Re-Joining R. L. Stevenson's and James Reeves' Poetry for Children through Reader-Oriented Theories

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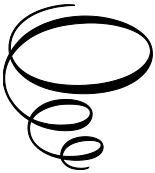

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This book first published 2022

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-8548-4
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-8548-5

To
The readers of my life,
My eager son,
My patient wife!
D. P.

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AS A PREFACE

Many years ago, during my postgraduate studies in the UK, I came across many chances, which have accompanied me on my academic journeys ever since. Firstly, I had the opportunity to get to know more deeply English Poetry for Children. Secondly, I was provided with the great potential to get in touch with Theory of Literature and to discover its dynamic aspects. It was then that a whole new world opened up before me, full of happy children's lyrics and charmingly difficult, almost frightening, theoretical concepts that captured my interest and catalysed my subsequent research pursuits. These quests, immediately after completing my studies and returning home, took shape and ensured the continuation of my studies and my academic career, still offering me methods, while enriching and continuously leading my cast of mind.

For a long time since then, rethinking the "British" times of my life, I have looked over my old readings and writings, with cute children's poems and mixed thoughts, with current concerns and theoretically misspelled notes, namely all the "discoveries" that until now I had treated as pending. It is not so much nostalgia for my past student days and the valuable experiences I had, but a kind of "academic wisdom," perhaps a form of research backwardness, that led me to put all these old papers into a new order with the renewed look of an adult, namely of a more experienced critical reader, who feels the need to revive and filter the children's poetic experience through Theory, rather than through the views that are oriented to the child-reader. But I have realised something else: The reason why then, that I chose to associate theoretical views with children's literary texts, and especially with their happy poetic voices, was a subconscious mechanism to soften the "scary" Theory with the cute, light notes of a childhood that functioned as a redemptive counterweight to the difficult theoretical references.[1] I also realised that the field of Literature for Children was finally proving to be a vital place for practising, applying and

[1] As one of the deeper motives for this choice was a "defensive" of theory and theoretically diverse book by Wolfgang Iser, in which he stresses the necessity of theory, while exposing a fair variety of versions. The book was the last one published shortly before his death. See: Wolfgang Iser, *How to Do Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).

confirming notional principles and academic concepts, because the historically established shift of theoretical interest from the author and the text to the reader, this unrecognised factor of reason-technical communication, can be captured more fully in literary texts for children than in texts for adults. Precisely, because children's literary texts guide us more painlessly, due to their style, to understand their functions and the ways of their reading access through the hypothetical or real reactions of their non-adult readers, these texts are acquitted as well as freed from adult consistency and can "talk" to us more spontaneously about their theoretical references, revealing their theoretical notches to us. In addition, as Deborah Thacker asserts, they guide us more effectively to portray non-adult readers, real or implied, as "social or theoretical constructs."[2] In this way, they lead us to highlight the contribution of fiction to their development and to their maturation as ongoing readers. Consequently, this book comes to intersect at some crucial questions that insist upon asking for clearer answers here: In fact, what kind of relationship could Children's Literature have with the Theory of Literature? How do they interact with each other and, finally, how does the latter help the former? Such questions are sometimes taken as logical or practical wordings, whilst they often serve as provocative formulations aiming primarily to trivialise the dynamics of literary texts for children and adolescents, and secondarily to degrade the reliability of the Theory and its ability to highlight the literariness of the texts addressed to non-adult readers. It is interesting to note here that my response to the above issues then and now remains the same: Children's Literature must be connected with Theory for Literature, since their relation is considered to be both reciprocal and useful, while each of the two substantiates the entity and activates the dynamics of the other. After all, the demand for a conscious, rather prosthetic, juxtaposition of theoretical principles and literary texts is as old as the indirect, at least invisible, use of theoretical versions in the instructive exploitation of literature in the classroom.[3] It was expressed by Aidan Chambers in the simplest but most resounding way about thirty years ago. As he states, in his prophetic and always timely words: "I have often wondered why literary theorists have not yet realized that the best demonstration of almost all they say when they talk about phenomenology or structuralism or deconstruction or any other

[2] Deborah Thacker, "Disdain or Ignorance? Literary Theory and the Absence of Children's Literature," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 24, no. 1 (2000): 1-2. https://doi.org/10.1353/uni.2000.0013.

[3] Michael Benton, "Readers, Texts, Contexts: Reader-Response Criticism," in *Understanding Children's Literature*, ed. Peter Hunt, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge-Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 86-102.

critical approach can be most clearly and easily demonstrated in children's literature. The converse of which is to wonder why those of us who attend to children's literature are, or have been, so slow in drawing the two together ourselves."[4]

The above request is urgently repeated today whenever the need to seek theoretical foundations for a more systematic approach to literary texts is explicitly redefined, while the need to move away from "convenient" but opportunistic and stillborn empirical choices is strongly presented as a necessity. From John Rowe Townsend's "critical and literary account"[5] along with Zohar Shavit's illuminating "poetics"[6] to Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer's "theoretical discussions on controversial issues,"[7] or Hans-Heino Ewers' updated "literary and sociological approaches,"[8] until today, engaging in the field of Literature for Children is not limited to clarifying terms and concepts, nor is it consumed by arguments for the autonomy or self-existence of Children's Literature; instead, it puts forward strong associations between the study, or teaching, of literary texts for children with the Theories of Literature. As Cristina Pividori and David Owen posit the issue: "We are now at a moment in which it would seem as absurd to question the importance of literary theory in teaching and studying literature as it would be to question the circularity of the earth in teaching and studying navigation."[9]

Given all the studies that have been conducted meanwhile, so many years after Chambers' remarks, one would have expected that we could have surpassed them as historically obsolete, while the older demand could have conceded space to even late reflections that may have caused its earlier satisfaction. However, it seems that we still insist on postponing the self-evident admission of the special dynamics and the poetics of Literature for

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[4] Aidan Chambers, *Booktalk: Occasional Writing on Literature and Children*, repr. ed. (Woodchester, UK: The Thimble Press, 2000), 133.

[5] John Rowe Townsend, *Written for Children: An Outline of English-Language Children's Literature*, 6th ed. (London: The Bodley Head, 1990).

[6] Zohar Shavit, *Poetics of Children's Literature* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1986).

[7] Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer, *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*, 3rd ed. (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 2003).

[8] Hans-Heino Ewers, *Fundamental Concepts of Children's Literature Research: Literary and Sociological Approaches* (New York: Routledge-Taylor and Francis Group, 2009).

[9] Cristina Pividori and David Owen, "Introduction," in *Theoretically Speaking about Literature: Understanding Theory in the Study of Literary Works*, eds. Cristina Pividori and David Owen (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021), xvi.

Children and Young Adults, since we are content to theoretically enrich the problematics of its relationship with theory. Despite the fact that both literary criticism and critical theory highlight the literary texts for children and adolescents in a privileged space of projecting the dynamics of the fictional word but also controlling the credibility of the theoretical one,[10] the reluctance for what is called "paradigm shifts," namely to change "the example," also regarding the ways in which these texts are viewed, that is, the disinclination to revise the strong grid formed by our conceptual, theoretical and methodological assumptions or prejudices, delays and essentially denies us entry to the "new" world.[11]

With these current thoughts I plunged my present searches into my "old papers and times," not into my computer files but in scattered pages, or pages arranged in folders. I am confronted again with kindergartens and forgotten though important "child-poets," with adult prejudices but also with theoretical obsessions, with all that I capture in the text that follows. I hope to convince my readers that this attempt will once again highlight the value of poetry for children but also the dynamics of the theory that tries to follow as discreetly as possible the hidden childhood inside us as adults.[12]

Patras, March 2022
Dimitris Politis

[10] Chambers, *Booktalk*, 133.
[11] Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
[12] Regarding the crucial parameters as well as the special role the Theory of Literature is expected to play in the field of Literature for Children, see the always interesting views put forward by Perry Nodelman in his book: *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008). The following references/studies are also of particular interest on the issue: Jill P. May, *Children's Literature and Critical Theory: Reading and Writing for Understanding* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Roderick McGillis, *The Nimble Reader: Literary Theory and Children's Literature* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996).

INTRODUCTION

THEORISING THE NECESSITIES OF LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN

Although it seems less embarrassing in the ever "expanding world of Children's Literature Studies,"[1] Theory of Literature does not appear to have completely suspended distrust of its intentions, or its possibilities. At the same time, it is not considered to be directly related to children and their texts, whilst it is essentially behind all the issues that define this relationship.[2] Besides, we are already at the point where Theory of Literature, and especially Reader-Oriented Theories, have established a place in the studies of Literature for Children,[3] formatting a stable basis for the direct correlation between theoretical concepts and literary texts that are

[1] Peter Hunt, "Introduction: The Expanding World of Children's Literature," in *Understanding Children's Literature*, ed. Peter Hunt, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge-Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 1-14.

[2] See absolutely indicatively: Alan Garner, *The Stone Book Quartet* (London: Collins, 1977); Maria Nikolajeva, *Introduction to the Theory of Children's Literature,* 2nd ed., rev. and enl. (Tallinn, EE: Tallinn Pedagogical University, 1997).

[3] During recent decades, more and more studies, books, chapters from edited books, and articles, tend to highlight the need to connect Theory of Literature to Literature for Children. Just to mention chronologically, some indicative works are: Perry Nodelman, "Children's Literature and Literary Theory," in *The First Steps: Best of the Early ChLA Quarterly*, ed. Patricia Dooley ([West Lafayette, IN?]-Purdue University: ChLA Publications, 1984), 73-92; Peter Hunt, ed., *Children's Literature: The Development of Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1990); Peter Hunt, *Criticism, Theory, and Children's Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991); Peter Hunt, ed., *Literature for Children: Contemporary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1992); May, *Children's Literature and Critical Theory*; McGillis, *The Nimble Reader*; Nikolajeva, *Introduction to the Theory*; Peter Hunt, ed., *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature,* vol. I (London: Routledge-Taylor & Francis Group, 2004) [particularly Part I: "Theory and Critical Approaches," 27-221]; Maria Nikolajeva, *Aesthetic Approaches to Children's Literature: An Introduction* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2005); etc.

mainly addressed to non-adult readers.[4] Furthermore, almost all theoretical approaches to literature have been applied in the Children's Literature field, regardless of whether some of them seem more appropriate, e.g., Response-Theories, Narratology or Feminist Theories, as they give more emphasis to the specificity of these texts and their addressees.[5] In addition to this introductory statement, a profound view of Peter Hunt on the functions of texts could even more effectively illuminate the "philosophy" of this book. According to Peter Hunt, "The 'realization'[6] of a text, especially a text for children, is closely involved with questions of control, and of the techniques through which power is exercised over, or shared with, the reader."[7]

Two main presumptions derive from Hunt's statement: the first may concern the necessity of examining the literary texts themselves along with, or before, evaluating children's "realization" of a literary work, namely their responses to a text; the second presumption refers to the participation of the reader in the reading process, thus indicating the significance of the reader's role in the literary experience. A third presumption, aroused by the words "control" and "power," might point to the role of the writer that could, however, be construed as a textual condition, since the reader deals with textual signs and is likely to decode the writer's intentions as such.

The reader's involvement in the literary experience, by implication, takes on immense importance therefore, if one takes into account the fact that this involvement along with literary genres, such as Poetry for Children, has been neglected for a considerable time. Regarding poetry for children as "a neglected art," Michael Benton points out: "Poetry has had bad luck. It has suffered a double misfortune: neglect where it most needs attention and concern where it is best left alone." Furthermore, Benton's contention that, "Understanding our praxis in dealing with poems is a useful

[4] According to Louise Joy, since the 1990s, "it has become customary to consider the peculiar relevance for children's literature of reader-response theories," especially with those associated with W. Iser, L. M. Rosenblatt, or N. Holland. See: Louise Joy, *Literature's Children: The Critical Child and the Art of Idealization* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 48-49.

[5] Every theoretical version that has been utilised and applied in the field of Literature for Children and Adolescents, each for its own reasons, strengthens its arguments with the help of texts addressed to non-adult readers, e.g., Narratology, Semiotics, Feminism, Reader Response, etc.

[6] Every term taken directly from an original scholarly source retains the spelling of this source, and not the one (more common spelling in the UK) followed in this book.

[7] Hunt, *Criticism*, *Theory*, 81.

point of entry,"[8] tallies with Hunt's statement, and both tend to treat literature as experience and the reading experience as a reciprocal relationship between the text and the reader. At the same time, both judgements indicate, though indirectly, the call for theoretical support of such reflections.[9]

As L. M. Rosenblatt states: "Literary judgements...are actually judgements on the potentialities of those texts to enable reader to evoke an aesthetic transaction."[10] In other words, by combining the aesthetic response of the reader with what is designated by the text, Rosenblatt implies that the main function of a text should be defined as substantiating the aesthetic experience. In respect of this it is not only the reader's response that must be taken into consideration, but also the text.

The aims of the study: In conjunction with what has been mentioned so far, the main purpose of the study presented throughout this specific book will be to examine the nature as well as the effects of the relationship between poetical texts and their potential child-readers. Moreover, since this examination will only sustain the poetical texts themselves, and not particular, noticed and analysed, empirical responses of individual readers, it should be regarded as a theoretical study of the reader's possible responses during their developing an understanding and an appreciation of the poems. And in Peter Hunt's words, such a study should be taken as a "possible process" in the experience of poetical texts for children, which therefore may assist to "move on to the much more important stage of deciding which of those processes are probable for any given reader."[11]

This book will mainly take into account those textual signs in the poems which are likely to designate, or to guide, to some extent the making of meaning by the potential readers. Additionally, we will examine fundamental questions and problems which arise regarding the status of the readers in relation to the poetical texts. The latter may account in a way for the method employed in this book to study the relationship between the poetical texts written for children by R. L. Stevenson and James Reeves, and their potential readers. Consequently, not only the child-reader will be considered, but also the poems as textual sequence will be considered, over the course of this book.

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[8] Michael Benton, "Poetry for Children: A Neglected Art," *Children's Literature in Education* 9, no. 3 (1978): 111.

[9] See also: Michael Benton, John Teasy, Ray Bell, and Keith Hurst, *Young Readers Responding to Poems* (London: Routledge, 1988); Hunt, *Criticism, Theory*.

[10] Louise M. Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), 153.

[11] Hunt, *Criticism, Theory*, 94.

The method of the study: Poetry for Children, as a form of art, has a basic material unit, namely the word, while expressing ideas, thoughts and feelings that lead up to its content.[12] However, while these elements constitute the "artistic pole," in Iser's terms, of the literary communication, there is also the "aesthetic pole" which is identified with the reader, specifically the child-reader, who realises or takes cognisance of the literary work by his/her own apprehension, sensitivity and receptivity. Accordingly, a theory applied to poetry for children should consider both these "poles" and, therefore, elevate the essential factor of the literary communication to a position of primordial importance, the reader's potential, or actual involvement in the literary experience.

If all theories which are considered to be reader-oriented,[13] mainly and best known as Reader-Response Theories/Criticism or Theories of Aesthetic

[12] From Street Rhymes and Nursery Rhymes to narrative poems and modern verses, Poetry for Children has always been the "natural space of childhood." For more on the particular defining elements of poetic discourse for children, see: Charles A. Temple, Miriam A. Martinez, and Junko Yokota, eds., *Children's Books in Children's Hands: An Introduction to Their Literature*, 3rd ed. (Boston, MA: Pearson, 2006), 259-306.

[13] And not "Reception Theory," whose very interest is in evaluating "the general reading public over the course of time." See: M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 10th ed. (Boston, MA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2011), 336. After Reception Theory was formulated and spread out by Hans Robert Jauss at the University of Konstanz (Germany), Reader-Response Criticism, or Reader-Oriented Theories, would establish a new perspective for the view of Literature. By focusing on the reading process as the praxis that associates a reader with a text during a reciprocal relationship where one becomes the environment for the other, the scholars framing this theory attempt to describe a process in which the text reflects the reader and the reader realises the text. Though reader-oriented criticism may be traced as far back as Aristotle and Plato, the origins of modern Response Theories should be first located in the United States with L. M. Rosenblatt's innovative and almost "heretical" views on the literary phenomenon in the 1930s (with her "avant-garde" book: *Literature as Exploration* in 1938) as a reaction to the dominance of New Criticism and its advocates. Taking their cue from Rosenblatt, obviously or not, especially from her further developed theoretical ideas in the late 1970s, many critics and scholars (e.g., Stanley Fish, David Bleich, Wolfgang Iser, Michael Riffaterre, Norman Holland, et al.) have significantly influenced the vast field of Reader-Response Theories, echoing Rosenblatt's early yell for a "personal sense of literature." Hence, the emergence of the reader would become the main axis of theoretical or teaching approaches of literary texts. For more specific information see: Jane P. Tompkins, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, repr. ed. (Baltimore, MA: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Richard Beach, *A Teacher's Introduction to Reader-Response Theories* (Illinois: National Council of

Response, are able to fulfil such aspects set by the peculiar nature of children's poetry, we will then attempt to apply particularly Wolfgang Iser's, Louise Michelle Rosenblatt's and Michael Riffaterre's versions of Reader-Response Theory to the poetry written for children. This application could also be reinforced by the assumption that, like all the Reader-Oriented Theories, these versions–and especially those of Iser and Rosenblatt but also that of Riffaterre to some extent–tend to liberate, more than every other theory, the reader through the reading process simultaneously respecting the reader's attitude-role. As Steven Lynn asseverates, albeit focused on Reader-Response Criticism, this criticism "authorizes and encourages readers–of whatever sort of text–to begin where, really, readers always must begin: with an individual response."[14]

Therefore, the theoretical framework followed in this study is based on Reader-Oriented Theories and, specifically, on the central notions of W. Iser's, L. M. Rosenblatt's and M. Riffaterre's versions.[15] As for the application of these essential notions to the material, the first chapter of this study deals with the presentation of the three theories used, which albeit appearing to be distinct due to their different theoretical origins, may in fact be regarded as interrelated, since they expose the reading situation mainly on behalf of the reading subjects. The second chapter examines the conceptualisation of the reader as it is detected throughout R. L. Stevenson's and James Reeves' poetry for children, and the expectations lent to their role in relation to such a conceptualisation. The third chapter describes the reading process itself and, in particular, the participation of the child-reader in the literary experience. The fourth chapter is concerned with the connections between the textual signs, in Stevenson's and Reeves' poetry,

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Teachers of English, 1993); Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth, and Imre Szeman, eds., *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Michael Benton, "Reader-Response Criticism," in *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature,* ed. Peter Hunt, vol. I (London: Routledge, 2004), 112-28; Deborah Cogan Thacker, "Criticism and the Critical Mainstream," in *International Companion Encyclopedia,* ed. Hunt, 44-55; Abrams and Harpham, *A Glossary*, 330-33; Steven Lynn, *Texts and Contexts: Writing about Literature with Critical Theory*, 6th ed. (Boston, MA: Longman, 2011), 65-101.

[14] Lynn, *Texts and Contexts*, 70.

[15] We hope it's clear that for apparent reasons the discussions of the versions applied in the course of this book could not be too extended, or even exhaustive by any means, due to the extent of the theoretical aspects as well as to the depth of the notions that make them up. Needless to note here that a deeply detailed presentation of even a single theoretical version could in itself support a separate, stand-alone study.

and their intertextual associations which serve as demands made on the potential reader.

The theoretical questions that arise in this book are answered with respect to the perspectives of the theories applied. Furthermore, it is also in relation to these theoretical perspectives that the contribution which Stevenson's and Reeves' poetics make to the development of children's poetry, in general, is evaluated.

The primary material: Regarding the material employed through this theoretical application, it includes poetry for children written by Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894) and James Reeves (1909-1978). Although these two poets are placed in the 19th and 20th century respectively, an essential premise made in this book is that we are not going to compare these poets, nor the centuries in which they live and write. However, specific features of them will be examined, which seem to weigh with Robert Louis Stevenson's and James Reeves' poetics. The selection of these two poets should not be considered as contingent since it has been made for specific reasons. According to Leonard Clark, both these poets, "have succeeded in writing poems of quality for children alone, poems that can hold their own against all other kinds of poems," while they "were poets before they began to be poets for children."[16] Particularly, James Reeves declares: "I did not feel qualified to write poems for children until I had been writing adult poems for over twenty years. I then felt technically competent, as well as sufficiently assured to know what I was doing."[17] In fact, both these poets consciously address and embrace their child-readers, placing children's world at the centre of the poetic experience they offer to them. At the same time, they obviously promote the value of childhood, while dictating the respect for children's selfhood, their personality and needs. Consequently, they offer to their readers many ways to activate their thought, to judge, to learn through playing, to perceive and enjoy their everyday moments and experiences and, finally, to save their individuality. This explains the fact that the overwhelming majority of Stevenson's and Reeves' poems are based on what would be called "childish experience" or empirical reality rendered in a childlike style.

[16] Leonard Clark, "Poetry and Children," *Children's Literature in Education* 9, no. 3 (1978): 127-35.
[17] James Reeves, *How to Write Poems for Children* (London: Heinemann, 1971), 5.

Robert Louis Stevenson

R. L. Stevenson (1850-1894), a Scottish novelist, travel writer, essayist, and poet was born and educated in Edinburgh.[18] Best known for *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes* (1879), *Treasure Island* (1883), *Kidnapped* (1886), *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), *The Black Arrow: A Tale of the Two Roses* (1888), *Underwoods* (1887), *Ballads* (1890), *Songs of Travel and Other Verses* (1896), *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889), etc., Stevenson is also noted for his poem collection entitled *A Child's Garden of Verses*.[19] First published in 1885,[20] Stevenson's verses for children are of special importance, since they are placed in a period when: "Ninety per cent of all verses written for children... was poetry-substitute, manufactured in good faith, but in a deliberate, purposeful way."[21] As it is stated, Stevenson's poems for children "represent with extraordinary fidelity an adult's recapturing of the emotions and sensations of childhood; there is nothing else quite like them in English literature."[22]

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[18] More about R. L. Stevenson's life and writings may be seen in Humphrey Carpenter and Mari Prichard, *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 496-97; see also: Townsend, *Written for Children*, 44-47.

[19] See: Paul Maixner, ed., *Robert Louis Stevenson: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1996), 146; Carpenter and Prichard, *The Oxford Companion*, 114-15. Being inspired by Kate Greenaway's verses in *Birthday Book for Children* edited out in 1880, Stevenson began writing his verses for children in the summer of 1881 and by March 1883 they numbered forty-eight. He would entitle them "Nursery Verses," but eventually he called these poems "Penny Whistles," and under this title they were published, privately, in 1883. Intermittently, till 1885, he wrote more verses. In the spring of 1885 the book, comprising sixty-four verses, came to have its final form as *A Child's Garden of Verses*, and has been regarded as one of the most influential children's books of the 19th century. Stevenson's main intention, through these verses, is to describe, to expose and to transform children's memories, his memories, into poetic substance.

[20] Stevenson's verses were first edited out in 1885 by Longmans, Green in London. Since then, the book has been published in much more than one hundred formats and editions, often in illustrated versions. In this study we use the edition: Robert Louis Stevenson, *A Child's Garden of Verses*, illustr. Eve Garnett, repr. ed. (London: Puffin Books, 1952).

[21] Harvey Darton, *Children's Books in England*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 314.

[22] David Daiches, "Robert Louis Stevenson," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Accessed February 3, 2022. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Robert-Louis-Stevenson.

Preserving "a large element of the child in his own personality,"[23] Stevenson with his poetry extended to "embrace" children and, therefore, to renew children's nerveless sense of happiness and gaiety. So much was he praised for these verses, that he was placed, according to William Archer, one of his contemporary critics, "In the front rank of our new school of stylists, [where] Mr. Stevenson holds an undisputed place. He is a modern of the moderns both in his alert self-consciousness and in the particular artistic ideal he proposes to himself. He is popular...with the better popularity which makes his books familiar to the shelves of all who love literature for its own sake."[24]

Through a kind of narrative "naiveté" and the lyricism of *A Child's Garden of Verses*, Stevenson tries to lead his readers to the enjoyment of day-to-day life by freeing them from the socially defined etiquette of his both austere and contradictory time. Actually, as Anne Thaxter Eaton has very concisely stated it, the power of Stevenson's verses lies in the fact that they offer, "not a glimpse, but the whole contour of the child's hidden world", in order to recapture this world for the sake of the children.[25] The rapid economic development of Victorian England of the late 19th century and the subsequent higher standard of living coexist with the citizens' anxiety about the future leading them to the restoration of old, tried and, by definition, conservative principles. Literature, as it usually happens in such cases, is once again used as a means for transporting and "painlessly" implementing these principles. Stevenson opposes this tendency as much as he can and dissociates himself from other poets. While he expresses his interest in children, in whom his hopes for the future rest, he also submits his own poetic proposal, a "poetics of childhood,"[26] that is enthusiastically accepted.[27]

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[23] Carpenter and Prichard, *The Oxford Companion*, 497.

[24] For Archer's full assessment of Stevenson's poetry for children (first published in *Time*, London, November 1885), see: William Archer, "Robert Louis Stevenson: His Style and His Thought," in *Robert Louis Stevenson: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Paul Maixner, 160-69 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981).

[25] Anne Thaxter Eaton, "Poetry for Children in the Nineteenth Century," in *A Critical History of Children's Literature: A Survey of Children's Books in English from Earliest Times to the Present*, ed. Cornelia Meigs (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1969), 270.

[26] See more in: Dimitrios Politis, "The Poetics of Childhood, or the Construction of Lost Innocence: R. L. Stevenson's Verses for Children," *International Journal of the Book* 2, no. 4 (2006).
https://cgscholar.com/bookstore/works/the-poetics-of-childhood-or-the-construction-of-lost-innocence?category_id=cgrn.

[27] See all the criticism included in: Maixner, *Robert Louis Stevenson*.

Indeed, Stevenson's poems, full of childlike ingenuousness and emotions, reach out to help the reader to enjoy the moments of day-to-day happiness, and thus to reform, let us say, a kind of illusion that is often preferable to the rational confrontation of life. In addition, while one believes that these poems direct one to the pragmatic experiences, at the same time, they exalt with their vivid "flights" on the skies of imagination.

James Reeves

James Reeves, a pseudonym of John Morris Reeves (1909-1978), a well-known British poet, was also illustrious as a literary critic, broadcaster, and noted anthologist. He published or edited about thirty books of poetry, short stories, and anthologies both for adults and children. Just to name some of his works: *Pigeons and Princesses* (1956), *Mulbridge Manor* (1958), *The Everlasting Circle: English Traditional Verse* (1960), *Senior Rumbelow and Britannia* (1962), *The Cold Flame* (1967), *A Vein of Mockery: Twentieth-century Verse* (1973), *The Reputation and Writings of Alexander Pope* (1976), *Arcadian Ballads* (1978), etc. Apart from Reeves' several works of tales, fiction, or criticism, his reputation stems mainly from the poetry he wrote for children[28] which includes: *The Wandering Moon* (1950), *The Blackbird in the Lilac* (1952), *Prefabulous Animiles* (1957), *The Ragged Robin* (1961), *The Story of Jackie Thimble* (1965), and *More Prefabulous Animiles* (1975). Except for the last one published separately by Heinemann, all the others, apart from their first edition, were included in a collective volume first published by Heinemann, in 1973, under the title: *The Wandering Moon, and Other Poems.*[29] All of Reeves' poems written for children are included in a final collective edition, entitled: *Complete Poems for Children.*[30]

Being placed alongside Walter de la Mare, by virtue of his "serious children's verse,"[31] Reeves "is a master of humour and nonsense, and of inventive lyric fantasy," whilst his poems emanate "lightness and energy of

[28] Carpenter and Prichard, *The Oxford Companion,* 445-46.
[29] The same volume under the same title reprinted in Puffin Books, in 1987.
[30] The volume was first edited out by Heinemann, London, in 1973. Since then up to today, the book has been published in many formats and editions. In the course of this book, we use the edition: James Reeves, *Complete Poems for Children,* illustr. Edward Ardizzone, repr. ed. (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), which incorporates eight more poems as "Additional Poems" that were not included in the original compiled volume of 1973.
[31] Carpenter and Prichard, *The Oxford Companion*, 445.

rhythm and diction."[32] His poetry style, usually expressed with some technical skills, such as the intertextual demands he makes of his readers and which are rather uncondescending to children, constitutes a peculiar and interactive reading relationship.[33] Justifiably, in virtue of his unique poetics, he has thus been regarded as one of the best poets for children in the twentieth century.[34]

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Generally speaking, though many differences may be detected between Stevenson's and Reeves' poetry for children, it is worth noting here that their poetics, namely the aesthetic experience they promote as well as the special confrontation of childhood and the child-readers these two poets adopt, seem to be particularly familiar with the perspectives of Reader-Oriented Theories, as will be exposed further in the following chapters.

[32] Peter Hollindale and Zena Sutherland, "Internationalism, Fantasy, and Realism (1945-1970)," in *Children's Literature: An Illustrated History*, ed. Peter Hunt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 284.

[33] This exact relationship may be examined efficiently in the light of the dynamic model of intertextuality as it has been refined especially by Reader-Response and Writing Theories. See more: Dimitrios Politis, "Intertextuality in James Reeves' Verses for Children," *International Journal of English and Literature* 3, no. 3 (March 2012): 55-59.
https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/36422714/intertextuality-in-james-reeves-verses-for-children-academic-.

[34] Brian Boyle, *The Who's Who of Children's Literature* (London: The Camelot Press, 1968), 231-32; Townsend, *Written for Children*, 311-12.

CHAPTER 1

THEORETICAL REVIEW: READER-ORIENTED THEORIES

(The chapter at a glance: The theoretical framework followed in this book is based on Reader-Oriented Theories and, specifically, on the central notions of W. Iser's, L. M. Rosenblatt's and M. Riffaterre's versions. Therefore, the chapter deals with the presentation of the three theories used, which albeit appearing to be distinct, may in fact be regarded as interrelated. All the theoretical questions that may arise in subsequent chapters are answered with respect to the perspectives of the theories presented in this chapter).

Giving an account of critical theory in his profound work *The Mirror and the Lamp* in 1953, M. H. Abrams declares that it is possible to form a scheme of all literary theories, from Aristotle to the present time, in relation to the four co-ordinates of all literary communication: the "universe" (reality), the "artist" (author), the "audience" (readers), and the "work" (text). He also arranges these co-ordinates into a "convenient pattern:" a triangle whose angles are the "universe," the "artist" and the "audience," while the "work" itself is located in the centre:[1]

[1] M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), 6.

According to this model, Abrams argues, classical criticism–from the ancient times to the Renaissance–had stressed the mimetic relationship between the "work" and the "universe," whereas neoclassic criticism was more "pragmatic" in examining the effects caused by the "work" on the "audience."[2] On the other hand, romantic criticism was "expressive," regarding the literary "work" and especially poetry, as "the overflow, utterance, or projection of the thought and feelings" of the "artist." Finally, modern criticism is considered to be more "objective" by focusing on the literary work itself as an objectively independent entity and focuses strictly on the internal relationship of its segments.[3] As a consequence of that "objectivity," which tried to establish a "scientific" basis for the study of the literature, the reader was expelled from the process of the production of literature.

It is apparent from what has been mentioned so far that every critical theory tends to designate only one of the elements of literary communication as the source from which meaning derives, no matter how strongly each of them seems to neglect, or pretends to ignore, the other co-ordinates of the literary procedure, specifically this notion of "reader." Although many critics had concerned themselves with the effects of literature upon the reader even in ancient times,[4] the significance of the reader's role was substantially demoted and neglected by literary theory until the first half of the twentieth century.

However, during recent decades, and especially after the 1960s due to the strengthening of post-Structuralist ideas, the theories of objective independence of literary works declined, and critical theory directed its interest to the readers. The new emphasis on the role of the reader had drawn him/her out of his/her passivity in order to give an account of the reader as the one who gives the meaning to a literary work.

Taking her cue from Ronald Barthes' contention about "The Death of the Author,"[5] Catherine Belsey asserts that the authority of the author is being challenged, for he/she is not considered any more as the "absolute subject of literature," while the text is liberated from his domination,

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[2] Ibid., 8-21.

[3] Ibid., 21-29.

[4] Aristotle, for instance, in his *Poetics,* which reflect the contemporary discussions about literature, refers not only to the issue of the effects evoked upon the perceiver, the reader, by the literary works, but also to the reader's participation in the literary production. See more in: S. H. Butcher, ed., *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, trans. S. H. Butcher, 4th ed. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1920), 23-24.

[5] Barthes' essay entitled "The Death of the Author," written and first published in 1968, is included in: Ronald Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 142-48.

"available for production, plural, contradictory, capable of change," and, finally, subjected to various interpretations and readings.[6] Thus, we refer not only to the reinstatement of the concept of "reader" but also to "displacement" of the interest in the author's domination.

Among the reasons which have contributed to that displacement one may consider the reaction to the "affective fallacy,"[7] namely to the New Criticism's contention that a literary work is objectively independent, and the claim that its texture must be analysed without references to the responses of its readers; other reasons include the appearance of the "Transformational Generative Grammar" of Noam Chomsky, which not only gave emphasis to the notion of "linguistic competence" but also challenged the static system of language that Ferdinand de Saussure had suggested.[8] Moreover, the increasing emphasis on the volatility of knowledge reinforced by Einstein's theory of relativity, and the several departures from the objective dogmatic certitudes of the nineteenth century in twentieth century thought should also be taken into account.[9] Of course, such a displacement did not occur suddenly but gradually, and this may account for the lack of homogeneity that exists in the varieties of reader-response theory.

Susan Suleiman has distinguished six variant versions of audience-oriented criticism: "rhetorical," "semiotic and structuralist," "phenomenological," "subjective and psychoanalytic," "sociological and historical," and "hermeneutic."[10] She also claims that these versions "are not monolithic (there is more than one kind of rhetorical or hermeneutic criticism), nor do they necessarily exclude each other." Besides, "a combination of approaches is not a negative eclecticism but a positive necessity."[11] Quite so, heterogeneous as they seem, all tend to converge on putting the reader's significance first.

We will examine in more detail three theorists who may be seen as interrelated: Wolfgang Iser, Louise M. Rosenblatt, and Michael Riffaterre.

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[6] Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*, repr. ed. (London: Routledge, 1994), 134-35.
[7] William K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), 21-39.
[8] Noam Chomsky, *Topics in the Theory of Generative Grammar* (The Hague, NL: Mouton, 1966).
[9] Raman Selden, Peter Widdowson, and Peter Brooker, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, 5th ed. (London: Pearson/Longman, 2005), 45.
[10] Susan Suleiman, "Introduction: Varieties of Audience-Oriented Criticism," in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, eds. Susan Rubin Suleiman and Inge Crosman, repr. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 6-7.
[11] Ibid., 7.

Suffice to say that, apart from this examination, we will refer over the course of this book to their views on specific issues and their notions regarding any questions that arise.

1.1. Wolfgang Iser's Theory of Aesthetic Response

Wolfgang Iser belongs to the German School of "Aesthetic Response" ("Wirkungstheorie") and is regarded as the main exponent of the phenomenological version of this theory. Iser follows the theory of Roman Ingarden who was in turn influenced by Edmund Husserl. Ingarden was the first theorist to set forth the view of "spots of indeterminacy" in the texts, whose "schematized aspects"[12] (skeleton) evoke the reader's activeness and participation. He tried to describe the aesthetic object, the literary work, from a philosophical point of view.[13]

Iser, taking his cue from Ingarden's work, points out in the preface to his essential theoretical work, *The Act of Reading* (1978), that his intention is to examine the reading process and, consequently, the aesthetic response, but not the aesthetic of reception. As he suggests, "A theory of response has its roots in the text; a theory of reception arises from a history of readers' judgements."[14] Although Iser does not identify the aesthetic object, namely the literary work itself, with the "artistic pole" that is to say the text created by the author, or with the "aesthetic pole," meaning "the realization accomplished by the reader,"[15] his tendency to combine the text as an objective entity with the subjective disposition of the reader is apparent. Moreover, he declares that such a realisation requires an active making of meaning by the reader, while he stresses that "the literary work is an effect to be experienced," not "an object to be defined."[16] As a result, Iser suggests that the literary object is an "interaction" between text and reader,[17] which enables access to the meaning of the text as a "dynamic happening," not as a "definable entity,"[18] and through which the aesthetic value of literary

[12] Every Iser phrase, sentence, or term used and taken directly from his texts adopts the spelling of the original source, and not the British one that we follow within this book. In the same way we handle the original quotes we use, which come from original scholarly sources and are not our own paraphrases or transcripts.
[13] Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Terence Hawkes (London: Methuen, 1984), 22-29.
[14] Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), x.
[15] Ibid., 21.
[16] Ibid., 10.
[17] Ibid., 20.
[18] Ibid., 22.

work emerges alongside the creative side of reading.[19] Thus, his aim is to describe this "interaction" by defining his approach to notions such as the "implied reader," the "literary repertoire," and the "literary strategies."[20]

The "implied reader", who is analogous to Wayne Booth's "implied author,"[21] is defined by Iser as a "role offered by the text," that "is rather the conditioning force behind a particular kind of tension produced by the real reader when he accepts the role"; a "model which makes it possible for the structured effects of literary texts to be described," and a "standpoint" from which the reader "can assemble the meaning toward which the perspectives of the text have guided him."[22] These statements imply that a reader may be active as he/she produces the meaning and passive as his/her involvement is fixed by the textual structures.[23] Taking together all the aspects of the notion thus fully indicates the association which an author creates with his/her readers.

During the praxis of reading, the reader has to modify his/her expectations and to transform his/her memories through a "wandering viewpoint," in order to inform the reading process.[24] This means that the reading procedure is continuous and should be regarded as a sequence of gradual stages. The reader is travelling continually between his/her temporary expectations and their refutation; he/she tries to achieve "consistency-building," meaning that he/she has to develop an account of the text by organising the information offered by the text and by transforming the textual signs into "mental images." In other words, the reader perceives what is present in the text, while he/she has to "ideate" what is absent, or implied, according to the "schematized aspects" the text indicates.[25]

In the latter case, the text that sets up the reading process punctuates it by interpolating "blanks," or "points of suspended connectability", namely empty spaces between the segments of the text, such as the characters or

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[19] Ibid., 108-109.

[20] Since Iser's Theory was formulated and applied mainly in prose texts, we avoid here extensive references to concepts and terms such as "blanks," "negations," or "negativity," found in narrative texts, especially the extensive ones, e.g., fictions and novels.

[21] Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 71-76.

[22] Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 36-38.

[23] Ian Maclean, "Reading and Interpretation," in *Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction*, eds. Ann Jefferson and David Robey, 2nd ed. (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1986), 131.

[24] Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 108-18.

[25] Holub, *Reception Theory*, 90-91.

the plot.[26] In that case, "the story line will suddenly break off and continue from another perspective or in an unexpected direction."[27] The reader is required then to fill in the "blanks" assisted, however, by the knowledge that he/she has accumulated during the preceding stages of his/her reading. Furthermore, by virtue of this stock of knowledge, the reader will be able to create multiple combinations and new associations based on the textual elements. Eventually, these "blanks," Iser claims, play an essential part in the success of the communication between text and reader, so long as they instruct the reader to bring to completion the meaning of the text.[28]

By using the term "implied reader" Iser seems to accept the limitations of the text. He believes that a reader represents the "predispositions" of the text, which, as it will be indicated further, Rosenblatt as well as Riffaterre point out, while at the same time also suggesting that the real reader plays an active role.[29]

For Iser, the "literary repertoire" is constituted by the social assumptions and literary allusions, namely elements of reality[30] such as social and cultural norms incorporated in the text,[31] and elements of the literary tradition, that the reader brings to his reading process.[32] Although these elements are contained, to some extent, in the text, in fact they promote the interplay between the text and the reader by providing the latter with the "guidelines that are essential in view of the overall function of the text."[33] In other words, they provide the reader with "an organization of signifiers which do not serve to designate a signified object, but instead designate instructions for the production of the signified."[34] However, all the conventions incorporated in the literary text "tend to be organized in such a way that their validity is, at best, called into question."[35] On the one hand,

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[26] Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 198.
[27] Holub, *Reception Theory*, 93.
[28] Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 167-68.
[29] Ibid., 36.
[30] Iser uses the term "reality" as referring not to the "contingent reality as such, but to models or concepts of reality, in which contingencies and complexities are reduced to a meaningful structure." Ibid., 70. In fact, "reality can only be retained as reality if it is represented in terms of meaning." Ibid., 125.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid., 81.
[33] Ibid., 80.
[34] Ibid., 65.
[35] Ibid., 66. The reproduction of social and extra-textual elements of reality within the imaginary text brings to light motives, behaviour and experiences that were not part of the reality from which they came. Iser proposes the replacement of the established "fiction–reality" dipole with the trinity of "real–imaginary–fantastic".

the task of the reader is to reorganise these conventions, in order to develop his/her account of the text; and on the other hand, the text itself, having already coherently reshaped these norms and conventions which it contains, causes indeterminacies between text and reader, and between text and reality.[36]

In terms of the first indeterminacy, the text tends to defamiliarise the reader's assumptions by presenting "existing norms in a state of suspended validity."[37] As regards the second indeterminacy, the reality incorporated in the text forces the readers to move into an "intertextual," rather to an "extra-textual," mode since they have no concrete situation to refer to.[38] In other words, "the literary recodification of norms... enables the... readers to see what they cannot normally see... to grasp a reality that was never their own."[39] In any case, what is apparent from the functions of the literary repertoire is that again there is a dynamic interaction between the elements that constitute the literary repertoire and the reader's participation. If we regard the "repertoire" as the "content" of a literary work, then we should consider the "literary strategies" to be the "form" of a literary work. Iser lends them a significant double function: "to organize both the material of the text and the conditions under which that material is to be communicated." In other words, the "literary strategies" border not only the inherent structure of the text but also "the acts of comprehension thereby triggered off in the reader". In fact the "strategies" should not be regarded as simple techniques or devices located in the text–such as "narrative techniques" in a narrative composition, or a "dialectical pattern" in a poetic one–, and which therefore offer the reader the possibilities to organise his/her own comprehension of the text.[40] On the contrary, by challenging "the validity of familiar norms" embodied in the text, and by fulfilling the rules that must be common in the communication between the two poles of the literary experience, in order for that communication to be "successful,"[41] the "strategies" tend to establish an equivalence between the "literary

See more: Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 1-2. The fictive–as a functional way of consciousness that violates existing aspects of the world, disrupts and replaces the elements of the reality, keeping their faces in the background–is done with intent, while the imaginary happens spontaneously. Ibid., xiii-xv.

[36] Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 66.
[37] Ibid., 70.
[38] Ibid., 66.
[39] Ibid., 74.
[40] Ibid., 86.
[41] Ibid., 87.

repertoire" and the reader. Iser cites as examples of these "strategies" the "foreground-background" relationship and the "theme-horizon" structure.

For the "background-foreground" relation, Iser borrows from Roland Posner the concept of "primary" and "secondary" codes. Comparing the "primary code" (background) with the "schematized aspects" of the text, and the "secondary code" with the aesthetic object, he describes a procedure through which the reader is directed by the primary code to decipher the secondary one, as "the chosen element evokes its original setting."[42] However, while the reader with the strategy of "foreground-background" is allowed to have access to the world of the text by selecting the "norms and allusions that enable the background to be built up," he/she also has to organise the elements that he/she selected by the task of combination in order to come to a comprehension of the text. This process of combination occurs, according to Iser, using the principle of "theme and horizon."[43]

Because of the continuous and interactive relation between text and reader, the latter is unable to assimilate all the multiple textual perspectives at once, but instead achieves this gradually and sectionally: "any particular moment is what constitutes for him the theme," while many "themes" constitute the "horizon" of his/her comprehensive procedure. In addition, "the theme of the moment will be conditioned by the horizon of past attitudes." In other words, the structure "theme-horizon" directs the reader to a comprehension of the text, by underlying the combination of all the texture perspectives, no matter how much they may vary each time regarding the ways of perspective arrangement.[44] Conclusively, while the "background-foreground" relation through the selection arrangement establishes the "outer link" of the textual perspectives, the "theme-horizon" structure through the combination arrangement establishes the "inner link", hence enabling the reader to complete the comprehension, to reach the interpretation, of the text.[45] Apparently, Iser's main anxiety is to construct an interactive theoretical model which could provide a reliable framework for studying a reader's potential response to the textual dynamics.

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[42] Ibid., 92-93.
[43] Ibid., 96-103.
[44] Ibid., 97-99.
[45] Ibid., 96. Iser's obsession with interpretation and the processes it initiates is evident in all of his texts. A representative sample of this very obsession could be considered as one of his last books, where he shapes a kind of "anatomy of interpretation." See: Wolfgang Iser, *The Range of Interpretation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).