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Research Article



Common Readers and the Singularity of Literature: A View on Derek Attridge's *Analysis of the Process of Reading*

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Abstract

Reading is a complex process. It mostly aims at getting at the most accurate meaning of a text, but it is not always easy. Because what is the accurate meaning is something very tough to decide. A text has various qualities which nearly all need to be analysed to come closer to a complete meaning. It needs expertise and attention while reading any text. On the other hand, the process of reading itself has various aspects to look at. For example, a reader always has

more than one perspective available to analyse and interpret a text. And it is necessary that a text is read and analysed using these different perspectives, so that the meaning one gets after such a reading is not narrow or obscure. Specially the reading of a literary text needs some extra attention. Here, the language is mostly minutely used, and there are qualities which are different and mostly superior to other common texts. At the same time, sometimes, the kind of meaning which is produced also depends on the reader. A common reader without expertise may come up with some simple meaning. But, at the same time, a scholarly reader may come up with some complex meaning of the same text. Thus, there is always a possibility that the same text may have different meanings by different authors. The present paper focuses on the common readers' reading of the texts and the different kinds and stages of reading as put forth by Derek Attridge in his works *The Work of Literature* and *The Singularity of Literature*, respectively. Common readers read the texts differently from the way the scholarly readers read them. Then, how far is it possible and necessary to take all readers as just readers and make some general comments on the reading process as a whole? It is a fact that based on the cultural and educational backgrounds, different people respond to the same text differently, and their respective responses should be respected as they all are readers, after all, who have the freedom to comment and interpret. The present paper tries to analyse this inclusivity in Attridge's arguments as far as the process of reading is concerned.

Keywords: Common readers, Reading process, Inclusivity, Literature, Texts, Literariness, Analysis, Interpretation

Literature has always been one of the most ambiguous terms to be defined. No one can clearly say what does it exactly signify (Eagleton 1). Some critics take it to be words in the written form. Some others identify it with the expression of thoughts and feelings. Some relate it to written accounts which are fictional in nature. But none of these definitions or rather identification marks of literature are complete in themselves (Eagleton 1). At the most, it can be able to denote a particular genre or the writings of some particular writers. While deciding the criteria for defining literature, some critics put emphasis on the content of the writing, whereas the others consider the form – the text – to be the decisive factor. Some famous definitions of different genres of literature are famous worldwide. For example, for Wordsworth, poetry is “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings...” (Wordsworth 6); for Coleridge, poetry is the composition of “the best words in the best order...” (Rennie 1); whereas for T. S. Eliot, it is “...an escape from emotion...” (Eliot 2). In the same way, there are authors

and critics who have put forth their respective opinions about various other genres of literature. But no one can say that any of these definitions is complete in all senses. They all try to focus on some particular aspects of literature and in this process there always remains some scope for improvement. Similarly, even if a text is identifiable as a work of literature, it becomes very tough to evaluate the degree of literariness it possesses. For example, any reputed critic can claim a work to be a literary piece, but coming at a uniform decision about the degree of its literariness is always impossible. Even in the cases of the already declared masterpieces of literature sometimes it becomes really difficult to point out the exact qualities which make that particular text a masterpiece. Some discrepancies also arise due to the fact that sometimes the other texts having the same literary qualities are not ranked to be a similar masterpiece. Overall, from the definition of literature to the identification of literariness, all these processes are not uniform, and they require such minute observation from the experienced minds that it really becomes tough to come at any certain conclusion. There can be just a few prime features which generally decide the nature and scope of a text of any literary genre. Moreover, these decision-making processes are so much complicated that every reader of a text cannot think to delve that much deep into them to come up with his or her own conclusion. In most cases, it is only the experts in the field who take the responsibility of defining or evaluating a text.

Since the unknown beginning of literary criticism, there has been tradition of commenting and interpreting different kinds of texts. In the same way, there have been critics who have tried to formulate certain rules and regulations of reading, interpreting, and analysing a text. Many of them have also tried to define and locate the scope and universality of various texts and techniques of interpretations and analysis. In recent times, Derek Attridge has made some such similar attempts in some of his books on literature and literary criticism. Particularly, his recent works *The Singularity of Literature* and *The Work of Literature* have made some considerable contribution in how literature is conceived by critics in present times. Attridge takes a text to be something which only becomes literary or a work of literature or even otherwise, when a reader realises it to be so. Thus, in Attridge's opinion, an author is not free to create a certain kind of text. Such a decision can only be based on the responses of the readers. Similarly, a writer or poet cannot claim his or her writing to be such and such because after being written a text is just a text until it is realised by some reader to be of a certain type or genre. But this process again contains much complexities. For instance, who is able to read and interpret a text? Everyone? Or just a few well-trained and experienced individuals? And even if such readings and decision makings are free to all, how far is it practicable in the real

world? And how can there be a harmony and cohesion in the conclusion of different readers? And if the readers are thought to be having equal ability and their weightage is same, can it be possible that the same text is literary for some and non-literary for the other readers? The present article focuses on analysing some such aspects of reading a text in relation to Derek Attridge's analysis of the process of reading in his books *The Singularity of Literature* and *The Work of Literature*.

In *The Work of Literature*, while answering to the question, "Isn't it the case, then, that in order to be realized as work of art the literary text has to be read by a special kind of reader, one who has been trained in a certain way and possesses certain skills of interpretation?" (Attridge 23), Attridge says,

To be able to read in this way doesn't require a long apprenticeship; it's more a matter of attitude and willingness than expertise. Oscar Wilde names the 'temperament to which Art appeals' 'receptivity'; education, he says, is no guarantee of an ability to do justice to the work of art, since 'an educated person's ideas of Art are drawn naturally from what Art has been, whereas the new work of art is beautiful by being what Art has never been' (*The Soul of Man under Socialism*, xx). Dickens was a great innovator in the form of the novel, but most readers who enjoyed—and still enjoy—his innovations had and have no special training in the reading of fiction. Anyone can have the openness to new thoughts and feelings, the readiness to be surprised, the capacity for careful attention that literature demands. Having said this, there's no doubt that the more widely you read, the more fully you engage with your cultural surroundings, the more you gain a sense of earlier periods, the better reader you are likely to be. More texts will yield themselves as literary, and you will gain more pleasure, and be more affected by, the works you read. (Attridge 23)

Now, according to Attridge, reading a text to realise it as a work of art more demands attitude and willingness than apprenticeship. It means that the training in the art of reading is secondary, and a reader can understand things and comment on that if he or she has the attitude and willingness to do so. So, in Attridge's opinion, any reader can read, understand, and interpret a text, irrespective of his background and proper apprenticeship. Here, in saying so, he further cites Oscar Wilde (Attridge 23) who, in his opinion, seems to advocate almost the same idea.

Here one thing can be pointed out that Wilde's view may be applicable to other art forms where sense and perception play a greater role, but as far as the written-texts are concerned, the importance of education and proper apprenticeship cannot be overlooked, because it is again the same education and apprenticeship which make Wilde, Attridge or anyone else

define what it is to be realised as a work of art. As far as the matter of attitude and willingness is concerned, they are always given less importance, at least practically, than good education and proper apprenticeship in the reading and analysis of literary texts. Although in Wilde's opinion, "...education is no guarantee of an ability to do justice to the work of art, since 'an educated person's ideas of Art are drawn naturally from what Art has been'" (Attridge 23), it is, in fact, education and the educated persons' ideas which play a vital role practically. Perhaps Wilde himself has been cited here more as an educated literary-scholar than a mere novice reader with attitude and willingness to perceive text as the work of art.

When it comes to Charles Dickens' novels, it is a fact that the novels have been most popular at a particular time. Even now they are popular, but a well-trained reader, aware of the places and familiar with the society they describe, will certainly get them more than a common reader. Moreover, the more a person reads them the better he or she will understand them as the works of art. On the other hand, a common reader with genuine willingness and no training may find the novels as they are, but cannot define their qualities as the works of art as he or she will have difficulty in defining these qualities, and moreover it is a general belief that this great task has already been reserved and meant to be valid only for a well-trained literary-scholar.

Attridge acknowledges that literature demands careful attention (Attridge 23), there is no doubt in it. Careful attention certainly gives a better understanding of a literary text, and perhaps it also helps in realising the minute artistic qualities of that particular text, but this careful attention is not so easy to be applied, as it needs a special kind of expertise in the act of reading. No common reader can get the text thoroughly, and point out as many points of discussion as a well-trained reader can do. Here comes the experience and the prior knowledge of the cultural surroundings of the text. As Attridge has pointed out, "The more widely you read, the more fully you engage with your cultural surroundings, the more you gain a sense of earlier periods, the better reader you are likely to be. More texts will yield themselves as literary, and you will gain more pleasure, and be more affected by, the works you read" (Attridge 23). So, although the reading of a literary text seems a similar task where all the readers are treated equals, there is no doubt that the training and experience always help in understanding a text thoroughly and consequently in realising and defending its literary and artistic qualities. Thus, a common reader without proper training and experience will always have to spend some time in reading literature to gain some experience before he or she is able to realise or comment upon the literary and artistic qualities of literature and see a literary text as a work of art.

Literary texts come from different social and cultural backgrounds, and from the different parts of the world. And in most cases, they are read by the readers which include persons other than the native people. Thus, there remains the issue of familiarity. The reader who is well aware of the social and cultural backgrounds of the text is able to connect to it more easily and with more clarity. On the other hand, an outside reader has to first estimate the background, and only then arrive at the description of the text. Here, mere willingness to read and acquire the artistic pleasure, without a proper knowledge of the social and cultural backgrounds of the text, do not, and to some extent, cannot, serve the purpose entirely. As Attridge has pointed out in his work, *The Singularity of Literature*,

Any text we read - like any person we encounter - is the product of a unique cultural formation of this kind; the process of reading, therefore, is the process of subjecting the assumptions of the cultural fields that make up my own distinctive idio-culture to those which the work embodies (not, of course, as the simple reflex of its time but as it is read in my own time). And the more fully I have absorbed the cultural materials that surround me—including those that make up the institution of literature (its history, its range, its linguistic and generic conventions) - the richer the encounter is likely to be. (Attridge 82)

Thus, a common reader, unfamiliar with the prerequisites of the text, may not be able to grasp the minute details of that particular text. And consequently, he or she may not be believed to have acquired the aesthetic and artistic pleasures of the text as the work of art. It is only after some experience or some proper initiation in the art of reading or in the background of the text that such a common reader can come at a stage to realise the artistic pleasure of the text. This argument with regard to the act of reading seems contradictory to Attridge's view mentioned earlier, where he denies the need of any special training before reading a text and realising its artistic qualities, though he does not seem to deny the importance of experience.

Re-reading the texts has much to offer to all kinds of readers, as it brings in the new ideas regarding the texts and at the same time reshapes the existing impressions of them. It highlights the inventiveness of the text and its importance to the readers, and similarly the readers' interest in pursuing the text once more with different perspectives. By re-reading a particular text, a common reader can get the heightened understanding of the things and events described therein. Familiarity with the texts comes from re-reading them, and a reader can achieve it by practice and get the artistic pleasures of reading. At the same time, re-reading also evaluates the literary and the artistic qualities of the text. All texts cannot be enlisted to be of the same importance. They have their limitations and virtues which re-reading can

define. If a reader is able to re-read a particular text, it means that it has something to offer constantly. Because only a powerful text can appeal to its readers to read it again and again. As Attridge points out,

The inventiveness of a literary work can, in part, be measured by its capacity to be re-read without loss of power; an uninventive work simply confirms my predispositions and expectations each time I read it. The effect of re-reading also offers a way of distinguishing between literary and non-literary works. In responding to the inventiveness of a non-literary work (or the non-literary inventiveness of a work that is also literary), there is no point in returning once I have registered the point of its new formulations. Re-reading the work simply repeats the process, and is only worth doing if I fail to grasp the work's argument, or I forget what I had gleaned the first-time round. Re-reading the literary work, by contrast, is an affirmation of its literariness. (Attridge 89)

Although Attridge believes that re-reading is only worth doing if the reader fails to grasp the work's argument, or forgets what he or she gleaned the first time (Attridge 89), it can always be put in mind that a common reader without much experience has the possibility to go through perhaps both these situations. Though the reader may be willing, his early limitations will perhaps make him re-read any particular text again. Moreover, if the given text describes unknown culture and society, it becomes more important to go through the text more closely and perhaps re-read it to get the minute details of what have been described by the author. In this way, re-reading helps a common reader develop the required abilities to grasp a literary text thoroughly. At the same time, re-reading is important because, as Attridge has mentioned earlier, it is an affirmation of the literariness of a literary work. Thus, re-reading enables a common reader to enjoy the pleasures of the literary text and comment upon its literary and artistic qualities. At the same time, as Attridge has opined earlier, it also automatically tends to judge the literariness and certain other important literary and artistic qualities of any particular text (Attridge 89).

Attridge further focuses on reader's response to a particular text. He calls for "a response that is both faithful and original" (Attridge 91). And one way to achieve this "faithful and original" response, according to Attridge is the singular response (Attridge 91). As a reader can mostly add something in his previous response after re-reading the same text, Attridge suggests the idea of singular response where there is just a final response based on the initial observation of the text. But can such a response be authentic and reliable? Most of the times, a reader cannot interpret the text the first time he or she reads it. It takes time to come to certain conclusions, and in most cases, it may demand re-reading. Specially, if the reader is a

common one and unfamiliar with the text, he or she may have to go through the literary work more than once to come up with the response. And only such a response can be taken as authentic and reliable. A hurried response or a response just based on the primary observation or the very first reading of the text may convey some irrelevant facts regarding the text which the reader may realise later on. Thus, it seems better when any response is given after a thorough review, and preferably the revision of the text. As Attridge himself calls for a “faithful and original” response (Attridge 91), it seems contrary when he subsequently promotes the idea of the singular response based on the first reading of the text. It is quite possible that some novelty may come in the later responses, but it cannot be ascertained beforehand that it will be of the negative kind or will affect the stature of the literary text as a work of art.

While discussing the reader’s response to the text, Attridge talks about the inventive response (Attridge 92), which according to him,

... is a response to a cultural situation in which the pressures and fractures inherited from the past make possible the emergence of what has been suppressed or disguised; but this cultural situation is manifested in particular inventive works ... and it is in response to these works that fresh inventions arise. (Attridge 92)

In Attridge’s opinion, “In an inventive response the reader attempts to answer to the work’s shaping of language by a new shaping of his or her own (which will in turn invite further responses) - whether it be in the form of a literal act of writing, an inward composition, a speech or intervention in a discussion, a change of behaviour” (Attridge 93).

Attridge’s discussion on literature in both these works, *The Work of Literature* and *The Singularity of Literature*, mostly revolves around the western cannon of the literary texts. Although some generalisations can be made, his arguments do not seem to be fit for the analysis of all kinds of literary texts from around the world. He suggests that attitude and willingness play more important part in reading a literary text than training and speciality (Attridge 23), but in general things are mostly found to be otherwise. There is hardly any unexperienced and untrained reader who can be able to handle such complex issues related to literature - literary texts and their literary and artistic qualities. Moreover, defining a literary text as a work of art is not a simple task to be performed by a common reader. It needs a proper involvement with the text which is only possible either after experience or proper training in the reading of the literary texts, or both. When it comes to academic standard, there also, a novice reader’s subjective response will not be taken as a mature interpretation of any particular text. On the level of the personal realisation of the text, a common reader can do justice, but when it comes to the widespread opinion, there seems difficulty in such a reading.

Attridge's focus here is more on what makes a text literary or non-literary? He attempts to comment on the literariness of a text and its artistic qualities which enable it to be counted as a work of art (Clark 1). Such a reading of any text can only be managed on the scholarly level. While Attridge himself and the likes of him may be fit for such a reading of the literary texts, when taken into consideration thoroughly, the common readers of literature without special expertise do not seem to come closer to this scholarly domain. As literary texts are read by all, even other than the people from the field of literature, it does not sound rational if the common readers from the other fields are expected to show the same competence. Reading can be enjoyed by all, but when it comes to special kind of attention and critical interpretation, some kind of initiation and experience in this field seem to be necessary and unavoidable.

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