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"How to Be Persuasive in Literary Theory: The Case of Wolfgang Iser" (Essay review of Iser's *The Act of Reading*)

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REVIEW ARTICLE

How to Be Persuasive in Literary Theory: The Case of Wolfgang Iser

Wolfgang Iser's latest book, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978), is a persuasive book indeed. I have little doubt that it will be welcomed by American literary critics who are attempting to incorporate "the reader" into a critical tradition long preoccupied with the autonomous text. For most literary theorists, the question is no longer **whether** the reader's interaction with the text should be discussed but **how**. Iser's new book, a translation of his 1976 *Der Akt des Lesens*, will find a comfortable place within these contemporary debates over readers reading. But why should this reader-centered "book of Germanic phenomenology" be so easily adaptable to the American critical tradition, a tradition long dominated by the objectivist theorizing of New Critical formalism? In other words, **why** is *The Act of Reading* a persuasive book?

Of course, my opening remarks already suggest one answer to this question: *The Act of Reading* appears in the United States at a time when many American theorists are aggressively promoting the reader's role in creating the literary work and still others are emphasizing the effects of the text on its real and ideal audiences. Reader-oriented critics like Louise Rosenblatt, Stanley Fish, Stephen Booth, Norman Holland, and David Bleich place the interaction of reader and text at the center of their otherwise very different literary theories. Jonathan Culler's *Structuralist Poetics*, a most useful introduction to structuralism, transforms this continental import into an account of readers' "literary competence," which consists of reading conventions for naturalizing literary texts. Even American versions of deconstruction include some mention of readers; in describing his Nietzschean premises, J. Hillis Miller writes: "The reading of a work involves an active intervention on the part of the reader. Each reader takes possession of the work for one reason or another and imposes on it a certain pattern of meaning." This recent concern for readers within American criticism is paralleled by the return of rhetoric to literature departments. Whether that rhetoric is composition theory or the "New Rhetoric" of Perelman, Burke, Weaver, and Richards, the discipline of literary

studies discovers in its return a revitalized interest in the **effect** (persuasive and otherwise) that texts have upon their reading audiences. Influencing, and influenced by, this resurrection of rhetoric, reader-oriented theory attempts to find new ways for describing how literature affects its readers during and after the reading process.

Iser's new book, a theoretical companion to his *The Implied Reader* (1974), offers contemporary American criticism a detailed model of aesthetic response by describing the reading process and the effects of that process. This account of reading begins with a functionalist model of the literary text, which focuses on two interrelated areas, the intersection between text and social reality and the interaction between text and reader. Iser does not take a strictly mimetic position in discussing the relation between the literary text and reality: for him, literature does more than simply reflect or represent society; it responds to its deficiencies. "In general, literary texts constitute a reaction to contemporary situations, bringing attention to problems that are conditioned though not resolved by contemporary norms." One of literature's basic functions is "to reveal and perhaps even balance the deficiencies resulting from prevailing [thought] systems." For example, the eighteenth-century novel and drama were preoccupied with questions of morality; this preoccupation "balanced out the deficiencies of the dominant thought system of the time," Lockean empiricism, which called into question the traditional assumptions guiding human conduct without providing new ethical premises to replace them. In effect, "literature supplies those possibilities which have been excluded by the prevalent system." Literature accomplishes this, however, not by formulating these possibilities in the text but by causing the **reader** to formulate them for himself.

Here we move from the intersection of text and reality to the interaction of reader and text. Literature entangles the reader "in the situation to which the text is a reaction." The author extracts social and historical norms (and references to past literature) from their original contexts and places them together to form the "repertoire of the text." In a novel, these "depragmatized" norms are distributed among various textual "perspectives" — the narrator, the characters, the plot, and the fictitious reader — and the system of perspectives they form outlines the author's view without stating it and provides the potential structure for the reader to actualize. The connections among the various perspectives emerge during the reading process, "in the course of which the reader's role is to occupy shifting vantage points that are geared to a prestructured activity and to fit the diverse perspectives into a gradually evolving pattern" that forms the "configurative meaning" of the text. This convergence of the textual perspectives functions as the standpoint from which the reader formulates the text's reaction to its social and historical environment. This reaction is not explicit in the text itself; rather, during the reading process the text becomes a "set of instructions" for the reader's production of the text's reaction, the author's view, the meaning of the literary work. Thus, by presenting familiar norms in unfamiliar arrangements, the

literary text points up the deficiencies of those norms and manipulates the reader into formulating a reaction to these deficiencies. Iser gives Fielding's *Tom Jones* as an example of a detail of this process: Fielding presents Allworthy as a representative of perfect Christian benevolence, but then he juxtaposes the Allworthy perspective to Blifil, whom the reader comes to see as the embodiment of hypocritical piety. But why does Allworthy trust Blifil? The reader soon draws the conclusion that Allworthy is naive and impractical in that his "perfection is simply incapable of conceiving a mere pretence of ideality." Fielding has forced the reader to this conclusion though he has not stated it in the text itself. The reader combines the various perspectives — Allworthy, Blifil, and the plot — into a "consistent gestalt" which resolves the tensions that resulted from the juxtaposition of the perspectives. But, again, "this gestalt is not explicit in the text—it emerges from a projection of the reader, which is guided in so far as it arises out of the identification of the connections between the signs."

Iser's model of the reading process is much more complex than what I have presented so far. I will return later to at least one more aspect of it. But for now I will restrict myself to the short- and long-term effects of reading that Iser describes. For Iser, reading is not a one-way process in which the passive reader merely internalizes the structures in the text; rather, it is a "dynamic interaction" in which the active reader is constantly responding to the meanings he produces in this interaction. Consistency-building and image-making are continual reading activities guided by the text; the configurative meaning must be assembled by the reader, who is then, in turn, affected by what he has assembled. The result of this literary effect involves a restructuring of the reader's experience, a phenomenon which occurs most forcibly in the reading of those texts that incorporate the norms that the reader already holds. Here the deficiencies that the text forces the reader to locate and resolve are deficiencies in the reader's own structuring of experience. A reader open to the text and its effects will have to reformulate his system of norms in order to accommodate the meaning the text has led him to assemble. Thus, the act of reading literature provides "an experience which entails the reader constituting himself by constituting a reality hitherto unfamiliar to himself." It is in this way that literature significantly changes its readers.

Like others before him, Iser makes a distinction between **meaning** and **significance**. "Meaning is the referential totality which is implied by the aspects contained in the text and which must be assembled in the course of reading. Significance is the reader's absorption of the meaning into his own existence." Iser's account provides for differing concretizations (meanings) of the same text and for different applications (significances) of the meanings assembled. But his phenomenology of reading is concerned primarily with describing the **general structure** of concretization and not the **specific, historical actualizations** of that structure. Thus, he distinguishes his theory of aesthetic response from the theory of reception (which is an account dealing with "existing readers, whose reactions testify to certain historically conditioned

experiences of literature"). Similarly, Iser is more interested in the structure of **potential** applications rather than the **actual** ways literary meanings have been applied in the experiences of historical readers or groups of readers. Because of these emphases in *The Act of Reading*, there are, by design, few examples of conflicting interpretations of the same text and few specific examples of significant changes produced in actual readers by literature. I find this exclusion disappointing because by constantly refusing to discuss conflicting responses and actual examples of change, Iser talks about potential, pre-structured effects on readers in a way that at times closely resembles very traditional discussions of texts in isolation. As we will see in a moment, this disguised talk of texts becomes another aspect of Iser's persuasiveness within American critical discourse.

Nevertheless, Iser's account of the reading process and literary effects does offer much of real value to contemporary critical theory and its emerging concern with the reader's response to literature. This is one reason *The Act of Reading* will be welcomed by American critics and theorists. However, I will make a stronger claim: among the theoretical models of reading now being promoted in this country, Iser's has the best chance of persuading the most people to adopt its shape and contents. The reason I make such a prediction has less to do with the present interest in readers and more to do with the critical tradition in which this interest is currently manifested. Put simply, Iser's book will persuade not only because of what it says about readers but perhaps even more decisively because of what it does (and doesn't) say about texts.

The Act of Reading and the American critical tradition share some basic assumptions about literary texts, and these common assumptions constitute the main source of Iser's persuasive power within American critical discourse. However, these shared premises are often covered over by Iser's rhetoric of reading and his critique of certain influential forces in recent American theory. For example, Iser's direct attack on Anglo-American New Criticism is especially revealing for what it suggests about his hidden agreements with aspects of the hegemonic position he is attacking.

Iser places his critique of New Criticism in the context of a more general attack on the "classical norm of interpretation," which he characterizes as an outdated mode of referential analysis searching for an extractable meaning in the text (instead of a meaning experienced by the reader). This extractable meaning is at the service of a mimetic truth and manifests itself in the text as a harmonized totality of balance, order, and completeness. Iser writes that New Criticism marked "a turning-point in literary interpretation" to the extent that it rejected "the vital elements of the classical norm, namely, that the work is an object containing the hidden meaning of a prevailing truth." In place of the search for the hidden message and representational meaning, New Criticism was concerned with "the elements of the work and their interaction," with the **functions** operating within the text. But Iser points out that

despite this important revision in the critical tradition, New Criticism still preserved the classical norm of harmony, which took on "a value of its own, whereas in the past it was subservient to the appearance of truth." This harmonizing of textual elements with its discovery and eventual removal of ambiguities was "the unacknowledged debt of New Criticism to the classical norm of interpretation," and it was here that New Criticism set and reached its limits. New Critics attempted to define the functions of the literary text through the same interpretive norm — harmony — used to uncover representational meaning. But "a function is not a meaning — it brings about an effect, and this effect cannot be measured by the same criteria as are used in evaluating the appearance of truth." Iser's functionalist model of the text and his phenomenology of reading attempt to move beyond New Critical limitations. However, his theory's relationship to New Criticism is similar to the complicitous relation he describes between New Criticism and the classical norm of interpretation: New Critics rejected the classical norm while preserving its value of harmony; Iser rejects New Criticism while preserving its assumption of a prior and independent text. As I will show, Iser's continued valorization of the text affects his theory just as crucially as the preservation of harmony limited the New Criticism.

It is not simply the general valorization of the text that signals a disguised continuity between Iser's functionalist theory and the critical tradition that New Criticism represents. A more surprising link is the role played by Polish philosopher Roman Ingarden and his phenomenology of the literary work. René Wellek and Austin Warren's 1949 study, *Theory of Literature*, crystallized the American movement toward intrinsic criticism, a movement dominated by New Criticism. Wellek made acknowledged use of Ingarden in his central chapter, "The Mode of Existence of a Literary Work of Art," in which he defined a poem as a "system of norms" consisting of "several strata, each implying its own subordinate group"; Ingarden outlined these strata in section eight of *The Literary Work of Art*. Ingarden's stratified view of the literary work formed the foundation of Wellek and Warren's theory of intrinsic criticism, and the *Theory of Literature*, in turn, became one of the most influential theoretical statements for the dominant force in American criticism.

Iser's theory of reading has a two-fold relation to Ingarden's phenomenology and to Wellek and Warren's *Theory of Literature*. Iser borrows many of Ingarden's concepts — concretization, schematized aspects, sentence correlates, places of indeterminacy, the de pragmatized character of fictional language. But Iser's initial use of Ingarden differs from Wellek's: Iser emphasizes the model of reading given fullest treatment in Ingarden's *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*, while Wellek used only the model of the work presented in Ingarden's much earlier book, *The Literary Work of Art*. Furthermore, Iser criticizes Ingarden's account and considerably revises it. For example, he praises Ingarden for proposing the idea of concretization but critiques its development in Ingarden's theory, where "concretization was just the actualization of the potential elements of the work — it was not an inter-

action between text and reader; this is why [Ingarden's] 'places of indeterminacy' lead only to an undynamic completion, as opposed to a dynamic process" in which the reader is made to switch textual perspectives and establish connections between them.

But a second criticism of Ingarden by Iser signals a more subtle relation to Ingarden's theory (and ultimately a closer connection to the critical tradition Wellek and Warren represent). Iser lists as one of the major drawbacks of Ingarden's account the fact that Ingarden "is unable to accept the possibility that a work may be concretized in different, equally valid, ways." Wellek's use of Ingarden was motivated by the very characteristic that Iser *seems* to be rejecting here. Wellek wrote that "we can distinguish between right and wrong readings of a poem, or between a recognition or a distortion of the norms implicit in a work of art, by acts of comparison, by a study of different false or incomplete realizations. . . . A hierarchy of viewpoints, a criticism of the grasp of norms, is implied in the concept of the adequacy of interpretation." Adequacy, or validity, in interpretation represents an overriding concern for the American critical tradition. This concern has grown in recent years because of the challenge from reader-response and post-structuralist theories. In a 1978 essay in *Critical Inquiry*, Wellek responded to these new onslaughts against interpretive adequacy, characterizing them as "the new anarchy which allows a complete liberty of interpretation." In a recent issue of *The Sewanee Review*, Cleanth Brooks, another respected advocate of intrinsic criticism, has communicated more colorfully the continuing fear of "what can happen when there is a lack of theoretical restraints": "Literary interpretation becomes a game of tennis played without a net and on a court with no backlines."

The question becomes, then, does Iser's critique of Ingarden indicate a rejection of validity in interpretation, a central tenet of the American critical tradition? This does not seem to be the case. Iser rejects only the notion that each text offers just one valid concretization, one correct meaning. For Iser, there is a prestructured **range** of meanings that the reader can validly assemble from the same text: "the structure of the text **allows** for different ways of fulfillment." Iser's stand is simply (and conveniently) another version of the critical pluralism quite respectable within traditional American literary theory (as most recently demonstrated by Wayne Booth's *Critical Understanding*).

But what is not acceptable in this tradition is a critical pluralism **without limits**; note Booth's subtitle, "The Powers and Limits of Pluralism," and the extended discussion in *Critical Inquiry* among Booth, M. H. Abrams, J. Hillis Miller, and others over "The Limits of Pluralism." In American theory, validity in interpretation has been guaranteed most often by constraints in the literary text that limit the range of permissible meanings to be derived from that text. Iser's account of reading supplies just the kind of textual constraints that make most critics comfortable. These constraints are the manipulative devices for ensuring that the reader can be **properly guided**: "Although the reader must participate in the assembly of meaning by realizing the structure

inherent in the text, it must not be forgotten that he stands outside the text. His position must therefore be manipulated by the text if his viewpoint is to be properly guided."

For Iser, the text's arrangement of perspectives guides the reader as he attempts to project a consistent pattern resolving the tensions among the various norms distributed among those perspectives. "The interaction fails if... the reader's projections superimpose themselves unimpeded upon the text." How exactly does the arrangement of perspectives guide the reader's activities and impede his projections? Between and within the textual perspectives, there are **blanks** (previously called **gaps** in *The Implied Reader*). These blanks are vacancies in the overall system of the text. "They indicate that the different segments of the text are to be connected, even though the text itself does not say so. They are the unseen joints of the text, and as they mark off schemata and textual perspectives from one another, they simultaneously trigger acts of ideation [image-building] on the reader's part." The blanks "function virtually as instructions" in the "theme-and-horizon structure" of the reading process. As the reader moves through the text, he constantly shifts from one perspective to another. The perspective he assumes at any one moment becomes the "theme" which is read against the "horizon" of the previous perspectives in which he had been situated; in the *Tom Jones* example given above, the Allworthy perspective is first a theme, then part of the horizon for judging the Blifil perspective, and then a theme again but this time one that is interpreted against the changed horizon that now contains the perspective of Blifil. The reader fills the blanks between perspectives according to the theme-and-horizon structure, which guides him to negate or to modify each thematic perspective in light of the accumulated horizon of previous perspectives. The perspectives, blanks, and theme-and-horizon structure constitute the constraints that Iser's account places on the reader's interpretation of the whole text.

This description provides an adequate composite of the textual constraints Iser presents. In passing, I would like to comment briefly on the status of these constraints in order to clarify the foundations of all such textual theories. The underlying basis of the interpretive constraints Iser proposes is the negating relationship among the perspectives. Negation characterizes the connections that the reader projects to fill the blanks between segments, and it describes the horizon's relation to the theme during any moment in the time-flow of reading. The reader's "process of formulation is continually guided by negation." In each case, what is negated (challenged, modified, etc.) is one perspective by another. And for Iser a perspective's **specific** negating function in any particular text is an uninterpreted given in that text, constraining the reader's assembly of meaning. For example, Iser lists four basic types of perspective arrangements for narrative texts — counterbalance, opposition, echelon, and serial. It is not necessary to describe how each of these arrangements functions. What is important here is that these relations between perspectives, as they appear in any particular narrative text, are not intersub-

jective givens as Iser supposes. Rather they are constructs varying according to an on-going interpretation. This means they cannot serve as **prior** textual constraints on that interpretive work because they are already its **products**. Whether the hero's perspective counterbalances a minor character's or vice versa is always an interpretation and never a given in the text as Iser holds. Of course, I could go even further and say that not only is the **relation** between the hero and a minor character an interpretive construct, but so is the "fact" that a certain character is designated "the hero" and another only "a minor character." The same holds for even the apparently more basic "given," the individual character in a text. And so on. It's interpretation all the way down. However, the textual theorist must start somewhere. Once such a theorist has the category of a "prior and independent text," he must begin filling it with textual elements, givens that will constrain its interpretation. These "givens" form the enabling fiction of any theory of the text. Iser's enabling fiction is the negative relation between textual perspectives. With this "given" he supports his functionalist model of the text and his whole phenomenology of reading. But the problematic nature of Iser's constraints in no way undermines the persuasiveness of his reading model within the American critical tradition because all the textual theories in that tradition also build their models of independent texts upon the fiction of uninterpreted givens.

It might at first seem a bit odd to say that Iser promotes the notion of an independent text, even in the problematic way I have described. After all, his is a **phenomenological** theory of reading, and he continually emphasizes how the subject-object division is destroyed during the reading process. But these claims must be examined closely. For in Iser's account, it is the literary work and not the text that is dependent on the reader for its existence: "the literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic and the aesthetic: the artistic pole is the author's text and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader. In view of this polarity, it is clear that the work itself cannot be identical with the text or with the concretization, but must be situated somewhere between the two." The text remains independent and prior to the reader's activities as it initiates, guides, and corrects the reader's concretization of the literary work. I would argue, then, that despite his critiques of New Criticism and Ingarden, Iser ultimately demonstrates that he shares with Wellek, Brooks, and Booth a **belief in interpretive validity guaranteed by constraints in a prior and independent text**; and these shared assumptions make Iser's detailed account of reading extremely attractive to traditional literary theorists in America.

Unfortunately, by presenting a reading model that is easily adapted to the American critical tradition, Iser is in danger of undercutting one of the purposes for writing his book: in his preface he suggests that the "anthropological side of literary criticism" deserves more attention, and he hopes that some hints in *The Act of Reading* might encourage a concern for the "actual function of literature in the overall make-up of man." Within today's sterile and

restrictive critical discourse, these are daring, even courageous goals, and indeed many of Iser's discussions do direct our attention to how literature functions in this humanistic way. His account of literary effect, of how literature changes its readers, certainly moves in this direction. But this fine attempt might be erased because of the text-centered theory of reading that is its foundation. The emphasis on textual constraints and the prestructuring of effect, combined with the lack of examples of differing interpretations and significant changes in readers, all of this will make it quite easy for Iser's theory to be grafted onto the American critical tradition without really affecting the text-centered, a-rhetorical criticism and theory that tradition fosters.

Thus, while it actually contains the seeds of a radically social and rhetorical approach, *The Act of Reading* is persuasive because it appears to be safe: it gives the American critic just enough of the reader but not too much. Or, more exactly, it provides an acceptable model of the text partially disguised as an innovative account of reading. Very economically, then, it fulfills both needs of current American theory: it incorporates the reader into a theory of literature while it maintains the traditional American valorization of the autonomous text. Iser allows American theorists to have their text and reader too.

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