Reader in a Strange Land: The Activity of Reading Literary Utopias by Peter Ruppert (review)

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thoroughly and who writes with confidence of important things.

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PETER RUPPERT. *Reader in a Strange Land: The Activity of Reading Literary Utopias.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986. 193 p.

Peter Ruppert's *Reader in a Strange Land* is an attempt to apply literary theories on semiotics and reader response to the utopian novel. Since reader response criticism is a fairly new field and since Ruppert's book is, as far as I know, the first monograph in the area, he performs a valuable service to those interested in utopian thought.

He summarizes the weaknesses in utopian literature which have led to the present lack of respect for the genre: on the one hand, it has failed to inspire the achievement of a perfect society which many readers expect from it; on the other hand, its dullness and rigidity make it a failure as fantastic literature. Ruppert defends the utopian genre by stressing its effect on the reader. By engaging the reader in a dialogue, by challenging existing social values and disturbing and provoking the reader, the successful utopian text activates and liberates us rather than leaving us passive and complacent. The reader thus plays an essential role as an "active producer of meaning" which "grows out of the interplay between social fact and utopian dream" (6). The same utopia will produce different responses from readers because it is essentially a "work in progress," both subversive and constructive at the same time.

According to Ruppert, there are two general types of utopian readers: those primarily interested in its sociopolitical functions and those who approach it as imaginative fiction. The first type, those who read utopias primarily as blueprints for perfection, do not make a sufficient distinction between nonfiction and fiction, fail to take into account the contradictions and paradoxes inherent in utopia's apparent realism, and blur the distinction between utopia and history. Ruppert clearly prefers readers of the second type, among whom he differentiates three different schools of thought: those who, like Darko Suvin, read utopias in terms of cognitive estrangement and value them for their usefulness in defamiliarizing the reader with the prevailing ideology; those who, like Northrop Frye, see them as therapeutic and mythic; and those — futurists like Alvin Toffler and Marxists like Ernst Bloch and Louis Marin — who emphasize the "anticipatory" aspects of the genre. These diverse readings make it clear that utopian literature is not as programmatic and one-dimensional as it is often assumed to be, and that if we focus on the dialectic at the heart of utopia we will appreciate its essential value.

In an expansion of this thesis, Ruppert discusses in detail the theories of Darko Suvin and of Gary Saul Morson, as well as Wolfgang Iser's *The Act of Reading,* from which comes the idea that literary utopias are best understood as a dialectical model "in which reader and text are welded together in mutual dependence" (55). From the "reader oriented criticism" of Iser, Umberto Eco, and others, he draws the distinction between "open" texts that invite the participation of the reader and "closed" texts that produce a more precise and passive response (60). Since for Ruppert the primary value of utopian texts lies in their ambiguities, equivocations, and contradictions, the "open" text is the more useful. However, even books as apparently "closed" as Bellamy's *Looking Backward* can serve to "startle and confound the reader" (73) into

becoming an active participant. The sort of utopia which Ruppert prefers is the "open-ended" or ambiguous utopia, which provides a "critical investigation into utopian values" rather than an ahistorical vision of perfect happiness (126). His best examples are Wells' *A Modern Utopia*, Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and LeGuin's *The Dispossessed.*

Ruppert's emphasis on the deliberate ambiguities and paradoxes of utopia opens up interesting new ways of looking at material we had come to regard as fixed and uninspiring, and his thesis is closely argued and stimulating. However, he devotes more space in his short book to what other critics have said than to the texts themselves. Ruppert inclines toward broad generalizations that do not always hold up in the light of actual experience, assigns utopian texts to some highly disputable categories, and sometimes distorts meanings in order to make them serve his argument. Although he gives a useful reading of More, he devotes most of his chapter on *Utopia* to the theories of Marin and Morson. His discussion of the anti-utopia is unconvincing, partly because he does not seem at all clear on the actual boundaries of the genre, sometimes making a distinction between anti-utopia and dystopia, sometimes confusing the two. Unless I have misunderstood him, he appears to say at one point that anti-utopias confirm the status quo and at another that they cast doubts on it (102-04).

Despite these weaknesses, Ruppert's book is one that most serious utopians will want to own. His style is free from the obfuscations of critical jargon, and he makes a mostly successful attempt to avoid sexist language, calling his reader "she" as often as "he." Ruppert has read widely, and he provides useful summaries of a number of important critical works, as well as an excellent bibliography. If, like many writers with a thesis, he overstates his claims for the efficacy of utopias, he is perhaps imitating what he sees as the primary function of utopias, to force the reader into an active dialogue with the text. He did stimulate this reader considerably and has inspired me to rethink my own opinions of a number of familiar works.

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DINA SHERZER. *Representation in Contemporary French Fiction.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986. 205 p.

Dina Sherzer warns the readers of postmodern French fiction that they should not approach a text expecting to find a traditional story with actions, characters, and suspense. "Rather, they must enter the textual turbulence knowing they are going to have a multifaceted experience" (176). Average readers (students or professors) might well be intimidated by the bedazzling array of "writerly" texts (*scriptibles*, as borrowed from Barthes) considered in this study, but Sherzer's critical approach successfully illuminates the multilayered systems of meaning which characterize French fiction of the past 25 years. The awesome title of the first chapter, "Toward a Thick Description of Polyvalent Texts," belies the accuracy and subtlety of Sherzer's critical terminology which is generally free of gnostic jargon. Indeed, the first chapter serves as an effective summary of critical approaches that are contemporaneous with the works which are studied here.

Under the theme of seriality (chapter 2), Sherzer has grouped Ricardou's *L'Observatoire de Cannes* with Robbe-Grillet's *La Maison de rendez-vous* and