

## **THE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF EMPIRICISM IN LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM: Sources and contemporary empirical researches**

*The article deals with the research of the basic principles of empiricism in Reader-response theory within the environment of American and European literary criticism, beginning with I.A. Richards as its important precursor and ending with contemporary empirical researchers (W. van Peer, D.S. Miall & D. Kuiken) as its indirect successors.*

**Key words:** *empiricism, Reader-response theory, empirical researches*

Concerning with the traditional dichotomy theory / practice, and the opposition of theoretical and empirical sources of knowledge, the main question is what's the contribution of experience to development of science? There are two main ways to answer it. From the point of view of empiricism, the human experience is the principal authority and guide, which validates any theory, conception or concept about everything in the world. The second way is controversial to the first one. Rationalism says that there are significant ways in which our concepts and knowledge are gained independently of sense experience. The third kind of answer from the pluralistic viewpoints is that theory and practice could be successfully combined or put together. Theory and empirical studies are dialectically related entities. In the present-day literary criticism, we could see the synthesis of elements from the above mentioned positions.

Empiricism views the human experience as the only source of any knowledge, which cannot be extended beyond it. Empiricism could also be seen as an employment of empirical methods in science. The practice of "basing ideas and theories on testing and experience" exist in it. From the point of view of empiricism all knowledge originates from experience. It is important to notice that the category of the experience is also the basic one in American philosophy of pragmatism of C.S. Pierce, W. James and J. Dewey. W. James with his notion of "radical empiricism" has made a great contribution into rethinking the nature of human knowledge and experience in philosophy and science.

**The purpose** of this paper is to examine the basic principles of empiricism in Reader-response theory within the environment of American philosophy, literary criticism and theory, beginning with I.A. Richards as its important precursor and ending with W. van Peer, D.S. Miall & D. Kuiken and others its indirect successors.

In the early 1960s the reader-oriented critics began to react against the hegemony of formalistic New Criticism and in the 1970s reader-response theorists "claimed the challenge the formalist theory and practice of New Critical interpretations" [12, p. 4]. Despite of the range of crucial differences, **Reader-**

**response theory and New Criticism** have a lot in common. We may suggest that empirical methodology was the basis both for the “objective” New Critical paradigm and “subjective” Reader-response one. By the way, **Thomas Kuhn** in his influential “The structure of Scientific Revolutions” (1962) book argues that all paradigms are **interparadigmatic**, in other words, they contain the features of other ones.

In the XX century American literary theory and criticism, the transition to Reader-response theory was the result of a **paradigm shift**, which was caused by the limitations of purely formalist models of interpretation and by the needs for revision of the aims and methodology of New Criticism. **Antony Easthope** argues that the primary feature of “old” New Critical paradigm (from Greek “pattern, example, sample”) is “*the traditional empiricist epistemology*” [8, p. 11].

It is difficult to say explicitly and exactly which paradigm from above mentioned appeared diachronically earlier. They probably emerged simultaneously and the main argument to prove this idea is the works of **I.A. Richards** (especially his *Practical Criticism* (1929)), who considered to be the “forefather” for both New Criticism and Reader-response theory. I.A. Richards was British scholar, and it is known that the primary interest in empiricism is an immanent feature of the literary criticism in Great Britain. But then **Catherine Belsey** argues that empiricism and idealism should be unseparable entities: “*Our concepts and our knowledge are held to be the product of experience (empiricism), and this experience is preceded and interpreted by the mind, reason or thought, the property of a transcendent human nature whose essence is the attribute of each individual (idealism)*” [3, p. 7]. The Americans are “*both materialists and idealists*” [2, p. 1822]. To explicate this though to American literary criticism, the dichotomy theory/practice (empirics) turns into some kind of unity in Reader-response theory.

From **Jules David Law**’s point of view, I.A. Richards was at the border-line between “pure” empiricism and Empiricist Literary Criticism. The arguments for this idea were articulated in epilogue entitled “From Ruskin to I.A. Richards: the end of empiricism and the beginning of Empiricist Literary Criticism” [11] of his book “The Rhetoric of Empiricism: Language and Perception from Locke to I.A. Richards” (1993). The primary aim of Jules David Law is to “*trace the consequences for literary theory of taking a classical empiricist stance*” [11, ix].

He says that “*Richards’s work also represents too many of the postempiricist trends of modern criticism and philosophy*” [11, 16].

**Art Berman** in a work “From the New Criticism to Deconstruction: the Reception of Structuralism and Post-structuralism” (1988) makes the primary assumption that “*the environment of modern American literary critical theory, like that of other disciplines of study, is – and historically has been – predominantly influenced by suppositions of a philosophical empiricism, which within the Anglo-American setting simultaneously define the grounds of objective knowledge and the limitations of such knowledge*” [4, 1]. He also argues that dynamic of movement from empiricism (John Locke, Thomas Hobbes) to skepticism (David Hume) is

*“repeated, cyclically, in evolution of Anglo-American literary critical theory”* [4, 1].

Mapping diachronically the terrain of our research, it could logically be divided into the following “stages”:

1920-30s – the beginning (“Practical criticism” (1929) and “The Principles of Literary Criticism” (1924) of I.A. Richards as the precursor both for New Criticism and Reader-response theory and the pivotal reader-oriented work “Literature as exploration” (1938) by L.M. Rosenblatt);

1960-70s – emergence and development of Reader-response theory and criticism (S. Fish, N.N. Holland, D. Bleich, J. Culler, L.M. Rosenblatt);

1980s – decay of Reader-response theory and emergence of empirical study of literature (Siegfried J. Schmidt, W.van Peer, D. Miall & D. Kuiken).

In the 1980s and 1990s the primary common concern among literary critics was *“the fear that the empirical study of real readers would degenerate into sheer interpretive randomness. But this ‘interpretive anarchy’ has not occurred”* [5, p. 23]. For the variety of empirical-centered researchers, the primary concern was (and still is) the role of individual differences in readings (interpretations, responses etc.) among real readers.

In D. Miall’s words, *“a basic principle of empirical work on literary reading”* [13, p. 296] is laid out in the book *“Psychonarratology: Foundations for the Empirical Study of Literary Response”* by Marisa Bortolussi & Peter Dixon (University of Alberta, Canada). It is the result of nine years’ collaboration, during which the co-authors *“developed an interdisciplinary framework for the empirical study of the reception of narrative”* [5, p. 4]. They point out that the works *“Is There the Text in this Class? The Authority of the Interpretive Communities”* (1980) by **Stanley Fish** and *“5 Readers Reading”* (1975) by **Norman N. Holland** are the prominent ones among other American reader-response theorists, because *“both critics have attempted to validate their hypothesis by means of empirical observation of real readers, but in both cases the methods used are flawed, rendering the conclusions drawn from them unconvincing”* (emphasis mine – L.A.)” [5, p. 8]. The authors also mention that the problem of relationship between the theoretical concept of the reader and the actual readers of real texts in Reader-response theory may be solved by psychonarratology as the foundation for the empirical study of literary response [5, p. 8].

The *organic nature of experience* is the main idea of American pragmatism. J. Dewey argues against any view of experience that denies its *transactional* character. It is absolutely mistaken to separate mind from body, subject from object, and self from the world around him/her. **L.M. Rosenblatt** was the first among literary critics and theorists in USA who developed the theory of reading that showed how the reader’s aesthetic experience with a text contributed to the formation of meaning in the reading process (transaction between **the** reader and **the** text). According to J.P. Tompkins, L.M. Rosenblatt was recognized to be the first among the Reader-response critics who empirically described *“the way the reader’s reactions to a poem are responsible for any subsequent interpretation of it”* [15, n xxvi]. She was also the first scholar who adopted J. Dewey and

A. Bentley's philosophical concept of transaction to literary criticism and developed the theory of reading, highlighting the reader's aesthetic experience with the text and questioning the place of meaning creation (not exceptionally in the text as New Critics believe).

**Jeanne Connell** argues that L.M. Rosenblatt's reader response theory "*focus on the experience of a reader with a text, drawing attention to how a reader's belief system is constituted by, and constitutes, reading*" [7, p. 397] is one of her major contributions to literary theory and criticism. Later this shift to experientially-based theory of reading had significant influence to the methodology of teaching literature at schools and universities.

**David S. Miall** and **D. Kuiken** (1998) in the paper "The Forms of Reading: Empirical studies of literariness" wrote that "*almost no professional attention is being paid to the ordinary reader, who <...> continues to read for pleasure of understanding the world of the text rather than for the development of a deconstructive or historicist perspective*" [14, p. 328]. For them the distinction between professional concerns and the interests of the ordinary reader seems profound. In literary criticism in general, "*the empirical dimension <...> is absent*" [14, p. 329]. In the article, they analyze **Jonathan Culler**'s literary theory and admit that "*study of actual readers is ruled out of order by theorists such as Culler*" [ibid.], because he argues that the reading conventions determine the reading process, but not actual experience of real readers.

It isn't obvious why D. Miall and D. Kuiken in the paper even do not mention the ideas of other Reader-response theory proponents, who were much more concerned with actual readers (N.N. Holland, D. Bleich or L.M. Rosenblatt).

In majority of his works, D.S. Miall concentrates on the research of real readers' responses to literary texts with the help of empirical methods. Instead of interpreting, he began studying readers' experience and feelings in the process of reading. The primary achievement of D.S. Miall in collaboration with D. Kuiken is the development the scales for measurement literary expertise (1995). D. Miall suggests that "*we can turn to the empirical study of reading (specifically, literary reading) for an independent source of information on certain processes of reading that may occur in any period*" [13, p. 293], because it could offer us the way of finding out what occurs during ordinary literary reading of real readers. **G. Steen** defines a Literary Response Questionnaire (LRQ) of D. Miall & D. Kuiken as "*a useful instrument to differentiate between readers' attitudes toward literature*" [16].

"*Empiricism does not stand in very high repute among literary theorists these days*" [11, p. 1], admits **Jules David Law**. It mainly depends on common associations with naïve positivism. There are other points of view. "*It's not such a good time to be a scholar in the Humanities*", stated **Willy van Peer** at his first lecture "The scientific study of Literature" at Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University (March, 18, 2013), but **empirical researches** are the ways to feel comfortable and to be in high demand in contemporary academic circles. And D. Miall argues, that "*the present moment may be propitious for empirical studies to catch the attention of literary scholars*" [13, p. 307], because in a time "after theory", "*we might want*

*to consider whether empirical studies of readers and reading provide new landmarks for a more socially responsible and ecologically valid form of scholarship”* [ibid].

Until recently empirical researches were far from the mainstream of literary criticism and theory, but the situation changes in progression. More and more scientists draw their attention to the empirical methods in their researches in order to prove or validate definite theories and assumptions. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, **Terry Flew** studies the ways in which empirical and digital methods are becoming the part of the mainstream scientific discourse and proves why it is possible to speak about a ‘*new empiricism*’ or ‘*empirical turn*’ [10]. The ‘old’ empirical methods are being applied to ‘new’ questions in new ways (with the help of computers), which were being raised in 1970<sup>th</sup> by Reader-response theory in the USA and reception aesthetics in Germany.

Nowadays, as **M. Bortolussi** and **P. Dixon** pointed out: “*both formal and reader-oriented approaches are not deeply informed by compelling empirical evidence concerning the behavior of real readers interacting with actual texts*” [5, p. 32]. And the scholars should review their position according to “new” empiricism in literary criticism and theory.

In the 1980s, the **empirical study of literature (ESL)** as an interdisciplinary field of research emerged in Europe. ESL does not mark a coherent discipline; it’s rather interdisciplinary complex study, mixture of literary theory, psychology, linguistics, sociology, anthropology, media and cultural studies, based on empiricism and, in some dimensions, on pragmatism, like American Reader-response theory in 1970s. ESL deals only with real readers. One of the main problems of the empirical study of literature is “*to know what happens when actual recipients attribute meaning to texts which they conceive of as literary texts*” [9, p. 4]. D. Miall differentiates ESL and “*reader-response studies of the last thirty years, from Fish to Wolfgang Iser*” [13, p. 307]. The crucial difference for him is “*a serious commitment to the examination of reading and the testing of hypotheses about reading with real readers*” [ibid.] in ESL.

In empirical researches, the scholars use experience, experiment and observation in order to access the possibility of scientific inquiry (for example, like in chemistry or physics) of literary text reception by specific readers. It is obvious that empirical literary studies try to do literary researches in a scientific way, blur the distinction between humanities and sciences, and unite distinct traditions of literary theory, criticism and empiricism.

Notable contributions to the empirical study of literature are made by the members of **IGEL** (International Society for the Empirical Study of Literature), founded in 1987 by **Siegfried J. Schmidt** (Siegen University, Germany). IGEL Presidents in different years were: Siegfried J. Schmidt (1987–1988), Elrud Ibsch from Vrije University, The Netherlands (1988-1990), David S. Miall from University of Alberta, Canada (2002-2004), Willie van Peer from University of München, Germany (2004-2006), Marisa Bortolussi from University of Alberta, Canada (2008-2012). Internationality and interdisciplinarity are the features of IGEL.

Jointly van Peer, Willie, Jemeljan Hakemulder, and Sonia Zyngier founded the international **REDES** (Research for the Development of Empirical Studies) Project in 2002. Their book “*Muses and Measures: Empirical Research Methods for the Humanities*” (2007) [17] is a lucid guide to contemporary empirical research in the traditional humanities. REDES area coordinator for Ukraine (since 2003) **Anna Chesnokova**, in the review of “Muses and Measures” writes that the authors “*dwell on the juxtaposition of the sciences and the humanities with the aim of showing that both are complementary rather than opposite and can easily and successfully cooperate: researchers from the humanities can and should use methodology from the sciences to add credibility and objectivity to their sometimes subjective conclusions*” [6].

Anna Chesnokova’s monograph “Як виміряти враження від поезії або Вступ до емпіричних методів дослідження у мовознавстві” [1] (Measuring the Impression of Poetry: Introduction to Empirical Research Methods in Linguistics) is a valuable contribution to Ukrainian humanities, because it introduces our scholars with the possible ways of using empirical research methods in linguistics.

### **Conclusions**

During the long period of time in literary criticism, from I. A. Richards, through the theories of Reader-response theorists to contemporary empirical study of literature, the principles of empiricism and empirical methodology were developing and improving in progression. Even though, empirics are traditionally opposed to theory, because of the usage in empirical researches observation, experience and experiment, nowadays empirical researches organically combine theory and empiricism.

In conclusion, Ukrainian scholars should also draw more attention to empirical researches of real readers’ responses to literary text, because as D.S. Miall admits “*an acquaintance with the methods and results of empirical study could act as a guiding perspective grounding future scholarship, enabling us to situate our findings within the realities of the process of literary reading, including how reading has changed historically and will change in future*” [13, p. 309].

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*В статье исследуются основные принципы эмпиризма в теории читательского отклика в контексте американского и европейского литературоведения, начиная с А.А. Ричардса как значимого предшественника и заканчивая современными эмпирическими исследованиями.*

**Ключевые слова:** эмпиризм, теория читательского отклика, эмпирические исследования

*У статті досліджуються основні принципи емпіризму у теорії читацького відгуку у широкому контексті американського та європейського літературознавства, починаючи з А.А. Річардса як важливого попередника та закінчуючи сучасними емпіричними дослідженнями.*

**Ключові слова:** емпіризм, теорія читацького відгуку, емпіричні дослідження