**Lesson 12 : Literary reading and writing methodology 02**

The following is the simplistic initial statement which is thereafter complicated at considerable length:

The literary or poetic text establishes, effectively, certain more precise and even conventional fixed limits for the creator of literary or poetic types of expression, which are unknown in the elaboration of the standard communication text. From the very start, the author of a sonnet works under the pressure of a closed textual space. He accepts a pre-set dimension for his discourse, which artistically specializes each of his operators and decisions regarding thematic invention, structural arrangement and elocution at every level. . . . [[1]](#footnote-2)Without knowing such stringent limits, the constructor of a theoretical piece or novel is similarly aware of the existence of relatively conventional boundaries, experienced, adopted and patterned for the communicative-aesthetic efficacy of said discourses.

This sounds like a rather restrictive description of literariness, but could be adjusted to allow for considerable flexibility. The generic closure of textual space that authors work with reference to could include, for instance, testing and even subverting the limits of that closure.[[2]](#footnote-3)

The usual objections to such formalist text-centred

approaches dwell on the productive and receptive dimensions. The literariness of the text arguably

cannot be grasped by looking at the text in itself. It seems natural that the author’s life and times may provide a useful frame here, but in fact that too is

now regarded as misguided. Processes of the production of a text include considerably more agents (influences, publishers, reviewers, translators, etc.) and[[3]](#footnote-4) factors (existing presumptions about what is literary, what is acceptable, how texts circulate, etc.) than an individual author can determine. The literariness of a text is therefore now considered to be an emanation from existing discourse formations, a sociopolitical ethos, a historical period, modes of book production and circulation, and so on. The ‘death of the author’ that Roland Barthes so influentially announced was because of such an understanding of texts and literariness (see his ‘The Death of the Author’, in Image, Music, Text, selected and trans. and yet the idea of an author is so powerful a convention of literary studies that its ‘return’ (as Seán Burke, in his Death and Return of the Author, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992, was to phrase it) seems to be always at hand. Consideration of the receptive aspects of literature also produces substantial challenges to the formalistic text-centred approach. Reception could be constructed within the text at one level, as Wolfgang Iser’s formulation of the ‘implied reader’ suggested.[[4]](#footnote-5)

For Iser, the text manipulates readers to obtain a range of possible readings by bringing their sense of relevant associations and selections. ‘[The implied reader] embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect – predispositions laid down, not by empirical outside reality, but by the text itself’. However, this is still too text-centred for some reception critics. In a series of influential formulations starting with the ‘informed reader’ and moving towards a concept of ‘interpretive community’, Stanley Fish first ‘challenged the self-sufficiency of the text by pointing out that its (apparently) spatial form belied the temporal dimension in which its meanings were actualized’, and, second, argued that literary texts are actually constructed even before they are read, in terms of pre-agreed strategies of reading that exist in ‘interpretive communities’ (Is There A Text In This Class?[[5]](#footnote-6)

If literary meaning has to be brought to the text, then the text, of course, does not contain literariness in itself.

Troublesome as these now familiar reflections on the literary text continue to be, further dimensions of complication are introduced by recent developments, especially innovations like digitisation of texts and growing familiarity with hypertexts (as in the Internet). These have distinct implications for literature and criticism which are worth noting.[[6]](#footnote-7)

Early studies of modifications in concepts of reading and writing in relation to hypertexts foretold promising developments for literature and criticism.

For instance, Jay David Bolter anticipated that electronic texts opened up the possibility of ‘interactive fiction’: ‘a nonlinear fiction, which invites the reader to construct a dialogue with the text’.[[7]](#footnote-8)

In this writers would be called upon to think of their work not as ‘a closed and unitary structure’ but ‘as a structure of possible structures’, and readers would cultivate the ability to become a ‘second author, who can then hand the same text to other readers for the same treatment’ . Subsequent attempts to come to terms with the development of hypertext within literary studies have followed broadly two directions.[[8]](#footnote-9)

First, it has been suggested that hypertext reveals practices and proclivities that are already implicit in literature and criticism but as yet insufficiently understood. Jerome McGann’s notion of ‘deformative’ rather than ‘interpretive’ reading is relevant here.

Briefly, the idea is that though readers are accustomed to read texts ‘deformatively’ at various levels (often cross-referring or going back and forth), in ‘interpreting’ texts there is a strong convention to impose linearity (going from beginning to end).[[9]](#footnote-10) Hypertexts, however, encourage explicitly deformative

reading and therefore reveal aspects of reading which are suppressed by the linear conventions of interpretation. Second, digitisation and hypertexts open up new possibilities which can comprehensively change current practices of text editing and textual criticism. These enable processes of textual juxtaposing and cross-referencing, for instance, which potentially render the need to identity definitive or original texts redundant. John Bryant and Jerome McGann have considered the theoretical implications, and foreseen radical changes in the shaping and maintenance of literary archives hereafter.[[10]](#footnote-11)

1. *Suman Gupta :* **The place of theory in literary,** [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. **The Handbook to Literary Research,** Edited by Delia da Sousa Correa and W.R. Owens,Second edition 2010

   P118 -121 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. *Suman Gupta :* **The place of theory in literary** [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. **The Handbook to Literary Research,** Edited by Delia da Sousa Correa and W.R. Owens,Second edition 2010

   P118 -121 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. **The Handbook to Literary Research,** Edited by Delia da Sousa Correa and W.R. Owens,Second edition 2010

   P118 -121 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. *Suman Gupta :* **The place of theory in literary** [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. *Suman Gupta :* **The place of theory in literary** [↑](#footnote-ref-11)