Transgression, Stylistic Variation and Narrative Discourse in the Twentieth Century Novel

Transgression, Stylistic Variation and Narrative Discourse in the Twentieth Century Novel

By

Marie-Anne Visoi

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Transgression, Stylistic Variation and Narrative Discourse in the Twentieth Century Novel offers scholars and students of world literature and culture opportunities to widen the scope of their knowledge of the twentieth century novel and expand their understanding of literary theory. To fully appreciate the novels' aesthetic value, I will examine "transgression" as a central theme, a notion that currently attracts widespread interest in the humanities. By discussing the content of the text in relation to its form, readers are encouraged to establish connections with the world of the text and pay specific attention to what Wolfgang Iser called the "repertoire" of the narrative text: socio-cultural norms and allusions (Iser 1982). Thus, without losing my focus on the proposed theme of "transgression", I will attempt to integrate knowledge about style, narrative structure and formal interpretive strategies with knowledge about specific cultural experiences as presented in the novels studied. As Jonathan Culler points out, cultural studies "can intensify the study of literature as a complex intertextual phenomenon" (Culler 2000). Key questions that will be discussed include the relationship between theme, plot and narrative technique; specific stylistic variations which affect meaning; "indeterminacies" created by self-reflexive narrative voices where the modern reader is constantly provoked to participate in the creation of meaning. In this light, deeper insights can be gained by developing an ability to distinguish among voices of the text, perspectives, and plot structure. The book presents an analysis of selected twentieth century novels and highlights distinctive rhetorical strategies and stylistic features which influence our reading. It also aims to develop aesthetic responsiveness, increase motivation to read in translation or in original challenging novels from various cultures and develop a more global understanding of literature. The interdisciplinary framework of the book is designed to improve the ability to interpret literary texts by engaging critically with literature, develop literary research skills and facilitate oral communication related to the discussion of literature and culture. By establishing connections among the novels analyzed, the study will trace a common theme and explore similarities and differences specific to the cultural and literary tradition represented in each narrative text. In his book, *How to Read World Literature*, David Damrosch has underlined the

importance of enriching our reading "repertoire" by including new "frames of reference": "Inevitably, we approach a work with expectations and reading skills shaped by the many works we have read in the past – both those of our home tradition and other foreign works we have already encountered. Rather than trying to erase this fund of prior knowledge, we need to use it productively as our springboard into the new" (Damrosch 2009).

The first chapter of the book opens with the presentation of "transgression" as a central theme in the study of six representative twentieth century novels. A detailed consideration of major reader-response theories and their importance will establish a useful context for the textual analyses in each chapter and will familiarize readers with formal interpretive strategies employed throughout the book. In this manner, readers will be encouraged to integrate knowledge about style, narrative structure and formal interpretive strategies with knowledge about specific cultural experiences as presented in the novels studied.

Chapter two deliberately concentrates on the "incipit" of Camus's novel *The Outsider*. Meursault's indifference at the news of his mother's death and his attempt to come to terms with the murder he commits will be discussed in relation to the stylistic deviation taking place during the scene of the murder. A parallel discussion of Parts 1 and II of the novel and the implications of the narrated events in Part II will throw light on the puzzling concluding lines of the novel and will lead to a deeper understanding of Meursault as an outsider in the world of the text.

A close reading of the novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez in chapter three will attempt to underline the foreshadowing effect of the "incest motif" as recounted in Melquíades's story of the Buendías. In this context, I propose to discuss the novel's richness and openness to interpretation by showing how the element of suspense and implicitly, the readers' interest, are gradually increased by frequent shifts in characters' perspectives, narrative rhythm and repetition, heteroglossia and the association of the fantastic with the commonplace.

Assia Djebar's novel *Children of a New World*, examined in chapter four, introduces readers to a fictional Algerian world where transgressive acts are narrated from a female consciousness perspective. By taking into consideration the event of Touma's murder by her own brother Tawfik, we can have a better insight into the traditional values and social norms of the fictional world portrayed in Djebar's text. The distancing narratorial comments which frame Touma's fragmented thoughts call attention to her distorted views of the Algerian world and her image as an outcast. As there is no obvious criticism expressed by the narrative voice, it is through

the consistency of the other characters' points of view that readers perceive Touma's alienation from the Algerian society.

In chapter five, the story *On the carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon* from Italo Calvino's novel *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller…* explores erotic acts which openly violate narrative levels. This text will be analyzed in relation to its model, Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's *The Key* published in 1956, a story of a problematic marriage where the two main characters attempt to resolve misunderstandings during sexual acts by using their diaries to communicate with each other. My reading of this embedded story will concentrate on certain aspects related to the readers' configuration of the text and the indeterminacies created by the fictional language which relate to the notion of "transgression". Finally, the nature of textual self-reference in Calvino's novel will be discussed in the context of parody, as an aspect of "transgression" on a formal level.

The sixth chapter pays attention to narrative fragmentation and the role of memory in recreating the past in Duras's *The Lover*. Defying genre classification, the textual digressions project the forbidden love story of the Chinese and the 15 year old in a succession of past and present images. Specifically, this chapter looks more closely at Duras' experimentation with fictional forms and seeks to evaluate the representation of transgression through the narrative voice's claim to explore sexual desire beyond cultural and moral taboos in 1920s Indochina.

Embedded stories and post-modernist devices make it increasingly difficult for readers of Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* to identify adultery as transgressive act in the novel or build a frame of reference as far as cultural traditions and social norms are concerned. Chapter seven throws into relief the subversive narrative conventions employed by Margaret Atwood in *The Blind Assassin* to hide the identity of the narrator until the very end. Drawing on the writer's use of intertextuality, my analysis will focus on textual "indeterminacies" and readers' assumptions activated by the cultural ideology of the text.

The book concludes with an assessment of our experience of reading the six twentieth century novels in relation to the theme of "transgression". Stylistic variation and narrative discourse will be evaluated as they reflect the individuality of each text. Within this context, the aesthetic pleasure derived from gaining deeper insights through significant connections and narrative patterns will be highlighted.

Chapter One

Theoretical Framework

Reading as Aesthetic Experience

The innovative features of the twentieth century novel blur the traditional distinctions that have dominated the literary scene before 1900. The traditional novel, with its dependence on an omniscient narrator, imposed a particular interpretation on events and provided a meaningful worldview, unity and coherence of plot and recognizable characters. Before I begin to look at specific elements of narration and style and their effects in influencing our understanding of the six twentieth century literary texts, we have to consider the emergence of new modes of writing in novels such as Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*, Proust's *In Search of Time Past*, Kafka's *The Trial* that resulted in a general tendency towards a dislocation of fictional time and space, self-conscious, unreliable narration, and increased use of symbolic, metaphorical language. The narrator is thus no longer the only authoritative presence in the novel; instead, there is an emphasis on shifting points of view and lack of closure which increase readers' participation in configuring the meaning of the literary text. In order to establish a useful context for the textual analyses in each chapter, I will start with a detailed consideration of major reader-response theories and their importance for the experience of reading.

According to Roman Ingarden, a faithful reconstruction of the literary work generates an aesthetic emotion which is increased in intensity proportionally with the value of the work. In *The Literary Work of Art,* Ingarden develops the idea of the literary work of art as a set of four layers or strata. The first layer, "Wortlaute", is formed by the word sounds while the second layer, "Bedeutungseinheiten", includes meaning units such as words and sentences. The third layer, "dargestellte Gegenstände", consists of aspects of represented objects, and finally, the fourth layer, "schematisierte Ansichten", is made up of schematized aspects by which the represented objects appear. The four strata are organized, according to Ingarden, as a "skeleton" or "schemata" which is to be completed by the reader. Literary works present points or spots of indeterminacy,

"Unbestimmtheitsstellen", and, as a result, can never be fully determined. This creates an obvious dilemma as the spaces of indeterminacy represent an obstacle in interpreting the work.

Ingarden's *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art* offers ways of reconstruction of the work. Varieties of cognition of the literary work of art are discussed in relation to the reader's attitude as Ingarden focuses on two particular attitudes: "(a) the purely cognitive or 'investigating' attitude and (b) the 'asthetic' attitude" (Ingarden 1973, 172). He goes on to define the aesthetic attitude and claims that, in the perception of an object, we are first struck by a particular feature that attracts us, producing what he calls "the original emotion": "This specific quality which attracts our attention and affects us produces in us a quite peculiar emotion, which, with a view to its role in the aesthetic experience, I shall call the 'original emotion' of this experience" (Ingarden 1973, 189).

The next phase in the aesthetic experience described by Ingarden is represented by "a certain hunger for the possession of this quality and for intensification of the enjoyment which the intuitive possession of it promises" (Ingarden 1973, 190). At this stage, points out Ingarden, we make an effort to look for "the missing qualities" of the object that aroused our emotion in the first place. The role played by imagination is emphasized by Ingarden, who distinguishes two possibilities in the constitution of the work. First, compelled by our aroused imagination, we construct the work by overlooking some of its "deficiencies" in a desire to obtain a certain harmony. In the second case, the work of art is apprehended as not being in harmony with our first impression of it and, as a result, it is constituted as an aesthetic object of negative value. The second instance leads Ingarden to recall the attitude of the reader concerned with the formation of the aesthetic object (Ingarden 1973, 172).

In discussing what happens to the reader when he returns to verify his first impression of the work, Ingarden explains that the work of art is difficult to apprehend all at once because it needs to be "viewed from different sides and also from different points of view" (Ingarden 1973, 201). In the apprehension of a literary work of art, warns Ingarden, the matters are further complicated by its temporal dimension which demands the reader's intensified activity. In order to constitute the literary work of art, the reader is called on to remove the "places of indeterminacy" and to fill out the gaps with his own projections. He calls this activity of the reader "concretization" as its aim is to "stabilize" the work:

> In concretization, the peculiar co-creative activity of the reader comes into play. On his own initiative and with his own imagination he "fills out" various places of indeterminacy with elements chosen from among many

possible permissible elements (although the elements chosen may not
always be possible in terms of the work) (53).

The problem with this particular way of approaching the work is, as
Ingarden admits, that readers tend to "concretize" it in various ways,
depending either on the attitude of the reader, or on certain characteristics
of the work itself. Consequently, "significant differences can exist among
concretizations of the same work, even when the concretizations are
accomplished by the same reader in different readings. This circumstance
carries special dangers for the correct understanding of the literary work
and for a faithful aesthetic apprehension of the literary work of art"
(Ingarden 1973, 53). In Ingarden's opinion, the reader will be able to
obtain a true reconstruction of the work, first by paying careful attention to
the phonetic and semantic strata and secondly, by comparing his or her
reconstructions with those of other readers.

One of the problems that might arise during the analytical investigation
of the literary work of art, claims Ingarden, is related to the identification
of "the places of indeterminacy" by the reader. The decision regarding
their removal or completion needs to be performed only by paying close
attention to the text. The most difficult task, concludes Ingarden, is to
decide which particular completions contribute to the aesthetic value of the
reader's concretization of the work. Here, Ingarden argues against
removing or replacing certain "places of indeterminacy" and shows his
disapproval of concretizations of this kind:

> The less cultivated reader, the artistic dilettante of whom Montz Geiger
> speaks, who is interested only in the fortunes of the portrayed persons,
> does not pay attention to the prohibition against removing such places of
> indeterminacy and turns well-formed works of art into cheap, aesthetical
> gossip about the persons by garrulous expansion of what does not need to
> be expanded (293).

According to Ingarden, only the reader who pays attention to all the four
strata and takes into consideration the limits dictated by the context of the
work will be able to obtain a concretization close to the work itself.

Text-Reader Relationship

Wolfgang Iser's work has been strongly influenced by Ingarden's
aesthetic theory. Iser adopts Ingarden's idea of the literary work of art as a
schematic structure which is concretized by the reader: "As the reader
passes through the various perspectives offered by the text and relates the
different views and patterns to one another he sets the work in motion, and

so he sets himself in motion, too" (Iser 1982, 21). In Iser's opinion, the actualization of the text stems from its interaction with the reader and, in order to investigate the reading process, we need to concentrate on the text-reader relationship. He warns that "exclusive concentration on either the author's techniques or the reader's psychology will tell us little about the reading process itself" (Iser 1982, 21).

Iser distinguishes between two main types of readers: the "real reader" and the "hypothetical reader" which is, in turn, subdivided into the "ideal reader" and the "contemporary reader". The problem that Iser finds with the "real readers" is that their existence is based on documents which reveal a set of norms of a particular period; also, given the scarceness of documents beyond the 18th century, it becomes difficult to consider such readers.

The "ideal reader" is defined by Iser as "a purely fictional being who has no basis in reality, and it is this very fact that makes him so useful: as a fictional being, he can close the gaps that constantly appear in any analysis of literary effects and responses". Iser goes on to show that modern criticism has developed other types of readers, each corresponding to a specific area of discussion (Iser 1982, 30). In concluding that the concepts discussed impose certain restrictions, Iser proposes a reader with no predetermined character or historical situation which he calls the "implied reader":

> We may call him, for want of a better term, the implied reader. He embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect predispositions laid down, not by an empirical outside reality, but by the text itself. Consequently, the implied reader as a concept has its roots firmly planted in the structure of the text; he is a construct and in no way to be identified with any real reader (34).

His concept of "implied reader", adapted from Booth's "implied author" is thus a theoretical construct arising from the interaction between reader and text, and is a role that the "real reader" assumes. The two aspects of the concept defined by Iser are: "the reader's role as a textual structure and the reader's role as a structured act" (Iser 1982, 35). The first aspect is described as consisting of three components: the perspectives present in the text, the standpoint from which the reader joins them and the meeting place where they converge. The second aspect is revealed in the reader's activity of filling in the blanks of the text and thus eliminating "indeterminacy" through consistency-building. Here, Iser points out, the imagination of the reader plays an important part since the convergence

and the meeting place of the perspectives have to be imagined by the reader. In this last case, the "implied reader" appears as a "structured act".

Iser's theory of reading represents an innovation in the sense that the meaning is revealed in the process of reading, as a result of the interaction between reader and text. Traditionally, the meaning was hidden in the text. The reader's activity in constituting the meaning of the text is thus highlighted by Iser who opposes Ingarden's view of "indeterminacy". For Iser, it is the presence of "gaps" or "blanks" that stimulates the reader's activity and induces communication. In *The Act of Reading*, Iser describes in detail how, in the process of reading, the images produced by the text come into contact with the reader's own images generating a constantly shifting image. The reader's expectations are thus modified as new expectations arise. The gaps in the text are filled by "each individual reader. . . in his own way" in order to build up the consistency of the text. Iser draws attention to the fact that the presence of a wide range of possible interpretations creates "areas of indeterminacy" and an "entanglement of the reader". In discussing "overdetermined" texts, Iser starts from Lesser's assumption that an "overdetermined" text may mean different things to different readers, but he claims that the different meanings arise from the increasing degrees of "indeterminacy". In literary texts, such as Joyce's *Ulysses*, predictability is reduced, and the reader is forced to relate the different levels of meaning in order to structure the meaning potential of the text. Iser affirms that the overdetermination of the text "is not merely a given textual quality, but a structure that enables the reader to break out of his accustomed framework of conventions, so allowing him to formulate that which has been unleashed by the text" (Iser 1982, 50).

Iser defines the relationship between text and reader as a process of communication where there is a constant feedback of information, from text to reader, from reader to text. The process is a "self-correction" one since the reader is constantly making adjustments to modify his ideas. The reader "realizes" the situation of the text in a sequence of imagined objects taking different shapes as reading progresses: "The text can never be grasped as a whole - only as a series of changing viewpoints, each one restricted in itself and so necessitating further perspectives" (Iser 1982, 68). The "repertoire" and the "strategies" guide the reader in the process of constituting the meaning of the text. Iser defines "repertoire" as references to earlier works and cultural influences which appear modified in the text; the familiar elements of the "repertoire" create a bridge of communication between the text and a reader who is compelled to see traditional norms in a new light:

> The reassessment of norms is what constitutes the innovative character of the repertoire but this reassessment may lead to different consequences: the participant will see what he will not have seen in the course of his everyday life; the observer will grasp something which has hitherto never been real for him. In other words, the literary text enables its readers to transcend the limitations of their own real life situation; it is not a reflection of any given reality, but it is an extension of broadening of their own reality (79).

Iser considers social norms and literary allusions two basic elements of the "repertoire" and illustrates what happens when the "repertoire" is made up of different systems. In this case, the reader becomes disoriented because it is difficult to connect the diverse elements of the "repertoire". The "strategies" have the task, in Iser's opinion, of structuring the communication between reader and text through a background-foreground relation in which the cultural norms and literary allusions constitute the background whereas the new meanings created form the foreground. The relationship between reader and text, as Iser sees it, is based on a "process of anticipation and retrospection, the consequent unfolding of the text as a living event, and the resultant impression of life-likeness".

It is the structure of theme and horizon that plays an important part in the reader's constant reassessment of the perspectives in the text. Iser postulates that the theme is constituted by the view of the perspective at one moment while the horizon is made up of all the other perspectives at different stages of reading. Thus, the readers' attitudes are broadened as the structure of theme and horizon offers them a "transcendental vantage point". In Iser's view, the perspectives of the narrative text are arranged in four distinct manners: "counterbalance", "opposition", "echelon", and "serial". "Counterbalance", the first type of arrangement, situates the hero's perspective as central. The "oppositional" arrangement advances opposing norms where the reader becomes aware of their conflict. The "echelon" arrangement lacks the referential element present in the former two types and consequently, the reader is faced with an "echelon of references and perspectives, none of which is predominant" (Iser 1982, 102).

The last type, the "serial arrangement", illustrated by Joyce's *Ulysses*, is characterized by a constant alternation of theme and horizon where the perspectives are continually changed. In discussing the perspectives of the text, Iser emphasizes the fact that in the interplay between text and reader the transfer of the text is initiated by the text itself, but it is the reader's task to use the textual "repertoire" and "strategies" in order to construct the aesthetic object. Iser further adds that during the process of reading the

reader encounters two major problems: first, the whole text cannot be perceived at any one time and secondly, the reader has to construct objects described in the text. In order to build consistency and thus grasp the text, the reader performs a "synthetizing" activity, a "wandering viewpoint" moving along the different stages of reading. This means, in Iser's terms, that the text is perceived as an event by the reader who formulates "gestalten" and creates the world of the text. At the same time, the readers react to their own "gestalten" when the process of consistency building is interrupted by the strategies of the text. Iser maintains that in modern literature the "entanglement" of the reader is increased by various literary devices present in the text, such as "divergent" textual perspectives.

In the chapter entitled "Interaction between Text and Reader", Iser draws attention to the fact that with reading (as opposed to other communicatory activity) there is no face-to-face situation (166). As the textual strategies provoke a re-adjustment of the reader's projections, an asymmetry between text and reader is created. In Iser's theory of reading, the concept of "gaps" differs widely from Ingarden's "places of indeterminacy". Iser finds limitations with Ingarden's concept and argues that "places of indeterminacy" occupy a less important role in the production of the aesthetic object:

> For him, concretization was just the actualization of the potential elements of the work, - it was not an interaction between text and reader; this is why his "places of indeterminacy" lead only to an undynamic completion, as opposed to a dynamic process in which the reader is made to switch from one textual perspective to another, himself establishing the connections between "schematized aspects", and in doing so transforming them into a sign sequence (178).

According to Iser, there are two basic structures of "indeterminacy" in the text: "blanks" and "negation". The "blank" is seen by Iser as a "vacancy in the overall system of the text". By filling in the "blanks", textual patterns interact and the reader is thus able to form images. The difference between Ingarden's "places of indeterminacy" and Iser's "blanks" consists mainly in the latter's potential of "connectability": the "blanks" indicate the need for combining schemata in the text and help the reader reformulate the world of the text. Therefore, the reader's participation in the text is stimulated by the "blanks" as they provoke the apparition of "first" and "second degree images". By reacting to the first images produced, the readers are able to watch themselves producing images and become aware of their transformation. Iser's observations with regard to the evolution of the interaction between reader and text shed further light on the role of the "blanks". Chronologically, with the apparition of the fictitious reader and

"unreliable narrator, the readers' interaction with the text changes as they have "to produce new criteria for judging the events and their significance" (205). As a result, the readers are forced to detach themselves from familiar norms and have to travel through different positions in the text. Iser further explains how, in the modern novel, the readers' expectations become frustrated as they cannot orient themselves among the increasing number of perspectives. The familiarity with fiction-making techniques becomes thus a prerequisite, and without it, the reader is not able to understand the communicative structure of the text. In the process of reading, stresses Iser, familiarity with norms and literary competence will guide the response of the reader.

As Iser justly acknowledged in *The Act of Reading*, a major concern of reader-response theorists surrounds the concept of reader. Who is the reader? Are the critics referring to an actual reader? Or are they considering the reader a theoretical construct, whose response is based on a system of literary conventions? Most critics seem to agree that the actual reader cannot constitute an object of study because of the variability of response. The actual reader appears as a type of reader whose expectations, experience and knowledge vary widely; in the process of reading, the mental images originating in the text come in contact with the reader's own images producing an image constantly shifting. The relationship between the actual reader and the text is a dynamic relationship where the reader incorporates own ideas in the text without letting them superimpose upon the text. For a successful relationship, the reader has to change projections and expectations. In Iser's view, the real reader recuperates the intention of the text by assuming a certain role, that of the "implied reader".

Literary Competence

It becomes obvious that the interpretation of a modern literary requires the ability to identify literary norms. Jonathan Culler clearly indicates the importance of the reader's awareness of conventions when approaching unfamiliar texts: ". . . a willingness to think of literature as an institution composed of a variety of interpretive operations makes one more open to the most challenging and innovatory texts, which are precisely those that are difficult to process according to received modes of understanding" (Culler 1975, 129). Since the narrator is "the most central concept in the analysis of narrative texts" (Bal 1997, 19), the reader's competence is an essential attribute in the reading process. The reason why we need to acquire such competence as readers becomes clear when we consider

modern novels. As we know, "literary competence" is necessary when dealing with fictional worlds in a literary work. One can read a text in many ways, but to read a literary text and to be able to understand it one needs to read it according to pre-established conventions. Even when the conventions seem to be transgressed and the text presents difficulty, the understanding of the fictional text is still possible if the reader resorts to a system of literary conventions. "Broken" narratives, "unreliable narrators", and "self-referentiality" are only some distinguishable features which compel the modern reader to take on an active role in constructing the meaning of literary texts.

Several critical reviews have recognized the influence of Russian Formalism and Anglo-American New Criticism in the shaping of a number of theories commonly known under the name reader-response criticism. Jane P. Tompkins sees this approach as a revision of formalism, even though meaning is to be realized in the reader. She argues that "although New Critics and reader-oriented critics do not locate meaning in the same place, both schools assume that to specify meaning is criticism's ultimate goal" (Tompkins 1980, 201).

Both Robert C. Holub and Elizabeth Freund have described the reader-response approach in connection with other influences. Holub, for instance, devotes a substantial part of his book *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction to Russian Formalism and Prague Structuralism* before tackling the issues concerning readers and reading. According to him, Iser wants a "way to account for the reader's presence without having to deal with real or empirical readers. . . he seeks a 'transcendental model' what might also be called a 'phenomenological reader' one that embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect while precluding empirical interference" (Holub 1984, 84-85). Likewise, Elizabeth Freund investigates reader-response criticism by taking as point of departure "a dissatisfaction with formalist principles" and considers Richards and Anglo-American New Critics as its "precursors".

I believe, however, that the explanation offered by Wallace Martin with regard to the type of reader used by Iser is more suitable: ". . . for Iser, 'the reader' is not the fictitious figure addressed by the implied author, the real person reading, or some combination of the two; rather, the reader is a transcendental possibility, not yet realized, that exists and changes only in the process of reading" (Martin 1986, 162). Also, the reason why Iser or other critics do not include the response of the real reader in their works is because they start their analyses of the "act of reading" from an advanced stage in the evolution of the reader, which we might call the "active stage" (active in the sense given by Ingarden when

he describes the actualization of the third and the fourth strata). The type of audience they address needs also to be taken into consideration. The analyses are scholarly in their content and are not directed to a lay audience. In presenting their views, the critics are fully aware that the audience must be familiar with the concepts discussed. That the reader cannot be a real reader becomes thus a commonly accepted fact. Therefore, the reader discussed is supposedly a reader who is able to actualize a literary text, a reader who progresses with every fictional text towards an acquisition of certain linguistic and literary skills. The "literary competence" is aptly defined by Jonathan Culler in *Structuralist Poetics*:

> . . . it is clear that the study of one poem or novel facilitates the study of the next: one gains not only points of comparison but a sense of how to read. One develops a set of questions which experience shows to be appropriate and productive and criteria for determining whether they are, in a given case productive; one acquires a sense of the possibilities of literature and how these possibilities may be distinguished. (Culler 1975, 21)

If any advance is to be made in reader-response criticism, then we have to agree with the idea that "critical commentary be freed from the notion that its function is to explain that what is not clear about the text to ordinary readers" (Valdés 1987, 57). This is the reason why some critics have completely abandoned the idea of identifying the reader or defining reading because of the inevitable one-sidedness of such theories and instead, have adopted a different approach. By confessing that the analyses of the fictional texts are presented from their own point of view, their work has centered on the elements in the text that provoke the activity of the reader. In the "Introduction" of her book *Poetics of Reading*, Inge Crosman Wimmers speaks of her discussion of reading as a shift in focus:

> . . . I decided to give up theorizing about readers and texts in general to see what happens when actual readers (my students, myself) read novels. . . . In choosing the texts, I purposely selected a variety of novels - ranging from seventeenth to twentieth century works and from the historical to the experimental - to get a better idea of what kind of texts novels are and to see if different novels make for different kinds of reading. (XlV)

Crosman Wimmers recognizes the difficulty "to pin down the reader in the various narratives" she proposes to analyze: "A chameleon-like, complex figure, the reader takes on various guises, including different critical and theoretical perspectives as well as different identities - for instance, a male as opposed to a female reader, a seventeenth- as opposed to a twentieth-

century reader, or a particular as opposed to a more general reader" (XVl-XV).

In my readings, this view of the reader is modified in order to encompass the individuality of each literary text discussed. It is in relation to the literary text that the "various guises" of the reader are perceived. The "shifting images" described by Iser occur when certain elements in the text become indeterminate and are difficult to grasp. I believe that by identifying the "determinate" features of the text we become aware of how the "indeterminacies" appear and affect our response. During reading, we constantly try to "stabilize" images formed and our success in doing it is dependent on our experience and competence as readers. How do we grasp the meaning of the text? Being an "active" reader is certainly a pre-requisite, as Ingarden repeatedly stressed in his works : "During active reading", we think with a peculiar originality and activity the meaning of the sentences we have read; we project ourselves in a co-creative attitude into the realm of the objects determined by the sentence meanings" (Ingarden 1973, 40).

Umberto Eco, a reader-response theorist of international fame, has been also preoccupied with the active role of the reader. In *The Open Work*, published in 1962, Eco lays the foundation of his poetics. Repeatedly revised, his theory of the "open work" will appear, taking a different focus, in *The Role of the Reader* and *The Limits of Interpretation*. Eco's concern with meaning, readers, and interpretation remains, however, constant over the years. He clearly states that the author has to "foresee a model of the possible reader". Eco's reader is a textual strategy, being able to "deal interpretatively with the expressions in the same way as the author deals generatively with them" (Eco 1976, 9). According to Eco, some texts clearly appeal to certain readers when they address them directly or by means of "typographical signals". The "Model Reader" is a reader who interprets a text by making use of a "specific encyclopedic competence". Eco believes that the competence of the "Model Reader" is "created" by the text itself; by making use of this competence, the reader recognizes literary conventions and makes inferences resorting to "common" and "intertextual frames". The "Model Reader" makes "forecasts" which the text "confirms" or "contradicts".

It is in the volume edited by Stefan Collini, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, where Eco clarifies his position as a theoretician who claims that there is a difference between *interpreting* and *using* a text. In his opinion, there are limits to the interpretations one can give to fictional works: "I accept the statement that a text can have many senses. I refuse the statement that a text can have every sense." (Eco 1992, 141)

To return to Iser's view of readers in *The Act of Reading*, it is important to note that, in his opinion, the role of the reader is to recognize the set of conventions present in the text. By understanding what motivated the selection of certain "strategies", the reader is thus able to discover the individuality of the literary text and its unique arrangement of formal and fictional elements:

> As far as the reader is concerned, he finds himself obliged to work out why certain conventions should have been selected for his attention. This process of discovery is in the nature of a performative action, for it brings out the motivation governing the selection. In this process the reader is guided by a variety of narrative techniques, which might be called the strategies of the text. (61)

The term "motivation" invoked by Iser was originally employed by Viktor Shklovskii in his writings on the aspects of narratives. For Shklovskii, "motivation" was the underlying factor of the techniques used by the writer. In other words, the writer had to "motivate" his/her devices. For instance, the "journey" was seen as such a device which "motivated" the gathering of a number of people who told stories or to take another example, the incorporation of memoirs and letters were employed to represent social reality.

From a reader-response perspective, Iser's remark on "motivation" is made in connection with the reader's interaction with the literary text. If the formalists concentrated upon discovering devices in the text without paying close attention to either the author or the reader, a reader-response approach starts with the reader's activity which is provoked by the presence of certain "areas of indeterminacy". By questioning accepted norms and their "motivation" the reader progresses to a new understanding of the text and its world. Since the authorial intention is no longer separated from the text, the readers are led to discover the relevance of the conventions used to shape the fictional world, and by producing their own images in the act of reading learn to orient themselves in the text. This is done, as Iser points out, by identifying the "strategies" of the text. In Iser's view, the "strategies" or "accepted procedures" are the techniques which organize the selected references in the text. In discussing the reader's relationship with the text, Iser draws attention to the four perspectives to be perceived as narrative structure: "Generally speaking, there are four perspectives through which the pattern of the 'repertoire' first emerges: that of the narrator, that of the characters, that of the plot, and that marked out for the reader" (Iser 1982, 96).

In my analyses of the six novels, I will concentrate on what Iser calls the perspective of the narrator; by exploring the reader's relationship with the narrative voice or voices, I attempt to show that the meaning of the text is disclosed when readers learn to distinguish among various textual metamorphoses.

A distinctive feature of the narrative text, the narrator has been traditionally considered as having a mimetic function. The narrator's relationship to the narrated material and to the reader was a central issue in the discussion of point of view. The importance of distinguishing between narrative perspective and narrative voice was pointed up by Gérard Genette in *Figures lll*. In his chapter on "Mode", he discusses narrative focalizations, and argues that the narrator's focalization had to be separated from the characters' perspectives. According to Genette, the category of mood ("mode") has been traditionally confused with the category of voice ("voix"). In the last chapter of "Discours du récit", Genette concentrates on the category of voice; he discusses the relation between the act of narrating, time of narration and person. For Genette "person" represents the relationships between the narrator, the narratee, and the story. Here, Genette argues against the use of "first-person" and "third person" narration and develops a distinction based on the narrator's relationship to the story: the "heterodiegetic" narrator who is absent from the story it recounts and the "homodiegetic" narrator, who is at the same time, a character in the story it retells.

Another major literary critic who devoted a substantial discussion to "focalization" was Boris Uspenski. The Russian critic developed the concept of "focalization" in *Poetics of Composition*; he postulated that point of view is manifested on several textual planes such as "the phraseological plane", "the spatial/temporal plane", "the psychological plane". On "the psychological plane", for instance, point of view may be expressed by a particular person's consciousness, in a subjective manner or, objectively, by events known to the author. A focalizer, according to Uspensky, could be a perceiver, a self-perceiver and self-reflecter, and is capable of openly acknowledging or concealing its viewpoint. In some narratives, Uspensky argues, we perceive a single perspective which dominates all the other viewpoints; in others, various perspectives intermingle in a "polyphonic" structure.

It is this "polyphonic" characteristic of some novels that attracted Mikhail Bakhtin. In his theory of dialogism, developed in *Problems of Dostoievski's Poetics* and also, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin postulated that within the narrative text one can distinguish several voices engaged in dialogue, in a sort of play of discourse. For Bakhtin,

"polyphony" implies that the multiple perspectives expressed by the voices in the text are free from authorial control, in the sense that they become "subjects of their own directly signifying discourse" (Bakhtin 1993, 7). In Bakhtin's view, Dostoievski was the creator of the "polyphonic novel" and his characters were not "voiceless slaves", but were capable of bringing in own views, alongside the author: "A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoievski's novels" (Bakhtin 1993, 6).

From this perspective, the concept of "polyphony" becomes a useful tool for a reader-response approach. If we recall Iser's assumption in his chapter on "Strategies", the "repertoire" is perceived through the four perspectives; Iser also maintains that the meaning of the text comes from the interaction of the shifting textual perspectives. By taking into account the polyphonic aspect of the novel, the reader is able to assemble various points of view in relation to a "controlling" voice, without ignoring the individuality of each perspective. As a result, the "shapes" of the text formed during the activity of reading appear with more clarity, making it easier for the reader to remember them. If we take into account the distinctions between first-person and third-person narrators pointed out by critics, we notice that the concept of "reliability" plays an important part. This is the condition of discourse, in which, as we know, the possibility of speaking the truth creates the possibility of misunderstanding, misperceiving, and lying (Martin 1986, 142).

As it becomes obvious from this theoretical overview, the readers' relationship with the narrator is of prime importance in their attempt to understand the text: "In the specialized case of fiction, the reader's control of the text is usually mitigated by the narrator. Thus it follows that control in fiction is to a large extent dependent on the reader's ability to cope with the narrative voice or voices" (Valdés 1987, 22).

Examples from three major twentieth century novels will serve to illustrate the complexity of the problem. For instance, the omniscient narrator of Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* presumes access to the minds of characters:

> While she marched around the pool naked with a large group of other naked women, Tomas stood over them in a basket hanging from the pool's arched roof, shouting at them, making them sing and do kneebends. The moment one of them did a faulty kneebend, he would shoot her. Let me return to this dream. Its horror did not begin with Tomas's first pistol shot; it was horrifying from the outset. (57)

What poses a problem for the reader here is the sudden change from third person to first person narration. There are slight chances that this abrupt digression might escape an attentive reader. Now, if the narrator qualifies the preceding events as "dream" and, at the same time, intervenes in the story, the reader is made to understand that the narrator's intervention must be important for the meaning of the text.

Robbe-Grillet's *The Voyeur* offers another example of how the change of focalization could mislead the reader. Some passages in the novel are repeated obsessively, as with the scene of Mathias's entrance into the house of a prospective customer. The sentences describing the actions of Mathias mention in passing the kitchen and the oval table. Mathias sees the actions being performed and the objects in detail, but there is a certain distance from which everything is visualized. Often, objects are brought into existence by his glance and in this sense, he becomes the "voyeur", having the power to create visually images that become entities. When Mathias becomes involved with the fictional objects or characters which correspond more or less to his imagination, then his capacity of "voyeurism" is passed to someone else in the novel.

As it has been noted by Robbe-Grillet's critics, objects do not appear incidentally in his novels. Indeed, objects in *The Voyeur* are always highlighted and they change their characteristics according to each new perception: the same series are repeated throughout the text of the novel with variations imposed by the changing point of view. The readers are thus faced with an increasing number of "indeterminacies" which force them to constantly return to the text in order to reconstruct its meaning.

One last example will further illustrate the "entanglement" of the reader in a modern narrative text. The reader of Cortazar's *Hopscotch* is challenged to approach the novel in one of two ways: in a linear fashion, from chapters 1 to 56, or starting with chapter 73 and following a clearly established sequence. The sly remark in this direct form of address intrigues the reader from the very beginning. As there is no omniscient narrator in the traditional sense, readers are urged to become actively involved in putting everything together. By learning to connect the various perspectives of the text in the absence of a traditional narrator, the readers will provide a key to the meaning of such an overdetermined text.

Against the theoretical background presented, the six subsequent chapters will be approached thematically. As the notion of "transgression" will be examined in the various cultural traditions represented in the six narrative texts, further considerations of the relationship between reader and text will be explored.

MURDER, NARRATION AND STYLISTIC DEVIATION IN *THE OUTSIDER* BY ALBERT CAMUS

The Outsider by Albert Camus has been an inexhaustible source of inspiration for literary critics who attempted to explain its appeal by paying close attention to its narrative structure. Drawing from the reader-response theories exposed in chapter one, I will argue that our understanding of *The Outsider* relies on a critical assessment of the narrator's manipulation of the reader's expectations. As we will see from the examples provided, our ability to distinguish the actual story and the events before and after the murder from the manner in which they are narrated will determine our interpretation of Camus's novel. According to Valdes, the readers' relationship with the narrator is of prime importance in their attempt to understand the text: "In the specialized case of fiction, the reader's control of the text is usually mitigated by the narrator. Thus, it follows that control in fiction is to a large extent dependent on the reader's ability to cope with the narrative voice or voices" (Valdés 1987, 22).

First, I will look into Meursault's narration in Part I and how it affects our reading. Here, Jauss's notion "horizon of expectations" and Iser's idea of interactive reading will provide us with new perspectives on Camus's novel. Secondly, as a means of grasping the text of *The Outsider* and the murder committed by Meursault, my discussion will focus on the evolution of the main character expressed stylistically by metaphorical language and a change in the tone of narration. Finally, I will attempt to show that the stylistic deviation in *The Outsider* is an innovative form employed by Camus to give narrative tension to Meursault's story and to transform his readers' "horizon of expectations".

The Telegram

To begin, I will deliberately concentrate on the "incipit" of *The Outsider* and thus examine the various implications of its ambiguity. Meursault's

indifference at the news of his mother's death and his attempt to come to terms with the murder he commits will be discussed in relation to the stylistic deviation taking place during the scene of the murder. A parallel discussion of Parts 1 and 2 of the novel and the implications of the narrated events in Part 2 will throw light on the puzzling concluding lines of the novel and will lead to a deeper understanding of Meursault as an outsider in the world of the text.

In *The Outsider*, it is the arresting manner in which social norms and cultural values are interpreted by the protagonist, Meursault, that will influence our expectations and ultimately, our reader response. From Jauss's point of view, the reader's "horizon of expectations" greatly influences the way a literary work can be interpreted. Indeed, with the opening of the novel, we are immediately made aware of the presence of a narrative voice which takes control of the events. Following Genette's classification of narrators, Meursault can be considered an **"autodiegetic narrator"** (Genette, 1980) whose cold and detached presentation of the events in Part I will disorient the reader.

Through my proposed interpretation, I will examine the degree of the character-narrator's participation in the events of the story and how the type of narration in *The Outsider* determines our reaction towards Meursault. The basic point in this argument is that by understanding our response to Camus's protagonist, we can understand the function of the detailed descriptions in Part I. Indeed, Meursault's perception of events and people is evoked through a limited point of view which centers on unusual, unique characteristics. Thus we can say that Meursault's discourse concentrates on apparently insignificant details and reveals the "strangeness" of his perceptions.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the first pages of the novel is Meursault's behavior when he reports the receipt of the telegram. The fact that he does not show any emotion defies social norms and expectations and transforms the reader's sense of reality by foregrounding human characteristics that cannot be easily identifiable. In my view, it is the opening paragraph that will provide the key to our understanding of Meursault's attempt to come to terms with the murder he commits. Also, several distinctive effects created by the changing rhythm of the narrative, repetition of words and phrases and the grotesque humour of certain scenes will displace our reality and thus gradually change our expectations as we read. In *The Act of Reading*, Iser maintains that in the process of reading, the images produced by the text come into contact with the reader's own images generating a constantly shifting image. This idea helps account for the change in the readers' expectations with regards to

the protagonist's attitude in *The Outsider* before and during the scene of the murder. As a result, Meursault's "confessional story" will provide to us clues about the protagonist's character and personality before the murder.

Let us return to Meursault's cold narrative stance at the beginning of the novel: "Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know. I had a telegram from the home: 'Mother passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Yours sincerely.' That doesn't mean anything. It may have been yesterday." (9)

Statements such as "I don't know", "It may have been yesterday" are key elements in suggesting to the reader that the attitude of the narrator towards the events presented in the text of the novel is unusual. If we consider Meursault the focalizer in the narrative, the events recounted are then related to his perception. In this case, the complexity of the narrative, characterized by many ellipses, creates "a subtle tension" between Meursault and the readers of *The Outsider* as David Sprinzer observed: "Between the complete unassuming naturalness of his actions and observations, on the one hand, and his insensitivity to normal feelings and expectations, on the other, a gulf emerges that makes it quite difficult for us to coordinate our emotional response to him". (Bloom, 2012)

The tension created by Meursault's lack of sensitivity in this passage is further intensified by the generic instability of Camus's novel. On a formal level, *The Outsider* represents a deviation from the norms, situating itself between confessional novel and diary, where Meursault's point of view is questionable.

With the opening paragraph, readers become acutely aware of the temporal limitations of the narrative voice. The fact that Meursault does not remember clearly when he received the telegram calls into question his reliability as a narrator. Also, as far as his participation in the events recounted in Part I is concerned, we can easily grasp his lack of emotion and his inability to communicate with others. There is also the perceived sense that the bus ride to Marengo is almost an obligation. The "strangeness" of this type of behaviour appears morally offensive and will make it difficult for some readers to identify with the protagonist.

Take, for instance, the incriminating passage where Meursault justifies his rare visits to his mother during the year preceding her death:

> She cried a lot the first few days at the old people's home. But that was only because she wasn't used to it. After a month or two she'd have cried if she'd been taken out of the home. Because by then she was used to it. That's partly why during this last year I hardly ever went to see her any more. And also because it meant giving up my Sunday-let alone making

> the effort of going to the bus stop, buying tickets and spending two hours travelling. (11)

There are two ways of reading this passage: on the one hand, we can easily detect Meursault's insensitivity towards his mother, but, on the other hand, his regard for "truth" becomes obvious when he records the events (Bloom 78). In re-evaluating his actions before the funeral, Meursault does not lie about his feelings and actions. In this case, the reader's ability to gain more knowledge about Meursault's actions before and after the murder is challenged by the "truthful" quality of his narrative. Is it then because of his "truthful nature" that he recounts all the events before the murder, or is it rather a "confession" in which he attempts to get to the bottom of things, to understand the truth about himself and about the society that will condemn him to die? This idea will throw a different light on our perception of Meursault as his story will faithfully mirror his character and personality. The result is that the reader will be able to identify elements in the text of Part I of *The Outsider* that will facilitate a detached, objective view of the scene of the murder instead of being grounded in a particular "horizon of expectations".

In this context, it is important to note that description plays an important role in Meursault's story. Camus's descriptions are often pervaded by a grotesque sense of humor that has a referential function and helps create an "absurd" type of fictional world populated by people Meursault does not understand. The emphasis on details and sometimes imperceptible movements create a humorous effect. Suffice it to recall the portraits of people from the asylum where his descriptions bring out striking elements in the physical or mechanical description of gestures and movements:

> It was at that point that mother's friends came in. There were about ten of them in all and they came gliding silently into the blinding light. They sat down without even a chair creaking. I saw them more clearly than I've ever seen anyone and not a single detail of either their faces or their clothes escaped me. And yet, I couldn't hear them and I found it hard to believe that they really existed. Almost all the women were wearing aprons tied tightly round their waists, which made their swollen bellies stick out even more. I've never noticed before what huge paunches old women can have. The men were almost very thin and carrying walking-sticks. (15)

Meursault's truthful comments from the preceding example might surprise us but, at the same time, they can lead us to a more intimate revelation of his perceptions. According to the story told in Part I, the portraits