

Meaning in the Text: Reader-response Theory of Criticism

Hasan Baktır¹

Abstract

The central issue in nearly all critical approaches is focused on the problem of meaning; each critical theory places the meaning of a text in a certain ground and tries to reach at truth with reference to the meaning. Theories that concern themselves with the external facts such as historical and biographical information, social context, philosophical and literary trends influential during the time of text's production search for meaning and truth outside the text, thus do not pay much attention to the textual context. They argue that poetry – literature- is an imitation of real life, therefore, meaning of a text is historically and socially defined. Theories, like Formalism, New-criticism, Structuralism, on the other hand, attack the former theories for their lack of textual, formal and literary qualities claiming that theories of these kinds bring subjective view, therefore, cannot be counted as a scientific and objective interpretation. Reader response criticism deals with author's attitude towards the reader, kinds of reader, the role of different readers in the determination of meaning, the relation of reading conventions to textual criticism, and status of a literary text. Meaning in the text is a result of interaction between reader, text and author.

Keywords: Reader, Meaning in the text, Response, Phenomenology, Hermeneutics

Metinde Anlam: Okur-tepkisi Eleştirisi Kuramı

Özet

Anlam edebiyat eleştirisi teorilerinin en önemli tartışma konularından bir tanesidir. Her bir teori anlamı belirli bir temele dayandırarak gerçekliğe ulaşmayı amaçlar. Dış dünya ile metin arasındaki ilişkiyi irdeleyen tarihsel kuramlar anlamı metnin dışında yer alan toplumsal bağlam, dönemdeki felsefi tartışmalar ve edebiyat akımlarında ararlar ve metnin yapısal özellikleri üzerinde durmazlar. Bu yaklaşımı benimseyen eleştirmenler edebiyatı hayatın bir yansıması olarak görür ve her bir metnin de- antik dönemde olduğu gibi, anlamının

¹ Hasan Baktır, Erciyes Ün. İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bl., hbaktir@erciyes.edu.tr

tarih ve toplum tarafından belirlendiğini düşünürler. Yapısalcılık, Yeni Eleştiri Kuramı ve Formalistler için ise anlamın tarafsız olarak incelenebilmesi için metnin kendi yapısına bakılmalıdır. Bu kuramı benimseyenler metin dışı yaklaşımların tamamının taraflı bir değerlendirmeye sahip olduğunu, bu nedenle de bilimsel olamayacağını savunurlar. Okur-tepkisi kuramında ise eleştirmenler yazarın okura karşı tutumu, okur türleri ve okurların metindeki farklı anlamları ortaya çıkarırken içinde buldukları süreç, okuma gelenekleri, metin eleştirisi ve metnin statüsü gibi konulara odaklanarak anlamı açıklamaya çalışırlar. Buna göre bir metnin anlamını yazar-okur-metin etkileşimi ortaya çıkarır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Okur, Metinde anlam, Tepki, Fenomenoloji, Yorumbilim.

I. Introduction

The central issue in literary theory is the problem of meaning; each critical theory places the meaning of a text in a certain internal or external ground and tries to reach at truth with reference to this ground. Historical theory of criticism and similar theories that concern themselves with the external facts such as historical and biographical information, social context, and philosophical and literary trends influential during the time of text's production. They search for meaning and truth outside the text thus do not pay much attention to the textual features. They share almost the same ideas with the ancient writers – that literature is an imitation of real life. Therefore, meaning of any text is historically and socially determined.² Theories, like Formalism, New-criticism, Structuralism, on the other hand, challenge the historical attitude and claim that they ignore textual, formal and literary characteristics for the sake of subjectivity. Reader-response criticism includes ideas from both theories. Reader-response criticism takes the writer of any text as an important participant in that authorial consciousness plays an important role in the construction and interpretation of the text. Reading is the involvement of readers into the author's experiencing the world, therefore, a reader of a text should also be aware of the author's intention. Text is not a single construction thus reading is not a simple process of finding out the meaning. A reader and critics of the text are under the influence of certain forces; therefore, interpretation includes not only individual view of a reader but also presents some ideas of interpretive community and strategy that a reader of any text belongs to. That is, each critical theory has its own community and each critic is under the influence of certain strategies. A Marxist community shares certain assumption like 'literature is a production a prestige group of people in the society and reflect their values'. A phenomenological theory agrees that reading is an

² Arslan Topakkaya, W.Dilthey and His Philosophy, Say Publish. İstanbul 2016, s. 234 vd.

interaction between minds of readers and writers. Interpretation is reader's attempt to figure out textual and authorial intention. Furthermore, each of this theory has its own methodology, which unites the members of these approaches and creates a certain interpretive community. In addition to their shared assumptions, each member of this theory has his own strategy of interpretation, which is not completely free from and dependent onto the interpretive communities. The differences arise from the differences of communities and strategies, not from individual differences or formal differences of a text. The readers who share similar assumptions and use similar strategies will reach at similar conclusion, which is going to be different from the interpretation of other community that uses different strategies. The differences in meaning, then, arises not from any individual, linguistic, formal differences but also from the differences of strategies.

II. Where is the Meaning in the Text?

The first question of criticism is "where is the meaning in the text?" Both, historical and reader-response criticism try to answer this question. Their aim is almost one, but they use different techniques to reach the end. Historical criticism searches for the meaning of a text in social, historical and biographical contexts and discusses the meaning with reference to writer's biographical information, historical circumstances and literary trends that are influential during the time of the work under the discussion. Historical reading relies on information outside the text. Reader-response theory, on the other hand, claims that one cannot interpret a literary text free from its reader. It is true that a writer produces the text and it may also be true that author of the text might be influenced by historical changes, social circumstances and literary tradition. Yet we always need a reader to read and interpret the text. Reader-response theory has shifted the focus of critical attention from prescribing the function of external forces that shape the world of meaning into defining the function and significance of reader to identify the textual meaning. However, reader-response criticism does not have a unified and complete idea about the meaning of the text. Critics of this theory do not have complete agreement on many issues. They pronounce a revolution to the historicist's assumption that meaning of a text depends upon the discovery of context. They also reject the new-critical idea that meaning should only and only be in the text. They emphasize the *reader, reading process* and *response* of a different interpreter and bring new principles into the nature of interpretive process. Tompkins argues this as follows:

It is just that instead of arriving at literary meaning by using a vocabulary based on

*formalism, linguistics, genre theory of myth, reader critics have recourse to interpretive system that describe various kinds of mental activity. What has happened is that the locus of meaning has simply been transferred from text to the reader*³.

Response of the reader, then, involve both contextual and textual reading. Here two concepts become crucial; reader and response, which have much changed in time. Readers of ancient age and their responses to a written work depended upon moral and pedagogical values that a text proposes to instruct. In Renaissance, there appeared a special group of readers whose intellectual responses to any written text signified the value of the text. As such, response of the privileged readers played the major role in literary criticism during the Enlightenment. Modern readers and their responses, on the other hand, are different from that of the classical and Renaissance readers. These differences come from the fact that the notion of response and reader have changed in the process of critical study. The work of a writer is presented to the reader as the interplay of formal and thematic properties in modern approach. Unlike the Renaissance writers, modern authors do not and cannot charge the individual reader with certain moral or social responsibility. Tompkins states this as follows:

*A corresponding development in the field of criticism moves attention away from literature's moral and social effects towards the psychology of reading, so that the concept of literary response, from having been primarily a social and political one, now becomes personal and psychological*⁴.

After 19th century meaning in the text became a matter of individual reading. That is, modern literary tradition allows for different interpretations of different readers. Similarly, modern readers do not take a literary text as something that carries out social and moral values, rather a text is an artifact to which each reader can act out his own interpretive process. The notion of *reader* and *response* arises from this modern attitude which prioritizes individual's personal and psychological reactions to the text and describe *response* as projections of the reader's psyche onto the text and claim that the situation of readers vis a vis the text determines the nature of the meaning in the text⁵. The meaning in the text, then, is void of significance without readers' response.

³ Tompkins, P.J., *Reader-Response Criticism*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, Maryland, 1994, p. 206

⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁵ *Ibid.*

However, it is difficult to present a unified idea about the notion of *reader* and *response*. Each critical attitude in reader-response theory has different tendency. A group of linguists who contributed to the development of reader-response theory consider *response* as consequences of language-text-reader- interaction. According to them, language consists of signs, text is the ground where all these signs are presented and reader of a text – with his awareness of linguistic and literary competence- resymbolizes the signs and this resymbolisation is the act of interpretation, or what we call *response* which includes a process of anticipation, frustration and satisfaction. The reader realizes, perceives and interprets a work of art through his mind. The meaning of a text comes out when the mind of the reader and signs of the text have true interaction. According to this view, text is made of language which consists of signs and symbols and which has a special form of codes, conventions and rules. The reader of the text constructs his argument and interpretation within this system; therefore, the awareness of language and linguistic form leads the activity of interpretation⁶.

Phenomenological group of reader-response theory has different view of the concept of response. They argue that *response* is constructed upon and with language, but it is not a result of language or sign system. Language and response is created in the mind of the user of language thus *response* is an outcome of reader and writer's consciousnesses. Signs are interpreted and reshaped by the mind; therefore, we cannot free the activity of interpretation or *response* from the consciousnesses of reader and writer. That is why Husserl becomes important for the reader-response criticism. He thinks that the act of *consciousness* completes the perception of object through the realisation of its existence from various perspectives⁷. A human being perceives an object through consciousness and the perception of an object is an intentional act. In this sense, 'to be conscious is always to be conscious of something'⁸. Thus, the analysis of a literary text is a conscious experience of a reader and writer. That is, a text is an intentional act of a writer, and a reader re-experiences a literary work of art in his consciousness, as stated by Ingarden:

A literary work of art originates in the intentional acts of consciousness of its author ... these intentional acts, as recorded in a text, make it possible for a reader to re-experience the work in his or her own consciousness. ... The reading concretises the literary

⁶ Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics, Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976, p.128.

⁷ M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* New York: Harcourt Brace College Publisher, 1993, p.226.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

work and it is co-creative with the conscious process recorded by the author, which result in the actualisation as a quasi-reality within the reader's consciousness (quoted in Abrams).

The mind of an artist creates an object of art with which the mind of a reader interacts in a dynamic process of perception and in this process of perception objects cease to exist as objects and become subjective reality of reader's consciousness⁹. That is, a reader places himself in the hands of an author and surrenders his time and attention to the author's creation and begins to live in the world the author imagined. Within the perception of a reader the text begins to come alive too, for the text can only live when it is read. This would mean that consciousness forms the point at which the author and the reader converge and at the same time it would result in cessation of the temporary self-alienation that occurs to the reader when his consciousness brings to life the ideas formulated by the author. This process gives rise to a form of communication which, however, is dependent on two conditions: the life story of the author must shut out of the work and the individual disposition of the reader must shut out of the act of reading¹⁰. Understanding entails the experience and experience is something that is actualised through language. In so far as text is a composition of the experience of a writer, it can only be understood internally and by reliving it. Understanding, then, of a text means getting not only inside the author's consciousness but also inside the author's time and place to reproduce new experience from the lived experience of another. Poulet argues:

whenever I take up a book I realize that I hold in my hands is no longer an object, or simply a living thing. I am aware of a rational being, of a consciousness of another, no different from the one I automatically assume on every human being I encounter, except that in this case the consciousness is open to me, welcomes me, lets me look deep inside itself, and even allows me with unheard of license, to think and feel what it feels¹¹.

However, the present phenomenological attitude is challenged by the hermeneutical theory of reader-response criticism.¹² Comprehension of a text is at the same time re-experiencing and reliving the author's life, however, rarely each of us re-experiences the things in a similar way. Each of us comprehends texts differently because each of us has a different life experience. In this case "conflict of interpre-

⁹ W.L., Guerin, A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature Oxford: OUP, 1999, p. 263

¹⁰ George Poulet, *Criticism and the Experience of Interoity, In the Structuralist Controversy: The Language of Criticism and Science of Man*, Edited by Richard, Macksey and Eugenio Donato Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1972, p.41-49.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 57.

¹² Arslan Topakkaya; "Philosophical Hermeneutics", *Flsf Dergisi*, sayı 4, pp.75-92.

tation” becomes inevitable. We assume that we understand and appreciate legal and sacred texts in a very similar way as we appropriate philosophical argument, political and scientific narrative. However, Bruns says that literary text resists appropriation because a literary work of art:

...is only an incomplete sketch, a fragment what needs to be translated into a complete world by the appropriative act of reading... a literary work is considered as a text “consists of holes, lacunae, zones of in determination, which as in Joyce’s Ulysses challenge the reader’s capacity to configure what the author seems to take malign delight in disfiguring.”¹³

A reader in such cases rewrites the literary text and interprets it to make it intelligible. According to hermeneutics, an interpretation of any literary text requires a *horizon of expectation*, which is a two-dimensional study. Firstly, literary text is shaped by a literary tradition and has historical and social background. Secondly, literary text has aesthetic sides. The interpretation needs to consider both sides of the text because the interpretation of any text requires not only awareness of the past and the present but also the knowledge of the aesthetic distance. Reading does not involve any essential distinction between the reader and the critic of the text in terms of meaning. This is because the meaning of any text is not only a physiological event but it is also a mental experience of the reader. For example, Ricoeur claims that the meaning of any text follows certain stages. Reading begins with naive perception and the reader of the text in this stage develops hypothesis. When the reader of the text is involved in the world of a text, he begins to grasp the meaning. A text is free from its author; in the process of reading there is a relation between the situation, that is, the atmosphere or the world of a text, and the reader of the text. And the interpretation arises from the fact that the meaning is totally free from its author and intended reader¹⁴.

Reader-response criticism takes the writer of a text as an important participant in the production process. Authorial consciousness plays an important role in the interpretation of a text. Reading is the involvement of readers into the author’s experiencing the world, therefore, a reader of any text should be aware of its author’s intention. Text is not a single construction thus reading is not a simple process of finding out the meaning. A reader and critics of the text are always under the influence of certain forces; therefore, interpretation includes not only individual view of a

¹³ G.L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992, p. 240.

¹⁴ Quoted in Selden, S., *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* Cambridge: CUP, 1995, p.280-85.

reader but also presents some ideas of interpretive community and strategy that any reader of the text belongs to. That is, each critical theory has its own community and each critic is under the influence of certain strategies. The readers who share similar assumptions and use similar strategies will reach at similar conclusion, which is going to be different from the interpretation of other community which use different strategies¹⁵. Although reader response critics disagree on many issues, there is one thing they all agree on. Meaning of any text does not completely inheres in its formal and internal quality. They reject the New-critical idea that meaning must be identified only and only in a literary text. In e sense, they do not revolutionise formalist theory but contribute to the New-critical endeavour with a new principles and fresh perspectives of interpretive process. The work of a writer is presented to the reader as ‘an interplay of formal and thematic properties’, author of a text or reading public do not charge the reader and his response with a moral or social responsibility. The response, thus meaning in the text becomes a matter of individual’s linguistic, mental and interpretive experience.

Conclusion

Historical theory of criticism claims that interpretation is an activity that requires professional expertise, therefore, can only be done by professional scholars. *Response*, in this sense, needs to be supported and justified with scholarly expertise which rejects any readerly response without scholarly attitude. Instead of dealing with reader, language and text as an active participant and constructor of critical activity, critics of historical theory granted for external information based on biographical and historical information. That is, they think that *response* is an intellectual activity and closely related to the historical, biographical and philosophical knowledge of the interpreter. From ancient Greece up to the modern era writers and literary critics tend to evaluate the value of a work of art in relation to its effect upon the audiences: because to create an effect was the main concern of literature. The shift of power from aristocrats to the parliament, new and large reading class, development of different sciences provided a new perspective on what it means to read and to respond literature. Formalist and structuralist approach challenged the historical attitude and rejected the necessity of historical awareness. The conditions of life –economic, social, political- more and more resembled to those of the present day, conceptions of literature take on a more and more familiar outline... this shift

¹⁵ For further information please look at “Is There a Text in this Class?”, Stanley Fish, Harvard University Press, London, p. 1-21.

registers itself in the changing definition of literary response¹⁶. Consequently, changes that took place on the concept of *response* is a result of changes that took place in the critical attitude. History of criticism attempted to identify certain principles for the historical, biographical and social context to elucidate the meaning in the text for the text to be rightly understood and evaluated. In reader-response theory of criticism identifying certain critical attitude became more complex due to terminological confusion. On the one hand, reader and its response are centralized. On the other hand, becoming a reader is problematized with linguistic, phenomenological and hermeneutical readings. Although meaning in the text is an act of reader, it is not possible for any reader to find out the correct meaning without literary competence- that is, awareness of literary terms and movements, critical mind, and historical information. Taking the role of reader-text-language interaction as the main area of investigation, reader-response theory of criticism investigated the nature of meaning as a matter of linguistic, mental and interpretive response.

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¹⁶ Ibid., p. 201-225.