

Locating Reader Response Theory in Jauss's *Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory*

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Abstract

Hans-Robert Jauss is known for his theory of “Reception” that began in Germany. Twentieth century unfolded multiple aspects to look at literature within the critical framework of theories. Development of Structuralism by Ferdinand de Saussure, later developed and critiqued by Jacques Derrida’s Deconstruction, and then Formalism and New Criticism- all paved the way to shift the critical focus from the text and the author to the reader. Prior to twentieth century things were supposed to be fixed and certain, that’s why reader was not taken into account, but there was always a reader / audience. Consequently owing to the variety of readers there emerged different theories that focused on readers and how a reader responds to a particular text. Reader-Response theory has its notion grounded in Phenomenology and Hermeneutics. Against this background we have the development of Reception theory by Hans-Georg Gadamar and Hans Robert Jauss. 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. Thus the long neglected reader comes to the forefront in reader-response theory. The text is left at the hands of the reader to receive its fate. Since no reader will have same outlook, the text is bound to be interpreted in various ways. Reader – response theory makes it clear that not only the socio-cultural, historical and ideological

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background comes into play, but also the intellectual and emotional activity manifested in the cognitive process of the reader's act of reading.

Key Terms and Phrases: Marxist criticism, Russian Formalism, New Criticism, Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, “aesthetics of reception”, “historical objectivism,” “horizon of Expectation,” “objectifiable system of expectations,” “horizontal change,” “actualization, realization or concretization.”



Courtesy: http://www.zeably.com/Hans-Robert_Jauss

Twentieth Century Criticism

Twentieth century unfolded multiple aspects to look at literature within the critical framework of theories. Development of Structuralism by Ferdinand de Saussure, later **Language in India** www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 13:5 May 2013
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developed and critiqued by Jacques Derrida's Deconstruction, and then Formalism and New Criticism- all paved the way to shift the critical focus from the text and the author to the reader. Prior to twentieth century things were supposed to be fixed and certain, that's why reader was not taken into account, but there was always a reader / audience. Consequently owing to the variety of readers there emerged different theories that focused on reader.

Reader in Classic Literary Criticism

Plato stated: "Poetry makes men immoral." It means Plato also had audience in mind but he viewed it as immoral and sentimental, as it can be easily deprived by poetry. Aristotle through his theory of *katharsis* perceived the audience not only as sensitive but mature enough to identify the difference between imaginary and reality. Horace talks of decorum and views his audience as sophisticated. It was particularly Longinus who was especially concerned about readers. He said that if a work of art contains sublimity than it transports the audience in spell bound state.

Marxist and New Criticism

Marxist criticism looked at a text being conceived by a reader who has certain socio-cultural background and ideology. Marxists neglected the artistic aspect of art. On the other hand Russian Formalism and New Criticism focused on the text alone; the task to analyze artistic feature was given to the reader, but secluding it from its origin, intention, socio-cultural and ideological background. Reader-Response theory attempts to bridge the gap between these two separated criticism by analyzing how a reader responds to a text through his understanding of his society and culture to the aesthetics of art.

Reader-Response Theory and Phenomenology

Reader-Response theory has its notion grounded in Phenomenology and Hermeneutics. Phenomenology deals with perception of phenomenon. Inaugurated by Edmund Husserl, Geneva School of Criticism shifted the emphasis of study away from the

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“external” world of objects towards examining the way in which these objects appear to the human subject. M.A.R. Habib expounds Husserl’s theory: “that a work of art (like any other phenomenon) cannot somehow exist prior to its reception; it is constituted by the sensibility which receives it as such, a work of art.” (711)

Reader-Response Theory and Hermeneutics

Another field of influence is Hermeneutics, grounded in theory of Martin Heidegger. When a text is written, it is interpreted; Hermeneutics focused on interpretation. Heidegger refers to “existentiality” or “transcendence,” to explain an encounter of human being with his/her world. Human being views the world in accordance with his own existence and potential.

Reception Theory by Hans-Georg Gadamar and Hans Robert Jauss

Against this background we have the development of Reception theory by Hans-Georg Gadamar and Hans Robert Jauss. 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 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.

Seven Findings by Jauss

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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.” (Literary History as Challenge 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.” (LHC, 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.” (LHC 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

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comes to fruition only in response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other.” (Bakhtin, 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. (LHC 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.

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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 of literary influence achieve the dimension of a literary history of readers, and do the statistical curves of the bestsellers provide historical knowledge. (LHC 26-27)

Jauss takes the example of Feydeau's *Fanny* which got immediate success in 1857 and over-shadowed 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." (LHC 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 judgment 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

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becomes a 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.” (LHC 35)

New literary form can re-innovate the concerns related to previous works that are now forgotten. These include the so-called “renaissances.” 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.” (LHC 35)

Jauss refers to linguistics usage of diachronic-synchronic relationship which is helpful in overcoming 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.” (LHC 36) Synchronic system must contain its past and its future; for this diachronic 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

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and reader's understandings of the world, which subsequently affects his social behavior. Thus, literary history needs to be connected also with reader's real world.

Bridging the Gap between Divergent Approaches

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 aesthetics of reception embodied in his concept of "horizon of expectations."

Wolfgang Iser elaborated reader-response theory in his two major works: *The Implied Reader* (1972) and *The Act of Reading* (1976). The main features of Iser's approach hinge around the distinction between what the text irrefutably provides ("schematized aspects") and how the reader, to use Iser's terms, 'actualizes' or 'realizes' it in his or her mind. Hence Iser forwarded the reception theory of Jauss through his concept of "actualization, realization or concretization," whereby the signifiers of the text are brought together in the reader's mental act of cognition to create the "world" of the text. Iser puts forth that a text is filled with "gaps" and "spaces" which are to be filled by reader in his act of reading to make it meaningful.

Then we have Stanley Fish who states that everything is subjected to an individual act of interpretation. In his seminal essay, "Is There a Text in This Class?" (1980), Fish charts a course between the remains of intentionalism and the possible violation by the reader of the author's overt intention. In other words there is actually no "pre-existing text," in fact everything is determined by the consciousness of the reader. Stanley Fish denounces Iser's notion and give the reader sole authority to impart the meaning.

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