Creativity in response

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Introduction

A clear requirement now is to embrace not simply the producer but the receiver of creative processes and to shift the analytical attention towards greater assessment and appraisal of creative outputs, with the aim of gaining enriched understanding of processes of reception on the part of different socially positioned readers or viewers of or participants in creative performances.

(Carter, 2007: 600)

Without a reader there is no text, without a text no reader. Arguably, however, stylistics has historically respected the textual term of this necessary relation more than the readerly, a trend continued today in dominant and developing stylistic approaches such as cognitive linguistics

(Hall, 2009: 331)

Ronald Carter (2007), in the first quotation, is responding to a special issue of the journal *Applied Linguistics* on language creativity. He sets out some of the achievements in this area of research – an understanding of creative practices across a range of genres and contexts – but comments that we need a greater focus on processes of reception. This comment is echoed in the second quotation from Geoff Hall (2009). Hall is responding to a special issue of the stylistics journal *Language and Literature*, focusing on literary reading as social practice. He contrasts this approach with a prevailing emphasis in stylistics on the analysis of literary texts in isolation from their reception by readers.

There is, however, an increasing swell of interest in reception, or response, as an aspect of creative practice, to which calls from researchers such as Carter and Hall (see also Hall, 2005, 2008) have themselves added impetus. While it is true that creativity in language is often considered in terms of linguistic characteristics and pragmatic functions of those texts – spoken, written, or multimodal – that are deemed to be in some way creative, recent attention has focused also on the take-up of such texts: how they are attended to and engaged with by an audience. In this chapter, I review different approaches to the study of aesthetic response. In keeping with current interests in language and creativity, I focus on research that seeks to understand the responses of ‘ordinary’ readers, viewers, etc., rather than the professional responses of critics. The story I shall tell applies particularly to literary texts, although I also refer to other texts and practices. I consider, in turn, a shift from abstract
conceptions of ‘the reader’ and ‘reading’ to empirical studies of response, studies that take a more contextualised approach to response, and finally, more recent studies that focus on interpretive moments in everyday discourse. I argue that these last two approaches accord agency and potentially creativity to respondents themselves.

There remains the question of terminology. I use the terms ‘reception’ and ‘response’ according to which is used in the studies to which I refer (sometimes both are used interchangeably). My own preference is for ‘response’ as a generic term, because this seems to allow for greater agency/creativity in the responsive act. A plethora of terms is available for those who make the responses, usually associated with particular receptive modes (‘reader’, ‘listener’, ‘viewer’, ‘audience’, etc.). In the main, I use ‘reader’, because of my starting point in literary response, and because ‘reader’ may also be used generically across different modes and media. I use other terms where these occur in particular studies or traditions.

The reader in stylistics: From idealised to empirical

Carter (2007) suggests that his call for a greater focus on reception in studies of language creativity would parallel a shift in literary criticism towards an increasing interest in reader response, although he concedes that, at the time he was writing, empirical studies of reader response were still limited. Allington and Swann (2009), similarly, note that while reader response theory focuses on the importance of reader–text interaction, reader response criticism tends to focus on the text itself rather than on responses from readers. This is consistent with Hall’s appraisal of stylistics, with its ‘textual’ rather than ‘readerly’ focus. I shall illustrate this general point with reference to stylistics and its emphasis on the responses of ordinary readers.

The notion of ‘the reader’ is fundamental to stylistics, which, in its analysis, assumes an interaction between reader and text. The stylistician Mick Short (1996: 5) comments that stylistic analysis attempts, explicitly and systematically, ‘to relate linguistic description to interpretation’, and that this is ‘part of the essential core of good criticism’. In practice, however, the interpretation comes from the analyst. The analyst invokes a more general reader, whose interpretations the analyst seeks to explicate, but this remains an abstract construct: an ideal or implied reader presupposed in the analysis of the text itself. This is evident in much of contemporary stylistics. In an examination of papers in *Language and Literature*, Allington and Swann (2009) found that 95 per cent of empirical studies referred to the reader, or reading, in their analysis, but most presupposed an ideal or implied reader rather than being concerned with responses generated by actual readers. The reader, and reading, also tended to be singular, with analysts constructing interpretations that are assumed to be held in common. What is at issue here is a kind of ‘everyreader’, with differences between readers, and conditions of reading, played down.

Short (1996: 6) concedes that readers bring different experiences to a text that may affect their interpretation, but argues that, despite these differences, ‘there is a remarkable amount of agreement among readers over what particular texts mean’. For Short, this resides not only in common knowledge of linguistic structures, but also in common ‘procedures of inference’ that are used to interpret utterances. Some stylisticians do more to highlight difference. In setting out the principles of feminist stylistics, for instance, Sara Mills (1995: 8) notes that part of her concern is with ‘the way readers form interpretations which are related to their gender – where the process of interpretation rests on cues in the text which have a different significance, or are significant to a different extent, depending on the reader’s gender-identity’. Mills’ analyses illuminate the gendered positionings
evident in many contemporary texts (not only literature). The analyses are designed to enable readers to distance themselves from these positionings. As in other approaches to stylistics, however, interpretations are constructed on the basis of textual analysis (and sometimes common cultural knowledge) rather than on consultations with actual readers. Mills is influenced by critical discourse analysis, and similar approaches to that which she adopts are evident in critical analyses of a range of popular media that assume effects on readers as a result of the characteristics of media texts (see discussion in Staiger, 2005).

Hall (2009) comments, as quoted at the start of this chapter, that even cognitive approaches to stylistics, with their explicit focus on interpretive processes, have been concerned predominantly with textual analysis and with abstract models of reading/interpretation. There have, however, been interesting developments in cognitive stylistics, with an increasing number of studies incorporating the responses of actual readers. A common research topic is **foregrounding**, the assumed psychological effect of linguistic deviation, which is a feature long associated with poetic language. Textual forms or structures that ‘deviate’ from linguistic norms are said to be foregrounded, or to stand out to readers. The ideas of deviation and foregrounding were developed by the early twentieth-century formalists (see Jones, Introduction) and are seen as fundamental in the stylistic analysis of literature (Short, 1996: 10ff). A special issue of *Language and Literature* (van Peer, 2007) provides examples of research on readers’ — and, in one case, viewers’ — responses to foregrounding, including: Fialho’s (2007) work on ‘foregrounding and refamiliarization’ in two short stories; Hakemulder’s (2007) study of different levels of foregrounding in films, including Shakespeare film adaptations; and Sopčák’s (2007) comparison of foregrounding in different drafts of Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922).

This kind of empirical approach to reader response has been termed ‘the empirical study of literature’ (Miall, 2006; Miall & Kuiken, 1998). David S. Miall and Don Kuiken (1998: 328) contrast this with traditional literary study, in which ‘literary scholars continue to produce readings of texts and elaborations of literary theory in an institutional culture that is inhabited almost exclusively by fellow scholars and senior students’. For Miall and Kuiken (1998: 328), the empirical study of literature sheds light on the responses to literature of readers outside such institutional settings, providing ‘a more ecologically valid approach to understanding the role and functions of literature in general’. Miall (2006: 12) argues, more specifically, that ‘our understanding of literary reading will be recast in the light of evidence gathered from real readers’.

While presented as ground-breaking in the study of literature, such empirical work has also attracted critical comment. Studies are often experimental or quasi-experimental, whereby subjects (frequently students) are presented with brief extracts from poetic and other texts. Texts are sometimes rewritten to allow comparison between particular textual features of interest. The situation is quite different from the more usual contexts in which people read, leading Hall (2008), and Allington and Swann (2009), to question their ecological validity. Hall (2008: 31) argues that they do not satisfy ‘the very basic demand that a study actually tells us about the phenomenon it purports to tell the researcher and the readers of that research about, and not about a suggestive but frustratingly parallel research universe’.

Formal stylistic analysis, cognitive stylistics, and the empirical study of literature share an interest in the interpretations produced by ordinary readers that, at least in principle, would differ from a preoccupation with the expert and distinctive readings provided by literary critics. In his introduction to cognitive poetics, Stockwell (2002: 11) presents this as ‘nothing less than a democratization of literary study’. There is a striking parallel between this position and Carter’s (and others’) interest in demotic creativity, and the extension of the notion of...
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‘literariness’ to everyday texts and practices. However, there is limited scope for creativity in the responses of an idealised reader constructed by an analyst. Critical approaches, such as Mills’ feminist stylistics, might be said to assume some level of agency in encouraging readers to question dominant meanings, or to read against (in this case gendered) texts, but again the meanings associated with texts derive from textual analysis. And the responses of actual readers in the empirical study of literature tend to be highly constrained by an experimental research design. While these approaches have much to say about literary and other texts, they do not help us to attain Carter’s goal of an ‘enriched understanding of processes of reception’ that takes into account the different social positions occupied by readers (or viewers, or listeners, or other participants in the creative process). This is, however, addressed in more contextualised approaches that allow for greater differentiation between readers and greater reader agency, to which I turn in the following section.

The study of reading experiences

In contrast to stylistics and the empirical study of literature, other academic fields interested in everyday reading have focused on the habitual behaviour of readers, acknowledging the significance of particular sociohistorical and cultural contexts of reception. These include the overlapping areas of the history of reading, cultural studies, literacy studies, and aspects of reception studies. In their focus on contextualised reading practices, and on difference and specificity in these practices, such approaches may collectively be termed ‘sociocultural’ (for example Gee, 2000), although they do not all use this term.

In a key text on the history of reading, Jonathon Rose (2001) discusses the reading practices of self-taught, British, working-class men and women (mainly men) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Rose comments that, while we have ample evidence of the reading experiences of ‘professional intellectuals’ (authors, literary critics, professors, clergymen), less has traditionally been known about ‘common readers’. Drawing on a range of sources, including memoirs and diaries, autobiographies, school and library records, and social surveys, he addresses questions that, he argues, have otherwise been the subject of speculation or assumption. To give an example, Rose (2001: 5) cites the assumption that canonical literature is irrelevant to people who have not received an orthodox Western education and contrasts this view with observations from readers such as the Labour MP Will Crooks:

Growing up in extreme poverty in East London, Crooks spent 2d on a second-hand *Iliad*, and was dazzled: ‘What a revelation it was to me! Pictures of romance and beauty I had never dreamed of suddenly opened up before my eyes. I was transported from the East End to an enchanted land. It was a rare luxury for a working lad like me just home from work to find myself suddenly among the heroes and nymphs of ancient Greece.’

(Rose, 2001: 4–5)

Rose (2001: 404) argues that a sense of epiphany — ‘The Book That Made All The Difference’ — was a common theme in working-class autobiography.

A recent British project has compiled a Reading Experience Database (RED) (the current director of which is Shafquat Towheed): a historical record of the reading experiences of British subjects and overseas visitors to Britain from 1450 to 1945. The database includes more than 30,000 records of all kinds of reading, ‘not only books but also newspapers, journals, posters, advertisements, magazines, letters, scripts, playbills, tickets, chapbooks and
almanacs’ (RED, undated a). A ‘reading experience’ here means ‘a recorded engagement with a written or printed text – beyond the mere fact of possession’, and the researchers argue that:

A database containing as much information as possible about what British people read, where and when they read it and what they thought of it will form an invaluable resource for researchers of book history, cultural studies, sociology and family history, to name but a few.

(RED, undated b)

An example of research drawing on the database is Katie Halsey’s (2009) study of reading experiences over the period 1800–1945, in which she provides evidence of the prevalence of: the reading aloud of literary texts throughout the nineteenth century and how this may have affected the reception of these texts; critical responses by readers to texts read aloud by authors, some of which seem to have contributed to the redrafting of texts; a close association between morality and style in readers’ responses; and the importance of emotional responses. Both Halsey (2009) and Rose (2001) contrast the study of actual readers with abstract constructs of the reader evident in literary theory, contending that the latter obscure the diversity of readers and reading practices. Similarly, the compilers of the RED comment that this will ‘certainly enable the study of readership to progress beyond the theoretical and speculative’ (Open University, undated a).

The three-volume History of Reading (Crone & Towheed, 2011; Halsey & Owens, 2011; Towheed & Owens, 2011) provides further examples of studies of historical reading experiences. Other collections provide a greater focus on contemporary reading. The papers in Rehberg Sedo (2011), for instance, consider various forms of reading community, from face-to-face and online reading groups, to mass reading events, locating these within a broader historical context of shared reading. Lang (2012) brings together a series of studies of reading at the turn of the twenty-first century, when, she argues, social and technological changes have the potential to transform readers’ engagement with texts.

Contemporary ethnographic studies, which go beyond written records of reading, can gain more direct access to Rose’s ‘common reader’, providing greater detail on the reading practices of individuals and groups. Working within cultural studies, Janice Radway (1984) carried out a now-classic study of women reading romance literature. Radway (1991 [1984]: 7, emphasis original) comments that she began to distinguish analytically between ‘the significance of the event of reading and the meaning of the text constructed as its consequence’. Her study became:

less an account of the way romances as texts were interpreted than of the way romance reading as a form of behavior operated as a complex intervention in the ongoing social life of actual social subjects, women who saw themselves first as wives and mothers.

(Radway, 1991 [1984]: 7)

Whereas textual studies of romance have seen this as a limiting genre that reproduces patriarchal values, Radway (1984) saw romance reading partly as a form of individual resistance, buying time away from the care and emotional nurturance of others. She comments too on the women readers’ insistence that romance reading ‘creates a feeling of hope, provides emotional sustenance and produces a fully visceral sense of well-being’.
Creativity in response (Radway, 1991 [1984]: 12). Other studies have commented, similarly, on how readers use books, and reading experiences, for their own ends. As examples of studies carried out in rather different reading contexts, see Elizabeth Long’s (2003) account of American women’s reading groups, Azar Nafisi’s (2003) account of a reading group for female students in Iran, and Shirin Zubair’s (2003) account of a critical approach to literature teaching in Pakistan (mainly women, some men). In all of these cases, literary texts, and their discussion, led readers to explore and sometimes question aspects of their lives.

The research discussed in this section, in its acknowledgement of differences between readers and its emphasis on how these readers make texts work for them, allows space for reader agency and creativity. Some work has focused on responses that seem particularly creative in that they play with the boundaries between reading and rewriting. A prototypical example is fan fiction, in which readers rework existing stories, changing or elaborating the story world, plot, aspects of characterisation, etc. – a practice discussed in several publications by Henry Jenkins (2006, for example; see also Knobel & Lankshear, Chapter 25). Examples of the practice can be seen in one of the main websites, http://www.fanfiction.net, which includes responses to a range of texts, including books, anime/manga, movies, cartoons, plays/musicals, comics, television shows, and games. In turn, stories reversioned by fans may be subject to feedback from other fans. This popular form of rewriting is a continuation of an established literary practice: literature is full of intertextual references to earlier literary texts, and rewritings may become literary works in their own right, as in Jean Rhys’ (1966) *Wide Sargasso Sea*, written as a prequel to Charlotte Brontë’s (1847) *Jane Eyre*, and numerous reworkings of Austen’s (1813) *Pride and Prejudice*. In the United Kingdom, Rob Pope (1995) has developed this idea into an approach to reading and criticism that he terms ‘textual intervention’. Pope challenges simple dichotomies between reading and writing, arguing, for instance, that reading necessarily involves rewriting in the sense of constructing meanings and interpretations. Textual intervention is a more developed form of criticism as rewriting, for example students may rewrite a poem, or rewrite and combine two texts from different genres. This encourages a creative engagement with texts in which the students produce critical commentary on the basis of their rewriting.

In Pope’s case, ordinary, or at least non-expert, readers transform literary, and sometimes canonical, texts. Creative interplay between literary texts and reader responses may occasionally be constructed to work in the other direction, as in the example of an ‘anti-edition’ of Virginia Woolf’s (1929) *A Room of One’s Own* produced by the Swedish conceptual artist Kajsa Dahlberg and discussed by Mats Dahlström (2011). Dahlberg had become interested in marginalia as responsive texts, and collated pages from Woolf’s essay that had been annotated by readers: in her anti-edition, these marginalia were prioritised over the original text. In this case, everyday responses were recontextualised as an art form in their own right. Dahlström (2011: 123) sees the result as a social text that plays with the boundaries between the private (marginalia) and public (a printed book), placed in the public sphere in an exhibition of work by the artist.

I commented earlier that the work discussed in this section could broadly be seen as adopting a sociocultural perspective on reading. Theorisations of the sociocultural would see readers as located within particular sociohistorical, cultural, and local interpersonal contexts that make available certain forms of engagement with text and potentially certain textual interpretations. Readers and readings are not, however, completely constrained by their sociocultural positioning. Lang (2012: 2), for instance, argues that while it is important to situate individual acts of reading in relation to the wider social and cultural relations within...
which they are embedded, this should not ‘lead us to lose sight of acts of individual agency, creativity, resistance, and freedom within the interaction between reader and text’. Such creative interactions would draw on whatever interpretive resources are available. Lang (2012: 2) gives as an example ‘when new technologies open up spaces in which readers can generate their own construction of texts and offer critical responses that need not adhere to the sanctioned judgments of literary experts’.

This emphasis on the relative creativity of readers is consistent with wider preoccupations in the field of cultural studies. In a review of children’s and young people’s consumption of a range of cultural products, not only reading material, Mary Jane Kehily (2003: 282) comments on a shift that has taken place from seeing people as passive consumers, ‘the manipulated dupes of omnipotent and highly persuasive commercial forces’, to according greater emphasis to more active processes of consumption in which people are seen to exercise agency and creativity in their interaction with cultural resources.

Discourse analysis and the creative reader

Ethnographic and other relatively contextualised approaches to reading and other forms of response have advanced our understanding of interpretive activity in which readers (and listeners, and viewers) manipulate texts for their own ends and create, rather than take, meanings from texts. It is sometimes possible to look more closely at such interpretive processes – that is, to capture interpretation in the moment, as this occurs. In this section, I discuss discourse analytic studies that have this as their focus.

A precursor to contemporary discourse studies can be found in early anthropological research on oral literature and folklore. During the 1960s and 1970s, this field saw a major shift from the study of text to the study of performance. The earlier focus on texts, such as transcribed oral stories, had presented a relatively impoverished view of oral literature. Richard Bauman (1986: 2) commented that it left a ‘thin and partial record of deeply situated human behaviour’. The contextualised study of performance, on the other hand, helped to revalue oral literature, revealing its skill and complexity. Of particular importance to this chapter is the fact that it also emphasised the significant role of the audience as a set of people, in a particular context, for whom the performance was designed and who themselves contributed to the quality of the performance. The audience became not simply consumers of oral literature, but also more creative participants. Close observation and recording of performance allowed a detailed examination of the interaction between different participants. In an early study of Limba storytelling in Sierre Leone, Ruth Finnegan (1967) discusses how audience members participated in performances with exclamations, laughter, and repetition, joining in songs, and movement (for example dancing). In a more recent reflection on this research, Finnegan (2006: 184) argues that the audience may be seen as ‘co-creators of the performance’.

The idea of performance may also be applied to informal interactions, although here it is likely to be much more fleeting – a ‘breakthrough to performance’ (Hymes, 1975). In such cases, the distinction between ‘performer’ and ‘audience’ is not normally sustained during the interaction. Jennifer Coates (2007) documents a complex interactive process in the creation of play frames (Bateson, 1972; see also Jones, Chapter 3) in conversations between women friends. The idea of the creation of a new frame suggests that playful talk can be distinguished, in some way, from the surrounding talk, and Coates (2007: 38) argues that it is ‘qualitatively different’. Episodes also include responsive laughter signalling amusement and appreciation, or involvement. This seems to lend playful talk some of the qualities of
creative performance, although Coates herself avoids this term. The play is highly collaborative and is better seen as a joint creative enterprise for which drawing analytical boundaries between ‘performer’ and ‘audience’ would be unhelpful. Coates (2007: 32) adopts the metaphor of jazz to describe this: ‘Humorous talk often involves speakers constructing text as a joint endeavour, just as jazz musicians co-construct music as they improvise on a theme’ (see also Sawyer, Chapter 4).

Such creativity in informal interaction, whether face-to-face or online, is necessarily responsive as speakers/writers orient towards prior talk – and indeed, intertextually, to prior utterances outside the interaction – but such talk routinely blurs distinctions between performer and audience as these roles blend or at least shift rapidly between participants (for an illustration from online interaction, see Goddard, 2011; Goddard, Chapter 23). Discussing this type of informal interaction, Maybin (2011: 129) refers to meaning, and therefore creativity, as occurring ‘like a spark between people through the synergy between utterance and response, and through the cumulative criss-crossing chains of utterances and responses which link people together’. Maybin’s own study was of contemporary letter-writing: she discusses the forms of creativity that occur as writers playfully echo and respond to each other over a series of letters.

By contrast with these highly interactive discursive processes, the act of reading itself, as a response to texts of various sorts, may seem to be a qualitatively different phenomenon in which the interaction occurs between an individual reader and a text, and usually in silence. The historical and contemporary studies of reading experiences discussed in the previous section have shown several ways of interacting with written text, including reading aloud and discussion. There is similar evidence of joint engagement with other media: see, for example, Morley (1986) for an early study of family television viewing in which discussion of programmes was an important component, and Staiger (2005), for a more general review.

Recent discursive approaches to reading focus on just such occasions on which, as commonly happens, people talk about a book (or film, television programme, etc.) that they are reading (or watching) or have previously read (or watched). While this might be thought of as talk about a prior act of reception, examination of the discourse suggests that it is better seen as a different form of reception: through talk, people co-construct joint interpretations that may differ from earlier readings. Researchers have adopted and sometimes combined different approaches to discourse analysis (conversation analysis, interactional sociolinguistics, linguistic ethnography – the boundaries may blur in contemporary iterations of these approaches). These allow one to identify micro-interpretive processes. For instance, I pointed out above that studies of reading experiences suggest that readers frequently use literary texts to explore aspects of their lives. This stands in contrast to the professional responses of academics and literary critics. Discourse analysis shows how this process is intricately played out between readers in their literary talk. In a study of the discourse of reading groups, David Peplow (2011) refers to the significance of a mimetic dimension in the groups’ discussion, in which characters and events are responded to ‘as if real’. Mimetic reading may support the exploration of ‘real-life’ issues of concern to readers, although Peplow comments that, in practice, it is often interwoven with more synthetic (that is, analytical) reading stances.

Several studies have examined the detail of ‘reading-in-talk’ (for example Benwell, 2009; O’Halloran, 2011; Swann & Allington, 2009), illustrating how this is rooted in particular interpretive contexts, and embedded in social and interpersonal activity: such social and interpersonal activity may affect readers’ interpretations – what they say about a text – and, in turn, the text that is the object of discussion may be drawn on to construct particular social
relations and reader identities. Such collaborative, situated interpretive activity has been termed ‘co-reading’ (Peplow et al., 2015).

Some studies have focused on co-reading in institutional contexts such as schools (Cremin & Swann, 2015; Eriksson Barajas, & Aronsson, 2009). Cremin and Swann (2015) consider how, in extracurricular school reading groups, readers work at the construction of readings that differ from the schooled readings associated with English lessons; as part of this process, they also construct non-institutional relationships between themselves as readers. Similar discursive approaches have been taken to the analysis of talk around other media, for example Hmensa (2013) on Ghanaian radio adverts, and Maybin (2013) on a British television soap.

All of these studies accord readers a degree of creativity, although this is joint creativity and contingent on particular interpretive contexts. Readers are seen as jointly constructing interpretations, rather than simply uncovering meanings inherent in a text, and also as drawing on texts to construct social/interpersonal relations. Sometimes, co-reading displays a heightened form of creativity as, in their interactions, readers transform texts – recontextualising and elaborating particular sequences. This may be seen as a micro-equivalent of the more fully developed practice of fan fiction, or the approach to rewriting developed by Rob Pope (1995).

In her study of radio advertising, Hmensa (2013) comments that adverts sometimes presented very brief narratives (because of financial constraints, these might be only a few seconds long) that were suggestive of familiar scenes. In talking about these adverts, groups of listeners often extended the narratives, playfully relating them to their own lives. Janet Maybin (2013) analyses the talk of a group of 10–11-year-old children about an episode from the television soap *Eastenders*. The children used the television text to explore moral issues and share their emotional responses, but they also engaged in more artful responses, performing (recreating and embellishing) fragments of the original dialogue and later parodying these.

In their work on reading group discourse, Peplow and colleagues (2015) consider practices such as replotting (whereby readers propose alternative plot lines), revoicing, elaborating, and sometimes parodying textual extracts, and on occasion blending the text world of the novel with the discourse world of the readers: for example, in comparing the narrative of Steinbeck’s (1947) *The Pearl* with the story of someone winning the football pools in 1960s Britain, a group of women readers playfully blended elements from these narratives – a performance that resulted in uproarious laughter. Such creative interpretations, like the more general process of co-reading, also served concomitant interpersonal functions (alignment with others, mock self-deprecation, teasing, etc.).

While their focus is on micro-interpretive processes, discursive approaches to reading are compatible with the study of reading experiences discussed above. However, the emphasis in discourse analysis on response as located within, and to some extent conditioned by, social and interpersonal relations may lead analysts to caution against taking personal testimony such as autobiographical evidence at face value. This point has been addressed by reading historians – in discussing the RED, Katie Halsey (2008: 136) concedes that:

> Memoirs and biographies, like autobiographies, are involved in fashioning an image of the subject they treat. And because the books someone reads can be used as a kind of shorthand to describe the kind of person they were, it is wise to be wary of such descriptions.

However, personal testimony, such as Will Crooks’ autobiographical account of his engagement with classical literature (Rose, 2001), still tends to be presented as a direct window on reading experiences. From a discourse analytic perspective, Crooks’ and similar accounts
might be better seen as narratives, creative in themselves, which select particular experiences (and not others) to make sense of their lives from within a particular sociocultural context (Allington & Swann, 2011).

Like the study of reading experiences, discursive approaches to reading stand in contrast to the relatively decontextualised and singular readings that emerge from the stylistic research, whether from the implied reader presupposed in textual analysis or the experimental subjects in empirical studies. Some stylisticians have, however, combined stylistic analysis of literary texts with a discursive approach to their interpretation. In a cognitive stylistic study, Sara Whiteley (2011) analysed reading group responses to a novel – Ishiguro’s (1989) *The Remains of the Day* – then identified features of the text that, she argued, might have occasioned these responses. In the following section, I consider further some possibilities for combining approaches that may, on the face of it, seem incompatible.

**Next steps**

In this section, I consider two principal ways in which the study of creativity in response has the potential to develop, both of which would also increase our general understanding of creativity: first, the possibilities afforded by challenging boundaries between analytical traditions; and secondly, taking greater account of a contemporary processual approach to the study of language and discourse.

I have suggested in this chapter that stylistic approaches to the reader, even those in the tradition of cognitive stylistics, have tended not to take account of situated reading practices, but that such practices are the preserve of more sociocultural (ethnographic, etc.) research. Both traditions have limitations, however: whereas stylistics ignores the reader (or at least the socially situated reader), sociocultural approaches, with their focus on reading experiences, may ignore the text. I cited earlier Radway’s (1984) developing interest in romance reading as a form of behaviour rather than in how the texts themselves operated (for a critique of this position, see Hall, 2009).

Whiteley’s (2011) research does something to link these two sets of interests, in analysing both literary texts and their reception by readers. This still, however, accords priority to the text in the creation of meaning: the focus is on textual features that might produce certain interpretations. While it is legitimate to focus on certain issues at the expense of others, it is also helpful, on occasion, to try to reconcile difference and bridge gaps. Our understanding of reading – and therefore of the potential for creativity in reception – would be enhanced by a systematic combination of textual analysis and a sociocultural analysis of reading practices – that is, by relating response to features of the text, how this is read, and the environment in which reading takes place. (For discussion and initial exploration of this with respect to reading groups engaged in literary reading, see Peplow et al., 2015.)

Some studies of media discourse have combined textual analysis with producer and reader/audience perspectives (see, for example, Cook, 2001, on the discourse of advertising, and Richardson, 2010, on television dramatic dialogue). In her study of Ghanaian radio advertising, Hmensa (2013) included producers’ accounts of their practice, observations of advertising production, and the responses of selected listeners alongside an analysis of advertising texts. The research makes an attempt to understand the nature of the texts themselves, the motivations, constraints, ad hoc practices, etc., that produce just those texts, and their reception by the target audience. Further exploration is needed of different ways in which complementary methodologies may be combined to provide fuller accounts of creative language practices.
A similar point relates to the potential for combining cognitive and sociocultural perspectives on reception. This has long been a focus of attention in some research within the sociocultural tradition: see, for example, Gee (1992) on the social mind and, more specifically on reading, Gee (2000). The studies in cognitive stylistics discussed in this chapter tended to focus on reading as a relatively decontextualised and singular cognitive process, but seeing the mind as social makes relevant more contextualised approaches to collaborative interpretation. Littleton and Mercer’s (2013) term ‘interthinking’ seems particularly valuable here. There is some consistency in approach between Littleton and Mercer’s psychological research on children’s learning as mediated through discourse and discourse analytic studies of co-reading, and such links could be further explored (see Peplow et al., 2015, for discussion and exemplification).

Much of the research that I have discussed in this chapter, across different traditions, has provided ‘snapshots’ of creativity in reception: the analysis of potential readings within texts; the identification of actual reading experiences; episodes from discussion of a book or other text. Sometimes, experiences are grouped to identify themes – for example Rose’s (2001) reference to epiphanic reading experiences, or Halsey’s (2009) discussion of the nineteenth-century practice of reading aloud – but the starting point is with one or more separate experiences. By contrast, some research on language and discourse carried out within a sociocultural tradition has adopted a more dynamic model of communication, often theorised in terms of Bakhtinian conceptions of dialogicality and addressivity (Bakhtin, 1935). Empirical research might focus on the shifts in meaning that occur when utterances and texts are recycled across times and places: see, for example, Blommaert (2005) and later discussion in Lillis (2013) on the idea of ‘text trajectories’. Creativity in this case would be seen partly in terms of response – in the transformation of utterances and texts, not only individual creative acts. Some of the studies mentioned are compatible with these ideas: Pope’s (1995) work on textual intervention and rewriting focuses on the critical/creative transformation of literary texts; Maybin’s (2013) study of children’s reading of Eastenders looks at how extracts from the original television dialogue are playfully recycled and recontextualised in the children’s talk; Hmensa’s (2013) study of radio advertising follows advertising texts from the original concept through a number of production stages during which they are responded to, adapted, etc., to their eventual reception by an audience; and Allington and Swann (2011) identify reading within a book club as a series of readerly acts in which interpretations are reworked over time and reversioned in different settings. There is a potentially rich seam here that could be exploited more systematically to deepen our understanding of creative practices and processes.

Related topics
cognitive stylistics; creativity and dialogue; creativity and discourse analysis; everyday language creativity; literary stylistics and creativity

Further reading

There are several recent collections on reading that are worth browsing, as noted throughout this chapter. Lang’s volume on contemporary reading practices is a good starting point.

Long discusses her ethnographic and historical research on women’s reading groups in the United States in a classic study of everyday literary reading.


A more recent study of everyday literary reading adopting a discourse analytic approach, this volume brings together cognitive and sociocultural approaches to reading group discourse, and includes a discussion of creativity.


This is another interesting collection that looks at both historical and contemporary examples of reading communities.

**Useful websites**

http://www.beyondthebook.bham.ac.uk

The website for a project entitled Beyond the Book – a study and resources on mass reading events.

http://www.devolvingdiasporas.com

*Devolving Diasporas* is a study of responses, from readers in different geographical locations, to narratives of movement, migration, and diaspora.

http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED

The Reading Experience Database (RED) is an open-access database and research project, including more than 30,000 records of reading experiences. These are mainly British, dating from between 1450 and 1945, but the site is in the process of internationalisation.

http://www.open.ac.uk/dorg

The website for the Discourse of Reading Groups – a study of everyday literary response in reading groups across Britain.

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