

## Lecture Series on Comparative Aesthetics

### Lecture No. 2

#### **Reception Aesthetics, Reader-Response Theory and the concept of the *sahrdaya***

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### **Abstract**

Reader-response theory and its corollary reception aesthetics which emerged in the 70s and 80s of the last century claimed to correct the reductionist limitations of Marxism and New Criticism. This paper examines the ideas of Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser, and Wayne C. Booth which brought about a paradigm shift by relocating the focus of critical procedures from the text to the reading process. Terms like ‘fusion of horizons’, ‘gaps and vacancies’, ‘the implied reader’ etc. are elucidated in order to expound the specific contribution of this school to the ongoing debate on the active role of the reader in the reading process. Tracing the development of the concept of the *sahrdaya* from Bharata to Jagannatha, the paper compares the way in which I. A. Richards and Abhinavagupta deal with the difficulties of reading and *rasa vighna*, obstacles to aesthetic experience. Finally, the paper demonstrates the significance of the reader- response theory by presenting an explication of the “What the Thunder Said” section of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* which may enhance the reader’s self-awareness.

## **Lecture Hand-out**

### **The Reading Process**

Wolfgang Iser

Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss are the most important proponents of what is known as “Reception Aesthetics”. Iser argues for an active role for the reader. Recovering the meaning of the text is not a passive process. Reading is an active and productive activity which, through controlled by the text’s strategies and rhetorical devices, enables the reader to fill the ‘gaps’ and ‘blanks’ in it. In the process the reader learns more about his own self.

#### **Reference**

David Lodge (ed.), *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, second edition, Pearson Education (Indian reprint 2003) pp.189-205

### **Literary History as a challenge to Literary Theory**

Hans Robert Jauss

H. R. Jauss uses his concept of Reception Aesthetics to rectify the inadequacies of Marxism and formalism. Marxism correctly stresses the role of production and representation but ignores reception. Formalism neglects the role of history in reception of literature. He claims that his theory of ‘melting of horizons’ does greater justice to the triad, author-text-reader.

#### **Reference**

Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (ed.), *Critical Theory Since 1965*, Florida State University Press (1990.)

### **Practical Criticism: a study of literary judgment**

I. A. Richards (1893 – 1979), one of the founders of the New Critical movement, wrote two books, *Principles of Literary Criticism* and *Practical Criticism* which have played a significant role in shaping the critical perspectives of the middle decades of the twentieth century. While teaching at Cambridge he used to distribute poems to his students without

revealing their authorship for their free responses. He found that there were wide variations in their responses. *Practical Criticism* explores the reasons for the wrong and inappropriate responses on the part of the students. He found ten obstacles to an adequate appreciation of poetry.

1. First must come the difficulty of *making out the plain sense* of poetry. The most disturbing and impressive fact brought out by this experiment is that a large proportion of average-to-good (and in some cases, certainly, devoted) readers of poetry frequently and repeatedly *fail to understand it*, both as a statement and as an expression. They fail to make out its prose sense, its plain, overt meaning, as a set of ordinary, intelligible, English sentences, taken quite apart from any further poetic significance.
2. Parallel to – and not unconnected with – these difficulties of interpreting the meaning, are the difficulties of *sensuous apprehension*.
3. Next may come those difficulties that are connected with the place of *imagery*, primarily visual imagery, in poetic reading. They arise in part from the incurable fact that we differ immensely in our capacity to visualise, and to produce imagery of the other senses.
4. We have to note the powerful and very pervasive influence of *mnemonic irrelevances*. These are misleading effects of the reader's being reminded of some personal scene or adventure, erratic associations, the interference of emotional resonances from the past which may have nothing to do with the poem. Relevance is not an easy notion to define or to apply, though some instances of irrelevant intrusions are among the simplest of all accidents to diagnose.
5. More puzzling and perhaps, more interesting are the critical traps that surround what may be called “stock responses”.
6. *Sentimentality* is a peril that needs less comment here. It is a question of the due measure of response.

7. *Inhibition*. This as much as sentimentality, is a positive phenomenon though less studied until recent years and somewhat masked under the title of Hardness of Heart.
8. *Doctrinal adhesions* present another troublesome problem. Poetry very often – religious poetry may be instanced – seems to contain or imply views and beliefs, true or false, about the world. If this be so, what bearing has the truth-value of the views upon the worth of the poetry?
9. Passing now on to a different order of difficulties, the effects of *technical presuppositions* have to be noted.
10. Finally, *general critical preconceptions* (prior demands made upon poetry as a result of theories – conscious or unconscious – about its nature and value) intervene endlessly, as the history of criticism shows only too well, between the reader and the poem.

I believe that most of the principal obstacles and causes of failure in the reading of and response to poetry may without much straining be brought under these ten heads.

### **Abhinavagupta on *Rasavighna***

Abhinavagupta says that this level can be reached only if there are no impediments (*vighna*). He has mentioned seven impediments in the realization of *rasa* (*rasa-vighna*). They are:

1. *sambhavanaviraha* – impossibility of the presented;
2. *svagataparagatatvaniyamena desakalavisesavesa* – subjective and objective limitations of time and place;
3. *nijasukhaduhkhadivivasibhava* – influence of personal joys and sorrows;
4. *pratityupayavaikalya* – lack of clarity to grasp due to insufficient stimuli;
5. *sphutatvabhava* – lack of clarity in expression;
6. *apradhanata* – subordination of the principal theme;
7. *samsayayoga* – lack of obviousness in the presentation;

These factors cause hindrance in the relish (*charvana*) arising from the aesthetic object.

**Reference**

Deshpande, G.T., *Abhinavagupta*, Sahitya Akademi (New Delhi 1989)

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