

If Everything Else Fails, Read the Instructions: Further Echoes of the Reception-Theory Debate*

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"O la! I ask your pardon, I fancy there is *hiatus in manuscriptis*."
Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones* (VIII.iii.374)¹

Though sixteen years have passed since the English publication of Wolfgang Iser's *The Act of Reading*,² and the author has moved on from reception theory to the anthropology of literature, the issues raised in that book continue to stimulate literary-theoretical and critical studies, whether by way of direct influence or by way of disagreement ranging from philosophical divergences that sparked the exchange between Iser and Stanley Fish³ to interpretive debates such as the one conducted on the pages of *Connotations*. Even in the latter debate, however, interpretive clashes seem to be a surface expression of varying ideological positions. In some cases it would therefore be impossible to request that the sides should consent to differ and yet sketch at least some common platform. The problem is aggravated by the lack of uniformity in the use of some of the key terms. Here I will not follow Locke's example of proposing that we all agree on what we mean by the words we employ but, instead, discuss a few given semantic asymmetries. I shall also use this occasion for making some interpretive and position statements of my own.

*Reference: Lothar Černý, "Reader Participation and Rationalism in Fielding's *Tom Jones*," *Connotations* 2.2 (1992): 137-62; Brean S. Hammond, "Mind the Gap: A Comment on Lothar Černý," *Connotations* 3.1 (1993): 72-78; Nicholas Hudson, "Fielding and the 'Sagacious Reader': A Response to Lothar Černý," *Connotations* 3.1 (1993): 79-84; Bernard Harrison, "Gaps and Stumbling-Blocks in Fielding: A Response to Černý, Hammond and Hudson," *Connotations* 3.2 (1993/94): 147-72; Lothar Černý, "But the Poet . . . Never Affirmeth': A Reply to Bernard Harrison," *Connotations* 3.3 (1993/94): 312-17.

I

Quite prominent among the causes for the lack of alignment between, in particular, the discourse of Lothar Černy and Wolfgang Iser as well as of Černy and Bernard Harrison is the difference in the meanings which the words “blanks,” “gaps,” and “vacancies” carry in Iser’s *The Act of Reading* and in other sources, such as Iser’s own earlier book *The Implied Reader*, studies in descriptive poetics, and, last but not least, the prefatory chapters of Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, a text repeatedly referred to in *The Act of Reading* and commented on by practically all the participants in the ongoing debate.

1. “Blanks”

In the meta-semantic network of *Tom Jones*, “blanks” is a synonym of “narrative compression”:⁴ the word refers to stretches of represented time in which nothing relevant to the story is supposed to have taken place and which are, therefore, more or less completely denied textual space. “These are indeed to be considered as blanks in the grand lottery of time,” comments Fielding’s narrator, suggesting, through a play on homonymy, that it would be a self-defeating game to dwell on the years that have drawn blanks rather than prizes (II.i.88). This is not the sense in which the word “blanks” functions in Iser’s context. I shall attempt to redescribe his notion of “blanks” with the help of both his own language and narratological vocabulary.

In a version of speech-act theory, Iser presents the fictional text not as a sequence of constative sentences but as a sequence of *instructions* given to the reader: “fictional language provides instructions for the building of a situation and for the production of an imaginary object.”⁵ Such instructions cannot be comprehensive. They delineate the contours of a referential field, but the field itself is a *blank* to be filled by the collaborative self-correcting projections of the reader. This is a view that parallels E. H. Gombrich’s scheme for activating the audience of visual arts: one needs the co-presence of blanks in which the viewer’s imagination can be exercised and of guidelines to direct and constrain

this exercise.⁶ The blanks in critical question are not at all limited to the compression of the represented time, that is, to Fielding's metaphoric blank tickets in the lottery of time. That is made abundantly clear in *The Act of Reading*; but the matter is somewhat vague in *The Implied Reader*, where the remark that "The vacant spaces in the text . . . are offered to the reader as pauses in which to reflect"⁷ immediately follows the quotation of the comment made by the narrator of *Tom Jones* on the function of narrative compression as giving the reader "an opportunity of employing that wonderful sagacity, of which he is master, by filling up these vacant spaces of time with his own conjectures" (III.i.121).

This somewhat unfortunate collocation of issues goes a long way towards justifying Lothar Černý's criticism of Iser for falling, as it were, "into the trap of Fielding's irony."⁸ One must agree with Černý that the narrator's reference to the reader's "sagacity" here is ironical, and that the reader is not really expected to work out in his or her mind, in detail, those experiences of the characters which the author chooses to summarize or elide, even though the narrator claims to have given the reader sufficient guidelines for doing so (for this endeavor "we have taken care to qualify him in the preceding pages" III.i.121). Černý's post-Wittgensteinian remark that "The reader should not talk of what the author is silent about"⁹ can be further supported by the fact that in his extended metaphor of the Guild-hall lottery Fielding applies the epithet "sagacious" to the reporters "who never trouble the public with the many blanks they dispose of" but make much ado about the prizes (II.i.88).

But if Iser does, indeed, fall into Fielding's trap, at least in *The Implied Reader*, this is no more than what is supposed to happen on the first reading of *Tom Jones*. Though a first-time reader of the novel can hardly be deemed to imagine the details of the events which the narrative elides, he/she is certainly made to feel competent to do so. Fielding's handling of scene and summary is precisely calculated to give us the impression that, having been shown how things work in the novel's world, we could easily imagine, if only we wished to do so, how its different characters would move when out of the limelight. Elsewhere, I have called this the impressions of our "synchronic competence" and compared it to Allworthy's presumptuous belief that he knows what Jenny Jones's evidence would be in the Partridge case had she been available as a

witness. The effect of this impression is a sense that the characters have a life, as it were, out of the limelight as well as on stage: thus the ground is laid for our eventual discovery that all kinds of things did happen off stage—though in ways that we could not possibly have imagined. In fact, the impression of synchronic competence is created only to be exploded and hence to give a salutary blow to the complacency of the “sagacious” reader.¹⁰

And yet the use of the word “sagacious” in the context of the lottery metaphor suggests that Fielding is not entirely ironic in his references to the “sagacious reader,” or else that his irony is double edged. The take-it-or-leave-it tone of the opening chapters of the novel signals that the feast laid out in its pages cannot accommodate every taste and that some of the customers, in particular the grave and the profane, may turn away from the book after the first chapter or two. This, in itself, is as effective a flattery of the remaining readers—the “sagacious,” and (as it were) discriminating and sophisticated ones—as that with which young Blifil disarms different segments of his audience when he presents his version of the incident with Sophia’s little bird in chapter 3 of Book IV. Here Square, Thwackum, and Allworthy himself are separate target audiences for separate segments of his monologue:¹¹ each listener is granted what he likes to hear, and the threshold of his attention to other matters is raised. I cannot resist the temptation to read this scene as a miniature model of an aspect of the novel’s rhetoric: indeed, it is not only on the first reading that we fall into the traps set for us by Fielding—even on a repeated reading, while the implied author seems to turn us into his co-conspirators, he may, by the same token, actually be diverting our attention from the whole extent of his subversiveness.

Consider, for instance, the remark that Fielding’s narrator makes when Mrs. Waters comes to visit Tom in prison: “Who this Mrs Waters was, the reader pretty well knows; what she was he must be perfectly satisfied” (XVII.ix.809). On the first reading, the first part of this sentence seems to do little more than identify Mrs Waters as Tom’s one-night-stand of Upton and the second part to hint at her easy morals (we may or may not notice that the former function is a somewhat unnecessary preamble to the explicit reminder of the Upton episode in the very next sentence). Obviously, on a repeated reading the sentence is construed

differently: “who” means “Jenny Jones” and “what” means “the fake mother”—by now we are, after all, in the secret. This flattering sense of being in on it, as well as the fact that the clause “what she was” can still be perceived as inviting an uncomplimentary label, are, in a sense, part of the female-rogue “cover story”¹² underneath which a “sagacious” reader (if I am here posing as one, it is still at my own peril) can discover that Fielding’s thoroughly sympathetic treatment of Jenny Jones is based on his bleak view of the predicament in which a gifted and intellectually avid young woman of the lower orders may find herself: Jenny’s sexual appetite may well be a displacement of her thwarted intellectual curiosity; and her fickleness is obviously motivated by a desire to compensate herself by a sense of power for the wounded vanity of her early days.¹³ It would, of course, take a historical study of non-fictional sources to establish whether Fielding held such proto-feminist views prior to writing the novel or whether—more likely—he “discovered” them through his attempt to reconcile the demands for mystification with those of the “conservation of character” (VIII.i.366).

2. “Vacancies”

Whatever the words “vacant spaces” may have meant for the author of *The Implied Reader*, for the author of *The Act of Reading*, “vacancies” are thematically void standpoints from which the reader concentrates on the theme of a new textual segment: “Whenever a segment becomes a theme, the previous one must lose its thematic relevance and be turned into a marginal, thematically vacant position, which can be and usually is occupied by the reader, so that he may focus on the new thematic segment.”¹⁴ In Iser’s phenomenological vocabulary, *blanks* are the “suspended connectability” of the text but not textual space *per se*, whereas *vacancies* are “nonthematic segments [of textual space—L.T.] within the referential field of the wandering viewpoint”; they “enable the reader to combine segments into a field by reciprocal modification.”¹⁵ I understand this use of the word “vacancies” in the following tripartite way: (1) “vacancies” have contained instructions for the reader’s picturing of the fictional world, but the reader’s performance in

accordance with these instructions is a matter of the past by the time a new segment presents itself to his or her attention, changing the previous picture as the new one intertwines with it; (2) the picture that every new segment of the text relegates to the past is not perceptually vacant—on the contrary, whereas the incoming instructions are more or less discrete, the ones already carried out blend into a continuous image;¹⁶ (3) what the memory of the past segment has been voided of is not the story but the theme—that is, if the new incoming instructions modify and transform the interpretation suggested by the earlier ones and not merely complement its field of reference or lend it further support. The transformation in question is the effect of what Iser calls “gaps.”

3. “Gaps”

In descriptive poetics one usually talks of informational gaps: the text suspends a piece of information without which the reader cannot complete a pattern of significances. In other words, this is not a matter of suspended connectability (“blanks”) between instructions given to the reader, but the felt absence of instructions as such,¹⁷ an absence that disrupts the contours of the referential field. Descriptive poetics distinguishes between temporary and permanent gaps, between gaps that are registered as enigmas and surprise gaps of which the reader becomes aware only when they are filled. In all those cases it makes sense to discuss the location of such gaps (in the *fabula* or in the *sjuzhet*; in the center or the periphery of either) and their specific rhetorical effects in each particular text.¹⁸ In his early work Iser likewise sometimes used the word “gaps” in this sense, but in *The Act of Reading*, the gaps he has in mind are located not in the text but between the text and the reader, or rather, as Bernard Harrison has put it, between the text “and the *noema* undergoing constitution in the reader’s mind.”¹⁹ The word “gaps” thus functions as a synonym of “the fundamental asymmetry between the text and the reader,”²⁰ of thwarted expectations, contradictory impressions, diverging directions of ideation, obscurities, longueurs, and so on.

The presence of such gaps is signaled by blanks of a special kind, those which occur when the connectability of the instructions for constituting the situation is problematic—that is, when the new instructions do not seem to be aligned with the previous ones. The “gap” (similar to the notion of “rupture” in the traditional *analyse de texte*) is in this case obviously a metaphor for a difference of position (mainly of an ethical position): to fill in such a gap means that the reader must modify or rethink his or her previous attitude, possibly also examine the assumptions underlying the abandoned expectations. Bernard Harrison proposes to replace this metaphor by that of hermeneutic stumbling blocks, obstacles that make us pause and adjust our course²¹—the blocks are given but it is we who skip or stumble. Both the model of gaps and that of stumbling blocks are metaphorical ways of thinking about textual stimuli for non-automatic modifications of the reader’s attitudes or trains of thought. Both gaps in the terrain (cf. Old Hell Shaft in Dickens’s *Hard Times*) and stumbling-blocks on the road (cf. the slapstick comedy in the picaresque-type chapters of Fielding’s novels) “obstruct the free passage of the reader’s habitual assumptions, bringing him up short in ways which confront him, if he is a sufficiently intelligent and candid reader, with a genuine and substantial challenge to his usual ways of thinking.”²²

As far as I remember, gaps, in any sense of the word, are not referred to in the prefatory chapters of *Tom Jones*, but one reference does appear, trailing an unwonted hermeneutic significance, in the scene of Tom’s first encounter with Partridge. While giving Tom a shave, Partridge discovers a bit of a hermeneutic gap—Tom’s fresh head-wound: “Will you please have your temples — O la! I ask your pardon, I fancy there is *hiatus in manuscriptis*. I heard you was going to the wars: but I find it was a mistake,’ ‘Why do you conclude so?’ says Jones. ‘Sure, sir,’ answered the barber, ‘you are too wise a man to carry a broken head thither; for that would be carrying coals to Newcastle’” (VIII.iii.374). This is a comedy version of the reception model: the person who encounters a gap, a rupture, a stumbling block is, as it were, invited to change his mind (in this case, pretend to change his mind) about things. Here, however, Fielding presents an account of an interpersonal, dyadic communication,²³ in which the discoverer of the gap, unlike

the reader of the text, also tries to influence its possessor (here, dissuade him from going to the wars). However that may be, the "*hiatus in manuscriptis*" is a trace of the unbridgeable gap between the ethical attitudes of Jones and Northerton, the author of the gash in Jones's head. It is, in fact, not surprising that the epistemological disagreement about the gaps should lead to ethical issues.

II

In his attempt to turn Iser's example from *Tom Jones* against Iser himself, and to show that not only the manner of filling gaps but the location of gaps in the first place may differ for different readers, Stanley Fish claims that one need not necessarily perceive a gap between (a) Fielding's presentation of Allworthy as a perfect person and (b) our eventual discovery that Allworthy is duped by Blifil: if there is a reader who believes that inability to suspect evil in others is part and parcel of being totally good, then for such a reader there is no gap between Allworthy's perfection and his gullibility. What Fish forgets is that Iser has forestalled him in discussing the ethical belief in question: "Allworthy trusts [Blifil], because perfection is simply incapable of conceiving a mere pretense of ideality."²⁴ However, Iser presents this not as the initial position of a certain type of reader, but as an intermediate stage in the process of ideation, a response to the opening of the gap (or the emergence of a stumbling block). The process must further reveal that since the results of Allworthy's acting "in character" are rather disastrous, some sort of discernment is apparently missing in Allworthy's perfection. This revision of the former belief in Allworthy's infallibility may then lead to several kinds of reconsideration of our initial attitude to his infallibility. For instance, we may wonder "why lack of discernment should be illustrated through a perfect man" and conclude that this choice signals Fielding's belief in the need for experience, along with disposition.²⁵ Obviously, Fish's believer in a Billy-Budd-type saintliness will easily skip over the initial stumbling block yet will hardly avoid stumbling over the block raised by the dire results of a totally virtuous man's legal²⁶ and private decisions. Whether such a reader will be ultimately convinced of the

need to appreciate the alterity of another instead of projecting his own virtues and perspectives on the environment, is, of course, another problem (the environment, in Fish's Berkeleyan/Rortean economy will not be a "given" in the first place; it will always remain a matter of construction in accordance with individual angles and frames of reference at the disposal of interpretive communities).

Iser's treatment of the basically ethical issue of the makings of the Great-Souled man is first and foremost epistemological. It is only in reference to the reader's seeking his own reflection in the fictional character that Iser notes that "a sense of discernment is useless without a moral foundation."²⁷ Though a non-denominational ethical attitude can be felt to pervade Iser's writing, moral philosophy is largely absent from his model approximation of the reading experience. Yet Iser's theory never claims to supply a comprehensive model of any novel's "repertoire." The essential openness of this theory is made obvious by the smoothness with which it can connect with other interdisciplinary perspectives—for instance, with Harrison's explanation of the way in which Fielding's treatment of Allworthy's gullibility undermines the Principle/Appetite dichotomy (which most of Fielding's contemporary readers would bring along to the text), the virtuous man's rejection of the life of the Appetites, in accordance with ideas based on this dichotomy, underlying his dangerous and basically unethical detachment from the life of his immediate community.²⁸

Harrison's discussion of the implications of the Allworthy-Blifil case is of considerable intrinsic interest and considerably self-sufficient. It is not surprising, therefore, that Lothar Černý disbelieves—rightly, I think—that all Harrison does is "modify" Iser's theory of reading. However, the fact remains that, as far as reader-response theory is concerned, Harrison and Iser are in agreement on a number of key issues, even though they have arrived at their positions by different routes. In particular, both show that a literary text provides a testing ground not only for the systems of thought that are explicit parts of its repertoire and not only for the attitudes developed in the process of reading but also for the thought systems, including prejudices and dogmas as well as respectable philosophical stands, that make up the reader's intellectual luggage on his or her first experience of the specific text. Iser frequently

notes that the text provides a testing ground for ideas and usually finds them wanting.²⁹ Harrison claims that great literary texts subject the reader to dangerous kinds of knowledge, so that the contract between the reader and the text may involve the reader's accepting the risk of emerging from the journey through the novel with a new, a different kind of moral/intellectual commitment.³⁰ In his analysis of the Allworthy-Blifil example, Harrison, indeed, does not merely argue for Iser's view as against the closed system of Fish—he does both less and more, and not only because a theory cannot stand or fall owing to the relative success of an example. A literary example can partially illustrate but not bear out a theory, since, as noted above, a literary text is a testing ground rather than a tribunal for ideas,³¹ a field which only partly overlaps with the theory which one superimposes on it. It is richer than the theory in some ways and poorer in others (less numerous); and it will necessarily indicate the insufficiencies of this theory while failing to do justice to its extensions. Notably, in *The Fictive and the Imaginary* Iser tends to dispense with examples altogether. (One may here consider the further fate of another example used by Iser in *The Implied Reader*, namely, Fielding's "camera-stopping"³² account of Lady Booby's surprise at Joseph's insistence on his virtue in *Joseph Andrews*. Brean Hammond's illuminating annotations of this episode are quite self-sufficient and do not need the theoretical framework in which they are, as it were, called upon to support his dismissal of both Iser and Černý as a pair of liberal humanists—in a language not altogether unreminiscent of the bolshevik labeling of liberal intelligentsia³³).

Lothar Černý rightly points to another item not included in Iser's model, namely the role of the text's engaging of the reader's emotional response. Though well aware of the relative weight of emotion in reader response, as well as, for instance, of Ingarden's interest in this subject, Iser does not, indeed, take up the study of emotive response any more than he does ethical theory. He has no obligation to do either. But here the point is even more complex than the reasonable limitations of the model. It is well known that modern literary theory and criticism are, in a great measure, diffident in matters of emotion. Emotion, indeed, is not only one of the most suspect constituents of reader response³⁴ but also one of the least historically stable ones: as the examples of

Richardson and even Dickens often suggest, what may have evoked intense sympathy and vicarious emotion in some of their contemporary readers is liable to provoke impatience and contempt in a present-day audience. The language of love, in particular, is subject to constant cultural change—Jane Austen does well to curtail the major scene at the end of *Emma*. It is a problem for the anthropology of literature whether the issue of “taste” and its changes can be an object of a fruitful historically oriented study or whether they should be treated as too unstable for study, as next worst, that is, to such irrelevant “noises” as the inevitable flagging of the individual reader’s attention, interruptions of the individual reading process, interference of movies and other media, and so on. In any case, for the purpose of achieving a degree of intersubjectivity in handling the problem of emotional response, literary criticism has still to evolve a new methodology. This challenge is, apparently, being faced in some contemporary literary schools, but the subject is beyond the scope of the present paper.

One of the numerous ways in which Iser’s more recent work, in particular *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, develops and modifies his earlier theoretical model is the awareness of the fact that different readers, or even the same reader at different moments of his or her life, may play a different game in their interactions with the text. From the standpoint of the anthropological approach to literature presented in *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, Iser concedes a prominent place to the types of games played in the text (following Roger Caillois: agon, alea, mimicry, ilinx)³⁵ and allows for the possibility that the ludic spirit in which the reader addresses the play of the text may not belong to the type that predominates in that text. This widens the theoretical basis for accounting for the differences between individual concretizations of the text and also imposes further theoretical limits on the predictive power of any reader-response theory.

For all that has been said about the inevitable asymmetry between literary example and theory, it is well known that works of fiction or poetry often anticipate psychological, sociological, ethical, literary, and other theories developed in much later periods. There is, perhaps, something profoundly genuine about texts which one trusts to have done so. This may be equivalent to saying that what Iser calls the Imaginary

—the non-verbal substratum that needs the fictive for its articulation³⁶—may have informed the language and imagery of such texts with potentialities to be approximated by second-degree fictionalization, that is, by critical selection, recombination, and a theoretical processing of literary material, in ways unavailable to culture-bound contemporary fictionalizing acts.³⁷

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NOTES

¹All the page references in the text of this article are to the Penguin 1985 edition of *The History of Tom Jones*, ed. R. P. C. Mutter.

²Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978).

³See Stanley Fish, "Why No One's Afraid of Wolfgang Iser," *Diacritics* 11 (1981): 2-13; and Wolfgang Iser, "Talk Like Whales: A Reply to Stanley Fish," *Diacritics* 11 (1981): 82-87. See also "Interview" in Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989) 42-69.

⁴Alternative terms: acceleration, condensation; see Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Methuen, 1983) 52-56.

⁵Iser, *The Act of Reading* 64.

⁶E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (London: Phaidon, 1962) 174.

⁷Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974) 51.

⁸Lothar Černy, "Reader Participation and Rationalism in Fielding's *Tom Jones*," *Connotations* 2.2 (1992): 138.

⁹Černy 139.

¹⁰See Leona Toker, *Eloquent Reticence: Withholding Information in Fictional Narratives* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1993) 108-11.

¹¹See Bernard Harrison, *Henry Fielding's Tom Jones: The Novelist as Moral Philosopher* (London: Sussex UP, 1975) 28-39.

¹²I use this term in the sense given it by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in "Jane Austen's Cover Story," *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979) 146-83.

¹³This is argued in detail in my paper forthcoming in *Rereading Texts/Rethinking Critical Presuppositions: Essays in Honor of H. M. Daleski*.

¹⁴Iser, *The Act of Reading* 198.

¹⁵Iser, *The Act of Reading* 198.

¹⁶Cf. the discussion of the digital and analogue effects in Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993) 275.

¹⁷Cf. also Meir Sternberg's discussion of the lacunae that should be separated into "relevancies ('gaps') and irrelevancies ('blanks')." *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985) 236 ff.

¹⁸See Rimmon-Kenan 127-29.

¹⁹Harrison, "Gaps and Stumbling-Blocks in Fielding: A Response to Černý, Hammond and Hudson," *Connotations* 3.2 (1993/94): 150.

²⁰Iser, *The Act of Reading* 167.

²¹Nothing is new under the sun, though much is never remembered. It turns out that the meaning in which Professor Harrison uses the word "stumbling-blocks" is very similar to the meaning of this term in an English translation of Origen: "But if the usefulness of the law and the sequence and ease of the narrative were at first sight clearly discernible throughout, we should be unaware that there was anything beyond the obvious meaning for us to understand the scriptures. Consequently the Word of God has arranged for certain stumbling-blocks, as it were, as hindrances and impossibilities to be inserted in the midst of the law and the history, in order that we may not be completely drawn away by the sheer attractiveness of language . . ." (*On First Principles* 4.2.9, trans. and ed. G. W. Butterworth [New York: Harper and Row, 1966] 285). To my question whether he recollected this passage while writing his *Connotations* article Professor Harrison replied in the negative. If "*les beaux esprits se rencontrent*" in this manner, the truth value of their insights is given strong support.

²²Harrison, "Gaps and Stumbling-Blocks" 168.

²³Cf. Iser, *The Act of Reading* 165-66.

²⁴Iser, *The Act of Reading* 120.

²⁵Iser, *The Act of Reading* 122.

²⁶Fielding makes sure that even an uninitiated reader should become aware of Allworthy's incompetence as a Justice of Peace; for a reader who commands some knowledge of the rules of evidence this stratum of significance is particularly vast. The extent of Fielding's malfunctioning as a Justice is one of the issues (102-05) discussed by Eric Rothstein in "Virtues of Authority in *Tom Jones*," *ECent* 28 (1987): 99-126.

²⁷Iser, *The Act of Reading* 123.

²⁸See Harrison, "Gaps and Stumbling-Blocks" 154-65.

²⁹See, for instance, Iser, *The Act of Reading* 72-79. One may note that while in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (Cambridge: CUP, 1985) Iser shows how Sterne closes a gap in John Locke's epistemology; in "Sterne and Sentimentalism" (*Commitment in Reflection: Essays in Literature and Moral Philosophy*, ed. L. Toker, New York: Garland, 1994), Harrison demonstrates Sterne's revision of ethical theories associated with Hume's system.

³⁰See Bernard Harrison, *Inconvenient Fictions: Literature and the Limits of Theory* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1991) 1-8.

³¹Taking recourse to Lothar Černý's favorite Sidney quotation, the poet, indeed, "nothing affirmeth"; see Černý, "'But the Poet . . . Never Affirmeth': A Reply to Bernard Harrison," *Connotations* 3.3 (1993/94): 312-17.

³²This term comes from Robert Alter, *Fielding and the Nature of the Novel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1968) 194.

³³See Brean S. Hammond, "Mind the Gap: A Comment on Lothar Černý," *Connotations* 3.1 (1993): 72-78.

³⁴Some of the reasons for this are presented in Nicholas Hudson's "Fielding and the 'Sagacious Reader': A Response to Lothar Černý," *Connotations* 3.1 (1993): 79-83. Hudson goes on to point to the paradox of Fielding's having "deployed persuasive arts comparable to those of his villains" in order to "craft" a deeply idealistic work addressed to a cynical world (83). In "Fielding's Hierarchy of Dialogue: 'Meta-Response' and the Reader of *Tom Jones*," *PQ* 68 (1989): 177-94, Hudson shows, among other things, how the non-manipulative rhetoric of the novel's virtuous characters fails on almost every occasion (181-83).

³⁵See Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary* 247-80.

³⁶See Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary* 2-4.

³⁷My thanks to H. M. Daleski and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan for very useful criticism of an earlier version of this article.