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READER-ORIENTED CRITICISM: A STUDY OF JAUSS' LITERARY HISTORY AS A
CHALLENGE TO LITERARY THEORY

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ABSTRACT

Reader-Response Criticism – sometimes called reader theory or audience theory – is quite unlike the other critical methods. In fact it is not a method at all in the sense of particular technique, a school of thought, or a systematic procedure used to approach all works of literature. Rather, it's more of an attitude that can be an effective starting point for a classroom inquiry into criticism, offering a student – friendly perspective on exploring literature, a distinct teaching outlook. "Reader-response criticism puts the individual reader into the driver's seat" (Abrams). It asserts that the meaning of any literary work is not what was created by author – or what has been decided on by experts or teachers or some consensus thereof – but what is constructed by the individual reader interacting with the work. The seven thesis that Jauss gave in his monumental essay "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory" which appeared in *Towards an Aesthetics of Reception* (1982). Reception theory as proposed by Jauss points at the relationship of text and reader which has two aspects: historical and aesthetics.

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Reader-Response Criticism – sometimes called reader theory or audience theory – is quite unlike the other critical methods. In fact it is not a method at all in the sense of particular technique, a school of thought, or a systematic procedure used to approach all works of literature. Rather, it's more of an attitude that can be an effective starting point for a classroom inquiry into criticism, offering a student – friendly perspective on exploring literature, a distinct teaching outlook. "Reader-response criticism puts the individual reader into the driver's seat" (Abrams). It asserts that the meaning of any literary work is not what was created by author – or what has been decided on by experts or teachers or some consensus thereof – but what is constructed by the individual reader interacting with the work.

This focus on a reader's reaction spans the whole history of criticism from ancient thinker to modern ones. Texts mean nothing until they are read, felt, and experienced. The meaning of a literary work, in other words, is not embedded in the text but in the process a reader or a viewer undergoes while engrossed in its words.

Prominent German scholar Hans-Robert Jauss, in formulating what has been called Reception-Theory, noted that our ability to experience art is bound by these historical and cultural determinants. To any given reading public has "horizons of expectations" beyond which they cannot see. Hans-Robert Jauss theories of reading, as for the reader's role in evaluating, enriching, adding, omitting or modifying on the already existent social and psychological assumptions of the literary text. Bestowing on the text newly and constant innovation, this process hel the reader transcend what is traditionally prohibited in the text to reach new epistemological and ethical realms concordant with the reader's horizons of expectations.

Reader-oriented criticism, as an approach to literary theory, originated initially from a structuralist approach to reading the written text: though the approach can hardly be distinguished from semiotics, the general science of signs. It has laid down new criteria against which the written literary text may be measured, namely, construing meaning from the text can be made by the reader at the cost of the death of the author, as Faucault makes it clear in his "what is an author?". This replacement of the role of the author by that of the reader paved the way remarkably for the introduction of the reader as a site of critical interest. According to this understanding, the "Author God" is replaced by inter-textual reader who is supposed to read the text "not as if it were some complete, objective process with each element given equal weight and consideration, but as a subjective, transient and pleasurable activity". In this sense, reading a text is grounded in the reader as a perceiving subject rather than in the text as an authorial statement.

This shift of emphasis from the text to the reader has created in the literary circles a kind of explosion in the literary critical standards against which to measure a text. This whirl came out first in the form of what has been known as phenomenological criticism in the work of early twentieth century philosopher Edmund Husserl. This assumption has been developed later by George Poulet and J. Hillis Miller. But more important has been reader/audience oriented criticism, this type of criticism has been adopted by a wide range of contemporary critics, starting from Roland Barthes, David Bleich, and Gerald Prence down to Wolfgang Iser and Hans-Robert Jauss. These critics seem to share the view that constituted the polemics of Text and Readers in Hans Robert Jauss' Reader-oriented criticism.

Here we will focus on the seven thesis that Jauss gave in his monumental essay "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory" which appeared in *Towards an Aesthetics of Reception* (1982). Reception theory as proposed by Jauss points at the relationship of text and reader which has two aspects: historical and aesthetics. Firstly, when a reader first encounters a text he compares its aesthetic value with other text. Secondly, the reader will impart his understanding of the text from generation to generation. Jauss focuses the formation of "a literary history based on an aesthetics of reception." Thus what is required is the transformation of "history of reception of the individual work to the history of literature," that is emblematic of the historical sequence of the works, capable of clarifying "the coherence of literature," to the extent that is meaningful for us. Hans-Robert Jauss formulates seven "thesis" to indicate how literary history can be methodically written in a new way.

Thesis 1. 'Historical objectivism' has to be removed and the focus has to be on the aesthetics of reception and influence: "The historicity of literature rests not on an organization of 'literary facts' ... but rather on the preceding experience of the literary work by its reader." (20) Jauss points that text is not a "monologic" monument, that is to say, it will produce different impact on different readers, beside its impact will also change according to time. It exposes the dialogic character of a text which establishes the philological understanding through incessant encounter of the reader and the literary work. Jauss calls literary history as "a process of reception and production." This process takes places in "the realization of literary texts on the part of the receptive reader, the reflective critic and the author in his continuing productivity." (21) Jauss calls conventional literary history as "pseudo-history" because it is "factual" which can exist without the observer. Then Jauss relates "coherence of literature" with "horizon of expectation" of coeval readers, critics, authors and their posterity. "Whether it is possible to comprehend and represent the history of literature depends on whether this horizon of expectation can be objectified." (22)

Thesis 2. Jauss establishes that drawbacks of psychology can be avoided if the literary experience of the reader is described within "objectifiable system of expectations." This objectifiable system of expectations

includes the understanding of genres, form and themes of previous works and cognizance of difference between poetic language and practical language. Jauss refers to Roman Jakobson who wanted to replace the "collective state of consciousness" by a "collective ideology" in the form of system of norms that exists for each literary work as langue and that is actualized as parole by the receiver. Mikhail K. Bakhtin points that not only language but understanding itself is a dialogic process: "Understanding comes to fruition only in response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other. (82) What Bakhtin has termed as dialogic is socio-cultural, historical and ideological background that comes into play; and what Jauss has focused is the reader's past experience of literature which results in their expectation when they read any other literary work.

The new text evokes for the reader (listener) the horizon of expectations and rules familiar from earlier texts, which are then varied, corrected, altered or even reproduced. Variation and correction determine the scope, whereas alteration and reproduction determine the borders of a genre-structure. (23)

Thus if one is to look at the subjective interpretation or tastes of different readers or level of readers than one has to take into account the specific horizon that influences the understanding of the text. The objective capability of such literary-historical framework in an ideal case raises reader's expectation and then shatters it gradually. This process serves twin purposes: firstly, it gives a critical view; and, secondly, it is able to produce 'poetic effects.'

Thesis 3. Jauss states that aesthetic value of a work can be determined by judging the way in which it affects the 'horizon of expectations'. If the audience changes its horizon and adapts itself to the aesthetics of new work then it will result in "horizontal change." If work fulfils the horizon of expectation than no 'horizontal change' will occur and audience will enjoy it in accordance with prevalent norms of aesthetics. It may happen that work may have auspicious or inauspicious reception by its first audience but this may gradually disappear for later readers and that may become a familiar expectation. The classical works belong to "second horizontal change" because of their beautiful form that has become self-evident, and their seemingly unquestioned "eternal meaning." They are read against the background of "accustomed experience" for artistic evaluation.

Jauss emphasizes that relationship of literature and audience depends on its historicity, society and ideology i.e. the writer has to keep in mind the milieu of his period. This may have two implications: a work may lose its importance when the change occurs in milieu; or the writer creates such work that it has universal appeal so that it caters to the taste of forthcoming generations.

When, then, the new horizon of expectations has achieved more general currency, the power of the altered aesthetic norm can be demonstrated in that audience experiences formerly successful works as outmoded, and withdraws its appreciation. Only in view of such horizontal change does the analysis history of readers, and do the statistical curves of literary influence achieve the dimension of a literary history of readers, and do the statistical curves of the bestsellers provide historical knowledge. (26-27)

Jauss takes example of Feydeau's *Fanny* which got immediate success in 1857 and overshadowed Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. But later the horizon of expectations changed and *Fanny* receded into the background while *Madame Bovary* became a success.

Thesis 4. Jauss states that reconstruction of 'horizon of expectations' of audience, when the work was created, helps in envisaging how the coeval reader could have construed the meaning and thereby encounter the questions posed by the text. "It brings to view the hermeneutic difference between the former and current understanding of work, it raises to consciousness the history of reception ... that its objective meaning, determined once and for all, is at all times immediately accessible to the interpreter." (28) When the author is anonymous, intention is not clear and his relationship to source is not directly accessible then the work can be understood by looking at those works that the author presupposes his audience must know.

Jauss points at Rene Wellek who described whether a philologist should evaluate a literary work in accordance with the past scenario, present stance or the "verdict of the ages"? He describes the drawbacks of all three of them and accentuates that the possibility of avoiding our impression is rare, the judgement has to

be made objective, as far as possible, so much so that one has to isolate the object. Jauss however rejects this "as no solution to aporia but rather a relapse into objectivism."

Jauss assumes the critique of Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. He opposes Gadamer's notion that "what we call classical does not first require the overcoming of historical distance - for in its own constant mediation it achieves this overcoming." Jauss described classical (which "signifies itself and interpret itself") as "second horizontal change" because the classical art at the time of its production was not classical; it is with change in horizon that audience perceives the 'timeless truth it expresses.'

Jauss' project of historicity of literature is considered in three fold manner: "diachronically in the interrelationships of the reception of literary works, synchronically in the frame of reference of literature of the same period, and relationship of immanent literary development to the general process of history."

Thesis 5. The theory of aesthetics of reception serves two purposes: firstly it conceives the meaning of work in its historical context; secondly, it helps in serializing of literary work to recognize its conspicuousness in the context of the experience of literature. The transition from history of reception of works to eventful history of literature renders the author's passive. In other words, the next work can solve problems presented by the previous work, and simultaneously confront new problems.

Jauss then questions that how can a literary work be transformed from the status of mere "fact" to that of "event"? For this he takes into account the Formalist approach of "literary evolution" on an aesthetics of reception; this has two implications: "literary history becomes vanishing point" and it allows one to recognize the distance between the actual and virtual significance of literary work. It means that a work may be resisted in its first reception on the basis of its virtual significance, but later, gradually with change of horizon its actual significance may be understood. "It can thereby happen that a virtual significance of the work remains long unrecognized until "literary evolution," through the actualization of a newer form, reaches the horizon that now for the first time allows one to find access to the understanding of misunderstood older forms." (35)

New literary form can re-innovative concerns related to previous works that are new forgotten. These include the so-called "renaissance." Thus, new things may be discovered in previous work which remained hidden through a new reception. The new can thus become not only aesthetic category but also a historical category: "When the diachronic analysis of literature is pushed further to ask which historical moments are really the ones that which is new in a literary phenomenon." (35)

Jauss refers to linguistics usage of diachronic-synchronic relationship which is helpful in over-coming the diachronic perspective in literary history as well. The focus can be shifted on "heterogeneous multiplicity of contemporaneous works in equivalent, opposing, and hierarchal structures, and thereby to discover an overarching system of relationships in the literature of historical moment." (36) Synchronic system must contain its past and its future; for this diachronous study of literary works will be required before and after that period. This aids in literary history that does not require its comparison with classical books, nor with those texts which cannot historically articulated. If one is to represent historical succession in literature than it will require an intersection of diachrony and synchrony.

Thesis 7. Diachronic and synchronic systems are not sufficient to represent literary history, it also requires a visualization of "special history" in relation with "general history." Jauss hints at the relationship of reader with literature and reality, the horizon of expectation and reader's understanding of the world, which subsequently affects his social behavior. Thus, literary history needs to be connected also with reader's real world.

Linguistics and Structuralism neglected the social function of literature and viewed it as a mere text, as a verbal artifact. On the other hand, Marxist ignored the artistic aspect of literature and considered it as a social construct. Jauss has attempted to bridge the gap between these two divergent approaches to literature. He attempts to

reduce the chasm between literary-historical and sociological research through an aesthetics of reception embodied in his concept of "horizon of expectations."

Hence Jauss's theory is held to be intellectually and philosophically important its chief among those theories which had attempted to overcome the deficiencies of other contemporary model; definitions of the reader, by promoting positive interaction between the text and the reader but being heuristic by nature, we can conclude that he inevitably simplify the complexity of the concept of the reader. Although Jauss's theory of reading has been held as controversial among other reception theories, it remains crucial to the understanding of the nature of the literary readers. It does not only urges a constant re-examination of social and individual conversions of the text, but also enriches our understanding of the literary reading, a contribution that can never be overestimated. The paper comes to the conclusion that in reading we discover not only alternate visions to explore, but also our own human thirst for freedom of action, ultimate understanding and wish to emancipate from all that hinders our developing human thinking through Jauss' reader oriented criticism in his reception theory.

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