Ben De Bruyn
Wolfgang Iser

Companions to Contemporary German Culture

Edited by
Michael Eskin · Karen Leeder · Christopher Young

Volume 1

Ben De Bruyn

Wolfgang Iser

A Companion

DE GRUYTER

ISBN 978-3-11-024551-6
e-ISBN 978-3-11-024552-3
ISSN 2193-9659

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A CIP catalogue record for this book has been applied for at the
Library of Congress

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the internet at http://dnb-d.nb.de

© 2012 Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co.KG, Berlin/Boston
Cover illustration: Universitätsarchiv Konstanz (Photographer: Heinz Finke, approx. 1967)
Printing: Hubert & Co. KG, Tübingen
∞ Printed on acid free paper
Printed in Germany

www.degruyter.com

for Liesbeth and Roselien,
my closed figures in the waste without form

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments

When I first encountered an essay by Wolfgang Iser, as a student in late 2003, I did not understand a word he was saying. As you are now reading my book about this enigmatic theorist, it will be obvious that I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to many people who have helped me make sense of his writings. I would especially like to thank Dirk De Geest, Jan Baetens, Jürgen Pieters, Pieter Verstraeten, Hilde Moors, Arne De Winde, Pieter Vermeulen and Winfried Fluck for reading parts of the book and offering helpful words of advice and even more helpful words of criticism. Although they did not read the manuscript, I am equally grateful to Wolfgang Iser, Dieter Henrich, Brook Thomas, Gabriele Schwab, Steven Mailloux, Alexander Gelley, Jackie Dooley, Richard van Oort, Anselm Haverkamp and the entire MDRN-group at Leuven University for helping me with practical issues, and stimulating me to push my analysis further. I have also learned many things from the students in my seminars on reception theory in Leuven and Nijmegen, the most important of which is undoubtedly the realization that I still have many things to learn about the act of reading. In practical terms, the Fund for Scientific Research (FWO) provided the financial backing which allowed me to study Iser's work in such detail. And the scrupulous proofreading of the series editors, especially Christopher Young, and his assistant, Charlotte Lee, as well as the intellectual support of Heiko Hartmann, Manuela Gerlof and Susanne Mang at Walter de Gruyter were decisive in turning this project into a book that other readers might actually be able to read. Apart from these direct sources of advice and support, I would also like to express my sincere thanks to those who have helped me in more indirect ways: Jens, Iris and Kara, my parents Jan and Diane and my parents-in-law Agnes and Miel, my grandparents Désiré and Mina and Victor and Anna, and my close friends Ben, Jan, Paul, Alexander and Bart. My last and most heartfelt thanks go to my wife, Liesbeth, and my daughter Roselien. To borrow a phrase from Beckett, one of Iser's favourite writers, you are truly my closed figures in a huge waste without further form.

Introduction

The subject of this book is the literary theory and criticism of Wolfgang Iser (1926–2007), a German scholar whose academic fame originates in the reader-oriented approach to literature which he pioneered in the 1970s. Together with his colleagues from the newly established university of Constance, Iser developed a method and theory of reading that proved highly influential. For his 'reception theory' and associated notions such as 'indeterminacy' and 'the implied reader' resonated with similar developments in other countries, most notably the US, and ensured that his publications had a wide audience.

Despite the unquestioned importance of Iser's theoretical reflections, they have never been the subject of a comprehensive study. Scholars including Winfried Fluck and Brook Thomas have noted that his thought is broader and more up-to-date than the continued reference to the work of the seventies might suggest.[1] However, these observations have not led to a detailed, book-length analysis of Iser's multifaceted theory. The similarities and differences between the various phases of his theoretical project have, therefore, not been adequately described. This is unfortunate, because his writings, especially when read in isolation, often appear impenetrable. As his translator, among others, has noted, Iser's theory explores processes that are important but also defy verbal expression: 'the "somethings" that take place between text and reader, that emerge from the interaction, that drive us to embrace fictions, that trigger, modify, transform our responses'.[2] Considering his publications as a whole helps to dispel some of this confusion. In respect of his literary criticism, many commentators have labeled Iser a modernist, because of his lifelong interest in T.S. Eliot, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, and have therefore ignored other aspects of his writings. Other critics, by contrast, have argued that Iser's theory not only sheds light on twentieth-century literature but also illuminates crucial aspects of Renaissance and Enlightenment culture. But again, these isolated remarks have not been developed in a systematic fashion. This book fills in these gaps by analyzing and comparing the different aspects of Iser's literary theory and criticism in detail, and presents us with an alternative Iser, one that may seem new to students and scholars of literary theory. As I will show, his oeuvre ultimately advances a systematic reflection on modernity, meaning and humanity, as well as on the

1 See Winfried Fluck, 'The Search for Distance. Negation and Negativity in Wolfgang Iser's Literary Theory', *New Literary History*, 31.1 (2000), 175–210; Brook Thomas, '*The Fictive and the Imaginary*. *Charting Literary Anthropology*, or, What's Literature Have to Do with It?', *American Literary History*, 20.3 (2008), 622–31.

2 David Henry Wilson, 'Working with Wolfgang', *Comparative Critical Studies*, 1.1–2 (2004), 19–25 (p. 20).

way these phenomena intersect in the novel, a literary form which throughout history has enabled its readers to imagine other realities.

As I have noted, Iser's work is a particular form of literary theory. The question of what 'literary theory' means is a complex one, and I will not be able to address it fully here. Instead, let me briefly recapitulate four ways of thinking about the theoretical study of literature that are relevant to my approach. First, René Wellek and Austin Warren famously argue that literary theory refers to 'the study of the principles of literature', whereas literary criticism refers to 'studies of concrete works of art'.[3] Literary theory is the study of general principles, literary criticism that of specific works. Although Iser's work actually straddles both disciplines, my book (notwithstanding its forays into Anglophone literary criticism) will focus more on general questions than on those which relate to a specific work. Second, Antoine Compagnon, inspired by the use of the term in the 1960s and 1970s, claims that literary theory denotes a sort of counter-discourse, which challenges the premises of traditional literary criticism, including those of Wellek and Warren. Targeting received ideas about literature, '[t]heory is opposed to common sense'.[4] According to this definition, the literary theorist does not study the general principles of literature, but criticizes the presuppositions that plague the common reader as well as the traditional professor of literature. In line with this definition, both Iser's work and this book aim to criticize, or at least nuance, certain literary prejudices.

Two other proposals offer further clarification, even though they do not use the term 'literary theory'. Mieke Bal argues that research in the humanities 'must seek its heuristic and methodological basis in *concepts* rather than *methods*'.[5] Bal describes her own project as 'cultural analysis', and emphasizes its interdisciplinary rather than literary character; but nonetheless, her remarks may be used to develop another definition of literary theory, in which it does not function as a methodological framework, but as a sustained attempt to clarify and revitalize the words and concepts – these 'miniature theories'[6] – used by literary critics and ordinary readers alike. In this spirit, this book sees Iser's oeuvre as a profound and sustained reflection on the notions of life, the novel, aesthetics, myth, modernity, negation, fiction, culture and theory itself. Finally, Peter Lamarque distances himself from the counter-intuitive literary theory à la Compagnon, and

3 René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (London: Peregrine Books, 1968 [1949]), p. 39.

4 Antoine Compagnon, *Literature, Theory, and Common Sense*, trans. by Carol Cosman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004 [1998]), p. 9.

5 Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities. A Rough Guide* (London: University of Toronto Press, 2002), p. 5.

6 Ibid., p. 22.

promotes the 'philosophy of literature', a branch of aesthetics that subjects general questions about 'critical practice and [...] the special features of reading literature as literature' to lucid conceptual analysis.[7] In a similar fashion, this book strives to give an accessible analysis of the conceptual issues dealt with by Iser. These different – but, to my mind, not necessarily incompatible – ways of thinking about the theoretical study of literature clarify both what is at stake in Iser's work and the aims of this book, which seeks to describe it. Specific literary works will play an important role, but the principal aim is to nuance literary prejudices – including those of Iser – through a lucid analysis of general principles and important concepts.

Each of the following chapters adopts a roughly similar structure. They all focus on the theoretical argument of a specific book or a related set of books by Iser, supplemented by related passages from smaller essays or more literary-critical publications. My analysis is originally based on the German versions of his works, as their chronology and formulation sometimes differ from that of the official English translations. Iser's study of Walter Pater was translated in the 1980s, for instance, but was originally published in German in 1960. The German table of contents of Iser's book on Shakespeare contains the phrase 'Ordnungsschwund und Politik' [Politics and Loss of Order] – an explicit reference to the work of philosopher Hans Blumenberg –, whereas its English counterpart substitutes the much less specific 'Manipulation of the World Order'. In many other cases as well, important information is lost if we do not start out from the German versions of Iser's books, even though he collaborated on and authorized their translations in English.[8] For ease of comprehension and reference, however, I will quote from the more easily accessible English translations where they are available and supply my own version where they are not, or a modified version where they are not satisfactory (for long quotations, I have included the original German versions in the footnotes).

To contextualize these German books, each chapter also begins with a brief analysis of their reception or the institutional setting in which they were produced. While neither aspect is discussed at length here (a detailed study of Iser's reception alone would require a book of its own), it is nonetheless important to touch on the reception of different parts of his theory by other critics, and on how his books originated within particular institutional settings or debates. Furthermore, by tracing conceptual similarities and differences with other thinkers, we are not only able to place Iser's thought in context, but also to pinpoint its specific contribution to literary studies. A good example is the comparison with Ro-

7 Peter Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), p. 11.

8 For a candid account of Iser's collaboration with his translator, see Wilson, 'Working with Wolfgang'.

ger Caillois in Chapter 4, which clearly reveals the aesthetic agenda behind Iser's literary anthropology. The selection of complementary thinkers referred to in this study is obviously limited, and other choices would certainly have been possible. Exploring each of Iser's intertexts in detail would be a massive and overly complex undertaking, however, which would confuse rather than clarify his argument. Hence, this book draws attention to those links which are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of Iser, including both familiar connections – Booth, Ingarden – as well as equally important but more unexpected links – Kierkegaard, Blumenberg, Caillois, Kermode, Hofstadter.

Each of these five chapters also has a more practical component. My analyses always conclude with a brief example drawn from contemporary literature, in order to demonstrate the practical and continued relevance of Iser's abstract theoretical insights. I have chosen to focus exclusively on novels (albeit novels from different subgenres, including the contemporary novel of manners, the historical novel, the post-colonial novel, the fantasy novel and, briefly, the non-fiction novel) because this was Iser's main research area, and because I feel that the work of extrapolating his insights to other cultural practices (theatre, film, comic books, videogames) merits a separate study. Even though I have limited myself to a select number of examples, it goes without saying that my brief discussions of these novels cannot do full justice to the works concerned. Since my chief concern is Iser's theory, I will only discuss those aspects of the texts in question that shed light on his argument, and must neglect their other features. Given that literary theory does not deliver ready-made reading methods, but simply provides us with concepts which illuminate particular textual structures, these examples merely show what happens when we juxtapose Iser's ideas with contemporary texts. They are meant as illustrations, in other words, not as fully-fledged analyses or blueprints for a methodology.

My determination to demonstrate the continued relevance of Iser's insights should not be misunderstood either. Even though I am convinced that his work is more fruitful than most critics assume, I do not, of course, follow his every word unquestioningly. Rather, this book aspires to a sort of 'critical charity', to modify an idea from *The Range of Interpretation*. I read Iser's work with W.V.O. Quine's 'principle of charity' in mind – which states that you should interpret the speaker's statements in the most rational and truthful manner possible – but still accept that certain parts of his theory are flawed and problematic. In addition to highlighting the practical potential of Iser's insights, each of my chapters therefore identifies some of their problems.

Moreover, each chapter discusses a theme or concept central to Iser's oeuvre by addressing the period in which it was most prominent. There are two methodological issues here. First, as many of Iser's themes and concepts recur throughout his oeuvre and are conceptually related, the student of his work is

faced with the problems of homonymy and synonymy. If Iser uses the same term in different phases of his career, can we assume that these terms have the same meaning? When his late publication *The Range of Interpretation* refers to 'life', for instance, are we allowed to think of the notion of 'life' from his first book *Die Weltanschauung Henry Fieldings* [*The Worldview of Henry Fielding*]? Conversely, when confronted with the different phases and notions of his work, the question arises whether notions such as the aesthetic, negativity, the imaginary and translatability are truly different, or at least partly synonymous. The only adequate way to resolve this issue, I think, is to pay careful attention to the nature and function of these terms within their different contexts. A related problem is the inevitable tension between continuity and change, similarity and difference in his thinking. Read in the light of his entire oeuvre, Iser's later writings often seem to return to earlier ideas, and earlier works frequently appear to anticipate later reflections. At times, I will therefore deviate from the linear trajectory of my narrative, working both proleptically and analeptically. To put it in an Iser-like fashion, we might say that this book first evokes a chronological narrative and then revokes it by highlighting the recurrence of certain concepts and themes. We should bear in mind, however, that such an approach lends a consistency to this body of writings that is undoubtedly more a construct than a reality.

To conclude this introduction, let me briefly survey the five chapters of the book. Chapter 1, 'Comic and Aesthetic Novels', sketches Iser's early academic career and the beginnings of his theory, with particular reference to his two dissertations. As I will demonstrate, Iser's PhD thesis, *Die Weltanschauung Henry Fieldings* (1952), draws on the 'anthropological' typologies of the *Geistesgeschichte* movement to analyze the different comic strategies in Fielding's work. Paying special attention to the novel, Iser's account is clearly shaped by Georg Lukács's account of this quintessentially modern genre. In his *Habilitation*, *Walter Pater. Die Autonomie des Ästhetischen* [later translated as *Walter Pater. The Aesthetic Moment*] (1960), Iser discusses the aestheticist novels and essays of Walter Pater on the basis of Sören Kierkegaard's proto-existentialist work *Either/Or* (1843). As we shall see, this discussion culminates in Iser's early account of the aesthetic state, an artistically fruitful but morally problematic condition that remains a central concern in much of his later thinking. Chapter 2, 'Montage and Modernity' expounds the view of history and modernity behind *Der implizite Leser* [*The Implied Reader*] (1972) by analyzing Iser's related contributions to the early *Poetik und Hermeneutik* conferences, looking closely at their accounts of montage, myth and metaphor. The chapter goes on to explore his analysis of Shakespeare's history plays and their evocation of modern meaning and politics in *Shakespeares Historien* [later translated as *Staging Politics*] (1988). Both his contributions to these conferences and his work on Shakespeare reveal the importance of Hans Blumenberg's thought for Iser's theory, and call into question

the frequent claim that he shows little or no interest in questions of history. Chapter 3, 'The Phenomenology of Reading', offers a detailed examination of Iser's *Der Akt des Lesens* [*The Act of Reading*] (1976), the book that truly launched his prodigious career as a theorist. By comparing it with Roman Ingarden's related work on the structure and reading of the literary work, this chapter revisits important questions concerning the nature of literary fiction, the role of the reader's imagination, the temporal character of reading, and the artistic uses of indeterminacy and negation. Chapter 4, 'Fictions, Roles and Games', unfolds the 'literary anthropology' hinted at in the transitional work *Prospecting* (1989) and fully explored in *Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre* [*The Fictive and the Imaginary*] (1991). My reading explains the remarkable sections on pastoral fiction and modern epistemology in the latter work, and examines Iser's return to the topics of fiction, imagination and reading, as well as his turn to notions such as the imaginary, role-playing and games. Chapter 5, 'The Recursions of Culture', concludes my quasi-chronological overview by analyzing Iser's final studies, *The Range of Interpretation* (2000) and *How to Do Theory* (2006). In these highly self-reflexive works, Iser considers the nature of literary interpretation and theory, two practices in which he himself had been engaged for much of his academic career. Implicitly, these books also claim that the recursive procedures of literary reading function as a model for a more dynamic account of culture and a more open-minded form of intercultural exchange. Together, they broaden the range of Iser's reflections further, for his insights on translation and feedback prove relevant to all forms of human discourse, despite their roots in literary reading and novelistic forms.

By discussing the different phases of Iser's theory in fairly self-contained chapters we risk losing sight of their underlying similarities. In his overview of ancient Greek and Roman civilizations, *The Classical World* (2005), Robin Lane Fox struggles with a similar problem, albeit one significantly larger in scope. Rather than write isolated chapters on topics such as gender and work in classical antiquity, Fox says, he chose to concentrate on the shifting shapes of three fundamental themes that were in the minds of contemporary people, namely 'freedom, justice and luxury'.[9] He feels that giving details of the changing connotations and functions of these three concepts helps him avoid reducing the different periods of classical antiquity to a false unity. For similar reasons, my book not only explains the different phases of Iser's theory in isolation, but also identifies three fundamental issues of its own, which return in different guises throughout his work. In the final analysis, his various publications introduce different ways of thinking about *modernity*, *meaning* and *humanity*. As the following

9 Robin Lane Fox, *The Classical World. An Epic History from Homer to Hadrian* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), p. 7.

chapters show, his work on the novel, literary history, the reading process, literary anthropology and cultural recursion invariably underscores the productive nature of the modern age, the semantic potential of indeterminate literary texts, and the dynamic character of human beings. By sounding out the changing connotations of these related concepts, my study simultaneously identifies the terminological and conceptual differences between the various phases of his theoretical reflection. Hence, this book offers both an introduction to and a new interpretation of Germany's leading literary theorist of the last forty years.

Chapter 1.
Comic and Aesthetic Novels

> I say certain things because they sound better than other things I could have said.[1]

On 24 January 1976, Wolfgang Iser delivered his inaugural address to the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences. The lecture took place between the publication of *Der implizite Leser* [*The Implied Reader*] (1972) and *Der Akt des Lesens* [*The Act of Reading*] (1976), the two studies that propelled him to international attention; and Iser used the opportunity both to take stock of the past and to map out a course for the future. In line with his intrinsic 'need for distance [*Bedürfnis nach Distanz*]', the lecture identifies his various attempts at putting the past behind him.[2] The first impulse he recalls is the desire to distance himself from the world of his loving but commercially minded parents. In the hope that it would provide him with a more satisfactory direction, Iser turned to literature. As German culture was tainted for him by the war, he devoted himself to foreign literatures, especially modernist British writing. At that time, he continues, the study of these works was regarded with suspicion in the academic world. The blithe restoration of German universities after the war had detrimental effects, as it cut students off from modern literary practice as well as important scientific trends.[3] Students increasingly demanded courses on structuralism and psychoanalysis, but these were summarily rejected by the retrograde academic authorities, who still favoured an approach to literature steeped in historical detail. Confronted with this situation, Iser says, he had no choice but to become an autodidact, relentlessly searching for answers in the related disciplines of philosophy and psychology, primarily in the work of Wilhelm Dilthey, Eduard Spranger and Karl Jaspers. Teaching assignments in other countries also provided a valuable antidote to intellectual provincialism in Germany, as did the experimentation that was typical of the newly founded University of Constance. In this account, Iser evidently stylizes himself as a revolutionary figure, who broke with stale traditions and single-handedly inaugurated a radically new perspective on literature.

The Heidelberg lecture gives a seductive account of Iser's origins, and indeed of his entire project, as an ongoing 'search for distance' from the stifling ideologies of the German past. This search manifested itself, as Winfried Fluck has ob-

---

1 Juli Zeh, *Spieltrieb* (Frankfurt a. M.: Schöffling, 2004), p. 491.

2 Wolfgang Iser, 'Antrittsrede Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften', *Jahrbuch der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften für das Jahr 1976* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1977), pp. 27–31 (p. 27).

3 See ibid., p. 28.

served, in Iser's focus on literature, an academic pursuit which was diametrically opposed to the contemporary self-definition of *Anglistik*, which at that point defined itself principally as a form of historical linguistics. According to Fluck, Iser's doctoral supervisor Hermann Martin Flasdieck 'was strictly a linguist and did not hide his distaste for the "unscientific" nature of literary studies'.[4] Taking his cue from the Heidelberg address, Fluck's account stresses the novelty of Iser's project. This is strikingly apt, not only because Iser is considered an advocate of modernist innovation, but also because his theory may be seen as a consistent attempt to explicate the emergence of novelty. Time and again, his work attests to his fascination with the sudden appearance of something which cannot be reduced to what went before. Yet, paradoxically, Iser's theory also warns us that radically new beginnings are impossible, innovation always emerging out of tradition rather than *ex nihilo*. What is more, he argues that beginnings are inevitably inaccessible and can only be known through our potentially misleading imaginings. These reflections suggest that we should be wary about any narrative of origins. In the present case, further analysis shows that Iser's early work was not as innovative as his lecture leads us to believe, nor was his relationship with Flasdieck wholly antagonistic. Iser explicitly thanks his supervisor for his methodological suggestions in the preface to *Die Weltanschauung Henry Fieldings* [*The Worldview of Henry Fielding*] (1952), and the obituary he wrote for his former supervisor reveals that Flasdieck was not opposed to the study of literature. He may have been a linguist first and foremost, but that did not stop him from wanting to transcend the increasing sub-specialization within the academic study of language and literature by advocating a form of 'philology' that integrated 'linguistics and literary studies'.[5] If we want a more nuanced picture of Iser's origins, we should investigate this connection with Flasdieck in more detail.

Flasdieck's essay *Kunstwerk und Gesellschaft* [*Artwork and Society*] (1948) exposes the similarities and differences between himself and Iser. This manifesto outlines a literary-critical programme which aimed to solve the endemic methodological and ethical problems of the post-war years. Focusing on British literature, Flasdieck set out to analyze the influence of social context on the creation and reception of works of literature, arguing that, just as the wide range of possibilities theoretically available to the artist is narrowed down by his specific social position, the reception of a work is determined by the audience its themes are likely to garner.[6] Flasdieck clearly feels that the reception of literature is as

4 Winfried Fluck, 'The Search for Distance: Negation and Negativity in Wolfgang Iser's Literary Theory', *New Literary History*, 31.1 (2000), 175–210 (p. 202).

5 Wolfgang Iser, 'Nachruf auf Hermann M. Flasdieck', *Anglia*, 80.1–2 (1962), 1–8 (p. 4).

6 Flasdieck's sociological approach to literature was shaped by the work of Levin Ludwig Schücking, who developed an early version of the reception history for which Iser's colleague

important in this respect as its production, and therefore asserts that the proper approach has to take the *reader* into account; the study of the history of works [*Werkgeschichte*] should be complemented by the history of their effects [*Wirkungsgeschichte*].[7] In his view, knowing about the contemporary and subsequent reception makes it easier to understand a past artefact. The manifesto develops the implications of this socio-historical approach to literature, tracing a genealogy of English literature which is underpinned by a rather crude opposition between 'aristocratic' and 'democratic' literature. This genealogy is nevertheless interesting for our purposes because it mentions many of the authors later discussed by Iser, notably Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Bunyan, Fielding. It also devotes attention to the novel – the early manifestations of which provide, to Flasdieck's mind, an exceptional illustration of the sociological factors which determine the position of artworks –, and even hints at the literary importance of film.

In the rest of his essay, Flasdieck reviews various contemporary methods and their implied ethics. He discards narrowly positivistic and sociological theories, such as the Marxist theorem of base and superstructure (with which Iser would later also take issue), on the grounds that they reduce individuals to mere products of their environment and contribute to the erosion of values, potentially even to the emergence of totalitarianism. Flasdieck believes that *Geistesgeschichte* and existentialism lead to the same problems, but nevertheless retains some of their insights. The manifesto mentions the 'either/or' opposition introduced by the proto-existentialist philosopher Kierkegaard; and Flasdieck is not unappreciative of the views of Dilthey and Spranger either, using the term *Weltanschauung* and pointing out the complex and mutable character of life [*Leben*], an argument I will return to later.[8] Nor does he completely reject the idea of a *Zeitgeist*, at least if we take into account the overlap between different eras and the multifaceted nature of national cultures. But ultimately, Flasdieck subscribes to a nuanced sociological approach, which, to his mind, is uniquely able to avert the methodological and ethical confusion of post-war Europe: for it successfully combines a sense of historical relativism with an appreciation of the lasting value embedded in certain ideas and works. Only thus, he feels, can the post-war university be safeguarded from the pernicious threat of 'politiciza-

---

Hans Robert Jauß would later become famous. In this respect, see Wilhelm Voßkamp, 'Literatursoziologie: Eine Alternative zur Geistesgeschichte? "Sozialliterarische Methoden" in den ersten Jahrzehnten des 20. Jahrhunderts', in *Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte 1910 bis 1925*, ed. by Christoph König and Eberhard Lämmert (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1993), 291–303 (p. 295).

7 Hermann Martin Flasdieck, *Kunstwerk und Gesellschaft. Eine Betrachtung über den Wissenschaftsgedanken der Literaturgeschichtsschreibung* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1948), p. 27.

8 See ibid., p. 13.

tion'.[9] Academics, Flasdieck seems to conclude, should maintain their *search for distance*. Whether or not this was an adequate solution to the post-war situation, it sounds remarkably like Iser's account of his own project.[10]

Despite claims to the contrary in the 1976 Heidelberg lecture, therefore, Flasdieck's importance for Iser's development should not be underestimated. This is not to say that Iser and Flasdieck are of one accord.[11] There are significant differences between their approaches: although he retains some of their insights, Flasdieck believes that Dilthey and Kierkegaard do not offer any real solutions, and also that positive facts and sociological positions are crucial to any understanding of literature. The latter claims are nuanced, if not rejected outright, in the prefaces to Iser's dissertation and *Habilitation*, where he voices his preference for a *hermeneutic* perspective over the narrow gathering of facts and the reduction of literary issues to sociological concerns. Moreover, Flasdieck pays no attention to the modernist literature which so fascinated his famous student. Iser's early work is not a mere repetition of older methods then, but neither is it the revolution which his Heidelberg address implies. In these writings, Iser's preferences may differ from those of his supervisor, but they can still be situated in the same broad field of methodological options (*Geistesgeschichte*, existentialism, positivism, sociology). This conclusion suggests that the innovative phase of Iser's work should be situated in the 1960s and 1970s, rather than the 1950s, and that this innovation may perhaps be understood as a reaction to the older methodological traditions in which he himself was raised and which he adopted in his earliest publications.

To further pinpoint Iser's early thoughts on method as well as on meaning, humanity and modernity, I will now turn to *Die Weltanschauung Henry Fieldings*, his PhD thesis, and *Walter Pater. Die Autonomie des Ästhetischen* [later translated

---

9 Ibid., p. 41.

10 Wolf Lepenies has pointed out that the idea of culture as 'a noble substitute for politics' quickly re-emerged in German intellectual circles after the Second World War. A new 'cultural enthusiasm [...] went hand in hand with an almost visceral abstinence from politics', even though 'the distance of German artists and intellectuals from the public realm [...] had made them easy prey for the Nazis'. This argument implies that the apolitical attitude of contemporary students and scholars like Iser and Flasdieck was not unproblematic. See Wolf Lepenies, *The Seduction of Culture in German History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 9, 136, 143–44.

11 Even in a much later publication, Iser still targets the Young Grammarians [*Junggrammatiker*], the linguistic tradition of his supervisor. Philology 'as practiced by the so-called "Young Grammarians" [...] strove to become a science by discovering the laws of language and language change', Iser says, and these scientific aspirations 'established a hierarchy within the cosmos of disciplines that left the humanities as the poor cousin'. Wolfgang Iser, 'Context-Sensitivity and its Feedback: the Two-Sidedness of Humanistic Discourse', *Partial Answers*, 1.1 (2003), 1–33 (p. 8).

as *Walter Pater. The Aesthetic Moment*] (1960), his *Habilitationsschrift*. Eight years separate these two publications, and there are a number of conspicuous differences between them. Nevertheless, they share an interest in the novel, being devoted to the oeuvres of two English novelists,[12] and grapple with the same methodological problem, one that still concerns us today, even in this very book, namely how can we adequately describe the development of a certain oeuvre? The affinity between these books and earlier methodological traditions also implies that, together, these studies provide a more nuanced picture of Iser's entry into the academic system than his Heidelberg lecture. As I will show, his dissertations can be connected to Dilthey's *Geistesgeschichte* and Kierkegaard's proto-existentialism. My analysis of these books concludes, in anticipation of the next chapter, by identifying the remarkable tension between modernity and its prehistory in both studies.

Beyond *Geistesgeschichte*

No one will disagree if I say that *Geistesgeschichte* (which may be roughly translated as 'history of the creative spirit') is not the most fashionable topic in literary studies. This term refers to a broad movement in the German humanities from the beginning of the twentieth century, which is akin to the so-called 'history of ideas' and, inspired by the work of Wilhelm Dilthey, sought to develop a philosophical approach to literature and other arts. Renouncing narrowly specialized perspectives, *Geistesgeschichte* has a highly interdisciplinary agenda, concentrating neither on a specific cultural practice – religion or art –, nor on the sum total of these practices, but on the human creative forces that underpin them. *Geistesgeschichte* also consistently shirks approaches derived from the sciences, and unites various non-positivistic approaches for a specifically humanistic project that promotes citizen-building rather than fact-gathering. Hence, Dilthey's *Geistesgeschichte* is often portrayed as a response to Wilhelm Scherer's positivism.[13] In addition to these interdisciplinary and humanistic interests, critics associated with this approach also share a fascination with German classicism and romanticism.

---

12 This emphasis on novels is significant because poetry was still considered 'the very model of literature' at the time when Iser was writing his dissertations. See Robert Folkenflik, 'Wolfgang Iser's Eighteenth Century', *Poetics Today*, 27.4 (2006), 675–89 (p. 676).

13 Critics have argued that the stereotypical opposition between Dilthey and Scherer should be nuanced. For further details, see Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller, 'Dilthey gegen Scherer – Geistesgeschichte contra Positivismus. Zur Revision eines wissenschaftshistorischen Stereotyps', *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 74 (2000), 685–709.

If *Geistesgeschichte* is considered to be unacceptably old-fashioned, that is because most critics have only a rough conception of the movement but a clear opinion of its problems. This opinion can be traced back to Wellek and Warren's influential *Theory of Literature* (1949). According to their landmark study, *Geistesgeschichte* confuses philosophy and literature by reducing complex literary works to straightforward philosophical tracts and shifting our attention from strictly literary concerns to a misguided focus on philosophical themes such as the concept of 'man' and his relation to death and love. (Not coincidentally, these themes will figure prominently in Iser's literary anthropology.) Another problem is that the use of the term *Weltanschauung*, widespread in *Geistesgeschichte*, reduces authors to a limited and implausible set of psychological types. Most famously of all, the vague and untenable concept *Zeitgeist* allegedly implies that the movement blurs the differences *within* the same historical periods and masks the similarities *between* different epochs. In Wellek and Warren's concise conclusion, the problems addressed by *Geistesgeschichte* may be real, but their solutions 'have been premature and, frequently, immature'.[14] Exit Dilthey.

The critical consensus teaches us that the movement in question was not only fatally flawed, but was also superseded in the 1940s by the text-based approaches of, for example, Emil Staiger and Wolfgang Kayser, not to mention Wellek and Warren themselves. It is strange, then, that Iser's dissertation of 1952 still adheres to the tenets of the unfashionable *Geistesgeschichte*, which might explain why *Die Weltanschauung Henry Fieldings* has never been translated into English, in contrast to Iser's *Habilitation* on Walter Pater (which has, in fact, recently been republished in paperback). This unexpected connection is easy to understand from an institutional perspective, since many of Iser's teachers were deeply influenced by the ideas of *Geistesgeschichte*. As the curriculum vitae appended to the unpublished 1950 version of *Die Weltanschauung Henry Fieldings* informs us, Iser's teachers included Eduard Spranger and Karl Jaspers, influential adherents of Dilthey's ideas who developed his thinking in the fields of psychology and philosophy. It also mentions that Iser took classes with literary critics such as Korff, Kluckhohn, Beißner and Böckmann, all of whom were involved in some way or other with *Geistesgeschichte*. More interesting than these biographical links, however, is the fact that Iser explicitly uses many terms and ideas from Dilthey, Jaspers and Spranger. These insights may be more fruitful than the critical consensus suggests. Kurt Müller-Vollmer has argued, for instance, that the traditional criticism of Dilthey's terminological apparatus fails to do justice to its originality and complexity.[15] And the underlying connection be-

14 René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (London: Peregrine Books, 1968 [1949]), p. 122.

15 Kurt Müller-Vollmer, *Towards a Phenomenological Theory of Literature. A Study of Wilhelm*

tween Iser's early work and his later thinking, a connection which is not impaired by the use of Dilthey's thinking in his dissertation, similarly suggests that Wellek and Warren's criticism may itself have been premature. Let us take a closer look at the use of *Geistesgeschichte* terminology in Iser's dissertation, especially the terms 'life' [*Leben*], *Weltanschauung* and *Zeitgeist*, before turning to its modification and disappearance in the *Habilitation*.

In the writings of Dilthey, *Leben* refers to 'the individual and the general [...] "life" of man' and is largely synonymous with the 'historical-human world'.[16] In *Die Weltanschauung Henry Fieldings*, *Leben* is similarly seen as both the individual process of existence, in which 'suffering and happiness' alternate, and a historical force that unsettles stifling conventions as well as productive projects.[17] Perhaps we should think of it as the disruptive force that opposes all rigid systems. Unsurprisingly, this dynamic 'life' is associated with water. On the one hand, the flow of life undermines reductive conventions: 'a humanistic outlook concerned with [...] eternally flowing life has to consider suspicious every solidification of character [and] mind, as it is a sign of a diminishing life force'.[18] On the other hand, Iser sees Fielding struggling with time, and having to acknowledge again and again 'how eternally flowing life started to eat away at [*unterspülen*] him'.[19] In the final analysis, life is the individual existence as well as the contingent, historical 'stream' that undermines our constrictive and constructive responses to reality. Since it cannot be pinned down, we must continually search for new ways of responding to life's demands.

This leads us to the second concept, namely *Weltanschauung*. Iser does not use this notion as part of a simple expressive poetics or as shorthand for a rigid worldview (which is why the translation 'worldview' is so unsatisfactory), but as a name for the interaction between man and reality, and the position of the subject vis-à-vis the realities of existence. Iser's study on Fielding actually maintains, in a move that anticipates Wayne Booth's take on the 'implied author', that the novel forms an organic whole in which 'the ethics of the creative subjectivity,

---

Dilthey's 'Poetik' (The Hague: Mouton, 1963). This study also suggests that Iser's later work remains akin to some of Dilthey's views. For the latter indicates, like Iser, that literary studies is related to philosophical anthropology and discusses both the temporal sequence of reading and the imaginative activity of readers. Iser's views on these matters are explored in Chapters 3 and 4.

16 Ibid., p. 137.

17 Wolfgang Iser, *Die Weltanschauung Henry Fieldings* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1952), p. 22.

18 Ibid., p. 99. 'So muß einer humanistischen Weltsicht mit ihrem dauernden Blick auf [...] das ewig fließende Leben jede Erstarrung des Charakters [und] Verstandes [...] verdächtig sein, weil sie ein Zeichen nachlassender Lebenskraft ist'.

19 Ibid., p. 237.

as revealed in the work's contents' functions as a unifying principle.[20] This ethical position toward reality is not exclusively subjective, however, but bears the imprint of contemporary ideas. According to the framework of Jaspers, which Iser uses here, the *Weltanschauung* of any given figure consists of three components, namely the subjective attitude [*Einstellung*] or life-form [*Lebensform*], the contemporary world-picture [*Weltbild*], and the life-process [*Lebensprozeß*] which results from the interaction between these subjective and historical components. A person's individual biography initially gives rise to a basic frame of mind, marked by specific ideals: a 'life-form'. As no single life-form can truly capture an individual existence, however, the individual psyche must inevitably be clarified with the help of different ideal types. Fielding's psyche, for instance, combines (in Iser's view) realistic, social and religious traits. Yet this composite psychological attitude is in itself but an empty guiding principle, which requires external material to articulate itself. The author's personal ideals therefore combine with contemporary ideas to form an intersubjectively accessible 'world-picture'. Applied to Fielding, Iser's analysis identifies those eighteenth-century ideas – man, nature and humour – which allowed the author to express his personal life-form in a more objective fashion. The analysis of Fielding's *Weltanschauung* concludes with a reflection on his 'life-process'. In Jaspers's framework, this notion refers to the process whereby an individual, after developing his personal ideals into a proper world-picture, tries to establish them, realizes that they cannot simply be imposed on reality, and gradually fine-tunes his knowledge of self and world. What is striking about Fielding's life-process, Iser's analysis goes on to show, is that it resorts to various comic devices. When reality does not behave as we want it to, it is suggested, all we can do is laugh.

In Iser's interpretation, Fielding uses three strategies to respond to the shifting demands of reality: namely satire, irony, and humour. Importantly, these comic phenomena are not understood by Iser in an eighteenth-century sense, nor in the way Fielding viewed them, but rather 'in an anthropological sense'.[21] In their various ways, each of these strategies brings personal values into conflict with the pressures of reality. For our purposes, the satire of Fielding's comedies and the irony of *Jonathan Wild* (1743) are not dissimilar. In both cases the reader's ordinary reality is placed in brackets. In a process that Iser will later call 'irrealization', satire disconnects readers from reality, and irony allows them to transcend temporarily the here and now. Both strategies also create a particular semantic situation. This is clearest in the description of satiric wit, which is supposedly structured in such a manner that we first seem to understand one meaning before, suddenly, 'a deeper [...] meaning shines through as the real message

20 Ibid., p. 160.
21 Ibid., p. 241.

[*Vorstellungsinhalt*]'.[22] This conception of meaning – according to which the reader has to revise his initial understanding of the text – prefigures Iser's later, famous view of literary ambiguity and the reading process. A final similarity between satire and irony is that both strategies expose social vices and promote social virtues. These ideals of virtue are still implicit in satire, but they cannot be misunderstood in irony, for the values embraced by the text are here present 'beneath the veil [*unter der Kappe*] of ironic negation'.[23] Irony is thus superior to satire, because its alternatives are less ambiguous. However, the third strategy, that of humour, is even better, because it not only pokes fun at external reality, but implicates the subject in its critique. Humour is also less harsh than satire and irony, for it accommodates and reconciles different perspectives. This is clearest in *Tom Jones* (1749), which Iser considers to be Fielding's greatest achievement. Even though humour is not as acerbic as satire and irony, its awareness of the ways in which reality resists our better selves may nevertheless culminate in 'a humour of melancholy'.[24] Humour is an important human faculty, seeing that it counteracts the rupture between self and world, but apparently, it is not necessarily funny. As these reflections on comedy indicate, Iser's early studies already discuss the anthropological function of literature, which is understood here as an instrument which helps readers cope with the inevitable tension between personal ideals and worldly realities.

The final notion that merits our attention here is *Zeitgeist*. We recall that this term is frequently considered to be synonymous with *Geistesgeschichte*, and that critiques of this movement often take the form of an attack against the term. In *Theory of Literature*, Wellek and Warren define it as 'some intellectual atmosphere or "climate" of opinion',[25] and take it to task, apart from its vagueness, for its undue emphasis on the unity and individuality of historical periods – every aspect of a certain age supposedly revealing the same *Zeitgeist*, and every period supposedly showing a *Zeitgeist* that is radically different from past and future periods. This objection is partly justified in the case of *Die Weltanschauung Henry Fieldings*, as the notion *Zeitgeist* here sometimes refers to the way in which a period's cultural activity reveals a signature focus on specific parts of life. In keeping with the emphasis on the *Goethezeit* in *Geistesgeschichte*, Iser maintains that this spiritual homogeneity is especially apparent in the English eighteenth century, when a distinct emphasis on the 'human' united all cultural practices. Sweepingly, he contends that, in this period, we find similar tendencies – clarification, particularization and privatization – '[e]verywhe-

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., p. 245.
24 Ibid., p. 252.
25 Wellek and Warren, *Theory*, p. 73.

re'.[26] However, Iser nuances this monolithic conception of historical periods in three ways. First, he agrees with Dilthey's claim that '[l]iterary works […] do not derive their "historical content" from the spirit of the age [but] it is rather through them and their creators that this spirit first comes into being'.[27] The creative individual is not only *shaped by*, but also *shapes* his era: '[a]ctive figures, as the vital parts of their century, first create the magic of the *Zeitgeist*, which channels the constitutive demonstrations of the life of a given era in a similar direction'.[28] Second, Iser agrees with Dilthey that every historical situation is characterized by 'a "multiplicity of particular phenomena" existing "stubbornly side by side" with each other'.[29] Apparently, the *Zeitgeist* is never fully homogenous. Iser is aware of the fact that the eighteenth century, for instance, is not as uniform as he occasionally seems to suggest. This period is unsystematic and multilayered, he concedes, and 'everything is as complex as that what people were looking for: human beings'.[30] (As we will see, the idea that human beings are uniquely complex and indeterminate figures will return in Iser's literary anthropology.) The *Zeitgeist* of Fielding's time is inevitably ambiguous, because in the course of a century '[t]he connotations of […] ideas changed […], and a modification of the [contemporary] body of thought was therefore an unavoidable consequence'.[31] Third, Iser points out that those who shape their era are sometimes ahead of their contemporaries and are therefore at odds with their own times. Because of his concern with social issues and his realistic aesthetic, 'Fielding was not yet a Romantic, nor was he an Enlightenment thinker of a rational stamp, but rather a subjective, transitional figure'.[32] As these observations show, Iser does not necessarily entertain a reductive view of historical periods, even though he uses the term *Zeitgeist*.

We have seen that *Die Weltanschauung Henry Fieldings* analyses Fielding's oeuvre by describing his relationship with the *Zeitgeist*, his personal life-form, and his unceasing attempt to objectify his ideals into a world-picture and adapt them to the demands of life via the use of comic forms. What happens to this methodological framework in Iser's second book, *Die Autonomie des Ästheti-*

26 Iser, *Weltanschauung*, p. 74.

27 Müller-Vollmer, *Phenomenological Theory*, p. 179.

28 Iser, *Weltanschauung*, p. 256. '[d]ie tätigen Menschen als die Organe ihres Jahrhunderts schaffen erst die Magie des Zeitgeistes, der die grundlegenden Lebensäußerungen eines Zeitalters in eine gleiche Richtung lenkt'.

29 Müller-Vollmer, *Phenomenological Theory*, p. 178.

30 Iser, *Weltanschauung*, p. 80.

31 Ibid., p. 257. '[d]ie Begriffsassoziationen der […] Ideen wurden […] andere, und eine Modifizierung des Gedankengutes war eine unausbleibliche Folge davon'.

32 Ibid., p. 229. 'Fielding war noch kein Romantiker, jedoch auch nicht mehr Aufklärer rationaler Prägung, sondern ein subjektiver Geist des Übergangs'.

schen? In this later thesis, the notion of 'life' recurs, but with certain variations. Through the intermediary of Marius, Walter Pater's prime fictional character, Iser again refers to the idea of suffering. If the Fielding book saw it as an inevitable consequence of existence, however, the Pater study implies that suffering is a matter of choice rather than necessity. Hardship is explicitly associated with a specific way of living. Those who devote their life to aesthetically pleasing moments have two options: either they actively search for a new continuity or they passively experience 'life [*Leben*] as suffering'.[33] And again, 'life' refers to that which eludes systematic thinking. Iser asserts, for instance, that Pater would never accept an 'all-embracing theory of life, for by definition such theories could only be reductions', and that art, from his aestheticist point of view, implies the disruption of 'solidified forms of life'.[34] The vocabulary of fluidity returns as well, for Iser again speaks of 'streaming [*fluten*] life'.[35] What is new in this study, however, is that life is sharply contrasted with the everyday; in contrast to the realistic novels of Fielding, aestheticist art recombines existing realities in order to transcend everyday life, an endeavour which requires forms of expression 'beyond the everyday use of language'.[36] The suffering of existence and the recalcitrance of life recur in Iser's second book, then, but the former is now seen as the consequence of an aesthetic life and the latter is clearly distinguished from the everyday.

The next point of comparison between these two theses is the cluster of concepts surrounding the notion of *Weltanschauung*. If we consider his argument closely, Iser might certainly have used these concepts in *Die Autonomie des Ästhetischen*: he discusses Pater's treatment of contemporary themes – art, history, myth, and nature –, and this could easily have been described, as in the Fielding book, in terms of Pater's 'world-picture' and 'life-process'. Yet Iser chooses to drop these terms. The reason for their avoidance can be gleaned from his continued use of the other terms from the *Weltanschauung*-cluster, namely attitude [*Einstellung*] and life-form [*Lebensform*]. Importantly, these are no longer applied to Pater, but to one of his characters, especially the eponymous hero from *Marius the Epicurean* (1885). Iser's description of Marius' existential attitude is reminiscent of the typologies of Spranger and Jaspers discussed earlier, even though he does not mention them here. If the study on Fielding analysed the author's realistic and social nature, we might say, the one on Pater explores Marius' aesthetic outlook, his 'optical attitude [*Einstellung*]':[37]

---

33 Wolfgang Iser, *Walter Pater. Die Autonomie des Ästhetischen* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1960), p. 207.

34 Wolfgang Iser, *Walter Pater. The Aesthetic Moment*, trans. by David Henry Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987 [1960]), pp. 17, 168.

35 Iser, *Autonomie*, p. 90.

36 Ibid., p. 70.

37 Ibid., p. 173.