The Reader, or: Imposture

THE READER’S GAME

When one decides to leave the doxic conception of interpretation where the author is given pride of place, the temptation is to go, for reasons of symmetry, straight to the opposite pole of the communicational exchange and place the burden of meaning squarely on the shoulders of the reader. The reader’s response it is that gives meaning to the text, and interpretation is no longer reconstruction. The immediate danger is interpretive anarchism, and the immediate problem is the formulation of the constraints that limit the infinite proliferation of ‘anything goes’. The usual answers, which we have already sketched, are to be found in intertext, in tradition, in the mutual beliefs that foster convention, in all that goes under the name of encyclopaedia. Proliferation there is, but within strict limits: midrash is tolerant, but not unto Ettleson.

All this is well-known. It is the problematic of German reception theory, of the Konstanz school of Jauss and Iser. They naturally deal with the subject of literary interpretation in terms of our extended metaphor – they naturally conceive interpretation within a communicational, pragmatic model. A quick glance through Iser’s The Act of Reading,1 where this tendency is at its most explicit, yields references to Charles Morris who gave the term ‘pragmatics’ the meaning that concerns us, and to Austin’s analysis of locution, illocution and perlocution. This insistence on the pragmatic character of meaning is encapsulated in a quotation from Northrop Frye: ‘It has been said of Boehme that his books are like a picnic to which the author brings the words and the reader the meaning. The remark may have been intended as a sneer at Boehme, but it is an exact description of all works of literary art without exception.’2 The quotation makes it clear that the origin of meaning is to be found in a pragmatic transaction, and that the transaction takes place neither between author and reader nor between author and text, but between text and reader.
This is enough to distinguish Iser’s model from the one I have suggested in the previous chapters: an imbalance symmetrical to the one perceived in an author-centered doxa is created. Nevertheless, reading Iser already gives us the main building blocks of my model. His sharp separation, for instance, between the artistic pole (where the text is the author’s text, in which her schemata are inscribed) and the aesthetic pole (where the text is not only received by the reader but composed by him) seems to insist upon the separation between the moment of writing and the moment of reading. The vanishing of the author from what is essentially a situation of communication forces the text into an active position of sender, in dialogue with the reader-receiver (I shall explore this intuition in this chapter), whereas the overlapping between the text’s and the reader’s repertoires corresponds to my concept of intersection between Ls and Es. The temporality of reading and meaning, which provides a new meaning for each new reading, is close to my notion of conjuncture; while the need for interpretation is ascribed, following R.D. Laing’s psychology of interpersonal experience, to the invisibility, for the subject, of her interlocutor’s experience (as her own experience is invisible to him). The result is a definition of fiction as a structure of communication:

As a structure of communication it is identical neither with the reality it refers to, nor with the disposition of its possible recipients, for it virtualises both the prevailing concepts of reality (from which it draws its own repertoire) and the norms and values of its prospective readers. And it is precisely because it is not identical to text or reader that it is able to communicate.3

This quotation shows that literary communication is conceived by Iser in the terms of what is sometimes called an aesthetics of negativity. Literary communication differs from common-and-garden exchange in that it opposes, and thereby reveals, its implicit norms and values. Iser’s ‘communicational’ analysis is conducted, as is well-known, in terms of syntagmatic blanks and paradigmatic negation, which together produce, within or from the text, the phantom text of negativity. This, which is a new version of the venerable criterion of literariness as disruption of ordinary language or communication, means that, in Iser’s words, the literary text ‘depragmatizes’ its object:4 objects are not denoted but transformed, their original frame of reference is shattered so as to