



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Reception Studies in France: Social Contexts, Reader Interpretation, and the Role of Julia Kristeva

Priya Venkatesan

L'Esprit Créateur, Volume 49, Number 1, Spring 2009, pp. 111-124  
(Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: [10.1353/esp.0.0047](https://doi.org/10.1353/esp.0.0047)



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/esp/summary/v049/49.1.venkatesan.html>

# Reception Studies in France: Social Contexts, Reader Interpretation, and the Role of Julia Kristeva

Priya Venkatesan

**R**ECEPTION THEORY, ALSO KNOWN AS reception studies, is a term usually applied to reader-oriented approaches developed by the Constance School in the late 1960s and early 1970s, including the work of Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser.<sup>1</sup> Jauss developed the concepts of “horizon of expectations” and extended the literary hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Roman Ingarden to arrive at the general concepts of reception theory.<sup>2</sup> Jauss approached literary history from the reader’s point of view. Schneider offers a good synopsis of reception theory as formulated by Jauss:

Hermeneutic theory holds that human beings always understand the world—and by analogy, literary works—in the contexts of their individual, historical specific position in life. Consequently literary texts do not retain a fixed value or elicit uniform responses across generations, but are always understood according to what the changing horizons of the readers’ expectations will allow. Jauss believes that subjective horizons of expectation can be objectified through a formal analysis of text’s genre markers, its use of literary conventions, and its linguistic features. A given work then can either conform to an audience’s horizon of expectations or go against it.<sup>3</sup>

According to Jauss, the greater the “aesthetic distance” between the horizons of expectations and the aesthetic characteristics of a work, the more aesthetically valuable it may eventually be deemed to be.

Reception theory, which flourished in late twentieth-century Germany through the Constance School and includes all possible approaches to cultural artifacts focusing on the conditions that control their reading, was later radically conceived and reformulated by American critics. In France, by contrast, literary analysis based on reception theory was held at bay by the currents of structuralism, postmodernism, poststructuralism, and semiotics. Since these forms of analysis focused either on the systemic features of the text or on ontological questions concerning narrative, the basis for this resistance was the inherently linguistic critique of these literary theories, which along with its strains of formalism overtly deemphasized the role of the reader.<sup>4</sup>

Despite this resistance, a number of scholars in France have written insightfully about reception theory. In France, however, literary analysis based on reception theory took a path different from the one taken in Germany

due to the French scholars' and theorists' attempt to incorporate the social into reception analysis. What distinguishes French reception studies is the attribution of a social context to the reader in the interpretation of texts. Julia Kristeva, primarily through *Revolution in Poetic Language*, emerged as arguably the first literary theorist in the French structuralist and semiotic tradition who assimilated reception studies by positing the reading of poetry as a social act. Through an analysis of Kristeva's text, I will show how the inconsistencies and inherent problematics of reception theory (and its variants in reader-response criticism) are addressed and partially resolved in the critical milieu of French reception studies.

This essay conducts a study of the state and character of reception theory in late twentieth-century France in four different sections. In the first section, I highlight aspects of reception theory and how it functions within the context of structural literary inquiry through Michel Riffaterre's essay on structural stylistics and Jauss' essay on literary historicism. The second section deals with some of the critical problems raised by reception theory, from its misconceived overreliance on anti-essentialism<sup>5</sup> to its unintentional association with formalism through aesthetic distancing and its problematic relationship with empirical studies.<sup>6</sup> In the process, I hope to convey some of the complexities of reception studies in order to promote a discussion of the social contexts, or more precisely of concepts of 'the social,' incorporated by French reception studies theorists. The third section discusses aspects of relatively recent French reception studies scholarship, culminating with my analysis of *Revolution in Poetic Language*, which articulates the social dimension of reception studies in France and addresses some of the limitations of German and Anglo-American reception criticism. The fourth section deals with the example of the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé to illustrate the aforementioned points.

### **Jauss and Riffaterre: Laying the Foundations for French Reception Studies**

A study of reception studies can aptly begin only with a contextual analysis of the seminal essay by Hans Robert Jauss. Through "The Identity of the Poetic Text in the Changing Horizon of Understanding," Jauss established the critical outlook for European reception studies and created its theoretical foundations on both methodological and ontological levels.

Jauss maintains that the evolution of the audience, not the historical period of the author, explains the history of a literary text. He grants that the author's original audience establishes the intended meaning, but he argues that this historical meaning and modern meaning are radically incommensurate. To describe the author's life or era, critics must not assume that they have a privileged

access to a text or ignore their subjective involvement with it; rather to preserve what Jauss terms “the hermeneutic difference of self and other,” they open themselves to the historical or cultural other presented by the text. In a platonic fashion, literary hermeneutics fosters an unending dialogue of self and other.<sup>7</sup>

Jauss acknowledges that the literary histories of Mikhail Bakhtin and Georg Lukács involve a dialogue of self and other: texts require an act of comprehension in which reader/critic distinguishes his or her modern self from the author’s historical self. Lukács argues that great literature transcends such unending historical dialogues, while Bakhtin maintains that the dialogue primarily reveals the author’s conditions of production. Jauss, by contrast, accepts the Heideggerian belief that because understanding is circular, hermeneutic experience requires openness and letting be. Jauss adopts Hans Georg Gadamer’s belief that, just as a festival exists only in its celebration, so a text exists only as an event that reveals the reader’s self. As a consequence, Jauss argues that, to preserve the hermeneutics of self and other, criticism must examine what he terms the audience’s “horizon of expectations.” Derived from Heidegger and Gadamer, the concept of “horizon of expectations” conveys the requirement that, to interpret a text or a society, readers must bring to bear the subjective models, paradigms, beliefs, and values of their necessarily limited background. For Jauss, the reader’s prejudices do not distort or misconstrue the text’s meaning or the author’s intention; a positive constructive influence, these prejudices establish the subjective horizon of the reader (Machor and Goldstein 2).

Instead of absorbing this method for reader interpretation, French theorists demonstrated that they were indeed heir to the structuralist tradition, which they extensively referred to in their conceptions of reader-response theory. For example, Michel Riffaterre’s “Describing Poetic Structures: Two Approaches to Baudelaire’s *Les Chats*” formulated a “structural stylistics.” Drawing upon his critique of Claude Lévi-Strauss’ and Roman Jakobson’s semiotic analysis of one of Charles Baudelaire’s lesser known poems, “*Les Chats*,” Riffaterre argued that “linguistic oppositions do not automatically entail stylistic differences”:

No segmentation can be pertinent that yields, indifferently, units that are part of the poetic structure, and neutral ones that are not [...]. There is no doubt that linguistic actualization does take place, but the question remains: are the linguistic and poetic actualizations coextensive? The sonnet is rebuilt by two critics [Lévi-Strauss and Jakobson] into a “superpoem,” inaccessible to the normal reader, and yet the structures do not explain what establishes contact between poetry and reader. No grammatical analysis of the poem can give us more than the grammar of the poem.<sup>8</sup>

Riffaterre criticizes the structuralists' reading of the poem because it relies on phonological and grammatical patterns that are imperceptible to the reader and consequently cannot be 'active' components of the poetry. As Jane Tompkins has noted, Riffaterre proposes instead to arrive at an understanding of the poetically significant linguistic features of the sonnet by focusing only on those features that have consistently arrested the attention of readers of various persuasions. The subjective element in these responses is screened out by ignoring the specific content of the readers' responses and focusing only on the fact of response to a given locution. Riffaterre's attention to the way poetic meaning is reflected in the readers' moment-by-moment reactions to its unfolding represents a new way of performing close stylistic analysis (Tompkins xiii).

### **The Complexities of Traditional Reception Theory**

The aforementioned theorists may differ on the details of reception studies and reader-response criticism; they all strongly emphasize the notion of literary meaning as emerging from the relationship (and communication) between text and reader. However, from their analyses arises an awareness of the indeterminacy of reception studies. In highlighting many of the complexities of reception theory and the various debates that were to result from it, one may discern the nature of French reception studies and its unique emphasis on social contexts. In focusing on how social theory is central to the concept of the aesthetics of interpretation, French reception theorists derived a socio-aesthetic element in reception studies, establishing the principle that the social is not inherently distanced from an individual aesthetics.

In its formulation of literary history, traditional reception theory did not shield itself from its ambivalences: the notion of what constituted an interpretative community, the limits of a reader's freedom to interpret in terms of how spontaneous or critical a valid interpretation could be, and how the reading encounter (which turns into interpretation) is "itself rooted in the psyche of the critical self but powerfully affected (or directed?) by the societal configuration."<sup>9</sup> In its concern over the long-standing debate of 'textologie ou interpretation,' French reception theory addressed many of these ambivalences, leading to further refinement of traditional reception studies and to establishing it as a valid progenitor of textual interpretation, in light of a literary tradition that included the intertextuality of Roland Barthes and the *sémanalyse* of Julia Kristeva.

Arlid Fetveit argues, for example, that the proliferation of reception studies, together with a radical undermining of the text, has been nourished by a misconceived anti-essentialism. He warns "against overrating the freedom of the reader and against thinking that it is more in line with anti-essentialist

notions to describe how texts and other objects are perceived, rather than describing their characteristics” (Fetveit 174). Fetveit is emphatic in distinguishing the question of *activity* from the question of *freedom*. The fact that, in the wake of anti-essentialism, it has become fashionable to say that the reader *makes*, rather than *finds*, the meaning of texts does not license the reader to make any meaning that he or she might fancy. “In order to answer the question about the freedom of the reader, or the polysemy of the text, we have to apply our theoretical knowledge of interpretation and turn to the empirical data—fully aware that the question cannot be answered generally and severed from the purpose of the reading or the circumstances in which it takes place” (Fetveit 174).

Elrud Ibsch has argued that the context of literariness cannot be defined on the basis of textual features but only as resulting from a communicative action which attributes literariness. This position leads to the controversy between the hermeneutic and the empirical approach in reception aesthetics. The process of understanding signs and texts has always played a prominent role in the hermeneutic tradition, and this concept of understanding cannot be separated from the concept of historicity, i.e., the chronological distance between the moment of production of a text and its later interpretation. Hans Robert Jauss, by raising the question of the historicity of understanding and by denying the isolated literary text a central position, re-established the hermeneutic tradition. Jauss called for a literary scholarship that does not register textual observations, but instead unlocks the reception process.

However, according to Ibsch, the empirical study of literature (exemplified by such scholars as Norbert Groeben and Siegfried Schmidt) belongs to the tradition of all empirical investigation, which requires: comparability, testability, falsifiability of the results; systematicity and explicitness of the propositions; and the objectives of explanation and predictability. Ibsch adds that the “compatibility between the hermeneutic and the empirical positions” is not an “unproblematic one.”

Although the hermeneutic and the empirical approach agree in rejecting an exclusively textual analysis and in emphasizing the study of the reception process, a difference emerges at the moment when the hermeneuticians appear to postulate an ideal, implied reader who, in fact is identical to the interpreter, whereas the empirical researchers differentiate between the various real readers as to their roles, personality structure and social position within the literary communication system. (Ibsch 43)

Fetveit also offers his assessment of reception studies and empirical approaches in terms of the connections between the two in which reception

studies may supplement or contradict empirical approaches that aim to distinguish academic readings from readings conducted by the general public:

Briefly, connections between “critical interpretations” of a text and “what happens empirically” can be sketched in three points: (1) we have theories and interpretations that aim to describe the activities of the reader; (2) “expert interpretations” and those conducted by “ordinary people” share a lot of cultural premises; (3) there are a number of mediating factors linking an academic interpretation of a text and an ordinary person’s meeting with the same text—for example, teaching institutions, public criticism and debate, cultural activities and so on. These mediating factors help to create not an unbridgeable gap but a dialogical relationship between the academic reading of texts and « what takes place empirically. (Fetveit 179)

Fetveit adds that “we might also develop new ways of combining textual criticism with empirical data on reception.” This argument may serve as a good formulation of the key concepts of French reception studies. The tension between literary hermeneutics and empirical studies leads to a conception of “readerly” interpretation as determined by a social context. Literary hermeneutics is defined by the engagement of the reader with the text that does not necessarily consider the social element. In turn, empirical studies of readerly activities inherently focus on the social determinants of reading. Thus, literary hermeneutics in the context of empirical studies gives rise to the concept of readerly interpretation as a socially-mediated act. It is this reference to the empirical (empirical study) vis-à-vis reception studies that leads to the development of the social in French reception studies, which is represented by references and allusions to social contexts that are thus inherently embedded within reader interpretation. The empirical approach highlights social contexts, social contexts precisely foregrounded by French theories of reader interpretation.

### **Literary History, Social Theory, and The Role of Julia Kristeva (or How Reception Studies Developed in France)**

Many critical studies using reception theory as a methodological tool discuss its practical aspects and consist of surveys of the reception of canonical philosophers (Kant, Hegel) in France, or the reception of famous French poets and writers (Molière, Corneille, Rousseau, Christine de Pizan) in the Spanish or Arab world, for example.<sup>10</sup> Others report on the reception of artistic movements such as American jazz or theatre in France.<sup>11</sup> While this list is hardly exhaustive (there exist a number of commentaries that qualify as reception studies in the category of history of the book or media studies), the focus of this essay is on the theoretical aspects of reception studies, rather than on highlighting the audience reception of certain works or movements.

In August 1985, the International Comparative Literature Association held a five-day conference at the University of Paris-Sorbonne on the subject of reception studies. The edited volume that resulted from the conference contains several papers by French scholars who reflected upon the state and nature of reception studies in France. The conception of reception studies presented by scholars represented in this volume is implicitly predicated upon the work of Julia Kristeva. Kristeva's work foreshadows the social context of reception studies presented by these commentators in that the notion of social context that these theorists of reception incorporate stems directly from the development of the connection between the act of reading and its social situation. This connection is most exemplified in *Revolution in Poetic Language*. While these theorists do not directly engage with the work of Kristeva, her work clearly presages the problematic relationship between empirical and reception studies alluded to in their assessments on accurately characterizing the relationship between reader (audience) and text by presenting it as a social activity. (I will return to Kristeva later in this section and further clarify her role in this development.)

In the first chapter of this collection, entitled "Théories de la réception, théories littéraires: continuité du littéraire," Jean Bessière begins with his assessment of reception theory, indicating its dual aesthetic and social nature:

Les théories de la réception valent, bien sûr, par elles-mêmes. Les théories contemporaines de la réception rapportent explicitement l'histoire de la littérature au champ de la communication. Ce champ est à la fois historique—les conditions et la réalité de la réception de la réception à telle époque—et transhistorique: la série des œuvres à travers les siècles constitue un champ de communication recomposable, variable, et cependant un. Il prête à la littérature, au littéraire, une continuité *de facto*: le littéraire ne produit pas le littéraire seulement par l'intermédiaire ou le moyen des écrivains, il le produit aussi par la lecture qui n'est pas tant imagination à propos du texte que continuation du texte, des textes, dans un rapport ambivalent de conservation et rénovation. Cette ambivalence suscite les approches interactives, sociologiques et esthétiques.<sup>12</sup>

Bessière is referring to the ambivalences indicated by Jauss, who pronounced that critics deemed his reception aesthetics to be either too sociological or not sociological enough. Bessière highlights two major points concerning reception studies: how the reception of texts is a function of the continuity of literature and the variable field of communication, and how reception studies stands at the juncture between innovation and tradition. The field of literature constitutes a response by the reader that is both conservative (i.e. transhistorical) and innovative (historical). However, the significance of this passage is that this simultaneity of historicity and trans-historicity is ambivalent, and this ambivalence leads to both sociological and aesthetic approaches to literature,



“les approches interactives,” according to Bessière. Here Bessière is alluding to the social component of reading, to which he will later refer directly.

Bessière continues in this vein by observing that reading is a communal effort presupposed by reception theory, which itself has a history:

Réception et histoire de la réception concernent moins la constitution et la transformation d'un code commun relatif à la lecture d'un corpus que le rapport au temps engagé dans l'acte de lecture et, par là, l'hypothèse temporelle, indissociable de la définition ou de la continuité du littéraire. Phénoménologie temporelle de la lecture et hypothèse temporelle de la continuité du littéraire marquent les deux extrêmes des théories de la littérature qui ont pour présupposés et pour croyance la continuité du littéraire: de l'acte de lecture au dessein global du littéraire, elles apparentent conscience du littéraire et acte de lecture, dessein global du littéraire et permanence de l'acte de lecture et de la conscience du littéraire. (Bessière 21)

In other words, the reading of literature establishes its continuity and a literary conscience. Bessière is quick to qualify this position, noting that the belief in this continuity leads to two extremes in literature as a result of the dichotomy between the temporality of the reader and the temporality of literature. However, it is commitment to the social conditions of the reader that resolves this dichotomy.

E. Rodón makes explicit reference to social theories in the context of reader interpretation of texts in “Rencontre, projection et transfert dans une théorie sociale de la réception littéraire.”<sup>13</sup> For Rodón, “l'importance accordée aujourd'hui à l'étude des phénomènes qui se rattachent à la réception de l'œuvre littéraire a mis en lumière le caractère tout à fait particulier du lien qui existe entre l'œuvre et son destinataire” (Rodón 78). Here Rodón argues that the social character presupposing a work (“l'œuvre et son destinataire”) places the characterization of the reception of a work in a new light.

Rodón argues that the specific instances of reception reflect the collective mentality, and that this reflected knowledge and interests of the reader are shared by other members of the society.

En d'autres cas, assez fréquents bien qu'ils ne soient pas toujours analysés dans cette perspective, il s'agit de situations de réceptions qui, même si elles répondent à des sentiments, à des connaissances ou à des intérêts du lecteur, sont néanmoins des reflets de la mentalité de son temps et sont par conséquent partagées par d'autres membres de cette société. (Rodón 78)

Referring to the literary tradition within which the reader remains, Rodón adds that reader-response theory has focused on this tradition (“le poids de la tradition”) but has dangerously ignored the socio-cultural context which emerges out of a linguistic, anthropological, and literary analysis:

Bien qu'à notre avis la coupure totale avec le monde extérieur ignore dangereusement le principe épistémologique du contexte socio-culturel, que Malinowski, à travers l'anthropologie, a si heureusement réussi à prêter à la linguistique et à l'analyse littéraire, le fait est que ces nouveaux courants méthodologiques avec leurs postulats qui font dépendre l'écrivain de son expérience de la littérature antérieure, s'avèrent à toutes fins pratiques être d'une grande aide pour mieux comprendre la façon dont, dans tout processus d'interprétation littéraire, le lecteur peut rester conditionné par le poids de la tradition. (Rodón 79)

In contrast to the traditional focus of reception theory, Rodón's assessment of readerly interpretation lies within the social domain that defines readerly interpretation not as a solitary act defined by individual values and prejudices, but instead through socio-cultural functioning. Rodón refers to "toutes les données du domaine social" to indicate that the phenomenon of reader reception results from the conditions of life and of culture, specifically the preferences, beliefs, and value systems of the social group that defines the reader. Rodón explicitly considers reading as a social activity that is no longer a solitary reception ("récepteur solitaire"). Thus, the individuality of the reader is a function of the social phenomenon that necessarily accompanies literary reception; in other words, the social milieu is intimately linked with the individual in his or her act of reading.

Mais ce que nous essayons ici de souligner, c'est que cette transmission de la réception littéraire ne fonctionne pas seulement dans le cadre restreint de la création ou de la critique littéraire, de l'histoire de la littérature, voire de l'histoire de cette réception. Il s'agit d'un phénomène qui se situe au point d'intersection de toutes les données du domaine social, des conditions de vie et de culture, des préférences, des croyances, du système des valeurs. En fait, il faudrait donc donner à l'étude de la relation auteur-lecteur une nouvelle dimension: le destinataire ne serait plus un récepteur solitaire ; ce serait tout le groupe social considéré comme une unité de fonctionnement culturel. L'attitude individuelle du lecteur devient ainsi le phénomène social de la réception littéraire. (Rodón 79)

Rodón situates reception studies within an anthropological framework (note the reference to Malinowski) that establishes a socio-cultural context to reader-response criticism. Rodón's article may also serve as an indication of the influence of the work of Julia Kristeva, whose work exemplified the idea of reading as a social act and phenomenon through a similar anthropological framework (that was situated mainly in the structuralist tradition).

Julia Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* serves as an epistemological precursor to the characterization of theories of reading and reader-response critiques in French reception studies in the attempts on the part of later literary scholars to provide an account of the place of the social in reader-response theory. Kristeva does state that "it is in language that all signifying operations

are realized (even when linguistic material is not used), and it is on the basis of language that a theoretical approach may attempt to perceive that operation.” However, she qualifies this observation by positing that even though

the process we have just described accounts for the way all signifying practices are generated, [every] signifying practice does not encompass the infinite totality of that process. Multiple constraints—which are ultimately sociopolitical—stop the signifying process at one or another of the theses that it traverses; they knot it and lock it into a given surface or structure; they discard practice under fixed, fragmentary, symbolic matrices, the tracings of various social constraints that obliterate the infinity of the process: the phenotext is what conveys these obliterations. Among the capitalist mode of production’s numerous signifying practices, only certain literary texts of the avant-garde (Mallarmé, Joyce) manage to cover the infinity of the process, that is, reach the semiotic *chora*, which modifies linguistic structures. It must be emphasized, however, that this total exploration of the signifying process generally leaves in abeyance the theses that are characteristic of the social organism, its structures and their political transformation: the text has a tendency to dispense with social and political signifieds.<sup>14</sup>

A close reading of this passage clearly reveals the social thrust that Kristeva attributes to the text and the reading process. It is the “multiple constraints,” sociopolitical in nature, that ultimately affect and hinder the process of infinite semiosis: textual theses contain traces of these social constraints that “lock” the meaning of the text through “symbolic matrices.” These symbols are in turn determined by the social context, a context that delimits the individual reader. The “phenotext,” which “conveys the obliterations of the process of infinite semiosis,” is tantamount to the “readerly” text alluded to by Bessière and Rodón and their assertion that social conventions define the act of reading.

However, according to Kristeva, this social thrust hinders the signifying process, which is overcome by the avant-garde texts of Mallarmé and Joyce. In light of Mallarmé and Joyce, the act of reading can be seen to obliterate the “social and political signifieds” resulting from reading within social practices defined by the “capitalist mode of production.”

Kristeva’s understanding of the historicity of the text and its place within social contexts is also remarkable in its presuppositions of the temporality of reading. “It has only been in very recent years or in revolutionary periods that signifying practice has inscribed within the phenotext the plural, heterogeneous, and contradictory process of signification encompassing the flow of drives, material discontinuity, political struggle and pulverization of language” (Kristeva 88). Ibsch provides the proper subtext for Kristeva in stating that “if the extraliterary impulse derives from the socio-political sector, the sharp distinction between popular art, classical art and avant-garde tends to become fluid” (Ibsch 51).

Jauss also contextualizes the condition of hermeneutic experience and literary history within the social functioning of texts, suggesting that he is evoking Kristeva's position:

The active participation of the reader in the historically progressive actualization of meaning was also left unclear so as not to present literary history as autonomous of the historical process but rather to stress its *Partialität*, where its own relation to general history had to be seen in order to grasp its social function and history-making energy: "The social function of literature manifests itself in its genuine possibility only where literary experience of the reader enters into the horizon of expectations of his lived praxis, performs his understanding of the world, and thereby also has an effect on social behavior."

Here I insisted on the expectation that literature today, as in the past, might renew the 'consolidated observation' of things and destroy the taboos of prevailing morality. This necessitated transposing reception-aesthetics, constituted from an internally literary point of view, into the force field of social praxis and inquiring if and how the historical actualization of the literary work, through the passive or the productive reception of the reader, reacts to a social situation, assesses its contradictions and attempts to solve them projectively. (Jauss 23)

In this passage, I would argue that Jauss is reiterating the reference to the social by Kristeva as well as French reception studies theorists. He acknowledges the "social function of literature" that ultimately influences social behavior. Jauss is essentially maintaining that reader-reception is a reaction to the "social situation," and attempts to solve the contradictions of "social praxis." The "taboos of prevailing morality" constitute the Kristevan "social and political signifieds." The "historically progressive actualization of meaning" is tantamount to the productively-social function that Kristeva attributes to literature and its reading. For Kristeva, the "historical actualization of the literary work" attempts to solve the contradictions of the "social situation."

### **The Example of Mallarmé's Poetry**

The poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé, the major French Symbolist poet of the nineteenth century and whose work inspired surrealism and Dadaism among other artistic movements, reflects the social character of literary reception studies in twentieth-century France. It is not mere coincidence that Kristeva chose Mallarmé as evidence of the social influence of poetry through reading.

According to Mallarmé's poetic theory, nothing lies beyond reality, but within this nothingness lies the essence of perfect forms. It is the task of the poet to reveal and crystallize this essence. Mallarmé's poetry employs condensed figures and unorthodox syntax. He believed that the point of a poem was the beauty of the language. "You don't make a poem with ideas, but with words," Mallarmé once stated. Thus a poem should be read as an object inde-

pendent of the world in which it existed and not simply have a directly referential function to language, or even to the world. Each poem is built around a central symbol, idea or metaphor, consisting of subordinate images that illustrate and help to develop the idea. However, Mallarmé preferred to hint between the lines at meanings rather than state them clearly. “*Nommer un objet, c’est supprimer les trois-quarts de la jouissance du poème qui est faite du bonheur de le deviner peu à peu: le suggérer, voilà le rêve.*”<sup>15</sup> The reader must return over and over again to the lines, concentrating on the music of the words rather than on the referential meaning.<sup>16</sup>

Consider the following Mallarméen sonnet:

À la nue accablante tu  
Basse de basalte et de laves  
À même les échos esclaves  
Par une trompe sans vertu

Quel sépulcral naufrage (tu  
Le sais, écume, mais y baves)  
Suprême une entre les épaves  
Abolit le mât dévêtu

Ou cela que furibond faute  
De quelque perdition haute  
Tout l’abîme vain éployé

Dans le si blanc cheveu qui traîne  
Avarement aura noyé  
Le flanc enfant d’une sirène<sup>17</sup>

This is one of the modern poems that Tolstoy singled out in *What is Art?* as having “no meaning whatever.”<sup>18</sup> The components do not fit together into a coherent natural scene, and syntactic ambiguity prevents the watery events that are named from settling into a single causal sequence. Kristeva describes Mallarmé’s poetic practice as “covering the infinity of the process,” that is, reading Mallarmé prevents the sociopolitical “constraints” from interfering with the process of reading a text that inherently dispenses with “social and political signifieds.” This is most exemplified by Mallarmé’s ambiguity, incoherence and unorthodoxy. Kristeva’s argument in *Revolution in Poetic Language* presupposes a unique reading of Mallarmé via the nature of his own poetry. Mallarmé’s poetry illustrates, through Kristeva’s own reading, that the act of reading poetry can reposition the reader (“poetry ceased being poetry and opened a gap in every order” (Kristeva 84). The reader in approaching a Mallarméen text does not immediately succumb to the sociopolitical context,

which inherently accompanies the act of reading. The reader comes to affirm freedom and relinquishes the connection to a society that values material goods and profit. Kristeva conceives this as the semiotic (of poetry) opposing the symbolic (of society); the semiotic of poetry can modify the linguistic structures of a text such that the text is able to contain the infinite potential of reading, thus transcending the social symbolic. This example conveys how the social contexts of the reader inherently determine the response to the text, and that the socio-cultural history of the audience, rather than the biography of the poet, bridges the temporality of the text with its interpretations.

Thus, traditional reception studies, as represented by Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser, and the Constance School, do not entail a thoroughgoing discussion of social contexts within reception theory as a method. However, the French variant of reception studies takes into account social theory in determining the aesthetic interpretative response. This valorization of the social theory I place within the literary context of structuralism in France, the context in which Kristeva was writing, and I use the work of Julia Kristeva as a basis for asserting that reading is primarily a social act, which Jauss implicitly refers to in his essay on the horizon of expectations and aesthetic response.

Jauss in his original essay proposed a return to hermeneutics in his formulation of reception theory. However, his formulation was framed from a very individualized point of view, stemming from his view of Gadamer's assessment of the dialectical relationship between reader and text as arising between the individual self and other (in this case the text). However, Jauss does acknowledge the individual relationship to the social in reader interpretation. In the French adaptation, reception theory was very much entrenched in a vision of reader-response theory that incorporated social contexts and explained interpretation as arising from the author's conditions of production. However, French reception studies explicates the meaning of interpretation as arising from and constitutive of the reader's conditions of production. This places French reception studies within a unique position in literary criticism in merging elements of New Historicism, a theory of socio-historical context for literary inquiry, and reader-response theory while still remaining within the bounds of the scientificity of the semiotic and structural tradition. This serves as a pivotal move in French literary theory in shedding light on the nature of reader-response criticism, and productively problematizing the role of the reader in the interpretation and response to texts.

*Santa Clara University*

## Notes

1. Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1978).
2. Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Garrett Barden and John Cumming, trans. (1960; New York: A Continuum Book, 1975). Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art*, George G. Grabowicz, trans. (Evanston: Northwestern U P, 1973).
3. Ralf Schneider, "Reception Theory," *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, David Herman, Manfred Jahn and Marie-Laure Ryan, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 493.
4. Robert C. Holub discusses the context of the French literary tradition for reception studies and its origin in Germany in *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1984) and in *Crossing Borders: Reception Theory, Poststructuralism, Deconstructionism* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1992).
5. Arild Fetveit, "Anti-essentialism and Reception Studies: In Defense of the Text," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 4:173 (2001): 173-99.
6. Elrud Ibsch, "Reception Aesthetics versus Empirical Research," in *Reception Studies*, Rien T. Segers, ed. (Bern: Peter Lang Publishing, 1993), 41-52.
7. James L. Machor and Philip Goldstein, *Reception Study: From Literary Theory to Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 2.
8. Michael Riffaterre, "Describing Poetic Structures: Two Approaches to Baudelaire's *Les Chats*" (1966), in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, Jane Tompkins, ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1980), 33-36.
9. *Reception Studies: Proceedings of the XIth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association*, Rien T. Segers, ed. (Bern: Peter Lang, 1993), back cover.
10. Bruce Baugh, "Limiting Reasons' Empire: The Early Reception of Hegel in France," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 31:2 (1993): 259-75; Warren Schmaus, "Kant's Reception in France: Theories of the Categories in Academic Philosophy, Psychology and Social Science," *Perspectives on Science* 11:1 (2003); Ahmed Darouich, "De l'influence de Jean-Jacques Rousseau sur la naissance du roman arabe moderne," in *Reception Studies*; Glenda McLeod, ed., *The Reception of Christine de Pizan from the Fifteenth Through the Nineteenth Centuries: Visitors to the City* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1991).
11. Jeffrey H. Jackson, "Making Jazz French: The Reception of Jazz Music in Paris, 1927-1934," *French Historical Studies*, 25:1 (2002): 149-70; Daniel Mortier, "Les Études de réception: le cas spécifique des œuvres théâtrales," in *Reception Studies*, 71-76.
12. Jean Bessière, "Théories de la réception, théories littéraires: continuité du littéraire," in *Reception Studies*, 19.
13. E. Rodón, "Rencontre, projection et transfert dans une théorie sociale de la réception littéraire," in *Reception Studies*, 77-80.
14. Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974), Margaret Waller, trans. (New York: Columbia U P, 1984), 88.
15. "Stéphane Mallarmé," in Jules Huret, *Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire* (1891) (Paris: Les Éditions Thot, 1982), 77.
16. Mallarmé once stated, "I become obscure, of course! if one makes a mistake and thinks one is opening a newspaper." <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/mallarme.htm> (accessed September 1, 2008).
17. "Hushed to the crushing cloud/Basalt and lava its form/Even to the echoes subdued/By an ineffectual horn/What shipwreck sepulchral has bowed/(You know this, but slobber on, foam)/The mast, supreme in a crowd/ Of flotsam and jetsam, through torn/Or will that which in fury defaulted/From some perdition exalted/(The vain abyss outspread)/Have stingily drowned in the swirl/Of a white hair's trailing thread/The flank of a young Siren girl." Kay, Cave and Bowie, *A Short History of French Literature*, 235.
18. *What is Art?* (1898), Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, eds. (New York: Penguin, 1996), 73.