

## READING (ACT OF)

By Chiara Scarlato

(First published May 31, 2024)

It. *Lettura (atto di)*; Fr. *Lecture (act de)*; Germ. *Lesen (der Akt des)*; Span. *Leer (acto de)*. The act of reading has been a subject of philosophical reflection throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The interest in this field of research has grown due to the widespread availability of books, which has also led to increased attention towards the practice of reading literature. Various analytical perspectives on this issue have emerged over time, including phenomenology (Ingarden) and aesthetics of reception (Jauss, Iser), structuralism (Barthes, Genette), hermeneutics (Gadamer), and semiotics (Eco). This entry focuses on theories that highlight the importance of the act of reading as an event, and proposes the phenomenological approach to reading, along with the aesthetics of reception, as fundamental backgrounds for the development of contemporary elaborations of the act of reading as such. More specifically, the following sections will analyze Roman Ingarden's phenomenological approach and Wolfgang Iser's aesthetics of reception.

### REALIZING THE LITERARY WORK OF ART: ROMAN INGARDEN

Treating the work as a multi-layered system, Ingarden employs the main theoretical coordinates of Husserlian phenomenology to analyse the nature of the work and the relationship between text and reader. In his work *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art* (which was first published in 1931 and subsequently republished in 1959 and 1965), he identifies four *strata* that enable the realization and fruition of the literary text: the *stratum* of linguistic sound formations, which corresponds to the study of sound, meaning, rhythm, and reading time of any literary proposition; the *stratum* of meaning units, which is the study of words and propositions in their respective function in the general context of the text; the *stratum* of represented objects, which includes the study of likeness to reality of the literary representation; the *stratum* of schematized aspects which is the study of the concrete formal organization of the literary work. Within this theoretical framework, the literary work is realized on two levels: internal and external. The internal level concerns the individual concretizations of the four *strata*, which are realized thanks to the reader's intervention during the reading process. The external level concerns the constant interaction between the system represented by the work and the context in which any reader

elaborates it. According to Ingarden, reading literature “evokes deep changes in our life; it broadens it, raises it above the flatness of everyday existence, and gives it a lovely radiance. It is a “nothing” and yet a wonderful world itself – even though it comes into being and exists only by our grace” (Ingarden 1973: 373). In essence, literature and human existence are inextricably linked in a mutual, permanent, and unbreakable relationship.

#### THE EVENT OF WRITING: WOLFGANG ISER

The relationship between the author, text, and reader is central to Iser’s *Der Akt des Lesens. Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung* (1976, trans. *The Act of Reading*). In this volume, Iser presents a theory that combines a phenomenological matrix with a perspective internal to the aesthetics of reception as firstly elaborated by Hans Robert Jauss in the context of the Constance School. As a fundamental methodological tool, Iser utilizes the theoretical concept of the implicit reader. This concept was previously introduced in his 1974 collection of essays titled *Der Implizite Leser: Kommunikationsformen des Romans von Bunyan bis Beckett*. In brief, the implicit reader device refers to the interaction between the reader and the literary text during the reading process. Readers aim to reduce the uncertainty of the literary text by creatively engaging with it, while being limited by the structure of the text. In the introduction to this collection, Iser states that authors have increasingly required readers to engage in the process of decrypting the text, particularly from the nineteenth century onwards. In this process, the “reader discovers the meaning of the text, taking negation as his starting point; he discovers a new reality through a fiction which, at least in part, is different from the world he himself is used to; and he discovers the deficiencies inherent in prevalent norms and in his own restricted behaviour” (Iser 1974, xiii). As previously mentioned, this discovery is motivated by the fact that the text only exists through the reader’s interpretation. However, Iser’s position is not simply an update of Ingarden’s theories, despite being influenced by them as is the case in *The Act of Reading*.

Addressing the dynamic interaction between the reader and the literary text as an event, Iser identifies three fundamental elements for any act of reading to take place: the textual repertoire, the strategies that enable the repertoire to be positioned in a broad field of reference, and the reader’s engagement with the text. The repertoire refers to all the elements that belong to the social and cultural context of the work and serves as the first opportunity for the reader to discover and create connections between the text and their own experience. Strategies for organizing the textual repertoire include compensation, opposition, grouping, and seriality. The reader grasps the text by enacting a mechanism of pretention and retention contextual to the process itself. Ultimately, a text can be considered literary only if it creates an aesthetic experience through a creative interaction between the fictional narrative and the reader’s experience. According to Iser’s phenomenological understanding of the reading process, a work’s meaning is not solely contained within the text, but it rather it depends on a response from the reader based on their own experiences and emotions. In this sense, Iser argues that the

significance of the work “does not lie in the meaning sealed within the text, but in the fact that that meaning brings out what had previously been sealed within us” (Iser 1978: 157).

#### CONTEMPORARY DEBATES

As mentioned in the introduction, the phenomenology of reading and the aesthetics of reception have sparked an ongoing debate in the field of aesthetic and in the philosophy of literature. This debate has taken on new connotations with the shift from physical books to digital pages. For example, in his 1993 *In the Vineyard of the Text*, Ivan Illich argues that the “screen, the medium, and “communication” have surreptitiously replaced page, letters, and reading” and, more precisely, that “the epoch of bookishness” has come to its end (Illich 1993: 1). In the same text, Illich also notes that the ritual of reading has been replaced by the affirmation of screens, which display things in their evidence. Similarly, Giorgio Agamben discusses the challenges of reading and the transition from text to screen in two essays published in the collection titled *Il fuoco e il racconto* (2014). In recent research, the act of reading is considered a performative gesture (Kivy 2006), a means of emotional connection between the reader and the author (Holliday 2018), and a profound way to communicate between humans (Barbero 2019, 2023).

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

G. Agamben, *Il fuoco e il racconto*, Milano, Nottetempo, 2014.

C. Barbero, *La porta della fantasia*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2019.

— *Quel brivido nella schiena: i linguaggi della letteratura*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2023.

R. Barthes, *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1953.

F. Bertoni, *Il testo a quattro mani. Per una teoria della lettura*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1996.

M. Blanchot, *L'espace littéraire*, Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 1955.

A. Cavarero, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1997.

G. Currie, *The Nature of Fiction*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

U. Eco, *Lector in fabula: la cooperazione interpretativa nei testi narrativi*, Milano, Bompiani, 1979.

H.-G. Gadamer, *Warheit und Methode*, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr, 1960.

G. Genette, *Seuils*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1987.

G. L. Hagberg, *Self-Defining Reading: Literature and the Constitution of Personhood* in G.L. Hagberg, W. Jost (eds.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Literature*, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010: 120-158.

J. Holliday, *Emotional Intimacy in Literature*, “The British Journal of Aesthetics”, vol. 58, issue 1, 2018: 1-16.

## READING (ACT OF)

- R. Ingarden, *Das literarische Kunstwerk*, Auflage, Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen, 1931 (trans. *The Literary Work of Art*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1973).
- W. Iser, *Die Appellstruktur der Texte. Unbestimmtheit als Wirkungsbedingung literarischer Prosa*, Konstanz, Universitätsverlag, 1970.
- W. Iser, *Der Implizite Leser: Kommunikationsformen des Romans von Bunyan bis Beckett*, München, Fink, 1972 (trans. *The Implied Reader. Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1974).
- W. Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens. Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung*, München, Fink, 1976 (trans. *The Act of Reading. A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, London and Henley, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).
- H.R. Jaus, *Kleine Apologie der Ästhetischen Erfahrung*, Konstanz, Universitätsverlag GmbH, 1972.
- *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt Am Main, 1970.
- P. Kivy, *The Performance of Reading: An Essay in the Philosophy of Literature*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2006.
- P. Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2009.
- M.V. Llosa, *Elogio de la lectura y la ficción*, Madrid, Alfaguara, 2010.
- A. Selleri, P. Gaydon (eds.), *Literary Studies and the Philosophy of Literature. New Interdisciplinary Directions*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- S. Suleiman, I. Crosman (eds.), *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980.
- K.L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*, Cambridge (MA) and London, Harvard University Press, 1990.

### HOW TO QUOTE THIS ENTRY

C. Scarlato, *Reading (Act of)*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Spring 2024 Edition, URL = [https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2024/spring/Reading\(actof\).pdf](https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2024/spring/Reading(actof).pdf), DOI: 10.7413/18258630156.

Please note that this URL is fixed, since it belongs to *ILAE's* archived edition. This allows readers to quote a stable document for academic purposes.

This entry also belongs to the seventh volume of *ILAE's* printed edition. Each issue of this edition collects the *ILAE's* Spring and Autumn online editions per year. The proper reference of the printed edition is:

C. Scarlato, *Reading (Act of)*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Vol. 7, Milano, Mimesis, 2025.