

WOLFGANG I SER
 "THE READING PROCESS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH" (1972)

Iser, Wolfgang. "The Reading Process: a Phenomenological Approach." The Implied Reader. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974. 274-294.

Iser argues that the text offers various "schematised views" or "perspectives" (275) that the reader concretises in the process of reading, that (s)he "sets the work in motion" (275). The "text only takes on life when it is realised. This realization is by no means independent of the individual indisposition of the reader--though this in turn is acted on by the different patterns of the text" (274-5). The determinate features of the "text" invites the reader to participate in a game of imagination upon which it imposes certain constraints. The text's "unwritten part . . . stimulates the reader's creative participation" by suggesting certain "outlines" that the reader can "shade in" and "animate" (276). The literary work is a "virtuality" (275) or "gestalt" (280), that is an always potential reality because it is the product of the "convergence" (275) of reader and text.

Iser argues that the reading process is temporal – it takes time to pursue the reading of sequent sentences which act upon each other without referring to an external reality outside of themselves. It is in their interaction with each other that they take on meaningfulness. The world presented by literary texts is constructed out of what Ingarden calls "intentional sentence correlatives" (278). The reader brings the text to fruition by accepting the perspectives offered by particular sentences and by effecting their sequential interaction. These sentences, as they interact, stimulate the readers' expectations as to what is to come, expectations nowhere fulfilled but constantly modified and continually deferred, there being no definitive final interpretation. Reading is a kaleidoscope of perspectives, preintentions and recollections in that successive sentences modify horizons already established and have a retrospective effective on what has already been read. The new background alters and bring to light new aspects of our memory which in turn affects the new background and arouses more complex anticipations. It is the raw material provided by the text which allows the reader to instigate these complex inter-relations of past, present and future and complexes of anticipation and retrospection. Indeed, different readings are proof that the act of reading is one of creative and active participation rather than passive reception. Hiatuses in the flow of sentences (where sequences that are anticipatory or retrospective cannot be established) do not lead to frustration but rather provide points of perplexity, unexpected twists and turns that are essential to the literary experience. It is at moments like these that the reader's freedom is greatest to exercise his own "faculty for establishing connections--for filling in gaps left by the text itself" (279).

Iser contends that the text is inexhaustible, infinitely richer than any of its individual realisations because it is capable of different realisations. Each reader, in filling in the gaps in a particular way, necessarily excludes other possibilities. Modern(ist) texts are especially fertile in this respect. Any reading is inevitably selective and exclusive in that the text necessarily reflects our "preconceptions" (280) that is, the baggage we bring with us to the text: "the text refers back directly to our own preconceptions (280), the text acting like a "mirror" (281) reflecting back the reader's "disposition" (281). Note, too, that the second reading is different from the first, the time sequence involved being necessarily different the second time once an awareness of what is to come has been established. Readers' constructions of the same text will necessarily vary but within the formal limits imposed by the written text. The reader is invited to exercise his imagination upon those as yet unwritten and indeterminate elements. It is the reader's imagination, once called into play, that composes the virtual reality that is the literary work. Readers require and impose

consistent patterns that are coloured by their own "characteristic selection process" (284) that derives from the reader's own "particular history of experience, its own consciousness, its own outlook" (284) in order to form a gestalt of consistency that is not identical to the true meaning of the text and which remains rather a configurative meaning. Comprehension "is an individual act of seeing things together" (284). Moreover, part of the baggage that the reader brings to the text includes the repertoire of familiar literary patterns and recurrent literary themes and allusions to familiar social and historical contexts that, however, inevitably conflict with certain textual elements that defamiliarise what the reader thought he recognised, leading to a distrust of the expectations aroused and a reconsideration of seemingly straightforward discrepancies that are unwilling to accommodate themselves to these patterns.

Iser points out that the fragmentary nature of modernist and postmodernist texts leads to an indeterminacy that frustrates our desire to form gestalts of consistency and to reduce the polysemantic possibilities of a text to a single interpretation. The reader's efforts to integrate the text is necessarily resisted by other textual features that do not accommodate themselves to the imposed paradigm, which can ever only be a *pars pro toto* fulfillment of the text and which remains always in conflict with alternative fulfillments of the same text. Such alien associations force the reader to reconsider restrictions placed on the text's meaning. There is a constant oscillation, integral to the aesthetic experience, between illusion-formation and revision, frustration, and surprise. The *sine qua non* of the aesthetic experience is the non-achievement of a final reading. The process whereby the reader recreates the text is a discontinuous one wherein the consistencies projected are constantly shattered before being reassembled differently. A reception-oriented criticism, that focuses on the way in which certain discrepancies in a text refuse to accommodate themselves to the consistencies projected by the reader, serves to uncover what would otherwise remain concealed in the reader's unconscious. The reader is forced to confront the alien, to establish affinities with the unfamiliar. The negation of familiar patterns that we seek to impose in affirmation of our assumptions reveals that to experience the unfamiliar world of the text we are forced to suspend the ideas and attitudes that shape our personality.

Iser points out that Poulet contends that the reader is drawn into the text to the point where one feels no distance between ourselves and the events depicted. Such an "identification" is precisely the "means by which the author stimulates attitudes in the reader" (291) and occurs when, in reading, the reader forms a joint consciousness with that of the author, whose thoughts can then occur subjectively in the reader in the form of a second I that temporarily displaces the reader's primary subjectivity, a "mind conscious of itself and instituting itself in me as the subject of its own objects" (293). It is Iser's view, however, that it is better to speak of what happens to the reader in terms of definition rather than identification. The reader's individuality recedes in the course of reading, during which the subject-object dichotomy becomes blurred and the boundaries between reader and author are redrawn. The reader's individuality is supplanted by alien thoughts which become the theme on which his attention is focused. Literature furnishes less wish-fulfillment than wish formulation (that is it defines our desires): "fictions contribute to defining the reader's or spectator's values, and perhaps stimulating our desires" rather than merely gratifying desire via some "mechanism of vicarious experience" (294).

For Iser, literature qua the experience of the unfamiliar is successful to the degree that something is formulated in us:

someone else's thoughts can only take a form in our consciousness if, in the process, our unformulated faculty for deciphering those thoughts is brought into play. Now since this formulation is carried out in terms set by someone else, whose thoughts are the theme of our reading, it follows that the formulation of our faculty for deciphering

cannot be along lines of our own orientation. . . . The production of the meaning of literary texts . . . does not merely entail the discovery the unformulated, which can then be taken over by the active imagination of the reader; it also entails the possibility that we may formulate ourselves and so discover what had previously seemed to elude our consciousness. (294)

In reading, access to the writer's thoughts is necessarily determined by the terms set by that writer whose thoughts are the theme of our reading. Our faculty for so doing cannot be along lines of our own orientation. Producing the meaning of literary texts does not merely entail the discovery of the unformulated which waits there innocently to be found. In formulating the unformulated according to a process of directed perception, we necessarily fashion ourselves. We are changed in the process of reading, our identities constructed.