

Lecture 14

Reader Response Theory: The Phenomenological Tradition

Absence of Chronology

Hello everyone and welcome back once again to this lecture series on literary theory. Now so far in this series we have tried to maintain a sense of chronology starting with ancient Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle and then gradually working our way through the literary theories of eighteenth and nineteenth century. However, in our study of twentieth century literary theories we will have to break away from this chronological progression and we will have to do that primarily for two reasons. The first reason is that in the twentieth century we see a plethora of literary theories emerging within the academia almost simultaneously and running their course parallel to each other. And in most cases these are overlapping theoretical trends with the same academician or scholar representing more than one category of literary theory. So for instance Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, whose works we will encounter later in this series is generally considered to be one of the most iconic figures within the field of postcolonial theory. But at the same time she is also one of the leading figures within the fields of contemporary feminist theory as well as Marxist literary theory. This makes a neat chronological category of literary theories and literary theorists more and more impossible as we approach the twentieth century.

Neat categorisations are also made difficult by theorists like Roland Barthes for instance who starts off as a structuralist critic and then takes a poststructuralist turn later on in his life. So there is a lot of overlapping and interconnectedness that we will have to deal with and given the circumstances, a chronological journey through the field of literary theory would be a difficult if not an altogether impossible proposition. There is another point that I need to make here.

A chronological progression is also made difficult because of the connections that one school of literary theory might have with some earlier theoretical positions. Let us, for example, take the case of Reader Response Theory that we are going to focus on in this lecture as well as in the next one. Now reader response as a literary theory gained prominence within Western academia during the last quarter of the twentieth century. But its roots can be traced back to the more general theoretical position established by the phenomenological school of thoughts during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Now in order to understand reader response theory better it is imperative that we also explore the philosophy of phenomenology. And indeed that is precisely what we are going to do in today's lecture. But this going back, though important as an aid to our learning, nevertheless problematizes the chronological positioning of reader response theory within this course. So it is better to clarify at this point that the sequence in which the various schools of twentieth century literary theories are going to be taken up would be mostly random. I will of course mention as always the important dates of theoretical works as well as of the theoreticians to help you map them within specific historical contexts. But even then a certain degree of chronological arbitrariness in the arrangement of lectures would be unavoidable.

Fourfold division

However, while pointing out the absence of a chronological sequence, I would here like to suggest another form of categorization which might help you navigate better through the thickly populated field of twentieth century literary theory. If you look at the field of literary theory comprehensively you will perceive four different centres around which the various theoretical schools revolve. These centres are firstly the author, secondly the text, thirdly the reader, and fourthly the context. So in other words, some theoretical positions prioritise the role of the author and focus the critical lens on him or her. And we have already encountered such author centric

literary theory while studying Romanticism as well as the theory of creative genius as proposed by Pseudo Longinus. In the twentieth century, this particular focus on the author becomes less prominent and indeed much of twentieth century literary criticism emerges as a direct opposition to the author-centric theories of the earlier period. But, in spite of this, the focus on the author does not completely disappear from twentieth century literary theory and we shall see for instance the significant role that the author plays in the psychoanalytic criticism inspired by the work of Sigmund Freud. Now let us come to the second centre which is the text. And the kind of twentieth century literary theory that we have dealt with so far namely New Criticism, Russian Formalism and even Bakhtinian Dialogism are all primarily text-centric theoretical positions. Their focus is on how a particular text uses different language components to fulfill various literary functions. And we will continue to observe this focus on the text or the language use throughout our discussions on Structuralism and post-structuralism. On the other hand, what we will be discussing in this lecture and the next one will provide good examples of reader-centric theories. Lectures on Marxist literary theory or Feminist literary theory, or Postcolonial literary theory in their turn will explore context-centric schools of literary theories and would look into how the literary process—both during its production and during its consumption—are guided by the social, political, and economic contexts.

Now, you will have to remember here that these distinctions are not water-tight compartments and there is a significant degree of overlap. Thus for instance though I have categorized Bakhtinian dialogism as primarily centred on the text and the language use within it, you will remember from our discussion of heteroglossia that Bakhtin closely connected this study of language with the internal fragmentations that inform any particular socio-political milieu. Also you will remember how his idea of carnivalesque is also deeply rooted within a specific

historical context. On the other hand, Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, for instance, who is closely associated with context-centric school of theories like postcolonialism, Marxism, and Feminism is nevertheless known for her emphasis on close reading and very careful attention to language uses within a text. And in this she closely follows one of her major intellectual mentors, Paul de Man, who was himself a deconstructive critic. So as you can see, this categorization of author-centric, text-centric, reader-centric, and context-centric theories are not very rigorous and cannot be sustained beyond a certain point. But nevertheless I think this categorization would provide a rough schema that might help some of you to get a better grasp of the plethora that constitutes twentieth century literary theory.

Edmund Husserl

So now with this introduction in place let us move to today's topic which is reader response theory. And as I have already, this is a particular form of literary theory which became popular in academic circles during the third quarter of the twentieth century. But since it has deep connections with the twentieth century phenomenological school of thought, we will start our discussion from there. And we will do this by focusing on the work of the intellectual, Edmund Husserl.

Husserl, whose dates are 1859 to 1938, was born to a Jewish family in Moravia which was then a part of the Austrian and is now in Czech Republic. By training he was a mathematician and an astronomer, but much like his contemporary and fellow Moravian Sigmund Freud, Husserl is today known for opening up a distinct field of enquiry. So whereas Freud is regarded as the father of the discipline of psychoanalysis, Husserl is credited for laying the foundations of the philosophical study of phenomenology.

It was in 1900, when Husserl was teaching at the University of Gottingen in Germany, that he founded the phenomenological movement. And by the second decade of the twentieth century he was successful in establishing the basic tenets of phenomenology as a separate field of study. One of the key texts of Husserl that we have from this period, which was actually first delivered in the form of a lecture, is titled “Pure Phenomenology: Its Method and Its Field of Investigation”. This text provides us with an interesting entry point into Husserl’s work from the perspective of a student of literature theory. In the middle of this short essay Husserl states:

“No object of the category "work of art" could occur in the objectivational world of any being who was devoid of all aesthetic sensibility, who was, so to speak, aesthetically blind.”

In what follows, my effort would be to elaborate on this sentence in a manner that will help to clarify not only some of the basic tenets of Husserl’s phenomenology but also how this phenomenology directs us to a reader-oriented literary theory.

Phenomenological object

One of the important words that needs elaboration in the quoted sentence is “object” and its derivative form “objectivational”. Now when we think of an object or speak of an object in our mundane conversation we are actually speaking of things that we believe are out there in the real world. Say for instance a pen or a table or toothpaste tube. These will all be considered as objects in our day to day conversation. But seen from the phenomenological perspective, the situation looks different. A phenomenologist will argue that we become aware of an object only when it appears in our consciousness. That is to say when I refer to a pen as an object then what I am referring to is my consciousness of an object and not to any real thing situated out there beyond the realm of my consciousness. The phenomenologist is here playing with a distinction that is

actually quite old in philosophical tradition – the distinction between reality and appearance or between noumenon and phenomenon.

So what is a noumenon? Well, a noumenon is a thing that exists independent of human perceptions and human senses. And phenomenon is how this thing might appear to human perception or human sense. Now this distinction between noumenon and phenomenon can be traced in western philosophical tradition to at least as far back as Plato. If you remember our lectures on Plato you will know how we had discussed the concept of Platonic ideas in them. These Ideas, according to Plato, existed above and beyond the realm of the mundane human perception and were indeed the true form of everything. Phenomenon was how this idea manifested in the world that was perceivable by the human senses. So in Plato's scheme of things, the idea of a bed will be a noumenon and how that bed is perceived through human senses in its material manifestation would be the phenomenon.

By the time we reach Immanuel Kant in the eighteenth century the distinction between noumenon and phenomenon had changed slightly. Phenomenon still signified a thing as it appeared to the human consciousness when grasped by human senses, but noumenon no longer signified a Platonic idea but rather more simply what Kant called the "thing-in-itself". This is actually easier to understand. Take for example a stone. Now following the reality/appearance distinction one can say that a stone has two aspects. The first aspect is its existence as a thing-in-itself beyond the realm of human perception, and the second is its existence as an appearance within human cognition. In its first aspect it is a noumenon and in its second aspect it is a phenomenon.

Now according to phenomenologists the existence of an object as a thing in itself is of little consequence because in that form it is not available to the human consciousness. And since it is

beyond human consciousness there is no way that it can be consciously known or explored or even validated as something that really exists. Objects from a phenomenological perspective is therefore only the phenomenon and not the noumenon because only the former can be known, explored and validated whereas one can never be sure of the latter. So if you go back to the sentence that I originally quoted from Husserl you will see that the phrase “objectivational world of any being” means the world of objects as phenomena which is within the grasp of our consciousness.

However, before we move on with the quoted sentence I want to clarify something else regarding phenomenon. Now when I say that phenomenon is how a thing *appears* to the consciousness, it is always assumed that phenomenon is a reflection of a noumenon that exists as a thing-in-itself beyond the human consciousness. However, let us say that I am hallucinating and I see a dagger in front of me just like Shakespeare’s Macbeth saw before him in Act 2 Scene 1. Now that dagger will not correspond to a thing that exists in the material world beyond me consciousness. But from a phenomenological perspective, this hallucinatory dagger is very much an object because it is part of the objectivational world of a being. Alternatively, if I think of a dragon while writing a sequel to Harry Potter then irrespective of whether there is a noumenal dragon or not the dragon exists as a valid phenomenal object within my consciousness. So whether or not something is an object or not is not determined by its relation to a noumenal world out there but rather it is determined by the notion of what the phenomenologists will call “intentionality”.

Intentionality

Now, this word “intentionality” is very important for a proper understanding of phenomenology as well as the literary theory based on it, so let’s try and look at it in more details. The word intentionality as used within phenomenology does not really mean what we usually understand

by the word in our everyday conversation. So for instance in our mundane conversation we speak of someone having a good intention or bad intention wherein the word means something like the desire to achieve a purpose. For a phenomenologist like Husserl however intentionality has a different meaning. According to Husserl, every thought that we can think of is a thought of something. In other words, our thoughts are always targeted towards some object or the other and here I use the word object in the more specific phenomenological sense. And this targetedness of thoughts to particular contents or objects is what is identified as intentionality by the phenomenologists.

So here we come across a question: Are these objects, towards which our thoughts are guided by intentionality, reflections of something else that exists beyond those intentional thoughts, or are they creations of our consciousness? In more radical terms, can we be at all certain of the existence of a world of objects beyond our consciousness? A phenomenological answer to this question will neither be a definite yes or a definite no. Rather the argument will be that since we cannot know of this world beyond our consciousness, we need to suspend our judgement about it. This is what is referred to as the “phenomenological epoché”.

So, to repeat, a world beyond the realms of our consciousness is not the field of investigation for a phenomenologist. Rather, this is how Husserl defines the phenomenological field of investigation:

It would be the task of phenomenology, [...], to investigate how something perceived, something remembered, something phantasied, something pictorially represented, something symbolized looks as such, i.e., to investigate how it looks by virtue of that bestowal of sense and of characteristics which is carried out intrinsically by the perceiving, the remembering, the phantasizing the pictorial representing, etc., itself.

Phenomenology and Literary Theory

So the question is: how does this phenomenological inquiry into the way things are perceived, influence the way we theorise about literature? Now if you notice carefully, you will observe that the phenomenological perspective is in sharp contrast to the positions adopted by the twentieth century literary theories that we have discussed so far. Thus, be it new criticism or be it Russian Formalism, we have seen a prioritization of literature as it exists as a text out there in the form of black words on white page. In the language of this present lecture, new critics and formalists considered literature as a text which is a thing-in-itself. But as we have seen, a phenomenologist will argue that the thing-in-itself, even if it exists, cannot be a proper object of enquiry because it is beyond the realms of human perception. Thus, from the phenomenological perspective, a literature or any kind of art in general should, and indeed could, only be studied in the form of how it is perceived by the reader's or the viewer's or listener's consciousness. In other words, a literary theorist cannot study a novel per se but can investigate only how a text becomes a novel through the bestowal of the reader's perception and her ability to make sense of the text. A novel or any other form of literature opens itself up as a field of investigation only when it emerges as a literary object within the objectivational world of any being. That is to say when it is perceived and read by a person as a piece of prose fiction. If a novel just exists out there and is never read or is never perceived and decoded as a piece of literary work, then from the phenomenological perspective it falls beyond the purview of literary theory and the best we can do is to suspend our judgement about it. And what is true for a novel is true for all literature and indeed all art in general. And this brings us back to the quoted sentence with which we started:

“No object of the category "work of art" could occur in the objectivational world of any being who was devoid of all aesthetic sensibility, who was, so to speak, aesthetically blind.”

So now we can see that a literary theory that emerges from this phenomenological tradition will foreground not the text nor even the author but the reader and how she responds to a text as and when it appears to her consciousness. However, this study of the readers’ response was not to emerge as a major literary theory till much later during the last three decades of the twentieth century. We will take up the contours of this literary theory in our next lecture.