The Question of Meaning: A Theoretical Deliberation on Reader-Response Perspectives

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Meaning commands inexhaustible attention ever since critical consciousness manifested itself. Gearing up to a textual engagement for meaning, the role of the author, text, and the reader has alternately attracted attention. This paper focuses on a set of reader-response theories where the reader's role is foregrounded in the negotiation of meaning. Accordingly, meaning has been proposed as a product of an ongoing and inconclusive process with the participation of the reader. The objective of this paper is to affirm the non-closure of meaning by pointing up the preoccupation of twentieth century theoretical propositions on reading such as Semiotics, Phenomenology, and Hermeneutics; these theories throw insights on the dynamics of meaning during the textual engagement, and make the reader conscious of the meaning-making process; as such, the propositions point out the possibly multiple semantic directions characteristic of such processes in this enterprise; in addition, they pinpoint the differences precipitated in meaning during a text's travel across space and time. This paper, at first, introduces these theories and their preoccupations; secondly, it discusses each of them in reference to their views on meaning; then, during the discussion, it points out the rich semantic possibilities that transpire during the triangular interaction among the author, text, and the reader. Finally, it affirms the notion that meaning is ever-changing[1].
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Ever since human communication materialized, starting out in the physical, coursing through the verbal and culminating in the graphic manifestations, the wrestle for meaning began to transpire on end. However, subsequent to a literary convention that imputed unparalleled primacy to author who ruled that the author's meaning be looked out for, the focus shifted towards the text. Later, it has further shifted in favour of the reader and his consciousness which is inevitably structured by the spacio-temporal realities. Meaning constitutes a much more persistent problematic to an enlightened readership today than ever. Especially, literary texts that have been written and preserved long ago reveal potentially newer meanings hitherto not thought of. The reader's engagement with them

unfolds meanings negotiated out of an entirely unfamiliar spacio-temporal reality. What's more, even the same reader elicits fresher interpretations over successive readings. Ideas drawn on Hans Georg Gadamer, Dilthey, Wolgang Iser, Husserl, Roman Ingarden all point out the hitherto disregarded elements in this respect; they highlight the elements that engage in the negotiation of the meaning and throw light on the meaning making process. This paper illustrates in tandem the theoretical attempts such as Semiotics, Phenomenology, and Hermeneutics that offer views which contest the conventionally held authorial intention (singular meaning), and discusses them in relation to their contribution to theories of reading and points up the inexhaustibility of meaning of the text.

Deriving from a Greek etymological root of "semeion" that meant sign, the word "semiotics" has been carried over into the philosophy of language, as a critical method, to mean the study of signs. Sign is a structure of meaning governed by an underlying grid of laws, rules and conventions. In other words, there is an underlying code[2] in a text. In Semiotics, intelligibility presupposes a shared code. In order to understand the meaning of a text, linguistic competence is essential; yet, insufficient, according to Wolfgang Iser. Iser also states that even literary competence is inadequate to unravel the meaning (when responding to Jonathan Culler's claim that uncovering the meaning of a text requires literary competence.) Thus, unintelligibility of a text is a semiotic crisis. It follows then that an act of reading is a rubric; a struggle to understand the meaning. As for the literary texts, they are supposed to be having an inescapable linearity. Even so, some authors command a creativity that zooms in straight to problematize semantic challenges at the level of textual linearity. Symptomatic succession gets complexified therein. Because of its complexity, the act of reading - a collective label for mental manoeuvres – is a labour. It is an entire baggage of mental manoeuvrings.

A word in semiotics is an opaque symbol. It is an unmotivated symbol. Icon is the term used in place of 'word' in Semiotics. Motivated symbols are easily recoverable in linguistic expressions. Whereas pictures are motivated symbols, words are unmotivated symbols. Therefore, the unmotivated gap of language tends to be wider in a literary creativity. There is symbolic opacity. The human mind has acquired through time the capacity to engage with symbolic opacity. In paintings and generic protocols artists and writers employ their higher creative capacity. Higher creative meaning can be grasped by normal facile linguistic expression.

Another aspect of meaning is that it is fraught with linguistic structuration. Any meaning is a consequence of code. Any meaning therefore is contingent. As much as a code can be encoded, it can also be decoded. In a communicative act, this process of encoding and decoding take place. It avails a number of possibilities for meaning. Meaning is therefore characterized by deiconization. Yet, it is crucial to keep in mind that symbolic opacity is not definitely a negative condition. A positive connotation is ascribed to this facility by designating it as

'symbolic freedom' available in language. That is, it is open for endless meanings. Higher literary creativity happens in the symbolic freedom as it is open for poly semantic possibilities. The act of reading is a dialogic act in which a reader engages with conditions and terms set by others (authors). Given the fact that semiotics is a play of signs, and terms and conditions stated above could be numerous, it follows, then, that the number of decoding possibilities too would multiply, and hence meaning cannot be restricted to single prescription.

Now that it has become obvious that semiotics posits the ground for multiplicity of meaning, phenomenology merits attention as a theory of reading. The etymological root of the term phenomenology can be traced back to Greek "phainemenon" meaning appearance (in consciousness). The English counterpart would refer to an object appearing in human consciousness. Phenomenology exceeds in meaning beyond sensation. The essence of object is beyond sensation. Phenomenology is said to be annulling the Cartesian dichotomy of the object and subject. The category 'consciousness' defines phenomenology. Consciousness is always consciousness of; there must be something to be conscious of; simply put, there is no objectless consciousness. Thus, phenomenology of literature could be construed as establishment of meaning for an ontologically existing literary text. Phenomenology maintains that writing is meaningless without reading. Writing by itself does not exist in the fullness of its meaning. It is indeterminate independent of a reading act. It lacks solidity of meaning. Roman Ingarden, the founder of phenomenological approach in literature says that reading is an ontological requirement; it is not a bonus or cosmetic frill; a literary text has a phenomenological inclination / desire to make an appearance; it defines the reader as an ontological value of the literary text. Nevertheless, a text embodies a scheme of clues and guidelines as to how it should be read. Reading annuls the split between the autonomous text and the mimetic reader. However, meaning is not pre-defined by virtue of the fact that a text is not a pre-given structure of meaning. Ingarden attributes the meaning to be the interplay of the "creative acts of a consciousness of its author and its physical foundation in the text set down in writing" (14). He further states that the text has "places of indeterminacy" (13), and they ought to be filled in. A text prior to reading does not have a complete meaning. As opposed to phenomenology, realistic ontology claims that in merely getting written a literary text attains complete meaning. Phenomenological axiom says that meaning is an event. A literary text invites responses. Engagement of a text has a corollary of responses which the reader would experience. It is fraught with certain operation of cognition. This presupposes an operation of consciousness. It is in fact a felicity condition, and it should be producible in reading a literary text in order to actualize the meaning.

There are three aspects involved in actualization of meaning. First, it needs to be read to evoke its meaning. Secondly, the reading should be able to tap the code of the text first to unveil the inherent set of guidelines, clues, and instructions therein in order to know how the text should be read for it to graduate

to its maximum meaning. The implied reader[3] would actualize the potential meanings in his reading. By extension, every text requires customized method of reading. What's more, all meaning is not exhausted in a given number of readings. When a text is read, the consciousness of the text (meaning) results in an interpretation, shape, configuration, pattern, or gestalt so much so that the totality of meaning of the given literary text could not be determined. For, eye and the brain are interpretively lazy with the details of what they see initially. Besides, for Ingarden, reading is not impervious to the 'gestalt' which entails backgrounding of many details and foregrounding of some details. Thus, a text is not simply a text; it is more than a superficial entity; it is a configured meaning. This configuration yields patterns of possible interpretation. This interpretation of meaning is virtuality, i.e. a seeming reality. Since a literary text is a heap of details, thematic, structural, and aesthetic meanings abound in any number.

Hermeneutics promotes human potential for understanding the meaning of language to expand the infinite possibilities of human thought, says Palmer (Regan 288). The present meaning of of hermeneutics derives from the etymological root of "hermeneutics" is traced to the Greek word "Hermeneutikos" meaning "to interpret". Hermeneutics of "Recovery" proposed by Schleiermacher and Dilthey is intent on recovering the original meaning; Hermeneutics of "Reception" proposed by Hans-Robert Jauss gives central place to reader's interpretation; By extension, "recovery" looks for the precise meaning with which a particular literary text was written; "reception" is how a literary text is read across its diachronic career of time; reception of a literary text is thus the inheritance of a literary text of the past; herein, eliciting of meaning happens in a liminal zone, the zone where the writer and the reader meet to approximate a meaning; it says that neither the author's identity nor can the reader's identity be claimed at liminal space. For Dilthey opines that interpretation is understanding of expressions of lived experience – that is to say, a reader uses his own experience as a means to identify and decipher meaning. This pinpoints the multifarious character of possible meanings.

Paul Ricoeur emphasized that Hermeneutics speaks of the future of a literary text – the meaning of the text consists in the future of a text, the implication being that the meaning of a text weighs less on the semiotics of its origins and more on the semantics of its future. The literary text is left to drift away temporally and this movement plays a role in exercising meanings for the text. Ricoeur introduces the category called "surplus of meaning" and defines it as the excess of original meaning gathered as a literary text travels across temporally. Surplus of meaning or reception is gathered through embracing the other. This takes place through dialogic process. This approximation of meaning takes place regardless of the distance and cultural diversity. The meaning of hermeneutics is moving towards discovering the self and making the other one's own. Hence, the claim for the openness/non-closure of the meaning of a literary text. Hermeneutics thus builds into itself the inclusion of futuristic meaning.

Hans Georg Gadamer speaks of "horizon" when he defined the meaning of hermeneutics. Horizon is a generation of readers: a given epoch of history; it determines and delimits the vision. Every horizon is pre-eminently characterized by prejudice. Prejudice comprises unexamined assumptions, unexamined values, and unexamined tendencies of the mentality of a generation. Gadamer's effective history explains how the meaning of the past eventuates a fresh meaning in the subsequent era. The past is not invalidated but it is present still in its compounded effect. The meaning of the cause is incomplete without its consequence. Accordingly, time is a unity of past and present as a porosity of meaning devoid of any split or division. Gadamer's "Effective History" meant that the past becomes a progressively altering subsequence or the past becomes a progressively compounded effect. Once a literary text is written it does not attain meaning; obviously, it does, ontologically; but, phenomenologically it does not. The concern here is how the effective history is being created. As a literary text travels across its diachronic career, it accumulates in meaning. For each horizon of temporality the literary text offers itself to different readings. The causal origin of the text begins to eventuate subsequence. The subsequent readings taken together form a fresh heap of causal impacts. This in turn eventuates fresher subsequent readings. When the original text eventuates interpretations across its diachronic career, the impact turns out to be exponentially on the rise; this is a continuous process; it is also to be noted that the original text persists in the compounded consequence; this process is neither demeaning nor invalidating of the past; the past is decipherable in terms of the effect it creates on the effective history. Earlier hermeneutic theories maintained that the historicity of the interpreter is a barrier to understanding. Yet, a truly hermeneutic approach is supposed to take account of its own historicity. In view of explaining the concept of effective history, Gadamer calls for a new type of consciousness which he calls "effective-historical consciousness" (Barthold). This consciousness makes one realise the process of effective history and acknowledge its ontology.

Gadamer appropriates the term "horizon" from Husserl and phenomenological tradition and infuses a new meaning. Accordingly, horizon is "standpoint that limits the possibility of visions and is thus an essential part of the concept of education. Horizon describes and defines our situatedness in the world". It is something into which we move and which moves with us. Gadamer explicates this through highlighting prejudice. All are prejudicial since all are subject to spatio-temporal influence that is inevitably present. When a literary text travels across its diachronic carrier it encounters generations of readers, each of which would differ in how it views the meaning of the given text. This is due to the fact that each of these generations are under separate horizons. There comes about different historical consciousness as the text passes through them. Gadamer describes the act of understanding as the fusion of all these horizons. There is no fixity of consciousness at that. Thus, no pre-determinate restrictions are operative with reference to meaning production.

All in all, for all its sameness in terms of the form and manifest structure, the impact of a text varies on account of a number of factors. An author-assigned meaning gets contested by further readings that yield hitherto unrevealed meanings. Readers across time and space project their mind onto the text in anticipation of meaning. The evolving consciousness of the reader plays a significant role in this connection. Insights thrown by Semiotics, Phenomenology, and Hermeneutics illustrate this. Since Semiotics is preoccupied with symbolic freedom meaning is not restricted. Phenomenology assigns reading as a complementary act in meaning production; and, Hermeneutics points up the compounding of the meaning over time. Thus, the said twentieth century reader-response theories on reading make the claim that meaning is inexhaustible.

NOTES & REFERENCES

[1] Poststructuralists (deconstructionists) maintain that there is no meaning as such; however, this paper subscribes to the reader-response theories which posit non-fixity of meaning.

[2] Code, a key term in semiotics, was coined by American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce

[3] See Wayne Booth.

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