

The Significance of the encounter: A case of Literary Actualization in “Dos cuentos católicos” of Roberto Bolaño

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Abstract:

This work has a double purpose: 1) to examine Wolfgang Iser's concept of Literary Actualization and contrast it with the theoretical approach of E.D. Hirsch and Stanley Fish, and 2) to illustrate Iser's concept through a short story by Roberto Bolaño. While contemporary theorists of literature cannot deny the importance of the reader in the construction of meaning and significance, postmodern literature has also acknowledged the theoretical presence of the reader within the literary process. “Dos cuentos católicos” exemplifies through its diegetical structure the endeavors of the author to recognize the importance of the reader's reception.

Keywords: Iser, Fish, Hirsch, hermeneutics, reader's reception.

Resumen:

Este trabajo tiene dos propósitos: 1) examinar el concepto de Actualización Literaria de Wolfgang Iser y contrastarlo con las propuestas teóricas de E.D. Hirsch y Stanley Fish, y 2) ilustrar el concepto de Iser a partir de un cuento de Roberto Bolaño. Mientras que los teóricos contemporáneos no pueden negar la participación fundamental del lector en la adquisición del sentido y el significado, la literatura posmoderna también ha reconocido la presencia teórica del lector. “Dos cuentos católicos” ejemplifica a partir de su estructura diegética el afán del autor por reconocer la importancia de los lectores en el proceso de construcción del texto literario.

Palabras clave: Iser, Fisch, Hirsch, hermenéutica, recepción literaria.

*“Había sobrevivido a todos los malos
agüeros de la extinción de la lectura”.*
-César AIRA, *LA PRINCESA PRIMAVERA*

Introduction

For Wolfgang Iser —co-founder with Robert Jauss of the Aesthetics of Reception— the Literary Actualization is the process in which the reader participates in the “construction” of the literary text.¹ By reading, Iser suggests, the reader re-writes the story that is in front of her eyes and in this way actualizes it. From this point, Iser asserts that to actualize means, in general terms, that the reader “incorporates specific historical views and expectations” that modify the reception and significance of the author’s text.²

The work of Chilean Roberto Bolaño,³ in particular “Dos cuentos católicos,” illustrates how the Literary Actualization takes place within the act of perceiving fictional reality, thus allowing the reader to participate in the construction of the literary meaning and significance. For instance, in “Dos cuentos católicos,” both of the narrators of the story actualize the same situation from their own *Erwartungshorizont*.⁴ Furthermore, the narrators of “Dos cuentos católicos” become readers of their own story, engaging in a Hegelian dialectic that involves literary and extra-literary elements, all departing from the principle of the Literary Actualization.

Regarding “Dos cuentos católicos,” it is a story divided in two parts, each narrated by totally different characters, but at the same time inherent to each other. In the first part of the story, the narrator is an adolescent that professes an incipient but deep devotion to the Martyrdom of Saint Vincent; in the second, the narrator is a hungry and homeless man,

¹ Iser, Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore. 1984. p. 152.

² *Ibid.*, p. 153.

³ i.a. The short stories *Llamadas telefónicas* and the novels *La pista de hielo* and *Los detectives salvajes* In both of these novels there are plenty of narrative structures presented from the perspective of different characters, thus emphasizing the hermeneutical level of the stories and proposing that there is not an inflexible path towards the acquisition of meaning and significance of the literary texts.

⁴ q.v. Jauss, Robert. *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis. 1982.

whose moral reputation is quite questionable. One day, the adolescent finds the homeless man in his way. However, because the homeless man is wearing the habit of a monk, the adolescent believes that the homeless man is a Franciscan monk immersed in his spiritual life.

Based on the plot, “Dos cuentos católicos” proposes to the reader a very particular Hegelian dialectic, in which the thesis arises from the narration of the adolescent, the antithesis from the narrative complement of the homeless man and the synthesis corresponds to the actualization *en attendant* of the reader. Whereas the adolescent and the homeless man narrate the same story from their own horizon, the reader, indeed, is the only one capable to synthesize both of the perspectives presented by the narrators.

In the following pages, a diegetical analysis of “Dos cuentos católicos” will be displayed with the main purpose of demonstrating how the Literary Actualization works within the discourse of the narrators of Bolaño’s story. However, a broader perspective of what is understood in this essay as Literary Actualization will first be presented.

1. The Literary Actualization

As stated by Wolfgang Iser and Robert Jauss, their theoretical effort is primarily an aesthetic approach to the process of literary reception. Iser and Jauss aimed to demonstrate that during the reading of a literary text, the reader uses all her senses from a situation determined by her historical background.⁵ But while Iser and Jauss aim towards the aesthetical value of reading, they also emphasize the hermeneutic inquiries such as Gadamer’s concept of *Horizont* and Roman Ingarden’s Indeterminacy concept.

Given the subjective character of Jauss’ and Iser’s Aesthetics of Reception, whose object of study is the effect that the literary text has on the reader, it is natural that methodological complexities arise. Iser and Jauss themselves have often had difficulties defining the central concepts of their theory; besides this, there are a number of scholars who have pointed out some of the uncertain concepts of theorists of Constanza, such as the idea that there is not a universal reader invariably following a fixed reading behavior.⁶

For the purposes of this essay, the definition proposed by Iser of Literary Actualization is here acknowledged: “the text and the reader solve their differences from a certain amount of possibilities of actualization, in which the text becomes continuously present.”⁷ Iser here concedes that the reader has the capacity of “re-writing” what she is reading. As she continues reading, the literary reality of the text becomes a narration that happens in present time and is determined by the *Erwartungshorizont* of the reader.⁸

⁵ q.v. Iser, Wolfgang. op. cit: “The Structure of Theme and Horizon.”

⁶ In his article “Value and Knowledge in the Humanities,” E.D. Hirsch criticizes the emergent methodological trends that ponder the value of multiple readings, and states, “when everyone began to ponder ‘the works themselves,’ a premium began to be placed on new ‘readings’ instead of new facts, and the ‘readings’ as they multiplied became more and more diversified, more and more remote, ingenious, abstract, and decadent.” Hirsch is here setting himself apart from those post-structuralist theorists whose efforts aim to elucidate the complexities of the method over the “historical” approach to literature.

⁷ Iser, Wolfgang, “La estructura apelativa del texto,” *Teoría de la estética de la recepción literaria*, UNAM, Mexico, 2001, p. 101.

⁸ Gadamer himself says that “to have horizons means not to be limited to the closest, but to be able to see beyond it” (Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Verdad y método “Fundamentos de una hermenéutica filosófica”*. Ediciones Sígueme, Salamanca, 1984, p. 373). While the hermeneutics of Gadamer has been regarded as relativist, Iser and Jauss pretend to mitigate this relativism by conceding that every reader, despite her own horizon, is in fact involved in an invariable historical process, which is to say that there is a sort of proto-reader (implied reader according to Iser) whom the rest of the readers theoretically emulate.

Using the definition above, it will be provisionally concluded that to actualize a literary text means to look beyond what the text offers as an autonomous structure, which implies that the *Erwartungshorizont* of the reader is always present and accordingly must be considered. For example, *El Periquillo Sarniento* by Fernández de Lizardi was read during its first publication mostly in regards of its humoristic effect. However, as it concerns the contemporary reader of *El Periquillo Sarniento*, the work of Fernández de Lizardi is not humoristic, but a cunning novel criticizing the colonial mentality of revolutionary Mexico of the first two decades of the XIX century. While the text itself is the same, the interpretation of the work has changed along with the reader, and it is the reader's experience that the Aesthetics of Reception seeks to study.

Among the literary theorists looking into the reader's role, and therefore into literary Hermeneutics, one of the fundamental distinctions between the Aesthetics of Reception and the Reader's Response of Stanley Fish resides in how each of these theorists define the reader.⁹ Iser and Jauss approach the reader as a "hermeneutical element" always involved in a measurable process, e.g., every reader, despite her background or extra-literary circumstances, always actualizes the text that she is reading, because the Literary Actualization is an inherent step in the process of reading. In contrast, Fish asserts that each reader is a particular case that deserves individualized attention, since the process of reading varies from one reader to another.¹⁰ While Iser and Jauss refuse to provide the reader a distinctive individuality, it is noticeable that the reader for both German scholars is an element as important as the author and the text itself. To some degree, Iser and Jauss believe that their Aesthetics of Reception opens the domains of meaning and significance beyond the author and the text. While this is theoretically possible, it is also possible that within their theory, the reader is confined to a process in which her participation is restrained to a recurrent "hermeneutical behavior." However, it is this interpretative behavior that makes reading an experience that produces commonalities, but also inevitable differences, among different readers.

In "Value and Knowledge in the Humanities," E.D. Hirsch points out the importance that the inquiry itself has in the acquisition of knowledge in humanities, "all empirical inquiry is a process directed towards increasing the probability of learning the truth."¹¹ The idea that the reader is neither abstract nor evanescent is essential within the theoretical approach of the Aesthetics of Reception. The fact that the scholar is as much of a reader as the man who reads the newspaper in the subway or the high school student discovering Milton's *Paradise Lost* is often left aside. Furthermore, to Hirsch the inquirer is the one responsible for pursuing the value and knowledge of her correspondent disciplines. Therefore, within the literary studies, the reader is a serious inquirer in search of valuable knowledge of the literary science. The fact that Iser and Jauss propose that their theory is primarily an aesthetical approach does not prevent their method from becoming a method of scientific inquiry.

Hirsch also points out the necessity of recognizing the pertinence of a theoretical effort, and claims that "nor can the model be accurate if unfavorable evidence is suppressed by a conspiracy of the inquiring community. Nor is the model descriptive if no one bothers to

⁹ Nevertheless, the differences between Aesthetics of Reception and Reader's Response often acquired personal connotations among its theorists, e.g. the aligid dispute between Iser and Fish (q.v. Fish, Stanley. *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, Harvard University Press, Massachusetts, 1995, p. 221-223).

¹⁰ Fish, Stanley. *Is There a Text in This Class?*. Harvard UP, 1995. p. 23-24

¹¹ Hirsch E.D., "Value and Knowledge in the Humanities", *In Search of Literary Theory*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca-London, 1972, p. 63.

bring unfavorable evidence to bear upon a hypothesis to which it is relevant.”¹² Departing from this, the “literary facts” that the reader brings to the entire process of understanding literature are valuable as they make evident the coherence and discrepancies arising from the encounter between a reader and its reality. Traditionally literature had been studied from two specific starting points, either from the author or the text itself. The days when the best way to study a literary work resided in learning everything about its author are far in the past; however, when the functionalist and structuralist trends replaced the hegemony of the author with another hegemonic approach such as establishing the text itself as an hermetic object of study, the literary studies were still missing an important source of knowledge, which is to say: the reader.

Although post-structuralist tendencies have aimed to conceal the radicalism of their predecessors, one of their main merits has been to pose the ethical problems concerning literary studies.¹³ Reading literature has become an activity that relates to social, political, economical and cultural aspects of historical societies; neither the author nor the structures implicit in the text are more valuable than the experience of the reader, and this is what Iser and Jauss aimed to grasp with their theory.

2. Diegetical analysis of “Dos cuentos católicos”

As stated before, “Dos cuentos católicos” is a story narrated by two different characters. The first part of the story has the title “La vocación,” whose narrator is a seventeen year-old adolescent who professes a fervent admiration for the Martyrdom of Saint Vincent. The second part is titled “El azar,” whose narrator is a homeless and mentally ill man who, after escaping from the psychiatric hospital, spends his days wandering the streets.

One morning, after going to the movies with his best friend, the adolescent decides to go to the top of a hill where the prostitutes of the town presumably gather. On his way up, the adolescent encounters a barefoot man who wears the habit of a monk. Due to the adolescent’s devotion to Saint Vincent, he concludes that the man is a Franciscan monk immersed in his prayers and philanthropic duties. The detail of the bare feet has an overwhelming effect on the adolescent, “Iba descalzo. Cuando me di cuenta me sentí herido por un rayo. Bajamos del cerro del Moro. Al pasar por la iglesia de Santa Bárbara lo vi persignarse. Sus huellas purísimas refulgían en la nieve como un mensaje de Dios. Me puse a llorar.”¹⁴

The adolescent, at this point, decides to follow the monk furtively; when they reach the train station, the monk puts his shoes on and grabs the first train that stops. The narration of the adolescent ends with a revealing affirmation, as it validates the particular experience of the young man devoted to Saint Vincent: “Al salir, ya solo, intenté buscar sus huellas en la nieve, las huellas de sus pies descalzos, pero no encontré ni rastro de ellas.”¹⁵

From the perspective of the adolescent, it is possible to say that the actions of the monk are comparable to a literary text which demands a set of very personal decisions from a reader: the adolescent, after encountering the “monk,” decides to follow him compelled by his *Erwartungshorizont*, which allows the adolescent to expect divine signals from the encounter.

¹² Ibid, p. 65.

¹³ Ibid, p. 69.

¹⁴ Bolaño, Roberto, “Dos cuentos católicos”, *El gaucho insufrible*, Anagrama, Barcelona, 2005, p. 143.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 145.

It is also relevant to mention the conditions that produced the encounter between the narrators: while the adolescent is on his way to the "cerro del Moro" with the purpose of looking at the prostitutes that gather on the top, the silhouette of the monk shows up coming down from the top of the hill. The encounter takes place exactly when the adolescent was considering to go back home and forget about the hill crowned with prostitutes: "Me estaba quedando helado. Decidí volver a casa de mi tía y tomar chocolate caliente o una sopa caliente junto a la estufa. Me sentía cansado y la cabeza me daba vueltas. Rehice el camino. Entonces lo vi."¹⁶

The interpretation of the adolescent is the direct result of his intimate inclination to the Martyrdom of Saint Vincent, thus the Literary Actualization plays in the adolescent's experience a process of cathartic nature: given the ecclesiastic vocation of the adolescent, he concludes without a doubt that the man who is walking barefoot down the hill and wearing the habit of a monk is unequivocally a Franciscan monk.

Highlighting the idea that the monk is the Text that the adolescent is actualizing, it is also possible to say that there is nothing in the outward appearance of the homeless man suggesting that he is not indeed a monk. Also, the whiteness of the snow is a possible metaphor for the book's pages where the monk leaves the prints of his steps. The actualization of the adolescent (the Reader) is valid as it arises from his direct encounter with the barefoot monk (the Text) walking on the snow.

However, the second part of the story, "El azar," dismisses the guess of the adolescent regarding the monk. "El azar" introduces the sordid and obstinate monologue of the homeless man that the adolescent believed to be a Franciscan monk. The character that a few pages before was regarded as a saint turns out to be a vagabond who, after stealing food from a house located on the outskirts of the Moorish's hill, aimlessly wanders towards the top of the hill.

After walking during an indefinite period of time, the vagabond finds in his way a half-opened gate leading to a house. He gets in and looks around, again, without any defined purpose. He finds a door whose knocker attracts his attention; when the vagabond opens the door he finds a sort of epiphany inside: "Era una especie de almacén de granos, con sacos apilados hasta el techo. En un rincón había una cama. Tendido en la cama vi a un niño. Estaba desnudo y tiritaba. Saqué mi navaja del bolsillo. Sentado a una mesa vi a un fraile."¹⁷ What happens after this encounter is totally unexpected: without any reason, the vagabond stabs the friar; then, he kills the child. The vagabond leaves the room wearing the habit of the friar and decides to take his shoes off to avoid leaving steps of blood on the snowy and pristine streets. That is when he starts his way down the hill towards the train station; during his journey the vagabond reveals that his name is Vincent...

While the vagabond descends the hill, he realizes that an adolescent is following him, "Mi perseguidor era un adolescente gordo y feo."¹⁸ If the adolescent's role is compared to the act of reading, the consciousness that the vagabond has of the adolescent could be understood as the validation of the adolescent as a reader with his own *Erwartungshorizont*. This situation relates to the concept of "implicit reader" that Iser regards as an element that triggers the inner progression of the texts, as this "reader, unlike the contemporary reader, is

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 141.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 148.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 150.

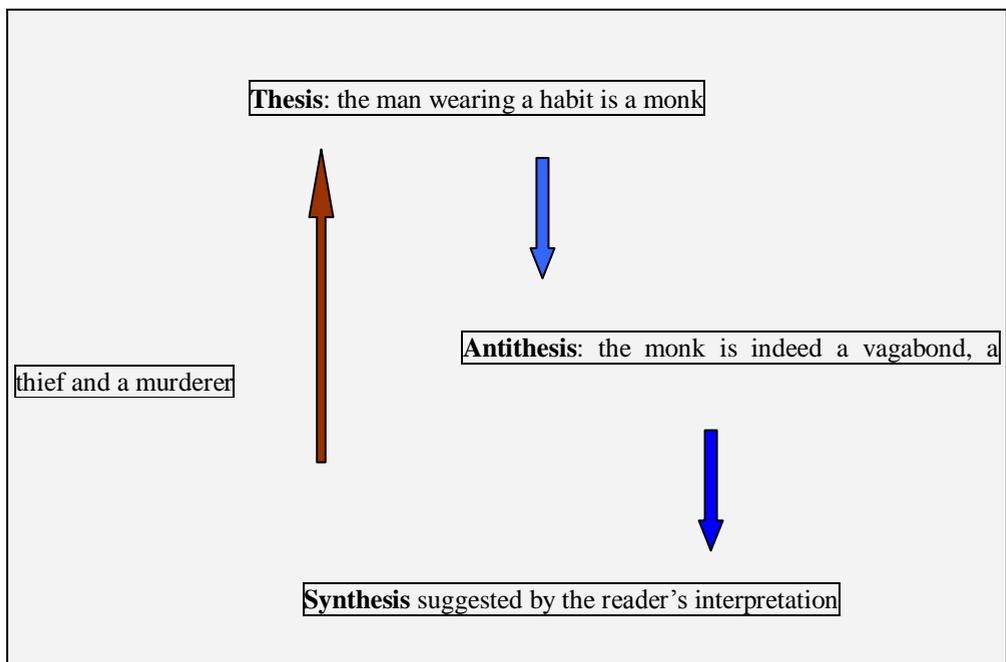
a purely fictional being; he has no basis in reality, and it is this very fact that makes him so useful [...] He can be endowed with a variety of qualities in accordance with whatever problem he is called upon to help solve.”¹⁹

Also, if the adolescent’s interpretations departed from his devotion, in the vagabond’s case the interpretations come from a sense of uncertainty and incompleteness. Throughout the entire story the adolescent cannot think or do anything without a reason or justification; meanwhile the vagabond keeps silence regarding the motives of his criminal behavior.

Considering these points, it is possible to refer to a very specific textual dialectic. On one hand, there is the Adolescent/Reader who interprets his encounter with the Vagabond/Text from his *Erwartungshorizont*; on the other, there is the Vagabond/Text defying the adolescent’s assumptions. Departing from a common experience, the thesis arises from the adolescent and the antithesis from the vagabond; both thesis and antithesis are to be synthesized by the factual reader, which suggests that a Hegelian dialectic underlies Bolaño’s story.

Paraphrasing Iser’s definition of the Literary Actualization and adapting it to “Dos cuentos católicos,” the result is the following: the adolescent plays the role of a reader as he re-writes the story from his own horizon and sensorial capabilities; his is an aesthetic experience whose reward is the mystification of Saint Vincent. At the same time, the discourse of the vagabond challenges the adolescent’s assumptions. Due to this, the factual reader of the story gets to know from the voice of the vagabond the cold-blooded crime that he has just committed; however, the adolescent’s interpretation is quite valid, as it surges from his direct exposure to the reality shared with the vagabond.

The following scheme exposes the Hegelian dialectic held by the narrators of the story and the hypothetical factual reader:



¹⁹ Iser, Wolfgang, *The Act of Reading*, p. 29.

3. Conclusion

From a hermeneutic approach, each of the chapters of the story could be read as independent realities. It could also be proposed that the monk seen by the adolescent has nothing in common with the vagabond that narrates the second part of the story. Perhaps, in “Dos cuentos católicos” there are two independent realities overlapped, whose narrative concordance gives the impression that they are both part of the same story. However, in the text itself there is no evidence to confirm this supposition, as there is neither enough evidence to refute the possibility that indeed the adolescent was following a real monk.

Supposing that the discourse of the adolescent is a metaphor for the act of reading, this shows that within every reader there is an implicit *Erwartungshorizont*. This does not mean that before the Aesthetics of Reception and the recent hermeneutical trend there was not an inherent interpretation in every reading, but what the Aesthetics of Reception did point out was the active role of the reader in the construction of the literary meaning and significance.

Going back to Bolaño’s story, the adolescent, equipped with his own literary subjectivity, performs a fundamental role in the construction of the hermeneutical level of the story. The case of the vagabond’s discourse is different, as his hermeneutical activity is scarce: of the two narrators of the story, just the adolescent is compelled to permanently interpret the reality that he encounters. The vagabond, in contrast, focused his efforts on an apparently unconscious praxis, on a sort of recurrent interpretative path. For instance, when he finds the friar and the child in the room, the vagabond does not stop to consider his different alternatives, his sole impulse is to execute an action, whose motives are neither revealed nor suggested.²⁰

In conclusion, “Dos cuentos católicos” could be considered a theoretical story that examines the hermeneutical character of the literary text, as well as illustrating Jauss’ concept of Literary Actualization. Due to the diptych structure of the story, one element is continuously highlighted: the reader, who provides the text with vitality and social significance. As Michel Tournier has noted, the reader gives strength to the text’s wings and allows it to fly in search of historical life; if a text does not have a reader, it inevitably withers.

²⁰ In this regard, it is interesting to look at the differences between the hermeneutics of Hirsch and Gadamer. For the American, meaning is “private property” of the author; for this reason Hirsch compels the reader to adequate her interpretations to the author’s purpose. However, for Gadamer interpretations always seek to align to tradition, which the German philosopher understands as a historical entity, opposing to Hirsch, who suggests that the author’s purpose is more a metaphysical entity than a historical one.