In the opening chapter of this book, we laid out a variety of problems and paradoxes. The central issue was that the author writes a narrative with her grasp of public language, while the reader reads a narrative with his grasp of the same. In this way the author reproduces her culture in the text, while the reader reproduces his culture out of the text. This tends to make the author disappear, as the reader applies his use of words, literary structures, and social institutions. The author vanishes behind the veil of each, so that her voice, her ‘meaning,’ is obscured by the fog. We have come a long way since that statement of the problem, and posed ways of bringing the author’s voice back into focus. Indeed, a summary is needed!

But more than just a summary is needed. We need a practice-oriented summary, that is, one which is organized along the task of actually reading texts. In short, we need to move from theoretical considerations about reading, to an application of theory in reading. To accomplish this, we will organize this chapter by laying out our general approach to an ethic of reading. Such will still begin with theory and its concerns, as oriented to the reading process, and end with an examination of other approaches, such as Feminist Criticism and Deconstruction.

Desires, Methods, and Ethics

Our model ethical readers (hereafter, just ‘readers’) pick up a narrative. They do so out of a desire, and that desire will create an inherent bias about what they find. Further, that desire will select a method to create the objects of that desire. Both will bend the text towards pre-reading ends, so that readers are never neutral about reading in the first place. It is like seeing the world through colored glasses, and then trying to identify the actual colors of that world. While readers can change the glasses, from one tint to another, they cannot view the world with no glasses at all. So, the initial goal is to decide which set of glasses to use.

Here readers turn to an inquiry about the issues of desire and method. They might begin by asking if it matters which desire or method they use. To answer this, we examined the author-text relation and the reader-text relation. Writing is an intentional act, where the writer begins with ‘things’ that she desires to
say and ‘effects’ she desires to create. She proceeds by creating an implied author, who formulates the imaginary (characters, story-world) in such a way as to be understandable to her authorial audience (her grasp of the intended audience). She utilizes the linguistic and literary conventions of that audience, and this forms the ‘language design’ of the text. In doing so, she reproduces the culture of her audience in the text.

But the author, functioning as an implied author, also proceeds by reproducing her subjectivity in the narrative. The author is capable of using her subjectivity in the creation of newness, especially when utilizing those specialized processes oriented towards developing newness (hermeneutic circle, supervenience, divergent thinking). To the degree that the author instantiates newness in the text, the text becomes her ever-unique voice in the world. The author’s voice may be encoded and transmitted through existing cultural elements (conventional language), but newness can intrude at almost every level, from new uses of words to new forms of language, and even extend to new themes and meanings.

As the text is the author’s voice, at least in part, readers recognize that they are dealing with a subject. For our reader, this calls for ethical principles, where the author-as-subject is treated as a subject (a Thou), and not an object (an It). Her voice is valued not because the text is well written or reproduces the reader’s favored ideology, but just because the author is a subject. Indeed, her intrinsic value is identical to the reader’s own, and this means that the reader affords her voice the same respect that he affords his own. This shapes the contours of the reader-text relation, by placing side restraints on the desires and methods that the reader initially applies to the text. Desires and methods that result in the manipulation or silencing of the author’s voice cross into problematic territory. Desires and methods that value the author’s voice, and so are designed to recover that voice, fit within these ethical restraints.

Of course, just because a desire or method fits within these restraints does not mean that it accomplishes these ends. Many traditional stances strive to ‘create the author’s meaning,’ such as strong intentionalism and literalism, but are based on problematic assumptions which fail to accomplish that goal. Our suggestion is that the recovery of the author’s voice requires an examination of how the author desired, planned, and structured her text to be read. In other words, before the reader actually reads, he turns to the author-text relation, and uses this to guide the reading process. Some might call this ‘showing respect’ to the text, but more properly, it is showing respect to the author: the reader is attempting to use the text as the author desired for the reader to use the text. After all, methods always use the text instrumentally, to reproduce their founding assumptions. Here the ‘use’ is simply guided by the author-text