

In Search of 'Logos': Theorizing the Reader and Responsive Meaning-making



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Abstract

The aim of this paper will be to examine the meaning-making aspect of responding to a text and how it is not unilaterally possible for the interchangeability of the positions of the speaker, the author and the reader. The text gains importance too, though a critique of the Formalist approach to regard the same will be established, in the process of meaning-making. What will further be argued is that meaning is arrived at and not derived, but the process of arriving at it is not just the task of the reader, especially in light of the statement by Louise Rosenblatt that, “the author at the time of its creation is the first reader”, thereby refuting that the author is not really dead or is not an agent in the productive process of establishing meaning, but is deliberately in the background. Therefore, an intricacy in the relationship between the author, the reader and the text will be examined, and how meaning is produced, thereof, with the interaction of all three.

Key Words: meaning-making, interchangeability, Formalist approach, Reader Response Theory.

“Thomas Mann, thinking of Goethe, asked, ‘Who is a poet?’ And answered: ‘He whose life is symbolic’” (Farell, 2016, 1). A poet, a playwright, a novelist, any creative artist whosoever, is symbolic enough to live through their work long after they are gone and long past their eras, but how is it so, what is the reason behind this apparent, indelible and perpetual symbolic existence—is it just the power of his words, his art, or is it a constant re-creation of the self by the investment of other selves in that persona, with whom he can relate, and metamorphose to, a constant shape-shifting, a deliberate invisibility and, thereby, an everlasting presence. But the author, as Roland Barthes tells us, is dead, yet there is a text, a literary product,

to be read, assessed, incorporated or discarded and realized. But the author cannot realize his work; for that, there needs to be someone who can who can assess it and make it acceptable in the social framework. The second participant, or the one, who has the next direct engagement with the text, after the author, is the reader. In this respect, Mann's definition becomes highly limiting, for the poet, or the author for that matter, is not complete in himself but works through validation from the reader to make his work meaningful. The preoccupation with meaning-making as the ultimate aim of literary production lies with the author and in his pseudo presence, the reader. The reader either subscribes to or discards the intended authorial meaning and invests in the text his own set of meanings, not doing away with the original linguistic reserve but moulding it to suit his purposes and intentions. There is always a search for meaning, within a particular socio-economic, cultural framework, an affirmation of sorts that propagates the views of the author, or the reader or even the reader-turned-author, as well as the times. It is, therefore, necessary to define and theorize the reader in order to understand his position and role vis-à-vis the author, the text and, more importantly his role in producing or reproducing, creating or re-creating meaning, which this paper will assess subsequently.

“The reader in literature” (Fish, 1980, 344) today is an industry. He is “regularly the subject of forums and workshops at the convention of the Modern Language Association, there is a reader newsletter which reports on the multitudinous labours of a reader industry, any list of currently active schools of literary criticism includes the school of ‘reader response’” (Fish, 1980, 344). In order to theorize the reader, it is important to understand the very concept of the reader. In a series of questions, Fish tries to examine the figure of the reader: Who is the reader? “What is the reader doing? What is being done to him? For what purpose?” (Fish, 1980, 345) The reader is the subject of scrutiny for decades now after it has been established how crucial his role is in the light of the “birth of the reader” being “ransomed by the death of the Author” (Barthes, 2016, 7). The authorial intentionality is all but done away with and it is the job of the reader to rescue the text from oblivion. He brings in the very concept of readability. Although readability is influenced by factors such as language, culture and social acceptance yet it is the ideological bend of the reader who is the final judge of what to identify with and invest in, with the aim of deriving meaning from it and infusing meaning into it and thereby give the text a new meaning—that is how literary texts live on, through different socio-economic, geopolitical eras and time spans and through numerous authors. A text, or specifically its meaning, is thus, reconfigured time and again by the readers through their active participation with it. Therefore, the reader elaborates the “structure of reading experience” (Fish, 1980, 345). However, the concept of the ‘reader’ is not unilateral. Whenever we speak of him, it is implied that there is, somewhere, an author, because of whom the reader enjoys the position of the reader. The reader, in himself, is not an isolated entity, as much as the author is not one. The two exist in a symbiotic relationship. They never function in solitude but are enisled within the dominant, popular, socio-cultural and ideological beliefs. Both are products of their times and environments. The reader is an entity who interacts with the writer's intentions. Both are interlinked through their reactions to the text so much so that their relationship is almost interchangeable. “The author, at the time of its creation, is the first reader” (Rosenblatt, 2016, 35). Here, the subjectivities of the two personae should be put to question. There is a great extent of similarity between the two because of which they can deconstruct or construct each other. Both have an immediate connection with

the text—both derive from and endow meaning to the text. Their primary engagement and discourse is through the medium of the text. The “inner-oriented type of authorial reading” (Rosenblatt, 1988, 10) is the moment of the first experience of reading a unique or new text when the author assumes the stance of the reader and is no longer the author. This is what Matthew Arnold calls the “touchstone method” (Farell, 2016, 1) where the roles of the two are interfused within each other. The author is no longer solely the author. The reader too, having discarded the meaning intended by the author, becomes the new author, the creator, of the text; he is no longer just a passive recipient, but an agent of creation.

While the “writer ‘composes’ a presumably meaningful text; the reader ‘composes,’ hence ‘writes,’ an interpreted meaning” (Rosenblatt, 1988, 2). Therefore, both aim at the production of meaning as the phenomenological outcome of the text. For the propagation of meaning, a false subjectivity is created both by the author and the reader. The writer, while writing, creates a false self—an imaginary persona, who is to respond to the text just as the writer wants him to, thus arriving at the final meaning—what Wolfgang Iser calls the “ideal reader” (Iser, 1972, 279) whose realization of the text is no different than the author’s. He is to “enact in his responses the very subject matter” (Fish, 1980, 345) of the text. But “no mock reader can be divorced for long from the specific words that made him” (Gibson, 1950, 269). However, it is a two-way construction and the self of the author is also constructed by the reader. The ‘speaker’ of a literary text is distinctly different from the biographical self of the author, for he is composed of “language alone” (Gibson, 1950, 265) and “his entire self lies on the page before us in evidence” (Gibson, 1950, 265). This does not obliterate the directed consciousness of the author, but rather takes up a form, a persona, to delineate the same. Language, therefore, is an important determiner in the course of realizing the meaning as well as those who are to determine it. The author-speaker-reader-meaning equation is thus, mediated by language. The meaning to be thus arrived at through the various levels of transaction between the real and the constructed selves has to be an effective meaning, for the individual is a social being and literature is not just some vague set of aesthetic pleasure principle but “a question both raised and resolved by what the text acts out and what an audience may act out under its prompting” (Farell, 2016, 4). The reader and the author are connected by language and its effectiveness in real life. “We know that words do not function in isolation, but always in particular verbal, personal and social constructs”(Rosenblatt, 1988, 3). Therefore, the meaning that is derived is also not something temporal but has the ability to adjust or remake itself with different social, cultural, historical, linguistic or personal experiences. Language is not an “autonomous system”(Rosenblatt, 1988, 3); it is not even a simple concept of the ‘signifier-signified’. Language is always the language of the privileged. So, the signifier (or, word) and the signified (or, object) have a set of significations that is directed towards a privileged reading, so that Wordsworth may talk about the language of a common man talking to other common men but those common men are never going to associate that very particular set of meaning which he invests, for example, in the daffodils. The intended meaning is very easily lost when someone outside the sphere assesses the text and makes a completely new meaning out of it. The daffodils might symbolize something absolutely antithetical to what Wordsworth portrays in the text. Language is what connects and detaches the author and the reader. It is what makes and mars meanings.

Meaning is generated through various transactions between the text, the language, the reader and the author. Meaning “does not reside ready-made in the text or in the reader, but happens during the transaction between reader and text” (Rosenblatt, 1988, 4). The text or mere linguistic symbols become a poem, according to Louise Rosenblatt, when there is a direct involvement of the reader with the linguistic reserve contained in the otherwise only symbols. A particular reader transacts, engages, with a “particular configuration of marks on a page, and occurring at a particular time in a particular context” (Rosenblatt, 1988, 4) and it is then that meaning is produced. A transaction also happens between the author and the language that he uses to express his thoughts. The diction or the choice of his words transforms mere lexical signs to personal and social experience. Language being a socially generated system and internalized by the inhabitants of the society is qualified and quantified when the available meanings are toppled by another set of meanings that is imposed on the lexical symbols. “The linguistic gesture, like all the rest, delineates its own meaning....Available meanings, in other words, former acts of expression, establish between speaking subjects a common world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1978, 185). When a reader constitutes a meaning of his own, he does away with the available meanings. The concept of the available meanings is one of intentionality and unquestioned acceptance. It was an instance of authorial imposition. As Merleau-Ponty states, “man superimposes on the given world the world according to man” (Merleau-Ponty, 1978, 187), it is all about establishing oneself and finding validation through acceptance and since ours is a voiced existence, a verbal life that transforms thought to speech and speech to words, language is transfigured and with it, meaning. “The orator does not think before speaking, nor even while speaking; his speech is his thought. In the same way, the listener does not form concepts on the basis of signs” (Merleau-Ponty, 1978, 179). In this analogy, Merleau-Ponty speaks of the “conceptual meaning”, that is, the “top coating of meaning...which presents the thought as a style, an affective value, a piece of existential mimicry” (Merleau-Ponty, 1978, 181). There is an “existential meaning” which inhabits words and which is inherently there and cannot be toppled off. It is this meaning that is a part of our understanding and is natural to us. It is standardized, and therefore needs to be interrogated. It is, at times, accepted when the major concern of the author is one of readability and social credibility, while more often than not, dismissed by the reader who rejects authorial supremacy.

On another level of transactional relationship between the reader and the author, the reader is both a private as well as public entity and so is the author. He, too, is always transacting with a personal and a social self. The author has a private self that can be replaced by the subjective, personal self of the reader. The transaction between the private and the public selves individually in each, that is, the reader and the author, and a confrontation of the two through the text, gives rise to meaning. While talking about the subjective, or personal, selves of the reader and the author, it is important to make a distinction between meaning and interpretation. Meaning encompasses a wider spectrum, it deals with social acceptance and is concerned with popular norms, dogmas, and prevalent ideologies. That is to say, it is what the public self of the reader or the author is associated with. Interpretation is the personal response to the text but the question of effectiveness arises again so that Stanley Fish argues that personal interpretations would go on to take the form of “competing interpretation” (Fish, 1980, 345). The reader, as it has been argued above, does not work in isolation. He works in accordance not only with the

author but also with other readers. A reader is never a unitary, unique individual but is a collective being. He belongs to “Interpretive Communities” (Fish, 1980, 1), so that each reader assesses a text from a collective standpoint, as part of the many, and not as an isolated individual. “Indeed”, Fish writes, “it is interpretive communities, rather than either the text or reader, that produce meaning” (Chapman, 2013, 27). Although such communities are composed of informed readers, there is always the chance of a wrong interpretation and no assurance that the meaning incorporated into the linguistic register after abjuring the existing meaning will be the ultimate one and best suited for future generations of readers. Due to the variability of readers, there is now a proliferation of meaning, a multiplicity of interpretations, as many as the number of readers and as many school of criticisms as could be founded, so that there is always the fear, the possibility of “Affective Fallacy” (Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1949, 1) where, as opposed to the dominance of the authorial meaning—the one absolute, final meaning, there is, now, an excess of meanings so that the essential text is lost, and pretentious or far-fetched, abstract, vague definitions and interpretations, even meanings, are extracted out of a text. Fish argues that the informed readers act in accordance to social constructs and not through idiosyncratic notions. While on one level, it is true that even the most personal of interpretations has to be socially validated, one’s own meaning, arrived at through personal life and linguistic experiences can never be thusly modulated so much so that one loses one’s individuality, the consciousness of the self and becomes another construct, this time not of the author’s doing but his own. Being a part of the collective is effectively subscribing to a kind of “psychoanalytic pluralism” (Fish, 1980, 345) but that does not entail negating one’s subjectivity, one’s essential self, however modulated it be by society.

From the reader of “Reader, I married him” (Bronte, 2016, 38), the relationship between the author and the reader has developed with evolution in reading and writing, so that now his persona is inter-fused with that of the author himself. He is no longer at the passive end, watching a story unfold in front of his eyes but is an active participant in the plot of the text. He is a modulator of the meaning that the text will offer and he is a determiner in that it is him and many other informed readers like him who constructs language and ideologies that guide meaning. Not only the figures of the author and the reader have evolved but also the meaning derived from the text. The text, too, is no longer a definite ultimatum but a “spatial object” (Fish, 1980, 345), a “temporal experience in the course of which meanings become momentarily available, before disappearing under the pressure of other meanings, which are in their turn superseded, contradicted, qualified, or simply forgotten” (Fish, 1980, 345).

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