

Ralph Waldo Emerson: A Precursor to Reader-Response Theory

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Abstract: This article contends that there exists significant similitude between the fundamental principles of twentieth-century Reader-Response theory and the notions of the role of the reader and the reading process ideated by nineteenth-century American Transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882). Through a close reading of the multifarious references, sporadically scattered through Emerson’s essays, addresses and journals, and the theories of Louise Rosenblatt, Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser and Jonathan Culler, this article attempts to shed light on how Emerson presages the Reader-Response theorists’ emphasis on the instrumental role of the reader in meaning formation, on the essentially creative and active, inherently subjective and unique nature of the reading process, the relentlessly dynamic and unduplicable experience of the act of reading; and, lastly, the indispensable importance of literary knowledge and competence as prerequisites to signification and meaning construal of the interpretative reading process.

Keywords: Reader-Response theory, Emerson, reading process, reader, literary competence

INTRODUCTION

In 1967, French post-structuralist thinker, Roland Barthes, in his ground-breaking essay “The Death of the Author” emphatically sounded the death knell for the author figure; and in doing so, he heralded “the birth of the reader.” The post-structuralist and post-modernist era in their unambiguous dismantlement of ideological structures and erstwhile considered normative cultural hierarchies, witnessed a diminution of the monological authority of the author. Decades before Barthes transferred the power of meaning-formation from the author to the reader, it was Louise Rosenblatt, who in her work *Literature as Exploration* (first published in 1933), delegated the

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reader as a co-creator and producer of meaning of texts, rather than being a passive consumer. Rosenblatt, along with thinkers like Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, Norman Holland in the last three decades of the twentieth-century challenged the subordination of the reader to textuality and the author figure through their postulation of Reader-Response or Reader-Reception Theory.

This article contends that well before Barthes and the Reader-Response theorists, nineteenth-century American Transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) had extolled the ideas of “creative reading” and the need to “be an inventor to read well.” Multifarious traces and references to the reading process and the instrumental role played by the reader in it, are interspersed sporadically throughout his essays, lectures and addresses; and perhaps this intermittent smattering is the reason why this perspective has eluded scholarly attention. Robert D. Richardson Jr. (2009, 13) in his work *First We Read, Then We Write* did briefly allude to the importance of reading as “creative for Emerson; it is active...”; and, that “there would be as many meanings of a book as it had readers”, but his elaboration of the subject is limited, since his focus lay more on how reading activates the writing process in the Emersonian mode of thought. Using the theoretical framework of Reader-Response or Reader-Reception criticism, this article attempts to fill this research gap, by collating these scattered variegated Emersonian traces and references, and correlating them with the ideas of Reader Response theorists on the role of the reader, the manifold facets of the reading process, and the notion of literary competence.

THE ROLE OF THE READER

What's a book? Everything or nothing. The eye that sees it is all. ...
(Emerson 1965, 93)

Inaugurated by Louise Rosenblatt (1904-2005), Reader Response Theory was a reader-centric school of theory which arose in opposition to New Criticism—its over-emphasis on the text as a self-contained, autonomous unit of meaning, and its absolute dismissal of the ‘Author’ and the reader figure in the formation of meaning. In contrast to New Criticism’s excessive “critical objectivity,” its highly streamlined focus on the materiality of text and its formal elements, its passive mode of reading, Reader-Response Theory marks “a paradigm shift towards a more readerly oriented framework of literary exploration” (Davis and

Womack 2002, 53; my emphasis). Reader-Reception or Reader-Response theory sheds light on the act of reading, the interpretive process, the instrumental role the reader plays in constructing the text and the meaning of the text, and examines the ways in which readers receive or respond to literary texts.

Reader-Response theorists ardently extend the idea that if the author is the creator, the reader is the co-creator of the text. Both Rosenblatt and Iser posit the existence of the literary work on the act of reading performed by the reader, “The poem or the novel or the play exists in the transaction that goes on between the reader and the text” (Rosenblatt 1995, 27); the literary work comes into existence through “the convergence of text and reader” (Iser 1978, 275). It is the reader who through his process of reading, breathes life into the text, thereby unfolding its “inherently dynamic character” (Ibid., 275). When Emerson defines a book as “Everything or nothing” except for the “eye that sees it all” (Emerson 1965, 93), he is inconspicuously alluding to the reader’s *eye*, the reader’s power of discernment and perception that aids meaning-creation. Akin to the Iserian hypothesis that the work “only takes on life when it realized” (Iser 1978, 274), the Emersonian view, “Let us answer a book of ink with a book of flesh and blood” (my emphasis) correspondingly predicates the power and authority of reader whose activity of reading imbues the literary work with life, with substance and meaning. It is only by bringing the text into realization, that the reader renders the literary work an everything or a nothing.

CREATIVE READING

In August, 1837 at the Phi Beta Kappa Society, Harvard College, Boston, Emerson delivered his monumental address “The American Scholar.” While scholarly consensus has inducted the address into the American canon for its sonorous call of awakening to the slumbering American intellect; the address is noteworthy also for the way it portends the reading process as an essentially tedious, active, creative, selective and inventive act. If Emerson’s notion of the ideal scholar posits the dynamic “Man thinking” over the static “mere thinker,” or worse, the “bookworm,” a passive consumer of books; his notion of the reading process situates it as an act of invention, “One must be an inventor to read well” (Emerson 2007, 89); as an act of production rather than just reproduction—it is “creative reading,” as he terms it,—

a phraseology reiterated by Louise Rosenblatt a century later in her work *Literature as Exploration* (first published in 1933).

We read often with as much talent as we write. (Emerson 1982b, 442)

There is then creative reading as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced with labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusions. Every sentence becomes doubly significant, and the sense of our author is as broad as the world. (Emerson 2007, 89)

Just as the author is creative, selective, so the reader also is creative. . . . it will not be the result of passivity on the reader's part . . . as in the case of the artist's creative process . . . (Rosenblatt 1995, 34; my emphasis)

Not only do the afore-cited last two excerpts begin in a concomitant fashion, with a striking resemblance in diction and rhetoric; their congruity extends well into the ideas they explore. Both Emerson and Rosenblatt bestow equal complexity, originality and inventiveness upon the act of reading, as is generally alluded to the act of writing or authorship. Dismissing the passivity and acquiescence which conventionally adorned the reading process, they locate it as fundamentally "creative," highly constructive and epistemological. It is not the passive ingestion of the author's words and implications constitute the act of reading; but a dynamic, active, creative act unfolding an endless plurality of possible interpretations. Reading is a process in which the reader "activates or completes a text" (Castle 2007, 177). As Gregory Castle puts it, "The literary text is far more than what is written in it; and this 'far more' comes into existence precisely as part of a creative process whereby the reader's own faculties are brought into being" (Ibid., 177).

READING AS A PERSONAL, UNIQUE, NON-REPLICATORY ACT

What can we see, read, acquire but what we are? . . . Well, the author is a thousand things to a thousand persons. Take the book into your own hands and read your eyes out. You will never find there what the other finds. . . . or do you think that you can possibly hear and bring away any conversation more than is already in your mind born or ready to be born. (Emerson 2007, 75)

If it is the reader who creates the book, who transmutes "a book of ink" into "a book of flesh and blood" (Emerson 1982a, 257) through the

“creative,” active exercise of interpretation and meaning-making, then reading stands as a particularly personal, individualized, subjective and unique endeavor—a hypothesis formulated and elaborated by Emerson (most fervently in his lecture “Ethics,” from which the above-cited excerpt is drawn), later reiterated by Rosenblatt in her definition, “the reading of any work of literature is, of necessity, an individual and unique occurrence, involving the mind and emotions of some particular reader” (1995, 32). Rosenblatt characterized the reading process as “an intensely personal activity” (Preface vi); as a transaction between the work of art and the “personality of the reader” (Ibid., 324). She extolled the idea that the reader’s past experiences, present preoccupations, needs, desires, expectations and frustrations guide the entire processes (Ibid., 25, 26, 30), making reading and interpretation essentially subjective and idiosyncratic.

Through the medium of words, the writer attempts to bring into the reader’s consciousness certain concepts, certain sensuous experiences, certain images . . . The special meanings, and more particularly, the submerged associations that these words and images have for the individual reader will largely determine what the work communicates to him. The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood . . . These and many other elements, interacting with the peculiar contribution of the work of art, produce a unique experience. (Rosenblatt 1995, 30)

What we can read in a book, what we can interpret is that which is present in us. Meaning and interpretation emanate from the wellspring of the reader’s own “estate”—his or her state of mind, emotion, feelings; his or her physical and psychological estate. The act of construal and meaning-formation is a reflection of the reader’s own self, a sublimation of the reader’s consciousness; an imperative congruity between the text and the reader’s own mental processes (Richardson Jr. 2009, 12) as Emerson puts it, “Insist that the Schelling, Schleiermacher, Ackerman or whoever propounds to you a mythology, is only a more or less awkward translation of entities in your own consciousness. . . . If Spinoza cannot [render back to you your consciousness], perhaps Kant will” (quoted in Richardson Jr. 2009, 12). Emerson in the previous excerpt unwittingly anticipates the phenomenological understanding of the reading process as a complete dismantlement of the barriers between the book and the reader, the subject and the object; as a transformation of the text as object into another subject, one that occupies the reader’s consciousness, existing

simultaneously within it (Castle 2007, 174). It is a union of the consciousness of the text and the consciousness of the reader. Akin to Emerson's affirmation that the reading of Kant or Schelling is a reflection of his own consciousness, the reader-response theory espouses that it "is the text and the consciousness of the text that penetrates the reader's mind and exists within the reader's mind and loans the reader's SUBJECTIVITY to the text" (Ibid., 177).

Emerson and Rosenblatt share a commonality of faith on several grounds. First, in their mutual insistence on the invariable incumbency of the book to resonate with the reader personally. Emerson had propounded, "only that book we can read which relates to me something that is already in my mind" (Emerson 2001, 75); Rosenblatt follows the Transcendentalist in her assertion: "If the images and ideas presented by the work has no relevance to the past experiences or emotional needs of the reader, only a vague, feeble, or negative response will occur" (1995, 56) (although this mandate of the book sharing implacable conformance to the reader's mental processes, is apparently too limiting and antagonistic to the ideal of creative, active reading that Emerson and Reader-Response theorists extoll the most). Another contention that unites Rosenblatt and Emerson is their notion that the heavily subjective, personalized, circumstance-grounded reading process culminates in a never reproducible or monotonous experience unique to the reader and the immediate time of the act. It is not only implied that the same book will carry a different meaning and value to us at different phases of our lives, under different circumstances; but also that it is a living, dynamic, mutable, newly-unfolding activity. Rosenblatt's conception of "the living and unsteretyped nature of the reading experience, made up . . . in a never-to-be-duplicated combination" (Ibid., 30) is pre-empted in Emerson's assertion, "I suppose every old scholar has had the experience of reading something in a book which was significant to him, but which he could never find again, though he buy the book and ransack every page" (Emerson 1982c, 64).

A THOUSAND READERS, A THOUSAND TEXTS

Every word we speak is a million-faced or convertible to an indefinite number of applications. If it were not so, we could read no book. Your remark would fit only your case, not mine. And Dante who described his circumstance would be unintelligible now. But a thousand readers in a

thousand different years shall read his story and find it a picture of their story by making of course a new application of every word. (Emerson 1970, 157)

In his work *First We Read, Then We Write: Emerson on the Creative Process*, Robert D. Richardson (2009, 13) affirmed Emerson's reluctance to single out one meaning of a book, and his subsequent acceptance of the idea that a book is imbued with as many meanings, as many readers there are. Reader-Response theory validates the existence of an endless array of viable interpretations, multifarious plausible meanings—all construed and fashioned by the reader. The preceding sections established the idea that it is the reader who produces the text, who acts as a repository of signification; how every personal reading, centered in a certain moment in time, is an essentially unique production of the text. If it is the interaction, the transaction between the words on the page and the reader, that animates and activates a book; if it is the reader because of whom the text exists, then as outlined in Emerson's afore-cited passage, there are as many books as there are readers; or there are as many versions of a book, as many meanings of a book as there are readers dissecting them and unearthing meaning.

Employing a rhetoric identical to Emerson's passage, Rosenblatt (1995, 20) reaffirms the same line of thought, "There is no such thing as a generic reader . . . there are in reality only the potential millions of readers of the potential millions of individual literary works. The novel, the poem, the play exists after all, only in interactions with specific minds". Both Emerson and Rosenblatt in their dismissal of the "generic" reader, give voice to the intrinsically multi-faceted character of every word, the multi-layered signification underlying every sentence. This ultimate polysemic nature of the text and the reading process implies that in the hands of uncountable readers, one text harbors within itself the potential to multiply into countless distinct, unique texts.

LITERARY COMPETENCE; THE INFORMED READER

Well a book is to a paddy (but) a fair page smutted with black marks; to a boy, a goodly collection of words he can read; to a half-wise man, it is a lesson which he wholly accepts or wholly rejects; but a sage shall see in it secrets yet unrevealed; shall weigh, as he reads, the author's mind; shall see the predominance of ideas which the writer could not extricate himself from, & oversee. (Emerson 1965, 93)

Whenever we are wise, every book streams with universal light. 'Tis the reader that makes the book. A good head cannot read amiss. (Emerson 2001, 75)

Stemming from their eulogy of the reader as the seminal element in the transmutation of a text into meaning, arises Reader Response theorists' trenchant underscoring of the pre-requisites of aptitude, knowledge and competence in the reader—what Jonathan Culler christens as “literary competence”; Stanley Fish, as the “informed reader” (Fish 1970, 145). In his famous work, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (first published in 1975), Jonathan Culler introduced “literary competence,” a key concept in the Reader-Response discourse. Literary competence refers to the ability to internalize and implicitly cognize the “grammar of literature” (Culler 1981, 25)—the set of literary conventions, codes, rules of reading literary texts (Ibid., 28); it entails the propensity to convert linguistic sequences into literary structures and meanings (Ibid., 23). The assumption that the multifarious possibilities of meaning embedded in the literary text can be accessed by a person according to his or her literary competence is one that was reckoned by Emerson in his *Letters and Social Aims* (1883):

Tis the good reader that makes the good book . . . the profit of books is according to the sensibility of the reader. The profoundest thought or passion sleeps as in a mine, until it is discovered by an equal mind and heart. (Emerson 1883, 185)

Emerson's above quote rephrases Culler's concept in more intelligible terms. It simply connotes how it is the “good,” capable reader that renders the book “good”—the good reader is the embodiment of the good book. It is the knowledge and awareness of the reader that can unravel the meaning beyond the words in the text. The reader's sagacity, passion and dedication can only unearth the meaning the author intended. Emerson's quote takes us to Stanley Fish's concept of the “intended reader”—“reader whose education, opinions, concerns, linguistic competences . . . make him capable of having the experience the author wished to provide . . . the efforts of the readers are always to discern and therefore to realize (in the sense of becoming) an author's intention” (Fish 1988, 320).

Culler (1981, 25) argued that reading literary text requires someone to have an “implicit understanding of the operations of literary discourse which tells one what to look for”. The process of interpreting

the meaning of a literary text is one that is learned and mastered over-time, through one's exposure to and cumulative experience with literary texts. Stanley Fish in *Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics* (1970) underlines obligation on who he terms as the "informed reader" to do "everything in his (or her) power to make himself (or herself) informed" (1970, 145) — a sentiment that is strongly echoed in Emerson's exhortation—"A man must teach himself because he can only read according to his estate" (quoted in Richardson Jr. 2009, 12). Both Emerson and Reader-Response theorists posit upon readers the duty to hone and refine, to polish the art of reading, and by extension, the art of interpretation by virtue of the texts, the reading experiences one gathers.

CONCLUSION

There is indeed, irrefutably, a notable degree of parallelism between Emerson's theories of reading and what the Reader-Response theorists formulated a century later. Intimately and indissolubly connected to creative and critical thinking and meaning formation, the reading process and the reader, in consonance with both Emerson and Reader Response theorists, are adjudicated to a higher pedestal in the literary scholar's arsenal. As demonstrated in the previous sections, the authority of the reader, the inherently active, dynamic, "creative" act of reading, and the requisite "competence" and knowledge of literary conventions and reading experiences which eventuate onto the text, breathing meaning and life into it, are ideas vindicated by Emerson, later reiterated and developed further by theorists Rosenblatt, Iser, Culler, Fish. Emerson's remarks on the reading process may not be a conglomerate whole, condensed into a singular essay or work, yet the striking similarity between his opinions on the role of the reader and the reading process, validate the contention that Emerson did anticipate many of the fundamental principles of Reader-Response theory.

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