Why We Need Fiction
Reception Aesthetics, Literary Anthropology, *Funktionsgeschichte*[*]

I. Reception Aesthetics

When reception aesthetics emerged in the early 1970s, it was seen as a paradigm shift in the study of literature. No one had developed a systematic theory of the role of the reader in the creation of literary meaning before, although the continuous, never-ending disagreements over the meaning, not only of much discussed cases like *Hamlet* or *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, but of almost any literary work, could only mean that the text itself, no matter how hard we study its formal organization or other constituents, cannot fully determine meaning.[1] In contrast, reception aesthetics' starting premise – that literary texts need readers to acquire meaning – was, and remains, convincing. Reception aesthetics, together with other versions of "reader-response criticism," as it was labeled in the U.S., became one of the cutting-edge

[1] Instead of taking the role of the reader into account, the response of literary studies to the phenomenon of interpretive disagreement usually consists in yet another survey of the various approaches that are currently *en vogue* in literary studies. The implication is that disagreement over meaning is produced by the fact that, in interpreting a literary text, we can choose to focus on one of its various constituents such as form, language, society, race, gender etc. In all of these approaches the basic assumption remains "text-centered," however. Meaning resides in the text and the task of the interpreter consists in deciding which of the meaning-carrying elements is central. Disagreement is disagreement over the centrality of the various constituents of the text. This attempt to deal with the problem of interpretive disagreement is based on denial. Not only do critics and readers with different interests consistently disagree over the meaning of literary texts, but so do critics of common ideological and political persuasion who focus their interpretation on the same textual aspects. Two feminists may agree completely on the constitutive role of gender in literary texts, but may nevertheless disagree completely over the application of this premise in the interpretation of any single text.

approaches in literary studies – and then suffered the inevitable fate of all such approaches. By now, it appears to be of interest more as a historical phenomenon than a relevant present-day practice. Why return to it, then? In the following essay, I want to argue that the original insights of receptions aesthetics are still valid and continue to provide valuable suggestions for literary and Cultural Studies – especially if we consider them not a critical orthodoxy but a way of thinking about literature that remains open to creative extension. Two projects of this kind have become influential in literary studies in Germany under the labels of literary anthropology and *Funktionsgeschichte* (history of the changing functions of literature). In the following essay I want to trace a line of argument that links reception aesthetics, literary anthropology and *Funktionsgeschichte* as part of a common project trying to clarify the function fictional texts have and the uses we make of them.

II. Negation and Negativity

Reception aesthetics emerged in the early 1970s in Germany in response to a crisis of legitimation in the study of literature. The student movement had challenged *Literaturwissenschaft* to go beyond the formalist agenda of studying literature "for its own sake" and to address the question what function(s) literature actually had in society. Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauß, who found their academic base at the newly established reform university in Constance and became the driving forces and major theoreticians of the Constance School of Reception Aesthetics, supported this challenge. They argued, however, that not only formalism but also the student movement failed to provide a satisfactory answer. The New Criticism regarded literature as an autonomous, self-referential object and the study of it as an end in itself, without ever considering literature's social or political effects. The major shortcoming of the student movement's Marxist account of the function of literary texts lay in a mechanically applied mirror-reflection theory, the so-called *Widerspiegelungstheorie,* in which literature can either mirror class relations truthfully or obscure them. For reception aesthetics, this concept of mirror-reflection appeared deeply flawed because it denied literature's potential of negation. Reception aesthetics emerged thus in response to the shortcomings of formalist as well as Marxist accounts of the function of literature. The larger purpose in drawing attention to the role of the reader and the act of reading lay in the attempt to find a more adequate answer to why literature was still important.[2] For this, one had to start not with a search for causal links between society and literature but at a more elementary level:

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2   Iser's essay on "*Ulysses* and the Reader" provides a good example of a definition of reception aesthetics as a project that avoids the pitfalls of "Marxist mirror-reflection theory" (136).

Why are human beings at all interested in literary texts, although, as a rule, they are well aware of the fact that these texts are mere "fictions" (310).[3]

This is the starting premise of Wolfgang Iser's reception aesthetics. By emphasizing the role of the reader in processing the text, it becomes clear that the function of literature cannot simply be derived from the textual object itself. The text cannot fully determine the meaning it has for the reader, although the text certainly frames and constrains the possibility of the reader's reception. A literary text and the meaning attributed to it in the act of reading are never identical. They are characterized by non-identity because, in order to acquire any meaning at all, the text must be actualized by a reader who has to translate the words on the page by means of his or her own imagination. Interpretations of literary texts by different readers, even by the same reader at different times, will therefore always differ. Any discussion of literature (and its "relevance" as an object of study) that does not take into account this elementary fact of the non-identity of text and meaning must be considered inadequate. This starting point, however, also gives a new twist to questions about the function of literature. For why are we reading literature (and return to it again and again), if we can never hope to arrive at reliable, stable meanings? For Iser, the answer is that we do not read literature primarily "for meaning."[4] Other discursive forms are much more reliable and effective in communicating meaning. To be sure, they, too, are in need of readers. But their primary communicative mode is referential, so that we have a criterion for determining their meaning,[5] while literary texts are, by definition, "fictionalizing acts" and as such made-up worlds.

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3   See Iser's summary "Do I Write for an Audience?" of what motivated him to study literature: "… I have been mainly concerned with conceptualizing why art, and literature in particular, exists. To be more precise, I am fascinated by its function. Why human beings need fictions is a question that intrigued me very early on, and literature appeared to epitomize this human desire for self-extension" (310).

4   There is a dimension of experience in our encounter with literary texts that exceeds meaning. Iser, in "The Current Situation of Literary Theory," therefore distinguishes between reading and literary theory: "In view of this situation the following thesis could be advanced: meaning as such is not the ultimate dimension of the literary text, but of literary theory, whose discourse is aimed at making the text translatable into terms of understanding. Such a translation presupposes that there is a dimension in the text which both provokes and stands in need of a semantic transformation in order that it may be linked up with existing frames of reference. It follows, then, that the *ultimate* dimension of the text cannot be semantic. It is what we might call 'imaginary' – a term that harks back to the very origins of fictional discourse" (17).

5   To be sure, this "referentiality" may be unstable in itself for a number of reasons – among them, as Hayden White has shown, the use of rhetorical elements and narrative patterns. There seem to exist almost as many disagreements about the interpretation of historical events as literary texts. Nevertheless, referentiality functions as an accepted criterion (and "court of appeal") for assessing the validity of different interpretations.

Fictional texts represent made-up worlds, even when they claim to be "realistic." Why do we read literature, then? Iser's answer transforms apparent liabilities into assets. Instead of regarding the non-identity of literary texts created by its fictionality, as a shortcoming which interpretation must overcome, he encourages us to see the asymmetry between text and reader as a chance, namely the chance of negating existing thought systems and opening up a critical, self-reflexive perspective onto them. Negation, in this case, is an effect not of a critical counter-perspective (which only a few readers may have) but of the inherent instability of literary meaning. The challenge would then consist in the development of a "negative aesthetics" that would emphasize literature's potential to expose the limitations and unacknowledged deficiencies of accepted systems of thought. Initially, for Iser as for many critics of his generation, the model for such a negative "art of reflexivity" was provided by literary modernism. In their experimental mode, modernist texts defy realist representation and compel the reader to become active in making sense of what often appears incomplete or even incomprehensible.

The reason for going back to the modernist beginnings of reception aesthetics here is to grasp the difference that would eventually separate the two. In an early essay on "Image und Montage," for example, Iser describes imagism as a form of modernist literature that helps to liberate an object from conventionalized forms of perception: "The function of art lies in the subversion of the illusions on which our perception is based; because the poetic image opens up an unexpected view of the object, it draws attention to the illusionism of conventional forms of perception" (367, my translation). This interpretation draws on T. E. Hulme's argument that the purpose of literature lies in the deautomatization of perception: "Poetry is to defamiliarize the conventionalized forms of perception, so that teleologically inspired constructions of reality are not confused with reality itself. … In order to realize this potential, the different perspectives on the object must contain a degree of reflexivity, for the poetical images are to reveal a dimension of reality that is hidden by convention" (369, my translation). Reflexivity is crucial, because it alone can elevate the defamiliarization of convention beyond the level of a mere routine of making things new, so that defamiliarization will lead not only to new perceptions but also to increased self-awareness.

However, Iser soon realized the shortcomings of this modernist model of reading. He responded by reconsidering the nature of the reader's activity in the act of reading. In a contribution to a volume of the group *Poetik und Hermeneutik* on *Positionen der Negativität (Positions of Negativity)*, he distinguishes his position from the concept of defamiliarization introduced by Russian formalism. Iser illustrates the difference by drawing on the phenomenological distinction between acts of perception (*Wahrnehmung*) and acts of imagining (*Vorstellung*). Perception is directed at objects that are already there and exist independently of the act of perception, while the "objects"

of the imagination are never identical with reality and thus also give shape to something that is absent.[6] The concept of defamiliarization is built on a theory of reading as an act of perception; its purpose is to liberate perception from culturally entrenched conventions in order to make us see things in a new and "fresh" way. By redefining the act of reading as an act of imagining, Iser, on the other hand, emphasizes the potential of the fictional text to articulate something that is still unformulated. This redescription of the reader's activity paves the way for the transformation of a modernist theory of literature into the theory of reading developed in Iser's two major studies *The Implied Reader* and *The Act of Reading*.

One of the recurrent misunderstandings about reception aesthetics is that its key concept of the reader refers to empirical or historical readers. Iser employs the term "implied reader" in order to draw attention to the reading activity inscribed in the text.[7] He wants to analyze the process through which the literary text is constituted as an object by the reader in order to grasp that elusive dimension of the reading experience which does not appear on paper and therefore cannot be reduced to the meaning of the text. In retrospect, Iser would later say: "Instead of asking what the text means, I asked what it does to its potential readers" (Iser, "Do I Write for an Audience" 311). Reception aesthetics should thus not be seen as "reader response criticism," concerned with the responses of individual readers, but as a theory of aesthetic experience because it is the element of aesthetic experience that constitutes the literary text as an object with a distinctive function of its own. At first sight, this may look like a flight from the question of function into the counter-world of aesthetics. But it has exactly the reverse purpose, namely to determine the function of literature (including its pragmatic functions) more precisely.[8] If

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6   This distinction would become the basis for one of the main objections voiced against Iser's form of reception aesthetics by proponents of the new cultural radicalism that would begin to dominate American literary criticism from the early 1980s on because, as they point out, any object is inevitably "constituted" by culturally available perceptual categories and therefore not "pre-given." (See, for example, Elizabeth Freund, *The Return of the Reader: Reader-Response Criticism*). It is Iser's point, however, that acts of imagining, although they depend on cultural constituents, nevertheless create a *new* object because of the need for a mental reconstruction by the reader. Iser does not claim that the act of imagining takes us outside culture; what he claims is that it opens up a space within culture.

7   Cf., for example, Gabriele Schwab's apt summary of the concept of the implied reader which "does not refer to the individual, the empirical, or to the ideal reader of a literary text, but to its strategies and structures of communication or its 'guiding devices' that exert at least a certain control over the reader's response" (130-1). This also means that the implied reader is not a reader-persona directly addressed in the text.

8   This can only appear contradictory to those who have accepted the conflation of the issue of aesthetics with formalism's version of it and the misleading dichotomy between political and aesthetic function derived from it. On this point, see my essay "Aesthetics and Cultural Studies."

literature has pragmatic functions, then it can realize these functions only on communicative conditions of its own and it is the task of literary theory to clarify these conditions.

The non-identity of text and meaning requires the reader to actualize the literary text by imagining objects that have an unreliable reference. Iser's conceptualization of this actualization is initially that of constant shifts between innertextual perspectives on the one side, and between text and extratextual reference on the other. These shifts, resembling the switch between theme and horizon described by gestalt theory, produce constant negations. Negation, however, only makes sense when it is referred back to that which is negated. The negated element remains present in the act of imagining as that against which the new perspective is defined. The same movement back and forth is triggered by blanks in the text which, for Iser, are an especially effective form of negation. Every text consists of segments that are determinate, and of blanks between them that are indeterminate. In order to establish consistency between these segments, the reader has to become active in providing links for that which is missing. A blank is thus not a mere gap, or an ideologically instructive omission. It is an intentional, often carefully crafted, suspension of relations in order to make us provide links for what is disconnected. The difference is significant: A mere gap allows readers to indulge in their own projections, a blank compels them to set up relations between their own imaginary constructs and the text. Aesthetic experience is thus, in effect, defined as a state "in-between." The possibility of aesthetic experience is no longer tied to certain defamiliarizing strategies of avant-garde literature but to the very activity through which we make sense of literary texts because this activity requires an interplay between a textual segment and the mental projection of a meaningful context and thus creates a constant switching of perspectives between reference and negation, blank and suspended relation.

In order to clarify this point, Iser adds the term negativity to that of negation. Negativity goes beyond the semantic level of negation to include an "unformulated and unwritten dimension" which is introduced by the act of imagining: "Unlike negations, negativity is not formulated by the text, but forms the unwritten base; it does not negate the formulations of the text, but – via blanks and negations – conditions them. It enables the written words to transcend their literal meaning, to assume a multiple referentiality, and so to undergo the expansion necessary to transplant them as a new experience into the mind of the reader" (Iser, *The Act of Reading* 225-6). Negativity generates aesthetic experience by enticing us to articulate something that is absent. What the term allows Iser to do is to transform the configuration of an interplay or "in-between" from a movement between either-or opposites to one between present and absent dimensions of the text – and thus to make an even stronger case for the crucial role of imagining acts in aesthetic

experience. Negativity as unformulated constituent of the text makes it possible to experience something which is not literally represented. Because it is absent, it has an unlimited negating potential. In this sense, it is also the negation of negation. It is negation in principle, so to speak, because it is not restricted to those norms, meanings, and forms of organization we would like to negate. This continuous invalidation, however, is also the precondition for activating literature's special potential: "In this way negativity not only shows that it is not negative, since it constantly lures absence into presence: While continually subverting that presence, negativity, in fact, changes it into a carrier of absence of which we would not otherwise know anything" (Iser, "The Critical Turn" xiv). For Iser, "negativity as a basic constituent of communication is therefore an enabling structure" (*The Act of Reading* 230).

III. The Real and the Imaginary

By transforming a modernist concept of defamilarization into a negative aesthetics and extending the concept of negation into that of negativity Iser solved one problem and created another. In reconceptualizing the idea of a negative aesthetics, he provided an answer to the problem of legitimation which had triggered the development of reception aesthetics. The negating potential of literature is no longer to be sought in a counter-position (which may in itself be heavily ideological), but in the mode through which we construe literary texts. The fictionality of the literary text leads to a constant movement between present and absent elements through which we try to compensate for the uncertainty of reference and the ensuing indeterminacy of the text. This activity provides distance to dominant thought systems in a far more persistent and systematic way than modernist strategies of negation could. Even uncompromising forms of negation entail, in the final analysis, only a change in position. This is not to say that the reader cannot or should not take up new perspectives or positions. The argument is not for an elusive position outside of ideology, but for an awareness of the provisional nature of any given world-view. The literary text is especially well-suited to create an awareness of this provisional nature because, in reading, we inevitably have to complement the linguistic representation of reality by mental images. These images are necessarily provisional and unstable because we create them as we go along reading. Hence the often irritating need to revise our mental constructs in the course of the reading process. The literary text can thus be seen as a training ground for the ability to revise our interpretations of reality and to make us aware of their provisionality.

However, in reconceptualizing the negating potential of literature as negation of negation, which prevents us, by constant perspectival shifts, from ever becoming arrested in any particular form of negation or counter-position,

Iser also creates a problem. By liberating his case for the negating potential of literature from "meaning" and tying it to a certain mode of processing the literary text, he narrows down the interpretation of literature to the analysis of these modes of processing. In his phenomenological study *The Act of Reading* this leads to a rich, helpful description of the reading process and the sources of interplay, but it also leads to a formalization that can never venture beyond the description of the literary text's potential: "As meaning arises out of the process of actualization, the interpreter should perhaps pay more attention to the process than to the product. His object should therefore be, not to explain a work, but to reveal the conditions that bring about its various possible effects. If he clarifies the *potential* of a text, he will no longer fall into the fatal trap of trying to impose one meaning on his reader, as if that were the right or at least the best, interpretation" (18). However, this triumphant liberation from the "fatal trap" of a search for meaning has a price, because it limits the possibilities of literary analysis to pointing out basic operations of text processing and, as a consequence, results in characterizations that can be marked by frustrating sameness.

Moreover, if the function of reading literary texts consists in an insight into the provisionality of our ways of explaining the world, why are we exposing ourselves again and again to this experience? The phenomenological approach of *The Act of Reading*, developed to give an account of the reading process that would not be restricted to an experimental, modernist mode, cannot deal with this question. Thus, it makes sense to return to a reconsideration of the function of literature and, by doing so, to move from reception aesthetics to the project of a literary anthropology. This anthropological turn addresses two problems in particular: It helps to do away with a still lingering modernist bias of reception aesthetics by shifting the point of emphasis, more consistently than before, from the category literature to that of fiction or, more precisely, to the fictive as an elementary component of all sense-making activities.[9] And, it does this by reconceptualizing the basic interplay which constitutes the "in-between" state of aesthetic experience through a new set of concepts, the real and the imaginary, the latter defined not in psychoanalytical terms as source of an illusion of wholeness, but phenomenologically, as an indeterminate, diffuse, and protean flow of impressions and sensations.[10]

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9   Cf. Iser's definition: "Fictionality is not to be identified with the literary text, although it is a basic constituent of it. For this reason, I refrain from using the word 'fiction' whenever I can and speak instead of fictionalizing acts. These do not refer to an ontologically given, but to an operation, and therefore cannot be identical to what they produce" (*Prospecting* 237). "Whenever I can" also means, however, that, for rhetorical and other reasons, we sometimes fall back onto the customary practice of using the word fiction as a short-hand term for fictional texts, as I am doing, for example, by translating the German word *Funktionsgeschichte* as "Changing Functions of Fiction" – without, however, intending to imply that "fiction" has an ontological existence of its own.

10 The distinction between psychoanalytic and phenomenological definitions of the

Literature is not just another form of discourse but staged discourse marked by fictionality. What constitutes a text as "fictional," then? Not any inherent linguistic or other property, but an invitation, signaled by certain markers or institutional contexts, to read a text not primarily referentially but aesthetically, that is, by foregrounding its aesthetic function. This does not mean, however, that the text's referential dimension is cancelled and that the text becomes entirely self-referential as a result. If the text is marked by negativity and therefore includes aspects that are still unformulated, then there is also no word available yet for this unformulated dimension. That which is to be articulated has to attach itself to a discourse of the real in order to become "sayable." Literature gives a determinate shape to imaginary dimensions, ranging from fantasy to affective dimensions, by linking these elements with a semblance of the real. The fictional text emerges thus out of the combination of the two. Without imaginary elements, the text would be a mere duplicate of discourses of the real; without semblance of the real, the imaginary would not have any form and thus would not be able to appear in representation.

> The act of fictionalizing is therefore not identical to the imaginary with its protean potential. For the fictionalizing act is a guided act. It aims at something that in turn endows the imaginary with an articulate *gestalt* – a *gestalt* that differs from the fantasies, projections, daydreams, and other reveries that ordinarily give the imaginary expression in our day-to-day experience. … Just as the fictionalizing act outstrips the determinacy of the real, so it provides the imaginary with the determinacy that it would not otherwise possess. In so doing, it enables the imaginary to take on an essential quality of the real, for determinacy is a minimal definition of reality. This is not, of course, to say that the imaginary *is* real, although it certainly assumes an appearance of reality in the way it intrudes into and acts upon the given world (Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary* 3).

As a representation of yet unformulated imaginary elements, the fictional text goes beyond discourses of the real; as a form of representation drawing on a semblance of the real, it is more than a mere fantasy or daydream; as a combination of the two elements, it places the reader in a by now familiar position "in-between." This creates the need for a constant movement between the real and the imaginary elements of the text:

> A piece of fiction devoid of any connection with known reality would be incomprehensible. Consequently, if we are to attempt a description of what is fictional in fiction, the time-honored opposition between fiction and reality has to be discarded and replaced by a triad: the real, the fictional and the imaginary. It is out of this triadic relation that I see the literary text arising. Within this context, the act of fictionalizing is seen as a

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imaginary is important. For Lacan, the imaginary is the source of the subject's misrecognition and self-alienation; for Iser – as for Cornelius Castoriadis in *L'Institution Imaginaire de la Société*, a book that was influential in Iser's anthropological turn – the imaginary is the source of a creative energy that escapes the control of systemic power effects and can therefore function as a source of cultural and social change.

constant crossing of boundaries between the real and the imaginary. By transforming reality into something which is not part of the world reproduced, reality's determinacy is outstripped; by endowing the imaginary with a determinate gestalt, its diffuseness is transformed (Iser, "Fictionalizing Acts" 5).

In an essay on representation as a concept of literary analysis, Iser illustrates his argument by drawing on the example of a reading of *Hamlet*:

> In this respect the required activity of the recipient resembles that of an actor, who in order to perform his role must use his thoughts, his feelings, and even his body as an analogue for representing something he is not. In order to produce the determinate form of an unreal character, the actor must allow his own reality to fade out. At the same time, however, he does not know precisely who, say, Hamlet is, for one cannot properly identify a character who has never existed. Thus role-playing endows a figment with a sense of reality in spite of its impenetrability which defies total determination. … Staging oneself as someone else is a source of aesthetic pleasure; it is also the means whereby representation is transferred from text to reader (Iser, "Representation: A Performative Act" 244).[11]

Since we have never met Hamlet and do in fact know that he never existed, we have to come up with our own images of him. Inevitably, this mental construct will draw on our own associations and feelings which are in this way interlinked with the representational level of the text.

This means that in the act of reading the literary text comes to represent two things at the same time: the made-up world of the text and imaginary elements added to it by the reader in the process of giving meaning to the words on the page. Although the fictional text makes use of elements of the life-world in order to create a semblance of the real, it thus cannot be identical with any reality it represents. And it is exactly this "doubleness" or double reference of fiction that can be seen as an important source of aesthetic experience, because it allows us to do two things at once: to articulate imaginary elements and to look at them from the outside. Aesthetic experience is a state "in-between" in which, as result of the doubling structure of fictionality, we are, in Iser's words, "both ourselves and someone else at the same time" (244) so that, in reading, we can be inside and outside a character at once.[12] The

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11 Since representation is the matrix for bringing something into the world that has not yet been represented, it is not a form of mimesis but performance. Thus, terms like performance or masquerading that have recently gained critical attention, often in relation with racialized or engendered texts, should not be restricted to shrewd maneuvers of a marginalized social actor but can also be used in a broader sense as description of the reader's actualization of a literary text.

12 Iser's "performative" theory of aesthetic experience is supported by a number of works on the psychology of reading and the transactions between reader and text summarized in J.A. Appleyard's study *Becoming a Reader. The Experience of Fiction from Childhood to Adulthood,* especially in his chapter on "The reader as player." In reading, we experience a double state of mind, "we both identify ourselves with the characters, incidents, and themes of the work, but also keep them at a safe distance …" (39). We can simultaneously enact and observe certain experiences; we can

fictional text allows us to enter a character's perspective and perhaps even his or her body; on the other hand, we cannot and do not want to completely give up our own identity. In reading, we thus create other, more expressive versions of ourselves. This is achieved, however, in a much more complex way than suggested by the term identification. One may assume, for the sake of the argument, that it may be possible to "identify" with a character, but one cannot identify with a whole text. It is the text, however, that provides an aesthetic experience, not just single characters in it. Clearly, in actualizing the text in the act of reading, all characters have to be brought to life by means of a transfer, not merely the good or sympathetic ones.[13] The "more expressive version of ourselves" is thus not a simple case of self-aggrandizement through wish-fulfillment but an extension of our own interiority over a whole (made-up) world.

IV. Changing Functions of Fiction

My argument so far has been that reception aesthetics continues to be of interest for present-day literary studies because it provides insights into the make-up and function of literature that have by no means become invalid or obsolete. Its starting point is the non-identity of text and meaning. No matter how well crafted a literary text is, it cannot fully determine its meaning. It always needs a reader in order to become actualized (and thus "meaningful"); the reader, however, can only actualize a literary text whose reference is "fictionalized" by drawing on his or her own associations, mental images and feelings as an analogue. Hence, the literary text can be actualized only by a transfer. This means that it represents two things at the same time – a referential dimension characterized by a semblance of the "real" and an unformulated, imaginary dimension which the reader adds in the transfer through which the text is actualized. This doubleness of the text places the

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indulge in a temporary "abandonment to the invented occurrences" and yet also take up "the evaluative attitude of the onlooker" (53-4). See also Catherine Gallagher's and Stephen Greenblatt's characterization in *Practicing New Historicism*: "In a meaningful encounter with a text that reaches us powerfully, we feel at once pulled out of our own world and plunged back with redoubled force into it" (17). In her study *Reading Cultures. The Construction of Readers in the Twentieth Century*, Molly Travis also conceives of reading as a process of going "in-and-out" and emphasizes the compulsive dimension of the act: "I conceive of agency in reading as compulsive, reiterative role-playing in which individuals attempt to find themselves by going outside the self, engaging in literary performance in the hope of fully and finally identifying the self through self-differentiation. Such finality is never achieved, for the self is perpetually in process" (6).

13 This is not to imply that the reader's transfer is restricted to characters. In principle, it concerns every word of the text. I am staying with Iser's example here for the sake of the argument.

reader "in-between" and results in a movement back and forth which for Iser is the core of aesthetic experience – not, because such movements have an inherent aesthetic quality in themselves but because they open up an interplay between present and absent dimensions of the text.

A significant problem remains, however: In Iser's reception aesthetics, the doubling structures of literary fictionality can be described only as potential, that is, in terms of their various doubling operations, because any attribution of a more specific meaning or function would arrest the ceaseless play of negativity.[14] And although Iser's anthropological turn promised to provide a more concrete description of the function of literary texts, it does not really enlarge the descriptive range because the anthropological reason given for why we need fiction is another version of the experience of non-identity, namely the "unknowability" of the self and the "inexperiencability" (*Prospecting* 148) of the end. But do we really seek out fictional texts again and again in order to be confronted with the unknowability of the self? And even if we do, why should interpretation restrict itself to this one elementary aspect? There cannot be any cultural or literary history written on this basis because the description of the text's function can result only in the ever renewed confirmation of its negating potential. Even if we grant that Iser has succeeded in describing a basic constituent of aesthetic function that distinguishes the fictional text from other forms of communication, it is obvious that different uses have been made of this potential in history. This is the starting premise for an approach called *Funktionsgeschichte* in German which, for my purpose, can be roughly translated as history of the changing functions of fiction.

The approach emerged at about the same time as reception aesthetics and, in effect, often in close connection with it. Both were responses to the challenge of the student movement to make a more convincing case for the importance of literature than formalism had done, and both found the Marxist alternative unsatisfactory. However, in contrast to reception aesthetics, *Funktionsgeschichte* initially tried to solve the question of function by clarifying the nature of the relation between literature and society. Instead of merely reflecting reality, literary texts respond to it actively and, in doing so, reinterpret and, occasionally, even reshape it. Moreover, literary texts respond not to

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14 Thus, a shift of emphasis can be noted in Iser's transition from reception aesthetics to literary anthropology. While the former deals primarily with the phenomenology of text-processing, the latter focuses on various manifestations of the text's doubling structures and their interaction. Again, however, this "play of the text" – exemplified, for instance, in Iser's book *Laurence Sterne's 'Tristram Shandy'* can only lead to a typology of play movements because any further concretization would undermine the conceptualization of the play of the text as a manifestation of negativity. This, however, leaves only one route open, namely "to grasp different modes of negativity that are in play with one another" (Iser, "The Critical Turn" xiv). To me, this is the most sterile and disappointing aspect of Iser's approach.

a broadly defined phenomenon such as, for example, "capitalism," but to concrete situations in which capitalism (or any other historical formation) manifests itself in specific, varied and often contradictory constellations. In contrast to historical determinism, the ability of human beings to come up with different responses to problematical situations is stressed. Iser later called the approach pursued in *The Implied Reader* an example of *Funktionsgeschichte* and wrote a programmatic essay on "Changing Functions of Literature" in support of the approach. It was only after the phenomenological reorientation of *The Act of Reading* that he began to distinguish between reception aesthetics and *Funktionsgeschichte.*

Iser's turn to reception aesthetics may be seen as response to the limitations of *Funktionsgeschichte* as it was conceptualized at the time. In postulating a historical logic of question and answer, derived from Collingwood, a deterministic model was replaced, but the question and answer model still implied a clear-cut causality.[15] The major difference to orthodox Marxism lay in the less sweeping, historically differentiated analysis of society,[16] and in the consideration of mediating factors such as market conditions for literature or the institutional contexts of literature,[17] both of which opened up a greater variety of possible responses for the literary text. But there was hardly a more differentiated view of how the literary text itself is constituted and how it shapes its effects through its textual structure. In most versions of *Funktionsgeschichte,* function is simply social function. However, if literature would derive its meaning and significance exclusively from its response to a particular social situation, then its "function" would be restricted to this particular situation and one would not be able to explain why the literary text can continue to be of interest under historically different, often far-removed circumstances.

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15 R.G. Collingwood and Niklas Luhmann's General Systems Theory are the two major influences on Iser's own version of *Funktionsgeschichte.* His recurrent argument, illustrated by the following quotation, is that literature responds to deficiencies and weaknesses which are produced by the various systems of society (social, cultural, intellectual) in their drive for inner-systemic stability: "Since literature endeavors to counter those problems, the literary historian should be able not only to gauge which of the systems were dominant at the time of the work's creation but also to reconstruct the weaknesses and the historical human impact of the systems concerned. If we were to apply R.G. Collingwood's question-and-answer logic, we might say that literature answers the questions arising out of the systems of its environment" (Iser, "Do I Write" 312).

16 See, for example, Wilhelm Vosskamp, "Literaturgeschichte als Funktionsgeschichte der Literatur (am Beispiel der frühneuzeitlichen Utopie)" and, for a revised Marxism, Peter Bürger's *Zum Funktionswandel der Literatur.*

17 For example, Niklas Luhmann, *Die Ausdifferenzierung des Kunstsystems* and Siegfried J. Schmidt, *Die Selbstorgansiation des Sozialsystems Literatur im 18. Jahrhundert,* both of which are based on basic assumptions of General Systems Theory and deal with literature as a social subsystem.

As social actors who respond to a particular situation, writers may have all kinds of goals and – conscious or unconscious – motives for writing. However, in order to communicate these and to achieve any effect, the text has to be crafted in such a way that it manages to give expression to these goals and motives. Social and other pragmatic functions can only be realized through a particular organization of the text itself, or, as reception aesthetics would put it, through a particular structure of aesthetic effect. Hence, only after clarifying the specific communicative mode of literature as fiction can one hope to explain the various uses convincingly that have been made of fiction's potential: "Thus, any talk of 'use' remains naive if the conditionality of this use is not taken into consideration" (Iser, "Changing Functions" 208). The attempt to determine the function of literature through a (historically and institutionally differentiated) analysis of social structure is thus replaced by the goal to clarify the function of literature as fiction. Accordingly, *Funktionsgeschichte* is reconceptualized as history of the changing functions of fiction. For me, such a redefinition holds the promise of profiting from the original insights of reception aesthetics, while at the same time opening up the possibility of linking the analysis of aesthetic experience with historical contexts of use.

How can an analysis of changing functions of fiction proceed? So far, I seem to have taken the analytical usefulness of the concept of function for granted. To many, however, the term may be suspect, because it seems to signal a throwback to sociological functionalism, or, if the term function is narrowed to political function, to a vaguely leftist search for direct practical consequences of literature. Indeed, in the latter sense, the term appears particularly ill-applied to literature, because it will hardly ever be possible to establish causal links between a literary text and concrete social or political effects. And yet, I claim that the term function is useful nevertheless. Since any interpretation of a literary text must go beyond its mere reduplication, we must make decisions about what we consider important or unimportant in a text. However, on what grounds can we decide what is important? The only way in which we can make sense of a text that has a "fictive" referent is to assume that the text is designed to do something and that the various textual elements have been arranged in the way they are in order to achieve this goal.[18] We can only make sense of them on the assumption that they are

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[18]   The various approaches to literary interpretation are therefore based on different assumptions as to what provides the textual coherence which is the pre-condition for the possibility of interpretation. In New Criticism, for example, this coherence is provided by the text's structure, understood, however, not merely as a set of rules for the production of texts, but as an innertextual pattern that transforms everyday language into the language of art – and thereby creates the aesthetic experience of an object without "extrinsic" purpose. Inevitably, interpretations based on these premises will focus on the identification of this pattern. But even in poststructuralist approaches, in spite of its valorization of heterogeneity and difference, the single sign is of interest only if it

"functional" in relation to a particular effect they are supposed to achieve. Or, to put it differently: It is our hypothesis about the text's function that makes a text coherent and its structure "readable." A structure is meaningless if it is not seen as being created for a reason (or as following a certain logic, for example that of language). As interpreters, we do not have a fictional text first and then try to determine its function. Quite on the contrary, we cannot interpret a fictional text without implying a function. To use the term function in this sense means to use it strictly as a heuristic category, not as a synonym for social function or social effect.[19] We can make choices in interpretation only when we imply a function. This heuristic assumption works like a spotlight. It is the pre-condition for identifying patterns of meaning and rhetorical strategies of effect in a literary text. No interpretation can do without such assumptions, although these assumptions often remain tacit and untheorized and the term function may not be used itself.[20]

However, even if the concept of function is used heuristically and not in naive sociological fashion two objections may still be raised: Isn't it reductive to work on the assumption of a single function when any literary text can obviously have several different functions at the same time? And even more pertinently: Is literature, in its inherent referential ambiguity, rhetoricity of language and imaginary surplus of meaning, not exactly the opposite of a

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can be shown to be part of a disseminative trace, for only in this way can its deconstructive function be demonstrated. Again, a hypothesis about what function literature has – in the case of American deconstruction, for example, to provide telling instances of rhetorical self-deconstruction – determines the direction interpretation will take.

[19] In the following formulation in "The Current Situation of Literary Theory," Iser confirms the logical priority of function over structure, but on different grounds. In the literary text, he writes, "the order and the formation of structures depend on the function that the text has to fulfill" (11). Such a formulation still seems to imply that we can determine the "real" function first and then explain the text's structure. Clearly, however, just as critics will differ on the text's meaning, so they will hold different hypotheses about the text's function. To introduce the term function as a category of analysis is thus not an attempt to anchor interpretation on "real" grounds but to draw attention to underlying premises that guide and govern every interpretation.

[20] Even those approaches which position themselves in uncompromising opposition to "functionalism" and value literature as counter-realm to the iron grip of rationality, cannot escape this hermeneutical logic. Formalists, for example, who insist that the special value of literature lies exactly in its potential to be "without function" can only attribute special significance to this fact, because it serves a larger function, namely the liberation of culture from the alienating impact of materialism and instrumental reason. Similarly, the poststructuralist valorization of heterogeneity and difference is based on a hypothesis about their social, cultural and political desirability. To deconstruct logocentrism or the tyranny of realistic representation or the universalizing thrust of "grand narratives" has its goal in the promise of systemic subversion and the liberation of singularity. No matter what we think of these claims, in each case a hypothesis about the function literature has within a larger system will also determine the interpretive choices the critic makes.

text that is "functional" in its organization, so that any heuristic assumption of an implied function must unduly homogenize the text? The argument is valid but it conflates two levels that should be kept apart logically. To employ the term function as a heuristic category does not yet determine whether my hypothesis entails homogenization or heterogenization. It all depends on the function implied. If I assume the function to be a deconstruction of logocentrism, then my attention will be drawn to those operations of the text that are "functional" for the purpose of deconstruction such as constant slippages in signification, but this will by no means homogenize the text in the "functionalist" sense of one unifying principle. Similarly, the contrast between mono- and multifunctionality confuses two levels: If we speak about historical functions of a particular text, then we may indeed encounter a variety of functions. But this is different from employing the term as a heuristic category, because in terms of interpretation, hypotheses about several functions will not work differently from hypotheses about a single function. They, too, will become the basis for interpretive choices based on the hypothesis that certain textual features are designed to achieve certain effects.

One potential gain in drawing attention to the role of underlying assumptions about literature's function(s) is the possibility of comparing the plausibility of these implied functions. Once they are made explicit, they can also become the subject of (self-)inspection and debate. It has been the purpose of the first part of this paper to provide a description of the function of fiction that would be able to account for the specific potential fiction has as a form of communication. We search out fictional texts not primarily for information or documentation but for a special experience described here as aesthetic experience. In this view, the aesthetic function is the pre-condition for the realization of other functions, because these other functions can be realized only on the basis of the text's fictionality. This raises the question of what form a history of the changing functions of fiction, based on the insights of reception aesthetics and, specifically, its theory of aesthetic experience, could take? Such an approach can no longer restrict itself to the idea of a "response;" it must also be able to account for possibilities of transfer opened up by the literary text. Its starting point must be the doubling structure of fictionality which, by linking the real with the imaginary, makes it possible to articulate dimensions of experience that have been unrepresented or unrepresentable so far.

American sentimental novels of the Early Republic, for example, can be read as negotiation between two conflicting views of literature's function: Is the novel to be a guardian or seducer of the reader?[21] Officially, the genre

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[21] For a more detailed version of this argument see my essay "Sentimentality and the Changing Functions of Fiction." For an extension of the argument into realism, and specifically, the novels of Henry James, see "Declarations of Dependence: Revising Our View of American Realism."

claims to deal with the issue of seduction for didactic reasons, namely to issue a warning to young readers in order to preserve the virtue of the young nation. However, in order to illustrate its moral lesson as effectively as possible, sentimental novels also have to present their story in a dramatic, potentially "seductive" fashion. The didactic discourse is thus enhanced by emotionally charged material which, before the arrival of the sentimental novel, existed publicly only in anti-aristocratic diatribes. Because the issue of illicit sexual relations is still taboo material, it retains a considerable degree of indeterminacy which invites the reader to fill in the blanks with imaginary elements of her own. Where these imaginary elements threaten to become too overwhelming, on the other hand, the reader can resort to the didactic perspective for (self)protection. Two possibilities are opened up in this movement: that of articulating an inner conflict between imaginary desire and social respectability, and, perhaps even more importantly, that of providing recognition of the reader's subjectivity. This individual empowerment goes beyond any identification with single characters or events in the text. It arises from the necessity of the individual reader to actualize a whole world, including the seducer or the hostile world of self-righteous citizens, along the lines of her own interiority.

I want to call this the "articulation effect" of fiction.[22] Because of its status as a made-up world and therefore as a "lie," the fictional text can employ "official" discourses of the real as host for the expression of yet unformulated and possibly "unsayable" things. But what exactly is articulated in this process? The example of the sentimental novel and its "guilty pleasures" of illicit affairs may suggest that the unsayable consists in socially tabooed material. This would tie the fictional articulation effect to the expression of daring transgressive material. We could, in this case, apply categories like desire or the unconscious for that which is articulated. However, as a name for that flow of diffuse, decontextualized and protean associations, sensations and sentiments that are always a part of us, but at the same time "unrepresentable," because these elements possess no structure, the phenomenological concept of the imaginary goes beyond definitions of the unformulated or unsayable as the culturally repressed. The unformulated dimension fictional texts articulate should thus not be sought primarily or even exclusively in a repressed, other side of ourselves, cut off from consciousness and self-awareness, but in the more fundamental fact that there exists a dimension of interiority – ranging from psychic structures to bodily sensations – that, by definition, can never be fully represented. Because fictional texts require a transfer in order to be actualized, they can provide the gratification of articulating something radically subjective, while at the same time representing this dimension in a version that appears to provide public recognition.

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22 For this term and a more detailed version of the following argument, see my history of the American novel, *Das kulturelle Imaginäre. Eine Funktionsgeschichte des amerikanischen Romans 1790-1900.*

This "duplicity" can explain fiction's usefulness for an articulation of the imaginary: Fictional texts are especially useful because they can link the subjective and the social by means of a structural analogue. Because readers have to draw on their own mental images, feelings and bodily sensations in the transfer process, the actualization of the text establishes analogies between elements that may be wide apart historically but linked by structural resemblances. This "articulation effect" is, I think, the actual gratification fiction provides and one reason for the increasing role fictional texts and aesthetic experience have come to play in modern societies. For modern society, this articulation effect serves an important purpose, because it contributes new elements to the ongoing conversation of a culture and thus functions as a source of constant redescription, renewal and, potentially, cultural regeneration. For the individual, the articulation effect is welcome, because it can provide cultural recognition of one's own individuality. "Empowerment" through fiction should thus not be falsely construed as self-aggrandizement, not even as construction of imaginary strength, but as a form of self-extension.

It is important, in this context, to be clear about the source and function of the fictional articulation effect. It should by no means be conceptualized as a last "authentic" residue of experience, nor should the transgressive potential of avantgarde texts be seen as its privileged manifestation. The reason for the constantly renewed search for articulation is not a pre-verbal, pre-reflexive energy but the inherent inadequacy of representation. We can only speak through the linguistic signs and cultural patterns that are available to us, but these will never completely express the range of associations, images and affective states that seek articulation. Articulation by means of fiction thus constantly refuels our need for articulation; this, in effect, explains why we return to fictional texts again and again, although we are well aware of the practical "uselessness" of this activity. Fictional texts are ideal means for the articulation of an interiority that seeks representation; however, what makes them so wonderfully effective for this purpose – their ability to link imaginary elements with a semblance of the real – is at the same time also the reason for the insufficiency of representation and, consequently, for new fictional attempts.

But if it is one of the major functions of literary texts to provide individuals with an opportunity to inscribe themselves into cultural discourses in their own, highly subjective way, how can we say anything meaningful about this process at all? How is it possible to discuss a reading, if this reading acquires meaning only by means of a transfer in which an "invisible" imaginary dimension is articulated? We can characterize the structure of the transfer that constitutes aesthetic experience, but we cannot come up with a ready-made formula to describe its content or psychic function. The whole point about aesthetic experience is that it goes beyond such formulas and "individuates" them in entirely unpredictable ways. The problem is, however, that we have

no direct access to that which is added in transfer. Strictly speaking, aesthetic experience is untranslatable. The only "document" we have is the reader's or interpreter's redescription of the aesthetic object which has functioned as host. In this redescription, the interpreter produces a second text (one may also speak of a second narrative) which provides clues for this reader's encounter with the fictional text. For reasons discussed at the beginning of this essay, none of these readings or interpretations will ever be identical. But the difference can be instructive where certain patterns of reception become noticeable. The cultural history of literary texts is the history of their varying uses in the act of reception. Literary history and the history of reception thus cannot be separated. The second narratives through which the literary text is actualized have their own historically distinct patterns and a history of the second narratives through which literary texts are actualized and appropriated at different times is therefore one of the logical follow-up projects of a history of the changing functions of fiction.

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