

# Reception and Revelation. How I Made the Most of Wolfgang Iser's Work

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**Résumé:** *Dans cet article, nous allons faire de brèves références à des écrits théoriques pionniers de Wolfgang Iser, en les traitant comme un geste de résistance et une tentative de sauver la culture et l'homme de la chute dans la barbarie. Et parce que l'auteur de cette exposition, en tant que lecteur «appelé» se sent pris dans la «récursivité» d'Iser, et aussi parce qu'Iser a produit une fiction du «fictive» pour aider le lecteur à comprendre «l'imaginaire», l'auteur ne peut pas refuser au théoricien le feed-back requis. Ainsi, il exprime sa préoccupation au sujet de la relation entre réception et révélation, une relation peu démontrée ou même ignorée par l'esthétique de la réception, où la révélation n'est pas traitée dans un sens religieux, mais comprise comme une source d'inspiration. Cependant, le péché du théoricien Wolfgang Iser – celui d'être préoccupé surtout par la grande littérature, en donnant ainsi un coup de main au nominalisme de Croce, et le fait qu'il a misé sur le modèle du lecteur idéal – se révèle finalement un avantage. Parce que, ainsi, tout lecteur d'Iser va s'identifier avec l'un des lecteurs privilégiés de Shakespeare, Joyce, Beckett, etc.*

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As I was looking through a pile of copies and translations of variants on one and the same hagiographic legend, that of St. Alexius<sup>1</sup> – ranging from 5<sup>th</sup>-century Syriac manuscripts to the Romanian 17<sup>th</sup>-century Codex of Cohalm –, I became aware that not only diachrony but diatopy as well produced *variance*. Whether he was going from Edessa through Byzantium and Rome towards Basel and Paris, through Spain back to the Coptic communities in Africa, or leaving Rome and crossing Croatia all the way to Wallachia, Moldavia and Moscow, our saint was always “at home”. I was the only one to see him as a stranger, as he always turned to me another face – an unfamiliar face, since each time at least one detail of his biography was different. “It makes perfect sense!” Marx would have said, like a true proponent of historicism, who realised that Ulysses equipped with gunpowder and ammunition could be but the expression of modernity. But Marx also insisted, in his famous *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* that the Hellenic art and heroic poems induce aesthetic pleasure to this very day. How can this be?

In his apology of the theoretical gains of the so-called “New Philology”, from his *Praise of the Variant*, Bernard Cerquiglini pointed out that the polymorph character of an epic material, as well as geographical and temporal variance, can raise identity problems: who

is the real St. Alexius? Is it he who, starting from Rome, passes through Jerusalem, or the one who stops only in Edessa? Actually how many Saints Alexius are there? Likewise, by way of generalisation, we might wonder who the “real” Ulysses is: the one we know mainly from the Homeric epic poems, endowed with positive attributes, or rather the “villain” we come across in Pindar’s works? Diachronic research would never have been able to give a satisfactory answer to such questions. For this very reason, I “chartered” as comprehensively as possible the *variance* of St. Alexius’ legend, work with a fairly limited corpus: fifteen versions in Mediaeval Latin, Old French and Middle German (the 11<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries). Applying a Structuralist method, I divided the epic material thus delineated into narrative or rhetorical units of meaning, which nonetheless should not be mistaken for “literary motifs”. Further on, these elements were combined to form a virtual text, which I called “the matrix text”; henceforth, by removing the elements of conflict (specific only to some variants) from the textual mass and focusing on the elements of consensus (recurrent in absolutely all variants), I was able to sketch a broad outline of the narrative structure of the legend.

However, there was an issue pending. The extension and the historical durability of what I named, in the theoretical part of my work, “a hagiographic convention” needed to be specified. Therefore, I added to the analytical corpus other hagiographic materials (Saints Gregorius and Eustatius), as well as Romanian reviews – be they dramatic or popular – of these legends, in order to show how enduring this poetic paradigm is throughout history, especially with regard to the circulation of motifs. Based on the few examples of legends that served as a model for “centrifugal” adaptations, I identified the constitutive elements of the literary species which had been distorted or obliterated, leading to an irreversible deformation of the hagiographic convention, in other words, to a migration towards the structure of another species. I also discussed the penchant for an allegorical rereading in the modern rewritings of legends (by Goethe, Hofmannsthal, Thomas Mann, Karl Borromäus Heinrich, Peter Dörfler, etc.), namely the changes which result in an aestheticization of the original epic matter.

Although the increase in expressiveness brought by each and every one of these authors was salient, I could not help wondering: why did not all these reviewers proceed in line with Quintilian’s rhetorical concept of *emendatio*, i.e. changing the figures of style but leaving the epic matter untouched? Could it have been, for all of them, just a case of journalistic curiosity? Could it have been the need to answer questions like *quid, ubi, quando, quomodo, cui bono*? Or perhaps the need to add an extra touch to the profile of the character? Or the need to make it more credible, more human? I realised that I was moving along already trodden paths.

That is how I came upon Wolfgang Iser’s older writings, primarily *Die Appellstruktur der Texte*, where I was told quite clearly that the literary text displayed many types of vague formulations, even “empty spaces” (*Leerstellen*) which the reader was supposed to fill in through an interpretive effort – a spontaneous effort, usually made unawares, a kind of automatism of reception, an *aesthetic response* to the text. I became therefore familiar with the benefits of what was called the aesthetics of “reception” (originally

*Rezeptionsästhetik*, later on and only by Iser: *Wirkungsästhetik*). It matched my theory about the literary species as a convention perfectly, all the more so as it cemented the cohesion of species by denouncing the “deserters”: any excessive rewriting, in the sense of a lush interpretation, broke the terms of the convention.

The aesthetics of reception, as it became clear to me, has its share of applicability, because, by broadening the field of the historicist approach – as defined by G. Simmel<sup>2</sup> (70-71) –, it may reveal the tradition of a motif or of a literary theme, it may identify archetypes or describe the fate of a literary species. This means that the work of art – in this particular case, the literary work – is seen in its exteriority, that it can “still” (re)tell us something. But something more than what it told the others in ancient times or the recent past. “Exteriority”, a concept coined by Karlheinz Stierle, is “the opportunity of the one who perceives the work of art to experience the remnants of the past inside the horizon of the work, thus gaining access to experiences and meanings which were previously foreign to his own human experience” (267). In this sense, the aesthetics of reception is no longer aesthetics, as it transgresses its borders. It no longer sees the literary work as such, but as the artistic expression it treasures – an answer, a thrill, a state of mind, all of which respond to the interests of the reader. It is clear that such an approach no longer refers to the immanence of the work, but makes the reader fully responsible. Valéry’s saying: “Mes vers ont le sens qu’*on* leur prête” is emblematic in this respect.

But the aesthetics of reception, as originally defined by Iser, did not part with the wider space of hermeneutics. In fact, it resumed – but not on the same normative level – the unity of the three hermeneutical moments, of the three *subtilitates* enounced by Gadamer (understanding, interpretation, application), of which only the last seemed to have been neglected for centuries by the literary reception, which made the term of reception so problematic. For this reason, Iser was to replace it, in time, with the term of *Wirkung*, which hardly finds a perfect equivalent in Romanian, meaning at the same time “action”, “influence” and “effect”. Therefore, *Wirkungsästhetik* became the counterpart, on the non-historical level, of the older *Wirkungsgeschichte*, suggested by Gadamer.

In *The Implied Reader*, the aesthetics of reception had been reformulated in terms of communication. I found it interesting that Iser had chosen as evidence of his theory a novel such as *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, where the *telos* of the story – as Walther Haug would have said (513) – had laid down the epic-symbolic guideline for the narrator and the protagonist alike. The latter’s movement could be but *one* (already announced in the title, that of *progress*), despite any hindrance or hesitation. It was about a mid-way entelechy, as Goethe defined it: a progressive increase of human personality in its metaphysical project. In fact, Iser himself noticed that the doctrine of predestination could have been playing a key role in the development of this novel. In addition, he placed the reader within the narration, as an aesthetic respondent to those empty spaces he had spoken about in the past and, therefore, as a kind of *sine qua non* feedback in the genesis of a literary work. Nonetheless, he meant an ideal reader, who could not commit any *peccatum actuale* in the Augustinian sense, being on a par with the masterpieces he talked about. Starting from this premise, Wolfgang Iser was able to add to the volume book a phenomenological study,

which made use of Husserl's terminology, as it was reinstated by Roman Ingarden, and which described the act of reading as a commensurable process, extracted from under the empire of its indelible character.

Later on, Iser authored *The Act of Reading*, where he dwelt precisely upon literary works having a higher degree of fictionalization, in close connection with what he used to call "the indeterminate" (*Unbestimmtheit*), which leaves room for the reader to fill in the gaps (*Weiterbestimmbarkeit*). Following his phenomenological approach, Iser defined the act of reading as coming from the reader's need to obtain consistent meanings, he, the reader, emitting expectations ("protentions") toward the narrative development and making corrections ("retentions") in the horizon of meanings already formatted. The reader has no choice but to select from the potential meanings of the text those corresponding to the previous development, which drives him toward a certain type of further reading, etc.

In 1989, Wolfgang Iser turned his attention towards the anthropology of literature, by gathering together into a book a series of theoretical essays (*Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology*), in which the author defined his new undertaking as follows: the fact that the literary text acts upon its receptor through its aesthetic effect means, among others, that it also reveals something about the receptor. Ultimately, it is a form of interaction. Therefore, literature reveals our psychological mood, our desires, our weaknesses, but also the masks behind which we hide ourselves – as readers.

More systematically, Iser will resume this problematic in *The Fictive and the Imaginary. Charting Literary Anthropology*, in which he will dwell on the difference between the terms in the title, in order to deepen the cognitive dimension of fiction. Therefore, fictional literature does not encompass only a social reality, but also an inner, emotional one. The act of fictionalization would therefore endeavour, on the cognitive level, to bypass reality and to make real the imaginary, this border transgression being the premise of an intelligible world imaginarily represented to the reader: because the epitome of literary communication is its relevance, not its *opposition toward it*, but the *relationship with the reader*, the fictive playing in this equation the role that ensures the "translatability" (*Übersetzbarkeit*) of truths issued by the writer, in this way closing up the hermeneutic circle and achieving what Iser calls "recursion".

Being myself caught up in this recursion, as Wolfgang Iser's reader, who "appealed to me" through his theoretical texts and developed the fiction of the "fictive" so that I could understand his "imaginary", I just cannot refuse him the feed –back required. Here is my query: it seems to me that what leaves both the aesthetics of reception and the anthropology of literature always in concealment is the possibility of the reading as *revelation*. I use the term not in the religious sense, that of the sacred texts as revealed texts: this revelation would be, says Nietzsche, a "holy lie" (182) designed, alongside tradition, to build a twofold wall against any progress. I am interested in the revelation from another definition by Nietzsche, which equates revelation and inspiration: "suddenly, with an indicable certainty and subtlety, something takes shape, is heard, something that moves us and drives us out of our wits [...]. You hear, you do not listen;

you get, you do not wonder who gives it: like a lightening a thought flashes through your mind, necessarily, with no wavering form, with no choice at hand [...]. Everything happens quite involuntarily, as if you are stirred up by a sense of freedom, of indeterminacy, of power and divinity" (*Ecce Homo* 337-338).

I can imagine that as readers of literature, we all dream of such revelations, miraculous encounters with books that would crucially change our lives, or with authors who would suddenly awake in us those affinities that would turn the aesthetic reception into a creative reception. Unfortunately, that "sudden" revelation makes the latter indescribable, even using the services of Husserl's phenomenology<sup>3</sup>. It remains each and everyone's secret how and if he/she has ever lived such a revelation through reading. What can be described, to the extent it can be described, has been already described by Wolfgang Iser. Ultimately, it is not the private reading experiences, but the common denominator of the receptor's universally human experience that primarily interests, because not only literature, but also literary theory cannot exist without "translatability".

From all I said above, it results that that "guilt" of Iser's theories would be that they are dealing, in general, with the great literature, therefore lending a helping hand to Croce's Nominalism, and, furthermore, they rely on an eminent reader, an ideal reader – as his colleague from the University of Konstanz, Hans Robert Jauss, noticed – a gifted reader mastering all the knowledge of literary history and theory brought up to date, a reader able to consciously record every aesthetic impression, which he would then redirect upon the cognitive structure of the text. Here, there is also a slight flattery addressed to his own reader. After all, whoever reads Wolfgang Iser's books will automatically identify with the privileged reader of writers like Shakespeare, Bunyan, Fielding, Joyce, Beckett and so on, because the author of these books knows that man is not, as the Enlightenment representatives considered, a constant human nature whatever the geographic area or the time in which he lives, but he is also the product of the culture he consumes, no less of literature.

Wolfgang Iser and his books are, in this sense, an act of resistance, an effort to save culture and humankind from the fall into barbarism. It is not enough to deplore the low consumption of literature and the alarming boom of consumption literature today. We must see the historical causes of the steep fall from the refined and exclusive aesthetic zone or, better said, from the aesthetic work of art into the aesthetics of the commercial product. However, in the absence of any interdisciplinary approach, the study of literature can no longer withhold neither in curricular nor in social terms. The solution lies in synthesis, in the intertwining of the sociological and the anthropological method, in the study of archetypes and conventions, of intentional poetics and the aesthetics of reception, etc. I feel that, in this line, an important, even crucial, step has been made by Wolfgang Iser. Those who are familiar with the evolution of his intellectual project would not say otherwise.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The quasi-anecdotic account refers to the method applied in one of the chapters of my book on hagiography, *Die hagiographische Konvention*, Konstanz, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> We owe to Simmel the clear-cut distinction between aesthetic and historical aperception. Unfortunately for contemporary literary theory, his ideas seem to have been forgotten altogether.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Edmund Husserl, *Vorlesungen zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins*, Tübingen 1980. Surprisingly or not, although it starts from the axiom that temporal consciousness means the cancellation of the objective time, Husserl does not analyse the revelation-type experiences on the edge.

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