

# Towards an Epistemology of Reading: Defining the Process of Reading in Modern Terms

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## Abstract

The chaotic space caused by information explosion in present times has made the process and purpose of reading to be always questioned. Technological advancement has made reading appear as a mere mockery at the very outset. But the world still prioritizes knowledge that is acquired through observation, valuation and interpretation. At the time of Big Data, there still persists a sense of agency to define a given information as episteme. The present essay emphasizes on looking at reading as a modern phenomenon by presupposing the epistemological presence at the centre of any rational pursuit. Based on the Kantian precepts on enlightenment, the paper attempts to understand this presence of knowledge by delving into the major disciplines of modern philosophy that help in observing, valuing and interpreting the act of reading in present times. More than laying terms for defining the text within the modern space, the study essentializes reading in a virtually driven algorithmic world.

**Keywords:** Modernism, Enlightenment, Reading, Epistemology, Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, Ontology.

Reading has developed as a process that doesn't confine itself within the paradigms of a written text in the growing visual culture world. In this dynamic environment, where every form of production appears to be a part of massive explosion of information, reading has been challenged in myriad ways. Reading gets translated within the perceptual constraints of various ideations while identified primarily as an individual act. At this juncture, when the reader remains as a dubious entity with his/her existence being questioned in a modern space, reading ascertains itself within the realm of episteme.

Reading has been a method in progress, even in non-linguistic forms, since early periods of human socialization. Primitive man used sign languages which required necessary skills to read. Behaviourists advocate of reading as a pivotal act in the cognitive process of learning. Children learn through imitation of what they have observed. Thus, reading becomes part of human life at a primary level. The advent of technology further allowed reading to become institutionalized. The art of writing and the right to read scriptures were limited within the scholarly during the ancient times in great civilizations that existed. But the modern turn of events redefined the terms

of reading. The invention of the printing press and the publication of *King James Bible* introduced a new criterion in the reading process. It can be seen that the timely transitions in various forms of art advised of a reading, which is carried out through certain approaches that evolved during the changing times.

During the initial advent of modernism, the liberal humanist understanding in criticism helped reading to acquire an individual identity rather than an institutional one. It combined the philosophical strand of enlightenment with the romantic understanding of totality and the subject-object unity. The dialectics in the dual role of reason, as defined by Immanuel Kant based on its "private" and "public use", set forth the space for a unity between sensibility and understanding in the way of knowledge. This unity in progress affirms a uniqueness to the event of enlightenment by providing an identity of its own. Reading endorses the graduality of classical reasoning and the abruptness of enlightenment. The text can be conveniently observed as a machine which comes alive through this human activity. The public use and the private use of reason involved in the reading process keeps the doors open for understanding the text as a source of enlightenment. This modern twist observed in the textual presence makes the process of reading to be identified as epistemological.

### **The Epistemological Presence and Modern Textuality**

The presence of the modern is ideated by many great thinkers as a disruption from the classical thought on epistemological grounds. Though it surfaced as a rupture, its purpose was clear in the distinct observation, valuation and interpretation of established structures. During ancient times, institutions never emphasized on any of the three approaches in reading, but systematically used them for the dissemination of knowledge as per their discretion. The very idea of God was mostly interpreted by a priest or a scholar for public use, but not observed or evaluated using reason, since such a step would have probably deterred the very existence of classical philosophy. It is enlightenment with its insistence on a dialectical harmony and romantic unity that helped people to read texts with due regard to its episteme.

After the advent of reason in the pretext of enlightenment, the cumulative approach of observation, evaluation and interpretation can be seen involved in reading. Though literary theory was in practice as a literary exercise since the time of Plato to explain, criticize and interpret a text, this newer approach in reading made a profound effect on the production and consumption of literature. Reading at this juncture evolves as a process which is pivotal in understanding reality itself. Reality being an important factor in modern philosophy, the reading of it necessitated intense study in major disciplines, namely; phenomenology, ontology and hermeneutics. These disciplines, with their intrinsic associations with each other helps to define reading as a modern phenomenon. It is necessary to comprehend the reading process as placed within these disciplines to understand the cumulative approach in reading.

## I

**Reading as Historical, Reading as Phenomena**

Reading is a social event where two entities come into a communion to form a new being, i.e., the reader. The entities involved are the individual and the text. Taking Heidegger's notion of being, the individual is such an entity who 'becomes-the-Being' during this association with the text. Here, the reader, like 'Being', is an arbitrary presence whose existence can only be observed, and that too during the reading process. Georges Poulet, in his essay "The Phenomenology of Reading" (1969), suggests the subjective approach towards the understanding of text. It adheres to the experience of reading through observation, where the senses come into play. Poulet says:

"The work lives its own life within me; in a certain sense, it thinks itself, and it even gives itself a meaning within me." (Poulet, 1969, p.59)

In fact, while reading, the reader takes up from what the writer has left. The impersonal nature, which T S Eliot talks about, in poetic creation provides scope for the manifestation of a new entity in the form of a reader. In other words, a new "I" is formed who is not the writer, but is not the individual (who reads) either.

In phenomenology, reading qualifies as observation which rather questions interpretative approach on reading by problematizing the identity of the individual. The dialectical existence of the reader within the individual suggests a historical presence. Hegel's dialectics (2015) propounds this historicity following Kant's account on the dual purpose of reason. The individual struggles within his self to carve a new entity (reader) that has nothing to do with any of the factors outside the text. In Kant's ideation of the scholar as someone who judiciously use reason publicly and privately, we find again an individual who is involved in knowledge acquisition while observing the reality around him. Thus, the reader, like the scholar, can be identified as Being in the Heideggerian sense who evolve during the process of reading.

Marxism, a movement highly influenced by Hegelian Dialectics, defines reality in a similar sense. Society is observed in Marxist terms based on production. Here, the proletariat 'becomes' a reader and his reading of reality on grounds of production makes space for 'class consciousness'. There is no essential difference between the reader and the proletariat, but one becomes the other during the act of reading reality. Georg Lukacs has elaborated on the observation skill of the proletariat in his work *History and class consciousness*; "The historical knowledge of the proletariat begins with knowledge of the present, with the self-knowledge of its own social situation and with elucidation of its necessity (i.e., its genesis)." (Lukacs, p.159) So, the proletariat's act becomes an epistemological endeavour where he observes his own becoming. Though other modern movements like structuralism and psychoanalysis make use of observation, it is in Marxism that we find a reader who is deeply involved in the reading of society, where it (society) stands for the text.

In contemporary theory, readers-response facilitated the textual environment to construct an implied historical structure. Even though it inculcates the essence of modernism at least in the form of the text, the major risk is that this derived textual space conforms the identity of the reader instead of the text, which makes it further problematic. Any given text, may it be of the ancient or the present, has been subjected to this kind of 'implied' approach during the reading process. The

reader is in dire straits with the reality of the text on one hand and his own reality on the other. Therefore, it can be concluded with regard to phenomenological reading or the observative approach in reading that the historical insistence of the authorial presence or of any other agency conforms the reader to the meaningful narrative duly observed by him in the text.

## II

### Ontology of a Written Text

While reading, the reader moves from the status of an observer to that of one being observed. It is a 'caught-in-the -act' scenario, probably seen at the event of Freudian Counter transference. Though it appears complex, it is part of the evolutionary process of the reader where his complete suspension from the text is deemed inevitable.

Jacques Derrida in his works, *Of Grammatology* and *Speech and Phenomena*, explains how writing, instead of being mistaken as supplementary to speech, should be taken as a sign on its own that represent an action and not mere reproduction of sound forms. Structuralism was able to assess this uniqueness of the written text to an extent by giving emphasis to the relations we find within it. Structuralist analysis is based on the dialectic relation between the diachronic and synchronic elements of the text. But for Derrida, the evolution of reading as a phenomenon is restricted by those texts that exist without an intrinsic history.

Ontology and structurality deal with similar factors but differ in the weightage given to historicity. The diachronic features in structurality inculcate historical narrativization as inevitable in defining the structure. Derrida elaborates on this aspect in his *Writing and Différance*:

"It [history] emerges from itself in order to take hold of itself within itself, in the 'living present' of its self-presence. In emerging from itself, hearing oneself speak constitutes itself as the history of reason through the detour of writing." (Derrida, p.208)

But, the space of *différance* allows an ontological evaluation by prioritizing supplementarity within the text. This approach helps us to weigh the textual content in actual terms devoid of any historicity. The text allows the reader to locate a narrative outside its own space. Thus, the ghost of phenomenology present in the form of intrinsic history is temporarily suspended as part of an evaluative process. Here, the text evolves as a 'thing-in-itself'. This ontology, unlike history, creates scope for the episteme to develop during the reading process. It occurs mainly by hinting at the presence of power and the sense of agency offered by the reader (phenomenological) in the textual discourse.

During the course of reading, it is the reader who stand as the agent, which nullifies the presence of any other power provided by history. An evaluation of text as a thing-in-itself by the newly evolved entity, i.e., the reader, as part of the individual's observation of the written text helps to identify the narrative in this discourse. The reader as quasi-agent is available only within the premises of reading, and is helpful in constructing a text for himself which is not historical but ontological. Meanwhile, he (the reader) also essentializes the power that he enjoys over the text. The powered narrative thus deconstructed by the ontological approach helps to evaluate the text as a thing-in-itself. It is this evaluative strategy which affirms a knowledgeable presence within the

text. Or in other sense, the text gets elevated to the status of the Thing, or the Text, in the hands of Being (i.e., the reader). It is a linguistic affirmation which happens only at the presence of the quasi-agent.

To Lévi-Strauss, the Text is the myth in action. The myth has its identity only when it is told; similar as in the case of the Text which needs to be read. The recent discussion on religious scriptures is a best example for understanding the dynamics of the Text. Religion, in one sense represent the 'interpretive communities'. According to the definition given by Stanley Fish, the phrase stands for cultural assumptions that restrict the movement of meaning within the existing social space. Similarly, in religions, the meaning and thereby the identity of the text (Holy scriptures) is recognized by the agent that is the reader or follower. The factions within religions; like, Catholicism and Protestantism, Shia and Sunni, Vedic and the Vedantic etc., assign certain merits to the scriptures within their agential capacity. It is this recognition which make them sacrosanct or Holy.

### III

#### **Hermeneutics of Reading: The Modern and The Readerly-Writerly Origins.**

Any human intervention starts with the basic sense of comprehending anything based on its relation with the individual. This exist in the very binary of what is 'mine' and 'not mine'. The consistent suspension of narratives for the sake of understanding it, makes the whole process highly impersonal. It is at this juncture that the individual attempts to reassociate with the text by interpreting it, or rather, by being interpreted by it. Reason, and that of the individual, appear as a determining factor in this epistemological pursuit. But it is an external factor which is not essentially found within a textual space; it helps in the evolution of the reader and in the recognition of the Text. Therefore, reason is a result of the knowledge that the individual has acquired through earlier experiences of his as a reader.

The reassociation with the being (individual) is an inevitable consequence of reading. The individual becomes the Being (reader) at the very outset of the reading act and the text becomes the Thing (Text) through an ontological evolution where the objective existence of the text is emphasized. Now, the Text takes the turn to reconnect with the individual to make the whole process meaningful. Reading invokes dialectics again, as it happened at the beginning. During that initial phase, it was observation by the individual which resulted in the becoming (dialectical) process of the reader. Dialectics further led to an ontological discourse in the next stage where the text was subjected to evaluation by the reader (that paved way for the formation of Text while reading). But it is not the objectified presence of the Text as 'thing-in-itself', rather it is the epistemic urge to be in acquaintance with the living-working-reality which make it a meaningful presence to the individual who is involved in reading. For that, the Text has to recognize the individual, and not the reader, since the reader exist only during the reading process.

At present, when there is a sheer multitude of texts awaiting to be read, the recognition of the individual by the Text seems a rarity. According to Roland Barthes, the textual experience is a result of cultural understanding. Barthes' *Mythologies* is a comprehensive work on this subject, where he tries to identify the texts of the present as contemporary myths. His work presents an

ontological study on social values and beliefs of his times based on structural analysis. Apparently, Claude Lévi-Strauss's notion of "bricolage" (1966, p.219) validates the existence of myth in the subjective space of culture. It constructs a narratorial history which merely observes the said space, as it happens in structuralism. Lévi-Strauss was critiqued most often for this ontologizing of the text or myth, where the role of the individual/reader is either reduced to that of an outsider, or that of a social scientist who validates his arguments based on experiments. He undermined the fact that the individual is also part of the reading process, though he exists outside the text.

The Text interacts with the individual as part of a hermeneutical intervention where the linguistic presence between them gets recognized as the Word. It is this sign, that evolve from the Text, that recognizes the individual within the textual space. The Biblical response to hermeneutics justifies this interpretative approach of the sign or the Word, where the individual uses the Holy text to define or interpret his own self. At this juncture the text is in conversation with the individual and not the reader. The Text and its sanctity cease to exist in the overwhelming presence of religiosity. Like such Holy scriptures, any given text gets recognised only when the individual associates with his own self during the reading process. There is a persistent need of inherent morality emerging with the presence of the individual.

The discussion on morality on a hermeneutical standpoint with the individual as subject invites a psychoanalytical interference. Jacques Lacan deliberated on the Ten Commandments in his lecture series on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* using this line of interpretation. His approach establishes the presence of morality with the acceptance of the Word by the individual. Lacan uses the Oedipal structure to demonstrate the triangular relation between the reader-Text-individual. Here, the Text or the commandments are made sacrosanct by the Father figure. But the Father's origin is a textual phenomenon, just like the appearance of the reader during the reading process. Thus, the historicity which the reader conforms to, also helps to reflect the moral space which defines the Father in the context of Holy scriptures.

Further, the objectification of the motherly figure as the Thing makes more sense in the ontological representation of the text. The Text acquires a motherly status as it gets recognized by the paternal agency during the evaluation of the text. The Text, thus evolved, interprets and recognizes the individual, that is the son. Lacan, in his lecture, looks into this hermeneutical interpretation which the individual involves in while reading texts, especially in a sacred environment. For instance, in one such analysis, the love towards the neighbour in the commandment 'loving-thy-neighbour-as-thyself', suggests the love of neighbour's *jouissance* which represents evil in Judeo-Christian tradition. (Lacan, p.186) Lacan says, "The resistance to the commandment 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself' and the resistance that is exercised to prevent his access to *jouissance* are one and the same thing." (Lacan, p.194) The statement evolves as the Word (or the Commandment), only when the individual with his outer reality engages with the textuality within this narrative. It is only in this dialectical conjecture, which occur with each of these statutes that morality finally lays its base.

Barthes also validates this hermeneutical presence while placing the individual at the centre. It is the written construct which the religions also emphasize on. But the written word is not free from the conditions that are responsible for its production, which Barthes terms as the "gaze" that conveys an "intention which is no longer linguistic" (Barthes, 1968, p.20). In other words, it triggers

a perception that comes from within the Text. This "gaze" acts as "coercion" through language. It acts as "passion" of language in the case of literary writing or as "threat" in the case of political ones. The Text makes the individual to semiotically analyse the meaning from within and find a signifier from outside. This signifier comprises of the individual's experiences in the tangible world. The signification process finally ends up in defining the Word itself. Lacan states that, ". . . the creationist perspective is the only one that allows one to glimpse the possibility of the radical elimination of God," (Lacan, p.213). Here, the Son's 'perspective' that led to the elimination or 'death' of God (Father) is transgressive in nature. The individual also transgresses into the environment populated by the reader, with his burden of experiences, and replaces him in the act. It is in this void created by the sudden absence of the reader, where the Word originates from the Text. This can be defined as the moment of enlightenment, since the individual do experience knowledge at this point.

During the reading process, Barthes observes this Word formation as an emergence of "infra or ultra-language". But it always finds an alibi in language in the form of "glorification or intimidation" depending on the nature of the power by which the Text controls the individual. According to Barthes, the purest type of writing exerts a power or conflict on the individual (Barthes, 1968, p.20). In other words, the subjective elements that ensure the closedness in writing is unveiled as we dissect the closure through reading. Barthes identifies these elements as codes. In the Derridean sense, these elements cater to a supplementarity which never goes beyond the prospects of history. The historicity ensures closedness to provide flesh for a phenomenal existence. But a hermeneutical intervention, through codes, as done by Barthes deconstructs the whole narrative and the process of reading. It essentializes a greater good than history in the form of episteme.

Hermeneutics finds a middle space between textuality and text at this stage through interpretation to problematize the whole signifying process and, moreover, to establish morality as part of episteme. Interpretation is a natural culmination that follows observation (phenomenology) and valuation (ontology) in the epistemological process. And as reading reaffirms the presence of all three approaches towards episteme at the event of enlightenment, it also allows us to comprehend the whole process of reading as a modern phenomenon.

### **The Modern Phenomenon of Reading and the Existence of a Deferred Agent**

The purpose of this paper is not to redefine reading through modernism, but to figure out how reading as a modern phenomenon retain the textuality in contemporary times. Reading as episteme, make it the most valuable and accessible tool for humans to assure themselves of a meaningful existence. All the approaches discussed in the present study focus on the movement of agency from the reader, to the text and then to the individual. In the final hermeneutical turn, the reading process reaches its full circle by vesting the textual response on the individual. The text evolves as the episteme; out of the socius with the emergence of the reader, acquiring an identity of its own as a Text, and eventually harmonizing with reality while reassociating with the individual.

Modern in one sense, is a confluence of all the three approaches that went against the received understanding of the epistemological presence during ancient times. Text embodies episteme only when we treat it as modern. In classicism, it was an interpretation that imposed a meaning that never allowed individual understanding through reasoning. Classical approach evolved as reading in the presence of a historical agency. The modern too relied on an agency, but insisted on its origins within the text. In the post-modern space, we encounter an utter disregard for the agency which finally ends up in questioning the text and the reading process. The post-truth world has provided man with resources that are good enough to exaggerate the disillusionment he is caught up with. And, what it did with reading is to suspend man from the textual agency.

Reading provides the textual environment for constructing episteme, but the multiple significations that we find nowadays, make it non-historical as well as non-ontological. Barthes observed the ex-nominated presence of the bourgeois well evident in this development. The bourgeois spreads its wings into all realms of knowledge by losing its name without any risk (Barthes, 1972, p.138). This deferred historicity, as agency, plays a pivotal role in determining the textuality at present. For instance, we come across 'corporate dominance' or 'Americanisation' as common terms that signify actions which resemble that of imperial forces at the time of colonization. During those stages in history, the presence of an agency in the form of colonizer provided a narrative to the acts of oppression and exploitation. The modern movements like Marxism and Feminism gained universal acceptance because the reading that was involved in comprehending the reality was able to identify the agency, may it be the capitalist or the colonizer or the male. But at present, the narratives still exist while the presence of the so-called agency remain non-essentialized.

Further, the moment of the 'spectacular' in the post-modern world allows the medium to stand on its own even if there is no meaning. Marshall McLuhan's observation of 'medium as the message' (1964) echoes this very idea of spectacle. Most of the time the spectacle lures us towards its episteme, but in the course, it shifts sides and question our own intent to find the meaning in nothingness. The ex-nominated capitalist becomes this deferred agent who always emphasize on the present which doesn't even have an episteme. Perhaps, it is this 'non' epistemological presence that would define the post-truth times. There will be more scientific historiographies emerging in near future to explain this absence of knowledge. But in whatever course that man undertakes in future to comprehend this absence, reading will remain as a necessary tool.

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