

Text, Reader, and the Nature
of Literary Reading

A Critical Survey of
Wolfgang Iser's Theory of Reading

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Preface

What is the peculiarity of the literary text? How shall we distinguish the “reader” from those who are not? How does reading occur, and what is the nature of literary reading? In what way can we best describe the interrelationship between the reader, the text and the reading process? These questions have baffled literary critics ever since literary criticism moved beyond mere impressionistic talks about literature. The most important early discussions occurred when the Russian formalists focused their attention on the “literariness” of literature, i.e., the peculiar components that make a piece of writing literary. However, it is not until mid 1960s that the above questions started to arouse serious critical attention among literary scholars. The following two decades witnessed an unprecedented contribution to the discussion of these questions, made by reader-oriented criticism in general, and Wolfgang Iser in particular.

The world has now entered into the post modern or post structuralist age. But this does not invalidate the discoveries made by the reader critics, nor diminish the historical significance of their theories. The point may be self-evident since critics like Iser are the first to investigate systematically the nature of reader, text, and reading, and provide various theories to account for their peculiarities. They, more than any others, also marked a transition from the formalistic approach to the post structuralist one, as the traces of both already exist in their theories. In addition, it is worthwhile to look into the dialogues be-

tween the reader critics themselves, and those between Iser and the post structuralists, which will inevitably shed new light on the contemporary Western critical theories and help us better understand what was going on at those important historical moments . The effort, finally, is beneficial pedagogically as the approaches discussed here will provide new ways of textual interpretation for literature courses .

The book is a critical survey of the key ideas proposed by early Wolfgang Iser, ideas that still remain the core of the Iserian theory of literary reading . A great part of the present discussion is based on the readings and writings I did during my Ph .D . years at Nanjing University . The work continued, intermittently, at the Catholic University of Leuven when I was there doing post doctoral research . It is the intention of the author to make Iser and his theory of reading accessible to ordinary readers, especially college students and graduates who are interested in reading strategy, textual interpretation and contemporary Western literary theory .

I would like to express my most heart-felt thanks to Professor Qian Jiaoru, my Ph .D . adviser, for his expert guidance and patient assistance throughout the reading and writing of Iser . His professional expertise and perceptive suggestions saw me through the struggles for precision and clarity and made the present book what it is . I am most grateful to Professor Wolfgang Iser for the valuable materials he sent me and his kind letters in which he answered my questions and offered helpful suggestions . Special thanks are due to Professor . H . van Gorp and the Husserl Archive at the Catholic University of Leuven for their gener-

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Introduction

The late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed a period of social turmoil in the West, marked by a general dissatisfaction with the political status quo and a popular demand for social reform. In West Germany the social unrest was accompanied by a crisis in literary scholarship, which led to the rise of a new school of literary criticism, namely, the German aesthetics of reception. For about three decades since its emergence, this critical school has not only played an important role in the mainstream of Western literary criticism, but also exercised a significant influence on other theories by its unique claims about the nature and methods of literary study. A full account of the rise of the German receptionist school is a difficult task, because the school rose primarily as an answer to the crisis in literary scholarship, which was in turn “the outgrowth of a nexus of factors that penetrated almost every area of German life” (Holub, 1984, p. 7). For the present discussion, we shall limit ourselves to what we believe to be the

To avoid possible confusion, a clarification of terminology is necessary from the outset. By “German aesthetics of reception” I refer in general to the Constance Critical School in Germany, represented by H. R. Jauss and W. Iser (although Iser prefers the word “effect” to “reception” which, according to him, is more appropriate for Jauss). “Reader-response criticism” designates the type of criticism practiced by S. Fish, N. Holland, and D. Bleich, the three contemporary American reader-oriented critics (although Iser sometimes employs the term to refer to the German aesthetics of reception). “Reader-oriented criticism” is an umbrella term used to encompass all those critics, both continental and American, who have been interested since the late 1960s, in one way or another, in the reader and literary reading.

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most relevant “ factors ”, that is, the drastic changes in German social, intellectual, and academic life during the period .

The crisis in literary scholarship began with an increasing awareness on the part of literary scholars of the relation between literature and social life, which was in turn a reflection of the public concern over the problems that harassed West Germany at the time . The most acute ones as a rule were those in the economic and political spheres . The general economic prosperity since 1948, or the “ economic miracle ” as many commentators had described it, came to a halt in the mid-60s, and in 1967 a big recession set in . The immediate effect of this recession on the German people was a disillusionment with the “ promise of unlimited growth and prosperity ” and a skeptical attitude toward “ systemic and institutional structures ” (ibid ., pp .7-8) . Moreover, the economic recession was accompanied by political problems that disturbed the Germans even more . The rise of the right-wing National Democratic Party, for instance, alerted many of the German intellectuals to the danger of a revival of fascism, and the indirect involvement of the country in the “ imperialist ” war in Vietnam drew ever sharper criticism from the public . Mass demonstrations and protests were common in the years at the turn of the decade, with young people, especially university students as their most active participants . The impact of this social unrest on the popular mentality of the time was great and helped to shape a new critical consciousness among the intellectuals as well as a new awareness that literature should have a more active role to play in society . This new consciousness was in conflict with the dominant critical theory and practice in West

Germany since the end of the Second World War, which were characterized by a stubborn insistence on the irrelevance of literature to its contexts . The “ internal ” studies of literature, which had till then been considered scientific and objective, began to be discredited because they were now felt to be inadequate in dealing with the social nature of literature and especially with modern literature characterized by an inherent subversion of traditional norms and conventions . This inadequacy now seemed all the more apparent in the tumultuous social climate in which all traditional norms and conventions were already widely suspected and attacked .

It is in this larger political and social context that the literary scholars' concern over the effect of literature on society and on the reader should be understood . It was part of an intellectual movement of the time toward self-awareness or what Suleiman calls “ self-reflexiveness ”, in which the concern over “ the investigator's role in delimiting or even in constituting the object of study ”, and the shift of attention from the observed to the relation of observed and observer were prioritized . In literary studies this sense of self-awareness was marked by increasingly conscious attempts at a delineation of the reader and his reading . In Anglo-American scholarship, for instance, such attempts were made as early as the 1920s and 1930s by I .A . Richards, D .W . Harding, and L . Rosenblatt, and were followed in the 1960s by more detailed and systematic explorations, such as those made by W . Booth on the relation between the reader, the implied author, and the implied reader, and by the reader-response critics in their respective inquiries into the subjective responses of read-

er, the process of reading experience, or the function of the reader's unique psychological make-up in the act of reading .

In West Germany the shift of emphasis from the text to the reader was also the outcome of strong criticisms of the sterility of the self-enclosed interpretations of literary texts favored by the text-centered formalistic approaches . Unable to put up with the “ ‘ sermons' preached in German lecture rooms ” on the appreciation of single meanings of the masterpieces (cf . , Iser , 1990 , p .5) , the Constance School of *Rezeptionsästhetik* (a group of young scholars including H .R . Jauss and W . Iser and a number of others who either taught and studied at the University of Constance in Southern Germany or contributed to the biannual colloquia held there since the mid-1960s) declared the indisputable priority of the reader in literary readings . Jauss , for instance , in his essay “ Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory ” , originally read as a lecture in 1967 and now generally considered the manifesto of the school , put forward the idea of literary history as a history of literary reception , thus laying an unprecedented emphasis on the reader's dynamic role in historical accounts of literature and the relation between what a work asks of the reader and what a reader expects of the work . Iser , on the other hand , focused on another aspect of this dynamic relation , i . e . , the interaction between the text and the reader , and built upon it a unique theory of “ aesthetic response ” . Thus the Constance School with its new critical emphasis on the reader aimed at a revitalization of critical sensitivity and rose as a reaction against the inertness and inefficiency of the kind of deliberately a-historical , asocial and apolitical literary study at a critical mo-

ment in German literary scholarship, a moment when people concerned with the situation were beginning to feel “ the imminence of the demise of literary criticism ” or even “ the death of literature itself ” (Iser, 1990, p 5) .

The above brief account of the rise of German reception aesthetics and its historical significance may serve as a rationale for making this critical school the subject of the present book . The critics of the Constance School, as we have seen, were among the first to feel called upon to save literary studies from apparent “ fossilization ” and possible “ death ” . Other than this, the rise of the Constance School was paralleled by the appearance of a group of reader-oriented critics in America . These two groups of critics on either side of the Atlantic concurred in their dissatisfaction with the text-centered criticism prevalent at the time and were together responsible for the shaping of a new critical and conceptual “ paradigm ” marked by an unprecedented emphasis on the reader and reading . The German receptionists especially have exerted a great influence on other contemporary theories of literature, to such a degree that, as Holub observes, “ from Marxists to traditional critics, from classical scholars and medievalists to modern specialists, virtually every methodological perspective and area of literary endeavor has responded to the challenge raised by reception theory ” (Holub, 1984, p .7) .

In China the German reception theory also found an enthusiastic response, although it did not come to the notice of Chinese critics and scholars until about ten years after it had been a topic of heated debate for their Western counterparts . Beginning in early 1980s the theory quickly spread among Chinese literary

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critics and theorists through publications and exchanges at academic conferences . An incomplete survey shows that within a short span of eight years there have been about two hundred major publications, including books, translations and essays, relating directly to the theory , not to mention a lot more studies that are indirectly related to it .

Among the Constance School critics, Wolfgang Iser has received the greatest attention outside Germany, not only because “ next to Jauss, he has been the most important German theorist to appear during the past decade and a half ” (Holub , 1984 , p .106), but also because as a professor of English he was at the time among the few major continental literary theorists who had more to share with the English-speaking academic community . His exchange of ideas with American scholars is both frequent and productive, and his major works (*The Act of Reading* and *The Implied Reader*) are among the most read in American university classrooms . Iser is popular with Chinese scholars as well, and this is shown by the amount of articles that have appeared discussing his ideas of reading and applying them to the interpretation of Chinese literary texts . The fact that three different Chinese translations of *The Act of Reading* have been done within

The survey, made by the present author, is based chiefly on the bibliography attached to the monthly *Duplicated Materials on Literary Theory*, published by the Information Center of the People's University of China .

four years is itself a clear indication of his popularity in China .

Like the other Constance School receptionists, Iser argues for a shift of attention from “ what the work means ” to “ how it affects the reader ” . In his monumental essay “ Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction ”, first read in 1969 as a lecture at the University of Constance, Iser claims that the question now crying out for investigation for contemporary scholarship is “ what actually does take place between text and reader ” (Iser in Miller, 1971, p .2) . Unlike his colleagues at Constance and the American reader-oriented critics, Iser approaches the question from a phenomenological point of view . Following the example of Husserl's student Roman Ingarden, but differing from him in significant ways, Iser incorporates in his reading theory the investigation of the intentional object (the text), the intentional subject (the reader) and the intentional act (the process of literary reading) . Iser's phenomenological inquiry of literary reading centers around three “ fundamental questions ”, namely, the process in which texts are absorbed, the structures that guide the reader in his processing of the text, and the function of the literary text in its contexts (cf ., Iser, 1990, pp .5-6) . The book deals with these questions respectively on the basis of the major works Iser has published on these subjects . They include *The Act of Reading* (1976, English translation 1978),

The three versions are: 《阅读活动》(trans . 霍桂桓、李宝彦, People's University of China Press, 1988); 《阅读行为》(trans . 金惠敏 *et al.* , Hunan Wenyi Press, 1991); 《阅读活动》(trans . 金元浦、周宁, Chinese Social Sciences Press, 1991) . Unfortunately, however, some of these translations are a misreading of Iser and some rather misleading to the Chinese readers .

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which is Iser's most important work containing almost all of his theoretical speculations on the reader's "aesthetic response"; *The Implied Reader* (1972, English translation 1974), which is an exemplary application of his reading theory to the analysis of English fiction; and a number of important essays, such as the aforementioned "Indeterminacy" essay (1970, English translation 1971) which, together with Jauss' "Challenge" essay, marked the beginning of the German aesthetics of reception. His more recent works will also be included in the discussion. They have moved further to include questions beyond the main concerns of the present book, but they all come from and contribute in turn to his early ideas of literature.

This book attempts at an in-depth study of Iser's phenomenological approach to literary reading, which includes his idiosyncratic accounts of the text, the reader, and their dynamic interaction with each other. The three chapters that constitute the main body of the book are devoted respectively to discussions of the response-inviting structure inherent in the text, the response-projection mechanism native to the reader, and the process in which the structure and the mechanism operate interactively. There is, of course, a potential danger in dividing the discussion into three separate parts because any discussion on one of these elements in isolation from the other two would severely distort, if not destroy, Iser's phenomenological account of reading. For Iser, these three elements form a coherent unity with each related to and dependent on the other two for its own existence. However, the potential danger can be minimized if our discussion follows the way Iser analyzes each of these elements sep-

arately yet without losing sight of the other two .In a sense, the division is inevitable, for a thorough investigation into the Iserian theory of reading would entail more or less independent inspections of his ideas about the text, the reader, and their interaction . It is hoped that the following inquiries into Iser's phenomenological text, the phenomenological reader, and his phenomenological account of their interaction will enable us to see how Iser tries to tackle the fundamental questions mentioned above and to what extent he has succeeded or failed .

The exposition of Iser's theory of reading is carried out in the context of reader-oriented criticism in general, and, in some instances, of post structuralism in particular . In some places, references are made to Chinese texts and contexts, in a belief that it will be more relevant to Chinese readers and that comparisons and contrastive analyses will better illuminate the questions under discussion .

Chapter 1 The Iserian Text: A Response-Inviting Structure

We begin our study of Iser's theory of reading with a discussion of the text, this is because the text has served paradoxically both as the common point of departure for all reader-oriented critics from the formalist critical tradition, and as the seed of controversy among themselves. Therefore, while the renunciation of the absolute authority (or even the tyranny) of the text characterizes the reader-oriented critics in general, it is their respective theoretical stances towards the text that distinguish them from one another. The difference between them, in fact, boils down to one question, namely, to what extent has the "departure" in each case been made?

H. R. Jauss describes reader-oriented criticism in terms of T. S. Kuhn's concept of paradigm change as a "revolution" or break through, in the sense that this new theoretical movement is characterized by "qualitative jumps, discontinuities, and original points of departure" from the old (Jauss in Holub, 1984, p. 1). This observation, however, seems more appropriate to formalist criticism than to reader-oriented criticism, for, in the former case, there did occur some kind of "break" from the traditional historical and causal inquiries of literature to the study of the "intrinsic laws" of the literary work itself. But it is not certain whether reader-oriented criticism, for all its "qualitative jumps", is marked by discontinuities and breakthroughs in relation to the formalist tradition. In reader-oriented criticism, the