

THE CASE FOR A HUMANISTIC POETICS

Also by Daniel R. Schwarz

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***CONRAD: 'ALMAYER'S FOLLY' TO 'UNDER WESTERN EYES'**

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ENGLISH NOVEL FROM JAMES TO HILLIS MILLER**

***READING JOYCE'S 'ULYSSES'**

***THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE ENGLISH NOVEL,
1890-1930**

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The Case For a Humanistic Poetics

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In memory of my grandparents:
John and Sadie Rimler;
Otto and Bessie Schwarz

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Introduction

The Case for a Humanistic Poetics continues my effort to define a humanistic and pluralistic ideology of reading that takes account of recent theory. This book answers the question that I have often been asked since I have been commenting on theoretical issues, 'What is *your* theoretical position?' Beginning with *The Humanistic Heritage: Critical Theories of the English Novel from James to Hillis Miller* (1986), I have been interested in defining and preserving what is valuable in diverse theoretical approaches. While respecting the contribution of deconstruction, I have been among its sceptics, preferring to consider it as one approach among many. In my practical criticism, most notably in *Reading Joyce's 'Ulysses'* (1987) and *The Transformation of the British Novel, 1890–1930* (1989), I have tried to show how the use of multiple approaches – an informed pluralism – creates a richer reading than exclusive reliance on one approach. I am questioning the hegemony of monolithic ideological thinking that insists that *any* one approach is better or more inclusive than others.

My work establishes a dialogue between recent and traditional theory and between theory and primary texts. Specifically, I try to bisect the distance between reader-response criticism and Aristotelian assumptions about how literary works generate a structure of effects. I read in terms of formal considerations without sacrificing authors, historical contexts, and what actual readers do when they respond to texts. Although the focus of my work has been fiction, much of what I say applies to poetry and drama; as my book-in-progress on Stevens will illustrate, my theoretical position is no less applicable to the reading of poetry. If my examples often derive from Joyce, it is because he provides an example of an author who requires multiple ideologies of reading.

The Case For a Humanistic Poetics was conceived as a whole. While a number of the following interrelated chapters were originally presented as lectures at conferences and later revised and lengthened for publication in journals, all but the first chapter, 'The Case for Humanistic Formalism' – which was the keynote address at the 1987 International Narrative Conference in Ann Arbor – have been substantially revised and their arguments have been developed more thoroughly. Thus a shorter version of the second chapter,

'The Ethics of Reading: The Case for Pluralistic and Transactional Reading', was presented at *Novel's* Twentieth Anniversary Conference in 1987. In this chapter, I focus on how each reader belongs to numerous interpretive communities and how an ethical reading depends on awareness of how we are reading complex texts. My example is Joyce's 'Araby'. I also propose five stages of the process of reading and a full definition of a transactional model of reading. The third chapter, 'Character and Characterization: an Inquiry', develops a talk I gave at the 1988 Narrative conference at Ohio State. This chapter addresses the necessity for understanding the difference between the mimetic function of *character* and the author's formal choices – conscious and unconscious – that constitute *characterization*. I differentiate the audience response to character in the visual arts from that in literature. In this chapter Joyce's 'The Dead' is a primary example; but, to show the applicability of my theories of reading to poetry, I also refer to the poetry of Wallace Stevens. The original form of Chapter 4, 'The Narrative of Paul de Man: Texts, Issues, Significance', was a lecture that I gave at the 1989 Narrative conference at Madison, Wisconsin. Using the posthumous revelation of de Man's collaborationist and anti-semitic writing, I show that to understand de Man's texts and their significance, we must rely on the continuity of an author's career, historical context, and narrative – the very elements that this major deconstructionist sought to banish from his work. I argue that the *story* of de Man's career questions deconstruction's basic tenets and refocuses our attention on content, narrative, voice, and mimesis. I also explore the relationship between de Man's wartime and later texts, and propose a narrative of repression and displacement to explain his life and work.

My fifth and last chapter, 'Towards a Humanistic Poetics: Contributions and Challenges', addresses recent work that owes its assumptions to and/or contributes to defining a humanistic poetics. Like the chapter entitled 'Modes of Literary Inquiry' in *The Transformation of the English Novel, 1890–1930*, this chapter discusses a number of important and provocative books that speak to the current debates in criticism and to the issues I raise in the earlier chapters. These books enable me both to define significant issues that a humanistic poetics needs to address and to give a sense of the current debates within the profession of teaching literature and reading. In the concluding piece, 'Who's Afraid of *Finnegans Wake?*', I use John Bishop's study of the *Wake* – a deliberately

unlikely text – to stress how we necessarily seek to locate coherent character, narrative voice, and anterior reality in even the most resistant texts. I believe that these discussions of critical and theoretical texts add another dimension to what I mean by a humanistic poetics.