THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF READING: A BRIEF STUDY OF ITS FEATURES AND ITS RELEVANCE TO WOLFGANG ISER’S ESSAY, “THE READING PROCESS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH”

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ABSTRACT
Etymologically, the English word, ‘phenomenology’ has roots in the Greek word meaning ‘appearing in’. Phenomenology is a philosophical study of subjective experience and consciousness. For phenomenology, consciousness is always consciousness of something. It is not an ‘empty consciousness’. In other words, for phenomenology, there is no object that cannot surpass its exteriority, its physicality or its empirical profile (the attributes of something that can be measured). It establishes the identity of the text. Coming to reading, the phenomenology of literature defines reading as an “ontological value” of the literary text. The basic question that the phenomenology of literature asks is: “Does writing require reading?” “Can a literary text as a state of writing exist in its fullness of meaning?” “Is there any difference between an unread and a read text?” and “What does reading do to a literary text that writing cannot do?” All these are the questions that phenomenology of literature rises in order to establish reading as an ‘ontological value’ of writing. This paper provides a background to the concept of phenomenology, explains briefly about what it means, while simultaneously dealing with the phenomenology of reading, its main features, and relating them all to what Wolfgang Iser said in his essay, “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach” in order to better understand the terminologies and meaning in the reading process.

Keywords: Etymologically, phenomenology of literature, Greek, consciousness, empirical, ontological value, literary text, Wolfgang Iser

INTRODUCTION
The answer that the phenomenology of literature gives to the questions posed above is that there is an absolute and unbridgeable difference between an unread and a read text. To explain better, for instance, a literary text is impoverished and poor when it is unread and so when a literary text becomes an appearance in the consciousness of reading there is something about the ontology or the nature of writing that is incomplete or indeterminate. One tends to think that writing makes in its fullness of meaning. But phenomenology of literature says ‘No’. It says that writing does not enable it to exist in its fullness of meaning, but only reading that gets value to different levels of meaning. The phenomenology of literature says that there is an ontological requirement for reading in writing which is built into the mode of existence of writing. This brings one to the first two main features of the phenomenology of literature.

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The two main features include: 1. Indeterminacy and 2. Concretization. From the discussed above, one can gather that writing without reading is indeterminate and reading is concretization. But one may ask what is the indeterminacy of writing? And in what terms is reading concretized? According to the phenomenology of literature Indeterminacy is the ontological characteristic of writing and concretization is the ontological characteristic of reading. To explain further, writing ontologically invites reading. There are gaps in a literary text when it is unread. So, only when the literary text like the Ambassadors becomes an appearance in the consciousness of the reader or when the text is read, then the gaps get filled. Therefore, as long as the text is unread, the text makes up only the potential meaning (averseness of meaning) of the text not the fulfillment of meaning. In other words, an unread text would be an indeterminate, non concretized potential of the text. But on the other hand, if the text is read, it is concretization of potential, which is nothing but the actualization of meaning. This is the basic idea of reading and concretization of a text. Here, Iser’s insight into what role a reader plays while reading a text is really admirable, as normal readers hardly think about reader as an important role player for a literary text.

WOLFGANG ISER AND THE IMPLIED READER:

The concept that comes immediately after indeterminacy and concretization as a major concept in the phenomenology of literature is Wolfgang Iser’s concept of the “Implied Reader”. By implied reader, Iser refers to a textual scheme which includes within itself how a text should be read. In other words, how a text should be read so that it raises to its fullest meaning is implied in the text itself so that one needn’t go outside of a text to ask and find out how a text should be read. The text itself contains guidelines about how it should be read and how it can be concretized. In other words, Iser’s concept of the implied reader consists of textual scheme consisting of guidelines, descriptions etc close to the reader, which tells how to cope cognitively with the semantic state of the text. Iser said, “There is no monolithic methodology applicable to all texts...No reader is adequate to all texts.” In other words, reading is always a matter of how to read a text and every text demands a customized reading methodology. Iser said that an active reader is supposed to approximate to the implied reader that would awaken the indeterminacy in the concretization. Iser says that one may respond to a text or not respond to a text. It’s one’s own choice. Built into the ontology of a literary text, there is a scheme of how to read a text. Iser said that one may be able to respond to the implied reader of a literary text like the “Sound and the Fury” but one may not be able to do the same with the implied reader of say “Pride and Prejudice.” This is because different readers respond differently to the implied reader of the same or different text. The important thing to note is that writing though invites reading yet it exceeds reading.

It is important to note that Iser’s concept of the implied reader is modeled on the concept of the ‘Implied Author’. By the implied author, one means that, in any poem or novel, one encounters an author, whom we may say we like. When one says one likes an author, one may not really like the author for himself but one may like the author for his persona or his ‘second self’. The author of a text is always a persona. Another point to note is that Iser differentiates between what is the potential of the text and the ‘gestalt’ of the text. The potential text, as I mentioned before, is a text in its state of writing prior to reading. Prior to reading, Iser characterizes the text as a potential, which has multiplicity of connections. When one reads a text, one makes little connections. These little connections that one makes is called the ‘gestalt’. The word ‘gestalt’ is a German word meaning ‘state’ or ‘pattern’ or ‘selective state or pattern’. It is a concept drawn from the physiology and the psychology of perception. For instance, when one looks at the Word with the eye, one sees myriad details. But one’s mental sense is not sensitive to all details. So the mind registers only a few details, while the others are scattered. Iser uses ‘gestalt’ to define reading. He says that reading results in a gestalt. Reading results in a reader connecting some of the points in the text, while other points get relegated to the background. Iser uses a word synonymous with the word ‘gestalt’. He uses ‘virtual dimension’ of the text for gestalt. Virtual dimension is a thing not in fact but in effect. The less you read a text the more virtual it
becomes and the more you read a text the more actual it becomes. So, reading is actualization. For instance, when one reads a text, one interprets it. This interpretation is a gestalt. It is only a selective pattern of numerous points that invites connections. As I noted earlier that, a text invites reading, but always exceeds reading. This brings to the third important feature of the phenomenology of literature, which is Inexhaustibility. A literary text is always inexhaustible. In other words, any reading is a configurative act. The text is not the gestalt. The gestalt is not the meaning of the text. But the text and its meaning always triumphs over reading. The phenomenology of literature says that writing ontologically requires reading, but always speaks on behalf of the text. It says that the text exceeds any number of readings.

In the second feature of the phenomenology of literature, there is a sub feature, which is linearity of text and temporality of reading. A literary text is characterized by its linearity (one thing after the other). It takes time to cope with linearity. For instance, in higher literary texts like the “Sound and the Fury”, the linearity of the text and the temporality of reading is exploited. That is, there are aesthetic and semantic complexities that impact on the linearity of the text. That is turning the pages of a higher literary text, involves a cognitive distress. Higher literary texts generate cognitive distress. Thus, here the linearity of the text and the temporality of reading is problematized. Because of the problematization of the linearity of the text and the temporality of reading, it becomes the ‘other side’ of what Roland Barthes calls “Bliss”. There can be no growth without labor of consciousness. It becomes a pleasure to read a text even though its linearity is disturbed. The phenomenology of reading talks about reading as a labor of consciousness and encounter with the unknown. All higher literary texts are books of bliss and they generate what is called as ‘neophobia’ which is the fear of everything being new. The beauty of Iser’s principles of reading is that he tells a clear cut way of how a reading should be done and that difficulties while reading should not be taken for granted. They rather need to be appreciated for its complexity as therein lies the challenge and the beauty of the text.

Another question that pervades the phenomenology of reading is why are some literary texts difficult to read? And why are some texts unintelligible and how does unintelligibility cause cognitive distress? To this question, Iser’s phenomenology of reading draws principles from a body of knowledge called ‘Semiotics’, which helps one to know why certain body of texts are intelligible and why are some texts unintelligible. The word ‘semiotics’ is taken from the Greek word ‘Semeio’ which means Sign. A sign is a form of meaning. A Word is overcrowded with sign. On the other hand, a code is an underlying meaning. There is no sign without a code. Semiotics is a study of sign in relation to its code or it is a study of code of system of competencies and the signs that they give. The golden principle of semiotics is a shared code. The code that supports higher literary texts such as the “Sound and Fury” is unconventional. To put it differently, unintelligibility is the semiotic crisis owing to the unavailability of a conventional code in advance. Iser says that reading higher literary texts is an inversion of the golden principle of semiotics. In other words, the code governing the meaning of higher literary text is never available in advance in any reading because it belongs to the genre of the idiosyncratic creativity of the author. If a code is private, it cannot be shared and is therefore unintelligible. But if a code is shared, Iser says it is intelligible and reading results in a discovery of the code.

Further, Iser says that reading is a nominalative experience of meaning. Literary language is not transitive (something that takes one beyond). It does not primarily allow one to transcend beyond the text. In active reading, for Iser, one is a citizen of textuality not actuality. Some theorists compellingly emphasized textuality as a paramount reality of a literary language of a text. Additionally one may transcend a text. The act of reading is a ‘nominalistic’ meaning. The English word ‘Nominalism’ is taken from the Latin word, ‘Nomina’ meaning ‘name’ or ‘word’. Nominalism is a philosophy of language. Thought exists prior to the Word. Language is a supplement to pre linguistic thought. For realism, language is not indispensable. But on the other hand, for Nominalism there is no thought independent of the Word. Therefore, when there is no language there is no thought. Nominalism does not believe in non linguistic thought. Nominalism is similar to anti-realism. Iser, here, talks about reading as textuality not actuality.
In his essay, Iser further talks about instability of reading. The question to rise is why do certain authors talk about the instability of an act of reading? Iser says that reading is an ‘illusion building’. He says that what one gets from reading is not the truth of the text, but an illusion of truth. Iser says that every reading is threatened by “alien associations” (other ways of filling the gaps in the text) and is handicapped by what he calls as the “latent disturbance”. Any number of readings of a text, he says, is an illusion of the truth. For instance, when we read a text, in our reading, we have done full justice to the text and there is a beautiful consistency about the way we have filled the gaps, made connections etc. Therefore one is seduced in to the illusion that one is consistent with the truth of the text. By ‘latent’ he means ‘built into’ or ‘intrinsic to’ or ‘concealed’. He says that any interpretation has built into its prospective invalidation. By ‘disturbance’ he means prospective in the future by another reader or one’s own self. ‘Disturbance’ is the prospective invalidation of a previous reading. Therefore, Iser says that any reading is handicapped by a ‘latent disturbance’.

CONCLUSION

In the closing pages of his essay, Iser rightly says that reading is the glorious experience of the “Other”. A literary text is one form of the other. All objects in the world constitute the ‘other’. Reading, Iser makes out, is an exceptional experience with the engagement of the other. The ‘other’ is nothing but ‘your own unknown you’. One may ask the question what kind of other is this literary text? The answer to this question lies in the fact that a higher literary text is an exceptionally defamiliarized other. Iser says that there is sensibility in the form of imagination and wisdom circulating in the text that makes it totally foreign to oneself. Iser’s essay on the reading process is interesting, especially his comments on how a reader’s interpretation and reaction to a text serves to shape the overall impression of the work. Iser quotes Georges Poulet, who states that “books only take on their full existence in the reader.” A normal person or a reader would hardly consider a reader having to play an active role in shaping a literary text. One of the golden principles of humanism says that there can be no growth of the self without an encounter with the other. It is important to remember that reading is a dialogic act not an introspective act. Reading is an openness to reality. In reading one is engaging with another self, because the other self is one’s own unknown meaning. The more dialogic one is the more potential will get formulated and this formulation is carried out by someone else. The essay proves Iser as a very deep thinker of reading in general and his ability to describe his points in an effective manner is thought provoking. Finally Iser concludes his essay by saying that “Reading literature gives us the chance to formulate the unformulated”. Therefore, the phenomenology of literature allows us to go deeper into the realities and intricacies of reading and writing and helps one to understand the process better.

REFERENCES


*All quotations are taken from this text.