passage is the invocation of earlier hypotexts that further complicate and challenge our sense-making operations, i.e. the same descriptive approach and strategy later employed by Rousseau. Beyond the biblical quote just referenced, in describing the drowning of Dindenault, Rabelais's narrator explains: "Le mouton feut si puissant qu'il emporta en mer avecques soy le

marchant, & feut noyé, en pareille forme que les moutons de Polyphemus le borgne cyclope emporterent hors la caverne Vlyxes & ses compaygnons” (1552, 18),⁸ a more or less evident allusion to Homer’s *Odyssey*. The narrator also explains why the sheep would follow one another blindly by citing yet another hypotext, Aristotle’s *History of Animals*: “Aussi le dict Aristotles lib. 9 de histo: animal. estre le plus sot & inepte animant du mōde” (1552, 18).⁹ In this, like Rousseau, Rabelais gives us clear examples of a referential citation (Aristotle) and of the more complex, phenomenological citation (Homer). Though pursuing these other intertextual links would make me stray too far from the argumentation I am constructing, it should suffice to say that Rabelais’s reader would be equally at a loss if s/he is not familiar with Homer’s *Odyssey*, especially since Rabelais’s quote is also potentially misleading: while clinging to the sheep results in the death of Dindenault in *Pantagruel*, the same strategy permits Ulysses and his companions to save their lives in the *Odyssey*, so that a formal similarity (“en pareille forme que les moutons de Polyphemus”) in fact reveals a substantially dissimilar content.

Complex as the second example from Rousseau may seem, intertextual gaps can be much more complicated and difficult to navigate for readers, as I will illustrate with an instance of what I will call *aesthetic citation*, for reasons that will be apparent at the end of this chapter when I discuss the invocation of intertexts as aesthetic objects. The quoted passage in this case, below, is from José Antonio Villarreal’s *Pocho*. Published in 1959, *Pocho* was one of the first contemporary Mexican American novels, and it centers on the life of young Richard Rubio and his family. In the novel, Richard is born in the Santa Clara, California, area to illiterate, immigrant Mexican parents, but he soon develops a love for reading that permeates Villarreal’s novel, while peppering it with references to all kinds of hypotexts. The one that will be of interest here is found in the final part of the novel. As Richard’s family begins to fall apart due to the pressures of negotiating traditional Mexican cultural expectations in the context of daily life in the United States, Richard makes an almost desperate attempt to bring them back together by reading out loud to them, something he seems to have done in previous occasions as well. Though somewhat long, the passage is worth quoting in its entirety, because of the details that it gives readers about norms that are being challenged, transformed, or negated (in the sense of Iser’s *negation*):

That night, for the first time in months, they had dinner together in the old way. After dinner, his father sat on the rocker in the living room, listening to the Mexican station from Piedras Negras on short wave. When the kitchen was picked up, the girls sat around restlessly in the living room, and Richard knew they wanted to listen to something else, so he said to his father, ‘Let us go into the kitchen. I have a new novel in the Spanish I will read to you.’

⁸ “The Ram was so strong that he carried the Dealer into the Sea with him, so that he was drowned, in the same manner as the Sheep of Polyphemus, the one-eyed Cyclops, carried Ulysses and his Companions out of the Cave” (Rabelais, 1893, 65).

⁹ “Moreover, Aristotle says *lib. ix, de histor, anim.* that it is the most foolish and silly Animal in the World” (Rabelais, 1893, 65).

In the kitchen, around the table, his mother also sat down, and said, 'It is a long time, little son, that you do not read to us.'

How blind she must be, he thought. Aloud he said, 'It is called "Crime and Punishment," and it is about the Rusos in another time.' He read rapidly and they listened attentively, interrupting him only now and then with a surprised 'Oh!' or 'That is so true!' After two hours, he could not read fast enough for himself, and he wished that he could read all night to them, because it was a certainty that he would not get another opportunity to read to them like this. They would never get to know the book, and he knew they were to miss something great. He knew also that they would never be this close together again. (Villarreal, 1959, 187)

As I have explored elsewhere (Martín-Rodríguez, 2003, 51–52), this scene illustrates the change of paradigm from a collective, traditional oral culture to the more individual-oriented world of print and reading. Traditional orality was invoked at the beginning of the novel—when Richard was exposed as a young child to campfire singing and storytelling—and it is present in the quoted scene only through the modified version that Walter J. Ong called "secondary orality."¹⁰ In the case of many Mexican American and immigrant families (like Richard's), that change of paradigm also entailed the shift from a world in which the elderly would teach values and beliefs to the younger to one in which the latter frequently became cultural brokers for the former. In that context, the episode just quoted presents not only a fascinating example of a form of alternative literacy (i.e. the process by which formally illiterate individuals may acquire literary cultural capital) but it also implies that the traditional norms of Mexican patriarchy represented by Juan Rubio (Richard's father) are negated, and that an uncertain new set of values opens up for the Rubio family as they see themselves, their culture and their experiences reflected or, better perhaps, refracted in those of *Crime and Punishment's* characters and society.

The intertextual reference to *Crime and Punishment*, however, creates an additional level of complication for the reader of *Pocho*: while in the fictional world of the novel the Rubio family gets to enjoy Dostoyevsky's masterpiece first hand through Richard's reading, Villarreal's readers do not. His reference to the Russian nineteenth-century classic is even more ambiguous and reticent than Rousseau's allusion to Rabelais, since Villarreal does not mention which passages from Dostoyevsky the family found *so true*. Instead of references to the contents of the hypotext, all that we find in *Pocho* is an account of the act of reading itself. Even the reader who is already familiar with Dostoyevsky's novel would be at a loss to figure out what in that hypotext might be motivating Richard's family to exclaim "That is so true!" or simply "Oh!"

In consequence, for the reader of *Pocho* forming an image of the family scene quoted above should pose only minor problems, if any, but negotiating the Russian hypotext remains an extraordinary challenge. At best, the reader familiar with *Crime and Punishment* must be contented with inferring from that knowledge what might

¹⁰Ong proposed this term to differentiate the technological oral/aural (television, film, the radio and other similar media) from the traditional oral culture which entails a set of norms and values, as well as an agonistic participative atmosphere that secondary orality no longer possesses (108).

be applicable to the Rubio family's sense-making operations about the life of certain Russians "in another time," all the while knowing that whatever hypotheses s/he formulates in that regard would be impossible to verify beyond doubt, and that they may be completely different from alternative hypotheses formulated by other readers.

In the case of readers *not* familiar with *Crime and Punishment*, ancillary sources are unlikely to be of much assistance either. If they were to look up *Crime and Punishment* in Wikipedia, to name a commonly used reference source, they would find out that it gives a (somewhat loaded) summary of the plot of the novel, emphasizing its protagonist's mental anguish and moral dilemmas. The Wikipedia entry also discusses the plot, characters, structure, symbolism, themes, and reception of *Crime and Punishment*, but how can that help the unfamiliar reader negotiate the intertextual blank in *Pocho*? The temptation to leave it unaddressed would be even greater than in any of my other examples, since the difficulties involved in making sense of the intertext may suggest it to be an impossible task.

3 Toward an Intertextually-Based Account of Reader Experience

Making sense of this type of hypotext, then, may require both a modification of Iser's understanding of sense-making and situation-building in reading, and a different approach to the conceptualization of reading itself, one that thinks of it as an *intertextually*- rather than just a *textually*-based endeavor, to which I will return at the end of this chapter. For Iser, who analyzes reading at an abstract level,¹¹ concepts like that of the implied reader, the ideal reader, or the superreader, among others he discusses (1987, 27–34), make it possible to postulate a theoretical more or less perfect match between the text and the reader as far as the repertoire is concerned. The implied reader, which he defines as a textual presence that "embodies all those predispositions for a literary work to exercise its effect" (1987, 34) would thus be able to easily make sense of any and all intertextual references present. But, as the examples above should have demonstrated (especially in the case of Rousseau's allusions to the work of Rabelais), we do not read as abstract readers, but as situated, concrete readers with personal, social, and cultural baggage that differentiates us from other real readers. That is why Rousseau, in trying to describe the sardonic smile of someone in his own world ended up imagining a similar one in one of Rabelais's characters; Rousseau's consciousness imposed on the Rabelaisian

¹¹ Iser explained why he chose a theoretical approach in these terms: "I have tried to establish my idealized model of text-processing along phenomenological lines. I have done so mainly for two reasons: (1) a phenomenological description allows us to focus on processes of constitution that occur not only in reading but also in our basic relations to the world in general; and (2) an idealized model that allows description of constitutive processes bears within itself a hermeneutic implication" (1993, 49).

hypotext a non-existent element that other readers of *Pantagruel* could never see, because it is not in the text but is, rather, the result of an actual reader's ideation.

Because of these limitations of the *implied reader* as a concept, Iser's reliance on a purely theoretical model was challenged by other scholars more inclined toward empirical research, such as Norman N. Holland, for whom "one can only arrive at a theory of response by induction from actual responses" (in Iser, 1993, 43).¹² I concur with Holland's views on the limited applicability of the Iserian model to the study of actual acts of reading, and thus in my own scholarship on reading and intertextuality, I have switched from the more theoretical study of *reading* that I offered in *Life in Search of Readers* (2003), to a multi-branched, empirical study of *readers*.¹³ Empirical research in this area works from the ground up, replacing deduction with induction in order to see how actual readers make sense of actual texts, rather than predicting or assuming what they do with a priori hypotheses. From that perspective, the final part of this chapter will concentrate on how some real-life readers have negotiated the intertextual relationship between *Pocho* and *Crime and Punishment*, as an example of strategies for working around intertextual blanks and for making sense of unknown texts.

My data and anecdotal evidence is taken from three cohorts of students in my upper-division seminar "Reading (from) the Margin," which I have taught at the University of California, Merced on only three occasions: in 2012, in 2016, and in 2018. The course requires an amount of reading significantly higher than other upper-division courses in my department, which results in somewhat lower enrollments; this, in turn, facilitates discussion and observation of students' progress in making sense of readings. Though some students in some of these three cohorts were familiar with some of the other texts in the syllabus, none of the forty-four individuals who have taken the class thus far had ever read *Pocho* or *Crime and Punishment* beforehand, which proved to be essential for observing reactions as they read them for the first time.

For many of my students, *Pocho* (the first book they had to read for the class) was a particularly interesting novel, since the plot takes place in geographical areas not far from Merced, California. Moreover, many of the students in the three cohorts under discussion were of Mexican or Latino descent, as is a large percentage of the overall undergraduate student body of the school (55.5% as of this writing).¹⁴ Therefore, negotiating cultural values and situations lived by Villarreal's characters was, for the most part, easy for them, since they could rely on personal experiences (in many cases) and/or on textual and contextual clues that made the text quite readable. Perhaps the most difficult textual element to deal with for these three cohorts of readers was the somewhat distorted syntax that Villarreal uses on occasion, writing in English but maintaining Spanish-language syntactical patterns, a technique

¹²Chapter 3 of Iser (1993) consists of a written interview in which Iser answered questions from three leading response and reception scholars, including Holland.

¹³For more information on that empirical study, see Martín-Rodríguez (2015).

¹⁴"Fast Facts 2019–2020" (2020).

that Ernest Hemingway had popularized before Villarreal but that was unfamiliar to my students.

By the time we arrived to the episode of Richard reading out loud to his family,¹⁵ class discussions had been fruitful in relating previous textual passages to social norms pertaining to gender and sexual violence. Though the novel is set in a period roughly ranging from the 1920s to the 1940s, students were reading it from a twenty-first century context, which allowed for a smooth ideation of incidents that are only alluded to in the novel, as in the case of João Pete's Manoel's alleged sexual transgressions. From that same sociohistorical vantage point, students (mostly female in all three sections) were quick to recognize and discuss the portrayal of women in *Pocho* as overtly traditional and even stereotypical, which resulted in some animated debates on gender and culture, with key concepts like *machismo* and *marianismo* taking center stage at those times.¹⁶ Beyond gender, aspects of the migrant/diasporic experience, social class, folklore, literacy, and discrimination, among others, were discussed and analyzed. Some students also mentioned identifying with Richard because they, too, were passionate book lovers on their way to becoming college graduates and bettering their station in life, in several cases as members of partially illiterate families. From a reception-studies perspective, it soon became obvious that my students' reactions to Villarreal's text were both conditioned by and representative of their particular "horizon of expectations" (Jauss, 1982, 184–185), in which *Pocho* answered questions that it had not had to answer for earlier generations of readers.

In all of our class discussions, my students demonstrated a keen ability to negotiate thematic blanks and sociocultural negotiations, but they seemed befuddled when I asked them to try to make sense of the Dostoyevsky hypotext. This assignment might have been more confusing to them, at least at first, because I had not required that they think about other hypotexts encountered earlier in *Pocho* (e.g. *Don Quixote*, Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, or Voltaire's *Candide*, among others). As I later explained to my students (when we got to discuss and analyze *all* intertexts) those previous hypotexts were easier to negotiate, being closer to the referential type exemplified by the first quote from Rousseau, above;¹⁷ but *Crime and Punishment* promised to be not only more difficult to handle but also a much more significant intertext for our understanding of the novel, while still refusing to hint to us exactly why or how.

¹⁵For the sake of a clearer exposition, I will be subsuming all three classes into one, since there were no major significant peculiarities in how each of those cohorts (or individuals within them) made sense of that intertext.

¹⁶Marianismo refers to particular expectations defining womanhood and femininity in Latin/o cultures, including self-sacrifice toward children and family. For more on machismo and marianismo, see Sanabria (2016, 152ff).

¹⁷The following quote from *Pocho* should substantiate that statement: "With determination, he followed Tom Jones and Dr. Pangloss through their various complicated adventures" (Villarreal, 1959, 103).

The first problem stemmed from the fact that, in this case, my students' hermeneutical skills were unable to find something familiar with which to connect Villarreal's enigmatic reference. When further pressed, the more daring students hypothesized that the linkage between both books might be related to violence (a concept explicit in *Crime and Punishment's* title and a common occurrence in *Pocho*), war (the plot in *Pocho* is framed by the Mexican Revolution, at its beginning, and World War II, at its ending, and they figured that a similar war or pre-war context could be conducive to violence and murder in the Russian novel as well), or to suffering or similar emotions they could see the Rubio family sympathizing with across time and distance. Family itself was another potential link they explored, especially because in the reading guides with questions that I sent to students before each class I had asked them to think about changes in family life/structure as the novel (*Pocho*) progresses. In all instances, therefore, these real readers attempted to negotiate the intertextual blank as if it were a thematic one.

Building on that set of skills and on that accumulated body of hypotheses, when we started reading *Crime and Punishment* (immediately after finishing *Pocho*) I told my students to keep thinking about the Rubio family as they read about Raskolnikov (*Crime and Punishment's* protagonist) and his world, to see if particular passages in *Crime and Punishment* would appear to be the ones that triggered reactions from the Rubio family, or at least to see what similarities they could find between both novels and/or both worlds.

Since these were the first two interconnected books that we read for class, students struggled much more than they did with other book pairings later in the semester, since by then they had developed stronger comparative abilities. As a consequence, in this case, I was forced to be much more active in identifying most of the potential connections myself and in lecturing on them. Though present space and topic would not permit me to give too many details in that regard,¹⁸ I can advance that once I explained the historical context for *Crime and Punishment*, including the recent abolition of serfdom (thanks to the Emancipation Reform of 1861) and the ensuing migratory movements from the countryside to the cities, for example, students quickly began to see both novels in a different light. Something similar occurred when I shared with them a table comparing Richard and Raskolnikov by using nine different parameters. While both characters remained distinct and disconnected in their minds, they had no trouble seeing the deeper structures that made them (and, as a result, their relationship with their families) very similar.

Students were also fascinated by the fact that many intellectual discussions within *Crime and Punishment* revolved around the so-called "Woman Question," then a major element of social anxiety in Russia. Since we had discussed gender extensively in our consideration of *Pocho*, this generated much interest in trying to figure out how different members of the Rubio household might have reacted to

¹⁸I intend to give a fuller account of these practices and experiences on a forthcoming monograph on the intertextual history of Chicano literature.

learning about this fact as well, should some of those passages had been the segments of the novel read out loud by Richard.

But, perhaps, the most eye-opening finding in their reading of *Crime and Punishment* was realizing that Dostoyevsky's novel was also full of intertextual references to earlier hypotexts. This was eye-opening not in the sense that they had failed to notice before that literary texts contain many such references but, rather, because this was the first time they encountered hypotextual references after being asked to reflect on their significance. Though most students kept on reading *Crime and Punishment* when they found those other citations (largely due to the intensive reading aspect of the class), many acknowledged that they felt uneasy about doing so, and others mentioned that they could not help but look up the references to get a better sense of why those hypotexts might had been invoked.

What my students seemed to have learned about the role of intertextual blanks was that (unlike other types of blanks) they could not be dealt with by resorting to contextual clues, personal experience of the world and of other books, or even narratorial guidance. What they also learned from the class design and methodology was the fact that intertextuality produces a most radical breakdown of linearity, in the sense that any hypotextual reference inevitably takes the reader outside of the hypertext, while at the same time the hypertext demands that the reader continues reading through. Such a clash of centrifugal and centripetal forces will prove essential for my closing remarks on intertextually-based reading, because if Iser is right and consistency building is a central aspect of the reader's ability to process a text by providing "good continuation" between textual segments (1993, 53), then it should be apparent that intertextual references pose a potentially major challenge to such a "continuation," especially those references of the types I have called phenomenological and aesthetic citations.

While in a different reading context most (if not all) of my students would have probably disregarded the reference to *Crime and Punishment* in *Pocho*, or they would have limited themselves to searching for some second-hand information about it, the fact that they were required to read Dostoyevsky's novel for class meant that they were able to see that, unlike what happens in the examples of Faulkner's flag and blooming tree, the strategies needed to make sense of an intertextual blank did not involve an ideation of worldly objects from the verbal signs that represented them in the text, but rather the much more complex task of perceiving (to paraphrase Dufrenne) the work as a whole as an aesthetic object in all of its sensuous aspects (Dufrenne, 1973, lii).

With some lecturing and guidance, they were able to understand as well the rhetorical power of Villarreal's strategy of not quoting or citing specific passages from *Crime and Punishment*. In doing so, *Pocho* succeeds in transcending a simple matter of highlighting thematic, social, and other external-world connections with its Russian hypotext. In their stead, what *Pocho* celebrates is the act of reading itself, the actual delight felt by its characters in constituting the aesthetic object that for them becomes *Crime and Punishment*. This particular hypotextual citation, therefore, is of the most open kind, one that invites readers to *read* (or *re-read*) the hypotext, and not so much to *recall* their prior knowledge of it. Even if a reader is already

familiar with Dostoyevsky's novel, finding it so ambiguously referenced by Villarreal's characters forces her/him to think not so much about her/his previous knowledge of *Crime and Punishment* but about what *Crime and Punishment* means when it is read by people such as the Rubios.

This brings us back to the question of what an *intertextually-based* rather than a *textually-based* analysis of reading might offer. In essence, it entails moving away not only from Ingarden's author-reader intersubjective communication model but also, to a certain extent, from Iser's phenomenological one, which focuses on the interactions between text and reader while privileging the sense of closure resulting from considering the book being read as a self-contained unity. If, as Kristeva suggested, "the notion of intertextuality replaces the notion of intersubjectivity" (1980, 66), for the very same reasons it must also challenge the possibility of making sense of any one text in itself.

Breaking away from notions of closure, then, an intertextually-based model of reading offers centrifugal opportunities not unlike the lines of flight and the rhizome, as conceptualized by Deleuze and Guattari.¹⁹ Rather than seeing the act of reading as the process by which a reader makes sense of *one* book, all the while assuming that the reader will have prior knowledge of all that is needed in order to do so, this alternative model conceives the book being read as a knot in a web of potentially infinite connections from which readers depart to explore (parts of) the rest of that web, potentially returning at some juncture in time to the original point of entrance to find its meaning altered because of their accumulated knowledge of the other knots on the web, *and* because the reader will have developed in the process an understanding of the connections between books as essential to their ever-changing meaning.²⁰

At a time when (at least younger) readers have become increasingly familiar with the practice of clicking on and following hyperlinks on the world wide web, jumping from webpage to webpage rather than reading them sequentially from top to bottom, I argue that embracing a comparable model for reading literary works would offer readers a more organic understanding of the history of literature than the one currently available to them from educational and other cultural institutions. The formation of readers in K-12-College (and their equivalent stages in other countries) focuses on teaching them about their national letters, first and foremost, and about the chronological succession of literary movements within countries or at an international scale. Most academic courses are still centered on specific time periods (or literary movements) and/or on geographical areas, with some others adopting thematic approaches that do little to challenge the underlying ethnocentric model. A consequence of these practices is that students end up being exposed to arbitrary groupings of texts (because they were all written during the Renaissance, for example, or because they were all published in the United States) that fail to

¹⁹On the possibility of a rhizomatic history of Chicano literature, see Martín-Rodríguez (2003).

²⁰Though presented here as an alternative model of reading, it is important to make clear that the theory behind this model (studies on intertextuality) has a long history of its own, going all the way back to Kristeva (1980) and Barthes (1973).

explain why and how actual books connect to other books through lines of affinity and affiliation, instead of through the preordained chronological and national lines of filiation.

Intertextually-based reading, of the kind we practiced in my class and I minimally hinted at here, brings the study of linkages between books to the forefront by embracing the world wide web hyperlink model. I contend that this type of reading is much more effective than traditional practices when it comes to consistency-building, sense-making, and even in dealing with issues of “continuity.” While intertextual reading could never erase the blanks and negations involved in the multiplicity of intertextual references from book to book, at least it enables and empowers readers to perceive *actual* linkages between texts and to understand them as springboards for building additional cultural reading capital. In the process, this practice becomes effective in blurring the differences between the center (the canon) and the literary margins, which was also a main goal in my course.

As George P. Landow has aptly suggested, discussing web hypertexts:

Hypertext linking situates the present text at the center of the textual universe, thus creating a new kind of hierarchy, in which the power of the center dominates that of the infinite periphery. But because in hypertext that center is always a transient, decenterable virtual center—one created, in other words, only by one’s act of reading that particular text—it never tyrannizes other aspects of the network in the way a printed text does. (2006, 120)

Notwithstanding Landow’s reservations on printed texts, I argue that when literary texts are conceived as part of a web of citations (rather than as self-contained, complete objects), a similar debunking of hierarchies can be achieved. The title of my class, “Reading (from) the Margin” points in that direction by privileging non-canonical texts (we begin the class by reading *Pocho*) and by exploring how those *marginal* texts actually “read” other texts, thereby allowing their readers to make sense of other books, including those in the canon. In fact, students in my class acted throughout the semester more like the so-called *wreaders* of the world wide web (Landow, 2006, 20), jumping from text to text, than like Iser’s implied reader. By placing *marginal* texts as temporary centers in the textual universe of our class, we were able to debunk preexisting hierarchies while acquiring a much-needed sense of how those pecking orders are constructed. Finally, we found that the most significant element of *continuity* in the history of literature is born out of the discontinuity generated when texts forego their self-contained worlds to open up to other preexisting literary universes. In that sense, the act of reading a book must always entail the act of reading its intertexts.

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