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The reader's role in the fiction of Menán du Plessis

Abstract

The reception theory of Wolfgang Iser is used to explore the effects of the differences in the narration of Du Plessis' novels. The chief differences are the degree of consciousness with which the reader engages in meaning-making and the level at which the reader encounters the major enigma on which the larger interpretation of each novel rests. Also considered are some implications of the analogy, to which my interpretation leads, between narrative form and Du Plessis' judgment of her world.

For years now I've longed for a politics that would be more profound than revolution itself, yet still simple enough to explain the fate of my own brother to me. (*A State of Fear*, 1983:175.)

Moving from one to another, steadily increasing, the drops of quiet light lifted and dipped, joining and splitting.
(*Longlive!*, 1989:182.)

The meaning-making process prompted by Menán du Plessis' novels, *A State of Fear* (1983) and *Longlive!* (1989), promises insight into the way that differences in narration affect this aspect of reading. Both novels are set in the last two decades of political unrest in Cape Town and both explore the condition of marginality, opposing the characters' desire for commitment to their inability to act. But, despite this similarity of context and theme, their narration is so different that the processes by which the reader arrives at their meaning are likely also to differ in significant ways.

For some time now, discussion of meaning in fiction has revolved around the question of who makes the meaning of a text. Traditional criticism has long held that the author is the creator of meaning; more recent theorists have argued, in various ways, that words on a page have no intrinsic or immanent meaning and that the reader is the creator of meaning. In practice, most theorists and critics seem to hold an interactive view: the reader "actualizes a potential meaning latent in the text" (Crosman, 1980:154). Wolfgang Iser's descriptions of interactive processes have been the major influence in this line of discussion; he writes that "interaction" occurs between "two poles ... the author's text and ... the realisation accomplished by the reader", and that the "work" is to be thought of as situated between these poles. This means that it "must inevitably be virtual in character, as it cannot be reduced to the reality of the text or to the subjectivity of the reader, and it is from this virtuality that it derives its dynamism" (Iser, 1980b:106). What prompts the reader to interactive reading are "gaps" and "negation" in the text, but, Iser (1980b:111)

argues, this interaction "is also controlled by what is revealed".

Iser's theory of interactive reading provides a basis from which to explore one of the differences arising from the narration of Du Plessis' novels. *A State of Fear* has a first-person narrator-protagonist, Anna Rossouw, while *Longlive!* uses figural narration (Stanzel, 1971 & 1984) with three chief focaliser-protagonists, Marisa, Desiree and André. These narratological differences lead to the reader's encountering, at different stages of the process, a major enigma on which the larger interpretation of each novel rests. In the case of *A State of Fear*, this encounter appears to break the interactive process for it calls up the reader's consideration of his/her personal, social context and values in a way which separates them from the reader-text field. That the text prompts these questions does of course make them the products of interaction, but it would seem that in reading *A State of Fear*, their resolution and evaluation does not sustain the interactive process. In resolving the major enigma of *Longlive!*, the reader remains much more consciously involved in an interactive process, being persuaded to turn to the textual information supplied by both the content and the narrative mode for guidance.

To some theorists, moving directly from text to actual reader may seem a false step, but I do so for several reasons. It is partly in recognition of a problem in the concept of the 'implied reader', for it can become yet another text-immanent property (Holub, 1984:85) and so put reception theory back into the realms of authorial intention. Another reason lies in Iser's account of why interpretation is necessarily interactive and distinct from a simple, one-way reception. He sees the interpretation of texts as analogous to interpreting other people, and bases his view of the need for interpretation on the argument of psychologists that as we have no direct understanding of the actions of others - we are unable to experience how others experience us (Iser, 1980b:108) - we have to interpret them. It is this "invisibility" (R.D. Laing, quoted by Iser, 1980b:108) of personal experience which invites me to attempt to describe how I experience the meaning-making processes of reading. I have also chosen to speak personally at times because reception theory's generalised category, 'the reader', suggests a homogeneity that would involve an arrogant claim in South Africa at this time.

In *A State of Fear*, the homodiegetic narrator (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983:92-6), Anna Rossouw, while disavowing her authority, fills the narrated world with her perceptions, encouraging the reader simply to follow where she leads. She herself is so active in attempting to "supply what is meant from what is not said" (Iser, 1980b:111) that the reader may be led away from interaction and lulled into a sense of passive reception. Such narration clearly supports the novel's broad subject of "consciousness" (Hunter, 1989:87) as well as, somewhat ironically, Anna's search for an all-encompassing belief system. As Anna writes, she recognises that her script has become an "epistolary fiction" to an unnamed narratee, a "you" who, she says, "can't answer me, after all, and so our conversation keeps winding back on itself - becoming internally sufficient, like the language of music, or insanity, maybe" (1983:127). Reading this "internally sufficient" narrative is a matter of following Anna's restless thoughts as she searches for a stable basis of belief, for a "profound ... yet ... simple" politics which will satisfactorily explain her circumstances to her. She is a schoolteacher at a 'coloured' school and has given temporary shelter to two of her pupils who are on the run from the police because they are engaged in 'subversive' activities. Despite her intense sympathy with her pupils' cause, Anna feels that the official policy of racial division which has shaped the whole of her life (let alone that of her pupils), now precludes her from joining their struggle. And so she sits, waiting, writing and wondering if they will return.

As she tries to untangle her feelings about her pupils' fight, she also tries to understand her sense of having been betrayed when her father, a famous Afrikaans poet, left home to live with his mistress, and again when he chose to live and write in Europe. A combination of desertion and betrayal also clouds her thoughts about her brother, Francois, who has disappeared and who may, she thinks, be dead.

Menán du Plessis has placed before her readers a young, erudite narrator-protagonist who is well versed in the various systems of thought that Western culture has developed in order to understand both inner and external experience. Because Anna's thought processes are complex and comprehensive, the reader may well be content to be led along a route that is rich and varied; but it is also one on which nothing happens for, besides feeling morally precluded from action, Anna also feels herself to be caught in a philosophical trap which extends to language itself. She fears that to act (and this includes speaking) might be to destroy the immediate and delicate wholeness of life to which she aspires. As she broods, she recognises that the same fear drove her naturalist brother, Francois:

He hated to kill any creature, even for the sake of learning something. Why couldn't he accept that you have to kill a part of your most vivid, richest experience - before you can enter into systematic knowledge. Isn't that it. The small murder that inaugurates each symbol. (1983:185.)

When she turns to her own case as a narrator, Anna sees that because of the inevitable gap between experience and language, she too is involved in "small murder[s]":

Maybe ... while you're actually at the heart of the moment ... your actions have a fixed quality; the immediate meaning of them bound to place and instant. It's only afterwards, when you stop to think about it, that meaning frees itself and becomes a symbol, a story. (1983: 24.)

This loss of connection coincides with the death of what Anna sees as her faith in natural beauty and "the high Romance of the Christian myths" (1983:130) as guarantors of meaning.

But, while Anna despairs over her imprisoned state, she also acknowledges two positive features of the act of utterance: despite their inevitable separation from experience, the symbols of language are also a means of communication, and communication involves a degree of 'free' creativity. Throughout her narrative, the reader watches Anna rest on this knife-edge of belief: language stands opposed to action, to immediate experience, and yet utterance is an act in itself - and it can be a creative act of communication. Because she desires communication above all else, Anna claims this freedom for her reader too: the unnamed 'you' to whom she is writing can "alter this fragmented print into a flowing pattern of remembered meaning within your own mind" (1983:15). But, although Anna wants the kind of interactive process Iser describes, the more she attempts to achieve it, the more her narration exerts a kind of control over her reader and her efforts are ironically negated. The reader remains an observer rather than a participant in her meaning.

What is significant here is that the textually declared (but ironically negated) interaction is between a character and the reader; it is in the character's, not the author's, text that the "inevitable omissions" (Iser, 1980a:55) which invite the reader's active meaning-making are located. In narratological terms, the focaliser is Anna and that which is focalised is her own perception of events. Her mind mediates all; the illusion that she is the source and the limit of everything seems complete. It is not until the reader actively resists this spell and asks, for example, why it is that the narrative's solipsism should be so powerful (solipsism is not a necessary concomitant of homodiegetic narration), or who has decided that this

should be so, that the narrator's power is dispelled and the author's hitherto hidden presence is revealed. What now appears is yet another gap to be filled by the reader's interpretative capacities. It is at this point, I think, that the reader is not in the same kind of interaction with the text as was the case in 'earlier' responses to its indeterminacy,¹ and the basis for the reader's answer will lie with a newly introduced consciousness of a text-external context and value system. Of course, every time that a reader names Anna's properties with terms such as 'diffident' or 'insecure' in order to account for matters like the style of her memories and judgements as well as their ordering, there is a minute break in the power of her mediating presence, but for most readers this would probably not entail their being aware of breaking Anna's spell. Self-reflection involving considerations outside the textual field only becomes clear when, for example, I ask myself why Anna's irritation with her claustrophobic narration is, in turn, annoying and disturbing to me. At this point the textually provided information about family failures, political irrelevance and philosophical problems with language cannot be enough to resolve the meaning of the narrative mode.

The spell of the narrative mode of *Longlive!* is differently created and different in effect. The figural narrators are agents of events in a way that Anna Rossouw is not. The action spans a single day during which they are each faced with an important decision: Marisa Siervogel, an often defensively flighty actress, has to brave her own fears and the use of force by the police in order to attend a political funeral in Hanover Park; Desiree September, orphaned daughter of a politically active, 'coloured' teacher and a part-time research student, has to resume her heartbreaking work with the casualties of the labour system in the advice office of a trade union; André Binneman, a breakaway Afrikaner and a dangerous 'commie' in the eyes of his father (but merely a pedantic lecturer, in his own), has to decide what place in his life he will allow his father when his younger brother comes home on leave from the army. There is a fourth, silent character who also makes a decision: Chris Braaf, who shares a house with the other three characters, is a 'coloured' music student who gives his last recital before leaving for America where he will further his training as an opera singer. None of his house-mates makes time to attend his recital; the day ends with his suicide.

Besides being figural, the tone of the narration is much more varied than that of *A State of Fear* and this is another factor which will prompt the reader into self-orienting recognitions. It varies as the characters seek to understand their place in political developments: Marisa and Desiree have little time for the philosopher André's abstractions; he himself is impatient with his inability simply to tell Chris how beautiful he finds his singing. Desiree teases him, trying to get him to recognise the truth of Goethe's contrast between the "greyness of the dogma, [and] the greenness of the tree of life" (1989:28).

Even more importantly for the reader's role, Du Plessis has moved away from the solipsism of her previous narrator-protagonist and has cast this narrative in the form of a quartet - a tragically flawed quartet. In the composite story of Marisa, Desiree, André and Chris, it is the reader who has to do what Anna Rossouw did in *A State of Fear*; the reader sorts out the connections, follows up the hints of relatedness, recognises the cultural load of what Jacobs (1990) has discussed as the "existential or historical" naming of the characters, and

¹ 'Earlier' is an analytical convenience, rather than an indication of an actual or necessary sequence of responses.

places the extensive, declared literary and musical intertextuality. By inviting a conscious 'joining and splitting' of meaning akin to that of the candle-light at the township funeral, the text employs indeterminacy to encourage the reader to a much more democratic kind of reading - to reflect continuously and consciously on what is involved in interpreting this text. It is no longer, as it was with *Anna*, a matter of simply following a narrator's comprehensive efforts to understand matters.

In view of the comparative conclusions that I will later suggest about the effect of Du Plessis' novels, it has to be remembered at this point that the freedom I am pointing to in *Longlive!* is an illusion which holds the reader within the field of the text. This can be shown in narratological analysis: in her discussion of focalisation (who sees and who speaks), Mieke Bal (1985:10) has pointed out that a sentence such as "Michelle saw that Mary participated in the protest march" has two focalisers. This doubleness is the mode of *Longlive!*: "André looked at Riaan. In the light of the falling, quietened flames, his brother's face was an assemblage of glistening planes and shadows" (1989:250); in both examples, there is a character-focaliser (Michelle and André) but logically there is also another, unidentified one present which focalises phrases such as "Michelle saw" and "André looked". As this imperceptible focaliser directs the reader's most basic orientations and meaning-making, we have to conclude that, all along, the sense of being in immediate contact with the characters' minds in *Longlive!* and of gaining a greater freedom and responsibility in meaning-making has been textually created.

The element of the text which does most to make the reader self-conscious about meaning-making is the way that the day's climax, Chris Braaf's death, is never explained; it is presented as an enigma. It is also this question which, while similar in importance to the major enigma in *A State of Fear*, engages the reader somewhat differently. For one thing, it occurs at the very end of the text so that the reader has to re-think everything that has gone before in order to create its meaning. This final enigma is also different in degree, perhaps even in kind, from the other gaps which have demanded the reader's involvement. When Barthes (1974) speaks of the reader's encountering enigmas which activate the hermeneutic code, and when Iser speaks of 'gaps' which have to be filled, their reference is not necessarily to a major question which dominates the narrative.² When faced with the shock of an unexpected suicide, a shock that is intensified by the constant mystery of Chris Braaf's being (he has been present only in the thoughts and words of other characters, not in his own right), the reader is made conscious of obligations which go far beyond the more routine answers which encourage a continued reading. But, while the question confronting the reader here is as large as the one that was raised by asking why the narration of *A State of Fear* is so claustrophobic, it is not one which thrusts the reader into awareness of text-external factors.

In fact, the narrative itself actively sets up the range of possibilities through which the reader will work. The first involves aesthetic matters: Chris Braaf may have killed himself because he had lost confidence in himself as artist. Or he may have gone further and lost faith in his art, seeing it as irrelevant to the immediate condition of his world. This

² As it happens, the first functioning of the hermeneutic code to which Barthes points in his discussion of *Sarrazine* does arise from an enigma (the curiously female form of the name) which will prove central to the narrative; but in principle the first-encountered enigmatic entity could equally well have been a more prosaic one - a mere doormat at the point of entry.

possibility is signalled through things like Marisa's memories of being unable to continue to play Cordelia in a production of *King Lear*, and through her lover's sneering at her inauthenticity as a political radical. By using Marisa as a parallel case, the reader may conclude that Chris's fatal loss of faith turns on the ambiguities of the the novel's silent, but ruling pun, 'to act', which means both to do and to imitate. This reverberating pun echoes Anna's concern, in *A State of Fear*, with the possibility of inauthenticity in all action, including writing. In this text, it is the romantic revolutionary Felicia (one of the pupils whom Anna shelters) who is able to spell out the opposed meanings of 'to act' when she rejects her past interest in "bourgeois theatre" and declares that fighting in the real world is "the only kind of acting I believe in now" (1983:126). In *Longlive!*, the narration requires that the reader, as well as the characters, engages self-consciously with the ambiguities of the ruling pun.

Chris Braaf's death can also be seen as the product of a more obviously personal conflict - one with his family, and here the parallel character would be André. Chris's father, who has never heard him sing, seems to be the one who has left him the arch-male weapon, a gun; his adored mother has left him both her collection of records and her frequent lament for the beauty they lost when the whites "came with their Group, to murder us all" (1989:42). In the shock of being evicted, she made a jasmine creeper her symbol of all that she lost. Chris learns from his father that there was no such creeper; it is possible that his discovery of the lie as well as his father's contempt for his mother's need for beauty is what has destroyed Chris's belief in himself as a creator of beauty, as a singer.

Finally, and at a level which is complementary to the punning on 'act' in *Longlive!*, Chris Braaf's death may work so as to make the reader self-conscious while creating a set of explanatory meanings for the significance of his being a singer.³ These meanings will rest primarily on the relational order that the reader gives to factors such as the physical effort of singing, described in Chris's study notes (1989:244); the beauty of song in Leontyne Price as she sings Puccini and in Chris himself as the "amber sound" (1989:247) of his voice on the audition tape plays out the last moments of his life; the puzzle of, as André puts it, a song's "enigmatic ... mode of existence [for it is both] a 'thing' [and] and an 'object' that dwell[s] only in the human mind" (1989:10); the gaiety of heart, the courage - Desiree's mother's maiden name was Hedsinger (1989: 217) - that wanting to sing demands of Marisa who, only after her ordeal by teargas, feels able to sing with the funeral crowd; the promise of perfect union and harmony in song, as the absence of Chris's voice from the narrative quartet constantly reminds the reader. Incidental support for the view that the perfect harmony attainable in song is a central idea, comes from Menán du Plessis' remark that she once planned to call this novel *Communion* (Willemse, 1989: 44). Against all this, there is also the uncomfortable truth that the unity that comes with keeping to a prescribed role is not always a humanly desirable condition. Marisa remembers the caretaker of the block of flats where she had lived when rehearsing for the part of Cordelia; he was murdered by his brothers when he tried to leave their choir.

These factors will also all function to create an understanding of why it is the singer who commits suicide, which is why the reader will be conscious of resolving the novel's major

³ From earlier versions of parts of *Longlive!* (1987 and 1988), it is clear that singing and the character 'Marisa' have remained central in Menán du Plessis' thinking. In the short story, "The Aria that Died in the Wind" (1988), a woman called Maria Siervogel is a concert and opera singer who finds that her art cannot accommodate the political fact of neglected, starving and dead children.

enigma from within the reader-text field. Like this novel, *A State of Fear* also has its unexplained death, that of Anna's brother Francois, but the role it gives the reader is to observe the way that Anna tries to accommodate it (and that of Wilson too) in her understanding of her world; the reader is not consciously faced with the obligation and the freedom to work out the significance of these probable deaths. As text-external considerations do not rise to consciousness until the reader resists and questions the imprisoning effect of Anna's narration, it is the presentational process rather than the presented world which brings the reader into self-conscious meaning-making.

The motivation for Chris Braaf's suicide which my reading supplies is that it arises from a sense of powerlessness and irrelevance in society. My reading is a political one produced by the interaction of the text-based possibilities and my own sense of my external context. But for other readers, an emphasis on the psychological (the family) or on the aesthetic may well provide a more compelling explanation.⁴ For example, Eva Hunter (1989:88) reports that family conflict is the explanatory factor on which her reading rests: "On second reading ... I became aware of how much focal consciousness is dominated by memories of childhood and parents. The characters are on the verge ... of breaking loose from parental domination into emotional freedom and commitment". In my political reading, Chris Braaf's suicide validates matters such as Marisa's efforts to achieve political commitment and Desiree's efforts to decide whether her work for the trade union is politically useful. It also works to place the irony of André's comforting his house-mates over Chris's death while his father dies alone in his car. It provides the thematic relevance of Desiree's family's long-standing political involvement, notably with the Unity Movement.⁵ It works similarly for Marisa's speaking of the need to celebrate when someone dies, "so we remember what it means to be alive" (1989: 132), and her hearing the preacher at the funeral give her sentiments a political force when he speaks of the mourners' joy because their gathering demonstrates that the "spirit of resistance" (1989: 191) is indestructible. With this political claim of an unquenchable spirit in mind, the reader may feel that there is an answer available (although not an easy one) to the members of the household who, after Chris's death, are left asking, in the words of André's younger brother, "Boet, what are we supposed to do now?" (1989:255). What counteracts nihilism and despair is the demand for responsibility in life.⁶

As should now be obvious, Anna's claustrophobic narration seems to me to express the impossibility of acting on a desired political responsibility. In understanding why such stasis should be as disturbing as it is, my text-external sense of how it comments on my own context seems to coincide with that of the author. Menán du Plessis has spoken of her

⁴ Margaret Lenta (1989) has shown, by comparing interpretations of novels which involve more than one cultural tradition, how readers located differently in place and time will find different meanings in the same text.

⁵ The Unity Movement came into being during the 1940s and attracted many 'coloured' intellectual members. It opposed the creation of a Coloured Affairs Department (the outcome of the disenfranchising of the 'coloured' people) and campaigned for political power and a fairer division of land (Davenport, 1977:249).

⁶ The political affirmations I am claiming give my reading a different emphasis from the equally political interpretation in Graham Pechey's review of this novel. He speaks of the "ordeal of being ambushed by history [which] engulfs everybody" (Pechey, 1990:4).

personal preoccupation with *Angst*, with people who find that the direction they want their lives to take is at odds with their heritage (Coetzee & Polley, 1990:134).

That the enigmas in both novels are given political meaning returns me now to re-examine the factor from which this discussion began: each enigma functions at a different level by virtue of the different narrative modes that Du Plessis has used. What significance, if any, does the difference between a text-internal and a text-external resolution of a major enigma have? My answers lie in the conclusion that both novels rest on an analogy between the reader's responsibility for making meaning and Menán du Plessis' own judgment of the political possibilities of her actual world. Because of their narrative modes, this analogy is located at different stages in the meaning-making process for each novel and this too seems to me to convey Du Plessis' judgments of her world. Thus in *A State of Fear*, which reflects the beginning of a period of sustained civic unrest as political protest in South Africa, claiming the freedom to be a responsible reader comes from an act of resistance against the relative passivity which the narrator has enjoined on the reader. The disobedience leading to ruptures which release meaning could be said to be a civic as well as a readerly obligation. In *Longlive!*, set at the height of the same long period of unrest, the reader is pitched into a sudden, conscious reading choice which then is sustained from within the text-reader field. By analogy, the society about which Du Plessis is writing would seem to offer greater possibility of meaningful action. Thus, in both novels, the act of selecting meaning becomes equivalent not only to claiming the right to political responsibility but also to the way in which, at an actual historic moment, it has to be claimed: form in both novels can thus be seen to be mimetic of Du Plessis' beliefs about her world.

What emerges from this suggestion of an analogy between political judgement and fictional form is the realisation that for both novels an interactive creation of meaning has, in a wider sense, remained under way. As was said earlier, the narrative mode of *Longlive!* may at first suggest that the meaning-making process that it invites is at all levels a more democratic one than in *A State of Fear*, but this impression is not altogether free from the illusory powers of narration. The interactive description of the reader's role that I have given ranges from the text-created role that Ong describes ("the office worker on a bus reading a novel of Thomas Hardy ... is playing the role demanded of him by [the narrator] in a quite special way" (Ong, 1977: 61)) to the disobedient, resisting side of the activity that I have shown coming into play in *A State of Fear*. These are not mutually exclusive options in reading, but variants within the reader's role.

As much of my account of reading involves an avowedly personal interpretation of the novels, particularly of their form, the content of my conclusions may be accepted by very few other readers. It may be that only those who have known the political irrelevance felt by white South Africans during the 1980s will give this theme the same importance. On the other hand, it may be that readers in other times and places will recognise the structuring processes (as distinct from content) and issues that I have described in the resolution of the novels' major enigmas. If so, this would be a small step towards the theory of reading envisaged by Culler (1980), and would comply with his claim that "to investigate literary signification one must analyse interpretative operations" (Culler, 1981:50).

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