In Memoriam: Wolfgang Iser (1926-2007)

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I met Wolfgang Iser when I was a doctoral student at the University of California, Irvine from 1996 to 2002. By this time, Iser had long been established as a major figure in literary theory. Together with Murray Krieger, Jacques Derrida, François Lyotard, and J. Hillis Miller, he helped establish Irvine's reputation as the place to go if you wanted to do theory.

In 1996, when I arrived in Irvine, I wanted to do theory. But the theory I wanted to do was anthropological rather than deconstructive or political. Earlier, while in Canada at the University of Victoria where I got both my BA and MA degrees, I had become interested in Eric Gans's notion of generative anthropology. Although I wasn't really aware of it at the time, this put me at odds with the main critical developments of the 1990s. After deconstruction swept through literature departments in the 1980s, criticism in the 1990s had become more overtly political and victimary in its orientation. Irvine was probably one of the few places where you could still do "high" theory without also grinding your victimary axe in favor of one or another "subaltern" class.

Iser certainly wasn't keen on the politicization of literature. He believed that the aesthetic was distinct from conscious or unconscious political agendas, and his later work in particular was concerned with attempting to see the aesthetic in broadly anthropological rather than narrowly political terms. Even more remarkable, at least to me, was the fact that Iser was familiar with generative anthropology. I recall referring to Gans's work tentatively during my first office hour with him in early 1997. We had been discussing Roman Ingarden and John Searle. I suggested that Gans's definition of metaphysics, as that mode of thought based on the assumption that the declarative sentence is the fundamental linguistic form, in fact described Ingarden and Searle pretty well. To my astonishment, Iser shot back, "Yes, of course. I agree with Gans." The rest of the hour we spend discussing generative anthropology. I couldn't believe my good fortune.

I spent many subsequent hours in Iser's office. Our conversations ranged far and wide, but they always returned to a single theme. This concerned the nature of the aesthetic. Coming from Germany, where he had studied with the likes of Hans Georg Gadamer and Karl Jaspers, Iser was intimately familiar with the continental philosophical tradition, and his early work was influenced by phenomenology, particularly the work of Edmund Husserl's student, Roman Ingarden. But during his last years, when I knew him, Iser had become more interested by frameworks less tied to the Cartesian subject. Cybernetics and systems theory were particular favorites.

Iser felt that these “cybernetic” approaches represented more accurately the human situation. A favorite line of his was, “We live, but we do not know what it means to live. So we invent.” I believe he was paraphrasing Samuel Beckett. In any case, what he meant by this was that humans are defined by their desire to know, to bridge the gap between living and knowing, between sensory experience and the displacement of experience in collective forms of representation. Iser regarded literature as a self-conscious attempt to bridge this gap. In fact, this was how he defined literature. In literature, humans invented temporary or exploratory answers to the fundamental questions of human life. But the exploratory nature of fiction was not something to be regretted, or contrasted negatively with the ontological certainties of science or metaphysics. On the contrary, it was a source of cultural renewal because it reflected the peculiarity of the human situation. We live in the space of a permanent deferral of reality. For Iser, this space or “gap,” as he preferred to call it, defined humanity. Hence his emphasis on the interminable nature of aesthetic invention among humans.

I was never altogether satisfied with this “anthropological” definition of literature. Aside from being tremendously abstract, I felt that it tended to privilege the aesthetic at the expense of other anthropological categories. Surely the aesthetic was inseparable from symbolic representation, the defining feature of the human? Iser was inclined to agree, but he shied away from proposing anything as concrete as an originary hypothesis to explain the origin of symbols.

For example, in one of his seminars we read the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, whom Iser interpreted in cybernetic terms. I can still remember him stabbing his finger on the page of his copy of *The Interpretation of Cultures* while quoting Geertz’s line about man being the “unfinished animal.” For Iser, this constituted evidence, from a nonliterary source, of Beckett’s dictum about humanity always seeking to extend itself. Geertz’s notion of cultural interpretation, in which humanity is defined by the interaction between inner experience and external representation, appealed to Iser because it seemed to pinpoint the generativity of the gap between subject and object, between inner experience and the outside world.

Iser preferred the abstraction of cybernetics to the anthropological concreteness of interpretive systems like psychoanalysis or cultural materialism. In this respect, Gans’s originary hypothesis was also suspect because, like Freud in *Totem and Taboo*, he insisted on the concreteness of the system’s founding metaphors. The originary participants surround an object that maintains their attention while simultaneously repelling their appropriative gestures. Iser felt that such a hypothesis must ultimately betray the aesthetic ends of humanity. If the human were defined by its capacity to extend itself imaginatively, then any attempt to hypothesize the origin of this capacity must itself eventually fall victim to its own definition. For what is the originary hypothesis if not another attempt to imagine what it means to be human?

You can see how this leads to a paradox when it comes to assessing the relative merits of generative anthropology. On the one hand, Iser admired the hypothesis as a discovery procedure. On the other, he was skeptical of its all-encompassing scope, which he interpreted as dangerously courting historical and narrative closure. For once the originary hypothesis had been formulated, it had to be stuck to. And this was to risk turning the discovery procedure into a myth, a substitute for reality rather than a self-conscious fiction. Iser never agreed with Gans that symbolic representation originated as a deferral of mimetic conflict. This was to concede too much to the metaphor of center and periphery. Even if Gans stressed the heuristic nature of the hypothesis, the risk was always that he, or one his disciples, would becomes so fascinated by the elegance of the theory that it would come to be interpreted as a reality.

Iser himself resisted discipleship, and more than once he cautioned me against identifying too closely with Gans's way of seeing things. Curiously, in this sense Iser was, to use a phrase invented by Gans to describe himself, also something of a "Bronx romantic." Reflecting back on our conversations, I would explain his preference for abstraction over anthropological concreteness as a consequence of his strong attachment to the aesthetic tradition. He believed in the autonomy of the critic and he feared the dedifferentiation of discipleship. I don't think he ever really believed in the "minimal method" of generative anthropology as a genuine alternative to more traditional forms of critical influence. Indeed, it was precisely for this reason that Iser was so hard on René Girard, whom he regarded as the ultimate myth-builder. Whereas Gans was at least self-conscious about the heuristic and fictional status of his central hypothesis, Girard claimed his hypothesis to be an empirical reality. In this sense, Iser shared the general deconstructive skepticism toward all originary scenarios.

But Iser was also suspicious of deconstruction, and I'm sure this was because of its capacity to collect disciples, especially at Irvine. One of the funnier moments I remember from his seminars (which were always electrifying in their well timed digressions–another of Iser's favorite lines was Laurence Sterne's "the digressions are the sunshine") was when he recalled a conference on deconstruction held at Irvine some years earlier. He described how an eager disciple had asked Derrida the inevitable question, "Yes, but what *is* deconstruction?" Derrida's reply, Iser recalls, was simple. "Deconstruction is an event." Iser thought this was a marvelous response, but he couldn't help remarking on the context. "I mean," he added mischievously, "this was the politburo of deconstruction." The comment was not a criticism of Derrida, whose answer Iser appreciated precisely for its refusal to offer a straightforward formula. It was a criticism of discipleship. Iser resisted collecting disciples, and I think this resistance was motivated by his belief that criticism was a deeply personal venture in which you had to learn to stand on your own two feet.

Iser clearly knew how to do that. He was an extraordinary man whose intellect was among the most agile I have ever seen. Though he was always personally attentive and generous to

his friends and colleagues, he was a fiercely independent thinker who sought to define his own terrain rather than follow others.

May his example continue to inspire us all.