Lecture 15

Reader Response Theory: Wolfgang Iser, Harold Bloom, and Stanley Fish

Hello everyone and welcome back to this series of lectures on literary theory. Today we are going to take forward our discussion on reader-response theory and see how the phenomenological insights offered by Edmund Husserl translates into literary criticism in the later part of the twentieth century. And we will start our exploration with the works of Wolfgang Iser. But before we can start discussing Iser we will have to trace back the story to the works of a Polish theorist called Roman Ingarden which act as a sort of connecting bridge between the phenomenological theory of Husserl and the reader-response theory of Iser.

Roman Ingarden

Ingarden, whose dates are 1893 to 1970, was a direct student of Edmund Husserl at the Gottingen University and worked towards building the framework of a literary theory based on Husserl's phenomenology. If we try to understand in the most concise manner the basic features of this literary theory constructed by Ingarden, then we arrive at three main points, one following the other. The first point is based on the phenomenological concept of intentionality. Now as you will remember from our previous discussion on Husserl, intentionality in phenomenology means the directedness or targetedness of a thought to a particular object or another. A piece of literature, according to Ingarden, is an expression of such intentional act which documents the directedness of the author’s thoughts to particular objects.

From this follows the second point which is that these intentional acts are reanimated by the reader when she reads the particular work of literature and in the process allows her own thoughts to be directed towards certain objects. However, there is no perfect one to one

correspondence between the author's coding in the piece of literature a certain set of intentional acts and the readers decoding of these intentional acts during the process of her reading. Ingarden argues that literary texts have indeterminacies which require the readers to fill them up with their own interpretations or what Ingarden calls "active readings". This is the third point that Ingarden makes, and this active reading results in what he calls the "concretization" of a literary work. So in Ingarden's view, literature is not a static object that is out there but rather a dynamic process that emerges through a dialogue between the consciousness of the author and that of the reader mediated by a text. And it is on this particular understanding of how literature works that Wolfgang Iser goes on to constructs his reader response theory.

Wolfgang Iser

Iser, who is known as the founding figure of what is called the Constance school of criticism named after the University of Constance in Germany, was born in 1926 and he died in 2007. His two major books are *The Implied Reader* which was first published in 1972 and *The Act of Reading* whose publication date is 1976. One of the key features of how Iser conceived the act of reading literature was the notion of textual "gaps" which I have referred to as textual indeterminacies while discussing Ingarden. But here let us try and understand in more details what exactly is meant by gaps in the text. Well these gaps, or blanks or textual indeterminacies are places within a text where the sense of a coherent progression seems to be disrupted. And this might be produced for various reasons. In today's lecture we will consider three typical reasons why textual gaps might be experienced by the reader.

Textual gaps

The first reason is the disconnectedness between various textual segments. To understand this let us take for instance a poem like Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*. As Coleridge mentions, the first two sections of the poem was conceived by him in an opium-induced dream state but the last section was written after this state of reverie was broken by the arrival of a visitor. And the sections of the poem *Kubla Khan* very distinctly carries the mark of this break in the mental state of the poet which the reader needs to negotiate through her reading. But even if we do not take an extreme example like *Kubla Khan*, where different textual segments are so radically separated by the conditions under which they were written, we nevertheless encounter in any literary text gaps in the form of differentiated segments like stanzas and paragraphs and chapters that schematically divide one section of a text from another. The passage between each of these schematic sections represent gaps in the narrative coherence which requires the reader to do what Iser calls "ideation" and Ingarden calls "active reading".

Take for instance John Keats' poem *To Autumn*. Each of the stanzas in the poem, though connected by the autumnal theme, are nevertheless distinct from one another. For instance, what is the connection between the autumnal scene of plenty as described in the first stanza and the figure in the second stanza who rests "on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep, […] while thy hook/ Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers"? We often infer that the figure is autumn incarnate. But the figure can as easily be interpreted as the representative of the approaching winter which will take away the plentitude of autumn. Indeed, this latter interpretation gains even more heft if we are conscious of the traditional poetic association between winter and death and note the fact that the sleeping figure of the second stanza is carrying a mowing hook or a scythe which in the Western imagery is strongly connected with the figure of death. So the argument that I am trying to make here is that because the stanzas are not connected by any explicit

commentary, in moving from one to the other we encounter interpretative uncertainties or textual gaps. And these gaps are then filled up by the reader's own imagination thereby producing literary experiences that are unique to the reader who is interpreting the text.

Now let us come to the second reason why a literary text might have gaps or indeterminacies, and I will call this reason the disconnect between narrative perspectives. Take a Dostoyevsky novel for instance. Now as we know from our earlier discussions, Bakhtin had described these novels as characteristically polyphonic. This means that rather than having a unified authorial perspective, it has a number of different and often contradictory perspectives articulated by different characters. Thus the fictional world that we are exposed to is not unified and continuous. We as readers need to piece these unmerged perspectives as so many different scraps of paper to create a collage of a comprehensive understanding. And since that collage is indelibly stamped by our own interpretative acts as readers, the literary experience will differ from reader to reader. A good example of these gaps arising from different perspectives is Akira Kurosawa's film *Roshomon* where the same story is told from radically different perspectives thereby forcing the reader to, in the words of Iser, "ideate" that is putting into use one's own imaginative activity to reach a sense of comprehension.

The third reason why gaps may be created has to do with the concept of the reader and its internal fragmentations. When I say that the concept of the reader is fragmented, what I refer to is the distinction between the "implied reader" and the "actual reader". Let us say that a literary text is written by an author with the assumption that it will be read by a white middle-class woman. In other words, a text is written with the white middle-class woman as its "implied reader". Now it is possible that the actual reader of that text might be very different from the implied reader socially, culturally, as well as historically. So let us say if the implied reader of

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is a nineteenth-century white British middle-class heterosexual woman, its actual reader might very well be a twenty-first century brown homosexual South Asian male. And this distinction too creates areas of indeterminacy. This is because cultural terms or social relations which might not have required much explanation to the implied reader might present themselves as opaque to the actual reader thereby forcing him to fill in these opaque blanks in the narrative with his own interpretations.

Reading and the sense of wholeness

But now that we know that a text might have a number of gaps and might have them for different reasons, the question is how do they affect the reading and appreciation of literature? Well, as you might have noticed, during my discussion on gaps and indeterminacies I have repeatedly spoken about how they need to be filled up by the reader through "ideation" or "active reading". As far as these Iser or even Ingarden is concerned, this process of "filling up" is central to the very way we read and understand literature or indeed any text. According to them, a reader in spite of encountering a literary text that is essentially fragmented from within because of the number of gaps and indeterminacies, cannot reconcile herself to a fragmented reading and understanding of that piece. Reading should necessarily lead to the comprehension of wholeness.

Let us go back to the example of Keats's *To Autumn*. As we have discussed, there is a gap separating the first and the second stanza where the connection between the scene of autumnal plentitude in the first stanza and the lonely figure in the second stanza is not quite established by the text. Yet as a reader we cannot just read them as two separate and distinct fragments within the same text. The moment we pass from the first to the second stanza we try and establish a connection between the two to reach a sense of wholeness – a comprehensive understanding of the poem as a unified work. As Iser notes in his book *The Act of Reading*, "consistency-building

is the indispensable basis for all acts of comprehension". Now this sense of wholeness arrived at through active consistency- building is, of course, a dynamic process and the reader needs to keep changing and adjusting it as she moves down the text. Thus, for instance, a reader moving from the second to the third stanza of *To Autumn* is exposed to one more textual segment which she needs to incorporate in her evolving sense of what the poem means as a whole. This in effect changes how the whole is comprehended. In other words, throughout the reading process, one idea of wholeness constantly gives way to another idea of wholeness and each of these depends upon the way a particular reader ideates in order to fill in the gaps that she encounters during the reading process.

Now here we encounter another problem. If a literary reading is so dependent on how individual readers interpret the gaps and tide over the indeterminacies through ideation, then how can we ever publicly refer to and discuss a particular literary piece. For instance, if my *Hamlet* is completely different from your *Hamlet* then how can we even talk about this one text called *Hamlet*? Well, Iser admits that this problem of "uncontrolled subjectivism" does complicate the reader response theory. But we will also have to remember that the ideation by individual readers does not happen in an absolute vacuum. A significant part of the reading experience involves being guided by the intentional acts of the author. So there are certain limits of ideation during the reading process beyond which an interpretation might be regarded as a misinterpretation. So in other words, irrespective of how you and I fill up the gaps that are present within Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the text still provides sufficient common ground for me to refer to it and for you to understand which text I am referring to.

Harold Bloom

Now from Iser, we would move to Stanley Fish who is another major figure in this critical tradition. But since I just mentioned the distinction between reading and misreading I would like to briefly touch on Harold Bloom's theory of "anxiety of influence" which casts a very interesting light on the concept of misreading. According to Bloom, the American literary critic born in 1930, any poet or literary artist finds her motivation to create new literature primarily by reading the works of earlier authors. However, the poet or the literary artist also wants to assert the individuality and uniqueness of her own work. And this she can only do by strongly denying the influence of the earlier author. This oscillating response towards the previous authors by later authors is what Bloom terms the “anxiety of influence”.

So how does a poet overcome this anxiety of influence? According to Bloom, the poet overcomes this influence by distorting the work from which she has drawn to such an extent that nobody is able to recognize the influence or shadow of that previous work in her own poem. This process of trying to resist the influence through distortion is what Bloom refers to as “misreading”. So what Bloom is effectively doing here is prioritizing misreading over a reading that tries to remain faithful to what the author might have intended. Indeed, Bloom argues that all readings by subsequent poets of the works of previous poets are necessarily ‘misreadings’. Some are ‘weak misreading’ where the degree to which the parent poem has been distorted remains less and therefore the influence distinctly identifiable. Others are ‘strong misreadings’ where the influence of the parent poem has been so successfully resisted that the later work appears as almost original.

My reference to Bloom in this lecture on reader- response theory is important on two accounts. First, it is important because it depicts how a section of reader response theorists like Harold Bloom and David Bleich use the insights of psychoanalytic theory. So, for instance, underlying

Bloom's theory of anxiety of influence and misreading is the Freudian notion of the Oedipal complex, which will become more clear when we discuss Psychoanalytic theory in our future lectures. The second reason why I think Bloom is important is that he shows that reader-response theory need not only concern itself with how we read or interpret texts but can also be used to gain insight into the creative process of literature or how a text is produced by the author.

Stanley Fish

Now we finally come to Stanley Fish who is one of the most celebrated as well as controversial scholars working in the field of reader reception theory. Fish was born in 1938 in Rhode Island in America and is currently a chair professor at the Yeshiva University in New York. Fish is primarily known for two very important theoretical concepts which are "affective stylistics" and "interpretive communities". So let's start with the first one.

Affective stylistics refers to how the reading of a text affects the reader and how these affects, in turn, shape the reading process itself. To explore this idea further, we will first have to understand that for Fish as for other reader-response theorists like Iser, a text is not a static entity located out there. Rather it is a dynamic process which unfolds over time as the reader proceeds through it. The dynamism results from the fact that readers bring their own imagination, sentiments, and expectations to the reading and these keep changing as they progress through the text. As a result, their idea about what the text also keeps changing during the course of their reading. So as Fish notes, the text is structured by the readers' response to it, and this structuring process unfolds temporally during the course of a reader's reading. Fish illustrates this by referring to the following line written by Walter Pater:

> "This at least of flame-like, our life has, that it is but the concurrence, renewed from moment to moment, of forces parting sooner or later on their ways."

Now as you can see that this line does not provide for a very easy reading and one of the reasons for that is because its flow is continually disrupted thereby forcing the reader to adjust her comprehension of the words accordingly. For instance, the phrase "concurrence of forces" is disrupted by the intervention of the words "renewed from moment to moment". This forces the reader to work these words into his interpretation of the phrase "concurrence of forces". And then again, as the reader reads along, he has to modify his understanding of the word concurrence as he encounters the antithetical word "parting". Again the sense of the word "parting" and the finality that it signifies gets modified and even suspended by the interplay of the following words "sooner or later". So as you can see with this explication, a reader's interpretation of a text changes as he passes from word to word and sentence to sentence and this process through which meaning builds up in the mind of the reader is what is referred to by Fish as affective stylistics.

Here, however, we encounter the same problem that we had encountered in Iser. If a text is so dependent on a reader's structuring of it through his expectations, and imaginative interpretations, then how can we ever refer to a text that can be commonly identified by the reading public at large? In studying Ingarden and Iser, we had found the answer to this question by referring back to the intentionality of the author inscribed in the text. In Fish too, the answer is to be sought in the author's intention informing the text but this answer gains a further nuance through the introduction of the concept of interpretive community.

According to Fish, the competent readers do not stray away from the intention of the author even while structuring the text through their own interpretation. This is because the author and the intended reader of a text belong to the same interpretive community and thereby share the same literary competence and cultural assumptions and expectations. So let us say that we are reading a play in which a character speaks some sentences in an "aside". Now while reading the play we do not consider that character to be a madman who assumes that the lines he has spoken will not be heard by other characters on the stage even while the audience can hear them distinctly. We do not make this assumption because we share the literary competence that the author expects us to have so as to understand the meaning that he seeks to convey. The same is applicable when we read other texts as well where we try and decode the author's intention and we are aided in this process by belonging to the same interpretive community.

This notion of the interpretive community then makes the academia and literary critics and theoreticians important because they are the ones who share the required competence to understand exactly what the author intended to mean. This idea of an interpretive community addresses the issue of unchecked subjectivism on the part of the reader but raises a different problem. What if the reader does not belong to the interpretive community, or even more importantly what if the reader is not in agreement with the author? For instance, I am not a supporter of fascism, nor do I share the cultural assumptions of a Nazi sympathizer. So what kind of a reader does that make me of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*? We will also see that for some schools of criticism like postcolonialism reading is a way of resisting the author's intention not agreeing with it. How do those kinds of reading fit in with Fish's theories? We will get to revisit these issues in some of our future lectures. But with this, we come to an end of our discussion on reader-response theory. Thank you for listening.