

# I

## Starting Points

Any commentary on a particular poem *must* attend to more than is present in the verbal structure itself.

Robert Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature*

### *What Is Reading?*

Many of us had friends in high school who were, through their religious training, capable of "reading" Hebrew or Latin in the limited sense that they could pick up a text and make the appropriate sounds at the appropriate places. But they could not be said to "know how to read" in a fuller (and more generally recognized) sense—for the ability to read is usually construed (and is so used in this book) to involve something more than the ability to parrot, something more than phonetics and memory. It is, rather, somehow involved with "understanding."<sup>1</sup>

But what is understanding? How can we tell whether someone does or does not understand? As long as understanding is viewed strictly as a subjective phenomenon, there may be no answer. It is probably impossible to determine precisely what the subjective phenomenon of understanding involves—and because no one can ever know what is happening in another's mind, it is impossible to determine whether someone else is understanding. Most people, however, have certain implicit but nonetheless *objective* stan-

1. See Louise M. Rosenblatt's discussion of this distinction, couched in somewhat different terms, in *Literature as Exploration*, especially chap. 3. See also Gerald Prince's claim, "Identifying a series of symbols as specific graphemes (corresponding to specific sounds) is not the same as extracting meaning from them and I would not say, except as a joke, that I read German (or Rumanian or Russian) very well but that I did not understand it" (*Narratology*, 104).

dards for determining understanding, for in our culture certain behaviors count as an indication that someone understands an utterance. Specifically, we rely on two commonsense means of verification: action and paraphrase. If a parent tells a child, "It's time for bed," the child can demonstrate understanding either by starting to put away his or her toys (action) or by asking, "Is it really eight o'clock?" (paraphrase).

As long as we are dealing with nonpoetic utterances, this may not seem a controversial claim. But when we deal with literature, we come up against the critical tradition of "the autonomous text." This traditional wisdom has many formulations,<sup>2</sup> but the most common in the American academy are variations of the New Critical axiom that a text says what it says in the only way it can say it. The text *means* what it *is*. Thus, a New Critic would view neither a paraphrase nor the act of sitting in at a lunch counter as a verification of the proper understanding of Chester Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. One is a different text altogether; the other is irrelevant to literature considered "as literature." Indeed, one of the most persistent residues of our New Critical heritage is our readiness to assume that when we speak of ethical effects, we are speaking of something extraliterary.

It would seem to follow logically that the only way for a reader to prove understanding of a text's meaning would be to repeat the text verbatim—in other words, that there would be no proper grounds for distinguishing mastery from memory. In fact, though, no practicing critics take such an extreme view; no matter what a critic's theoretical position may be, he or she always falls back on action or paraphrase as verifications of understanding. I will leave for some other book the vexed relationship between action and understanding (although I believe one can argue that there is a sense in which a racist whose actions were neither changed nor examined after reading *If He Hollers* had not "understood" the book) and limit myself here to the issue of paraphrase. *Paraphrase* is a difficult term, in part because it is entangled with the concept of synonymy. And if one uses the word *paraphrase* to mean an "absolutely synonymous" utterance, then no artistic text of any

merit or complexity can be paraphrased.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, since the meaning of any utterance depends on its context—at least if meaning is taken broadly to include tone, emphasis, and connotation—then no utterance is ever synonymous even with itself: you cannot step into the same meaning twice.<sup>4</sup>

But paraphrase need not imply identity of meaning; it can also be used in the wider sense of an imitation or transformation, with the recognition that imitations are by definition imperfect. Indeed, the prefix *para-*, in some of its meanings, suggests both imperfection (as in *paralexia*) and close resemblance without identity (as in *paratyphoid*). In this sense, a paraphrase is a translation into new terms that need not be judged in an on/off binary fashion in terms of equivalence (synonymous/nonsynonymous), but that can rather be evaluated along a continuum of greater or lesser adequacy or appropriateness. It is for this reason that "It's time for bed" could be paraphrased "It's eight o'clock"—not because "It's eight o'clock" is an exact synonym, but because in the given context, it comes closer to imitating the original sentence than most other sentences that could be uttered.

Whatever their theories, almost all critics act on the twin principles that paraphrases can be more or less adequate, and that, as Gerald Graff puts it, the act of paraphrasing or transforming is a "normal and unavoidable aspect of the reading process."<sup>5</sup> Roland Barthes claims that "to read is to struggle to name, to subject the sentences of the text to a semantic transformation"; E. D. Hirsch, Jr., defines interpretation as construing something else from the signs physically present in the text; Susan Sontag describes Becker's plays as "delicate dramas of the withdrawn consciousness" in the middle of her argument against interpretation. All these critics admit, in their different ways, that to read—in the sense of to

3. See David Lodge: "I believe it can be convincingly argued that novels are non-paraphrased" (*Language of Fiction*, 19). For a different position, see E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Aims of Interpretation*, chap. 4. For a detailed account of the problems of paraphrase, see James Phelan, *Worlds from Words*. See also Barbara Foley's discussion in *Telling the Truth*, 45–46.

4. For an exploration of this phenomenon, see Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote," in *Ficciones*, trans. Anthony Kerrigan (New York: Grove, 1962), 45–55.

5. Graff, "Literature as Assertions," 99.

2. For a good survey, see Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism*.

understand—a text is to imitate it in some way, to produce something “around” (*para*) it that is new but that bears some clear relationship to the original text.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, the very institution of interpretive criticism betrays a belief that understanding is manifested in restating—and in making those restatements public. The question, then, is not whether works can be paraphrased, but rather how one determines what constitutes an adequate or acceptable transformation of the original. Paraphrases differ, after all, not only in their accuracy, but also in their emphasis and in their perspective. Different kinds of imitations are adequate under different circumstances, since the imitator's decisions about which features are essential and which are secondary will depend in part on his or her purposes. A doctor's standards for adequacy, when judging an anatomical chart that serves as his or her “imitation” of the human body, will differ substantially from a dressmaker's when judging a mannequin, and these are in turn different from those of a grandparent when judging a photo of a grandchild. Likewise, paraphrases will differ according to the context and the conventions surrounding them. In Swann's love affair with Odette, the phrase *faire cattleya* (“to do a cattleya”) served as an equivalent for “the act of physical possession.”<sup>7</sup> In a household where snacks are the custom before going to bed, the sentence “Let's get down the Cheerios” might be an appropriate paraphrase for “It's time for bed.”<sup>8</sup>

6. Barthes, *S/Z*, 92; Hirsch, *Aims of Interpretation*, 75; Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Dell/Laurel, 1969), 18; see also her claim that “the task of interpretation is virtually one of translation” (15). This view is very widespread. Janice Radway remarks that an analyst's attempt to determine the significance that the act of reading has for a particular reader always involves the “activity of translation” (“*Reading the Romance*,” 9). Terence Hawkes uses the convenient notion of “recoding” (“*Structuralism and Semiotics*,” 104). Steven Mailloux discusses interpretation as “accepting and approximating translation” (“*Interpretive Conventions*,” 146). See also Prince's discussion of the various ways one can “give an account of a particular text” (“*La Nausée and Closure*,” 182–90, esp. 188–90).

7. Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff (New York: Modern Library, 1934), 336.

8. For a discussion of this point from a different perspective, see Stanley Fish, “Normal Circumstances, Literal Language, Direct Speech Acts, the Ordinary, the Everyday, the Obvious, What Goes without Saying, and Other Special Cases,” in *Is There a Text?* 268–92.

For this reason, different kinds of reading involve different kinds of transformation and different standards of adequacy. Does the paraphrase more or less adequately imitate the latent psychosexual content of the original text? Does the paraphrase take into account the socioeconomic conditions under which the text was produced? Does the paraphrase maintain or at least represent the essential formal features of the original text? Whatever their origins, though, these standards for adequacy inevitably bring some extratextual context into the judgment of understanding. As Robert Scholes puts it, “The critic who ‘recovers’ the meaning of any given work always does so by establishing a relationship between the work and some system of ideas outside it.”<sup>9</sup> Or, in Annette Kolodny's terms, “We appropriate meaning from a text according to what we need (or desire) or, in other words, according to the critical assumptions or predispositions [conscious or not] that we bring to it.”<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, this act of recovery is always both rule governed and reductive. Whether sitting on a beach or in a library, a reader can only make sense of a text in the same way he or she makes sense of anything else in the world: by applying a series of strategies to simplify it—by highlighting, by making symbolic, and by otherwise patterning it. It is perhaps worth stressing the reductive aspect of this process. Since all imitation is imperfect and incomplete, understanding—in the sense of being able to paraphrase—always involves the ability to *ignore*. Although many critics argue that in literature everything is significant, we know from experience that when we read literature (as opposed to the single sentences so many critics offer as examples), it is impossible to keep track of, much less account for, all the details of a text. As Michael Riffaterre's criticism of Jakobson makes abundantly clear, readers need to ignore or play down many textual features when they read lyric poetry;<sup>11</sup> they need to ignore even more in longer

9. Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature*, 9.

10. Kolodny, “Dancing through the Minefield,” 11.

11. Riffaterre, “Describing Poetic Structures,” 11. See also Jonathan Culler's discussion of Jakobson in *Structuralist Poetics*, chap. 3; and Fish, “What Is Stylistics and Why Are They Saying Such Terrible Things about It?” in *Is There a Text?* 68–96. For a discussion of authorial memory and control with respect to revision—and the subsequent problems of producing correct texts in the first place—see Hershel Parker, *Flawed Texts and Verbal Icons*.

works like novels. As the Gestalt psychologists have shown us (and as Borges has reminded us in a more fanciful way),<sup>12</sup> perception involves simplification, which in turn involves some organizing principle, some hierarchy of attention and importance. The reader who pays no more attention to Hamlet's soliloquies than to Bernardo's opening sally has not yet grasped what most other readers have considered the play's basic figure/ground dichotomy.

### Who Is Reading?

There can be no reading without a reader—but the term *reader* is slippery, not only because all individual readers read differently, but also because for almost all of them, there are several different ways of appropriating a text. This fact has been recognized, at least implicitly, by the large number of critics whose models of reading are multiterred. Usually, a two-leveled opposition is posited, although different critics use different terms. For Hirsch, it is "significance" and "meaning." For Wayne Booth, it is "understanding" and "overstanding." For Tzvetan Todorov, there are three terms: "interpretation," "description," and "reading."<sup>13</sup> Many other critics, despite the recent arguments of Fish, remain wedded, in one form or another, to the distinction between literal meaning and interpretation.

These distinctions all discriminate among activities that a reader can engage in under different circumstances or for different purposes. I would like to start with a different kind of distinction, one that discriminates among *simultaneous* roles that the audience of a text can play. There are three of these roles that will be central to my argument, but I will reserve the third for Chapter 3 and will only outline the first two here. First, there is the *actual audience*. This consists of the flesh-and-blood people who read the book. This is the audience that booksellers are most concerned with—but it happens to be the audience over which an author has no guaranteed control. Each member of the actual audience is differ-

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ent, and each reads in his or her own way, with a distance from other readers depending upon such variables as class, gender, race, personality, training, culture, and historical situation.

This difference among readers has always posed a problem for writers, one that has grown with increased literacy and the correspondingly increased heterogeneity of the reading public. An author has, in most cases, no firm knowledge of the actual readers who will pick up his or her book. Yet he or she cannot begin to fill up a blank page without making assumptions about the readers' beliefs, knowledge, and familiarity with conventions. As a result, authors are forced to guess; they design their books rhetorically for some more or less specific *hypothetical* audience, which I call the *authorial audience*. Artistic choices are based upon these assumptions—conscious or unconscious—about readers, and to a certain extent, artistic success depends on their shrewdness, on the degree to which actual and authorial audience overlap. Some assumptions are quite specific. William Demby's *Catcombs*, for instance, takes place in the early 1960s, and it achieves its sense of impending doom only if the reader already knows that John F. Kennedy will be assassinated when the events of the novel reach November 22, 1963. One of the Encyclopedia Brown mysteries is soluble only by the reader who knows that skydivers always wear two parachutes. Other assumptions are more general: "Rip van Winkle" assumes readers who know that during the Revolution, the American colonies became independent of England. Some assumptions are historical: Flaubert assumes considerable knowledge of the revolution of 1848 in *Sentimental Education*. Some are sociological: at least one critic has argued convincingly that *The Turn of the Screw* makes proper sense only to a reader who knows something about the conduct deemed proper to governesses in the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup> Some authors rely on our precise knowledge of cultural fads (Peter Cameron, in "Fear of Math," assumes that his audience will draw the proper conclusions about a character when he tells us that she eats a "tabbouleh-and-pita bread sandwich"),<sup>15</sup> others on our knowledge of more widespread cultural conventions (in

12. Borges, "Funes the Memorious," in *Ficciones*, 107-15.

13. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, esp. 8; Booth, *Critical Understanding*; Passim; Todorov, *Poetics of Prose*, 238-46.

14. Elliott M. Schreier, "Exposure in *The Turn of the Screw*," *Modern Philology* 78 (February 1981): 261-74.

15. *New Yorker*, March 11, 1985, 42.

Nabokov's *Lolita*, the refusal of the Enchanted Hunters to accept Humbert Humbert as a guest when he first shows up makes sense only if readers recognize both that they have garbled his name so that it sounds Jewish, and that the phrase in their advertising, "Near Churches," is a code phrase for "No Jews".<sup>16</sup> Some authors presume that we have a knowledge of specific previous texts (Stoppard assumes that his readers know *Hamlet* before reading *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*). Sometimes authors assume that our higher motives will triumph (Dostoyevsky assumes that we are capable of sympathy for the sufferers of Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* even though he is a murderer). Sometimes authors—even the same authors—assume that we will be influenced by our baser prejudices (in *The Idiot* we are expected to be distrustful of Ganya because his teeth are "altogether too dazzling and even").<sup>17</sup> The potential range of assumptions an author can make, in other words, is infinite.

The notion of the authorial audience is clearly tied to authorial intention, but it gets around some of the problems that have traditionally hampered the discussion of intention by treating it as a matter of social convention rather than of individual psychology. In other words, my perspective allows us to treat the reader's attempt to read as the author intended, not as a search for the author's private psyche, but rather as the joining of a particular social/interpretive community; that is, the acceptance of the author's invitation to read in a particular socially constituted way that is shared by the author and his or her expected readers. Indeed, authorial reading is not only a way of reading but, perhaps equally important, a way of talking about how you read—that is, the result of a community agreement that allows discussion of a certain sort to take place by treating meanings in a particular way (as found rather than made). In this sense, what Susan R. Suleiman says

16. Although I have taught this novel several times, none of my students—commenting as they do from a cultural context quite different from that of the authorial audience—has caught this, or any of the other references to anti-Semitism in the novel.

17. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. David Magarshack (Baltimore: Penguin, 1955), 48 [pt. 1, chap. 2]. In Dickens' *Domby and Son*, we are expected to distrust Carker for the same reason.

about the notions of the implied author and the implied reader (which are themselves only variant formulations of the notion of authorial intention) applies to the authorial audience as well: they are, she says, "necessary fictions, guaranteeing the consistency of a specific reading without guaranteeing its validity in any absolute sense."<sup>18</sup> But it is crucial to note that this is not just an arbitrary convention invented by academics for their own convenience—it is a broader social usage, one that is shared by authors as well as their readers, including their nonprofessional readers. My position here is thus very close to that of Foley, who rightly sees fiction "as a contract designed by an intending author who invites his or her audience to adopt certain paradigms for understanding reality."<sup>19</sup> In other words, as Terry Eagleton argues, intention is best seen not in terms of "essentially private 'mental acts,'" but rather in terms of social practice.<sup>20</sup>

By thinking in terms of the authorial audience rather than private intention, furthermore, we are reminded of the constraints within which writers write. For despite the theoretically infinite number of potential authorial audiences, it does not follow that authors have total control over the act of writing: any more than that readers have total control over the act of interpretation. In a trivial sense, of course, they do: authors can put down whatever marks they wish on the page; readers can construe them however they wish. But once authors and readers accept the communal na-

18. Suleiman, "Introduction," 11.

19. Foley, *Telling the Truth*, 43.

20. Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 114. See also Patrocinio P. Schweickart's claim that validity is not "a property inherent in an interpretation, but rather . . . a claim implicit in the act of propounding an interpretation"—that is, that validity is "contingent on the agreement of others" ("Reading Ourselves," 56). Fish argues similarly that authorial intention "is not private but a form of conventional behavior" ("Working on the Chain Gang," 213). Hirsch, with less enthusiasm, notes that "we can circumvent the whole question of author psychology by adopting a semiotic account of interpretation. Instead of referring an interpretation back to an original author, we could . . . refer it back to an original code or convention system" ("Politics of Theories of Interpretation," 239). Hirsch insists that this would not really be an adequate account, but I suspect it is as adequate as any that relies on actual psychology. It is worth remembering that this is not simply a matter of arbitrary definitions; as Mailloux's arguments in "Rhetorical Hermeneutics" make clear, the very act of treating readings in this way has serious effects on the ways in which people subsequently do read—on what counts as evidence, for instance.

ture of writing and reading, they give up some of that freedom. Specifically, once he or she has made certain initial decisions, any writer who wishes to communicate—even if he or she wishes to communicate ambiguity—has limited the range of subsequent choices.

Some of those limitations spring from what might be called brute facts. Writers of realistic historical novels, for instance, shackle themselves to events that are independent of their imaginations. As Suleiman has argued:

The most obvious . . . difference between fictional and historical characters in a novel is that the latter impose greater constraints on the novelist who wants to be a "painter of his time." He cannot make Napoleon die—or win the battle—at Waterloo, just as he cannot make Hugo the court poet of Napoleon III. . . . And if the novelist chooses to place in the foreground events as well-known and public as the Boulanger affair or the Panama scandal, then he will have to bend to similar constraints even as far as the activities of the *fictional* characters are concerned.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, once Margaret Mitchell chose to write *Gone with the Wind* as a historical novel about the Civil War, she relinquished control over certain areas of her text. She could have saved Melanie had she wished, or killed off Rhett, but there was no way to give victory to the South or to preserve Atlanta from the flames.

More central to my argument, though, are *conventional* limitations on choice. There are no brute facts preventing an author from writing a religious parable in which a cross represented Judaism, but it would not communicate successfully. As Mary Pratt puts it, "Although the fictional discourse in a work of literature may in theory take any form at all, readers have certain expectations about what form it will take, and they can be expected to decode the work according to those assumptions unless they are overtly invited or required to do otherwise" (italics in original).<sup>22</sup> The writer

21. Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions*, 120.

22. Pratt, *Toward a Speech Act Theory*, 204. Pratt's own strong critique of speech-act theory (including her own work) can be found in "The Ideology of Speech-Act Theory." I think that my definition of fictionality (Chapter 3) solves

who wishes to be understood—even to be understood by a small group of readers—has to work within such conventional restraints.

Despite these limitations, however, there is still an incalculable number of possible authorial audiences, and since the structure of a work is designed with the authorial audience in mind, actual readers must come to share its characteristics as they read if they are to experience the text as the author wished.<sup>23</sup> Reading as authorial audience therefore involves a kind of distancing from the actual audience, from one's own immediate needs and interests. This distancing, however, must be distinguished sharply from the apparently similar kind of objectivity, represented in its baldest form by Dr. Blimber, in Dickens' *Dombey and Son*, who claimed "that all the fancies of the poets, and lessons of the sages, were a mere collection of words and grammar, and had no other meaning in the world."<sup>24</sup> Of course, few critics subscribe to Blimberism in its purest form, yet many critical windows are draped with remnants from Blimber's school. Northrop Frye insists that "the fundamental act of criticism is a disinterested response to a work of literature in which all one's beliefs, engagements, commitments, prejudices, stampings of pity and terror, are ordered to be quiet."<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the reader postulated by Stanley Fish's once-popular "Affective Stylistics" is psychologically blank and politically unaware, an automaton who approaches each new sentence with the same anesthetized mind.<sup>26</sup> In a radically different critical

some of the questions that Pratt raises; while my book tends to focus on a type of reading that includes an attempt at author-reader cooperation, I have accepted many of the arguments on which her critique is based, and have tried not to "normalize" this particular kind of reading, nor to define others as "deviant" (see "The Value[s] of Authorial Reading" below). Even if one accepts her new position, though, much of Pratt's earlier work remains useful as a description of certain kinds of reading.

23. See Booth's discussion of this process in *Rhetoric of Fiction*, esp. 138-41.

24. Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (New York: Dutton/Everyman's Library, 1907), 134-35 (chap. 11).

25. Frye, *Well-Tempered Critic*, 140. Frye backs off a bit from the implications of this statement by distinguishing later between the pure disinterested critical act and the act of ordinary reading.

26. Fish, "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics," in *Is There a Text? 21—Pursuit of Signs*, 130.

tradition, Gerald Prince's degree-zero narratee—whom he assumes to be the addressee of the text except where "an indication to the contrary is supplied in the narration intended for him"—has no "personality or social characteristics," and although he (apparently, the degree-zero narratee is male) knows grammar and the denotations of words, he knows neither connotations nor connotations. He is, in other words, capable of reading a text without any distorting presuppositions; neither his "character" nor his "position in society . . . colors his perception of the events described to him."<sup>27</sup>

Authorial reading, however, is quite different. It does not escape "distorting presuppositions." Rather, it recognizes that distorting presuppositions lie at the heart of the reading process. To read as authorial audience is to read in an impersonal way, but only in a special and limited sense. The authorial audience has knowledge and beliefs that may well be *extrapersonal*—that is, not shared by the actual individual reader (I, for instance, do not personally share the racist perspective of the authorial audience of Ian Fleming's *Live and Let Die*). The authorial audience's knowledge and beliefs may even be *extracommunal*—that is, not shared by any community (and we all belong to several) of which the actual reader is a member at the historical moment of reading (what current community shares the belief in Zeus characteristic of the authorial audience of the *Odyssey*?). But these authorial audiences, whatever their distance from actual readers, certainly have their own engagements and prejudices. To join the authorial audience, then, you should not ask what a *pure* reading of a given text would be. Rather, you need to ask what sort of *corrupted* reader this particular author wrote for: what were that reader's beliefs, engagements, commitments, prejudices, and stampings of pity and terror?

The reader, in other words, can read as the author intended only by being in the right place to begin with—and that can come about only through an intuitive mix of experience and faith, knowledge

27. Prince, "Introduction," 10–11. But see also his claim, "There may frequently be points in my reading where . . . I have to rely not only on my linguistic knowledge and the textual information supplied but also on my mastery of logical operations, my familiarity with interpretive conventions and my knowledge of the world" (Narratology, 128).

and hunch—plus a certain amount of luck. There is consequently no ideal point of departure that will work for any and all books. And since each point of departure involves its own corruptions, commitments, and prejudices, every authorial reading has significant ideological strands. As I suggested earlier, my primary concern here is with a particular aspect of the authorial audience's corruptions: the literary conventions that it applies to the text in order to transform it. As such critics as Culler are now making clearer, reading (especially the reading of literature) is not only not a natural activity—it is not even a logical consequence of knowledge of the linguistic system and its written signs. It is, rather, a separately learned, *conventional* activity.

In other words, literary conventions are not in the text waiting to be uncovered, but in fact *precede* the text and make discovery possible in the first place.<sup>28</sup> Note, however, that I speak here of discovery, not creation. The notion of reading as authorial audience is closer to what Steven Mailloux calls "textual realism" (the belief that "meaning-full texts exist independent of interpretation") than to what he calls "readerly idealism" (the belief that "meaning is made, not found," since "textual facts are never prior to or independent of the hermeneutic activity of readers and critics").<sup>29</sup> True, I share the idealists' belief that texts are incomplete when we get them and must be put together according to the

28. As Culler argues, "The implication that the ideal reader is a *tabula rasa* on which the text inscribes itself not only makes nonsense of the whole process of literary education and conceals the conventions and norms which make possible the production of meaning but also insures the bankruptcy of literary theory, whose speculations on the properties of literary texts become ancillary and *ex post facto* generalizations which are explicitly denied any role in the activity of reading" (*Pursuit of Signs*, 121). See also Mailloux's claim that "a reader's understanding of authorial intention always depends on shared communicative conventions, but the success of the intention to achieve certain perlocutionary effects is not guaranteed by those conventions, only made possible by them" (*Interpretive Conventions*, 106). This notion of reading is confirmed by research into cognitive psychology. See, for instance, Mary Crawford and Roger Chaffin's claim that "understanding is a product of both the text and the prior knowledge and viewpoint that the reader brings to it" ("Reader's Construction of Meaning," 3).

29. Mailloux, "Rhetorical Hermeneutics," 622. Mailloux attacks both schools and argues against doing "Theory" at all. Although I do not follow this path, I find his alternative—a study of the *institutional* politics of interpretation—a profitable one as well.

principles of the reader's interpretive community, but in the case of successful authorial reading, the author and readers are members of the same community, so while the reader does in fact engage in an act of production, he or she makes what the author intended to be found. Of course, as I will discuss in more detail in Chapters 6 and 7, not all attempts at authorial reading are successful. Even readers who try to find out what an author intends may thus in fact *make* something the author never expected, in such cases, though, the readers will still act as if they have in fact found the meaning of the text.

I am not arguing that we do not use logic to interpret literary texts. Given that Edna Lossler is twenty in 1900 when Margaret Ayer Barnes' *Edna His Wife* opens, we can reasonably infer—as the author intended us to—that she is in her fifties when the novel ends, in the early 1930s. But such inferences are not sufficient for a complete authorial reading. Nor am I arguing that one cannot describe the features of literary artifacts or the rules that govern reading according to “logical” categories. Thus, for instance, Gerald Prince is quite correct when he claims, “Should an event A precede an event B in time, the two may be temporally adjacent, or proximate, or distant.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, we can claim, with some precision, that in any book, the rule that we should eliminate likely suspects either applies or does not apply. But providing a logical classification of all possibilities is quite different from providing a logical system that explains which of those possibilities will be actualized in a given novel. A reader who picks up Ellery Queen's *Tragedy of X* for the first time knows to eliminate obvious suspects, not because of some *systematic* understanding of possible literary types, but rather because it is the *conventional* thing to do in that kind of book. For this reason, discussions of the actual conventions of reading will always appear arbitrary and ad hoc compared to the classifications of structuralists.<sup>31</sup> Knowledge of these conventions is a major part of what Culler

calls “literary competence.”<sup>32</sup> It is not simply that we need to know conventions in order to read Joyce; even the simplest literary artifact (say, a comic strip) calls nonlinguistic conventions (such as the left-to-right spatial representation of the passage of time) into play.<sup>33</sup> As Janice Radway puts it, “Comprehension is . . . a process of sign production where the reader actively attributes significance to signifiers on the basis of previously learned cultural codes.”<sup>34</sup> As I will demonstrate, the reliance of reading on conventions that precede the text has enormous consequences for the processes of interpretation and evaluation, in many ways the central activities of the academic literary community.

### *The Value(s) of Authorial Reading*

In this book, I will focus primarily on authorial reading. In so doing, I am not claiming that this is either the only or even the best way to read. I do not agree with Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels that “the meaning of a text is simply identical to the author's intended meaning” or that “authorial intention is the necessary object of interpretation.”<sup>35</sup> And I do not agree with Wayne Booth and E. D. Hirsch, Jr., who often suggest that there is a

32. Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, esp. chap. 6. Conventions are also one aspect of Hans Robert Jauss' notion of “horizon of expectations.” See, for instance, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. For a strong critique of Culler's notion of competence, see Pratt, “Interpretive Strategies/Strategic Interpretations,” esp. 215–21. Pratt points out that, as Culler uses the concept, literary competence can end up as a theoretical justification for the mainstream practices of academic criticism. Literary competence, however, need not be restricted to what the academy believes it to be; as I hope will be clear in Chapters 6 and 7, my own stress on actual authorial intention, rather than on received opinion about the “right” way to read “good” books, helps avoid this problem.

33. For a good unpacking of the conventions of the comic strip, see Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 37–41.

34. Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 7. Radway sees this as a process of “making” meaning, but as I have argued, reading as authorial audience at least attempts to “find” a meaning that is in some sense already there.

35. Knapp and Michaels, “Against Theory,” 724, and “A Reply to Our Critics,” 796. For a series of incisive responses to Knapp and Michaels, see *Critical Inquiry* 9 (June 1983): 725–89.

30. Prince, *Narratology*, 64.

31. For a different perspective, see Todorov's discussion of the difference between logical (“theoretical”) and historical genres (*Fantastic*, chap. 1).

moral imperative to read as the author intended.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, I would argue that authorial reading is more than just another among a large set of equally valid and equally important ways of approaching a text. Authorial reading has a special status for at least two reasons.

First, while Knapp and Michaels are wrong that "the object of all reading is *always* the historical author's intention" (italics added),<sup>37</sup> it is true that most people actually do read—or attempt to read—this way most of the time. Of course, different individuals may disagree about what the author's intention is, just as they may react differently to it once they think they have found it. Nonetheless, the initial question most commonly asked of a literary text in our culture is, What is the author saying? The critical revolutions of the 1970s and 1980s may have deluded us, but the millions of readers of Len Deighton's *SS-GB* or Judith Krantz's *Scraples* were interested neither in deconstructing texts nor in discovering their underlying semiotic codes. In fact, even among the most jaded readers—academics—the majority still attempts to read as authorial audience. Authorial reading continues to provide the basis for most academic articles and papers—and, even more, for classroom teaching.

Second, the perhaps more important for critical theory, reading as authorial audience provides the foundation for many other types of reading. True, some approaches to texts skip over the authorial audience entirely: certain kinds of structuralist or stylistic studies, for instance, or the kind of subjective reading proposed by David Bleich in *Readings and Feelings*.<sup>38</sup> But then again, many types of reading depend for their power on a prior understanding of the

authorial meaning.<sup>39</sup> The manifest/latent distinction of certain Freudian studies, for instance, collapses if we don't have a manifest meaning to begin with. Georg Lukács' Marxist analysis of Balzac depends on the distinction between what Balzac wanted to see and what he really did see.<sup>40</sup> Most important—if importance has any connection to the power of a critical movement to make us recognize the world with new eyes—we see the same dependence on authorial intention in much feminist criticism. Judith Fetterley's "resisting reader" can come into being only if there is something to resist.<sup>41</sup>

Two examples may clarify how certain kinds of political criticism can be strengthened if they are built on a foundation of authorial reading. Imagine a critic who wanted to uncover Natasha's victimization in *War and Peace*—to show how Russian society restricts the development of her natural talents, how it curbs and punishes her spirit and individuality. Such a critic could well point out Natasha's unjust fate—even explain its social, psychological, and historical causes—without any reference to authorial intention. But if—and only if—the critic works through an authorial reading of the text, the scope of this political analysis can be enlarged to explore the *contradiction* between the authorial audience and the critic. For only by starting with an authorial reading could the critic analyze the social, historical, and biographical implications of the fact that from Tolstoy's point of view (and from the point of view of the authorial audience, as well as of

39. Booth has called such readings "parasitical" ("M. H. Abrams," 441). See J. Hillis Miller's response, "Critic as Host."

40. Lukács claims, for instance, that Balzac was faced with a contradiction between the torments of "the transition to the capitalist system of production" and his awareness that this "transformation was not only socially inevitable, but at the same time progressive. This contradiction in his experience Balzac attempted to force into a system based on a Catholic legitimism and tricked out with Utopian conceptions of English Toryism. But this system was contradicted all the time by the social realities of his day and the Balzacian vision which mirrored them" (*Studies in European Realism*, 12–13; emphasis added).

41. See also Mailloux's claim that "every feminist and nonfeminist approach must posit some kind of reading experience upon which to base its interpretation. Only after a reader-response description is completed or assumed can a feminist critique begin" (*Interpretive Conventions*, 89).

36. See Booth: "It is simply self-maiming to pretend that any blissful improvisation on [Henry James'] words, sentences, or themes . . . can equal the value of his making" (*Critical Understanding*, 284). See also Hirsch, *Aims of Interpretation*. For positions that oppose Booth's, see, for instance, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *On the Margins of Discourse*, esp. chap. 6; and "English 692" [Joanna Brent, Rita Conley, et al.], "Poem Opening: An Invitation to Transactive Criticism," *College English* 40 (September 1978): 2–16.

37. Knapp and Michaels, "A Reply to Our Critics," 798.

38. Esp. 80–95. For a further development of Bleich's ideas, see also his *Subjective Criticism*.

millions of actual readers), Natasha does not suffer in the end. Indeed, her victimization is worse than invisible—it is construed as a reward.<sup>42</sup> Without this grounding in an authorial reading, Tolstoy's misogynist text is indistinguishable from feminist irony. Similarly, reading *Jane Eyre* in the context of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*—and Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria*—provides a useful perspective that underscores the inhumanity of Rochester's—and Jane's—treatment of Bertha and suggests that we look behind her function as a convenient Gothic plot device to consider her as a significant character who has been driven mad by her social and economic conditions. But again, with authorial reading one can go further to explore the extent to which Brontë was herself unable to see the oppression behind that convention.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, in arguing for the importance of reading as authorial audience, I am not suggesting that it is either the final reading or the most important. Were I teaching either Tolstoy or Brontë, I would be disappointed in a student who could produce an authorial reading but who could not, in Terry Eagleton's phrase, "show the text as it cannot know itself"<sup>44</sup>—that is, move beyond that reading to look at the work critically from some perspective other than the one called for by the author. But while authorial reading without further critique is often incomplete, so is a critical reading without an understanding of the authorial audience as its base.

So far, I have argued the importance of authorial reading on the grounds that many readers try to engage in it, and that it is a necessary precondition for many other kinds of reading. But it does not logically follow that it is actually possible. Indeed, I would argue that in a sense it is not. I am not referring here to the problems of interpretation that arise because authors simply fail at the act of writing, or because, when editors are allowed to muddle with

42. See, in this regard, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's discussion of the "happy ending" of *Our Mutual Friend* and what it really means for Lizzie (*Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1985], 178).

43. For a different perspective on this problem, considered in the context of European imperialism, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985): 243–61.

44. Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, 43.

finished texts, authors, as Hershel Parker puts it, "very often lose authority, with the result that familiar literary texts at some points have no meaning, only partially authorial meaning, or quite adventurous meaning unintended by the author or anyone else."<sup>45</sup> Even beyond this, even among the most polished and accurately edited of texts, there are many (perhaps all) where neither scholarship nor imagination is sufficient to allow us to recover the text in the sense of experiencing the full response that the author intended us to have as we read. This impossibility stems directly from the actual/authorial split. These audiences differ in, among other things, the knowledge and belief they bring to a text. To the extent that the knowledge distinguishing the authorial from the actual audience is positive or additive (that is, to the extent that the authorial audience knows something that the actual audience does not), the gap can often be bridged through education. The reader of *The Catacombs* who does not know the date of Kennedy's assassination can be informed. But knowledge can also be negative. That is, sometimes actual readers can respond to a text as authorial audience only by *not* knowing something that they in fact know—not knowing, as they read John Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle*, the actual (often unidealistic) course that the American labor movement would eventually follow; not knowing, as they read *U.S.A.*, that Dos Passos would later shift his political views. As for beliefs—they are usually neither additive nor negative, but substitutive: it was difficult for some college-age readers in the late 1960s to accept the passion with which Clarissa protected her virginity.

The problems of recovery caused by the actual/authorial split have a musical equivalent: what I call the authentic-performance paradox. Many performing groups assume that by recreating the physical sounds that a composer had available, they come closer to recreating the intended musical experiences. But do contemporary listeners really move closer to Beethoven's intended experiences when they listen to his sonatas on a Conrad Graf fortepiano? In at least one way, they take a significant step *away* from Beethoven. I am not convinced by those structuralists who argue that binary

45. Parker, *Flawed Texts and Verbal Icons*, 4.

oppositions underlie all of our perceptions of the world, but structuralists are surely right that we see things not in themselves but rather in terms of their relations, and specifically in terms of positions determined largely by culturally imposed categories that may change radically over time. Thus, when I hear Beethoven on an early-nineteenth-century fortepiano (and I think this experience is shared by many contemporary listeners), I hear it first and foremost *against* modern sounds. That is, the sound is defined by me (and hence experienced by me) partly in terms of its being not-that-of-a-modern-piano. That component of the listening experience was obviously not envisioned by Beethoven. Similarly, the range of choices that Mozart faced now seems restricted in ways that it did not in 1790, since we now know what Beethoven, Wagner, Schoenberg, and Jay Reise have added to available harmonic and formal vocabulary.<sup>46</sup>

In other words, we live in a world with a history and with traditions, and it is impossible to experience what an author wanted us to because it is impossible to forget all that has happened between the time when a text was written and the time when it is read. What reasonably educated member of our culture can read *Hamlet*—even for the first time—without being influenced by the traditions of interpretation encrusted on it? Of course, tradition is a factor in authorial reading as well; the tradition of literature out of which *Hamlet* grew is, to some extent, part of Shakespeare's assumed starting point. But the traditions coming *afterward* are assuredly not, and modern readers are more likely to be familiar with the latter (which cannot be erased) than with the former.

Thus, while books do sometimes have the power to take readers out of themselves, that power is limited. Nor is that limitation necessarily to be lamented. Despite romantic notions about the beneficial consequences of great art, books are in fact capable of moving readers in immoral as well as in moral directions. In the climactic chapter of Thomas Dixon, Jr.'s once-popular *The Leopard's Spots*, for instance, our hero, entering a chaotic Democratic convention, makes a stunning speech that unites the party, gains

him the nomination for the governorship, provides the first step toward the routing of the Republicans—and, happily, wins over the father of the woman he loves. Few of the readers who pick up this text have trouble recognizing that, for the authorial audience, this is an inspiring moment—especially since Dixon gives clear signals as to how we should react:

Two thousand men went mad. With one common impulse they sprang to their feet, screaming, shouting, cheering, shaking each other's hands, crying and laughing. With the sullen roar of crashing thunder another whirlwind of cheers swept the crowd, shook the earth, and pierced the sky with its challenge. Wave after wave of applause swept the building and flung their rumbling echoes among the stars.<sup>47</sup>

But should the actual reader respond emotionally, as the author intended, to the *content* of the speech?

"Shall we longer tolerate negro inspectors of white schools, and negroes in charge of white institutions? Shall we longer tolerate the arrest of white women by negro officers and their trial before negro magistrates?"

"Let the manhood of the Aryan race with its four thousand years of authentic history answer that question!" [436]

"The African has held one fourth of this globe for 3000 years. He has never taken one step in progress or rescued one jungle from the ape and the adder, except as the slave of a superior race . . . and he has not produced one man who has added a feather's weight to the progress of humanity." [437]

The ability to "forget" the viciousness of this passage is not an ability to be nourished, even if it increases our aesthetic enjoyment of this text. And New Critical dogma to the contrary, it is not simply in works of lesser aesthetic quality that this problem

46. For a fuller discussion of this problem, see my "Circumstantial Evidence: Music Analysis and Theories of Reading," *Mosaic* 18 (Fall 1985): 159–73.

47. Thomas Dixon, Jr., *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden, 1865–1900* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1902), 443 [bk. 3, chap 13]. Further references to this edition are made in the text.

emerges.<sup>48</sup> The ability to forget the ways that women have been abused is not a moral asset either, even if it increases our enjoyment of the way Don Giovanni makes a laughingstock of Donna Elvira, or our pleasure in Rochester's final release from the burden of a mad wife.

But while it is neither always possible nor always desirable to experience a text as an author intended, it does not follow that all interpretation need be subjective or idiosyncratic. We can, after all, describe what we cannot experience—and we can often determine what the authorial audience's response is without sharing it fully. A reader can, for instance, know what the authorial audience of *The Leopard's Spots* finds the speech gratifying, or that the authorial audience of *Jane Eyre* finds Bertha unsympathetic—even if, as actual audience, the gratification or the lack of sympathy are problematic. This is important because, as I have argued, authorial reading has a special status against which other readings can be measured (although not necessarily negatively); it is a kind of norm (although not necessarily a positive value), in that it serves as a point of orientation (although not necessarily as an ultimate destination). In short, authorial reading—in the sense of *understanding* the values of the authorial audience—has its own kind of validity, even if, in the end, actual readers share neither the experiences nor the values presumed by the author.

### *The Difficulties of Authorial Reading*

Any discussion of reading must eventually come to grips with a fundamental fact: texts are often ambiguous. This claim of ambiguity, of course, is itself ambiguous, for it means several different

48. Thus, for instance, Brooks and Warren admit that there are some works that "offend us at too deep a level" for us to accept them. "But always we should be careful that we have made the imaginative effort to understand what values may be there, and what common ground might, with more effort, be found." It is significant, though, that they hasten to add, "Furthermore, in the end, we may find that we have rejected the story not because of its theme as such, but because we have found the story unconvincing" (*Understanding Fiction*, 276).

things. It means, for instance, that readers from different interpretive communities—readers who are using the text for different ends—may well find different things in it, and may well call on different kinds of evidence to support their claims: Marxists and Freudians may well see *The Trial* as different texts that are both contained within the same marks on the page. It also means, as many deconstructionist readings have made clear, that the nature of our linguistic system is such that actual readers may find meanings in a text that subvert the meaning apparently intended by the author. It means, in addition, that authors often attempt to communicate ambiguity itself—thus, even readers in the same interpretive community may well see different things in *The Trial*, since Kafka was consciously trying to confuse.

The actual/authorial distinction, however, suggests yet another type of ambiguity. Even among readers attempting to read as authorial audience (whatever they may call it)—that is, even among readers who share ties to the same critical methodologies—there are bound to be disagreements that literary theory can explain but never erase. For even within a given interpretive community, interpretation depends radically on the reader's starting point, which will influence (although not necessarily determine) his or her reading experience. And the proper starting point is always, as I have suggested, presupposed by the text, not contained within it.

To be sure, it is often claimed that texts provide their own rules for unlocking their meanings. "What attitude are we to take toward Walter Mitty?" ask Brooks and Warren. "The reader will need no special help in deciding how to 'take' this story. . . . The action of the story serves to suggest the proper blend of sympathy and amusement."<sup>49</sup> And it is true that we often apply rules of interpretation with so little thought that the act of literary perception appears to be automatic; furthermore, texts do, to some extent, give directions for their own decoding. But the phrase "give directions" is revealing. Every literary theoretician these days needs a governing metaphor about texts: text as seduction, text as fabric, text as abyss, text as system. I suppose that my metaphor

49. *Ibid.*, 63.

would have to be text as unassembled swing set. It's a concrete thing that, when completed, offers opportunities (more or less restricted depending on the particular swing set involved) for free play, but you have to assemble it first. It comes with rudimentary directions, but you have to know what directions *are*, as well as how to perform basic tasks.<sup>50</sup> It comes with its own materials, but you must have certain tools of your own at hand. Most important, the instructions are virtually meaningless unless you know, beforehand, what sort of an object you are aiming at. If you have never seen a swing set before, your chances of riding on the trapeze without cracking open your head are slight.

The same is true of reading. You must be somewhere to begin with. Even when a text gives some fairly explicit guidance, you need to know how to recognize it and how to apply it. The moment I pick up Vanessa James' Harlequin romance, *The Fire and the Ice*, and find a story that begins with an erotically charged confrontation between a journalist heroine and her new boss (a wealthy playboy she had attacked in print two years earlier), I know a great deal about what to expect—but that is only because I have met the genre and its conventions before. One can well appreciate the kind of insensitive reading that led such critics as I. A. Richards to launch an attack on stock responses—but the fact remains that

50. See Gerald Graff's comment that "the reason most students are baffled by what we ask them to do is that they do not know what kind of thing it is that they are supposed to say about literary works, and they can't infer those kinds of things from the literary works themselves, because literary works themselves don't tell one what it is one is supposed to say about them" ("Joys of Not Reading"). See also Eagleton's remark, "The competent reader is the one who can apply to the text certain rules, but what are the rules for applying rules?" (*Literary Theory*, 125). Wolfgang Iser also relies heavily on the notion of giving directions; see, in particular, *The Act of Reading*. Iser, however, stresses what the text offers, rather than what the reader is presumed to bring; that is, he starts with a reader who already incorporates all the rules I am discussing here. And by suggesting that all worthwhile texts develop their own codes (see, for instance, 21), he smudges the line between the text's directions and the readerly presuppositions that allow those directions to work. He thus minimizes the different types of presuppositions required by different texts. Despite his theoretical insistence that "the reader's role can be fulfilled in different ways, according to historical or individual circumstances" (37), he rarely discusses different possible approaches to a text (for an exception, see his 201–2). As a consequence, his analyses, and especially his view of the canon, differ radically from mine.

without some stock responses to begin with, reading is impossible.<sup>51</sup>

Now suppose you are given something to assemble and a set of directions. If you make a mistake in construction, you may eventually find yourself in a self-contradictory position, one where you cannot go further—where following the directions is made impossible by the material reality ("attach the dowel to the holes in posts A and B"—where the posts are six inches further apart than the dowel is long). At this point, you have to reconsider your whole "interpretation," often starting over again from scratch. So it is with reading. The reader of *Crime and Punishment* who assumed that the rule of the least likely suspect applied and that, as in Agatha Christie's *A. B. C. Murders*, our protagonist had been framed—such a reader would eventually reach an interpretive dead end. And unless the reader were exceptionally dull witted or strong willed, he or she would eventually have to rethink what had been done so far.<sup>52</sup>

But sometimes erroneous assembly produces something internally consistent: the swing set holds up, but the swings are three inches closer to the ground than the manufacturer had in mind. And that can happen in reading as well. That is, there is a significant number of texts (perhaps all texts) where two or more starting points can result in conflicting, but equally coherent and consistent, *meanings*—using the word broadly to include the step-by-step experience of tension and relaxation, surprise, confusion, and euphoria. Jane Austen fans will remember the scene in *Emma* where Emma and Harriet have a conversation in which neither understands the other—although both *think* they are communicating—because they are beginning with different assumptions about the referent of the pronoun "he." This kind of misunderstanding comes up in our conversations with authors, too—more

51. See, for instance, Richards, *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World/Harvest, 1964), 223–40, esp. 232. See also Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration*, 113–23.

52. For an amusing exploration of this issue, see James Thurber's story about an attempt to read *Macbeth* as if it were a classical detective story: "The Macbeth Murder Mystery," in *The Thurber Carnival* (New York: Modern Library, 1957), 60–63.

often than we may believe.<sup>53</sup> An example may show more specifically what I mean.

On the surface, Agatha Christie's *Mystery of the Blue Train* is a commonplace member of the genre "classical British detective story." It has a murder, it has an adequate collection of readily identifiable cardboard characters, most with plausible motives and questionable alibis, it has trains and timetables, jewels and false jewels, accusations and false accusations, disguises and discrepancies, and, of course, it has an eccentric detective. A reader experienced in the genre will know fairly quickly what to fasten on to. Of particular importance will be such details as who has seen the victim after the train has left the Gare de Lyon. Such a reader, from his or her experience with other similar novels, will also know that in detective stories, "there must be no love interest."<sup>54</sup> He or she will therefore rightfully dismiss as window dressing the romantic story of the pure and simple Katherine Grey, who has just inherited a fortune from the crochety old woman to whom she was a companion.

Read in this way, the book works well. As we expect, some of the apparent clues turn out to be important, others to be red herrings, and there is the expected unexpected twist so that the average reader will, at the end, experience that very special emotion that only a good classical English detective story can offer: the rush of "Oh! I should have caught that!" I have taught the novel several times as a model of the genre, and most students have enjoyed it and been both surprised and pleased by the ending.

I had two students, however, who used a different point of depar-

53. I thus disagree with Monroe C. Beardsley's claim that "the more complicated a text, the more difficult it becomes (in general) to devise two disparate and incompatible readings that are equally faithful to it" ("Textual Meaning and Authorial Meaning," 171). One problem with Beardsley's position is that he does not take a sufficient account of the differing conceptions of what it means to be "faithful" to a given text. In this regard, see Thomas S. Kuhn's observation that when philosophers and historians read the same texts, they read them differently. "Undoubtedly the two had looked at the same signs, but they had been trained (programmed if you will) to process them differently" (*The Essential Tension: Selected Studies in Scientific Tradition and Change* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977], 6).

54. S. S. Van Dine, "Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories," in *The Art of the Mystery Story: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Howard Haycraft (New York: Grosset and Dunlap/Universal Library, 1947), 189.

ture. The rule that love interest is secondary, after all, is not *in* the text. Nor, for that matter, is it an article of faith of any regularly constituted interpretive community. Rather, it is brought to bear on the text from the outside. And without a prior decision to apply that rule, there is no textually imposed reason not to pay more attention to Katherine Grey, especially since her actions are given considerable prominence, as is her perspective on the events. In fact, it is possible to treat the novel as a kind of romance. From this standpoint, the timing of the trains becomes a secondary consideration, and a different stock pattern emerges: a sympathetic and lovely young woman is wooed by two apparently suitable suitors. From our knowledge of such texts as *Sense and Sensibility* and *War and Peace*, we expect that one of them will be eliminated. But we wouldn't be satisfied if one were simply bumped off (like Tolstoy's Andrei) or one were simply rejected, for we like them both, and this is not the sort of novel in which the tragedy of life or even the sadness of having to make difficult decisions seems a major theme. The best solution, therefore, is to have one of them lose our respect, like Austen's Willoughby, he must turn out to be a scoundrel beneath the surface. Given the subject matter of the story, the most appropriate resolution would be to have one of the suitors turn out to be the killer. The author, in fact, fulfills the expectations raised by this pattern; indeed, so that we can maintain our love and respect for Katherine, Christie goes so far as to assure us that she has known the truth for some time. When Knighton turns out to be the villain, then, the reader starting off from this romance premise experiences something quite different from the surprise that the detective reader experiences: a satisfying Austenesque confirmation of expectations.

These two readings of the book—and given the radically different effects they produce, they have to be considered two distinct readings—do not stem from differences in critical methodology. And for this reason, they are (in contrast, say, to Freudian and Marxist readings of *The Trial*) irreconcilable. The argument that Joseph K.'s experiences represent his inner psychodrama does not necessarily contradict the claim that they reflect the irrationality of modern-day society; one can well believe both simultaneously. But one cannot simultaneously be surprised and not surprised by

the ending of *The Mystery of the Blue Train*. Each reading confers a different meaning on the text, and each is consistent and coherent in itself.

How can we explain this double-barreled detective story? We could, perhaps conclude that all texts are open, that they are all susceptible to multiple (even infinite) equally correct readings. Alternatively, we could claim that this novel plays on the conflict between knowledge and ignorance, and that it thus speaks the truth through paradox or artfully deconstructs the genres to which it appears to belong. We might also conclude that it is a poor text. But there is another perfectly reasonable claim one could make: that it is a detective story that does not provide enough *internal* evidence for the actual reader to determine correctly the nature of the authorial audience. This does not make it any less of a mystery story—but to read it correctly (in the sense of successfully joining the authorial audience), you have to know what its genre is *before* you read it. In other words, it is a text that readily opens itself up to misreadings—a term that I use to refer not to readings that simply skirt the authorial audience, but rather to readings that *attempt* to incorporate the strategies of the authorial audience, but fail to do so. In this regard, as we shall see, it is far from an unusual case.

In Chapters 6 and 7, I have a great deal to say about the implications of such misreadings, especially about the ways in which they interact with ideology. But before doing so, I need to look more closely at the kinds of conventions on which competing authorial readings are apt to be based.

### Rules of Reading

The term *convention* may appear, at first, somewhat restricted—for many people, when they think of literary conventions, think of formulas of plot and character. Conventions, however, inform our reading in far more complex ways. There are any number of ways of classifying them, and I would like to suggest now a four-part system. Let me make it clear from the outset that this framework is neither exhaustive nor privileged. That is, I intend neither to provide a complete taxonomy of interpretive conventions nor to oust other

systems that have been offered (my scheme, for instance, complements, rather than replaces, the typology suggested by Steven Mailloux).<sup>55</sup> Rather, I am offering what I hope will be a useful if rough sorting out of an extremely thorny area—a system that is not only convenient for organizing the ways that we can think about narrative conventions, but that also serves to illuminate some of the relationships between them. Specifically, the system sets out four types of rules. These rules govern operations or activities that, from the author's perspective, it is appropriate for the reader to perform when transforming texts—and indeed, that it is even necessary for the reader to perform if he or she is to end up with the expected meaning. And they are, from the other end, what readers implicitly call upon when they argue for or against a particular paraphrase of a text. The rules, in other words, serve as a kind of assumed contract between author and reader—they specify the grounds on which the intended reading should take place. They are, of course, socially constructed—and they can vary with genre, culture, history, and text. And readers do not always apply them as authors hope they will—even if they are trying to do so, which they sometimes are not.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, as I will argue in Chapter 7, canonization is, in large part, a matter of misapplication. But even when readers do not apply the *specific* rules the author had in mind, in our culture virtually *all* readers apply *some* rules in each of the four categories whenever they approach a text.

First, there are what I call rules of notice. Despite repeated claims by critics that everything counts in literature (especially poetry), we know from experience that there are always more details in a text—particularly a novel—than we can ever hope to

55. See, for instance, the distinction Mailloux proposes among traditional, regulative, and constitutive conventions, as well as among social, linguistic, literary, and authorial conventions and conventions within individual works (*Interpretive Conventions*, esp. chap. 5). See also the distinction among linguistic, pragmatic, and literary conventions in Ellen Schaubert and Ellen Spolsky, "Reader, Language, and Character," and the classification of codes in Barthes, *S/Z*.

56. See, for instance, Umberto Eco's claim that "we must keep in mind a principle, characteristic of any examination of mass communication media . . . : the message which has been evolved by an educated elite (in a cultural group or a kind of communications headquarters, which takes its lead from the political or economic group in power) is expressed at the outset in terms of a fixed code, but it is caught by divers groups of receivers and deciphered on the basis of other codes" (*Role of the Reader*, 141).

keep track of much less account for. We have learned to tame this multiplicity with a number of implicit rules, shared by readers and writers alike, that give priority to certain kinds of details, and that thus help us sort out figures from ground by making a hierarchy of importance. Some rules of notice cover a wide spectrum of texts: for instance, there is the simple rule that titles are privileged. This may seem trivial, but it is a tremendous help for the first-time viewer of *Hamlet*. In the opening scenes, there are so many characters that he or she would not know where to focus attention without some cue. Similarly, the first and last sentences of most texts are privileged; that is, any interpretation of a text that cannot account for those sentences is generally deemed more defective than a reading that cannot account for some random sentence in the middle. Other rules of notice are specific to smaller groups of texts. For instance, when we are given some apparently obscure detail about a character's grandmother in a novel by Faulkner, we are supposed to pay more attention to it than we would in one by Dostoyevsky.

Second, there are rules of signification. These are the rules that tell us how to recast or symbolize or draw the significance from the elements that the first set of rules has brought to our attention. Included here are rules for determining symbolic meaning (the rules that tell us when to invoke the religious connotations of words, for instance); rules for distinguishing degrees of realism in fiction (the rules that allow us to discriminate, for instance, among the degrees and types of realism in the various representations of Napoleon in *War and Peace*, Anthony Burgess' *Napoleon Symphony*, and Woody Allen's *Love and Death*); the rule that allows us, in fiction, to assume that post hoc is propter hoc; rules that permit us to assume that characters have psychologies and to draw conclusions about those psychologies from their actions.

Third, there are rules of configuration. Certain clumps of literary features tend to occur together, because of our familiarity with such groupings, we know how to assemble disparate elements in order to make patterns emerge. We can thus both develop expectations and experience a sense of completion. Our ability to perceive form—in Kenneth Burke's sense of the creation and satisfaction of appetites ("Psychology and Form")—involves applying rules of configuration. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith's *Poetic Closure* dem-

onstrates, so does our ability to experience closure. And so does our recognition of the plot patterns and formulas so often illuminated in traditional genre studies. One need not get much further than the opening scenes of Philip Barry's *Holiday* to know how it is going to end. But that is not because it signals its own unique form, rather, it is because we know how to put together a few elements—a charming man, a rigid fiancée, an attractively zany fiancée's sister—and see an emerging pattern.<sup>57</sup>

Finally, there are rules of coherence. The most general rule here, familiar in part through such critics as Wayne Booth and Mary Louise Pratt,<sup>58</sup> states that we should read a text in such a way that it becomes the best text possible. Of course, as Pratt notes, "this is not to say . . . that we do or should assume all literary works to be somehow perfect. It means only that in literary works . . . the range of deviations which will be construed as intentional is much larger" than in "many other speech contexts."<sup>59</sup> From this follow more specific rules that deal with textual disjunctures, permitting us to repair apparent inconsistencies by transforming them into metaphors, subtleties, and ironies. Even deconstructive readings, which widen rather than bridge textual gaps, often find some overarching theme or philosophical point in terms of which the discontinuities make sense.<sup>60</sup>

Now while there is a certain logical order to these rules, I am not

57. In the film version, there is an added signal, since we assume that the characters played by Cary Grant and Katharine Hepburn will be the ones who get romantically entangled.

58. See, for instance, Booth, *Critical Understanding*, esp. chap. 7; Pratt, *Toward a Speech Act Theory*, esp. chap. 5.

59. Pratt, *Toward a Speech Act Theory*, 170. See also Ronald Dworkin's rather more extravagant claim that "an interpretation of a piece of literature attempts to show which way of reading [or speaking or directing or acting] the text reveals it as the best work of art. Different theories or schools or traditions of interpretation disagree . . . because they assume significantly different normative theories about what literature is and what it is for and about what makes one work of literature better than another" ("Law as Interpretation," 183). In subsuming all interpretation under rules coherence, Dworkin is not the only critic to privilege this category of rules.

60. Thus, it is not surprising that Serge Doubrovsky, writing in 1966 of what was then "the new criticism" in France—and what now appears to have been the initial stage of what eventually grew into post-structuralism—argues as follows: "Unity, totality, coherence: I believe that to be a motto common to all the new critics or, if you prefer, their common postulate" (*New Criticism in France*, 119).

suggesting that we read a text by applying them one after another. Reading is a more complex holistic process in which various rules interact with one another in ways that we may never understand, even though we seem to have little difficulty putting them into practice intuitively. Thus, for instance, rules of notice would seem to precede rules of configuration, since we cannot perceive a pattern until we notice the elements out of which it is formed. But one of the ways elements become visible is that they form parts of a recognizable pattern. Thus, when Lisa is stabbed in the breast near the end of D. H. Thomas' *White Hotel*, the authorial audience notices that it is the left rather than the right breast in part because her left breast has been mentioned so many times in the novel (repetition is one of the basic means of attracting attention). But it is noticeable for another reason as well: the reference fills out a basic configurational pattern in the novel centering around the theme of clairvoyance.

In addition, a given convention may well be capable of reformulation so that it fits into more than one of the four categories. Take, for instance, the way we are expected to respond to the conventional use of literary parallels. It involves a rule of notice (it is appropriate to pay attention to textual elements that parallel one another), but it is also a rule of signification (parallel forms suggest parallel meanings), a rule of configuration (given an element A, there is a good chance that there will be an element A' parallel to it), and a rule of coherence (given elements A and B, their mutual presence can be explained to the extent that we are able to interpret them as parallel to one another). The division of conventions into these four types, therefore, is intended neither as a descriptive model of the way the human mind actually reads nor as an absolute and exhaustive classification. It is, rather, a practical analytic device, of value to the extent that it is useful for answering particular questions.

Let us now consider each of these types of convention in turn.

## Trumpets, Please! Rules of Notice

I do not see how Mr. Stauffer can reject the proposition that every word in a good poem counts and still continue to use the term "poem" in a meaningful sense.

Cleanth Brooks, *Well Wrought Urn*

### *The Hierarchy of Detail*

In his essay "How Readers Make Meaning," Robert Crosman presents an interpretation of "A Rose for Emily" worked out by one of his students.<sup>1</sup> The analysis is unusual: while it accounts for many details in Faulkner's story that are usually passed over, it does not come to terms with the ending, for the student fails to mention, much less catch the implications of, the famous "long strand of iron-gray hair" on the pillow.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, argues Crosman, the interpretation is valid; it may fail to incorporate certain textual features, but that is true of *any* interpretation. While more traditional readings of the story all account for the last sentence, they skim over elements that his student vividly illuminates.

In one sense, I agree with Crosman: no interpretation can possibly account for all the details in a text. This position, however, runs against the current of a strong critical tradition based on two

1. Crosman, "How Readers Make Meaning." See also his "Do Readers Make Meaning?"—especially his claim for the validity of an interpretation of Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" "as a statement that we should drink milk regularly" (133).

2. Faulkner, "A Rose for Emily," in *Selected Short Stories of William Faulkner* (New York: Modern Library, n.d.), 61.