

Introduction: A Brief Overview of the Historical Roots of Reader-Response Theory

In his book, *Literary Theory* (1997), Culler asks: “[i]ntention, text, context, reader - What determines meaning?” (90). This question is significant for the overall purpose of this thesis because despite being a reader oriented theory which is supposed to be mainly concerned with the reader, exploring the conflicting models of reader-response criticism indicates that the reader’s role is always assessed in relation to, or in comparison to, the other constituents of the literary experience; the author, the text, and the context. Sometimes the reader is a passive marionette whose strings are in the hands of the author or the text; at other times, she/he is an active co-constructor of the text or its meaning, and sometimes even a solo player.

The acknowledgement of the presence of readers of a text, a literary work, or any work of art, and its impact on them can be traced back to as early as the age of classical Greek genres of drama and rhetoric. For instance, in Aristophanes’ *Frogs* (405 BC), Aeschylus explains the general functions of poetry and gives examples of how Orpheus taught people religion and medicine through his poems. He even goes on to criticize Euripides for depicting what he considers morally depraved characters, something that, he claims, spreads immorality and vice in society (Habib 11). This very concern about the impact of literature upon its readers is shared, though in a more hostile manner, by Plato (428-ca. 347 BC) who banishes poetry altogether from his *Republic* (380 BC). Plato criticizes poetry as “psychologically damaging, for it appeals to an inferior element in the soul, and encourages us to indulge in emotions which ought to be kept firmly in check by the control of reason” (qtd. in *Classical Literary Criticism* xxv).

As for Aristotle (384-322 BC), his stance is more tolerant; in his famous definition of a properly structured tragedy, he advises the poet to maintain a proper magnitude which triggers the audience's emotions of "pity and fear ... bringing about the catharsis of such emotions" (qtd. in *Classical* 64). Moreover, Aristotle reaffirms the role of poetry as a learning tool since it depends on mimesis which, according to him, is the primary tool for knowledge and learning (*Classical* 60).

During this classical period, the art of rhetoric also acknowledged the role of the reader/audience. Gorgias (ca. 485-380 BC), the famous Greek sophist defines rhetoric as "the art of leading and persuading souls" (qtd. in Habib 68). He defends Helen of Troy's elopement with Paris on the grounds that she was "persuaded to do so by the irresistible power of speech". Speech, he claims, including poetry, can generate the feelings of fear, joy, sorrow, and pity, and he writes that "[t]hose who hear it feel the shudders of fear, the tears of pity ..." (qtd. in *Classical* xx-xxi). Later, with the shift from the Greek tradition of rhetoric to the Roman one, Cicero (106-43 BC) comes to the foreground of the scene. In his *De Inventione* (87 BC), he divides speech into six parts, the first of which, the exordium, "is intended to make the audience well disposed, attentive and receptive" (qtd. in Habib 86). In *Brutus* (46 BC), he claims that the acceptance of the audience is the primary criterion for measuring the success of the rhetorician (Habib 86).

What distinguishes these declarations so far is the claim that the criterion for the judgment of a good text or speech is left within the vicinity of the reader or the receptor. There is also the assumption that the text has a certain influence/guiding role for its reader. However, the inferred conclusion from these varying dispositions indicates that these acknowledgements of the reader's role are, in a sense, passive. Indeed readers may

benefit morally, cognitively, or emotionally, but in the end, they remain either passive or in the best part led by the hand toward pre-intended, uniform reactions away from which they have no map.

It is Horace's (65-8 BC) work that first acknowledges the readers' role as more active than just passive marionettes. In his work, he reaffirms the classical notion of the social roles of poetry and art in general. However, while Aristotle allows for a pseudo-subjective response to this role on the side of the audience, Horace goes as far as viewing this response as an integral part of the very existence or creation of art, and of its desired impact. Talking of drama, he reinforces this point when he tips the author: "I will tell you what I, and with me the public ... look for in a play" (qtd. in *Classical* 102). Not only, then, is the audience the ultimate criterion of genuine artistry, but also literature is intrinsically dialogic; attempting to achieve a desired response of an audience guides the creation of the literary work (*Classical* 101).

With the dawn of the Christian era, a major rhetorical treatise: *On the Sublime*, long believed to be Longinus' (first century AD), adds a new harbinger to modern reader-response theory. The importance of this treatise comes from its anticipation of such concepts as the "competent reader", and the "informed reader". This is the reader who has certain backgrounds that qualify her/him to attain the intended effect or the optimal/ultimate experience of the text. It is indicated in this treatise that true sublime will have a lingering effect on "a man of sense, well-versed in literature" (qtd. in Habib 120). Furthermore, the document also refers to the judgment of such "intelligent and well-read [men]" as the criterion of judging whether a structure has achieved sublimity or not (qtd. in *Classical* 120). Even more, it also resorts to the congregation of such

judgments as the basic criterion of trusting a work as sublime (120). These notions of competence and evaluative communities find their voices again in the works of social model theorists.

Moving on to the Neo-Platonic philosophy, three crucial conceptual harbingers which are to have profound effects on modern reader-response theory express themselves in the works of Plotinus (AD 204/5-270), Macrobius (b. ca. 360), and liberal Christian thinker St. Augustine (AD 354-430). The first of these concepts is Plotinus' identification. For him, the ability to be conscious of an object (here a literary text) at all, is to internalize it, identify with it, and then elevate this identification to "self-knowing, [and] self-consciousness" (Habib 137). This notion is a compact precursor to Holland's more detailed transformational proposition. The second harbinger has to do with the notion of interpretation and the idea of understanding a message imbedded in a text. This we find in Macrobius' commentary on enigmatic dreams as the ones that require interpretation in order to reach an intended message. The significance of this discussion is that it throws the task of reaching meaning in the lot of the receiver. However, Macrobius' main contribution is his integration of the roles of both authorial intentions and the interpretive acts of the receiver in the process of interpretation, something that is later specifically stressed in the works of the inter-subjective model theorists.

This indulgence in working out allegorical meanings stems from the wish of Christian thinkers at this point to internalize "pagan" texts into the Christian tradition. This is particularly evident in the works of such liberal thinkers as St. Augustine, especially what he calls the rule of faith. He discusses the fact that objects can have several meanings depending on the context in which they appear, and warns against the

dangers of neglecting the influence of context or trying to impose a literal meaning or interpretation on allegorical structures (Habib 162). This contextual reference entails different interpretations, and textual authority; other propositions that find their voices in the works of inter-subjective model theorists as well as social model theorists.

With the Renaissance overturning the medieval world picture, however, a shift from this theologically affiliated allegorical tradition towards a more dialogic outlook on language; one which situated meaning within larger historical and social contexts, occurs. This is especially apparent in the works of Giambattista Giraldis (1504-1573) who insists on viewing literature within its historical contexts (Sidnell121). This same argument, providing the same contribution, reappears during the neoclassical era in the works of Samuel Johnson (1709-1784). He exemplifies the dialogic relationship between the reader and the text by Shakespeare and his audience, a relationship which is based on his being “the poet of nature: the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life”, and on his audience’s “willingness to praise his graces and overlook his defects” (qtd. in Habib 308). Johnson’s contribution here is not limited to his notion of dialogism, but extends to his concept of nature which draws a comprehensive view of contextualization as a contributory element to the reading experience; something that his biographies display. This historical contextualization and its effect on interpretation and on the reader’s response exertample effects on the works of inter-subjective theorist Jauss, and social theorists Fish and Culler.

Another seminal figure whose influence must be discussed is Francis Bacon(1561-1626),who rejects the idea of depending on any previously established systems of thought that try to put limits on humanity’s need to experience the world first hand. His works

promote subjectivity, urges people to start anew, and warns them against four “idols” or misleading forces that hamper such an attempt. Bacon’s influence on modern reader-response theory is largely apparent on the works representing the psychological model. His discussions of the first three types of idols, the tribe, the cave, and the marketplace, offer a direct precursor to Bleich’s subjective criticism and Holland’s notion of “identity theme”. In addition to that, his discussion of the fourth type of idols, idols of the theatre, especially his claim that grand narratives are essentially social constructs, is a founding principle for social model theorists, who maintain that the text, its interpretation, and the interpretive strategies and conventions used by its reader are all social/cultural constructs.

Moving on to David Hume (1711-1776), an Enlightenment philosopher and another figure whose contribution to the subjective paradigm is substantial, he asserts that the true essences of things are unknowable. He argues that what we gain through our senses are “ideas” which are not the same as the essences of external realities. These ideas are nothing but our own constructions based on our perception of these ideas. Hume argues that everything, from the simplest notions to grand narratives, is but the constructions of our minds (Habib 315).

His other contributions to modern reader-response theory include his discussions of taste. In his essay, “Of the Standard of Taste” (1757), he discusses issues concerning taste as an indicator of response, and assesses the possibility of reaching a reconciliation of tastes or responses. For him, collective human experiences do reach consensus (“Of the Standard of Taste”). However, this does not negate the fact that certain internal or external factors can cause the experience of the individual reader to divert from such

consensuses (Habib 334). This congregation/contextualization of subjective responses contributes as the main argument in the psychological/social models' accountings for similar responses. The last of Hume's contributions is his claim that there can be "an artistic taste" ("Of the Standard of Taste"). What he preaches is a mechanism for reaching competence which anticipates Fish's interpretive communities, as well as Culler's competent reader.

With Romanticism, William Wordsworth (1770-1850) rejects the notion of poetic diction on the grounds that "poets do not write for poets alone, but for men" (qtd in Holland, *The Dynamics of Literary Response* viii). Consequently, unless a poet seeks that sort of admiration gained because a reader feels ignorant of what the poet expresses, or that it is beyond her/his understanding, the poet should only use such language that other people use. He maintains that "in order to excite rational sympathy, he must express himself as other men express themselves" (qtd in Holland, *Dynamics* viii). In other words, readers won't respond with "rational sympathy" unless the poet expresses herself/himself in what later came to be termed ordinary language as opposed to poetic diction. The argument with/against this distinction between ordinary language and literary language later developed and became a major concern for literary critics. Fish also tackled this issue in his works.

Another romantic figure, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), claims that poetry offers "supernatural, or at least, romantic" characters, and that in order to "transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith" (qtd. in Holland *Dynamics* viii). In other words, for readers to be

able to handle such exotic images and language, they must willingly suspend their disbelief and embrace poetic faith. This exact proposition is tackled later in Holland's model, when he sets out to investigate the reasons readers suspend their disbelief and the manner in which this is achieved.

Moving on to the early twentieth century, the major influences on modern reader-response criticism can be traced back to three key figures: Freud (1856-1939), Husserl (1859-1938), and Rosenblatt (1904-2005). Starting with Freud, he contends that far from rationality, actions and thoughts are mainly unconscious and dependent upon body drives, and such fixed characteristics as its color, gender, and social situation (Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration* 19; Habib 571). The immediate effect of this proposal on the theory this thesis tackles is mainly concerned with the fact that debating authorial intentions, uniform responses, or the transparency of language as a medium of communication, can no longer be sustained.

More importantly, his account of creative writing and response or interpretation is of special significance for our purpose. His methodology of analysis of such processes is almost typical to his methodology of interpreting dreams as he contends that both represent an imaginative wish-fulfillment of repressed desires (Habib 578). This is the exact methodology psychological/subjective model theorists apply. Freud contends that despite the somewhat universal characterology he proposes which is based on the body parts responsible for pleasure and the collectively uniform set of defense and adaptation mechanisms "typically repression, avoidance, or denial" (Anderson and Taylor 92)

applied to unconscious phantasies¹ that trigger fear and anxiety for the ego, the “phantasy” created is inherently subjective. He also argues for a unique individual psychological make-up that maps its own identity out of these fixed givens. In the following chapter, the discussion proves that these exact propositions contribute to the main basis on which Holland builds his transformational model.

It is worth mentioning that despite the uniqueness of the individual identity, Freud, does not deny the possibility of reaching a collective “super-ego”. In his discussion of civilization, he states that the “community itself ‘evolves a superego under whose influence cultural development proceeds’” (qtd. in Habib 586). Moreover, he claims that the “individual’s superego will ‘coincide with the precepts of the prevailing cultural super-ego’”. This, Freud takes as evidence that the human psyche is situated “within the fabric of social institutions”. However, these institutions, and in a larger sense, civilizations, are but the “cumulative product of our psychology, its intrinsic character, and the ways it reacts upon its environments; civilization is also in some ways analogous with the human psyche, exhibiting a collective psychology that develops according to similar rules” (Habib 568-583). The core of this proposition, earlier proposed by Hume, represents the argument the psychological/subjective model theorists always resort to in order to account for similar interpretations and to find a criterion for the acceptability of interpretive accounts, it is also a proposition that will play a crucial role in processing the synthesized model.

The other major influence from the early twentieth century is that of Husserl’s phenomenology, which is based on “the description of the structures of experience as

¹The original spelling used by the original author.

they present themselves to consciousness” (Wrathhall and Dreyfus 1). It provides “a careful description of what perception itself is ... It is not concerned directly with entities, as are natural sciences, but with our *experience* of entities” (10; emphasis in original). This is achieved through what he terms the “phenomenological reduction”, which is the shift of focus from the study of the objects themselves to the study of these objects’ manners of appearance to the human subject and this subject’s manner of perceiving these objects. In other words, instead of studying an object as it is in itself, it is studied as it is perceived by the human consciousness and the subjective contribution this consciousness attributes to the object perceived (Habib 709-713).

Furthermore, in his essay “Pure Phenomenology, its Method and its Field of Investigation” (1917), he maintains that to have a “phenomenon” of an object is to undergo a series of processes because “[t]he same entity can be experienced in a variety of ways” (Wrathhall and Dreyfus 21). What happens, therefore, is that a perceiver gets many perceptions of the same object. These perceptions are then integrated to form a unified “consciousness” of this phenomenon. After that, the consciousness itself processes this phenomenon through various “referential, combinative, conceiving, theorizing” cognitive processes (21).

Discussing literature, Husserl applies these propositions to the literary experience starting with the very acknowledgment of the presence of a text. He argues that a text cannot exist on its own, independent of its perception by a reader. His proposition offers an intersubjective paradigm of philosophy as opposed to the objective one. This proposition is based on the dual relationship between the text as it appears to the reader, and the processes of consciousness applied by this reader to the phenomenon at hand, here the

text. Similarly, the inter-subjective model proposes a dialogic relationship between textual guidance/authorial intentions, and the reader's subjective processing of such input within the limits of the text.

The last key figure to exert a major influence on modern reader-response criticism is Rosenblatt. In his preface to her fifth edition of *Literature as Exploration* (1995), Wayne Booth admits, "I doubt that any other literary critic of this century has enjoyed and suffered as sharp a contrast of powerful influence and absurd neglect as Louise Rosenblatt" (qtd. in Church). Similarly in his introduction to *The Experience of Reading: Louise Rosenblatt and Reader-Response Theory* (1991), John Clifford predicts that when "histories of the reader-response movement are eventually written, Louise Rosenblatt's *Literature as Exploration* (1938) is sure to be cited as the inaugural text" (1). As a matter of fact, Rosenblatt's influence on modern reader-response criticism is not simply that of a precursor whose ideas and propositions were later developed by disciples. Studying her impact reveals her to occupy a unique status. She was a generation ahead of her contemporaries, a step ahead of her disciples, an anticipator and, at the same time, a critic of the propositions that succeeded hers.

In her writings, Rosenblatt acknowledges the various values and roles literature plays in the lives of its readers, both as individual beings, as well as social ones. She believes that in addition to the traditional escape value of literature which it achieves through offering an outlet for emotional tendencies and desires, and of objectifying human problems and conflicts, it also offers some other unique values. Literature provides in a livelier and more dynamic manner what may otherwise be brute facts. She asks:

Will it be the grain production of the Middle Western states or Garland's *A Son of the Middle Border*? Will he remember longer the statistics about New England's shipping or Melville's *Moby Dick*? Will the theory of the inferiority complex be more vivid or Jane Austen's Mr. Collins? ...Will the provisions of the Fourteenth Amendments or Mark Twain's Huck Finn and Nigger Jim affect him more? (*Literature as Exploration* 9)

This argument takes her to another crucial value of literature, that of identification. Rosenblatt maintains that "one of the most precious of our human capacities is that of sympathizing with or identifying ourselves with the experiences of others" (*Literature* 46). She holds literature as the most favorable inducer of such a tendency (46). She extends that value even further by contending that the readers' psyches represented in their personal needs, lacks, and desires guide this tendency of identification. An adolescent suffering from "disillusionment" with friends may identify with the Othello-Iago relationship most of all while reading or watching *Othello*. In doing so, literature offers even more values, it gratifies the readers' lacks and desires, even if this is just a temporary gratification, and it may even give them an insight into these drives about which they may be quite unconscious. Furthermore, literature allows readers to identify with experiences they otherwise have no access to due to the distance of space, time, cultural differences, or any other barrier.

Rosenblatt's reading theory, the "transactional theory", is based on the contention that the text is not an object; it is "an event", and it emphasizes "the essentiality of both

reader and text, in contrast to other theories that make one or the other determinate” (qtd. in Church). In the preface to her book *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* (1978), Rosenblatt writes that “the premise of this book is that a text, once it leaves its author’s hands, is simply paper and ink until a reader evokes from it a literary work – sometimes, even, a literary work of art” (ix). She defines this whole process as an “experience” which she insists, is transactional, dynamic, and non-linear.

One of the distinctive features of Rosenblatt’s transactional theory is its inclusiveness. The first characteristic of this inclusive reading strategy is the integration of the formal elements in her model. However, she relegates the importance of these elements to an adequate proportion in comparison to the other elements she integrates into the reading experience. She believes that, as readers, “[w]e shall find that, though the social and esthetic elements in literature may be theoretically *distinguishable*, they are in actuality *inseparable*” (*Literature* 31; emphasis in original). Critics, she argues, sometimes fail to see that an object can have more than one value; a work can “yield the kind of sensuous and emotional fulfillment which we call *esthetic* – it can be enjoyed in itself- and at the same time have a social origin and social effects” (*Literature* 31; emphasis in original). What she is proposing is an evaluation of the literary experience in which the formal elements, their role, value, and impact are awarded as much attention as other “social” aspects. This word social naturally includes a context, and, by association, implies communication and dialogism which would rope in the author and the text in their acts of communication to the reader.

This point she illustrates even more in the following manifesto in which she explains the roles attributed to those elements that participate in shaping the literary experience:

Through the medium of words, the writer attempts to bring into the reader's consciousness certain concepts, certain sensuous experiences, certain images of things, people, actions, scenes. The special meanings and, more particularly, the submerged associations that these words and images have for the individual reader will largely determine what the work communicates to him. The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition (The extent to which these are socially determined will, ... be a later topic for discussion). These, and many other elements, interacting with the peculiar contribution of the work of art, produce a unique experience. We must be constantly aware of the living and unstereotyped nature of the reading experience, made up as it will be of many complex elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination. (*Literature* 37)

Rosenblatt starts by acknowledging the role of the author. The writer according to her is a conscious entity who attempts to put forward an experience for the readers. While writing, "[t]he author ... seeks to make us sympathize with, and to value, one character more than another, one type of choice in life more than another" (*Literature* 23). The writer is, in other words, sharing an experience with the readers, trying to propose, as opposed to "to impose", her/his outlook of this experience. The important mechanism applied here is what she refers to as the "selective force". The author does not play the

role of a mirror; rather, she/he “selects” from the abundance of what life offers only such elements that are significant to the experience this author wishes to communicate to the readers. After that, she/he uses the medium of her/his art, here the medium is words, and attempts to convey this experience to her/his readers (*Literature* 42).

Despite this confirmation of the conscious, active role of the author and her/his personal message, Rosenblatt does not in any part of her work imply that there is a mechanism by which this experience or message is imposed upon the reader. She also never implies that there is, at least, a mechanism by which it can be guaranteed that this experience or message will have the specific impact its author intended. She does, however, as will be seen, allow these intentions, as well as the text’s contribution, to have a guiding role during the reading experience, and to be used in favoring one reader’s response over another.

What she does allow to have a significant influence over the reader, however, is the context. Rosenblatt, as apparent in the previously quoted manifesto, places the literary experience within a unique matrix of contexts. Studying the first two chapters from *Literature as Exploration* helps in mapping out this matrix. While reading literature:

[w]e find ourselves inevitably dealing with materials that at least imply specific psychological theories and moral and social attitudes. As soon as we recall the very obvious fact that literature involves the whole range of human concerns, we are reminded that it is impossible to deal with literature without assuming some attitude toward these human materials. Moreover, because our implied moral attitudes, our assumptions, our unvoiced systems of social values, are re-enforced

by all the electric intensity and persuasiveness of art, we should bring them out into the open for careful scrutiny. (10)

This quotation, elaborates her reference to contextual elements in her previously quoted manifesto and places the literary experience within a two-level matrix of psychological and social contextualization. She bases her argument on the fact that since literature is representing “human concerns”; it is natural that the human experience of this literature involves a reflection of, as well as a reflection upon, these concerns. Thus, it is impossible to dismiss such contexts while discussing the literary experience. She even finds this notion not only natural by association, but also useful as it places these very contexts under the scrutinizing glasses of those involved in the experience, thus triggering a conscious metacognitive evaluation of them.

Discussing the psychological context, Rosenblatt maintains that the “accepted practice” of literary criticism reveals an undeniable interest in topics that are generally categorized as psychological theories. The idea of characterization, the “causal relationship between motive and action”, etc., are all essential elements of producing literature and of experiencing and analyzing it. However, they are also borrowed concerns from the psychologists’ domain. Adding more dimensions to this psychological context, Rosenblatt further discusses the issue from two perspectives. The first of these is the personal/social perspective of psychology. She clarifies the uniqueness of the individual psyche in opposition to what is termed the universal “human nature”. Here, she both inaugurates the subjective reader-response model and criticizes its subsequent extremism. She admits the fact that each reader is a unique entity, yet she/he submits to universal common factors (though she challenges the fact that this universal human

nature is clearly defined). This particular point will be further discussed while discussing her concern with the nature of the issue of subjectivity (see below p. 19).

The second perspective is the relativity of the historical context if added to the psychological one. Rosenblatt argues that the historical era in which the text was written as well as that in which it was read render different experiences and interpretations. For instance, she argues that the interpretations and reactions towards the literary work and most probably the intentions of its author when voluntaristic psychology dominated, when human beings were held responsible for all their actions as human conduct was believed to be largely conscious, would be strikingly different from modern reactions. “Present-day psychology stresses the importance of unconscious factors motivating behavior” (*Literature* 19). Therefore, the reaction may quite swing to the extreme opposite. Before Freud, for instance, it was not quite possible, or at least acceptable, to come across an interpretation of *Hamlet* that is based on the relationship between Hamlet and his mother.

Moving on to the social context, Rosenblatt argues that both readers and authors work out of a “scheme of values, a sense of a social framework or even, perhaps, of a cosmic pattern” (*Literature* 7). She argues that:

Anthropologists have revealed to us societies in which human beings have suppressed or rigidly regulated some of the drives, such as sex or the desire for self-preservation, that we tend to consider most fundamental and ineradicable. In these societies, human beings act in ways that seem to us “unnatural;” their

motivation seems incomprehensible to us – and therefore not quite “human”.

(*Literature*18)

An essential point that Rosenblatt highlights in this quotation is the influence of what the modern theory terms the interpretive communities on the reader. She argues that human beings tend to experience life (including literature) through their own social schema. Therefore, anything that comes across as incomprehensible or that fails to make it through this schema is usually dealt with in a judgmental manner. She argues later in the book that literature offers a broadening of this limited judgmental perspective. However, the point here is that human beings, as essentially social creatures, have social frameworks of values, anticipations, and codes that shape their experiences of life in general, and of literature in particular. The corollary of this proposition would be that different social contexts, foreign cultural orientations, and unusual circumstances trigger different reactions, interpretations, and experiences on the part of the readers.

Adding the historical context to the social one, Rosenblatt argues that the “social and historical considerations enter even more obviously into the study of any period of literature or the chronological treatment of any form such as poetry or the drama” (*Literature* 25). Naturally, when reading classical or Elizabethan drama, there is a need to be conscious of the idea that “in different ages and in different parts of the world man has created extraordinarily dissimilar social, economic, and political structures which pattern the life of the individual in ways very different from our own” (25). What is even more relevant is the impact this relativity of the historical context has over the readers’ experiences. Anticipating Jauss, Rosenblatt insists “that the same book will have a very different meaning and value to us at different times in our lives or under different

circumstances” (*Literature* 43). Consequently, the impact would be even greater if we extend the time over different historical eras.

Concerning the issue of subjectivity in its broader sense, Rosenblatt rejects the notion of a generic reader or a generic text. She announces that “[t]here is no such thing as a generic reader or a generic literary work; there are in reality only the potential millions of readers of the potential millions of individual literary works. The novel, poem or play exists, after all, only in interaction with specific minds” (*Literature* 32). This sounds like a proposition of the highest level of subjectivism. However, she resorts to two mechanisms that work as brakes to stop her theory short of rank subjectivity. The first of these mechanisms is what is traditionally referred to as “human nature”, and the second is the text itself which she allows to play a considerable part in managing the reading experience.

Rosenblatt argues that despite the claim that there is no specific definition or listing of what exactly are the constituents of this human nature, there are some notions or experiences that are shared by all human beings. These experiences include, “birth, growth, love, death – things ... to which we can apply certain general labels because of some common core of experience, even though there may be infinite personal variations upon them” (*Literature* 34). In addition to these, and despite the fact that there are personal differences, “[h]uman beings are a part of particular social systems and tend to fall into groups – age, sex, profession, nation, race. These again offer general pattern[s] upon which individual variations can be played” (34). These are all elements that constitute parts of that human nature since they are all shared by all human beings.

Now, we come to the text which is the medium of communication between the author and the reader. The text according to Rosenblatt's theory plays three vital roles during the literary experience. Firstly, the text offers the stimuli that trigger certain elements of the reader's contextual experience. Secondly, it acts as a brake against misreadings and subjective interpretations. This is achieved through its third role; the text as the guide (*Literature* 11). In order to understand this guiding role, an account of the reading process must be presented. The reader, while reading, is actively involved in making out "a poem" out of the text at hand. In other words, just as the author uses the "selective force" in order to make out a pattern from the bigger picture life offers to present to her/his reader, the reader also uses this selective force to make a poem out of the text. She/he chooses from the several references that the symbols and stimuli of the text refer to in that context of the personal as well as the physical external world what may be relevant or consistent with the text or the poem this reader is trying to construct.

Moreover, while reading, the reader's experience under textual guidance becomes "self-corrective". As the reading process begins; the reader starts to work out meanings, assumptions, expectations, reactions, and judgments. These are based on the contribution of the text as well as the reader conjuring up her/his own reservoir of memories, personal experiences, literary experiences, and social values and frameworks. However, as reading proceeds, the reader is urged to alter these meanings, expectations, etc., as she/he "may discover that he had projected on the text elements of his past experience not relevant to it, and which are not susceptible of coherent incorporation into it" (*Literature* 11). The reader then modifies the former responses formed in favor of others (10). She concludes this point that the reader "[finds] it necessary to reinterpret

earlier parts of the text in the light of later parts. Actually, he had not fully read the first line until he had read the last, and interrelated them” (10).

Rosenblatt then discusses another important notion that contributes to the reader’s experience; that is the notion of unity which guides the reader’s selecting forces and determines what elements or references will be incorporated in the reader’s poem. “As the reader seeks a hypothesis to guide the selecting, rejecting, and ordering of what is being called forth, the text helps to regulate what shall be held in the forefront of her/his attention” (*Literature* 11). Once the reader finds or constructs this unified theme, it guides her/his selection forces as they order her/his experience of the text. This exact account of the reading mechanism is advocated anew in the works of modern inter-subjective theorists.

It is important here to make three distinctions. The first distinction is between the text and what Rosenblatt calls the poem. The former is a set of printed signs which work as symbols for things outside themselves. In other parts she names the text thus defined as the “stimulus” that triggers the reader-response by virtue of this referential nature. As for the poem, it “presupposes a reader actively involved with a text and refers to what he makes of his responses to the particular set of verbal symbols” (*Literature* 12). What can be inferred here is that by the term “poem” Rosenblatt is referring to what the reader makes out of her/his processing the symbols and stimuli provided by the text. The conscious meaning or sense the reader comes out with. This exact distinction between the text and the poem is slightly modified and integrated in Iser’s work as the artistic pole and the aesthetic pole of the text, as well as the implied reader which is a textual structure that invites certain responses on behalf of the reader.

The second distinction is between the author and the text. Rosenblatt's writing implies that, to a certain extent, she distinguishes the author with her/his attempts, goals, and intentions from the text, as she states that:

Post-Romantics are used to seeing behind the text the figure of the author. Nothing that I have said or shall say denies that the text is the outward and visible result of an author's creative activity. One can understand and appreciate the great interest in textual analysis in recent years, since the author has selected these words and no others as the cues that will guide the reader's performance. ... Yet we must remember that once the creative activity of the author has ended, what remains for others - for even the author himself- is a text. To again bring a poem into being requires always a reader, if only the author himself. (*Literature* 15)

This distinction is based on the contention that the text, as far as the author is concerned, is the final product of an experience, not the experience itself. It is, however, the beginning of an experience for the reader. The author has an experience that she/he wishes to share. All the way during the creative process, the author has control over the text, she/he chooses out of the bigger picture only such themes, ideas, character, images, etc., that serve her/his intentions. However, once the creative process is over, the text stands as an independent stimulus. The text then is not necessarily the objective manifesto of its author's intentions, nor does it offer an eternal universal message to all its readers (*Literature* 49 & 76).

The third distinction is based on her realization of different stances or modes of reading. Rosenblatt argues that among the elements that can influence the reader's

realization of the poem she/he constructs out of the text is the question of why the reader is reading the text. She puts the answer to this question on a continuum that spans between efferent reading on one end, and aesthetic reading on the other. A reader who comes to the text with an efferent mode or stance is usually concerned with the end value of the work; the conclusion or the result. Despite the fact that this might be more applicable for scientific texts, it can still influence some readers' approach to literary works. On the opposite side of the continuum comes the aesthetic reader who enjoys the process as it goes along; this is reader who enjoys the reading process as an event. Rosenblatt argues that whereas someone might help the reader with an efferent reading, no one can do so aesthetically (*The Reader* 22).

With this distinction the transactional theory is largely explained. As discussed so far, Rosenblatt's contributions to modern reader-response theory are extensive and most profound. These contributions include her anticipation of reader response models proposed by later theorists. She anticipates the psychological model when she proposes the identity theme as part of the psychological context of the experience. She also helps bring the subjective dimension of the experience, which is regarded as part of the psychological model, to equilibrium. On the level of the inter-subjective model, Rosenblatt pioneers this model by proposing almost all of its propositions. As for the social model, Rosenblatt's writing offers a social contextualization of the literary experience that is almost identical to the notion of "interpretive communities" on which the social model is based. There are also direct references to the structuralist elements that guide Culler's work when she refers to the underlying conventions that are socially and culturally structured and that guide the reader's response to the poem.

Apart from this diachronic panorama of individual influences over modern reader-response theory, one last influence lies not in the individual capacity but in the collective one; that of other schools of literary criticism. At a certain point in its history of evolution, reader-response criticism had expanded to include theorists from other schools such as Holland who comes with a background of both psychoanalysis and New Criticism, and Culler who is essentially a structuralist. Later, it became also normal to have theorists working in the vicinities of other schools or disciplines with a reader-response orientation such as Judith Fetterley and Patrocinio Schweikart who are feminists, and Don Kuiken; a psychologist. The importance of that influence resides in the richness of perspectives it offered to the school. The outcome could have been a comprehensive, inclusive theory. However, the actual experience led to a conflict between the different orientations leading to the formation of what Mailloux labels “models”. As this chapter has attempted to provide an overview of the historical roots of the theory, the following chapter will thus proceed to examine these models of modern reader-response theory.