

PROBLEMATISING THE ‘TEXT’ :READER RESPONSE CRITICISM, ITS PRAXIS AND ROLE OF THE ‘READER’ IN EVALUATING ,INTERPRETING AND REINTERPRETING THE LANGUAGE AND SEMANTICS OF A TEXT.

Shreya Sarkar

Formerly Assistant professor, course co-ordinator,
Department of English (Basic Science & Humanities)
University of Engineering & Management, Kolkata

In the year 1796, French Enlightenment philosopher, Destutt de Tracy coined the term “ideology” assembling the parts ‘idea’ or, an assumption and ‘logos’ or, ‘knowledge’. “Ideology” therefore, is the knowledge or study of ideas. Lexical meaning of the term suggests, a body of assumptions that represent the beliefs of a nation, generation, class and so forth. Through this definition, it becomes apparent, that the term is somewhat politically oriented. However, what is important here, is the nature of the relationship between “ideology” and “praxis”. To begin with, it is praxis or, the awakening of a phenomenon from a state of stasis, which gives birth to an ideology. That is to say, ideology always follows praxis, never the other way around. For instance, Christianity has become such a potent religious ideology only after the noble thoughts and preaching of an exemplary inspiring figure, Jesus Christ. In short, an ideology is an umbrella term that involves certain tenets. This collaboration between ideology and praxis is strongly analogous to, that between theory and text, in the vast domain of Literature. When certain common and distinguishing characteristics of a group of writers of a particular age are noticed, they are critically analysed and conveniently enmassed as one category and endowed with a suitable label by critics and scholars for further research and reference. Thus, literary ideology, better known as literary theory, follows literary praxis, an oblique reference to actual literary texts.

Since the time of Renaissance, major literary movements, theories and “isms” have proliferated. Still, researchers and students of English have often lacked the ability to apply the literary theories successfully to the actual practice of literary criticism. One of the primary causes behind this limitation is perhaps, the nature of literary studies, which is mostly, subjective. Unlike an impassioned scientist who is conveniently armoured with laboratory samples to carry out his experiments and thereby draw solid inferences, to prove his point, a man of literature finds this procedure somewhat out of his province. His genius depends rather on an exhaustive reading and an extraordinarily analytical mind. Unfortunately, the wide range of knowledge that is acquired, often creates an imaginary cauldron, brimming with overlapping, at times perplexing multiple perspectives inside the mind of the reader causing unsavoury digressions. Then it becomes increasingly arduous to apply literary theories profitably in the field of interpretation or re-interpretation of specific literary texts. Considering myself to be no exception to this problem, in my paper, I have painstakingly attempted to achieve a fruitful remedy. Our primary duty is to prevent the interference of unrelated or even partially related stored knowledge in the course of applying a specific literary theory to a text. A no-mind state could aid in achieving a truly spontaneous analytical proficiency. For instance, if one is reading Machiavelli’s *The Prince*¹ as a humanistic text, one must adhere to it strictly, rather than pouring facets of other grand literary theories such as Modernism or the Carnavalesque²,

Feminism, et al, into the analysis, just because one is academically familiar with them. My treatise particularly concentrates on the Reader-response criticism, as its tenets make me both interested as well as, distraught. First and foremost, Reader-response is a conflicting ideology of problematizing the text. The meaning and message designed by the writer, dwindles into nothingness as a text is problematized by the restive reader. He decides the ultimate meaning. A significant aspect of Reader-oriented theory, it focuses on the relationship between a text and its reader and vice versa. Practitioners are ardently concerned with the crucial role played by the reader in the course of reading a text , consequently giving birth to myriad perspectives and interpretations. Although reader-response criticism emerged in the 1970s, its concerns were not entirely new. As far back as the classical era, critics viewed literature as a means of making the audience respond in the desired manner. 1970s nevertheless, was a vital period for reader-response to mature as a critical literary theory. During this time, French literary critic Roland Barthes, was corroborating the stasis of the author no sooner than he put his pen down. In the concluding section of his famous essay ‘The Death of the Author’(1967), Barthes declares, “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the Death of the Author”. In his book *S/Z* (1970), he made a distinction between two kinds of text: the “lisible” or ‘readerly’ and the “scriptible” or ‘writerly’. In the former, a fairly recognizable world is depicted, as in realistic novels and the reader may then remain dormant. A ‘writerly’ text, however, makes demands on the reader, such as Joyce’s *Ulysses*. One significant quotation of Giovanni Boccaccio articulates the obligation of such a reader – “You must read, you must persevere, you must sit up nights, you must inquire, and exert the utmost power of your mind. If one way does not lead to the desired meaning, take another; if obstacles arise, then still another; until, if your strength holds out, you will find that clear which at first looked dark.”³ Fundamentally, a poem, short story or essay, according to German critic, Wolfgang Iser, have “Leerstellen” meaning lacunae or gaps which ought to be “concretized” by the reader in order to actualize the potential meaning of the text. He mentions this in *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*(1978). Gaps and indeterminacies provide space to readers for participation. Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* has blank pages which invite the reader’s generous interpretation. Iser also invented two terms discussed in *The Act of Reading and The Implied Reader*(1974) - the ‘implied reader’ and ‘actual reader’. The former is a ‘model’ whom the text creates for itself and such a reader is both active as well as passive. The latter, by contrast receives mental images while reading, and these images are inevitably modified by the intrusion of other images already ingrained in the mind. Interestingly, the hypothetical implied and actual reader co-exist and are the same person responding to a text in numerous ways and at varying levels of consciousness.

Thus, reader-response theory is primarily concerned with the reader’s contribution to a text, and it defies the text-oriented theories of Formalism⁴ and New Criticism⁵. Devoid of a rigid theoretical stance, diverse schools have contributed to its development. For instance, reader-response criticism is fundamental to Phenomenology and phenomenological criticism and also to theories of Hermeneutics. The latter is derived from ‘Hermes’, the great messenger of the gods in Greek Mythology. Thus, Hermeneutics involves a kind of transmission and in Literature, it is concerned with the way textual meaning is communicated. Made famous by Hans-Georg Gadamer, it is an attempt to translate something obscure and foreign. At the same time, we cannot have a chaotic and anarchic reading of texts. Every text has got some sort of structure. For instance, *Hamlet* cannot be read as a science fiction. Again Shakespeare did not think of postcolonial criticism when he

wrote *The Tempest*. Yet this text can be read as a postcolonial text because of latent archetypal power structures embedded in different ways. Heidegger, Gadamer believes that the reading of a text brings out not only what is latent in the work, but also what is latent in the reader. They explore a realm which takes leave of the epistemological approach and move towards what is called, fundamental ontology or 'situatedness'. That is to say, one would interpret a text with reference to his own present condition or situation in life. The central query of these German philosophers therefore revolves around the question of the being. Heidegger uses a German word 'Dasein', which means not just the being but also the question of the being. Here lies the essence of the words of French writer, Ernest Dimnet: "A book, like a landscape, is a state of consciousness varying with readers." Initially, Hermeneutics was related to the finding and interpretation of the spiritual truth in the Bible. The following are its stages:

- 1."Sensus Literalis" or interpreting something in its literal sense;
- 2."Sensus Spiritualis" or a spiritual understanding of a passage. For instance, in the

Yogic interpretation of Mahabharata, the five brothers represent the five senses. These modes of understanding were later challenged by Protestants.

3."Philological Hermeneutics" is primarily concerned with language. Although close to New Criticism, it is strongly allied to translation and pedagogical concerns.

4.A highly empirical stage is "Enlightenment Hermeneutics" consisting of two dimensions- 'Affective' and 'Semiotic'⁶ both of which agree to the fact that, every text must have a single interpretation based on two factors- intention of the author and reader's understanding of the text.

5."Romantic Hermeneutics" is concerned with authorial intention and psychological identification with the author.

Hermeneutics therefore, is the art of interpretation and translation, and depends particularly on the reader as an active agent in the creation of meaning. Let us try and analyse Shelley's 'To a Skylark' from a hermeneutic point of view. In its literal sense, the ode delineates an "unseen" bird that envelopes the poet's mind and the surrounding "In profuse strains of unpremeditated art." On a spiritual level, the divine song of the skylark inspires the poet to identify himself with the bird so much so that the creature turns into a "blithe Spirit" in his eyes. From a philological point of view, one cannot help but notice the abundant use of similes, resplendent imagery, lucid syntax, regular pauses for suggesting a thought and unaffected diction. The fourth stage, Enlightenment Hermeneutics, albeit is similar to the preceding one, is even more radical in its approach. T.S Eliot wrote an essay, 'Tradition and Individual Talent'(1919) on the impersonality of the poet. Likewise, Enlightenment Hermeneutics is essentially empirical and negates multiple perspectives. Thus, from this angle, 'To a Skylark' is simply, a celebration of the song of a bird, as it mesmerizes the poet. The fifth stage, Romantic Hermeneutics is perhaps closest to the meaning intended by Shelley himself. In the ode, the poet eulogizes the spontaneity of the bird and wishes to identify himself with it, as the bird teaches the poet philosophical truths about life such as, "Our sincerest laughter/ With some pain is fraught;/ Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought." This stage allows a subjective reading of the text. It gradually becomes obvious, the hermeneutic theory does not permit the meaning of

any text to lie at a single stratum; it peels open like an onion; the deeper we delve, the more we perceive about its evocations. Hermeneutics thus, is a three-dimensional phenomenon which involves encountering the text or reading; understanding the argument and praxis or application of the acquired knowledge, which could be by writing.

Reader-response criticism corroborates the plurality of meaning as opposed to any definite interpretation of a literary work. Critics focus on the 'gaps', a key term in Iser's theory, in a text, to reconstruct its meaning. While preparing this treatise, I was reminded of a tiny part of the invocation from The Book of Common Prayer⁷(Collect for the second Sunday in Advent,1548), "... read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest". Likewise, the reader reads thoroughly and decodes the text. Thus, a text hardly has a real existence until it is read. Italian semiotician and critic, Umberto Eco, in *The Role of the Reader*(1979) distinguishes between what he calls 'open' and 'closed' texts. As the name implies, a 'closed' text generally has a concrete argument and ending, such as detective stories. It hardly makes room for further analysis. An 'open' text, however requires the reader's close and active participation in the creation of meaning. One instance could be Joyce's *Ulysses*. Some critics consider Eliot's *The Waste Land*, a quintessential 'open' text. When the work was published in 1922, it was interpreted as "the plight of a whole generation". Eliot however, dispelled the poem's interpretation as a criticism of the contemporary world. In 1931, he recalled, "When I wrote a poem called *The Waste Land*, some of the more approving critics said that I had expressed the 'disillusionment of a generation', which is nonsense. I may have expressed for them their own illusion of being disillusioned, but that did not form part of my intention." Smugly ignoring views of critics, he preferred to describe the poem as an expression of his state of mind rather than as 'social criticism'. Given this, Reader-response becomes might become a contested ideology. Dr. A. J. Ayer argues in his treatise, *The Problem of Knowledge*, that conclusions frequently become "suspect" because of the way they seem to go beyond the evidence on which they depend.⁸ Thus, one should not always be blindfolded by over-analysis done by experts. I would rather consider Eliot's masterpiece, as a commingling of both 'open' and a 'closed' text. At times, the work approximates to Claude Levi-Strauss' concept of 'bricolage' owing to the plurality of voices and different areas of experience which invite multiple interpretations. Strauss used the word 'bricolage' to describe any spontaneous action in his book, *The Savage Mind*(1962). Primarily *The Waste Land* was Eliot's relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; a piece of "rhythmical grumbling". Michael Riffaterre uses a word, "Superreader" in his book, *Semiotics of Poetry*(1978) for such a reader, who analyses a text in a search for meanings beyond and below surface meanings. Another notable theorist is Stanley Fish. In his essay, 'Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics'(1970), he evolved a reader-oriented theory called 'affective stylistics'. He is interested in the ways the response of a reader grows and modifies in relation to the diction or syntax as they succeed each other in time. Yet another theory is that advanced by Americans, Norman Holland, famous for his book, *Five Readers Reading*(1975) and David Bleich who wrote *Subjective Criticism*(1978).Both considered reading a form of covert wish-fulfilment. Closely associated with the reader-response is another theory popularized by Hans Robert Jauss known as, Reception theory. It studies the collective reception of a work since its publication. He uses a term "horizon of expectations" to describe, how a particular work is valued and interpreted, when it appears. Unlike reader-response which concentrates on the response of an individual reader, reception theory caters to what is called 'reading communities'. Several American critics such as Edward Said, Fish and Jonathan Culler have been interested in 'reading communities'. In *Is There a Text in This Class?*(1980), Fish introduces the idea of 'interpretative communities'

persuading readers to adopt “a set of community assumptions”. Jonathan Culler highlights the same view in his book, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*(1981). He examines the strategies of readers laying emphasis on the operation of interpretive moves instead of the content of the moves.

Last but not the least, is a modern philosophical tendency known as Phenomenology. Derived from the Greek “phenomena” or ‘things appearing’, it is a method of philosophical inquiry emphasizing on the central role of the perceiver in determining meaning. It is indebted to the thinking of German philosopher Edmund Husserl. According to him, the proper object of philosophical enquiry is not the objects in the world that are perceivable through the senses, but, rather, the “a priori” contents of our consciousness. Heidegger and Gadamer are also united in this conviction. They imply that, an individual human mind is the centre and origin of meaning. In the domain of literature and literary theory, the phenomenologist’s critical approach involves an entry into and investigation of the underlying nature and essence of a work of literature under scrutiny, and thus an access to the consciousness of the author. A phenomenological critic must empty his mind of all presuppositions about the author and the text he intends to study. This makes the critic highly receptive and sensitive so that he can share the mode of consciousness of the author. This state of mind is known as ‘consciousness of the consciousness of another.’ However, such a state of mind is difficult to achieve. The influence of phenomenology nevertheless, has been widespread and felt in the theories advanced by Jauss and Iser.

Reader-response is indeed a vast literary discipline that demonstrates infinite ways of looking at a text. The reader is the ‘centre’ of this realm of literary theory. Yet, one must not forget that any “ideology” is after all, a ‘weltanschauung’, an idealistic philosophy and idealism is characterized by uncertainty. In *The Problems of Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell considers ‘uncertainty’ to be one of the major problems of philosophy. Reader-response may be an established literary ideology or philosophy, yet one could conclude by saying that it is not always wise to damage the innocence or purity of a subject by overanalyzing it. When a baby is born, its mind is in the purest form, devoid of skepticism, problems of perception, memory and so on. It is only when the baby matures with age, does its mind become transformed from a state of ‘tabula rasa’ to a gargantuan canvas of conflicting thoughts. The innocence, gradually evaporates. Similarly, when a text is written, it may simply contain a singular beautiful speck of life. Unfortunately, the impossibility of a written piece’s hideout, leads its essence to be tampered, dampened, finally lost, by dry analyses. An excess of garments often hides the beauty of the human shape, likewise over-analysis of a text, sometimes blurs its essential beauty. After all, “The beautiful things of the earth become more dear as they elude pursuit.”⁹ Thus, to conclude this discussion of the relevance of reader-response, I would suggest that, a text is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers, since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of questions themselves; because these questions enlarge our conception of what is likely; enrich our intellectual imagination, and diminish the dogmatic assurance which “closes the mind against speculation.”¹⁰

References:

1. Written in 1513 by Italian humanist, Niccolo Machiavelli, for the Medici, following their return to power in Florence, *The Prince* is a handbook on ruling and the exercise of power. The piece was written when Machiavelli was in exile. It challenges the lexical meaning of "Machiavellian".

2. Mikhail Bakhtin coined the word 'carnivalization' in his book *The Dialogic Imagination*, to describe the incorporation of carnival or merrymaking into everyday life, and its shaping effect on language and literature. A carnivalesque element is characteristic of burlesque, parody and personal satire.

3. Italian Renaissance humanist, author, poet and a student of Petrarch, was Giovanni Boccaccio. He is famous for the medieval allegory, *Decameron*.

Link - <www.goodsreads.com/author/quotes/29227.Giovanni_Boccaccio> accessed on 6th December, 2011.

4. A literary theory which developed in Russia in the early 1920s. Russian Formalists were primarily interested in the way that literary texts achieve their effects and in establishing a scientific basis for the study of literature. A notable practitioner was Roman Jakobson (1896-1982).

5. A term which refers to a kind of 'movement' in literary criticism which developed in the 1920s, for the most part among Americans. New Critics were least interested in knowing the mind and personality of the poet, the sources, history of ideas and so forth. They emphasized on detailed textual analysis of poetry. Leading figures were Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, Wimsatt.

6. Affective approach is propounded by Chladenius which is the psychological approach, a significant aspect of Enlightenment Hermeneutics. Closely related, is the Semiotic approach developed by Meier which corresponds to analytical reasoning.

7. *The Book of Common Prayer* is the short title of a number of related prayer books used in the Anglican Communion and churches.

8. Born in 1910, Professor Ayer was educated as a King's Scholar at Eton and as a classical scholar at Christ Church, Oxford. In *The Problem of Knowledge*, he has attempted to define knowledge and also throw light upon the nature of philosophical method and upon some of the problems connected with time and personal identity.

9. Quoted in Thomas Hardy's *Desperate Remedies*.

Link - <www.notable-quotes.com/b/beauty/quotes.html> accessed on 6th December, 2011.

10. Quoted in Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980.

Bibliography:

Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today*. London : Routledge, 2008.

Iser, Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

Jain, Manju. *T.S. Eliot : Selected Poems*. India : Oxford University Press, 1992.

Chakrabarti, Piyas and Robert Douglas - Fairhurst. *Anthem Dictionary of Literary Terms and Theory*. UK : Anthem Press, 2006.

Ayer, A.J. *The Problem of Knowledge*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex : Penguin Books Ltd, 1956.

Cuddon, J.A. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. UK : Blackwell Publishers, 1998.

Palgrave, F.T. *The Golden Treasury*. London : Oxford University Press, 1964.

Selden, Widdowson and Brooker. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. India : Pearson Education, Ltd, 2005.

Russell, Bertrand. *The Problems of Philosophy*. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1980.

Stevenson, Burton. *The Macmillan Book of Proverbs, Maxims and Famous Phrases*. New York : Macmillan, 1948.