

Toyin Adeyemi

Meaning and Interpretation Reader-Response Criticism “Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers”

In the essay “Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers,” literary theorist Walter Gibson makes a thoughtful distinction between two figures he calls the “real” and “mock” readers. The “real reader” to Gibson’s mind is an “individual whose personality is as complex and ultimately as irrepressible as any dead poet’s” (2), whereas the “mock reader” is a fictitious reader, an artifact “whose mask and costume the individual takes on in order to experience the language” (2).

Gibson concerns himself in this essay with clarifying the relationship between the mock reader and the text. But he also gives some thought to some basic differences between the “real” and “mock” reader—the ways in which their approaches to reading lead them to engage differently with the text. The relationship between the mock reader and the “speaker” [narrator] according to Gibson, is characterized by a heightened level of engagement with the textual language. A mock reader does not merely read to get a sense of the message the text might convey— passively, in other words. Rather, a mock reader submits himself to the speaker’s language, so as to be transformed, moved, and whisked off to an alternative imaginary space as he reads. In order to achieve this level of intimacy with the speaker, the mock reader lowers his defenses, makes himself amenable to the differences of the speaker’s language, and even changes his “real” character to a “mock” character that is more closely related to the speaker’s target reading audience.

As Gibson explains, the mock-reader often reads for the subtext. He reads as much for what the textual language says as for what it implies. That is because the speaker’s tone and humor, among other mechanics of style and technique—are cues with which the

mock reader must connect in order to judge which costume fits him better as a reader. Gibson devotes some passages on pages 2 and 3 to translating literary passages for their subtexts, the way he claims mock readers are intended to read them. In short, the mock reader “plays” along with the fictive worlds of the speaker he reads. We might characterize the relationship between the mock reader and the real reader, once one finds a speaker with whom one is willing to “play along,” as a struggle between a kind of id and ego—in psychoanalytic terms. The mock reader frees himself to the language of the text, while the “real” reader meets the text with higher degrees of skepticism. Gibson does in fact acknowledge that the meanings of literature differ according to the reader. In his examples, he refers to the “real” and “mock” reader. The objects of literary study are always either the objective text or the speaker’s subtext: the latter object of literary study is the more engaged and possibly intimate experience.

Gibson’s response to the question of readers’ apathy toward others’ subjective responses to literature is as follows: the mock reader realizes the critics’ (for example) response to a text is a gimmick. The critic means to promote his or her view as compelling and worthy of attention, and possibly, even admiration. The critic’s strongest tool as a promoter of his/her own subjective response is seduction by way of language. As Gibson notes on page 1, the mock reader either falls for the language or reverts to his status as a “real” reader. Or, he simply puts the book aside. “We assume, for the sake of experience, that set of attitudes and qualities which the language asks us to assume, and, if we cannot assume them, we throw the book away” (1).

If the mock reader chooses to, he can develop an interest in the critic’s response to literature, but certain conditions (both aesthetic and relational) must first be set in place.

Gibson's formulation of the relationship between the critic and the mock reader implies that there is a measure of performance on the reader's part. But it is the performance of engagement with the critic's language, which always starts with the reader's willingness to perform.

The strange but striking analogy Gibson makes between the self-promotional attitude of the critic and wary skepticism of the reader further clarifies the nature of these relationships.

"Recognition of a violent disparity between our self as mock reader and our self as real person acting in a real world is the process by which we keep our money in our pockets.

'Does your toupee collect moths?' asks the toupee manufacturer, and we answer,

"Certainly not! My hair's my own. You're not talking to me, old boy; I'm wise to you.'

Of course we are not always so wise" (2).

Furthermore, it implies something about the mock reader's character—namely his lack of critical restraint as a reader. Gibson means to say that a mock reader is either incapable or uninterested in acknowledging his hair as his own; so he dons a fictitious toupee for the experience of feeling and experiencing a different language.

That, I suppose, is the answer to Gibson's question about the value of reader other critic's subjective responses to literature. It is simply an entertaining excursion away from the familiarity of one's own response to a text.

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"The Well Wrought Urn"

"I have said that even the apparently simple and straightforward poet is forced into paradoxes by the nature of his instrument. Seeing this, we should not be surprised to find poets who consciously employ it to gain a compression and precision otherwise unobtainable."

Cleant Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn*

Cleant Brooks suggests that the language of paradox calls for readings that tease out contradictions in images and terms, which decipher metaphors, symbols and analogies in ways that force readers to engage equally with the figurative and literal elements of the work in question. It demands attention to textual subtleties that steer readers away from treating language like a collection of logical codes and symbols that can carry only literal meaning. The language of paradox calls in short, for an imagination.

Paradox is the poet's only solution, Brooks argues. By this statement he means that unlike the scientist, the poet cannot rely upon objective notations for conveying meaning. Imagination and explorations of such subjects as metaphysics and emotion often invoke irony, and even rely on reinvention as a means of defamiliarizing the commonplace, which poetry essentially strives to do.

Brooks further distills the paradoxical language of poetry as follows:

“We may approach the problem in this way: the poet has to work by analogies. All of the subtler states of emotion... necessarily demand metaphor for their expression. The poet must work by analogies, but the metaphors do not lie in the same plane or fit neatly edge to edge. There is a continual tilting of the planes; necessary overlappings, discrepancies, contradictions. Even the most direct and simple poet is forced into paradoxes far more often than we think, if we are sufficiently alive to what he is doing.” (10, *The Well Wrought Urn*).

Since Brooks conceives of the artistic method as a subtle endeavor, best approached indirectly, readings of the language of paradox to his mind must consider slippages of language and meaning that are inherent in a fully realized, “well wrought” poem.

Of course, the language of paradox has its weaknesses. Since language cannot be summed up by rules and codes, there can be no final analysis on what words themselves denote, since their meanings shift with time, context, and word choices vary by individual. If the

language of paradox insists that images and language are usually not what they appear to be, then the language of paradox can also be said to lack a definable system by which a reader can achieve stable meaning. If the language of paradox (as Brooks argues) is rhetorical device, it is a method for imparting meaning (or, an impression) with no structural cues at all for guiding the reader in her final analysis. For this reason, the language of paradox can be said to permit many readings of the same poem, even though the readings might be contradictory, and any resolution of such meanings would require concerted suspension of disbelief. Furthermore, anachronistic readings of older poems could easily misread temporally-specific forms of irony and wonder that contribute to the meaning of the poem. One can never be sure.

Yet Brooks is right to observe that fully-realized poetry often cannot be interpreted—without regard to context and irony—through reliance on the words as they appear. One cannot speak at length about metaphysics without metaphors, analogies, and symbols to aid one's listener in interpreting meaning. Nor can one write persuasively about the contradictions inherent in living without giving thought to the role of paradoxical language-- as an effective rhetorical device. When Brooks writes about John Donne's "The Canonization," he acknowledges that the poet cannot do justice to the languages of love and religion by reducing his own language to logical symbolism. In transferring meaning from his imagination, Donne must rely on metaphors and numerous other forms of irony, which he does to masterful effect: irony and wonder lie at the heart the subjects Donne tries to capture. There is a sense that though the language of paradox values literature as a thing bestowed by an astute imagination, and a thing whose angles should be turned with considerable care in the light, it is also a language that does not necessarily take issue with diffuse interpretations. Yet it does just the opposite of taking a work for granted. Brooks's cites Coleridge's observation that good poetry lends charm to quotidian habits of life,

and “awakens the mind,” and thus by implication, adds value to literature as an instrument for interpreting life. Literature provides a means for interpreting planes of life and living that science cannot reach.

In responding to the question of literature's value, Brooks' invokes the symbol of the phoenix from “The Canonization” to illustrate his point:

“But there is a sense in which all such well-wrought urns contain the ashes of a Phoenix. The urns are not meant for memorial purposes only, though that often seems to be their chief significance to the professors of literature. The phoenix rises from its ashes; or ought to rise; but it will not arise for all our mere sifting and measuring the ashes, or testing them for their chemical content. We must be prepared to accept the paradox of the imagination itself...” (21)

It is remarkable that Brooks works richly with the language of paradox to share his thoughts on the value of literature. The urn as a metaphor for literature is not to be valued for its apparent utility alone, as the case may often be. The phoenix as a metaphor for meaning should transcend the words themselves; and interpretations of that meaning are not produced by subjecting words to logical exercises in search of a final truth. Rather, the phoenix in Brooks's opinion soars when freed from the confining space of the urn which holds it. Imagination cannot thrive in tight space, Brooks seems to say.

Brooks' response to the value of literature is a thoughtful one. The value of art is in a way, whatever we think it is; but more specifically, it is an interplay of devices for gaining insight into matters about which we seek to gain understanding. It is necessary for us all to accept then, that literature may not always provide answers in the sense that a mathematical equation does. But it satisfies the human desire to add novelty to quotidian experience every now and then; to awaken the mind and reach levels of reflection that can enrich the experience of living all the more. The argument for the language of paradox is that interpreting poetry is a balancing act, and the language of paradox is the best available tool for doing so.

I see the conflict between logical interpretations of literature and more liberal methods for deciphering literary meaning as a question of one's goal as a reader. If one sees literature as a kind of vaunted source of guidance with the prophetic urgency of a biblical text, then it is clear how the language of paradox would offer more trouble than help. If the reader is the kind of person who wishes to sink and expand with each line, allowing words to carry her as far as her imagination and wit, then the language of paradox is all the better for her.