Chapter II

Theory of Interpretive Communities as the Culmination of Various Presumptions of Common Reading

“What's in a book is not what an author thought he put into it, it's what the reader gets out of it.”

(William Golding, “Lord of the Flies: Author Reads Complete Text with Commentary”)

Confronting and tackling the riddle of reality was, in hindsight, one of the chief objectives of philosophical inquiries for centuries. However, just like most other riddles of life, reality has often transcended human apprehension. Great philosophers, irrespective of their allegiance to the Eastern or Western schools, have deliberated on the existence and nature of reality since the evolution of man as a rational being. The current paradigm of space and time, it seems, may not be sufficient for man, a finite being, to solve the enigma of reality and its manifold manifestation. For the practical purposes of life, he accepts what he experiences through the senses as the reality, repudiating the doubts imparted by other faculties of knowledge regarding the likelihood of errors in such a conception. However, the arrival of various theories of science from the beginning of the twentieth century has further subverted such beliefs in objective certainties. Einstein’s theory of relativity (1905) reduced the possibility of absolutist knowledge. At the same time, theories like Gestalt psychology found the human perception striving for meaningful and organized wholes from the unrelated bits and pieces of perception.
Shifting attention to the setting of language and literature, one finds how the exponents of poststructuralism like Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), Roland Barthes (1915-1980), Paul de Man (1919-1983) and Joseph Hillis Miller (1928-) objected to the belief in the traditional concept of a work as a structure of meanings to the extent of denying definite and fixed meanings. At the same time, Reader-response theorists like Wolfgang Iser (1926-2007), David Bleich (1940-), Norman Holland (1927- ) and Stanley Fish (1938- ) consider meaning as the creation of individual readers. Though the responses of the actual reader are different from what is expected from the “implied reader”, one could reach a common reading, as the readers share “interpretive strategies”, “identity themes”, “expectations” “similarities of concern” and “social and artistic conventions” even before reading a particular text. Stanley Fish was a prominent theorist among them who gave a proper form and shape to this possibility of common reading from many reader-oriented readings, anchoring his arguments on the novel idea of “interpretive communities”.

2.1 Knowing the Reality: Philosophical Backgrounds

Philosophical thoughts down the centuries have assumed different theoretical standpoints about reality and our understanding of it. However, the work-a-day life entails a faith in the senses rather than in the comprehension of the ontic nature of reality. At the same time, one has to refrain from making absolute claims regarding reality, as reality defies its comprehension as it is. Whatever be the “real” reality, one can be certain of its manifestation discerned empirically by oneself and a similar kind by others. At least one could arrive at a consensus and find the “one in many”.11
It is the universality and similarity of perception that make social life possible. This is the basis for naming a group en masse as “being,” or a “human being”. However, absolute similarity may remain an unattainable myth and could not be possible, for, as A. J. Ayer contends: “[The other] tells me that he is in pain, but may it not be that what he understands by pain is something quite different from anything that I should call by that name?” (205). Even then, the continuation of life in this world is made possible through the belief in a similarity of perception across various beings in general and human beings in particular. Jean Paul Sartre shares the same concept when he states, “people of the same period and community, who have lived through the same events, who have raised or avoided the same questions, have the same taste in their mind” (51). Obviously, these communities existed at different places and at different times with various levels and kinds of community attributes.

2.2 Subjectivism and Reality

People often take their senses for granted and believe whatever they perceive through them as true. But a closer analysis of the same perceptions proves the defective nature of such beliefs. The impressions received through the senses are not pure due to the influence of the medium of senses. It is scientifically proven that colour is nothing but the ability to reflect certain wavelengths of sunlight. The nervous system enables the perception of colours. If all human beings in the world were blind and had no indirect knowledge of colours (similar to that of ultra violet rays), one would not have even thought about colours. Even the angle from which a particular thing is seen alters the way of seeing it. It is the particular arrangement of the eyes which enables human
beings to understand depth through 3-D perception. Sound, again, is nothing but a vibration which reaches the ear through air. Taste and smell are sensations formed from chemical reactions occurring respectively at the taste buds in the tongue and the receptors in the nose.

It is the brain which ultimately deciphers these sensations. That is the reason why people feel delicious food items as tasteless when they are afflicted by fever. Dishes that are discarded due to foul smell and taste are considered delicious by animals like pigs. Even size is relative to the subject of perception. The perception of a particular object is dependent on the subject who perceives and the medium through which he/she attains this perception. Many a time, one could see theorists of reader-response themselves use this analogy while proving their theories. Norman Holland says in an interview with Wolfgang Iser: “It may seem obvious that the sky is blue, but if we explore that perception, we find a complicated refraction of many colors besides blue interacting with an equally complex arithmetic summing of energies through ‘edge-reading’ integrations by our visual cells” (Iser, Prospecting 46).

2.3 Subjectivity and Commonality in Reading a Text

In the wake of philosophers upholding a common agreement among a group of individuals with regard to reality, a situation has emerged wherein the author has no role with regard to the finished text. “Meaning” is seen as the result of an encounter between the reader and the text, an encounter in which meaning is not so much exposed as it is fashioned. The reader is no longer the recipient of meaning but rather the creator of it. This creates an infinite number of texts in proportion to the number of readers and the number of readings.
Various thinkers have explored the possibility of multiple readings by the readers, while some have sought to reconcile these differences and found a thread of common elements running through them all.

The basic assumption of various theorists regarding reader-response has an individualistic point of view implicit in it. Each reader is a separate person. Besides, a reading of the same book by the author himself at diverse times (with different interpretive strategies) results in multiple “texts”. At the same time, if the understanding of a book is absolutely different to all its readers—or even to the same person at different times—without any common ground of similarities, life would not be possible on earth. Therefore, finding a common thread in the readings by various readers has become a necessity, as in the case of the perception and comprehension of external reality. However, different theorists hold different opinions regarding these differences as well as the unity perceivable in such common readings. On closer analysis, one may find a distinction between theorists who prefer authentic individual readings and those who focus on a community of readers. However, even the staunch supporters of individualist readings find common elements across various readers and readings.

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), an exponent of philosophical hermeneutics does not find a literary work emerging into the world as a finished bundle of meaning. According to him, meaning depends on the historical position of the interpreter. He uses the concept of horizon to elucidate the incidence of comprehension. Gadamer explains this concept in *Truth and Method*:
Every finite present has its limitations. We define the concept of ‘situation’ by saying that it represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision. Hence essential to the concept of situation is the concept of ‘horizon’. The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. (301)

This horizon is not always a static one. There is always a possibility of narrowing or expanding such horizons. For Gadamer, “the horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed” (305). It is always based on past horizons. Mind is not at all a “tabula rasa” or “white paper” as John Locke claimed (Essay 51). Preconceptions or prejudices make our understanding possible in the beginning of our comprehension. “Understanding,” according to Gadamer, “is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves” (305; original emphasis). The textual comprehension occurs through projection. Gadamer explains how this projection occurs based on the expectations resulting from previous experiences:

A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting. He projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again, the initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. Working out this fore-projection, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there. (Truth and Method 269)

These expectations make the reader project certain meaning into a text while reading. At the same, it also opens up the possibilities of analogous reading,
when the readers have similar expectations. Further, in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, one could find Gadamer making an argument in favour of common understanding:

> There is always a world already interpreted, already organized in its basic relations, into which experience steps as something new, upsetting what has led our expectations and undergoing reorganization itself in the upheaval. . . . Only the support of familiar and common understanding makes possible the venture into the alien, the lifting up of something out of the alien, and thus the broadening and enrichment of our own experience of the world. (15)

Without this common understanding one cannot communicate and lead a social life. “*Hermeneutical reflection* teaches us,” says Gadamer, “that social community, with all its tensions and disruptions, ever and ever again leads back to a common area of social understanding through which it exists” (*Philosophical Hermeneutics* 42). He indirectly speaks of the presence of a community of readers in *Truth and Method* as well: “All representation is potentially representative for someone. . . . Their being is not exhausted by the fact that they present themselves; at the same time they point beyond themselves to the audience which participates by watching” (108). Thus the signification is not a solipsistic or private affair. The audience—not individually—have also a share in the to-and-fro movement between meanings.

Like Gadamer, Hans-Robert Jauss (1921-1997) also uses the term “horizon of expectations” to explain the conditions that the readers use to judge literary text in any given period of time. A person’s points of view regarding the
present always involves a connection with the past, but at the same time the past can only be comprehended through the restricted perspective of the present. The attempts at comprehending a work are based on the questions related to the cultural milieu of the reader. At the same time, the reader seeks to find out the questions, which the work itself is trying to respond to in its own dialogue with history. Since the cultural milieu is shared by various readers, a common reading is possible among them. According to Jauss, if literature needs to be understood and communicated properly, the readers should share some common information among themselves (“The Idealist” 201). He introduces the term “Lebenswelt vermittelten Erwartungen” ‘social horizon of expectations’ to find a common meeting ground across similar minded readers (“Der Leser” 328; Segers 48).

Louise Michelle Rosenblatt also finds the possibility of common reading among various readers when she says: “[G]iven a shared cultural milieu and shared criteria of validity of interpretation, we can, without claiming to have the single ‘correct’ meaning, agree on an interpretation” (“Writing and Reading” 8). The “self-awareness on the part of the readers,” says Rosenblatt, “foster[s] communication across social, cultural, and historical differences between reader and author, and among readers” (“Writing and Reading” 9). This communication further reinforces the possibilities of finding similarities across readings by various individuals.

Jonathan Culler, an exponent of structuralist theories, considers the interpretation of works as an encounter where various conventions and expectations determine the course of reading. He finds certain “conventions” that enable the readers to make sense of the works which they read (Literary Theory
Culler considers the act of interpreting as a social practice. Critical arguments are based on “shared notions” of what is acceptable or not (Structuralist Poetics 145). If one needs literary evolution, it can be acquired only by a displacing of “old conventions of reading,” with new ones (151). The interpretation of something is achieved by subjecting it to “the modes of order which culture makes available” (161). This order must be common to the members of a particular cultural family, and causes a common reading amidst those members.

David Bleich found the readers of the same text experiencing similar “sensorimotor” sensations. There is an agreement among readers even regarding “the nominal meaning of the words” (“Subjective Character” 753). He considers social viability as the touchstone of truth in critical interpretation. Bleich reiterates this idea in Subjective Criticism, when he asserts the impossibility of interpretation in “isolation from a community” (296). Though there are minute differences among different individuals at different times, one can find commonality which overrides such differences on a broader outlook. One also participates in diverse communities that overlap indefinitely. This presence in different communities at the same time results in intersubjective reading. Therefore “individual readings take place in the family, the classroom, [and during] the academic meeting” (Bleich, “Intersubjective Reading” 418). Though, this working of the community takes place subliminally, the effects of the same in reading are recognised as similarities within the commune.
2.3.1 Stanley Fish and the Theory of Interpretive Communities

The theories of common reading get shape and are its culmination with the theories of Stanley Fish, an American literary critic of the twentieth century. According to Fish, “perception (and reading is an instance of perception) always occurs within a set of assumptions that preconstrain what could possibly be perceived” (“Why No One’s Afraid of Wolfgang Iser” 11). Fish does not find any subjective elements in reading as advocated by other theorists of reader-response. The observer, according to him, is a social construct rather than being an individual having unique features. Whatever one understands is due to the presence of being a member in the particular community of interpretation. Therefore, the “blanks” or “gaps” which a text puts forward before a reader cannot be filled as per his/her preferences.

Fish denies the text’s independence as a repository of meaning. Similar to other theorists of reader-response, he too does not find meaning in the text. Even though a text is written by the author, it could be considered a tabula rasa, a blank slate which becomes an actual “text” only upon someone reading it. This difference between text in printed or other forms and the text produced through actual reading by readers is the central concern for Fish. Fish explicates this tricky situation with an anecdote in the beginning of his essay, “Is There a Text in This Class?”:

On the first day of the new semester, a colleague at Johns Hopkins University was approached by a student who, as it turned out, had just taken a course from me. She put to him what I think you would agree is a perfectly straightforward question: ‘Is there a text in this class?’
Responding with a confidence so perfect that he was unaware of it (although in telling the story, he refers to this moment as ‘walking into the trap’), my colleague said, ‘Yes; it's the Norton Anthology of Literature,’ whereupon the trap (set not by the student but by the infinite capacity of language for being appropriated) was sprung: ‘No, no,’ she said, ‘I mean in this class do we believe in poems and things, or is it just us?’ (Is There a Text 305)

The ambiguity was purposefully created by the student to test her teacher. Being a student of Fish, she knew the subtle difference in the connotations of “text”. Though, the teacher who reported the incident to Fish certainly knew those implications, he did not share the same strategies and assumptions with the student at that moment. Therefore, the reader must have a reservoir of information and should be capable of using that knowledge at the appropriate time.

Fish uses the term “informed reader” to designate the reader, in consonance with other theorists of reader-response. In the essay “Literature in the Reader,” Fish defines his “informed reader” as one having the following qualities: “The informed reader is someone who (1) is a competent speaker of the language out of which the text is built up; (2) is in full possession of ‘the semantic knowledge that a mature . . . listener brings to his task of comprehension,’ . . . ; and (3) has literary competence” (145). This is an echo—but with lesser resonance—of what Derrida says in the afterword to Limited Inc (1988), giving examples of Rousseau and his Essay “On the Origin of Languages”: 
To evaluate the two sides and to get one’s bearings, one must be armed, one must understand and write, even translate French as well as possible, know the corpus of Rousseau as well as possible, including *all the contexts that determine it* (the literary, philosophical, rhetorical traditions, the history of the French language, society, history, which is to say, so many other things as well). (Derrida, *Limited Inc* 144; emphasis added)

Therefore, to read and understand, one must be competent enough to know everything related to the context of something written or read.

The ideas sought to be propagated by Fish is in contrast with what William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley have said in *The Verbal Icon*: “The Affective Fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its results (what it *is* and what it *does*). . . . It begins by trying to derive the standards of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism. The outcome . . . is that the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear” (21). Wimsatt and Beardsley demanded more objectivity from the text. According to him, the belief in the emotional effects created by the literary text belittles the literary work. Fish answers this by saying that the “objectivity of the text is an illusion, and moreover, a dangerous illusion, because it is so physically convincing . . . . A line of print is so obviously there . . . that it seems to be the sole repository of whatever value and meaning we associate with it” ("Literature in the Reader" 140). To Fish, the poem can’t vanish because it was never actually there in the first place except as an indication of the interpretive strategy used to comprehend it.
Stanley Fish points out that it is not the reader’s personality but the reader’s interpretive strategies which make the text, otherwise powerless. In “Interpreting the Variorum,” Fish says: “formalist analyses—analyses generated by the assumption that meaning is embedded in the artifact—will always point in as many directions as there are interpreters; that is, not only will it prove something, it will prove anything” (467). Therefore, the possible meanings created from a text are directly proportionate to the number of interpreters at different times. It offers multiplicity of interpretations rather than adhering to precise meanings.

Interpretation is not a two-stage process of finding a “context-independent semantic meaning” and then choosing a context. For Fish, “it is within some or other context—of assumptions, concerns, priorities, expectations—that what an interpreter sees as the ‘semantic meaning’ emerges” (“Consequences” 445-46). One cannot attribute pure objectivity to the text. Meaning is always acquired through a background or context. In his essay, “Still Wrong after All These Years” (1987), Fish reiterates this concept: “Meanings only become perspicuous against a background of interpretive assumptions in the absence of which reading and understanding would be impossible” (403). Therefore, emphasis is on the background—the presence of interpretive assumptions—rather than the “objective” text-out-there.

Here, a problem confronts Fish. Each individual has his/her own assumptions and one cannot make clear-cut demarcations regarding these assumptions. Fish disentangles this problem by agreeing to Gerald Graff’s
criticism regarding the possibility of overlapping of assumptions and interpretive strategies within communities. Fish explains:

No interpretive community exists in a hermetically sealed or monolithic state; the activities of any interpretive community are legitimized not only by the interests and goals it explicitly proclaims, but by the more general interests of the larger society, interests that provide a rationale when the activities of the community are interrogated by those who are not members of it. (“Resistance and Independence” 126)

Furthermore, Fish suggests the presence of subcommunities and continuous redrawing of boundaries within these communities (Is There a Text 343). Therefore, there is constant overlapping among different communities resulting in fluidity and instability within them.

Fish’s major concerns are the two questions arising from his theory: 1) Why does the same reader interpret “different” texts in different ways? and 2) Why do different readers interpret the “same” text in a similar way? (“Interpreting the Variorum” 481). Here, Fish says that it is the very status of the words in quotation marks, “different” and “same,” that is being problematized. By “different,” he does not mean different works, but the different texts created by the same reader due to the presence of different backgrounds. Similarly, by “same,” he does not merely mean the same work, but the same interpretation achieved by different readers with similar backgrounds.

Fish speaks of different readers employing different “set of interpretive strategies” upon the same literary text in the production of different “texts”. Thus different interpretations are the creation of the reader and not of the author. A
reader who employs “interpretive strategies similar to mine [on the same poem] will perform the same (or at least a similar) succession of interpretive acts” and produce similar results. (“Interpreting the Variorum” 482). If another person reads the same text differently, that is due to the application of a “different set of interpretive strategies”. Thus, Fish concludes that the “notions of the ‘same’ or ‘different’ texts are fictions” (482).

According to Fish, if two judges reach different decisions about the same case, such difference is not because they have diverse theories of interpretation, but due to the presence of “different sets of priorities or concerns” among them (“Consequences” 446). It is the presence of different interpretive strategies that creates difference in the verdict, not anything else. The verdict varies according to the change of previous experiences among the judges, which, in fact, sets different background to them, giving them potential difference in approaches and later resulting in different verdicts.

This possibility of a common reading is further expatiated on by Stanley Fish, who maintains that it is the readers who “write” the “text”. In this sense, there are innumerable “texts” as readings. (Even the “texts” created by readings of a particular reader at different times are varied insofar as the interpretive strategies differ.) Similarly, the sharing of interpretive strategies by the readers belonging to a community of readers leads to a universal reading. He also thinks that these “strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read”. If a particular community has “a variety of texts,” it is due to the presence of “a repertoire of strategies” in that community (“Interpreting the Variorum” 483). Similarly, if one community “believes in the
existence of only one text,” that means that their members employ only “single strategy” for “writing it” (484).

Fish says that the only possibility for one to become aware of one’s presence in a particular community is “fellowship, the nod of recognition from someone in the same community” (485). David Bleich explains Stanley Fish’s concept of community thus:

[A] community is founded on similarities of concern, where agreement is not always necessary except on what is of common interest. If this is not obvious, it is always negotiated until it is; if the negotiation is unsuccessful, the community dissolves. Conversely, the sheer continuance of the community means that negotiations have thus far been successful. In any case, the simple “knowing” that one is in a community on the part of two or more people defines that community.

(“Epistemological Assumptions” 152)

Therefore, the feeling of belonging to a community is not totally abstruse. The agreement regarding interpretation is the touchstone that helps the reader locate themselves as being part of a particular community.

Thus the act of recognizing literature is not constrained by something in the text, nor does it issue from an independent and arbitrary will; rather, it proceeds from a collective decision as to what will count as literature, a decision that will be in force only so long as a community of readers or believers continues to abide by it. To claim that each reader essentially participates in the making of a poem or novel is not an invitation to unchecked subjectivity and to the endless proliferation of competing interpretations. For, each reader
approaches a literary work not as an isolated individual but as part of a community of readers. “Indeed,” Fish asserts, “it is interpretive communities, rather than either the text or reader, that produce meanings” (Is there a Text 14).

2.4 Author’s Place in Interpretive Communities

Even though the reader-response theories have their thrust on the reader, there has to be a place set apart for the author also. The author may have certain strategies which he consciously employs in his work so as to be invoked later by certain readers. He cannot be considered an alien who does not know anything about what the reader possesses as background information. Of course, the readers may not share all the strategies of the author and vice versa. They may even find new meanings which the author has not intended at all. However, the place of the author cannot be dismissed altogether.

The theorists who practise and advocate reader-response are not altogether silent on this. Even while speaking highly of the reader’s contribution in the production of the reading of a text, Roman Ingarden and Wolfgang Iser lay stress on the centrality of the text and the author—Ingarden does not deny the possibility of considering a literary work of art as “author’s or his contemporaries’ relation to the world” ( Literary Work of Art 281), and Iser considers every text as representing “a perspective view of the world put together by . . . the author” (The Act of Reading 35). David Bleich shows his conformance with this approach, when he categorically asserts, “If you don’t like the author as a person, you can’t like the novel” (Readings and Feelings 92).

Rosenblatt regards the writing process as more transactional influenced as he/she is by the cultural ambience outside. Simultaneously, she regards the writer
as the “first reader of the text” (*Transactional Theory* 940). Even the sharing of
the same time period with analogous scholastic, legal, literary, scientific, athletic,
or theological groups, affects the communication process (942).

Stanley Fish wants the name of the author included in an article of his/her
authorship. Once *PMLA*, the official journal of the Modern Language
Association of America (MLA), promoted hidden authorship to insulate the
reader from extraneous influences. Fish, on the other hand, argued against this
stance, emphasizing the inseparable nature of the author’s background while
assessing what he or she produces (“Guest Column: No Bias, No Merit” 741).
The extraneous elements such as “rank, professional status, previous
achievement, ideology, and so on” are essential while judging the intrinsic worth
of a piece of art (744). The previous efforts of the author are inherent in his/her
very name. Therefore, one cannot deracinate the author altogether from the
scene.

Mary Louise Pratt strongly criticises the relegation of the author in the
production of a literary work. While considering a text as a product as well as a
raw material for interpretation, Pratt argues: “To say that a text can be made to
mean anything by readers does not require one to deny the text's existence as a
historically determined product” (“Interpretive Strategies” 205). One has to
admit that even the text has its own power to induce certain interpretive
strategies due to the particular mode of creation. Pratt is not reluctant to relate the
author with similar environments, which the reader is in possession of, according
to the theorists of reader-response. She finds the presence of “an implied author .
. . in all speech acts” (“Ideology” 64). She contends, “Just as the subject who
reads a text must be seen not as an autonomous, self-consistent, essential self but
as constituted by its social reality, so must the same be said for the subject who
produces a literary text” (“Interpretive Strategies” 205-206). It means that the
author has also certain strategies, cultural assumptions, etc. which he could
possibly share with readers. An author can also be a social construct. If readers
are writing texts, the author can at least be a person who brings on a number of
strategies.

Thus, the theorists of reader-response, with all the differences in their
approach to this theory, admit the presence of a common reading among the
multiplicity of readings by different individuals. If there is any conformity
among the readings of a particular text by different people, it is a proof for the
existence of an interpretive community among them. Such communities have
been there all through history. However, these communities have not been of a
fixed pattern. As expounded by Fish, the presence of sub communities and
frequent redrawing of their boundaries hold back these communities from
acquiring a permanent shape (Is There a Text 343).

While Mary Louise Pratt and Edward Said dwell upon the beginnings of
colonialism in the eighteenth century, one cannot but be convinced that an event
of such magnitude would not have originated on its own. One could certainly
think of the presence of an interpretive community—or communities having
similar strategies—as the reason for the origin and continuance of colonialism. A
major contribution to the formation of such interpretive communities during the
seventeenth century and the following periods was the large number of travels
undertaken by people bitten by the sailing bug and the accounts written thereof.
At the same time, they were not the only causes for the emergence of such communities, as many of these travelogues provided narrations of hardships as a potential deterrent against colonisation. The third chapter seeks to analyse certain select travelogues and related works that represent a cross section of seventeenth century European travelogues that explicitly promoted further travels.