THE TEXT AND ITS READING - W. ISER'S MODEL

Corina PUŞCAŞ

Abstract

The paper deals with the principles of Wolfgang Iser's aesthetics – the *phenomenological approach* to the literary criticism performed from the reader's point of view - and tries to identify a specific literary genre to which Iser's theory can be successfully applied – *the short story cycle.*

I. Positions in reader-response criticism

The theories of reader-response seek to revise the aims and methods of literary study by reminding us that the reader is an active participant in the production of meaning. The question of authority for literary meaning determines these theories to situate themselves either among the ones that emphasize the authority of an author's creation or word, and thus support the institution of an objective criticism, or among the ones that emphasize the authority of a reader's recreation or response, and thus support the institution of a subjective criticism. The most extreme statement of the first position is widely associated with the name of E.D. Hirsch and the view that " hermeneutics must stress a reconstruction of the authors aims and attitudes in order to evolve guides and norms for constructing of his text" (apud Freund, p.153), whereas the second position is well represented by Stanley Fish who argues that we, the readers, 'write' the texts we read, i.e. the readers' cognitive activities supply everything.

However, there also exists a position that stands in between and tries to reconcile the other two mentioned above: it is the phenomenological approach[1], whose main representative is Wolfgang Iser. In his review of *The Act of Reading*, 'Why no one is afraid of Wolfgang Iser' (1981), Stanley Fish notes that "he is influential without being controversial, and at a moment when everyone is choosing up sides, he seems to be on no side at all or (it amonts to the same thing) on every side at once." (apud Freund, p.148)

II. Wolfgang Iser's Aesthetic Reception

Wolfgang Iser is the leading exponent of the reception theory and a German critic whose work (especially his two major works *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*[1], and *The Act Of Reading: A theory of Aesthetic Response*[1]) received a hospitable reception by the American academy. His name is associated with the school of the aesthetics of literary reception, which sprung up at the University of Konstanz in Germany, and the philosophical influence behind his work comes fom Roman Ingarden[1].

Central to Iser's intuition is the view that reading consists of an *interaction* between the structure of the literary work and its recipient. His model, therefore, presents three interrelated aspects of the reading process: there is the text with its supposed schemata or layers of determination and the concomitant places of indeterminacy, constituting a

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potential for the production of meaning; there is the reader's processing of the text - his construction or concretization of a cohesive aesthetic object by means of a synthesizing or consistency-building activity; and finally there are the conditions that give rise to and govern the text-reader interaction:

"[…] the literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic and the aesthetic: the artistic refers to the text created by the author, and the aesthetic to the realization accomplished by the reader. From this polarity, it follows that the literary work cannot be completely identical with the text, or with the realization of the text, but in fact must lie halfway between the two. The work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realised, and furthermore the realization is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader – though this in turn is acted upon by the different patterns of the text. The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader." (*The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach*, p.50)

III. 'Gaps', 'blanks' and 'indeterminacies'

Iser insists that the literary work does not point to a referential reality (as does a 'document') but represents a pattern, "a structured indicator to guide the imagination of the reader". This set of instructions, however, is incomplete, full of 'gaps' or 'blanks' or 'indeterminacies' which must be filled by the reader (i.e. the text instructs whereas the reader constructs), both according to his disposition and to the perspectives offered by the text. The 'gaps' (the unspoken dialogue or the unwritten text) are that which induces communication. Moreover, this 'relative indeterminacy' of the text privileges the participation and creative imagination of the reader as a co-author.

Each reader will fill in the gaps in his own way, hence the inexhaustibility of the text. Iser has noticed that "with 'traditional' texts this process was more or less unconscious, but modern texts frequently exploit it quite deliberately. They are often so fragmentary that one's attention is almost exclusively occupied with the search for connections between the fragments; the object of this is not to complicate the spectrum of connections, so much as to make us aware of the nature of our own capacity for providing links." (*The Reading Process*, p.55)

'Gaps' are the means by which the text 'tempts' the reader to continue reading. No matter how detailed the presentation, questions can always be asked, gaps always remain open. Through these inevitable omissions a story gains its dynamism. In *Narrative Fiction* (pp. 127-129) we find the issue of gaps taken a step forward. Thus Rimmon proceeds to identifying different types of gaps. According to him the most typical is the *hermeneutic gap* (also called 'information gap'). This can either be *temporary* i.e. filled-in at some point in the text, or *permanent*, i.e. remain open even after the text has come to an end. The distinction between temporary and permanent gaps can be made only in retrospect.

IV. An application of the 'gap' theory

In the course of our academic research we have come across one literary genre that is by definition prone *to permanent gaps* fill-in – the short story cycle[1] (a genre more and more employed in moder literature), which gives Iser's theory a fertile 'soil' for application. Because stories in a cycle have dual textual positions as both self-enclosed and sequential entities, and because connections between stories are often ambiguous, the

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story cycle invariably slips outside the narrative expectations constituting Western notions of beginnings and endings and the causally linked events in between. While each text-piece "ends" in that it reaches a denouement that provides some level of closure, the story cycle requires that some larger narrative remain unresolved, so that the text-pieces also act as the chapters of a novel do to urge the reader forward. The result of these often conflicting impulses is to create openended spaces between stories (or sections of stories) that are rarely as easy to negotiate as are the breaks between chapters in a novel where, even if shifts in time or locale should prove momentarily disorienting, certain identifying markers gradually surface to ground the narrative. The story cycle's fractional form necessitates instead that the reader connect the "pattern of nerves" across the page, perhaps by locating a unifying or regulating element bridging the individual stories that could help interpret and integrate the text-pieces even if their juxtaposed arrangement does not suggest an overt organization. Where the traditional reader is conditioned to discover through careful reading the cause of any given event or detail, the story cycle reader may never be satisfied on particular points. How some event came about or how another will be resolved rarely takes central importance as the story cycle manipulates and magnifies the capricious natures and radically shifting perspectives of whole communities of characters. Such a wide-ranging lens necessarily catches fragments rather than whole pictures, bringing into focus the critical interests of one character briefly only to move on to another character while the earlier focus fades. Moving from one story to another, we may reach a fuller understanding of an earlier conflict, only partially resolved in its own section, or we may discover the narrative interests to have utterly shifted

When approaching story cycles, we discover a reading task that includes negotiating sometimes tremendous gaps between stories where unifying elements are often absent and where the breaks may entail abrupt shifts in time, place, and perspective. If, as Wolfgang Iser points out in *The Act of Reading*, the function of the break between chapters in a novel is not separation so much as a tacit invitation to find the missing link, then this urge is magnified in the story cycle where unity and coherence within and among stories fundamentally reside within the unreadable gaps. The gaps between the stories are a space where the reader is especially responsible for generating significance. If we feel compelled solely by the urge to bridge these gaps between individual stories, however, the story cycle narrative itself confounds us by its resistance to such normative interpretation. Instead, we must *learn to read associatively*, looking for meaning in each discrete story which can add to the whole but which need not follow the same narrative rules as other pieces of the text. Yet it is this urge to "author" the elusive blank spaces and thus neatly connect all the stories that makes reading a story cycle feel at first foreign and disjointed, until we have freed ourselves from the impetus to organize and can allow the gaps to co-exist with the story.

V. CONCLUSION

The attractiveness in Iser's theory lies in his attempt to accommodate the broad spectrum of theoretical speculation and to integrate it within a total theory of reading (the theory of the aesthetic response) which will do justice to every component in the act of

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communication: author, text, reader, the world, the process of reception, the phenomenology of perception and reading, the dynamic nature of comprehension. [1] In view of this accomodation, 'indeterminacies' or 'gaps' or 'blanks' have a vital role in establising the link between the separate elements involved in the act of reading prose fiction.

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