



IN MEMORIAM

Wolfgang Iser
Professor of English, Emeritus
UC Irvine
1926 – 2007

Professor Wolfgang Iser of the Department of English, University of California, Irvine, died January 24, 2007, in Constance, Germany. At the time of his death, Professor Iser was one of the most prominent literary theorists in the world.

Wolfgang Iser was born July 22, 1926, in the German spa town of Marienberg in the state of Saxony, which after World War II became part of the Russian zone. He studied English and German literature as well as philosophy at the University of Leipzig until he arranged an exchange to the University of Tuebingen in the American zone, where Hans Georg Gadamer, his former professor had relocated. Iser transferred again to the University of Heidelberg. It was at Heidelberg that he met his wife Lore, who was his intellectual partner throughout his academic career. He received his Ph.D from the University of Heidelberg for a dissertation on the eighteenth-century novelist Henry Fielding. After teaching at Heidelberg, he spent a year at the University of Glasgow in Scotland, followed by academic appointments at universities in Cologne and Wuerzburg.

During the early part of his career, Iser was drawn to the power of works of art at the same time that he was deeply skeptical of the prevailing view that art was somehow inherently ennobling. Viewing the ruins of Germany at the end of the Second World War and contemplating how many humanities professors had been politically compromised by the ideology of the third Reich, the young Iser was all too aware of the folly of believing that high culture was benignly humanistic. Indeed, uncritical sacralization of art and literature was, he recognized, part of the problem. At the same time, he still believed that art and literature had an important role to play in human life. In order to figure out what that role was he found it necessary to challenge prevailing approaches to literary criticism, which, in turn, necessitated understanding and interrogating Walter Pater and others who propounded the doctrine of “art for art’s sake.”

His work began to attract international attention when he became a founding member of the faculty at the University of Constance on Germany’s border with Switzerland. Established at almost the same time as UC Irvine, Constance was a “reform university,” intent on remedying various institutional limits of the German university system. For instance, in other German universities the study of literature was conducted according to national or linguistic traditions. Refusing to be bound by that definition of the field, Iser and his colleagues created a “Department of ‘Literaturwissenschaft,’ (Literary Science)” that studied the institution of literature itself. The innovative research that resulted led to the formation of the “Constance School” of literary theory and criticism. Along with Hans Robert Jauss and Jurij Striedter, Iser helped shift the focus of German literary theory in the late 1960s from the author to the reader. Rather than ask what a work of literature means, they turned their attention to what a work does to the reader. If Jauss outlined a model for how to study the historical reception of a work of literature (Rezeptionsaesthetik), Iser focused on what occurred in the act of reading a work of literature (Wirkungsaesthetik).

In Germany Iser's theories reached beyond the field of literature and influenced work in the arts and media studies. His support of interdisciplinary research led him, along with Jauss and Dieter Henrich, to found the research group, "Poetik and Hermeneutik," that Theodore W. Adorno praised for year after year bringing together the best humanities scholars in Germany. The group published seventeen volumes between 1963 and 1998 in a series that articulated the intellectual program of a German postwar generation influenced by the international modernist movements in literature and the arts.

In the United States Iser had a major impact on the field of literary studies with the publication of *The Implied Reader* (1972) and *The Act of Reading* (1978), a translation of *Der Akt des Lesens* (1976). It was in 1976 that Iser first came to UC Irvine, as a visiting Professor of German. In 1978 he became a permanent member of the UCI faculty in the Department of English and Comparative Literature, dividing his time between Constance and Irvine. Along with Murray Krieger, J. Hillis Miller, Jean- Francois Lyotard, and Jacques Derrida, he helped make UCI one of the most important centers of literary theory in the world. Expanding on his groundbreaking work on the effect of literature on the reader, he explored new territory by developing the field of "literary anthropology," which speculates on how literature functions in the human experience. This phase of his career resulted in *Prospecting* (1989) and *The Fictive and the Imaginary*. (1993). Noted for his excellent readings of individual works as well as for his theoretical positions, he published major books on the eighteenth- century novelist Laurence Sterne, *Laurence Sterne* (1988), and on Shakespeare's history plays, *Staging Politics* (1993). He also exerted a strong influence on modernist studies through essays on Joyce and Beckett.

His seminars in both Germany and the United States were legendary, delivered with exacting rigor and precision. Not learning to type till late in his life, he composed books by dictating them orally. Students in his seminars, which often included post- doctoral fellows from around the world, had the experience of hearing a book in progress unfold during the course of a semester. Legend has it that he was never late for a seminar in his life, even when a German snow storm once forced him to abandon his car on the way to the university and hitch- hike to make it to class on time.

In 1991 he retired from the University of Constance, but continued to teach at UCI until 2005. In 1994 he delivered the Wellek Lectures at UCI, which, revised, were published as *The Range of Interpretation* (2000). He held a number of honorary degrees, Doctor honoris causa, from, among others, the New Bulgarian University, Sofia, Bulgaria, the University of Bucharest, Romania, and the University of Siegen, Germany. The Charles University of Prague awarded him its Golden Medal, and he was a Fellow of the Heidelberg Academy of Arts and Sciences; the Academia Europea, London; an Honorary Foreign Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Boston; a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy, London; a Senior Fellow for life of the School of Advanced Study, London University; an Honorary Member of the British Comparative Literature Association, Cambridge/ England, and an Honorary Member of the Modern Language Association of America, New York. He was also the recipient of the Werner- Heisenberg Medal, Alexander von Humboldt- Foundation, Bonn.

To all who knew him, students, staff, and colleagues alike, Wolfgang Iser was a consummate, cosmopolitan gentleman. It is, therefore, appropriate that he bequeaths to a world fascinated with issues of globalization a body of work devoted to a cosmopolitan aesthetic. That work both influenced his life and was affected by it. If, for instance, his work describes how works of literature allow readers to imagine new perspectives by crossing the boundaries of existing ways of seeing, his life consisted of numerous boundary crossings, from his move as a student from East to West Germany, to his decision to test his training in continental philosophy with a year in Scotland, the home of "common sense" philosophers, to frequent academic visits to Israel, to his years shuttling across the Atlantic between Constance and Irvine, to his everyday life in Constance, where both his university and home looked across a national border to stunning views of Switzerland. Even in retirement, he and Lore kept on the move, dividing their year between life in London, Vienna, and Constance, where they could indulge their passions for intellectual exchange, excellent music, and fine wine and cuisine.

Still crossing boundaries in the last year of his life, both national and intellectual, Professor Iser found time and energy to lecture in numerous countries, publish a book called *How to Do Theory*, and almost complete a new one on the concept of "emergence." He is survived by Lore, non sequitor.

Chancellor's Professor of English