

A virtual roundtable on Iser's legacy Part IV: a conversation with Federico Bertoni

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Abstract

In this article you find the fourth and last part of our 'virtual roundtable' on Wolfgang Iser's legacy with Gerald Prince, Mark Fremman, Marco Caracciolo and Federico Bertoni. In part IV we discuss with Federico Bertoni the state of theories of reading and the centrality of Iser's work in the field, the ethical potential of literature, and the role of literary criticism and theory today.

Parole chiave

Iser, reader-response, literary theory, ethics, aesthetic reception.

Contatti

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1. Theories of reading

[LR] Professor Bertoni, in your book *Il testo a quattro mani* (1996) you presented a review of different theories of reading. Despite criticisms and polemics (e.g. the one with Stanley Fish, see "Why No One's Afraid of Wolfgang Iser"), Iser's theory of the act of reading (based on the heuristic model of the implied reader) has been one of the most successful ones through the years. What is the reason of this success and what are – in your opinion – its limits?

[FB]I wrote that book in 1996 with a twofold purpose of critical synthesis and theoretical elaboration. In the first part, I wrote a detailed review of the most important approaches to aesthetic reception, while in the second one I offered my personal theoretical model of the workings of the act of reading.

In hindsight, it almost reads like a book written in the very last days of a remote season. In those years, the methods and ambitions of literary research were changing deeply; new perspectives of study were coming to the foreground, while a certain type of literary theory (and literary criticism, in general) was about to enter a time of crisis that seemed irreversible. However, it was necessary – and perhaps it still is necessary today – to reflect on a complex critical panorama of which we still are the heirs, although perhaps unconsciously. It was not easy to chart such an uneven terrain. It was very lively and often characterised by internal debate and included diverse approaches – based on different theoretical assumptions – each claiming to describe the same object, which was thus multiplied and multifaceted as passing through a prism. It is no accident that someone

¹ I would like to thank Alessio Mattana for helping with this translation [LR].

called literature «the blind-spot of theory»: it is an instable, elusive and metamorphic field; it is a powerful trigger of heterogeneous visions, which sometimes are definitely alternative to each other.

Now, among the different approaches that I have charted and described (rhetoric, semiotics, phenomenology, hermeneutics, sociology, psychology, and deconstruction), the role of Wolfgang Iser was of course central. Certainly, his theory was the most important – due to its parentage from Roman Ingarden’s work – in the chapter dedicated to the «phenomenological approach». Actually, the model I elaborated in the second part of the book draws much from Iser’s insights and theories, possibly more than from any other scholar. I think that the strength and success of his theory of reading depends on several factors. First of all, it depends on Iser’s ability to reconcile a theoretical-systematic definition (mainly in *The Act of Reading*) with a concrete and often illuminating interpretative practice on the texts (e.g. in *The Implied Reader*). Second, it possibly depends on the overall balance that he provided to the different elements with which he was dealing (the text and the reader, the rhetorical strategies and the subjective activity, and the unity and multiplicity of interpretation) in a dynamic vision, which is complex and problematic, and which nonetheless avoids unilateral positions and extremist provocations. Coming to its limits, I mainly point out its lack of historicity. With this I refer to the risk to fix the figure of the implied reader and the interactive mechanism of reading in a hypothetical and abstract dimension. Although Iser certainly assumes a concrete existence of the work in its following actualizations, he does not take into consideration the real historical dynamism of this process, which as a matter of fact happens *in time* and in the continuous evolution of the horizons of expectation. We must also say, however, that Iser partially tried to amend this limit in his later works, proposing a new direction of research towards literary anthropology.

This said, I would like to highlight one specific aspect of the current perspective in literary studies. I am not sure whether I can speak of the ‘actuality’ of Iser’s theories or rather of their ‘inactuality’ in a Nietzschean sense, but I confess that I am more and more taken aback by the conception of literature that is dominant nowadays. ‘Contentism’, moralism, utilitarianism, trivialized realism, and a new «aesthetic Platonism» require relentlessly that the literary be «useful», follow «reality»’s injunctions, and slavishly interact with other types of discourse about the world. In a time when reality is continuously confused with its representation – *pace* those who declare the end of the postmodern – literature is conceived again as a ‘message’, as an offshoot of the author’s opinions or experiences, or as a mechanical tool of knowledge, if not of problem-solving entirely.

Iser, instead, saw the literary work as an unstable and problematic object. Some of the key concepts of his theory (the blanks, indeterminacy, negativity, polysemy, the «unformulated double», the «total potential» that can only partially be actualized) are not confined only to the field of reception studies but hint, more broadly, towards an exact idea of literature. This derives from Iser’s belief that the literary work comes to life in the plurality of meanings and in the simultaneous activation of multiple connotative virtualities that the reader must recognize and actualize – in the logical sense of the word, i.e., turning them from the potential to the actual. This is because the most dynamic and vital feature of literature is its ability to undermine our certainties, to frustrate our need for order and consistency, to offer us a cognitive opportunity to cope with errors, ambiguity, inconsistency, contradiction, disharmony, and conflict – i.e., exactly the things life is made of. Only a simplistic and sterilized idea of literature (the one that is dominant today) validates its comforting, identitarian, even ethical and therapeutic power. Real literary texts –

those which can change our lives – are not the ones that comfort us, but rather those that provoke us, disturb us, annoy us, destabilize us, and compel us to ask ourselves questions and to revise our categories of judgment. Not those, which give us back our reflected image, but rather the ones that force us to become something else. I think that Iser's studies have still much to teach us about this.

2. Reception studies today

[LR] Starting from their appearance between the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, those approaches that gave centrality to the act of reading have always had fluctuating success. After an aesthetic revival of sorts, nowadays we see the predominance of cognitive perspectives or more empirical approaches such as the psycholinguistic and evolutionary ones. What is the state of reception studies? What can they offer to current literary research?

[FB] My feeling is that that season is completely over and that we need, in fact, to historicize it as a specific period of twentieth-century criticism. That approach to literature was only possible in a specific theoretical context, which was perhaps already fading, but which was stable enough at the time. The dominant paradigm today has completely changed, and we have to acknowledge it. As far as I am concerned, I must confess that I am quite skeptical about recent trends such as literary evolutionary theories, literary Darwinism or cognitive narratology. To put it differently, I am naturally suspicious when facing a possible neo-positivist turn, which I consider questionable and dangerous. More specifically, however, I often have the feeling that these approaches – supposedly revolutionary – actually only demonstrate – even from different premises – the same processes that aesthetics and theory of reception described long time ago with more richness and heuristic flexibility. I am not contending that it is wrong to experiment or to look for new perspectives in research, even in interaction with other disciplines. However, I am often surprised by the carelessness with which some recent studies on the relationship between literature and cognitive studies ignore (purposely?) the twentieth-century's theories of reading, from which they could in fact take advantage. Today's fashionable concepts like experience, embodiment or empathy certainly are not new. To be sure, we can track down their biological origins in the neurosciences, in the theory of evolution or in the philosophy of mind. Nonetheless, this should not imply the (almost) complete oblivion of previous theoretical achievements. We can of course historicize them, but we also have to reconsider the tools that are still valid, otherwise we end up reinventing the wheel.

3. An ethics of reading

[LR] In *Il testo a quattro mani* but also in your later articles “«Reader! Brüder!»: Retorica della narrazione e retorica della lettura” and “Sull'utilità e il danno della letteratura per la vita” you proposed an ethical approach to literature. Starting from that ungraspable dynamics triggered in the literary text – from its linguistic-rhetorical structure – which then interacts with the real world with the only mediation of the reader, what is the ethical propulsion of reading and what can it tell us about the human relentless urge to read?

[FB] This is also Iser's question in *Prospecting*: «why do we need fiction?» and I think that from a theoretical overall perspective, Iser's answers are completely acceptable. Coming to a possible ethical approach to reading, we need to distinguish between two different levels. On the one hand, we have literature conceived as an ethical tool, sometimes even pedagogic and therapeutic, in order to convey messages, promote the education to certain values, or train 'future citizens'. On the other hand, we have the ability of literary texts to raise ethical problems (even political) in a complex, unsolved, and overtly conflicting interaction with the readers. Just in the past few weeks, in Italy we have seen polemics and simplistic and harsh debates on Walter Siti's latest novel *Brucciare tutto*. I am suspicious about instrumental views on the relationship between ethics and literature. I see them as another variation of the new «aesthetic Platonism», i.e., a subordination of literary phenomena to external interests, with an unavoidable underestimation of formal problems and with very *naïf* forms of identification (between author and character; reality and fiction; and lived experience and narrative invention). Iser's literary theory and literary anthropology give us, instead, a lucid reflection on the very state of fiction in its dialectical relationship with reality, imagination, dreams and primary human needs. In this sense, literature exists to satisfy «the desire, not to repeat what is, but to gain access to what we otherwise cannot have» (*Prospecting* 282), since «[l]iterature does not reflect this reality, but mirrors its reverse side, which would otherwise remain hidden by the cultural context itself» (283).

This is why I am more interested in the other aspect of the question of the relationship between ethics and literature. It is, perhaps, its dark side, and it is certainly not one related to moralistic and pedagogical views. I am interested in understanding the functioning of certain texts in relationship to the reader, to their ethical and emotional responses, to the often ambiguous mechanisms by which textual rhetoric generates a conflict, a complicity, or an engagement that is dissonant if compared to their morally deplorable (when not even juridically criminal) themes and situations. It is not a matter of «repertoire», as Iser would put it, but, rather, of «strategies». It is not a matter of content but a matter of how the text elaborates content, by means of its language, composition devices, interplay of viewpoints, and formal choices. A textbook case of this problem is the big international literary sensation *The Kindly Ones* by Jonathan Littell. Here, the meaning of the last story of Maximilien Aue is embedded in the experience of the person who reads this terrible descent to hell through «the worst crime in human history», as Primo Levi used to call it. The stakes are high; the terms of the deal are most demanding. This is not simply because we have to accept the juridical defense used by Aue, just like the one by Eichmann, in several situations – «What I did, I did with my eyes open, believing that it was my duty and that it had to be done, disagreeable or unpleasant as it may have been» (Littell 18) – but also because we have to experience ourselves the devastating implication of this reasoning. If this enormous destructive apparatus machine was made possible not by sadistic monsters but by 'normal' people – averagely coward and influenced by the circumstances – what would have *I* done in those situations? Who can guarantee that nowadays moral and political principles, apparently so stable, could resist in a situation like that one? Who will assure me that this is not going to happen again? Besides the morbid insistence with which Littell describes massacres, tortures, matricides, incest or various sexual perversions, here lies the provoking and scandalous energy of this book. We must accept to read it under the condition that we consider ourselves «human brothers» to this despicable criminal; we must wipe out all the hypothetical cautions and tell ourselves: well, yes, this is a man too, and I cannot just label him as

a monstrous and radical *other* away from which I can feel safe. If I can finish this answer on a lighter vein, I think that many philosophers, critics, and journalists, who today lecture on the ethical commitment of literary text, definitely need a crash course on literary theory.

4. Do we still need literary theory?

[LR] In his last book *How to do theory*, Iser reflected on the practice of literary theory. What do you think is the role and the use of literary theory at the present day? Do we still need it? How should we do it?

[FB] I think we really need it, by all means. However, nowadays there is arguably not a discipline as out-of-date as literary theory. The crisis of literary criticism, about which we have been talking for at least twenty years, is nothing more than the effect of a deeper mutation, which is the reflux that affected a certain idea of theory that was prevalent in some periods of the twentieth century. Despite the hyperproductivity of academic research and the proliferation of ‘studies’, we undoubtedly have a problem of legitimation with respect to literary studies and, in general, humanities. More specifically, this problem has to do with the role that our disciplines play in the contemporary cultural context. It is a broad and complex process, which nonetheless derives from the failure of a critical agenda shaped on the linguistic model, which aimed to find a ‘hard’ science of literature based on practices and approaches akin to those of natural sciences.

This agenda failed for several reasons. In some cases, for an excess of dogmatism and theoretical fundamentalism; in others, for an excess of intellectual generosity, a sort of utopic intention, with the ambition of creating a *mathesis universalis* of the study of literature; but mainly, perhaps, for the effect of an involution that led us to repeat tiredly some ready-made formulas that caused the degeneration of the most innovative theories into simple ‘methods’, meant in the more restricted and trivialized sense of the word—like ‘recipes’ that we can mechanically apply to every object (Remo Ceserani cleverly described this trend, with a very postmodern image, as «the supermarket of methods»).

This was followed by a strong antitheoretical reaction, accompanied by the revenge of the worst enemy of theory: common sense. On this basis, literary theory was labeled with judgments that circulate in the *doxa* as rigid, dogmatic, abstract, extremist, difficult, pedantic, with its supposed abstruse language, jargons, brainy taxonomies, verbose declarations on methods and procedures, and so on. This was undoubtedly the resounding revenge of common sense, which identified literary theory (defined by Barthes in 1971 as «the subversive weapon *par excellence*») with its restricted and dogmatic version, degenerated into a method or ‘recipe’. A timely and symptomatic product of this reaction was Antoine Compagnon’s book *Literature, Theory and Common Sense*, based on the captious premise – a common one – that all literary theory coincides with one of its manifestations, i.e. the one that occurred in France between the 1960s and the 1970s. This is described as a theory supposedly that was specialized in ‘extremist theses’ (reality is an effect, the author is dead, the reader is a crucible of codes, every writing is a rewriting and so on and so forth) and that did not survive to the long-lasting sensibility of common sense.

Against this restricted and reductionist version of theory, we should compare an enlarged vision, like the one we find in the 1995 book by Michel Charles *Introduction à l'étude des textes*.² Charles's vision is untimely and frantically out-of-fashion: «Every process of analysis is influenced by a set of prejudices and assumptions that relate to the definition, the goals and functions of literature and of reading. This is due to the fact that literary theory is not a method of reading, while rather the very foundation of any meticulous reading». «The theoretical and reflexive dimension is the only one that is able to lead us to a justification of literary studies, but only provided that this reflection concerns the problem of their very validity» [LR: my translation].

We should therefore ask ourselves what theory is and what it is not to free ourselves from the blind corners of the *doxa* and give sense to our work on literary texts. I will try and advance five brief points:

1. Theory is not a method, nor a set of methods, but a set of possible questions and answers. It obviously investigates/inquires on the general categories of literature – the character, realism, literary genres, the style, etc. – but mainly it inquires over «the last things» and provides a rational description of the fundamental experiences we make during the act of reading a book.
2. Theory is not dogmatic, nor totalitarian, but, rather, it is relativist. It is always ready to question its certainties, theses and premises on which is based – in this sense, theory is properly «critic», in the etymological meaning that relates *criticism* and *crisis* in a common semantic root.
3. Theory is not ideological. Rather, it unveils the premises on which our ideological representations are grounded. It does not trust what is already known and it does not deal with general concepts and categories (the author, the text, literature, reality, culture, etc.) as natural but as historicized forms, belonging to specific social and cultural frameworks.
4. Theory is neither neutral nor pseudoscientific but it is 'situated', militant, and unavoidably political. It accepts its contextual historicity; it tries to affirm its position; it contradicts everyone else's practices; and it is located in the conflict of interpretations.
5. From a methodological and operational point of view, theory is not an abstract and auto-referential system, but it always works in function of a better understanding of texts. It does not provide us with nomenclatures and taxonomies to be applied mechanically to the phenomena we observe, but it gives us an optic instrument, a heuristic tool that allows us to see in the texts something that we could not otherwise see, something that is already there and we cannot see.

It is exactly because of this that theory always leaves us with a residual, something that exists but avoids categorizations. It is what *The Resistance of Theory*, that is, first of all the resistance of theory to itself, but also the resistance of texts to any attempt of univocal solution, to those solutions which claim to be able to explain everything. Those that claim that they can explain everything are not theories but caricatures of theories degenerated to methods that we can buy in the supermarket of methods of contemporary criticism. Even when they seem to work perfectly, there will always be, in the text, residuals, remains, breaches, unfathomable spots, that regenerate in new questions. On this topic, again, Wolfgang Iser's theoretical proposal and idea of literature still have much to teach us. It is indeed time to read his works again.

² Federico Bertoni translated the book for the Italian edition in 2000.

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