Surfaces

Wolfgang Iser's "On Translatability"
Roundtable Discussion

Hazard Adams, Ernst Behler, Hendrik Birus, Jacques Derrida, Wolfgang Iser, Murray Krieger, Hillis Miller, Ludwig Pfeiffer, Bill Readings, Ching-hsien Wang et Pauline Yu

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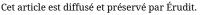
Résumé de l'article

Ces discussions autour du texte de Wolfgang Iser, « On Translatability », ont eu lieu en avril 1994, dans le cadre du premier Congrès sur le Discours Humaniste. Les communications de cette première réunion du Congrès ont été publiées dans le volume 4 de *Surfaces* (1994).

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ABSTRACT

This roundtable discussion of ["On Translatability"](#), Wolfgang Iser's contribution to the first International Conference for Humanistic Discourses, was held in April, 1994. The papers of this first meeting of the ICHD have been published in volume 4 of *Surfaces* (1994).

RÉSUMÉ

Ces discussions autour du texte de Wolfgang Iser, ["On Translatability"](#), ont eu lieu en avril 1994, dans le cadre du premier Congrès sur le Discours Humaniste. Les communications de

cette première réunion du Congrès ont été publiées dans le volume 4 de *Surfaces* (1994).

Iser : What I sould like to do is to situate my paper in relation to our discussion. I have no problem with the term "humanistic discourse," because as a non-native speaker I may not be aware of all the reverberations of "humanistic." "Humanistic" for me is to a large extent identical to what we call in German '*interpretierende Geistenwissenschaften*.' However, this does not mean that *Geist*, or the spirit, is the topic to be interpreted. Instead, it highlights the distinction between those who either operate from the armchair or the laboratory. Such a distinction has a tradition in Germany. The so-called Southwest Neo-Kantians, Rickert and Windelband, distinguished the '*interpretierenden Geisteswissenschaften*' from the natural sciences according to their different operational procedures. The former operate 'ideographically,' the latter 'nomothetically.' In the one instance the approach is basically descriptive with regard to the individuality, and the features, and the particularity concerned, whereas in the other instance the approach is concerned with laws and the way in which laws are to be discovered. Therefore "humanistic discourse" does not pose a problem as it designates the procedures pertinent to the '*interpretierenden Geisteswissenschaften*.'

Interpretation is our basic activity. If that is the case, we have to ask ourselves, what in actual fact happens when we interpret. Interpretation is basically an act of translation, because in each interpretation, we transpose something into a different register, be it a text, which is transposed into another type of text, be it something non-textual like a culture, which is transposed into a language, or be it something imponderable like God or humankind, which are transposed into cognitive terms. If interpretation is basically an act of translation, each of these acts opens up a space between the subject matter and the register into which the subject matter is translated. However, there is always something that resists translatability, which cannot be totally carried over. Thus the space between has to be negotiated in any act of interpretation. Therefore my concern is not primarily with presuppositions that underlie and condition interpretation, but rather with the way in which the space opened up is coped with.

For this reason, I have singled out one operational mode for the sake of illustration, although there are quite a few other modes one can think of. I have focused on recursive looping as a mode of coping with the space when something non-textual, openended, or beyond the reach of one's own stance has to be made manageable such as a foreign culture or intracultural levels. Apart from recursive looping we may also consider the hermeneutic circle or the traveling differential as modes of translatability.

A possible change could be levelled at what I tried to do by calling it a metanarrative of interpretation. Yet I doubt whether this is a metanarrative for one reason in particular: we are aware that interpretation, as an act of translation, always constitutes, up to a point, what is interpreted. Nietzsche once remarked, "Interpretation is nothing but a massive tailoring." Even if one does not go as far, it implies that whenever something is transposed into something else, the subject matter is *slanted* in one way or other. If interpretation constitutes the subject matter to some extent, the "humanistic discourse" stands in need of being inspected and fine-tuned, so that we might be aware of what we constitute when we interpret.

Derrida : Thank you. It's a difficult task for me. If I understand correctly the paper and what you've just said, I see some tension between two elements, and I would like you to tell me if I'm right in perceiving such a tension. First, there is (and this was clear after your oral presentation), there is some synonymity between interpretation and translation. Then you, when you, just now, distinguished between the act of interpretation as constitutive of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, as opposed to laboratory, all laboratory sciences. Were you (that was a preliminary question) were you implying that the act of translation, or the act of interpretation, was absent in the hard sciences. If there is such a thing as translation at the core of physics or mathematics or genetics, genetics especially, then how would you handle this implication? That's a question I would have on the oral presentation you just gave. Now, the tension I referred to just before would be this one. At the beginning of your paper, you propose a concept or counter-concept of translation, translatability, which would have what I would call sort of a pacifying function, that is, to limit the war, the hierarchies in culture, the implicit conflicts which the hierarchical scheme would introduce in the field of different cultures. So, on the one hand, translation or translatability would suspend, so to speak, a state of war between the cultures, or problematize the

hierarchical order. That's the first step in your paper. Then you address the question of the space between cultures, and translation having to do with the differences of the status between cultures. And then comes the question otherness. And you say that (I'm summarizing very roughly, very awkwardly), you say that the otherness never appears as such, except through what you call "manifestations," or it "cannot be grasped" anterior to "its manifestation," translating that into "ever other manifestations."[**1**] So you imply, and I would agree with you to some extent, you imply that the otherness as such never appears. It appears through manifestations, through determinations. And you would think, in that case, that the way for the otherness of the other, internal, of the otherness of the other culture, the way for it to appear is to consist in hiding itself under its very manifestation, under its very determination. In that case, the translation, to the extent it has to do with what you call "manifestation" of the otherness, would be a way of erasing or, let's say, hiding, or dissimulating, to some extent, the otherness of the other. And then, at what I would call the third essential moment in your paper, you deny that (again, I would agree with you), you deny the possibility of a third dimension, of an overarching third dimension, any thirdness, because the claim, the alleged thirdness would be something which wouldn't be really third, but an involved party in the field. So that's why there are only translations of translations, interpretations of interpretations, no metatranslation, no metanarrative, no meta-interpretation, only involved stances, involved translations. Now, my question would be, if this is the case - there is no third dimension, no meta-interpretation, no metanarrative, no metatranslation - - how would translation play the, what I call the pacified role? That is, if there is no metaphor third party, then the translation again would be engaged in a hierarchical scheme, that is, sort of in a war, or conflict (if you don't want to call this "war"), that is, a struggle between hierarchies. Now a better text, a better translation, a conflict of forces, differences of forces between texts, cultures, translations, and so on. So my question would be, how would you conceive of a compatibility between the first statement - that is, translatability as a counter-concept to hierarchical schemes - and the last statement about the in-existence, or impossibility of a third, a thirdness, a third party? That would be my question.

Iser : Interpretation in the hard sciences has a hermeneutic implication. An informed guess has to be made with regard to the experiment, which has then to be tested. In that sense there is interpretation in the

hard sciences as well, although we might not call it an act of translatability.

Krieger : What about translation from the problem to the making of the experiment, to deciding what the experiment will be?

Iser : Scientists may not necessarily be aware that they are hermeneuticists. Now as far as manifestations of otherness are qualified as forms of "hiding," I should like to maintain that otherness is only to be experienced in terms of its manifestations. I cannot say anything on what you called the "unthematizable otherness," as any statement concerning it would imply either adopting or even pretending to have a stance outside it. To call otherness "unthematizable" indicates that I have to refrain from predicating what that otherness is. However, such an otherness encountered will only produce an experience. I may qualify that experience, but it is not a qualification of an "unthematizable otherness."

Derrida : If you tie experience with horizon...

Iser : We have only a manifestation of imponderables. This holds true with regard to otherness, but equally, for instance, with regard to imagination. We only know of the imagination, or of otherness, in terms of their manifold manifestations, which are not forms of hiding. To say that these manifestations are forms of hiding is a very strong statement insofar as it lays claim to a knowledge regarding the nature of otherness and why its nature should not come out into the open. If I confine myself to saying that we have only manifestattions of otherness, I simultaneously acknowledge that there is something 'underneath' these manifestations, which in itself is unfathomable.

Now as to the implicit criticism that translatability may exercise a pacifying role in the conflict of interpretations, I am prepared to admit that there is a pacifying element involved when things have to made negotiable. However, such a negotiation has to be seen in the light of what you once stressed when talking about the way in which current discourses keep appropriating one another in order to make up for their respective deficiencies. This mutual appropriation of discourses gives birth as you have said to "monsters." Translatability is a form of negotiating the space between a subject matter and the register into which the latter is to be transposed. Pacification may be one of the options according to which this negotiation is executed,

but is not identical with it. What it, however, allows is watching what appens when such a translation occurs. As there is no third dimension overarching subject matter and the register, a concomitant observation of what appens in interpretation is necessary. This need not necessarily be a form of self-monitoring; however, it may alert us to the various risks inherent in any act of interpretation. Therefore it seems expedient to conceive of interpretation as translatability.

Derrida : Just a word before Ernst, first. I'm not sure that we have the choice between war and peace in this area, between different kinds of war or peace. And although there is no third party, no existing and reliable third party, I would claim that the third party effect, so to speak, is also unavoidable when you translate. And it is in this logic that the question of war and peace occur, that negotiation occurs. But I won't keep Ernst...

Behler : Just a brief comment, combined with a question. I see the chief merit of your paper, Wolfgang, in establishing a model of cross-cultural interchange, in its operational, functional, formal aspect, moving away from what you call presuppositions, or metaphysical bindings. If one looked for a term from the history of metaphysics that would correspond to what you are describing in its form and functioning, you gave us the name "interpretation." One could also think of "tolerance" in the sense of the German Enlightenment: *Nathan the Wise*, Lessing, Kant, and Mendelssohn. And we immediately realize how much value-burdened such a term is in comparison to your model, which is value-free. It points out the functional aspect. I have a question only in this regard, concerning the last section of the paper, in which you talk about recursive looping. I am wondering whether this process of recursive looping does not (it's a question) constitute a metamodel, in the sense of hermeneutic dialogue, ongoing agreement, that then moves away from the more formal aspect of your model that you have described initially.

Iser : I would not be inclined to conceive of recursive looping as a "metamodel". Instead, it is another variable of interpretation. Variable means that beside a hermeneutic procedure of interpretation we also have one of recursion. The difference between the two procedures depends on what is interpreted. If a text such as a holy or a literary one is translated into another text such as a commentary or a critical assessment, the hermeneutic circle would be an appropriate way of dealing with the space between the subject matter and register into which the latter is translated. It may equally

apply, as Ricoeur has outlined, in psychonanalysis in which the circular movement is meant to bring out the hidden *telos* in the *arché* and the hidden *arché* in the *telos* of the psyche. Recursive looping as a procedure of interpretation is appropriate when something unknown and openended like a foreign culture has to be made manageable or even comprehensible. The loop developing in such an undertaking is one of output from a certain stance that will come back as a corrected input from what it has targeted, and thus a fine-tuning of a further output will follow. In this ongoing feed forward and feed backward the familiar and the alien are made mutually translatable. General systems theory conceives of the ongoing interaction between systems in terms of recursion.

Whether this is 'war and peace' is not to be decided categorically. Instead, both circularity and recursion produce shades between warring and pacifying, and translatability may be one of these shades.

Adams : My question has to do with how much investment you have in your cybernetic looping analogy. First of all, in your paper it seemed to me that you were advocating it as a model. In your remarks a little later it seems more than that. In your remarks at the beginning, it seemed to me you were offering it as one possible model. Or on the other hand, is it simply a metaphor for a sort of perfected dialectic? And if it is (and this is the malicious part of the question), is it not more complex than what is being explained?

Iser : First of all, I would not call it a model. Recursive looping is a strategy of interpretation that may well be combined with other strategies such as the hermeneutic circle. There is some kind of feeding forward and feeding backward going on even in an interpretation of a text. If initial guesses and hunches do not tally, their 'inadequacies' have to be fed into a renewed attempt for fine-tuning further outputs. Something similar happens in the talking cure of psychoanalysis. There is always some kind of looping going on in our otherwise predominant circular procedure and vice versa. It depends on the subject matter to be tackled in interpretation which procedure is given prominence and which remains subservient. Furthermore I should not like to call the operational mode of these procedures dialectic. There is actually no synthesis to be aimed at when something is translated into something else. In other words, the so-called result you arrive at is not a resolution, but it is an arrival in terms of what you

intended to do with regard to the looping, and it may lead you to results which may not have been in the orbit initially?

Adams : I understand all that. I wasn't thinking of "dialectic" in the sense of Hegelian dialectic. I was simply thinking of it in terms of some kind of ongoing conversation, the notion of conversation itself. I find the analogy you use - I don't know what it is exactly that troubles me about it, but I feel that the analogy is attempting to give some kind of status, new status, to a fairly simple notion, which is that of how a conversation progresses, how ideally it progresses.

Iser : I am not so sure whether conversation is a fairly simple form of talking. Gadamer once said, whenever you enter into a conversation you will never know what will come of it. A conversation continually shifts what is talked about into unforseeabilities. Ivy Compton-Burnett has thematized the unpredictability inherent in any conversation. Her many novels are nothing but ongoing conversations, in the course of which the characters say awful things to one another. Each character pulls out an implication of what his or her partner had said though not exactly meant. As these procedures structure the conversation, an unforeseeable verbal violence takes place. This is recursive looping gone wild. However, when it is used as a strategy of interpretation, it tends to be a controlled operation. What I am advocating is just to find out how these strategies can be employed whenever we interpret. And such an activity cannot be equated with what takes place when we are engaged in a conversation, although conversation may be a specific type of recursive looping.

Pfeiffer : You just made an interesting remark that there are shades between war and peace, and that brings me to the question, on which levels are the recursive loops operating? And are there, and if so, which are the stopping rules for different levels on which they operate? My impression is that once the recursive loops have started going, in terms of systems theory there are hardly any stopping rules for them, which would mean, on the level of discourse... which *could* mean, on the level of discourse, that the notion of culture dissolves. That would be okay with me - I mean, I'm just asking whether this might be a consequence, that the theoretical notion, the concept of culture would dissolve. And on the practical level, I might lean towards Jacques. I think the series of superimpositions, to use your term - between war and peace maybe, but still superimpositions, might go on. In terms of cultural

practice, the tendency toward superimpositions might go on.

Iser : What I have tried to put forward is not something that overarches war and peace. I have singled out an interpretive procedure whose workings I intended to elucidate Now as far as the stopping is concerned basically, the looping can go on. When the looping comes to an end, especially in cross-cultural interaction, pragmatic reasons are more often than not responsible for it. In this respect Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus.* is an interesting case in point. German Idealism is fed into British Empiricism in order to remedy a decaying laissez-faire culture. The recursive looping which brings about such a transfer changes German Idealism just as it does the British attitude, because the respective peculiarities of each culture are fed forward and bounce back as a corrected input into the other culture concerned. The recursion organizes the interaction in the course of which German Idealism turns into a phantastic image that, however, is able to remedy British deficiencies. Culture, then, is no longer a definable entity, but something which undergoes changes in the process of interaction out of which something other ensues of which the two cultures concerned are just components. These components, in turn, may then initiate another type of process. Something similar is to be observed in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. War and peace as fairly clear-cut ideas are dissolved to the extent that each turns into an ingredient of the other out of which a ramified conspiration ensues. This is also a stopping of the ongoing recursion and by no means a preconceived superimposition on what is in play or plays recursively against one another: i.e. war and peace. Recursion is therefore another mode with regard to cross-cultural and intracultural interaction, which marks it off from other modes such as mutual appropriation, incorporation, or assimilation. However, I do not want to make a statement about culture, but about interpretation. For this purpose recursive looping is a strategy for porting over from a stance to something as yet unknown, openended, etc. Obviously, there are other strategies of interpretation such as a negotiation of the space between or of a differential unfolding of something imponderable into a graduated sequence of profiles, which continually shade into one another in order to fathom something incommensurable such as God, the world, or humankind for that matter.

Miller : This is a wonderfully rich, complicated paper, and it's obvious that a lot of your thinking gets concentrated into it. You've done us the honor of trying to put everything into a short paper. Years and years ago, Paul de Man wrote a review of a book of mine along with one by Joseph Frank, who's famous for writing an essay called "Spatial Form and Modern Literature," and he accused me... de Man accused me of being a "space critic." That was the title... And in the context of de Man's thought at that time, the opposition was not between spatiality and language, but space and time. Too much space in Miller, not enough time. If Miller had only read Heidegger on temporality, he wouldn't talk in these spatial images. And so on... and I fear this is still a danger in my own thinking forty years later, or thirty years later. I'm about to publish a book called *Topographies*, so it hasn't gone away. When I read your paper, this question arises: I find an under-text that runs throughout it, not just of individual spatial images, but of spatial images which develop in my mind as I read the essay, a kind of a mental image which is very spatial, a kind of an allegory, which I could define, in which you have two cultures, space between, some borders there. Each one of the cultures has levels. There's an action, which is a recursive looping, another spatial image. Whatever you do with it, a loop is a spatial image. And cybernetics itself, as you know, is a metaphor borrowed from the image of steering. When I think about cybernetics, I want to think of an example of it, the simplest one that comes to my mind, and one that I think Wiener uses, is steering a boat, using a rudder. Ideally, you might say, a self-steering boat. When you're sailing alone across the ocean, you have a wind-vane, you set a course, and when the boat gets a little off that course, the wind changes a little on it, then it corrects it, brings it back, and there's a constant recursive looping, governed by the goal that you set. But... Right. Well, but you can go to sleep. The idea is that you go down below and go to sleep, and you get up in the morning and the boat, unless the wind has changed a lot (that's the problem with this), the boat is still waded in the same direction And those are pretty sophisticated engines. But they're cybernetic engines. Here, a list of these images I just looked through: you spoke in your discourse just now of circularity, orbit, a space between... Oh, I should have mentioned that there's a lot of mirroring and refracting going on here, that's a primarily visual-spatial image. The different cultures are refracted, or mirror one another, or refract one another. There are intercultural levels. There's the image of figure and ground. You speak of mapping out, of mutual

spotlighting, of frame of reference (another spatial image), of vantage point, of stances for looking at and assessing one another, of umbrella concepts. Now most of these are innocent enough terms, but they add up in your paper, as I said, to a kind of a... I got a kind of picture in my mind. And my question is (and it's a serious question, it's not frivolous), what's the status of these figures? That is to say, are they accidental? That is, could you say what you're saying in some other language, or are they essential?

Iser : In German, I could say it differently.

Miller : You see my question. And I think it's important, because spatial figures are so fundamental to the language that you use here. It looks to me as if you really need it, and as if it does determine to a considerable degree - I would say maybe even absolutely - the image you have of cultures, and in fact, your discourse. That is, the discourse is turned into something that can be spatialized. And translatability, you spoke again of translation as a spatial image. It's hard to know what other word you could use, but you highlight it in your discussion, the way in which translation is transposition, that is to say, carrying over. I'm inclined to do the same thing myself, but I worry about what happens when you turn a culture into something that can be spoken of in terms of refraction, mirrors, stances, spaces between, and so on. And so you see my question.

Iser : As to the terminology which I used, I was hesitant to commit myself to a clear-cut definition, because definitions confer predicates on what they are set to determine. I'd rather juggle with terms in order to avoid their reification. Something similar was the case in psychoanalysis as Freud conceived it. He avoided reification of his terms, whereas a great many of his followers converted them into a sort of Hegelian concepts. Therefore you get monstrosities like 'phallic wounding' or 'oral submission' as categories. This is a trap I tried not to fall into. However, I concede that there is a spatial element in the idea of looping.

Miller : So it seems to me.

Iser : The space we are talking about also has temporal implications. When in an interpretive act something is negotiated, or a porting over takes place, a great many selections have to be made for the interpretive intent to realize its objective. This equally applies to the space between the signifier and the signified.

Miller : Negotiation, by the way, doesn't seem to me spatial. It seems to me a linguistic term. Negotiation involves dialogue.

Iser : Due to the selections made in any act of interpretation the space between the subject matter and the register bears a temporal inscription. The space is always different, yet ever present, as it is opened by interpretation itself. It has another dimension when texts have to be translated into other texts, or when a foreign culture is to be interpreted. Hence the selections made in the process of negotiating or porting over that space will equally vary. What interpretation creates is thus a spatio-temporal difference between subject matter and the register into which it is transposed.

Miller : I suppose what I was worrying about is not so much the space/time opposition as the space/sign or space/language one, and what happens to language, to something like a culture, which for me exists as very complicated systems of signs (including visual ones, not purely verbal ones). What happens when you speak of those unimaginably complicated collections of signs as a spatial manifold, or a spatio-temporal manifold. The cybernetic image involves a lot of time. The self-steering boat goes through waves over a period of time in a recursive loop, that is of course temporal. I don't think that worries me. It worried me when de Man said there was too much space and not enough time. But I think the real feeling I had was that none of these figures... the choice of the figures is not, can never be what you wanted to say it was - - innocent - any more than it would be innocent for me to say, I choose a rhetorical language, the language of figures of speech. It's not absolutely innocent. It's back to Aristotle and before. It belongs to the whole of Western culture. I'm not doing anything that begs any questions by speaking in terms of synecdoche, and metaphor, and so on. That's obviously not the case, because if I were doing what you're doing, I would transpose it into a very different category of language. And my... I'm just wondering whether one is back again to what we were talking about a little earlier, and that is that on the one hand it's impossible not to have some phantom third, however hard you try not to, and that one shouldn't be ashamed of that, but be self-conscious about it, both about the power that you get out of using a consistent set of figures like this, but also of what's lost, that is to say, what can't be subsumed under that, any more than rhetorical terms can talk about everything. But it makes a lot of difference which you choose.

Iser : The reason why I used a mixed terminology is due to the fact that I did not want to commit myself to a particular system, such as rhetoric. This makes it hard for me to relate to Paul de Man. If you stick to one particular system for your terminology, you are bound to get in trouble. A mixed terminology regarding spatial or temporal at least indicates an awareness that something is being coped with which either defies conceptualization or which makes fairly well-defined concepts slip.

Miller : What I was saying was that you do. That is to say that these visual images are so dominant in your paper that they constitute, I spoke of a kind of undertext, which builds up, in my mind as a reader, to create a kind of a visual theatre for these elements.

Derrida : "Undertext" is a spatial metaphor.

Miller : Yes, it is.

Adams : You're talking very spatially.

Miller : I'm still as spatial as ever. Therefore I'm sensitive about it, and anxious...

Iser : If my terms trigger this kind of visual imagery, as you say they do, I would still be inclined to maintain that my terminology releases an ideational sequence which does not have the characteristics of a system.

Miller : You're not...

Iser : Not that I'm saying that I did that deliberately, mind you. I'm only responding to...

Miller : But that was my question, whether those figures are necessary or...

Iser : An ideational sequence provides leeway for associations and contains suggestions that allow for shading the various features into one another which have emerged through the selections in the space between.

Derrida : You negotiate with spacing, spacing... I don't know whether it is an opposition between space and time. It's not an opposition. Spacing might be the pacifying, negotiating term. And I think, Hillis, you shouldn't feel so guilty for having been a...

Miller : A space critic.

Derrida : ... because you could have replied to our friend Paul de Man that *Sein und Zeit* has powerful pages on the unavoidability of, on the necessity of spatial figures, metaphors. So he doesn't advocate time instead of space. He can't claim that he could account for the unavoidability of spatial figures.

Miller : Even in talking about time, that's just the point, that Heidegger makes in that famous passage: there are only spatial images for time.

Krieger : I can begin, of course, by mentioning that de Man himself always had to define difference by talking about distance. So, I mean, no one escapes.

Yes, I have three questions about all the stimulating comments on these pages. First a very practical question with respect to our undertaking here. Since all interpretation is perceived as translation, so that what you are proposing here applies both to interpretation and to translation in general, I'm just wondering, since this applies even to the translation between two elements as closely related within one's own cultural discourse as my reading a text of yours and Hillis's, whether there is any difference in the attempt to apply this to the kinds of translations we must talk about in the gigantic cross-cultural leaps we have to take between, let's say, the West and the East? There are translations within our culture, interpretations in our culture, which are relatively minute next to the difficulties between my culture and your culture, or my culture and Jacques'. In other words, within the West there are all these degrees of distance in what seems to be one identical sort of operation. And yet one wonders, what are the differences in degree, as you try to apply your procedural proposals to the leaping across vast barriers between us and those cultures that we now, in this conference, are engaged in worrying about? What differences have to be calculated, if any? Or is it pretty much the same, with differences only in degree? That's my first question, a very practical one.

The second, I want to pick up what has been mentioned a number of times about the investment you have in the cybernetic metaphor. How operational is it? You mentioned that it is not a model, but then I assume you want to throw out the bottom of page seven, because on page seven you say, "Why is the mechanics of recursive looping an adequate operational model for translating cultures into one another?"[**2**] And then, the next

sentence is very troublesome: "It is appropriate insofar as it tallies with what one might consider the make-up of culture." "Tallies with" is a very powerful phrase with enormous investment in it of referential claim. We know how tentative all of us were in writing our brief working papers, and this certainly doesn't represent what you've been saying here. But if it should, then of course we do wonder about what kind of ("evidence" is too strong a word) what kind of authority will you want to give the claim? What kind of authority would you want to give the recursive looping, and so on? How would you demonstrate that it's a good model? As I say, these are all unfortunate questions in a way, because you've already really retracted those claims.

Pfeiffer : Sorry, Murray. Did you say page seven, bottom, "operational model" or "mode," because in my copy there is "mode."

Krieger : Oh, I'm sorry. I read it as "Operational *mode*" -- you're quite right. But "adequate" is the word that worries me, "mode" or "model." "Adequate," the question of adequacy. But yes, you're right, I misread it.

Krieger : Yes, my cybernetic process led me to read "model." It's the words "adequate" and "tallies with" in combination. And my third question shifts a little, asking about the whole question of the use of systems theory here, and your definition of culture as "an autopoetic system that continually generates its organizations," et cetera, et cetera. "In terms of general systems theory, a culture could be described as a network of interlinking processes, which, in turn, produce the very components that set the process in motion." This is very much, it seems to me, a systematic construct on your part. I'm saying that it is a claim of a construct. As a matter of fact, it almost seems like a new form of organicism, of organic metaphor. That is, "a network of interlinking processes, which produce the very components that set that process in motion" - that isn't altogether out of keeping with what some nineteenth century German thought. That is, the way in which an organic system cannot be imposed upon from the outside, is self-generating, and so on and so on.

Iser : It is just meant as a summing up of what has been implied in my basic statement. And if you qualify it as a"systematic construct" on my part, I can only say that at best it is an abstract from of description allowing us to conceive of how systems interact, disturb, and use one another, and how the outcome of such an interaction

may be grasped. It is a phenomenological description rather than a "systematic construct."

Krieger : Because it is, essentially, the distinction between mechanic and organic that August von Schlegel makes. Obviously, this is not intended to be an organicist theory. I'm just saying that some of the language here, once you set forth a systems theory and the definition of culture in those terms, runs the risk of defining a culture in somewhat holistic terms, even if the holism is generated from within rather than imposed from without. And the notion of "autopoetic" works that way.

Iser : The first question has two sides, at least to my understanding. When self-organizing systems interact they tend to bring about something that did not exist prior to this interaction. Culture, therefore, is something arising out of such interactions; it is not holistic, but emerging. Second, I do not want to imply let alone state that interpretation has the same function in a Far Eastwern culture as it has in Western culture, although I'd assume that it also plays an important role.

Krieger : I didn't mean to criticize. I was sort of throwing that on the table as saying, once we have this, we now have the problem of seeing what the enormous differences are in a similar operation, if it is similar.

Iser : Perhaps from a Far Eastern angle one would have to come up with something that is different in the way in which interpretation operates.

Krieger : It's Jacques' question about how many "translations" they are?

Iser : Well, the question of mode has been set right. Furthermore I did not intend to privilege recursive looping as a strategy of interpretation. I am well aware that there are other strategies operative in interpretation such as the hermeneutic circle, or a traveling differential, each of which is geared to the subject matter to be transposed into a different register. These strategies themselves also shade into one another in almost any act of interpretation with one of these strategies dominant and others subservient. There is an element of looping in the hermeneutic circle indicated by the toing and froing between a text and its understanding. There is also a differential operating in the circle, which unfolds this potential of a text into a sequence of graduated profiles. There is also a circular moment in the recursive looping, indicated by the feed forward and the feed backward, just as there is a

differential operating in the continual molding of input and output. And finally the travelling differential contains an element of recursion, because the graduated profiles into which it has fanned out the potential to be interpreted fold back upon such a potential, thus allowing to grasp it. We are able to assess the dominance or subservience of these interpretive activities in relation to the purpose that is to be realized whenever interpretation occurs.

Krieger : Although how about the "adequate" and the "tallies with"?

Iser : I shall come to it.

Krieger : Okay, I'm sorry. I thought that was part of the mode/model problem.

Iser : I'm following the sequence of your questions. As to the question of mode, I was astonished that I should have used it.

Krieger : I'm astonished too that I said it.

Iser : Did I really use that word?

Krieger : It's a wonderful cybernetic.

Iser : You objected to "adequate" and "tally."

Krieger : Not object; but worried about what you were investing this with.

Iser : "Tally" just means that recursive looping might be an adequate strategy of describing of what appens when cultures encounter one another, or when levels of culture, such as high, low, and popular culture interact. Perhaps, recursion might even designate the very processes that make up the life of a culture.

Krieger : One of the reasons it tallies, and must tally, in a way, is because you pre-protected yourself by creating both a negative and a positive feedback loop. In other words, the most obvious response to the looping is for someone who is a critic of imperialist cultures to argue, my God, this never really happens. We take the culture and superimpose, and we never let it speak, we never hear it, we're only forcing it to speak our language, et cetera, et cetera. Obviously, that would seem not to fit the model, except that this is a descriptive model, not a normative one. You say, well, look, there's a negative and

there's a positive. The negative loop is when we allow only a minimal return.

Iser : And when our output misses what it has targeted, it will return as a corrected input to be fed into a revised output.

Krieger : Exactly. And we only allow it to stabilize the system, not to destabilize it. The positive is, when it has repercussions, destabilizes, and then restabilizes. But in a way, of course, that makes your metaphor impregnable because you can't lose. That is, it's a metaphor that has it both ways.

Derrida : ... uncontrolled events, uncontrollable events, in that case.

Miller : Yes, I was going to say, you've kind of falsified what he says. The positive one is really destabilizing. It bombards it with uncontrollable forces.

Krieger : I said the negative is stabilizing, the positive is destabilizing. It's what I said. It's destabilizing in the extreme, the positive. That's the virtue of your model... forgive me... of your mode.

Iser : The mode I'm describing has the positive and the negative feddback loop as possible extremes on a scale.

Krieger : This is a virtue of the *mode*. I called it destabilization. But what I'm saying is, because so often, in reality, this is an ideal that is only reached among great...

Iser : But then you have to read further. I have pointed out that it depends on the aim of the discourse concerned that makes it veer either to the pole of the negative or positive feedback loop.

Krieger : Yes, of course. Yes, but I'm saying, whatever may happen in a particular situation, it'll fit somewhere on your spectrum.

Iser : Schematization has one advantage. It enables you to map out structures which you need, if you want to come to grips with a problem, and want to prevent confusion.

Derrida : Knowing what you're talking about is the first violence. If you want to know what you mean, that's the first violence.

Iser : I keep asking myself whether organicism is an overarching concept, whereas an autopoetic system is self-organizing that continually reacts to perturbations outside itself by modifying its internal structures.

Krieger : General systems theory is the same thing. But the organic, as I understand it, the organic theory of evolution is an open system as well, continually generating change.

Derrida : When we have time, I would like to ask you, what is an overarching concept? And then what is a non-overarching concept, if there is such a thing? A non-overarching concept - what would it be? A non-overarching...

Iser : The unconscious.

Derrida : The unconscious would not be overarching?

Iser : No, because Freud tried to describe it by drawing concepts, terms, words, and images from a welter of narratives and disciplines, ranging from mythology to physics.

Derrida : But the more it separates that way, the more it is all-embracing.

Iser : The very fact that Freud broke it up into primary and secondary process which interact prevents the 'unconscious' from congealing into an overarching concept in the Hegelian sense. Only the Freudians, as Pontalis has shown, later on did something of this kind by converting the Freudian designations into a sort of Hegelian notion.

Yu : Yes, I guess my comment (I don't know if it's a comment or a question) has to do both with the schematic dimension of the paper, and I guess it has to do with time and space. It has to do with Murray's first practical question. I like very much the idea of looking for some mode or model that is not one of subsumption, as far as the encounter between cultures is concerned, and that rejects notions of hegemony, and the monolithic, and the hierarchical, and everything. I very much like the critique of comparatism, and the sort of easy transcendentalism that is often... is usually uninterrogated. I read a review of a book on Nietzsche and Asian philosophy (which I haven't read - the book I haven't read myself), but the reviewer made a very, I thought, a very apt comment to the effect that work in comparative philosophy (and I guess I would include

comparative literature, or add comparative literature to that) often assumes that whoever is doing the work occupies an endowed chair of transcendental subjectivity, and that somehow therefore has a claim to be able to get to be standing at some point from which he or she has a panoptic gaze over everything. My problem is that, you know, when I place this into a historical and/or temporal context, it seems very utopian to me to be able to make these claims and to sort of declare, this is what translation is all about, this is what the encounter between cultures is all about. Both historically and institutionally (and again, just talking about China and Chinese literature historically), when the Chinese encountered the foreign culture at the end of the nineteenth century, it was not a happy encounter. And of course that's what motivated them to send their students abroad to learn all about Western weaponry, and then even Western weaponry in the hands of the Japanese had proved to be fairly devastating to Chinese culture. And so, in that historical situation, the encounter with the foreign culture didn't result in an alteration of the indigenous frame of reference. It resulted in a fundamental negation of it. They just had to throw everything out and look at the entire cultural tradition as being derelict in some fundamental way that allowed this total destruction to take place, and humiliation. So there's that historical instance that seems to test, you know, that somehow needs to test the model in some way. And then institutionally, we need to think about how, both in American institutions and in Chinese institutions, how Chinese literature is studied in the contemporary context, how it meets theory, and the terms in which it is talked about, which are usually unquestioned as universal terms, generic definitions or evaluative standards of one sort or the other. Then I think it's also difficult to see that the encounter is as un-political as we would like it to be, that somehow we can't take the politics out of the two terms of the relationship, either institutionally or historically. And how one does that, and how one can propose this model without taking into account the political and historical specificities, is a problem.

Iser : I perfectly agree with you. I did not describe a historical situation. However, in order to assess what appens when cultures encounter one another, a self-refexivity has to be inscribed into our acts of interpretation. Recursive looping does it almost automatically, as the output with regard to viewing a different culture will certainly return corrected and modified. Such a mode of interpretation recommends itself vis à vis our historical experience and the

interpretive practice current in our institutions. It would equally be recommendable to the politically inspired oppositional discourses that are now rampant.

Yu : Yes.

Iser : Oppositional discourses are in trouble, because they undercut a great many frames of reference, which they simultaneously invoke in order to make their agenda persuasive..

Yu : I think Hillis made a good analysis of that too the other day.

Iser : I should like to add William Paulson's book intitled *The Noise of Culture* as a further example of what recursion is able to do. Paulson maintains that literature is just noise in a technologically-oriented modern culture. Yet the noise creates perturbations for the systems that make up a technological culture. Feeding noise into other systems has repercussions on their self-organization whose readjustments enhance cultural circulation.

Krieger : The paper's so daring now that I think people are picking on it only because it dares so much. But I think it could dare even more, as I say, if you rhetoricize it and moralize it.

Iser : I do not want to moralize the mode of interpretation I tried to describe. It is a formal strategy and a feed backward. I would only be inclined to say at best the noise is the third position.

Krieger : I understand that. I think it is implicit. That's, I think, Pauline's point.

Iser : The noise is the third position.

Derrida : At the end of the discussion, I would come back to this problem of noise. I would like to.

Readings : I wanted ask you a question which, I think, comes into a lot of things people have been saying. But it has to do with a problem of translation, perhaps - I don't know. But the way in which you use "translatability" and "translation" as if they were synonymous. And I guess what I want to ask in the first place is something like: Can the presupposition of translatability be made available through translation? And I'm not sure that it can, which is another way of asking a similar question. I mean Jacques, though, just said that knowing what you're talking about is the first violence. And I would say,

no, it's the second; the first violence is knowing that you're talking. That's to say, you ask what happens when we are in fact engaged in conversation, and the question of whether one is engaged in conversation is a problem for me. And it's because I have a particular neurosis about the telephone.

Iser : That's what we share.

Readings : I'm constantly attacked by Americans and Canadians for my inability to converse at length on the telephone, and for my belief that people send me messages by not calling me, that to not call me is to send me some kind of a message. And I find that that means that there's a real problem often between us about the question of whether we're actually having a conversation when the telephone is silent, because I tend to think that they are, and they tend to think that I'm not. Then we're not. So what I want to say is, these are just little ways of talking about how there is a structural impossibility, it seems to me, to translation, that cultural exchange happens, but it happens in its structural impossibility. And we have to work out a way of thinking about how you can keep open that suspicion. And I guess that's where the negative/positive thing seems to me on the right track, but it worries me because it suggests somehow that you can - how can I put it? - introduce a margin of that structural impossibility as if it were a margin of tolerance. And there I've come back to what Ernst said about tolerance. The danger of tolerance is that it's not very tolerant to be tolerant if you presuppose the possibility of understanding, comprehension, or translation. Here I think of a remarkable movie by Werner Herzog, *Where the Green Ants Dream*, which is about mining and native aboriginal land rights in Australia, which raises a very severe problem because he's trying to work out some questions about mining, about mining as a form of translation, of transposition, about intercultural interaction. The film, I think, is remarkable because it points out that you cannot be sure whether you're engaged in conversation or not, and above all, you cannot be sure that you're engaged in any one conversation at a time. And I think that's another way of picking at the kind of problem I have here, which is, how do you know that the conversation you're in is one conversation? How do you identify one conversation? And here I think of my favorite example, which is "The Charge of the Light Brigade," a great moment in British history, precisely because what's at stake there is a terrible disaster that arises from the presupposition that a conversation is occurring, the presupposition of the possibility of

understanding, not on the basis of a misunderstanding, but on the basis of the assumption that understanding is possible in a situation where it's not. And I think, you know, Tennyson gets that right: the soldiers die without knowing that a mistake has been made. And then the problem becomes, how can you form a moral judgment about people who cheerfully die for no reason, pointlessly, in ignorance of the pointlessness because they presumed that no mistake had been made or that something had taken place. And this is like my constant sort of worry about the way in which we tend to assume in conversation, just in the last few days, that China or Japan is a very long way away and that France is very close. And I will tell you (I'm the only person here who lives in a bilingual culture), it's a lot nearer, China is a lot nearer to many people who speak English in Montreal than the person nextdoor who's a Francophone. I mean, very very simply, Chinatown is an area where only Anglophones can go.

Derrida : He is looking at me when he says that.

Readings : No, I happen to be drifting... This is not a question simply geographical. For example, I happen to live in French because I was so terrified when I got my job - Bill, you have to learn this damn language or you're going to be a disaster. And then I met someone at a cocktail party very soon who complained that where they lived everyone was Anglophone and they wished to have the romance of the French language. And I said, oh no, it's different where I am; wherever I go, everybody speaks French to me, and so on and so on. And of course it turns out, the punch line is, I then ask him where he lives, and he lives three doors down from me. All this to say, I don't think that translation and translatability should be confused, because I think that the structural impossibility of translation, even when very minimal, when very very thin, has to be kept open in a way that refuses access to notions of tolerance. I'm sorry, I went on too long.

Iser : The operational mode of interpretation that I have outlined would be totally overtaxed if it were to be taken for finding out whether a conversation takes place or whether what occurs in verbal interchange points to the structural impossibility of a conversation. The mode described is neither a divining rod nor anything overarching allowing predication. Instead, it tries to spotlight differences and suggests to what extent they can be dealt with in view of the fact that they can never be eliminated. Instead of postulating any kind of

thirdness, recursion arises out of a struggle with 'black boxes.'

Krieger : Everything has to be translatable because somewhere on a positive-negative scale one is translating.

Iser : There are still two questions to which I should like to respond. I have no problem with a "structural impossibility" in any act of translation. There is, of course, always a residual untranslatability which, however, as we have said earlier on, energizes the very attempts of translating something into something else. Furthermore this "structural impossibility" functions as an agency for specifying interpretive strategies. Recursion, circularity, interplay, and differential are for that matter modes for porting over, negotiating between, narrowing down, and carrying across what is apart and separated by the space between. For this reason I used the term translatability designating a set of conditions - - in the Kantian sense - in order to highlight that in each act of translation a specific condition may apply. In this respect my usage of translatability is almost congruent with your usage of Peirce's term "conditional possibilities."

Adams : Wolfgang, I hate to come back to this mode/ model business again, but there's one thing I wanted to say about it. If we began the two hours talking about modes, then mode surely becomes a model in time.

Iser : But not because of me.

Adams : Ahh - but I'm not sure that makes any difference. And I think even according to your own principle, it probably does. I was looking at a sentence on page seven which says... (I'm just going to use this to ask you a question, and I really believe that what I'm asking is an attempt to interpret, I'm not trying to criticize.) "Each output, in cybernetical terms, is an intervention into the organization of the system targeted, and such inroads bounce back as a heightened complexity of information." In any case, doesn't that situation always very quickly turn into an operation by certain rules? And then, if that's the case, isn't your system (as I will insist on calling it for a moment) a story which tells about a moment of fixity followed by a moment of disruption, followed by another moment of fixity, followed by a moment of disruption, and so forth? Is that the model you're - I hate to use that term, but is that the story you're telling?

Iser : No, because fixity and disruption would indicate that the mode concerned is a binary opposition.

Adams : Then why isn't it that then?

Iser : Recursion develops as a process in the course of which information is generated that is fed back into any subsequent feed forward loop. Recursive looping is an invasion into something as yet unknown, alien, or unmanageable. Therefore the input received from what has been invaded makes your initial output look different. This difference is the amount of information that you get back. And as this information has to be processed, the subsequent output is bound to be different. Processing information entails changing or rearranging the stance from which initially the inroad into some thing other was made.

Adams : But hasn't what you said just been spoken from only one side of what is a two-sided situation.

Iser : Yes, I do, but I do not know beforehand in which way my initial output is subjected to modifications when the 'system' into which I have made an inroad responds.

Adams : But aren't you presuming that the other side is doing the same thing?

Iser : When different systems, or cultures for that matter, encounters one another, or interact, I am fairly certain that the system invaded will respond. What I should like to add, however, is that recursive looping is only one of many interpretive strategies and applicable only when interactions between systems, cultural levels, or cultures have to be assessed.

Adams : You're not presuming, but you're hoping.

Iser : Yes, you have many options.

Adams : And the model is a model of desire, isn't it?

Iser : Hazard, it's not a model.

Adams : Of course it's a model.

Iser : No. It is a strategy of interpretation.

Derrida : But can we exclude the desire, or the word "desire," from this machinery? Or do you think it's totally impertinent to speak of something like desire in this system, model, or whatever? Something... desire or

anything which could have a metonymical relationship to desire - some force, some cause, something which pushes, or...

Iser : Yes. I do not want to deny that there is a desire in what I tried to say. But if you imply that the mode I had described is a means through which I want to desire something as yet hidden, I would have to say no. What I desire is to find out what happens in interpretation. If that can be called a desire, it is okay with me.

Adams : To find out what you *would like to have* happen in interpretation.

Iser : No, I am trying to highlight the diversifications of interpretation. I have confined myself to the exposition of one type in what was after all only a working paper. It is my 'desire', however, to find out why we do have such diversifications of the very activity we are continually engaged in. This 'desire' may be conditioned by the cultural code, meaning that we should have a look at what goes on in the marketplace of interpretation.

Birus : Well, I have a question to Ching-hsien and Pauline with respect to translatability in East Asia. I think there is a very pertinent case of translation, also in the Latin sense of *translatio*, of the corpus of scriptures from India to China, Korea, Japan - that is, the corpus of Buddhist...

Yu : Buddhism, yes.

Birus : ... canon. And well, this translation found a place, and now you have Buddhist cultures, or part of cultures, and Buddhism in India is nearly extinguished now. So at the original place where this began, there is quite another canon, or canons. And what is very important in difference to the translations in China, and Korea, and Japan since the middle of the nineteenth century: there was no power relationship between India and China, and so on, but it was a peaceful negotiation. Quite different was the relationship between Ancient Greek and Roman culture and that of the rest of Europe. And my question is: was it thematized? And how was it reflected in the practice of translation? Because there was a continuous reflection in translating about intranslatability, ways of translating, paraphrasing, and so on.

Yu : I think your point about the lack of a power differential is sort of related to what I was talking about too. That, you know, that had very much to do with the

fact that it could take place. The second condition that allowed it to flourish to the extent it did is the fact that at the moment that the Buddhist scriptures entered China, China was in a state of increasing political disarray, and so the influx was something that entered a context that was politically disunified and, you know, the central power was weakened. There were various local centers that could be established. And translation was something that took place almost as a business. I mean there were houses that were almost like factories of translation, where, in fact, a Chinese and a Sanskrit reader would work together. Most of the translation was done by the Indians, who learned Chinese and moved it into Chinese. And one of the interesting things that took place, I think, was that this was really one of the first moments when the Chinese became much more aware of what the qualities of their own language were. This is when tonal properties of Chinese were discovered. When they started chanting these things and trying to hear what it would sound like in Chinese, they realized, this is something very different. I mean, the awareness of the difference in the languages became thematized. I mean, there was a sense that this was an impossible thing. It never produced anything that was commensurate with the original, that reading a translation (I think one of the translators said) was like chewing somebody else's already chewed morsels of rice. So you always had a sense that it was of a second order; I mean, there was a very practical goal. Whatever the quality of the end result, there was this proselytizing goal that really drove the whole effort, and that allowed it to proceed regardless of the relative success or failure.

Birus : But this practical aspect... okay... But in reading the first pieces of Bi-yän-lu "The Writing of the Emerald Wall of Rock", one of the major works of Zen Buddhism, then you realize these loops of how to translate it...

Yu : Yes.

Birus : They consist in an anecdotic example, introduced by a short remark and followed by an incidental remark and an explanation of the example; then a canto, the poetical version of that anecdote, followed again by incidental remarks and explanations that often deal with the transfer of Buddhism from India to China and with the translatability of its main concepts.

Yu : Right.

Birus : And this far is away from only practical problems. And I thought there must be steps between this very practical challenge of a nearly impossible translatability and these paradoxical reflections (Kô-an) so characteristic for Japanese Zen Buddhism.

Yu : Yes, I think that's true obviously. I think it's also true that, as you said, there is an effort or a movement within the culture to appropriate that which is intranslatable, to produce something that can be defined as being Chinese.

Birus : Isn't that a good illustration of Wolfgang's paper?

Yu : It is, it is. Yes.

Derrida : Shall we stop? I wanted to come back to this problem of noise. Is there such a thing as pure noise?

Readings : It's white noise.

Derrida : I'm not saying this simply because of our common cult for literature. But on the one hand, let's take the example I referred to the other day of Salman Rushdie. Could we consider that this event - his work, and what happened to his work, and everything which was mobilized by that - is so peripheral? What does that mean - peripheral - in that case? So what's happening today with this so-called literary noise in our world, on the one hand? On the other hand, since noise is only determined as noise, as pure noise, from a certain place in the room or in the space, then there's nothing like pure noise. It's only relative. Then couldn't we say that not literature itself as something specifically institutionalized, identifiable as such, that the possibility of literature, the possibility of literature within language, could we say that the possibility of literature as the possibility of making noise - that is, as introducing some uselessness or some play, something in language - - is noise anywhere? This possibility of literature is at work in every language, in journalistic language, political rhetoric, etc. So the possibility of literature is here at work as a possibility. In that case, the noise is not pure, or if it is... to the extent it is noise, it's not noise. It's the most determining, one of the most determining elements in the system. So that's why this concept of noise (although I think I understand what is meant by that), this concept of noise...

Iser : Self-organizing systems feed not only on order but on noise as well, as Atlan maintained from whom Paulson took his idea of literature as noise of culture. Paulson relates that idea to a technologically based culture for

which literature as noise is a perturbation of the technological ecosystem. Literature is marginal in such a system and thus irritates the center. In this respect the margin becomes central in one way or other.

Derrida : What one calls noise is something one doesn't like to, doesn't want to hear. This is noise, this is pure noise. So it's a function in the system...

Iser : Yes.

Derrida : ... with repression, exclusion...

Iser : What you said about uselessness and all these other things are qualifications of what Paulson and perhaps Atlan as well call noise.

Derrida : The question of the desire is going to come back. Perhaps it has something to do with noise. That is, something which is apparently outside the system - and a moment ago you said, well, I'm just describing the inner function of the system - it's outside the system, but it's what makes the system work.

Iser : It is neither a subsumption, nor a predication of the system, nor an assessment of the system. It may be noise for the system: i.e. the system of interpretation.

NOTES

1. This appears at the beginning of the first full paragraph on page six of Iser's paper.

2. In my copy, this sentence appears in the middle of page eight.