Reading as system and as practice

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The patron god of hermeneutics, the bearer of messages from the greater gods, was also the god both of boundaries and of the crossing of boundaries, and the patron of a special mercantile class of what Homer called 'professional boundary-crossers'. Any adequately dialectical hermeneutic will be aware of the determinacy of boundaries but also of the need to transgress them, to be disrespectful of the limits of proper authority. My concern in this paper is with the elaboration of a Marxist theory of reading, and this reminder of the many and often contradictory roles of the god is intended to serve as a warning against the confusion of determinacy with determinism or the setting of interpretative sanctions.

Since the concept of determinacy is central to a theory of reading, I shall begin with a discussion of E. D. Hirsch's argument for the determinacy of meaning. In re-reading Hirsch's two books on interpretation I discovered again the pleasure of disagreeing with this argument: what seems initially to be a rather simple position is then hedged and complicated in such a way that a simple taking of sides becomes impossible. One thinks one has outmanoeuvred Hirsch, only to turn the page and find him standing in the place from which one's own criticism was directed. In Althusserian terms I would want to say that Hirsch is working at the edge of a problematic, and that his questions and his hesitations are therefore more interesting than his answers. This suggests the possibility of something like a symptomatic reading, the construction of a set of different and unintended questions in such a way as still to be consistent with much of his argument. At the same time it would avoid the danger of engaging him on his own ground and grappling with questions which are insoluble at the level at which they are posed.

In what follows I shall briefly isolate my points of difference with Hirsch and then try to shift the hermeneutic perspective by mapping
an alternative model, one which is not necessarily 'truer' but which carries different methodological and political consequences. I can perhaps best focus my quarrel with Hirsch's position by looking at his adjudication (in Appendix 1 of *Validity in Interpretation*) of two readings, by Cleanth Brooks and F. W. Bateson, of Wordsworth's 'a slumber did my spirit seal'. To put the point at issue crudely: Brooks stresses the contradiction between the poem's two stanzas (between the living and the dead girl), whereas Bateson argues that 'the final impression the poem leaves is not of two contrasting moods but of a single mood mounting to a climax in the pantheistic magnificence of the last two lines'. Rejecting the argument that the two readings could be seen as complementary, Hirsch opts in favour of Bateson's reading as the correct one, and he does this by reference to 'the most probable context': that of Wordsworth's 'characteristic attitudes' in 1799. Brooks's interpretation is disqualified on the grounds that 'from everything we know of Wordsworth's typical attitudes during the period in which he composed the poem, inconsolability and bitter irony do not belong in its horizon.'

In short, the correct methodological procedure involves a reconstruction of 'the poet's outlook' rather than an anachronistic projection of the critic's concerns and categories.

My initial problem here (and I claim no originality for it) is with the concept of historicity that underlies this judgement. In a first move a single context, a single speech situation is privileged as the closed origin of a meaning which is isolated from our own historical concerns and from all later functionalizations of the text. As Jauss argues, the consequence of the principle of forgetting everything one knows of later history is the irrationality of 'empathy' (*Einfühlung*) which cannot account for the conditions and determination of its own situation. This means, in Lentricchia's words, that 'the cultural subject that is ourselves, in [Hirsch's] argument, is not traced or marked by the history that was; the meaning of the past, in other words, has no meaning for us.'

The counterpart of this antiquarianizing strategy is a removal of the act of interpretation from its temporal matrix. Here the crucial supporting assumption is that 'historicity is not the chief component of a person's spiritual world. It is, rather, a limited domain of shared cultural experience apart from the bigger domain of unshared experience that makes up a person's world.' The possibility of understanding, in other words, is recuperated by a radical dehistoricization of the subject; and this brings me to my second problem: that of the category of the subject.

The appeal to 'Wordsworth' as the point of genesis of the poem's
meaning is possible to the extent that meaning is conceived in terms of private property. Thus the ‘speaking subject’ is established as the criterion of legitimacy because ‘it is the author’s langue as an internal possession, and not the interpreter’s which defines the range of meaning possibilities a text can represent’. Those critics who insist on ‘what the text says’ fail to recognize that ‘the text has to represent somebody’s meaning’. A comparison with quite different conceptions of meaning, however – that of medieval exegesis, for example, or that of most oral story-telling traditions – would suggest that the concept of meaning as the possession of a subject is not a universally compelling principle but is, rather, the function of a particular ideological set. Since meaning is taken by Hirsch to be ‘an affair of consciousness, not words’, the effect of this is to anchor meaning to an extra-discursive point of origin, a centred moment of authority which guarantees the stability of textual meaning.

This brings me to my third problem: the concept of meaning itself. The difficulty here is that Hirsch offers no definition of what meaning is, only of what kind of thing it is. The closest we get to a definition is perhaps this sentence: ‘Meaning is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent.’ It may be that all definitions of meaning are necessarily tautological; but tautology here directs us, through the concept of ‘representation’, to a presence which is external to language (hence its privileged proximity to the authority of the speaking subject). The same effect is achieved by the argument for synonymy. Hirsch concludes from his reading of Saussure that, because of the arbitrary and unstable relation between signifier and signified, and because the ‘same’ content can be expressed through different linguistic forms, meaning therefore pre-exists language. But Saussure’s point is surely quite the reverse: that words don’t stand for ‘pre-existing concepts’; that the signified is not an entity but a differential value; and that differentiality thus ‘divides any identity to mark it with what it is not as its condition of existence’.

There is a further problem here in that meaning is apparently conceived in terms of propositional content. Hirsch tells us, on the authority of Kant, that ‘cognitive meaning’ is ‘the only kind there could be’ (although ‘affects’ usually accompany cognitive meaning). The effect of this is to exclude the semantics of modality (the ‘interpersonal’ dimension of language) and the semantics of formal structure from the concept of meaning. Such a restriction seems to me to be particularly
dangerous for the interpretation of literary texts, in which the semanticization of a number of different linguistic levels tends to create a tension between what Lotman calls the ‘semantic network of relations of the natural language’ and a secondary semantic level.\textsuperscript{15}

Let me try to clarify this, rather schematically, by returning to the text under discussion:

\begin{quote}
A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course
With rocks, and stones, and trees.
\end{quote}

At the levels of propositional content and deixis a clear contrast is established between stanzas one and two. This is then modified by a number of lines of continuity: ‘She seemed a thing’ undermining the opposition of animate to inanimate; the repetition of ‘earth’ (with the semantic shift this involves); and the paradoxical inversion performed by the application of ‘years’ to ‘earthly’ (human) life and ‘diurnal’ to ‘earth’s...course’. At the metrical level, however, a quite different message is transmitted: the text’s rhythmic homogeneity proposes not an opposition but a continuity between the two stanzas. Within this predominant sameness relations of difference are in turn established: in particular through the play between the rhymes on vowel + [s] and vowel + [z]. This dialectic of sameness and difference within each level is, however, subordinated to the dialectic between the two levels which fills the paratactic gap between the stanzas with two incompatible modes of coordination: continuity or opposition.

This structural sketch is not offered as an ‘interpretation’ of the poem but is intended, rather, to indicate the determinate formal grounds which give rise to the possibility of different readings. I want to emphasize that a text is a hierarchy of levels of meaning which are in play; the ‘meaning’ of a text is a process, not a state or a statement. Clearly, however, a fuller reading of the poem would need to move beyond these formal conditions: perhaps to explore the text’s relation to other texts in the Wordsworthian corpus (e.g. the use of the marked lexeme ‘diurnal’ in a key passage of all three texts of the \textit{Prelude} –

\begin{quote}
yet still the solitary cliffs
Wheeled by me, even as if the earth had rolled
With visible motion her diurnal round!
\end{quote}
or to explore its intertextual transformation of the elegiac lyric; or to pursue Coleridge’s identification of the dead girl with Dorothy Wordsworth, and to relate this to the thematics of incest and necrophilia in Romantic poetry; or to investigate the poem’s status as an anthology piece, and the different aesthetic and pedagogic functions which have constituted its successive modes of textual existence. In all cases, however, the formal structure of the poem will partly constrain its recontextualizations. Hirsch does at times recognize this level of determinacy — that of the conditions of meaning. He argues, for example, that “a vague or ambiguous text is just as determinate as a logical proposition; it means what it means and nothing else”.16 But this seems to me to shift the focus of his analysis (from ‘what is meant’ to how things are meant) in such a way as to blur together two distinct theoretical objects.

The central point in Hirsch’s argument concerns the question of implication, and it is here, I think, that we can begin to reach the edges of the problematic within which he works. ‘Most of the practical problems of interpretation’, he writes, ‘are problems of implication. There are, of course, a good many instances where the most primitive and “literal” meanings of a text can come under dispute, but these are far rarer than controversies which turn on the “unsaid” meanings of a text’.17 This is a theoretical as well as a practical question: Hirsch acknowledges that ‘the determinacy of verbal meaning is entirely dependent on the determinacy of implications – that is, on the existence of a principle for including them or excluding them’.18

Implication is defined as a sub-meaning in relation to a meaning, and ‘that type which embraces the whole meaning of an utterance’ is defined as its genre.19 In these terms, ‘an interpreter’s preliminary generic conception of a text is constitutive of everything that he subsequently understands, and … this remains the case unless and until that generic conception is altered’.20 In other words meaning is relative to a context which is that of the ‘intrinsic genre’ of an utterance.21 Up to this point I am in more or less full agreement, as I am with the argument that the same piece of language will change its meaning as the relevant generic framework shifts — this is what I take to be implied by the statement, made in relation to MacDiarmid’s versification of a passage of prose, that ‘almost any word sequence can be subsumed by more than one intrinsic genre, and therefore can carry different implications’.22 I agree, that is, that meaning is determinate in relation to the context of a particular genre; but I would then want to add that genre itself is relatively indeterminate. The generic frame is not given but is a matter of
model; one which postulates that discourse is systemically structured, and which treats the concept of context in terms of its semiotic dimension. The model is foreshadowed in the work of Bakhtin/Vološinov on the situational codification of speech genres, but it has been most fully elaborated in Halliday’s development of the concept of register. Register, or genre of discourse, is ‘a contextual category correlating groupings of linguistic features with recurrent situational features’, and it can be defined as ‘the configuration of semantic resources that the member of a culture typically associates with a situation type. It is the meaning potential that is accessible in a given social context – a set of semantic options ‘at risk’ in a particular environment. It can be recognized to a large extent through formal markers, but its structure is semantic. Thus the distinction between one register and another is a distinction of what is said as much as of how it is said, without any enforced separation between the two’. The further integration of register with the context of utterance is achieved by conceptualizing situation as an abstract representation of relevant contextual categories – that is, by bringing the two concepts to a comparable level of abstraction. At this level it is a question of the situation type, which ‘is, essentially, a semiotic structure. It is a constellation of meanings deriving from the semiotic system that constitutes that culture’. This constellation, the semiotic structure of the situation, can be analysed in terms of the three variables of field, tenor, and mode, which ‘represent in systematic form the type of activity in which the text has significant function (field), the status and role relationships involved (tenor), and the symbolic mode and rhetorical channels that are adopted (mode)’. Although these categories are not themselves linguistic, they have direct linguistic consequences: thus field governs lexis; tenor governs mood, modality and intonation patterns; and mode governs forms of cohesion, patterns of voice and theme, and forms of deixis.

Discourse genre, or register, is a conventional institution: a normative codification of different levels of meaning appropriate to a type of situation. Discourse is therefore not the random product of an indeterminate subject operating ‘outside’ or ‘above’ the language system, and it is not an aggregate of conventional forms of expression superimposed on some underlying content by “social factors” of one kind or another. It is the production of a unified cluster of semantic, structural, and contextual meanings in accordance with generic norms. The codification of meanings appropriate to a situation is ultimately a function of the
ideological formation, and different social classes and sexual classes will encode the genres of discourse with different semantic potentials. The French linguist Michel Pêcheux has tried to schematize this process by arguing that meaning is produced within the various discursive formations (i.e. higher-level universes of discourse which subsume and distribute registers) which are intricated in the ideological system of a society. The discursive formation is a semantic matrix – a structure of relations of synonymy, paraphrase and substitution – which determines what can be said within and through a particular register.  

If meaning is produced in accordance with generic discursive norms, it follows that it is not an abstract potential but is closely tied to the structure of the context of utterance. Foucault argues that relations of signification can only be assigned within ‘a specific, well-stabilized enunciative relation’, because language is based on a principle of thrift which gives rise to homonymy and synonymy, and therefore to an unsteady sliding between signifier and signified which is only eliminated in a higher order of contextual codification where the fixing of signifiers to signifieds, and the selection from the complex network of implied predicates attached to a cultural unit, takes place. Pêcheux similarly claims that words receive their meaning from the discursive formation in which they are produced: ‘the meaning (le sens) of a word, an expression, a proposition, etc., doesn’t exist “in itself” (that is to say in its transparent relation to the literalness of the signifier), but is determined by the ideological positions brought into play in the socio-historical process in which words, expressions and propositions are produced’. Polyvalence and connotation are functions of the semantic shift that occurs in the passage from one discursive formation to another. To put this slightly differently: linguistic value is produced within particular generic constellations of field, tenor, and mode, and the lexical ‘core’ of a word is no more than an aggregate or average produced by the interlocking and overlapping of genres of discourse at any point in time.

A crucial aspect of the normative structuration of discourse is the encoding of subject positions within the complex of register. These positions are modes of relation to authority, but, as Foucault argues, the subject of the statement should not be regarded as identical with the author of the formulation – either in substance or in function… To describe a formulation qua statement does not consist in analyzing the relations between the author and what he says (or wanted to say, or said without wanting to); but in determining what position can and must be occupied by any individual if he is to be the subject of it.
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The formalization of registers over time means that there will not necessarily be a direct correspondence between the social position of speakers and the positions they will occupy in discourse. Rather there will tend to be a simple binary structuration of most genres, specifying a dominant position as that of a ruling-class adult male and a repressed position as that appropriate to members of dominated classes, females, or children. In the case of those registers reserved to dominated groups this coding will be reversed. But the crucially important fact here is the discontinuity between discursive positions and the actual social position of a speaker. The positions of utterance and reception which are specified as appropriate are empty and normative positions which may be filled, or rejected, or ironized, or parodied, or replaced with alternative positions; the speaker may fill them consciously or unconsciously, or may fuse them with other positions, or may simply be unaware of them or incompetent to fill them. There is thus a complex network of subject positions available to the speakers of a language (enabling the transformation of existing registers and the generation of new ones), and this means, in Foucault’s words, that

the subject of the statement is a particular function, but is not necessarily the same from one statement to another; in so far as it is an empty function that can be filled by virtually any individual when he formulates the statement; and in so far as one and the same individual may occupy in turn, in the same series of statements, different positions, and assume the role of different subjects.\textsuperscript{40}

To appropriate a discursive position involves the assumption of an ‘appropriate’ form of authority and rhetorical organization, and an appropriate ordering of the semantic field. That is, it involves the assumption of three levels of meaning corresponding to field, tenor and mode. To be the subject of a discourse is to ‘produce’ this complex of meanings; that is, to position oneself and simultaneously be positioned in structures of meaning that are presupposed in the structure of register.

The concept of presupposition is central to a theory of the way implied subject positions are locked into implied structures of meaning, in accordance with the norms of register and in such a way that the ‘subject’ understands itself as the real producer of these meanings. Volosinov’s conception of the enthymemantic structure of discourse defines the logic of self-evidence which is an important consequence of generic norms.\textsuperscript{41} Field and tenor of discourse determine the level of discursive explicitness, i.e. the appropriate kind and degree of presupposition, and this in turn establishes the quality of textual cohesion, especially anaphora. The ‘free’ (‘preconstructed’, implicit) information in a sentence is frequently
more important than the 'tied' information insofar as it anchors the discourse to a context of meaning other than the immediate context. In an analysis of scientific discourse, for example, Greimas indicates that its truth statements are always linked referentially to another discourse or another system of knowledge: its authority is established by inter-discursive reference to an endlessly deferred Authority. By establishing the limits of the sayable, genre allows the unsaid to be said without being uttered, i.e. without the speaker's taking responsibility for the enunciation of the message. In the case of ellipsis, for example, or of most rhetorical tropes, what is involved is a distribution of meaning between a foreground and a background of non-actualized meanings which fall within the scope of the semantic potential of a register.

I have proposed this model in order to try to make three points. The first is that meaning is always constructed in relation to a set of contextual determinations. It is not a function of extra-linguistic instances: of 'consciousness', 'intention', or any other transcendental point of origin. The second is that the propositional content of an utterance is not separable from modal relations or from its grammatical and rhetorical organization. And the third is that the objects or referents signified by language are internal to particular language varieties, as are the norms and protocols by which they can be analysed. The last point is, I think, close to Gadamer's dictum: Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache, and it suggests one major point of convergence between recent discourse analysis and post-Heideggerian hermeneutics.

This shift away from an atomistic and empiricist conception of linguistic representation has been closely paralleled in recent Marxist theory, where it has taken the form of a critique of the epistemological problematic of the possibility of a correspondence between thought and the real, and has led to a movement towards a semiotic conceptualization of knowledge and its objects. It is perhaps most dramatically exemplified in Hindess and Hirst's argument that the theoretical object is constituted 'within definite ideologies and discourses', whereas 'the distinction and the correlation characteristic of epistemology depend on objects which exist independently of knowledge, and yet in forms appropriate to knowledge itself'. Epistemology works by prescribing an appropriate form of order to theoretical discourse which will guarantee the fit between the theoretical grid and the order of the real. The bases for this closure of discourse are: (i) the construction of privileged and tautological criteria of validity; (ii) normative requirements concerning the mode of operation of discourse; and (iii) an aprioristic conception of the process
of production of knowledge. But discourse in fact remains stubbornly unlimited, because 'the forms of closure of discourse promised in epistemological criteria do not work. They are silent before the continued discourse of theories which they can never correspond to or appropriate'.

The occasion of this critique, within Marxism, is a rejection of the definition of ideology as 'false consciousness' (and of the scientism that accompanies it). If ideology is defined – as Althusser, for example, defines it, in Lacanian terms – as the 'imaginary', then the forms of the 'imaginary' cannot arise spontaneously from the subject (that would convert recognition into imagination and restore the constitutive subject), equally, they cannot be given by 'reality' (that would restore a simple reflection theory). The forms of the imaginary should, if these positions were to be avoided, have the status of significations, representations which are reducible neither to a represented which is beyond them, nor to an origin in a subject, but which are effects of the action of means of representation.

The signifieds of discourse (including the 'referential' discourses of science or history) are generated not from an extra-discursive real to which we may appeal as a final authority but within specific processes of signification. The decisive criterion of analysis could thus no longer be the relation between discourse and a reality which would be external to it, since discourses would be 'interpretable and intelligible only in terms of their own and other discourses' constructions and the categories of adequacy which they apply to them'. Instead, the relevant criterion would be that of the relations between discourse and power, the intricate of power in discourse. We would be specifically concerned with the institutions, the forms of transmission and diffusion, and the pedagogical forms which impose and maintain discourses and which contain dissenting or marginal positions within certain limits. It would still be possible to apply specific local criteria of adequacy and appropriateness (although not of validity), but there could be no appeal to the epistemological unity of a knowledge-process in general. Thus – to take an example from Hirsch – a legal and a literary hermeneutic will be differentiated not only by 'distinct contexts of relevant knowledge' but also by institutional prescriptions and precedents, and by an institutional delimitation of the ends of interpretation. They would not ('and here Hirsch would of course agree) be differentiated in terms of the ontology of their object; rather, the ontological status of texts is assigned by institutions in accordance with their social functions.

The 'specificity' of literary discourse is, then, that of an apparatus
of signification. In relation to this apparatus, the ‘literary’ constitutes a universe of discourse which is normatively reified as a distinct language game. It is, however, formally, although not functionally, continuous with other language games—in particular, with forms of metadiscourse (joking, irony in everyday language, mimicry, and so on); and the logic of its forms (its genres, its rhetorical strategies and densities, its degrees of ‘keying’) are normatively coded as being appropriate to the institution of Literature.

The most important attempt to define this institution remains, I believe, that of Marghescou. Noting the plurality of possible valid readings of a text, he concludes that none of them therefore has a formal necessity. What they all have in common, however, is that they insert the signifier into a new semantic field in which it tends to the realization of all its semantic possibilities. This functional constant is not an effect of the particular speech situation or of the formal structure of the message; nor is it the product of a subjective intention, because it is a shared semantic code which gives information about the operability of a text. Marghescou designates as the regime of a text this supra-linguistic semantic code which assigns the message to its type and labels it with directions for use without specifying a particular content. In itself, he argues, the text is a purely virtual entity, and ‘only a regime designating the textual function through opposition to its linguistic function and above all to other possible semantic functions could give form to this virtuality, transform the linguistic form into information’. I might note, in passing, that the concept of textual regime corresponds closely to what phenomenologists would call the ‘aesthetic attitude’: the difference is that the regime is conceived not as a fact of consciousness, nor even as an intersubjective consensus, but as a semiotic constraint.

A number of consequences flow from this definition. The regime, the semiotic institution, will determine the historically specific mode of existence of texts, as well as the point at which the line between the ‘literary’ and the ‘non-literary’ will be drawn. Further, the categories of text, author, and reader will have the status, not of entities but of variable functions; they are products of determinate practices of reading, produced by, not given for, interpretation. These categories are therefore unstable and shift in value as texts are translated from one literary system to another. Finally, interpretation, and a limited and definite range of contradictory interpretative strategies, are themselves constituted as determinate social practices within a specific historical regime. Thus the contradictory demands for determinacy and for
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indeterminacy of meaning are equally constituted within a particular historical matrix (or rather a series of historical matrices); and they are equally anchored in specific institutional sites (departments of literature, academic journals, conferences...). To repeat the earlier argument about the relation of meaning to genre, we could say that the categories of text, author, and reader are determinate in relation to the semiotic institution of Literature, but are indeterminate to the extent that this institution is itself historically unstable. Any text is therefore marked by a multiple historicity, although its historicities are always nachträglich, always components of our own horizon.

From this theoretical basis it becomes possible to move to a meta-interpretative level at which our concern is not with the rightness or wrongness of a particular reading but with the formal and social conditions and preconditions of interpretation: that is, with an analysis of the politics of reading and the historicity of readings – the synchronic and diachronic heterogeneity of interpretation. This shift of level has been characteristic, I think, of much recent literary theory, under the double influence of structuralism’s construction of its theoretical object as a poetics rather than a practice of reading, and the demand made by reception theory that our own reading be relativized to the chain of prior interpretations. The move seems to me a positive one, for two reasons: first, because of its generosity towards disparate readings, its insistence, not on disqualifying invalid readings but on recognizing the politically and historically relative validity of different interpretations; and second, because it opens the way to an inscription of our own situation (political, methodological, historical) in the object of analysis, as a component of that object.

For Marxist criticism – in which I include my own practice – such a shift of level entails paying particular attention to the institutions within which literary criticism adopts the form of a practice: that is, above all, to the educational apparatuses, which promote specific forms of circulation of writing and specific valorizations of certain kinds of writing; and which seek to impose a hegemonic ‘consensus’ at the same time as they also make available certain possibilities of resistance. It has also led, as in Bennett’s Formalism and Marxism, to a stress on the necessity of actively politicizing a text, on making its politics for it rather than extracting a politics which would be inherent in the text as a latent presence. But this conclusion seems to me to be excessively voluntarist, and I would prefer to adopt Heath’s formulation in a discussion of the effectivity of films:
To hold that a given text is ‘different for everybody’ is as much the end of any consequent political analysis and practice as to hold that it is ‘the same for everybody’; the implication of the latter is the possibility of a definitive analysis able to determine the use-value of a film in abstraction from the actual historical situations of its use; that of the former is a malleable transparency of the particular film to the determinations of the particular individual or audience, thus removing in the end all real basis for supporting through political-cultural analysis any film or films against any other or others.

Heath goes on to argue that

the idea that films can be pulled into more or less any ideological space... is itself perfectly abstract in the conception of freedom it posits, its forgetting of the determinacy and defining domination at any moment of specific ideologies, specific institutions of meaning, within the spaces of which are given the grounds of contradiction, mobilization, reappropriation.\(^9\)

What I find striking here is that the judgement as to the degree of determinacy required for interpretation is based on political rather than epistemological grounds, and thus bypasses any compulsion to establish an absolute and universally binding ground for interpretative practice.

My concern up till now has been with the systemic determinants of reading; but clearly there is a danger here of sociologic reduction, in which a text, or its interpretation, would be seen simply as the effect of a system. I need to stress now that the frames of genre and regime are not external and objectively given but are constructed from texts, in interpretation, as the norms that govern text and interpretation. In other words, the determinants of textuality are internalized and become the object either of confirmation or of subversion: they are themselves textual. I am proposing, then, that a description of the literary system needs to be complemented by a deconstruction of the concept of system. One way of doing this would perhaps be through a Marxist rewriting of De Man’s assertion that ‘a literary text simultaneously asserts and denies the authority of its own rhetorical mode’\(^8,6\) in which the ‘rhetorical mode’ would be taken as the ideological, automatized state of canon norms within a system. This would correspond to Lotman’s description of the artistic text as a process of tension between structure and entropic deautomatization.\(^6\)

To demonstrate what is at stake here, let me conclude this theoretical monster with a reading of a very small mouse of a text: an Australian poem (I think) which I saw recently on a button and which runs as follows:

SEND A DINGO TO LADY DI
The button on which this slogan is inscribed functions as both ground and frame. As frame, it is a material representation of the abstract genre to which the text belongs: that of the button-slogan. As ground, it is a material representation of the relation between figure and ground in interpretation, and also, since the button was circular, of the hermeneutic circle, which in this case is non-paradoxical insofar as the whole is given simultaneously with its parts. There is, nevertheless, a set of part/whole relationships between the surface structure of the utterance and several levels of presupposition; and in order to make sense of the poem we will need to rewrite it and expand it to include these levels.

At the first level, that of the surface structure, we will extrapolate generic specifications and the directions for use they give. In this case I would want to argue that the genre of the button-slogan mediates and transforms the registers of the joke and of graffiti or political slogans. However, at this level of generality we probably have insufficient information to fill in the modal ellipsis — that is, to answer the question of who should send a dingo. The possibilities are, I think, that the addressee is either a private individual or a public entity: either the real reader or an inscribed and indirect addressee. I shall opt for the latter interpretation on the basis of a projected intertext: I read the slogan (this instance of the genre) as the parodic transformation of another genre, that of the official announcement, the usual form of which would be something like ‘The Australian Government is to send [a thoroughbred horse, or a koala bear] to [a member of the royal family]’. The slogan would thus function as a polyphonic counter-statement, a voice from the crowd: ‘Why don’t you send a dingo instead’, and we could designate this anonymous cultural voice as the real ‘author’ of the text.

In order to make this expanded surface structure meaningful it will be necessary to rewrite it to a second level, that of cultural presupposition. The relevant cultural texts here are two myths constructed in the popular press: one concerning the killing of a baby in the Australian desert, ostensibly by a dingo; the other concerning the Princess of Wales and her pregnancy. At this level, then, the informed reader will rewrite ‘dingo’ as ‘dingoes supposedly kill babies’, and ‘Lady Di’ as ‘the Princess of Wales is expecting a baby’. It is important to note that the reference here is to two totally fictive constructs: neither the ‘dingo’ nor ‘Lady Di’ has any reality outside the registers of journalism.

Only at a third level of rewriting will we be able to extract the necessary information from these cultural sentences to yield the coherence of a ‘meaning’. The other, unspoken but forcefully present side of the
press coverage of the baby's death was an implicit accusation of the mother (with suggestions of a ritual sacrifice in the wilderness). In a hysteria of amateur detection, every Australian 'produced' this solution to the mystery as his or her 'own' interpretation. Thus at this level the reader will rewrite the first half of the sentence as 'everybody knows dingoes don't really kill babies, the mother did'; and the metonymic correlation with Lady Di's baby will pull the sentence together to give us the deep structure meaning: 'Lady Di really wants to kill her baby'. Level three therefore reverses level two, transforming it into an anti-monarchist fantasy.

This reading yields a fully adequate sense and is in accordance with the registers of joke and political slogan which are fused in the genre of the button-slogan. But it is not the only possible reading. If we put aside cultural signifieds for a moment and concentrate on the formal structure of the signifiers, we will notice a marked phonetic patterning: an alliteration on the phoneme [d], and the repetition of near-homophones in dingo, lady, and Di. This near-homophony suggests the obvious homonym: 'die', which effects the rhetorical conversion of a joking fantasy into a deadly Cratylic reality. The conversion is, I think, supported rhythmically: the metrical structure of the slogan is that of a nursery rhyme – the closest parallel that comes to mind is 'here we go round the mulberry bush', in which the last two words are repeated in the second line. If this parallel holds good, then the 'full' metrical form of the slogan would be:

\[
\text{Send a dingo to Lady Di,} \\
\text{Lady Di, Lady Di}
\]

in which the repetition of 'di[e]' unleashes a savage hostility onto the 'Lady'. In this reading the person whose death is fantasized is no longer the baby but the mother; and the screen image of Lady Di gives way to the ambivalent figure of a female monarch (a contradiction in patriarchal terms) and, behind her, the repressed figure of the Mother.

Only the first three levels of interpretation would, I think, be conceded by a theory of the determinacy of meaning. The fourth level refuses generic totalization by undermining the joking relation and by privileging the semantics of phonic substance over the semantics of cultural reference. It lays bare the contradictory play of meanings within an apparently unitary text, and it attempts to include the interpretative frame (the popular hermeneutic which 'discovers' the guilt of the mother) within its own horizon and its own polemical situation.
Reading as system and as practice

Reading is both a system and a practice, then; but as a practice it is not a one-off event. It is not the opposite of the social and the historical. If reading is necessarily (and historically) an individual practice, it is also something that we practise, that we learn by practising. The indeterminacy of a reading is always a function of the determinacy of reading; but it is only by learning how to define the boundaries that we will known how to cross them.

NOTES

26 Hirsch, *Aims of Interpretation*, p. 3.
56 Marx describes the categories of bourgeois economics as being ‘forms of thought which are socially valid [gültig], and therefore objective, for the relations of production belonging to this historically determined mode of social production...’.
Reading as system and as practice
