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Literary History as a Provocation to Reception Studies[1]

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The majority of essays in the present collection take up questions of reception with a decided emphasis on central theoretical questions. What, for example, does a focus on reception contribute to our ability to read, understand, and interpret works of the past, in the case of this volume, primarily so-called "classical" literary texts from ancient Greece and Rome? One might say, then, that in our approach to reception, we are coming to grips with the larger question of hermeneutic possibility or, rather, possibilities, since a number of the essays pluralize reception along various significant parameters, among them gender and class. Whether this is actually just another mode of philology pure and simple remains to be seen; surely it is not, if by "philology" is understood an anti-historicist positivism, but in its longer history, "philology" has usually been much broader than that. She was, after all, thought by Martianus Capella to be a bride fit for no less a hermeneut than Mercury ("De Nuptiis Mercurii et Philologiae").

My aim here is to focus attention on a possibly subordinate issue, one that, come to think of it, seems to have received surprisingly little attention: reception history in the sense of reception historiography, and in particular, reception studies organized around the reception tradition of a single author's works. When reception studies as such were inaugurated, which one might date to Hans-Robert Jauss's essay to which I allude in my title,[2] the idea of reorganizing the writing of literary history by shifting focus from author to reader, from "influence" to reception, was a central one. Indeed, it was programmatic. Jauss's own approach had its roots in phenomenology (for example, his key phrase "horizon of expectation" (*Erwartungshorizont*)) and an even longer history of hermeneutics, both

1 The title is intended as an homage to Hans Robert Jauss's original provocatory address now some 35 years in the past.

2. "Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft" (in Jauss (1994) 144–205). A somewhat less than ideal English translation appears in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (Jauss (1982a)).

philosophical and biblical; in fact, almost immediately writing emerged that either developed the literary-historical parameters of Jauss's provocative essay[3] or emphasized the hermeneutic axis. Jauss himself was as interested in "reception" for its axiological potential: in other words, as a source for aesthetic judgments.[4] However, the historical and even the aesthetic dimensions of "reception theory" and even "reception history" faded in the face of the growing emphasis on the reader qua reader, obviously the cornerstone of any reception-based approach but now the focus of analysis and systematization all its own. The impulse in this direction derived also from Germany, specifically from Wolfgang Iser, like Jauss at work in Konstanz,[5] who popularized the term "reading process" (*Lesevorgang*), but its elaboration occurred primarily in English studies (Iser's own field) and first in the United States (where Iser soon started teaching and publishing).[6] Focus on the reader *à la* Iser in the field of English found ready resonance. It had a glorious precursor in I. A. Richards,[7] and almost simultaneous with Iser's first publications a home-grown American tradition of reader-focused analysis sprang to life.

While focus on the reading process is not necessarily ahistorical, for readers are perforce historical actors, some noted work in the English tradition has de-emphasized the historical.[8] More Jaussian and thus, in my sense, more historical is the early writing of Stanley Fish, focused in that phase of his career on the seventeenth century.[9] Subsequent studies in the English tradition have focused

3 Born the same year as Jauss's essay was the journal *New Literary History*. Ralph Cohen (1974) anthologizes a number of significant pieces printed in the early years of *NLH*. In German, note Gunter Grimm (1977). An early attempt at an overview is the first edition of Rainer Warning (1994), published in 1975. Both Warning's and Grimm's volumes have extensive bibliography of the work up to their respective dates of publication. An indispensable English-language orientation in the first 15 years of reception theory is that of the Germanist Robert C. Holub (1984).

4 In the original "Literaturgeschichte" (Jauss (1994)), note the famous essay on *Madame Bovary*. Also in 1968, Jauss, a medieval Romance philologist in the great tradition of Auerbach and Spitzer, edited *Die nicht mehr schönen Künste: Grenzphänomene des Ästhetischen* (Jauss (1968)). His own attempt at systematizing a reception-based aesthetic emerged as *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik* (Jauss (1982b)); its first part, issued in 1977, was translated into English as *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics* (Jauss (1982c)).

5 Iser (1971); in English, Iser (1978b). His own further work and reception is primarily based in the United States.

6 His next book, Iser (1978a), followed almost at once. A collection that well displays the impact of this line of criticism is Suleiman and Crosman (1980).

7 Richards (1929).

8 For example, the more psychologically focused readerly analysis (and thus in a sense more in the Richards tradition) represented by Holland (1975).

9 I think first and foremost of Fish (1971 and 1972), virtually contemporary with Iser's publications. Among his later, more theoretical elaborations of reader-based analysis is Fish (1980).

attention on reading in earlier societies with different textual and publication processes, not to mention different modes of literacy, as well as in different communities (to pick up a term of Fish's) of readers, most importantly, in my view, women.[10]

This by no means exhausts the streams of reader-based analyses in the 1970s and early 1980s. Umberto Eco came to the analysis of the reader's role from semiotics,[11] hardly a surprise, since no system of sign theory can do without a recipient, explicit in Jauss and his fellow German theorists. In contrast, the French tradition seems somewhat bipolar. On the one hand, before 1968 (and Jauss) is Robert Escarpit's *Sociologie de la littérature*, which could be read, at least in retrospect, as an early contribution to reception history.[12] After 1968, one could certainly point to many of Roland Barthes's most influential works as performances of literary analysis from a readerly perspective. Though different in style of representation, *S/Z*, codes and all, has its surprisingly Jaussian dimensions.[13]

As this volume and earlier works of so many of its contributors amply establish, if classics as a field was somewhat slow to embrace wholeheartedly new literary critical modes that focused on the reader, it has long since made up for lost time. The manifold investigations of intertextuality, which has to a large extent remapped the entire field of Roman literary studies, are oriented around the textual experiences and repertoire of readers (and authors as readers), though some of the "early adopters" of reception, or at least of readerly analysis, within classics exhibit interest in a broader range of areas, from hermeneutics and narratology to gender, sexual, and nationalist politics.[14]

I think it valuable, even from the very "middest" of current rich work that digs deeply in certain fields within the large land of "reception," to reflect back on

10 A good starting point, but only that, is Schweickart and Patrocinio (1986). A full exploration in this area would range from Fetterley's "resistant reader" (1978) through the conceptualization of "reading like a man" (Dinshaw (1989), esp. 28–64). A recent investigation of reading, literacy, and gender in the early modern period is Ferguson (2003).

11 Eco (1979).

12 Escarpit (1964). Even if one sees this as more a contribution to the "history of taste," in general no complimentary term, in fact, Jauss's own individual analyses not only contribute to but are in part based in *Geschmacksgeschichte*. An uncannily contemporary example of *Geschmacks-* and *Rezeptionsgeschichte* to which I will return is Dörrie (1968).

13 Barthes (1970); in English, Barthes (1974). See also Foucault (1977); Barthes (1973); in English, Barthes (1975). A relatively early survey that sought to emphasize the poststructuralist overtones of the school of reader-response analysis was Tompkins (1980).

14 Bartsch (1984); Block (1984); Winkler (1985); Slater (1990); Hexter (1990); Selden (1992), as well as Hexter (1992) in the same volume. Two important collections from this period are Pedrick and Rabinowitz (1982) and Woodman and Powell (1992).

earlier explorations and other avenues taken, or at least started, within this capacious and oh-so-malleable territory. One of the literary historical industries that long predates modern reception studies is that of tracing the tradition of a single author. Studies of this sort are legion, for example, the hoary examples of Domenico Comparetti's work on Virgil, Spargo's more narrow study of Virgil the magician, or Rand's *Ovid and His Influence.*[15] Such studies were, as Rand's title makes explicit, pursued as histories of "influence," so that, with the reorientation of perspective called for by Jauss and others (and in the wake of the general embarrassment about literary history itself), studies of such literary traditions became perforce reception-based inquiries. And rightly so. That I do not mean to dispute.

Since it has been for some time an area of my interest and activity, let me remain with Ovid, and use the opportunity afforded me here to air some of the most fundamental methodological questions that trouble – or should trouble – all of us who write chapters in the *Nachleben* of a classical author, or any author for that matter. The problem need not (necessarily) inhere in any single chapter. In other words, Jauss would permit us (and in his work often exemplifies) the reconstruction of a single moment of reception on or along a particular historical "horizon of expectation." So, to pick a fairly well-known example, one might certainly write a focused study of the *Ovide moralisé*, by far the most influential of medieval translations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* into any vernacular, whereby one understands translation as it was practiced in the Middle Ages, at least for literary works, as offering considerable freedom for reduction, expansion, and adaptation. The immediately preceding clause already begins the work of setting the *Ovide moralisé* in its original horizon of expectations, explaining to modern readers what fourteenth-century readers would even without thinking understand about the work even before they actually encountered it. Jeremy Dimmick dedicates two pages of his survey "Ovid in the Middle Ages: Authority and Poetry" to it, well describing it as "an Ovidian and post-Ovidian museum, under Christian curatorship."[16]

> It incorporates earlier French adaptations, including the *Philomena* sometimes attributed to Chrétien de Troyes (6.2183–3840). Its expanded account of the Trojan War brings in material from the *Heroides*, and more unlikely sources: when Paris has made his judgement in favour of Venus (11.1473–2400), she provides him with commandments of love which précis the *Ars amatoria*, and the whole scene seems to be modelled on Amant's homage to the god of love in Guillaume de Lorris' *Roman de la Rose.*[17]

15 Comparetti (1896); in English, Comparetti (1908 and 1997); Spargo (1934); Rand (1963). From the same period is Munari (1960).

16 Dimmick (2002), with discussion of the *Ovide moralisé* concentrated in pp. 278–80; cited here is p. 279.

17 Dimmick (2002) 279.

As Dimmick indicates, in coming to understand the *Ovide moralisé* we need to expand our interpretive horizons[18] across the whole Ovidian canon, including not only other "Ovidiana" but their own individual reception traditions, along with the sequence of commentaries above all on the *Metamorphoses*.[19] His references to Chrétien and the *Roman de la Rose* point to yet other horizons that also must be taken into account, here – as often in the case of classical authors in the medieval period and later – the horizons of vernacular literary tradition(s).

Dimmick highlights here, in line with his program, points where the vernacular tradition is already heavily invested in Ovid – Chrétien as (likely) adapter of Ovidian tales, Guillaume de Lorris, author of the first portion of *Roman de la Rose*, with its fountain of Narcissus. This is precisely the point at which I want to ask the question that troubles me: where do we draw the line? Granted, all historical work involves setting boundaries, but I want to put in question the seeming inevitability that when we set out to write a history of Ovidian reception, even of one era,[20] we as a matter of course privilege the Ovidian linkages that both precede and follow any work that appears in our sequence. The *Ovide moralisé* also incorporates non-Ovidian material, from Statius' *Thebaid* in book 9, for example. Should we not, at least in some ideal version of such an account, find a way to calibrate the reception of Ovid with that of Statius (not to mention Virgil)?[21] Even seemingly Ovidian episodes have wider fields. Another

18 These horizons are not the same, of course, as the horizons of expectations of the *Ovide moralisé's* first audience, but as interpreter one seeks to elaborate interpretive horizons that permit us to reconstruct and understand the historical horizon(s). There may be a function of mirroring in this; in the ultimate act of aesthetic appreciation and judgment, the horizons are, in Jauss's project, to "melt" (*verschmelzen*), but as historical interpreters we hold short of liquefaction.

19 Beyond Pierre Bersuire (Petrus Berchorius), whose *Ovidius moralizatus* – the fifteenth book of his expansive *Reductorium morale*, the entirety written with preachers in mind – has intense and complex interconnections with the *Ovide moralisé*, one could expand one's purview to what was by this time a good century and a half of explanatory commentary and allegorizations (natural-scientific, euhemerist, moral, and overtly Christian) by such named sources as Arnulf of Orléans, John of Garland, and Giovanni del Virgilio. Bersuire, early versions of whose commentary may have contributed material to the *Ovide moralisé*, himself incorporated material from the *Ovide moralisé* into the last of the stages (1342). See further, Hexter (1989), esp. 53–6.

20 A recent example would be the valuable survey by Ziolkowski (2005).

21 The impact of Statius' *Thebaid* and even the fragmentary *Achilleid*, epics only recently returning to the center of critical attention, in the Middle Ages can hardly be overstated. Even before the period of which I have been speaking, the reception of Statius "interfered" in significant ways with the reception of Virgil and Ovid. If I had focused this essay more on the Virgilian tradition, I would be making the point that while Macrobius and Fulgentius, for example, have their places in any history of the reception of the *Aeneid*, neither of them is as significant for understanding the *Roman*

twelfth-century episode like the *Philomena* incorporated into the *Ovide moralisé* is the *Pyramus and Thisbe* (*Ovide moralisé* 4.219–1169). A full account would want to bring in the entire complex of *Pyramus and Thisbe* exercises popular in schools.[22] What we have seems very much like a large room where the voices of these texts echo and reecho. The risk of cacophony cannot put us off from realizing that the music we make ourselves hear is a simplification. Can we achieve at least polyphony?

And should we not also be setting the *Ovide moralisé* in the context of all the vernacular options available to its first audience, whether for edification or entertainment? (As if the boundaries there were easily drawn!) Then of course we must take into account the wider history of the years during which the *Ovide moralisé* was put together (1316–28) and consider what its special significance may have been for Jeanne, wife of Philip V, who seems to have been its intended recipient. Not only what we might imagine her to have made of it, but what its makers might have wanted her to make of it, hoping to anticipate her desires (rightly or wrongly). In an earlier note I referred to the work's "first audience," and by definition there was one. But it is important to realize that the modern edition on which we all rely[23] tends to obscure the significant variation among manuscripts, each of which permits us a perspective and purchase on its reception even as it complicates any account of that reception. There were multiple *Ovides moralisés*.[24]

We may grant, and of course we must grant, that every historian faces the challenge of drawing some boundaries about his or her study. Perhaps everything is connected, but some connections are more significant than others, and we look to historians to make precisely that claim, explicitly and implicitly, in their works, starting with their choice of focus, their organization of the material, and their

d'Eneas as is knowledge of the history of the reception of Statius' *Thebaid* and, above all, of the *Roman de Thèbes*. And were we to proceed thence to Heinrich van Veldeke's *Eneit*, we would need to draw in a swarm of other romances, in Middle High German and in Old French as relevant. And so on, *ad infinitum*.

22 Edited by De Boer (1921); cf. Glendinning (1986).

23 De Boer (1966 [1915–18]).

24 Cf. Jung (1994); he lists some 23 manuscripts (pp. 170–1), suggesting that a thorough study of the tendencies of each manuscript remains a desideratum. As in the case of commentaries, where each manuscript even of an attributed commentary can exhibit differences, sometimes small, sometimes large, each manuscript is a witness – in the truest sense of the word – to a different instance of reception and in turns allows us to reconstruct a potentially distinct horizon of expectation, so each of the *Ovide moralisé* manuscripts could let us read a different refraction of Ovid, and all the other figures and texts behind the *Ovide moralisé*, as many as our analytic procedures and minds can allow us to perceive. I leave to the side the fifteenth-century history of prose reworkings of the *Ovide moralisé*.

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narrative. What I am raising as a concern here is that by revisiting – with no seeming end in sight – the reception traditions of classical literature rather unimaginatively author by author, and repetitively for an author like Ovid,[25] we are deepening channels and fortifying ways of thinking we ought rather to be conceiving as temporary assemblages that should give way to yet other imaginary constructions.

Of such studies, whether an individual author's monograph surveying or collective endeavors organized around the reception tradition of a single classical text or author, I believe we must pose the question: precisely what historical connections obtain between subsequent readings of a given work (or subsequent readers of an author's works)? As I began to suggest in the case of the *Ovide moralisé*, above, are not all texts historically fully and only to be explained in the moment and against the horizon of their arising? That moment may be replete with earlier readings, but it will be the business of the reception historian (if I can use that term) to instance the degree to which those earlier readings are alive in the historical moment in question.

The questions I am raising about reception history here are in some ways not new. They are essentially the questions that already in the third quarter of the twentieth century were being raised about the historicity of "literary history" *tout court*.[26] My concern extends beyond the worry that reception histories of the sort I have been describing may in the end be no more than a sequence of individual moments that we are, if for no reason other than habit, privileging, to the fear that, in organizing such by tracing readings of a single author's work or works, we are organizing such chronicles in a maximally irrational way. Again, are separate instances of Ovidian reception part of the same history, and if so, how? Some are clearly hard to link historically in any meaningful way. What has, for instance, Maximus Planudes' Greek metaphrasis of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to do with Caxton's English version? And in other cases where there are clear linkages, there are inevitably complex doublings of reception histories, crossings and amplifications, that one would also need to take into account. How does one, for instance, sort out and distinguish, for, say, French readers from the later fourteenth century onwards, the impact of the *Ovide moralisé* (itself an instance of the reception of the *Metamorphoses* along with *Metamorphoses*-commentaries and

25 In addition to Hardie (2002), there is also Boyd (2002), to which I, too, contributed an essay.

26 Not that this ended the enterprise. See Martindale (1996) for a trenchant critique of a more recent grand outing of Latin literary history with, along the way, many observations I find very much in the spirit of my essay. Perkins (1992) is an indispensable discussion of the enterprise of literary history, though he quite intentionally treats "literary histories of reception and impact" only briefly in his introduction (23–7); relevant to my focus in this essay is his observation that "[r]eception history is acutely vulnerable to the difficulties of structuring and grouping" (27).

other parerga, not to mention other vernacular octosyllabic works) from direct encounters with the Latin *Metamorphoses* (holding constant, for the moment, issues of manuscript presentation, not to mention marginal commentaries that might accompany the poem itself) in subsequent readings and renderings of Ovid's poem, in French and many other European vernaculars?[27]

One can worry and worry and not write, and one could of course write and not worry. Neither course seems at all advisable. One must worry and write, write despite the worries. What we can do is construct future projects in reception history such that they are in no way blind to these difficulties but rather, by facing the challenges, in a variety of ways seek to overcome them. No solution will be total; each will be a partial evasion. Perhaps the most important point will be, in fact, the very variety of the strategies, so that the picture that might begin to emerge will be suggestive of a three-dimensional one by virtue of its multi-ocular focus. Nor will it be a steady or even a very bright one; it will be flickering, and the flickering will remind us of the impossibility of complete success.

One obvious approach is to focus on one work by Ovid. As noted, of course, one can never separate the reception of the *Amores*, say, or the *Ars amatoria* from the reception of "Ovid," including his biography, real and imagined. One gets some sense of the "thickness" a thoroughgoing history of one of Ovid's major works would attain from the monumental survey by Heinrich Dörrie of the *Heroides*-mania which raged across Europe in the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries.[28] Even if, in that magisterial chronicle, there can be no full accounting of the way the taste for the "heroick epistle" fits into a full program of reading and writing (much less viewing visual images, listening to music) in which fans of the *Heroides* and its multitudinous offspring engaged, it remains in my mind one of the most successful full, if inevitably partial, accounts of a major chapter of Ovidian reception.

Again: one might imagine a sequence of projects each of which takes one instance of Ovidian reception – as I began ever so slightly to do with the *Ovide moralisé* above, or once tried to do with an earlier and much more marginal bit of Ovidiana[29] – and tries to construct the horizon(s) of expectations along which it emerged, and not merely the Ovidian ones. One could also imagine an Ovidian reception project that focused on a series of years – for example, 817, 1000, 1130, 1278, 1380 – and tried to write a thick description of the literary context for the reception of Ovidian works in each of those years. Probably one would be wise to pick a geographic focus as well for each of these studies, because it goes practically

27 For example, the *Metamorphoses of Ovid* translated in 1480 by William Caxton (but never published by him), which constitutes the first complete English version of any Ovidian work, turns out not to be an Englishing of Ovid's Latin at all but, rather, a rendering of the *Ovide moralisé*, and of a particular fifteenth-century version of the *Ovide moralisé* at that (now London, BL MS Royal 17.E.iv).

28 Dörrie (1968).

29 Hexter (1988).

without saying that the reception of Ovid does not proceed smoothly across Europe. Especially in the earlier centuries, some works are available in only one place; even later, different commentary traditions prevail in different areas,[30] and there are different emphases of tastes among Ovidian works, not to mention the very different vernacular horizons. Theoretically, one could imagine an army of scholars writing such dossiers for every year for every place. Then might our history be complete, though I have a strong sense that we would find ourselves in a Borgesian gyre of one sort or another. Could anyone in any generation ever read the sum total of histories that would thereby be created?

I have myself along the way toyed with other strategies. Rather prosaically, I fear, in "Ovid in the Middle Ages: Exile, Mythographer, Lover,"[31] I tried, conforming to the style and sense of the edited collection, to model my account of medieval Ovidian reception on Ovid's highly varied corpus itself, which has never permitted his reception to be viewed as a homogeneous entity. I somewhat arbitrarily constructed a triple focus, with a section devoted in turn to each of the three aspects evoked in the piece's subtitle. The very fact that each section highlighted a different set of works from the Ovidian canon, and that each had a different temporal center of gravity, so to speak, itself constituted a definite statement about the contours of Ovidian reception. Perhaps the best that can be said about this strategy is its very arbitrariness; at least in that way it pointed to the flickering nature of the image, almost advertising it rather than attempting to conceal it. Somewhat more boldly, in an essay entitled "Ovid's Body,"[32] I used the corporal theme of the volume to which I was contributing as an opportunity to play with some analogues of reception, from the imitative stylization of "drag" fashion houses of Harlem (at least as known to a wider audience from the 1990 film *Paris Is Burning*) to the prosthetic addition of medieval pseudo-Ovidiana, especially the serio-comic and often scabrous *De Vetula*. If the latter seems, in retrospect, not much more than a bad joke itself, the former strikes me to have potential precisely because of its frankly ludic nature. The analogy to which I pointed brought out an element of stylization that I think explains much of the creative reception of Ovid in high medieval Latin poetry, and in the legendary houses, and those who perform in them, we have perhaps a sense of the ludic spaces in which it might after all be true to say that geographically scattered and historically distant admirers of Ovid come together, to play. There might be other possible analogies for transhistorical and thus imaginary reading communities in which members in later days are aware of their predecessors, "faith communities," for example, but the ludic has much more appeal.

So let the games begin.

30 Hexter (1986).
31 Hexter (2002).
32 Hexter (1999).