

A virtual roundtable on Iser's legacy Part III: a conversation with Marco Caracciolo

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Abstract

In this article you find the third part of a roundtable on Wolfgang's Iser legacy with Gerald Prince, Mark Freeman, Marco Caracciolo and Federico Bertoni. In Part III we discuss with Marco Caracciolo the common grounds of Iser and cognitive literary approaches and the role of interpretation in cognitive literary studies.

Parole chiave

Wolfgang Iser, cognitive literary studies, interpretation, neuroscience, cognitive narratology.

Contatti

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1. Iser and the cognitive sciences

[LR] In 2010 Jürgen Schläe­ger described with these words Iser's lasting contribution to the contemporary theoretical effort: «no one among his competitors took the rational model of the human mind to such limits, no one illuminated so clearly the sort of questions and the sort of complexities that were at stake. In this sense Iser's works can serve both as a catalyst for a thoroughgoing analysis of the present state of theory as well as a springboard for an overhaul, long overdue, of the model of the mind that still governs most research paradigms in the humanities today». With this description Schläe­ger hints at cognitive research as Iser's legacy, although Iser himself failed in providing a personal cognitive model. What do you think of this? How did Iser – if he did – influence cognitive research?

[MC] I will preface my answers by saying that, while in many ways Wolfgang Iser's ideas have shaped my thinking about literature, I am far from being an Iser expert. I'm familiar with later books such as *The Fictive and the Imaginary* and *The Range of Interpretation*, but my interests lean heavily towards Iser's early work on reader-response. Therefore, what I say here should be taken as the musings of a sympathetic, but unsystematic and perhaps in some respects unreliable, commentator.

Coming to your question, a lot hinges on what you mean by «cognitive research». If you're referring to the cognitive sciences, I think the answer is «not much», because Iser's work has not significantly impacted discussions in psychology and neuroscience. Clearly, this is a missed opportunity: while Iser did not build on the language and methodology of cognitive science, many important theoretical insights can be found in his oeuvre, particularly insights that illuminate the interaction between cognition and culture. For example, when, in *The Implied Reader*, Iser wrote that «fictions alone can fill in the

gaps apparent in man's knowledge» (260), he was outlining the crucial cognitive function of the human imagination and creativity. Cognitive science would turn to these issues only much later.

Yet the lack of recognition for Iser in the cognitive sciences is not surprising, because Iser did not – or could not – open a conversation with the psychology of his times. His claims, from *The Implied Reader* to later works, remain firmly grounded in the tradition of phenomenology and philosophically informed literary theory. This is particularly true for Iser's theory of reader-response, which is an entirely – one could say unapologetically – speculative endeavor. In an interview with Norman Holland, Iser himself defended the importance of speculation: «If there is no reference in my book “to an actual reader actually reading”, this is because my aim was to construct a heuristic model of the activities basic to text-processing» (Iser, Holland, and Booth 61). Fundamentally, this is a phenomenological move: empirical research, Iser argues, is always driven by presuppositions, and if we do not keep these presuppositions in check – as one can only do through careful introspection and conceptual analysis – then empirical research is bound to confirm what we think we already know.

This points to what is, in my view, both a shortcoming of Iser's work and an important lesson to be learned from it: Iser's disregard for empirical psychology kept him problematically isolated from the mind sciences, which are now central to the field of cognitive approaches to literature; on the other hand, Iser made a convincing case that empiricism should always be accompanied by thoughtful theory-building. That is one of the conclusions I reached in a book co-authored with a psychologist, Russ Hurlburt (Caracciolo and Hurlburt). At the beginning of this project I – the literary scholar – was the one pushing for empirical research, while Russ insisted – rightly, I believe in hindsight – on the importance of bracketing one's presuppositions before ‘going empirical.’ I don't think Russ is aware of Iser's work in literary studies, but his ideas confirm Iser's intuitions.

This shows why we should continue reading and teaching Iser in our data-obsessed, empirically minded age. And there are encouraging signs in that respect: to name just two recent books in cognitive approaches to literature, Paul Armstrong cross-fertilizes Iser's theories and neuroscientific models in *How Literature Plays with the Brain*; Karin Kukkonen revisits Iser's literary anthropology in the conclusion to her *A Prehistory of Cognitive Poetics*. These and other recent studies demonstrate the continued relevance of Iser's work.

2. The reader in cognitive literary approaches

[LR] The problem of interpretation – and I would like to add, of using a heuristic model of the reader within the text – seems to be central to cognitive literary studies. I am referring to your recent article “Cognitive Literary Studies and the Status of Interpretation: An Attempt at Conceptual Mapping” but also to how you dealt with phenomenological reader's response theories in your *The Experientiality of Narrative*. In particular, both models face the problem of justifying non-empirical analyses of readers' interactions with the literary text. Is this an actual problem? Also, did cognitive literary approaches overcome reader's response theories or are the latter still viable in contemporary theorisation?

[MC] I think that's an actual problem, because it reflects the divergence between the goal of scientific work – generalization, finding the abstract rule or tendency that explains a

set of data – and the goal of literary interpretation – doing justice to the specificity of a text or set of texts. The divergence may not be unbridgeable, but pretending that it isn't there does not help, in my view. It's really a question of what we want to do: if we want to explore the intricacies of a text and its engagement with its culture and context, we're practicing interpretation; if we want to understand how readers in general make sense of it, we're observing interpretation at work. Cognitive science may not be irrelevant to the first project, but it is unlikely to make a huge difference: it is the skill and contextual or historical knowledge of the interpreter that matter most. The second project is much closer to the concerns of psychological work: we can, for instance, study how cognitive-level processes (such as mental imagery, bodily feelings, or emotional reactions) shape and guide the meaning-making of readers, or groups of readers. Within this project, I think (as I pointed out in my answer to the previous question) that there should be room for speculation and heuristic models, especially if these models are in themselves inspired by experimental findings and/or result in empirically testable hypotheses.

All in all, my sense is that the «problem» you discuss should be broken down into two separate issues: how empirical work and theoretical speculation can be reconciled; and how interpretation (especially in the practice of close reading) fits into the larger picture of cognitive approaches to literature. The former requires opening up literary scholarship to empirical methods, by building on the pioneering work of scholars such as Marisa Bortolussi, Peter Dixon, and Frank Hakemulder (see Bortolussi and Dixon; van Peer, Hakemulder, and Zyngier). The latter issue – it seems to me – reflects a more fundamental difference between two conceptions of literary study: one looks at specific texts and contexts, the other at shared patterns in reader-response. Obviously, in the concrete practice of (cognitive) literary scholarship these projects are more often than not intertwined, as they were already in Iser's work. But, because of their closer confrontation with scientific research, today's cognitive literary scholars are in a better position than Iser was to grasp the different epistemological underpinnings of interpretation and reader-response research.

3. Metacognitive questions in literature

[LR] In “Cognitive Literary Studies and the Status of Interpretation: An Attempt at Conceptual Mapping”, you highlighted how processual and functional cognitive literary studies are more interested in the process and in the effects of reading literature than in the interpretation of the literary text. On the other hand, you suggest the heuristic advantage that literary interpretation can provide to cognitive studies by means of what you call «metacognitive questions» addressed by literary texts. What do you expect from what you describe as a «two-way dialogue» between literary interpretation and cognitive science? What can this tell us about the human obsession with those meta-cognitive questions and with literature?

[MC] Insisting on the different stakes of literary interpretation and cognitive-scientific knowledge, as I have done above, does not imply that the former cannot possibly contribute to the latter. This is the possibility I discuss under the heading of «thematic approach» in the article you refer to. As Iser knew well, fiction gravitates towards questions that are of interest to us as human beings. Some of these questions have to do with mind, its material basis, its functioning in individual psychology as well as intersubjective interactions. Not all fictional texts deal with these «metacognitive» questions, of course;

but some are certainly capable of extraordinary psychological insight, whether they foreground personality change (George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*), mental illness (some of Edgar Allan Poe's best-known tales, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*), or developmental disorder (Benjy's monologue in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*). The thematic approach sees these fictional texts as a repository of intuitions that may reveal gaps in current scientific knowledge about the mind. The role of interpretation is that of exposing these intuitions and bringing them to bear on contemporary discussions in the mind sciences. The value of these texts, and of the interpretations that focus on them, is heuristic in nature: it is a form of metacognitive brainstorming that cannot feed directly into scientific research, but may still inspire new approaches or problematize current knowledge.

This may happen in several ways: fictional texts may reveal phenomenological qualities that are not easily captured through objective methods; they may serve as thought experiments, reverse engineering the human mind by (for instance) disrupting a character's memory or sense of self; they may position today's scientific knowledge *vis-à-vis* historically or culturally alternative conceptualizations of mental functioning. Yet anyone interested in establishing a «two-way dialogue» between interpretation and scientific research is walking on extremely thin ice, and not only because of the epistemological and methodological difficulties discussed above. Whether the metacognitive brainstorming afforded by fiction turns into a genuine «two-way dialogue» also depends on mind scientists' sensitivity to the lures of fiction. Certainly, this kind of conversation is slowed down by institutional and cultural hurdles: if fiction is seen by many, not just in society at large but also in the scientific community, as a mere pastime, it will be difficult to convince psychologists of the seriousness of fictional experimentations with mind. Ultimately, however, I don't think we can blame scientists for their lack of humanistic education, because it is part of our vocation as literary scholars to explain why fictional practices are central to our culture and to our cognition. Once again, Iser's work can help us frame these claims: I'm thinking in particular of his insight into how fiction «enables us to transcend that which we are otherwise so inextricably entangled in – our own lives in the midst of the real world» (*The Act of Reading*, 230).

Interpretation alone cannot take on the task of demonstrating this claim. This, in my view, is the promise of a cognitive approach to literature, and it involves moving beyond the practice of interpretation for its own sake: we need to be able to speak the language of science if we want to make a convincing case for the cognitive significance of fiction, and for the heuristic value of the reflections it inspires.

4. A literary anthropology?

[LR] All Iser's last efforts were in the appeal for the foundation of a new discipline «Literary Anthropology». Such an inquiry on human life requires specific heuristic tools and cannot make use of frames borrowed from other disciplines. The risk would otherwise be that literature is merely used to provide illustrative examples. Do you think that we need such an independent discipline? What could be the most suitable premises for it?

[MC] Iser's literary anthropology aims to understand how literature, and fiction in particular, enters life and shapes their readers' horizon of meanings: «Fictions are inventions enabling humankind to extend itself», writes Iser in *Prospecting* (265), echoing his statement (quoted in my previous answer) about the «transcendence» promised by literary fic-

tion. In this sense, I cannot but applaud Iser's project, which paves the way for more recent discussions on the «uses» of literature (to quote Rita Felski). However, I do not accept the idea that such project «cannot make use of frames borrowed from other disciplines» as you put it above. If that is what Iser's later work implies, then I believe Iser was fundamentally on the wrong track. Fiction does not exist in a vacuum, but in the embodied minds of social animals who live embedded in countless other practices and institutions. Likewise, literary anthropology cannot afford to sever links with other disciplines. We need psychology to grasp how fiction builds on – and perhaps develops – aspects of our personality and intersubjective skills. We need ethnographic methods to study how readers talk about fiction – in contexts such as the classroom or discussion groups, for example. We need sociolinguistics to examine how reading fiction may enrich the ways in which readers narrativize their own lives in everyday interactions. Consider, for instance, the studies published by Raymond Mar and his collaborators, Zazie Todd, or David Kidd and Emanuele Castano: none of these writers is a literary scholar, but I consider their work an important step towards a literary anthropology. This does not mean that literary scholarship has nothing to contribute to these discussions: on the contrary, I believe work on fiction's real-world impact would benefit greatly from a closer engagement with literary studies, as I have argued in a co-authored article (Caracciolo and van Duuren). Involving literary scholars in the research design is the best way to avoid reductive treatments of fiction (using it “to provide illustrative examples,” in your words). But, *pace* Iser, interdisciplinarity remains a necessary condition for a literary anthropology.

5. Do we still need literary theory?

[LR] In his last book *How to do theory*, Iser reflected on the practice of literary theory. What do you think is the role and the use of literary theory at the present day? Do we still need it? How should we do it?

[MC] I think today's literary study needs theory more than anything else: as I explained above, it is literary scholars' task to prove why fiction matters, and this is necessarily a theoretical effort – i.e., one that abstracts from the practice of literary history or criticism. But the theory I have in mind should be able to move beyond the jargon-rich, esoteric style that is sometimes associated with the word «theory», especially in an Anglo-American context. Undeniably, Iser himself indulged in this kind of bombastic prose at times. The problem with this way of doing theory is that it tends to erect barriers – between lay readers and scholars, between everyday modes of reading and academic ones. Theory should question these barriers: it should show why even sophisticated interpretations have their roots in widely shared emotional responses; and why the meaning-making practices of readers outside of academia always already imply cultural evaluation and interpretation (see Caracciolo, “Narrative, Meaning, Interpretation”). The dialogue with empirical research, with its penchant for clearly formulated hypotheses, can thus contribute to democratizing theory. When I say «empirical research», I do not only mean the experimental testing of the mind sciences, which has inevitable limitations and blind spots, but also qualitative research as a «softer» methodological option. Learning to combine these methodologies with the know-how of literary scholarship is the future of Iser's literary anthropology. This is the philosophy behind my current research project, “Narrating the Mesh”: the goal of the project is to bring together literary scholarship and

the social sciences, in an effort to study contemporary narratives (fictional and nonfictional) envisioning our species' interrelation with the natural world. We'll see whether this approach proves successful in the long run, but it is – I think – a step in the direction of a literary anthropology that embraces, and profits from, an interdisciplinary set-up.

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