Intended' and 'Experienced' Meaning: Reevaluating the Reader-Response Theory

Aurelian Botica

Ph.D. Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati
Professor of Semitic Languages, Emanuel University of Oradea

Abstract

Typically, Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason has been discussed in the context of epistemology, the study of human knowing. However, one aspect or implication that scholars seem to have missed is the relevance that Kant's theory has for the field of literary criticism; in particular, its relation to the "Reader-Response" theory.In this paper, we will reexamine the basic claims of the Reader-Response and ask whether one may draw a connection between the assertions of Immanuel Kant – that truth is construed by the observer – and of proponents of the Reader-Response theory. As it is commonly accepted, the Reader-Response proponents believe that the reader of a given text should receive a more prominent role than he or she is given in the traditional schools of literary criticism. That is, "instead of asking 'what does this sentence mean?' one should ask 'what does this sentence do?' " (R. Williams, Literary Meaning). In other words, as soon as a reader approaches the text, he or she "compromises" its meaning by the mere fact of experiencing it. Accordingly, we will want to examine the link between Kantian thinking and the premises that operate behind the logic of the Reader-Response arguments. Without attempting to acknowledge a direct influence of Kantian logic on the Reader-Response theory, we will show that Kant's epistemology did influence the wider context of philosophy, science and literature and that this influence must be taken into account. We will also want to ask whether criticism of Kantian epistemology may be used against the Reader-Response logic. We will consider the arguments of several of the more important authors who have written on this subject, but will state a more personal, and perhaps controversial, understanding of the issue.

Keywords: literary criticism, Kant, Reader-Response, Formalism.

1. Introduction

Ever since Kant wrote the *Critique of Pure Reason*, literary critics began to wonder whether human reason and the imagination were more successful in the area of literature than in sciences or philosophy. As Kant argued (1991),

> *We indeed, rightly considering objects of sense as mere appearances, confess thereby that they are based upon a thing in itself, though we know not this thing as it is in itself, but only know its appearances, viz., the way in which our senses are affected by this unknown something (p. 314).*

What Kant postulated was that neither the philosopher, nor the scientist could trust their sense perception with absolute certainty. According to Kant, it is within one's own mental apparatus where the final product of perception or understanding comes into existence. The individual who experiences outside realities does not remain a passive observer. He becomes a "constructor" or reality, one whose mind transforms the raw data from "out there" into convenient appearances that can be personally understood and analyzed. This shift from *passive observation* to *active reconstruction* also means that there exists no such "given truth" – something that would bypass the human cognitive powers and appear to the human mind as it is "in itself." Now, what about "literary" truth? Could a reader hope to understand the meaning that a given author intended in the text that he wrote? Or, does a writer have an intended meaning that can be objectively known by him, if not by his or her audience as well?

Reader-Response criticism is the literary current that emphasizes the role of the reader as the "creator" of meaning. Reader-Response criticism argues along the lines of Kantian epistemology, denying the reader the ability to access the "objective truth/meaning" of the text. It changes the question "what does this text mean?" to "what does this text do?" In this paper we want to examine some of the claims of Kantian epistemology in relation to the worldview of the Reader-Response criticism, a movement that has applied a similar mode of reasoning when dealing with the interpretation of literary texts. We do not claim that Kantian epistemology exercised a direct influence on Reader-Response criticism. We are aware that, between Kantian epistemology and Reader-Response criticism, there arose

other schools of thought (e.g., Phenomenology) that served as foundational links to Reader-Response criticism. Given the constraints and focus of this paper, we will refer to these schools only in passing. What we affirm is that Kantian epistemology, and particularly his *Critique of Pure Reason*, altered irremediably the confidence that subsequent philosophy, science and the arts placed in the power of human reasoning. And that, Reader-Response theory has been the modern, literary embodiment and expression of the Kantian revolution in philosophy.

2. Kantian Epistemology

Immanuel Kant attempted to bridge the gap between the Empiricism of Hume, Locke and Berkeley, and Idealism. In essence, he wanted to show that "sense perception in general is unable to produce objective knowledge into the natural makeup of things exterior to us" (Botica, 1996, p.1). Against *Empiricism* he argued that "there were dimensions of our knowing and judgment which precede and configure sense experience; the so-called "a priori categories" (Coppleston, 1964, 4:217). He called them concepts of "necessity" and "universality," which are "sure marks of a priori knowledge." In other words, that any perceived reality is subjectively "constructed" reality. Against *Idealism* Kant held that "that things exterior to us are ontologically real, and exist apart from whether we perceive them or not" (Botica, 1996, p. 2). As Kant (1977) pointed out,

> On the contrary, I say that things as objects of our senses existing outside us are given, but we know nothing of what they may be in themselves, knowing only their appearances, i.e., the representations which they cause in us by affecting our senses. Consequently, I grant by all means that there are bodies without us, that is, things which, though quite unknown to us as to what they are in themselves, we yet know by the representations which their influence on our sensibility procures us, and which we call bodies (p. 33).

Kant (1977) called his project "transcendental idealism" (p. 37); *idealism*, because he still agreed that what we are presented with in perception are *appearances* (of real objects, nevertheless), and *transcendental* (or rather "critical idealism"), as a reference "to our faculty of cognition." As David Oldroyd (1986) noted, for Kant "any philosophical system that was wholly 'pure' or rationalistic, making no allowance for the input of information through the senses, was doomed to disaster" (p. 120). The experience of evaluating external realities is *a priori* conditioned (note especially Odlroyd and W.H. Walsh, 1976, p. 9, and Paul Guyer 1992).

Now Kant generally agreed with Hume that, "in sense perception, one is presented only with the appearance of the object, not with the object as it is in itself" (Botica, 1996, p. 4). Furthermore, in all experience, "the knower experiences an object by virtue of the mediation of *space* and *time*." In other words, "if we omit from the empirical intuitions of bodies and their alterations (motion) everything empirical, i.e., belonging to sensation, space and time still remain, and are therefore pure intuitions that lie *a priori* at the basis of the empirical" (Kant, 1977, 27). In addition to the categories of *space* and *time*, Kant identified a number of secondary categories of understanding which pre-condition our perception of reality. These become "concepts which are fundamental to all knowledge," and which are "merely intellectual, having their origin solely in the understanding" (Young, 1992, pp. 101-102; Kant, 1977, 46). Again, "Kant sees these categories as purely intellectual, a priori ideas which regulate and determine all human knowledge of external things" (Botica, 1996, p. 5).

The philosophy of Kant has been considered both revolutionary and a mixed blessing. For some, Kant introduced a number of concepts that have changed for ever the landscape of all subsequent philosophy (Hahn, 1988; Walker, 2006, pp. 238-268). But others have raised a number of objections, especially with respect his epistemology. For example, Olroyd argued that Kant might have made up his list of categories and then "constructed the list of judgments to fit it" (1986, p. 7). Coppleston noted that, on the one hand Kant argued that human beings may be "phenomenally determined," while on the other hand making the concept of "freedom" essential to the success of his moral philosophy (Coppleston, 1964, vol. 6:291). The question remains: "how could he trust the one and ignore the other?"

Furthermore, rather than postulating the a priori categories of *space* and *time*, it would make more sense to explain them as being conditioned by the everyday interaction between human beings and the external world outside. We believe that, unless one proves that people first engaged "in geometrical and arithmetical reasoning apart from their experiencing with everyday life situations," one may not conclude that "the concepts of space and time (vital to arithmetic's and geometry) can be derived apart from sense experience" (Botica, 1996, pp. 8-9). For example, how could a person who is "totally deprived of sense experience" think of, or "prove, the *a priori* nature of time and space"? We can ask the same questions with respect to the notion of "quantity," or, for that reason, "quality" or "relation." In others words, "what makes quantity a pure a priori, intellectual category independent of sense perception?" Could one meaningfully claim that he or she understands the idea of "quantity" in abstraction from *sense experience*? How so? Unless one

admits the presence of the objective world, one cannot meaningfully argue about categories of space and time. It is worth asking, then, to what extent has Reader-Response criticism been influenced by the epistemological perspective of Kantian philosophy? To put this into the context of our subject-matter, what good does it do to doubt or minimalize the intended meaning of the author of a text?

3. The Revolutions of Science

Another current of thought that had a wide impact on the sciences and the arts has been "anti-logical positivism." Namely, that all scientific laws are "theory laden" laws. Simply put, that all theories regarding the analysis of reality are pure "subjectively interpreted" theories. According to this perspective there appears to be "no privileged method of scientific inquiry which, if followed, will lead to the successful acquisition of knowledge" (Olroyd, 1986, pp. 135, 335, vs. Feyerabend's argument in *Against Method*, 1993). As with Kuhn's paradigm of "scientific revolutions," Feyerabend argued that new scientific ideas are produced at the expense of proving former ideas wrong, or ineffective. This process of explaining the same "reality" by virtue of multiple different theories proves how finite human perception is. What Kant applied to epistemology others have applied to entire paradigms of scientific progress.

Referring to Kuhn's concept of "revolutions in science," Stephen Bonnycastle (1991) noted that "once you become aware of the existence of paradigms, ...you can see that the 'truths' about the world – about religion, politics, and even science – are not absolute truths; they depend on particular paradigms" (p. 42). In a similar way, since the literary critic approaches the texts from one's own paradigm, the meaning that he or she derives is, by necessity, a "paradigm-relative" meaning. Bonnycastle believes that Kuhn's argument "is illuminating about the study of literature" because there is no agreement as to what form of criticism truly characterizes the study of literature. The only hope that one can cherish is that one day the new paradigm that will evolve and "work in literary study will seem less chaotic" (p. 48).

Evidently, science and literary theory operate with relatively different data. We believe that this critical distinction has not been weighed properly by much of contemporary literary criticism. To a certain extent, scientists agree that a lot of the data from the world out there is yet to be understood and explained. Yet science must start from the premise that the outer world is objective and that it can be examined and known. Otherwise, many of the inventions in science today would have been unimaginable. As Kimbell (1989) pointed out, "the very power science has given us to manipulate and control reality shows that its truths, though reductive, are genuinely universal." Even a philosopher of science like Kuhn defended himself against the label of "relativist." True: science has developed in paradigm shifts: the failure of one giving rise to the birth of another. But admitting the fact of "change" and "progress" does not necessarily imply the rejection of objective truth. Yes, Kuhn believes that scientific theories cannot claim access to the ultimate, ontological form of reality, since that would contradict the nature of science as revolutionary progress. Yet he also noted (1970) that,

> Later scientific theories are better than earlier ones for solving puzzles in the often quite different environments to which they are applied. That is not a relativist position, and it displays the sense in which I am a convinced believer in scientific progress (p. 206).

For Kuhn (2012), progress means reaching for an objective that is attainable. In this sense scientists are "fundamentally puzzle-solvers" (p. 204). Indeed they cannot operate with the assumption that all scientific truth is relative, even though a number of scholars have charged Kuhn with this view (P. Hoyningen-Huene, 1993, p. 260ff., N. Capaldi, 1998, pp. 62-63, and D. Stanesby, 2013, pp.145-146). In this sense, we believe it is essential to be aware that Reader-Response criticism has not developed in a cultural/philosophical vacuum.

4. Reader-Response Criticism

Before evaluating the claims of Reader-Response criticism, it is important that we describe some of the elements of Formalism, the very movement against which Reader-Response criticism rose.

4.1 Formalism

Traditionally, authors have argued that the vehicle of "value" or "meaning" in the exercise of literature is the text, the work of a given author. That is why, perhaps, many critics have charged that traditional criticism so values the text itself that the reader risks becoming almost non-existent or "transparent." In Bonnycastle's view (1991), "the reader is supposed to

be transparent – to make himself or herself conform as closely as possible to the mind of the author. But most people don't want to be invisible – they want to gain authority and presence themselves" (p. 55). This leads us now to focus more closely on the logic of Traditionalism and Formalism, two schools that emphasized the integrity of the original text. This, in spite of the fact that certain Formalist critics distrusted the emphasis that Traditionalism put on criteria such as the historical, socio-cultural and personal context of the author of the text.

When studying attentively the content of a poem, with attention to its form and structure, the critic should be able to understand and experience aesthetically the work as such. For example, applying this critical method, the school of Formalism emphasized the "intensive reading" of a text, "with a sensitivity to the words of the text and all their denotative and connotative values and implications. An awareness of multiple meanings, "even the etymologies of the words, will offer significant guidelines to what the work says" (Guerin, 1992, p. 66). For this reason the Formalist critic believes that there exists some underlying value in the work itself, and that this can be understood and aesthetically experienced. In other words, that the work has an "intended meaning" *in itself*, one that may reflect – to a certain extent – the very purpose of the author itself. Hence, the concern of the reader should be to let the text speak for itself and find its value apart from any personal, subjectively or pragmatically conditioned, impositions on the text.

Now, neither Formalism, nor the Tradition schools of criticism that have operated with these assumptions, has excluded the factor of the personal experience of the reader when "experimenting" with a text. Permitting the text to speak for itself does not depersonalize the reader; neither does it neglect the inherent subjectivism that he or she will bring to the reading experience. Rather, one will cultivate the concern with the "primacy of the text" in order that all subsequent evaluation, experience, personal enjoyment, and criticism be possible in the first place. As Guerin (1992) pointed, "after we have mastered the individual words in the literary text, we look for structures and patterns, interrelationships," for these "reveal a form, a principle by which all subordinate patterns can be accustomed and accounted for" (p. 66). This analytic approach – where "all the words, phrases, metaphors, images, and symbols" are studied "in terms of each other and of the whole" – eventually yields in the text's displaying of "its own internal logic." According to the Formalist critic, "when that logic has been established, the reader is very close to identifying the overall form of the work."

The poem need not be "all truth bearing," in the sense of claiming some spiritual or scientific authority to be recognized and accepted by all readers. One may think, for example, of the *Call of the Wild*. Now, the "naturalist" worldview of the author need not be entirely adopted by the reader as an a priori condition for either agreeing to read the text in the first place, or to understand the meaning and literary value of the work itself. London's artistic merits ought to be judged *stricto sensu* by literary criteria alone. It is in this context that the usage of metaphors and the plot, along with the ability to reflect the struggle of life in an aesthetically wonderful manner, convince the reader to recognize the value, and understand the authorial meaning, of the work. In this way, at the end of the literary analysis, the reader will have been offered enough details to understand the meaning that Jack London intended. That is, a meaning independent of the reader's acceptance of, or disagreement with, London's world view. A reader may be touched by London's superb portrayal of the experiences of the Buck character, and still not surrender to London's hopeless world view. Evidently, artistic beauty and truth about life may blend together. However, since not everyone shares the same worldview, the only criterion that all may accept remains the literary vehicle of the text, its greatness and the aesthetic qualities that the reader will recognize and experience. Unless some standard of objectivism is assumed, all subsequent efforts toward evaluating a work of art will be jeopardized.

In this sense, the formalist or the traditionalist critic will insist that questions about the subjective experience of the reader have always been asked by these schools. The problem should not be whether the reader is important or not, but what is his or her place in the hierarchy of the meaning of the work itself.

4.2 Reader-Response Criticism

We believe that Immanuel Kant instilled in the philosophical discourse that followed after him an attitude of "epistemic pessimism." While he might have not had a direct influence on Reader-Response critics, this pessimism spilled over into the fields of *science* and *literature*, and that literary critics have used the change of paradigms in philosophy and science to advance an attitude of "anti-foundationalism" against traditional norms (Kimbell, 1989). Scholars have also shown that Reader-Response critics have been influenced by subsequent developments of Kantian epistemology, such as the school of Phenomenology (Barber, 2010, p. 231-34). With Kant, Husserl argued that one cannot be certain of the world outside, but only of the construct that he or she has formed inwardly. Husserl coined this process a "phenomenological reaction." In essence, what the observer experiences are the "phenomena" that are being constructed within his or her

mind, at the moment he or she perceives reality. Husserl believed that the aesthetic consciousness is "concerned with the way in which an object *appears*, and not with its existence" (Brough, 2010, pp. 151-53). Husserl's emphasis on "subjectivity" had a sizeable impact on German literary critics like Wolfang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss (Kharbe, 2009, p. 386, and Wolfang Iser. 1980, p. 50-69). In the Anglo-Saxon context, the first efforts toward a theory that developed later into the Reader-Response school were made by authors like I.A. Richards, D.W. Harding, L. Rosenblatt, and especially with Walker Gibson (Burke, 1988, pp. 1-19, S. Suleiman, 1980, pp. 3-45, Tompkins, 1980, and Leitch, 1988, pp. 210-3).

Reader-Response criticism "arose as a critical theory in response to formalist interpretations of literature" (Kharbe, p. 380). Against Formalism, Reader-Response criticism argued that one cannot experience reality but through his or her own "cognitive categories." This has meant that even the beliefs that an author may share in his or her text are "author-relative" beliefs. In other words, "imprisoned in our convictions, incapable of stepping outside of the institutions that define us, we can never know the differing from oneself so frequently associated with literary experience" (Kharbe, p. 169).

Questions such as these have been best conceptualized by the Reader-Response school of literary criticism (Berube, 2004, pp. 11-13, and Kharbe, 2009, pp. 380-83). According to Reader-Response critics, instead of asking 'what does this sentence mean?'" one should ask "'what does this sentence do?'" (William, 1984, p. 154). What makes reading critical is the experience itself. As Fish noted (1980b), "'the meaning of any utterance, I repeat, is its experience – all of it – and that experience is immediately compromised the moment you say anything about it'" (p. 65). There exists, then, no pure subject and no pure object in the encounter between the reader and the text itself (see Babaee, 2012, pp. 18-24). There only exists an "interpretive community." Meaning becomes the temporal fruit of experience and, as soon as experience changes, meaning changes itself as well. That is why one needs to reexamine the sense of the word "literal," as in the "literal sense of this passage is..." Fish (1978) explains that

> [. . .] we usually reserve 'literal' for the single meaning a text will always (or should always) have, while I am using 'literal' to refer to the different single meanings a text will have in a succession of different situations. There always is a literal meaning because in any situation there is always a meaning that seems obvious in the sense that it is there independently of anything we might do. But that only means that we have already done it, and in another situation, when we have already done something else, there will be another obvious, that is, literal, meaning […]. We are never in a situation. Because we are never in a situation, we are never in the act of interpreting. Because we are never in the act of interpreting, there is no possibility of reaching a level of meaning beyond or below interpretation (pp. 625-44).

That is why, since there exists no inherent meaning apart from what is conditioned by the experience of the reader, the ontological status of meaning becomes irrelevant or, at best, marginal for the critic. This position shares the assumption that "meaning is not some 'thing' to be found, for it is itself the finding – and that finding can only occur to the extent that it already has" (Ray, 1984, p.164).The situation in which one finds himself or herself will always determine one's understanding of the text. In this sense, all interpretation of literary texts can only be contextually relative to the world view and life-situation of the reader.

Ironically, in addition to casting doubt on human reason, this approach invests the observer with a new role: *constructor* of reality. If one is unable to access ultimate reality, at least he or she may construct a temporary and relative version of the original, whatever that might be. Either directly or indirectly, this line of reasoning appears to have informed the worldview of Reader-Response critics. Here too, the essential assumption is that human reason is incapable of knowing the real text as it is in itself, because the reader is a constructor of reality. Knowing becomes constructing. The ontological essence of reality is broken down into information that can be fed to human reason. There is no "given" insight into the nature of reality that the scientist can claim. There is not "objective meaning" of the text that the reader may posses. All interpretation means, essentially, reconstruction.

As we will argue, what is at stake here is the underlying assumption that the Reader-Response theorists worked with and whether its claims are justified or not. Now, if one thought of the text as a datum that must be examined and understood, should he or she expect the same limitations in discerning the intent of the author of the text? Does the analogy have the same explanatory power or relevance in literature as the theory does in science? As we have noted so far, a number of literary critics believe that both the scientist and the reader are conditioned by the same subjective limitations and that the final result will eventually have to be identical: temporal, subjective knowledge at best, but never pure objectivity. We believe, however, that there exist a number of differences between this Kantian scenario and the world of literary criticism.

There exists a fundamental difference, both in worldview and in methodology, between the aims of the scientist as a puzzle-solver and Reader-Response's critic as "creator of meaning." As Michael Berube (2004) pointed out, at least

"Kuhn offered an account of how ordinary science produces anomalies that challenge paradigms, and Fish has not" (p. 23). And indeed he can't, because science views the outside reality in a way that Reader-Response critics don't. Note Kimball (1989) too, for,

> The simple fact of scientific progress—relying as it does on there being some descriptions of phenomena that are demonstrably more objective than others—effectively undercuts the anti-foundationalist ambition to disenfranchise the notion of truth and transform facts into a form of exotic political capital generated by "interpretive communities."

In this sense, we want to argue that one critical element is missing in scientific research, but not in literary criticism: the factor of the *author of the data*. For example, many scientists today would disregard the notion that God exists and that, as Creator of the universe, he may be consulted about the ultimate makeup of the universe. This is so because, unless the possibility of the existence of God is reasonably established, the very suggestion to asking God about the essence of the universe would seem utterly meaningless to them.

However, the existence of the author of a given text cannot be denied. We believe this remains a painful thorn in the flesh of Reader-Response critics. Obviously there are minor exceptions to this rule, especially as is the case with ancient anonymous texts like *Enuma Elish*, the ancient *Egyptian Funerary Texts* or *The Book of the Dead*. Yet, even in situations like this, the best a critic can do is to doubt knowledge of the author, not of the fact that the text can be understood or that it has an author. One may also think about known circumstances or historical events that might have influenced the authors themselves. For example, we can pinpoint with some accuracy the historical events that spurred authors like Plato (*The Apology*), Dostoyevsky (*The House of the Dead*), and C.S. Lewis (*A Grief Observed*) to pen their works. It would be unrealistic to dismiss the data that a critic can obtain from the historical, social, cultural and religious context in which the author lived, or from accounts about his or her own personal histor.

Now, an alternative solution for the critic would be to contend that once the poem became public reading, it looses its originally intended meaning. When reading a text, the reader has access to data that were created by another human being. The author of the text operates with syntax, grammar, figures of style and other tools through which he or she conveys meaning. Unless there existed a background that the writer shared with the reader, the experience of reading would be hard to imagine. Even texts in which an author employed ambiguity, equivocation, or allegories follow rules that have been consciously agreed upon by a given community or communities.

It is true that the reader, conditioned by his or her own subjective experience, is not merely a participant, but an active creator of meaning. But the mere fact of subjectivity on the part of one or countless readers does not, by itself, invalidate the ontological integrity of the text. As C.S. Lewis (1961) argued, "a work of art can be either 'received' or 'used'" (p. 88). Unless the reader discovers first some part of the intended meaning of a work there hardly remains any possibility for a critical evaluation or even true personal enjoyments of that work. "Ideally, we must receive it first and then evaluate it. Otherwise, we have nothing to evaluate," explains Lewis. Indeed, "the effect must precede the judgment on the effect" (p. 92). In fact, the very existence of literature as a self-corrective discipline implies some inherent authority or value to which people must refer. We believe that Lewis' notion of "discovering" rather than "creating" meaning remains worthy of being considered

We agree with the notion that the reading of the same text by one person, at different times, may induce dissimilar meanings in the perception of that person. It is also true that a text can produce various or even contradictory experiences, and thus meanings, in different readers. As various scholars have shown, for Stanley Fish the force of literature is "an affective one" (Babaee, 2012, p. 20). Literature is an experience, is "something you do." However, what we want to question is not the subjective experience of the reader, but the assertion that the work itself – the reality out there – cannot be known in its objective state. Or that an objective reality even exists! We believe that once the author has decided upon sharing a given experience, at a given time, and has employed figures of speech, syntax, grammar and content in a coherent manner, the final product becomes a datum that ought to be known as it is. This should be true whether we think of fiction, biography, history or university textbooks. Our basic assumption is that the paradigmatic Kuhnian theory, employed as comparative model for literary criticism – breaks down at a certain point, unless one restricts them to their own fields of expertise.

Now, it is true that poems, for example, can elicit different feelings at different occasions in the experience of the reader. No one will deny that each particular reader brings to the reading experience his or her own worldview, along with the personal struggles, feelings of joy, sadness and other emotional states. Just as no one will contend that subsequent readings of the same text may elicit new or even contradictory dimensions of experience or insights in the life of the reader. Note that for Reader-Response critics, the reader will always be part of an interpretive community which evolves and changes its own ways of interpreting reality. As Fish (1980c) argues, the interpretive communities "are no more

stable than the texts because interpretive strategies are not natural or universal, but learned" (p. 172). What we state, however, is that the Reader-Response critic needs to do a better job explaining why is it impossible for the reader to access the one meaning that the one author intended to convey at one given time? Or why the critic should not approach the text with the assumption that an objective meaning even exists, or that it is relevant for the reading experience? To use a cliché argument: why should one trust the coherence of the Reader-Response theory, if the notion of "coherent objectivity" is denied by the very logic of this theory?

The assertion is made that the reader is conditioned by his or her life situation, which makes all meaning an „experience-relative" meaning. Yet, what if an author were asked to identify the meaning that he or she intended for a given text? Let us assume, for the sake of the argument, that the American poet Emily Dickinson (1993) had been asked if, in the poem *Death and Life* (Apparently With No Surprise), she sought to convey the inconsistency between the belief in loving God and the evil of the "frost" killing a "happy flower" (p. 98).

> *"Apparently with no surprise*
> *To any happy flower*
> *The Frost beheads it at its play*
> *In accidental power*
> *The blond assassin passes on*
> *The sun proceeds unmoved*
> *To measure off another day*
> *For an approving God."*

Suppose that in the last three decades Reader-Response critics have come to various conclusions as what Dickinson might have intended to convey in the poem. For the sake of the argument, let us assume that in 2013 a scholar named Francis discovered a letter in which Emily Dickinson detailed the exact meaning that she had intended in the poem. Finally, Francis would write an essay about *Death and Life*, underlying the exact meaning that Dickinson had intended in the poem, yet without disclosing the fact that Dickinson herself revealed that particular meaning. Francis also relied on knowledge of Dickinson's own (melancholic) personality and (frail) physical health and the circumstances of her religious beliefs. And, as a response to Francis' essay, a Reader-Response critic challenged the thesis of the essay, arguing that Francis' interpretation could only be a "construction" of his own understanding of the text. Would the publication of Dickinson's own explanation change the view of the Reader-Response's critic?

We may surmise that, unless the critic were unfaithful to the inner logic of Reader-Response criticism, he or she would have to question even Dickinson's belief that the text has an objective, author-intended meaning, and that such a meaning can be ascertained. He or she would have to argue that not even Dickinson's own purpose matter for us today, since she wrote in a particular "life situation" and was conditioned by her own "world view," cultural background and subjective experiences. For Fish, the attempt to locate meaning "in authorial intention" is doomed to failure for the simple reason that the intention of the author "is necessarily beyond the reach of the critics" (Babaee, 2012, p. 24). However, in each of these scenarios what follows is the demise of the author's own authority; that is, the "death of the author" (Barthes, 1977, pp. 42-48, Freund, 1987, p. 80). Or, as is the case with the example above, to remain true to his or her philosophical commitments, the critic would have to deny the author the right to explain the meaning that he or she had intended in the first place. As Kimball (1989) pointed out, the Reader-Response critic "cannot claim truth for his own theory without denying the relativistic principles upon which it is based."

Now, in a sense no one denies that different texts have different levels of difficulty and that in some cases it is hard, if not impossible, to reach even relative certainty with respect to "authorial meaning." At times, multiple meanings may emerge during the reading of a text, especially in the case of long and (intentionally) complicated literary works. There is also the case when authors create suspense by empowering conflicting world-views with the same authority, without allowing a final arbiter to impose a resolution (Garcia, 1995, pp. 113-14). As Garcia noted, we can also imagine scenarios when the author himself may not even be fully aware of all the ramifications of the meaning that he or she intended. Or when authors write under the spell of pure artistic emotions, without consciously imposing a discernible meaning in the text. Or when they "change their minds about the meanings of the texts they have created" (pp. 116). What we are trying to say is that the difficulty or even the impossibility of discerning the meaning of a text cannot be the basis to deny that the text has an intended meaning.

In essence, we agree that the Reader-Response critic may be justified in questioning the possibility that one can discern the intended meaning of a text. The experience of subjectively appropriating one's own meaning is what makes reading all the more special and unique. Nevertheless, the difficulty or even the inability to discern the intended meaning

of a text does not mean that such a meaning does not exist. Since the poem itself is written by intelligent human persons, there exists a certain dimension of literary meaning, a purpose, an assumed end which appeals – more or less – to the reader's own existence, and to which the reader can relate. Writing a text is a non-repeatable, time and space-bound, unique experience, regardless of how many subsequent interpretations and reinterpretations will have been performed. This final work can indeed be called a "given," even if its semantic significance is passed through the grid of the ever-changing literary community. We agree that what makes a text a literary masterpiece may be its limitless ability to stimulate – with every subsequent reading – profound, but also conflicting aesthetic experiences in the life of the audience. It still remains worth asking why one cannot accept this aspect along with the fact that a text might have an intended meaning and that one can expect to discover it.

References

Babaee R., Montashery I. (February 2012). Stanley Fish with respect to the reader. *International journal of English and literature*, vol. 3/2, 18-24.

Barber, M.D. (2010). Maurice Nathanson. In H.R. Sepp (Ed.), *Handbook of phenomenological aesthetics* (pp. 231-34). New York: Springer.

Barthes, R. Death of the author (1977). *Image, music, text. essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath* (pp. 142-48). New York: Fontana Press.

Berube, M. (2004). *Postmodern sophistry: Stanley Fish and the critical enterprise*. New York: SUNY Press.

Botica, A. (1996). A Critical evaluation of the epistemology of Immanuel Kant. Research Paper. Wilmore, KY: Asbury Theological Seminary.

Bonnycastle, S. (1991). *In search of authority*. Ontario: Broadview Press.

Brough, J.B. (2010). Edmund Husserl. H.R. Sepp (Ed.). *Handbook of phenomenological aesthetics* (pp. 151-53). New York: Springer.

Burke, S. (1988). *The death and return of the author: criticism and subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida*. Edinburg: Edinburg University Press.

Capaldi, N. (1998). *The enlightenment project in the analytic conversation*. New York: Springer.

Coppleston, F. (1964). *A history of Philosophy*, 9 Volumes. New York: Doubleday.

Dickinson, E. (1993). Death and life. *The works of Emily Dickinson*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Publishing.

Feyerabend, P.K. (1993). *Against method*, 3rd edition. New York: Verso.

Fish, S. (1978). Normal circumstances, literal language, direct speech acts, the ordinary, the everyday, the obvious, what goes without saying, and other special cases. *Critical Inquiry*, 4(4). The University of Chicago Press. 625-644.

_____ (1980a). *Interpretive communities*. Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press.

_____ (1980b). Literature in the reader: the affective fallacy. In *Is there a text in this class? The authority of interpretive communities*. Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press.

_____ (1980c). Interpreting the Variorum. In *Is there a text in this class? The Authority of interpretive communities*. Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hahn, R. (1988). *Kant's newtonian revolution in philosophy*. Carbondale, IL: Souther IL University Press.

Guerin, W. (1992). *A handbook of critical approaches to literature*. New York: Oxford Press.

Guyer, P. (1992). *The cambridge companion to kant*. New York, NY: Cambridge Press.

Freund, E. (1987). *The return of the reader: reader-response criticism*. New York: Routledge.

Garcia, J.E. (1995). *A theory of textuality: the logic and epistemology*. New York: SUNY Press.

Hoyningen-Huene, P. (1993). *Reconstructing scientific revolutions: Thomas S. Kuhn's philosophy of science*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Iser, W. (1980). The reading process: a phenomenological approach. In J.P. Tompkins (Ed.), *Reader-response criticism: from formalism to post-structuralism*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press.

Kant, I., (1991). Prolegomena to any future metaphysics. In N. Oaklander, R. Hoy (Eds.), *Metaphysics*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1991.

_____ (1977). *Prolegomena to any future metaphysics*, revised by J.W. Ellington. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing.

Kharbe, A. (2009). *English language and literary criticism*. Delhi: Discovery Publishing.

Kimbell, R. (1989). The Contemporary sophist. *The New criterion*. Retrieved June 29, 2013 from (http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/The-contemporary-sophist-5547.

Kuhn, T. (1962, 1970). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.

_____ (2012). *The structure of scientific revolutions: 50th anniversary edition*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Leitch, V.W. (1988). *American literary criticism from the thirties to the eighties*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lewis, C.S. (1961). *An experiment in criticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Oldroyd, D. (1986). *The Arch of Knowledge*. New York, NY: Methuen.

Oldroyd, D. and Walsh, W.H. (Eds.). (1975). *Kant's criticism of metaphysics*. Chicago, MI: Chicago University Press.

Ray, W. (1984). *Literary meaning*. New York: Basil Blackwell.

Suleiman, S. (1980). Introduction: varieties of audience-oriented criticism. In S.R. Suleiman and I. Crossman (Eds.), *The Reader in the*

text (pp. 3-45). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Stanesby, D. (2013). *Science, reason and religion*. Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis.

Tompkins, J.P. (1980). An introduction to reader-response criticism. In J.P. Tompkins (Ed.), *Reader-response criticism: from formalism to post-structuralism* (pp. ix-xxvi). Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press.

Walker, R.C.S. (2006). Kant and transcendental arguments. In P. Guyer (Ed.). *The Cambridge companion to Kant and modern philosophy* (pp. 238-68). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Young, M. (1992). Functions of Thought and the Synthesis of Intuitions. In P. Guyer (Ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Kant* (pp. 101-22). New York, NY: Cambridge Univ. Press.