CHAPTER

I

Five concepts in search of an author: suite

Whether you can observe a thing or not depends on the theory which you use. It is the theory which decides what can be observed.

Einstein to Heisenberg

'Lor!', cried Mrs. Boffin. 'What I say is, the world's wide enough for all of us!'

'So it is, my dear', said Mr. Boffin, 'when not literary. But when so, not so.'

. . .

'But what was tokenz?'

'Marks', said Mr. Podsnap; 'Signs, you know, Appearances – Traces.'

'Ah! Of a Orse?' inquired the foreign gentleman.

Our Mutual Friend

The first little bird flew into the bush . . . , and it sang – 'Who's bin digging-up *my* nuts? Who's been digging-up *my*-nuts?'

Timmy Tiptoes went on with his work without replying; indeed the little bird did not expect an answer. It was only singing its natural song, and it meant nothing at all. But when the other squirrels heard that song they rushed upon Timmy Tiptoes and cuffed and scratched him, and upset his bag of nuts.

The Tale of Timmy Tiptoes

Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still.

T.S. Eliot

'The question is', said Alice, 'whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.'

'The question is', said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master – that's all.'

Through the Looking Glass

1 Two short (tall?) stories

I offer two short stories about the world we inhabit and how we can know it. According to the first story we can survey the world, disinterestedly, 'from outside' and, at least to some degree, arrive at a rational (God's-eye) view of its constitution. According to the second story, the character of our knowledge is always dependent on the observer's angle of vision, and phenomena are only describable from 'within' particular discourses,[1] which indeed determine what are to count as 'the phenomena' in the first place. We can call the first story the Newtonian story, the story of 'Enlightenment' (a story which has brought us much that we, in the West, hold most dear, over a large range of human activities). The second story we can call the Einsteinian story,[2] the story of 'Modernism'. This book could be described as an attempt to think through some of the implications of inhabiting this second story for the study of what we call 'ancient' literature.

2 Are you receiving me?

There are many versions of 'reception theory', but, on any of them, interpretation cannot be separated from the ways texts are, and have been, received by readers. Let a poet start the conversation:

> I met a traveller from an antique land
> Who said: 'Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
> Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
> Half-sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
> And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,

[1] Cf. Veyne (1988a), who uses the image of a fish-bowl (118).

[2] For the importance of Einstein, and especially his paper of 1905, 'The electrodynamics of moving bodies', for literary theory see Holquist (1990) especially 20–1, 156–62. A number of earlier writers can, of course, easily be appropriated for 'Modernism' (Montaigne, Sterne, etc.).

> Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
> Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
> The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed;
> And on the pedestal these words appear:
> 'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings –
> Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!'
> Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
> Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
> The lone and level sands stretch far away.

We could interpret this poem as a fable about reception. How, for example, should the inscription be read? Is it a sign of Ozymandias' authority? Or rather of the transience of all earthly power? The poem embodies a clash of viewpoints, and, consequent on this, a clash of readings. In the presumed historical context we have both Ozymandias' view and the view of the artist who mocked the king's pretensions and yet produced a work of art (this on the assumption that, in the ambiguous eighth line 'the hand that mocked them and the heart that fed [i.e. 'them': 'the passions'], the hand and heart are, respectively, those of the artist and the king, and are the objects of 'survive', taken as a transitive verb). Each finds a different meaning in the statue. But there are at least two further possible viewpoints within the poem, the traveller's and that of 'I', the speaker of the lines who may, or may not, also be the poet Shelley. There could be a further implication that both art and human greatness survive, even amid an eternity of sand. Although tyrant and sculptor are now dead, Ozymandias' 'passions' outlast them both, and live on as depicted in the shattered fragments, and that despite the sculptor's placing mockery; yet they are also ironized by their new context. And the 'despair' which an onlooker now feels is presumably quite different from that envisaged by Ozymandias, monarch of all he surveyed. And the complexities do not stop there. For there is also the question of where authority resides, in the poem, for identifying, and describing, these diverse receptions. How reliable, in other words, are the various voices and the claims made for them? And, beyond that, my reading of the poem, in the light of reception theory, becomes itself a tiny part of the dialogical processes of its reception and thus of any argument about its meaning. *Meaning*, could we say, *is always realized at the point of reception*; if so, we cannot assume that an 'intention' is effectively communicated within any text. And also, it appears, a writer *can never*

control the reception of his or her work, with respect either to the character of the readership or to any use which is made of that work.

Let us juxtapose with the voice of 'Shelley' a second, more academic voice. In the *Journal of Roman Studies* for 1989 there appeared an essay on the *Eclogues* by Richard Jenkyns, which begins thus:

> There is an obstacle to our natural appreciation of Virgil's *Eclogues* which looms as large in their case as in that of any poetry whatever. . . . though they themselves take Theocritus as a model, they were to become the fountainhead from which the vast and diverse tradition of pastoral . . . was to spring. To use them as a model was in itself to distort their character . . . Moreover, the growth of the later pastoral tradition meant that many things were attributed to Virgil which are not in Virgil . . . It is hard, therefore, to approach the *Eclogues* openly and without preconceptions about what they contain . . . No poems perhaps have become so encrusted by the barnacles of later tradition and interpretation as these, and we need to scrape these away if we are to see them in their true shape.[3]

Anyone at all familiar with the writings of classical scholars will have met this kind of rhetoric before, for here we approach what is still, for many classicists, the holy of holies, the reified text-in-itself, its meaning placed beyond contingency. Produced in an apocalyptic moment of creation (like the emergence of Athena out of the head of Zeus) the text comes forth, fully armed with the intentions of its creator, and available and present to at least the wiser readers of the day. Unfortunately, during the intervening years, it suffers depredations from the follies, incompetences and sheer ignorance and naivety of our nearer ancestors (particularly those unfortunate enough to live in the Middle Ages, as we quaintly call the thousand years from St Augustine to Dante). Luckily modern classical philology is at hand, to roll back the years and reveal to us the original in all its gleaming, pristine purity. I exaggerate, of course, but not much (and will my irony help, or hinder, the reception I hope for, but cannot control?).

Some of the terms Jenkyns uses to valorize his approach merit further inspection. For example, he starts by invoking the discourse of the 'natural'; a competent reader, it is implied, would, 'naturally' and

[3] Jenkyns (1989), 26. Further quotations (in order) are from 26, 29, 35, 31, 37, 36. When Jenkyns invokes such parallels as *Le Grand Meaulnes*, we see the discourse deconstructing itself (29). For the sensibility cf. Jenkyns (1980).

without excessive difficulty, arrive at an original meaning corresponding with the 'true shape' of the poems, were it not for the barriers interposed between reader and text by history, tradition and critical misinterpretation. But, it can be replied, this drive for interpretative singleness, far from being in any sense 'natural', has a history and is rooted in specific cultural practices; it would, for example, have surprised Dante, for whom the text was, precisely, 'polysemous', containing many signs, including allegorical senses not necessarily under the full control of the (human) author (*Letter to Can Grande*, 7). Jenkyns likewise draws a sharp distinction between what is '*in* Virgil' and interpretations 'put *upon* Virgil'; but such a distinction will only hold absolutely firm if we posit a 'metaphysics' of the text and a meaning immanent within the signs regardless of any readerly activity. Jenkyns urges us to approach the *Eclogues* 'without preconceptions' (while at the same time reminding us that they are modelled on Theocritus, and assigning them to the pastoral genre, thereby inviting a certain sort of reading); but any notion of a naked encounter between a text and a reader who is a sort of *tabula rasa* is absurd. We all approach the reading of texts with the baggage of our values and our experience, with certain categories, assumptions, prejudices and 'fore-understandings'. To have such baggage is what it is to be a human being in history; *without it we could not read at all*. It is easy to show how Jenkyns' own essay can readily be situated in a particular time and particular place, dependent on particular (contestable) methods of interpretation, and revealing particular (equally contestable) local tastes, containing the traces of the Victorian writers Jenkyns so admires, and with ideological implications which could be further unpacked. Thus Jenkyns, we may note, finds 'a sort of shy urgency' in 'the tiny scene of the children in the orchard' (8.37–41) which 'some have thought the most affecting thing in all the *Eclogues*' ('all is so small, all so tender'); of *Eclogue* 10 he writes 'one has only to read line 14 or line 52 aloud to hear their lovely cold romantic sounds'. Further instances of a post-Romantic sensibility of this kind include his remarks on 'the mystery of ocean or its perennity or even its salt indifference', or his references to the 'sweet, pretty' world of the Italians in the *Aeneid*, and the 'modest country-gentlemanliness' of Evander's life-style. None of this, of course, means that Jenkyns' reading is a purely subjective or private one. Rather it reflects public argument, and institutional practices and questions. It is enmeshed in previous readings by previous reading communities, and thus testifies to much wider agreements and disagreements than the

merely here and now. Or rather the here and now is always the locus of discourses stretching back into a largely lost past and forwards to an unknown future. But, for all that, it is evidently the view of a British scholar of 'our' time.

'Jenkyns', we may say, is enlisting, in support of his own reading, the authority of a particular (here mystified) version of historicist discourse. In Classics one of the founding documents of this brand of historicism is Wolf's *Prolegomena ad Homerum* of 1795. In a letter to Heyne, Wolf stated that 'the most pernicious' of the obstacles to 'genuinely historical research' are the opinions 'which attempt to adapt antiquity to our taste, our scholarly desires and artistic ideas'.[4] In practice, however, readers may find their responses modified by a reading of 'Homer'. Thus, just as the use of 'our' smooths away competing tastes, so too such a notion of the formation of taste seems to ignore the influence of the past on the present. We do not merely interpret 'Homer' by the light of our taste, since the Homeric poems have themselves contributed to the formation of that taste. Historicism of this kind in the end denies history. Homer has been changed for us by Virgil and Milton, who have left their traces in his text, and thereby enabled new possibilities of meaning. Aesthetic preferences and supposedly 'pure' historical judgements in the event prove inseparable, as Wolf's own judgements can illustrate. Indeed we need to remember the historical contingency of the categories involved, categories including 'the aesthetic' and 'the historical'.

Two views about the significance of works of art are not infrequently set in opposition. The first ('humanistic') view is that such works are the vehicles of eternally valid truths and experiences (but it may be doubted whether such verities exist or, if they did, whether we could recognize them). The second is that these works are wholly or largely contingent on an original set of historical determinants (but against this clearly readers can both enjoy, and advance persuasive readings of, works about whose historical circumstances they know little, or nothing). Again a widespread recognition that, almost inevitably, we read *from the present interest* conflicts with a desire for otherness and a supposed recognition, or experience, of it during the process of reading; theorizing the gap has, however, proved difficult.[5] In this book, in an attempt to negotiate these two sets of conflicting positions, I shall explore a historicized version of

[4] Wolf (1985), 246.

[5] Thus in Beer (1989), 1 there is a lack of 'middle' between the claims in the first and second paragraphs ('Literary history . . . starts now . . . Engaging with the *difference* of the past . . .).

reception theory, associated above all with Hans Robert Jauss; but it will be one of a less positivisitic character, which will concede rather more than he does to the operations of *différance*, the key term of Derrida's, which combines the idea of difference (meaning is an effect of the contrast between signs) and deferral (meaning always resists closure, a final – or originary – meaning, because signs never stand still). Jauss's 'reception-aesthetic' (to use his preferred designation) is linked with the German hermeneutical tradition culminating in Hans-Georg Gadamer's important work *Truth and Method*, published in 1960 (the 'and' of the title is disjunctive). On Gadamer's view 'the truth of works of art is a contingent one: what they reveal is dependent on the lives, circumstances and views of the audience to whom they reveal it'.[6] In Gadamer's words, 'It is part of the historical finiteness of our being that we are aware that after us others will understand in a different way'. Understanding in which 'the dead trace of meaning' is 'transformed back into living experience'[7] is always made *within history*; indeed our historicity is a necessary concomitant of understanding of this kind. Beliefs and fore-understandings ('prejudices' to use Gadamer's word) are not barriers to understanding but their precondition.[8] Interpretation also involves a constantly moving 'fusion of horizons' between past and present, text and interpreter. Accordingly, to use a more Eliotic formulation, we have to learn to respect not only the presentness of the present but also its pastness, and not only the pastness of the past but also its presentness.

From such a reception-theory stance I shall advance two theses, one 'weak' and the other 'strong'. The weak thesis is that numerous unexplored insights into ancient literature are locked up in imitations, translations and so forth (this thesis may be uncontroversial, but it is more honoured in the breach than the observance). The 'strong' thesis is that our current interpretations of ancient texts, whether or not we are aware of it, are, in complex ways, constructed by the chain of receptions through which their continued readability has been effected. As a result we cannot get back to any originary meaning wholly free of subsequent accretions. Meaning is produced and exchanged socially and discursively, and this is true of reading, even in a society like ours, in which it has become, to a greater or lesser degree, a 'private' activity. In order to be read, a text has to be made *readable*, in a complex process which begins

[6] Warnke (1987), 66. [7] Gadamer (1975), 336, 146.

[8] Cf. Michaels (1978), 780: 'Meaning is not filtered through what we believe, it is constituted by what we believe'; cf. 782, and Gadamer (1975), 358.

with the acculturation of children and continues through educational institutions to wider interpretative groups. If we take the case of Homer and Virgil, the weak thesis would be that Virgil gives us powerful insights into Homer; the strong thesis, that, since Virgil, no reading of Homer, at least in the West, has been, *or could be*, wholly free of a vestigial Virgilian presence – not even one given by an interpreter not directly familiar with Virgil's poems – because the Homer Virgil opposition is so deeply inscribed, both in the exegetical tradition and in the wider culture, because the two texts are always and already culturally implicated. In general poets have played the largest part in creating our sense of what earlier poems can 'mean', partly because their 'readings' have carried such cultural authority.

Accordingly, when we read an ancient poem, we have to remember the vast amount of cultural activity over the centuries which has made it possible for us to do so, including such material and institutional factors as scriptoria, publishing houses and the whole apparatus of scholarship, together with countless acts of appropriation by readers. To take a specific instance: 'Horace' and 'Horatian' are ideological signifiers, always already written but always on the move. Tennyson's 'To the Rev. F.D. Maurice', for example, can be read as an imitation, or recreation, of the Horatian invitation poem, its stanzas recalling Horace's Alcaics and echoing one of Horace's most famous phrases ('far from noise and smoke of town' recalls *C.* 3.29.12). The young Tennyson, we are told, had learned the Odes by heart, and thoroughly internalized what they stood for. Tennyson is writing to a friend who was a classical scholar and a unitarian minister, and who had aroused hostility by denying the doctrine of Hell. Tennyson, a modern 'Horace', invites him to the Isle of Wight to see his godson and to share conversation and companionship. Friendship thus blurs into Roman *amicitia* (indeed it is my contention that they cannot now be wholly disentangled), British imperial rule and the *pax Britannica* into the *imperium Romanum*, Christianity into pagan ethics, Tennyson in his house and garden into Horace on his Sabine estate. The poem is a small part of what 'Horace' now 'means'. And yet many scholars continue to believe that Horace is the 'same' today as he was 2,000 years ago.[9]

The point can perhaps be clarified by means of an example from one of literature's 'sister arts'. A form of historicism has now been operative for some time in the performance of 'early music'. Such 'authenticity', it is

[9] Cf. Smith (1988), 48, 53.

claimed, takes the listener back to a more accurate recreation of the original work in its first context. But, even if such a recreation were possible (anyway doubtful), how could we know, exactly, how such music was, 'then', 'received'? Richard Taruskin has argued, plausibly, that, behind the historicist crust, the crucial point about such performances, at their best, is rather their *modernity* (even if the appeal to the authority of a historicist discourse initially helped to validate the new approach). He shows how the style of performance can be linked with the aesthetics of Modernism, as defined by Pound and Eliot in literature, or by Stravinsky in music. Bach's 'authentic' interpreters are really 'reinterpreting' him 'for their own time – that is, for our time – the way all deathless texts must be reinterpreted if they are . . . to remain deathless'.[10] In a contribution to the ensuing debate, Charles Rosen, arguing that 'the philosophy of Early Music is indefensible, above all in its abstraction of original sound from everything which gave it meaning', concludes: 'Every performance today is a translation; a reconstruction of the original sound is the most misleading translation because it pretends to be the original, while the significance of the old sounds have irrevocably changed'.[11] The musical analogy can also assist in destabilizing reified conceptions of the literary text. We can readily concede that a musical performance, though necessarily time-bound, can be a wholly satisfactory 'realization' of a score on a particular occasion, without thereby becoming in any sense definitive. Moreover we have been shown that a work like Handel's *Messiah* was performed by the composer in different versions on different occasions, and was only given a single canonical form by subsequent editors and performers. With music the metaphysical 'text-in-itself' is more evidently a mirage.

Jauss's historicized version of reception theory is not without its defects. It exaggerates the knowledge which we can have of earlier readers, thereby reverting to a positivism which it supposedly rejects. It over-emphasizes the conformity of reading practices within designated 'periods'. Indeed, on the model of reading I am proposing, the identity of a period is intricately connected with the cultural politics of reading; *a period is recognized as such only at the point of reception.* Confident divisions of period, whether ancient or modern, constitute an essentializing move. What we call 'our' time is always something made up of fragments of 'the past'. Similarly the boundaries we select for historical

[10] Taruskin (1988), 197.

[11] Rosen (1990), 52. I shall return to this argument in ch. 4; Rosen's formulation of it involves obvious reification ('the significance of the old sounds').

definition are always, from some other perspectives, tendentious, or arbitrary, or hegemonic. We privilege a 'period', or a 'culture', which we then define, and characterize, on the basis of our selection, eliding innumerable possible differences of place, life-style and discourse. Periodization – like the division into Antiquity and the Middle Ages, or Republic and Empire – is so engrained that we take it for granted (we can call this 'the ideology of periodization'). Similarly, since the 'present' is not one thing, the difference between past and present need not be seen as *necessarily* greater than the difference which exists today within a single 'culture'; thus 'understanding' some Romans may not be more difficult than understanding some of our fellow citizens.

In an anxiety to avoid the charge that reception theory treats all interpretations as equally valid, Jauss resorts to a variant of the traditional appeal to the 'verdict of the ages', redefined by him as 'the successive unfolding of the potential for meaning that is embedded in a work and actualized in the stages of its historical reception as it discloses itself to understanding judgement, so long as this faculty achieves in a controlled fashion the "fusion of horizons" in the encounter with tradition'.[12] Quite apart from the problem of deciding what constitutes an 'understanding' judgement (and who is to decide), the notion of 'potentiality' (i.e. that the various interpretations were, in a sense, always 'there') is either trivially true (the potential is whatever meaning has been assigned), or occluded idealism, or false. How, for example, could any Roman, before the rise of Christianity, have guessed that Ovid's *Metamorphoses* would be subjected to Christian allegorizations of a sophisticated and comprehensive kind (whereby, for example, the story of Orpheus became, *inter alia*, an allegory about Christ and the human soul), which may well have appeared to readers operating within new paradigms of interpretation reasonable, authoritative, or even inevitable? If interpretation is contingent, then its future is unknowable in advance. For Jauss, by contrast, reception is, in Aristotelian fashion, organically inevitable rather than historically contingent. In the next section I shall accordingly modify Jauss's picture in the light of other, more deconstructionist models of dissemination. But the central point, I believe, still holds. What else indeed could (say) 'Virgil' be other than what readers have made of him over the centuries?

[12] Jauss (1982), 30; cf. the idea of 'horizons of potentiality' in Booth (1988), 91, and cf. 86.

3 Framing contexts

We can look again at what to many is the 'scandal' of interpretation, the fact that texts can be read so variously, that meanings proliferate. This proliferation is not, however, a purely arbitrary process, for there is always a connection between the framework within which we read texts and the interpretations we give of them (which is not to deny that our reading practices may themselves be interrogated, and modified, during the reading process). The point can be illustrated by looking, briefly, at two competing readings of Horace *Odes* 1.20. The piece is usually read, against a discourse of patronage or *amicitia* (that network of mutual obligations which bound together Roman society), as a panegyric of Maecenas, recalling his recovery from illness. Horace invites his grand 'friend' to dine with him; while he cannot serve the expensive wines Maecenas is used to, he will provide a wine with sentimental value, bottled by his own hand, on the 'farm' Maecenas had himself given him. In line 5 (if *clare* rather than *care* is read) we may be reminded, obliquely and ingeniously, that Maecenas preferred to stay within his original status as an *eques* (*clarus* was normally applied to senators), despite his wealth and his influence with the *princeps*. The contrast between the (comparative) poverty of the poet-friend and the greatness and wealth of the addressee was, it is claimed, conventional in such poems, reflecting social values and a preoccupation with status. An alternative reading has been proposed by Colin Macleod, who sees the Ode, against an Epicurean grid, as concerned with the dangers of success, to which are opposed the philosophical ideals of friendship and privacy.[13] Macleod finds a significant contrast between the wine which has been stored for a long time (*conditum*) and the acclaim given once only in public at the theatre (*datus*), which he reads as an implied depreciation of public success. So too with the contrast of wines: Horace is free since expensive wines do not control his cups (let Maecenas take note). On what basis do we adjudicate between these two readings? And in this case, we may observe, they are, as well as being different, not readily commensurable readings, so that it is not easy to resort to the common tactic of suggesting that both are partial and proposing a third which incorporates the other two. Each interpretation has its own precision; each interprets what it sees as the significant data. Choice between them is likely to depend on

[13] Macleod (1983), 225–9; cf. Nisbet and Hubbard (1970), commentary *ad loc.*

our overall view of 'Horace' and the general character of his work. But that, in turn, rests on innumerable other interpretative acts, every one of them open to dispute or revision, and dependent on prior reading strategies. Words will not stay still.

New reading practices accordingly bring new readings, for example, those recently constituted within 'feminism'. The presentation of Cleopatra in *Odes* 1.37, and in particular the apparent about-turn in that presentation in the final stanzas, has been variously discussed and accounted for. Steele Commager's seductive New Critical reading, in terms of 'antithetical and metaphorical structures' creating 'a double moral commitment' within a 'tense unity', stresses the poem's 'denseness of verbal suggestion' by which 'history has been concentrated into image'.[14] This approach can be compared with contemporary readings of Donne or Shakespeare (to which Commager refers), or of Marvell's 'Horatian Ode' for Cromwell (a poem partly imitative of 1.37) which became, in the hands of Eliot and his followers, something of a *locus classicus* for the virtues of 'maturity', 'poise', and 'ambivalence', in its presentation of historical figures. Feminism can offer us an alternative way of accounting for the poem's 'obliquities'. The now-traditional title, the 'Cleopatra Ode', is misleading, since her name is suppressed, unspeakable. The Ode attempts to fix the meaning of Actium in the West in terms of social, racial and sexual ideologies. *Libertas* resides with the victory of Caesar. The omission of other leading participants foregrounds the opposition between woman and man, the queen of Egypt and Rome's leader, the latter an embodiment of *virtus* (the quality of being a *vir*). Cleopatra thus becomes the 'Other' in terms of both race and sex. After the battle she is given the 'male' characteristics of bravery, philosophical equanimity and regal stature. This partial regendering (*nec muliebriter*) is the more surprising because the doves figuring her in line 18 are called *mollis*; we can map this word onto an epic discourse (an analogous simile is used of Achilles' pursuit of Hector in *Iliad* 22.139f.), but we can also map it onto a moral/sexual discourse which condemns *mollitia*, effeminacy, as a root cause of the decline of Rome. Thus Caesar brings a measure of enlightenment to Cleopatra by defeating her, and in this way enables her to transgress her gender (thus becoming 'other' in yet another sense), but only by death. How can 'women' 'win', within this

[14] Commager (1962), 88–97; quotations from (in order) 88, 91, 94, 93, 95. Among feminist readings of Latin poetry I am particularly indebted to the writings of Maria Wyke, especially her notion of the elegiac mistress as *scripta puella*: Wyke (1987).

discourse? This reading seems to offer as precise and comprehensive an account of the poem as Commager's. The common complaint that feminist readings emphasize some details at the expense of others misses the mark, since this is something all interpretations do – *and must do*. And in general feminists do not occlude their *interestedness*.

Texts, it may be, are endlessly *redescribable*. And they are constantly being made rereadable in multifarious ways, and in that sense are always 'in production'. Let us imagine we find a text in an unknown language, which is therefore initially unreadable. Or would it be better to call it a 'pre-text', for, if a text were not *already* readable, how could we know that it was a text? Entertaining the hypothesis of its potential readability, we find someone to translate it for us. The translated text is already an interpretation (see chapter 4), since translation depends on prior reading practices. We are now in a position to map that text onto some sort of interpretative matrix (to a large extent this has already been done in the act of translating). Today that matrix will usually be a historical one. The text is now readable *in a certain way*, but our original axioms are not transcended, nor what we constitute as our 'final vocabulary'.[15] We are moreover part of what we are describing. Critics and scholars attempt to establish stable grounds for interpretation in a number of different ways, including authorial intention, historical context, ideology, genre, literary history, the nature of language and so on. The catch is that all these are as problematic as the 'text', dependent on other 'texts', and susceptible themselves to destabilization.

The difficulties with intentionalism are now widely familiar. How far do we 'intend' what we say? Are words wholly under our control? Can we have knowledge of another person's consciousness? Do signs offer direct access to reality? And one trouble with contexts is that there are too many of them. Contexts are not single, nor are they found 'lying about' as it were;[16] we have to construct them from other texts, which also have to be interpreted. (And by text I mean any vehicle of signification, so that in this extended sense a mosaic, or a marriage ceremony, is a 'text' as much as a book.) For example, Sallust's Sempronia (*Cat.* 25), one of the 'new women' with a more 'emancipated' life-style who supposedly appeared in the late Republic, is frequently cited as an analogue for the mistresses presented, in more stylized form, in Roman erotic poetry; and, of course, a woman with this name existed, whereas Lesbia or Cynthia could be an

[15] Rorty (1989), 73 for this phrase. [16] So Felperin (1990), 126.

invented character. But our only access to Sempronia is through a piece of writing, within a particular discourse, by an aristocratic, male politician, so that she too is a 'written woman'; we have no way of knowing how she would have described herself, whether she had internalized a discursive role like that mapped out in Sallust, and, if so, whether in all social contexts, or only in some, since particular modes of description are often specific to particular discourses. In Derrida's notorious phrase, 'there is no outside-text' ('il n'y a pas d'hors-texte'). This does not mean that there are no non-linguistic entities, rather that all meaning is generated, and exchanged, within some signifiying system or other.[17] There is no unmediated access to 'reality'. As with historical context, so with genre. Francis Cairns argues that only if we recover the precise ancient understanding of genre (as set out, for example, in Menander Rhetor, a Greek rhetorical writer of the third century AD) can we give a true account of ancient texts. In connection with the supposed continuity of ancient generic practices, he claims that 'in a very real sense antiquity was in comparison with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a time-free zone'.[18] Thus, in his search for an objective, non-contingent basis for interpretation, he presents us with a world of unchanging, eternal essences, floating above the apparent contingencies of history; producing a curious (if familiar) combination of historical positivism and a covert Platonism which reifies concepts and dissolves history into an eternal now. However, to have assigned a work to a genre does not *precede* interpretation, rather it is *already to have interpreted*.[19] Cairns also avoids any recognition of what we might call 'the politics of genre'. We might instance Ode 4.2, where Horace encodes a public/private dichotomy within generic distinctions between grand and humble lyric, in order to celebrate Augustus' regime. Genres need not be reified, but can be understood discursively, as part of the dynamics of social transaction and communication, and of artistic practice.

The frames within which reading occurs, *and must occur*, become, on this view, provisional, pragmatic, heuristic and contingent, means of controlling textual indeterminacies by establishing agreed procedures and goals. We cannot operate without them, but we can constantly (re)make and unmake them and thereby the possibilities they open up or close off. The danger arises when they become naturalized or otherwise

[17] Harrison (1985), 15, 21.

[18] Cairns (1972), 32. My objection here (as elsewhere) is not to Platonism *as such* but to its occlusion. [19] Cf. Michaels (1978), 788.

congealed as (occluded) metaphysical entities (i.e. categories of fundamental being). For example, the notion that texts have stable meanings may operate as a useful heuristic 'fiction' to facilitate interpretation. But when the resulting tradition becomes unacceptable to enough readers, they may have to initiate an alternative 'fiction', that texts can be appropriated for any position. (It should be clear that I am not making any exception for my own proposals.) It is in this way that we may view the current turn, or return, to the reader, and not as something which could solve all outstanding problems. A written text is a set of marks until a meaning is construed by a reader (in that sense an author is also always a reader); to that extent texts should not be separated from the processes by which their meaning is constituted. Moreover certain obviously institutional readings – like those offered in universities – are connected with issues of power, since rewards (and penalties) are awarded in accordance with whatever is regarded as success or failure in these operations. The academy legitimates itself by identifying 'problems' to which it can offer 'solutions'; the will-to-power to impose a particular reading, and to persuade others of its validity, is thus integral to the whole academic process. Authority is variously inscribed within particular reading practices, which require (for example) the avoidance of 'anachronism' and so forth. Judgements are always socially constituted, and based on 'an invocation of shared values and public beliefs'.[20]

But problems remain, with readers no less than with (other) contexts.[21] For example, constructions like that of 'a competent reader' (who decides?) or 'an implied reader' (always already a matter of interpretation) seem to amount to little more than the critic himself in another guise. It is hard to discover what readers 'really' think (whatever we take that formulation to mean), especially since any questions we ask have agendas already written in them. Any division between immediate response and reflective critical activity is likewise easily deconstructable. Accounts of reading usually have little to say about minute-by-minute readerly reactions (boredom, distraction, etc.), or the connections we make between a particular text and other areas of our lives (often quite outside the public domain). Accounts of readers thus tend to oscillate between the 'ideal' and the 'historical'. Since interpretation is a socially informed activity, the notion of 'an interpretative community', with

[20] Michaels (1978), 787.

[21] See Moore (1989), 106–7 for a brief but trenchant critique.

shared assumptions, methods and goals, a notion associated above all with Stanley Fish, the leading American proponent of 'reader-response criticism',[22] seems an obviously useful one. But we soon encounter problems of definition. Are we talking about small groups of readers – e.g. radical feminists, deconstructionists, Fishian readers etc. – in which case these are not wholly isolated but overlap? Or of readers within larger periods – Elizabethan readers, Augustan readers etc. – in which case how are the periods to be delineated? How far can there be dialogues between different communities? Is Shakespeare part of 'our' community, or of another community? Is Fish guilty of 'the ideology of communities'? Accounts of readers can be redescribed as competing stories about reading.[23] The Fishian reader, who constantly modifies her understanding of sentences as she reads (as a result of adjusting her sense of their grammatical and syntactical relations) never seems to learn, but is always amazed by the next example of the text's 'self-consumption'. Fishian reading has, in that sense, a narrative shape: surprise, leading to re-structuring, issuing in self-discovery. Problems like these are debated, with particular vigour, within feminism. What does it mean to read 'as a woman', especially if gender is taken, not as something biologically determined, but as tropical and textual?

Texts, we can say (following Derrida), have a capacity for reingrafting themselves within new contexts, and thus remaining readable. As Derrida has it: 'Every sign, linguistic or non-linguistic, spoken or written (in the current sense of this opposition), in a small or large unit, can be *cited*, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable'.[24] In this way texts ensure their 'iterability' (though this formulation erases the agency involved) in a process of 'dissemination'.[25] In the light of this, instead of treating texts as having more or less fixed meanings located firmly within partly recoverable backgrounds, which help to explain them, we could negotiate the possible connections which can be constructed between texts, yet with an awareness that this involves a constantly moving 'fusion of horizons'. Every reading of a work becomes a fresh 'instantiation' with its own

[22] For the doctrine *in nuce* see Fish (1980), 3: 'the reader's response is not *to* the meaning; it *is* the meaning.' Fish (1989), 68–86 easily disposes of Iser's view that readers fill up gaps and limited indeterminacies in otherwise determinate texts ('Why no one's afraid of Wolfgang Iser').

[23] Culler (1983), ch. 1, especially 64–83 (65–9 on Fish).

[24] Derrida (1977), 185.

[25] Cf. Felperin (1990), 95–9, 121–30; Culler (1983), 121–34.

character (as we can see, for example, from our own re-reading of books at different periods of our lives). The process of *re*contextualization was already in motion with the text's first receivers, so that there never was an obviously fixed original context. Rather each work becomes an intervention within an intertextual field, which, however much it tries to stake out a position, never wholly succeeds in doing so, and whose meanings are constantly realized anew at the point of reception.

If we now return to the Gadamer–Jauss model of reading outlined in section 2, with its stress on the necessarily *historical* nature of understanding, we can see more clearly what I have already suggested is its principal defect. For this model does not, in the end, relinquish the comforting 'metaphysics of the text', that movement towards ideality, of which (in theory) it is suspicious.[26] The text, despite the interpretative movement within time, oddly 'remains the same work'.[27] The problem here may be clarified if I return to my musical analogy. A musical work only becomes such when it is realized in a performance (whether this is a public performance, or a private reading of the score 'in the mind's ear'). Every performance is different from every other performance. A performance of a Bach concerto conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängler differs from one conducted by Christopher Hogwood in tempi, in phrasing and articulation, in pitch, in the number and type of instruments used, in the notes themselves. We may dislike either, or both, but we can only do so by presenting, or positing, a rival realization. No musical performance, even one directed or sanctioned by the composer, could be definitive for all time; indeed composers perform their own works differently on different occasions. We should think then not of a series of more or less imperfect embodiments of an hypostatized perfect performance (a Platonic 'idea') but of a set of performances (some more satisfying than others to particular listeners), displaying 'family relationships'; but nonetheless involved in an unceasing movement of *différance*. And the signs themselves will not serve as grounds, since signs are meaningless unless 'read', realized, and anyway the signs will differ in different editions of the score, which indeed give only very approximate indications to a performer. (Analogously a carefully paragraphed and punctuated modern text of an ancient author, quite unlike an ancient text in presentation, can be seen as an appropriation, a making familiar, and

[26] But contra Graff (1985–6), 122: 'in Wittgensteinian terms, this assumption [that interpretations may be predetermined by what they purport to be interpretations *of*] is built into our language game.'

[27] Gadamer (1975), 336.

also, necessarily, an interpretation. The operations of *différance* are already at work in the very (re)constitution of the text.) A concerto by Bach cannot then be 'the same', but has to be involved in a process of differing, for where can that 'sameness' be located? Even a recording cannot stay the flux, for the effect of listening to a performance by Furtwängler today is different from the effect of listening to it at some earlier time, and indeed it is not the same 'I' who listens. So too with a verbal text. A set of signs becomes a poem when it is realized by a reader, who thus acts as a 'performer'. She will have to decide innumerable details of phrasing, rhythm, sound, tone, syntax and so on, and in that sense we cannot draw a firm distinction between reading a poem and offering a (critical) reading of it. Every reading is different from every other reading; once again there is no text-in-itself, but only a series (potentially endless?) of competing (or complementary) readings. Is a poem, in other words, better thought of as *an event (in time)* than as a thing?

4 Telling stories about the past

All current approaches to reading involve, at certain points, historical claims of some kind (we are all historicists now). But there are many histories, and many competing stories about history. History can be seen as a socially embodied, socially negotiated *practice*, constructed discursively. In situating a 'literary' text within history one is therefore negotiating between (at least) two different 'codes'. Any attempt to define history is subject to the rejoinder that such definitions are essentializing, and that, within them, power is being negotiated and distributed, with winners and losers (feminists would argue that women have been among the principal losers, since, in the now notorious word play, history has been, primarily, his story). One of the most influential definitions, Aristotle's in the *Poetics* (1451a 5–7), marked out (despite the somewhat dismissive attitude to history) a distinct area for historical writing, legitimating in theory the practices of Herodotus and Thucydides already inscribed by them in a new category, and projecting this enabling distinction – enabling at least for history-writing as a separate praxis – into the future. History, defined in some such terms as Aristotle's, was, is, or can be a useful category to think and work with, contingently. Anyone who wants to call herself a historian clearly has to draw the line somewhere between what she assigns to 'history' and what to 'non-history':[28] the decision will not be without its rationale, but it can – and will – be represented as defective from other positions. Such decisions, shall we say, are 'always and never' arbitrary. In antiquity there were already arguments about whether Lucan's *Pharsalia* was a 'poem' or a 'history' (both terms, of course, subject to constant slippage); accordingly we have to decide whether Lucan's work 'fails' because it does not fit the existing categories, or whether it would be better to worry about, renegotiate, redefine, or abandon the categories themselves. In other words the *Pharsalia*, to an unusual degree, destabilized the categories operative at the time of its composition, and continues to do so, in so far as we share, or think we share, in those categories today. Classics of 'history' are not infrequently relocated, as a result of institutional activities, as 'literature', another (sliding) discursive category.

We may distinguish, for heuristic purposes, two opposed conceptions of history. Most students of ancient history remain committed to a version of historical enquiry which could be termed positivist, empiricist, referential and realist. According to this model historians scrutinize the 'facts', and interpret them according to rational procedures, to give progressively more accurate accounts of the past 'as it really was'. Of course few would put it as baldly as that, at least in their explicitly methodological statements (where, that is, they make them). They would concede the problems and deficiencies of 'the evidence', the necessary areas of darkness, the diverse way the data can be interpreted. But something not unlike the position I have outlined could be said to underlie the *practice* of many of these historians and above all the style(s) in which they present their 'findings'. There are a number of objections to this model. First, in view of the development of various relativities, together with the 'linguistic turn', it can be argued that there are no 'plain facts' because what counts as a 'fact' is established in discourse, and facts are always already 'under description', always already interpreted. Thus even to use the name Actium, an ideological signifier operating in the interests of 'Augustus' to valorize his new state, is already to be partly complicit with an Augustan account.[29] Similarly structures of temporality, both wider chronological schemes and basic conceptions of time itself, are not 'natural' but cultural variables, conventionally organized. History, it could be argued, is generated by such chronological structures, since dates fix events in relation to other events. In general there is

[28] Cf. Patterson (1987), 44.

[29] Cf. Fish, 'Rhetoric', in Lentricchia and McLaughlin (1990), 203–22, esp. 213.

nothing outside the discourses of history by which accounts of the past can be tested or checked. There is no independent access to historical 'reality' outside the discourses which constitute it. Again historians put the 'past' to the question from the 'present'; since they use the language and concepts of their own day, they could be said to be engaged in an act of translating the past into the terms of the present in a 'fusion of horizons', and translations are, as we shall see in chapter 4, 'different' from the 'texts' translated. So too a piece of historical writing is necessarily teleological, since past events have to be seen 'in the light of the end'. But this is to impose a closure (always and never arbitrary) on the contingent and continuing processes which constitute historicity. Finally, despite the occasional disclaimer, most historians remain committed to a discourse of motives and causes. They are constantly reconstructing, confidently, the motives of historical figures; Augustus' designs, for example, are regularly construed as like those of a modern statesman or politician, as these are taken to be. Even when historians admit that Roman conceptions of character may have been different from ours, instead of allowing that Romans might be substantially alien in their modes of self-construction, they assume that ancient writers are describing the same phenomena as modern writers but less convincingly. So too with causes; as Nietzsche observed, there is a sense in which effects always *precede* causes, since we have to identify an 'event' before we can look for its cause.[30] Even if we accept the validity of a discourse of causes, there will always be an endlessly regressive chain of causative factors inevitably, and, from other perspectives, arbitrarily cut off at some point: events are, in that sense, massively over-determined.[31] Only in the structures of stories can a clear system of cause and effect, action and result, beginning and end – in short, of closure – be inscribed.[32] 'We had the experience but missed the meaning,|And approach to the meaning restores the experience|In a different form.' History is a 'mode of experience', a *praxis*: history is what historians do.

Opposed to this positivistic approach is one which might be termed textualist, post-structuralist, conventionalist, culturalist, anti-foundationalist. On this model history – the past – is an 'absence', and can never be restored to a full presence. It is only available to us in the form of

[30] Culler (1981) 183–4, and (1983), 86–8.

[31] Cf. Veyne (1988b), 178: 'Historians . . . do not explain events . . . They explicate them, interpret them'; also Felperin (1990), 150–1.

[32] Cf. Kermode (1967) *passim*.

'traces', first and foremost perhaps in the language we use, and then in the other 'texts' which surround us. Past actions always have to be represented – *under*-represented – in a linguistic or other textual medium. Historians offer us different representations, *re*-presentations, redescriptions, and there are no extra-textual grounds for disputing their rival constructions. As Barthes put it in a famous essay, 'The sign of History from now on is no longer the real, but the intelligible'.[33] History then could be described as 'constructed intertextuality': history is 'a kind of storytelling towards the present, that is, a textual construct at once itself an interpretation and itself open to interpretation'.[34] In this sense all history, whatever truth-claims it may make, is, and has to be, equally textualist: history is something *written*. So I offer my own provisional description of history: *it is a discourse constituted by the traces produced by différance which are present in all textuality*.

One implication of any textualist account is that history always involves troping and figurality, as Hayden White in particular has argued. If history is a story, it requires a plot, and one of White's key terms is, precisely, 'emplotment'. Histories, as he puts it, are 'fictions of factual representation' (the title of one of the essays in his *Tropics of Discourse*). The 'facts' are presented in a style which constitutes a particular interpretation. Histories involve the emplotment of material into different sorts of stories: 'in both [fiction and history]', he writes, 'we recognize the forms by which consciousness both constitutes and colonizes the world it seeks to inhabit comfortably.'[35] On this view rhetoric, within White's practice, is once again privileged over logic and philosophy, and history subordinated to rhetoric, while style becomes inseparable from meaning. The way the story is troped is thus decisive for explanation. In Thucydides events are encoded against an opposition between 'word' and 'deed'.[36] In *The Roman Revolution* Sir Ronald Syme takes details from ancient writers, 'facts' always already interpreted, and re-emplots them within his narrative, where, as in his models Sallust and Tacitus, irony is the dominant mode of troping. Inevitably White's views have met with considerable opposition. His critics accuse him of introducing a disabling relativism, of weakening the notions of 'fact' and

[33] Barthes (1981), 18; cf. Bann (1990), 56–63.

[34] Felperin (1990), 144, 159; for *under*representation 51. Both this and the previous section owe a great deal to this book.

[35] White (1978), 99. For a development of these views see Kellner (1989).

[36] Cf. Bann (1990), 55.

'reality', and of undermining the truth of his own meta-historical discourse. To which White replies that he has not deserted 'truth' and 'fact', but reconceptualized them: the point is not that all historical narratives are equally valid, but that they are all equally rhetorical.[37] 'Truth' is anyway a property, not of the world, but of sentences within specific discourses. In the words of Richard Rorty: 'Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own – unaided by the describing activities of human beings – cannot.'[38] And we could argue further that truth is made, not found, and made within textuality. There is nothing, it should be added, in the textualist approach to deny that events happen, or that people write books, or suffer, nothing to deny the materiality of the world. But, as Paul Veyne has it, 'The materiality of the gas chambers does not automatically lead to the knowledge one can have about them.'[39] The question is rather an epistemological one, how and in what sense we know those events, those people, that material substance.

In calling history a story, I am not seeking to downgrade it, rather the reverse. We might modify 'there is no outside-text' to 'there is no outside-story', since most language-uses either constitute stories, or at any rate imply a story. Human beings define themselves by the stories they tell as well as by the company they keep. We can only contest one story by telling another. Understanding things means telling stories about things. In stories we (re)make and remake what we call ourselves and what we call the world. In stories we engage in the adult equivalent of the pleasurable play of the child. In stories we repair the damage done by our sense of our own and the world's imperfections, and of our loneliness. Stories speak in and through us. A marriage, for example, tells a story, both personal and social. In theological terms storytelling is the prime act of secondary creation, and in sociological terms it integrates us into our culture, while also allowing us to interrogate it. Stories encode values, and our accounts of stories are always value-laden. The minds we use to judge a story are themselves constituted by other stories (when Wayne Booth talks of 'unnarrated life', he invites the response that life is *always already* narrated[40]) as well as by the story we are 'judging'. Value can be seen as 'counterfactual', but so can most of the other things we most prize: love, friendship, honour, beauty. Value is nonetheless deeply inscribed in the language we use. There is no meta-language in which we

[37] White (1989), 31–6. [38] Rorty (1989), 5. [39] Veyne (1988a), 107.
[40] Booth (1988), 14 (but cf. 33) and on story 40–1.

could describe a value-free system. As a result any denial that some stories are better than others collapses in on itself. To seek to avoid value is to court only silence and ultimately madness. It would thus be easy for the textualist to represent the positivist as the enemy of culture and therefore of humanity. In the Judaeo-Christian myth the desire to be God is the sin of Satan.

The textualist story of history is not, of course, invulnerable. One of the commonest criticisms is that it cannot account for historical change. But 'metaphoric redescriptions' would change the world if what contitutes 'the world' is regarded as a matter of description; in Rorty's words 'a talent for speaking differently . . . is the chief instrument of cultural change.'[41] More damaging is the point that each of the two contrasted approaches, at some point, always makes an appeal to the other: they are, in other words, two sides of the same coin. And this has important implications for literary interpretation. As Felperin puts it, 'at a certain level, the historical text must always offer itself, and be received, as timeless and universal textuality even as it remains at another level remote and specific historicity – *if it is to be interpreted at all*.'[42] But when we are within sight of the abyss, it may be a good strategy to essay another path, accepting, with Heidegger, that, for better or worse, language is 'the house we live in', and remembering too that there are many truths, some of them incommensurable. So we can end with a proclamation: 'History is dead – long live history.'

> Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,
> Every poem an epitaph . . .
> We die with the dying:
> See, they depart, and we go with them.
> We are born with the dead:
> See, they return, and bring us with them.

5 Firing the canon: tradition or treason?

The interlinked ideas of tradition, a canon of approved authors and the classic (a work of proven quality and value, which has stood 'the test of time') remain important within Gadamer's conception of reading

[41] Rorty (1989), 16, 7. This is also part of the answer to Fish's claim that theory has no consequences; cf. Smith (1988), 221, note 28.
[42] Felperin (1990), 14. For the Heidegger quotation 53.

historically. The question of the canon has recently generated debate, often acrimonious, both within and outside the academy. The 'radical' critique of the canon hinges on the claim that canons imprison us in the past – 'the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living,'[43] as Marx put it colourfully – and thus in undesirable past values (patriarchal, racist, imperialist etc., and, one might add, 'Marxist'). So, for example, Terry Eagleton, for whom Gadamer's tradition is simply 'a club of the like-minded',[44] sees the formation of canons as one means whereby local ideological interests are given the status of eternal values, the gap between past and present is elided, and 'literature' is depoliticized by an occlusion of those constraints and cultural processes which determine the nature of its discourses. 'We make texts timeless by suppressing their temporality.'[45] Classics can serve as icons, totems, in the interest of the powerful. The very notion of the classic, it is gleefully pointed out, was based on analogy with property qualification (the word was first used of writers by Aulus Gellius, and meant 'a first-class and tax-paying author, not a proletarian'[46]), and classics were employed in schools to teach 'correct' speech and grammar to rising elites. Canons are constructed, as a source of authority, and we ought to look carefully at the processes of their construction, to determine who chooses, and why, and to whose advantage. Canons, in short, on this account, are sites where hegemony is encoded and reproduced.

We must, I think, attend seriously to these charges. Within defences of canon and tradition there is frequently a conservative political agenda, either open or, more commonly, concealed. Geoffrey Strickland, after a defence of the humanist pursuit of 'objective truth', and a claim that the canon 'has created itself' (notice the suppression of agency), writes revealingly: 'it is more than ever necessary to point out the advantages of sharing not only a common humanity, but, within this, a common *imperium*, with its language and common culture, as distinct from the warring tribalism that precedes and follows the rise of empires.'[47] Eliot's influential and still valuable defence of tradition was part of his attempt to vindicate a Roman, Christian and European identity against tendencies towards what he termed 'provinciality'. 'We are all', he wrote, 'so far as we inherit the civilization of Europe, still citizens of the Roman Empire.'[48] Anxieties about what it means to be a 'Westerner' or a 'European' (here cultural/ideological signifiers) are thus frequently located within arguments about tradition and canon. E.R. Curtius, for example, found in the idea of the *topos* a stable base for Western culture, whose renewal he sought after the devastation wrought by Nazism (but analogues can be found *outside* the Western tradition for many of these *topoi*); in Curtius' account the *topos* is, unsurprisingly, reified and separated from cultural politics. Eliot's model of tradition also contains traces of idealism (great literature 'composes a simultaneous order'[49] rather than being embedded in culture). Power and authority are likewise at issue. Canons are not infrequently constructed by poets who insert themselves into a tradition in such a way as to seem a valuable addition to it, or even its *telos* (Virgil, for example, does this in the *Georgics*, which gathers together the whole spectrum of previous 'didactic literature', Greek and Roman). Institutions are also involved in the formation and transmission of canons, and, quite apart from an element of sheer inertia, have an obvious interest in maintaining aspects of the *status quo*: teachers of literature who have themselves been trained within a certain tradition tend to wish to perpetuate it.

The charges can, however, be countered, and a more positive view of the uses of the canon developed. First, we may ask whether it would in practice be possible to operate without a canon of any sort: 'given the finiteness of personal existence and of institutional authority, there must be agreed economies.'[50] Canons are needed to preserve disciplines (some disciplines might be better not preserved, of course), and can sustain communities (the role of the Hebrew Bible in maintaining a sense of Jewish identity during periods of persecution would be an obvious instance). Inscribed in the radical critique seems to be an opposition to institutional and cultural authority *in any form*.[51] Moreover there is no reason why canons should be regarded as necessarily, or intrinsically, conservative, since texts can be appropriated for different positions.

[43] Quoted by Patterson (1987), 56 (from *The Eighteenth Brumaire*).
[44] Eagleton (1983), 73. It is tempting to respond with a *tu quoque*.
[45] Smith (1988), 50. For other critiques of traditional notions of tradition see Jauss (1982), 673–6; Weimann (1984), 609–88.
[46] Curtius (1953), 249–50. [47] Strickland (1991), 36.
[48] Eliot (1957), 130 (from 'Virgil and the Christian world').
[49] Eliot (1975), 38 (from 'Tradition and the individual talent').
[50] Steiner (1989), 64.
[51] Cf. Rorty (1989), 64: Foucault 'still thinks in terms of something deep within human beings, which is deformed by acculturation'.

Milton, for instance, used his knowledge of the classical tradition to *challenge* the values of the ruling elite. Even with Eliot canons operate in a dynamic, not a static way; when a 'really new' work is produced, it alters the whole of the tradition.[52] For Eliot tradition (however much he may reify the concept and erase alternative accounts) is, we could say, a structure of differences,[53] not merely a list of approved authors. The relationship between canons and cultures can likewise be seen as a dialectical one: a canon both produces, and is produced by, cultural formations. We may ask too whether canon-making can usefully be reduced to an issue of power alone. Indeed any denial of the canon could just as well be represented as an instance of a will-to-power, since it exalts the role of the critic or theorist (students read Eagleton instead of Milton).[54] Canons can instead by seen as sites where rival claims are registered and where narrowly local interests and tastes can, on occasion at least, be transcended.[55] An ecclesiastical canon (often assembled by councils) may be fixed, though it will generate commentary and diverse interpretation (moreover it did not harm (say) the dissemination of St Augustine's works that they could not be included in the Bible); but secular 'literary' canons are always renegotiable. In Elizabethan grammar schools there was something close to a national curriculum; at St Paul's, for example, in 1580 the list of authors approved for study comprised Terence, Cicero, Caesar, Sallust, Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Valerius Maximus, Seneca, Persius, the younger Pliny, Juvenal, Quintilian, Silius Italicus, and similar lists exist for many other schools.[56] This is a rather less restricted canon of classical authors than ours, but it also excludes some writers widely studied today, in particular Lucretius, Catullus, Propertius. Catullus, who rose to such prominence in the nineteenth century and who was greatly admired in Southern Europe from the sixteenth century onwards, was less popular in England, partly perhaps as a result of the more conservative nature of English humanism (he was not in the medieval canon); only one edition of his works was published in England before 1700, and only in 1702 was there an edition

[52] Eliot (1975), 38.

[53] This conception of tradition as a structure is criticized by Bruns (1991), 11, but his own definition ('tradition . . . is just the historicality of open-ended, intersecting, competing narratives') is so broad that nothing could slip through the net. Cf. Weimann (1984), 76. [54] Weinsheimer (1991), 134.

[55] Weinsheimer (1991), 126–7.

[56] Baldwin (1944), 1 (415–28 for the Paul's system).

by an English scholar.[57] Above all – to return to my initial point – canons make the past 'usable', amid a contestation of meanings (and thus of futures). Past texts are too extensive; they have to be ordered so that history can be made manageable and evaluated. Canonicity is required, if the past is to be studied at all. Canons, as Kermode points out, thus allow for modernity, creating 'out of the indeterminate, disject facts of history, a core of canonical memory; out of history value'.[58] In the terms of Eliot's *Four Quartets*, we can redeem the past by the use we make of it.

In Eliot's sense of tradition past and present exist in a changing dialectical relationship, in which the present illuminates the literature of the past as well as vice versa. This dynamic concept can usefully be extended to the processes of evaluation themselves. What Barbara Herrnstein Smith terms 'the dynamics of endurance' involve 'a series of continuous interactions among a variably constituted object . . . and mechanisms of cultural selection and transmission'.[59] C.S. Lewis, who, a decade before Jauss's programmatic lectures which launched reception theory in Germany, had proposed a switch from writers to readers' responses, has an eloquent page on the vagaries of 'taste' and fashion: '"Taste" in this sense is mainly a chronological phenomenon. Tell me the date of your birth and I can make a shrewd guess whether you prefer Hopkins or Housman, Hardy or Lawrence.'[60] The often-made claim that the greatness of particular texts is demonstrated by 'the test of time' is hard to reconcile with these vagaries. Hume, for example, illustrating his claim that 'taste' is grounded in 'nature', wrote: 'Whoever would assert an equality of genius and elegance between Ogilby and Milton, or Bunyan and Addison, would be thought to defend no less an extravagance than if he had maintained a molehill to be as high as Teneriffe.'[61] Unfortunately history tends to undermine this appeal to normative agreements, as in the case of Hume's second example. The superiority of Bunyan to Addison would seem as self-evident to many moderns as the reverse did to Hume. And we operate within a necessarily limited time-scale; we have simply no way of knowing whether Shakespeare or Ovid will be read in 500 years time.

[57] For Catullus' *Nachleben* see McPeek (1939); Gillespie (1988), 84–89; Wiseman (1985), 211–45.

[58] Kermode (1988), 146. Kermode is constantly returning to the linked issues of canon and institution: see Kermode, (1975) and (1979) *passim*; (1988), chs. 7 and 8; (1988), pt. 2; (1989), ch. 9. Cf. the essays in Von Hallberg (1984); Gorak (1991).

[59] Smith (1988), 47. [60] Lewis (1961), 105. [61] Quoted by Smith (1988), 57.

Reception theory will allow us to steer a course around both the radical and the conservative positions. Any talk of tradition negotiates the discursive space generated within the poles of 'change' and 'continuity', 'difference' and 'sameness'. As Alastair MacIntyre puts it: 'Those texts to which . . . canonical status is assigned are treated both as having a fixed meaning embodied in them and also as always open to rereading, so that every tradition becomes to some degree a tradition of critical reinterpretation in which one and the same body of texts, with of course some addition and subtraction, is put to the question, and to successive different sets of questions, as a tradition unfolds.'[62] So too one can argue that the intersection of the contingently time-bound and the transhistorical is precisely where such works of art are situated, *and have to be situated*, if we are to talk coherently about them at all. (One might guess too that part of the reason why 'Shakespeare', say, remains a 'classic' is the unusual openness of his works to the traces in the language.) In terms of the hermeneutics I have been defending, *a classic becomes a text whose 'iterability' is a function of its capacity, which includes the authority vested in its reception, for continued re-appropriations by readers*. As a result of these appropriations the works so appropriated become richer as they are projected through history, because more 'voices' have made themselves heard within them. In this way reception theory can reconcile tradition and culturalism with progress in an empowering synthesis.

MacIntyre has in general made tradition his master-term. Tradition is, to him, an 'historically extended, socially embodied argument',[63] and coherent judgements are made, and can only be made, from within some tradition or other (tradition thus operates like 'discourse' in Foucauldian accounts), since there is no disinterested position outside-tradition from which to operate. We have to recognize this if we are to understand, and make coherent, our present disagreements, and not appeal to some reified, 'liberal' conception of 'Reason' supposedly ungrounded in any prior set of assumptions. The mere possession of a list of 'Great Books' will not of itself bring that coherence:

> It is not of course that such texts are not important reading for anyone with pretensions to education. It is rather that there are systematically different and incompatible ways of reading and appropriating such texts and that until the problems of how they

[62] MacIntyre (1988), 383.

[63] MacIntyre (1985), 222; and see Martindale (1992b).

> are to be read have received an answer, such lists do not rise to the status of a concrete proposal. Or to make the same point in another way: proponents of this type of Great Books curriculum often defend it as a way of restoring to us and to our students what they speak of as *our* cultural tradition; but we are in fact the inheritors, if that is the right word, of a number of rival and incompatible traditions and there is no way of either selecting a list of books to be read or advancing a determinate account of how they are to be read, interpreted, and elucidated which does not involve taking a partisan stand in the conflict of traditions.[64]

(Here we see how MacIntyre shares with 'radicals' a recognition of the necessary interestedness of all discourse, seen as perspectival and rhetorical *all the way down*.) This is an attractive approach, but it prompts an obvious objection. How do we identify a 'tradition' without gross reification? How do we decide where one tradition begins, and another ends? Whether to stress continuity within change, or breaks with continuity? This is where we encounter again the ideology of periodization, of categorization. If we retain the notion of tradition as a useful one but reconstrue it as plural, then conceptions of what is rational and valuable will change *within* the same tradition as well as between different traditions. In sum the notion of tradition – because of the differences within the term – can easily be destabilized, and can only be sustained, like all other such descriptions, by an 'act of will'. Nonetheless we may decide to retain the notion, on pragmatic grounds, because of its empowering character. What matters will then be not whether a tradition really exists, but whether people are able to position themselves within what they see as commensurable modes of enquiry. Tradition then becomes not a thing but a way of conceiving the character of an intellectual programme, or a body of texts, or whatever.

6 Recovering dialogue

Throughout the centuries many thinkers have stressed the importance of dialogue in our experience of the world. According to Martin Buber, human encounters should be construed as encounters of an 'I-Thou' type, which register the claims of the 'Other', in contrast to objectivist

[64] MacIntyre (1990), 228; cf. (1988), 386.

models of knowing, which reduce 'Thou' to 'It'.[65] For both Gadamer and Bakhtin our encounters with texts assume this character. According to Bakhtin the reading process operates within a social context of competing voices and modes of discourse (this polyphony of co-existence, interaction and contestation he called 'heteroglossia'). The 'I' who reads is the locus of dialogue, the text a focus of dialogical processes of production, reception, appropriation. A 'text' is thus a mosaic of voices with specific and different cultural histories whose meaning is controlled by the particular contexts-of-their-use; in this continual exchange 'an utterance is never *in itself* originary',[66] and likewise no utterance will ever be final.[67] Indeed the self is itself dialogic, and thus a person 'lives by the fact that he is not yet finalized'.[68] In Bakhtin's words: 'There is no first or last discourse, and dialogical context knows no limits . . . At every moment of the dialogue, there are immense and unlimited masses of forgotten meaning, but . . . as the dialogue moves forward, they will return to memory and live in renewed form . . . Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will celebrate its rebirth.'[69] Accepting our contingency, we can negotiate the world, from where we are, by probing it dialogically, within, or through, different modes of experience.

Reading is often treated as a straightforward communication between a writer and a reader. So Tennyson, in his poem 'Frater Ave atque Vale' (1883), records how close he felt to Catullus when on a visit to Sirmio (ironically the 'Roman ruin' to which he refers is of imperial date).[70] But any claim to be in direct contact with an author, unless we take it as a heuristic fiction to enable interpretation to proceed, seems to be predicated on an unacknowledged metaphysical principle (what deconstructionists call 'the metaphysics of presence'). Further problems reside in disagreements about what constitutes a 'person' in the first place. Ancient philosophers frequently saw the person primarily as a moral agent, influenced by circumstance but capable of self-reformation; Freudians stress the role of the unconscious (structured, according to Lacan, like a language); poststructuralists conceive of de-centred persons who inscribe themselves, or are inscribed, within pre-existing subject-

[65] Gadamer (1975), 322–3; Holquist (1990) *passim*; Todorov (1984), especially chs. 4 and 7.

[66] Holquist (1990), 60; cf. Leith and Myerson (1989), 162: 'Language forbids pure origination.' [67] So e.g. Bruns (1991), 10–12. [68] Morson (1991), 214.

[69] Quoted by Todorov (1984), 110. [70] Text in Gillespie (1988), 87.

positions (on this view we are partly a product of the grammar we use). In *Inferno* 5 Francesca tells the story of the beginnings of her adulterous liaison with Paolo:

> We read one day for pastime of Lancelot, how love overcame him
> . . . when we read that the longed-for smile was kissed by so
> great a lover, he who never shall be parted from me, all trembling,
> kissed my mouth. (127–36)

Dante here shows how a book might relate to an action. The key, on this interpretation, lies in the description of the two kisses, the first described in 'courtly' language which creates a glossy atmosphere of romance, the second insisting on sheer physicality; instead of the 'longed-for smile' (*disiato riso*) a fleshly human mouth (*la bocca*). The lovers, in other words, adopt the subject-position of two famous literary figures, in what could be appropriated as a story about the modalities of appropriation, and this (in Dante's view) destroys their capacity for morally rational judgements and actions. Certainly we may agree that we have no access to sexual experience outside the discourses of sexuality. Such experience is part of the symbolic order, and not simply dependent on biological difference: our sexuality is always *inscribed*. So, in Horace Ode 4.1, which can be read either as a poem about the experience of falling in love again or as a poem about resuming the writing of lyric, the paradoxical elision of sex and text shimmers through the climactic moment of self-revelation (33–6); the significance of being tongue-tied in love only registers because of the existence of an eloquently written discourse of desire. On this view the person is, we could say, 'textualized'. In Barthes's words, 'This "I" which approaches the text is already itself a plurality of other texts, of codes which are infinite or, more precisely, lost.'[71] Indeed if human life is regarded as radically cultural, then the distinction between 'life' and 'representation' partly dissolves, since 'life' becomes, precisely, the experience of cultural representations.

This might suggest that if reading is like getting to know a person, this should not be construed as having a relationship with an author outside or beyond the text, but with an author who is (in Derrida's phrase) 'an idiom which constructs itself in language'. The text can be read, in the author's 'absence', 'non-presence', because meaning is constituted, not

[71] Barthes (1974), 10–11.

within consciousness, but within textuality.[72] The gap between texts and persons can thus be closed, but in the opposite direction to the one more often taken: people are like texts in that we encounter their gestures, words and actions, but have no direct access to the full presence of their minds and consciousness. And just as human relationships are matter of value, so meaning and value are inseparable — to discover meaning is to experience value.[73] On this view authors themselves are 'effects of *différance*', and in consequence they become 'iterable'.

There are distinct advantages in conceptualizing the reading process in this way. Reading would then be, not simply a matter of 'decoding' meanings, but rather *an encounter*.[74] As with people, so with books, both the subjectivist and the objectivist reveal a desire to dominate, the one by imposing *his* (supposedly subjective) meaning, the other by imposing *the* ('true') meaning. A complete lack of trust, a complete nihilism about the possibility of understanding, also becomes difficult, or at least hardly a viable human option. Seeing through books, like seeing through people, may make it impossible to see, for people are evidently not wholly ours to command. Like people, books would have their reticences, their partial disclosures, their resistances to complete appropriation: they would invite us to respect their otherness. What we often call 'imagination' in a writer could be like another person's habitual way of construing the world.[75] Trusting another's comments, we could, for example, use our own experience of being discriminated against to understand other forms of discrimination. Understanding would be, not a matter of 'identification', but a matter of 'approximation'.[76] And we are aware that, with people, there is always more to be known, other ways of experiencing them than our own. We would have to steer a course between total determinacy and total indeterminacy. Successful dialogue partly involves delimiting meanings within a specific context; radical indeterminacy, a very different phenomenon from *différance*, would collapse into total non-communication. In general 'nothing is more frightening than the *absence of answer*'.[77] But in practice the human mind seems to be

[72] So Harrison (1985), 15–16; cf. Gadamer (1975), 260: understanding is not 'a mysterious communion of souls, but a sharing of a common meaning'. See the introduction to Martindale and Hopkins (1992) for a fuller exposition; Harrison (1991), 188–218.

[73] Mitter (1987), 29 for this formulation. [74] Cf. e.g. Booth (1988), 70–1.

[75] So my two-year-old son, on seeing a green carpet flecked by sunlight, exclaimed 'cucumber'. [76] So Todorov (1984), 108; Steiner (1989), 175.

[77] Bakhtin, cited by Todorov (1984), 110.

constituted so that it can, given the opportunity, learn to grasp, or accommodate itself to, symbol systems other than its own, partly, it may be, because these systems constitute structures in which one term illuminates another. And this is so even if the activity of these terms involves *différance*. Or rather it is because of such deferral that a text belonging to one set of cultural codes can fit, more easily than we might have expected, into another. Understanding between two people, it has been suggested, could be like the relation of tenor and vehicle in a metaphor, which creates extension and enhancement in a two-way process.[78]

Of course there are problems with this model of reading, as with any other. There is a danger of excessive optimism about the possibility of fruitful dialogue. Conversations frequently collapse, and there can be losses of readability (for example, many Western-Europeans no longer have a sense of the universe as God's book). Dialogue tends to become, in these accounts, an abstraction which elides the constraints of power, the voluntary and imposed suppressions which conversation can be said to enact.[79] Bakhtin makes the concept of dialogue so all-embracing as to run the risk of emptying it of analytic power: if everything is dialogue, nothing is. And modern critical theorists simultaneously unfix the person, and yet rely for their own communications (if they are to be so regarded) on some residual notion of fixity. In MacIntyre's words: 'A piece of writing, whenever it confronts a reader . . . does so at a time which is not only 'now' for that reader . . . but becomes the author's coincident 'now' . . . In that shared time, exempted in some respects, although not in others from the temporal separation of the 'now' of utterance from the 'now' of reading . . . the timelessness extends to the standards of reason-giving, reason-accepting, and reason-rejecting . . . This appeal . . . is . . . only to be understood adequately as a piece of metaphysics'.[80] To some of these problems we shall be returning.

This notion of dialogue also has implications for the nature of language. Language is often, and usefully, described as 'a signifying system', a system of 'arbitrary' signifiers. But such a description could imply that language is primarily instrumental, that language is a form and meaning a mental activity, and that words operate like numbers; and to this extent it has not freed itself entirely from an 'Enlightenment' belief

[78] Weinsheimer (1991), ch. 4: 'Metaphor as a metaphor of understanding'.

[79] I owe this formulation to Duncan Kennedy.

[80] MacIntyre (1990), 45.

in an abstract 'rationality' outside culture and tradition. It has, in short, residual elements of unacknowledged idealism and covert Platonism.[81] In one sense a word is evidently an arbitrary signifier: what we call 'horse', the Romans called *equus* (given the necessary degree of slippage). But in another sense the arbitrariness of the signifier is only trivially true. For the language-user – except, of course, Humpty-Dumpty in *Through the Looking Glass* – the signifier is never arbitrary because it is always located within a cultural matrix, and thus inextricably connected with use and history. Because we understand the world through language, because language is the basis of any symbolic order, so language and 'reality', signs and things, are bonded. 'The human world is always already a language world, and for exactly that reason the human word is always and in every case worlded.'[82] Moreover, if language is ever on the move, no language-use is wholly containable within any pre-existing system. Language only exists in use, and thus is always a fresh *event*. It can be argued that some particular language-uses involve an unusual degree of renewal of meaning. This sense of the potential freedom of embodied usage, this feeling of the word's complex rootedness in a disclosed and disclosing history, may be a particular feature of what we call 'the classic'. Hence too the paradox that certain texts from the past can speak to some people with more power than anything else in their continuing conversation with the world.

> The communication
> Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living,

for those communications have been made important by time and by the history to which they have themselves contributed. 'I began with the desire to speak with the dead . . . I could hear only my own voice, but my own voice was the voice of the dead, for the dead had contrived to leave textual traces of themselves, and those traces make themselves heard in the voices of the living.'[83]

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[81] See Weinsheimer (1991), ch. 5, 'A word is not a sign', for much of this argument.
[82] Weinsheimer (1991), 112. [83] Greenblatt (1988), 1.

CHAPTER

2

Rereading Virgil: divertimento

> Every writer creates his own precursors.
> Borges

> There is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.
> Walter Benjamin

> And that's true too.
> Gloucester in *King Lear*

1 Prelude: the critic as artist

The purpose of this chapter is to explore further, through specific instances, two propositions advanced in the preceding one: first, that all readings of texts are *situated*, contingent upon their historical moment, and thus that *to understand is always to understand historically*; and secondly, that one useful approach to certain great 'imitative' texts is to see them as rereadings of the works imitated. The first proposition may not seem particularly controversial, although in practice many critics, while acknowledging the situatedness of earlier criticism, employ a rhetoric which might suggest that, partly because of the 'advances' of scholarship and partly because of their particular 'insights', their own writings are substantially free from this supposed 'deficiency'. The second proposition, however, will require some further preliminary explication before we can turn to the analysis of particular examples.

One of the most characteristic strategies of poststructuralist criticism is to collapse traditional categories, and (usually) to follow this by the construction of fresh ones. As we have seen, this is not because the new