**Reader-Response Theory**

To the Editor:

It is surprising to find an essay in *PMLA* that, at first reading, may seem to add something new to our understanding of reader-response theory but that, after close study, does not. Marshall W. Alcorn, Jr., and Mark Bracher's "Literature, Psychoanalysis, and the Re-Formation of the Self" (100 [1985]: 342–54) summarizes quite adequately the complementary yet often opposing views of Holland and Iser. And their call for "a theory of reading that will reconcile the central insights of both perspectives, explaining how reading might evoke formulation as well as fulfillment of wishes . . . " (343), is admirable. Yet their conclusions have been known for a long time: "Through identification, then, literature offers the self the sort of nourishment that is essential for development" (351) is a broad critical commonplace that can be traced to nearly every literary critic in the history of Western thought. And their declarations that "the teacher of literature . . . functions in a general but very effective way to resist and undo the reader's projections . . ." and that the "conflict between the text and one's projected values is most evident, perhaps, in classroom analysis of literary characters and personae" (347) are fine summaries of not only what Louise M. Rosenblatt has said in *Literature as Exploration* (1938) but also of what can be found, in one way or another, in the writings of John Dewey, Joyce Cary, R. P. Blackmur, Herbert Read, Alex Comfort, Frederick Crews, Leslie Fiedler, Irving Howe, and Wayne Burns. What is even more surprising is the lack of appropriate reference for a statement that is apparently one of the major conclusions of the essay: "Literature promotes re-formation of the self, however, not merely by creating grand and sublime ideals but also by fostering the recognition of ideals that overstep the finite human condition. . . . Indeed, some forms of literature seem to concentrate on the disillusionment of passionately mobilized ego ideals" (350). The seminal study of literature responsible for this idea is José Ortega y Gasset's *Meditations on Quixote* (1914; rpt. New York: Norton, 1961), where, in chapters 10 through 13, Ortega y Gasset reaches his famous conclusion about the illusory nature of our ideals by stating that the power of the novel lies in the materiality it contains, "before which, providing it is declared sufficient, man's pretension to the ideal, to all that he loves and imagines, yields" (144).

Independently discovering the same idea, D. H. Lawrence is equally important for our understanding of "reader-response" theory. Clearly, he is the first modern voice to call attention to the fact that literature endangers our ideals. His essays on the novel (i.e., "The Novel" and "Surgery for the Novel—Or a Bomb"), his comments on the novel in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1929), and especially his letter to Carlo Linati on 22 January 1925 provide the original material for our reader-response theory. "Art, especially novels," Lawrence tells Linati, "are not little theatres where the reader sits aloft and watches—like a god with a twenty-lira ticket—and sighs . . . whoever reads me will be in the thick of the scrimmage. . . ." In America, John Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1934) could be cited as original reader-response theory because of its chapter "Having an Experience." But more important contributions can be found in Stephen C. Pepper's *The Basis of Criticism in the Arts* (1945), where in the key chapter, entitled "Contextualist Criticism," original reader-response theory is found.

Now the critic who discovered a way of bringing all the above works into a single and coherent theory of student response to literature and who was the first to apply such "reader" theories to the novel and in the classroom is Wayne Burns. He has been doing so since the 1940s. His monograph *The Panzaic Principle* (1965)—based on Ortega y Gasset's *Meditations*, Pepper's theories of "contextualism," D. H. Lawrence's criticism, and Louis-Ferdinand Céline's novels—and his autobiography *Journey through the Dark Woods* (1982) document the discovery; in fact, they are examples of work from a teacher who has been quietly responsible for the idea of "reader-response" in the classroom. Burns beautifully explains how readers respond to powerfully "Panzaic" literature: literature that, like Sancho Panza, endangers the reader's ideals. His work goes beyond Alcorn and Bracher's conclusion that "literature pressures the self to develop more realistic and sophisticated ideals" (350). For what D. H. Lawrence says, as well as Ortega y Gasset and Stephen C. Pepper, Burns points out, is that "it is life," the life of the individual reader, "and the novel against culture and morality" (Burns, "On Reading Novels: An Outline for a Contextualist Primer," *Recovering Literature* 10 [1982]: 41).

There seems to be a tendency among our current reader-response theorists to forget their critical roots. I'm not sure why. Perhaps Russell Jacoby's thesis in *Social Amnesia* is correct: that we ignore the powerful insights of the past for either professional or political reasons, or out of sheer and understandable fear.

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*Reply:*

William K. Buckley is of course saying nothing new in concluding that our conclusion says nothing new. He forgets that this point has already been made many times—by Harold Bloom about writing, by Whitehead about theory, and by Ecclesiastes about everything under the sun. More significantly, however, in charging that we forget our critical roots, Buckley forgets our in-