

“Mind the Gap”: a Comment on Lothar Černý*

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In his article, Lothar Černý takes issue with Wolfgang Iser’s reading of Fielding, which, as Černý rightly argues, is not merely illustrative but actually constitutive of the hermeneutic approach known as “reader-reception-theory,” at least in its early phase. In the palimpsestic way of contemporary criticism, I wish to engage with Černý’s reading of Iser’s reading of Fielding, but in order to make absolutely clear the grounds for discussion with Černý, I must begin with Iser himself.

In chapter three of *The Implied Reader* (1974), Iser gives a succinct account of his entire project:

Although a novel addresses itself to a reader, literary criticism has been mainly concerned with the author’s point of view, paying little attention to how the reader might be affected. If one changed this predominant perspective a text would have to be studied according to the influence it exercises over the reader. Such an approach would concern itself less with the actual subjects portrayed than with the means of communication by which the reader is brought into contact with the reality represented by the author.¹

At the time of writing, Iser was surely justified in arguing that the *reader* was the neglected factor in the author-text-reader line of transmission. In subsequent elaborations of such a methodology as is being proposed here, Iser goes on to argue that *reading any text whatsoever* involves the reader in “concretizing” meanings that the text does not specify; filling in gaps, responding to cues, interpreting indeterminacies, recapitulating and anticipating—engaging, in short, in acts of reading.² In chapter two of *The Implied Reader*, Iser demonstrates some of these reading skills in

*Reference: Lothar Černý, “Reader Participation and Rationalism in Fielding’s *Tom Jones*,” *Connotations* 2.2 (1992): 137-62.

action on *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*, but here, he seems to believe that it is *not* any and every text that offers itself up to such acts of reading. On the contrary, he distinguishes between Richardson's writing and Fielding's precisely on the grounds that the latter offers the opportunity for active reader-participation whereas the former does not:

Historically speaking, perhaps one of the most important differences between Richardson and Fielding lies in the fact that with *Pamela* the meaning is clearly formulated; in *Joseph Andrews* the meaning is clearly waiting to be formulated. (46)

For Iser, therefore, it becomes part of Fielding's *conscious intention* to write novels containing gaps to be filled and silences to be made audible by the reader—and part of Richardson's *conscious intention not* to do so.

Iser's reading of the episode in *Joseph Andrews* I.viii, in which Joseph resists the sexual advances of Lady Booby, will serve as a concrete example of the reader-centred approach that this book is piloting (I apologise for the necessity to quote at some length).

Lady Booby leads on her footman, whom she has got to sit on her bed, with all kinds of enticements, until the innocent Joseph finally recoils, calling loudly upon his virtue. Instead of describing the horror of his Potiphar, Fielding, at the height of this crisis, continues:

You have heard, reader, poets talk of the statue of Surprise; you have heard likewise, or else you have heard very little, how Surprise made one of the sons of Croesus speak, though he was dumb. You have seen the faces, in the eighteen-penny gallery, when, through the trap-door, to soft or no music, Mr. Bridgewater, Mr. William Mills, or some other of ghostly appearance, hath ascended, with a face all pale with powder, and a shirt all bloody with ribbons;—but from none of these, nor from Phidias or Praxiteles, if they should return to life—no, not from the inimitable pencil of my friend Hogarth, could you receive such an idea of surprise as would have entered in at your eyes had they beheld the Lady Booby when those last words issued out from the lips of Joseph. "Your virtue!" said the lady, recovering after a silence of two minutes; "I shall never survive it!"

As the narrative does not offer a description of Lady Booby's reaction, the reader is left to provide the description, using the directions offered him. Thus the reader must, so to speak, enter Lady Booby's bedroom and visualize her surprise for himself. (37-38)

Iser goes on to discuss how the passage differentiates between groups of readers on social grounds, and how its refusal to describe Lady Booby's surprise leaves a gap in which the reader's imagination plays freely, creating an animated impression of the scene. This, I submit, is an almost touchingly naive reading of the entire episode. Leaving aside Iser's error in likening Lady Booby to Potiphar (she is, of course, Potiphar's wife), it is bordering on the absurd to argue that Fielding has left, here, any kind of gap at all and actually absurd to argue that the reader's imagination necessarily fills it with a pop-up cartoon version of the scene. Is it not very clear that Fielding's triumph is a rhetorical one, and that the reader need not stray beyond the pale of words to get the full effect? The passage first offers the reader one of the general knowledge tests that Augustans seemed so much to enjoy. The "statue of Surprise" mentioned by the poets, the Wesleyan editor Martin Battestin suggests, might allude to Ovid or to Shakespeare's *Richard III* or to Theobald's *The Persian Princess* or perhaps to a play by Edward Young: although it is tempting to conjecture that Fielding had seen prior to publication the celebrated passage in the 1744 text of James Thomson's *Summer*, where the poet refers to Musidora having received the intelligence that Damon has been spying on her bathing in terms that compare her to the Venus de Medici:

With wild surprise,
As if to marble struck, devoid of sense,
A stupid moment motionless she stood:
So stands the statue that enchants the world;
(1344-47)³

The reference to Croesus' son that follows is a story told by Herodotus. There is then an abrupt shift of register to the crowd-pleasing tricks of the contemporary stage, and the reader who has been able to pick up the previous allusions can be confidently addressed as one who can see the pallor created from powder and the blood from ribbons for the shams they are. More "ancients versus moderns" games are played in the climax that works *up* from Phidias and Praxiteles, the great masters of Greek sculpture, to the contemporary popular artist Hogarth. However much Fielding admired Hogarth, he knew that in the structuring of *this*

crescendo, he was likely to outrage some readers. The ironic effect of this passage is contained in its structure. It surely does depend on certain operations being performed by the reader, but not at all on the operations posited by Iser.

Having followed Iser's reading of this passage with mounting scepticism, one is not altogether confident about the general theory of reading it is supposed to illustrate. Fielding is offered to us as a writer who gives the reader considerable freedom to participate. It soon turns out that the participation being offered is rather like the kind of "audience participation" theatre I recollect being popular in the 1960s. This was participation entirely on the theatre company's terms. The glorious freedom to participate spontaneously in a theatrical happening turns out to be the freedom to be a pawn in a game already planned by the actors. Such freedom resembled coercion far more than did paying your money and sitting down quietly to watch a pre-rehearsed show! Thus, according to Iser, although Fielding does not at every point tell us what conclusions to draw from the narrative events he represents ("the gaps . . . are those very points at which the reader can enter into the text, forming his own connections and conceptions and so creating the configurative meaning of what he is reading" [40]), he "pre-structures" the text, disposes the cues, rigs the case, in such a way that he will "elicit the correct response" from the reader:

If this intention [that of making the reader conscious of his own conduct, customs and prejudices] is to be realized, the process of change cannot be left entirely to the subjective discretion of the reader—he must, rather, be gently guided by the indications in the text, though he must never have the feeling that the author wants to lead him by the nose. If he responds as the author wants him to, then he will play the part assigned to him, and in order to elicit the correct response, the author has certain stratagems at his disposal. (36-37)

Surely this account of the way Fielding (ab)uses reader freedom entirely justifies the critique of the edifice of reader-reception theory that Terry Eagleton has made in his *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, where he argues that in this model, the only freedom the reader has is to play the part of exactly the kind of liberal reader that the text itself always posits and requires.⁴ A genuinely radical reader of Fielding would be about as

welcome as the man I once saw at an audience-participation show in London who, when ordered to stop one of the actors from reaching the back of the auditorium, knocked the hapless thespian unconscious with a single punch.

At which point, enter Professor Černý. Lothar Černý argues, I think convincingly, that Fielding is every bit as coercive with respect to the true meaning of his text as is Richardson. If he does sometimes *appear* to leave gaps and vacant spaces in which the readers may step in, he very often ironises in advance the efforts that they are likely to produce. Černý is absolutely right, I think, to stress that Iser often underestimates Fielding's ironising of the reader whom he is simultaneously creating. There is much in the early part of Professor Černý's article that I want to cheer to the echo:

In Iser's description of the reading process the terms "gap," "vacant spaces," and "missing links" are not ironical as they are in Fielding's (or in Sterne's) dialogue with the reader and their literal meaning is taken to be stronger than their function as metaphors. For Iser they seem to signal a deficiency. The reader is supposed to fill in what the author left out—on purpose and by necessity (the text cannot spell out its own meaning). But an author like Fielding does not leave out anything essential. The metaphors of space, if not used ironically, are rather unsuitable in a theory of reading as they suggest the author left out parts, almost in the way of a puzzle. (140)

With all of the above, one might readily concur—though one might point out that Sterne actually *does* use gaps in the material way that Iser seems to construe the term, and that this becomes a recognisable technique in the discourses of sentiment. But what license is there for Černý's next move, through which he argues that Fielding's overriding purpose in *Tom Jones* is to "expose the rationalist school of thought" (143)? Černý argues that when Fielding attributes "sagacity" to his readers, he is usually being ironic; whereas Iser takes this predicated "sagacity" to be a mark of genuine respect—more evidence that the reader is expected to be actively involved in the constitution of meaning. To Černý, Fielding's harping upon "sagacity" is actually a parodic allusion to John Locke, in whose *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, sagacity is defined as a paradigm of deductive reasoning—a tool of rationalism.⁵ Extrapolating from that, Černý presents Locke throughout his article

as an apologist for rationalist dogma. I find it surprising that John Locke should be presented as a textbook rationalist. There *are* rationalist elements to Locke's epistemology, particularly strongly present in the fourth book of the *Essay*, but in most standard accounts of the history of philosophy, Locke is regarded as a transitional figure between rationalism and empiricism in virtue of his denial of innate ideas and his attempt to secure the foundations of knowledge on ideas derived from sense perception. Černý simply does not do enough to establish that Locke played the part of rationalist bogeyman for Fielding.

This area of contention is more a matter of nuance, however, than of real substance. I think Černý is broadly correct to argue that there is an anti-rationalist bias in Fielding's work. The stress he lays on Fielding's advocacy of feeling, of empathy, of good-nature, of active Christian charity, of the heart rather than the head, of emotional response rather than rational instruction, of action rather than profession, is difficult to gainsay. Much of this is more or less explicitly stated in the *Essay on the Knowledge of the Characters of Men* published in Fielding's 1743 *Miscellanies*. This does not strike me as an especially unfamiliar or contentious perspective on Fielding. What is contentious is the argument that Fielding arrives at this set of positions primarily through a critique of philosophical rationalism. He might equally have arrived at this set of positions primarily through the Latitudinarian attempt to forge a religion that was free of doctrinaire and theological adherence to particular creeds and forms: a genuinely broad church acceptable to very many practising Christians precisely because it emphasised Christian practice. But one might well ask why it is necessary to derive Fielding's anti-rationalism from *any* single source, and indeed why his anti-rationalism should be advanced as a key that unlocks the overriding intention of a work as complex and multi-faceted as *Tom Jones*? It seems to me that Černý's reading is not, finally, very different from Iser's. Whereas Iser thinks that Fielding has contrived it such that the reader will actively collaborate in the construction of the proper way to be human, Černý thinks that "the author always guides the reader in a process of communication which achieves a fusion of irony and satire with empathy and charity" (157). Černý's Fielding is more directive, to be sure, or at least more up-front about being directive, but otherwise,

where is the vast difference? For Iser, the "aim of the novel" is "to induce the reader to make balanced judgements" (55); for Černý, it is to promote the "unity of reason and feeling in wisdom" (157). Both are intentionalist accounts, both are liberal humanist accounts, both are thematisations: from the point of view of the radical reader, the difference is between a flea and a louse. Neither is a very powerful transformation of the knowledge already contained, on some level, within the text itself. Neither is, to use Fredric Jameson's term, a true "metacommentary."⁶

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NOTES

¹Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (1972; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974) 57.

²This view is elaborated in *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

³Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews*, ed. Martin C. Battestin (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1967) 40; James Thomson, *The Seasons, Poetical Works*, ed. J. Logie Robertson (1908; rpt. London: OUP, 1965) 103. Even in the 1730 version of the text, Musidora is directly compared to Venus de Medici (*Summer, The Seasons* [rpt. Menston: The Scholar P, 1970] 1018-20 [p. 111-12]):

*So stands the statue that enchants the world,
Her full proportions such, and bashful so
Bends ineffectual from the roving eye.

**The VENUS of MEDICIS.*

Whether or not Fielding had seen the more pointed passage in the 1744 text, he is likely to have Thomson in mind. They shared a publisher (Andrew Millar); and Thomson was famous for his statuesque passages in *The Seasons* as well as for the passage on the rise of classical sculpture in *Liberty* IV.134-214 (*Poetical Works* 361-63).

⁴For Eagleton's critique of Iser see *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983) 78-80.

⁵The word "sagacity" seems to me to be neutrally defined by Samuel Johnson in the *Dictionary* as "acuteness of discovery," with two contextual citations deriving from Locke's *Essay*. "Acuteness of discovery" might have the rational-deductive meaning given to it by Černý, but it might have a more humane usage—an acuteness of discovery with respect to human character and motive.

⁶The term is defined in Fredric Jameson, "Metacommentary" (1971), rpt. in Fredric Jameson, *Situations of Theory*, vol. 1 of his *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986* (Minneapolis: U of Minneapolis P, 1988) 3-16.