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THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF READING

Akash Deep

ABSTRACT

The philosophical perspective and method called phenomenology was given a concrete shape by the German thinker Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). Husserl was on a quest to analyse human consciousness--- that is to describe the concrete "lebenswelt" or the "lived world" as experienced independently of any prior supposition or experiences notwithstanding whether these suppositions are borne out of philosophy or common sense. He proposes that consciousness is a unified intentional act. By "intentional" he does not imply a deliberately willed action, but an action that it is always directed at an "object". In other words, to be conscious is always to be conscious of something. Husserl's concedes that in this unitary act of consciousness, the conscious subject and the object it "intends", or is aware of share a reciprocal relationship. To rid itself free of prior conceptions, the phenomenological analysis of consciousness begins at an "epoche" or "suspension" of all presuppositions about nature of experience.

KEYWORDS: Phenomenology , philosophical perspective , phenomenological analysis.

INTRODUCTION:

Phenomenology has had a wide philosophical spread since Husserl's work in 1900. It has been further developed by Martin Heidegger in Germany and Maurice Merleau-Ponty in France. It has greatly influenced Hans-Georg Gadamer and other theorists' in the field of analysing the conscious activity of understanding language. Every mental phenomena or psychological act is a reference to a certain intentional object. These intentional objects in turn are resultant of our psychological consciousness. The focal point of experience is that it refers toward an object.

Phenomenology of reading assumes that the act of reading is an

intransitive act. This intransitive nature of the act of reading in phenomenology comes in a stems from a tradition of reflections on the nature of literary language.

The phenomenological viewpoint is employed by polish theorist Roman Ingarden (1893-1970). He had adapted the phenomenological viewpoint and its concepts to a formulae or a way to understand a work of literature. In Ingarden's scheme of things, a literary work is the result of an intentional acts of consciousness by its author--- "intentional" in the sense that the acts are directed for the specific cause of the object. These acts put down in black and white makes it possible for a reader to "re-experience the work in his or her own consciousness." The reading, thus in Ingarden's



words, is *konkretisiert* (realized) in different schematised views. Such a reading can be said to be “co-creative” with the conscious processes recorded by the author, and to result in an actualised “aesthetic object” which does not depict a reality that exists independently of the work but bears some resemblance to the fictional world created by the author

Phenomenology is primarily subjective its approach to literature as opposed to the objective approach of Formalism and American New Criticism. Its roots trace back through the nineteenth century to that type of romantic expressive criticism wherein a literary work is regarded as a revelation of the personality of its author.

Phenomenology is anti-realist in its approach. The word “*phenomenology*” is derived from the Greek word “*phainomenon*” which means “appearance” or “appearing in”. The claim made by Phenomenology is that “objects exist in the fullness of their meaning.” The *phenomenological* reading entails the intransitive conceptualization of reading. The act of reading, according to phenomenology, is the meaning of the text.

The act of reading is termed as “*gestalt*”. A “*gestalt*” is the primitive, first and the primordial shade of meaning. A text produces counter *gestalts* to all the *gestalts* it has itself created and finally exceeds the entire *gestalt* it had created and promoted for an entirely new dimension. Reading is the morphing of an incomplete potential state of meaning to an actualised meaning. The phenomenology of literature says that a text does not exist in the fullness of its meaning. A phenomenological reader is the opposite of a realist reader. Phenomenological reader is not a mimetic reader. He, unlike a realist reader does not merely recover a meaning already given, but produces a new meaning of a text.

The reality of a literary text stems from the reader’s consciousness. The manner in which the reader tries to create the reality is a mental activity. Now a question can arise here:

‘Can literature impart itself some meaning sans reading?’

The answer is NO. Reading is not a cosmetic frill. A literary text gains its reality from the reader’s consciousness. The reader’s mind records the ideas, sentences, images of the text, and figures of words as mental images. The way the reader will interpret a literary text is influenced by the reader’s consciousness which they gain from experiences. The way in which a reader tries to create the reality is a mental activity. Every reader will impart their personalized and unique interpretation to a literary text. And hence no two interpretations are ever alike. However all interpretations are within the limits imposed by the text. This is akin to two people gazing at the night sky and maybe looking at a constellation of stars but one imaging it as a plough and the other interpreting the same image as a dipper.

The stars in a literary text are constant. Only the lines joining them are a variable and are subject to the individual readers’ whims of interpretation. All literary texts contain within themselves a stretch of empirical meaning. This empirical meaning of a literary text does not exhaust the meaning of the text though it exceeds its empirical profile. Every text is consciousness-bound wanting to become an image in human consciousness. It attains its fullest identity as an appearance in consciousness. Every literary text brings in itself the guidelines, clues and cues to actualise as maximum meaning in human consciousness.

Wolfgang Iser has described three points in his essay “THE READING PROCESS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH”.

- (1) The process of anticipation and retrospection
- (2) The consequent unfolding of a text as a living event
- (3) And the resultant impression of lifelikeness.

Iser (1926-) held that a literary text has a twofold meaning. One is the Phenomenological and the other being the Neumenological meaning of a text. The Phenomenological meaning of a text is borne in the mind of a reader when they actually read the literary text and the Neumenological meaning of a text being the text itself.

When we read a literary text, we reconstruct the literary text by relating every sentence in the text to make it a more coherent and reasonable meaning. Since we cannot visually experience the world that the literary text portrays, we take recourse to vivid imagery to imagine the world of the literary text, thus, in the process, imparting our own interpretation to the text, just as a star gazer draws the image of a plough or a dipper while gazing at the same constellation of stars. The meaning that a literary text is not autonomous and concrete in

meaning. It looks to us as readers of the text to impart it meaning and concreteness. The convergence of text and the reader brings the literary work to fruition. Ingarden argues that the world presented in a literary text is constructed out of *"intentionale Satzkorrelate"* (intentional sentence correlatives). He held that sentences are linked up in various innovative ways to form more complex units of meaning.

These sentences, however, are neither the sum total of the text itself nor complete in its meaning. They exist in the text as "component parts". While reading a literary text, the reader relates every sentence to the next. In the process they fill in the gaps occurring in between the sentences. No literary text can by itself fully complete the visualisation of the world contained in it. The text has to give unto its reader, the freedom to employ his imagination. The reader will not be able to employ their imagination if there are no elements of indeterminacy, no gaps to fill where his imagination can run riot. As Husserl rightly points out: "every originally constructive process is inspired by pre-intentions, which construct and collect the seed of what is to come, as such, and bring it to fruition".

After reading a literary text, the meaning of the text will be absorbed by the reader, and when the reader re-reads the text; their interpretation of the same text is bound to be different. This is because the reader has already experienced the world contained in the literary text and it will have coloured their expectation to a certain extent. In the second reading, the reader has to look through an already tinted lens and it affects their response to the entire text. Multiple reading of a literary text will enable the reader to anticipate the relationship between ideas of the literary text. Also the reader's interpretation will be different for the same text when subjected to multiple readings.

The reading of a literary text reflects the process by which we can gain in experience. The reader begins to continuously relate to the new unfolding world of ideas. He lets go of his preconceptions. The text becomes his "present" while his own ideas fade into the past. The reader is made open to the immediate experience of the text. The efficacy of a text is brought to the fore by evocation and bracketing of the "eidos" or the "logical structure through which the members of a culture organize and interpret experience." The reader must suspend the empirical fixation and desert the world of the familiar and seek out a previously uncharted path for newer and fresh experiences. A literary text is an illusion. The reader, to puncture the bubble of illusion, must suspend the ideas and attitudes that mould and dictate their personal being.

As Georges Poulet has so correctly put up about Phenomenology of Reading

"When I read as I ought...with total commitment required of any reader", then, "I am thinking the thoughts of another... But I think it as my very own...my consciousness behaves as though it were the consciousness of another"

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