

Wolfgang Iser. Towards Literary Anthropology. Introduction

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Abstract

In this article you find the editorial remarks of this special issue on “Wolfgang Iser. Towards Literary Anthropology”, edited by Laura Lucia Rossi. Alongside introducing the content of the issue, the author reflects on Wolfgang Iser’s influence and legacy and on the perspectives of the Iserian studies, in particular with regard to «literary anthropology».

Keywords

Wolfgang Iser, literary anthropology, reader-response, literary theory, hermeneutics.

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On the tenth anniversary of his death (2007) we wanted to commemorate the critic and literary theorist Wolfgang Iser with a special issue. Our reflections could only begin with the critical classic, *The Act of Reading*, which contributed to the making of reader-response theories as a cornerstone in the field of literary theory, and to generating a most lively debate, in the past forty years. However, our main aim was to focus on the point of arrival of Iser’s critical and theoretical reflections and on the many paths of research that his work opened for us.

In the thirty years that separated the publication of that fundamental work from his death, Iser never stopped expanding his research. To his readers, Iser’s theoretical speculation comes across as non linear and recursive (one could as well say «not easy»). Nevertheless, with his work he drew a path that has a clear starting point and a point of arrival, although the latter is an open one, inviting further exploration.

Iser’s early and most famous works, in which he analyzed the act of reading and the textual function of the implied reader, saw enormous success, and became milestones in the study of literary theory and narrative. There is, however, a later reflection – rooted in his early studies of the phenomenology of reading – that still requires clarification and implementation. First, he moved from his aesthetic response theory to the concepts of the «fictive» and the «imaginary», especially relevant to the current debate. Eventually, Iser developed a new discipline, namely «literary anthropology», with which he aimed to provide an account of literature as a universal and human device for self-interpretation, and as a tool for the relentless urge of human beings to become known to themselves. Iser was convinced of the fact that a single, fixed perspective is insufficient to analyze such a complex human activity; (self) interpretation is not just a practice, it is a human need that allows us to expand and shape ourselves. Nevertheless, Iser also believed that such an enquiry of human life requires specific heuristic tools and that it cannot make

use of frames borrowed from other disciplines. The risk would otherwise be that literature is merely *used* to provide illustrative examples. Which is why in his more recent works he pursued a self-contained heuristic framework *within* the new discipline. Still, he continuously kept an eye on all the possible intersections with hermeneutics, cybernetics, biology, and cognitive and evolutionary studies.

It is only for the sake of convention, however, that we speak of a second phase in Iserian studies: the idea of literature as an anthropological device, which is able to tell us something about our nature as human beings was already present in his early work. The main concern of an anthropological approach to reading (as it will be clarified in selected articles from this issue of *Enthymema*) is firstly in the interaction between the author, the text and the reader, taking place *within* the act of reading.

For this special issue of *Enthymema* we welcomed reflections on Iser's legacy and on the implementation (e.g. in narrative studies, Dan Irving and Roksana Zgierska) and influence (Martina Di Stefano) of his reader-response theory; on the intersection between Iser's hermeneutic approach with other twentieth-century perspectives, i.e. Hadot's (Carmen Dell'Aversano), Girard's and Lacan's (Teodoro Patera, Matteo Moca) and with poetics (Samuli Bjorninen); on the connections between Iser's literary anthropological stance and Nietzsche's (Antonino Sorci); and on the common grounds and differences between Iser's «literary anthropology» and Literary Darwinism and Cognitive Anthropology (Salvatore Cifuni; Federica Abramo, Renata Gambino and Grazia Pulvirenti). Two questions are at the fundament of these contributions – the same binomial that guided Iser throughout his research –: how do we interact with literary texts/why do we need literature?

With our “Virtual roundtable on Iser's legacy” we discussed Iser's influence on today's literary research with illustrious international scholars from narrative and cognitive studies and literary theory. With Gerald Prince we reflected on the influence of Iser's aesthetic response theory on past and current reader-oriented approaches. The role of narrative hermeneutics in understanding the human realm and the tenets of self-interpretation was the main topic of conversation with Mark Freeman, while with Marco Caracciolo we focused on the common grounds of Iser and cognitive literary approaches and on the role of interpretation in cognitive literary studies. Finally, the ethical potential of literature and reading, and the leading role of literary criticism in guiding us through this process, was at the center of our conversation with Federico Bertoni. Two questions were asked in each of our interviews: do we need an independent discipline called «literary anthropology»? And, do we still need literary theory?

At the background of these interviews and this issue is the core question of Literary Anthropology: what is specific about *literature* that comes to our aid in our relentless urge for self-interpretation? If charting storytelling and fictionalizing has been done with some success from different perspectives (since the so-called «narrative» and «cognitive» turns), the tenets of literature and its specificity in our anthropological makeup seem harder to clarify (especially after that the most recent approaches in literary theory rejected any idea of «literariness»). This was one of Iser's biggest concerns; as Jürgen Schläeager puts it, «The world is ultimately unknowable, many important things seem to be unsayable, but literature overcomes these ‘deficiencies’ and offers its readers the chance to transcend their limitedness – on one condition only, however: that we are always conscious in the process of reading of the conditionality of everything that takes us beyond ourselves. This is what Iser tried to encapsulate» (Schläeager 320). In reality, even Iser's project was unable to give a complete account of this specificity. However he had the

merit of «establish[ing] an anthropology of reading, one that seeks to get beyond such tired binarisms as the fictive versus the real, and to add a third component, the imaginary» (Swales 45), i.e. of connecting aesthetic and anthropological research, as well as of reminding us «that the work of art is never simply a clear pane of glass through which we see an extraaesthetic world. The statement of the text is created by dramatic, lyric, narrative modalities. The text is made, constructed in our reading» (48).

It is not just about celebrating the work of a scholar, one who was not immune from direct criticism; it is also about reflecting on the shortcomings and incompleteness of the theoretical *apparatus* he left us. Despite his theoretical prolificity and interdisciplinarity (in a time when the latter was not an obsession of academia), literary criticism (including critics close to him professionally and personally)¹ never missed the chance to show a sort of disappointment – or dissatisfaction – with the failure of a project, i.e. that despite its big promises, the foundations of the new discipline – «literary anthropology» – had been only partially developed.

Iser's last project was indeed far from completed; it was open and moved relentlessly in new directions. I am personally convinced that the difficulty of Iser's monographs – complicated by an unstable, ever-changing and, in a word, 'refractive' terminology – discouraged many readers in the outlook of easy solutions and theoretical shortcuts. Someone might call this difficult 'language' a limit, perhaps not without reasons. But it was most of all an impulse of consistency for Iser, who carefully avoided any form of reification of concepts and whose theoretical systemicity we find elsewhere – i.e. in that wider vision of literature as a human device.

However, this difficulty of the Iserian theoretical system is certainly one of the factors for which his anthropological theory failed to have the same impact in the contemporary scientific debate of the 1990s and 2000s as his theory of reading had in the 1970s and 1980s. As De Bruyn sums up, the very success of Iser's theory of reading – the label for which he is still influential today – along with the decline of reader's response criticism in that specific moment, contributed to the fact that his new proposal was overlooked. To this we must add that the whole project was viewed as a 'German product', so imbued with phenomenology and continental philosophy and so far from the ethnographic perspective of Angloamerican anthropology, with which the only common ground was the influence of Goodman and Kermode (De Bruyn 152-54).

We still have to clarify the link between Iser more recent studies and the converging developments of Literary Darwinism and cognitive literary studies. Although moving from different premises, some of Iser's conclusions can be related to Boyd's and Carroll's (see Cifuni in this issue). Certainly Iser would have been cautious in embracing these approaches – always claiming independence and autonomous laws for his «literary anthropology» – but he would have also certainly encouraged the interdisciplinarity of these recent studies.

In regards to the limits of his theoretical proposal, we can find the same slip-ups in the work of other scholars and approaches (e.g. the ambiguity of the concepts of fiction/narrative/literature and the exclusivity of the approaches). Still there is at least one sense in which we can consider Iser's work remarkable and unique: despite the many points that still needed clarification, it managed to provide a general theory of literature

¹ E.g., Schlaeger «No doubt, he was, as always, up to something highly interesting but it appears that the answers he was seeking lay ultimately outside the scope of the theoretical scaffoldings he himself had constructed» (322).

as an anthropological device and to give an account of the functions of the literary texts in his performative manifestation.

What Iser's contemporaries overlooked when his new theories came out in the 1990s was the actual coherency and continuity of his project. Without trying to impose any teleological perspective on Iser's work, nor to present his last theories as the ultimate aim of his early researches, we are moved to agree with De Bruyn (155) when he highlights the circularity of Iser's theoretical effort in the dialectics of fiction *within* and *outside* the literary text and which Iser himself summed up as such: «aesthetic response tries to ascertain why readers have images in their minds, while only perceiving letters, and how this imagery can be manipulated by textual strategies, and «literary anthropology» tries to ascertain why human beings stand in need of fictions in order to satisfy their inveterate urge to be simultaneously with themselves and outside themselves» (Iser 314).

There is still much that needs to be clarified and studied in Iser's work. First of all, we need to provide a complete account of his disseminated anthropological theory. Second – as we are living in the years of an interdisciplinary turn and as many scholars from many perspectives have been interested in the anthropological makeup of literature and in the functioning of the mind in the act of reading – we cannot overlook what Schlaeger (again) calls «the unintended consequences of Iser's lasting contribution to the contemporary theoretical effort» since

no one among his competitors took the rational model of the human mind to such limits, no one illuminated so clearly the sort of questions and the sort of complexities that were at stake. In this sense Iser's works can serve both as a catalyst for a thoroughgoing analysis of the present state of theory as well as a springboard for an overhaul, long overdue, of the model of the mind that still governs most research paradigms in the humanities today. (320)

This was necessary in 2010 and it still is today. As Swales (in 2004) put it, Iser «gave us our subject back – both as a specific set of analytical practices and as a broader dimension of human relevance. That was, and is, no small contribution», one of which we have to take the most advantage. Reader-response criticism might have lost its revolutionary and groundbreaking mission – as well as its necessity – long ago and it might look dated now that we have deeper insights in the functioning and makeup of the mind in processes like storytelling, fictionalizing and reading. Yet, combining these findings with an aesthetic approach and an interest for literary texts is the only way to understand the specificity of literature as a tool for human beings and it is therefore more necessary now than ever.

Understanding that Iser's reader-response and literary anthropology theories were ultimately addressing the same question is therefore crucial and I believe that proceeding along this binomial (always looking *inside* and *outside* the literary texts at the same time) is the path towards a real Literary Anthropology, which literary theorists *in primis* should enter.

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