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A Modest Proposal for Reading: Four-Aspect Critical Taxonomy for Students¹

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Introduction

This taxonomy has been developed for students at BA or MA Level, who have frequently come across difficulty in critical reading. One reason for that might be the fact that students are to some considerable extent alienated from the reading medium in its conventional sense and unable to be authentically involved in the act of reading. Another, yet predominantly central problem, however, is that students are afraid of the critical approaches to texts. They unconsciously alienate or avoid themselves from critical reading and prefer to read for pleasure regardless of the fact that pleasure does not arouse without understanding modern texts. Even though this sounds reasonable when we consider the essential and eventual outcome of literary appreciation, it does not work well particularly with the texts produced after the modernist turn. The rise of theory and the emancipation of it from mere historical biographical approaches, the new critical schools brought about new aspects to criticism, and literary theory has revealed itself to be not only responsible for explanation but also for pleasure.

This lecture, regarding the issue of challenge and charming of literature, which for long has been highlighted as literary appreciation, is therefore about what makes critical reading of the contemporary narrative texts and how to study these texts in a systematic and informed manner.

A large number of novels are made available to readers every day, and the most popular ones, regardless of the literary merit of the texts, are charming the reader in the street. On the other hand, the popularity of a novel does not necessarily signpost the degree of its quality. In fact, we are far away from the world of *Ars Poetica*, and its motto "to teach and to delight." Particularly after

¹ The text is based on Çıraklı's Seminar/Lecture on the issue of "Critical Theory and Practice," Karadeniz Technical University, Department of Western Languages and Literature, de Saussure-Jacobson Seminar Hall, 10 October 2017, Trabzon, Turkey.

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modernist and postmodernist turns, both teaching and delighting should be considered from different perspectives in that these poles of appreciation have been reversed for the sake of art and craftsmanship rather than conveying a message or, in its classical sense, teaching a lesson to the modern or postmodern reader.

I have taught literary criticism and critical theory for years and always contemplated how I would develop some strategies to carry out a joyful reading for my students, whom I qualify as being both idle and attentive readers. The schizophrenic act of reading, due to having pleasure and keeping critical distance at a time, is the notion that characterizes reading activity in the modern times where any reader should be as knowledgeable as the author, and the author should be as detached as a reader to their own text. I often ask my students to read the text as if they were the idle reader (reading for pleasure) in the street and at the same time as if they were the historical (real) author of the text, that is, as an attentive reader (keeping critical distance).

Upon brushing up so many books and articles including examples as well as theoretical insights into critical reading, I have come up with the idea that I should offer an initial taxonomy to my students, which would ease their practical application and tidy their attentive mind concerning complicated elements of critical reading.

To my genuine experience so far, we can specify four essential aspects for critical reading, thereby enabling the readers to have an entrance into the fictional world of the texts. These are Text-History Aspect, Aspect of Repeated Patterns, Psychoanalytic Aspect and Aspect of Binary Oppositions.

Table I. Four Aspects

ÇIRAKLI'S FOUR ASPECTS			
1 st Aspect	2 nd Aspect	3 rd Aspect	4 th Aspect
TEXT-HISTORY	REPEATED PATTERNS	PSYCHOANALYSIS	BINARY OPPOSITIONS
-Historical -Biographical -Formalism -Narratology -New Criticism -Reader Response	-Structuralism -Myth Criticism -Archetypal Criticism -Genre Criticism	-Freud -Lacan (-Adler, Kristeva, etc.)	-Moral/Philosophical Readings -Marxist Readings -Deciphering of Orientalism -Postcolonial Readings -Ecocriticism -Feminist Criticism -Deconstruction -Cultural Criticism and Hybridity

I. Text-History Aspect

Particularly after modernist and postmodernist turn, the critical view of literature witnessed a remarkable, somewhat dramatic, shift in the issue of “author,” that is, historical author. The concept of historical author became a controversial issue in that the very history and the author as part of history were transformed into a fragmented and furthermore constructed entity. With the rise of reading public after the 18th century and the regulations of compulsory education in the 19th century were the steps in the same tracks along with the developments of the rise of the middle class, industrial revolution, and individualism. The thriving heritage of the reading stuff and the increasing individual consciousness, as well as scientific and philosophical revolutions at the time, were initial threats to the centrality and authority of the author as a historical, real figure.

Understanding of a text with regard to the historical author would be pointless if there is no reliable biographical data as to the real author then. On the other hand, the modern readers are to a great extent involved in the text itself rather than the questionable history of the author, and the text's autonomy gained priority in the act of reading. That is, of course, in conformity with the developments about individual consciousness after modernism. The first step in the critical reading, therefore, should be the reception of the text as an autonomous product having its own literary merits and a literary work of art produced by an author (and his intention) in a certain period of history. So, the reader should investigate the historical author, the implied author, the historical context of the work, and textual elements, such as figures of speech, paradox, unparaphrasable idiom, metaphor etc. The attentive reader should also consider the premise that the form and meaning are inseparable, that is, the form is meaning, and that a text can be read with regard to its own formal characteristics. Moreover, if the text is a narrative text, the attentive reader should also investigate the narrator, the focalizer, narrative levels, temporal and spatial arrangements. That would bring about an overview of the text and equip the attentive reader with technical tools of interpretation. Such a formalistic attempt to deal with a text would alert the attentive reader about the gaps in the text, which paves the way for readers' response to the text. Regarding the importance of the reader for critical analysis enables us to see the alternative ways of "seeing and reading" even though the attentive reader hardly ever finds out a "best" way of reading. Thus, what an attentive reader is concerned with is the validity of the act of reading; and being aware of the essential criteria for critical reading is consistency.

II. Aspect of Repeated Patterns

Cervantes, in his tour de force work *Don Quixote's* preface, discusses the expectations of the critics of a romance, which was the popular genre of the time since the readers' taste has been already determined to receive certain genres with certain repeated patterns and recurrent decorative features. As previously foregrounded by Aristotle and his followers, genres matter, and not only the author but also the addressee should train themselves as to the certain genres. Archibald MacLeish, in his well-known *Ars Poetica*, explores this issue of genre and tries to raise some insights into the nature of poetry. So, the attentive reader should consider, as suggested by Fowler and Genette, the genres, kinds, and modes of literature, which are repeated patterns and help the readers considerably with the reception, and appreciation, of the text. As an initially important tool for critical judgement, the knowledge of genres, kinds, and modes, enable the attentive reader to see the generic discrepancies and deviations, in Bakhtin's terms, as well as the commonplace and repeated characteristics of a text. Thus, the attentive reader, on the one hand, can learn about the place of the text in the "organic developmental stages" of the history of the text, you can call it tradition," and, on the other, they can learn to what extent the implied author has wrought an innovative peace.

Secondly, the pivotal influence of the myths and archetypes on literature can be traced through the texts. Considering the reproductive and rewriting function of literature, identifying such origins of stories and underlying archetypes can be very useful in that the attentive reader can enjoy the comfort of familiarity. Furthermore, these myths and archetypes resonate at the realm of social consciousness and unconsciousness respectively, which would ease the reception and appreciation of the texts as much as provoking the reader to review and question the existing stories.

Thirdly, the stories being told have certain patterns from cosmos to chaos or from disequilibrium to equilibrium, where conflict plays a critical role for the dynamic structure of any narrative. Apart from the allegorical stories, particularly conventional stories follow up these schemes of

development, simply based upon exposition-conflict-resolution structure. Regarding the system of recurrent patterns or motifs, however, the underlying structure in Fiction marks that people are still suffering from the transgenerational traumas, which does not promise any sense of resolution. The modernist turn, on the other hand, with its fragmented, anxious and mostly spatial forms, disregards mere equilibrium or resolution as such. Nevertheless, the narratives can reveal such structural elements of plotting. The case with postmodernism is a bit more sophisticated in that it parodies these structural inclinations. Either this way or that way, an attentive reader should be aware of these repeated patterns and structural impetus behind the narratives.

The source of conflict or disequilibrium in modern fiction, particularly in Modern Turkish Fiction, is the transgenerational trauma of a nation. This trauma reveals itself with two facets: Loss of the Empire and Cultural Encounter with the West. The traces of this trauma can be discerned almost in every text, which explains why it is relatively easier for familiarized foreign readers to appreciate a story than non-experienced foreigners to receive a native one. Thus, it can be argued that, say the Turkish Novel, has been governed by an essential rule: A “culture-history dependent code” determines the universal “grammar of narratives.” In fact, one has to consider and decipher the disrupted equilibrium in history and culture (or history of culture or culture of history writing) and how it has been represented in various ways. The effect of this disruption as local/national trauma can still be indicated in the texts. The recurrent pattern in the narratives signs, therefore, a lack of equilibrium, in Todorov’s sense, which seems hardly reinstated in the stories.

III. Psychoanalytic Aspect

The attentive reader can use the terminologies offered particularly by Freud and Lacan to analyse the psyche of the characters, who suffer from different types of anxiety and mental disorders. Even though the narrative symptoms that we discern in the texts are the signs of the pathological disorder, the discourse can provide us with invaluable ethnographic data as to the characters. Character is the central element in a text, whose point of view orients the text. Either as a narrator or as a narrative construct, an attentive reader should not overlook the primacy of character. If a reader is more of an interest in the character than the narrative fiction or plot, psychoanalysis can provide them with useful terminologies so that they can explore the characters.

Historically speaking, all started with the disintegration of the self, infected with the loss of integrated reality. The fragmented sense of truth, therefore, is tried to be compensated with the arts, which concerned itself with the recuperation or tolerate the loss or split of the holistic view of the external world. Traditionally accepted, and consolidated at the age of the enlightenment, the notion of self-assumed character’s integrity and the centrality of authorial discourse, particularly in the fashion of authorial cautionary remarks or interference in the free indirect style grew into a questionable conviction. Discourse in this sense was regarded as having a capability of revealing (and judging) the character regardless of their inner spatiality and anxious temporality which marks split of consciousness and fragmented reality that emerged after the modernist turn. Since there is no ultimate truth; and reality is no longer as coherent as a unified phenomenon, the agony of the disintegrated self is seen to produce a discourse of mourning for the loss of an integrated self and reality. Freud stresses the primordial influence of the unconsciousness on the developing ego struggling to fulfil a balance between the Id/subconsciousness and the Superego/society. The attentive reader should interpret the sub-narratives produced by the narrator(s) or characters and analyse to what degree the ego can mediate between subconscious drives and social impositions.

For the attentive reader, a text is like a combination of dream narratives or therapeutic narratives. From historical point of view, the text, as a projection of the author's psyche tells us about the author whereas from the textual point of view it narrates the unconscious desires, anxieties or neuroses of the characters. Therefore, the characters' unresolved feelings, inner conflicts, sense of guilt, emotional fluctuations manifested through the discourse of the text can help understand the characters' childhood traumas. Moreover, since psychoanalytic approach never concerns itself with the "intention" of the author, which reminds us of the New Critical approach, it primarily lays emphasis on the interpretation of the narrative account provided by the text. In the similar vein, Lacan's terminologies may help the attentive reader in the interpretation of the texts revealing the unconscious protracted desire caught at a constant act of whining and never satisfied with its desired objects, whose inclinations are distorted by the repressing consciousness shaped and controlled by the Law of the Symbolic order, that is language.

Desire is continuously being represented in the narrative texts. The developmental stages of the construction of Self and Other can be investigated through the narratives. For example, Lacan, who reviewed Freud's psychoanalysis, can provide us some terminologies concerning the Unconscious Desire and the developmental stages. Lacan incorporates these terminologies with structural and poststructural theories and assumes a realm of language, the Symbolic Order. The attentive reader can analyse discourses produced in the narratives from this perspective. How desire is the active agent upon the construction of "other and self" can be explored or how traumatic their separation becomes after the mirror stage can be investigated through the narratives. The imaginary wholeness of the Self and Other is distorted in the Symbolic, which can be termed as a realm of paternal language controlled and determined by the social consciousness. An attentive reader, therefore, explores to what extent and how the characters are "whining" through the repressive order and how they can find a way through poetic language, the realm of maternal language. So, literary language and psychological material have something in common in that they are both based on figural and indirect expressions. So, any symbol, for example, can be regarded as a reflection of the repressed object or concept. The terminologies such as desire, encoding, disguise, complex, displacement, anxiety, condensation, pause, silence etc. can be useful in such kind of critical reading.

IV. Aspect of Binary Oppositions

The attentive reader of the postmodernist era carries out an act of "misreading" continuously questioning its own truth value of critical approach. What lies at the heart of a critical reading after the postmodernist turn does not need to hold a postmodernist attitude but should be aware of the layers of the text, both as text and as history; as fact and fiction; as a serious attempt to make a point about the world and as a parody of the existing texts. So, to put figuratively, the ironic and neurotic reader of modernism turns out to be a parodic schizophrenic reader of postmodernism, getting on the one hand delighted with the art of the author or the power of the text with its own reality, and, on the other hand, keeping the critical distance between the text and themselves. To do this, the contemporary attentive reader is supposed to raise their consciousness as to how binary oppositions are exerted to control the constructive processes and how all these constructs are, in Paul de Man's terms, so vulnerable to remain fixed allegories. The attentive reader, therefore, does at least two things at a time: Constructing the allegories of reading—the reader is also an allegorical construct—and deconstructing these constructs. So, the attentive readers in the postmodernist era consider at a time the mutual correspondence between the sign and the signified as was presumed

by Saussure within the structuralist frame, and deals with decentering, in Derrida's terms, deciphering and deconstructing metaphysical assumptions based upon underlying binary oppositions. An attentive reader, therefore, should also start with identifying the binary oppositions that reinforce the centers at the text. The internal contradictions and somewhat arbitrarily grounded relationships prove fictional.

Hence, the structuralists propose that language (and thought) operates only at a system of signs, which generates continuously oppositions and opposing concepts. Since assigning a meaning is an act of producing an allegory, a closed sensible box of the message, or framing concepts so that they could serve certain codes, the attentive reader should investigate binary oppositions and the centres in the text, receiving and interpreting the framed message as well. So, critical reading at this stage is concerned with how certain binary oppositions are used and organized in a way that constructs a centre. Saussure regards binary oppositions as the "means by which the units of language have value or meaning; each unit is defined against what it is not." That is, signs or concepts are imbued with positive or negative qualities. The attentive reader in this age, therefore, should decode these positive or negative associations and concerns themselves with the reversal of these categories, which privileges the former one over the other: Reason/Passion, West/East, Man/Woman, Self/Other, Human/Nature, White/Black, Civilized/Savage, Inside/Outside, Presence/Absence, Knowledge/Nature State, Speech/Writing, Rational/Irrational etc. The decoding of these opposing categories and reversal of them can put forward new possibilities of reading as well as referring to ongoing misreadings characterized with *difference*, deferral and difference of a fixed meaning frame.

Upon considering the efficacy and convenience of the strategy of referring oneself primarily to the identifying binary oppositions, the attentive reader in the postmodern (and therefore postcolonial)³ era can adopt a multi-functional toolbox to analyse a text from various aspects. Surprisingly enough, a moral reading of a text can be brought together with that of Marxist reading, or decrypting orientalism can coalesce with feminist reading. The act of decoding the binaries nurtured by the narratives can provide a ground for deconstruction as well as cultural hybridity. Accordingly, the initial deciphering of the binaries in a narrative text can help reading critically at two levels: With reference to the findings already acquired at the outset of our critical reading in relation to the first aspect, Text-History, the attentive reader will be able to decide whether the text under consideration can be deconstructed in a way that reveals the biased fictional organization and literary representation, or whether the narrative text itself, particularly in the postmodernist cases, attempts to unearth already existing binaries.

Conclusion

To conclude, with so many books and articles I have got involved thus far, theoretical insights into a profound analysis of the texts have always lingered in my mind. Moreover, I have always sought to find out a useful taxonomy to my students, which would ease their practical application and

³ I do not use the terms as completely intersecting with each other.

organise their attentive (as well as idle) mind pertaining to the complicated process of critical reading.

Eventually, I have specified four essential aspects for critical reading, which I think can enable the prospective readers to take a courageous step into the analysis of fictional works. Once an attentive reader considers the elements related to the categories of Text-History Aspect, Aspect of Repeated Patterns, Psychoanalytic Aspect and Aspect of Binary Oppositions, they can easily read a narrative text form quite a few aspects.

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