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THE IMPLIED READER: A SHORT HISTORY OF THE TERM

The notion of the implied reader has been present in literary studies for more than twenty five years now and for the majority of scholars it is a natural element of contemporary critical idiom. However, the meaning of the term is not so obvious as it might seem. The aim of my paper is to analyse its major theoretical expositions and to demonstrate that the theorists with whom the notion is usually associated – Wolfgang Iser (1974, 1978) and Wayne Booth (1983) – fail to present a coherent and applicable concept of the implied reader. Iser's definitions seem to be self-contradictory and he does not employ the term in his own studies, whereas Booth does not really maintain the differentiation between real and implied readers. On the other hand, the most consistent model proposed recently by Nelles (1997) achieves clarity at the expense of applicability: it is mainly of theoretical value.

Significantly, the term 'implied reader' became known without being really defined. It was first introduced by Iser in his collection of essays *The Implied Reader* (1974). The fact that it is used in the very title accounts probably for its widespread popularity. If we look closer at this volume, it appears that the title is the most significant element of the book in which the term occurs. Apart from that, Iser mentions the implied reader only once in the introduction and does not provide any proper definition of it.

It is in his later, theoretical study *The Act of Reading* (1978) where Iser does discuss the concept of the implied reader. He begins his presentation of it with the discussion of other concepts of readers, namely these of contemporary, ideal, informed and intended readers. It is beyond the scope of this essay to repeat his critical presentation of each of them; let it be just stated that the strongest criticism is directed against the ideal reader. Iser mockingly writes that we do not really know where it comes from but most probably it originates in a critic's brain. He also refutes the idea that it is possible for such a reader to perform the role of the ideal interpreter:

[...] such a being would have to be able to realize in full the meaning potential of the fictional text. The history of literary responses, however, shows quite clearly that this potential has been fulfilled in many different ways, and if so, how can one person at one go encompass all the possible meanings? (Iser 1978:29)

In Iser's view the ideal reader is a purely fictional being with no basis in reality or in text and consequently any set of qualities can be arbitrarily attributed to it. It is just a rhetorical tool a critic resorts to, when he/she cannot support his/her interpretation in any other way.

Iser emphasises that his concept of the implied reader is, in contrast, derived from the text. It is an element of its structure and the implied reader should not be identified with any real reader. It *embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect – predispositions laid down not by an empirical outside reality but by the text itself* (34). Iser does not specify whose predispositions he is writing about; the context of the effect of a literary work and his further discussion suggest that these are predispositions of a real reader.

Although the two readers should not be confused, there is a relationship between them: the implied reader embodies the role which the reader is to play to actualise the text. Iser emphasises that it does not mean that a real reader subordinates him/herself to the role imposed by the text. On the contrary, the constitutive element of reading process is the tension between the predispositions embodied in the text and those of an individual real reader. The former set of qualities usually dominates, while the latter forms a necessary background. Such a presentation of the interaction between implied and real readers seems to be at variance with the categorical statement that the predispositions embodied in the text are necessary for its actualisation. Iser stresses that if the text is to exercise its effect, a real reader cannot posses only the capacity laid down in the text. If we accept such a view of reading process, the implied reader should rather be described as the predispositions the text includes and **attempts** to impose on a real reader, not as those *necessary for the text to exercise its effect* (34). Iser himself is not consistent with his own definition and describing the process of reading further in his study he presents the implied reader in more flexible terms as *the role the text **offers*** (37, emphasis mine) to a real reader to play.

This problem is related to the fact that different readers perform their roles in different ways, depending on historical circumstances, their individual predilections and competence, but the text still exerts its effect on them. Iser acknowledges that, but he does not explain how his observation that the text includes within its structure the set of *predispositions necessary for [it] to exercise its effect* (34) accords with these empirical facts. He just states that the concept of the implied reader simultaneously designates an objective element of

the text (text structure) and a subjective realisation of it (structured act). It contains all the potential realisations of the text and *each actualisation [performed by an individual real reader] represents a selective realisation of the implied reader* (37). Iser seems to believe that such a situation is an intrinsic property of the text and as such it should not be explained but simply accepted as given.

However, if the implied reader contains all the possible realisations of the text, then it is dangerously close to the concept of the ideal reader, which Iser himself refutes a few pages earlier in his book, the only difference being that the ideal reader is – in Iser's view – a vague idealisation of a real reader, whereas his implied reader is *a textual structure*. Still, to describe the implied reader would mean to exhaust the meaning of the text, which, as Iser suggests, is an impossible act.

Furthermore, his own practice seems to suggest that the term is redundant in the discussion of text-reader relationship. Having defined the implied reader at the beginning of his study and suggested that it links the text and the real reader, Iser does not employ this notion in his further analyses and concentrates on the presentation of direct (without the mediation of the implied reader) interactions between text and reader. The reader Iser is writing about is an abstraction of a real reader – a reading subject, a construct analogous to an observing subject of phenomenology – not a reader implied in the text. It should not be surprising, for his major concern is a reading process and it transpires between text and real reader. Iser's aim is to describe what happens when any real reader is reading any text, not relations internal to the text.

The implied reader as the role embodied in the text and, in a sense, imposed on the real reader can be retrospectively detected in *The Implied Reader* if we analyse this study in the light of *The Act of Reading*. In this volume Iser analyses how certain texts challenged their readers' expectations and modified their perception of literature, outside world, and themselves. However, Iser himself does not state that he is analysing the interaction between implied and real readers. Furthermore, describing the strategies of the analysed texts he relies on a generalised image of the contemporaneous readers addressed by a given text, so his reconstruction of the implied reader is not based solely on textual data. The implied reader of his essays is dependent on the historical context and consequently is not congruous with Iser's own definition.

Iser's concepts form a basis for W. Daniel Wilson's discussion of the implied reader (1981). His definition is even more categorical than Iser's and focuses on understanding of the text. Wilson's implied reader is *the behaviour, attitudes and background – presupposed or defined, usually indirectly, in the text itself – necessary for a proper understanding of the text* (Wilson 1981:848). Similarly to Iser, Wilson stresses that the implied reader should not be confused with a real reader and simultaneously directs his model towards real readers, claiming that

the implied reader can be defined as the attitudes and judgements demanded of the real reader by the text (856). However, he rejects Iser's idea that a text can be realised in more than one way. In Wilson's view whether a text can be read in many ways depends on its individual nature and flexibility is not a property of a text as such.

Wilson's proposition that the implied reader embodies the set of features which are **necessary** *for a* **proper** *understanding of the text* (848, emphasis mine) suggests that his concept of the implied reader has a prescriptive character. Describing the implied reader of a given text, a critic tells real readers how they should behave in order to understand the text properly. The problem is how we can state which is the proper reading of a given text. Wilson seems to contradict himself at this point: on the one hand he uses categorical phrases like 'necessary', on the other he stresses that in his understanding of the notion, the implied reader discerned by a critic in a given text is as objective or subjective as any other interpretative statement about it and that it can be verified through recourse to a text.

In his discussion of the implied reader Wilson does not demonstrate how it can be detected in the text but rather focuses on showing how it should not be constructed. In his view we should distinguish it from another type of a reader embodied in the text which he calls a characterised reader and which he defines – as we might expect – as the reader characterised in some way in the text. At first sight this distinction might seem a bit vague and superfluous; after all, the implied reader is also characterised in the text. However, there are indeed texts in which two different types of readers can and should be distinguished. *Tristram Shandy* is a good illustration of the point Wilson is trying to make. By characterised reader he means 'Madam' addressed directly by the author of the novel, who berates her for her apparent negligence and overlooking of a certain chapter. In Wilson's view there is a difference between the characteristics of Madam we can infer from the remarks directed to her and the qualities of the reader who fully understands the text and for whom he reserves the term 'implied reader.' He thus proves that the narrator's remarks directed to the "you" of the reader and the competence assumed in them should not be treated as the guidance for the proper understanding of the text.

In Wilson's model the author addresses a certain characterised reader and, as if, via or above it the implied reader, who should be situated on some higher level and who is able to discern the characterised reader in an overall construction of the text. Wilson stresses that such a structure should be distinguished in every text and that it does not only pertain to the texts in which the characterised reader is allowed to speak like 'Madam' of *Tristram Shandy* or is directly addressed by the narrator. The texts which are not framed narratives or do not directly address any recipient still contain elements which characterise a reader invoked in them. Wilson observes that in such cases the two readers –

characterised and implied – usually coincide; however, it need not always be so. To support this thesis he gives an example of an imaginary parody of Hemingway's style. A typical element of his writings is the buddy relationship the narrator establishes with both characterised and implied readers. In Wilson's view, we could imagine a parody in which the characterised reader would still be situated in a buddy position, but some ironic undertones would signal to a reader that he/she should approach the text from the perspective of ironic aloofness. Surprisingly, Wilson, very concerned with maintaing the difference between implied and real readers and very adamant about not including the latter in the discussion, writes at this point: *the real reader would not be expected to take on this [characterised reader's] role* (854). This unexpected abandoning of the implied reader and turning to a real reader emphasises that, despite all his reservations, Wilson's model is oriented towards real readers. It also suggests that to describe the competence required of a real reader we do not really need the concept of the implied reader, we can simply write about the reactions demanded of a (real) reader.

Even more confusing than Iser's and Wilson's is the approach to the problem of the implied reader adopted by Booth, to whom the coinage of the notion is frequently wrongly attributed. In the first edition of *Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) he introduced only the term 'implied author', which probably provoked Iser's invention of 'implied reader'. Booth presents his understanding of the term in "Afterword" to the second edition of his study (1983), where he sketches his system of authors and readers in the text. At the beginning of his discussion he states that a simple distinction between real and implied readers is fundamental and pertinent to all texts; nevertheless, the differences between the two are blurred in the actual presentation of the implied reader.

Booth's system is quite confusing, not only because it has, as he himself stresses, a tentative character but also because he uses the same term, the implied reader, in different contexts and in reference to various elements of text structure. To complicate the matters further, he distinguishes three senses of the term 'implied reader' in accordance to the degree of credulity and awareness of fictionality of a given text it represents.

The implied reader (sense one), also called 'postulated reader' by Booth, simultaneously designates the reader postulated by the flesh-and-blood author, the reader implied by the text, and the role the real reader plays. As William Nelles (1997:30) rightly observes in his critique of Booth's model, these three should not be treated as identical. The real author may postulate a certain reader for his text but this reader need not coincide with the reader implied in the text and detected by a critic. As many writers attest, readers and critics find much more in their texts than they intended and read them in many unexpected ways.

According to Booth, the relation between implied reader and text is not based on full actualisation or understanding but on the accordance of their

values. Unfortunately, the exposition of this element of his theory is rather vague. Booth (1983:428) claims that the values of the implied reader *must finally – at least temporarily – accord with those of the tale told.* The question arises why the values of the reader postulated by the text should only temporarily accord with those of this very text. Booth's admittance that it may be transient suggests that describing the implied reader he was thinking about a real reader's pretending that his values are identical to those of a tale. Similarly, describing the competence of the implied reader, Booth stresses that it is limited by the text and therefore this reader *knows some matters and is ignorant of others (even if, as working reader, the ignorance is faked)* (428). The reference to the faked ignorance of the working reader, new and puzzling as this category of reader may seem, again points to the fact that it is actually a description of the behaviour of a real reader, who – in Booth's view – only pretends that he/she is identical to the implied reader and shares the same competence.

The basis of Booth's concept of the implied reader (sense one) is then not only the text, but also what he perceives to be a constitutive element of reading – pretence. While Iser and Wilson define the implied reader in terms suggesting a list of features required of a real reader, Booth introduces in his concept the activity of a real reader and describes – in very general terms – the mode of behaviour needed to become the implied reader. What he presents is a general nature of reading as such based probably on his self-observation and not implied in the text.

The implied reader (sense one) is distinguished by Booth from the credulous listener within the tale (implied reader [sense two]) who *believes that it all happened as reported by the teller* (430). This type of a recipient is unaware of fictionality of the tale and treats it as real. In Booth's model he/she is not only an element of the text structure but also yet another role a real reader is to play. Again, Booth is not completely consistent and at another point he writes that it is the postulated reader (implied reader [sense one]) who through his/her willing pretending that it is all true creates the credulous listener (429).

Booth's presentation of the difference between implied reader (sense two) and implied reader (sense three) is equally confusing. The former *accepts the narrator's values without questioning* (430); however, he/she is credulous only to some extent, because he/she should be distinguished from a more credulous listener (implied reader [sense three]) who *takes all the narrators at their word* (430). Given such definitions, one cannot but wonder whether there is any difference between the two. This somewhat vague distinction is probably the result of Booth's decision to introduce a category of listener which would correspond to an unreliable narrator. Hence, the implied reader (sense two) treats the world presented as real but need not trust the narrator, whereas the implied reader (sense three) does believe the narrator, irrespective of whether he/she is reliable or not. Still, the definition of the implied reader (sense three)

is misleading and furthermore it would be simpler to assume that there is only one listener within the tale who either believes or mistrusts the narrator, depending on his/her characteristics included in a particular text.

William Nelles (1997) rejects the systems presented above as insufficient and inconsistent and introduces his concept of the implied reader, which is apparently most consistent and which clearly maintains the distinction between implied and real readers; however, as he himself admits, his model is mainly of theoretical value. It has a threefold structure and consists of a set of pairs: historical author and reader, implied author and reader, narrator and narratee[1] (Nelles 1997:10). He defines the implied reader as somebody or rather something which can entirely grasp the meaning of the text generated, of course, by the implied author. His approach differs from the others in the fact that he does not explicitly direct the implied reader, a theoretical construct, to a real one; it is not a role a real reader should play. It is rather the ideal he/she can only aspire to become; however, the inevitably complex character of every literary text makes his/her chances rather thin.

We may assume in theoretical discussions that there exists an ideal interpreter of a given text and that we, real readers, are unable to become him/her, but the implied reader thus understood cannot really be employed in critical practice and it is doubtful whether we should multiply theoretical entities. Besides, Nelles's concept of the implied reader is not so original as he seems to believe: it is another incarnation of the idea of ideal reader.

Nelles assumes, just as Booth does, that the concept of the implied author involves the need for a symmetrical concept of reader. However, the two concepts are not exactly analogous and he himself does not define them in the same way. The concept of the implied author denotes the image of the author we create on the basis of the text and to whom we attribute the conscious creation of the text. It emphasises the fact that this image usually does not coincide with the historical author. Thus the implied author is an index to an individual real reader's interpretation. Nelles does not claim that the implied author is the ideal author who has created all possible subtleties of the text, irrespective of whether they are visible to us or not. On the other hand, the implied reader is by definition able to see more than a real reader.

As regards the narratee and his/her relation to the implied reader, Nelles does not really analyse it. The narratee is just a counterpart of narrator – somebody who listens to him/her. Nelles justifies lack of more detailed presentation of this element of his model by saying that the discussion of the relationship between narratee and implied reader would require a separate essay, which is a rather lame excuse.

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[1] This term was originally coined by Gerald Prince (1980), who defines the narratee as *someone whom the narrator addresses* (7).

Despite its apparent consistency, Nelles's study is not free from inconsistencies and ambiguities, similar to those of Booth's and Iser's models. He stresses that the implied author is the construct of the real reader; nevertheless, discussing the concept of the implied author, he writes: *the image the implied reader constructs is that of the implied author* (36). Not only does the implied reader (a theoretical construct) infer the implied author from the text, it also infers itself:

> *the implied reader exists not in the mind of the historical author but as a property of the text taken as a whole, inferable like the implied author, by the historical reader (imperfectly) and the implied reader (perfectly) (40).*

As can be seen, the implied reader is one of these literary terms which everybody seems to know, even though they have not been properly defined by theorists who coined them. Furthermore, the examples of the scholars discussed above seem to indicate that it is virtually impossible to be completely rigorous, consistent, and scientific, while analysing the interactions between text and reader solely in terms of internal textual relations. Sooner or later a real reader slips into the discussion, or the critic, just like Nelles, gets caught in the vicious circle of theoretical constructs infinitely breeding one another.

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