

reversibility leads naturally to the conclusion that to write means also to be written, that to read is equal to being read and that falsehood coincides with truth. It also follows that not being able to read a book to the end does not constitute the defeat of the reader as a consumer of literature; it is rather the greatest victory he can hope for. It means he can free himself from the dulling effects of traditional reading and approach the literary text with a reawakened sensitivity and a new openness of mind.

Luciana Marchionne Picchione

### WOLFGANG ISER

*The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*  
Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978. Pp. 239. \$15.00.

*The Act of Reading*, which Wolfgang Iser describes as "a book of Germanic phenomenology," is an outgrowth of two earlier essays, "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction" (German, 1970; English, 1971) and "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," the concluding chapter in *The Implied Reader* (German, 1972; English, 1974). If at times ponderous, labyrinthine, and puzzling, *The Act of Reading* is also genuinely exciting and is properly labeled by its publisher "an important and fundamental work." The impressive number of sources, German and English (not French), cited by Iser suggests that his work is in part a synthesis, though, of course, he argues against some of the points of his predecessors, such as Stanley Fish, Norman Holland, Simon O. Lesser, and Roman Ingarden. *The Act of Reading* is also another sign of the growing disenchantment with New Critical procedures and the seemingly endless "readings" or "interpretations" of novels: in his "Preface," Iser observes that "one task of a theory of aesthetic response is to facilitate intersubjective discussion of individual interpretations" and that "such an intention is a reaction to the spreading dissatisfaction arising out of the fact that text interpretation has increasingly become an end in itself."

Given Iser's terminology—"repertoire," "perspectives," "strategies," "horizon," "the wandering viewpoint," "protection," "retention," "perceptual *noema*," "ideation," "gaps" or "blanks," "vacancies," "theme-and-horizon structure," "negation," "negativity," "syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes," etc.—and the complexity of his schema, summarizing remarks will be especially inadequate. In any case, Iser is interested in describing "articulated reading moments" and more generally the interaction between a reader and a text, which is not a reflection of any given reality. (He is not concerned with retrospective views, surely the basis for most literary criticism.) It is this interaction which produces the aesthetic object, and the "meaning of a literary text" certainly is not a "detachable message" but rather "a dynamic happening." Such "a reader-oriented theory," Iser admits, "is from the very outset open to the criticism that it is a form of uncontrolled subjectivism"—and he continues to worry about "subjectivism" from time to time throughout the book. Very generally, Iser perceives within texts four "perspectives" (narrator, characters, plot, as well as "intended reader," "a sort of fictional inhabitant of the text") which are intermittent and never coincide or mesh, but which the "wandering viewpoint" of the reader does interweave. Also, "gaps" occur ("suspensions of connectability" between textual or perspective segments), and these stimulate the reader to "ideate": "By impeding textual coherence, the blanks transform themselves into stimuli for acts of ideation," that is, imaginative activity or production of meaning on the part of the reader. Though texts are inevitably "indeterminate," especially some modern ones, Iser also explains that "consistency-building is the indispensable basis for all acts of comprehension." Some of his most illuminating explanations are those on "gestalt coherence" (pp. 118-25). If I understand correctly, in the dynamic process of reading, one gestalt gives way to another, closure depending on a particular reader's selection. With Joyce, Beckett, and occasionally the *nouveau roman* in mind, Iser offers brief but helpful comments on "a new mode of communication" in which an "openness of structure" necessitates the increased activity of the reader. And there is much more which even the most quarrelsome literary theorists should find engaging and for the most part, I hope, cogent.

Possible limitations? After several readings of Iser's book, I continue to worry

about his four *alternating* "perspectives." More importantly, although Iser shares some of the terminology and interests of the proponents of structuralism and semiotics, he notices their literature only incidentally and makes no attempt to explain relationships. (See Jonathan Culler's "Phenomenology and Structuralism," *The Human Context*, 5 [1973], 35-42). In addition, his illustrations, or brief applications of his theories, are too infrequent, and questions remain about the relationship between his theory of aesthetic response and publishable literary criticism. He suggests that the object of the critic should be "to reveal the conditions that bring about . . . [a literary work's] various possible effects" or to clarify its "*potential*" and not "to impose one meaning on his reader"—a crucial point which may become clearer if Iser proceeds to offer a book of models.

If *The Act of Reading* does not eventually prove to have the same stature as, say, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* and *Anatomy of Criticism*, surely it is one of those rare books which deserve to be *studied* by all serious students of fiction. Could there be any more basic question than how we process or interact with literary texts?

Daniel P. Deneau

XENIA GASIOROWSKA  
*The Image of Peter the Great in Russian Fiction*  
Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979. Pp. 199.

No other figure in Russian history has inspired so many historical and fictional treatments as has Russia's greatest czar, Peter the Great. To be sure, his greatness and the significance of his rule for the future of the Russian people make it natural and fully warrant the frequent preoccupation with him. But there is a certain uniqueness and peculiarity about this man that intrigues scholars, artists, and common men alike. No wonder, therefore, that so many writers have used Peter the Great as their subject matter, not to speak of historians, who have yet to exhaust this fascinating subject.

As the author of the book under review states, her intentions were not to write another history of Peter the Great, nor just to catalogue the numerous anecdotes about him, nor to examine and evaluate as such the fictional works dealing directly or indirectly with him. Rather, her purpose was to arrive at "the composite image" as etched by fiction writers and thus to capture the human portrait as put together by the various authors. This is achieved by pursuing the historical truth, by using anecdotes, true or mythical, or simply by inventing events and characters as they fitted their artistic schemes. Xenia Gasiorowska has succeeded quite well; she has skilfully avoided the trap of checking the historical veracity of the depiction of Peter the Great or of evaluating the liberties taken by writers of fiction. While doing so, she has pursued, and captured, that elusive "composite image" created by fictional literature about Peter the Great.

The author goes a step further in that she establishes a new approach to historical fiction: she combines the existing approaches with the search for the purely human element, which might, after all, be the *raison d'être* of literature. She begins by discussing briefly the nature of the genre of historical fiction, and this sets up the framework of her study. After a biographical sketch of Peter the Great, she describes the sources about him at the disposal of writers throughout the centuries. She delves into the czar's personality, his appearance and behavior, the people in his entourage, the women in his life, the questions of the succession to the throne, and the environment in which the drama of his life and rule unfolded. All this, of course, as presented in Petrine fiction which consists of about sixty novels and stories.

The study provides brief, though very useful, plot summaries, a bibliography, and footnotes. It adds a scholarly touch to the highly readable and often amusing tone of the book. By cutting across several disciplines—a practice rather in vogue these days—the author confirms once again that the study of literature does not have to be a cut-and-dry, hermetic endeavor. Such an approach also assures this book of a very wide audience.

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