Some Thoughts on Reading Wolfgang Iser's 'Interaction between Text and Reader' [1980]

Wolfgang Iser [1926- 2007] adopts a model of Transactional Reader-response—give and take between text and reader—and focusses on the reading process from a Phenomenological approach. Phenomenology was propounded by Husserl and applied to Literature by Roman Ingarden. The idea is that while reading a text [let us assume that it is a work of fiction] the reader concretizes the 'schematized aspects' already present in the text. In other words, in the tradition of Formalism or New Criticism, the text guides the reader by providing a blueprint to construct a 'virtual' text in his/her imagination. Reader-response criticism is opposed to Wimsatt and Beardley's notion of "Affective Fallacy" which dismisses consideration of the reader as a 'confusion between the poem and its results'. [Norton:1671]. I may illustrate with the help of children's drawing books where in order to draw a picture, the child is asked to join the dots in a numbered sequence. Now, remove the numbering, imagine new ways to join the dots, new pictures will emerge. In a work of fiction, according to Iser, on the level of the plot, happenings or textual segments that break off or take a different turn, are the dots we join in our imagination, each individually. Is then Reader-response a free-for-all? How does meaning emerge? Perhaps that is why Iser insists that reading is neither purely subjective or objective but somewhere in-between.

I move on to the essay in the syllabus, 'Interaction between Text and Reader' that summarizes the theoretical argument offered in Iser's *The Act of Reading* [1976, trans. 1978]. A thing to note is that Iser uses terms he finds elsewhere so that his writing seems to suffer from what Robert C. Holub calls 'terminological overload' [Holub:100]. In my attempt to summarize the essay as simply as possible, I'm breaking it up into four sections.

- Section I: Iser introduces the two poles of a literary work and how the work is 'virtual', he explains with the help of the psychology of social communication [Tavistock School] and develops the notion of the gap or blank in the text—

indeterminacy. It ends on p.1676 with 'Whenever the reader bridges the gaps, communication begins.'

- Section II: Iser explains further the nature of the 'blank' and various types of negation that result from the reading process. Discusses blank, vacancy, theme and background structures of reading, ends p. 1679, second paragraph.
- Section III: Illustrative references from Fielding's novel, *Tom Jones.* Ends on p.1680.
- Section IV: A summary and clarification of all he explains above.

Section I

The essay begins by referring to the Phenomenological theory of Art which considers that the work is created in the reader's consciousness through reading. Iser uses the notion of two poles [I think of the North and South Pole], the artistic pole which is the author's text and the aesthetic pole which is the realization accomplished by the reader. The reader sets the work ''in motion'' when he relates the different patterns and perspectives present in the text. So the interaction between the subject [reader] and the object [text] posits the work as virtual. Think of the globe and how we draw imaginary lines, the parallels and the meridians to map the space.
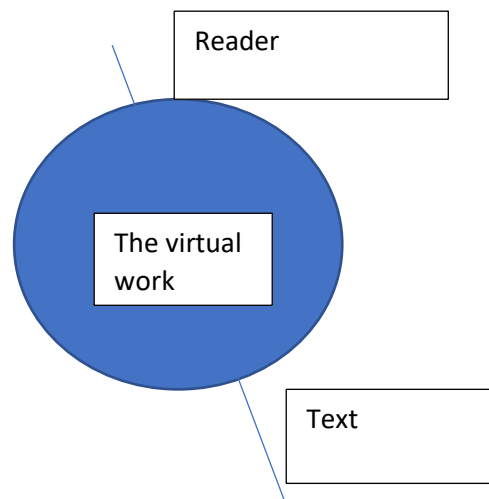
This aids in visually grasping the metaphor of the poles and helps us to move on to the next point Iser is making—in the case of the globe, there is an accepted method of drawing the lines or a code common to all geographers. But, in the case of reading a text, there is no common code because the imaginary lines are not fixed or determined—each reader may draw the structure in her individual way, even in new ways each time she reads the text. When you read *Feluda Stories* as a child and when you read as an adult, isn't there a difference in perception or appreciation?

Iser now turns to psychology to explain his ideas of interaction between text and reader with the help of social communication. Drawing upon the work of Laing, he writes of how in one-to-one communication, neither of us know what the other is experiencing. So we seem to be invisible or 'no-thing' to each other—but we build upon our perception of what the other might be thinking in order to fill in the nothing. Thus, in communication, interpretation is part of the interaction, 'pure' perception is not possible.

However, in reading there is no face-to-face as in social communication. There are two points to be grasped here: i) the reader cannot ask the text to verify her views; ii) there is no context or frame of reference governing the text-reader relationship. [A word here, Stanley Fish would not agree about the absence of the common frame of reference because the 'interpretive community' cannot be wished away.]

Anyway, Iser says that in social communication gaps arise because we cannot experience each other's thoughts and are filled according to a common situation and conventions. So the gaps function as 'a basic inducement to communication'. Similarly, gaps or a "fundamental asymmetry" between text and reader caused by the lack of a common situation gives rise to communication in the reading process. Iser now insists that in order for meaning to emerge, the text must control the reader's activity. This control is not specific as the response from the other person in social communication, nor it is determinate as a social code.

['Would you like an ice-cream cone?' Social code dictates you answer 'yes' or 'no'. But in a book, if the response is 'Only if it is mango flavoured', then you require prior knowledge of the respondent's history to understand the preference. But it could equally be, that in the book, set in Greenland, there is no mango-flavoured ice-cream, so the response is actually either wit or sarcasm. You might object, this is my inference, it is not stated in the query and response.] Iser uses a more complex example here to illustrate his point. He quotes

from Virginia Woolf's *The Common Reader*, an excerpt where Woolf writes of Jane Austen, '… She stimulates us to supply what is not there.' [Norton: 1676]. Thus, the trivial expands in the mind to become an experience of life. The unsaid in dialogue or what is missing, the gaps, expand while reading Austen's novels. The richness of the reading experience is not on the printed page, it is a product arising out of interaction between text and reader. Iser now theorizes what he has been outlining till now, 'Communication in literature… the reader bridges the gaps, communication begins.' [1676]. This is crucial to our understanding of the next section. Pay attention to the notion of explicit and implicit meaning and to the notion of mutual transformation.

Section II

Holub in *Reception Theory* [p.92] explains that in order to explain the "manner in which the text exerts control over the dialogue" in the communication between text and reader, Iser assigns the structure of "blanks" the "central regulatory function". Blanks are, according to Iser, the 'unseen joints' of the text, they indicate that the different segments and patterns of the text are to be connected, even though the text itself does not say so. When the textual perspectives have been linked, the blanks 'disappear'. Iser points to the segments on the level of the story or the plot. The thread of the plot can be suddenly broken off and continued in unexpected directions. He says that a narrative text has four main perspectives: i) of the narrator, ii) of the characters, iii) of the plot, iv) of the fictitious reader. The meaning emerges from intertwining the divisions between all these perspectives, for instance, the hero's may be set against that of the minor characters. [Darcy vs Wickham?] Iser says, as the reader's wandering viewpoint travels between all the textual segments, or we read back and forth, anticipate and retrospect in our imagination, a network of connections emerge due to the intertwining of perspectives.

Let me explain with the help of *Pride and Prejudice*. Remember the textual segment where Elizabeth visits Darcy's estate and hears his praise from the housekeeper? It opens up a new perspective by changing her prejudiced opinion of Darcy. So,

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┌─────────────────────────┐
│        Segment  C       │
└─────────────────────────┘
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Segment A   Segment B

Elizabeth's prejudice   Darcy's praise

Here, in the above representation of textual segments organized into a referential field, the empty space or blank is filled as soon as the new segment 'C' comes into being. When 'B' is preferred over 'A', it becomes the "theme" and the background against which the next segment takes on its actuality, here 'C'.

New Blank

Segment B   Segment C

Theme or background   Change in Elizabeth's perception

The new blank is conducive to further development of the Elizabeth-Darcy relationship.

Segment A is now a thematically vacant position, this marginal position is called a "vacancy".

Definition of Blank: Blanks refer to suspended connectivity in the text.

Definition of Vacancy: Vacancies refer to nonthematic segments within the referential field of the wandering viewpoint.   [Norton: 1679]

 Holub states: "The blanks and vacancies thus chart a course for reading a text by organizing the reader's participation with their structure of shifting positions. At the same time they compel the reader to complete the structure and thereby produce the aesthetic object." [Holub: 94]

Section III

[A note: Please read this portion of the essay carefully as it cannot be explained. It requires prior acquaintance with *Tom Jones*. I have already explained Iser's terms with the help of *Pride and Prejudice,* which I assume most of you have read.]

Section IV

Since here Iser summarizes the reading process involving blanks and ideation by the reader, I think a note on what he means by 'ideation' is required.

I am quoting Holub:

While we read, we are continuously and unconsciously constructing images… These images should be distinguished from perceptions we have while encountering empirical reality; for the image "transcends" the sensory… [Here Iser is drawing on the difference between the German words for perception and ideation.] … The former occurs only when an object is present to be perceived, while the latter presupposes the absence or non-existence of an object. Reading entails ideation because, aside from the marks on the page, the reader must bring forth or ideate the "object", usually thought of in terms of a world suggested by the "schematized aspects" of the text. Ideation, in other words, is an essential part of the creative imagination that ultimately produces an aesthetic object. [pp 90-91]

References

1. Textual references are to Iser's 'Interaction between Text and Reader' in the Norton edition [p 1670-1682]
2. Holub. Robert C. *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* [London and N.Y.: Methuen, 1984]

Please refer to any glossary [M.H. Abrams or the Bedford Glossary] for Phenomenology and to L.Tyson on critical theory for Reader-response criticism.

You may of course refer to any other critical material.
All best wishes.

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