

Roles of Interpretation in Wolfgang Iser's Theory of Reading and Systematic Poetics

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Abstract

Among the many areas of literary theory on which Iser has left his footprint one rarely hears any mention of one that nonetheless coincides with his rise to prominence – study of poetics. Although poetics vs. hermeneutics was one of the major theoretical themes of the late 1970s, Iser is better understood in the context of critical thought avoiding the strict opposition between the two. This article bridges the gap between Iser's theory of reading and study of poetics by delving into the writings of scholars like James M. Harding, and the theorists of poetics such as Stein Haugom Olsen and Roger Seamon, who emphasize that the endeavor of systematic poetics barely got off the ground before it had to reckon with the cyclical process of interpretation. However, Iser's description of hermeneutics suggests that the very distinction might be misconceived. Iser discusses the tradition spanning from the 18th Century thought of Friedrich Schleiermacher to the hermeneutic phenomenology of Paul Ricoeur in his final book, *The Range of Interpretation* (2000). According to Iser, this tradition has by default conceived of hermeneutics as a self-reflexive practice of coming to understand the conditions of understanding. Interpretation is seen as “the rigorous practice of discovering and elucidating the ramified conditionality of how understanding comes about” (*The Range of Interpretation* 41–42). Thus defined, hermeneutics emphasizes self-reflexivity and interest towards its own conditions. As my article will show, a similar self-reflective turn also characterizes Culler's version of structuralist poetics (1975), and prefigures what Seamon (1989) calls the «third phase of scientific poetics».

Keywords

Poetics, hermeneutics, Iser, interpretation, literary theory.

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1. Introduction

In his captivating story of how the reader of Henry James's “The Figure in the Carpet” becomes conscious of the tacit assumptions and historical norms shaping interpretation, Wolfgang Iser outlines a process that also describes certain movements within the study of literary poetics. By delving in turn into Iser's theory, his analytical practice, and theory of poetics, this essay attempts to give evidence for certain points of convergence between Iser's work and the latest vogue of Anglophone study of poetics, which underwent its trajectory of dominance and decline in the 1970s and 1980s in the American academia. More particularly, it argues two things: firstly, that contextualizing Iser within the movements or phases of poetics can enrich our understanding of the aims and scope of his work. Secondly, the essay argues that our view of poetics will be enhanced when juxtaposed with Iser's changing positions.

In addition, it should be assumed that Iser's reading of "The Figure in the Carpet" can serve as a practical example of how Iser's theory of reading is used in analysis. Usually Iser is seen alternatively in the context of phenomenological study of literature or reader-response criticism.¹ Here a more encompassing term «theory of reading» is preferred. This choice is pragmatic: the aim of this essay is not only to discuss Iser's theory but also to analyze his critical practice. Iser's theoretical underpinnings and their problems have been studied more extensively than any other aspect of his thinking. The pragmatic approach attempted here hopes to contribute to our view of Iser's work by juxtaposing his theory with his analyses of literary works. As Clifford Geertz famously argues, understanding «a science» may not be primarily a theoretical challenge – we must first and foremost «look at what the practitioners of it do» (Geertz 5).

2. Figuring the Carpet with Iser: A Story of Reading

According to Iser, the reader of Henry James's "The Figure in the Carpet" is from the outset invited to participate in the narrator's (whom Iser calls «the critic») scholarly quest for the meaning of the mysterious author Hugh Vereker's final novel. However, as Iser points out, ultimately the reader and the critic must part ways. The critic remains caught up in the search of the ultimate meaning and conclusive interpretation. He is tantalized by another critic's apparent discovery of Vereker's «general intention» – the true meaning of the work – and is finally left embittered as the rival critic takes the secret to his grave. According to Iser, however, this is not the reader's fate.

The change in fortunes comes about, Iser argues, when the other critic's discovery is also withheld from the reader. The reader has been «oriented» by the perspective of the narrator-critic, but this orientation is now challenged and foregrounded as a convention of reading. Iser writes:

This detachment is remarkable, in that normally the reader of fiction accepts the lines laid down for him by the narrator in the course of his «willing suspension of disbelief.» Here [the reader] must reject such a convention, for this is the only way he can begin to construe the meaning of the novel. (*The Act of Reading* 8)

The reader has to resist the impulse to accept the narrator's viewpoint, but this can only do this by becoming conscious of the conventionality of this impulse. To reject the perspective of the critic is, according to Iser, to read against one's own prejudices. This is anything but simple, but the reader is helped by the realization that it is precisely the critic's «perspective» that is responsible for withholding the other critic's discovery.²

¹ Iser rose to prominence in Anglo-American literary theory as a part of the first wave of reader-response theories in the mid-1970s. Yet it soon became clear that the various strands of reader-response would and should not converge to mark a unified critical or theoretical position (Tompkins ix). The influential volumes compiling contributions to reader-response or 'audience-oriented' criticism highlighted that the turn towards the reader was, above all, a shift in perspective that affected many areas of literary study (Suleiman, *The Reader in the Text* 3–4, 6).

² Arguably, this is true in two different senses of «perspective». One of them is the narratological one: the restriction of the narrative to the epistemological viewpoint of the narrator is responsible for withholding information about what other characters in the story think and experience. Therefore, not only does not the narrator understand how the other critic discovers the meaning of Vereker's novel, he also quite simply does not know what went through his head at the time of the discovery. The nar-

Iser then shows where this process must lead the reader:

The process then consists of the reader gradually realizing the inadequacy of the perspective offered him, and turning his attention more and more to that which he had up to now been taking for granted, and finally becoming aware of his own prejudices. The «willing suspension of disbelief» will then apply, not to the narrative framework set up by the author, but to those ideas that had hitherto oriented the reader himself. (8)

As soon as the reader makes the choice to treat the narrator as unreliable, another reading convention becomes noticeable: if the reader has thus far been oriented by the critic's viewpoint, (s)he is now to question the very procedures of meaning-seeking portrayed in the story. According to Iser, the story thematizes, in the critic's perspective, certain nineteenth-century norms of reading that are internalized to such a degree that, even today, they seem 'natural' to readers. The critic is seeking the truth about the text – a secret message, a philosophy, a view of life, or «at the very least some stylistic figure impregnated with meaning» (5). This is the reading convention that Iser's story of reading James most forcefully contends: that the meaning of the work is a message or a philosophy of life interpretable from the text.

But this is just one half of the story. There is another set of interpretive procedures thematized in the story. This side of the affair is represented by the other critic in the story, George Corvick, as well as the author Vereker himself, who attempts to enlighten the narrator-critic, although only in vaguest of terms. Unlike the narrator, the critic Corvick eventually seems to get the gist of Vereker's novel, but he is unable to articulate his discovery before being silenced by death. Yet of course this inarticulation is, in part, the point. The reason why the narrator-critic is unable to understand Vereker, not only in writing but also in person, is that he is seeking the access to meaning in the «givens» of the text. Vereker, on the other hand, insists: «My whole lucid effort gives him the clue – every page and line and letter. The thing's as concrete there as a bird in a cage, a bait on a hook, a piece of cheese in a mousetrap» (James, "The Figure in the Carpet" 368). Vereker's view of the literary text, Iser seems to say, is basically Iserian: the «whole» which Vereker refers to is only perceptible to a reader who understands that a text is produced by the reader, in interaction with the givens and the «blanks» of the text (*The Act of Reading* 9).

Indeed, Iser argues, during the reading process the reader must abandon the search for a definite meaning, and instead become a kind of meta-reader – a reader conscious of but also implicated in the interpretive procedures responsible for creation of meaning. While this process undergone in reading does not lead Iser to explicitly argue that «the

rator is the *locus* of what is in Gérard Genette's narratology called «internal focalization» (*Narrative discourse* 189). The second sense of «perspective», and probably the only one intended by Iser stems from his own phenomenology of reading. According to Iser, the text is never apprehended in total but within a «wandering viewpoint» – the reader's vantage on the textual perspectives (*Prospecting* 35; cfr. *The Act of Reading* 109). Perspectives are connected by the spots of indeterminacy which Iser names «blanks», and they are to be filled by the reader in such a way that makes the change of perspective understandable to the wandering viewpoint which is thus transformed (*Prospecting* 34–35). In "The Turn of the Screw" one such perspective is constituted by the narrating protagonist. New perspectives arise when the text allows us a glimpse into something the narrator does not comprehend. The perspectives (the narrator's, Vereker's, the critic Corvick's) interlink and interact, are introduced and superseded, and from them emerges the reader's «realization» of the text (*The Act of Reading* 33, 68).

thing» of a literary work is something other than the meaning, his way of using the word *meaning* emerges from this analysis as something highly unorthodox.³

Such a meaning must clearly be the product of an interaction between textual signals and the reader's acts of comprehension. And, equally clearly, the reader cannot detach himself from such an interaction; on the contrary, the activity simulated in him will link him to the text and induce him to create the conditions necessary for the effectiveness of that text. As text and reader thus merge into a single situation, the division between subject and object no longer applies, and it therefore follows that meaning is no longer an object to be defined, but is an effect to be experienced. (*The Act of Reading* 9–10)

The reading performed by Iser immediately strikes one as a brilliant interpretation. Arguably it also succeeds as a practical demonstration of Iser's theory of reading. Due to its emphasis on what the reader does and realizes in the process of reading, Iser's performance fulfills to a tee Jonathan Culler's (*On Deconstruction*) argument that interpretations are actually conceptualizable as «stories of reading.» According to Culler, an interpretation of a work can be seen as an account of what happens to the reader: «how various conventions and expectations are brought in to play, where particular connections and hypotheses are posited, how expectations are defeated or confirmed» (35). This is an apt description of Iser's reading as well.

It is also clear that Iser himself is here situated in a particular historical context of criticism, within a movement of reading, as it were. The book introducing itself with the story of what the reader of “The Figure in the Carpet” does and comes to realize is *The Act of Reading*, perhaps Iser's best known work. As will be shown below, the ideas it presents align with certain critical notions afoot in the field of poetics at the same time.

In the course of this essay we will move between theory of poetics, Iser's theory of reading, and Iser's analytical practice. In the following section, a brief look into the study of systematic poetics is taken, with focus on how poetics negotiated – or failed to negotiate – its relation to interpretation. In the subsequent sections, it will be argued that certain aspects of Iser's work can be contextualized fruitfully by looking into the problems surfacing in the study of poetics in the late 1970s and early 1980s. However, it will also be argued that some of Iser's ideas stand in interesting contrast to problems encountered in systematic poetics, and that our understanding of poetics could be enriched by a juxtaposition with Iser's theory of reading.

3. Systematic Poetics and the Problem of Interpretation

Poetics, conceived as a systematic study of literary canons, genres, or corpora – and, more contentiously, individual works – has been programmatically pursued at many junctures of literary history. What connects these attempts to «occidental poetics,» from one century to the next, is the pronounced engagement with structure, systematicity, and scientific thought of the time (Doležel 1–8). According to Roger Seamon, literary theory at large has been structured by a tension between «the effort to make criticism scientific and the resistance to that effort posed by the hermeneutic impulse» (“Poetics against It-

³ As James Harding points out, this is something that the American critiques of Iser sometimes failed to take into account. According to Harding, Iser equates meaning with the very process of the reader that his approach describes (42).

self' 294). Also in the twentieth century, this tension manifests in changing emphases and foci of study.

In the context of our discussion of Iser and poetics, it is especially important to ask how the problematic relationship of poetics and hermeneutics is seen in the structuralist era of poetics marked by the influence of linguistics-based models. This is the vogue of poetics temporally proximal to Iser's work, but one to which he rarely is linked. There are, of course, several good reasons for caution when discussing Iser in this context. One of these is the theoretical heritage of the Constance school approach to reception and hermeneutics. Hans Robert Jauss, for example, very deliberately distances his version of *Rezeptionästhetik* from linguistics (Kloepfer, "Escape into Reception" 51). While Iser does not share his compatriot's distaste for all things linguistic, it is obvious that textuality, in the structuralist sense, is neither the object of study or the domain of theory for Iser.⁴

However, as we trace the turns of poetics in the late twentieth century, the juxtaposition between Iser's approach(es) to literary study and systematic poetics with a structuralist background begins to seem less and less forced. We could argue that this is because the internal dynamics in poetics, as described by Seamon and others, gradually move poetics closer and closer to Iser's position. This argument requires us to take a closer look at the systematic poetics of the 1970s and 1980s.

As Seamon shows, in its latest heyday systematic poetics was not a unified endeavor with common goals and agreed-on methods. As widespread as the interest in poetics was, there was disagreement about many key issues, including the very purpose and scope of study. Additionally, the field was riddled with interesting ambiguities resulting from the linguistic models underlying the practice of studying texts. According to Seamon, however, what may be called the *first phase* of systematic poetics is largely unified in how the area of inquiry was defined by its difference to criticism and interpretation. Poetics does not compete with hermeneutics; it stands clearly apart from it because of its different aims and foci (Seamon 295).

The clearest indication of this difference might be the insistence that study of poetics concerned not particular works but the system of literature (e.g. Hrushovski; Barthes "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative" 237–39; Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*). This entailed finding the proper object of study and defining the «system» to be studied. If the object of study was not to be the work, traditionally the object of criticism and interpretation, it could not be the whole of language either. Roman Jakobson famously defined the mid-level object of study situated between language and a particular work as the «literariness» of literature ("On realism in art"). Although theoretical formulations were not uniform, in one form or another, this idea informs most approaches to poetics.

According to Benjamin Hrushovski, an operational delimitation of the study of poetics could be made through a distinction between theoretical and descriptive poetics. In this scheme of things, descriptive poetics is to the study of poetics what fieldwork is to other human and social sciences. In Hrushovski's poetics, theoretical hypotheses are to be falsifiable by the practical work applying theoretical concepts to description of textual corpora. Thorough scrutiny of literary works provides material, data and experimental evidence for theory to build on (Hrushovski xvi). The twofold task assigned to poetics

⁴ Iser is vehemently opposed to the idea that linguistics is a sufficient frame for literary theory, but he also engages with linguistics-based theories – for example in his discussion of the varieties of «implied» readers in theories of Michael Riffaterre and Stanley Fish (see e.g. *The Act of Reading* 30–32).

echoes the synthesis of rationalism and empiricism in Kant's metaphysics: fieldwork accumulates the perceptual data without which concepts remain empty, yet fieldwork produces nothing, remains blind, unless it relies on conceptual structures. The bipartite scientific practice also aligns with the Popperian ideal of scientific progress through the interplay of falsifiable theory and repeatable experiments.

Interpretation was considered an outlier to this duopoly. Hrushovski sees interpretation as a subfield that is still in its pre-scientific state and may only be legitimized as a part of systematic poetics after a rigorous development (xxiv). The thing to do with individual works, therefore, is not to interpret them but to describe them in sufficient detail at a relevant level. This diminished role of individual works is echoed in the early writings in French structuralist poetics (e. g. Todorov 31). The understanding of individual works achieved through description is instrumental rather than an end in itself. The task of poetics is still defined at the level of the system of literature.

However, the idea of the work as a system of its own is accepted in systematic poetics by transference. Work is a system of a different order, and can now be legitimately the object of systematic study in poetics. Seamon considers this as an augur of radical change in the endeavor of poetics – although one that is repeated in every iteration of scientific poetics. The *second phase* of systematic poetics is distinguished by this return of the work to the focus of study (Seamon 298–99). What makes this shift significant is not only the overturning of a formerly held stricture; this signals a change of fortunes for interpretation as well.

4. The Role of Hermeneutics in Iser's Theory of Reading

This problem of interpretation is the first context in which Iser's thinking productively compares to the enterprise of systematic poetics. In the first phase of poetics, consensus was against interpretation, sometimes on the grounds of its un-scientificity (cf. Todorov; Hrushovski), at other times for reasons more to do with the institution of criticism (e.g. Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* and "Interpretations"). Yet arguably interpretive readings have not been treated as the be-all and end-all of criticism, but equally, as a part of the practical application of literary theory. As Karin Littau writes, literary theorists frequently use readings – both their own and those of others – as an occasion from which to extrapolate a theory of reading (107). Indeed, as shown above, in his reading of James's "The Figure in the Carpet," Iser interprets the story in such a way that seems to recommend his own notion of reading as an interaction between the reader and the text.

It is, of course, utterly unsurprising that we should find Iser using his own interpretations of literary works to bolster his theoretical claims. This is very much business as usual in literary studies. Perhaps more interestingly, Iser's theory of reading seems to embody on a more fundamental level the dual drives of literary study identified by Seamon: on the one hand, the search for 'scientificity', and on the other, the resistance mounted by the hermeneutic impulse. As it has been well and duly documented, Iser's theory of reading builds on Roman Ingarden's theory of the phenomenology of a literary work, but is equally indebted to Gadamer's version of the hermeneutic circle (e.g. Holub; Alanko; Littau 108–11). These elements, however, are not as easily reconciled as Iser seems to think. This is also what many of Iser's commentators have pointed out.

Iser adopts elements from the Gadamerian hermeneutics because he wishes to avoid objectifying the text, as Ingarden's phenomenological approach seemed to do.⁵ Iser continually emphasizes that the focus of his approach is on the movement *between* the text and the reading mind. Text and reader are no longer the opposite sides of a subject-object divide but are defined together in a «situation» of interaction (*The Act of Reading* 9–10). The emphasis on in-betweenness and dialogicity points towards the influence of hermeneutics to Iser's thinking. As Outi Alanko points out, these ideas borrowed from hermeneutics are in equal measures supposed to safeguard the reader against the objectification. Yet it is undeniable that a kind of objectification takes place. In Iser's theory the reader is not the empirical reader but a «phenomenological» one whose wandering viewpoint shifts from one vantage to the next in accordance with the procession of «perspectives» offered by the text. Iser turns to phenomenology in order to maintain a certain scientific rigor: the phenomenological method supposedly allows for a bracketing of the idiosyncratic and empirical aspects of reading and reveals its intersubjective aspects (Alanko 57). As Karin Littau shows, conceptualizing the reader as a «transhistorical, transsubjective, and transcendental receptor» unites the various formulations of the reader: «informed (Fish), ideal (Culler), implied (Iser) or textualized (Barthes)» (Littau 107).

The failure of reconciliation between the scientific rigor of phenomenology and the dialogicity of hermeneutics has served as the punchline for several criticisms of Iser's theory. Even the most famous of them, the one offered by Stanley Fish, is understandable in the context of the final incompatibility of the scientific and hermeneutic impulses.⁶ In his review of *The Act of Reading* entitled “Why No One's Afraid of Wolfgang Iser,” Fish ostensibly takes issue with Iser's idea that it is possible to distinguish between the «given» features of texts and spots of indeterminacy spurring the reader into activity (Fish 5–7; see also Holub 101–06). According to Fish, this position is untenable: Iser must assume that there is a level of observation, «a place for a reader to stand,» where the given features of the text can be seen prior to any interpretation taking place. Fish counters that observation is always already an interpretation within a system of intelligibility, which makes certain features observable:

[T]he assigning of that interpretation is not something one does after seeing; it is the shape of seeing, and if seeing does not have this (interpretive) shape, it will have some other. Perception is never innocent of assumptions, and the assumptions within which it occurs will be responsible for the contours of what is perceived. The conclusion is the one I have reached before: there can be no category of the «given» if by given one means what is there before interpretation begins. (Fish 8)

The idea of no perception being presuppositionless is presented in a way that is highly reminiscent of Gadamerian hermeneutics (cf. Holub 41). This idea can also be found in many contexts. In philosophy of science, for instance, Thomas Kuhn takes a step towards hermeneutics by arguing that expectations inherent in theoretical «world views»

⁵ Robert Holub points out that Ingarden's insistence on focusing on the work as an object endeared his work to American New Critics like René Wellek, whose notion of «intrinsic» modes of criticism is indebted to Ingarden's views (Holub 23).

⁶ However, many scholars have maintained that Iser's critics have failed to address the theory «in its own terms.» This critique is frequently applied to the North American reception of Iser's writings, including Fish's review (Harding 40).

pre-structure observations: observation is «theory-laden» (Kaiser 78). A similar position has been taken in assessments of poetics as well.

In his discussion of systematic poetics, Stein Haugom Olsen argues that the scientific method of hypothesis and experiment builds on the assumption that structures and patterns described in poetics are inherent features of the text. This would mean that the *data* of literature can be observed empirically and objectively: «[s]cientific poetics accepts structural patterns as given; the semantic theory takes the given facts to be secondary meanings of phrases and words» (Olsen 339–40). The obvious counterpoise to this argument is one that questions the *givenness* of patterns and secondary meanings by arguing that these features are, in fact, acquired via interpretation. This is Fish's counterargument to Iser, as well as the line of questioning Olsen takes.

Olsen addresses the question of observable givens via the concept of relevance. According to Olsen, observation of literary data will always require predetermining the relevance of certain features or properties of literary texts; seeing literary work as structured requires a prescribed set of relevant structural categories. Olsen claims that no description of the work can rest on given structural features but requires an explication of «a method (interpretation) [sic] of assigning artistic relevance to parts of a work identified through this method» (349). Olsen, therefore, considers the descriptions of literary works in poetics as necessarily interpretive. This is due to the cyclical hermeneutic process always already prefiguring observations of «structural features».

This criticism against the faux-objectivity of poetics comes in many forms. Seamon provokes that interpretation is nothing less than the subversive secret at the heart of poetics (304). It seems clear that this necessary and substantial critique of systematic poetics is, *mutatis mutandis*, equivalent to the criticism leveled at Iser. Though perhaps making otherwise dissimilar arguments, Iser's critics have consistently pointed out that his phenomenological and hermeneutic impulses are finally at odds with each other.

5. Towards a Metahermeneutic Poetics – With Iser or Without?

According to Seamon, in the *third phase* of poetics the object of study changes yet again: «from the structural unity that underlies literature or literary works to the deep structure of interpretation itself» (Seamon 301). This shift can be seen in the proliferation of various turns towards the reader, some explicitly linked with study of poetics, others deliberately distancing themselves from it. Jonathan Culler's version of structuralist poetics is since its inception a reading-oriented enterprise, turning away from itemization of textual elements towards description of conventions and conditions of meaning-making (see e.g. Littau 111–12). Steven Mailloux puts the label «social critics» of those theorists who turn towards a study of conditions of meaning and conventions of reading (21–22). Various brands of reader-response criticism surfacing in the latter part of the 1970s can also be seen in the context.

Within Iser's oeuvre, too, we can see a critic becoming increasingly «social.» We can trace a movement from the individual textual analyses of *Implied Reader* (1974) to the phenomenology of reader response explored in *The Act of Reading* (1978) and revisited in *Prospecting* (1989). Thereafter Iser moves on to «literary anthropology.» *Prospecting* (1989) concludes by pointing to the direction of a broadly «anthropological» literary theory (*Prospecting* 263–65). Iser's subsequent works of literary anthropology together comprise an extended survey of the place of fiction, imagination, and interpretation in human cognition and culture. This survey is undertaken in *The Fictive and the Imaginary* (1993) and *The*

Range of Interpretation (published in 2000 but based on a series of lectures given in 1994). In his final book-length study, the textbook *How to Do Theory* (2006), Iser describes the general change in literary theory «from a semantics to a pragmatics of art, and from the-matics to operations of art» (8). The development of Iser's own thinking overlaps with this trajectory at several points.

However, although parallels between the phases of poetics and Iser's theoretical reorientations can be made, there are certain articulated concerns in Iser's work that put it subtly out of sync with the movements of poetics.⁷ One of these is the continuing emphasis on interpretation as a self-reflective process, while another one is the continuing emphasis on the historical norms and conventions that are understood as a result of this self-reflectivity.

These themes are salient throughout the reorientations in Iser's writing. We can already see it in *The Implied Reader* (1974), when Iser is still conspicuously quiet about hermeneutics and interpretation. He does, indeed, explicitly claim that his readings are *not* contributing to a specific theory of readerly «discovery» (xiii). Yet the aim of understanding is already there:

[T]he discovery concerns the functioning of our own faculties of perception. The reader is meant to become aware of the nature of these faculties, of his own tendency to link things together in consistent patterns, and indeed the whole thought process that constitutes his relations with the world outside himself. (xiv)

This view of interpretation recurs in Iser's writings. As we see in his reading of James's "The Figure in the Carpet," the pivotal moment of reading is that in which the reader has to doubt and become conscious of that which up to that point has been taken for granted – the historical norms of interpretation. Iser's theory of reading does not equate interpretation with recovery of meaning: the destiny of reading is not completion by interpretation, but, rather, continuation in a more encompassing sphere of understanding. This sphere envelops the possible meanings of the text, but also the conventions of reading involved. Further, this continuing process allows one to reflect on the procedures by which both the meaning and the conventions at work in its production are articulated and evaluated.

Ultimately, in what may be considered Iser's last contribution to his theory of the processes and functions of reading, this view is explicitly linked with hermeneutics. In *The Range of Interpretation* (2000), Iser puts forth that the continental tradition of modern hermeneutics has since Schleiermacher defined itself as a self-reflective practice of aiming to understand the conditions of understanding. Interpretation is seen as «the rigorous practice of discovering and elucidating the ramified conditionality of how understanding comes about.» In this view, hermeneutics is seen as a specific historical and generic variety of interpretation whose arrival marks «the stage at which interpretation becomes self-reflective» (41–42).

This persistent feature in Iser's thinking gives the process of becoming conscious of the historical norms and conventions of interpretation a key role in reading. Yet although this strand of thinking stems from hermeneutics, in practice, the procedures of analysis

⁷ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan discusses the main themes of Iser's work and their development (91). She shows how these themes undergo a process of «intensification, self-reflexivity, and expansion» as his work proceeds from the early phenomenological approach to literary anthropology (92).

cannot bear out this hermeneuticism. As Alanko argues, Iser's self-reflective reading requires an objectification and an awareness of the unconscious conventions shaping one's perception and thinking. Yet for Iser the text makes this objectification and awareness possible only by virtue of its difference from what is already taken for granted and internalized in perception and thinking. This is why the Iserian «meaning,» that always requires this self-reflection, resides not in the text but in its concretization by the reader. However, as Alanko shows, this means that the Iserian analyst should figure out the conventions and laws governing this concretization while the text is being concretized: the consciousness should be able to observe its object and itself simultaneously (Alanko 110–11). The view of interpretation as a self-reflective, hermeneutic, and yet somehow «rigorous» practice always seems to find trouble. Still, it is the final point at which we will compare Iser to poetics.

As we have seen above, Seamon identifies the third phase of poetics with a reorientation of the scientific ambition: while it was first directed at literature generally, it now addresses itself to interpretation (Seamon 301–02). However, a more fitting parallel between Iser's practice and poetics is found in a tendency, which Liesbeth Korthals Altes has called *metahermeneutic*. She is looking into the tradition of narrative poetics within the field of narrative studies, but the idea is more generally applicable to the internal dynamic of systematic poetics as described by Seamon. Yet the idea of metahermeneutic study, as Korthals Altes defines it, also contains an idea rarely articulated in any phase of poetics.

Korthals Altes posits that metahermeneutics studies presuppositions, procedures, aims, and claims implicitly shaping interpretive processes and conditions. Yet, according to Korthals Altes it is possible to see the metahermeneutic orientation itself as hermeneutic «in a general sense» and it is distinguished from interpretations of individual works by its higher degree of generality: «it can certainly concentrate on one particular text, but the focus then lies on reconstructing interpretive processes and conventions» (96). This is an interesting argument, as many others would argue otherwise. According to Richard Rorty, for instance, to ask «what are the conditions of possibility of...» is specifically a transcendental project attempting to find «non-causal, non-empirical, non-historical conditions» (210). Indeed, in many respects the metahermeneutic position in poetics is not unlike the *phenomenological* component in Iser's theory of reading. Since metahermeneutic validation proceeds «via reasoning and does not itself include empirical testing» (Korthals Altes 96), the understanding it describes is not that of an individual, empirical reader but akin to the intersubjective, bracketed experience of the «phenomenological» reader posited by Iser and many reader-response critics. As Littau remarks, the reader whose position these presuppositions, procedures, aims, and claims may describe, is always very much «the reader in theory» (107).

However, if we scrutinize seriously Korthals Altes's idea that metahermeneutics is broadly hermeneutic, then we might be able to examine critical practices like Iser's within the context of poetics. Iser, as we have seen, uses his own readings to support his theoretical claims which can be seen as metahermeneutic in Korthals Altes's sense. What remains to be done in this essay, therefore, is to discuss what this configuration of theory and interpretation might imply for procedures and results of analysis.

6. The Roles of Iser's Interpretations

We can now see the main difference between Seamon's *third phase* of systematic poetics and what is called above metahermeneutic poetics. It is once more the role given to or

denied of interpretation. In the *third phase*, proponents of poetics would often argue that interpretations are not the goal of literary analysis but should be taken as its data (Culler "Interpretations: Data or Goals?"). As Culler puts it, in earlier stages of systematic poetics the proliferation of interpretations may have seemed an obstacle to knowledge, but this could be rectified by making interpretation the object of knowledge (*The Pursuit of Signs* 48). As Seamon notes, this entails, again, that the role of an individual work diminishes. Poetics once more pulls itself up by its own bootstraps to an «Archimedean site where the scientific project can escape the magic spell that literature puts on readers, the spell of meaning that generates interpretation» (Seamon 302). This, according to Seamon, is where poetics is last seen standing (in 1989).

Yet Seamon describes a procedure that «each literary science adopts when it moves from theory to analysis,» or when a poetics becomes a hermeneutic. He calls the procedure alternatively «theming» and «thematizing.» It involves discovering themes in texts that are actually concepts from the theory being applied – hence, the theory «themes» the work (Seamon 301). According to Culler, any critical practice prefers concepts, which «can be and are treated as themes» (*On Deconstruction* 212). However, Seamon's assessment of this strategy of analysis is more damning: this strategy merely «allows the reader to draw the conclusion that what has been 'discovered' validates the method and constitutes support for the [...] theory» (Seamon 301).

It seems that this procedural description applies to Iser insofar as many of his readings – especially those in his first books – seek thematizations of reading in literary works, which then support theoretical arguments about reading. The interpretation of "The Figure in the Carpet" is one of Iser's best implementations of this strategy, but there are others. Certain novels seem to be made into emblems of certain aspects of Iser's theory, and these are also the novels to which Iser returns over and over again in his analyses. Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* teaches the reader how to adopt several successive viewpoints, and does this with the help of the authorial narrator. *Vanity Fair* requires the reader to question the viewpoints offered by the narrator and to learn to read the blanks between the offered perspectives (Iser, *The Implied Reader* 112–13). The kaleidoscopic *Ulysses* exemplifies the reader's grappling with a wild multiplication of indeterminacies while requiring her to master everything she has learned from every other book – or at least those in Iser's canon (*The Implied Reader* 225–27; cf. *Prospecting* 131–33). In this history novels gradually become assemblages of blanks, and the high modernist moment in literary history also marks the place in which literary theory must become reader-oriented (*Prospecting* 134–36).

Although Iser presents this as a historical development, Iser's readings, curiously enough, also present a kind of synchronic image of his theory of reading, an exploded view of the apparatus: the ideas of wandering viewpoint, the blank, or the multiplication of blanks all find an emblematic companion piece in a classic novel.

This makes one wonder whether the phases of poetics, as described by Seamon, could also be seen as something one can pass through in a single analysis. Arguably, Seamon does not posit a historical development in his study, either. The identification of the three «phases» of poetics does not entail a historical succession, although something resembling a succession inevitably takes place (cfr. Seamon 294, 303). Rather, Seamon describes an internal dialectic within poetics. According to Seamon, the question of interpretation is bound to arise because it is always already there: the hermeneutic impulse prefigures the entire endeavor of literary study (294).

It is quite possible that the present analysis of Iser's theory and practice is itself participating in a kind of metahermeneutic thrust of poetics. If we characterize this phase as a practice that combines a research interest in conventions and procedures of interpretation with the practice of textual interpretations or analyses, it seems that at least in narrative studies this notion seems to have been periodically entertained. We can find it in James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz's idea of «theorypractice» and in Brian McHale's radical (more radical than he suggests, at any rate) reconceptualization of descriptive poetics (see Phelan and Rabinowitz 5–14; McHale). Seamon does not consider distinguishing such a phase necessary, but it is clear that «thematizing» readings or readings appealing to an emblematic status of certain works, stand apart from his third phase – precisely by virtue of interpretation of literary works making a re-entry into study of conventions, readerly competences, and historical norms of interpretation. To characterize the practice in this stage as hermeneutic «in a general sense,» as Korthals Altes does, may be as apt as it is unsatisfactory. This is where Iser's theory of reading and poetics coming to terms with hermeneutics may overlap again: in a circular practice of theory of reading that cannot help but count interpretation as one of its objects as well as one of its protocols.

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