The Search for Distance: Negation and Negativity in Wolfgang Iser's Literary Theory

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I

IN THE CURRENT CRITICAL CLIMATE of a far-reaching politicization of literary studies, it has become customary to dismiss reception aesthetics, and, more specifically, the theory of reading developed by Wolfgang Iser, as being ahistorical, apolitical, and, worst of all, "liberal."[1] Although the major discussions of, and objections to, Iser's theory of reading focused initially on the question of the precise nature of the text-reader relationship, this political critique set in already in the '70s and early '80s and has since then taken the standard form of criticizing Iser's "liberal humanist ideology."[2] In this argument, liberalism is not used as a term of political theory, for this would mean to refer to a body of assumptions about political organization, the distribution of power, or issues of justice and fairness.[3] Instead, "liberal humanism" functions as a shorthand for an apparent evasion of political commitment and ideological analysis in favor of a persistent belief in the transcending powers of art. From this point of view, an increased cognitive mobility of the individual reader will not lead to change but merely to self-confirmation: "The reader is not so much radically upbraided, as simply returned to himself or herself as a more thoroughly liberal subject" (*LT* 79). Already in 1980, Frank Lentricchia had argued that Iser's reception theory posits a seemingly "neutral" reader while, in reality, it privileges a certain historical type by defining the reader "as an autonomous and private individual."[4] The term "private individual" does not only point to a retreat from politics. It also draws its polemical edge from an insinuation of an attitude that is considered socially irresponsible. Consequently, Iser's reading subject is described in the language of personal indulgence: "So from a theory which in its beginnings appeared to promise movement in a historicist direction, we end with a theory centered in the delights of the personal (sic) reading subject" (*AN* 149ff.). The true purpose of Iser's theory of reading "is not to know the text . . . but to experience ourselves as active, creative, and free agents" (*AN* 149). The cognitive mobility which reception aesthetics

New Literary History, 2000, 31: 175–210

envisages is really a fight against the boredom of the bourgeois subject: "Perhaps because Iser defines authorial intention as the desire to help the reader to avoid boredom by experiencing the joy of his activated deciphering capacity, he is uninterested in asking what a text is and what a reader is." In this sense, the aesthetics of reception embodies "some straightforward hedonistic values" (*AN* 149). Others have stated the case less hyberbolically, but have remained within the paradigm of liberal self-indulgence. Robert Holub, for example, takes Iser to task for implying "a competent and cultured reader" and criticizes "the espousal of a liberal world view."[5] Even Jane Tompkins, who played an important role in introducing a variety of theories of the reading process to American readers, insists that the "divorce between literature and politics, which was finally effected with the advent of formalism" has not been overcome but perpetuated by critics like Iser: "In short, reader-response critics define their work as a radical departure from New Critical principles, but I believe that a closer look at the theory and practice of these critics will show that they have not revolutionized literary theory but merely transposed formalist principles into a new key."[6]

In their determination to "unmask" Iser, critics such as Eagleton or Lentricchia can be seen as representative of current forms of political criticism. Their criticism paved the way for a widespread perception of Iser's phenomenological theory of reading as an escape from politics. As a result, reception theory and the aesthetics of reception, once considered one of the major reorientations in contemporary literary theory, have begun to disappear from surveys of major approaches of literary criticism. In the recent volume on "Criticism" of the new *Cambridge History of American Literature*, which presents a survey of contemporary literary criticism from the point of view of a "politically oriented criticism," reception aesthetics is no longer even mentioned.[7] This lack of interest has also affected the perception—and critical reception—of Iser's more recent project of a "literary anthropology," which grew out of his theory of reading (partly in response to certain recurrent points of criticism levelled at reception aesthetics). This anthropological turn has provided the basis for some of the most interesting and promising work currently done in literary studies in Germany, but it has had surprisingly little impact on current debates in American literary and cultural theory which continue to focus on "invisible" manifestations of discursive power effects. Another way of making the same point would be to say that reception aesthetics and literary anthropology are no longer of central theoretical interest because contemporary literary theory has refashioned itself as "critical theory" to which they do not seem to be able to contribute anything.

But if it is true, as Eagleton claims—I think, correctly—that "there is no such thing as a purely 'literary' response," that "all such responses . . . are deeply imbricated with the kind of social and historical individuals we are" (*LT* 89), and that, moreover, informing and sustaining literary theories "are more or less definite readings of social reality" (*LT* 90), then one would in fact be required to look more closely at the historical and political constituents of a particular theory. To restrict the search for a historical context to the convenient label "liberal subject" is a piece of—unexamined—essentialism in reverse and actually strikingly ahistoricist, because the term is, at a closer look, not used as a category of historical analysis but for the purpose of ideological contrast between a Marxist perspective and its absence. Neither Eagleton nor Lentricchia, in contrast to their own professed theoretical orientation, is interested in approaching the issue historically.[8] In almost all discussions of the aesthetics of reception, the discussion has remained on a synchronic and strictly intradisciplinary level, constituted by the broad umbrella terms of "reception theory" or "reader-response" criticism, so that the "context" in which reception aesthetics is discussed is that of competing theories of the reading process. In this essay, I propose to provide another context by trying to recover some of the historical and political experiences that stand at the beginning of Iser's work and have provided it with a set of questions and themes to which he has returned time and again. The three major stages in the development of Iser's work—his "modernist" phase, his reformulation of a modernist aesthetics as a theory of reading, and his extension of an aesthetics of reception into literary anthropology—can be seen as three stages in the development of a project that has its origin in the immediate postwar period when Iser began his studies at the Universities of Tübingen and Heidelberg.

II

Where attempts have been made to provide a historical context for reception aesthetics, the major point of reference is usually the German student movement of the '60s, which initially considered reception theory as a welcome ally in the fight against a sterile, obsolete, and, in many cases, deeply compromised form of philology. Iser himself has characterized reception aesthetics as response to a far-reaching crisis of legitimation of literary studies at German universities of the '50s and '60s. In this sense, reception aesthetics was directed against the reification of the bourgeois concept of literature as much as was the protest of the student movement. Yet when the student movement turned to orthodox Marxist and Maoist positions in the early '70s and began to question the

"social relevance" of literary studies altogether, the two allies in an initially broad movement for academic reform parted company. The dissatisfaction with a fossilized philological method provided scholars like Iser and Jauss with an impulse to make literary studies relevant again, but it was the challenge of a politicized student movement that gave a specific direction to that impulse. Since the student movement turned to a naive mirror-reflection theory ("*Widerspiegelung*"), a defense of literature as a form of communication with its own specific potential for responding to reality had to be able to legitimate literature in a way that resorted neither to the concept of *Widerspiegelung*, nor to the outworn philological concepts and practices of the past: "In order to find a more adequate answer to why literature was still important, a paradigm change became necessary."[9] The turn to the role of the reader in the process of meaning-formation provided an ideal solution. By focusing on the activity of the reader, a convincing case could be made that the significance of literature was not identical with the textual object and could not be reduced to a message. The study of literature could thus be limited neither to formal analysis nor to an assessment of the "realism" and political correctness of a particular form of literary representation.

The question remains, however, why Iser was so strongly convinced that the study of literature *was* important. Before literature could be defended against claims of "irrelevance," there had to be a will and strong motivation to do so. This sense of a special importance of literature was not the result of a reaction to the student movement. It was the result of much earlier experiences. Iser's theory and theoretical development cannot be fully understood and appreciated without taking into account the historical moment immediately after World War II and the encounter with a compromised cultural heritage that the postwar period brought about for a young intellectual coming of age in postwar Germany. In a rare autobiographical statement, a short, little-known speech of self-characterization, delivered in 1976 on the occasion of his induction into the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences, Iser traced his decision to study literature back to the experience of a "zero hour" in postwar Germany: "When the war ended, I was eighteen and thought that the study of literature could help me to realize my own need for distance."[10] "Distance" here refers not to a wish for disengagement but to the opening up of a space for self-determination. It promises to overcome an all-pervasive corruption of thought by Nazi ideology and to find a way of thinking for oneself: "As other members of my generation, I hoped that the study of literature would finally enable me to develop my own perspective on life" (27). Literature provides "distance" not through escape but through its potential to open up another perspective upon that which is unquestioned. The self-assertion against dominant, unquestioned systems of thought became the driving force of Iser's intellectual development and the major focus of his own theoretical work. This search for distance invests his work at every turn. In fact, his work can be understood as one long ongoing exploration of the conditions which constitute distance and the possible modes of maintaining it.

Iser's search for distance can be misunderstood as liberal self-indulgence only if one disregards the historical context in which it has its origin. The first step in that search was to overcome exactly those received bourgeois notions of culture with which critics still want to associate Iser's work. Iser himself speaks of "the illusory nature of humanistic culture" (*P* 207) and "a humanistic ideology" that led "to a whole fabric of delusions" (*P* 206) and then approvingly paraphrases Herbert Marcuse: "This basic disposition of humanistic culture, Marcuse concluded, lent itself readily to any kind of manipulation, as evinced by the political fate of Germany, from which this ideal originally arose" (*P* 209). Thus, "[h]umanization through culture has been proved by history—especially in Germany—to be an illusion" (*P* 207). Although the classical humanist tradition gave rise to the prospect of distance through its promise of aesthetic transcendence, this promise is also the basis of its "irrelevance" in a situation such as the postwar period: "Autonomous art did not ennoble man, as is all too clear from the appalling slaughter that has taken place in this century" (*P* 206). To reaffirm a tradition of humanist education would thus merely start another cycle of self-deception.[11] Iser is very much aware of this danger from the start and looks for ways to dissociate himself from this tradition through a series of reorientations within his field of study. His early academic career is characterized by three practical acts of distancing: turning to "foreign languages," and especially English, was the first of these acts;[12] focusing on the study of literature in an academic discipline, English, which still defined itself primarily as the historical study of language was another;[13] and dealing with modernism, then still considered a symptom of cultural decay in both conservative and leftist camps, was a third.[14] These reorientations paved the way for a theoretical reflection on the role and function of literature and, particularly, on its potential to provide distance. The most important step in the pursuit of distance consisted, however, in the development of a theory of literature that would emphasize literature's potential to expose the limitations and unacknowledged deficiencies of accepted systems of thought.

In his Heidelberg address, Iser concedes that the hopes he put on literature may have been influenced originally by the bourgeois sacralization of art. It makes good sense, therefore, that he started his own

theoretical project with a study of Walter Pater, because Pater's aestheticism provided a radicalized version of the idea of art as the ultimate value of existence. An analysis of Pater's work "seemed to promise experience of what it meant to make Art the ultimate value of finite existence. Such an experience would bring to light the problems which New Criticism could not cope with, since it was no longer concerned with the consequences of the autonomous object."[15] The "New Criticism has separated artistic technique from its pragmatic functions and has made it into an end in itself." (*P* 15). Pater may stand firmly in a tradition of conceptualizing art as autonomous, but his radical commitment to "art for art's sake" made him shift his attention to the experiential dimension of our encounter with art and to the stature of aesthetic experience. Iser's somewhat surprising turn to a writer who already looked "dated" in the era of the New Criticism thus serves two purposes. On the one hand, it allows him to address what he considers a weakness in formalism's approach to art which, in light of the origin of his own interest in literature, must have appeared especially glaring: New Critics have little or nothing to say about the function and aesthetic effects of the literary works they are interpreting closely. Pater, in contrast, "dealt precisely with these problems, because for him Art was an ultimate value, enabling man to forget the pressure of finite human existence. For Pater autonomous Art and real life joined hands, as it were, under the table—a relationship that could only be anathema to the basic principles of New Criticism. And so by analyzing Pater's work I hope to uncover what had been glossed over by New Criticism and had thus ultimately caused its demise as a paradigm of interpretation" (*WP* viiff.). Iser never subscribed to the idea of art as a self-referential object. Pater was of interest to him because he discusses art in terms of possible effects, without, on the other hand, using mimetic models. What Iser takes from Pater is the conceptualization of the aesthetic sphere as an intermediate realm "in-between."[16] It is a configuration which was extremely useful for the search for distance and to which Iser therefore returned again and again in later stages of his work, although in some interesting transformations.

For Iser's later work, Pater's definition of the aesthetic mode is helpful on two accounts: on the one hand, Pater describes the aesthetic not as a quality of the object but as an attitude to be taken toward an object, so that the description of aesthetic experience cannot be confused with the search for meaning, or, worse, a "message." On the other hand, the aesthetic sphere is described by Pater in a way that creates something like an inbuilt distance. It constitutes itself out of an "interpenetration of opposites" which has the effect of invalidating "existing norms without replacing them with others" (*WP* 81). The basic characteristic of this

space "in-between" is that it is a state between either/or positions, never identical with any of them, but, instead, always moving between them. As Iser would later describe the effect: "The resultant dynamic oscillation betwen the two ensures that their old meanings now become potential sources for new ones. It is such transformations that give rise to the aesthetic dimension of the text, for what had long seemed closed is now opened up again" (*P* 237–38). In this model, the incessant movement "between" is the crucial factor, because it prevents the subject from the danger of becoming arrested in any one position or perspective and in this way secures distance. Where distance from a position is established by mere negation, on the other hand, one is in obvious danger of taking up merely a counter-position—and thereby losing one's ability to preserve a critical distance to that counter-position. The only way to prevent this is to be in movement between position and counter-position, so that the two constantly put each other in perspective. This space in-between should not be understood as a dialectical synthesis, however (that is, as creation of a "third" position in which the first position and its negation are reconciliated). It is a halfway state that is, by definition, not a position, because it can only be conceptualized as an interplay between its constituents: "Reconciliation was not a dialectic movement toward synthesis; it was, rather, an interaction of opposites, a telescoping of incompatibles" (*WP* 39). One should not mistake this model as an acceleration of a flight from commitment, therefore, but, quite the contrary, as a consequent application of the idea of negation, one that also embraces negation itself.

Iser's analysis of Pater's work does not only provide him with a model for the description of the aesthetic mode. It also provides him with an opportunity to explore the possibilities of describing the "in-between world whose territory Pater wanted to chart" (*WP* 135) and to develop a vocabulary for its description which would form the basis of the description of aesthetic experience in his later work. For any reader who is aware of the centrality of the idea of the "in-between" for Iser's theory of reading and of fiction, it must be striking to realize the extent to which this idea (and the language for describing it) are already present in the book on Pater. Again and again, the book returns to that elusive transitional quality which characterizes the "in-between" state. Pater's interest in transitional periods provides one opportunity: "When this happens, the determinate becomes vague and permeated by a dark and still uncertain future, giving rise to a discernible moment of transition in which the old loses its validity and the new is not as yet firmly established. The two must interact, since the new depends on the old for its shape, gaining determinacy to the degree in which it erodes the old. The moment of transition brackets the two together and thus

encompasses what in terms of philosophical and moral definitions can only be conceived as separate entities" (*WP* 38ff.). Art, for Pater, "is an in-between region of undecidedness, separating itself from a single metaphysical interpretation of the world without being committed to rejecting such an interpretation" (*WP* 40). Art brings about "an interaction of opposites, a telescoping of incompatibles" (*WP* 39). Beauty embodies a quality that belongs to a region halfway between empirical reality and a transcendent world. "The untamed mobility of sensual experience and the abstractness of the transcendental idea find common ground in aesthetic qualities in which neither pure experience nor pure abstraction is ultimately triumphant" (*WP* 87). Art thus can be seen as "an intermediate realm, situated between an experiential and an intangible reality, and this realm takes on a tangible reality in history" (*WP* 69). The relation of art to periods of transition is therefore twofold: "as the only genuine representation of the interpenetration of opposites, it nevertheless appears to be dependent on history, which alone provides the backing for such a view. . . . And the absence of the overriding ideal rendered the process aesthetic, since all these periods of transition invalidated existing norms without replacing them with others. Art, as aesthetic reconciliation, embodied this in-between world and drew its tangibility and its legimitation from history" (*WP* 81).[17]

According to Iser, Pater's *Imaginary Portraits* reveal how conscious he was "of the problems associated with the aesthetic sphere. . . . It is a sphere suspended halfway between dissatisfaction with human experience and the moral resolve to change reality" (*WP* 167). This halfway position is for Pater the true sphere of life: "It is the middle terms that Pater embraces, whereas Pascal would obliterate them with his demand for all or nothing" (*WP* 168). The avoidance of "either/or decisions" creates a problem, however, as soon as it is used as a recipe for living: "The aesthete lives in contradiction to reality, and herein lies the revolutionary aspect of his attitude, for his approach breaks up existing, solidified forms of life. But he can go no further than this negative contradiction, being unable to devise new forms and ideals. This is why all Pater's characters perish in the end" (*WP* 168). The negating potential of the aesthetic mode is turned into mere negation once it is lived. Mere negation reifies distance because it arrests distance and robs it of its ability to constantly renew itself. The conflation of art and life must contradict Pater's own conception of the aesthetic mode because it leads to a "reification of an in-between state" (*WP* 169) and thus turns art into another ultimate ground which would be in need of negation. What was designed to break through reification (*WP* 16), ends up in a new form of reification (*WP* 168). Iser, therefore, cannot accept Pater's

extension of the aesthetic sphere to an aesthetic existence because it robs the aesthetic of its very potential for distance.

III

The challenge emerging from this dilemma is that of a reconceptualization of the aesthetic that retains the idea of a specific function and potential of the aesthetic mode, without, however, turning it into another model for living. The literature to achieve this, not only for Iser, was literary modernism. Iser saw the book on Pater as paving the way for his study of modernist literature which interested him as "*Reflexionskunst*," as an "art of reflexivity."[18] Reflexivity is needed because it can secure and increase distance. In the traditional modernist argument, it does this by breaking up an illusion of representation. In his first studies of modernist literature Iser seems to subscribe to this traditional modernist model. In an early essay on "Image und Montage," Iser describes imagism as an art form 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 illusionist nature of conventional forms of perception" (my translation).[19] Iser's interpretation draws on T. E. Hulme's argument that the purpose of literature lies in the de-automatization of perception: "Poetry is to defamiliarize the conventionalized forms of perception, so that teleologically inspired constructions of reality are not confused with reality itself. This project is generated by an important impulse of this new type of poetry: the impulse to create the possibility for freedom. In order to realize this potential, the different perspectives on the object must contain a certain degree of reflexivity, for the poetical images are to reveal a dimension of reality that is hidden by convention" (my translation).[20]

For this modernist model, reflexivity is crucial, for it alone can elevate the defamiliarization of convention beyond the level of a mere routine of making things new, so that defamiliarization leads not only to a new perception but also to an increased understanding. It is important to realize, however, that Iser quickly began to move away from an aesthetics of defamiliarization and that his own project should not be confused with this branch of modernism. The distancing already begins in "Image und Montage," where Iser takes pains to differentiate the modernist project of de-automatization from the Marxist concept of defamiliarization ("*Verfremdung*"), as it is propagated, for example, by Ernst Bloch in his book *Verfremdungen*: "Imagist poetry only bears similarities to the Marxist

concept of defamiliarization ("*Verfremdungseffekt*") in that the *image* brings about a de-automatization of conventional forms of perception; the ensuing pluralization of perception, however, is diametrically opposed to Bloch's *Verfremdungseffekt*" (my translation).[21] In a later contribution to a volume of the group *Poetik und Hermeneutik* on *Positionen der Negativität* [*Positions of Negativity*], the argument is broadened to include the concept of defamiliarization outlined by Russian formalism.[22] Iser illustrates the difference between their and his position by distinguishing 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 give shape to something absent.[23] The concept of defamiliarization expounded by Russian formalism is built on perception; its purpose is to liberate our perception from unexamined habits and unquestioned conventions in order to enable us to see things in a new and "fresh" way.[24] Iser's concept of negation on the other hand emphasizes the power of art to articulate something that is not pre-given and yet unformulated. This is an important modification that paves the way for Iser's transformation of the modernist project into the theory of reading developed in *The Implied Reader* and *The Act of Reading*. The modernist theory of defamiliarization can temporarily open up distance but it cannot maintain distance. This formalist concept of defamiliarization cannot explain aesthetic experience; only aesthetic experience can create a form of distance that is more than a temporary complication of the act of perception.

However, our acts of imagining do not automatically possess an aesthetic quality. For Iser, such an aesthetic quality is created only when the imagined objects are deformed, negated, or delegitimated in their validity, because such negation also challenges us to imagine that which is negated. It does this in a double sense, for in order to make the negation meaningful we have to mentally construct not only the object or situation itself which appears in negation but also that which it negates. We also have to relate it to the absent or nonverbalized horizon of meaning in which the negating act makes sense and by which it is motivated: "Negation therefore represents a specific modality to which this knowledge is subjected in a sense once defined by Husserl as follows: 'No matter what kind of object may be involved, it is always characteristic of negation that the superimposition of a new meaning upon one already constituted is tantamount to the displacement of the latter; and correlatively in a poetic sense a second concept is formed which does not lie *beside* the first, displaced one, but above it and in conflict with it.'"[25] Negation, therefore, not only produces blanks within the textual

repertoire but also maneuvers the reader into an intermediate position between what is canceled and what has to be supplied as the motivation for the cancellation: "It is through the blanks that the negations take on their productive force: the old negated meaning returns to the conscious mind when a new one is superimposed onto it; this new meaning is unformulated, and for precisely this reason needs the old, as this has been changed by the negation back into material for interpretation, out of which the new meaning is to be fashioned" (*AR* 217). Negation in the modernist sense of deformation, subversion or defamiliarization is an important starting point to set in motion this movement between what is canceled and what is put in its place in motion. But it is not sufficient to describe what takes place in experiencing an aesthetic object. A "negative aesthetics" is therefore insufficient for Iser. In order to capture the specific potential of aesthetic experience he adds the term "negativity" to that of negation. Negativity goes beyond the semantic level of negation to include an "unformulated and unwritten dimension" of our experience of the literary text:

> Blanks and negations increase the density of fictional texts, for the omissions and cancellations indicate that practically all the formulations of the text refer to an unformulated background, and so the formulated text has a kind of unformulated double. This 'double' we shall call negativity, and its function deserves a few concluding remarks. 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. (*AR* 225ff.)

Negativity is defined as an effect of a structure of doubling that characterizes the literary text and distinguishes it from other discursive modes by definition.

What the term negativity allows Iser to do is to transform the configuration of an interplay or "in-between" from a movement between either/or opposites, as it is still conceptualized in the book on Pater, to one between present and absent dimension of the text—and thus to stress the crucial role of imagining acts in aesthetic experience. Negativity as an experience of non-identity is an unformulated constituent of the text. It is the precondition for making us experience something that is not already there: "This brings us to the *third* feature of negativity. Communication would be unnecessary if that which is to be communicated were not to some extent unfamiliar. Thus fiction may be defined as a form of communication, since it brings into the world something

which is not already there. This something must reveal itself if it is to be comprehended. However, as the unfamiliar elements cannot be manifested under the same conditions pertaining to familiar existing conceptions, that which literature brings into the world can only reveal itself as negativity" (*AR* 229). Negativity, in this sense of an unlimited negating potential, also functions as the negation of the negation.[26] It is permanent distance, so to speak, because it dislocates all norms, meanings, and forms of organization, not just those we would like to negate. This continuous invalidation 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."[27] Negativity thus "does not so much indicate oppositions as combine negation with a resultant unforeseeability" (xv). By transforming a modernist concept of de-automatization into an aesthetics of negativity, the "new" perception of the modernist model becomes an intangible other with which literature brings us into contact.

It is obvious that such a use of the concept of negativity stands in opposition to Hegelian negativity, which is to bring about self-consciousness.[28] On the other hand, Iser refers to Adorno's aesthetics in his own definition of negativity and thereby points to a common interest in the negating potential of literature that, in view of the complete collapse of a once cherished cultural tradition, linked a wide range of intellectual projects in postwar Germany.[29] Iser's contributions to the *Poetik und Hermeneutik* volume *Positionen der Negativität,* published in 1975 (above all his position papers "Konträre Leistungen der Negation" and "Negativität als tertium quid von Darstellung und Rezeption"),[30] his concluding chapters on "Negation" and "Negativity" in *The Act of Reading,* and the introduction to the volume *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory,* written together with Sanford Budick and entitled "The Critical Turn: Toward 'Negativity' and the 'Unsayable,'" testify to the fact that Iser, in marked contrast to a perception of his approach as "formalist" or "liberal humanist," works within a critical tradition based on the premise of literature's negating potential. But the way in which this common starting point was realized in the theoretical work of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory and the Constance School of Reception Aesthetics soon led in very different directions. The *Poetik und Hermeneutik* volume on "Positions of Negativity" brings the contrast out into the open. In the attempt to make literature politically relevant, the student movement had initially revived critical theory and its project of a "negative aesthetics," but had eventually watered it down to a form of explicit political criticism that

would leave only a choice between "affirmation" or "negation" as possible functions of literature. In this way, the student movement, for Iser, arrived at "pure" negation and merely turned the idealistic tradition of the nineteenth century upside down: "With pure negation the revolution remains dependent upon that which it negates. . . . Thus, the tradition of the nineteenth century has prevailed over its would-be destroyers" (*P* 200).[31] Reception aesthetics defines itself against this reduction, and this, in turn, meant reconsidering and reconceptualizing the terms "negation" and "negativity."[32]

In his essay on "Negativität und Identifikation" ["Negativity and Identification"],[33] Hans Robert Jauss therefore takes his point of departure from a critique of Adorno's aesthetics of negativity.[34] His basic point is that Adorno's radical restriction of negativity to those hermetic modernist works that defy a seemingly all-pervasive logic of systemic affirmation cannot account for a wide range of aesthetic experiences. In this way "[t]he history of art simply cannot be subsumed under the general term of negativity . . ." (285; my translation). Negativity defined as social resistance is subject to historical change. Art that was once conceived as a negating act often changes its function during the historical reception and may even become a cherished "classic." More importantly, Adorno's concept of negativity cannot account for art's potential to establish new forms of orientation and is thus inadequate to account for a wide variety of art forms, because for Adorno this "positive" communicative potential is immediately suspected of reaffirming a systemic logic of instrumental reason. In his own attempt to present an alternative, Jauss thus restricts the use of the term negativity to the idea of negation and goes on to revive such seemingly traditional concepts as "identification" and "catharsis" for the description of aesthetic experience.[35] In contrast, Iser reclaims the term negativity for the description of aesthetic experience itself by radicalizing the idea of the intermediate realm. Like Jauss, Iser wants to draw attention to the productive communicative potential of literature; but in contrast to Jauss he does not advance this project by pointing to the variety of alternative modes of aesthetic experience, but by locating this potential in negativity itself, because it is negativity, defined as the doubling structure of the literary text, which generates aesthetic experience by articulating something that is absent. The concept of negativity thus allows Iser to transform the search for distance from a figure of self-defense to a source of creative self-extension. For Adorno, negativity is inextricably linked to a particular historical situation which, in the present, leaves only the option of hermetic withdrawal;[36] for Iser negativity becomes a prerequisite for the articulation of something that is otherwise not accessible, or indeed is "unsayable."[37]

IV

This transformation of negativity from a concept of radical resistance to an enabling structure and productive matrix lies at the center of Iser's reception aesthetics, which cannot be understood without the constitutive role which the terms negation and negativity play for his theory of reading.[38] The crucial concept of the blank is a rewriting of the idea of negation in phenomenological terms that allows Iser to ground the promise of distance in the act of cognition itself. As Iser has pointed out repeatedly in defense of the concept, a blank is not to be equated with a mere gap, or an ideologically instructive omission. Nor is it a textual rupture that indicates an underlying contradiction of the textual or social system. It is an intentional, often carefully crafted, suspension of connectivity in order to make us provide links for what is disconnected. The difference is significant and of central relevance for the question of distance: a gap allows readers to indulge in their own projections (or suspicions); a blank compels them to set up relations between their own imaginary projections and the world of the text and thereby prevent a mere identification with either one of them. The possibility of distance to one's own dispositions is thus no longer generated by certain defamiliarizing strategies of avant-garde literature but by 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 creates a constant switching of perspectives between reference and negation, blank and suspended relation.[39]

The whole point about the concept of the blank lies in the possibility of describing this configuration of interplay. Blanks elicit a constant switching of figure and ground through which we try to compensate for the suspension of connectivity and the ensuing indeterminacy of the text. Blanks thus initiate a certain mode of text processing characterized by constant perspectival shifts. As a "negating" structure, suspended in connectivity and, hence, characterized by indeterminacy, the literary text can be meaningfully processed only by a movement back and forth between figure and ground that compels the reader to look at the text from constantly reversed angles. These constant perspectival shifts generate "distance" 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.[40] This is not to say that the reader cannot or should not take up new perspectives or positions. But the provisional nature of this perspective, its status as a "try-out," will work against a loss of distance. The argument is not for an elusive position outside of ideology, but for an awareness of the

provisional nature of any given worldview. 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 with mental images. These images are necessarily provisional and unstable, because we create them as we go along reading. Hence the often unpleasant and irritating need to reconsider and revise our mental constructs in the course of the reading process. The literary text can therefore be seen as a training ground for the ability to correct or revise our interpretations of reality and to make us aware of their provisionality.[41]

Most forms of reader-response criticism can be characterized as theories of meaning in which the reader is assigned a new role and a new freedom in the construction of meaning. This explains the predictable and often-repeated objection that Iser's theory of reading is only a half-hearted attempt to liberate the reader, because he does not give up the idea of textual determinants.[42] It is one of the most misunderstood aspects of reception aesthetics that it is not a theory of meaning but of aesthetic experience.[43] Consequently, Iser is not talking about the level of meaning but about the act of text processing in which everything that is non-identical has to be referred to that which it negates or complements in order to be able to construe it as an object.[44] The reader is not discovered because he has been neglected so far, but because he is the agent who is needed to realize the potential of literature to provide an aesthetic experience. This potential does not arise from the semantic level but from a complex set of interactions:

> Whatever the relationships may be like, two different types of discourse are ever-present, and their simultaneity triggers a mutual revealing and concealing of their respective contextual references. From this interplay there emerges semantic instability that is exacerbated by the fact that the two sets of discourse are also contexts for each other, so that each in turn is constantly switching from background to foreground. The one discourse becomes the theme viewed from the standpoint of the other, and vice versa. The resultant dynamic oscillation between the two ensures that their old meanings now become potential sources for new ones. It is such transformations that give rise to the aesthetic dimension of the text, for what had long seemed closed is now opened up again. (*P* 237–36)

As a logical consequence, Iser's theory of reading moves beyond interpretation to text processing, because it is this processing which opens up the possibility of aesthetic effect. This shift from meaning to aesthetic effect marks a crucial step in the search for distance. If distance depended on (negative) textual meaning, then it could not be permanently secured, because it could be the representation of just another ideology. Thus, it has to be located in a realm that is, by

definition, not identical with meaning. The true potential of literature lies "in-between." Or, to put it differently: the promise of literature to provide critical distance resides in its aesthetic dimension.

Do all literary texts provide this distance? Is it provided, for example, by sentimental or realist novels, which are, after all, historically highly influential manifestations of the potential of literature to have a strong impact on the reader? Is negativity in Iser's definition of a double structure an element of all literary texts or are specific literary strategies or genres required to produce it? In one way, there can be no doubt that negativity is a characteristic of literature in general, if it is defined as a specific form of communication in which reality is doubled and thereby made "irreal."[45] But it is also plausible to assume that certain textual strategies may be especially effective in achieving this result, for example, by breaking up the illusion of representation through a decontextualization of images, as in the case of imagism, or by the dissolution of realist modes of narration, as in *Ulysses* and other examples of high modernism. Iser himself gives rise to a (mis)understanding of his aesthetics of reception as a specifically modernist project by beginning a programmatic essay on *Ulysses* with a reference to the close relation, since the Romantic era, between new forms of literature and new literary theories that grow out of the literature they seek to understand. He continues: "This radical switch engendered by *Ulysses* also necessitated a change of interpretative paradigm that would enable the critic to capture the experience undergone in *Ulysses*" (*P* 135). The emergence of reception aesthetics is thus explained as a response to experimental modernism. If *Ulysses* "is first and foremost a structure for eliciting responses and thereby engaging its readers, then a theory that is applicable to such literature must incorporate this change: it must replace the author-oriented perspective by one that is reader-oriented" (*P* 136). Seen this way, *Ulysses* and "reader-response theory" become part of a modernist teleology "from representation to effect" (*P* 136). *Ulysses* destroys an illusion of representation to which the realist novel of the nineteenth century had accustomed its readers. Reception aesthetics is the fitting approach for a literature that disrupts representation and thus forces the reader to supply what is suspended, negated, or deformed: "This shattering of hallowed expectations points to the fact that the strategies of the novel are less concerned with depicting a given reality than with undermining attitudes of the reader established by tradition. . . . The undercutting of norms, however, will inevitably bring them above the threshold of consciousness and thus exhibit them for inspection. They are then shifted into a new perspective that is not part of them and that consequently brings to light that which remained hidden so long as their validity remained unquestioned" (*P* 136). In

statements like these, Iser still seems to tie the potential of literature to provide distance to an antirepresentational mode.

There is a fine line between focusing on a text because it is especially well suited to exemplify an aspect that characterizes all literary texts, or elevating a particular type of text or genre to a norm against which all other texts are measured. *The Implied Reader* is an especially interesting book in this respect.[46] On the one hand, the book valorizes literary modernism as standing at the end of a line of development in which blanks assume an increasingly important role. In this sense, modernist literature emerges as a literature that seems to realize the potential of literature most effectively. On the other hand, the description of this special potential points to an element that must, in principle, be a quality of all literary texts. It is often forgotten that *The Implied Reader* deals not only with Faulkner, Joyce, and Beckett but also with Bunyan, Scott, and the realist novel. To tie the negating potential of literature to certain modernist strategies would clearly strengthen the claim that literature is a medium especially well suited to provide "distance," but it would weaken the claim that this effect is a consequence of literature as a medium. Thus, tying this function to modernist strategies tended to undermine a general defense of literature as inherently "different."

The problem is addressed by moving from the historical approach of *The Implied Reader* to the phenomenological approach of *The Act of Reading*.[47] This move solves a problem (that of a modernist teleology) but creates another one. By giving up the possibility of historical differentiation, the description of aesthetic effect has to focus on the systematization of the network of textual perspectives and relationships that function as a prerequisite for the production of an aesthetic effect. This brings about a rich and useful inner differentiation in the description of the reading process and the sources of interplay. But it also leads to a formalization that, ironically enough, can never go 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" (*AR* 18). This triumphant liberation from the "fatal trap" of a search for meaning has a price, because it limits the possibilities of literary criticism to that of pointing out basic operations of text processing and, as a consequence, results in characterizations that can be marked by frustrating sameness.

In his critique of naively mimetic readings of *Ulysses*, Iser quite rightly

criticizes a Marxist interpretation based on the mirror-reflection theory, because it will find in the literary text only a confirmation of its own prior economic and social analysis. This provides a severely restricted description of aesthetic experience: "Why should the futility of every-day life be reproduced in a novel, and why should we be fascinated by the reproduction of our drabness and misery?" (*P* 136). Instead, a reader-oriented analysis "serves to elucidate the processes by means of which everyday life is made accessible to experience" (*P* 137). It does this by making the reader aware, as it is put in the preface to *The Implied Reader*, "of his own tendency to link things together in consistent patterns, and indeed of the whole thought process that constitutes his relations with the world outside himself. . . . In this way, the reader is forced to discover the hitherto unconscious expectations that underlie all his perceptions, and also the whole process of consistency-building as a prerequisite for understanding" (*IR* xiv). The terminology used in different essays varies, but the basic pattern of the argument—and the function it assigns to the literary text—is remarkably similar. By shattering expectations, undercutting norms, and undermining traditional attitudes, these unquestioned forms of sense-making will "inevitably" be brought above the threshold of consciousness and thus exhibited for inspection: "They are then shifted into a new perspective that is not part of them and that consequently brings to light that which remained hidden so long as their validity remained unquestioned" (*P* 136). The result of such self-awareness is an insight into the provisionality and artificiality of our ways of world making. But why should we be returning to literature again and again in order to gain this one insight, as if all reading can only lead to a reenactment of the same experience? Moreover, why should we be reading literary criticism that will predictably and unfailingly find this one potential in its interpretive objects? One may even argue that the emphatic promise of self-awareness is undermined by the puzzling fact that the approach reveals no awareness of the problem that a phenomenological theory of reading will inevitably privilege those aspects of aesthetic experience that it is especially well suited to describe, so that its description of the "openness" of aesthetic experience remains inextricably linked to a phenomenological description of the operations of cognitive faculties. The challenge of rescuing literature from being merely the illustration of a particular perspective would in this case be met by describing it in a way that turns it into an illustration of another philosophical perspective.

V

If literature does indeed bring to light the artificiality of all concepts used in conventional orientation, why are we exposing ourselves again and again to this experience? The phenomenological approach of *The Act of Reading*, chosen for good reason to give a generalized account of the reading process that would not be restricted to an anti-representational mode, cannot deal with this question. Thus, it makes good sense (and is another example of the admirable way in which Iser continually develops and extends his theory) to return to a reconsideration of the function of literature and to move from reception aesthetics to the project of a literary anthropology as it is presented, above all, in his two recent books *Prospecting* and *The Fictive and the Imaginary*.[48] This anthropological turn solves two problems. First, it helps to do away with the still lingering modernist bias of reception aesthetics by shifting the point of emphasis from the categories of art and literature to that of fiction, or, more specifically, to the fictive as an elementary part of all human sense-making activities.[49] It does this by reconceptualizing the basic interplay that leads to the "in-between" state of aesthetic experience in terms of a new set of categories, the real and the imaginary.

The transition to literary anthropology is ushered in by a reconsideration of the issue of representation. In the programmatic essay on *Ulysses*, the word "representation" still refers to a mistaken belief in the mimetic function of art. An antimimetic modern literature of "effect" can thus be set in contrast to an outworn literature of representation that betrays literature's true potential. In an essay on representation in *Prospecting*, the term is freed from its association of mimesis and redefined as *Darstellung*, "that is, as not referring to any object given prior to the act of representation" (*P* 236). Representation, in this sense, can be seen as "an act of performing and not—as Western tradition has repeated time and again—an act of mimesis, since mimesis presupposes a given reality that is to be portrayed in one way or another" (*P* 243). Representation is first and foremost an act of performance, because it brings forth "in the mode of staging something that in itself is not given" (*P* 248).[50] Constituted by negation (and turned into an aesthetic experience by negativity), the literary text can never be identical with "the real." This fundamental non-identity of the literary texts leads to forms of doubling that pervade all levels of the literary text (selection, combination, and self-disclosure).[51] Since "the various acts of fictionalizing carry with them whatever has been outstripped," the resultant doubleness might therefore be defined as coexistence of the mutually exclusive or seemingly incompatible, which for Iser becomes a formula "to pinpoint the aesthetic nature of fictionality in literature" (*P* 240). The literary text is

thus constituted by inherent difference: "The doubling effect as the hallmark of literary fictionality comes about because the mutually exclusive realms that are bracketed together nevertheless retain their difference. If they did not, that which appears as doubled would instead merge into one" (*P* 241). Representation, as the illusion of a meaningful world, arises out of a wish to remove difference. However, "the removal of difference that is the origin of representation is always visible in the product," and this "irremovability transforms representation into a performative act of staging something other than itself" (*P* 245). Representation is therefore both performance and semblance: "It conjures up an image of the unseeable, but being a semblance, it also denies it the status of a copy of reality" (*P* 243). Representation is a performative act because it represents something that has no given reality of its own. In this sense, negativity is not only a constituent of a certain type of modernist literature or a certain type of multiperspectival text but characterizes all fictionalizing acts. While in the *Ulysses* essay, our "indefatigable quest for an underlying organizational schema makes it evident that in *Ulysses* we are confronted with the processing of reality rather than with its representation" (*P* 135), representation itself has now become a mode of processing.

One of the most interesting and useful aspects about Iser's discussion of representation is that it does not remain on the level of a systematic description of doubling structures but begins to describe them in terms of human needs. While the reader of reception aesthetics is still primarily a text-processing consciousness in inspection of its own faculties, the potential of literature to create an intermediate realm through negation and negativity now assumes a more concrete dimension: "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. . . . For the duration of the performance we are both ourselves and someone else" (*P* 244). Why do we seek out the experience of staging ourselves as someone else? For Iser, the answer lies in our anthropological makeup: "Literature reflects life under conditions that are either not available in the empirical world or are denied by it. Consequently literature turns life into a storehouse from which it draws its material in order to stage what in life appeared to have been sealed off from access. The need for such a staging arises out of man's decentered position: we are, but do not have ourselves" (*P* 244).[52] By stepping out of ourselves in order to

grasp our own identity, we act out a wish to overcome our own duality: "Wanting to have oneself as one is, means needing to know *what* one is" (*P* 213). But this drive to grasp the inaccessible can never be entirely successful: "Because it conjures up an image of the origin out of which this split arose, literature makes perceivable what is otherwise sealed off from cognitive penetration. Yet picturing what eludes our grasp in the incessant effort to accommodate ourselves to the world serves only to indicate how we conceive the inconceivable and why we conceive of it in such kaleidoscopically changing imagery. Since the impenetrability of that origin inscribes itself insistently into all of literature's ideas, it turns them into pure semblance. At this point the question of why we should want to think the unthinkable at all arises" (*P* 213).

Iser's move from reception aesthetics to literary anthropology leads to a gradual shift in the explanation of the function of fiction and thereby also provides the search for distance with a new grounding.[53] While in reception aesthetics, the transgressive potential of literature promises to make us aware of the hidden deficiencies of a thought-system or of our own unexamined modes of explaining the world, the major emphasis is now put on a search for an ungraspable and intangible origin. While in the modernist stage, distance was provided by the negating potential of literature and in reception aesthetics by the exercise of our sense-making and text-processing faculties, it now gets an almost existential grounding, namely "the indeterminacy of human existence," "the insurmountable finiteness of man," or its "irremovability" (*P* 150ff.). In response to our desire to know that which is inaccessible to us, literature offers two choices: either to provide an illusory image of the unavailable or to "stage the desire itself, and so raise the question of the origin and nature of that desire—though the question, of course, is unanswerable" (*P* 247). There is, then, a chance of self-awareness, but it now is an awareness not so much of our cognitive faculties but of our inescapable entanglement in a fiction of origin.

In the early development of Iser's theory of fiction, distance was provided by literature's potential to highlight the inner limitations and weaknesses of thought systems. However, in this case, literature's potential to provide distance would depend on our sharing this world. In trying to justify the distancing potential of literature on more general grounds, Iser therefore proceeds to a phenomenology of text processing. But the constant acceleration of the frequency of cognitive disruption and perspectival change in experimental postmodern literature or the serialization of "suspended connectivity" in various forms of popular culture undermine the equation of active text-processing with self-reflexivity and self-awareness.[54] Iser therefore begins to explore the possibility of an anthropological explanation of aesthetic experience

which conceives of literature as a search for an origin we can never have. In contrast to reception aesthetics, this anthropological model of explanation no longer justifies distance as a quality we have to cultivate but as an inescapable human fate that provides our encounters with literature with an endlessly supplementary dimension.[55] This supplementarity is constantly renewed because the imaginary, defined here not in psychoanalytical terms as the source of an illusion of wholeness, but phenomenologically as an indeterminate, somewhat diffuse, and protean flow of impressions (*FI* 3), again and again refuels the search for a ground or origin. With the imaginary, Iser provides a new version of the indeterminant that triggers ever new sense-making activities. The development sketched out in this essay can, in fact, be illustrated by the different terms used for this indeterminant element: from the modernist concept of negation to its phenomenological redefinition as blank and, finally, to an ungraspable substratum of human existence that strives for articulation but can only be represented as "semblance." The first depends on antirepresentational strategies of deformation, the second is constituted by suspended connectivity and motivation, and the third confronts us with the ultimate unknowability of the self and the end.

The concept of the imaginary solves a crucial problem in Iser's theory of aesthetic experience. What blanks provoke us to do is to provide links to counter the experience of suspended connectivity. We have to become active as readers, because we have to establish meaningful continuity. But why are we reading literature in the first place? Because we enjoy our faculties to come up with continuity or our capability for self-reflexivity; that is, for the thrill of cognitive mobility? To many, this looked like a philosophically-minded reader who bears striking similarities to Iser himself. Moreover, where do the images come from through which we realize the text's cues? And what impact do psychic and emotional aspects have on our ideational processes?[56] Clearly, Iser aims at a moment in the mental construction of an object before these aspects have a bearing. Before we invest emotions in Hamlet, we have to construe him as a mental object. But because we do not precisely know who Hamlet is, we will inevitably construct an image of him by drawing on our own feelings and emotional needs. Iser acknowledges this when he says: "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" (*P* 244). But nowhere in his aesthetics of reception is the role of emotions and the unconscious addressed. With the concept of the imaginary, on the other hand, the whole array of emotions, moods, day dreams, phantasms, or unconscious wishes, in short, the world of desire, is

theoretically included as a crucial element of the interplay that constitutes the fictive, without, on the other hand, tying the imaginary to any one particular theory of emotion or desire. The concept of the imaginary is therefore ideally suited to address the question of function without giving up the indeterminacy that secures distance. Thus, although a deliberately "empty" concept of the imaginary may appear unsatisfactory in its lack of a more concrete description of psychic processes, there is a good reason for it within Iser's approach.[57] For as soon as the imaginary would be defined through Lacan's mirror stage, for example, it would merely illustrate a particular psychoanalytic theory and thus lose its quality as an indeterminant. Instead, Iser has to preserve a structure of non-identity. With the concept of the imaginary, he has found a way to talk about an aspect of aesthetic experience his literary theory had neglected so far—but with distance, and by maintaining an ineradicable source of difference.[58]

VI

Ever since the demise of a mimetic theory of literature, literary studies have had to grapple with the question of what role literature is to play in our lives. On the one hand, discarding the idea of mimesis has liberated literature. On the other hand, it has also created a problem of legitimation, because literature now has to be justified on other grounds than a promise of truthful representation. In the twentieth century, and especially after World War II, the answer to this challenge of legitimation has increasingly focused on the negating potential of literature. If literature is not to be justified by truthful representation, the source of its special potential must be derived from the fact that it is, by definition, different and thus ideally suited to counter dominant ways of world-making. In the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, in which art becomes the last placeholder of a utopian impulse that has not yet entirely submitted to reification, this negating potential becomes the central issue of aesthetic theory.[59] When this critical theory was rediscovered by the student movement of the '60s, especially through the influence of Herbert Marcuse, it was soon criticized as not political enough and was replaced by an equation of negation with powerful or effective social criticism.[60] As a consequence, oppositional criticism routinely began to divide literary history into "affirmative" or "negative" (subversive) texts without ever considering the question whether such an equation of negation with social criticism does not severely reduce the negating potential of literature, because it restricts aesthetic experience to the confirmation of (or a failure to confirm) a prior analysis of

the economic or social order—not to speak of the fact that the history of twentieth-century intellectual movements is that of a constant embarrassment and invalidation of such claims for superior insights.[61]

Taking note of such a critique, a further radicalization of contemporary criticism has taken place in which the possibility of negation is questioned altogether, either because it is seen as part of a ritual of dissent that has the paradoxical effect of confirming a liberal consensus, or because there can be no "outside" position in a discursive system that constitutes the very terms and structure of negation. In contrast to Iser's position, neither the fictive nor the aesthetic mode can provide distance in this view, because neither is defined any longer by non-identity. In a system in which the manifestation of power, racism, or imperialism is everywhere, that is, both "inside" the text and "outside" of it, there can be no difference between text and ideological system. Instead of non-identity, the literary text is characterized by a negative identity in which an "absent cause" pervading and marking all aspects of the system is reproduced.[62] As a result of this conflation of inside and outside and the radical rejection of the negating potential of literature linked with it, all fictionalizing acts and forms of aesthetic experience can function only as sources of systemic containment.[63]

As I pointed out at the beginning of this essay, the historical situation in postwar Germany strongly reinforced an emphasis on the negating potential of literature that has stood at the center of critical theories of literature since the Romantic era. In view of the sweeping triumph of Nazi ideology, postwar intellectuals turned to art as a resource for negation and as residue of critical practice. Iser's literary theory does not stand in opposition to this critical tradition, as the vague term "liberal humanism" with its associations of individual indulgence and aesthetic escapism insinuates, but is very much part of it. However, Iser takes the idea of negation in a different direction which can be appreciated best when compared with its currently prevalent alternatives. One is the reduction of the negating potential of literature to an articulation of the right kind of politics, which informs past and present forms of political radicalism and many manifestations of the current identity politics in literary studies. The other is an emphatic rejection of the potential of fiction or art to provide a different perspective at all. In both cases, the potential of literature to be different is eliminated—in the first case by reclaiming literature as a place to establish identity, in the second by the sweeping claim of a negative identity. In both cases, the price is high, because both approaches can only give an extremely impoverished and underdifferentiated version of aesthetic experience and our encounters with fictions.[64] As a consequence, the literary text can be described only

as a reenactment of an all-pervasive power effect and not as a struggle with, or negotiation of, that power effect by means of the transgressive potential of fiction.[65] Ultimately, what such a conflational epistemology denies us is the chance to take our own attitude toward the world.

In contrast to these approaches, Iser offers an original and suggestive reconsideration of the negating potential of literature. The development of his theoretical work is an admirably consistent attempt to retain the idea of negation—in a way that would not discredit the aesthetic dimension but describe it as potentially a radicalized form of negation which includes the possibility of a critical perspective unto itself. This "radicalization" is achieved by extending the idea of negation to that of negativity. At the beginning of his postwar interest in literature, Iser may have derived his hopes for distance from the traditional bourgeois belief in the power of art to transcend everyday reality. His study on Pater helped him to realize that the "other" world of art, inevitably and by definition, constitutes itself in relation to that which it negates. It thus does not transcend reality but opens up a new perspective on it. In his early work on modernism, this perspective is attributed to formal strategies of the text that give the text a dimension of reflexivity. By clarifying his position in contrast to formalist notions of defamiliarization and other versions of a modernist negative aesthetics, Iser goes beyond this textual model, however, and locates the source of distance no longer on the level of an interplay of opposites (negation) but on that of an experience of non-identity that creates a structure of doubling (negativity) between the present and the absent, the expressed and the inexpressible. By transforming negativity from its Frankfurt School meaning of a radicalized, last-stand residue of resistance to a doubling structure that constantly delegitimates and reconstitutes itself, Iser actually provides a much more complex and sophisticated model of the relation among the various constituents of the literary text than many versions of the current cultural radicalism. On the one hand, these constituents are never independent of one another and constantly act upon each other; on the other hand, they do this without ever losing their difference and thus their potential for a transgression or redefinition of existing worlds. If non-identity is a prerequisite for aesthetic experience, then aesthetic experience is a means to preserve the possibility of difference.

Iser's redefinition of the negating potential of literature as negativity in the sense of a doubling structure allows him to pinpoint a basic constituent of aesthetic experience and to describe literature as an intermediate realm in which self and other interact. By dismissing his literary theory as "liberal" or "liberal humanist," oppositional critics have dismissed an account of aesthetic experience that could enrich their

own work, for in its reduction of the idea of negation, the current cultural radicalism has consistently failed to give a convincing account of aesthetic experience.[66] One may very well argue, on the other hand, that Iser's use of negativity creates a problem insofar as it seems to put a severe restriction on what can be said about literature. In Iser's redefinition of negativity, 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.[67] The starting premise, the assumption of non-identity, seems to prevent the theory from ever going beyond the assertion of negativity and can thus lead only to ever-new rhetorical evocations of the "in-between." There cannot be any cultural or literary history written on this basis, because it can result only in the ever-new confirmation of the potentiality of literature.[68] And although Iser's anthropological turn promised to provide a more concrete and varied description of the function of literary texts, it does not really enlarge the descriptive range at a closer look, 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 of the end (*P* 148). However, if these descriptions eventually take on a certain monotonous dimension and do not open up into "history," it is not because Iser evades such issues, but because he remains true to his own starting premise. In order to grasp fully the logic of this choice, we therefore have to return to its historical source.

I have attempted to describe Wolfgang Iser's work as an ongoing project from its beginning in a politically and intellectually devastated postwar Germany to its recent reconceptualization as a literary anthropology not only in order to liberate it from its being stereotyped and banalized as "reader-response criticism," but even more to reconstruct the logic and remarkable consistency of a project that cannot be understood without the historical context from which it emerged as a response. For a critical intellectual, the situation in postwar Germany left only one choice: the search for a distance that would keep open the possibility of negation and self-reflexivity. Iser's interest in literature was triggered by the promise of a medium that could provide and maintain such distance. His literary theory was developed in the search of such distance and designed to prevent its possible collapse. Its most frustrating aspect, the refusal to endanger the distancing potential of literature by going beyond a description of potentiality to changing historical uses and functions, must be seen in this context. It reflects the experience of a totalitarian system, which was highly successful in eliminating differing perspectives. In this situation, critical distance must be sought from

"within," and it must come from a medium that cannot be as easily controlled as other discourses, because it is, by definition, characterized by non-identity and thus carries an inherent potential of negation. A generation like mine that has not experienced history in the same way may not be entirely convinced by Iser's definition of the intermediate realm of fiction as a ceaseless play of negativity, but before we criticize it, we have to make an effort to understand its inner logic, consistency, and admirable consequence.[69] And if we fail to be entirely convinced, it makes little sense to restrict our discussion to one technical aspect of it, such as the exact nature of the determining role of the text. Instead, we have to see these aspects as part of a larger project, and we have to take into account the tacit assumptions about history and society on which this project is built.

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NOTES

1 A note on terminology: in the following argument, the term "reception aesthetics" is used to refer exclusively to a theory of aesthetic experience and does not include theories of the history of reception. A simple solution to the terminological problem would be to use the term "reader-response criticism." However, I consider the term unnecessarily reductive and therefore unfortunate, because Iser's theory is, above all, an aesthetic theory. Its goal is to clarify the character of aesthetic experience and not "responses" of the reader.

2 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford, 1983), p. 79; hereafter cited in text as *LT*.

3 The issue in the following discussion is therefore not that of liberalism and its merits as a political philosophy but the superficiality and inadequacy of the term for characterizing Iser's literary theory.

4 Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago, 1980), p. 149; hereafter cited in text as *AN*.

5 Compare the whole quotation: "For although Iser postulates a 'transcendental construct,' in reality his reader approximates the ideal of an educated European. Throughout *The Act of Reading* we encounter a competent and cultured reader who, contrary to Iser's wishes, is predetermined in both character and historical situation" (Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* [New York, 1984], pp. 97–98).

6 *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore, 1980), pp. xxvi, 201.

7 Evan Carton and Gerald Graff, "Criticism Since 1940," *The Cambridge History of American Literature: Vol. 8. Poetry and Criticism 1940–1995*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (New York, 1996), pp. 261–471.

8 Holub criticizes Iser for foreclosing "an integration of historical information in anything but a superficial fashion" (*Reception Theory*, p. 99), but, ironically enough, this can also be seen as a very accurate characterization of the prevalent form of political criticism of Iser's work.

9 Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore, 1989), p. 136; hereafter cited in text as *P*. Iser's essay on "*Ulysses* and the Reader" in that

same volume provides a good example of a definition of reception aesthetics as a project that avoids the pitfalls of "Marxist mirror-reflection theory."

10 Wolfgang Iser, "Antrittsrede," *Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften für das Jahr 1976* (Heidelberg, 1977), p. 27 (my translation); hereafter cited in text. Compare the German original of the whole passage on which I draw: "Als der Krieg zu Ende ging, war ich 18 Jahre alt und glaubte, durch ein Studium der Literatur jenes Bedürfnis nach Distanz realisieren zu können. Freilich war es nun anders besetzt. Mit vielen meiner Generation teilte ich damals die Überzeugung, durch eine Beschäftigung mit Literatur mir nun endlich die eigenen Lebensorientierungen selbst erschließen zu können" (p. 27). "Der Arbeitsbereich schien abgesteckt, als ich mich in Heidelberg im Jahre 1957 nach zwei Assistentenjahren mit einer Arbeit über das Phänomen des Ästhetischen im *fin de siècle* habilitierte. Diese Arbeit entfaltet eine historische und eine systematische Implikation. Ich wollte die geschichtliche Bedingtheit durchschaubar machen, aus welcher der Gedanke von der Kunst als dem letzten Wert des endlichen Daseins erwachsen war, wodurch sich zugleich die Frage nach der Notwendigkeit für eine solche Apotheose der Kunst stellte. Die Arbeit war als Vorklärung für die Kunst der Moderne gedacht, die ich nicht als ein Verfallssymptom einstiger Vollkommenheit begreifen konnte. Deshalb schien es mir geboten, den Gedanken autonomer Kunst in jenem phänomenologischen Sinne zu reduzieren, um sie auf ihre Ursprünge zurückzubringen. Der Weg zu einer analytischen Beschäftigung mit der Literatur der Moderne war dadurch vorgezeichnet" (p. 29).

11 An analysis of this humanist position and its shortcomings can be found in Iser's essay "Changing Functions of Literature" (in *Prospecting*, pp. 200–201).

12 Compare his "Antrittsrede": "Für mich stand fest, daß es fremde Literaturen sein müßten, die ich studieren wollte—nicht zuletzt deshalb, weil die eigene in der Vergangenheit so vieles zu legitimieren hatte" (p. 27). ["For me, it was a foregone conclusion that I wanted to study foreign literatures—because my own had had to legitimate so much in the past"; my translation.]

13 Iser's "Doktorvater" (Ph.D. advisor) in Heidelberg, Martin Flasdieck, was strictly a linguist and did not hide his distaste for the "unscientific" nature of literary studies.

14 Compare Iser's "Antrittsrede": "Wovon ich in meinem Studium abgesperrt war, erschloß sich mir während meiner Jahre als Lektor in England. . . . Die literarische Moderne faszinierte mich als Reflexionskunst" (p. 29). ["In the years I spent as a lecturer in England, I finally had the chance to study those areas from which I had been cut off during my studies at home. . . . Literary modernism fascinated me as an art of self-reflexivity"; my translation.]

15 Wolfgang Iser, *Walter Pater: The Aesthetic Moment* (Cambridge, 1987), p. vi; hereafter cited in text as *WP*.

16 As Iser points out in the preface to *Walter Pater*, this idea was in turn derived from Iser's intense reading of the early writings of Kierkegaard. His work on Pater thus provided him with a chance to transfer a philosophical idea to literary studies and to test its usefulness.

17 See also Iser's characterization of "Plato's unique achievement" (*Walter Pater*, p. 88): "What in Platonic philosophy has always been a strict division between idea and copy is seen by Pater as a blending of the two. The abstract realm of ideas is a 'hollow land,' which needs contact with concrete experience in order to come to life, and it is only when experience and ideas join together that there is Platonism, according to Pater's interpretation of the term. Instead of division there is interpretation, which becomes tangible through 'imaginative reason'—a faculty that establishes not only the Platonic order of the world, but also the predominantly aesthetic quality of this order" (*Walter Pater*, p. 89).

18 "Die Arbeit [the book on Pater] war als Vorklärung für die Kunst der Moderne gedacht, die ich nicht als ein Verfallssymptom einstiger Vollkommenheit begreifen konnte. Deshalb schien es mir geboten, den Gedanken autonomer Kunst in jenem phänomenologischen Sinne zu reduzieren, um sie auf ihre Ursprünge zurückzubringen. Der Weg zu einer analytischen Beschäftigung mit der Literatur der Moderne war dadurch vorgezeichnet" ("Antrittsrede," p. 29). ["This book [on Pater] was intended as preliminary study for a discussion of modern art which I could not see as a symptom of decay. Therefore, I felt the need for a phenomenological focus on the idea of autonomous art in order to recover its original purpose. This, in turn, paved the way for an analytic study of literary modernism"; my translation.]

19 "Die Funktion der Kunst besteht dann im Aufdecken der in dieser Sehkonvention enthaltenen Trugschlüsse; indem das konstruierte Bild eine unerwartete Ansicht vom Gegenstand entdeckt, wird das illusionistische Moment der konventionellen Wahrnehmung sichtbar gemacht. Illusionistisch ist diese insofern, als die sie bestimmende Perspektive vorgibt, den Gegenstand erfaßt zu haben" (Iser, "Image und Montage. Zur Bildkonzeption in der imagistischen Lyrik und in T. S. Eliots *Waste Land*," *Immanente Ästhetik, Ästhetische Reflexion. Lyrik als Paradigma der Moderne. Poetik und Hermeneutik, Vol. II*, ed. W. Iser [Munich, 1966], p. 367).

20 "Die Dichtung soll den Blickzwang des in seinen Gewohnheiten befangenen Menschen entstören, damit die in teleologischer Rücksicht verfertigten Schemata der Wahrnehmung nicht mit der Realität verwechselt werden. In dieser Überlegung verbirgt sich ein wichtiger Impuls der neuen Dichtung: sie ist Möglichkeit zur Freiheit. Damit diese Möglichkeit realisiert werden kann, müssen die von den Gegenständen entworfenen Ansichten ein Moment der Reflexion in sich enthalten, denn die Bilder dieser Dichtung sollten in der Gegenstandswahrnehmung eine Dimension aufblenden, die durch die Gewohnheiten verdeckt wird" ("Image und Montage," p. 369).

21 "Die imagistische Dichtung berührt sich mit dem Verfremdungseffekt nur insoweit, als das *image* eine Entautomatisierung der geläufigen Wahrnehmung bewirkt; die dadurch intendierte Pluralisierung der Gegenstandserfassung aber läuft der Absicht des von Bloch skizzierten Verfremdungseffektes geradezu entgegen" ("Image und Montage," p. 375).

22 "Um eine solche Vermittlungsleistung zu beschreiben, ist es sinnvoll, der von Sartre entwickelten Unterscheidung von Wahrnehmung und Vorstellung zu folgen. Denn was uns in fiktionalen Texten gegeben ist, besitzt nicht die gleiche 'Gegenstandsqualität' wie jene Objekte, die wir in den Wahrnehmungsakten erfassen. Der Wahrnehmung müssen immer Objekte vorgegeben sein, deren Gegenstandsqualität darin besteht, daß sie auch dann noch vorhanden sind, wenn wir sie nicht wahrnehmen. Wenn daher die russischen Formalisten—auf die sich Wellershoff bezieht—von der Kunst als einem Prozeß der Wahrnehmungserschwerung gesprochen haben, so glaubten sie, daß die Kunst die Objektwahrnehmung kompliziere, woraus zwangsläufig eine längere Beschäftigungsdauer resultiere. . . . Während für die Wahrnehmung immer ein Objekt gegeben sein muß, sind die 'Gegenstände' der Vorstellung dagegen immer ein Nicht-Gegebenes bzw. ein Abwesendes" (Iser, "Negativität als *tertium quid* von Darstellung und Rezeption," *Positionen der Negativität. Poetik und Hermeneutik VI*, ed. Harald Weinrich [Munich, 1975], pp. 530–31. ["In order to describe the specific nature of the reception process, it is useful to draw on the distinction between acts of perception and acts of imagining developed by Sartre. For what we encounter in fictional texts does not possess the same 'object quality' as those objects we register in acts of perception. Perception depends on pre-given objects whose object quality consists in the fact that they exist independently from the act of perception. When the Russian formalists—to which Wellershoff refers—describe art as a process of de-automatization, they postulate that art complicates the process of perception, which, in turn, leads to a prolonged process of perception. . . . But whereas perception always depends on a pre-given object, the 'objects' of the imagination are always non-given and absent"; my translation.]

23 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 '80s on, because, as they point out, any object is inevitably "constituted" by culturally pre-existent perceptual categories as well as prior cultural knowledge and is therefore not "pre-given." (See, for example, Elizabeth Freund, *The Return of the Reader: Reader-Response Criticism* [London, 1987], p. 150.) However, this point does not weaken but rather strengthens Iser's distinction, because, in this way, the object of perception is already "known," while it is not if we have to construct it anew, because there is no identical referent given for it: "I emphasize the difference between ideation and perception because when one reads a text, there are no given objects to be perceived; instead objects must be built up from the knowledge invoked or the information provided" (*Prospecting*, p. 52). It is certainly true, as Iser himself points out in his later description of fictionalizing acts as constituted by an interaction of the real and the imaginary, that the mental construction of an object will draw on existing discursive conventions. But since, in reading a book, we have to actualize the words on the page by imagining something we *do not* yet know, we also have to draw on associations and feelings of our own. The result is the creation of an object that does not yet exist in this particular form in the world.

24 See also Iser's brief characterization in a later essay of his: "For the Russian formalists, art has to de-automate perception, in order to 'enforce a new vision of things and so correct one's own relation to the world.' [a quote taken from J. Striedter] For this purpose it was necessary for the structures in the literary text to be seen as running contrary to the workings of perception, so that the resultant alienation would draw attention to the automated modes we use in gaining access to the world" ("Key Concepts in Current Literary Theory and the Imaginary," *Prospecting*, p. 226).

25 Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore, 1978), p. 213; hereafter cited in text as *AR*.

26 Compare the following characterization of negativity in *The Act of Reading*: "Negativity, in the true sense of the term, however, cannot be deduced from the given world which it questions, and cannot be conceived as serving a substantialist idea, the coming of which it heralds. As the nonformulation of the not-yet-comprehended, it does no more than mark out a relationship to that which it disputes, and so it provides a basic link between the reader and the text. If the reader is made to formulate the cause underlying the questioning of the world, it implies that he must transcend that world, in order to be able to observe it from outside. And herein lies the true communicatory function of literature. Whatever may be the individual contents which come into the world through a work of art, there will always be something which is never given in the world and which only a work of art provides: it enables us to transcend that which we are otherwise so inextricably entangled in—our own lives in the midst of the real world. Negativity as a basic constituent of communication is therefore an enabling structure" (pp. 229–30).

27 Wolfgang Iser, "Introduction," *Languages of the Unsayable. The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (New York, 1989), p. xiv; hereafter cited in text.

28 There is an influential discussion of Hegel's philosophy of art in the *Poetik und Hermeneutik* circle in which Hegel's aesthetics is extended to a philosophy of modern art. See Dieter Henrich's essay "Kunst und Kunstphilosophie der Gegenwart (Überlegungen mit Rücksicht auf Hegel)," *Immanente Ästhetik. Ästhetische Reflexion. Lyrik als Paradigma der Moderne*, ed. Wolfgang Iser, pp. 11–32; reprinted in English translation in *New Perspectives in German Literary Criticism: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Richard E. Amacher and Victor Lange (Princeton, 1979), pp. 107–33.

29 "However, as the unfamiliar elements cannot be manifested under the same conditions pertaining to familiar existing conceptions, that which literature brings into the world can only reveal itself as negativity. This comes about in the text through the dislocation of external norms from their real context, and through draining these norms of their reality—as described by Adorno: '. . . everything that works of art contain, as regards form and materials, spirit and matter, has emigrated from reality into the works, and in them has been deprived of its reality'" (*The Act of Reading*, p. 229).

30 Wolfgang Iser, "Konträre Leistungen der Negation," "Negativität als *tertium quod* von Darstellung und Rezeption," *Positionen der Negativität, Poetik und Hermeneutik, VI*, ed. Harald Weinrich (Munich, 1975), pp. 509–11, 530–33.

31 See also the following statement: "But if literature embodied a counterbalance to existing conditions in order to repair their deficiencies, it would be nothing more than the extrapolation of a bad reality turned, as it were, upside down" (*Prospecting*, p. 211). This would also apply to a theory of literature as utopian anticipation.

32 There is no explicit discussion of the student movement's view of literature in the impressive 570-page *Poetik und Hermeneutik* volume on *Positionen der Negativität*, but is obvious throughout the volume that the choice of the topic negativity is the group's way of responding to its challenges and to clarify its own views of the "negating potential," or, to put it more positively, of the function and possible effects of literature. Occasionally, in scattered references, the "absent cause" is acknowledged, as, for example, in Marianne Kesting's comment: "Since 1968 and the emergence of the student movement, the wish has grown again, as Th. W. Adorno has noted critically, to give literature a socially useful role without taking into consideration that literature itself 'negates' such instrumentalization" (p. 541). The reference to Adorno shrewdly manages to set up a "negativity" faction against the demands of the student movement that soon began to criticize Adorno and critical theory for not being political enough.

33 In his own definition, Jauss embraces both an existentialist and a historical definition: "Negativity constitutes the literary work and works of fine art as an unreal object which must negate the real—in the sense of existent reality—in order to constitute it anew and which thereby—according to Sartre's phenomenology of the imaginary—constitutes 'world' (*dépasser le réel en le constituant comme monde*). But negativity also constituted the work of art in a historical process of production and reception, if it goes beyond the familiar horizon of tradition, changes an established way of dealing with the world, or subverts existing social norms" ("Negativität und Identifikation. Versuch zur Theorie der ästhetischen Erfahrung," *Positionen der Negativität*, ed. Harald Weinrich, p. 263; my translation; hereafter cited in text).

34 For a discussion of the various meanings of negativity in Adorno's aesthetic theory (as the anti-ideological negativity of bourgeois art; as the formal negativity of autonomous art; and as the ontological negativity of the work of art in contrast to the factually existent), see Hendrik Birus, "Adorno's 'Negative Aesthetics'?" in *Languages of the Unsayable*, pp. 140–64. See also Michael Theunissen, "Negativität bei Adorno," *Adorno-Konferenz 1983*, ed. Ludwig von Friedeburg and Jürgen Habermas (Frankfurt, 1983), pp. 41–65. The volume *Materialien zur ästhetischen Theorie Th.W.Adornos, Konstruktion der Moderne*, ed. Burkhardt Lindner and W. Martin Lüdke (Frankfurt, 1979) contains a number of helpful discussions of Adorno's aesthetic theory.

35 The essay forms the basis of Jauss's last major work, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics* (Minneapolis, 1982).

36 See, for example, Adorno's observation on the changed nature of the utopian dimension of art: "In Selma Lagerlöf's *Marbacka* a stuffed bird of paradise causes the paralysed child to recover. The impact of an appealing Utopia of this kind was as fresh as ever. But today this has become impossible; nowadays darkness is the representation of Utopia. Art's Utopia, the counterfactual yet-to-come, is draped in black. It goes on being a recollection of the possible with a critical edge against the real; it is a kind of imaginary restitution of that catastrophe, which is world history; it is freedom which did not come to

pass under the spell of necessity and which may well not come to pass ever at all. The tension that art maintains in relation to the perpetual catastrophe presupposes negativity, which in turn is the *methexis* of art in the obscure" (*Aesthetic Theory* [London, 1984], p. 196).

37 Iser's own (brief) discussion of Adorno's position can be found in "Changing Functions of Literature" (*Prospecting*, p. 211): "Literature refers to things that are suppressed, unconscious, inconceivable, and perhaps even incommensurable, but this does not mean that a view of the invisible must necessarily be Utopian." See also his comments on Adorno's Beckett interpretation in *Prospecting*, p. 301.

38 There is a tendency, for example in Holub's discussion of this development, to see this transformation of the terms negation and negativity into paradoxically "positive" terms as a kind of sellout of the idea of negation. But the rejection of a Frankfurt School version of negative aesthetics was also characteristic of the student movement, which criticized it for not being able to provide a more positive version of literature's potential and function, although it defined this potential in terms of "real" political relevance. For the student movement, negative aesthetics was not political enough, while for the Constance School of Literary Theory negative aesthetics could not provide a convincing explanation of aesthetic experience.

39 Iser thus assigns blanks and negations—defined as a cancellation or resemanticization of our dominant codes which nevertheless retain a reference to that which they negate—a similarly constitutive function for initiating an activity of text processing. Consequently, negation, for Iser, never had the heroic connotation of a last form of resistance to reification which it has for Critical Theory. For Iser, negation is part of a sense-making process, a cancellation of a reference that allows us to move on and try out new stances by becoming actively involved in the production of sense.

40 One may, in fact, understand the radical conceptualization of negativity in Adorno's aesthetics as an attempt to escape this aporia. Occasionally, Iser himself unwittingly illustrates this dilemma in his own readings of modernist classics, where the temptation is ever-present to locate the negating potential of literature in its superior insight into the human condition. Thus he says about Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* that "the constellation of mental images provoked by the blanks" provides us with "the key to the meaning of the novel," namely, "the senselessness of life" (*The Act of Reading*, p. 220). About Beckett's prose he writes: "Here we have a basic dilemma of life itself: though we are alive, we are constrained to search for the meaning of something we can, in the last analysis, know nothing about" (*Prospecting*, p. 145). "And this is precisely the position of Beckett's characters, who have rejected all the alternatives and so leave themselves without alternatives, thus revealing the insurmountable finiteness of man to be an endless or infinite going-on. . . . What Beckett's rejection of fiction reveals is the nature of man's inescapable limitations; it is an infinite retention of the self within this insurmountable finiteness" (*Prospecting*, p. 151).

41 Iser's objection against "ideological" readings thus need not enter the level of ideological debate. It is not directed against certain ideologies but against a certain mode of dealing with ideology, namely that of internalization: "The question is therefore to what extent a theory of reading that aims at educating to conformity with the system—however praiseworthy such a conformity may be if it is the correct one—must interfere in such process. . . . The producing of a 'socialist' manner of reading demands the internalization of the correct social norms so that the subject can adapt to society" ("Im Lichte der Kritik," *Rezeptionsästhetik. Theorie und Praxis*, ed. Rainer Warning [Munich, 1975], p. 339; the translation is Holub's [p. 133]).

42 See, for example, Jane Tompkins's introduction to her volume on *Reader-Response Criticism*: "But he does not grant the reader autonomy or even a partial independence from textual constraints. The reader's activity is only a fulfillment of what is already implicit in the structure of the work—though exactly how that structure limits his activity

is never made clear" (p. xv). The encounter between reception aesthetics and American reader-response criticism was an exercise in futility. American critics never understood Iser's underlying concerns and thus grappled, somewhat helplessly, with the concepts that seemed to signal a new approach, that of the reader and the somewhat elusive concept of the blank. In their attempt to present reception aesthetics as a manageable "approach," they completely ignored the issue of aesthetic experience.

43 Iser has stressed this point again and again, for example in his response to critical questions by Norman Holland and Wayne Booth: "My basic concern, however, is not with meaning-assembly as such but with what I have termed the aesthetic object, which has to be created in the act of reading by following the instructions given in the text. . . . I should certainly not want to identify the aesthetic object solely with meaning; had I wished to do so, I should scarcely have bothered to use two different terms" ("Interview," *Prospecting*, pp. 65, 53).

44 See his own characterization: "If I have given the impression that I seem obsessed by 'seeking a meaning' this is due to the fact that I should like to move the discussion of meaning onto a different plane: not what the meaning is, but how it is produced" (*Prospecting*, p. 645).

45 This is a literal translation of the German word "irrealisiert" in order to avoid the implication of escapism associated with the word "unreal" in English.

46 Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore, 1974); hereafter cited in text as *IR*.

47 Because the title of *The Implied Reader* has become a kind of shorthand designation for Iser's approach, the two books are often conflated, while they are actually very different books. In his "Heidelberger Antrittsrede," Iser characterizes *The Implied Reader* as *Funktionsgeschichte* (history of the changing functions of fiction) and *The Act of Reading* as *Wirkungstheorie* (theory of aesthetic effect).

48 Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore, 1993); hereafter cited in text as *FI*. The move from reception aesthetics to literary anthropology, programmatically stated in the subtitle of the essay collection *Prospecting*, is thus not a change of direction but a continuation and concretization of Iser's ongoing project.

49 See 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*, p. 237).

50 In this sense, it seems fitting to speak of re-presentation (instead of mere presentation), because the renewed (feigned) presentation of an object provides the prerequisite for the establishment of difference. Re-presentation in this sense is repetition with a difference.

51 In this way, the doubling effect becomes the hallmark of literary fictionality: "The fictionalizing acts simultaneously separate and encompass the extratextual fields and their intratextual deformation (selection), the intratextual semantic enclosures and their mutual telescoping (combination), and finally a bracketed world and its suspension of the empirical world" (*Prospecting*, p. 241).

52 This characterization of the human situation is taken from Helmuth Plessner's essay "Die anthropologische Dimension der Geschichtlichkeit" and provides the basis for Iser's literary anthropology (in *Sozialer Wandel: Zivilisation und Fortschritt als Kategorien der soziologischen Theorie*, ed. Hans Peter Dreitzel [Neuwied, 1967], pp. 160–68).

53 I use the word "gradual" because almost all of the aspects discussed in this essay can be found in the various stages of Iser's work, but with a gradually changing emphasis.

54 In his lecture "Von der dementierten zur zerspielten Form des Erzählens," Iser

discusses the work of Thomas Pynchon and Donald Barthelme as two examples of postmodern writing and describes their work as yet another stage in the radicalization of negation that, in retrospect, makes even experimental modernism look like a deeply humanistic project. The lecture has been published in the "Working Paper" series of the John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies of the Freie Universität Berlin, as *Working Paper* No. 60 (Berlin, 1993).

55 "But literature is not an explanation of origins; it is a staging of the constant deferment of explanation" (*Prospecting*, p. 245).

56 Gabriele Schwab, who wrote her dissertation and her *Habilitationsschrift* (the German qualification for a professorship) with Iser, attempts to address these questions in more detail in her books *Subjects Without Selves: Transitional Texts in Modern Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994) and *The Mirror and the Killer-Queen: Otherness in Literary Language* (Bloomington, Ind., 1996). See also the Constance dissertation of Iser's student Ulla Haselstein, *Entziffernde Hermeneutik* (Munich, 1991). Generally speaking, Iser's students have pursued two different lines of work. One, of which Eckhard Lobsien's *Theorie literarischer Illusionsbildung* (Munich, 1991) is the best known, offers phenomenological descriptions of perceptual and textual schemata in literature and aesthetic reception; the other, exemplified by Schwab and Haselstein, draws on psychoanalytic and psychological models to describe the intermediate realm of fiction not only as a space of transferring but also of transference.

57 For different attempts to work with the category of the imaginary see Schwab's *Subjects Without Selves* and *The Mirror and the Killer-Queen*, as well as my own study *Das kulturelle Imaginäre. Eine Funktionsgeschichte des amerikanischen Romans, 1790–1900* (Frankfurt, 1997) and the essay "'The American Romance' and the Changing Functions of the Imaginary," *New Literary History*, 27 (1996), 415–57. In each case, Iser's work provides a point of departure.

58 See Iser's characterization of the imaginary in his essay "Key Concepts in Current Literary Theory and the Imaginary": "The imaginary is not semantic, because it is by its very nature diffuse, whereas meaning becomes meaning through its precision. It is the diffuseness of the imaginary that enables it to be transformed into so many different gestalts, and this transformation is necessary whenever this potential is tapped for utilization. Indeed fiction, in the broadest sense of the term, is the pragmatically conditioned gestalt of the imaginary. . . . Fiction reveals itself as a product of the imaginary insofar as it lays bare its fictionality, and yet it appears to be a halfway house between the imaginary and the real. It shares with the real the determinateness of its form, and with the imaginary its nature of an 'As If.' Thus features of the real and the imaginary become intertwined, and their linkup is such that it both demands and conditions a continuing process of interpretation. For fiction always contains a representation of something, but its very fictionality shows that what is represented is merely an 'image,' is put in parentheses and thus accorded the status of an 'As If.' And this is neither totally real nor totally imaginary; the gestalt is too real to be imaginary, but its substance is too imaginary to be real. Thus fiction can never be identified either with the real or with the imaginary, and if the two are bracketed together through that which fiction represents, this does not mean that what is represented is the object of the representation; the object is the possibility of formulating what is represented in a different way from that given by the linguistic formulation" (*Prospecting*, pp. 232–33).

59 An interesting example is provided by Adorno's comments on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*: "The immanence of art works, i.e. their almost *a priori* distance from empirical being, would be inconceivable were it not for the implicit presupposition of a new social order brought about by self-conscious praxis. In *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, Shakespeare does not by any means expressly espouse an ideal of love free of familial meddling. And yet

the drama is about precisely this: the human longing for a condition where love is no longer disfigured or prohibited by patriarchal rule, or any rule for that matter. Were it not for this tacit, imageless Utopia it would be difficult to explain the abiding attraction *Romeo and Juliet* has had for generations of theatre-goers. That it is only a tacit Utopia is no coincidence, for the same taboo that forbids cognition to flesh out Utopias holds for art too. Praxis is not the impact works have; it is the hidden potential for their truth content" (*Aesthetic Theory*, p. 350). Art is thus "like a plenipotentiary of a type of praxis that is better than the prevailing praxis of society, dominated as it is by brutal self-interest. This is what art criticizes. It gives the lie to the notion that production for production's sake is necessary, by opting for a mode of praxis beyond labour. Art's *promesse du bonheur*, then, has an even more emphatically critical meaning: it not only expresses the idea that current praxis denies happiness, but also carries the connotation that happiness is something beyond praxis. The chasm between praxis and happiness is surveyed and measured by the power of negativity of the work of art" (pp. 17–18). In art works, then, "there is only one way to denote the concrete, namely negatively. The work of art suspends empirical reality and its abstract functional interdependence. It does so not by means of some particular content, but because its existence is *sui generis*. The utopia anticipated by artistic form is the idea that things at long last ought to come into their own" (p. 195).

60 Adorno reciprocated in kind by calling the political criticism of art by the student movement "totalitarian": "When the political avant-garde disrupts events of the artistic avant-garde, the result is confusion writ large: neither the belief that disruption is revolutionary nor the related belief that revolution is a thing of artistic beauty holds any water. Artlessness is not above art but below it; and commitment is frequently no more than lack of talent or of adaptation, in any event a weakening of subjective strength. Far from being new, the recent disruptions by activists are taken straight from the fascist bag of tricks: ego weakness, the inability to sublimate, is being the line of least resistance The days of art, these people allege, are over, and what is left to do is to actualize the truth content of art (which they rashly equate with social content). This condemnation of art is totalitarian in kind" (*Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 355–56).

61 One should add that the use of the terms "affirmative" and "negative" in contemporary "oppositional" criticism presents a significant reduction of Marcuse's argument, because Marcuse uses the concept of "affirmative culture" to characterize the "culture of the bourgeois epoch" *in toto*, and not just those works which fail to be critical or "oppositional." See Marcuse's essay "The Affirmative Character of Culture," *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory* (Boston, 1968), p. 95. Marcuse's argument, in turn, can be seen as a reduction of the aesthetic theory of Critical Theory. Thus, Adorno writes: "Justified as Herbert Marcuse's critique of culture and its affirmative character may be, it is incomplete because it does not deal with individual projects of art. As it stands, it verges on the perspective of an imaginary league against culture (Antikulturbund) that is no better than the cultural legacy it criticizes. A rabid critique of culture is not the same as a radical critique. As culture is not completely wrong just because it failed, so affirmation in art is not completely wrong either. Culture keeps barbarism in check; it is the lesser of two evils" (*Aesthetic Theory*, p. 357).

62 See the excellent analysis of this form of political criticism by Wolfram Schmidgen who points out "that the principle of determination in such a structure is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. It is everywhere because every element is defined by the totality of relations that surround it, and it is nowhere because it is nowhere empirically present, can be nowhere concretized or mapped: the complexity of all the relations precisely exceeds the possibility of such spatialization. This is why Jameson called this type of structure an 'absent cause.' What I want to argue in regard to topics such as race, imperialism, or nationalism, is that one branch of recent criticism—not strictly confined to

literary criticism—pushes the case for these topics by constructing them as absent causes. As such, race, imperialism, or nationalism permeate the entire network of social relations and affect all literature, even those canonical texts more conservative critics consider exempt from such 'contamination'" ("The Principle of Negative Identity and the Crisis of Relationality in Contemporary Literary Criticism," *REAL*, 11 [1995], 391).

63 For an analysis of this new type of "cultural" radicalism (in contrast to older forms of political radicalism), see my essay "The Humanities in the Age of Expressive Individualism and Cultural Radicalism," *Cultural Critique*, 40 (1998), 49–71.

64 The dominant forms of historical criticism cannot explain, for example, the processes of transfer and transference that take place in reading fiction. How is it possible that we can still relate to an eighteenth-century sentimental heroine? The only—highly problematical—answer provided by historical criticism is that of historical or systemic continuity.

65 An especially interesting test case for this approach is provided by recent literary criticism of the work of Henry James. See my essay "Power Relations in the Novels of James: The 'Liberal' and the 'Radical' Version," *Enacting History in Henry James: Narrative, Power, and Ethics*, ed. Gert Buelens (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), pp. 16–39.

66 One of the reasons for this neglect lies in the rejection of the idea of aesthetic difference, either by political claims for adequate representation or by the radical redefinition of power as an all-embracing systemic effect that also pervades the aesthetic and turns the power of art into the art of power. If one wants to claim that power is everywhere and pervades the very forms by which we make sense of the world, then this claim has to be extended to the aesthetic dimension and, consequently, art can no longer be a source of difference. However, such a view could hardly have taken hold as widely as it has in American literary criticism, were it not for a far-reaching professionalization of literary criticism, which, inevitably, has a tendency to suffocate aesthetic experience. If a critic has read and taught a literary text for the thirtieth time, there may not be any aesthetic experience left.

67 In this sense, a shift of emphasis can be noted in the transition from reception aesthetics to literary anthropology. While the former deals, above all, 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 on *Laurence Sterne's "Tristram Shandy"* (München, 1987)—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.

68 The last part of *The Act of Reading* contains a chapter on "Historical Differences in the Structure of Interaction," but the chapter remains a description of the changing function (and increasing importance) of the blank as a "negating technique" (p. 211).

69 My own major objection would be that we cannot escape from a "pragmatization" of the depragmatized space of fiction, because this is the only way in which real or imagined objects become meaningful to us. Therefore, even a radical theory of negativity can very well be understood as another version of such pragmatization, as I have tried to argue in this essay. However, this neither invalidates this theory as aesthetic theory, nor its description of literature as an intermediate realm and of aesthetic experience as constituted by an interplay of elements. It merely opens these models up to include other and different uses. For an attempt to extend Iser's description of aesthetic experience by reconsidering the notion of transfer see my "Pragmatism and Aesthetic Experience," *REAL*, 15 (1999), 227–42.