

# Hub Edits

- **Wolfgang Iser, *The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach* (1972)**
- [These notes are largely in the form of direct quotes taken from Iser's essay]
- I.
- “The phenomenological theory of art says that in considering a literary work, one “must take into account not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text”
  - In this analysis, then, the literary text has two poles: the artistic and the esthetic
    - The artistic refers to the text created by the author
    - The esthetic refers to the realization accomplished by the reader
  - “From this polarity it follows that the literary work cannot be completely identical with the text, or with the realization of the text, but in fact must lie halfway between the two”
    - In other words, the work is more than the text since it “takes on life” only when it is realized by the reader
      - This realization, furthermore, is not independent of the individual disposition of the reader (and this disposition is in turn acted upon by different patterns in the text)
- The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence and is not wholly identified with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader
- “As the reader uses the various perspectives offered her by the text in order to relate the patterns and the “schematized ties” to one another, she sets the work in motion – and this very process results ultimately in the awakening of responses within herself”
  - Thus reading is what causes the literary work to unfold itself, to unfold its dynamic character
  - This has been recognized since the earliest days of the novel; for example, the author of *Tristram Shandy*, Laurence Sterne remarked:
    - “...no author, who understands the just boundaries of decorum and good-breeding, would presume to think all: the truest respect which you can pay to the reader's understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as for yourself.”
    - Sterne said the author must keep the reader's imagination as busy as his/her own
      - Sterne's sees the literary text as something like an arena in which reader and author participate in a game of the imagination
        - Reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative, thus the author must leave the reader with the task of working certain things out herself
          - Virginia Woolf cited Jane Austen as a master of bringing this imagination game between author and reader to life
- “The unwritten aspects of apparently trivial scenes, and the unspoken dialogue within the ‘turns and twists,’ not only draw the reader into the action, but also lead him to shade in the many outlines suggested by the given situations, so that these take on a reality of their own. But as the reader's imagination animates these ‘outlines,’ they in turn will influence the effect of the written part of the text. Thus begins a whole dynamic process.”

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- “The written text imposes certain limits on the unwritten implications in order to prevent these from becoming too blurred and hazy”
  - “But at the same time these implications, worked out by the reader’s imagination, set the given situation against a background which endows it with far greater significance than it might have seemed to possess on its own”
    - “In this way, trivial scenes suddenly take on the shape of an “enduring form of life””
- II.
- An important question to answer is how this process of play between author and reader can be adequately described
  - Thus far in literary criticism, most attempts at understanding the reader or the reading process have skewed towards psychoanalysis and have been restricted to the concepts such as the unconscious
- A truly helpful starting point for this phenomenological analysis of reading is to first examine how sequential sentences act upon one another
  - The world presented by literary texts is constructed out of what Roman Ingarden has called intentional sentence correlatives
    - Ingarden: “Sentences link up in different ways to form more complex units of meaning that reveal a very varied structure giving rise to such entities as a short story, novel...”
      - For Ingarden, if these complex units finally form a literary work, the whole sum of sequent intentional sentence correlatives becomes the “world presented” in the work
  - The sentences and their complex units set in motion a process out of which emerges the actual content of the text itself
    - As Husserl once remarked: “Every originally constructive process is inspired by pre-intentions, which construct and collect the seed of what is to come, as such, and bring it to fruition”
      - For this “bringing to fruition” the literary text requires the reader’s imagination, which “gives shape to the interaction of correlatives foreshadowed by the sequence of sentences”
      - This Husserl quote draws our attention to a point that plays a key role in the process of reading
        - “The individual sentences not only work together to shade in what is to come, they also form an expectation in this regard”
          - Husserl calls this expectation “pre-intentions”
          - The interaction of these sequences will not be a fulfillment of the expectation so much as a continual modification of it
          - For this reason, expectations are scarcely ever fulfilled/confirmed in truly literary texts
            - And strangely we feel that any confirmative effect – such as the kind we explicitly demand of expository texts – is a defect in a literary text
              - For the more a text confirms an expectation it has initially aroused, the more we become aware of its didactic purpose

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- “More often than not, the very clarity of such texts will make us want to free ourselves from their clutches”
- However, “the sentence correlatives of literary texts do not develop in this rigid way – for the expectations they evoke tend to encroach on one another in such a manner that they are continually modified as one reads”
  - One might say, of a truly literary text, that each intentional sentence correlative opens up a particular horizon, which is modified, if not completely changed, by succeeding sentences
  - These expectations act to arouse interest in what is to come, and the subsequent modification of them has a retrospective effect on what has already been read
    - “Whatever we have read sinks into our memory...it may later be evoked again and set against a different background with the result that the reader is enabled to develop hitherto unforeseeable connections”
      - “The memory evoked, however, can never reassume its original shape, for this would mean that memory and perception were identical, which is manifestly not so”
      - The new background brings to light new aspects of what we had committed to memory
        - And these, in turn, shed their light on the new background, thus arousing more complex anticipations
        - These connections are the product of the reader’s mind working on the text but are not the text itself (which consists of sentences, statements, information, etc)
- Iser says the activity of reading can be characterized “as a sort of kaleidoscope of perspectives, preintentions, recollections”
  - “Every sentence contains a preview of the next and forms a kind of viewfinder for what is to come, and this in turn changes what has been read”
  - According to Iser: “This whole process represents the fulfillment of the potential, unexpressed reality of the text”
- However, this process of anticipation and retrospection itself does not follow a smooth pattern
  - According to Roman Ingarden: “If by chance the following sentence has no tangible connection whatever with the sentence we have just thought through, there then comes a blockage in the stream of thought.”
    - This blockage is met with surprise, and even indignation, and must be overcome if the reading is to flow once more
      - According to Ingarden, such blockages are flaws in the text
        - This is based on a deeply classical idea of art and unity of form
    - Many literary texts are full of such blockages and twists and turns – proving that readers do not feel exasperated by such blockages
      - A blockage is almost inevitable since no tale can be told in its entirety – it is through this inevitable omission that a story gains its dynamism
    - Rather than serving as an obstacle, whenever the flow of a story is interrupted and we are led off in unexpected directions, it gives the reader the opportunity to bring her

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own faculties into play, e.g: our faculty for establishing connections, for filling in the gaps that the text leaves

- Since these gaps in a text can often be filled in different ways, “one text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no reading can ever exhaust its full potential (for each individual reader will fill in the gaps in her own way, thereby excluding other possibilities)”
  - In this very act of personalized gap-filling, the dynamics of reading are revealed
  - Paradoxically, by making her decision (about how to fill in a certain gap), the reader implicitly acknowledges the inexhaustibility of the text – and at the same time it is this very inexhaustibility that forces her to make her decision
    - With traditional texts, this process was more or less unconscious, but modern texts grew to deliberately exploit this process of gap filling
      - These modern texts are often so fragmentary that the reader’s attention is continually occupied with the search for connections between the fragments
  - Iser says, with all reading texts we must say that the reading process is selective, and the potential text is infinitely richer than any of its individual realizations
    - Hence why a second reading of a text often produces a different impression from the first
- “In every text there is a potential time sequence which the reader must inevitably realize as it is impossible to absorb even a short text in a single moment”
  - So the reader is always moving through the text, her perspective continually on the move, linking up the different phases of the text
  - This time sequence is different for the reader’s first reading and any subsequent reading, such that each new reading results in a modification of the reader’s experience of the text
    - Thus even in repeated readings a text induces “innovative reading”
- In whatever way, and under whatever circumstances (e.g. second reading) the reader may link the different phases of the text together, it will always be this circle of anticipation and retrospection that transforms the text into an experience for the reader
  - The way this experience comes about is through a process of continual modification that is closely akin to the way in which we gather experience in life
    - Thus the “reality” of the reading experience can illuminate basic patterns of real experience
- The manner in which the reader experiences the text will reflect her own disposition (and in this respect, Iser says, the literary text acts as a kind of mirror) – but at the same time the reality that this process helps to create is one that will be different from the reader’s own
  - Thus the reader is forced to reveal aspects of herself in order to experience a reality which is different from her own
  - Indeed it is only by leaving behind the familiar world of her own experience that the reader can truly participate in the adventure the literary text offers
- III.

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- The impressions that arise as a result of this reading process, this active interweaving of anticipation and retrospection, will be different for each reader
- Iser says: The author of the text may, of course, exert plenty of influence on the reader's imagination (using a panoply of narrative techniques) but no author worth her salt will ever attempt to set the whole picture before her reader's eyes
  - If the author attempts to set the whole picture she will lose the reader, for it is only by activating the reader's imagination that the author can hope to involve her in the text
  - We can only picture things in a literary text that are not there
    - The written part of a text will give us knowledge of things, but it is the unwritten part that gives us the chance to activate our mind and picture things
      - "Indeed without the gaps in the text we should not be able to use our imagination"
      - For example: think of reading a novel and then seeing a film of that novel
        - The reader creates a picture of what the protagonist looks like but upon seeing the movie, all the possibilities of the protagonist's appearance are narrowed down to one
        - This image on the screen becomes a complete, immutable picture and the imagination that was working to see the protagonist's appearance while reading is now put out of action
        - The imagination is put out of action and we feel that we have somehow been cheated
      - With the novel the reader must use her imagination to synthesize the information given her, and so her perception is simultaneously richer and more private
        - The filmic representation cancels that out
- IV.
- "The "picturing" that is done by our imagination is only one of the activities through which we form the "gestalt" of a literary text"
  - For example, the process of anticipation and retrospection is another tool the reader uses as she experiences the text
    - Iser says we can add to this, the process of grouping together all the different aspects of a text to form the consistency that readers will always be in search of
      - "While expectations may be continually modified, and images continually expanded, the reader will still strive, even if unconsciously, to fit everything together in a consistent pattern"
- In the reading of images, as in the hearing of speech, it is always hard to distinguish what is given to us from what we supplement in the process of projection which is triggered off by recognition
  - "By grouping together the written parts of the text, we enable them to interact, we observe the direction in which they are leading us, and we project onto them the consistency which we, as readers, require"
    - This "gestalt" is not the actual, final meaning of the text – at best, says Iser, it is a configurative meaning
- The reader brings expectations to a text, and this allows the writer to work with the device of illusion (wherein expectations are manipulated)

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- Illusion, says Northrup Frye, is “fixed or definable, and reality is best understood as its negation”
- “The text provokes certain expectations which in turn we project onto the text in such a way that we reduce the polysemantic possibilities to a single interpretation in keeping with the expectations aroused, thus extracting an individual configurative meaning”
  - If the illusion were complete, the polysemantic nature of the text would vanish; if the polysemantic nature were all powerful, the illusion would be totally destroyed
- Walter Pater: “For to the grave reader words too are grave; and the ornamental word, the figure, the accessory form or color or reference, is rarely content to die to thought precisely at the right moment, but will inevitably linger awhile, stirring a long ‘brainwave’ behind it of perhaps quite alien associations.”
  - “Even while the reader is seeking a consistent pattern in the text, he is also uncovering other impulses which cannot be immediately integrated or will even resist final integration”
    - Thus the semantic possibilities of the text are always more numerous than the actual configurative meaning that the reader forms while reading
- A consistent, configurative meaning is key to the interpretation of an unfamiliar experience, and becomes incorporated into the interpreter’s imaginative world
  - “At the same time, this consistency conflicts with the many other possibilities of fulfillment it seeks to exclude, with the result that the configurative meaning is always accompanied by “alien associations” that do not fit in with the illusion formed”
    - While forming our illusions we also produce a subtle disturbance of these illusions
    - “As the formation of illusions is constantly accompanied by “alien associations” which cannot be made consistent with the illusions, the reader constantly has to lift the restrictions she places on the meaning of the text”
      - “Since it is she who builds the illusions, she oscillates between involvement in and observation of those illusions; she opens herself up to the unfamiliar world without being imprisoned in it”
      - “Through this process the reader moves into the presence of the fictional world and experiences the realities of the text as they happen”
  - “In the oscillation between consistency and “alien associations,” between involvement in and observation of the illusion, the reader is bound to conduct her own balancing operation, and it is this that forms the esthetic experience offered by the literary text”
    - If the reader ever actually achieved a balance, she would no longer be engaged in this dynamic movement of forming and disrupting consistency
      - So the inherent non-achievement of the balance is a prerequisite for the very dynamism of the operation
      - “In seeking the balance we inevitably have to start out with certain expectations, the shattering of which is integral to the esthetic experience”
- To say, though, that the reader’s expectations are satisfied by a text is to create another ambiguity

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- Because a statement like this denies the obvious fact that much of our enjoyment of texts is derived from surprises, from betrayals of our expectations
- According to Iser, the solution to this paradox is to find some ground for a distinction between “surprise” and “frustration”
  - “Roughly, the distinction can be made in terms of the effects which the kinds of experiences have on us”
    - Frustration blocks or checks the reader’s activity and it necessitates a new orientation for that activity if she is to escape its cul de sac
      - Consequently we abandon the frustrating object and return to blind impulse
    - “On the other hand, surprise merely causes a temporary cessation of the exploratory phase of the experience, and a recourse to intense contemplation and scrutiny”
      - The surprising elements are seen in their connection to what has come before
      - It appears that there must always be some degree of novelty or surprise in all these values if there is to be a progressive specification of the direction of the total act
- “As we work out a consistent pattern in the text, we will find our “interpretation” threatened by the presence of other possibilities of interpretation – and so there arise new areas of indeterminacy”
  - We may only be dimly aware of these “indeterminacies” (if at all) as we continually make decisions as readers that exclude them
    - “In the course of a novel, for instance, we sometimes find that characters, events, and backgrounds seem to change their significance – what really happens is that the other “possibilities” begin to emerge more strongly so that we become more directly aware of them”
      - According to Iser these shifts in perspective are what make us feel that a given novel is more “true to life”
        - “Since we ourselves establish these levels of interpretation and switch from one to another as we conduct our balancing operations, we impart to the text the dynamic lifelikeness which, in turn, enables us to absorb an unfamiliar experience into our personal world”
- “As we read, we oscillate to a greater or lesser degree between the building and the breaking of illusions”
  - According to Iser, in a process of trial and error, we organize and reorganize the various data offered us by the text
    - “These are the given factor, the fixed points on which we base our “interpretation,” trying to fit them together in the way we think the author meant them to be fitted”
  - John Dewey, *Art as Experience*:
    - “For to perceive, a beholder must create his own experience. And his creation must include relations comparable to those which the original producer underwent. They are not the same in any literal sense. But with the perceiver, as with the artist, there must be an ordering of the elements of the whole that is in

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form, although not in details, the same as the process of organization the creator of the work consciously experienced. Without an act of recreation the object is not perceived as a work of art.”

- According to Iser, This act of recreation cited by Dewey is not a smooth or continuous process, but one which, in its essence, relies on interruptions of the flow to render it efficacious
- “We look forward, we look back, we decide, we change our decisions, we form expectations, we are shocked by their nonfulfillment, we question, we muse, we accept, we reject”
  - This process is guided by two main structural components within the text
    - 1) “a repertoire of familiar literary patterns and recurrent literary themes, together with allusions to familiar social and historical contexts”
    - 2) “techniques or strategies used to set the familiar against the unfamiliar”
  - “The defamiliarization of what the reader thought she recognized is bound to create a tension that will intensify her expectations as well as her distrust of those expectations”
    - Similarly, we may be confronted by narrative techniques that establish links between things we have a hard time connection; this forces us to reconsider elements in the text that we at first assumed to be perfectly straightforward
  - “The entanglement of the reader is, of course, vital to any kind of text”
- “The efficacy of a literary text is brought about by the apparent evocation and subsequent negation of the familiar”
  - “What at first seemed to be an affirmation of our assumptions leads us to our own rejecting of them, thus tending to prepare us for a re-orientation”
    - “And it is only when we have outstripped our preconceptions and left the shelter of the familiar that we are in a position to gather new experiences”
    - According to Iser: Once the reader is entangled her own preconceptions are continually overtaken so that the text becomes her “present” while her own ideas fade into the “past”
      - And, Iser says, as soon as this happens the reader is open to the immediate experience of the text, which was impossible so long as her preconceptions were here “present”
- V.
- Iser: In our analysis of the reading process so far, we have observed three important aspects that form the basis of the relationship between reader and text
  - 1) the process of anticipation and retrospection
  - 2) the consequent unfolding of the text as a living event
  - 3) the resultant impression of life-likeness
- “Any “living event” must, to a greater or lesser degree, remain open”
  - In reading, this forces the reader to seek for consistency, because consistency is the only thing that allows her to close up situations and comprehend the unfamiliar
    - But consistency building is itself a living process, says Iser; one in which one is constantly forced to make selective decisions – and these decisions in turn give a

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reality to the possibilities which they exclude (insofar as they may take effect as a latent disturbance of the consistency established)

- This is what causes the reader to be entangled in the text-“gestalt” that she herself has produced
- Through this entanglement, Iser says, the reader is bound to open herself up to the workings of the text and so leave behind her own preconceptions
  - “This gives her the chance to have an experience in the way George Bernard Shaw once described: ‘You have learnt something. That always feels at first as if you had lost something.’”
  - We must even suspend ideas and attitudes that shape our own personality before we can experience the unfamiliar world of the literary text
- The process of absorbing the unfamiliar in a text has been labeled as the “identification” of the reader with what she is reading
  - What is normally meant by the term “identification” is the establishment of affinities between oneself and someone outside oneself
    - The author’s aim, Iser says, is to convey the experience and, above all, an attitude toward that experience
      - “Consequently, “identification” is not an end itself but a stratagem by means of which the authors stimulates attitudes in the reader”
      - Iser points out that this fact does not deny that there is a form of participation as the reader reads; one is certainly drawn into the text in such a way that one has the feelings that there is no distance between oneself and the events described
- George Poulet noted that books only take on their full existence in the reader
  - It is true that books consist of ideas thought out by someone else, but in reading: the reader becomes the subject that does the thinking
    - “Thus there disappears the subject-object division that otherwise is a prerequisite for all knowledge and all observation”
  - Poulet concludes: “Whatever I think is part of my mental world. And yet here I am thinking a thought which manifestly belongs to another mental world, which is being thought in me just as though I did not exist.”
- But for Poulet – the strange subject that thinks the strange thought in the reader indicates the potential presence of the author, whose ideas can be “internalized” by the reader
  - When we read we put our consciousness at the disposal of the text we read
  - For Poulet, consciousness then is the point where author and reader converge (“and at this convergence there is the cessation of the temporary self-alienation that occurs to the reader when she brings to life the ideas formulated by the author”)
    - This process gives creates a mode of communication
      - For this communication to be optimized, the life story of the author must be shut out of the work and the individual disposition of the reader must be shut out of the act of reading
        - This allows the thoughts of the author to take place subjectively in the reader

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- “If reading removes the subject-object division that constitutes all perception, it follows that the reader will be ‘occupied’ by the thoughts of the author – and these thoughts in turn will cause the drawing of new ‘boundaries’”
  - The reader, in thinking the thoughts of the author, sees her own individuality temporarily recede into the background (supplanted by the author’s thoughts)
    - And every text we read will draw a different boundary within our personality
- For D. W. Harding, “It seems nearer the truth...to say that fictions contribute to defining the reader’s or spectator’s values, and perhaps stimulating her desires, rather than to suppose that they gratify desire by some mechanism of vicarious experience.”
- According to Iser, the dialectical structure of reading is as follows:
  - The need to decipher gives us the chance to formulate our own deciphering capacity – and in this process we even formulate ourselves and so discover what had previously seemed to elude our consciousness
    - “These are the way in which reading literature gives us the chance to formulate the unformulated”