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Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology Wolfgang Iser

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seventeen novels, five short-story collections, and six books of poetry, Alan Sillitoe cannot adequately be described in terms of a long-past "cultural event." What the later novels may lack in terms of immediate proletarian anger and emotional force, they often make up for in terms of the writer's greater knowledge of the world and of himself. The extent of any writer's entire identification with his (or her) class origins is, of course, a matter for argument; after Derrida, Bakhtin, and Foucault, we cannot return to a state of readerly innocence. Sillitoe's later novels make clear that he no longer possesses (if he ever did) an easy identification with the working class, from which (by his own analysis) his achievement of a certain kind of self-consciousness has severed him. The predicament of class alienation and an attempt to come to terms with it form the themes of such recent Sillitoe novels as *Her Victory* (New York, 1982) and *Down from the Hill* (London, 1984).

Finally, I must add that, while Hitchcock's book offers much that is valuable, it would have profited from some minor revisions. It bears too closely the marks of its genesis in his 1987 dissertation with a similar title. The initial chapter, in particular, demonstrates all too well that Hitchcock has mastered the mandatory critical texts and vocabulary. This chapter establishes the inherently oppositional and subversive role of working-class literature within a middle-class culture. It follows that working-class writing must be viewed as a social construction and as a marginal cultural activity. Although none of this sounds new, Hitchcock's ensuing discussion of "the cultural event"—an illuminating account of the politics and economics of text production—depends to some extent on the theoretical groundwork laid in the first chapter. However, these theoretical and background chapters never quite mesh with the chapters devoted to the study of Sillitoe's individual works. For this, I blame the editors at UMI Research Press.

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Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology. Wolfgang Iser. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989. Pp. ix+316.

As its full title implies, *Prospecting* depicts a transitional moment in Wolfgang Iser's theories about literary texts. This important collection of previously published essays summarizes his earlier phenomenology of the reading process and then previews his future treatise on the anthropological implications of "the special nature of literature"

(p. vii). In moving beyond the reader-oriented perspective of *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore, 1974) and *The Act of Reading* (Baltimore, 1978), Iser's transitional book is not unlike earlier examples of the genre such as Stanley Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), Jonathan Culler's *The Pursuit of Signs* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1981), my own *Interpretive Conventions* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982), or even Jane Tompkins's anthology, *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore, 1980). However, in these other examples, each book's developing argument calls into question a reader-oriented theory presented earlier in its pages. This is not the case in *Prospecting*. Rather, Iser announces that his future literary anthropology (outlined in pt. 3) will complement his theory of aesthetic response (summarized in pt. 1). More precisely, Iser claims that his anthropology of literature "is both an underpinning and an offshoot of reader-response criticism" (p. vii).

In what follows I will focus on this assertion of relationship between Iser's theoretical projects. Such a focus on parts 1 and 3 will leave me little room to discuss part 2, "Paradigms," which consists of practical applications of Iser's phenomenological criticism. These impressive critical performances skillfully argue for reader-oriented interpretations of literary texts by Spenser, Shakespeare, Joyce, and Beckett. I recommend Iser's readerly readings to anyone especially interested in the works discussed or in the interpretive practices of reader-response criticism. However, it is clear from the preface that Iser regards these applications to be as important for the theoretical questions they raise as for the persuasive interpretations they propose.

In part 1 of *Prospecting*, "Reader Response in Perspective," Iser lays out the main elements in his phenomenological theory of aesthetic response. "Central to the reading of every literary work is the interaction between its structure and its recipient" (p. 31), and it is the goal of Iser's theory to provide a detailed model of this interaction: the different perspectives or segments presented by the text, the sequential organization of the perspectives in a theme and background pattern, gaps to be filled or connections made between perspectives, and the wandering viewpoint of the reader guided by the perspectives, gaps, and theme/background sequence. The reader's participation in the text becomes a "self-regulating structure" in which "the blank in the fictional text induces and guides the reader's constitutive activity" (p. 39). By following the "instructions" of the text (p. 52), the reader constitutes the "aesthetic object"—an object that is "text-guided though reader-produced" (p. 65).

I will not rehearse in detail here past criticisms of Iser's reader-response theory: the reinscription of the very subject-object split that phenomenology seeks to avoid; the textual formalism predominating within a supposedly reader-oriented model; the foundationalism suggested by positing noninterpreted textual givens as prior constraints on

all interpretations. Iser is confident enough in his own theory to let his critics speak for themselves in the pages of *Prospecting*. He reprints an "interview" with pointed questions from two other reader-oriented critics (Norman Holland and Wayne Booth) and his summary of the questions from another (Stanley Fish). These questions and Iser's answers make up the most interesting chapter in part 1. Though Iser simply clarifies his previous theoretical formulations and does not, to my mind, convincingly respond to the criticisms listed at the beginning of this paragraph, he does stage an extremely valuable dialogue with his critics by giving them voice in his own book.

I have in other places spelled out why I believe Iser is vulnerable to charges of objectivism, formalism, and foundationalism. Here I would like to place his concepts in a different perspective. Iser is most anxious to have his theory of aesthetic response be viewed as an abstract model that can be used to analyze every reading experience, every interaction of reader and text. This "idealized model of text-processing" (p. 49) thus presents itself as a universal, transcendental framework for investigating all literary responses. In Iser's view, this model initially has nothing to do with specific, historical receptions of particular literary texts; he quite explicitly contrasts his phenomenology of reading to a reception aesthetics focused on histories of actual interpretations. However, there is another way to view Iser's theory. His detailed discussions of perspectives, gaps, wandering viewpoints, etc., provide a useful vocabulary for discussing literary performances. That is, though Iser claims to present a universal model, he actually makes available a repertoire of terms, tropes, and narratives for arguing about the meanings and effects of specific texts. In this sense, Iser's model is less a general theory for understanding all reading and more a helpful thesaurus for talking about particular readings, either one's own or those of past readers. Viewed from this rhetorical perspective, part 2 of *Prospecting* is not so much an "application" of part 1's abstract theory as the demonstration of the usefulness of a certain interpretive vocabulary. Whether readers of Iser's book are convinced or not by his theory's objectivism, formalism, and foundationalism, those readers will likely be persuaded by his specific readings and perhaps be influenced to adopt parts of his vocabulary in their own interpretive practices.

Rereading Iser's project in this way, against its theoretical grain, provides a different strategy for relating part 1 on reader-response theory to part 3 on literary anthropology. Iser presents part 3, "Avenues for Exploration," as a search below part 1 and 2's reader-response criticism to find its anthropological supports and as a mapping of the prospective field such an excavation opens up. What he discovers is the theoretical concept of "fictionality" and its dialectical relation to the "imaginary." I suggest viewing part 3 as a historical and cultural extension of the vo-

cabulary introduced in part 1 and a rhetorical investigation into the vocabulary of contemporary literary theory in its talk about literature, performance, fiction, and imagination. The difference between these two slants on *Prospecting* cannot be fully developed here, but I will illustrate my point briefly with a few examples from the final chapters.

In the course of an incisive and provocative discussion of key concepts in contemporary literary theory (pt. 3, chap. 10), Iser demonstrates how his earlier talk of readers interacting with texts fits together with an expanded framework for talking about (1) how reading literature functions historically within different cultural contexts; and (2) how competing literary theories (past and present) attempt to figure these functions in their own rhetoric. For example, he writes on the latter point: "Polyphonic harmony (the strata of the work merging together) is the favorite metaphor of phenomenological theory; the fusion of horizons (between the past experience embodied in the text and the disposition of the recipient) is a metaphor basic to hermeneutics; and the interrelation between making and matching (adapting inherited schemata to the world perceived) is a metaphor favored by gestalt theory" (p. 219).

Part 3 of *Prospecting* offers such instructive rhetorical readings of literary theories along with a suggestive vocabulary for extending (synchronically and diachronically) Iser's previous discussions of literary response. This seems more than enough of a payoff for the book's final section. However, Iser wants more from his explorations. As he puts it at one point, "Prospecting the regions of the imaginary entails conveying the experience of an intangible pot of gold which is always within our reach whenever we need it and which offers us such wealth that even the coveted treasure of meaning is devalued to the level of a mere pragmatic concept" (pp. 233–34). Instead of being satisfied with a provocative analysis of the different historical uses and cultural figurings of literary texts, Iser wants an anthropology that discovers "the *ultimate* dimension of the text," which he finds in the imaginary (p. 232). Rather than stop with a useful reminder about the unavoidable blindness and partiality of various literary theories, he goes on unnecessarily to essentialist talk about "the potential contained in the literary text": "If one work can be interpreted in different ways, it must contain this variety of meanings within itself" (pp. 231–32). And instead of resting with a persuasive narrative about theoretical shifts in dominant vocabularies and cross-disciplinary borrowings, he laments the imposition "of alien orientations on literature" and talks as if he could keep his own vocabulary free from interdisciplinary influences as he begins his anthropological study of the "special nature" of the literary medium (p. 264).

Nevertheless, these additional (Iser would call them central) philosophical claims for his literary anthropology do not negate the singular insights of the more limited historical and rhetorical claims he makes

along the way in part 3. Indeed, Iser's discussions of literary fictionality, his histories of key theoretical terms, and his speculations about the cultural functions of the imaginary will challenge many to rethink their own critical perspectives. I find myself still wrestling with the theoretical implications of Iser's proposed project. Granting, as Iser does, that literature "cannot be ontologically defined" and that there are no "anthropological constants," how exactly do we go about investigating "why we have this medium [of literature], and why we continually renew it" (pp. 264–65)? And how successfully can I untangle my disagreement with his idealist-sounding claims about literary fiction as a medium for the manifestation of a disembodied imaginary (indeed its "ideal manifestation" [p. 277]) from my agreement with his characterization of fiction as a "staged discourse," whose function of "overstepping the given" (p. 268) enables literature to intervene effectively in its own and later cultures? How one answers these questions follows significantly from how one views the theoretical frameworks for Iser's reader-response and anthropological arguments.

There are, then, at least two ways to read the relationship between *Prospecting's* first and final parts. Iser wants his reader to see part 1 as presenting a universal model of aesthetic response, which leads in part 3 to an anthropological definition of all literature and its imaginary functions. In contrast, I suggest viewing part 1 as introducing a vocabulary for reader-talk about specific texts and part 3 as extending that talk to the uses of literature within the rhetorical history of its production and reception, including its use as a topic within literary theory. In either reading, however, *Prospecting* remains an important transitional book, usefully summarizing the past and thoughtfully mapping out the future of a significant critic's theoretical project.

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Against Deconstruction. *John M. Ellis*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989. Pp. x+168.

Deconstruction and the Interests of Theory. *Christopher Norris*. Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press. Pp. 250.

Were institutional changes as rapid as intellectual ones, in today's academia one might expect to find increasing mergers of philosophy and literature departments, particularly if deconstruction were identified as the primary movement motivating these disciplines. That is not the case,