

**DISCOURSE AND THE RECEPTION OF
LITERATURE: PROBLEMATISING
'READER RESPONSE'**

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For Beata.

And for our little Jamie.

Acknowledgements, part I

Family first. Dear Beata: it would be impossible to acknowledge everything you've done to contribute. Thank you – I love you – and I know you've had to put up with more than you should have for the sake of this peculiar document. Dear Jamie: I owe you apologies you won't understand – but I can promise you'll see a lot more of your daddy from now on. I'm so proud of you, little love. Dear Aneta: you did so much for the three of us when we truly needed it. I won't forget that, cousin.

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Note: This dissertation contains previously published material (particularly in Chapter 3, see Allington 2007a) and material that is forthcoming elsewhere (particularly in Chapter 2 – see Allington 2008 – and Chapter 4 – see Allington 2010).

Abstract

In my earlier work, 'First steps towards a rhetorical hermeneutics of literary interpretation' (2006), I argued that academic reading takes the form of an argument between readers. Four serious weaknesses in that account are its elision of the distinction between reading and discourse on reading, its inattention to non-academic reading, its exclusive focus on 'interpretation' as if this constituted the whole of reading or of discourse on reading, and its failure to theorise the object of literary reading, ie. the work of literature. The current work aims to address all of these problems, together with those created by certain other approaches to literary reading, with the overall objective of clearing the ground for more empirical studies. It exemplifies its points with examples drawn primarily from non-academic public discourse on literature (newspapers, magazines, and the internet), though also from other sources (such as reading groups and undergraduate literature seminars). It takes a particular (though not an exclusive) interest in two specific instances of non-academic reception: the widespread reception of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* as an attack on Islam, and the minority reception of Peter Jackson's film trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* as a narrative of homosexual desire.

The first chapter of this dissertation critically surveys the fields of reception study and discourse analysis, and in particular the crossover between them. It finds more productive engagement with the textuality of response in media reception study than in literary reception study. It argues that the application of discourse analysis to reception data serves to problematise, rather than to facilitate, reception study, but it also emphasises the problematic nature of discourse analysis itself.

Each of the three subsequent chapters considers a different complex of problems. The first is the literary work, and its relation to its producers and its consumers: Chapter 2 takes the form of a discourse upon the notions of ‘speech act’ and ‘authorial intention’ in relation to literature, carries out an analysis of early *public* responses to *The Satanic Verses*, and puts in a word for non-readers by way of a conclusion. The second is the *private* experience of reading, and its paradoxical status as an object of public representation: Chapter 3 analyses representations of private responses to *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy, and concludes with the argument that, though these representations cannot be identical with private responses, they are cannot be extricated from them, either. The third is the impossibility of distinguishing rhetoric from cognition in the telling of stories about reading: Chapter 4 argues that, though anecdotal or autobiographical accounts of reading cannot be taken at face value, they can be taken both as attempts to persuade and as attempts to understand; it concludes with an analysis of a magazine article that tells a number of stories about reading *The Satanic Verses* – amongst other things. Each of these chapters focuses on non-academic reading as represented in written text, but broadens this focus through consideration of examples drawn from spoken discourse on reading (including in the liminal academic space of the undergraduate classroom).

The last chapter mulls over the relationship between reading and discourse of reading, and hesitates over whether to wrap or tear this dissertation’s arguments up.

A note on the transcriptions

In this dissertation, four samples of digitally-recorded spoken data are cited. Those in Chapters 1, 3, and 4 were recorded in undergraduate classes taking place within the Department of English Studies at the University of Stirling in Spring 2006 as part of my research for this dissertation. That in Chapter 2 was recorded in December 2007 at the Halfway II Heaven pub in central London as part of the AHRC-funded Discourse of Reading Groups project at the Open University, for which I am full-time Research Associate. I was present throughout the latter recording but, for the former three, I left the room after setting up the equipment, and returned only while students were leaving or had already left. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and care has been taken that none of them shall be identifiable.

In order to respect the orality of this data, it has been transcribed verbatim, with a minimum of punctuation. Capital letters are used only for proper nouns and the first person nominative pronoun, and the full stop is used to signify a pause of any duration up to three seconds. Underlining indicates emphasis, parentheses enclose descriptive comments (including timings of longer pauses), square brackets are used to indicate the beginnings of overlap between different speakers' utterances, and equals signs are used in two different ways: where they occur at the end of a line spoken by one speaker and at the beginning of one spoken by another, they indicate that there was no perceptible pause between the two turns, and where they occur at the end and beginning of two lines spoken by the same speaker, they indicate that this speaker did not break off speaking even if the layout of the page would otherwise suggest this (this is often necessary where overlap occurs). All speakers are identified with the letter S followed by a number,

except in classroom situations, where the tutor is identified with the letter T. Where it was impossible to identify the speaker, the letter S alone was used. Thus:

T okay . so the kind of [personal reactions you=
S [(laughs nervously)
T =might have to the play might sort of influence the
 kind of . reading into it you're going to do=
S4 =yeah

This system reflects a somewhat simplified adaptation (perhaps a corruption) of standard transcription practices among conversation analysts. I have deviated from the conventions of conversation analysis most blatantly in using question marks as they are normally used in written English, ie. to indicate that a question seems to be intended by the speaker: in conversation analysis, the question mark is used not to indicate a question but to indicate rising intonation. Although rising intonation is often hearable as a question, this is not invariably the case, and a question may be signalled in other ways (including by the use of falling intonation). My use of this punctuation mark in the transcriptions is therefore semantic rather than prosodic, and relies upon my own interpretative abilities as a speaker of English in much the same way that conversation analysts would typically rely on their interpretative abilities in deciding whether to treat the sound [Iz] as the present tense singular form of the verb to be (written: 'is') or as the masculine third person singular possessive adjective (written: 'his' or 'is'). In a study of (for example) the hearability of utterances as questions (or, for that matter, of that of the sound [Iz] as verb or as possessive adjective), this would be unacceptable. In the current study, however, I feel that it usefully displays the sense of utterances to the reader.

My use of quotation marks is also potentially controversial, because these are certainly not a feature of spoken English and they are generally not used in conversation analysis. As with the question mark, I have relied upon my own interpretative abilities to place them, and in doing so to help my readers understand the sense of what is transcribed. Greg Myers (1999) finds that, though speakers frequently *do* speak in such a way as to express viewpoints other than their own, and do not *necessarily* indicate (even by tone of voice) that this is what they are doing, there were in his own corpus of recorded interactions ‘no instances of participants raising such shifts as an issue, [or] responding as if the speaker was speaking in his or her own voice.’ (377) In other words, it is usually clear to participants in the original context that a speaker is speaking from someone else’s perspective. However, since (as Myers notes) confusion on this matter is easy once utterances are taken out of context, I have (unlike Myers) taken the decision to mark out such instances as they would be marked in narrative prose.

1. Introduction: the problematics of this study

the most important and insidious legacy of the New Criticism is the widespread and unquestioning acceptance of the notion that the critic's job is to interpret literary works. Fulfilment of the interpretive task has come to be the touchstone by which other kinds of critical writing are judged, and reviewers inevitably ask of any work of literary theory, linguistic analysis, or historical scholarship, whether it actually assists us in our understanding of particular works.

Culler 2001(1981):5-6

Two decades on, the above author considered that little had changed: 'critics', he laments in his preface to a new edition of the same work, 'are more interested in interpreting novels than in trying to spell out how we go about understanding them as we read.' (Culler 2001:xvii) To take the point further, it seems clear that, where literary critics *do* try 'to spell out how we go about understanding' literary works, this is often simply in order to support their own interpretations of those works, on the assumptions firstly that 'validity in interpretation is guaranteed by the establishment of norms or principles for explicating texts' and secondly that 'such rules are best derived from an account of how interpretation works in general.' (Mailloux 1989:5) The problem is not limited to those working on Culler's side of the institutional divide between 'English Language' and 'English Literature': in their review of discourse analytic approaches to literature, for example, Simpson and Hall set out high hopes for the field before admitting, with evident regret, that '[t]he publications reviewed here are characteristically conservative, tending to focus more on text explication and interpretation than on social and institutional explanations and implications.' (2002:136-

137) It would seem that a sort of post-New Critical malaise has long since set in across English Studies.¹

Perhaps a little anecdotal evidence might be permitted. As a Masters student, I experienced tremendous institutional resistance to the idea that a critic's job might be anything other than 'to interpret literary works': an assignment that attempted to falsify a theory about how narratives are interpreted was directly criticised for undermining the

¹ In this dissertation, I use the term 'post-New Critical' to refer both to the New Criticism and to those forms of criticism that have followed it in making close, interpretative commentary on literary works their central research procedure and the goal of their pedagogy. The precise extent to which criticism of this type became and has remained dominant in literary studies is debatable, and in any case may be assumed to vary from sub-discipline to sub-discipline. The relevance of my critique to a 'cultural studies' approach in which works of literature are discussed in relation to repressive or subversive ideologies circulating in society (see Subsection 1.3.3) might be contested, for example; however, the distinctiveness of this approach from the New Criticism in this regard may be less than is sometimes imagined. For example, Green (2003:70) argues that '[e]ven those critical modes that in effect work to deny or undermine an important New Critical axiom really only do so by affirming an underlying premise held in common.... the consortium of critics contributing to the rise of cultural studies (Marxists, New Historicists, all those who investigate representations of gender and sexuality) learned to use the strategy of close reading – even extending it to the analysis of nonliterary "texts" – in their own antipathetic scrutiny of canonical works of literature.' Thus, as Culler (2001a:xvii) observes, even where '[s]tudents learn to interpret literary works for what they show us about the condition of women, for instance, or about the dialectic of subversion and containment in which works of art participate', this does not change the fact that '[i]nterpretation is still the primary task'. On the other hand, I would suggest that the New Criticism and its interpretative preoccupations may have had a comparatively weak influence on classical and medieval studies, where works of poetry and drama rub shoulders with those of science and medicine, and textual and linguistic scholarship are all but inescapable (see Subsection 1.3.1 on the historically contingent dichotomy between scholarship and interpretative criticism).

interpretation that it showed the theory to predict (Green and Carter [2005:unpaginated, emphasis added]: '[t]he critique... is convincing, but this has the *unfortunate* affect [sic] of calling into question the analysis itself [ie. the interpretation]'), and an attempt to write a dissertation analysing the reception of *Heart of Darkness* was rendered ridiculous by my being forced to incorporate into it a novel interpretation of that work.² And in more recent years, I have not hesitated to give high marks to undergraduate essays that present coherent thematic interpretations of literary works, whatever my theoretical misgivings have been, and – human, all too bloody human – I have sometimes found myself teaching semiotics as if it were a tool for close reading.

In this dissertation, however, I have neither made nor been encouraged to make any such compromises. The questions I wrestle with (I do not venture to say 'answer') are, from the point of view of interpretative criticism, quite *pointlessly* theoretical: very little here 'actually assists us in our understanding of particular works' (at least given a post-New Critical understanding of what is constituted by a 'work'; see Subsection 1.3.1). From another point of view, however, these questions are entirely practical: from the point of view, that is, of wishing to investigate the practices in and by which literature is used (including the practices of literary interpretation). These practices are a quite enormous topic, of which I have in fact covered very little. However, my principal aim has been to lay sufficient groundwork for future studies to be able to cover rather more. Those studies are what I came to the University of Stirling to begin. That they have scarcely begun testifies to my failure to anticipate the scale of the groundwork they would

² As Culler (2001[1981]:103) states with gentle irony in his commentary on Rifaterre (1978): 'it is difficult to treat the efforts of previous readers simultaneously as the phenomena one wishes to explain and as the errors one is attempting to surpass'.

require. But it may also, I hope, testify to my commitment to getting a job done as well as can be.

Just over a year and a half ago, I published a paper entitled ‘First steps towards a rhetorical psychology of literary interpretation’ (Allington 2006). Now I know that it was barely even a gesture towards a first step, that interpretation was only a small part of the subject matter, that the word ‘literary’ was an accident waiting to happen, and that no psychology, by itself, was ever going to be enough. This dissertation attempts to correct some of that; and the current chapter attempts to introduce the background to that attempt. This is done largely by surveying some of the problems dealt with and raised by existing theoretical works, although – given the scope – a full literature review is impossible.

1.1 The questions

I set out with the aim to study reading as a social practice, subject to ‘social or institutional determinants of what’s available to read, what is “worth reading”, and how to read it’ (Long 1992:193). What I have done in practice is to follow hunches as far as they will go, letting empirical and theoretical interests bleed into one another. The remainder of this chapter attempts to reconstruct the field that I have seen myself as contributing to, picking out the problems and the promises to which I have tried to respond. The research questions I started out with – the ones on my application form – are long gone. The questions I have tried to answer are the ones that have come to trouble me; they are dispersed throughout Sections 1.2 to 1.9.

1.2 'Literature'

This dissertation does not fall into the field of 'literacy studies' (eg. Barton 1994). It is not, in other words, a study of the incorporation of written text into the social practices of everyday life: not an investigation of *whatever* uses of *whatever* writings. It is more limited than that, though it is hard to say precisely what the limitation consists in. It investigates (some of) the uses to which people put written texts of a particular kind – with the proviso that these written texts are constituted *as* a kind by their being put to particular uses. Nor is this a study in (textual) cultural consumption (eg. Bukodi 2007), since it has (from its outset) been disproportionately focussed on those forms of consumption that involve the production of discourse, and on the representation of consumption in discourse. And although such discourse is – controversially, although perhaps necessarily – of special importance to the history of reading,³ this is not a study in that field *either*, since its focus is (see comments above) far narrower than 'reading'.

³ Cf. Halsey (2008:127): 'Publishers' records, to take a single example, tell us that John Murray published 2,000 copies of the first edition of Jane Austen's *Emma* in 1814, and advertised them at a price of 21s. Sales records tell us that of those 2,000 copies, 1,248 copies had been sold in 9 months, 1,437 after 4 years, and the rest were remaindered. This is interesting and important information. But these numbers do not tell us with any degree of accuracy whether any of the 1,437 books were read by the people who bought them, or whether they sat, pages uncut, on a shelf in a gentleman's library for 100 years, or were passed on to someone else unread, or were sold to a circulating library, where they might have been read by anything between 1 and 500 readers, or sank when the ship on which they were being transported abroad went down in a storm, or were scribbled on by children looking for paper on which to draw. Sales figures certainly do not tell us what readers actually thought of the books they read – for that we need to turn to the kinds of evidence the RED [Reading Experience

Thanks in large part to its dialogue with the history of reading, this dissertation has a close relationship with the field that subsumes that sub-field, best known either as ‘book history’ or as ‘the history of the book’. Accordingly, I adopt the distinction between ‘work’ and ‘text’ used by textual scholars to distinguish a written composition, such as *The Satanic Verses*, from a specific realisation of that composition, such as the 1988 British hardback edition of *The Satanic Verses*. This is problematic both in that readers – even academic readers – do not commonly make this distinction (as Paul Eggert writes, ‘[t]he text that the editor constructs... may represent the work – it may *be* the work – for the bulk of its actual and potential readership’ [1991:64]), and in that many literary scholars use the word ‘text’ to refer to something else, ie. the sequence of linguistic signs that they *suppose* to constitute the work. Nonetheless, I believe that the distinction is essential for study of the reception of the kind of texts about which I have been talking, and which (throughout the remainder of this section) I shall fail to define: a study of the reading of printed ephemera could make no use of such a distinction; a study of the reading of (what I can hardly avoid calling) literature surely demands it.

So: literature. What is it? We would seem to need an answer, for otherwise we will find it hard to justify our attending to certain acts of reading and not to others. And yet there is no answer, nor even the hope of one: as Peter McDonald (2006) shows, the debate over the nature of literature is now between different antiessentialist positions, and not between essentialism and anti-essentialism. And so I must manufacture an answer, one with which to make do for the time being. Others have done so: a historical study of the supposed referent of the word ‘literature’ (as used today) in the period before that word came to be so used defined its subject as ‘those texts valued more for their mode of

Database] project collects, which aims to fill in precisely the gaps left by available “hard” evidence.’

Note that this database may be searched online: <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/>

expression than their expository content' (Terry 1997:89); similarly, Derek Attridge defines as literary those texts where 'the author's creative labour' is not primarily 'centred on the manipulation of ideas, the construction of arguments, the representation of existing entities in a new light, or the imagination of hitherto nonexistent entities', since 'such labour is combined with, and is in a certain sense always subject to, the selection and arrangement of words.' (2004:107) These definitions would both appear to draw on the second part of the Oxford English Dictionary's definition for 'literary', sense 3b: 'Pertaining to books and written compositions; also, in a narrower sense, pertaining to, or having the characteristics of that kind of written composition which has value on account of its qualities of form.' (1992 edition) They will not do for me, however, since they presuppose literary formalism, and adopting them would therefore prevent me from studying readers who read works 'for the story' (see Radway 1987[1984]:189-190) – not to mention excluding the bulk of what is (for my attempted justifications are post-hoc) already Chapter 3.⁴ I am going to use the word 'literature' in two senses, neither of which corresponds to the above.

⁴ It should also be noted that – in the absence of evidence that all the works supposed to be encompassed by the category of 'literature' so defined could, in their time and place of origin, have been understood as having been written in relation to an identical category to be evaluated on identical terms – the application of these definitions could be argued to be anachronistic. Such anachronism is not necessarily a problem, provided that it is recognised that what is at stake is not the nature of the works in question but the textual practices of communities, including communities beyond the originary context of the categorised works (see Subsection 1.3.1). In twenty-first century Britain and North America, for example, it would hardly be controversial to suggest that the works of Geoffrey Chaucer are 'valued more for their mode of expression than their expository content', and editions of them can thus quite happily be read and published as works of what we now call literature. In early modern England, however, they seem, as Wiggins (2007) argues, to have been read and valued as 'repositories' of sententiae and practical advice, and thus to have been assigned to

The first sense is entirely too simple to be taken seriously, but entirely too useful to be avoided, and it is the sense I will most frequently employ. In this sense, just as ‘poem’ is the superordinate term for ‘sonnet’, ‘sestina’, ‘villanelle’, etc, ‘literature’ is the superordinate term for verse, fiction, and drama. As anything but a working definition, this is clearly unsatisfactory, both for what it excludes and for what it glosses over. As for what it excludes, Earl Miner (1990:40) reminds us that ‘[p]rose narrative literature need not be fictional’, particularly in ‘a culture prizing literary fact above fiction’ (such as China):⁵ and yet it cannot be stretched to include nonfictional narrative prose without including much that is (to my knowledge) nowhere in the world considered literature, such as news reporting. A similar case is that of *belles-lettres*, works of which would ordinarily be described as works of literature, but must be excluded here: verse is distinguished from prose by being written out in verses, but *belletristic* prose appears to

a rather different (and perhaps equally anachronistic) category, wherein expository content was *not* subordinated to mode of expression. Where ‘the author’s creative labour’ is taken to be ‘centred’ will depend on the category to which the work taken to be the object of that labour is understood to belong: thus, the presumptive centre of Chaucer’s labour will appear to shift as we move between the two aforementioned post-Chaucerian contexts. We can study each of these categories, together with the acts of evaluation that produce and presuppose it, as part of a specific complex of practices that does not rely for its historical interest on similarity with the (potentially very different) complex through whose practices the work’s first texts were written. See Chapter 2 for further discussion of these issues.

⁵ Chinese literature, and Chinese ideas about literature, are, of course, beyond the scope of this dissertation, which investigates the reading of English-language literature through English-language discourse on literature.

be distinguished from other kinds of prose by being literary,⁶ so that to make literature the superordinate term for verse, fiction, drama, and *belles-lettres* would beg the question. As for what the definition glosses over, ED Hirsch (1978) points out that even if ‘poems, stories, and plays... were the only works which we happened to call literature... the[se] genres themselves merge into hybrid forms which cause just as many problems as the great big genre which we call literature’ (29) and, moreover, ‘some ancients, who stressed imitation or fictionality as the important defining trait of poetry, did not conceive of lyric poems as belonging among the recognised genres.’ (30)

The second sense is harder to state succinctly, but that is because it is drawn from ordinary language usage rather than convenience. It includes only *some* fiction, only *some* verse, and only *some* drama. For example, some of the spoken examples we will be looking at are excerpted from the large body of data I accumulated while recording ‘literature’ seminars and tutorials in the Department of English Studies at the University of Stirling. In all of these recordings, one can hear works of verse, fiction, and drama being used, but works of what I can only call *non-literary* verse, fiction, and drama were conspicuous by their (official) absence. If I had carried out my fieldwork in a different semester, I would have been able to record seminars in the ‘Pulp Fiction’ module: but, despite the name, this would have meant listening in on sessions devoted to discussion of such hardly disrespected – and, in their first editions, respectably hardbacked – works as Ian Fleming’s *Casino Royale* and Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, which might best be described as *borderline* literary. It is a long way from there to Lin Carter’s

⁶ The Oxford Essential Dictionary of Foreign Terms in English defines *belles-lettres* as ‘[s]tudies or writings of a purely literary character, especially essays, criticism, etc.’ (1999 edition, emphasis removed)

Thongor in the City of Magicians and Julia Justiss's *The Untamed Heiress* – or, for that matter, to Hollywood movies like Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. In the sense discussed in the previous paragraph, all these are works of literature (if film can be counted a species of drama, which I think it should), but, in the sense discussed in this paragraph, they are not.

This sense does not only exclude much of what the first sense includes; it also includes much which that sense excludes. Exploring the ordinary usage of the word 'literature', ED Hirsch (1978) observes that, though 'the most obvious... criterion we use is that of genre' (29), it is sometimes the case that 'literature is anything written by a great literary figure' (30), and sometimes that 'any text in any genre may be included in literature if it exhibits some excellence of form or style' (ibid.). Moreover, the Platonic dialogues are usually considered literary not because of their style but 'because they are imitations' (ibid.), and the Bible is often considered to be literature, but not for consistent reasons: some consider it to be such on the (aesthetic) grounds of 'the stylistic magnificence of the Authorised Version', others on the (generic) grounds that it contains 'poems and stories', and others on the (effectual) grounds of its 'bringing the whole soul of man into activity.' (31) Hirsch's own argument is in fact that it has been a *mistake* to define 'literature' as we have tended to since the Victorian period, ie. in solely aesthetic terms, 'subsum[ing] literature under art' (33), and that departments of literature ought to cast their curricular nets far more widely than Attridge, etc would permit.

While the first sense of 'literature', above, is a convenience on my part, the second is an important and contested category in the real world: Ken Gelder (2004) argues, for example, that popular fiction and what he calls 'Literature' (with a capital L; this

corresponds to literature in my second sense) are subsets of ‘literature’ (with a small l, a category he defines none too clearly) that are not only mutually exclusive, but defined by their differences from one another. Gelder has most success in defining the two subsets ostensibly, listing large numbers of authors whose work would intuitively be considered to belong to one or the other: for example, Henry James, James Joyce, and Toni Morrison for Literature, but Robert Louis Stevenson, Agatha Christie, and John Grisham for popular fiction. Although some works of Literature sell very well, and many works of popular fiction sell very badly, it is clear enough that the former trio write for an elite readership and are thus positioned in Pierre Bourdieu’s (1993:115-131) ‘sub-field of restricted production’, and the latter for a mass readership and are thus positioned in Bourdieu’s ‘sub-field of large-scale production’. Gelder’s problems of definition are simpler than ours, since he discusses only fiction, and yet his dichotomous schema has flaws that his own findings serve to highlight. For example, science fiction has greater intellectual ambitions and closer links to academia (Gelder 2004:94-96) than most of the other seven genres that, for Gelder, comprise popular fiction (42), and moreover – once media tie-ins like the *Star Wars* novels are discounted – its readership is surely small enough (68-69) for science fiction writers to be considered to operate in a field of restricted production. This does not, of course, make science fiction Literature – but it is not clear what it *does* make it. Gelder’s distinction at first seems more nuanced than Thomas Roberts’s (1990) distinction between a ‘literary bookscape’ and a ‘paperback bookscape’, since literary works are quickly reissued in paperback and – as the above comments on Fleming and Fielding make clear – much ‘popular’ fiction first appears in hardback. However, in practice it may be less so, since Roberts distinguishes between *truly* popular nonliterary fiction – written by multimillion-selling authors like

John Grisham – and ‘junk fiction’, Roberts’s true love, which is neither literary (in my second sense) nor particularly popular.

This tripartite distinction can be seen to be very important to many readers of literature (in both my first and my second senses),⁷ but perhaps especially in academic contexts. To illustrate this point, I will reverse the pattern of the following chapters, by placing this chapter’s sole engagement with ‘data’ so near to its beginning. These data comprise a recording from a second year undergraduate class.

During a discussion of Coleridge’s ‘Frost at Midnight’, the tutor asks ‘how is the moon traditionally thought of?’ and ‘what sex is the moon?’ The first response, from several students simultaneously, is ‘man in the moon’, with somebody else chipping in an utterance of which the only audible words are ‘the cow’: a reference to the popular nursery rhyme is clear. The tutor acknowledges this contribution (‘yes there is a man in the moon’) but presses for something more:

T but what about th- th- the tr=

⁷ Petrucci appears to deny this, although the publishing and reading dystopia he describes is far from my experience of the world of books: ‘publishing... has fallen back on offering the public products of a *Triviallitteratur* and classics with parallel translations, journalistic “instant books” of the worst sort, books for hobbyists, philosophical or linguistic essays, collections of jokes, volumes of poetry, mysteries, science fiction, books on politics, histories of customs or of sex, and lightweight romances. *All these have been published indistinguishably*. Neither the publisher’s imprint nor the way the work is marketed nor the price discriminates among them, or brings any sort of order to the mass of texts that are produced every day.... Because the institutions (the schools in particular) that have always maintained and diffused both the traditional canon for reading and traditional values have lost their forward motion and their capacity to influence people... *the reader too begins to lose all criteria of selection*’ (1999[1995]:356, emphasis added).

S =* *

T how is the moon . equally popularly s- . I think the
man in the moon . has to be . accepted this . this is
interesting . because you say . the moon is also
associated with romance=

S1 =it's meant to be . female . cuz if you . think of .
ehm . like . you know the song . "Memory" . it's like
. the moon . "has the moon lost her memory . if she
smiles alone?" sort of thing

T yeah . [you were thinking of the Eliot [poem=

S1 [ehm [m-hm

T =too . w- w- . another case where the image [the=

? [(sniffs)

T =moon uh . doesn't hold any grudges it just stands in
the doorway like a prostitute waiting

What is interesting here is that though the tutor apparently *hears* S1's contribution as (ie. he seems to respond to it as) a quotation from TS Eliot's 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night', it is *meant* (and quite clearly signalled) as a quotation from Andrew Lloyd Webber and Trevor Nunn's bowdlerised popular reworking: Eliot's line is the declarative 'The moon *has lost* her memory', and he writes not that the moon is *smiling*, but simply that 'She is alone' (Eliot 1974[1917]:l.52, 56, emphasis added) – and, in any case, the student

directly refers to ‘the song “Memory”’.⁸ Did the tutor physically fail to hear the student’s words? He could be regarded as gently⁹ correcting a faux pas: *you may have spoken only of the Lloyd Webber and Nunn song*, but ‘you were thinking of the Eliot poem too’. At any rate, though the tutor asks for *and gets* something from popular culture, what ends up being discussed is again literature: verse that is literary in the sense that Lloyd Webber and Nunn’s verse is not. Why did he ask for something popular, then? The following provides a clue (and a serendipitously clear one, when one knows that the ‘art’ the writer refers to as ‘comparably “popular”’ is none other than the musical, *Cats*, from which ‘Memory’ is the best-known song):

although it has long been considered respectable in academic circles to take seriously as well as to enjoy popular ‘Folk’ art, proletariat [sic] art, and non-bourgeois art-forms such as jazz, folk songs, and soul music, comparably ‘popular’, commercially successful, bourgeois, middle-class, middle-brow art of the kind attracting audiences of twenty-five million people in fifteen different countries has traditionally been ignored if not deplored in certain intellectual circles, or dismissively put down... as the kind of thing that ‘*other* people like’.

⁸ Incidentally, the simile the tutor draws is not explicit in the poem, though it is strongly suggested by parallels in the verses which introduce the woman and the moon: first, ‘Half-past one, / The street-lamp sputtered, / The street-lamp muttered, / The street-lamp said, “Regard that woman / Who hesitates toward you in the light of the door / Which opens on her like a grin...”’ (l.14-18), then, ‘Half-past three, / The lamp sputtered, / The lamp muttered in the dark. / The lamp hummed: “Regard the moon...”’ (l.46-50) Moreover, the moon ‘winks a feeble eye’ (l.52) and the corner of the woman’s eye ‘[t]wists like a crooked pin’ (l.22). That the woman is a prostitute is again suggested but not explicit.

⁹ His tone is indeed gentle.

In other words, verse that is *literary* – such as ‘Rhapsody on a Windy Night’ – contrasts not only with verse that is *unliterary* – the lyrics to ‘Knock on Wood’, let us say – but with verse that is (at least in academic circles) *embarrassingly* unliterary – such as the lyrics to ‘Memory’ – ie. the sort of verse that a stereotypical bourgeois philistine (see discussion of Bourdieu [1984{1979}] in Subsection 1.3.3) might prefer to both ‘Rhapsody on a Windy Night’ *and* the lyrics to ‘Knock on Wood’. And the same must go for other forms, as the above comments about science fiction would suggest.

Consider these examples:

(a) A senior academic colleague with whom I am not well acquainted finds me watching *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*.

(b) The aforementioned colleague finds me watching *Dandy Dust*.

(c) The aforementioned colleague finds me watching *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*.

In situation (a), I could be confident of having come across as a person of taste: *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* is an acclaimed filmic artwork with an important place in the canon. Situation (b) could be awkward, since reactions to ultra-low-budget queer cinema are somewhat variable, but my intellectual credentials at least would be uncompromised. This, however, would clearly not be the case in situation (c), unless I swiftly moved to explain that I am writing a chapter on the film’s reception and that no, ha ha, of course I don’t really think it’s any good.

1.3 'Reading'

1.3.1 Criticism, interpretation, and the study of literature

Before going on to specify what it is that I hope to study, I should first discuss certain related topics that I shall not be studying. This is important, not only for purposes of clarification, but also because, as we shall see, a consideration of these topics and the ways in which they have been treated in the literature will help us to explore many of the key concepts for our investigation.

I shall begin with something that I would like to call (with a nod to Wimsatt and Beardsley [1946], from whom we shall be hearing more in Chapter 2) the 'interpretative fallacy'. This is the assumption that, when one reads, an 'interpretation' of the text being read forms in one's mind. This assumption is often implicit and sometimes explicit in literary-critical rhetoric; the fiction of an unarticulated interpretation is a useful critical fiction (since it enables the critic to present his or her textual commentary as the explanation of a naturally-occurring phenomenon; see below), but it is a dangerous assumption in the study of reading and reception because it can lead us (a) to equate reading with interpreting, and (b) to search for the 'meaning' which each work has for each reader. This equation and this search are highly appropriate when we are dealing with situations in which one reads by producing interpretative commentary,¹⁰ for example, post-New Critical literary study, and, for this reason, the 'interpretative

¹⁰ And with regard to which there is no fallacy in assuming the production of an interpretation: an interpretation that will, in any case, be constituted by the critical commentary that is materially produced, and which does not therefore need to be *assumed* in quite the same way as when we are dealing with forms of reading that do not involve the production of interpretative commentary. That said, it is still possible to commit a version of this fallacy by assuming the interpretation to *precede* the commentary. As we shall see in this subsection, several thinkers do precisely that.

fallacy' might also be termed the fallacy of the *little critic in the brain*: it involves the assumption that *all* readers read like a particular kind of literary critic, whether they know it or not, and possibly on a subconscious level. We shall see examples of this later, but first we must satisfy ourselves that reading and interpreting are not, generally speaking, the same thing.¹¹

The Oxford English Dictionary gives the primary meaning of 'to interpret' (with examples dating back to the Old English period) as:

To expound the meaning of (something abstruse or mysterious); to render (words, writings, an author, etc.) clear or explicit; to elucidate; to explain. Formerly, also, To translate (now only contextually, as included in the general sense).

Oxford English Dictionary 1989, sense 1a

The additional meaning, 'To make out the meaning of, explain to oneself' (sense 2a), is more recent, with examples dated no further back than the late 18th century. Moreover, it is clearly derived from – and even a special case of – the earlier uses: one privately explains to oneself, rather than publicly explaining to an audience. The idea that for a

¹¹ It is important to emphasise what I am *not* arguing at this point. I am not, for example, claiming that interpretation itself ('the oldest song we sing in literary and cultural studies' [McGann 2005:4]) is somehow fallacious. Indeed, this dissertation is centrally concerned with interpretation: even though it argues that reading is not intrinsically interpretative, a great deal of its text is taken up with discussing – and practising – interpretation; Chapter 2 in particular attempts to distinguish different kinds of interpretation, and to clear a little space for my own interpretative practice. The interpretative fallacy may be committed in discourse on interpretation and reading; discourse on interpretation and reading may occur in the course of interpretative discourse.

reader to understand *any* text – even an obvious, mundane, clear, and explicit text in languages the reader understands – requires him or her to *interpret* it is a new one, and one that I find hard to make sense of, unless one assumes, as some cognitive theorists seem to, that *all* languages are foreign to the brain, which must therefore translate every text and utterance it encounters into its own, private, ‘language of thought’.

Since I do not make this assumption, I will use the word ‘interpretation’ as Steven Mailloux does when he states that interpretations are ‘attempts to convince others of the truth of explications and explanations’ (1989:15). Interpretation may be a process of discovery in cases where the interpreter seeks the explanation that will be most convincing and defensible. Unless we are to use it metaphorically, the referent of the word ‘interpretation’ must, under this definition, be a spoken utterance or written text, or – at a stretch – an imagined sequence of words; where there is no such utterance, text, or sequence to refer to, I shall avoid the term ‘interpretation’. This usage will seem intuitive to media reception researchers (see Subsection 1.3.3), who have come to the realisation that much textual usage is *meaningless* (Hermes 1995), and that to ask consumers about the meaning of texts may in many cases be to oblige them to engage in an (interpretative) intellectual activity to which they may (at least with regard to those particular texts) be entirely unaccustomed. As Alan McKee puts it,

Just because people say when you ask them that this is what they think about a particular text, it doesn’t mean that this is what it means to them in their everyday lives.... the very process of telling somebody what you think about something isn’t the same thing as thinking about it in your everyday life.

...an audience member might never actually have thought about, or actively made

sense of, a text before they're asked about it.

2003:84

Such a usage may, however, seem rather less intuitive to many literary critics, who, '[a]s inheritors of the romantic notion of seeing works of literature as autonomous, and of hermeneutic traditions of drawing out precise meanings from critical reading of texts... may be at risk of expecting more than can ever reasonably be demanded' from the study of real readers (St Clair 2004:401): to put it another way, they 'are in the business of meaning production and interpretation' but may not necessarily realise that 'the majority of media users are not' (Hermes 1995:16). Particularly in the more conservative branches of literary criticism, such as stylistics, the illusion remains that there is always an interpretation, that it forms naturally in the mind, and that analysis (the stylistician's word for criticism) serves to provide a causal explanation for it. As one of the most prominent representatives of that field puts it, '[s]tylistic analysis involves examining carefully the linguistic structure of a text and showing the role which that linguistic structure plays in helping a reader to arrive at an interpretation of that text' (Short 1993:8); the same fallacy is implicit in the following manifesto from another stylistician:

interpretative and evaluative criticism is an essentially humanistic discipline. Its insights are intuitive and personal. It is written to share experiences of reading which it considers valuable, and to enhance appreciation. It should not be written to make points about the relationship between signifiers and signified. On the other hand, a theoretical discipline is possible, based on a theoretical literary pragmatics that seeks to describe and explain poetic effects. This theoretical

discipline requires that the other humanistic discipline thrive, because theory necessarily needs to work with, describe, and explain the readings that criticism produces.

Pilkington 1991:49

Here, interpretation (together with evaluation) is identified with 'intuitive and personal' and therefore irrational or pre-rational 'experiences' that the *idiot-savant* non-stylistic critic (who replaces the former statement's ambiguous 'a reader') can only 'share', but the stylistician can subsequently 'explain'. The conservatism of this position can be seen from the fact that it replicates, without acknowledgement and in only very slightly modified form, that of IA Richards, the 'distinct but related disciplines' being merely the two halves of what Richards (1960[1924]:23) terms a 'full critical statement', and the major difference being that Richards did not confuse experiences with interpretations. These thinkers fail to recognise that, far from being an intuitive and pre-rational mental process, literary interpretation is, like other forms of interpretation, a rational engagement with a field of knowledge:

in this profession, you earn the right to say something because it has not been said by anyone else, or because it is a reversal of what is usually said, or because, while it has been said, its implications have not yet been spelled out. You do not offer something as the report of a communion between the individual critical sensibility and a work or its author; and, if you did, if your articles were all written as if they were titled 'What I think about *Middlemarch*' or '*The Waste Land* and me', they would not be given a hearing.... Instead, they would be

dismissed as being a waste of a colleague's time, or as beside the point, or as uninformed, or simply as unprofessional.

Fish 1989:164-165

A variant of the interpretative fallacy can be found in the writings of ED Hirsch (philosophically sophisticated though they are):

This distinction between the meaning of an interpretation and the construction of meaning to which the interpretation refers is one of the most venerable in hermeneutic theory. Ernesti called it the distinction between the art of understanding and the art of explaining – the *subtilitas intelligendi* and the *subtilitas explicandi*....

It is obvious that understanding is prior to and different from interpretation.

1967:129

As Hirsch elaborates,

Attempting to efface this distinction results only in logical embarrassment before the simplest questions, such as, 'What does the explicator understand before he makes his explication?' Gadamer's difficulty in coping with this basic question is quite apparent when he comes to describe the process of interpretation. He cannot say that the interpreter understands the original sense of the text, since that would be to disregard the historicity of understanding. He cannot say, on the other hand, that the interpreter understands his own subsequent explication, since that would be patently absurd.

However, this only causes embarrassment if one assumes that explication (ie. interpretation, in the sense employed in this dissertation) can only be the expression of a previously formed understanding (ie. interpretation, in the sense employed by Short). I would suggest that ‘understanding’ and ‘misunderstanding’ are, rather, qualities that are attributed on the basis of an explication’s persuasiveness. The explication may be preceded by an ‘aha!’ experience, but *that* is not understanding. The ‘aha!’ experience in understanding a mathematical rule is explained here by Meredith Williams, following Wittgenstein (1968[1953]); I would suggest that the same analysis can be applied to other forms of understanding:

In the ‘aha!’ experience, the exclamation itself is not a report on an inner state of mind. It is rather expressive of confidence that one can go on in a certain way.

Whether or not one really understands depends solely upon whether, in fact, one can go on in the correct way.

Williams 1999:212

Feeling that one understands, or does not understand, a literary work amounts to confidence, or lack of confidence, in one’s ability to use it, for example by explicating it. If a problem arises – for example, if a hitherto overlooked textual detail is brought to light in the course (or aftermath) of one’s explication, and it is not obvious that the same explication can be extended to encompass it, or if a previously unsuspected ambiguity is

perceived – one may have to conclude that one did not understand the text after all.¹² In principle, this may always happen, even though, in practice, it does not. Eric Livingston sees something like this at the very heart of literary-critical practice:

The reading of some particular text appears, at first, opaque and fragmented, or clouded by the commentary that has surrounded its reading. A possible inner coherence of a way of reading the text is seen, and the text begins to unfold to its reading, becoming the embodiment of clarity....

Producing such demonstrations and seeing such demonstrations performed sustain the members of the discipline in their work. Each critical article offers itself as containing such a demonstration – whether it is about a specific text, the use of imagery in a particular period, or a feature of the critical literature.

1995:18

To be satisfied with my explication of a text is to accept me as having understood it. At least within the enterprise of post-New Critical literary studies, one is said to be able to understand those texts that one is deemed to be able to explicate satisfactorily. This applies even to myself: if I cannot provide an explication that satisfies myself, then I cannot accept myself as having understood. Of course, there is no criterion by which

¹² Explication is here used as an example because of its particular relevance to post-New Critical literary criticism. I would, however, suggest that the situation is broadly similar with regard to other uses of text. For example, if I attempt to use an instruction leaflet not by explicating but by *carrying out* its instructions in the course of (let us say) setting up a household appliance, and I find myself either unable to do so, or (in seeming to do so) encountering unexpected difficulties, then one of the possibilities I will have to consider is that I have not understood that particular text. (Another such possibility is, of course, that the text is in some way unfit for the use to which I have put it.)

satisfactory explications can be distinguished from unsatisfactory ones, but that is not the point: it is not that the explications are satisfactory in themselves, but that they have satisfied a particular audience. That no unanswerable objections have been raised today is no guarantee that this will still be the case tomorrow (though equally, there is no guarantee that the objection that is unanswerable tomorrow will still be so the day after). This makes interpretation and understanding an essentially interpersonal (rather than intra-mental) matter, in literary studies no less than elsewhere: as one social psychologist has argued, ‘perhaps it takes multiple perspectives in order to have concepts and conceptual problems, to propose that an explanation is wrong or needs justification or testing, even to provide a basis for such a notion as “explanation”.’ (Edwards 1997:33) Without the possibility that one’s explication (in Edwards’s terms, explanation) of a text may be objected to, the activity of searching the text for details to support (in Edwards’s terms, *be used in justification of*) it would have no meaning. Worse, with no-one to explain to, there could be no explication at all, and without the possibility of an explication’s being objected to, the notion of understanding would be meaningless. Understanding is different to (is something else than) explaining or interpreting, but it is in no sense prior to it. Interpretation as we know it is possible – and, indeed, conceivable – only because there is more than one potential interpreter. This line of thought is developed further in Chapter 3.

If reading does not necessarily involve interpretation, it may nonetheless involve other processes. This is often forgotten in post-New Critical literary studies, in which ‘reading has been conceptualised as an act(ivity) of interpretation, and interpretation as mode of cognitive intellectual application’ (Pearce 1997:7); such forgetting is arguably the result

of the *institutional* privileging of that genre of writing known as ‘the reading’ at the levels of both research and pedagogy. Suggesting that ‘readings’ are the stock-in-trade of ‘American criticism’, Robert Scholes (1974:151) defines a ‘reading’ as ‘a reduction of the text to a particular meaning that may be drawn out of it’, and notes that these are usually about twenty pages long, ‘whether the work being considered is a poem of twenty lines or a novel of two hundred pages’;¹³ with regard to pedagogy, Robert Hodge (1990:51) writes as follows:

The classroom practice organised around literature in [New Critical] practice seemed to emphasise reading over writing, but what was actually involved was a specific reading regime constantly monitored by a writing regime, which operated to banish uncontrolled intentions and affects.... The plenitude of semiotic syntagms specified or allowed by... various genres is thus anchored, in the conditions of the classroom, to the overriding meanings constituted by the teacher’s response (‘good work’, ‘65%’).

Alternative approaches are suggested by, amongst others, Lynne Pearce (1997), who conceives reading in terms of (often bitterly unhappy) love affairs with characters, works, authors, etc (see Section 1.3.2), and Barbara Herrnstein Smith, who constructs a brief history of Shakespeare’s sonnets that centres not on meaning and interpretation but on value and evaluation. The Quarto edition may have been suppressed, she writes, but

¹³ Cf. Lodge (1984[1966]:35): ‘Paraphrase, in the sense of summary, is as indispensable to the novel-critic as close analysis is to the critic of lyric poetry.... [C]lose analysis is itself a disguised form of paraphrase, differing from the paraphrase of conventional novel-criticism only in that it tends towards expansion rather than compression.’ Lodge does not directly link this state of affairs to the conventional qualities of ‘the reading’ as a genre of academic writing.

Thirty years later, [the sonnets] were found at least worth the pirating and republishing. Thereafter... we can begin to trace the fortunes of the sonnets in the hands of the literary establishment – the editors and anthologists, the critics and scholars, the professors and students of Eng. Lit., down to our own time and this very moment – and, with less assurance, their fortunes in the hands of those myriad inarticulate nonprofessionals for whom, during more than 350 years, the sonnets have figured in some way: the ‘reading public’, those who, for whatever reasons, have treasured or dismissed them, bought them as gifts for friends, read them aloud to lovers, quoted them in letters, or tossed them out when cleaning up the attic.

1988:3

This shows how much more there must be to a study of literary works in use than a study of how they have been interpreted. Readers (academic and otherwise) do more than interpret texts: they also buy them, throw them away, etc. Implicit in these acts – only some of which involve interpretation – are evaluations. I suspect that there are many theorists who would still suppose interpretation to be fundamental – who would, for example, suppose that an evaluation is always contingent upon an interpretation – that one throws away an edition of the sonnets if one evaluates them negatively, for example, and that one evaluates them negatively if one dislikes the meanings that, in them, one discerns.¹⁴ But this is mistaken. It projects upon every reader the self-image of the interpretative critic – perhaps the purest expression of the ‘interpretative fallacy’. Janice Radway’s (1987[1984]:19-45) analysis of ‘category publishing’ in general and

¹⁴ Alternatively: that, from them, one constructs. See Chapter 3 of the current study.

the paperback romance in particular – a sterling example of book historical research (see below) that has tended to be sidelined in the reception of Radway’s investigation as a classic of affirmative cultural studies (see Section 1.3.3) – reveals the folly of this approach. As Radway argues,

Because literary critics tend to move immediately from textual interpretation to sociological explanation, they conclude easily that changes in textual features or generic popularity must be the simple and direct result of ideological shifts in the surrounding culture. Thus, because she detects a more overtly misogynist message at the heart of the genre, Ann Douglas can argue, in her widely quoted article ‘Soft-Porn Culture’ [1980], that the coincidence of the romance’s increasing popularity with the rise of the women’s movement must point to a new and developing backlash against feminism. Because that new message is there in the text, she reasons, those who repetitively buy romances must experience a more insistent need to receive it again and again.

Although this kind of argument seems logical enough, it rests on a series of tenuous assumptions about the equivalence of critics and readers, and ignores the basic facts about the changing nature of book production and distribution in contemporary America. Douglas’s explanatory strategy assumes that purchasing decisions are a function *only* of the content of a given text and the needs of readers. In fact, they are deeply affected by a book’s appearance and availability as well as by potential readers’ awareness and expectations. Book buying, then, cannot be reduced to a simple interaction between a book and a reader. It is an event that is affected and at least partially controlled by the material nature of

book publishing as a socially organised technology of production and distribution.

Radway 1987(1984):19

To understand evaluation requires perhaps an aesthetic and certainly a sociological frame of reference (see Subsection 1.3.3). Interpretation remains important, but to interpret texts is only one of many ways of using them. We will often (though by no means always) find a need to speak of interpretation when we try to discuss situations where people talk and write about literary works (see Footnote 10). This is the case when we study twentieth century literary criticism, as Jonathan Culler (1975) and Eric Livingston (1995) do: both these scholars describe the procedures by which criticism operates, and both their accounts centre around descriptions (and programmes of proposed description) of interpretative practice, since both understand criticism in the terms established by the New Critics. Culler and Livingston's accounts of 'literary competence' and the reading practices of the 'critical community' might therefore be considered to be ahistorical, in that they elevate literary interpretation to something like a universal principle (whether or not they choose to practise it themselves). In order to overcome this, we will need studies of the literary-critical *ideas* entertained in various periods (eg. Habib [2005], or the nine-volume *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*), but we may have still greater need of studies that show the socio-temporal development of literary-critical *practice*.

Terry Eagleton first discusses the emergence of the Leavisite periodical *Scrutiny* as a historical moment in *Literary theory* (1976), later extending this account both forwards and backwards in *The function of criticism* (1984). He shows that what we know today as literary criticism grew out of 18th century coffee house discussion, first in the pages

of the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*, later taking an ‘explicitly, unabashedly political’ form in journals such as the *Edinburgh Review* and the *Quarterly Review*, which ‘tended to select for review only those works on which they could loosely peg lengthy ideological pieces’ (1984:38). By the Victorian period, a crisis emerges: as Eagleton describes it, a problem ‘which has never ceased to dog the English critical institution, and is indeed quite unresolved even today’: that ‘either criticism strives to justify itself at the bar of public opinion by maintaining a general humanistic responsibility for the culture as a whole, the amateurism of which will prove increasingly incapacitating as bourgeois society develops; or it converts itself into a species of technological expertise, thereby establishing its professional legitimacy at the cost of renouncing any wider social relevance.’ (56-57) Under Eagleton’s analysis, *Scrutiny* denied the contradiction between the two aims with the claim that ‘the more rigorously criticism interrogated the literary object, the more richly it yielded up that sensuous concreteness and vital enactment of value which were of general human relevance’ (83): a ‘strategy’ that became the foundation of every major critical movement until the 1960s, being taken up in particular by IA Richards, Northrop Frye, and the New Critics – each of whom repeated this gesture in some way, but each of whom ‘tipped that balance’ towards the technocratic (85).

In *Defining literary criticism* (2005), Carol Atherton charges Eagleton with having focused on *rhetoric about criticism* rather than actual critical practice. Atherton’s longer and more historically rigorous study reveals a far greater diversity of critical practices than Eagleton discusses. For example, she shows that, in the late 19th century, the newly-founded universities examined students solely on their *factual* knowledge of literary works and their authors, for example asking them ‘to give an outline of any one of the *Canterbury Tales* or to “quote any passage” from “Christabel”’ (2005:31) –

something that Eagleton ignores. Oxbridge English courses, which began still later in the 19th century, were initially focused on the philological study of Old and Middle English, only later coming to what Eagleton supposes them to have begun with, ie. the teaching of English literature on the model of the Classics. Moreover, this post-philological strategy was accomplished in two very different ways: on the one hand, Oxford's Honour School of English Language and Literature came to teach a curriculum in which 'what students were expected to develop was... a concrete body of knowledge about a pre-defined literary tradition' (46-47),¹⁵ while, on the other, the first examinations for Cambridge's English Tripos 'demand[ed] reasoned argument and a certain amount of playful lateral thinking.' (49) A further complexity unnoticed by Eagleton arose outside the higher educational system: nineteenth century professors such as AC Bradley 'drew on certain aspects of literary scholarship in order to claim... [professional] authority' in their published criticism, while seeking, in that same criticism 'to distance themselves from the methods it [scholarship] employed and the types of knowledge it prioritised, foregrounding a personal sympathy that offered itself as the only route to a "true" understanding' (87), whilst modernist critics of the early twentieth century, such as Virginia Woolf, produced entirely 'unacademic' criticism, 'elevat[ing] judgement over knowledge, with the capacity to judge... securing the critic's authority.' (99) It is important to recognise, however, that underlying all this is the same dialectic of technocratic professionalism (ie. scholarship) and humanist amateurism (ie. criticism – except in those uses where 'criticism' means 'scholarship', as in 'textual criticism', 'lower criticism', and 'higher criticism') that Eagleton discerns: and that, much like Eagleton, Atherton sees this dialectic continuing throughout twentieth century debates

¹⁵ For example, a student apparently failed his BLitt examination in 1915 'partly on the grounds of his overestimation of the works of Aphra Behn' (Atherton 2005:46).

on the nature and purpose of literary criticism and literary education. Atherton sees this in terms of a conflict between legitimacy and distinctiveness: historicist approaches, for example, tend to privilege *historical*, rather than specifically literary, knowledge,¹⁶ she argues, while the humanist-amateur approach appears not to ‘fulfil the essential criteria for disciplinary status: it possess[e] neither a methodology nor a clearly defined body of knowledge, and [is] unable to demonstrate any kind of social utility.’ (41)

I would argue that the New Criticism (as typified by Brooks [1968{1947}]) and the forms of criticism which have followed on from it (as described by Livingston [1995] and defended by Fish [1995]) *do* actually manage to create a methodology and a body of knowledge that are specific to themselves (respectively, the minute examination of the wording of literary works and the ever-growing corpora of interpretations resulting from past examination of those same works), and that this is why they have been so institutionally successful, steering between both poles as they do. Nonetheless, they seem to have been unable to imagine any convincing form of social utility for themselves (see Fish 1995), and thus remain vulnerable to criticism from outside. I must confess to great sympathy for Jerome McGann’s alternative critical project, which positions itself in this debate by employing principles of textual scholarship (this the methodology) to construct a history of textuality (ie. a specifically literary form of historical knowledge) and (this the social justification) to instill an awareness of ‘the pastness of the past’ (McGann 1985:64); it seems unlikely that such a form of literary study will ever become widespread, however, since the methodology requires skills that

¹⁶ This is not, of course, a problem specific to historicism. Psychoanalytic criticism privileges knowledge of psychoanalytic theories, stylistics privileges knowledge of linguistics, cognitive poetics privileges knowledge of cognitive psychology, etc. In each case, whatever legitimacy literary study acquires is essentially borrowed.

are rarely taught even at postgraduate level and the social utility that is proposed – effectively, that of ‘defin[ing] the limits and special functions of... current ideological practices’ through exposure to ‘culturally alienated products’ (158) – is unlikely to attract much custom in the post-Thatcherite, post-Reaganite educational marketplace. Yet another alternative, proposed by Peter McDonald, is to study literary works ‘not to interpret their meaning but to reconstruct their predicament’ (1997:113), where this involves ‘consider[ing] the entire production cycle from manuscript to book’ (118) in context of the ‘field of cultural production’ (Bourdieu 1993) as it existed in the time and place of those works’ publication: this conception of literary study is very close to McGann’s, with the difference that its emphasis is less towards bibliography and more towards the history of symbolic production, since ‘the primary task’ is not to trace the work’s transmission history but ‘to reconstruct the field’ that gives it significance (McDonald 1997:113). This relates closely to the applications for speech act theory and the idea of intention which I propose in Chapter 2, and indeed (see Footnote 4 and concluding note to Chapter 4) to my overall approach to reception. Nonetheless, it is an extreme minority position in the study of modern literature, and I am aware of no-one else working in that field who has advocated it.¹⁷

¹⁷ In the sociology of literature (to take three pertinent examples cited here: Bourdieu 1996[1992], Fowler 2000, Gelder 2004; see Sections 1.2, 1.7 ,and 1.8 of this study), in the history of the book (see Subsection 1.3.2 and Chapters 2 and 4), and in classical and medieval studies (see Footnote 1), it is a rather less extraordinary position. Studies of particular relevance include Jackson’s (2007) study of the struggles by which William Wordsworth and his supporters consolidated his posthumous position as the pre-eminent poet of his time and Bell’s study of ‘the way in which, *within* a single writer’s oeuvre, certain texts (and even fragments of text) are over time given priority over others (apparent in the language of the “seminal”, the “major” and the “minor”, the “best” and “worst”, the “representative work”)’ (2000:155).

A more widespread move has been the turn to ‘theory’ as a body of knowledge specific to literary studies, though this has notoriously resulted, as Atherton notes, in ‘a level of specialisation that could only be comprehended by a small circle of readers’ (2005:154). That this should be perceived as a problem may seem strange (incomprehensibility to outsiders is the condition of much academic discourse today, especially in the sciences) until we recognise the persistence – as an ideal if not in practice – of ‘the Arnoldian concept of the critic as mediating between the text and the educated general public’ (ibid.): though there is nothing inherently controversial about a paper in the field of information science that would, for the majority of internet surfers, seem both impenetrable and irrelevant, to many people, there seems something outrageous about a paper on Hamlet that would not be understood and found interesting by a typical member of the Royal Shakespeare Company’s audience. Such latter-day Arnoldianism is displayed, for example, in James Wood’s (2004) review of volume 12 of the *Oxford English Literary History*: an anti-academic rant that bemoans the supposed demise of non-academic criticism whilst ignoring the fact that it is itself a token of that type and yet has, despite this, been given no lesser a platform than the *London Review of Books* in which to vent its spleen.

This would seem an opportune moment to position this dissertation in relation to the above debates: its central preoccupation is literary reception (more of which below) and the principles by which histories of literary *commentary* may be constructed. Whether such histories may be considered a specifically literary form of knowledge is likely to prove controversial; I am mindful of the warning I received as a Masters student whilst trying to write a smaller dissertation that did much the same thing: the professor to whom I appealed for arbitration between myself and my supervisor refused to acknowledge my intertextual analysis of four interpretations of *Heart of Darkness* (see

Allington 2006) as constituting an engagement with ‘the evidential base’ or as sufficient for anything but a ‘pure philosophy Masters’ (Stockwell 2005: unpaginated). Such a view is less unreasonable than it might at first seem, given the assumptions under which literary study usually proceeds: although literary knowledge (in the post-New Critical sense discussed above) is constituted *by* the total body of interpretative commentary, it is the literary works commented upon (and not the commentaries themselves) that are considered to be (a) the objects of this knowledge, and (b) the evidence to be appealed to in constructing such knowledge: as I have written elsewhere, ‘[i]f to read *Heart of Darkness* is to play a game, then the meaning of *Heart of Darkness* is the stake for which one plays, and it is only by referring to its text that one may make a move.’ (2006:133) Such assumptions mean that the knowledge assembled by post-New Critical literary study cannot be critiqued from within, since anything that is not an interpretation of a literary work and founded on the linguistic structure of a text of that work conceived as the primary ‘evidential base’ will be regarded as extraneous to that knowledge, and indeed irrelevant to the discipline as a whole: one may, of course, contest particular interpretations or ways of interpreting, but this is only to *add to* or at most to *revise* the structure of knowledge erected by the New Criticism. Most perniciously, this thinking has come to influence theoretical discourse within literary studies to such an extent that one often finds that discussion of theory is regarded as ‘preliminary to the real work of interpreting texts’ and ‘“theory” is assumed to mean “method”’ (Culler 2001[1981]:246).

Thankfully for this dissertation, the notion of ‘reception study’ exists, although it remains marginal to literary studies. If the reception of a work is to be regarded as an aspect of the history of that work – and particularly if, as I argue in Chapter 2, the work

is to be regarded as a function of its own history¹⁸ – then it is possible for reception study to construct literary knowledge; moreover, this knowledge can aspire to transcend mere amateurism through the application of a rigorous critical methodology. It is therefore time to consider what ‘reception study’ means.

1.3.2 ‘Reader response’, and literary reception study

Over the last four decades, notions of ‘reader response theory’, ‘reader response criticism’, and ‘reception aesthetics’ have appeared – and remained – on the margins of literary-critical practice. They involve looking at the literary work from the point of view of an (imaginary) reader, and possibly arguing that the experiences this reader has whilst reading the work are the meaning of the work. These ideas are primarily known to us from Stanley Fish (1971), Wolfgang Iser (1978), and Hans Robert Jauss (1982), all of whom focus on the aesthetics of literature, although there is a political variant of reader response criticism, perhaps the best example being Judith Fetterley’s *The resisting reader* (1978). In the most extreme version of reader response theory, laid out in Stanley Fish’s controversial *Is there a text in this class?* (1980), the reader does not merely respond to but creates the text that is read, and is not merely the locus but the origin of literary meaning. This notorious view, which is re-examined in Chapter 3, is well-known but not widely accepted, and has been attacked as ‘false consciousness’ from a feminist point of view (Pearce 1997:42).¹⁹ Other versions of reader response theory, including

¹⁸ That is, not as an arrangement of language items which came into being at a specific point in time and which now exists atemporally, but as the organising principle of an ongoing sequence of acts in which publishing and interpreting (among others) are no less important than the initial acts of composition.

¹⁹ On her past reading of the works of John Clare under Fishian assumptions, Pearce states: ‘Because I thought it was I, the reader, who had made these voices audible... both their gender and mine were

Iser's, Jauss's, and Fetterley's, emphasise the power of the text while focusing attention on the reader's interaction with it; their non-engagement with *empirical* readers means, however, that the specifics of this interaction remain speculative: the empirical readers about whom we can learn most from their works are the reader response theorists themselves. Indeed, Charlene Avallone (2008) shows that Fetterley *exemplifies* (rather than describes) a centuries-old tradition of women's *writing*, in which canonical literary works are criticised for their damaging effect on women. The reader invoked in reader response criticism can thus be thought of as an explanatory device: the notional being by definition able to realise (or prone to realising) each of the meanings and effects that a critic attributes to a work *without the help of the critic or his/her explication*. This 'reader' is perhaps the mirror image of an equally notional 'author' (cf. Fish 1980:161), and (as discussed in Chapter 2 of the current study), this imaginary pair are often discussed as though engaged in communication with one another.

Two more recent theories with a responding reader at their heart have been proposed by Lynne Pearce (1997) and Derek Attridge (2004). Pearce's theory, which has already been mentioned (above; see also Chapters 2, 3, and 4), adapts the narrative of romance from Roland Barthes's *A lover's discourse* (1978[1977]) to account for the experience of the reader, who is seen to be powerless before the unresponding work that he or she has fallen in love with, and therefore largely condemned to jealousy, frustration, anxiety, and fear of disappointment. Attridge's rests on a complex network of terms of which three – inventiveness, singularity, and alterity – refer to the experience of the reader in encountering a work which may not 'be wholly comprehended within the norms of the culture' (2004:64) but which, in its othernessness, leads to further invention: for example, '[t]he reduplication of Celtic intertwined animals as motifs for modern interior

irrelevant.' (1997:43)

decoration does not involve an inventive relation to the original works of art', but '[w]hen Japan was opened to the West... Manet, Degas, and Whistler were among those who responded inventively to the visual alterity of Japanese prints' (53).²⁰ Both Pearce and Attridge's theories differ from classical reader response theory in that they are only incidentally concerned with 'meaning' and in that they undermine the premise of reader response criticism, ie. that it is possible to analyse a work by describing the responses to it of 'a' or 'the' reader. Attridge sees the creation of a written response to a literary work as a situation in which 'the reader attempts to answer to the work's shaping of language by a new shaping of his own' (2004:93), ie. as the production of a new work rather than a report on (or prediction of) an encounter with an old one. In a move disturbing for all forms of literary criticism, including reader response criticism, Pearce sees writing as 'the (only?) means through which the reader/lover can effectively deal with the frustration of his or her own silence/inactivity' by 'turning the tables on the one that has had us in its thrall' (1997:156), and therefore not as rational analysis but as a mere coping strategy.

Contrary to what is commonly assumed (eg. by Childs 1999:2), a notion of the reader's response has been at the implicit heart of twentieth-century criticism: as McGann (1985:111-114) argues, the mainstream of twentieth-century literary studies broke with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philological traditions by grounding itself instead in

²⁰ This example, together with others Attridge uses, gives me cause to wonder whether what makes the works Attridge discusses appear singular might not be (at least in part) their alienation from a context in which they could have been read as non-singular. For example, the singularity of encounters with the sort of (canonical) literary works that Attridge primarily focuses on may be contributed to by what Roberts (1990:215) calls the 'segmentation' of 'the literary bookscape... into major texts' that are both 'surrounded by commentary' and cut off from the (frequently vanished) genres that 'produced' them.

a Kantian aesthetics in which poems and other artworks were conceived as ‘integral phenomena whose finality was exhausted in the individual’s experience of the work.’ (McGann 1985:113) It is thus the concept of the responding reader that implicitly creates the ‘text’ as the object for both formalist and structuralist criticism, and this is indeed explicit in the work of such founding figures as IA Richards (1960[1924]) and Roland Barthes (1997[1967]). In other words, while appearing to overturn the assumption that ‘[t]he function of criticism is to illuminate the operations of those linguistic structures which we now like to call “texts”’ (McGann 1985:114), reader response criticism may be argued to re-assert the principle that legitimates such analysis. Indeed, following on from my comments about the reader as explanatory device, I would argue that reader response criticism is, in practice, a way of conducting formal and structural analyses of texts of works: reader response critics ‘work from the text itself rather than from information about responses’ (Culler 2001[1981]:62), when it is surely clear that ‘we cannot, without circularity, recover the range of actual responses to the reading of printed texts without information from outside the texts.’ (St Clair 2004:4)

The recovery of actual responses (rather than the postulation of imaginary responses, as in reader response criticism) is undertaken in literary reception study, the loosely organised effort to understand the ways in which works are taken up and made use of by real readers, and the history of reading, which is usually conceived to be a subset of the history of the book but (I would suggest) blurs into reception study to create a single (nameless) interdisciplinary field; another way of looking at it would be to say that book history has both redefined the scope of literary reception study (so that it can now encompass the reception of *all* written and printed matter, regardless of whether it is in any sense ‘literary’) and provided it with a range of methodologies. Contributions to this field – whatever we are to name it – take many forms. One of the most important for

literary and cultural studies has been the study of how specific works, or text types, were received in specific cultural and historical contexts. A good example of this would be Lawrence Levine's study of Shakespeare in 19th century America (1988). Reception, in this sense, would include the production of editions and translations of the works in question, the circulation of the aforementioned, their appearance in collections, their reviewing in the press, their mention in diaries and letters, and their referencing in subsequently published works. Descriptive bibliography provides a useful tool here, as copies of a text may be examined for physical evidence of how they were read, used, and understood – as in Owen Gingerich's (2002) meticulous tracking down and examining of every extant copy of the first two editions of Copernicus's *De Revolutionibus*. Another important form is the study of how reception works more generally in those same contexts: rather than asking how some particular work was received, it asks which works were read and how, as in Kate Flint's (1993) study of female readers and Jonathan Rose's (2002[2001]) study of readers from the British working classes, or asks which *texts* of which works were read by which groups and in what numbers, as in William St Clair's (2004) economic history of the British book trade; Heather Jackson's (2005) study of handwritten notes in a staggering 1800 volumes published between 1790 and 1830 shows just how much may be learnt in this regard from material evidence alone. Yet another form takes the reading of a single historical individual for its object, whether through examination of his or her book collection, where this can be reconstructed or is still in existence (eg. Attar 2004), or through analysis of his or her diaries (eg. Colclough 2000).²¹ Some studies look at

²¹ Where the readers in question are also the *authors* of works, this form of study sits very comfortably within enduring pre-New Critical traditions of scholarship, since it amounts to a form of source study (a vital component in what the nineteenth century knew as 'higher criticism'). Robert

reading within the wider context of manuscript culture or print culture, as in Roger Chartier's (1994[1992]) study of how authors, scholars, and librarians organised the expanding world of letters in the Late Medieval and Early Modern periods. Work carried out in all areas of this interdisciplinary field explicitly or implicitly makes clear the difficulty (perhaps the absurdity) of trying to study readers apart from other actors in the world of books, and thus subverts the notion of 'reception' (which is not, in any case, central to the majority of the studies cited here) – a problem that I make some attempt to address in Chapter 2 of the current study.²²

Is this field then a figment of my own imagination? Perhaps it is best seen (synchronically) as a 'fuzzy category' or (diachronically) as a converging set of research traditions that may yet (indeed, that is to a great extent the point of this dissertation) converge with others. Whether it shall in time become more or less marginal to literary studies is impossible to know: it certainly cannot be contained by that discipline as currently constituted. However, I would suggest that the mainstream of literary studies very much needs to take account of it, particularly given the recent partial ascendancy of 'cultural studies' as an approach to literature (see Footnote 1). All the kinds of work

DeMott's (1984) thorough catalogue of books owned and read by John Steinbeck, for example, is clearly conceived as a contribution to scholarship on Steinbeck's works: see in particular his account of *East of Eden's* debts to certain of these books (xxxii-xliii).

²² A further point to make is that, in practice, implicit distinctions are sometimes drawn between 'reception study', whose object is often presumed public, and 'reader study', whose object is often presumed private. Thus, in a monograph with the word 'reception' in the title, Annika Bautz (2007a) surveys predominantly public written statements about certain novels (eg. reviews of them), while in a paper with the word 'readers' in the title, the same author excerpts from that work her short survey of private written statements (eg. informal comments in letters) about some of the same novels (Bautz 2007b).

mentioned in the previous paragraph share a potential to threaten the sacred cows of literary studies, and – while specific studies (a case in point being Rose’s [2002{2001}]) may have been written in defence of those cows – they can lead us to ask very searching questions about what has come to be considered literary history, and in particular about that (ever retrospectively imposed) structure, the canon. St Clair puts the challenge very forcefully in a public lecture:

When we read a book or essay called, say, ‘The Age of Wordsworth’, should we not be concerned that, in his lifetime, most of Wordsworth’s books were produced in editions of about 500 to 1,000 copies of which many were remaindered or wasted several years after publication? Could that amount of reading have shaped the minds of ten to fifteen million people? Especially when Wordsworth was, on the whole, reinforcing ideas that were mainstream in the culture of his day? How do we deal with the fact that over two million copies of Scott’s verse and prose romances had been sold in Britain alone by the middle of the nineteenth century, maybe a million more than all other authors put together? And that Scott was regarded by the best critics as the equal of Homer, a great teacher and model, not a predecessor of Jeffrey Archer or airport pulp fiction?

2005:4-5

This invocation of airport pulp fiction should perhaps remind us of the cognate discipline of media studies, which (like the history of the book) studies (amongst other things) texts that the New Criticism would dismiss as worthless and ephemeral: texts that (like those of the works of Scott) frequently achieve circulations vastly exceeding those of works of canonical ‘great literature’ (such as those of Wordsworth), at least in their own day. Like the research traditions at which I have gestured with such

unsatisfactory names as ‘literary reception study’ and ‘the history of reading’, media reception studies would seem to offer the possibility of an engagement with texts that owes nothing to the New Criticism. It also provides methodologies that have yet to make a significant impact on literary reception study or the history of reading: the ‘discursive’ approaches to reception study which I discuss in Section 1.5 and which directly inform the current study have largely grown out of media reception studies, addressing difficulties which (as we shall see in Chapter 4 in particular) have been noted by historians of reading but have yet (I would suggest) to be *systematically* addressed by them: in her above-mentioned study of women readers, for example, Flint usefully makes the point that ‘[a]utobiography involves self-fashioning through selectivity and arrangement’ (1993:187-188), but makes no reference to the developments in social psychology which might have helped her to theorise this ‘self-fashioning’ (see Section 1.4). Media reception study also benefits from a disciplinary closeness to the sociology of cultural consumption, although the relationship between the two has not been exploited as fully as it might have been. We shall now turn to a consideration of both these fields.

1.3.3 Media reception study and the sociology of cultural consumption

Being ‘effectively the audience research arm of modern cultural studies’ (McQuail 2005:404), media reception study has little connection with film studies, a discipline which largely developed from literary study and takes scant interest in reception: what is sometimes known as ‘Screen theory’, ie. the body of structuralist, Althusserian-Marxist, and Lacanian-psychoanalytic critique that was particularly associated with the journal *Screen* in the 1970s and typified by Laura Mulvey’s essay, ‘Visual pleasure and

narrative cinema' (1975), is centred around a notion of the spectator *as implied by the* cinematic text: a spectator no more 'real' than the 'reader' of reader response criticism.²³ As Lapsley and Westlake (1988:12) put it, '[t]he idea that the subject is constituted by the text... was the emergent orthodoxy in this period of film studies'; it was, moreover, an orthodoxy that long remained in force: Philip Corrigan's argument that the history of cinema should be approached 'from the point of view of the audiences' (1983:24) had so little influence that, seven years later, Robert Allen (1990:347) could still complain of the near-universal assumptions 'that film history was to be studied as a succession of texts' and that 'film history rested upon the interpretation of a body of texts': assumptions that he notes were held in common by proponents of Structuralism, the New Criticism, and what he dryly calls 'Lacthusserianism'. The question of how much things have changed in film studies today is a vexed one. Martin Barker (2004) describes the 'move in recent years away from a primarily text-interpretative approach to films' as 'far from complete', and Jackie Stacey observes that increasing interest in

²³ The studies collected in Staiger (2000) are largely written against this position, but remain methodologically committed to an essentially post-New Critical approach, as when Staiger tries to account for the fact that at least one reviewer enjoyed the sexist teen comedy *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* despite being both female and an adult: Staiger's solution is to 'perceive her [the reviewer] as perceiving the text as a critique of authority' (120): a reading of the film that Staiger herself has to provide, since the reviewer unaccountably neglected to. (It should be noted that Staiger's later work, for example the excellent survey *Media reception studies* (2005), leaves behind the confines of Screen theory to take stock of a vast interdisciplinary range of approaches to real and hypothetical readers and viewers.) See Moores (1993:12-27) for a critique of Screen theory from a cultural studies perspective. Barker (2005:354, 358-359) argues that Screen theory's psychoanalytic abstractions of 'interpellation', etc, simply recycle ideas of audience vulnerability that date back to the moral panics of the mid-19th century. See also discussion of Horkheimer and Adorno (2002[1944]) below.

‘the politics of location’ has simply resulted in ‘ “other” categories [being] added into the textual analysis.’ (1994:34)

By contrast, there is a great deal of empirical work on television audiences: indeed, ‘ “[a]udience studies” within cultural studies are almost exclusively studies of television audiences’ (Turner 1990:131). Although film studies is founded on textual analysis, and tends to approach the audience via the analysed text, cultural studies has (despite the influx of post-New Critical methodologies in the 1980s and 1990s – see below) been more strongly influenced by media research traditions dating back to such studies as the Payne Fund reports of the 1930s, which aimed to discover the (frequently presumed pernicious) effects of the mass media on their audiences (see Jarvis [1991] for a history), and the work of Bureau of Applied Social Research, which studied the effect of broadcasting campaigns on audience decision making under the direction of Paul Lazarsfeld. Although some studies from the mid-twentieth century describe fairly spectacular instances of media effects (eg. Cantril, Gaudet, and Herzog 1940; Merton, Fiske, and Curtis 1946), these were not found to be the norm: as one survey puts it, ‘rather than finding that mass media directly affected audiences, the academic mass communications theory found more and more interventions and complications.’ (Staiger 2005:44)²⁴ Although it has since been argued that the media’s apparent lack of influence

²⁴ Compare Billig’s (1985[1996]:95-102) survey of mass communications research following World War Two. Early estimations of the possibility of scientific principles for infallibly effective film and radio propaganda eventually fell by the wayside, as successive studies found no clear principles by which to predict the persuasiveness of mass media messages: ‘The more accurately psychologists summarise the evidence, the less likely they are to offer the sort of confidently clear guidance which the inheritor of the television station [ie. a would-be propagandist] might wish for.’ (102)

was as an artefact of an excessive focus on the viewer as isolated individual and on ‘short-term changes in attitudes following exposure to a single programme or series of programmes’ (Halloran 1970a:18, 1970b:30), this resulted in something of a crisis for audience researchers.²⁵ In response, Elihu Katz proposed what has since been dubbed the ‘Uses and Gratifications’ approach, in which the key question is not ‘What do the media do to people?’ but ‘What do people do with the media?’ (1959:2, emphasis removed)

This programme of research involved making and testing hypotheses about the functions (eg. group interaction or solitary fantasy) for which particular types of people (categorised according to psychological tests) were likely to use given media texts. It was criticised for its psychological rather than sociological categorisation of audiences and for its assumption of audience activity even with regard to such a supremely passive activity as television viewing (Morley 1999a[1980]:127; Morley 1992:80; Severin and Tankard 1992:275-276), and it was widely considered discredited by the mid-1980s, since it had ‘failed to provide much successful prediction or causal explanation of media choice and use’ (McQuail 2005:426).

By that point, however, a distinctly ‘critical’ alternative (ie. one largely shorn of the depoliticisation indulged in throughout the mainstream of media studies; see Ang [1991 {1989}] for a full discussion) was being proposed: the cultural studies theorist

²⁵ In a paper arguing that Lazarsfeld was more aware of the limitations of this paradigm than has generally been supposed, Katz (1987:S34-S35) pertinently asks ‘How did it happen that, of all things, persuasion was chosen as the focus for a programme of research on broadcasting? Why not information, or, better, entertainment?... And if it had to be persuasion, why limit it to the short run? Critical theorists – no less interested in persuasion, but in the long run – would blame the administrative orientation. The object, they would say, was to help sell products or votes.’

Stuart Hall had formulated the ‘encoding/decoding’ model of media production and consumption (1980[1974]), in which media producers are supposed to ‘encode’ ideological messages into their products: products from which media consumers are supposed to ‘decode’ messages in a ‘dominant’, ‘negotiated’, or ‘oppositional’ manner, depending on their relationship to the power structures of society. If the consumers’ decoding corresponds to the producers’ encoding, then the result has been ‘perfectly transparent communication’, the producers’ ideal – but instead, the producers typically have to ‘confront... systematically distorted communication’ (135). Encoding/decoding not only represented a renewed awareness of power relations in the production and consumption of media products, but a welcome intrusion of theoretical nuance into a field that, it has been argued, has, in its positivism and its enthusiasm for quantitative methodologies, ‘consistently mistaken rigour for understanding’ (Morley 1992:174);²⁶ in both these respects, it played a key role in making possible many of the studies that have informed this dissertation. It can to some extent be viewed as an attempt to combine Horkheimer and Adorno’s (2002[1944]) view of the mass media as a hegemonic, quasi-propagandist system with the recognition that mass media *texts* and their *audiences* are no mere *effects* of a historical dialectic, and with the ambition to subject these entities to empirical study; as such, it is also an invaluable contribution to critical theory.

²⁶ I will be ignoring quantitative television audience research from this point onwards, since it offers comparatively little on which this study can draw.

As a model of media use, however, it is a highly problematic. For example, Hall's claim that 'the viewer who listens to a debate on the need to limit wages but "reads" every mention of the "national interest" as "class interest"... is operating with what we must call an *oppositional code*' (1980:138) arguably reduces critical thinking to something like the use of a bilingual dictionary, and raises the question of whether Hall's approach confuses 'perfectly transparent communication' with *perfectly effective persuasion*.²⁷ The encoding/decoding model has been extensively criticised on the theoretical level (see Staiger 2005:83 for an overview), but its theoretical details may be less important to the history of audience study than the fact that it represents 'a shift from a technical to a semiotic approach to messages' and thus a move 'away from a behaviouristic stimulus-response model to an interpretive framework, where all effects depend on an interpretation of media messages' (Alasuutari 1999:3). It should also be recognised as a serious attempt to deal with a

²⁷ Katz's (1987) observations on 'persuasion' versus 'information' and 'entertainment' remain pertinent, see Footnote 25: the arguable equation of 'communication' and 'persuasion' can perhaps be attributed to Hall's 'critical' stance. That said, Katz's claim that '[o]nly politicians and advertisers, and some academics, think that broadcasting is about persuasion' (1987:S34) is clearly exaggerated and may be culturally specific, as his own research with Tamar Liebes suggests: Liebes and Katz found that Russian-Jewish Israeli viewers of *Dallas* were particularly likely 'not only to ascribe intent to the producers but to ascribe manipulative intent, in the sense that the producers are telling us something they want us to believe but do not necessarily believe themselves.' (1991[1989]:210; see below for further discussion of this study). Horkheimer and Adorno are comparatively uninterested in any strictly *persuasive* effects of mass media texts, whose ideological orientation they regard as trivial (2002[1944]:108): 'The social power revered by the spectators manifests itself more effectively in the technically enforced ubiquity of stereotypes than in the stale ideologies which the ephemeral contents have to endorse.'

possible intractable theoretical problem, ie. the danger of ‘sliding straight from the notion of a text as having a determinate meaning (which would necessarily impose itself in the same way on all members of the audience) to an equally absurd, and opposite position, in which it is assumed that the text is completely “open” to the reader and is merely the site upon which the reader constructs meaning.’ (Morley 1991[1989]:18)²⁸ But it seems clear to me that to convincingly challenge these two

²⁸ Much of my own work (see Allington 2006, and Chapters 2 and 3 of the current study) attempts to deal with this same problem, ie. to find a framework for conceptualising texts as (with regard to their writers and readers) neither fully determinate in meaning nor infinitely polysemic. As I see it, one of the central problems here is the difficulty of discussing limitations on readerly agency without according agency to the text being read (which I would consider no less absurd than the two positions Morley so dubs). It should be noted that an alternative path is taken by certain linguistic analysts influenced by or claiming to practise ‘cognitive science’: conceptualising reading as a matter of active text processing, they assume that such processing will take place along determinate pathways that may be discovered through experiment (eg. van Peer, Hakemulder, and Zyngier 2007), elicitation (eg. Stockwell 2000), or speculation (eg. Turner 1992), and thus treat texts as *effectively* determinate in meaning and/or effect (since, once one knows how this processing proceeds in general, one can predict how each individual text will be processed in practice; see Allington [2006:125-126] for discussion). For example, Fowler’s (1991) claim that meaning and behavioural effects result from the reading of texts through ‘the constructive, if unconscious, co-operation of the reader’ (40-41) functions as a theoretical fix permitting the *assumption* of sociocultural relevance for his politically engaged analyses of the determinate meanings of newspaper articles *in spite of* his theoretical claim that ‘being a reader is an active, creative practice.’ (43) The notion that this ‘active, creative practice’ is engaged in *unconsciously* and *cooperatively* seemingly permits Fowler to assume that it is also engaged in *predictably*, such that a text’s ‘effects’ can be deduced from its linguistic structure – as in his statement that ‘by constantly articulating a link between a type of expression and a category of referent, discourse makes these socially constructed categories seem to be natural common sense’ [105]). My greatest quarrel with this cognitive approach is that it engages with the

‘absurd’ positions, we need a workable theoretical model of how texts are used by writers, readers, and others *in practice*, and I would question whether the ‘code’ metaphor can be an adequate basis for such a model (as will become apparent in Chapter 2, I find Robert Darnton’s [1990] ‘life cycle’ metaphor a more productive starting point), even though some audiences *do* discuss books, television programmes, and films *as if* they were in code, consciously attempting to unscramble their ‘secret’ messages (a point developed in Chapter 3).

Martin Barker (2006) argues that the adoption of the encoding/decoding model ‘made audience researchers begin again from scratch’ (128), but that these new beginnings have amounted to little due to an unfortunate retreat from the ‘tougher forms of research’ (139) practised under the Uses and Gratifications approach: research, that is, that attempts to test, rather than simply illustrate, claims. An example of such ‘begin again from scratch’ thinking can be seen in Alasuutari’s division of reception research into three phases or generations, of which the first proceeds under the assumptions of encoding/decoding (1999; see Morley [1999b] for a critique). However, David Morley’s *Nationwide* Audience project (Morley 1999a[1980]) was explicitly intended to test the model. In this research, excerpts from the BBC current affairs series, *Nationwide*, were shown to groups of people in public locations where they already came together as groups (eg. in their places of study). These groups were then asked interpretative

immense range of real-world reading practices only by *constituting* – in disguised fashion – a small part of that range, whether by staging an artificial reading practice (as in the experimental mode; see Section 1.5 for further discussion), by indulging in *explication de texte* (as in the speculative mode; see Allington [2005]), or by sliding between the two (as in the elicital mode, at least in the example cited above).

questions about the presentation and content of the programmes.²⁹ The groups were classified by ethnicity and occupation, and the televisual text was analysed by the researcher in order that audience responses could be classified as dominant, negotiated, or oppositional decodings in relation to messages believed to have been encoded in it. The results showed great similarities within and great differences between groups, but did not *appear* to show any clear correlation between social class and decoding, and so many scholars have assumed, with Shaun Moores, that ‘the *most significant conclusion* to be drawn from the research is that viewers’ decodings of a TV current affairs text cannot be reduced in any simple way to their socio-economic location.’ (1993:21) However, Sujeong Kim (2004) shows that Morley under-interpreted his findings: once gender, ethnicity, and social class are controlled for as separate variables, Kim’s statistical re-

²⁹ As Morley himself notes, ‘this strategy had the disadvantage that I was not talking to people about television in the context in which they normally watch it’ (1986:40): a criticism that has often been repeated. Nonetheless, it should be observed that he was talking to people in a context in which they do normally *talk*. In other words, the research situation may not have been *quite* as artificial as has been supposed. When, in the course of the same auto-critique, Morley goes on to speculate about what might happen if we were to follow one of his respondents home ‘and look at how he might react to another *Nationwide* programme, this time in his home context’ (42), he might be argued to commit the fallacy of supposing the period of viewing (in contrast to the period of response) to be the authentic moment of reception: for example, he elsewhere writes of his later work as ‘prioritis[ing] the understanding of the process of television viewing (the activity itself) over the understanding of particular responses to particular types of programme material (the level at which the *Nationwide* audience study is pitched).’ (1992:134) On the other hand, I consider his argument that ‘viewing television is done quite differently in the home as opposed to in public places’ (1992:133) to carry weight regardless of how one conceives the relationship between viewing and responding

analysis of the same data suggests that ‘audience’s social positions... structure their understandings and evaluations of television programmes in quite consistent directions and patterns.’ (103) Had this been recognised at the time, the subsequent development of cultural studies might have been different, since claims of audience autonomy (see below) would have seemed less plausible. At any rate, comments such as Moores’s would have been seen to be exaggerated, if they had been made at all.

From the point of view of this study, the central flaw of *The ‘Nationwide’ audience* was not methodological, but theoretical: involving something very like the model of media consumption that had *preceded* Uses and Gratifications, the study was conceived as an attempt to ‘get at’ something that had happened to the audience members as a result of their exposure to a message (albeit with their class-determined interpretative competencies presumed to be a variable; see Chapter 3 and Footnote 28 of the current study). This in turn is underpinned by the theory that literature and the media involve the communication of messages between producers and consumers:

most studies of television discourse remain grounded in the notion that a news broadcast is a social interaction in which some sort of message is sent – ‘constituted’ would be a word more consistent with present usage – from the television set and received on the other end – here the preferred word might be ‘interpreted’. That is, studies of television discourse seem still quite securely rooted in the notion that it is a social interaction between the producers of mass communication and the consumers.

Much can be said to support the sender-receiver view, of course, but... this view

of mediated discourse may well disguise other significant aspects of the social interactions going on in the same situations.

Scollon 1998:17

Chapter 2 of this dissertation extends Scollon's approach by trying to understand literary discourse without invoking the 'sender-receiver view'; Chapter 3 shows the importance of this view as a sort of folk-theory invoked for rhetorical purposes in reader-reader (or viewer-viewer) interactions. Thus, I would prefer to see *The 'Nationwide' audience* as an experiment to see what social interactions various groups would enter into once exposed to a single media text in a (relatively constant) artificial situation and once prompted by a researcher who (through asking questions) entered into interaction with them, than to see it as an experiment to find out about the private mental processes *ordinarily* applied to media discourse by the members of those groups *individually and in private*. That different interactions were entered into by groups in ways that can be seen to have been determined by class, race, and gender is potentially very significant indeed, even if it does not *necessarily* tell us much about their practices of media consumption outside the experimental situation, and I would consequently see *The 'Nationwide' audience* as one of the most important audience studies to have been conducted. Had it been interpreted and evaluated thus at the time, it might have led (for example) to a major research tradition investigating media-related discourse produced by groups in non-artificial situations. And such a tradition need not have been tied to the idea that this discourse transparently represented prior mental acts of decoding: as Morley came to argue, 'should you wish to understand what I am doing [in watching television], it would probably be as well to ask me. I may well, of course, lie to you or

otherwise misrepresent my thoughts or feelings, for any number of purposes, but at least, through my verbal responses, you will begin to get some access to the kind of language, the criteria of distinction, and the types of categorisation through which I construct my (conscious) world.’ (1992:181)³⁰ In other words, *The ‘Nationwide’ audience* can be viewed as potentially very revealing with regard to the particular competences available to members of different socioeconomic (and other) groups for talking about television programmes.

As things were, however, the apparent failure of *The ‘Nationwide’ audience* played a role in ushering in a different type of audience study in the early 1980s (though Liebes and Katz’s [1991 {1989}] famous study of *Dallas* viewers combines characteristics from both; see below). According to Alasuutari, this ‘second generation’ involved a move from ‘conventional politics’ to ‘identity politics’ and from ‘public affairs programmes’ to ‘fictional programmes’, together with a major methodological reorientation such that ‘[o]ne studies the role of the media in everyday life, not the impact... of everyday life in the reception of a programme’ (1999:5). On the whole, studies of this type investigated discourse produced by audience members in one-to-one communication with researchers, and many of them analysed this discourse in what I find to be a slightly naive manner. Perhaps the most influential example of such a study was Dorothy Hobson’s study of the British soap opera *Crossroads* (Hobson 1982). Hobson studied both producers and consumers of this serial with the initial intention of observing the whole of the encoding/decoding process in action (as she puts it, ‘linking the understanding of the

³⁰ Whether such studies would necessarily have avoided the ‘interpretative fallacy’ discussed in Subsection 1.3.1 is another matter.

production process of specific episodes or programmes with the audience reception and understanding of those same episodes or programmes' [107]). Rather than create artificial viewing situations, she sat with her research subjects while they watched episodes in the normal course of their television viewing practices:

Watching television is part of the everyday life of viewers. It is not... a separate activity undertaken in perfect quiet in comfortable surroundings. Nor is it done in a darkened room, as so many programmes are shown when viewed in professional settings... Nor is it watched on a video recorder for close analysis of shots, camera angles, or 'messages' in the text... as in academic studies. At least, it is none of these things for women with families and husbands to look after and, especially, it is not the way that they can watch television programmes transmitted in the so-called 'tea-time' slot.

Hobson 1982:110

Hobson's genuinely ethnographic approach is salutary, and her argument is an early and particularly clear articulation of the thesis that reading and viewing can *only* be understood in terms of diverse reading and viewing practices, as in the above contrast between the everyday practice of watching a television programme in the midst of one's household chores and the academic practice of watching it on a video recorder for close analysis – a thesis that I consider to have serious consequences for many cognitive, experimental, and text-based approaches to reading (see Footnote 28, and elsewhere in the current subsection). In addition to observing them, Hobson also asked her research subjects questions about the episodes she had just watched with them, but found that

they ‘quickly moved the conversation to the programme in general and talked about other episodes through the medium of the storylines.’ (107) She concludes from this that ‘the audience do not watch programmes as separate or individual items, nor even as types of programmes, but rather... build up an understanding of themes over a much wider range of programmes and length of time of viewing’ (ibid.); while this is an interesting hypothesis, as an interpretation of Hobson’s data, it involves a fallacy, since it presumes that the speech produced in answer to her questions transparently reflects a prior mental process of television watching. Hobson reflects on the ‘linguistic competence’ needed to talk about programmes, but considers her research subjects’ competence in this matter only in terms of their *lack of training* in literary and media criticism; it might be argued that her research subjects were fully (although informally) trained in a different linguistic competence, ie. the competence to talk about soap operas ‘through the medium of the storylines’ (which is what she seems to have observed in action in a fortuitously overheard conversation between four pensioners on a train from London to Birmingham [125]), and that, when she asked those research subjects about soap operas, they simply responded by putting that competence to work. If this is correct, then Hobson’s discovery relates not to how audiences *watch* soap operas, but to how they *talk* about them – this may, of course, have consequences for the way in which they watch what they have talked about – and what they are to talk about – but this theoretical position needs to be carefully considered rather than simply assumed (see Section 1.5 and the concluding note to Chapter 3 for discussion).

Hobson’s work was revolutionary in its day: Horkheimer and Adorno’s (2002[1944]:111) generic ‘housewife’ to whom ‘the dark of the cinema grants a refuge’

(and who might perhaps also indulge in reading a ‘weak-minded women’s serial’ [123] from time to time) disappears and is replaced by a range of individuals who can speak for themselves. But, at times, Hobson appears to take on the role of an advocate for the viewers of *Crossroads*, to such an extent that she arguably inaugurates the populist tradition in cultural studies,³¹ articulating what would become its core principles, ie. that the mass media text is infinitely polysemic and the active creation of its consumers, and that its regular consumers are the people who understand it best: as Hobson puts it, ‘there is no single *Crossroads*, there are as many different *Crossroads* as there are viewers’, and ‘the viewers are the critics. Or at least, the only ones who should count.’ (136) These principles are discussed more fully below; for now, I hope it will suffice to observe that the clear dangers of applying them in a study of (let us say) consumers of certain forms of pornography may suggest why it is that, in carrying out audience research, ‘critical researchers must avoid becoming trapped in the semiotic worlds of our consultants.’ (Gibson 2000:255)

A study that was contemporary with Hobson’s, but which largely avoided this particular problem was Ien Ang’s *Watching Dallas* (1985[1982]). Ang placed an advert in a Dutch women’s magazine, inviting readers to write and tell her about their relationship to the programme:

I like watching the TV serial *Dallas*, but often get odd reactions to it. Would anyone like to write and tell me why you like watching it to, or dislike it? I

³¹ This connection is also made by Turner (1990:143). The most notorious exponent of this tradition is Fiske (1989a,b), discussed below.

should like to assimilate these reactions in my university thesis. Please write to...

1985(1982):10, ellipsis in original

In response to this, she received 42 letters that she quotes from in her discussion of the programme and its reception. Ang's research method was therefore much more distanced than Hobson's, lacking any ethnographic element. This may be thought something of a disadvantage, but I suspect that it helped her to maintain a critical attitude to her research subjects, and thus to avoid becoming 'trapped' in the way described above. Ang refuses to 'let the letters speak for themselves', instead treating them 'as texts, as discourses people produce when they want to express or have to account for their own preference for, or aversion to, a highly controversial piece of popular culture like *Dallas*.' (1985[1982]:11) This is a sophisticated approach, and has been justly recognised as an important contribution to cultural studies (see, for example, Hills's [2002] later use of the idea of the 'discursive mantra', theoretically vital to Chapter 3 of the current study). But it is not without problems, not least of which is that Ang wants her analysis of her respondents' letters to yield up a reading of *Dallas*: from them, she argues 'we can get to know something about what experiencing pleasure (or otherwise) from *Dallas* implies for these writers – what textual characteristics of *Dallas* organise that experience and in which ideological context it acquires social and cultural meanings.' (ibid.) It would seem legitimate to derive, from analysis of a particular person's account of why he or she likes or does not like *Dallas*, an understanding of the meaning (for that person, in this interactive situation) of what it is to experience pleasure (or not) while watching *Dallas*. But to proceed from this to knowledge of how *the experience itself* is

organised by particular textual characteristics of *Dallas* seems a step too far, when all one has to go on are the texts of (a) the account, and (b) *Dallas*.³² Ang does not really discuss this issue, which is why I have covered her work in the current subsection, rather than in Section 1.5. A second problem is raised by the following – fascinating – discussion of one of several letters from people claiming to enjoy *Dallas* ironically:

The ironic viewing attitude places this viewer in a position to get the better, in a sense, of *Dallas*, to be above it. And in this way, as a ‘serious, intelligent feminist’, she can allow herself to experience pleasure in *Dallas*. She says in fact: ‘Of course *Dallas* is mass culture and therefore bad, but precisely because I am so well aware of that, I can really enjoy watching and poke fun at it.’

Ang 1985[1982]:100

Ang analyses the letters as texts, but not as texts produced in response to an advert and addressed to someone who had advertised herself as (a) enjoying *Dallas* but being aware of problems with this, and (b) being involved in academic research. In other words, she left out of her analysis the social relationship between herself and her research subjects: the above constitutes Ang’s entire analysis of the letter, though she is scrupulous enough to quote the letter itself far more fully than her own analysis requires. I would suggest that the perceived social relationship may

³² Ang’s second chapter consists almost entirely of her own reading of *Dallas*, which concludes with the bathetic ‘But the above is only a theoretical construction.’ (83) This is followed by a two-page coda in which a sequence of short quotations from letters is presented, but barely analysed, leading to the banal observation that ‘[p]leasure is... obviously something uncertain and precarious.’ (85) It would seem that Ang herself has little confidence in this aspect of her project.

explain why this particular writer should want to distinguish herself from a stereotypical image of the watcher of *Dallas* (and reader of women's magazines) by presenting herself as a 'serious, intelligent feminist' – and presenting herself, furthermore, as attending 'evening school' and reading 'feminist books' rather than 'Mills and Boon' (ibid.). Note also how this writer highlights her agreement with values she assumes ('of course') Ang to hold, to wit, the negative evaluation of 'mass culture'. It is in this context that I think we should read her assertions that she enjoys *Dallas* by 'poking fun at it' and that she is able to do this 'precisely because' she is 'so well aware' that *Dallas* is 'bad': consciously or otherwise, this text would seem designed to prove, to an addressee presumed to be 'above' *Dallas*, that its writer is above it, too. Thus, I would argue that this letter reveals its writer's belief that experiencing pleasure from *Dallas* has different meanings depending on the *kind* of pleasure, where an ironic, a *knowing* pleasure may indicate a degree of intellectual distinction compatible with being an evening student and a reader of feminist books but incompatible with being a reader of Mills and Boon. Taking a non-ironic, an unknowing pleasure in *Dallas* would thus have a different meaning, being associated with reading Mills and Boon and with being intellectually inferior, academically unambitious, culturally unsophisticated – at least, this is the meaning it would seem to have in the context of *this* letter, from *this* writer, addressed to the person she assumes Ien Ang to be. This interpretative approach is adopted by Jackie Stacey (1994a&b) in research that will be discussed in Section 1.5 and Chapter 4. It can be contrasted with Liebes and Katz's (1991[1989]) study of *Dallas* audiences, an ambitious project which combined the methodologies of

Morley (1999a[1980]), Hobson (1982), and Morley (1986) in an international range of settings: researchers first observed friendship or neighbouring groups of married couples in Israel (both Arabs and three different Jewish ethnic groups), Japan, and the US as they watched taped or broadcast episodes of *Dallas*, and then engaged them in discussions that were audio recorded for later analysis. Statements made by the participants were then divided into the ‘referential’ (ie. those that discuss the characters and events of *Dallas* as if they were real) and the ‘critical’ (ie. those that discuss them as constructions), further subdividing the latter statements into the ‘syntactic’ (ie. those concerning the generic, formulaic, and dramatic form of *Dallas*) and the ‘semantic’ (ie. those concerning its theme, ideology, or message). This is a very important study because it draws attention to the competences on which members of these various groups are able to draw (see discussion of Morley [1999a{1980}] and Hobson [1982], above). For example, Liebes and Katz note that syntactic critical statements about *Dallas* were most commonly made by American viewers, which can be assumed to result from their greater exposure to the genre of soap opera (see Chapter 2 of the current study for further discussion), and that there are correlations between the occurrence of critical statements and both the ethnicity and the level of education of the viewers (‘indeed, among the lower-educated, the *only* metalinguistic [ie. critical] statements are made by the more western groups’ [206]). They also emphasise the importance of social identity by drawing attention to the tendency of Arab Israeli and Russian-Jewish Israeli viewers to ‘see the programme as representing ‘ “moral degeneracy” or “rotten capitalism”’, and by suggesting that, for historical reasons (including their association of western culture with colonialism and with Israel itself, ‘considered [as] a present-day colonial power’), ‘Arabs... have more reason than others to dissociate themselves from the

culture of *Dallas*.' (209) But Liebes and Katz do not discuss the dialogic context of this dissociation: these viewers are performing their (dissociative) response to a cultural commodity (a) in conversation with one another, and (b) before the audience of an Israeli institution, as participants in an investigation that (in assembling them as a group) constitutes them as specifically *Arab* viewers.

This connection between cultural consumption and social identity calls to mind the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's influential study, *Distinction* (1984[1979]), which inaugurated the most important contemporary debates in the sociological study of cultural consumption. Bourdieu sent questionnaires on matters of taste to over a thousand adults in the area in and around Paris, attempting to correlate the respondents' cultural preferences (eg. what kind of food they considered best to serve to guests) and knowledges (eg. whether they knew the stars and directors of recent films) with their responses to more traditional sociological questions regarding such topics as age, sex, educational achievement, and father's occupation. Bourdieu proposed the notion of *habitus* to explain the correlations he found, and coined the term 'cultural capital' to refer to competence in the cultural codes associated with the *habitus* of the dominant social classes: one's *habitus* is the complex of dispositions that underlies all aspects of one's cultural consumption, such that the latter become signs of one's social position. Thus, '[t]aste classifies, and it classifies the classifier' (Bourdieu 1984[1979]:6): one exercises *distinction* in consuming cultural products on the basis of one's *habitus*, and the choices one makes achieve one's own distinction as a member of a particular class – or, crucially, class *fraction*, this being Bourdieu's way of integrating the distinct sociological

concepts of *class* and *status*. Bourdieu argued that the class that possesses the greatest volume of capital is divided, because the capital possessed by some of its members (the dominant fraction of the dominant class, ie. the bourgeoisie) is predominantly economic while the capital possessed by others (the dominated fraction of the dominant class, ie. the intelligentsia) is predominantly cultural. Thus, social position is achieved and maintained not only through the accumulation and expenditure of economic capital, but also through the accumulation and display of cultural capital, ie. through acquiring and performing taste in and knowledge of (elite) culture: ‘whereas economic capital is expressed through consuming goods and activities of material scarcity, cultural capital is expressed through consuming via scarce aesthetic and interactional styles that are consecrated by cultural elites.’ (Holt 1997:98). A good example of such behaviour can be seen in the Russian billionaire (or former billionaire) Alexander Lebedev’s self-distancing from other Russian billionaires by focusing on their lack of cultural capital. Speaking to a British newspaper, he states: ‘They don’t read books.... They don’t go to exhibitions. They think the only way to impress anyone is to buy a yacht.’ (Harding 2008:29) The contrast Lebedev constructs is between a group who can demonstrate membership of the dominant class *only* through vastly expensive material purchases, and himself, *also* able to demonstrate it through appreciation (which also entails consumption – and, in his case, patronage) of highbrow artforms, and therefore in possession of higher status.

John Frow (1995) describes Bourdieu's work as 'an overwhelming case' regarding 'the social functions of culture' (27), but goes on to observe that Bourdieu's positing of 'a single aesthetic logic' for each class's aesthetic codes – formalism for the dominant classes, realism for the proletariat – is 'almost explicitly interventionist, working to discount "aesthetic" experience (understood as primarily an experience of form) and to valorise the directness of the working class relation to the world' – when the idea 'that one class stands in a more "natural", less mediated relation to experience than do other classes is a romantic obfuscation.' (34; this idea is referenced in Chapter 4 of the current study) However, this populist aspect of Bourdieu's thought is clearly extraneous to his general theory of taste, outlined above and returned to in chapter 4. For the purposes of this study, then, a more significant critique may be Moores's (1993:121) observation that 'it is quite possible for a single object or cultural form to circulate in different "taste zones" at the same time', as has been the case with the opera singer Luciano Pavarotti: those who 'attend expensive venues such as the English National Opera in Covent Garden' maintain social distance from those who 'watch "Pavarotti in the Park" on Sky.' An equally striking example is provided by Holt's explanation of why, in his ethnographic study of a rural community, people with high cultural capital were

³⁴ By 'progressively reorder[ing] the occupations and the taste choices so that occupational status groups with the most similar patterns of music choices are adjacent and the music genres chosen by the most similar patterns of occupational status groups are adjacent' (155-156), Peterson and Simkus (1992) arrive at a hierarchy of occupational groups ranging from 'higher cultural' professionals down to farm labourers (Table 3) and a hierarchy of musical genres ranging from classical music down to country music (Table 2).

found to express a liking for rap music, when Bethany Bryson's (1996) analysis of the American General Social Survey would suggest that they would not: 'The informants in my study are white and live in an ethnically homogenous setting far removed from urban life. In this locale, rap is a cosmopolitan badge for HCCs [informants with high cultural capital] and a foreign conundrum for LCCs [informants with low cultural capital]. However, in urban areas where, presumably, many GSS subjects live, rap is the lingua franca of youth culture.... In this locale, rap cannot be used by HCCs as an exotic object to express cosmopolitanism. Thus, rather than a stable cultural category, rap music is better conceived as a multivocal symbolic resource.' (1997:117) One might also argue that the 'ironic' *Dallas* watcher discussed above maintained social distance from other *Dallas* watchers by writing a letter to Ien Ang and presenting her *Dallas*-watching as sophisticatedly ironic: in common with other signals incorporated in her letter, her viewing mode suggests her membership of the intelligentsia. Roger Chartier recognises the importance of such issues to the history of reading in his argument that '[a] retrospective sociology that has long made the unequal distribution of objects the primary criterion of the cultural hierarchy must be replaced by a different approach that focuses attention on different and contrasting uses of the same goods, the same texts, and the same ideas.' (1989:171)

Because a key element of Bourdieu's theory is the idea that taste is primarily asserted through rejection – as Bourdieu himself puts it, that 'tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes' (1984[1979]:56) – Peterson and Simkus's (1992) 'omnivore' thesis (see also Peterson 1992) presents a major challenge. While their analysis of the US's 1982 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts shows a strong

correlation between status (as defined by occupational group) and preferred musical genre,³⁴ Peterson and Simkus also find a correlation between high status and a taste for a broad range of musical genres, and therefore argue that ‘elite taste is no longer defined as an expressed appreciation of the high art forms (and a moral disdain or bemused tolerance for all other aesthetic expressions)’, but ‘as an appreciation of the aesthetics of every distinctive form *along with* an appreciation of the high arts.’ (1992:169, emphasis added) This would appear to suggest that elite tastes are defined *not* by distastes but by their absence, while, for those lower down the status hierarchy, distaste plays a much more important role, as ‘musical taste serves to mark not only status levels but also the status boundaries between groups defined by age, gender, race, religion, life-style, etc, at roughly the same stratum level.’ (168-169) In a fascinating survey of secondary sources, Richard Peterson (1997) provides a historical explanation for this, arguing that, for specific reasons, social status in the United States came to be marked by displays of cultural capital in the late 19th century,³⁵ but that this has *ceased to apply* in America (see also Peterson and Kern 1996). Support for this thesis is found in Bryson’s analysis of answers to questions pertaining to music in the US’s 1993 General Social Survey – which she shows to suggest ‘greater formation of taste boundaries around group identities at low levels of education’ (1997:148) – as well as in the fact that ‘[s]tudies made in the United

³⁵ ‘As etiquette lost its utility and associational membership proved inadequate for the increasingly national elite, there was an opening for a criterion of status that was both difficult to acquire and applicable in all situations.’ (Peterson 1997:81) I find this rather more convincing than the claim made by Levine – on whom Peterson draws extensively – that the genteel and *nouveau-riche* urge for ‘distinctiveness’ in ‘life-style, manners, and cultural artefacts’ (1988:227) was to provide post-hoc justification for the continuing exploitation of the working classes.

States since the mid-1960s have not found as clear a pattern of highbrow snobbery as found by Bourdieu in and around Paris' (Peterson 1997:87).

Peterson's 'omnivore' thesis has found wide support, but has also been questioned and qualified. For example, Bryson observes that 'the genres most disliked by tolerant people are those appreciated by people with the lowest levels of education' (Bryson 1996:895): this suggests that there may be few *absolute* omnivores, since distaste for genres with very low status audiences remains characteristic of 'omnivorous' elites (Tambupolon [2008], however, notes problems in Bryson's statistical analysis; see below). Douglas Holt (1997) argues that the failure to replicate Bourdieu's findings in America has been due to an excessive focus on the fine arts (which would seem less important to American than to Parisian culture; Peterson observes that 'there is no good reason why reasonably stable hierarchies could not be found by ranking... sports, magazines, toys, wine and alcohol, automobiles, hunting and fishing, gardening, food preparation, homes, and more' [2005:266-267]) and a failure to distinguish economic from cultural capital in social groups; in a similar vein, Omar Lizardo (2006) goes so far as to argue 'that there are no dramatic differences in the way that Americans in different structural positions engage highbrow culture – when class fractions are properly operationalised according to both their total and relative capital composition – in comparison to the findings reported by Bourdieu.' (20) And, while studies carried out outside the United States have not found people of elite status to cleave exclusively to the forms of high culture discussed by Bourdieu, neither have they found them to be true omnivores. Analysing survey data from the Danish town of Aalborg, for example, Prieur et al observe that 'all of the most intellectually challenging choices regarding literature, newspapers, genres of arts, TV-programmes, and music have

their highest frequencies' (64) among social groups in possession of high overall capital volume and with a cultural, rather than economic balance of capital composition: exactly what Bourdieu's theory would predict. Moreover, Prieur et al argue that a *relational* view of cultural capital (ie. not 'classical high culture' alone, but 'an expression of taste in relationships with other expressions of taste' [ibid.]) shows the symbols of elite taste to have shifted, but the practice of discrimination to have remained the same: '[s]coring high on adherence to [relatively] highbrow tastes goes together with the refusal of [relatively] lowbrow tastes, and vice versa', a result which 'provide[s] little support to the theses about the contemporary cultural elite being omnivorous or about snobbism losing ground' (2008:66).

Carrying out a national random sample survey in the UK and following it with focus group discussions and (for selected survey respondents) semi-structured interviews, Warde et al (2008) find that 'alongside a relative openness to popular culture evidenced by their volume of likes, omnivores disproportionately favoured legitimate items' of the type 'that would earlier have conferred cultural distinction in the sense implied by Bourdieu' (158) and, concomitantly, 'are more dismissive of popular culture than of other types.' (159) Furthermore, Warde et al argue that '[w]hen their likes and dislikes are unpacked using qualitative data, persistent forms of discrimination and disavowal of forms of popular culture (reality TV, fast-food, electronic dance music) suggest that the openness of the omnivore is partial and qualified.' (164) The picture is complicated still further by Peterson's (2005:264) suggestion that 'there may be several distinct patterns of omnivorous inclusion and exclusion', and Gindo Tampubolon's (2008) observation (following highly sophisticated statistical analyses) that '[h]igh status people actually form different

groups and they *dislike* different items' (258) and that 'strong dislikes are to be found across all groups of omnivores and univores.' (256)

For all their theoretical differences, these sociologists of cultural consumption would nonetheless appear to agree that taste is a means of maintaining intra-group cohesion and inter-group distance. That class fractions should be the only groups to use taste in this way would in fact seem highly unlikely, and many other distinctions can be argued to be maintained through differential consumption, whether or not one believes that this will be more pronounced at particular status levels. For example, Peterson and Simkus (1992) find that a taste for jazz has a higher correlation with membership of high-status groups among white people than in the general population (Table 2), and suggest that 'the historically African-American musical genres operate quite differently in marking social status for African-Americans and for whites.' (165) Furthermore, Arab-Israeli and Russian-Jewish Israeli viewers in Liebes and Katz's study were keen to distance themselves from the culture they associated with *Dallas* by discussing it in relation to ideas of social degeneracy, which would seem to have less to do with their class fraction than with their experience as cultural groups with a specific relation to 'the west'. As for gender, Peterson and Simkus argue that 'while men and women tend to make somewhat different aesthetic choices and tend to be found in different occupational status groups, women and men in the same occupational group make the same patterns of music choices' (1992:164-165), and Omar Lizardo (2006) argues that, though women have been found to engage in 'highbrow' cultural consumption to a greater extent than men – a phenomenon that could be taken to refute Bourdieu's explanation of taste in terms of class fraction alone – this can be explained within Bourdieu's framework once one takes account of the sectors in which women are

employed and their differential engagement with those sectors. Nonetheless, it is easy to think of both highbrow and lowbrow authors who have a greater association with readers of one gender than with those of the other (Philip Roth, Toni Morrison, Andy McNab, Sophie Kinsella). Chapter 4 of this dissertation returns to these issues, and Chapter 3 discusses a social group primarily defined by the distinctive style in which its members consume artefacts of popular culture.

As the sociology of cultural consumption tends to function at a very general level (Bryson, for example, complains that ‘we do not really know how people use taste in their everyday lives’ [1996:897]), qualitative work such as that by Holt (1997) and Warde et al (2008), mentioned above, is particularly important. Work of this sort can be carried out by a number of means, a good example (to which we shall return in Chapter 4) being Harper and Porter’s (1996) analysis of responses to a Mass-Observation³⁶ question that, in August 1950, asked participants ‘whether they ever cried in the cinema, and if so, whether they were ashamed.’ (152). Breaking down these responses by the respondent’s age, gender, and class fraction (judged by occupation only), Harper and Porter find that

only middle-class respondents were extensively concerned with questions of artistic quality, with the literary origins of a film, or with the emotional impact of the music. Neither the men nor the women in the lower middle class refer to art-house films. Nor do they appear to be in the business of using film as an index of their cultural status. Only middle-class respondents were concerned with the artistic standing of film texts; only they considered the consonance between a

³⁶ <http://www.massobs.org.uk/>

film's quality and their own cultural capital. On the other hand, the lower middle class appeared to be roused by exclusively domestic issues in films – threats to children, animals, or family unity.

Harper and Porter 1996:168

This clearly supports Bourdieu's theory, both in terms of the cultural artefacts consumed and of the style of consumption. Ethnographic work has the potential to go still further, by contextualising cultural consumption in the life of communities. A pioneering study in that vein was carried out by Derek Wynne (1990) in his investigation of members of the 'emergent middle class' (ie. people of middle class status but working class origin) on an English housing estate. Wynne found that the regular users of the estate's leisure facilities used the terms 'drinkers' and 'sporters' to divide themselves into two groups, the latter (predominantly graduate professionals, thus members of the intelligentsia) being associated with use of the tennis and squash courts, and the former (predominantly managers in manufacturing and other traditional industries who had left school at 16, thus members of the bourgeoisie) being associated with use of the lounge bar. Wynne found many contrasts between these two groups at the level of *habitus*: comfortable home furnishings (drinkers) versus stylish home furnishings (sporters), musicals (drinkers) versus avant-garde theatre (sporters), package holidays (drinkers) versus self-catering cottages (sporters). Wynne suggests that the 'drinkers' and the 'sporters' both construct their middle class identity through consumption, but whereas the former emphasise volume of consumption, and the objects of their consumption are those valued by their working class parents, the latter

emphasise consuming in an elite or refined manner, and consume objects that they associate with the class they perceive themselves as having entered.

Like Bourdieu, Wynne takes no particular interest in the consumption of literature (there are no questions on literature in Bourdieu's survey, for example, and Wynne takes no note of the books on the shelves of the houses with the fitted carpets and the parquet floors),³⁷ nor indeed of television, but his work provides an intriguing context for another classic work of 'second generation' media reception study:

David Morley's *Family television* (1986). Contrary to assumptions of a complete break with prior audience research traditions (discussed above), this 'attempted to build upon some of the insights of the "uses and gratifications" approach to audience research – asking what people do with the media – but taking the dynamic *unit* of consumption to be more properly the family/household rather than the individual viewer.' (Morley 1986:15) This modification – which might seem counterintuitive, in these days of multiple television sets and media players within a single home,³⁸ but which were highly appropriate to the mid-1980s – permitted

³⁷ Bourdieu's major work on literature, *The rules of art* (1996[1992]), comes to the question of reading only at the very end; moreover, the chapter in question, 'A theory of reading in practice' (322-330), is in fact a reading, *in the conventional literary critical sense*, of William Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily'. The implication would seem to be that the reading of literature is uniquely different from the forms of cultural consumption analysed in *Distinction* (1984[1979]); however, since Bourdieu does not explicitly state, explain, or justify this position, I shall ignore it. Fowler (2000, discussed below in Sections 1.7 and 1.8) applies some of the ideas from *The rules of art* to the case of *The Satanic Verses*.

³⁸ Though see Morley (1992:175-176): 'even in multi-set households, there is usually a "main set", which is the focus of competing demands'.

Morley to address ‘questions of differential power, responsibility, and control within the family, at different times of the day or evening.’ (ibid.) Although Morley does not employ a Bourdieusian framework to interpret the data he collected, something very like Bourdieu’s ‘distinction’ appears to be operating in much of the discourse he recorded, and (though this is difficult to be sure of) to be correlated with something like class fraction, or at least with aspirations to class-fraction membership.³⁹ The following extract, for example, begins with an exchange produced in the course of Morley’s interview with one of the middle class families in his study:

‘I’m into opera, well, classical music anyway or blues and jazz. On the TV and radio you get what they call folk music. Like the Spinners! I mean, that’s like Boy George!’

Daughter: ‘What’s wrong with Boy George?’

This interchange between father and daughter clearly catches a small slice of an ongoing dynamic in the family where the father defines himself as part of a cultured minority and scorns popular television and music, much to the

³⁹ I do not wish to suggest that Morley *should have* interpreted his data in relation to Bourdieu. As Ang (1991[1989]:109) argues, Morley’s approach was a feminist one, in the sense of being ‘sensitive to the fact that male/female relationships are always informed by power, contradiction, and struggle.’ Bourdieu’s work can indeed be criticised for *insensitivity* to this fact, although, as have seen, a case can still be made that gender *per se* may be unnecessary to a theory of cultural consumption, *at least on the level dealt with by Bourdieu*. I interpret Morley’s data from a different point of view than he does, however, not because of opposition to feminist analysis because but this dissertation is not primarily concerned with male/female relationships. As I have acknowledged, gender differences certainly *can* be performed through taste in reading matter.

annoyance of his daughter who identifies strongly with these things. Thus, later, when discussing *EastEnders*, the daughter justifies the programme, against her father's rejection of 'popular culture' – which is part of his concern that he and his family should escape from his own working-class roots...

...

Her father's views on popular television are perhaps best encapsulated in his earlier comment that the crucial point is that 'You've got to discriminate, haven't you?' This is in the context of his wife's explanation that they, as a couple, 'can't stand *Dynasty*', although her husband admits, with some embarrassment, that 'my mother likes it, and *Dallas*'... Interestingly, in this family the woman does not occupy the traditional feminine position as a soap opera fan. Indeed, she makes a point of distancing herself from that type of programme.

Morley 1986:128-129

Though this couple appear to exhibit something like the *habitus* of Wynne's 'sporters', they both left school at nineteen, and the husband is a furniture dealer. However, the wife is a mature student, which shows that the couple's aspirations have much in common with those of the intelligentsia, and in turn may explain their rejection of cultural objects they associate with the working class tastes (which Wynne's 'drinkers' continue to embrace). Morley's particular focus on gender in his interpretation of the findings of his study may have prevented him from generalising at this level. The extreme divergence between the daughter's expressed tastes and her parents' (just like her father's 'embarrassment' when speaking of his mother's tastes) may reflect a desire on the behalf of all three speakers to perform a *generational* distinction that might not have come to the fore had they been interviewed separately, or in different groups: the

parents display the cultural capital they have accumulated in moving into the middle class (in contrast to the grandmother, who has remained working class), and the daughter, in what could be interpreted as an example of ‘inverse snobbery’, displays her disdain for such cultural capital (see Hawkins 1990, discussed in Section 1.2 and Chapter 4). It is possible that, interviewed alongside an *haute bourgeois* jazz buff, the father might have emphasised taste in something else, and that, interviewed alongside a fanatical admirer of Boy George, the daughter might have echoed her father’s disparagement of that particular pop singer. Of course, it is also possible that they might not, since distinction – the classifying of the classifier – is, like other forms of identification, an *agentive* process. This also goes to illustrate the importance of recognising the discursive context for each performance of consumption that we study.

A further criticism of Bourdieu is John Fiske’s allegation that ‘[h]e does not allow that there are forms of cultural capital produced outside of official cultural capital.’ (Fiske 1992:32) This is, I think, an intriguing idea, but one that should be treated with a degree of caution; in Fiske’s hands it unfortunately tends towards utopianism:

Fans, in particular, are active producers and users of such cultural capital and, at the level of fan organisation, begin to reproduce equivalents of the formal institutions of official culture.... fan culture is a form of popular culture that echoes many of the institutions of official culture, although in popular form and under popular control. It may be thought of as a sort of ‘moonlighting’ in the cultural rather than the economic sphere, a form of cultural labour to fill the gaps left by legitimate culture. Fandom offers ways of filling cultural lack and provides the social prestige and self-esteem that go with cultural capital.

Fiske thus suggests that the ‘cultural economy of fandom’ to which the title of his essay alludes is one run according to something very like the Socialist principle ‘to each according to his needs’. However, I would suggest that, in order to function as capital, non-official (ie. illegitimate) cultural capital must necessarily produce inequalities of its own, rather than simply compensate for the inequalities of the larger cultural economy. Indeed, it would by no means seem unlikely that the unequal distribution of fan cultural capital might to some extent coincide with the unequal distribution among fans of economic capital (due to the cost of the merchandise, books, DVDs, etc that fans must purchase in the course of accumulating their own brand of cultural capital) and indeed of official cultural capital too (Hills [2002:18] notes that some of the most prominent fanzine writers have been English Literature or Media Studies graduates – and even lecturers – and the analysis provided in Chapter 3 of this dissertation suggests that academic knowledge and status may be highly valued in some fan communities). Furthermore, whilst Fiske (1992:45) insists that only official cultural capital ‘can readily be converted into career opportunities and earning power’, we can readily find phenomena that challenge this thesis; examples would include fan artists who sell their work to other fans, ‘big name fans’ who are paid to speak at fan conventions, and fan writers who have been commercially published. For these reasons, although I would not dismiss Fiske’s notion of unofficial forms of cultural capital, I would suggest that it is insufficiently developed for application, since its distinction from what Bourdieu referred to as ‘cultural capital’ is unclear. The trend in sociological studies of cultural consumption is clearly towards the recognition of complexities and divisions overlooked

by Bourdieu, and so it would seem likely that ‘cultural capital’ will ultimately be replaced by a more nuanced concept or set of concepts, but I am poorly equipped to attempt such an analysis, and I do not believe that it can be carried out on the basis of Fiske’s theories of fandom.

As in Bourdieu’s foundational work, reading has continued to receive less attention from sociologists than certain other forms of cultural consumption (particularly music-listening, the focus of many of the studies cited above). However, official surveys incorporating questions about reading behaviour are carried out in many countries, and these have been used to provide large-scale pictures that appear to confirm the applicability to this area of cultural life of Bourdieu’s theory of distinction: for example, Florencia Torche uses evidence of this type to show that, in Chile, ‘a country where books have traditionally been associated with the cultural elite’, the reading of books (as opposed to magazines) ‘still appears to be a powerful vehicle to express, and perhaps maintain, status distinctions’ (2007:89). More detailed survey data was available to Erzsébet Bukodi, who discovers that, in Hungary, ‘serious readers are a kind of cultural elite comprising high-status people coming from high-status family backgrounds’ (2007:125); her analysis shows that, in contrast to these ‘readers of classical and modern novels, drama, poetry, etc’ (117) – most likely to be ‘teaching and cultural professionals and legal professionals’ (118) – readers of ‘factual and technical books, including work-related materials’ (117) are likely to be ‘engineers and computer scientists, social science professionals, and senior government officials’ (118), that ‘readers of crime stories, love stories and romances, adventure stories, science fiction, etc’ (117) are most numerous in ‘the middle ranges of the status order’, ie. among such people as ‘cultural associate professionals and personal service workers’ (118), and that over

80% of general labourers, the lowest status occupational group in her study, are non-readers (Fig. 1, fourth graph), with the proportion of non-readers falling rapidly as status rises. If the relevance of all this for reception study of the type carried out in this dissertation is not immediately obvious, the following excerpt from an explanation of Bourdieu should make it clear:

To take an example that Bourdieu might use were he to study the contemporary United States, when someone details Milos Forman's directorial prowess in *The People vs Larry Flynt* to a friend over dinner (or, conversely, offers a damning harangue of Forman as an unrepentant proselytiser of the dominant gender ideology), this discussion not only recreates the experiential delight that the movie provided, but also serves as a claim to particular resources (here, knowledge of directorial styles in movies, and the ability to carefully analyse these characteristics) that act as reputational currency. Such actions are perceived not as explicit class markers but as bases for whom one is attracted to and admires, whom one finds uninteresting or doesn't understand, and whom one finds unimpressive and so seeks to avoid. Thus, status boundaries are reproduced simply through expressing one's tastes.

Holt 1997:102

Social identity is thus displayed through styles of discourse on text: talking about *The People vs Larry Flynt* in *either* of the ways described above would (provided it was done competently) demonstrate high cultural capital on the part of the speaker, whose specific identity within his or her class fraction might be further signalled through the choice of one or the other: connoisseur vs feminist, perhaps. Training in

these kinds of discourse is (of course) available at university level, and therefore it is hardly surprising that differences in terms of both content (ie. which works to express appreciation for, and which to dismiss) and form (ie. the verbal style in which to do so) were found in Marcy Dorfman's experimental attempt (see also Section 1.5) to compare the behaviour of members of 'interpretive communities' defined by participation or non-participation in postgraduate literature courses:

For literary novices, there was a clear discrepancy in ratings between the science fiction story and the literary texts. The science fiction story was perceived to be more interesting, more enjoyable, better written, and easier to understand. Novices were also more likely to derive a message or point for this story when asked to do so. In contrast, experts found the literary texts to be more interesting and more enjoyable. Experts also showed more interest in stories they did not particularly like, and were more willing to interpret stories they did not readily understand. Finally, in comparison to novices, experts' literary and critical judgements were more closely aligned with conventions established by the literary community.

...it is clear that the groups of readers studied here approached the interpretive task with different assumptions concerning how a text should be read.

Dorfman 1996:465-466

Whether we should attribute these differences to literary training (see Bortolussi and Dixon [1996] for an experiment testing the effects of this as a variable) or to class fraction is debatable; I would suggest that these two interpretations are in fact compatible, since literary training can be assumed to be one of the means by which

cultural capital is acquired (Van Dijk [1979], for example, suggests that the purpose of a literary education may simply be to prepare the student for a lifetime's polite conversation in the middle classes; see the data analysed in Section 1.2 of this dissertation for a possible example of how this training might function). At this point, however, we are approaching the current limits both of the sociology of cultural consumption and of empirical literary studies, for which reason we must return to media reception study.

Although, as I have stated, this field is primarily occupied with television audiences, some of its key studies have been on the readerships of mass-produced print media: above all, the work of Janice Radway (1987[1984]) and Elizabeth Long (1986). To some extent, these two studies represent a unique research tradition of their own, since Long's work was partly inspired by Radway's, which was in turn (as Radway explains in the introduction to the British edition of her book [1987]) produced in ignorance of recent Cultural Studies research, responding largely to debates within the discipline of American Studies. However, Radway and Long's work closely parallels that of Hall, Hobson, etc, and they have, with those British researchers, come to be regarded as the representatives of a single, transatlantic research tradition (this is, for example, how they are discussed by Gibson [2000] and Travis [2003]).

After 24 years, Radway's *Reading the romance* (1987[1984]) remains one of the most thorough, important, and rigorous studies of reception ever to have been carried out. The core of Radway's research consisted of eight hours of group interviews with members of a network of frequent romance readers to whom she had been introduced by Dot, a bookshop worker who was also the editor of a newsletter for romance readers. In

addition to this, she carried out a series of interviews and informal conversations with Dot herself, and created two questionnaires, the first of these being completed by her interviewees and the second by a wider sample of Dot's regular customers. In common with my approach in this dissertation (see Chapter 4 in particular), Radway does not wish to 'deny the worth of the readers' understanding of their own experience' (1987[1984]:187); rather than taking what they say at face value, however, she engages with it carefully and critically, working between the interviews and questionnaires, her own analyses of the books being read, and Nancy Chodorow's (1978) social and psychological analyses of the American family. Her use of textual analysis is particularly important, because it enables her to go beyond the readers' own statements of why they read romances: by carrying out a Proppian analysis of a corpus of twenty novels that had been repeatedly cited as favourites by her research subjects or that had been highly rated in Dot's newsletter, she was able to identify the characteristics that set these readers' 'ideal romances' apart from those that they 'deemed disappointing or "disgusting"' and to correlate these characteristics with the readers' 'comments about how they feel when they read bad romances' in order to reach the conclusion that 'one of the measures of an ideal book's success is its ability to deal convincingly with female fears and reservations by permitting them to surface briefly during a reading process that then explicitly lays them to rest by explaining them away.' (1987[1984]:158) Without the Proppian analysis, Radway would have been unable to reach such a conclusion, since her research subjects' accounts were contradictory: they could, for example, deny 'the repetitious or formulaic quality of the fiction they read' whilst 'exhibit[ing] fairly rigid expectations about what is permissible in a romantic tale and express[ing] disappointment and outrage when those conventions are violated.' (63) However, without eliciting her research subjects' preferences and dispreferences, she would have

been unable to carry out the Proppian analysis (which is not in itself an interpretation but a claim about generic regularities), and without her application of Chodorow's ideas and (for that matter) her research subjects' statements, she would have been unable to establish the significance of this analysis. Radway's study of the arguments romance readers use to justify their reading is particularly interesting, and prefigures the 'rhetorical' approach to reception discussed in Section 1.5 of this dissertation:

When Dot and her customers insist that they have a right to escape and to indulge themselves just as everyone else does, they are justifying their book purchases with arguments that are basic to a consuming society.... However, when they subsequently argue that romances are also edifying and that reading is a kind of productive labour, they forsake that ideology of perpetual consumption for a more traditional value system that enshrines hard work, performance of duty, and thrift.

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Although Radway describes the system of values appealed to in the first argument as 'subversive' of the system of values appealed to in the second (*ibid.*), it is clear that there is nothing radical about this: the ideology of a later mode of capitalism subverts that of an earlier, but both are sufficiently well established for these readers to appeal to in constructing arguments. Radway's use of different forms of data and different approaches to the same data (note also her use of book historical methods, referred to in Subsection 1.3.1) should ensure that her work remains a source of ideas in reception study for some time to come: there is certainly nothing comparable in the literary reception studies discussed in Subsection 1.3.2, for all that single studies may have exceeded her work in particular respects.

Elizabeth Long's (1986) research was very different, in that she collected her data not by interview but by ethnographic observation of a range of all-female, middle class reading groups (ie. book clubs) in Houston, seeking to learn about their practices of selection and interpretation of reading matter. Although she asserts that their interpretative practices were more playful than those of the literary academy, she finds that their practices of selection were far from independent, in that 'reading groups generally accept without question the categories of classification and evaluation generated by socially sanctioned sources of cultural authority', employing them as means for 'demarcating what is worth discussing from trash' (599). Moreover, Long's arguments suggest that the playfulness she discovered may have been no more than a sort of blissful uncriticality: '[o]ne reason that reading groups can be playful', she writes, 'is because they are not held accountable for their discussions and interpretations as are "professional readers" and their students', and therefore 'do not have to assert their interpretations in a serious way or defend them with tightly reasoned arguments from the text.' (603) Moreover, she also found that reading groups tend to employ naively realist and mimetic conceptions of literary meaning: a tendency exacerbated by their lack of attention to context, such that 'modern novels, especially, float in a context-free space that strips them of intertextual situatedness and allows them to appear to be simple utterances directly representing the world.' (606)

Despite their critique of their research subjects, Radway and Long's investigations have come to be identified, like Hobson's, with a growing 'populist' trend in Cultural Studies: an anti-authoritarian, anti-sexist, anti-capitalist approach to the mass media organised around a notion of 'resistance' that had first been associated with reading in Michel de Certeau's *The practice of everyday life* (1984[1974]). The central thesis of this approach

has been that, for all that mass media texts might seem to promote repressive ideologies, ordinary people exploit the polyvalence of those texts to consume them in ways that resist those ideologies. This was taken to its logical extreme (and thereby to a large extent discredited) by John Fiske (1989a, 1989b). Fiske advocates the study of ‘how people cope with the system, how they read its texts, how they make popular culture out of its resources.’ (1989a:105) In practice, what this amounts to is Fiske presenting *his own readings* of ‘popular’ texts, together with his *speculations* as to how other audiences might be reading those same texts: readings and speculations that seem to be underpinned by the unspoken assumption – traceable back to Certeau – that there is something inherently resistant about activity on the part of readers, and that for people to ‘make popular culture’ out of mass media texts is *in itself* a form of resistance to the mass media and the ‘system’ in which it operates. Although this may seem to be mitigated by Fiske’s description of ‘popular culture’ (ie. ‘the people’s’ uses of mass media texts) as ‘*potentially, and often actually, progressive*’ (1989a:21, emphasis added), it is in fact assumed by it, since Fiske never discusses the possibility that popular culture may be, by the same token, ‘*potentially, and often actually*’ reactionary (a possibility that is highlighted by my analysis of ‘resistant’ reading in the classroom in Chapter 3).⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Compare Stacey (1994:47): ‘“Activity” in and of itself is not a form of resistance: women may be active viewers in the sense of *actively* investing in oppressive ideologies.’ Fiske’s approach is, as he admits ‘essentially optimistic’ (1989a:21), and this optimism leads him not only to ignore such possibilities, but to produce interpretations that border on the bizarre, as when he asserts (on the grounds of a boutique owner’s estimate that a mere one in 30 people browsing through her shop actually buys something) that ‘[s]hopping malls are where the strategy of the powerful is most vulnerable to the tactical raids of the weak.’ (1989b:18) See Bee (1989) for an early and incisive critique of Fiske’s populism.

Dangerous populist assumptions are also implied when media scholar Henry Jenkins (1992) draws on Certeau in order to propose a ‘conception of fans as readers who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests, as spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture’ (23): for all Jenkins’s care to hold back from the populist enthusiasms displayed by Fiske, these notions of *appropriation*, of *different interests*, and of *transformation* suggest that there is something *revolutionary* about the intensive consumption of mass media texts. The most strident attack on this tendency has come from Thomas Frank (2001:276-306), who observes that, in the 1990s, the ‘market populists’ of consumer capitalism joined with the radical intellectuals of cultural studies in extolling ‘the revolutionary power of popular culture and the wonders of subjects who *talked back*’. The brushstrokes with which Frank lays on his polemic are broad, and sometimes excessively so – his misreading of Levine (1988, see Frank 2001:281) is particularly glaring – but he is right to observe that something must have gone wrong in a situation where ‘the gap between critical intellectuals and simple salesmanship seems only to shrink.’ (2001:305) The notion that audiences are *empowered* through their active construction of meanings from the industrially-produced texts of mass culture is profoundly convenient for the multinational corporations that own the copyright to those texts. And the notion that these constructions of meanings can be *re-constructed* through close interpretative commentary on those mass media texts might be thought equally convenient for academics who would rather produce close readings of glossy magazines and television programmes than carry out empirical studies of reading and viewing practices in their social contexts:⁴¹ Morley warns against ‘the tendency towards the

⁴¹ This is not to deny that certain producers of mass cultural goods have taken legal steps to constrain

“textualisation” of cultural studies’, which he associates with the establishment of departments of cultural studies within faculties of arts and humanities rather than of social sciences (1992:5), and Rojek and Turner complain that, in cultural studies, ‘literary interpretation has marginalised sociological methods’ (2000:629; see Footnote 1 of the current study for a brief discussion of such literary interpretation as imported *back into* literary studies under the banner of ‘cultural studies’).

It is against this background that Shalini Puri (2003:24) decries ‘a fetishisation of resistance and transgression in cultural studies’, and that Trysh Travis (2003:136) protests against the ‘populist comforts’ of the cultural studies ‘narrative of resistance, contest, and solidarity among the marginal’: comforts that must be set aside if we are to investigate ‘the specific historical conditions in which people make and read books.’⁴² Travis’s investigation of the reception of Rebecca Wells’s *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* leads her to the conclusion that, though this novel’s readers ‘register dissatisfaction and desire... these are then ever-more-rapidly rerouted... into unthreatening forms.’ (2003:155) It also shows the extent to which the supposed grassroots enthusiasm for the novel was manufactured in the process of promotion: perhaps Travis’s biggest blow against the ‘resisters’ thesis in an argument that is specifically written against the work of Radway and Long:

the expression of certain forms of audience autonomy (see section 1.7), nor that certain literary critics wish to preserve the principle of a single meaning for a single text (see Chapter 2).

⁴² As Travis observes, the encoding/decoding model has been taken to provide support for this comforting narrative. Given the theoretical purposes for which the model was proposed (see above), this is somewhat ironic.

Radway and Long each qualified her findings, admitting the partial and indeed ambivalent character of the ‘resistance’ her readers offered to cultural authority. But both concerned themselves primarily with noting and validating their subjects’ resistant behaviour rather than with plumbing its ambiguities.

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Given the *total* content of Long’s paper and Radway’s monograph, Travis’s judgement might seem rather unfair. However, it seems an appropriate response to both Long and Radway’s *conclusions*: Radway describes romance reading as ‘a valid, if limited protest’ (1987[1984]:220) and a ‘minimal but nonetheless legitimate form of protest’ (222); Long comes to see the naively realist interpretative strategies that she has earlier implicitly criticised her subjects for as ‘giv[ing] them the authority to interpret [characters] in ways that challenge the critical establishment.’ (1986:610) And this is what Radway and Long have generally been taken to stand for, their critique of the readers they study forgotten, their affirmation of those readers’ powers to ‘protest’ and ‘challenge’ remembered. A good example of this is inadvertently provided by Nick Turner (2005:195), who states that Radway ‘showed in 1984 in *The Reading of Romance* that allegedly “escapist” fiction can give female readers identity in a patriarchal society’: that Turner was not referring directly to Radway’s book is clear from the fact that he provides no bibliographic reference and gets the title wrong; what he cites is the Radway that almost everyone knows (or thinks he or she knows): the affirmative, populist Radway who

supposedly tells us that serial consumption of mass-market paperbacks is an act of defiance against patriarchy.⁴³

Alasuutari considers the next big change in reception studies to have been the ‘constructionist’ turn, which may have begun as early as the mid 1980s and which is characterised by greater reflexivity and by an aim ‘to get a grasp of our contemporary “media culture”, particularly as it can be seen in the role of the media in everyday life’ (1999:6). It must be observed, however, that the studies he groups together as third generational possess no unifying factors other than that they involve aspects of critique regarding various characteristics of studies he associates with the first and second generations. I shall therefore focus from now on purely on those studies that directly prefigure this dissertation by employing a broadly ‘discursive’ approach to reception data. Before I can do that, however, I would like to consider the meaning of ‘discourse analysis’ outside of reception study.

⁴³ Although Radway notes that romance readers frequently claim to have gained confidence from reading romances, she remains ambivalent, describing romance reading as an experience that may help a female reader to ‘feel temporarily revived’ (1987[1984]:84) but cannot help her to address the *causes* of her dissatisfaction, since its ‘short-lived therapeutic value’ is ‘made both possible and necessary by a culture that creates needs in women that it cannot fulfil’ (85). In other words, romances are not ‘allegedly’ but *genuinely* escapist, and the benefits of their reading do nothing to compromise their readers’ continuing occupation of a patriarchally-defined identity position. The one aspect of romances that Radway discovered to challenge patriarchal conceptions of a woman’s role appears to be that they enable their readers ‘to throw up a screen between themselves and the arena where they are required to do most of their relating to others.’ (92)

1.4 'Discourse analysis'

In *The Archaeology of knowledge*, Michel Foucault influentially defines a discourse as 'the group of statements that belong to a single system of formation' (1972[1969]:107), such that he can 'speak of clinical discourse, economic discourse, the discourse of natural history, psychiatric discourse' (108), and the word is used in a similar sense by many of those who can broadly be called discourse analysts, since it enables them to talk specifically about something that would otherwise have to be given the vaguer label of 'ideology'. For instance, Roger Fowler (who always described himself as a critical linguist, but for our purposes can best be seen as a discourse analyst with a very tightly defined methodology) employed the more metaphysical but clearly very closely derived definition of a discourse as 'a system of meanings within the culture, pre-existing language.' (1996:7) However, in the current work, the word 'discourse' is used as in contemporary linguistics, ie. to mean situated language use. Thus, this dissertation involves discourse analysis in the sense that '[t]he analysis of discourse is... the analysis of language in use' and 'cannot be restricted to the description of linguistic forms independent of the purposes or functions which those forms are designed to serve in human affairs.' (Brown and Yule 1983:1)

'Discourse analysis' does not constitute a procedure, an approach, or even a set of research questions, but rather a loose grouping of academic traditions defined largely by the type of data on which all of them focus: which is to say, almost any kind of 'naturally occurring' written or spoken language. It is, as Martin Barker writes,

a motley domain, made up of scholars who probably cannot agree on any fundamental definitions, yet all of whom are drawn to certain questions, which are seen as of particular relevance today. These questions concern the nature and

role of language and other meaning-systems in the operation of social relations, and in particular the *power* of such systems to shape identities, social practices, relations between individuals, communities, and all kinds of authority.

forthcoming

For the purposes of this dissertation, the most important form of discourse analysis is discursive psychology (often abbreviated to DP), an approach to social psychology whose principles are laid out in Potter and Wetherell's *Discourse and social psychology* (1987), and Derek Edwards's (1997) *Discourse and cognition*. Robin Wooffitt (2005:113) describes discursive psychology as 'a thorough reworking of the subject matter of psychology' which 'seeks to analyse reports of mental states, and discourse in which mental states become relevant, as social actions': a good practical example is Abell and Stokoe's analysis of a *Panorama* interview with Diana Spencer. Abell and Stokoe show that Diana invokes '[t]he dispositional characteristics both of her own personality and "others"... as [she] locates her blamings [of others] within descriptions of past events.' (1999:301) '[T]o study "feelings",' as Michael Billig writes with characteristic irony, discursive psychologists pay 'attention to what people are doing when they claim to have feelings.' (1997:141) When it comes to identity, discursive psychologists regard this not 'as a fixed set of properties or operations' which 'may receive occasional expression' through language, but 'in terms of lay or vernacular social categories, the ascription of which is inextricably tied to the details of talk-in-interaction.' (Wooffitt and Clark 1998:107)

Discursive psychology takes its lead from conversation analysis (often abbreviated to CA), itself originally an offshoot of ethnomethodology. The latter is a radical approach

to sociology pioneered by Harold Garfinkel in his classic *Studies in ethnomethodology* (1984[1967]). Ethnomethodology consists in studying the ways in which people display and negotiate their understandings of the social world and in doing so create social order. It terms these displays and negotiations ‘accounting practices’ and sees them as ‘carried on under the auspices of, and... made to happen as events in, the same ordinary affairs that in organising they describe’ (Garfinkel 1984[1967]:1). Conversation analysis develops this by specifically studying the orderliness of *conversation*, defined as ‘that organisation of talk which is *not* subject to functionally specific or context-specific restrictions or specialised practices or conventionalised arrangements, in the way in which courts of law in session *are*, or classrooms, or religious ceremonies, or news interviews, or talks at scholarly and scientific meetings.’ (Schegloff 1999c:407)

Although conversation analysis was first proposed by Harvey Sacks in a series of lectures given between 1964 and 1968 (1995[1992]), it has in its development largely been steered by his colleague and literary executor, Emmanuel A Schegloff, whose pronouncements can therefore be considered to represent its mainstream. For Schegloff, the key principle of conversation analysis appears to be that ‘talk-in-interaction has an internally grounded reality of its own that we can aspire to get at analytically’ (1997:171) but that this is only possible if one comes to one’s data with a ‘clean gaze’ (1999a&b). This realist ontology and positivist epistemology may explain a preoccupation among conversation analysts with the question of eliminating bias, leading to a ‘general CA dispreference for studying interactions in which oneself has taken part, as this may bias one’s understanding of what went on.’ (Ten Have 2002:529) Nonetheless, Michael Billig (1999b) and Stokoe and Smithson (2001) complain that conversation analysis relies on untheorised presuppositions and cultural knowledge on

the part of the analyst, and it should be noted that Schegloff's implication that it is possible to understand the world through induction *alone* is outside the scientific mainstream. Further complaints against both conversation analysis and those forms of study inspired by it often relate to its fetishisation of data, which Scollon and Scollon object 'has come to mean "that which can be recorded as sound and/or images and then... transcribed so that it can be placed typographically silent and supine on the printed page of the dissertation, book, or journal article"' (2007:620): the resulting transcriptions are of ever-increasing complexity and are pored over by analysts on an almost microscopic level; a touch sardonically, Billig (1996:19-22) thus refers to discursive psychologists as 'students of detail'.

Perhaps the most serious limitation of conversation analysis, however, is its principle that the terms on which an interaction can best be analysed are given by the interaction itself: as Schegloff puts it, 'because it is the orientations, meanings, interpretations, understandings, etc, of the *participants* in some sociocultural event on which the course of that event is predicated... it is *those* characterisations which are privileged in the *constitution of socio-interactional reality*, and therefore have a prima facie claim to being privileged in efforts to *understand it*.' (Schegloff 1997:166-167) Although analytic attention to the categories used by participants in an event (as opposed to the categories imposed by the analyst) is valuable (see Edwards 1998; Widdicombe 1998a&b), to state – as Schegloff does – that these categories are always the best ones to employ in analysing the event involves the manifestly unjustified assumptions that (a) participants invariably understand what it is that they participate in, and (b) they invariably display these understandings as they participate. These assumptions have generally been accepted by discursive psychologists, with the result that, as Billig notes

in an article on the unconscious, ‘analysts tend not to search for absences in conversation’ and ‘[w]hat is absent from the conversation tends to be absent from the analysis.’ (1997:146)

Although Billig sometimes argues in favour of critical discourse analysis (1999a&b), he is primarily associated with (and is the primary exponent of) an approach to social and cognitive psychology that he calls ‘rhetorical psychology’, the key texts for which have been his monographs, *Arguing and thinking* (1996[1987]) and *Ideology and opinions* (1991). Rhetorical psychology has affinities with discursive psychology, and is often bracketed with it. However, at its core, it is far closer to traditional psychology: it is primarily interested not in talk about mental process but in mental processes themselves, its radical manoeuvre being not the discursive psychological strategy of studying talk *about* mental processes, but the very different strategy of studying particular kinds of talk *as* mental processes. The basic rhetorical psychological position is that to engage in argumentation is to think and that to think is to engage in argumentation: a position deriving from the ideas of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969[1958]), who stated that ‘it is by analysing argumentation addressed to others that we can best understand self-deliberation, and not vice versa’, since ‘[a]greement with oneself is merely a particular case of agreement with others’ (41). Rhetorical psychology sees individual people’s ‘attitudes’ as stances taken in relation to public controversies (see Section 1.8), and examines ideology in terms of argumentative justifications. Billig has argued that not only thinking, but other psychological mechanisms besides, such as repression, might be learnt from processes occurring in conversational interaction (1997); and, in this, rhetorical psychology would seem to have strong affinities with the work of Lev

Vygotsky, who holds that '[e]very function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later on, on the individual level; first, *between* people (*interpsychological*), and then *inside* the child (*intrapsychological*)', such that '[t]he internalisation of socially rooted and historically developed activities is the distinguishing feature of human psychology, the basis of the qualitative leap from animal to human psychology.' (1962:57; see also 1978) Interestingly, although this conception of psychology was dismissed for many years by cognitive science, it has now significantly gained in currency due to support for Vygotsky's ideas in the results of '[r]ecent research on human infants, nonhuman primates, and human adults' (Spelke 2003:305).

Rhetorical psychology would thus seem a promising tradition for reception studies to engage with, since its principles would *suggest* that readers' and viewers' supposedly private mental responses to texts can be approached through the study of public uses of literature. However, it has been subjected to criticism from a discourse analytic and conversation analytic viewpoint by Robin Wooffitt, who objects that '[r]hetorical psychology restricts its focus to argumentation and ideology; and empirical research thus concerns a limited set of issues.' (2005:112) This is a fair comment, although I might venture to suggest that, for at least some purposes, even such apparently unimportant subjects as argument and ideology might be of at least some small interest to somebody: perhaps even of as much interest as the 'natural' organisation of conversations. A restricted focus is not necessarily a bad thing in itself, and indeed it is part of the scientific method. Although Wooffitt disapproves rhetorical psychology's practice of 'establish[ing] from the start what might be analytically interesting' (2005:167), this is

no more than the practice of having a set of research questions that lay out what it is that one is attempting to theorise – a practice that conversation analysis shares, though does not always admit to:

CA has been from its outset a formalistic programme of inquiry. Its fundamental concerns are with *structures of interaction* and... in pursuit of rigorous description of these, classical CA consciously ignored particularities of ‘content’ – such as speakers’ social identities, the location and avowed purpose of the interaction, and other contextual features – *except insofar as these were analytically relevant to the description of the structures under consideration.*

Hester and Francis 2001:216

Rhetorical psychology reminds us that ‘there are other stories to be told beyond stories about the micro-processes of discourse’ (Billig 1996:22): something that is easily forgotten when there is a heavy emphasis on ever-more-finely-detailed transcriptions. Although I will continue to make reference to arguments from within discursive psychology, rhetorical psychology is closer to the heart of this dissertation.

What is it, then, that I take from these traditions discussed above: ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, discursive psychology? Essentially, it is their aim of exploring the categories made relevant by the participants in the conversations being analysed rather than imposing analytic categories on that discourse: an aim which I would rather treat as a positive ambition than a negative prohibition. I mean by this that I shall not attempt to analyse discourse *solely* on its own terms, but shall nonetheless approach discourse in the hope of discovering (amongst other things) the categories and distinctions that

discourse participants use to organise their activities. These I shall attempt to relate to larger structures discussed on the level of theory, history, etc: an approach that might perhaps be accurately described as a form of critical discourse analysis.

The term ‘critical discourse analysis’ (often abbreviated to CDA) is used in several senses. In what was for many years its best known sense, it is roughly synonymous with so-called ‘critical linguistics’, and refers to the politically engaged analysis of written or spoken text using the frameworks of systemic-functional linguistics (as can be seen in several studies published in Caldas-Coulthard and Coulthard [1996]). In the sense associated with the journal *Discourse and Society*, however, it refers to a school of speech (and sometimes text) analysis that resembles conversation analysis but rejects the idea that all the resources necessary for the analysis of a conversation are to be found within that conversation: in their spat over the legitimacy of this approach to spoken data, both Billig (1999a&b) and Schegloff (1999a&b) take this to be the primary distinction between critical discourse analysis and conversation analysis. Both of these types of critical discourse analysis are politically engaged, but the first seems to imagine itself more as a means for political intervention than as a means for finding out about the world, for which reason I shall be rejecting it here: its utopian political programme (‘to bring a system of excessive inequalities of power into crisis by uncovering its workings and its effects through the analysis of potent cultural objects – texts – and thereby to help in achieving a more equitable social order’ [Kress 1996:15]) is in many respects laudable but does not really coincide with my current project, and neither does its obsession with systemic-functional linguistics. A methodology for critical discourse analysis of the second type is proposed in a survey article by Allan Luke (2002), who

argues that the basic critical discourse analytic procedure is the simultaneous analysis of discourse and of social context – a procedure that, I might observe, sets critical discourse analysis clearly apart from ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, and discursive psychology. As Luke puts it,

CDA involves a principled shunting back and forth between analyses of the text and the social, between cultural sign and institutional formation, between semiotic/discourse analysis and the analysis of local institutional sites, between a normative reading of texts and a normative reading of the social world.

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Critical discourse analysis of this type achieves the linkage of the specific sample of discourse under analysis to the social by means of something like Foucault's concept of a discourse (discussed above): discourses circulating in society are presumed to be manifest in individual interactions. This approach discredits it in the eyes of positivistically-minded conversation analysts, who complain of 'a clear lack of consistency as to what counts as evidence for the presence of [a] discourse' and ask 'what value is the concept of discourses as an analytic tool if there is no clear method by which to establish the presence of any particular discourse in any specific sequence of talk-in-interaction?' (Wooffitt 2005:183) As can see, however, critical discourse analysis of this type is *not* a technique for the analysis of talk-in-interaction, but an attempt to simultaneously approach large- and small-scale social phenomena in context of each other: so many factors are involved that the quest for a 'clear method' would probably be futile, with each case needing to be argued on its own merits. This is acknowledged in the arguments of Ruth Wodak ('CDA... should... *justify theoretically* why certain

interpretations of events *seem more valid* than others' [2001:65, emphasis added]) and Norman Fairclough:

the identification of configurations of genres and discourses in a text is obviously an interpretative exercise which depends upon the analyst's experience of and sensitivity to relevant orders of discourse, as well as the analyst's interpretative and strategic biases. There are problems in justifying such analysis which are not made easier by the slipperiness of constructs such as genre and discourse, the difficulty sometimes of keeping them apart, and the need to assume a relatively well-defined repertoire of discourses and genres in order to use the constructs in analysis.

Fairclough 1995:212

Fairclough concludes that the analysis must be properly contextualised through long-term 'social and ethnographic research' (ibid.). An alternative approach would be to study both contemporary and historical discourse, but, though this would seem to be the best way for critical discourse analysis to make use of the heritage of Foucault, who writes history in order to understand the development of topics that are important today (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982), the only prominent critical discourse analyst to take a sustained interest in history is Ruth Wodak. Wodak's 'discourse-historical' approach focuses closely on argumentation, and has much in common with what I shall be attempting in this dissertation, Chapter 4 in particular. For example, in her study of a document produced by the right-wing populist Austrian Freedom Party, Wodak examines 'five types of discursive strategies, which are all involved in... positive self- and negative-other presentation' (2000:73):

- 1) How are persons named and referred to linguistically?
- 2) What traits, characteristics, qualities, and features are attributed to them?
- 3) By means of what arguments and argumentation schemes do specific persons or social groups try to justify and legitimise the exclusion, discrimination, suppression, and exploitation of others?
- 4) From what perspective or point of view are these labels, attributions, and arguments expressed?
- 5) Are the respective utterances articulated overtly? Are they intensified or are they mitigated?

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For all that my interest here is in discursive realisations of reading, rather than of discrimination, and that I have tended to follow arguments wherever they may lead, rather than to set out and then follow a systematic list of analytic questions such as the above, the approach I have taken to discourse is very closely related to Wodak's. At one stage or another in the following three chapters, I have asked all the above questions of my data, with the partial exception of the third, since I have examined the use of 'arguments and argumentation schemes... to justify and legitimise' reading practices, rather than practices of 'discrimination, suppression, and exploitation'. Moreover, I have followed Wodak's advice in attempting to avoid bias by 'work[ing] with different approaches, multimethodologically and on the basis of a variety of empirical data as well as background information' (65). There might therefore be some justification for applying the terms 'critical discourse analysis' and 'discourse-historical approach' to at least some parts of this dissertation.

1.5 Discursive approaches to reader and reception study

From a discourse-analytic perspective, the idea is not to treat the interviewees' talk as a screen through which to look inside their head [sic]. Instead, the idea is to start by studying the interview text – or any texts or transcriptions of conversations for that matter – in its own right. What is going on in the interview text and in the interaction situation? How do the participants (the interviewer and the interviewee) co-construct and negotiate their roles, definitions of the situation, or different objects of talk? What frames, discourses, or 'interpretive repertoires'... are invoked, and what functions do they serve?

Alasuutari 1999:15

Arguably the first 'discursive' approach to reception study (although it has never been claimed as such) was taken by Lyons and Taksa in *Australian readers remember* (1992), a work of oral history that aimed to reconstruct the early twentieth century reading habits of Australians born in 1917 or earlier. They state their principles as follows:

All autobiography, whether written or oral, is a form of fiction. When informants speak to the historian, they do not give us a transparent view of lived experience, but one which is censored and reconstructed by memory.... Past reality is reworked for a particular purpose: to justify oneself, to make a special claim on the interest and sympathy of the interviewer, or to give meaning and coherence to one's experience. Writing or speaking an autobiography is part of a process of discovering, or of manufacturing, a personal identity.

Lyons and Taksa 1992:13-14

Thus, what Lyons and Taksa saw their interviews as providing was ‘not something concrete and factual, but the perceptions and attitudes of the interviewees.’ (15) One problem with ‘many interview and questionnaire studies’, as the discursive psychologist Jonathan Potter notes, is that they ‘put people in the position of disinterested experts on their own and others’ practices, thoughts, and so on, encouraging them to provide normatively appropriate descriptions’ (2002:540). However, this could be argued to be an advantage if one wants to learn what *constitutes* a normatively appropriate description in the interviewees’ estimation, and this is precisely the approach taken by Lyons and Taksa. Theirs is a fascinating approach that could do much to improve other testimony-based histories of reading (in particular Rose 2002[2001]; see Chapter 4 of this dissertation). However, the earliest such work to lay claim to a discourse analytic heritage was Joke Hermes’s *Reading women’s magazines* (1995). An admirer of Ien Ang and Janice Radway’s work, Hermes set out to discover, through interviews, the meanings that women’s magazines had for their male and female readers in her native Holland, using a small sample of British readers for comparison. To her initial frustration, she found that her interviewees had very little to say about those magazines, eventually leading her to realise that she had – in common with much of media and cultural studies – been labouring under the misapprehensions of a ‘fallacy of meaningfulness’. This is the assumption that anyone using a text must be making meaning from it, and has been discussed in Subsection 1.3.1. It is reflected, Hermes argues, in studies that focus ‘on isolated bodies of text’ (such as *Dallas* in Ang’s study) ‘or on interviews with readers who, on average, are more knowledgeable than other viewers or readers’ (such as Radway’s romance readers), where it has the ‘unintended consequence... that popular culture is given the status of high culture.’ (14) Hermes proposes that women’s magazines are consumed in the interstices of daily routines, and

in a distracted, discontinuous manner, their textual content seldom coming to have much significance for their readers; moreover, she suggests that a study of listening or viewing that followed her research procedures would probably ‘find that much of the radio and television text never acquires substantial meaning’ either (145). These are all points with which I would concur: in this study I focus on articulate readers and viewers not because I take their practices of public commentary to reveal private sense-making practices shared by a silent majority of inarticulate readers and viewers, but because I am interested in practices of public commentary.

Hermes proposes a form of audience study that she calls ‘repertoire analysis’, which, taking its lead from Potter and Wetherell’s (1987) concept of the *interpretive repertoire*, ‘consists of going back and forth through the [interview] text, summarising transcripts according to different criteria, for as long as it takes to organise the bits and pieces in meaningful structures. One looks for statements or manners of speech that recur in different interviews.’ (1995:27) These repertoires ‘are not available at the level of everyday talk; they are the researcher’s reconstruction of the cultural resources that everyday speakers may use (dependent upon their cultural capital and, thus, the range of repertoires they are familiar with)’ (145). There is a problem, however, in that while she sometimes takes these repertoires to reveal something about reality – for example, she takes the ‘easily put down’ repertoire to reflect the actual usage of women’s magazines in day-to-day life (ie. to suggest that men and women read them to provide ‘instant, short reads’ [53] when they have no time for anything else) – at other times, she takes them to be purely rhetorical – for example, she takes the ‘practical knowledge’ repertoire to be a way of talking about women’s magazines developed for use in social interaction with those who are scornful of such magazines (ie. as ‘a way to legitimate spending money on them’ [37]). Of these two approaches to repertoires, only the latter is

consistent with Potter and Wetherell's (1987) methodology. Thus, Hermes takes both a realist *and* a discursive approach to her data: although this dissertation broadly concludes that a unrelievedly discursive approach may in the long term be neither possible nor desirable, I find Hermes's assumption that it is possible to divide repertoires (or any other discursive phenomena) into *those which are to be interpreted as transparent* and *those which are to be interpreted as rhetorical* to be unwarranted.

This assumption is avoided in Bethan Benwell's (2005) study of readers of men's magazines. Much in the vein of Radway, Benwell 'proposes a triangulated method whereby the discourses and categories identified in talk can be intertextually linked (and indeed are sometimes intertextually indexed within the talk itself) to other communicative contexts in the circuit of culture, such as the magazine text, media debates, editorial identities and everyday talk.' (147) Drawing on the methodology of discursive psychology (rather than simply the concept of repertoires), Benwell analyses the speech of her readers far more closely than Radway or Hermes, and is therefore able to draw links between talk and text on the level of register and vocabulary and thereby 'recreate the rich ethnographic context in which the speech event or text is embedded, by tracing the discourse through a variety of relevant contexts or instantiations' (2005:158-9). However, like David Morley's (1999a[1980]) work on 'Nationwide', this work was handicapped by the need to elicit discourse in artificial situations: as Benwell recognises, the interview situation obliged readers to comment in depth on parts of the magazines that they might not have chosen to read otherwise. Although this may help us to identify the repertoires that these readers are able to draw on in verbally making sense of texts, a degree of inference is necessary to relate this to their actual reading practices outside of the experimental setting.

This problem can be avoided if we directly study reading practices that involve talk, provided that we do not then take those practices to stand in for the whole range of reading practices in which our research subjects engage. Eriksson and Aronsson's work on schoolchildren's discussions of short stories takes this tack in 'focus[ing] on institutional book talk practices, ie. on conversations, not on the participants or on reader responses *per se.*' (2004:512; see also Eriksson 2002) These discussions are institutional practices, and cannot be taken to represent the participants' private mental responses to texts, but that is not the point: they (like the institutions in which they take place) are a part of 'real life' for the participants. Eriksson and Aronsson's insight is that, '[w]ithin a theoretical framework of discursive psychology, booktalk (like other conversations) is seen as a type of social action' (2005:723) – it is not something different, for example a report of a private mental 'decoding'. The important lesson to learn is that if reading does not appear as a social interaction, then it does not appear, as is indeed the case with most of the (decidedly unliterary) reading that goes on in the world. In these cases, to make a reader speak about his or her 'interpretations' of the matter being read will be to place him or her in a social relationship with the researcher and the other participants, in which he or she becomes, for interpretations he or she might not otherwise have produced, publicly accountable in ways that would not otherwise have been the case (see below on the particular instance of this phenomenon which is the experimental situation). This will activate the sorts of shifts, accommodations, and (in some cases) instances of learning and discovery seen in the data analysed in the following chapters: processes that would never ordinarily occur in (for example) the consumption of glossy magazines and the advertisements that fill them. With regard to the study of the reading of such texts – customarily without discussion, without even concentration – such occurrences can only be considered an interfering distortion (which is how Hobbs et al

[2006] quite correctly treat them in their study of young girls' interpretations of weight loss advertising), but, with regard to the study of the reading of literature – on which discourse is incessant (while not ubiquitous) – they must constitute one of the central objects of enquiry.

The status of such discourse *qua* discourse – and not as the expression of the mysterious essence of 'real' reception, unspoken reception, reception in general – should not be taken for a stumbling block. Greg Myers (2008), for example, argues that reading groups are important *both* as an example of literary reception *and* as a common form of social activity that deserves to be studied in its own right – which is perhaps to say that they can be regarded as worth studying *both* because they are a form of social activity *and* because they are one of the many forms of social activity through which literary works are audibly received.⁴⁴ Psychological experiments on literary reading, with their 'think aloud' protocols, their rating tasks, their tests of recall, etc, can be regarded in much the same way (for all that they are rather less common than reading group meetings), although the attempts by some theorists (see Footnote 28) to abstract universal mental *processes* from the highly institutional *practices* that, in setting up such experiments, they engineer, should (by the same token) be treated with a degree of caution: I would rather treat such practices, like those engaged in by Morley (1999a[1980]) and Benwell's (2005) subjects, as illustrative of the public acts of which particular groups or

⁴⁴ Drawing on conversation analysis, Myers's approach is related to that adopted here, and – had this dissertation not been submitted for examination some months before Myers's presentation – the following chapters would have benefited from sustained consideration of it. Myers applies his methodology not to reading groups but to broadcast literary punditry – yet another culturally important form of discourse on literature.

individuals are capable when pressed. This can in itself be put to good use, as in the following procedure:

Each [subject] received a booklet consisting of an instruction sheet and six randomly-ordered short stories. Three of the stories consisted of materials for the current experiment... while three of the stories were materials from a different, but related experiment. The three stories chosen for the current experiment were reprinted verbatim from the collections in which they appeared with the exception that information which identified the author or the title of the text was omitted.

Subjects were tested in groups. At the beginning of each session, subjects were given the test booklets and asked to read the instructions on the first page of the booklet....

At the end of each story, subjects were asked to answer 15 questions that measured their responses to the text. Some of these questions required short answers, while others asked students to complete 7-point rating scales.

Dorfman 1996:459

This experiment obliges its subjects to engage in a reading practice that is highly typical of the reading practices undergone in experiments but eccentric on at least three counts when considered in relation to many reading practices elsewhere: subjects read a *bibliographically idiosyncratic* text and respond to it *simultaneously but without interacting with one another by filling out a questionnaire*. The non-experimental reading practices most similar to this are those taking place in formal examinations. Such practices will not have been entirely alien to these particular

subjects (students at a British university), but are also noticeably different from the reading practice produced in the experiment, being organised around tests in which ‘success’ and ‘failure’ will have consequences for the individual (not the case here) and in which one is not typically *paid* to take part (as these subjects were). But this is not a problem for the particular study in question, as its point was simply to find out whether subjects from two different groups (undergraduate students of computer science and postgraduate students of English literature) would respond differently to an identical task (as indeed they did), and in this way to test hypotheses following from (a version of) the ‘interpretive communities’ theory (originating in Fish 1980).⁴⁵ Rather more problematic are attempts to discover, through experiment, the *nature* of literary reading (see Miall 2006:26-32 and *passim*), since these rely upon the assumption that this nature exists independently of the diverse literary reading practices to be found in the world, such that it can reliably be abstracted from subjects’ engagement in the highly specific reading practices local to each experiment – as, for example, if we were to assume that the questionnaire responses of the subjects in the experiment above were determined by specific mental processes that will also determine their engagement in all other literary reading practices.

⁴⁵ Dorfman (1996:457): ‘(1) that there are identifiable communities of readers, (2) that readers who belong to the same interpretive community will demonstrate similar patterns of response in terms of comprehension, liking, and story appreciation judgements when asked to read and respond to the same text, and (3) that readers who belong to different interpretive communities will demonstrate different patterns of response in terms of comprehension, liking, and story appreciation judgements when asked to read and respond to the same text.’ These hypotheses are supported by Dorfman’s findings; in Section 1.3.3, I place this result in a Bourdieusian frame.

A different approach is taken by Jackey Stacey (1994a) in her discussion of the 1536 letters sent to *Picturegoer* magazine in 1940: a discussion which is not identified as discursive but approaches its data in a similar manner. Stacey finds that these letters appear to follow an agenda set by the articles published in the magazine, and concludes that they cannot be separated out from the contents of the magazine to which they are addressed and treated as the ‘pure’ expression of a ‘raw’ response to cinematic text (1994a:54-56). However, she does not attribute this to the ‘mediation’ or ‘distortion’ of response by the constraints of letter-writing, since this would suggest ‘that there is pure cinematic experience beyond the limitations of representation.’ (56) This would appear to amount to the position that experiences are already structured by discourse before they come to be represented in discourse – indeed, at (or perhaps before) the very moment of their being experienced (cf. Bamberg 2006:143). Thus, one could describe the experience of those who wrote letters to *Picturegoer* in 1940 as ‘mediated through’ the discourses common to their letters and the magazine articles, meaning not that the experience was misrepresented, but that, *even while sitting in the cinema*, these people subjectively experienced the films and their relationship to them through the mediation of these (and other) discourses. And whether or not this theoretical fix is accepted, discourse on reading could still be comfortably counted among the ‘underlying structures of reception’ which can be assumed to have generated ‘the myriad [private] readings of individual texts’ (Allen 1990:353) now lost to view.

This is an idea that I have tentatively revisited throughout my research, which has drawn both on discursive and on rhetorical psychology. In my first published work, I used Billig (1996[1987]) and Edwards’s (1997) comments on schema theory to argue that ‘in stylistics, the script [ie. schema] has passed from being a scientific theory about the brain into being a highly formalised variant of a type of argument familiar from ordinary

conversation' (Allington 2005:3); my analysis was of two cognitive stylistic readings, but I argued that there were continuities between stylistic (not to mention other kinds of literary critical) readings and day-to-day talk on literary works: 'a stranger on the train sees you with a book and asks you what you think of it, a friend wonders what you would recommend for holiday reading' (4). The following year, I published a longer analysis of four studies in Conrad criticism, in which I argued that the critics in question 'produc[e] readings principally constituted by their convergences with and divergences from previous readings' (Allington 2006:141): each of these readings comprises a set of rational engagements with other readings, engagements that I showed to function much like the 'anti-logoi' described by Billig (1985[1996]) or the types of argument catalogued by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969). In my conclusion to that paper, however, I was cautious enough to admit that these findings could not be generalised beyond the world of literary studies until further work was done. My subsequent publication, 'How come they don't see it?' (2007a; see Chapter 3 for an updated version) was in many ways designed to achieve this goal, focusing as it did on online interpretative argument, and I again found evidence of the importance of rational refutation, with textual details becoming relevant according to the evidential needs of the unfolding argument; there, I argued that, for *certain kinds* of reader (who may be found both inside and outside of the academy), 'textual consumption is a long-term relationship composed of repeated readings or viewings framed by revisited discussions – or, equally, of revisited discussions framed by repeated readings or viewings.' (59)

What is at stake in all this is the question of the relevance of the academic sub-field to which I have endeavoured to contribute, since it is endlessly vulnerable to the accusation that it focuses on reading practices that are – because verbalised – in some respect atypical. This question is perhaps resolved in 'Reading the reading experience' (under

review), a chapter that I wrote with Bethan Benwell and which makes the following, overtly ethnomethodological, argument:

Although the analysis of ‘booktalk’ as talk is the renunciation of the indirect study of silent reading, it may be considered the direct study of the *verbal stage* of an individual or group’s encounter with, or reading of, a text. One obvious example of this ‘verbal stage’ of reading occurs in book club or reading group sessions, where a text’s meaning and the experience of reading it are publicly articulated, negotiated and made accountable. This public and social form of reading not only alternates with the private and solitary form: it represents it, too.

Similarly, the sorts of documents that historians of reading have often regarded as evidence can be studied not for what they seem to tell us about instances of reading that took place prior to their own creation as documents, but as texts whose production was integrated into lengthy careers of reading, and which may not merely mark, but *constitute*, key moments in those careers. Such verbalisations are not, then, the hoofprints and broken twigs from which a tracker may reconstruct the elusive private reader’s vanished progress (for those, look to library records, sales receipts, and the like), but the scent marks by which a reader organises his or her public/private life of the mind relative to that of other readers.

unpaginated

On such a view, private reading is not deducible from talk about reading, but neither is it separable from it: it is through talk that (certain kinds of) private reading are organised, and if we cannot study the private acts of reading, we can at least study the public acts of speaking that organise them. Although I am not entirely persuaded by our argument, I

am nonetheless encouraged by its possible connection to Eric Livingston's view of written or spoken exegesis 'hover[ing] around our reading as its organisational theme' (1995:23). As with 'How come they don't see it?', however, the analysis contained in that chapter to some extent undercuts this by viewing representations of reading experiences and of emotional responses exclusively as rhetorical warrants for arguments made in the here-and-now.

Perhaps the best answer to the objection that '[r]eading is essentially a silent, private activity' (Alderson and Short 1989:74) is simply to observe that this is only necessarily true of *silent, private reading* – and that, far from being the norm from which all other forms of reading depart, silent reading *develops out of* reading aloud – not only for the individual learner, but also (Svenbro 1999[1995]) in human history.

1.6 The world outside discourse and the problem of metatheoretical regress

And this raises a question. If discourse is always to be regarded as discourse and as discourse alone – if everything everybody ever says is a situated performance, an accounting practice, an attempt to achieve immediate pragmatic goals in the immediate pragmatic context – if a report of what happened before should always be understood purely by reference to the here-and-now of its making – then what are we to make of the discourse that constitutes discourse analysis? This problem is always present in discourse analysis, but discourse analysis of *reception data* brings it uncomfortably to the fore: a reader purports to analyse a text of a literary work, but in my analysis of the text that is the transcript of his or her utterance, I show that what seemed to be the analysis of a work was in fact a series of rhetorical strategies by which the putative

analyst presented him- or herself in a particular light: but what, then, of *my* analysis? Is it just more of the same? It would be hard to argue otherwise – and indeed, discourse analysts generally do not.

Let's look at what they do instead. Potter and Wetherell write that '[d]iscourse analysis aims to explicate the constructive activity involved in the creation of a "world out there"' (1987:181); having acknowledged that this creates a problem, they then propose a non-solution.⁴⁶

if the upshot of research of this kind is to question the simple realist model of the operation of discourse and suggest that 'realism' is, at least partly, a rhetorical effect constructed through the careful choice of particular linguistic forms, then what are we to make of the discourse in which this claim is itself couched? How should we deal with the fact that our accounts of how people's language use is constructed are themselves constructions?

...Most of the time... the most practical way of dealing with this issue is simply

⁴⁶ Potter and Wetherell deserve credit for raising the problem, however, since it is often more swiftly brushed under the academic carpet: for example, Stokoe states that 'EM/CA [ie. ethnomethodology / conversation analysis] does not take up a particular ontological position with regards to the nature of "reality". Instead, it "respecifies"... issues of what is real, authentic, factual, and true... as matters for "members" [ie. participants in interactions] themselves to deal with' (2005:124). I would suggest that this may be a problem, because (a) it is not strictly true (given that, as we have seen in Section 1.4, the most influential living conversation analyst adopts a realist ontology), and (b) it has not been demonstrated that the deferral of ontological questions is indefinitely sustainable. As will become clear, my point is not to criticise this 'respecification' *per se*, but to question whether ontology can be treated *solely* in this 'respecified' manner.

to get on with it, and not to get either paralysed by or caught up in the infinite regresses possible.

Potter and Wetherell 1987:182

Potter and Wetherell's 'practical way of dealing with this issue' is, in other words, to avoid dealing with it. The 'infinite regresses' to which they allude are not snares in which one can simply choose not to get 'caught up': they are serious objections to any theory which sees discourse as a closed system of representations. When people speak about the world, they construct discursive representations – 'St Paul's Cathedral is in the City of London' no less than 'St Paul's Cathedral is on Montmartre' – and we can, without stepping outside of discourse, study the discursive strategies by which certain representations come to be accepted as *reality* – eg. the appeal to authoritative representations such as official maps. This means that 'reality' is itself a discursive representation, hence the scare quotes with which Potter and Wetherell frame the words 'world out there'. When we carry out discourse analysis of the kind that Potter and Wetherell promote (ie. discursive psychology), we therefore make no judgements as to what is 'true' or 'false' in what our research subjects say, treating everything they assert about the world as a sort of fiction that aims at a 'rhetorical effect' of realism, and studying the means by which this effect is created. The problem is that our analyses themselves will trade upon and construct discursive representations, and appear to depend for their interest on that same 'rhetorical effect', since nobody would bother to read a study of conversation that claimed not to have anything to say about real conversation, but only to play around with some representations. Interpreted in this

way, discursive psychology – and all other forms of scientific investigation – are no more than rhetorical exercises.

Fortunately, however, Potter and Wetherell have made a mistake: the constructing of representations and rhetorical effects is not the *only* thing that we can do through the issuing of utterances; one of the other things that we are also able to do is to *refer*. As John Searle (1979:xi) writes, reference has, ‘since Frege... been regarded as the central problem in the philosophy of language’; he goes on to explain that by reference, he ‘mean[s] not predication, or truth, or extension but *reference*, the relation between such expressions as definite descriptions and proper names on the one hand, and the things they are used to refer to on the other.’ If I state that St Paul’s Cathedral is on Montmartre, I am not merely constructing a representation but asserting the truth of a proposition that happens to be false; it is false by virtue of the facts that ‘St Paul’s Cathedral’ and ‘Montmartre’ are not simply representations, but proper nouns, and that, in using these proper nouns, I refer. I cannot state what I refer *to* without referring *again*, but this simply reflects the fact that reference cannot be reduced to anything else. When we analyse discourse, it is indeed important to ‘explicate the constructive activity involved in the creation of a “world out there” (and, for that matter, ‘in here’): but we should not blind ourselves to the fact that, in constructing ‘a world out there’, our research subjects also refer to *the world*. If we do not do this, then we will destabilise our own attempts to refer to our research subjects’ constructions.

I would like now to turn to a reception researcher’s engagement with the same problem. Matt Hills is not a discourse analyst, but his ‘performative’ approach to reception (on which I shall be drawing heavily in Chapters 3 and 4) creates the same difficulty that

Potter and Wetherell face, and leaves him equally unable to do anything much about it. Instead, he gets it out of the way in what looks suspiciously like a token admission to be promptly forgotten (note the page reference):

my work here cannot escape its own emphasis on performativity, and must therefore be seen as an instance of that which it seeks to analyse, rather than as a constative reflection on performative consumption and analyses of horror occurring elsewhere.

2005:xiii

Hills is nothing if not consistent, at least in the neutral space of his preface. He analyses horror fans' statements about their fandom as performative rather than constative – as, that is, performances of (fan) identity, nothing more, nothing less – and then admits that his own statements about horror fans' statements should, by the same token, be understood purely as performative of (academic) identity. But if Hills's assertions about the performative utterances of fans 'must' themselves be taken for performative 'rather than' constative utterances, then we cannot suppose ourselves to learn anything from them about their seeming referent, ie. the performative utterances of fans: we can, of course, analyse them as further examples of performative utterances, but our analytic statements will in turn be performative 'rather than' constative. The problem can be traced back to the works of Austin (1962) – but so (apparently unbeknownst to Hills) can its solution: as we shall see in Chapter 2, Austin found the idea that utterances are *either* constative *or* performative to be untenable, rejecting this dichotomy in favour of the idea that utterances are used to perform *both* locutionary *and* illocutionary (not to

mention several other kinds of) acts *at one and the same time*. The locutionary and illocutionary acts performed in issuing an utterance may even be thought of as the constative and performative *aspects* of the same speech act. Hills's notion of performativity derives more from Judith Butler's (1990) reading of Austin than from Austin himself, but the same point applies: his book may be a performance of academic identity, but that does not mean it cannot *also* be seen as a 'constative reflection on performative consumption and analyses... occurring elsewhere'. This does not mean that we have to accept it as the revealed truth about horror fans, but it *does* mean that we can judge it on its reasonableness and explanatory power. It is, in other words, both illocutionary and locutionary, both performative and constative. Indeed, I would insist that it performs academic identity precisely *by* engaging in constative reflection, and that it would be difficult to perform academic identity without doing this (except in the sense that stalking around Cambridge in a black gown and scowling at tourists is a performance of academic identity). To take a more immediate example, in unloading three copies of what you are now reading into the university's bureaucratic mechanisms, I will have carried out the illocutionary act of submitting a PhD thesis: but this act will in itself have committed me (and committed me in an unusually strong way) to the reasonableness and explanatory power (not to mention originality) of this work's propositional content (the 'thesis' itself). That Hills's work and mine can be seen as performative should not prevent it from being seen as constative, because (as Austin showed) there is no sustainable distinction to be made between 'performative' and 'constative' utterances. Hills's 'rather than' is an error.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ As should be apparent from the use I make of their work elsewhere in this dissertation, I am a

One last point, echoing my response to Potter and Wetherell. If an academic treatise analysing the performative aspects of utterances can itself be seen both as performative and as constative, then perhaps the utterances it refers to should be seen in the same way. This means that analyses of the kind that Hills carries out are incomplete (not that any analysis of qualitative data can ever be complete). An awareness of this incompleteness permeates this dissertation, particularly in Chapter 4, where I have tried to acknowledge that much of the data that I analyse can itself be regarded as something not entirely dissimilar to my own analysis. In a way, the most important point is simply to remember the two historical senses of the word ‘rhetoric’ when we are analysing the rhetorical character of our research subjects’ utterances: as Michael Billig (1996[1987]) reminds us, in the ancient world, ‘rhetoric’ meant not only (sophistic) employment of arbitrarily impressive turns of phrase (Potter and Wetherell’s ‘careful choice of particular linguistic forms’) but also (philosophical) engagement in dialogic reasoning.

1.7 The data cited in this study

There are three basic types of original data studied here: (1) conventionally published texts; (2) texts ‘published’ on (what was at the time) an open-access website discussion forum; and (3) verbal interactions whose participants had agreed to my recording them for research purposes. The first of these sources has long been used in reception research, and even employed as a *substitute* for ethnographic research – as in the work of Bridget Fowler (2000), who carried out her reception study using materials drawn from

great admirer of Potter, Wetherell, and Hills. The tone I take in this section reflects not my overall assessment of their work, but the importance I attach to this particular issue, and to its being engaged with directly, rather than waved away.

Appignanesi and Maitland's (1989) edited collection of *Satanic Verses* punditry because 'older men and women from the Muslim community were loath to discuss their detailed response to the book with a non-Muslim outsider' (Fowler 2000:48). To regard newspaper articles, etc, as in some sense equivalent to private responses is, from a discursive point of view (if not from Fowler's sociological point of view, grounded as it is in a different research tradition), entirely unacceptable: talk is to be analysed as talk, and journalism as journalism. The two do not have to be considered to operate in entirely different worlds, however, as Martin Barker makes plain when he argues that '[r]eviews need to be considered for their place in the flow of talk around a film' (2004: no pagination).

With online data, one of the greatest problems is the ease of acquisition, and the over-enthusiasm this may lead to: a few hours of Googling will yield great volumes of what would seem to be the sort of data that reception researchers of the past could only dream of. While the more careful studies (eg. Baym 1993, Clerc 1996, Pearson 1997) avoid this, there is therefore a danger of 'supposing that the Internet can unproblematically unveil those cultural processes and mechanisms which cultural studies has been positing for the past two decades' (Hills 2002:175), when in fact it has provided the possibility for *new* cultural processes: internet-mediated cultural consumption is not simply cultural consumption made conveniently visible to the researcher. This 'transparency fallacy' is characteristic of much academic writing on fans, which often (and arbitrarily) takes fan behaviour to be paradigmatic of reception beyond the fan community, as when Janet Staiger argues that '[f]ans display interpretations and effects (activities) in their most observable form' and that '[w]hile the phenomenon of fandom exceeds the typical, likely it points toward the more silent spectator' (2005:114). By contrast, the current study

treats internet fan activities as specific uses of texts, and makes no assumption that these uses reflect 'silent' mental or emotional processes engaged in by non-fans.

A further problem raised by the use of online data is that of informed consent, since it may be very difficult to track down the individuals responsible for material one wishes to quote (as in a mailing list to which somebody posts and then unsubscribes) and it is (in any case) practically impossible to discover whether a pseudonymous internet user is legally capable of giving consent. Lynn Cherny argues that 'develop[ing] a presence and show[ing] some commitment to the community' makes it easier for a researcher to gain informed consent, but warns that 'commitment to the community may leave one's research hostage to the community's approval' (1999:303): a drawback that my own experience confirms. For this reason, I chose to study only postings made pseudonymously on openaccess fora, and to anonymise them for quotation. Although they may be considered something of a grey area, I would insist that postings made to a message board that appears on Internet search engines and does not require the reader to log in should be regarded from an ethical point of view as analogous to letters published in magazines or newspapers, being accessible to anyone who can access the World Wide Web. Furthermore, it is well known among fans that statements they make in contexts such as this are liable to being quoted without their permission and with no concessions to anonymity on various blogs, including the notorious 'Fandom Wank' (www.fandomwank.com). It would, then, be extremely condescending to suppose those using this forum to believe it to be somehow 'private', for all that Cherny (1999:309) insists that internet users may not fully understand the non-privacy of the fora they use. My approach can be compared to the following, which was taken by an ethnographer who belonged to the broad online community she was engaged in researching (ie.

players of ‘first person shooter’ games). I have in fact been far more cautious in that I have anonymised quotations which she would not have, and refrained from quoting statements which her principles would have permitted her to quote once anonymised:

The key criterion I used was whether or not the statement was intended for publication.

Using this approach, I considered any material appearing on webpages (site content, forum postings) to be publicly available, and had no hesitation in reproducing statements and authors’ (online) names. Material not meant for public consumption required more ethical consideration, and its use depended on gaining permission from the author, concealing their identity, or avoiding the use of direct quotes requiring attribution.

Morris 2004:37-38

Lastly, the spoken data used in this dissertation might be thought to be the most authentic and least mediated example of reception, but this is an illusion: it was recorded in the relatively formal environment of the higher education classroom and the relatively informal but still conventionalised environment of a reading group (see Tyler 2007); moreover, the speakers knew that they were being recorded and understood (in broad terms) the reasons why. Whether or not this is a problem is another matter. O’Rourke and Pitt note that though discourse analysts worry about ‘a supposed “corrupting” of the data’ in interview sessions, in fact, ‘*all* forms of interaction... are “incurably contaminated” by the fact of being the subject of research, by media constructions, or by other public portrayals of similar interactions.’ (2007:22, emphasis added) Similarly, Bethan Benwell (2005:164) argues that ‘*all* talk is to some degree mediated by the constraints of its context; and all talk, whether before an academic interviewer in a

formal situation or before one's peers in an informal situation, is likely to involve forms of accounting and self-presentation'. Rather than waste time hunting out mythical unmediated data, I have simply chosen to accept that all data, and indeed all textual usage, is mediated, and to study these data and these textual usages as examples of mediation. Reading group discussion, seminar interaction, newspaper journalism, and asynchronous chat are not assumed to mediate the use of literary text *in the same way*, however, and my analyses shall attempt to come to terms (so far as is possible within their limits) with the specificity of each mediating medium or genre.

1.8 Introduction to the 'primary texts'⁴⁸

Whether the topic is political, moral, religious, commercial, or whatever, an attitude refers to a stance on a matter of public debate and disagreement. In other words, an attitude represents an evaluation of a controversial issue, or sometimes a controversial individual, such as a president or a queen.

Billig 1996[1985]:207

A response to a work, like an attitude, always entails a stance on a matter of public disagreement, though the precise matter involved may be difficult to identify.⁴⁹ Where it is the work *itself* that is the object of controversy, this becomes especially apparent. For reasons that I shall now discuss, Salman Rushdie's bestselling novel, *The Satanic Verses*

⁴⁸ The scare quotes are necessary not because the meaning of the term is in doubt, but because its usual significance does not apply here: my study of the works in question does not proceed through analysis of their texts. Indeed, for the purposes of this dissertation, it is data pertaining to the works' reception which is truly primary and my own (occasional) comments on or quotations from their texts that are secondary.

⁴⁹ Except in academia, where public debates are explicitly invoked and differences of opinion carefully cross-referenced (see Mailloux 1989 and Allington 2006).

(see Chapters 2 and 4) and Peter Jackson's blockbuster film trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings* (see Chapter 3), are excellent examples of such works. They may have nothing in common in terms of medium, ideology, and intellectual ambitions, but they have each been highly controversial, with this controversy played out in ways that should be of great interest to scholars of reception, of reading, of audiences, etc. I will now treat them one by one.

The Satanic Verses was the fourth novel by Salman Rushdie, who was already a critically acclaimed writer with a high public profile as one of Britain's leading left-wing intellectuals: *Midnight's Children*, his second novel, published in 1981, had won Britain's most prestigious literary prize, the Booker, and *Shame*, his third, published in 1983, had been shortlisted. Like its predecessor, *The Satanic Verses* was also shortlisted for the Booker Prize; unlike it, it was widely perceived to be offensive to Muslims, and, in the months following its British release on 26 September 1988, it was banned by numerous Muslim and non-Muslim states, starting with India on 5 October.⁵⁰ British Muslim protests took time to get underway, and were most strongly associated with the north of England: a copy of the book was publicly burned in Bolton on 2 December, and again (with rather more press coverage) in Bradford on 14 January, making the latter city the symbolic centre of outrage against the book, at least in the British imagination.

⁵⁰ It has frequently been observed with respect to *The Satanic Verses* that the censorship of books is unenforceable in India, as cheap pirate editions of banned novels are easily available (Kuortti 1997:58, 66). Pipes (2003[1990]:201) claims that bans turned *The Satanic Verses* into 'highly valued contraband' throughout the Muslim world and elsewhere. In retaliation for the publishing of *The Satanic Verses*, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference resolved on 16 March 1989 to ban *all* Penguin books, though I have found no record of any significant practical consequences following from this ban.

Thus began a truly extraordinary reception history: since that time, *The Satanic Verses* has overwhelmingly been perceived in terms of its status as either ‘the pre-eminent symbol of both censorship and freedom of speech, of cultural misunderstanding and shared values’ (Pipes 2003[1990]:202) or else an entirely despicable slander on one of the world’s major religions. Before that time, the reception of *The Satanic Verses* was low-key: reviews seem to have appeared in only three British newspapers (the centrist *Times* and *Independent*, and the left-wing *Guardian*), and only one of these refers to the novel’s religious significance – tellingly, with a baffled question as to ‘why exactly are we being treated to a fanciful recreation of selected aspects of Muhammad’s story?’ (Tomalin 1988:28) No-one at that time could have foretold what was about to happen.

For reasons that are not entirely clear, thousands of anti-Rushdie protestors attacked the American Cultural Centre in Islamabad on 12 February, resulting in five deaths. The following day, a major riot in India led to the death of one anti-Rushdie protestor, and the Supreme Leader of Iran, the Ayatollah Khomeini, issued a *fatwa*, or legal ruling, calling on all Muslims to assassinate both Rushdie and his publishers: as he explained a week later, it would also be acceptable for Muslims to arrange the assassination of Rushdie at the hands of a non-Muslim. Rushdie was given full police protection by the British state, and went into hiding for the next decade. Joel Kuortti (1997) claims that ‘[i]n Britain, the [Bradford] book-burning was the spark which set emotions alight’ (122), but he is emphatic that it was the *fatwa* that most radically changed perceptions of Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, and Rushdie’s earlier novels, all of which came to be perceived in relation to it (158). At any rate, both of these events took place at what Ian Richard Netton calls the affair’s ‘shattering climax’, ie. January and February 1989 (1996:20). Protest and violence continued sporadically thereafter, with a number of attempts made on the lives of individuals involved in the novel’s international

publication – including the Japanese translator, who was killed in 1991. The appearance of paperback English-language editions of *The Satanic Verses* in 1992 led to renewed controversy, and Netton records that, in 1993, up to forty people died in a *Satanic Verses*-related Islamist arson attack in Turkey (1996:21), but it is clear that interest faded throughout the 1990s. However, Rushdie's knighthood in June 2007 led to fresh expressions of Muslim outrage, particularly in Pakistan, where news of the award was met by government condemnation, anti-British street protests, and the (subsequently retracted) statement from the Minister for Religious Affairs that '[i]f somebody has to attack by strapping bombs to his body to protect the honour of the Prophet, then it is justified' (Ijaz-ul-Haq, quoted Hoyle 2007:3). Twenty-first century condemnation was no less quick in coming from the right wing of the British press: a journalist writing in the *Daily Telegraph* opined that a knighthood 'should never have been offered' to Rushdie, as '[h]e is an appalling writer, and seems to despise the country honouring him.' (Heffer 2007:25)

Due in no small part to its complexity, its difficulty, and its controversiality, *The Satanic Verses* has also been the subject of a vast number of conference papers, journal articles, and monographs, but I shall make no attempt to survey them here since my concern is its reception outside academia. For these purposes, the most important contextualising resource is probably *The Rushdie affair*, by the political journalist, Daniel Pipes (2003[1990]). Though this work is occasionally marred by bias (most blatantly in what John Swan [1991:436], in an otherwise complimentary review, describes as Pipes's 'excessive irritation with Rushdie's politics' and the 'one-dimensionalism' and 'falsifying' evident in his portrayal of Rushdie), it remains a thoroughly detailed factual investigation, and is particularly valuable for its analysis of the book's title as perhaps the defining factor in its public reception. Netton's (1996) *Text and trauma* is more

balanced, but far less detailed, covering two other case studies besides that of *The Satanic Verses*. Richard Webster's (1990) *A brief history of blasphemy* is an interesting meditation on the course of the affair and on its precedents, but, as what appears to be a self-published work, it necessarily carries less weight. Perhaps the closest parallel to my own work (in Chapters 2 and 4) on *The Satanic Verses* is *Place of the sacred* (Kuortti 1997), which examines the worldwide reception of *The Satanic Verses* in terms of the public rhetoric employed. Appignanesi and Maitland's (1989) *The Rushdie file* is a useful scrap-book of published discourse on *The Satanic Verses* (though its referencing of sources is often inadequate), and I was greatly helped in the early stages of my research by the opportunity to browse James Procter's personal archive of press clippings related to the work.

Kuortti's (1997) study highlights the role of 'fundamentalism' and 'liberalism' as (vaguely defined) argumentative touchstones, of ideas of the sacred (including of the sacredness of literature and of freedom of expression), and of metaphors of pollution. Perhaps most interestingly, Kuortti applies Albert Hirschman's (1991) analysis of the 'theses' (ie. arguments) of 'perversity (any action is only counterproductive), futility (any action is unavailing), and jeopardy (any action endangers achievements already made)' (Kuortti 1997:57) to the Rushdie affair, finding that futility theses were used against Rushdie's attackers, that perversity theses were used against Rushdie *and* against his attackers (in particular, Khomeini), and that jeopardy arguments were made most frequently of all, and against a range of positions. Kuortti's approach chimes closely with the arguments made in the preceding sections of this dissertation: 'I am not,' he writes, 'interested in applying media effects theories.... the affair was from the onset largely a series of responses, texts containing persuasive arguments about the matter.'

(9) In other words, he recognises that writings on *The Satanic Verses* do not

transparently reflect the ‘effects’ of the book upon the individual reader; rather, they take stances on particular controversies. Even emotional responses were clearly (produced in the knowledge that they would be) understood as declarations of *allegiance*: Shabbir Akhtar, for example, insisted that ‘[a]nyone who fails to be offended by Rushdie’s book *ipso facto* ceases to be a Muslim.’ (1990: 228, quoted Mufti 1994:323) Thus – and particularly when protest leaders (including Akhtar himself, see Akhtar [1989]) organised the reading to assembled Muslims of those passages from *The Satanic Verses* that they could be expected to find most offensive – being offended by *The Satanic Verses* arguably became a new way of doing *being a Muslim*. Amir Hussain discusses this in relation to Canadian Muslims, though his analysis clearly applies more widely:

this novel, and the controversy that surrounded it, allowed the Muslims of Toronto (as well as Muslims worldwide) to articulate their ‘positions’ as members of a minority religious tradition. To be sure, the Gulf War also allowed for this articulation, but there were, of course, many non-Muslim groups in Toronto that were also opposed to the war.

2002:2

Why did this happen? Incorporating a satire on the origins of Islam, the novel’s *potential* to offend is unquestionable, particularly in the era of rising fundamentalism for which it was written. As Aamir Mufti (1994: 325) explains, through its irreverence and questioning, ‘the novel throws into doubt the discursive edifice within which “Islam” has been publicly produced in recent years.’ But the text of the novel alone is insufficient to explain the maelstrom of its reception – the phenomenon by which its offensiveness was broadcast, as Mufti puts it, ‘through written and verbal commentary,

and general rumour and hearsay' (331) – even if one accepts Mufti's argument that it *anticipates* this mode of dissemination with its 'pastichelike structure' (332). As James Procter (2003:168) insists, '*The Satanic Verses* did not initiate protest and counter-protest within a political vacuum, it acted as a catalyst to local and pre-existing cross-cultural tensions.' In other words, complex pre-existing disagreements became catalysed into disagreements over the single issue of the book. This catalysing was transparently political (indeed, Sadik Jalal Al-'Azm [1994:281] notes that the Arab world – as opposed to the wider world of Islam – 'took the whole Rushdie Affair with a grain of salt'), and, as discussed above, achieved in large part through the open *manufacture* of outrage. Responses to these expressions of outrage were in many cases equally opportunistic, even amounting to Christian or European suprematism (see Webster 1992), though it was harder for such invectives to structure themselves as responses to *the book*, since the satirical object of the latter is more often British racism and Thatcherite brutality than Islamic fundamentalism.

It should be noted that, though Pipes (2003[1990]:94) dismisses Muslim criticisms of Khomeini's ruling as 'differences of procedure, not of substance' (ie. as differences as to 'whether his [Rushdie's] death should precede or follow a trial' [ibid.]), this is unfair: as Zaki Badawi (1989) shows, a death sentence for Rushdie would not be inevitable in an Islamic trial, and even if such a penalty were to be meted out, Rushdie would still be offered the chance of a reprieve. Moreover, Lewis (1991) observes that, in condemning also Rushdie's (non-Muslim) *publishers*, 'Khomeini's *fatwa* goes beyond even the most extreme of earlier Shi'ite rulings' (193), and that, though there is a (primarily Shi'ite) view that a Muslim must *immediately* kill anyone who insults Mohammad *in his presence*, 'even the most rigorous jurists... say nothing about an arranged killing for a reported insult in a far place.' (194) A further peculiarity in this case was the

extraordinary status accorded to the ruling itself: although a *fatwa* is not usually considered to be definitive, on the third anniversary of Khomeini's ruling, the death threat was 'extended to all Iranians speaking against the *fatwa*'.⁵¹

I have already mentioned *The Rushdie Files* (Appignanesi and Maitland 1989), and Bridget Fowler's (2000) analysis of the texts it reproduces in Section 1.7. Fowler's analysis of these textual responses is limited to such observations as that '[i]n the main, reception can be divided into those that sustained an *anti-modernist popular aesthetic* and those that accepted a *critical aesthetic* response' (48), the purpose being to establish the relevance of what are (for all that they are illustrated and developed in dialogue with quotations from *The Rushdie Files*) essentially Fowler's own readings (48-50) of *The Satanic Verses* in terms of 'the popular aesthetic' (to explain conservative Muslim responses to *The Satanic Verses*), 'an Islamic critical aesthetic' (to explain responses to *The Satanic Verses* from Muslims critical of Islamic politics), and 'the critical aesthetic of Modernism' (to explain responses that defend *The Satanic Verses* as a 'moral parable'). Such observations are very interesting, although they to a great extent misrepresent the public reception of *The Satanic Verses* by suggesting that this work was invariably perceived in literary-critical terms, ie. that it was present to the public as what Livingston (1995) calls a 'poetic object'. For example, Fowler holds that, in the popular aesthetic, '[f]airy-tale and realism are held to be illegitimately mixed together [in *The Satanic Verses*] in a form of unacceptable literary miscegenation' (58): a suspiciously literary reading of the book for a supposed explanation of its popular

⁵¹ 'The Rushdie Affair: chronicle of deaths forewarned', *Index on Censorship* 1993, issue 10, p40.

Under normal circumstances, a *fatwa* is 'neither binding nor enforceable', and '[i]f the inquirer is not persuaded by the *fatwa*, he is free to go to another *mufti* and obtain another opinion' (Esposito 2003: Fatwa).

reception. Daniel Pipes emphasises that such an approach to *The Satanic Verses* cannot account for the 'Rushdie affair':

assessing the accusations against the book requires that it be looked at in a literal, and very unliterary manner, for this is the way it is understood by those who protest it. This means that every statement in the book must be taken as representative of the author's own thinking, even though that is clearly not the case; on occasion, for example, two characters debate a point and hold contrary views. Intellectually deficient as it may be, such a narrow approach is unavoidable if one is to understand the novel's political meaning as understood by unsophisticated readers.

2003(1990):53

Moreover, it should not be forgotten that most of those 'readers' never actually saw a copy of *The Satanic Verses*. The statements to which Pipes refers were circulated in photocopies and excerpts, or declaimed in public readings, and the content of the book was the subject of untrue rumours that greatly exaggerated its offensiveness (see, for example, Siddique [1989], discussed in Chapter 2): this is what Mufti (1991:98) calls the novel's 'reception by pastiche'. To a great extent, this was also how it was received by non-Muslims, and some Muslim commentators made much of this, arguing that it was being defended by people who had not read it properly: for example, Ahmed Deedat's pamphlet, 'How Rushdie fooled the West' (1989) suggests that, if non-Muslim

Westerners were aware of the real content of *The Satanic Verses*, they too would feel offended and join with Muslims in condemning it.⁵²

On the one hand, this might be thought to make *The Satanic Verses* a signally unsuitable focus for a study of reception: how is one to separate out responses *to the book itself* from responses to its public representation, or simply to the controversy? But in fact this makes it an ideal focus: the reception of *The Satanic Verses* makes clear the extent to which ‘the New Criticism’s dream of a self-contained encounter between innocent reader and autonomous text is a bizarre fiction.’ (Culler 1988:13) Thus, it is with specific reference to *The Satanic Verses* that Mufti (1991:97) argues that ‘[c]onceptions of reception based on an almost Victorian image of the solitary bourgeois reader’ must be abandoned in favour of a ‘reconceptualisation of reception’ that will ‘account for forms of mass “consumption” other than “reading” in the narrower sense of that word.’ It is social factors, and not individual psychologies, that account for the diverse ways in which *The Satanic Verses* was received around the world: its lethally violent reception in South Asian states (Mufti 1994), its peaceful reception in Canada (Hussain 2002), and what would – had it not been for the shooting of its publisher – have been an equally muted reception in Norway (Harket 1993). And, similarly, it is to the social that we must look for an explanation of the commonalities between these local phenomena: as Mufti (1991) argues, though there is great diversity within the Islamic world – and even between fundamentalist Muslim groups – a ‘discursive unity’ in the ‘self-representation’ of the latter ‘in terms of “Islamic” cultural authenticity and anti-imperialist political

⁵² Ironically, this pamphlet supports its position *not* by reference to the novel’s unflattering portrayal of the UK as a racist state, but by means of a great many very short (frequently, one-word) quotations whose significance is entirely lost (and, in at least one case, reversed).

purity' enables 'similar fundamentalist arguments to be formulated in very different political and cultural contexts.' (106)

To turn to the second 'primary' work, *The Lord of the Rings* (which is usually considered to be a single novel although it was initially printed in three hardback volumes) is an internationally bestselling work of fantasy by the respected philologist, JRR Tolkien. It was first published between 1954 and 1955, and was the sequel to its author's first novel, *The Hobbit*, a very successful children's book that had appeared in 1937. Although CW Sullivan (2007[1992]:425) voices a common opinion in describing *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* as 'perhaps the best and the brightest' examples of the High Fantasy genre, it should be recognised that this is itself an unprestigious genre. Much of it consists of what Thomas Roberts (1990) fondly refers to as 'junk fiction', ie. mass-market category publishing, but – unlike the 'sword and sorcery' works of, say, Fritz Leiber or Lin Carter – the works of Tolkien are (with the exception of *The Hobbit*) written with a scholarly seriousness that may have played a role in elevating them from the lowbrow and the unliterary to the middlebrow and the *embarrassingly unliterary* (see Section 1.2). For Tolkien's admirers, such as the poet WH Auden (1968), *The Lord of the Rings* is an epic tale of good and evil; for his detractors, it is a work of kitsch characterised in particular by its 'childishness' (see Smol 2004:949). Thus, Shaun Hughes writes, in a pro-Tolkien polemic, that '*The Lord of the Rings* is... a work that has provoked, from the very beginning, especially from among sections of the intelligentsia, an almost irrational hostility' (2004:808), and complains that even '[l]iterary theorists trying to make a claim for fantasy as a literary genre... have found Tolkien's work not worthy of serious consideration.' (810) Despite this, *The Lord of the Rings*, together with its author's other, lesser-known works, has generated a sizeable amount of scholarship and literary criticism, as can be seen from

the various annotated bibliographies of the field of ‘Tolkien studies’ (eg. West [2004], which lists three earlier such bibliographies). Moreover, the published existence of at least one study guide (Hardy 1977) and two critical readers (Bloom 2000a&b) indicates that Tolkien’s works are not uncommonly taught in the US, presumably (to judge by these three volumes) to high school and undergraduate students.

This dissertation is not, however, concerned with the reception of the novel, *The Lord of the Rings*, but with the three live action films directed by Peter Jackson and released in cinemas worldwide between 2001 and 2003: *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, and *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*. Kristin Thompson’s *The Frodo franchise* (2007) is the major study of this trilogy and its spinoff products, covering every stage of negotiation, production, marketing, and distribution, and drawing on interviews with many of the people involved. Thompson writes about the trilogy both as three individual works and as a single work in three parts: a practice that I shall follow, since I shall be analysing discourse which was produced in 2005 and which is therefore able to refer to the trilogy as a whole. As Thompson argues, the film trilogy is not a literary adaptation in the usual sense but a series of genre films constructed on the basis of a novel. In accordance with the conventions of the fantasy film genre, there are more action scenes in the films than in the novel, and these scenes are longer and more spectacular. Narrative followability was sacrificed at the editing stage in order to avoid cutting the action or the very large cast of characters carried over from the book;⁵³ moreover, Thompson shows that these

⁵³ Although her own examples comprise two edits so baffling as to be incomprehensible on first viewing, Thompson comments only that ‘Jackson’s team opted to depend on the film’s spectators to make the effort to follow along.’ (73) Less idealistically, one might say that they opted to depend on the film’s fans to buy the ‘extended edition’ DVDs, which restored scenes cut from the original

characters are reconceived as types from various genres of action movie: ‘humble everyman figures’, a ‘kung fu fighter’, a ‘comic warrior’, a ‘heroic warrior’, and a ‘*sifu*’, or kung fu master (63-64). However, as Thompson also shows, the filmmakers paid unprecedented levels of attention to the visual details of the imaginary ‘world’ in which that novel is set. Thus, Thompson, an admirer of both the novel and the films, writes that ‘[a] book about imaginatively conceived characters on a lengthy journey interspersed with skirmishes has been turned into what some might see as a gallery of battles and monsters.’ (54)⁵⁴

releases: ‘For example, the Faramir/Boromir/Denethor storyline exists almost entirely in the extended versions of *The Two Towers* and, we can presume, the forthcoming *The Return of the King* extended cut. In fact, astute viewers... note that some back-story appears to be missing in theatrical releases, and they assume and expect they will see more scenes in the later editions.’ (Sue Kim 2004:888) If viewers feel that they have not seen the whole of a film until they have watched these previously deleted scenes, then the release of a sequel provides an additional incentive to purchase the extended edition (particularly if it is released just in time for such a viewing practice). As Thompson notes: ‘A print ad for the extended version of *Fellowship* urged magazine readers, “See this version before you see *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers!*”’ (2007:215)

⁵⁴ Comparison of books with their screen adaptations would seem to constitute a very widespread form of academic and popular textual commentary, and would certainly reward further investigation as such. The generally likeable *Peter Jackson: the power behind cinema’s The Lord of the Rings* (Wright 2004), for example, discusses Tolkien’s trilogy and Jackson’s in terms of the Christian Humanist philosophy which it argues to be expressed more consistently by the former than by the latter. Three chapters in the (intermittently) more academic *Tolkien on film: essays on Peter Jackson’s The Lord of the Rings* (Brennan Croft 2004) are primarily concerned to advance arguments that the films are in various senses worse than or equal to the books, and seven more compare the construction of particular characters across the films and the books, eg.: ‘JRR Tolkien in his *Lord of the Rings* gives us... the lofty poetic expression and larger-than-life heroes of epic... In his film treatments of this material, Peter Jackson, in contrast, offers the conflicted, modern protagonist,

The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring was released in the USA and UK on 19 December 2001 and in much of the rest of the world over the next two or three months. In common with worldwide press, British reviews were generally very positive, from tabloids and broadsheets alike: Alun Palmer (2001:5) calls it ‘a stunning visual epic’ and Andrew O’Hagan (2001:6) describes it as ‘the modern quest film to beat all quest films’. The remaining two films in the trilogy were released over the following two years: *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* from 18 Dec 2002 and *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* from 17 December 2003. The second film won the fewest Academy Awards (two, to the first film’s four and the third’s eleven), and, though it attracted a certain amount of criticism from Tolkien fans for involving the greatest sacrificing of character development and plot continuity for the sake of action, it was also widely considered an improvement on its predecessor for precisely this reason: one UK broadsheet reviewer described it as ‘a better film than the first, simply because it gets on with the business of big and beefy fights’ (Clarke 2002:12). The final part of the trilogy met with the greatest praise, and was described by one British tabloid reviewer as ‘the blockbuster of the year’ as well as ‘of the decade’ (Tookey 2003:58). Generally received as a series of increasingly spectacular action movies, the trilogy has been incredibly lucrative, with major corporate sponsorships, combined worldwide box office takings running into billions of dollars, and immense continued earnings from the sale of film merchandise, DVDs, computer games, etc: Thompson writes that she ‘would

smaller in scope and lesser in nature.’ (Wiggins 2004:121) I have also come across examples of fiery internet mailing list discussions on the relative merits of the papery and celluloid versions of *The Lord of the Rings* – not forgetting the mock outrage expressed by some ‘slashers’ (see below) at the celluloid Arwen’s having ‘stolen Glorfindel’s horse’ (an outrage not at all incompatible with preferring the film overall).

not be at all surprised if *Rings*' gross income ultimately went well over \$10 billion.'
(2007:9)

The audience for the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy was the object of a major research project (Barker 2005) that will be referred to again in Chapter 3. Other investigations relevant to aspects of the trilogy's reception include Sue Kim's (2004) discussion of attempts to rebut accusations of racism in the book and film versions of *The Lord of the Rings*, Jones and Smith's (2005) analysis of discourses of 'authenticity' in the films' promotion, and Carl, Kinson, and Smith's (2007) study of *Lord of the Rings* tourism. Much 'slash' (ie. homoerotic and copyright-infringing) fiction has been inspired by the movies, and this is discussed by Thompson (2007:117-180; see also Booker 2004 and Sturgis 2004). Two published papers also discuss the reception of the films by slashers: one has been referred to already (Allington 2007a; see Section 1.5) and forms the basis of Chapter 3; the other, Anna Smol's 'Oh... oh... *Frodo!*' (2004; see Chapter 3) takes a very different approach by focussing on the textual elements that are given a sexual interpretation in slash fiction featuring the characters Frodo Baggins and Samwise Gamgee.

1.9 A guide to this study

This chapter has been painfully (although, I think, rather necessarily) long, and I am grateful to the reader who has pressed through to the end of it. The remainder of this dissertation shall attempt to address specific theoretical and methodological problems that arise against the general background that has been discussed in Sections 1.1 to 1.7. At its heart are three case studies, contained in Chapters 2 to 4. Each of these involves two analyses, one involving spoken discourse that I audio-recorded, and one involving published discourse: in Chapter 3, this discourse was published on the internet, in

Chapters 2 and 4, in traditional print media. The second of each pair of analyses is considered to be the focus, and it is these that relate to what I have reluctantly been calling this study's 'primary' works.

Chapter 2 discusses theoretical attempts to consider literary discourse in terms of a message passing from author to reader, focusing in particular on those that function by reference to general theories of language use: the work is the vehicle of intentions that are realized (or not) in the reader's responses; the work is a 'speech act' that operates on the reader and causes his or her responses. This chapter argues that such theorizations mistake the role of communication in literature, but suggests that they nonetheless reflect prevalent *ways of talking about* literary texts, which should be investigated as tactically useful techniques employed in discourse between readers (and non-readers) of those texts. Drawing on the work of a range of thinkers, notably Quentin Skinner and Jerome McGann, it then proposes an alternative application of the concepts of authorial intention and speech act to the genesis of literary works. This is exemplified first with some spoken data, in which a gay reading group discuss a work of gay fiction, and then with a study of early contributions to the public controversy over *The Satanic Verses*, in which commentators attempt to structure this novel as a speech-like action carried out by its author.

In Chapter 3, I examine the question of whether meaning is determined by the text or by the reader, treating this not as a theoretical problem, but as a practical problem faced by interpreters of texts. I take this approach to two samples of data, in each of which the possibility of 'hidden' sexual meanings in a work is at issue for a group of readers. In the first sample, the readers are a tutor and her students in a first year undergraduate literature class, and the work is Oscar Wilde's play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*; of

all my analyses of data, this comes closest to what is usually regarded as discourse analysis and a discursive-psychological approach. In the second, the readers are members of an online community dedicated to slash fiction, and the work is the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy. These two analyses constitute this dissertation's most sustained application of the discursive psychological approach to discourse analysis, though the second makes much use of Chaim Perelman's theories of argumentation, representing a crossover with rhetorical psychology.

Chapter 4 brings together scholarship from audience study, cultural theory, and social psychology to re-theorise one of the key forms of data in the history of reading: anecdotal descriptions of reading experiences. It proposes a methodology for the analysis of such anecdotes that assumes neither their literal truth nor their literal falsity, treating them not as records of responses to text, but as responses in their own right. Drawing on a range of theoretical and methodological sources, from media studies and discourse analysis to historiographic theory, this approach explores the historical determination of representations of the 'subjective' aspects of reading by showing how and for what ends these representations have been constructed in situated discourse. Primarily concerned with the reading of literature, it is exemplified first with a short stretch of data from an undergraduate seminar devoted to Irvine Welsh's novel, *Trainspotting*, and then with a *Spectator* article about *The Satanic Verses*.

Chapter 5 discusses the limitations of the 'discursive' approach to reception, and considers some alternatives.

2. Speech acts, intentions, and uncommunicativeness: a theory of literature and of how literature is used⁵⁵

2.1 Introduction

when language is spoken, it occurs in a specific location, at a specific time, is produced by a specific person, and is (usually) addressed to some specific other person or persons. Only written language can ever be free of this kind of anchoring in the extralinguistic situation. A sentence on a slip of paper can move through space and time, “speaker”-less and addressee-less.

Fromkin et al 2003:217

Struggling to see literature as a form of communication, and seeing in speech the prototype thereof, theorists have often treated authors as the senders of messages through the medium of their works, and readers as the recipients of those messages. There is nothing straightforward about this treatment: as I hope to demonstrate, attempts to theorize a literary work as a message from its author to its future readers turn out to be rather less intuitive than they might initially seem.⁵⁶ There is also nothing necessary

⁵⁵ This chapter is adapted from Allington (2008).

⁵⁶ Cf. Dixon and Bortolussi (2001:1-2): ‘we question a fundamental tenet that is commonly found in the field of discourse processing. That conception, simply put, is that text is communication: based on a linguistic model of oral language use, it is assumed that the writer has the goal of communicating an intended message, encodes this message in the text, and then the message is decoded by the reader.... we argue here that although there may be a limited sense in which text functions as communication under some circumstances, in general this is an unproductive and misleading way to think about text and text processing.... we believe that the problems with the text-as-communication view are most acute and apparent in the processing of literature.’ Dixon and

about it: the message passed between a sender and a recipient may be a text (literary or otherwise), but – as the above quotation reminds us (and I take it from such a reassuringly pedestrian source as an undergraduate linguistics textbook in order to make plain how very uncontroversial a claim it really is) – a text’s usability for its readers (and never mind that of a literary work) cannot depend on its playing the role of such a message, for, if it did, Fromkin et al’s ‘sentence’ would become incomprehensible the moment it slipped anchor. Indeed, as Stein Haugom Olsen (1982) argues, it may be inappropriate to speak of a literary work as having a ‘meaning’ at all, in the simple sense that a message does: Olsen rejects any analogy between literary works and ‘basic linguistic expressions like metaphor, sentence, and utterance’ (31), and, as in the following aphorism of Northrop Frye’s, associates them instead with entirely mute objects of appreciation (in Olsen’s case, not statues but fine wines and beautiful landscapes [21]):

Criticism can talk, and all the arts are dumb. In painting, sculpture, or music, it is easy enough to see that the art shows forth, but cannot *say* anything. And, whatever it sounds like to call the poet inarticulate or speechless, there is a most important sense in which poems are as silent as statues.

Frye 1957:4

What, then, is the impulse behind the contrary theoretical position, that poets speak to their readers through their poems? I will argue that it derives from two sources: on the one hand, the ubiquity of certain ways of talking about literary works, and, on the other,

Bortolussi’s *psycholinguistic* approach would be difficult to integrate with the *anti-mentalistic* approach taken here, but it is interesting to note the similarity of their conclusions.

from the fact that there is (and has been) communication going on, whether or not it really is between the author and readers of the work under discussion. I will suggest that there *is* a role for discussions of intentions and speech acts in the investigation of literary works, but that this role may not serve the purposes of post-New Critical literary interpretation.

Those ‘ways of talking about literary works’ are explored in the penultimate section of this chapter, which examines a selection of early responses to Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988). None of these responses constitutes academic criticism of this work; they are polemics issued by public commentators and illustrate (a) its wider reception, and (b) its author’s responses to that reception. Although this analysis follows Jonathan Culler’s (2001[1981]:3-19) recommendations in its refusal to offer its own interpretation of a literary work, it is different from Culler’s approach to interpretations (as embodied in his seminal *Structuralist Poetics* [1975]), in that it aims not at the reconstruction of a past state of ‘literary competence’, but at the understanding of specific responses to a given work as events taking place in the context of high profile ideological conflicts. These responses are collected, then, in much the same spirit as the dossier reproduced in the edited volume *I, Pierre Rivière* (Foucault 1975a): “to draw a map, so to speak, of these combats, to reconstruct these confrontations and battles.” (Foucault 1975b:xi).⁵⁷

2.2 Communicative circuits

There is a longstanding tradition of conceiving a work of literature as the *medium* of one-way communications from a single author to a theoretically unlimited number of

⁵⁷ I am indebted to one of the anonymous peer reviewers (of Allington 2008) for pointing out the comparison.

individual readers. IA Richards (1960[1924]:184-189), for example, conceives of an author as someone who has experiences of a special character that he or she then communicates to his or her readers, in whose consciousness the experiences are replicated – provided, of course, that the author is ‘efficient’ (206) and the readers are ‘adept’ (114). Robert Darnton (1990) decisively breaks from this tradition with his famous description of the ‘life cycle’ of a book.⁵⁸ He envisages this life cycle as ‘a communications circuit that runs from the author to the publisher (if the bookseller does not assume that role), the printer, the shipper, the bookseller, and the reader’, where ‘[t]he reader completes the circuit’ not only ‘because he influences the author both before and after the act of composition’ but also because ‘[a]uthors are readers themselves.’ (111) This is a model of the process whereby manuscripts and early editions of books come (or rather, came, for the publishing industry is rather more complicated now) into being. It explodes the fantasy that to read is to enter into solitary communion with the author: the author *has been* in direct and indirect communication (with publisher, printer, etc), but, in the case of the vast majority of literary texts, the ‘circuit’ in which the author’s communications took place is irrevocably closed, all readers but a privileged few locked out by time, geography, and social distance. The work of literature is thus seen as the *product* of multidirectional communications between the members of a finite set of people, among them the author. We could imagine further life cycles for the subsequent editions, but these would still remain accessible only to a tiny minority of readers, ie. those involved in or otherwise able to

⁵⁸ There is some comparison with the ‘circuits of culture’ model used in the approach to material culture associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (eg. Johnson 1986). In the latter conception, however, different problems are addressed, and the ‘circuit’ is more metaphorical.

influence the processes of editing and production. What can it mean to read while belonging to none of these circuits? Lynne Pearce (1997) has considered the “emotional politics” of such a position: the excluded reader is in the position of a ghost, haunting the work but unable to influence it (24-25),⁵⁹ and, though he or she may imagine that the author speaks to him or her alone (89), his or her real relationships are with fellow readers and potential readers: that is, with *extratextual* others (235). Works of literature are thus seen as the mute *objects* of readerly love and disappointment, as much alienating as inspiring to their readers.

If we focus on those extratextual relationships between readers, however, the picture becomes more lively. The Darntonian life-cycles of books, kept turning by authors, publishers, printers, et al, can be considered the preliminary stage for unlimited ‘afterlife-cycles’ kept turning by flesh-and-blood human beings who make use of texts in a variety of ways. In a study of news media, Ron Scollon (1998:20-21) conceives of the production and subsequent use of (in his case, non-literary) texts in terms of distinct sets of social interactions:

The central argument is, first, that, in the production of the texts of the news media, the primary social practices, and therefore the primary social interactions, are concerned with negotiations of power and identity within the communities of practice [Lave and Wenger 1991] formed by journalists, newsmakers, owners, and editors of the organizations. Secondly, in the communities of practice within which these texts are appropriated for use by readers and viewers, the primary

⁵⁹ One is, of course, at liberty to tear out old pages from a text of a work and paste in new ones, but one cannot thereby avert the suicide of Romeo and Juliet, *except in the new text of which one makes oneself the editor.*

social interactions are among viewers and readers, not between them and the producers of the texts.

In this conception, reading is understood in terms not of receiving a message, but of carrying out social actions made possible by the text. Once more in the air following protests against its author's knighthood, *The Satanic Verses* reminds us that such actions are by no means trivial, and we shall return to its case following a theoretical discussion of communication and meaning in the production and consumption of literary works and a demonstration of that discussion's relevance to a group of readers outside the academy. My aim throughout shall be to provide conceptual tools by which book history may, as Peter McDonald (1997:120-121) puts it, concern itself 'not only with the initial field of writing and reading, but with the ongoing history of such fields, tracing the text's [ie. the work's] various material and social predicaments, and the history of its uses and meanings'.

2.3 Communication and signification

Literature is the most interesting case of semiosis for a variety of reasons.

Though it is clearly a form of communication, it is cut off from the immediate pragmatic purposes which simplify other sign situations. The potential complexities of signifying processes work freely in literature. Moreover, the difficulty of saying precisely what is communicated is here accompanied by the fact that signification is indubitably taking place.

Culler 2001[1981]:39

Considered from the viewpoint adopted in this chapter, Culler's statement raises many questions. In what sense is literature 'clearly a form of communication' – indeed, how

can it be, in the absence of ‘immediate pragmatic purposes’? It is certainly meaningful – ‘signification is indubitably taking place’ – but does that automatically mean that it is communicative in any useful or interesting sense? Who, for example, is communicating with whom? Elsewhere, Culler describes literary works very differently: as something disturbingly other than communication, which we recuperate with interpretative attempts ‘to make literature into a communication, to reduce its strangeness, and to draw upon supplementary conventions which enable it, as we say, to speak to us’ (1975:134). This view – that literature is not communicative, but that interpretation may (mis)represent it as being so – is closer to what this chapter will be arguing. In this section, I will briefly recap two approaches to communication that originate in the field of pragmatics but have been used ‘to make literature into a communication’, and then contrast these with an approach to signification promoted by Jacques Derrida and arguably underpinning much contemporary literary study.

2.3.1 Communication: speech act theory

An important theory of communication was proposed by JL Austin in a series of lectures delivered in 1955 and subsequently published as *How to Do Things with Words* (1962). This is ‘speech act theory’, which theorises the uttering of sentences as the carrying out of actions. Austin’s lectures are exploratory and whimsical in character, but the theory they propound has been usefully and systematically developed in several works by his student, John Searle, in particular *Speech Acts* (1969) and *Expression and Meaning* (1979). As we shall see, both Austin and Searle discuss literature in passing, though without making it a central concern; however, a number of works of critical theory, today most famously Sandy Petrey’s monograph, *Speech Acts and Literary Theory*

(1990), attempt to develop speech act theories of literature and the reading of literature. Beyond literary theory, the influence of speech act theory appears to have been both vast and diffuse: Jonathan Potter (2001), for example, credits it with great influence on discourse analysis, and, thanks to Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), it has arguably influenced much of feminist and queer theory, though the practical debt to Austin seems in both cases slight. Rather than attempt a survey here, therefore, I will constrain my attention in this chapter to the three works already mentioned by Austin and Searle, and to works of hermeneutic theory that engage with them directly.

Austin's lectures begin with a distinction between 'constative' utterances, ie. 'true or false statements' (1962:3) and 'performative' utterances, ie. utterances where 'the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action' (6). Finding this distinction to be untenable, he proposes in its place a distinction between kinds of acts that may be performed in the issuing of a single utterance. For the purposes of this chapter, the most important of these are locutionary acts, illocutionary acts, and perlocutionary acts: when I say a certain set of words, my locutionary act is what I do by virtue of the fact that the words of my utterance have a certain sense and reference, my illocutionary act is what I do by virtue of the fact that my utterance is of a recognisable type that has certain conventional effects, and my perlocutionary act is what I do by virtue of the fact that my utterance comes to have certain consequences that are not determined by convention. One of Austin's best examples is that of enquiring about a third party 'whether it was not her handkerchief which was in X's bedroom' (110): the locutionary act is that of uttering these words with a certain sense and with reference to a specific object and place, the illocutionary act is that of uttering a structure of words that (by linguistic convention) counts as a question, and the perlocutionary act might be something as dramatic as convincing the addressee that adultery has been committed. There are

linguistic conventions for asking, but not for convincing – nor for surprising, intimidating, annoying, beguiling, etc. Austin does not arrive at a completely satisfactory distinction between illocution and perlocution (see 117-119), and Searle, who is largely uninterested in perlocution, shows that the distinction between locution and illocution is highly problematic (1968),⁶⁰ but there is something intuitive about the distinction of sense and reference from action-type, and of action-type from specific consequence. To consider literary works in relation to this scheme leads to problems, but, as we shall see, there are respects in which it can also be illuminating.

2.3.2 Communication: intentionalism

There is in the philosophy of language and in theoretical cognitive psychology a tradition by which speech and the comprehension of speech are understood in terms of the speaker's intentions and the hearer's recognition of these intentions: the intention is then a message that begins in the speaker's mind and ends in the hearer's, having been inferred by the latter from the former's utterance. This tradition begins with Paul Grice's much-referenced argument that to say something and to mean something by it is to say it 'with the intention of inducing [in one's hearers] a belief by means of the recognition [by one's hearers] of this intention.' (1957:384) In a modified form, it is the basis of Sperber and Wilson's theory of communication, in which people are conceived of as 'information-processing devices': one device 'modifies the physical environment', for example by speaking or writing, and thereby stimulates other devices to construct 'representations similar to representations already stored in the first device.' (1986:1)

⁶⁰ Instead, he conceives of speakers carrying out 'propositional acts' and 'speech acts of referring' in carrying out many, but not all, illocutionary acts (1969:26-33). Saying 'Hurrah', for example, neither expresses a proposition nor refers.

The writing and reading of literature is theorized in a directly analogous way by IA Richards, as we have seen (above), and authorial intention is identified as the true goal of literary interpretation by ED Hirsch (1967). Nonetheless, this position has been heavily contested within critical theory, particularly since the development of the New Criticism and its partial supersession by forms of criticism influenced by structuralist and post-structuralist thought: authorial intention is directly attacked by Wimsatt and Beardsley in their famous essay 'The intentional fallacy' (1946), and is sometimes taken to have been a casualty of the bewildering array of arguments and assertions in Roland Barthes's 'The death of the author' (1997[1967]).

An alternative approach to intention is put forward by the philosopher and intellectual historian Quentin Skinner, who makes a distinction between 'locutionary', 'illocutionary', and 'perlocutionary' intentions (1972a).⁶¹ This distinction is founded on Austin's distinction between kinds of speech act (above): a locutionary intention is the

⁶¹ It should be acknowledged that Skinner (1970) expresses approval of Strawson's (1964) reading of Austin (1962) in terms of Grice (1957), and that this might be taken to indicate that Skinner's theory is in some sense a variant of that described in the previous paragraph. However, what Skinner takes from Strawson is only the idea that the uptake of an illocution (ie. the recognition that an utterance constitutes some particular illocutionary act) must involve the recognition of the speaker's intention to carry out some particular illocutionary act (Skinner 1970:121). Once we consider Skinner's concept of intention in depth (see Subsection 2.4.2), it becomes apparent that, for Skinner, recognising the intention with which an utterance is produced is the same thing as recognising what conventional utterance-type was produced: this is very different from the idea that communication is realised in the hearer's successful reconstruction of the speaker's intention. Moreover, for Skinner, an intentional description of an action (for example, an utterance) is 'neither causal, nor reducible to a causal form.' (1972b:156) This is entirely incompatible with Sperber and Wilson's (1986:22-23) contention that one recognises intentions by reasoning from effect (action/utterance) back to cause (intention).

intention that the words of one's utterance have a certain sense and reference, an illocutionary intention is the intention that one's utterance be of a particular conventional type, and a perlocutionary intention is the intention that one's utterance will have particular non-conventional consequences. The intentions around which the theoretical arguments of Hirsch and others have tended to centre are Skinner's locutionary intentions, but Skinner argues that it is illocutionary intentions to which interpreters need to attend: a view to which the current chapter assents.

Although I consider (for reasons that will become apparent) that Skinner is correct in his view that talking of illocutionary acts is the same thing as talking of intentions (1971:2, 1972b:141-142), the idea of illocution is made to do very different work in his system than in Austin or Searle's, and so I will discuss it separately from the theory of speech acts. In particular, Skinner's illocutionary intentions appear to be much more subtly variable than Austin and Searle's illocutionary acts: while the latter two philosophers are primarily concerned with explicating the general principles of utterance as act, Skinner is primarily concerned with detailed explication of works in relation to their historical context, a project for whose purposes the taxonomies of illocutionary acts that Austin and in particular Searle are at pains to develop (eg. Austin 1962:150; Searle 1969:vii-viii) are more-or-less irrelevant. I will argue that Skinner's approach to illocutionary intention is useful, but that it does not support the model of literary works as author-reader communications. Where I discuss what Skinner calls perlocutionary intention, I will employ ethnomethodologist Lena Jayyusi's (1993) analysis of intention talk, since this provides a coherent framework for investigation of this problematic category. This is the approach put into practice in the analysis of *The Satanic Verses* carried out in Section 2.6. I would argue that this separation of illocutionary and perlocutionary intentions is potentially very helpful in distinguishing the different kinds of intentionalist

rhetoric that have been employed with regard to *The Satanic Verses* and other novels. For example, what appears to be illocutionary intention is discussed by Joel Kuortti (1992) when he meditates on contrary understandings of *The Satanic Verses* as ‘a contest of fixed language’ on the one hand and ‘a parody of the sacred’ on the other (133). These are, he suggests, ‘different approaches... by which the author’s name “Salman Rushdie” is connected with *The Satanic Verses*.’ (ibid.) Elsewhere, however, he discusses what Skinner would term perlocutionary intentions, though without acknowledging this distinction: in the type of argument that, following Hirschman (1991), he calls ‘the perversity thesis’, Kuortti states that ‘the central argument is that the outcome of an action is the opposite of intentions.’ (63)

2.3.3 Signification: the functioning of the mark

One of the central difficulties in trying to understand the scene of reading other than as one in which the reader receives a message from the writer, is that of seeing how else the reading matter might be present, than as an utterance – whether “utterance” is conceived in intentional or speech act terms. To structure a text or a work as an utterance is above all to relate it to an utterer who sent it forth at some particular moment and in some particular context; as I shall show in Sections 2.4 and 2.5, one can do this *without* conceiving of it as an author-reader communication, but it is important to recognise that structuring it in this way may be very unhelpful in understanding many scenes of reading. To understand many such scenes, we will have to recognise that a stretch of discourse can *mean* independently of what anybody has *meant by it*. Rather than talk of ‘“understanding” the “written utterance”’, Derrida (1977b:199) thus discusses the ‘functioning of the mark’, which ‘operates *a fortiori* within the hypothesis that I fully understand what the author meant to say, providing he said what he meant’, but ‘also

operates independently of such a hypothesis'. He insists that in the nature of the mark is 'the possibility of its functioning being cut off, at a certain point, from its "original" desire-to-say-what-one-means [*vouloir-dire*] and from its participation in a saturable and constraining context.' (1977a:186) It can thus 'break with every given context' (ibid.) through 'engendering *and* inscribing itself' or 'being inscribed *in*, new contexts' (1977b:220). Intentionalism and speech act theory can accordingly be seen as attempts to return 'the mark' (here, the work) respectively to an ' "original" desire-to-say-what-one means' or to 'a saturable and constraining context'; in writing the above remarks, Derrida was critiquing both speech act theory and the intentionalism of its major advocate since Austin, John Searle (more of which in Subsection 2.5.1).⁶²

It is necessary to consider the reasons hermeneuts might have for making and for resisting such attempts to return the work to its origin: Jason David BeDuhn (2002:95-96), for example, approves Skinner's (intentionalist) use of 'Austin's language of illocutionary act' to facilitate the discussion of 'texts as events in a past context, not as linguistic resources whose meaning is constantly reconstrued in interpretation', but, while this goal is clearly appropriate for the *historical* study of works, its

⁶² Cf. Dixon and Bortolussi (2001:23): 'we are not disputing that writers have intentions and that these are reflected in the text; clearly they do. We are also not arguing that readers are uninterested in the intentions of the (implied) author. Our point is simply that what controls the reader's inferences in this regard is generally the text, not the author's intention.' I would suggest, however, that Dixon and Bortolussi's reference to 'inferences' implies a lingering debt to a version of the communication model, and that the idea of the text exercising *control* over the reader is misleading; for these reasons, I would favour the slightly different formulation these writers offer earlier on the same page ('what *determines* readers' *attributions*... is primarily the text, together with the context and the reader's knowledge *and goals*' [ibid.]).

appropriateness to their *literary* study is problematic. Stein Haugom Olsen (2004), for example, argues that there are different forms of interpretation, and that each has a different aim: ‘a literary interpretation is concerned with the experience of a work of art’ and its aim is ‘appreciation’, which makes it different from a ‘historical interpretation concerned with recovering what the clauses of [a] document would have meant in the historical situation in which it was produced.’ (147) ED Hirsch (1967), on the other hand, rejects the possibility of any such special dispensation for literary interpreters: ‘All valid interpretation of every sort is founded on the re-cognition of what an author meant.’ (1967:126) If Hirsch is right, then a literary work can only be understood in terms of its having issued from a particular person at a particular place and time; Hirsch of course proposes that this be done through the recovery of authorial intention, but this particular argument of his would also support a speech act approach, amongst others. If Olsen is right, then it is legitimate for certain hermeneuts (ie. those who are engaged in ‘literary interpretation’) to read a work as something connected less to the historical moment of its production, than to the experiential moment of its reading.

Although there is clearly strong feeling on both sides, I would suggest that, for all the arguable anachronism of his focus on ‘appreciation’, Olsen has understood something about the practice of post-New Critical literary study that Hirsch has not: that it has tended to promote interpretation not as a means to an end (the discovery of a uniquely valid reading of the text) but as an end in itself.⁶³ Post-New Critical literary study has, I

⁶³ Livingston (1995:134) writes that, in contemporary literary criticism, ‘[e]ach instructed reading [ie. interpretation] puts together the community’s arts of reading to reveal, as a discovery about those arts, how those arts can be organised as a novel, distinctive, and original instructed reading.’

Compare: ‘When, in a pedagogic mode derived from New Criticism (and which is still the norm in

would therefore argue, generally been committed to what Derrida would call the inscribing of the mark in new contexts, a process that Jeffrey Stout (1982:3) recommends as providing more various and more interesting results than a focus on what the author intended: 'Take as your frame of reference the history of Scotland, and Hume's *Dialogues* will have one "meaning". Concern yourself with dialogue as a genre, critiques of religion, or psychobiography, and it will have another.'⁶⁴ William Downes

high schools and probably in undergraduate classes as well), students are taught to respond sensitively and fully to a literary work, they are expected to detect the unique and permanent significance of the work in question (or what the teacher, representing a cultural tradition, takes this significance to be). At the same time, there is also an insistence on responsiveness as a mark of the individual *reader's* unique identity; students of literature are encouraged to develop their "own" responses, and censured if they merely reduplicate someone else's response. A student handing in an essay that largely repeated an existing critical work would not expect high praise, no matter how accurately it represented what was held to be the work's essence.' (Attridge 2004:90) Similarly: 'a literary interpretation's success means that its claims cannot be repeated' (Jackson 2003:199). See McGann (1988:105-106), Mailloux (1989), and Culler (2001:xvi-xviii) for further discussion of the persistence of this New Critical principle beyond the apparent collapse of the New Criticism.

⁶⁴ Hirsch might not disagree with Stout on this point; his real difference of opinion from the latter is in his insistence that the contextual significance of a work is in the relationship of *its author's intended meaning* to some particular context (Hirsch 1967:143). Stout refutes this by analogy: 'just as I can ask, "What is the meaning of *I do*?" when inquiring about the significance of a linguistic act in a ritual or institutional context, I can raise a question of similar form when inquiring about the significance of some text within a given frame of reference or system of relations.... For any given text, numerous contexts could in principle be deemed relevant, with the contextual significance varying accordingly.' (1982:3) Just as I can ask about the meaning of 'I do' without asking about any specific individual's intentions in uttering those words, so can I ask about the significance of a work without asking about its author's intentions. A similar point arises in Graham's (1988) critique of Skinner, discussed below.

takes this still further, writing of literary studies and its ‘institutional *exaggeration* of the property of the under-determination of interpretation by literal meaning’ (1993:125, emphasis added). These principles are combined in Derek Attridge’s conception of ‘creative reading’ as the successful apprehension of a literary work’s ‘otherness, inventiveness, and singularity’ (2004:79), where a reading is creative if it is ‘not entirely programmed by the work and the context in which it is read... even though it is a response to... text and context’ (80). For this kind of reading, the relevant context is that in which the work is read, and not that in which it was composed, but the work or mark’s mere *functioning* in this new context is not sufficient, and must be creatively extended by the reader: ‘in this sense’, a creative reading ‘might be called a necessarily unfaithful reading.’ (ibid.)

To literary criticism of this type, works are thus known as, in BeDuhn’s words, ‘linguistic resources whose meaning is constantly reconstrued in interpretation’. The key assumption that makes possible the post-New Critical mode of literary interpretation is that a literary work ‘belongs to the public’ (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946:470) and the only meanings that anyone can legitimately claim to find in a work are those that others can, through careful explanation of its wording in context of the histories of words and of literature, also be brought to see. This is what Paul Armstrong (1990) calls the requirement of ‘intersubjectivity’, and it entails a (purely) notional equality between readers: if one reader sees a work as having a meaning that, even following explanation of this sort, nobody else can see a textual basis for, then it must – at least in theory – be discounted.⁶⁵ Importantly, this must apply *even if* that reader is also the author of the

⁶⁵ That this principle is not limited to post-New Critical approaches should hardly be in doubt; indeed, something like it may even be observed outside of academic literary criticism. In the

work, because otherwise, the careful and continuous appeal to public (and preferably internal) evidence that characterizes criticism of this type would count for less than argument from authority ('I wrote it, so I should know what it means!'). Under these conditions, it is hard to see how a work could be conceived otherwise than as an entity which 'is detached from the author at birth' and which subsequently 'goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it' (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946:470). Given any specific text, the writer then becomes one reader among many, albeit an early one: 'the Dante who writes a commentary on the first canto of the *Paradiso* is merely one more of Dante's critics.' (Frye 1957:5) One of the best expressions of this state of affairs can be found in the analogy between criticism and direction. As Northrop Frye argues, the discovery of Shakespeare's 'own account of what he was trying to do in *Hamlet* would no more be a definitive criticism of that play, clearing all its puzzles up for good, than a performance of it under his direction would be a definitive performance.' (1957:6) The wording of the play is there for any reader to make sense of, just as it is there for any director to stage a production of.⁶⁶

Although there exists in literary studies the desire (as seen in Hirsch and those who have put forward similar proposals) to practise forms of historical interpretation that would return each literary work to its originary moment, the discipline's procedures emphasize (and perhaps even, as Attridge and Downes suggest, exaggerate) the continued

following chapter, we will examine a sample of non-academic interpretative discourse on a popular film; in it, the interlocutors orientate towards a closely related notion, problematic for some of them because of their commitment to an interpretation that is not widely shared.

⁶⁶ In keeping with the use Frye makes of this argument, I would insist that the same principle applies to non-dramatic works: the words of a literary text are there to be *made use of*, and, for our purposes, it matters little whether this happens in the private reading of a novel (or a play) or in the public performance of a play (or a novel).

‘functioning of the mark’ beyond that point, such that those who engage in literary studies may unapologetically reconstrue the meanings of works indefinitely (whether or not they in practice choose to do so: elsewhere, I have found that academic critics may move between the two modes [Allington 2006]). Thus, within as well as without the academy, literary works remain among those discourses ‘which give rise to a certain number of new speech-acts which take them up, transform them or speak of them... which, over and above their formulation, are said indefinitely, remain said, and are to be said again.’ (Foucault 1981:57) As will be demonstrated in Section 2.6, reception study can foreground this process by practising historical interpretation on interpretation itself, and taking for its object the reconstrual of meaning that begins with a work’s first appearance.

This method can be compared to Jorg Gracia’s (2000) approach to ‘meaning interpretations’. Like Hirsch (1967:24), Gracia argues that interpretation must *choose* its goals; unlike Hirsch, he sees many different goals as valid, and gives no special status to the goal of reconstructing authorial intention. Thus, while Hirsch rejects the idea that a work’s meaning changes over time as one that would deny us a ‘dependable glass slipper’ by which to identify the ‘real meaning’ of the work, and thus leave us with ‘no way of finding the true Cinderella among all the contenders’ (1967:46), Gracia treats attempts to discover the original meanings of a work as qualitatively similar to attempts to discover the meanings that work has had for subsequent audiences. Gracia argues that such interpretations ‘are *not* relativistic insofar as, in principle, there are criteria for determining the value of these interpretations, and these criteria are not determined by individual persons, social groups, or cultures, but rather derive from the aim of the interpretation’ (2000:54, emphasis added): if my aim is to reveal the meanings that the

works of Aristotle had in Medieval Europe, for example, then the meanings I proclaim can be judged for the understanding they facilitate of *actual* Medieval European interpretations of Aristotle. Gracia's focus on understanding and interpretation as events taking place in an unobservable mental realm may, however, make this judgement somewhat difficult to make in practice (although not more so than the application of Hirsch's equally mentalistic 'glass slipper'⁶⁷): this chapter, by contrast, focuses on the meanings literary works (specifically, *The Satanic Verses*) acquire in the 'public sphere' (specifically, of Britain in the late 1980s; see Mufti [1994] for a discussion of the same work's reception in other public spheres). It proposes a number of approaches to literary works that, for all their historicism and their concern with intentions and speech acts, respect those works' freedom from the context of their production by refusing to treat them as communications from their authors to their readers.

2.4. Literary intentions

2.4.1 Locutionary intention

Theoretical debates on authorial intention frequently concern what Skinner calls 'locutionary intention', and, where this is the case, these can take a variety of forms. Two of the main issues are the idea that the meaning of an utterance or a literary work is identical with the speaker or author's intended locutionary meaning (what Monroe Beardsley [1968] calls 'the identity thesis'), a position which is advocated by Hirsch (1968:1-27), Grice (1969), Hancher (1972, 1981), and Sperber and Wilson (1986:1-64),

⁶⁷ 'I can never know another person's intended meaning with certainty because I cannot get inside his head to compare the meaning he intends with the meaning I understand, and only by such direct comparison could I be certain that his meaning and my own are identical.' (Hirsch 1967:17)

and attacked by Beardsley (1968) and Dickie and Wilson (1995); and the idea that what a speaker or author can 'mean' by an utterance or work is limited by the conventional meanings of the words he or she uses, a possibility which is left ambiguous by Grice (1957), insisted upon by Hirsch (1968:27-31, 48-51) and Searle (1969:42-50), assumed by Grice (1969), and attacked by Hancher (1981) and Sperber and Wilson (1986:24-28).

Of these two issues, the first would seem to have very little practical consequence to literary scholars. Hirsch, for example, suggests that where a word might have more than one sense, one should try to establish (so far as is possible) which sense is appropriate, but one does not need to be an intentionalist to do this, nor even to follow the methodology he recommends: his advice that one can consider as evidence usages of the word typical of works composed at the same approximate time (1967:184) would, for example, be entirely acceptable to Wimsatt and Beardsley (1946:478), for all that his underlying *theory* would not.⁶⁸ The second issue, on the other hand, could have serious practical consequences, since rejection of the principle that 'one's meaning when one utters a sentence is more than just randomly related to what the sentence means in the language one is speaking' (Searle 1969:45) would, when combined with the 'identity thesis', imply that there was no necessary connection between what an author wrote and the meaning of what that author wrote, which would (if taken to its logical conclusion) make the interpretation of works impossible. Both Hancher (1972) and Sperber and Wilson (1986:24-26) attack Searle for this modification of Grice's (1957) account of meaning, although Grice's (1969:148) later work implies the adoption of the same

⁶⁸ Cf. Eco's structuralist methodology: 'a sensitive and responsible reader is not obliged to speculate about what happened in the head of Wordsworth when writing that verse ['A poet could not but be gay'], but has the duty to take into account the state of the lexical system at the time of Wordsworth.' (1992:68)

position as Searle. I would like to examine Hancher's argument briefly: first, since he develops it in direct reference to a problem in interpreting a literary work, and second, since the problem in question develops the argument of this chapter by suggesting the importance of *illocutionary* intention.

Hancher (1972:844) begins his case against Searle with a jibe at Wittgenstein:⁶⁹ 'At the grocer's, I can (mistakenly) *say* "Six apples, please", while *meaning* "Six tomatoes, please"', in which case, 'anyone who wanted to understand my utterance would have to know that, in uttering it, I am requesting tomatoes, not apples'. It seems to me that Hancher has already gone too far at this point: all I would be inclined to say in such a situation is that, anyone (for example the grocer) who wanted to understand what Hancher *wanted* (ie. tomatoes) would have to know that the latter had mistakenly requested something he did *not* want (ie. apples). Nonetheless, Hancher's subsequent argument about the interpretation of Robert Browning's dramatic work *Pippa Passes* deserves fuller consideration:

When Browning refers to nuns' 'twats' at the end of *Pippa Passes*, he uses the token-word to mean something like 'wimples' even though the semantic rules of English make no provision for such a use. Browning is lucky that he has been understood here; usually the penalty for a linguistic mistake of this order is blank misunderstanding, or worse. But he has been understood: we understand that the word in this passage means what he intended_A it to mean.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ "Say 'It's cold here' and *mean* 'It's warm here.'" (Wittgenstein 1968[1953]:Para. 510) Searle argues that this is possible only with "further stage setting" (1969:45).

⁷⁰ The term 'intended_A' refers to the author's intentions at the time of writing, which Hancher distinguishes from the author's intentions before writing and at the time when writing is complete.

This is an interesting example, but it does not prove Hancher's point that meaning is constrained by authorial intention rather than linguistic convention, since there are at least two other ways of approaching the problem. The first is to understand the word 'twat' as a synonym of 'wimple' in Browning's idiolect but not in the English language as a whole. This makes the meaning a matter of (admittedly idiosyncratic) convention, rather than intention, and is consistent with Wimsatt and Beardsley's position that 'the meaning of words is the history of words, and the biography of an author, his use of a word, and the associations which the word had for *him*, are part of the word's history and meaning.' (1946:477-478) Indeed, Browning's aberrant usage of the word 'twats' is recorded in that paragon study in the history of words, *The Oxford English Dictionary*. The second way to approach the problem, and the one I would favour, is simply to understand the word 'twat' as it is usually understood, ie. as a vulgar synonym of the word 'vulva', and to acknowledge that, in considering Pippa's song as a whole, readers are likely to be struck by the inappropriateness of this word's inclusion. While Hancher (1981:52) later argues that 'to interpret Browning's phrase as if it encoded the standard meaning of "twats", would be to mistake his token utterance as badly as he mistook the type meaning of the word', I would insist that it would be no less a mistake to interpret the phrase as if 'twats' *really were* a synonym of 'wimples'; the best interpretation of the word 'twats' in this context is not as a synonym of 'wimples' but as a *blunder* on the author's part. Implicit in these judgement of inappropriateness and blunder is, I would suggest, a conception of the author's intention to write Pippa's song as the dramatic monologue of a tragic innocent: an intention we infer from the fact that it would have entirely succeeded – were it not for the 'twats'.

2.4.2 Illocutionary intention

As this example shows, a statement about intention does not have to be a statement about sense and reference: it can also be a statement about the type of work we are dealing with, and about what would constitute its success and failure. Awareness of the latter kind of intention prompts John Searle (1979:66) to argue against *absolute* anti-intentionalism in literary criticism with the observation that ‘even so much as to identify a text as a novel, a poem, or even as a text is already to make a claim about the author’s intentions’. A work or text is not a natural phenomenon but something *made*, the result of human action, and to try to ignore this would, as Searle reminds us, be perverse. Similarly, Stanley Fish (1989:99-100) argues that ‘one cannot read... independently... of the assumption that one is dealing with marks or sounds produced by an intentional being, a being situated in some enterprise in relation to which he has a purpose or a point of view.’ Although they do not make the link themselves, Searle and Fish would appear to be invoking the sort of intention described by Quentin Skinner as ‘illocutionary’: not the sense and reference of the wording of a work, but the deliberate, purposive character it has when considered in relation to the human being who composed that wording. This is, then, a form of what Olsen (2004) calls ‘historical interpretation’, and involves ignoring all aspects of the signification of a work’s wording that cannot be explained in terms of a purpose with which it can be assumed to have been created. This may render it inappropriate for the aims of many literary scholars (see Subsection 2.3.3), and even for those of some historians: Keith Graham (1988) and John Keane (1988), for example, both criticise it for its wilful blindness to whatever a work’s author would also have been blind: as Graham puts it, ‘a text might have the force of expressing the aspirations of an ascendant social class in circumstances where there was barely a recognition that the class in question existed (or where, perhaps, the concept of social class was itself

unavailable).’ (153) Taken within its limits, however, the concept of illocutionary intention can, as we shall see, be a powerful tool, and it is the only form of intention which I consider to be of use in analysing literary works (as opposed to discourse on literary works; see Subsection 2.4.3 and Section 2.6).

The first point to note about illocutionary intentions is that they are *explanatory re-descriptions* of works in terms of their origins. Skinner writes that to discuss intentions of this sort is ‘to characterize what the writer may have been doing – to be able to say that he must have been intending, for example, to attack or defend a particular line of argument, to criticize or contribute to a particular tradition of discourse, and so on.’

(Skinner 1972a:404) This intentionalism is to be further distinguished from explicitly mentalist theories such as that of Sperber and Wilson (1986), since it involves *no necessary reference* to the private mental states of individual human beings. As Jason BeDuhn (2002) explains, there is no implied attempt to access ‘the actual subjective states of individuals in the past’ (88), since ‘for Skinner the “actual intention” is the position or stance of an utterance determined relative to other possible utterances in a tradition of speech acts.’ (100)

A second point to emphasize is that the illocutionary intentions with which a work was composed do not constitute a ‘message’ to be received by the reader: simply ‘to identify a text as a novel, a poem, or... as a text’ is not to have received a message from its author, and nor, I would suggest, is to identify it as (let us say) the dramatic monologue of a tragic innocent. Indeed, recognising an author’s illocutionary intentions may involve the recognition that the work *was not intended* as a communication from its author to anybody else. It could be argued that this should be the standing assumption where there is no evidence otherwise (as there will be, for example, if what we are

referring to as a work is a letter). Illocutionary intention is actively ignored in the type of criticism which approaches literary works with the assumption that they are invariably communicative, since this involves treating all works as of the same message-bearing type, regardless of the intentions with which we suppose them to have been produced: reading works of fiction, drama, and verse *as if they were* ‘texts that have imagined themselves as informational – texts that have been constructed on a sender/receiver, or transmissional, model.’ (McGann 1991:11) This can be seen in one leading advocate of the literature-as-communication school’s revealing admission that, although he considers that ‘it is as a communicator that it is most profitable to consider the artist, it is by no means true that he commonly looks upon himself in this light’ (Richards 1960[1924]:26).⁷¹ Such a statement clearly entails the recognition that it is very unlikely that an author composing a work of literature would have understood him- or herself to be engaged in communication: a point that for Skinner would disallow that his or her intention had been to communicate (1972a:406, see below).

In defining his concept of illocutionary intention, however, Skinner arguably confuses this issue by moving from utterances to works as if the transition were unproblematic, thereby suggesting that a work is a sort of utterance. For example, he writes that the question of the meaning of Machiavelli’s ‘utterance’ of the sentence, ‘Princes must learn when not to be virtuous’ is a question about ‘what Machiavelli may have been doing in

⁷¹ Richards’s suggestions for what an artist might be likely to consider himself to be doing are both vague and unworldly, eg. ‘making something which is beautiful in itself’ (ibid.). With regard to this point, Hirsch’s position is relatively close to that advocated in this paper: he argues that the intentions that an author will have had in producing ‘such formalized utterances as poems’ should be conceived less in terms of his or her personal experiences than of ‘genre conventions and limitations of which the author was very well aware’ (1967:15-16).

making this claim' (1972b:144), apparently without considering the difference between *composing a work containing this sentence* and *uttering it in conversation*. Skinner is perfectly well aware that a work is not an utterance, and elsewhere this is reflected in his analysis – he does not write that Machiavelli attacks the moral conventions of advice books to princes, for example, but that he intended his work, *The Prince*, as an attack on them (155) – but he does not theorize *works* independently of *utterances*. To do so is necessary to avoid slipping at this point into the naive communicative model against which this chapter has been written. I would therefore suggest the following reading of Skinner's example: There is a book called *The Prince* which contains certain ideas which, judged against the standards of a genre to which we have reason for taking it to belong (that of advice books to princes), seem rather scandalous; since we know that the appearance of this book was not 'a strange and miraculous event with no connection whatsoever to human history' (BeDuhn 2002:95), we read it in terms of (to quote Fish) an 'intentional being', Machiavelli, 'situated in' the 'enterprise' of the writing of a book of that particular genre, 'in relation to which he has a purpose' – which, given the ideas in the book and the moral conventions of the genre, we take to have been that of attacking the genre's moral conventions. My point is that it is not really an action that we interpret, but a work, conceived in relation to its author: the author's action was not, strictly speaking, to attack anything, but to have put together a composition some of whose characteristics are conventional for a genre (permitting it to be identified as participating in that genre) and some of whose characteristics are anticonventional for that same genre. The meaning of the sentence, 'Princes must learn when not to be virtuous', in other words, is probably best conceived *not* in terms of what Machiavelli was doing in uttering it (if, indeed, he can be said to have uttered it), but in terms of its

relation to generic conventions: a relation the explanation for which is a purpose that we ascribe to Machiavelli and somewhat metaphorically call 'attack'.

The usefulness of Skinner's conception of illocutionary intention becomes all the more apparent when debates on the intentional fallacy are re-appraised in its light. An instructive example of this can be found in Noël Carroll's (1997) debate with Dickie and Wilson (1995). In the course of presenting their anti-intentionalist case, Dickie and Wilson admit that there are situations where one's goal in conversation may be to understand a speaker's intentions, to wit, when the meaning (ie. the sense and reference) of a speaker's utterances is puzzling or unclear, but they argue that such cases are exceptional (1995:246).⁷² Carroll picks up on this admission by arguing that though this may be the exception when we are dealing with conversational utterances, it is something very like the rule when we deal with works of art: it is, he states, 'a standard characteristic of artworks... that they often come with features that are unusual, puzzling, initially mysterious or disconcerting' (1997:307). Although Carroll's suggestion is that we respond to what is puzzling in artworks precisely as we do to what is puzzling in what he calls 'everyday conversations', ie. by trying to grasp the intended sense and reference, his argument invokes the specificity of artworks, and therefore the possibility that what is puzzling in them plays a specific role and is responded to differently. My

⁷² This is fairly intuitive. A relative of mine who spoke poor German quite often mistakenly initiated social interactions with the words 'Danke schön': where this was successful, we could quite reasonably say that her interlocutor had recognised her intention to greet him or her, but there would be something quite strange about saying this if her utterance had been the more conventional 'Guten Tag'. *Pace* BeDuhn, I would suggest that this is because it is only in those cases where we do *not* apply 'the working assumption that the speaker knows what he or she is doing' (2002:95) – or where we apply it, but acknowledge either our *own* or our *audience's* ignorance in this matter – that we employ 'the language of intention' (*ibid.*).

suggestion is that the presence of such puzzling elements in artworks is in fact conventional (as is suggested by the phrase ‘standard characteristic’), and indeed Carroll seems to recognize this in referring to them as ‘the sort of artistic innovations and defamiliarizations that we expect from avant garde novelists’ (ibid): not only can he put them into conventional categories (‘innovations and defamiliarisations’), he knows to ‘expect’ them in particular types of literary work. Carroll, however, resists any suggestion that these features are conventional, arguing that because they ‘defy, redefine, or complicate standing conventions, we do not explicate them by applying meaning conventions, but we ask ourselves what the artists in question intend to mean by them.’ (ibid.) If we look at this from the point of illocutionary intention, however, we can simply recognize the author’s intention to write a literary work of a type (the avant garde novel) that is conventionally defined by innovations and defamiliarizations – and, moreover, we can note that these innovations and defamiliarizations are what they are by virtue of their defiance, redefinition, and complication of “standing conventions”, ie. that they are recognisable for what they are in relation to those conventions. This approach will remain closed to Carroll so long as he assumes that intended and conventional meaning are opposed; according to Skinner, they are not, because intentions are conventional:

even if S can in principle conceive, he cannot in practice communicate an intention which is not already conventional in the sense of being capable of being understood, executed in the way S intends, as being a case of that intention.... If S’s speech act is also an act of social and linguistic innovation which S nevertheless intends, or at least hopes, will be understood, the act must necessarily, and for that reason, take the form of an extension or criticism of

some existing attitude or project which is already convention-governed and understood.

Skinner 1970:135

Skinner's hermeneutic methodology is therefore to assume that 'whatever intentions a given writer may have, they must be conventional intentions in the strong sense that they must be recognisable *as* intentions' and that in order 'to understand what any given writer may have been *doing*... we need first of all to grasp the nature and range of things that could recognisably have been done... at that particular time.' (1972a:406) As his interest lies in the study of works of political philosophy such as Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Skinner is interested in understanding, for example, what positions could recognisably have been argued for or against through particular uses of particular concepts. To apply his methodology to the study of literature whilst respecting the specificity of literature (ie. without studying it as political philosophy) would involve a historical study of the intentions that would have been recognisable for people engaged in the writing of literary works: something that would arguably amount to a *history of literary purposes* (see Footnote 4). Suppose we tried 'to grasp the nature and range of things that could recognisably have been done' in the late 20th century by means of the 'outlandish, enigmatic events, irrational character motivations, unusual metaphors, oxymoronic sentences and sentence fragments, as well as the gaping narrative ellipses' that Carroll (1997:307) finds in Kathy Acker's novel *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, then (if

Carroll's own intuitions are correct) we might well discover that one of those things was the putting together of an 'avant garde novel'.⁷³

This approach to intentions can be refined through a consideration of arguments put forward by the philosopher Gilbert Ryle, in particular his use of 'thick' description as a means of analysing actions that would be, from a strictly physical point of view, indistinguishable (1990[1971]). Although 'thick' description has, following Clifford Geertz's (1993[1973]) influential appropriation of the concept, been regarded as a method in anthropology, its initial use was in Ryle's demonstration that 'thinking' is not the carrying out of a particular brain activity, and in other related arguments. Ryle best defined 'thick' description by example, particularly in his discussion of winking (1990[1971]:480-483), made famous by Geertz (1993[1973]:6-7): 'winking' is the 'thick' description of an action to which could also be applied the 'thin' description of 'contracting the eyelids'. Moving on to still thicker descriptions, Ryle observes that covertly signalling to an accomplice by contracting the eyelids is not the same as pretending to do so, nor the same as parodying somebody else doing so, nor the same as rehearsing such a parody, even though the very same 'thin description' could apply in each of these four cases.

What distinguishes between these actions must be the intentionality of the eyelid-contraction, but not in any mentalist sense: not, in other words, because the eyelid-contraction is accompanied or preceded in each case by different mental activities (even though it might be true that this does actually happen), since this would (for example)

⁷³ Hirsch's (1967:71-126) meditations on genre are very interesting in this regard, although I find his repeated insistence on the authorial *will* as the determinant of genre highly unconvincing, particularly since his own arguments for the defining importance of will relate to meaning (1-23).

contradict Ryle's account of what it is for someone to have been 'thinking what he was doing' when speaking. Ryle argues that, where this has happened, the 'bits of uttering were not accompanied by or interspersed with bits of something else [ie. thinking] that he was also doing [as well as speaking]; or if they were, as they often are, it was not for these accompaniments that he qualified as thinking what he was saying.'

(1990[1971]:468) Rather, 'if a person spontaneously initiates or embarks on something... and if he does the thing with some degree of care to avoid and correct faults and failures, and if, finally, he learns something as he goes along from his failures and successes, difficulties and facilities, he can claim and we shall allow that he has been thinking what he was doing.' (ibid.)

For the same behaviour to be carried out with two different intentions is, on this analysis, for it to be carried out under different success/failure conditions: to return to the example of winking, a covert signal fails if it is spotted by a third party, but a parody fails if its irony is missed. This notion of success/failure conditions has clear bearing on the literary works that result from authors' actions, since the evaluation of literature is one of the tasks of criticism. As we shall see, Hirsch (1967) assumes that evaluation is a matter of judging the correspondence between planned and actual effects, and so locates the object of evaluation *outside* the text, but the Rylean analysis proposed here suggests a different approach that recalls one of Wimsatt and Beardsley's aphorisms: 'Judging a poem is like judging a pudding or a machine. One demands that it work.' (1946:469) A soufflé will be evaluated differently than a pancake, a hairdryer differently than a blowtorch, and a lament differently than a lampoon, not because of inferences about their creators' mental states, but because the conventions by which they are recognisable as particular kinds of things include or imply the conditions for their success or failure as the kinds of things as which they have been recognized. To recognize a milk-and-egg-

based substance that has collapsed below the rim of the dish in which it was baked as a ‘soufflé’ is to understand as pertaining to it certain success/failure conditions under which the act of its creation will be deemed to have failed. To recognize an arrangement of words as a ‘lampoon’ is to acknowledge that it will only have succeeded as such if it represents some real individual in such a way as to make him or her look ridiculous.⁷⁴

This form of intention is clearly at issue for the following readers: a group of gay men who meet every month in a gay pub to discuss books ‘of gay interest’ (here, *My Lucky Star* by Joe Keenan, which they are comparing to *Parallel Lies* by Stella Duffy). The interaction has some very interesting interpersonal features, but I shall focus here only the relationship of what they say to the ideas discussed in this section. The transcript has been broken up to facilitate the insertion comments, with some material cut to save space.

⁷⁴ Hirsch employs something very like these notions of illocutionary intention and success/failure conditions in deciding which word an author intended to use in a work: ‘it is in general very likely that a medieval homilist would be hostile to the pagan gods... it is usual that a homilist would not confuse matters by making his judgements only halfheartedly pejorative’ (1967:187). The assumption Hirsch makes here is, of course, that the author in question would have written a work that would be deemed successful. What is most interesting for the purposes of this paper, however, is that these *entirely conventional* intentions and conditions *amount to the whole of* ‘authorial intention’ in this case. Compare BeDuhn’s (2002:100-101) observations on the interpretation of anonymous and pseudonymous literature: ‘we extrapolate a model of the author as a convenience... “Actual intentions” are positions within this model, not mental states or events in a dead writer.’ There may be a parallel in Eco’s notion of the text’s, rather than the author’s, intentions: ‘[in interpreting a verse by an unidentified author] I am not speculating about the author’s intentions but about the text’s intention, or about the intention of that Model Author that I am able to recognise in terms of textual strategy.’ (1992:69)

As this extract begins, the group have been talking about how ‘interesting’, ‘charming’, and ‘fantastic’ Stella Duffy had been in person when she came to read from her book, but also about how ‘dreadful’ that book was – one even called it ‘drivel’, although two claimed to have heard that ‘her other books are much better’, and a third leaned across to me and said ‘I enjoyed the book’.

S1 okay well . the one that [sh- th- th-
S8 [that's "Parallel Lies" it's it's a
very similar sort of [book it's the same
S1 [it is
well=
S8 =[it's s-
S2 [it's much drier though=
S8 =s- same [area
S1 [it's a simi- it's similar subject matter [but=
S2 [it's not so cram-packed
S [yeah
S1 =I think told with a from a very different [perspective
S8 [and the
storyline is about as
S1 about a [lesbian [yeah
S8 [about as convincing as (laughing) [this one
S1 well absolutely but it's . but the thing is
[that book is meant to be convincing this mean- this=
S8 [this one's funny
S1 =one's meant to be [funny
S7 [it's funny okay yeah=
S1 =[yeah . but
S2 [that wasn't . it had humour in it . it wasn't .
[essentially a comedy though
S1 [no
no it wasn't

The first thing to note is the implied perception of each work in terms of its similarities to and differences from other more and less similar works to be found in the intertextual

field in which it is embedded (another such work is mentioned below). It is close (if not identical) to the mode of reading that Thomas Roberts (1990) associates with genre fiction, and resembles what Stanley Fish suggests is the typical eighteenth century commentator's approach to literature, in which each work was understood not as a mysterious and iconic artefact whose meaning must be teased out but as 'a poetic performance... judged against the background of past performances of a similar kind.' (1995:27)⁷⁵ Above all, neither *My Lucky Star* nor *Parallel Lies* is being discussed as a

⁷⁵ Note the knowledge of genre necessary to discuss texts in this way: a specific cultural competence. In their study of *Dallas* audiences, in which they also argue that American audiences will have had the greatest exposure to the genre of soap opera (see Chapter 1 for further discussion), Liebes and Katz make the following observation: 'Apart from identifying *Dallas* as a soap opera, there is occasional awareness of the way in which *Dallas* is not a soap opera. The Americans specialise in these nuances, emphasising that *Dallas* is in prime time, and that the leading character, in his devil-like surrealism, is somehow different from soap opera characters.... Comparisons are made between *Dallas* and successors such as *Dynasty*, in character delineation, geographic location, dramatic inventions, and rhythm.' (1991[1989]:214) To discuss (say) *Lycidas* in this way would be far beyond the abilities of most twenty-first century readers, since *extensive* knowledge of seventeenth century poetic genres is immensely time-consuming to acquire (arguably representing a particularly rarified form of cultural capital, fructifiable in the rewards of an academic appointment in Early Modern Literature). This may to some extent explain the persistence of post-New Critical approaches to pedagogy, since it is arguably more efficient to teach universally-applicable hermeneutic procedures (eg. Brooks 1968[1947]) – particularly if they can be boiled down to checklists (eg. Short 1996) – than to attempt to impart detailed knowledge of genres the great majority of whose constituent works are non-canonical (and therefore, at least from the point of view of curricula aiming to acquaint students with the 'most important' works of the 'most important' authors of all periods in a supposed cultural heritage [see Van Dijk 1979, Readings 1996], superfluous). With regard to the literatures of the past, therefore, 'reading-by-genre' is likely to remain the province of experts and PhD students

‘singularity’ (Attridge 2004; see Chapter 1 of the current study) – there is no suggestion in these readers’ discourse that reading these novels would involve a creative encounter with the Other; instead, the books are represented as operating entirely within the limits of the known.

Firstly, these two works of fiction are found to be similar in terms of their ‘subject matter’ but different in terms of their tone; secondly, they are found similar in that neither of them is ‘convincing’, but found different in that only one of them is ‘meant to be convincing’. As with the pancake/soufflé example above, these judgements appeal to the intentional nature of the two works’ creation – as too with the pancake/soufflé example, this is not a matter of the creator’s past mental states but of the conditions that constitute success and failure for each conventional type of creation. Unconvincingness is considered one of the failings of *Parallel Lies* because, even though – as S2, the speaker who stated that he had enjoyed that novel, says – it ‘had humour in it’, it was not – as S2 admits – ‘essentially a comedy’. Quite a large proportion of the group expressed a strong dislike for *My Lucky Star*, but a consensus seems to arise that unconvincingness cannot be one of that book’s failings, since it is of a type that would not *have* to be convincing to succeed (whether or not it actually does). This point is taken further in the following extract, which follows a quick recap of *Parallel Lies* between S1, S8, and S2:

(see Roberts 1990), with taught postgraduate and advanced undergraduate courses providing a sort of halfway stage at which the focus is still on a relatively small group of authors and works that are, however, encouraged to be seen as representative of larger genres (see Bortolussi and Dixon [1996] for an experiment appearing to confirm the effectiveness of this pedagogical approach).

S1 yeah yeah [so
S6 [but it . with this book I mean . the only thing
in . you could say for the author . he doesn't sort of say .
"this is a serious [book"
S7 [no=
S1 =no=
S6 =and so you I mean in . and in a way he may actually find it
a little bit absurd [that we're actually talking about=
S1 [mn
S6 =a book [that he [but i-
S8 [I think that's why that's why it'[s . it's
enjoyable=
S7 =that's e[xactly it
S6 [I think yeah
S8 if he had . m- [made it serious . it I mean it would've=
S [ch-
S8 =been drivel but it's=
S7 =yeah

S6 has earlier been very disparaging about *My Lucky Star*, and what he says here comes as a concession prompted by the preceding interchange about what the book is 'meant to' be ('the only thing... you could say for the author' is a very small concession, however). What he refers to in his mention of what the author 'sort of say[s]' is not the contents of Joe Keenan's mind at the time of writing but the novel's generic signposting: S6 certainly regards this signposting as deliberate, as when he suggests that Keenan might 'find it absurd' that the group are – in having a serious discussion about his novel – putting it to a use for which it was not designed and to which it is not suited.

S8 develops the point made above: *My Lucky Star* would be a failure – would not be 'enjoyable' – if Keenan 'had made it serious', ie. had written it in such a way that it would be identified as a serious book rather than a 'comedy'. That this is what S8 regards as having happened with *Parallel Lies* is emphasised by his use of the word

‘drivel’, which he had earlier used to describe that book. A book that is ‘meant to be convincing’ is a book that is ‘made... serious’. Interestingly, the conversation moves immediately into a more detailed discussion of conventional kinds – here, of humour – and of *My Lucky Star*’s positioning in relation to those kinds:

S2 [quite aside from the comedy there’re different kinds of=
S1 [I think
S2 =comedy there’s really bi- . biting dark . comed[y
S [yeah=
S1 =mn=
S2 there’s really mordant . ugly y’know . his is very amiable .
it’s sort of “like me please”
S1 yeah [but I I [th-
S2 [comedy
S7 [it’s very gay comedy
S oh [oh yeah=
S1 [it is
S2 =it is very gay but it’s [also
S7 [yeah which we get, well I get
S2 he’s is very [genial you can tell he tell he wants you to=
S7 [s- sarcastic * *
S2 =like him
S1 mn yeah
S2 and the character the that [speaks in the first person

Speaking over the top of each other, S7 and S2 define two specific conventional types of comedy into which *My Lucky Star* falls: ‘genial’ or ‘amiable’ comedy (defined here by its difference from ‘biting dark’ and ‘mordant ugly’ comedy) and ‘very gay comedy’ (defined here by being ‘sarcastic’). Intention is again invoked, here by S2 and in relation to the idea of ‘genial’ comedy: he states that the author ‘wants you to like him and the character... that speaks in the first person’. But what does this mean, and how is it that ‘you can tell’? S2 is drawing on the cultural knowledge that this is the type of humour that speakers use in order to make their hearers like them, such that using this type of

humour is hearably equivalent to saying ‘like me please’. This leads back into direct comparisons with *Parallel Lies* (note that the last line of the above is repeated in order to make the overlap clear):

S2 and the character the that [speaks in the first person
S7 [yeah
S1 [but but I th- I think I think
from this . I think this book makes all the s- same points
that Stella Duffy’s book was making but but but because it’s
. but because it’s . it’s . I gue- I think a more
interesting book . it can it makes them better even though
it’s a comedy
S7 this one?
S1 yeah=
S =yeah=
S1 =yeah
S2 [although I think her book reads a little more=
S [* *
S2 seriously [because she doesn’t try to pack it . I mean=
S [it does
S2 =there’s=
S1 =aha=
S2 =humour in it but she doesn’t try to pack it . [so choc=
S1 [yeah
S2 =a bloc [with jokes and . every line with description is=
S1 [yeah
S2 =meant to be [funny and
S1 [but it’s not about it’s not meant to be about
S2 yeah I know
S1 jokes . uhm
S7 yeah
S8 has anybody read uh . “California Dreaming”?

Here S2 is explicit about what makes *My Lucky Star*, unlike *Parallel Lies*, ‘essentially a comedy’: it is packed with jokes to the extent that ‘every line with description is meant

to be funny' – *meant* to be funny in the sense that (being 'pack[ed]' with what are recognisable as 'jokes') it will be a failure if it is not funny and a success if it is.

Although S2 consistently advocates *My Lucky Star* throughout the discussion, he could be regarded as criticising it slightly in comparison to *Parallel Lies*: there is a suggestion of tiresomeness about the phrase 'choc-a-bloc with jokes', and he does not state that 'every line with description' in the former actually *is* 'funny'. Perhaps in emphasising the humorous content of *Parallel Lies* he is implying that, like *My Lucky Star*, it does not need to be 'convincing' to succeed, and in emphasising the (possibly overdone) 'pack[ing]' of the latter with jokes, he is suggesting that the less overt nature of the former's humour should count in its favour. He does not press the point, however, and S8 brings up a third book likewise identified as relevantly similar to *My Lucky Star*, thus shifting the topic away from *Parallel Lies*.

On the view that I have been developing here, an author may have ideas about his or her intentions in writing a work, but these are to be given no priority over the ideas of anyone else who is literate in the conventions of the genres in which it participates. *My Lucky Star* is 'essentially a comedy' because it is 'choc-a-bloc' with recognisable attempts at humour, and that is all we need to know: we do not need any information about the author's mental states, because it is no more possible that anyone could *accidentally* compose such a work than that they could *accidentally* make a grandfather clock. It is because we know this that we may say that its composition as a work of a particular kind was an act of the author's will, and attribute its successes and failures as such a work to his or her efforts, calculations, and abilities. But we say this and do this because it *is* a work of a particular kind, and not (as Hirsch [1967] would have it) the other way around. And this is why it is possible to 'discount a writer's own statements about his... intentions' (Skinner 1972a:405), this being 'only to make the (perhaps rather

dramatic, but certainly conceivable) claim that the writer himself may have been self-deceiving about recognising his intentions, or incompetent at stating them. And this seems to be perennially possible in the case of any complex human action.’ These particular readers, fully literate in the conventions of contemporary gay fiction, would be unlikely to take Joe Keenan seriously if he stated that *My Lucky Star* was a serious book: indeed, they might even regard such a statement as a rather good joke.

2.4.3 Perlocutionary intention

Having defined perlocutionary intention, Skinner argues that it requires no further attention, since the question of whether or not the author of a work intended it to induce, eg. sadness, can be ‘settled (if at all) only by considering the work itself’ (1972:403), and in any case ‘does not seem to be a question about the meaning of his [ie. the author’s] works so much as about the success or failure of the work’s structure of effects.’ (ibid.) Following my arguments above, I would suggest that Skinner is at this point failing to distinguish adequately between illocutionary and perlocutionary intentions, since it is on the basis of an *illocutionary* intention recognized through ‘considering the work itself’ that a given ‘structure of effects’ will constitute ‘success or failure’. A more clearly perlocutionary intention is invoked in Hirsch’s (1967:12) argument that an author’s intention for a work to induce a particular emotion in those who read it constitutes the meaning of that work even if the emotion is not, in fact, induced – although he gives no clue as to how such an intention could ever be known. Questions of perlocutionary intention are, I think, fundamentally questions of the author’s *responsibility* for whatever are presumed to be the effects of the work, for example in the sense of the emotions experienced by those who read it, in the sense of its influence on subsequent literary work, or in the sense of the political consequences

ensuing from its publication – and, as we shall see with regard to *The Satanic Verses*, the first and third senses may be interlinked.

It is thus perlocutionary intention that Lena Jayyusi (1992) analyses as one among several ‘critical parameters for the moral constitution, assessment, and description of actions and events’ (1993:442). In discourse that invokes it, Jayyusi discerns what she (somewhat metaphorically) calls a ‘logical grammar’:

the grammar of ‘action’ accounts is a logical grammar of ‘intention’, ‘knowledge’, and ‘outcome’. What ‘action’ attribution or description is given or used in any particular context, then, depends on and projects a particular ‘composite’ or ‘conjuncture’ of these three action parameters.

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‘Murder’ is a good example of such an action description. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘murder’ (sense A. 1a) as ‘[t]he deliberate and unlawful killing of a human being, esp. in a premeditated manner’ (draft revision, Dec. 2007); thus, to describe an incident as murder is to credit that incident with an outcome (a human being has been killed), to credit someone responsible for the incident with an intention (killed *deliberately*), and perhaps also to invoke the knowledge of that responsible person (since premeditation at least suggests that this person knew what he or she was doing). Conversely, the appropriateness of the description ‘murder’ can be contested by challenging any or all of these parameters: for example, ‘He was already ill, and that’s what finished him off’, ‘I only meant to frighten him’, or ‘I didn’t know the gun was loaded’.

To consider a person's speech as an action may involve judging the speech by the speaker or the speaker by the speech (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969[1958]:316-321), and it seems to have become vital to the concept of an 'author' that he or she should be held in an analogous relation of responsibility to his or her writing (Foucault 1987[1970]). Thus, we can reasonably apply Jayyusi's framework to the analysis of discussions of literature, expecting the attribution of knowledge and intentions to the author of a work, combined with the attribution of outcomes to the writing, publishing, or reading of the work, to form parameters in the representation of author, work, and readers by the attributor. For example, if I were to claim that the publishing of *Capital* had a negative *outcome* (Stalinism), but that Karl Marx could not have *known* that this would occur, then this might form part of an apologia for Marx, but if I were to claim that a poem was written to stir its readers with an emotion that it does not actually inspire (ie. that its *outcome*, in the form of the readers' emotional response, does not match the poet's *intention*), then this might function to denigrate both poem and poet (as in Hirsch's [1967:12] invented example). To finish with a real example, to say that a body of works 'resonates with themes that consistently inspire later generations of writers' (Shire 2006:377) is unmistakably to commend both it and its creator by crediting the former's appearance with this positive outcome.

These simple examples showcase entirely ordinary ways of talking about literary texts that we shall see more of in section 2.7; and, whether or not one subscribes to the forms of literary criticism that institutionalize them, they are extremely difficult to avoid, for the simple reason that they are so familiar and so useful. One does not have to be a reader response critic to say of a book, 'It left me cold' (invoking the outcome of reading), any more than one would have to be an intentionalist to call it 'unintentionally hilarious' (invoking the author's intentions). Though invocations of intention and

outcome may be much more principled and regularized in academic literary criticism than in everyday discourse, they should not be reified by hermeneutic theory, for instance by supposing them to be *hypotheses* regarding the *actual* mental states of authors and readers (as in Gracia 2000). Having considered the ways in which concepts of intention might be employed in the understanding of literature and of discourse on literature without assuming literary works to *communicate* those intentions to their readers, I would now like to enter into a parallel discussion of a different approach to utterances: speech act theory.

2.5. Literary speech acts

2.5.1 Speech act theories of literature, and literary theories of speech acts

Speech act theory has long found literature problematic, in that it is hard to place literary texts into its framework of illocutions and perlocutions (Austin 1962:104; Searle 1979:74-75). It has at the same time, however, aroused great interest in literary theory, perhaps because ‘the subject of speech act theory is the contribution that contextual factors make to the significance of a piece of discourse, and this would also constitute a fair definition of much literary criticism’ (Gorman 1999:94). As an approach to literary interpretation, it suffers from some of the same problems as intentionalism, since it focuses on the literary work as a sequence of sentences uttered by the author (see for example Searle’s [1979:58-75] discussion of fiction), rather than as an entity detached from its author and going about the world independently of him or her. For this reason, speech act theory as known within criticism sometimes seems to bear little resemblance to speech act theory as known within philosophy, which David Gorman (1999) ascribes to literary critics’ ignorance of the philosophical tradition in which Austin worked, but

which I would prefer to explain more charitably, in terms of critics' having read Austin for those aspects of his work which seemed to have a bearing on their own practice: to employ the curiously bucolic imagery of Petrey's (2000:425) response to Gorman, they have found in fragments of Austin's lectures suggestive 'avenues' of thought down which they have subsequently 'gambolled... with endless delight'.

A telling explanation of speech act theory's literary appeal can be found in Jonathan Culler's observation that 'literary criticism involves attending to what literary language *does* as much as to what it *says*' (2000:506, emphasis in original), and that 'the concept of the performative *seems to provide* a linguistic and philosophical justification for this idea' (ibid., emphasis added). If this is accepted, then the delighted gambolling of literary critics may be seen to have less to do with any sense in which literary texts *are* speech acts than with its frequently being, for the purposes of literary criticism, productive to talk or write about them *as if they were*. But this is not all that Culler's explanation reveals, since it also implies an understanding of the term 'speech act' that would seem peculiar to literary criticism. Language, literary or otherwise, does not *do* anything, and this is presupposed by Austin's speech act lectures, published not as *How words do things* but as *How to do things with words*.⁷⁶ However, post-New Critical literary criticism is (as Culler's pronouncement makes clear) founded on the contrary presumption that works do and say what they do independently of their authors, and, though the standard critical usage of speech act theory may have been to 'provide a linguistic and philosophical justification' for forms of interpretation for which this is the starting point,⁷⁷ the use to which Austinian ideas seem best suited is, as BeDuhn puts it,

⁷⁶ Cf. Searle: 'speech acts are performed by speakers in uttering words, not by words.' (1969:28)

⁷⁷ The choice Culler presents is between language the sayer and language the doer; the *writer* of that language is ignored. Compare Petrey's contrast between deconstruction and speech act theory: 'One

‘to bring speakers and writers into some sort of relation to the speech acts which flow from their mouth or pen’ (2002:95). I do not think (against my own arguments in the preceding sections) that the independence of a literary work from its author is a fantasy: though ignored by speech act theory, it is as real as a speech act’s dependence on the human agent who carries it out. But I do think that attempts to apply speech act theory to literary interpretation have often suffered because of a failure to recognize the essential mismatch between a philosophy concerned with the *act of utterance* and “the modern hermeneutical tradition in which text is not something we *make* but something we *interpret*.” (McGann 1991:4).

This mismatch is at its most pronounced when it comes to the literary critical focus on outcomes (as discussed at the end of the previous section). Austin referred to poetry as one among several ‘parasitic uses of language’, in which there is ‘no attempt made at a standard perlocutionary act, no attempt to make you do anything, as Walt Whitman does not seriously incite the eagle of liberty to soar.’ (1962:104) The sentences of which literary works are composed may thus *resemble* utterances that might perform particular speech acts, but the people who wrote them seem not to have done so in the attempt to bring about the standard perlocutions of those acts. As I see it, critical theory has had three problems with this aspect of Austin’s thought.

One of the most celebrated is Jacques Derrida’s (1977a) charge of phonocentrism with regard to this exclusion of ‘parasitic uses of language’: that ‘[i]t is as just such a ‘parasite’ that writing has always been treated by the philosophical tradition’ (190).

There is not much to say about this, except that it is correct, though possibly beside the

method concentrates on *the things language does* by virtue of its nature, the other on *the things it does* by virtue of its conventional context’ (1990:164, emphasis added).

point: speech act theory is, as its name suggests, unapologetically phonocentric. It is not a theory of language, nor of written language, nor even of the act of writing. It is a theory of signalling, with speech as its paradigm: a theory that describes the issuing of signals from individuals and their direction towards other individuals, where this is all assumed to take place within a determinate context. Such signals may take the form of written texts, but speech act theory will have nothing to say about them from the moment they start behaving like Fromkin et al's 'sentence on a slip of paper' (above). All that speech act theory can enquire about is the nature of the texts' issuing as signals, and this is what Austin does when he notices (above) that Whitman's verse does not appear to have been issued with the force of a 'standard perlocutionary act'. Similarly, when Searle (1969:58-75) discusses 'The logical status of fictional discourse', what he is enquiring into is not fiction, nor the language of fiction, but the issuing of the sentences inscribed in texts of fictional works: the issuing of assertion-like sentences, for example, to whose truth the issuer is not by their issuing committed.

The explanation that Searle was to adopt, and which is, I would suggest, already implicit in Austin's formulation ('does not *seriously* incite'), is that the illocutions are pretended: that, just as he or she might *pretend* to hit someone by *actually* moving his or her arm, '[t]he author pretends to perform illocutionary acts by way of actually uttering (writing) sentences.... the *illocutionary act* is pretended but the *utterance act* is real.' (Searle 1979:68) From the point of view of speech act theory (understood as a theory of the issuing of signals), this is, I think, entirely acceptable. From the point of view of literary theory, to which (as we have seen) literary works are known as entities independent of their authors, and in which such notions as authorial or narrative voice are recognized as tremendously unstable (see Barthes 1997[1967]), it is likely to seem naive, and this is the second problem that critical theory has had with speech act theory. Accordingly,

some literary theorists have recast this aspect of speech act theory in terms of *mimesis* (which is seen as a property of the *work*), rather than *pretence* (seen as an action of the author's). Thus, Richard Ohmann (1971), and subsequently Mary Louise Pratt (1977), conceive of literature as *mimetic* of real speech acts. Although these conceptions are interesting, they fail to provide the 'definition of literature' or 'theory of literary discourse' that the titles of Ohmann and Pratt's works promise, largely because of the inadequacy of speech act theory to any such task. Ohmann, for example, suggests that 'a literary work *purportedly imitates*... a series of speech acts, which in fact have no other existence', and that '[b]y doing so, it leads the reader to imagine a speaker, a situation, a set of ancillary events, and so on.' (1971:14) But does the poem to which Austin alludes lead the reader to imagine a speaker who *seriously* addresses the eagle of liberty? I think not. And very often, it is difficult to imagine any form of speech act that a literary work might be imitating. Pratt (1977) proposes a new speech act for this very purpose: the 'written narrative display text', her sole example of a real one being Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. This enables her to define novels as '(imitation) written narrative display texts' (207). Thus, a novel is an imitation of the real narrative display text that would be written in a world where the events of the novel were not fictional but true. However this solution relies upon the assumption that a narrative must narrate real events if it is to be a real narrative. Without this arbitrary rule, there is no sense in which the novel *as such* is an imitation of anything (even of something imaginary).⁷⁸ This is not to deny the importance of imitation to novelistic texts: dialogue may be mimetic of real speech, for

⁷⁸ There are, of course, particular novels written in this way, such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, which imitates a historical document produced in an imaginary future reality. But this is a specific case of literary style, and not a general rule for literature or even fiction as a whole – and the work imitated does not have to be factual. Norman Spinrad's *The Iron Dream*, for example, imitates a work of fiction written in an imaginary past reality.

example, and a novel may imitate other novels, pastiche other forms of text, and incorporate elements of ‘skaz’ into the narration in order to suggest (through limited and conventionalized imitation of spoken language) that it records an oral narrative.

However, as Culler (1988:214) argues, even ‘in the case of novels with distinctive first person narrators – the case for which the theory [of literary text as imitation speech act] is explicitly designed – one often finds not an imitation of a real world speech act but a quite fantastic speech situation and mode of utterance.’⁷⁹ The obvious solution to this particular problem is to see literary texts not as imitation speech acts but as real ones, which Culler does when he argues that *any* written narrative display text is a real one (1988:211). But this leaves speech act theory with nothing to say about literature, other than that it is a special case.⁸⁰

The third major problem with Austin’s formulation, as seen from a literary point of view, is that it has been taken to imply that the issuing of a literary work is a speech act without effects. Literary studies is committed to literature as aesthetic experience (recall

⁷⁹ The problem here is not so much that the narration, taken for speech, would appear ‘fantastic’ – after all, there is much in literature that appears fantastic – but that Ohmann’s general rule – that a literary work ‘leads the reader to imagine a speaker, a situation, a set of ancillary events, and so on’ – seems only to apply to the kinds of narrative to which Culler refers, and even there, raises questions. It is possible that, in those cases, the use of speech act theory might help to explain *what* about the speech situations evoked seems so fantastic. But this would not constitute a theory or definition of literature, only the analysis of a particular stylistic effect.

⁸⁰ Whether it is useful for speech act theory is another matter. Searle (1979:63-64) rejects, but does not refute, the notion that there is a ‘class of illocutionary acts’ that includes ‘writing stories, novels, poems, plays, etc’. I will be proposing (below) an illocutionary act that to some extent corresponds to this, but it bears on a different problem than the one that Searle is discussing (ie. the problem of the ‘seriousness’ or ‘non-seriousness’ of the illocutionary acts apparently carried out in *writing* the sentences of a work of literature).

Olsen's conception of literary interpretation),⁸¹ and this has made it seem obvious to some theorists that there is, in literature, an attempt to make you do something: when one issues a literary work, one attempts to make those who read it undergo the experience of interpreting it. Thus, Stanley Fish (1982:706) protests that 'the reading or hearing of any play or poem involves the making of judgements, the reaching of decisions, the forming of attitudes, the registering of approval and disapproval, the feeling of empathy or distaste, and a hundred other things that are as much perlocutionary effects as the most overt of physical movements.' Petrey (1990:52) makes much the same argument, though he identifies the effect as illocutionary rather than perlocutionary:

Agreed that I don't do what Donne orders when I read his injunction to go and catch a falling star or get with child a mandrake root, but why does that mean the *absence* of conventions rather than the *presence* of the conventions defining literary language? Those literary conventions would, say, invite me to *interpret* Donne's imperative rather than *execute* it, through social processes identical in kind to those that invite an infantryman to execute a sergeant's imperative rather than interpret it.

Thus, there are countless works that have been made the object of literary study, many of which are very complicated and many of which are very long, but the issuing of each of these diverse linguistic formulations was always the same illocutionary (or perlocutionary) act: in issuing a work, an author invites (or induces) everyone who comes into contact with that work, everywhere and for all time, to interpret it. To incorporate such effects – occurring as they do not in the context of issuing but in *every*

⁸¹ See McGann (1988:38-39) on the Kantian origins of this commitment.

single context of reception – into something as phonocentric as speech act theory, we would need to assume that literary works ‘move through space and time’ not ‘“speaker”-less and addressee-less’ like Fromkin et al’s ‘sentence on a slip of paper’ (above), but followed everywhere by virtual speakers and finding addressees in everyone who lays eyes on them. But this extravagance is unnecessary, since Fish and Petrey’s arguments really do no more than to formulate, in the terms of speech act theory, the standing assumption in literary studies that works of literature are there to be interpreted: it is not the conventions of utterance but the conventions of reception that produce such effects, which cannot therefore be explained through speech act theory, at least as formulated by Austin and Searle.

As we shall see, however, speech act theory can help by re-focusing our attention on what is more firmly within its scope: the communicative behaviour of real individuals. Consider the following example:

it is possible that when Elizabeth Barrett Browning sent or gave ‘How do I love thee? Let me count the ways’ to Robert, she and he both understood the discourse to be a standard speech act, with the illocutionary force of a declaration of love. In that case, I would have to say that the discourse was not at that time a literary work. Did it then become one when it was shown to other people? When it was published? The suggestion that it could so change its status is mildly disturbing, but hardly unprecedented....

...

I would be willing to live with such bizarre side-effects of the definition [of literary discourse as lacking in real illocutionary force], for they simply reflect

the fact that it is the whole context of the whole discourse that establishes its literary status.

Ohmann 1971:15

Ohmann's analysis is entirely consistent with speech act theory, and he should find nothing 'bizarre' in the poem's change of status. Indeed, in yielding such 'side-effects', speech act theory proves its value to literary studies, underlining the point that '[b]ecause literary works are fundamentally social rather than personal or psychological products, they do not even acquire an artistic form of being until their engagement with an audience has been determined.' (McGann 1983:43-44) Considered in the abstract, the wording of 'How do I love thee? Let me count the ways' is no more a declaration of love (nor even a work of literature) than the sentence 'Hello', considered in the abstract, is a greeting; only the *use* of a linguistic form in a context (and never the form itself) can be a speech act, and an arrangement of words can only be a work of literature if it is used as such.

It would be 'bizarre' to deny that Elizabeth Barrett Browning could have declared her love for Robert *by presenting him with a text of* that splendid poem – just as it would be 'bizarre' to deny that anyone else can now declare love for any other individual by presenting him or her with another such text. Nonetheless, it is worth reflecting on the difference between responding to a poem as a token whose issuing from one individual to another constituted a declaration of love (as one might perhaps be likely to do on finding it copied out by hand into a Valentine's card), and responding to it as a work of literature (as one might perhaps be likely to do on finding it printed in an anthology of verse). This is not to say that the two modes of response may not be simultaneously engaged in, as when one reads a work of literature in the knowledge that it was written

to be presented as a declaration of love – or reads a text presented as a declaration of love with the awareness that it could also be read as a work of literature, as, in this case, Robert Browning evidently did.⁸² But, even in such cases, neither the work nor the declaration is reducible to the other. A text of the sonnet was issued from a woman to her husband; texts of the sonnet exist in collections of verse. In the former ‘form of being’, the sonnet is known to what Wimsatt and Beardsley (1946:477) call ‘personal studies’ (ie. biography); in the latter, to what they call ‘poetic studies’ (ie. criticism).

There is, of course, no uniquely correct response to a work of literature, just as there is no uniquely correct response to a declaration of love. Once a work has acquired what McGann calls ‘an artistic form of being’, there are many ways to acknowledge its status as such: aesthetes may read it for pleasure, philistines may sniff at it derisively, academics and students may make it the object of research (for example, by interpreting it), and anyone at all may talk about it. It is such *talk* (or writing) that this dissertation is primarily concerned with, and, as we shall see, talking about a work sometimes involves describing its writing, publishing, or both as a speech act whose agent is the author. But speech act descriptions that fit conversational utterances comfortably sit uneasily with literary works.

To read a poem by a poet who is not an acquaintance is very different from reading one of his letters. The latter is directly inscribed in a communicative circuit and depends on external contexts whose relevance we cannot deny even if

⁸² ‘Mr Gosse has recorded, upon information imparted to him by Browning eight years before his death, how in the spring of 1847, at Pisa, the bundle of manuscript was slipped by the poetess into her husband’s hand. The latter, immediately conscious of their permanent value, “dared not,” he said, “reserve to himself the finest sonnets written in any language since Shakespeare’s.” Moved by his persuasion, Elizabeth consented to their preservation in print.’ (Wise 1970[1918]:75)

we are ignorant of them... The poem is not related to time in the same way, nor has it the same interpersonal status. Although in the act of interpreting it we may appeal to external contexts, telling ourselves empirical stories (one morning the poet was in bed with his mistress and, when wakened by the sun which told him that it was time to be up and about his affairs, he said, 'Busie old foole, unruly Sunne...')... we are aware that such stories are fictional constructs which we employ as interpretive devices.

Culler 1975:164-165

In such cases, the context, the speaker, the addressee, and the communication itself are all imaginary, even if they have a degree of historical or textual grounding: the poet Culler half-seriously imagines waking up and saying 'Busie old foole' to the sun is John Donne, but this 'empirical story' is not deployed as a hypothesis about the real speech behaviour of the historical personage John Donne. For one thing, it would be untestable: the closest we could get to a test would be to ask how satisfactory it seems as an imaginative reading of the poem, as compared to other imaginative readings. But more importantly, there is no need to test it, since we know that poems do not come into being like that: that they are not the transcripts of utterances spontaneously produced by their authors in the speech situations they seem to imply. There were speech acts, but they were not the kind one plays with when interpreting a poem in this manner. Rather, they were the speech acts that the participants in Darntonian 'communications circuits' must have uttered to one another to bring literary works into being.

We are moving into the territory of textual scholars, genetic critics, and book historians, because it is the documents with which they deal – manuscripts, corrected proofs, contracts, etc – whose passing between the people in question will have constituted

many of these speech acts. The result of all these speech acts is that a work appears and is typically attributable to an individual author, and so we might want to postulate a notional speech act, *authoring*: something that a person does not so much *do* as, through the appearance of a work attributable to him or her, come to be regarded as *having done*.⁸³ The illocutionary effects of this act might be compared to those of christening, analysed by Austin as follows: ‘“I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*” has the effect of naming or christening the ship; then certain subsequent acts such as referring to it as the *Generalissimo Stalin* will be out of order.’ (1962:116) My authoring of a work is what establishes the existence (from that time onwards) of the work, and entails that certain subsequent acts will be ‘out of order’: for example, speaking or writing a sequence of words that was not to be found in any text of my work would not be quoting my work.⁸⁴ ‘Authoring’ might then be usefully compared with Searle’s class of ‘declarations’, a category of illocutionary act whose ‘successful performance guarantees that the propositional content corresponds to the world’, as in the utterance ‘your employment is

⁸³ This terminology of authoring as ‘notional’ speech act, of ‘works’, and of the ‘appearance’ of works, should not be taken to imply the unreality of *writing*, of *texts*, and of *publishing*. It is rather employed to avoid the suggestion that these matters can satisfactorily be analysed in purely material terms, or purely in terms of the speech acts of proposing and accepting manuscripts for publication, requesting and making revisions to those manuscripts, etc.

⁸⁴ Cf.: ‘This arrangement of thirty-four words [William Blake’s ‘The Sick Rose’]... constitutes a linguistic text that is different from every other linguistic text, which is only to say that these words in this order will always constitute this poem.’ (Attridge 2004:65) Three things should be noted: first, that, from the viewpoint laid out in this chapter, we would rather say that these words *written or printed* in this order will always constitute *a text of* this poem; second, that other arrangements of words can also potentially constitute texts of this poem (for all that they may be considered ‘corrupt’); and third, that these things can only have been the case since the poem was authored – whenever we consider that event to have occurred.

(hereby) terminated' (Searle 1969:17): the act of authoring guarantees correspondence (and not, I note, identity) between *the authorised text* and *the authored work*. A further point of comparison exists between the conditions necessary for declarations and those necessary for authoring. As Searle argues, to make a declaration that concerns anything other than language, the utterer must occupy a special place within an 'extra-linguistic institution' (18): 'It is only given such institutions as the church, the law, private property, the state, and a special position of the speaker and hearer within these institutions, that one can excommunicate, appoint, give and bequeath one's possessions, or declare war.' (ibid.) This can clearly be compared to the conditions necessary for authoring:

Literary work can be practised, can constitute itself, only in and through various institutional forms which are not themselves 'literary' at all, though they are meaning-constitutive. The most important of these institutions, for the past 150 years anyway, are the commercial publishing network in all its complex parts, and the academy. The church and the court have, in the past, also served crucial mediating functions for writers.

McGann 1988:117

The most important point to recognize from this is that, though discussion of this sort might encourage us to talk about how writing and publishing have operated at different times, or about how particular works came to be written and published – which are, of course, tremendously interesting topics – it will not permit us to engage in the sort of study that Olsen (2004) describes as 'literary interpretation', because it will show us the work not as an experience but as what McGann calls the 'residual form' of an 'action' (1988:55). Although the action to which McGann refers will have been communicative

(in that it will have involved the passing of messages between various people), the residue – the authored work – is not (in that it is not itself a message, even though its texts may – as we have seen – be employed as messages). In short (and *pace* Culler [2000]): when it turns to works of literature, speech act theory shows us not language that does something, but language that somebody did something with. It is, in other words, best suited for employment in something closely related to what Olsen (2004) calls ‘historical interpretation’.

When one authors a work, one authors a work of a particular character (as discussed in Subsection 2.4.2: avant-garde novel, lampoon, etc), and, just as analysis may tease this out, so may it tease out what has seemed to be its character in contexts other than that in which it was authored: for example, in other regions, or other eras, or to readers with cultural literacies different from those of the author and his or her peers. As the character of the work changes, so will that of the act presumed to have produced it. But the work that is ‘considered by some to be an extended exploration of the theme of cultural alienation, and by others to be an atheistic and blasphemous attack on a major world religion... and its holy Founder’ (Netton 1996:134) was not authored twice: there were not two speech acts, one for each group of readers’ benefit, but two recognitions, one by each group, of the character of the single work that was authored, each recognition according different success/failure conditions to the same work, and each thereby according different intentions to the individual who carried out the act of its authoring.

These recognitions occur in acts of reading, and the history of a work is a history of such events, as much as of those of writing and publishing (the bulk of Karen Armstrong’s [2007] ‘biography’ of the Bible, for example, concerns the uses to which this work has been put, rather than the composition or editing of its various texts). The communicative

acts of a book's readers may be subjected to speech act analysis in much the same way as the communicative acts that constituted that book's Darntonian 'life cycle': recall Scollon's discussion of news media texts in terms of the social interactions through which they are produced and the social interactions in which they are used. This makes it important to analyse, not only the speech acts of authors, publishers, etc, but also those of the people who read the books produced, or who do not read them but nonetheless discourse upon them in their own communities of practice. Moreover – and this is one of the assumptions behind Section 2.6 – in the course of reconstructing these many speech acts, it may be helpful to reconstruct the reader-addressed speech acts a work has been (mis)taken for by its interpreters. But before we can do this, we will have to depart from speech act theory proper to the messier 'folk-categorizations' employed in non-academic discourse on literature.

2.5.2 Literary works and speech-like actions

Lena Jayyusi, from whom we last heard in Section 2.4, argues that any action can be given a 'second-order moral action description' in discourse: 'such an ordinary act as 'turning on the light' can be constituted as 'harassment', 'escalating a quarrel', or simply 'doing something mean', given the appropriate context.' (1993:442) By the same token, any speech act can be provided with just such a second-order description: such an ordinary utterance as 'I like your dress' can be constituted as 'a compliment', 'flattery', or indeed 'harassment', and conversational debates over such descriptions ('I was only trying to give her a compliment!') may be considered a sort of 'folk' version of speech act analysis. Literary works, too, can be constituted, assessed, and described in the same way – which is to say, in terms developed for the second-order moral action description of speech – although any attempt to impose such a description as 'flattery' or

'harassment' on the complex structure of a novel, play, or poem, is unlikely to withstand close scrutiny: while an utterance spoken in conversation may fit a number of such descriptions equally well, works of drama, fiction, or verse are likely to fit them all equally poorly, exceeding (and yet falling short of) every single one. As we shall see, however, this does not stop people from trying to make them fit, and controversy over literary works can thus find expression in irresolvable arguments as to which speech-like action description to (mis)apply.

A theoretical problem identified by Searle (1979:74-75) is that, though '[l]iterary critics have explained on an ad hoc and particularistic basis' how specific, individual works have carried the illocutionary force that their interpretations identify them with, it has so far proved impossible to explain the general 'mechanisms' by which this operates (Searle 1979:74-75). Recall Northrop Frye's assertion that poems are 'as silent as statues': I would suggest that what happens in the cases that as Searle mentions is that criticism, able to talk, makes literature *appear* to say things by quoting or paraphrasing it in a manner that seems to resemble communicative speech. This is the closest that literary works can get to the ordinary communications that they obviously are not (Culler 1975:134), and it is what we shall see in action in the following section.

2.6. Analysis: The reception of The Satanic Verses as a communication from its author

In the following extracts from the early stages of the controversy over *The Satanic Verses*, intention, foreknowledge, and outcomes, along with various speech action and speech-like action descriptions, are used in the performance of real communicative acts

by public commentators.⁸⁵ Analysis of these extracts shows how works of literature in general – and this one in particular – are given a (typically very straightforward) pseudo-interpersonal moral character in the course of the (at times highly politicized) public debates that coalesce around them. For the sake of providing a coherent corpus, the extracts chosen are all broadly critical of the people responsible for the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, but no implication is made that the statements of Rushdie and his supporters are less open to analysis of this kind; indeed, comments from Rushdie himself are appended for comparison. Each extract is followed, first by a list of intentions, knowledge, speech-like actions, speech actions, and outcomes *explicitly* attributed to the people and institutions involved, and second by a discussion of these attributions and their rhetorical function.

In the first attack, Mohammed Siddique, a representative of the Bradford Council for Mosques (the organization most strongly associated with the first UK protests against the book) writes a guest feature for a local newspaper:

He has made history – by abusing his rights to freedom of speech and expression, he wrote a book, which sent him into hiding.

In his *Satanic Verses*, he mocked the character and personality of the Prophet of Islam (by calling him the Devil’s synonym ‘Mahound’), insulted the wives and Companions of the Prophet (by calling them ‘prostitutes’ and ‘bums and scums’

⁸⁵ In this section, I will use ‘speech action’ rather than ‘speech act’, to reflect the fact that I am no longer dealing with speech act theory but with the ways in which ‘ordinary language verbs carve the conceptual field of illocutions’ (Searle 1979:ix). ‘Speech-like actions’ will be used where a work of literature is described; ‘speech action’, where spoken or written communications are described.

repectively), and made ridiculous allegations that the Quran contains revelations inspired by the Devil.

Muslims all over the world are offended and hurt by such lies, and are protesting against the supposedly ‘fictional’ novel, on the grounds that it is blasphemous and should be withdrawn for the sake of maintaining world peace.

The publishers paid more than £850,000 to Salman Rushdie, and asked him to write the controversial *Satanic Verses*. The Viking-Penguin staff warned the senior management that if the book was published, there could be a serious escalation of violence.

Muslim leaders, too, pleaded with the publishers and the Government to stop the publication, but both defended Salman Rushdie’s rights to freedom of speech and expression. Also, the Government sent Ministers to key cities to tell the Muslim communities: ‘You can march, you can shout, and you can protest, but you must not break the law – the law will protect Salman Rushdie and his publishers.’

Consequently, several protest marches followed, in the Muslim world as well as in several European countries, which culminated in 22 deaths during clashes between the police and protesters.

Siddique 1989:6

Speech-like actions (Rushdie’s): mockery, insult, allegation

Speech actions (of publishers): ask Rushdie to write *The Satanic Verses*

Speech action (of Viking-Penguin staff): warn management of escalation of violence

Speech actions (of Muslim leaders): plead for publication to be stopped

Speech action (of publishers and the British Government): defend Rushdie's rights

Knowledge (Viking-Penguin senior management): had been warned of the likely outcome

Outcomes (of the acts of Rushdie, his publishers, and the British Government): Rushdie sent into hiding; Muslims are offended and hurt; there are protest marches, clashes, and deaths

Siddique attributes several negative outcomes to the publishing of *The Satanic Verses*, and assigns responsibility for these to three different agents: Rushdie for writing it, his publishers for (a) commissioning it, (b) defending Rushdie's rights, and (c) going ahead with the publication, and the British government for (a) not banning the book, (b) defending Rushdie's rights, and (c) promising legal protection to the other two agents. The force of Siddique's polemic is clear: from the deaths to the feelings of offence and hurt, all of the negative outcomes listed were caused by the aforementioned agents and no others. The ascription of blame not only to Rushdie and his publishers, but also to the British government, was a familiar theme in Iranian rhetoric at the time.⁸⁶ Most

⁸⁶ This, however, took a more paranoid tone. As Pipes ironically puts it, '[n]ot for a minute were the Iranian authorities fooled by the story put out that this book had been written by a single author pursuing the whimsies of his own imagination.' (2003[1990]:126)

strikingly, Rushdie was sent into hiding not by the people who threatened his life, but by himself, through the performance of the speech-like actions of mockery, insult, and allegation that, in this version of events, constitute the writing and publication of *The Satanic Verses*.

It should be noted that Siddique plays fast and loose with the facts, both historical and textual. *The Satanic Verses* was not commissioned, there was no campaign against it prior to its publication, and the ministerial visits to which Siddique alludes cannot therefore have taken place.⁸⁷ The supposed ‘revelations inspired by the Devil’ do not become part of the Qur’an, as represented in the novel, in which it is, for that matter, far from clear that they are to be understood as satanic in origin. Moreover, neither Rushdie, nor any of the voices in his novel calls the wives of the Prophet ‘prostitutes’; rather, a character in the novel re-names a group of prostitutes after the Prophet’s wives.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ It is harder to find references to a non-occurrence than to an occurrence, and Siddique’s vagueness (‘Muslim leaders’, ‘Ministers’, ‘key cities’) makes it doubly hard to establish with certainty that this part of his account is spurious. Nonetheless, histories of the Muslim response to *The Satanic Verses* (eg. Pipes 2003[1990]:19-37, Netton 1996:19-21) identify the British campaign as having begun in October 1988, ie. in the month *following* publication.

⁸⁸ On the supposedly ‘satanic’ verses: ‘These verses are banished from the true recitation, *al-qur’an*. New verses are thundered in their place.’ (Rushdie 1988:124) The verses, moreover, appear – like the ones that replace them – to have been spoken not by the Devil but by the ‘angel’ Gibreel, though the question of who inspired Gibreel to speak is ambiguous: ‘Gibreel, hovering-watching from his highest camera angle, knows one small detail, just one tiny thing that’s a bit of a problem here, namely that *it was me both times, baba, me first and second also me*. From my mouth, both the statement and the repudiation, verses and converses, universes and reverses, the whole thing, and we all know how my mouth got worked.’ (123) On the naming of the prostitutes: ‘How many wives? Twelve, and one old lady, long dead. How many whores behind The Curtain? Twelve again; and,

The following is an extract from a monograph by Shabbir Akhtar, an Islamic scholar who was, at his time of writing, also a member of the Bradford Council for Mosques. It provides an interesting comparison, since it is focused on Rushdie's intentions and makes none of Siddique's factual errors.

The life of the Arabian Prophet is of great interest to many thinkers and historians... It is also valid territory for imaginative reconstruction... But neither historical nor fictional exploration of his biography can, with impunity, lapse into abuse and slander. Rushdie relishes scandalous suggestion and pejorative language. His account is uniformly self-indulgent, calculated to shock and humiliate Muslim sensibilities. It is unwise to ignore the role of provocation and polemic in exciting hatred and anger to the point of physical confrontation.

Akhtar 1989:12

Speech-like actions (Rushdie's): abuse (in the sense of "insult"),
slander, suggestion (in the sense of "insinuation"), provocation,
polemic

Intentions (Rushdie's): shock and humiliate Muslim sensibilities

Outcomes (of Rushdie's actions): hatred and anger, physical
confrontation

This account is (especially with regard to the speech-like actions in terms of which *The Satanic Verses* is described) substantially similar to the first, except that, where Siddique suggests that the intention that set the train of events in motion was the publishers', and

secret on her black-tented throne, the ancient Madam, still defying death.... Baal told the Madam of his idea; she settled matters in her voice of a laryngitic frog.' (380)

that Rushdie, motivated by financial gain, was only the instrument of that intention, Akhtar insists that Rushdie *calculated* the book to hurt Muslims, implying not only intention but also a degree of foreknowledge on Rushdie's part.⁸⁹ Physical confrontation occurred because hatred and anger had been excited by provocation and polemic, ie. by Rushdie's *planned* infliction of shock and humiliation. Indeed, Akhtar's blandly matter-of-fact description, on the same page, of a murder that took place many years earlier in Lahore, reinforces the idea that the illocutionary act of slandering Muhammad is invariably the perlocutionary act of causing a Muslim to assassinate the slanderer: like Siddique, Akhtar accords agency (and therefore moral responsibility) only to the slanderer.

An intriguingly similar strategy is pursued in the following account, written by a British convert to Islam, Yakub Zaki. This was published in that most Establishment of British newspapers, *The Times*, its author's intellectual credentials established by the accompanying description of him as 'a visiting professor at Harvard University':

Perhaps more nonsense has been uttered on the subject of Islam in the last week or so than at any time since the Middle Ages. The ravings of the popular press may be discounted, but when the *Independent* says that Khomeini's verdict on Salman Rushdie is acceptable only to the 10 per cent (really 12 per cent) of the Muslims in the world who are Shi'ite, it is time for scholarship to enter the fray.

⁸⁹ Compare the Ayatollah Khomeini's pronouncement: '*The Satanic Verses...* is a *calculated* move aimed at rooting out religion and religiousness, and above all, Islam and its clergy' (al-Khomeini 1989:90, emphasis added). Mercenary motives are ascribed in Akhtar's assertion that 'Rushdie's book was written for instant fame and easy money.' (1989:135) No contradiction is involved if it may be assumed that fame and fortune predictably result from successful humiliations of Muslims.

...

To the medieval mind... Islam was nothing less than a satanic conspiracy and the Koran a satanic fabrication. Satan had pulled off the greatest religious fraud of all time, producing a scripture purporting to come from God while all the time being the work of the Devil. Only satanic intervention in world history could explain Islam's phenomenal success.

Rushdie's use of the name of the devil responsible for the fraud is intended to indicate that the whole Koran is fraudulent and Muhammad a mean impostor: not a question of the two verses spotted as such but all the 6236 verses making up the entire book. In other words, the title is a *double entendre*.

...

On the penalty for apostasy, there is complete unanimity between all five schools of law in Islam (four in Sunnism, one in Shi'ism)....

Imam Khomeini, simply by articulating what every Muslim feels in his heart, has recouped at one stroke everything lost in the war with Iraq and emerged as the undisputed moral leader of the world's one billion Muslims. Meanwhile, the silence from such Islamic capitals as Riyadh, Cairo, and Islamabad is deafening.

Zaki 1989:14

Intention (Rushdie's): indicate Koran fraudulent and Muhammad an impostor

Speech action (Khomeini's): articulate what every Muslim feels in his heart

Outcome (of the above acts): Khomeini is moral leader of all Muslims

This article presents Khomeini's 'verdict' as an inevitability, given the content of *The Satanic Verses*. It accords Khomeini a speech action, but makes this no more nor less than the act of articulating what all Muslims know to be the case: thus, Khomeini has no moral responsibility for Rushdie's fate, since he did no more than speak the obvious truth – and yet because, in speaking it, he was the only Islamic authority to state what 'every Muslim' already knows, he thereby established for himself a moral authority that transcends the Shi'a / Sunni divide.⁹⁰

As a response to *The Satanic Verses*, this has a certain superficial resemblance to a work of academic literary criticism, in that the interpretation (expressed in the form of a claim as to Rushdie's intentions in writing) is anchored both in a linguistic feature of *The Satanic Verses* (ie. the name 'Mahound') and in an assembled mass of contextual information. It should be noted, however, that this is a very great weight to place on a single piece of textual evidence, and that a different interpretation of the name is explicitly stated by the omniscient narrator of the novel.⁹¹ Zaki does not attempt to argue

⁹⁰ That this was a fantasy of Zaki's should hardly be doubted. Hussain (2002:17) cites the idea 'that somehow Khomeini spoke for all Muslims' as a point of concern for many Muslims at the time. Zaki's invocation of 'complete unanimity between all five schools of law in Islam' is also highly misleading, since it implies that Khomeini's pronouncement was in accordance with Islamic law, when (as we have seen in Chapter 1) it was not.

⁹¹ "Here he is neither Mahomet nor MoeHammered; has adopted, instead, the demon-tag the farangis hung around his neck. To turn insults into strengths, whigs, Tories, Blacks all chose to wear with pride the names they were given in scorn; likewise, our mountain-climbing, prophet-motivated solitary is to be the medieval baby-frightener, the Devil's synonym: Mahound." (Rushdie 1988:93)

against this alternative interpretation. Indeed, since his article is *not* a work of ‘scholarship’, he does not really have to; addressing a general audience proportionally few of whose members are likely to have read *The Satanic Verses*, he can quote as selectively as he pleases. Perhaps the most interesting thing about this piece is that, although Zaki uses *The Satanic Verses* to make his case – it is *because* this novel shows that its author is an apostate that ‘every Muslim feels in his heart’ that Rushdie should die – his main purpose is clearly to praise the Ayatollah: the article announces itself as having been occasioned by a slight on the latter’s authority, and it concludes with scorn for Sunni leaders and hyperbolic aggrandizement of Khomeini himself.

The next account, written by a right-wing British historian, Hugh Trevor-Roper, and also published in a national newspaper, recognizes both Rushdie and Khomeini as agents, and attacks both of them:

I wonder how Salman Rushdie is faring these days, under the benevolent protection of British law and the British police, about whom he has been so rude. Not too comfortably, I hope. Of course, we must protect him against holy murder, and in general I admit to some sympathy for heretics; but I cannot extend it to him. After all, he is well versed in Islamic ideas: he knew what he was doing, and could foresee the consequences.

If an expert entomologist deliberately pokes a stick into a hornet’s nest, he has only himself to blame for the result....

...

The theme of being negatively labelled by Westerners and of rebelliously appropriating the label recurs in the primary narrative: Saladin Chamcha is transformed into a devil by British racism, and British Asian youths begin to wear devil horns as a street fashion.

I would not shed a tear if some British Muslims, deploring his manners, should waylay him in a dark street and seek to improve them. If that should cause him thereafter to control his pen, society would benefit and literature would not suffer. If caught, his correctors might, of course, be found guilty of assault; but they could then plead gross provocation and might merely, if juvenile, be bound over. Our prisons are, after all, overcrowded. This would seem more satisfactory, in the long run, than extending the law against blasphemy.

If only it had not been for the Ayatollah in Iran!... Once the late Ayatollah, for his own internal political purposes... had called on the faithful to despatch the heretic, the whole situation was transformed.

Trevor-Roper 1989:14

Speech-like action (Rushdie's): provocation

Knowledge (Rushdie's): could foresee the consequences

Speech action (Khomeini's): call for Rushdie's murder

Outcome of the above acts: Rushdie needs protection from murder

The first point to note here is the way in which Rushdie's knowledge of 'Islamic ideas' is used to establish his moral responsibility for his own sufferings ('he has only himself to blame'). This was a common theme in non-Muslim criticism of Rushdie (an almost identical argument was, for example, made by the popular children's author Roald Dahl in a letter to the *Times* [Dahl 1989:15]), as was the insinuation that the protection of Rushdie by the British police in some way refuted Rushdie's expressed views of Britain

and the West ('benevolent protection... been so rude').⁹² Muslims are, in Trevor-Roper's version of events, only hornets into whose nest a stick has been poked (a familiar metaphor for needless provocation, and one that distinctly implies mindlessness on the part of the provoked), and Trevor-Roper even suggests that this viewpoint should be adopted by a court of law, in the event of Rushdie's being physically assaulted ('they could then plead gross provocation and... [o]ur prisons are, after all, overcrowded'). The Ayatollah Khomeini is accorded responsibility for making the situation worse, and for doing so hypocritically, ie. not because he was provoked, but 'for his own internal political purposes'. Interestingly, Trevor-Roper implies that the main cause for regret ('If only it had not been...!') is that, in calling for Rushdie's murder, Khomeini has obliged the British state to protect Rushdie, and thus prevented the latter's would-be

⁹² Rushdie responded to the 'he knew what he was doing' argument by challenging those who endorsed it to apply its underlying axiom to any other case but his own: 'when Osip Mandelstam wrote his poem against Stalin, did he "know what he was doing" and so deserve his death?', etc (Rushdie 1991a[1990]:407). Pipes (2003[1990]:70-93) takes the argument literally, and finds it to be without basis: there are long histories of apostasy and blasphemy in the Muslim world, but the response to *The Satanic Verses* was absolutely unprecedented and could not, therefore, have been foreseen by anyone, including Rushdie. On the irony of Rushdie's predicament, however, Pipes takes the conservative, pro-Western line suggested by Trevor-Roper: 'Will he regret having reviled Mrs Thatcher after her government stood by him in his hour of need? In the final analysis, Rushdie can only make a home in the West.' (Pipes 2003[1990]:49-50) Seeing in Rushdie's satirical attacks on the governments of India, Pakistan, and Britain, on American foreign policy, and on Islamic fundamentalism only the disaffection of 'an immature and spoiled intellectual' (49; the contrast with the Western response to Soviet dissidents is striking [see Al-'Azm 1994]), Pipes thus ignores the possibility that such a recantation might be given the second-order moral action description of hypocritical toadying. Such a description is implied, for example, by Gopal's claim that Rushdie's acceptance of a knighthood from a later British government confirmed '[t]he mutation of this relevant and stentorian writer into a pallid chorister' (2007:33).

‘correctors’ from giving him the beating that might otherwise have seemed such a ‘satisfactory’ resolution to the controversy.

The following account by political writer Richard Webster appeared in *The Bookseller* in 1992 (the year of the long-delayed British paperback edition of *The Satanic Verses*), updating a book-length version published shortly after the two above-quoted accounts (Webster 1990). It is critical of Rushdie, but neither accuses him of malintentions nor accords him sole responsibility for his predicament:

Today, more than three years after Khomeini pronounced his tyrannical *fatwa*, it is possible to see what the consequences of Penguin’s decision to publish Rushdie’s novel actually were. The Rushdie affair has led directly to demonstrations, riots, murder threats, and the death of more than 30 people; it has also resulted in the destruction of international goodwill on a huge scale and caused incalculable damage to race relations throughout Europe.

Perhaps most tragically of all, *The Satanic Verses* has had the opposite effect on the worldwide Muslim community from that which was apparently intended by its author. For instead of undermining the cruel and murderous rigidity which is so clearly a part of some forms of Islamic fundamentalism, the publication of the novel has strengthened the hand of extremists in countless Muslim communities – especially in Britain. As Mahmood Jamal has written, Salman Rushdie, by choosing to attack Islamic rigidity in the way he did, ‘galvanized all Muslim opinion behind the bigots, hence furthering the cause of revivalists and fundamentalist forces within Islam’.

It is difficult not to come to the conclusion that Rushdie badly misjudged the mood of British Muslims and failed to understand the full complexities of the situation he had placed himself in by writing as he did.

To say this is not to seek to shift the blame for the Rushdie affair from religious zealots entirely onto the shoulders of Salman Rushdie and his supporters.

Webster 1992:99-100

Speech-like action (Rushdie's): attack on Islamic rigidity

Intention (Rushdie's): undermine the cruel and murderous rigidity of some forms of Islamic fundamentalism

Knowledge, or rather, lack thereof (Rushdie's): bad misjudgement, failure to understand

Outcome (of the above acts): strengthening the hand of extremists

Interestingly, Webster classifies the most violent outcomes as consequences not of Rushdie's writing *The Satanic Verses* but of 'the Rushdie affair'. This phrase may be taken to refer to the complex interaction between the actions not only of Rushdie and of Penguin, but also of Rushdie's 'supporters', and of Khomeini, whose death sentence for Rushdie is denounced as 'tyrannical' and therefore no mere effect of Rushdie's agentic activity. Moreover, the publisher appears to be accorded a more powerful agency and greater responsibility than the author, since Webster discusses the decision not to *write* but to *publish* the book. This implies a multi-agentic view of the production and reception of literature that might be thought incompatible with an interpretation of *The Satanic Verses* based on reconstruction of the author's intentions. However, Webster

does not decline to supply such an interpretation, suggesting that, to the extent to which the fault is Rushdie's, it is a matter of professional error (which can be seen in opposition to anything resembling the '[m]ilitant evil' with which Akhtar [1989:7] credits Rushdie): of having *intended* one outcome but, through misjudgement and misunderstanding, having *achieved* the precise reverse.⁹³ Of particular interest is Webster's presupposition that blame would (without this argumentative intervention) be placed with Muslim 'religious zealots'. Webster denies that his argument shifts the blame *entirely* from the one to the other, and yet the very denial signals that blame is indeed being shifted in this direction, making this account a criticism of Rushdie – despite the conspicuous spotlessness of the motives with which it credits him. This demonstrates the importance of argumentative context (Billig 1996[1987]:121) for all such accounts: in direct response to Siddique and Akhtar's contributions, the same configuration of intention, knowledge, and outcome would function as a defence of Rushdie, since it presents him as innocent of everything that they accuse him of. Presented in a book industry trade magazine and therefore to an audience who might be assumed likely to feel sympathy with Rushdie and his publishers, it operates very differently.⁹⁴

Another moderate response assigning responsibility (though not *blame*) to multiple agents is the following statement by the liberal Islamic scholar and community leader,

⁹³ This is a typical example of what Kuortti (1997, following Hirschman 1991) calls the 'perversity thesis': as noted in Chapter 1, a commonly used argument in debates on *The Satanic Verses*.

⁹⁴ Indeed, the main target of Webster's article is not Rushdie himself but those who defend him in the name of Western values in general and free speech in particular, and, in this, his argument comes to resemble portions of Akhtar's (1989:130-131). The latter, however, constructs Rushdie not as 'the victim of a cruel injustice' (Webster 1992:100), but as a sort of thus-far-unsuccessful suicide whose impending annihilation will have involved no agency but his own.

Zaki Badawi, who combines criticism of Rushdie with criticism of the extremist response. His formulation is particularly interesting for its justification of the stance *vis-à-vis* Rushdie that he advocates elsewhere in the same national newspaper interview: he would be willing to shelter the apostate from those who would carry out the *fatwa*.

The book, which I've read from cover to cover, is a confused surrealistic jumble: a hurling of insults and mockery rather than a concerted argument or campaign against Islam. It does make Islam look ridiculous and less than holy and it violates the Prophet's person. That's a very deep wound to those who read it – but the remedy was for Muslims not to read it.

Martin 1989:39

Speech-like actions (Rushdie's): insult, mockery, violation of the Prophet, making Islam look ridiculous and less than holy

Outcome (of the above acts): very deep wound to Muslims who read it

These three sentences set out a complex representation which needs to be unpacked. The speech-like actions with which Badawi identifies the book – 'hurling of insults and mockery' etc – are similar to those of Siddique and Akhtar's accounts, and elsewhere in the same interview, Badawi expresses the pain of reading *The Satanic Verses* in hyperbolic terms ('far worse... than if he's raped one's own daughter... an assault on every Muslim's inner being... like a knife being dug into you – or being raped yourself' [ibid.]). However, what distances Badawi's account from the other Muslim responses quoted here are his claims as to what *The Satanic Verses* is not: 'a concerted argument

or campaign against Islam.’⁹⁵ His negative evaluation of the book’s aesthetic qualities (it is ‘confused’ and a ‘jumble’) supports this, suggesting that it is too badly written, too much of a mess, to accomplish the kinds of speech-like actions that might require a response (let alone a retaliation).⁹⁶ It is painful for a Muslim to read it, but the responsibility for the pain is shared by the individual Muslim who chooses to let it be inflicted on him or herself: ‘*to those who read it... the remedy was for Muslims not to read it*’. Importantly, Badawi identifies himself as just such a Muslim (‘The book, which I’ve read *from cover to cover*’), as indeed he must for his claims to knowledge of the text to be credible.

This account to some degree resembles Webster’s, since it suggests that Rushdie is guilty of professional failures, although it would appear to rule out any possibility of his having had any such noble intentions, since a campaign against Islamic fundamentalism would be no more compatible with ‘a confused surrealistic jumble’ than would a

⁹⁵ Note that he does not describe it as a *failed* argument or campaign against Islam.

⁹⁶ Interestingly, in their own textual analyses of *The Satanic Verses*, Akhtar (1989, *passim*) and Webster (1992:99) both make the same accusation of unclearness, but without considering this to undermine their (radically opposing) interpretations of the novel. Akhtar (1989:27) supports his case with the assertion that the dream sequences (wherein are to be found the alleged blasphemies) are unique in being the only parts of *The Satanic Verses* to ‘retain complexity, motivation, and coherence.’ This assertion is, however, itself unsupported, and would certainly be rather difficult to support: a picaresque novel, *The Satanic Verses* is largely composed of fantastical episodes with minimal continuity between them, so it is easy to see how a reader might find it incoherent or even nonsensical *as a whole*, but the episodes themselves do not divide in any obvious way into those that are coherent, complex, and motivated, and those that are not. Webster’s accusation of unclearness relates specifically to the function of the name ‘Mahound’; strangely, he does not discuss the explanation of its function that is to be found in the novel itself (see Footnote 91), presumably regarding it as inadequate.

campaign against Islam *per se*. Indeed, the intention to work against fundamentalist Islam is one that Badawi would have sympathized with (see O’Sullivan 2006:31) and might therefore have been particularly reluctant to associate with the hated Rushdie. Instead, he presents a response to Rushdie’s work that seems both distinctively liberal and distinctively Islamic, and in doing so promotes yet another: leave it alone.⁹⁷

Again, however, argumentative context is everything. In a BBC TV interview five years later, Salman Rushdie himself appealed to something very like Badawi’s ‘remedy’, although with the very different purpose of insinuating that the degree of offence it had caused had been overstated. As he argued, ‘a lot of the people it has allegedly offended are people who haven’t read it. It’s very easy not to be offended by a book. All you have to do is shut it.’ (Isaacs 2001[1994]:157-158) Badawi would not, of course, have wanted to endorse Rushdie’s attempt to downplay the negative outcomes of his work (‘allegedly offended’ is belittling to anyone who has felt offended by the book), but it relies upon the same attribution of agency to the individual reader and on the same theory that a closed book has no power to hurt anyone.⁹⁸ Rushdie’s claims with regard to his own intentions are also very interesting:

⁹⁷ Initial hyperbole aside, Badawi presents a detailed argument to the effect that Rushdie must not be killed, and the interview concludes with his expressing a great deal of sympathy for the author, whom he describes as ‘a tortured soul, whose loss of faith appears to have stemmed in part from the disgust he felt at some Islamic rulers’ (ibid.).

⁹⁸ Pipes (2003[1990]:115-118) provides a convincing explanation of why this was not the case: the word “verses” was rendered into Arabic and other major languages of the Muslim world as ‘ayat’, which specifically means *Qur’anic* verses. Thus, the *title* of Rushdie’s novel – which was visible to those who did not open the book, and audible to those who could not read – was widely taken to mean ‘The Satanic Qur’an’.

For over two years, I have been trying to explain that *The Satanic Verses* was never intended as an insult; that the story of Gibreel is a parable of how a man can be destroyed by the loss of faith; that the dreams in which all the so-called ‘insults’ occur are portraits of his disintegration, and explicitly referred to in the novel as punishments and retributions; and that the dream figures who torment him with their assaults on religion are representative of this process of ruination, and *not* representative of the point of view of the author.

Rushdie 1991[1990]:431

As in the many attributions of intention to Rushdie by others (above), this self-attribution (‘never intended as an insult’) supports a particular understanding of the moral nature of *The Satanic Verses* (and therefore of the various responses to it), and has implications for the author’s moral responsibility for the events following its publication: if he did not *intend* the book as an insult, then he is not responsible for anyone’s feeling insulted by it. And, like Siddique and Zaki’s attributions, it is in turn supported by a somewhat questionable reading of the book’s content.⁹⁹ In one important respect, however, this account is very different from the others: it identifies *The Satanic Verses* as a work produced with specifically literary illocutionary intentions: to parabolize, to portray, and to represent.

⁹⁹ ‘Portraits of his disintegration’, etc, is highly reductive as a reading because it ignores the many allusions to Islamic history which are to be found in these sequences (see eg. Netton 1996:22-40, Hussain 2002:6-9). That Rushdie should want to deploy such a reading in a reconciliatory article entitled ‘Why I have embraced Islam’ is hardly surprising; indeed, his phrases ‘destroyed by the loss of faith’ and ‘torment him with their assaults on religion’ are strongly redolent of Badawi’s reconciliatory comments (see Footnote 97).

2.7. Concluding note

There is currently great interest in the reading practices of the ‘ordinary’ (ie. non-academic) reader (eg. Long 2003, Crone 2008), and of how to interpret evidence of such practices (one major conference in 2008 is entirely devoted to this specific issue).

Interest in reception study is similarly strong, and crosses disciplinary boundaries (as in Machor and Goldstein 2001, Staiger 2005, Long 2007). Given such a situation, attempts to theorize forms of discourse on literature, and the forms of discourse as which literature has been taken, would seem timely. This chapter’s attempts to theorize the discursive activity that is the production of literature have been limited to asides, but will hopefully clarify matters by eliminating confusions that arise when theorists do what readers all-too-easily do, and begin to discuss literature as if it were spoken communication from those who write to those who read.

If this approach appears to shift the focus away from the silent, solitary decipherer of texts as the object of reader and reception study, then that in itself may be something to recommend it (see McGann 1991:5, Long 1992). And if, in its focus on public punditry, the analysis performed has allowed non-readers of a work to compete with readers, then this too may be no bad thing: to focus exclusively on the pronouncements of those who read books carefully would entirely misrepresent the place of literature in the contemporary world; indeed, as so many comments on *The Satanic Verses* suggest, non-readers and the non-reading of works are at least as important as readers and reading and as much in need of theorization.¹⁰⁰ To say ‘I have not read it, nor do I intend to’ (as did

¹⁰⁰ As Ranasinha (2007:46) argues, ‘the vocal “non-readers” who constitute a significant interpretive community remain routinely sidelined in literary and sociological discussions of the Rushdie Affair.’ See Bayard (2008[2007]) for a lively theoretical discussion of many forms of non-reading.

Indian politician Syed Shahabuddin [1989{1988}:47] in his defence of his country's ban on *The Satanic Verses*) is as much an action as to say 'I've studied it in depth and I understand the author's intentions perfectly', and such denials and disavowals should be subjected to rigorous analysis in order to reveal their rhetorical and ideological functions: apart from anything else, they are integral to a work's cultural reception.

3. Sexual exegesis and the disassociation of ideas: representing the intimate textual encounter¹⁰¹

3.1 Introduction

I would now like to focus on a different type of discourse on literary works: discourse on their locutionary meaning, where such meaning is presumed obscure. This is the type of discourse that Susan Sontag calls 'interpretation' in her classic essay, 'Against interpretation'. 'The task of interpretation', she writes, 'is virtually one of translation. The interpreter says, Look, don't you see that X is really – or, really means – A? That Y is really B? That Z is really C?' (1994[1963]:5)

Discourse of this type has been discussed in both the previous chapters, although at times in what some (I hope not *too* many) readers might consider to have been a rather disparaging tone: it is the species of discourse engaged in by practitioners of post-New Critical literary studies, and the practice of post-New Critical literary studies is one of the things to which I have at certain points ventured to raise objections.¹⁰² But (as Sontag's essay makes clear) the New Critics and their

¹⁰¹ This chapter is adapted and expanded from Allington (2007a).

¹⁰² I have also, as attentive readers may have noticed, ventured at other points to defend it against objections. Indeed, one such reader considered an argument included in Chapter 2 of this dissertation

successors have no monopoly on such discourse: they have simply institutionalised it in certain ways. In exploring this point, I could continue with *The Satanic Verses* and with published commentary. Joel Kuortti, for example, finds that, in many published responses to that work,

the author is seen, in different ways, as the originator of some specific, inherent meaning. The position of the reader is understood as that of a cryptologist who tries to solve the problem, the enigma, the terrifying secret of the text. Thus, readers have been able to claim that they are the best readers or interpreters of Salman Rushdie and *The Satanic Verses*, to claim that they know the *proper* reading, the true meaning of the novel.

1992:148

However, to so continue would render this dissertation vulnerable to a number of criticisms that could also be levelled at my earlier studies of interpretative and evaluative rhetoric (Allington 2005, 2006). These studies focused on the reception of literary works in *academic* contexts, and so it is perhaps unsurprising that they should have found such reception to be saturated with rational argument (although the nature of this argument had been, I suggest, rhetorically disguised in the readings analysed in the first of these two studies): after all, such argumentative rationality has (as we saw in Chapter 1) come to be the defining feature of academic literary reading. Although the

to be a case of ‘loading the dice’ *in favour of* ‘anti-historicism, or anti-intentionalism’ and to involve the implication that there has been ‘a quantum leap from unreason to reason since the New Criticism’ (Sternberg 2008:unpaginated). I mention this in order to suggest that my critique of post-New Critical literary study may not have been *entirely* one-sided, since it parts of it have also (in another context) been read as an excessively biased argument *for* it.

chapters preceding and following the current one avoid focus on academic responses to *The Satanic Verses*, the latter remains a markedly ‘intellectual’ and ‘literary’ work, a ‘difficult’ book that, it might be suggested, brings out the scholar in people: the very un-scholarly responses analysed in the penultimate section of Chapter 2 should to some extent lay that suggestion to rest, but it remains necessary to look at the reception of a ‘popular’ work. Moreover, it should be noted that the *Satanic Verses* affair has been dominated by male media pundits: as it has been suggested by Deborah Tannen (1998) that agonistic argument is a masculine obsession, it would seem appropriate to examine a female-voiced debate, and in particular, one that has largely been carried out far from the control of the gatekeepers of print.

This chapter shall therefore work towards an analysis of responses to Peter Jackson’s crowd-pleasing version of that popular work of twentieth century fiction, *The Lord of the Rings*. These responses are drawn from the world wide web, were produced by pseudonymous enthusiasts of a textual genre generally assumed to be of solely female interest, and centre around the question of whether two fictional male characters are in love. On the way to that analysis, we shall detour through some comparative data: a first year English Literature tutorial, where the tutor and all the students but one are female, and where the question of homosexuality is also key.

3.2 *Slash, The Lord of the Rings, and A/L*

Prototypically, slash fiction is a form of fan fiction (ie. fiction written by and for fans on a not-for-profit basis) that centres around romantic and/or sexual encounters and relationships between same-sex characters drawn from the mass media. Slash fiction is distinguished from camp re-writings of mass media texts by being created primarily by and for female fans, and the term is used contrastively with ‘het fiction’ (romantic or

erotic fan fiction featuring mixedsex character pairings) and ‘gen fiction’ (fan fiction without romantic or sexual storylines). This definition is problematic, as we can readily see from the existence of slash fiction that is not fan fiction (eg. involving pairings of historical personages, such as Alexander Hamilton and John Laurens), but it seems less so than more specific definitions: I have, for example, avoided the frequently reiterated claim that slash is written by and for *heterosexual* females, since this is contradicted by the self-identification of what appears to be a significant minority of readers and writers of slash as lesbian or bisexual. The word ‘slash’, which derives from the forward slash conventionally used to conjoin the names of paired characters (e.g. ‘Kirk/Spock’ or ‘Aragorn/Legolas’, abbreviated to ‘K/S’ and ‘A/L’, respectively), has enjoyed an interesting etymological development: it can function as a synonym of ‘slash fiction’, and also as a verb, referring to the consumption of texts that do not feature overt homosexuality (e.g. *Star Trek* and *The Lord of the Rings*) as romantic or erotic representations of homosexual desire. It has also yielded the noun ‘slasher’ – one who participates in slash-inflected activities – and the adjective ‘slashy’ – homoerotic. The noun ‘femslash’ designates slash fiction where the primary pairing is female-female, which structures such stories as outside the norm, since there is no equivalent marker for slash featuring specifically male-male pairings. The phrase ‘real person slash’ (RPS) has been coined to designate slash fiction that pairs non-fictional mass media personas (usually contemporary celebrities, e.g. Viggo Mortensen and Orlando Bloom), and, much as the popularity of slash has required non-slash fan fiction to be reclassified as gen fiction or het fiction, the popularity of this new form may soon require non-RPS slash fiction to be re-classified as ‘fictional person slash’. Although slash is regarded with horror by many in film and television, this attitude is far from ubiquitous, and it is

hard to avoid the suspicion that media industry creatives have begun to draw on slash for inspiration (as in the BBC science fiction series *Torchwood*).

Slash occasionally features in the mainstream media – for example, Kitty Empire’s (2006) misinformed and sensationalist article on RPS – and the study of it is a growth area in academia, with enquiries being published into many aspects of the slash phenomenon, from the literary qualities of the stories (Pugh 2004) to what they are alleged to reveal about evolutionary psychology (Salmon and Symons 2001); this ever-gathering wave of publications dates back to the classic studies of the early 1990s, which established slash as an academically respectable topic. The reception of mass media texts by slashers (and fans more generally) was theorised as a form of cultural resistance by Constance Penley (1991) and Henry Jenkins (1992) in studies whose very titles announce their allegiance to Michel de Certeau (1984[1974]), loaded as they were with references to his terminology; see also John Fiske’s (1992) use of Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984[1979]) very different theories to achieve an almost identical result (see Chapter 1). This soon led to accusations that ‘an almost uncritical celebration of fans as “resisters”’ in cultural studies (Barker 1993:180). More recent studies of slash reception (for example, Jones 2002 and Woledge 2005) have rejected the paradigm of ‘resistance’, although they have tended (like the published version of this chapter [Allington 2007a]) to avoid any serious investigation of respects in which slash can be reactionary.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ I have, for example, come across an 89-part story that features the purchase of very small children as slaves and their subsequent beating and rape/seduction. Such stories are not the norm in any slash fandom, but they can be found on major slash archives, and, while they may be described as ‘squicky’, a ‘squick’ is simply a sexual turn-off, a distaste: it is the same word that a slasher might use in explaining why she does not read sex scenes involving men with beards. Perhaps because

There is in fact a great deal more work to be done on slash fiction, including on the reception of the stories themselves, a topic on which I have done some preliminary work elsewhere (Allington 2007b). Here, however, I will be looking at what is probably the most obvious question, and the one which preoccupied most of the studies mentioned above, ie. the question of how slashers read what they call the canon: not the canon as discussed in Section 1.2, ie. the chronological list of the works supposed to have been the best of all that has been written, but the commercially-published (usually televisual) works regarded as authoritative in particular slash fandoms (eg. for Kirk/Spock fans, the three *Star Trek* television series and at least the first six *Star Trek* films, but not the animated series, the spinoff fiction, or anything that has been produced and distributed solely within the fandom itself).

I first came across *Lord of the Rings* slash while carrying out preliminary research for a study of the online reception of popular fiction; it caught my attention because, to me, it seemed to be an extreme interpretation of JRR Tolkien's work, and (as Jonathan Culler mischievously remarks) 'like most intellectual activities, interpretation is interesting only when it is extreme.' (Culler 1992:110) This is, indeed, how media studies has tended to view slash: it is as an example of the unpredictable extremes of interpretation, for instance, that Alan McKee alludes to K/S slash with the rhetorical question, 'If you wanted to find out what *Star Trek* viewers thought about the programme, would you actually have thought to ask: "Have you ever considered that maybe Kirk and Spock might be lovers?"' (2003:84) What I slowly came to realise as I looked more deeply, however, was that this involves several misapprehensions: for one thing, slashers do not invariably claim that the homosexual relationships of which they write are 'in' their

slashers perceive themselves to be vulnerable to criticism from non-slashers, they would appear to have developed a vocabulary in which genuine critique is almost impossible.

‘canonical’ texts, and, for another, where they do make this claim, it is often supported through the use of very familiar and unextraordinary (which is not at all to say uninteresting) interpretative techniques. Both of these points come out in the data analysed here, although they have been obscured by studies that presume, with Jenkins, that slash *fiction* ‘represents a mode of textual commentary’ (1992:202): my decision has been to focus (like Woledge 2005) on *literal* textual commentary produced by slashers.

As Thompson writes, *The Lord of the Rings* ‘is considered one of the main fandoms for slash fiction’ (2007:178): some *Lord of the Rings* slash predates the films, ‘but the appearance of Film 1 [*The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*] led to an outburst of slash writing, much of it by people who had never read Tolkien.’ (ibid.) There is an important relationship between slash and *The Lord of the Rings* films, not least because the former is primarily distributed via the internet, the same medium that was used to promote the latter by means of ‘viral marketing’ (see Murray 2004; Thompson 2007:160-164). Moreover, the *Lord of the Rings* films appear to have played a role in the development of ‘real person slash’. Slashers to whom I have spoken about this explained it in terms of the scorn expressed by the small, established Tolkien slash community that existed at the time of the release of *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* towards people who wrote stories about the characters in ignorance of the novel and its six appendices; writing stories about the movie *cast* was, my informants argued, a way of slipping below this subcultural critical radar. As Thompson argues, the *acceptance* of real person slash by the slash community as a whole seems to have been facilitated by the *Lord of the Rings* cast itself, certain members of which (Ian McKellen, Elijah Wood, and Dominic Monaghan) indicated in interviews that, contrary to expectations, they did *not* find sexually explicit homoerotic

stories about themselves ‘intrusive and exploitative’ (2007:179).¹⁰⁴ This attitude may not have been shared by all the other cast members, but it seems to have been generally accepted that ‘[h]owever distasteful many associated with the film might have found such material, it served as one more way of publicising the film, and slash authors, both FPS and RPS, were among the repeat viewers of the films, combing the scenes for “plot bunnies” (inspiration).’ (192) Thompson could have added that slashers were also keen to buy DVD editions of the films (and even, as we shall see, *multiple* DVD editions of the *same* films) at a time when, as she shows, the film industry was trying to phase out the rental of videocassettes in favour of the more profitable selling of DVDs: a change for which *The Lord of the Rings* was at the forefront (see Thompson 2007:219-223). This policy of tolerating fan activities did not originate with the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, but it may have become more widespread in the entertainment industry partly as a result of its success: Elana Shefrin (2004), for example, compares Peter Jackson’s apparent embrace of the internet fan community with Steven Spielberg’s attempts to control its activities, arguing that Spielberg acted against his own interests. The case of *The Lord of the Rings* thus goes some way towards undermining the idea that slash is ‘resistant’, although neither Shefrin nor Thompson make this point.

In Tolkien slash fandom, the two most popular pairings are almost certainly Frodo/Sam and Aragorn/Legolas: as of 24 May 2008, the primary internet archive for the fandom listed altogether 368 fics under ‘Aragorn/Legolas’, and 359 under ‘Frodo/Sam’.¹⁰⁵ The

¹⁰⁴ See, moreover, Sean Astin and Elijah Wood’s good humoured (and very physical) response to questions about slash at a fan convention (Smol 2004:970).

¹⁰⁵ Compare 218 for Glorfindel/Erestor, 142 for Merry/Pippin, 107 for Aragorn/Boromir, 97 for Legolas/Haldir, 92 for Legolas/Gimli, 66 for Elladan/Elrohir, and so on – not forgetting the large number of novelty pairings with only a single story each (eg. Bill the Pony/Treebeard). These figures

second of these can draw on much material from the book, as has been demonstrated by Anna Smol (2004). Smol argues that, in the context of First World War literature (with which she identifies *The Lord of the Rings*), ‘the physical expressions of devotion that Sam shows Frodo... are not extraordinary’ (963), but that, even once these have been toned down (as they are in the film adaptations), they are strong enough ‘by current standards’ to ‘evoke discomfort and commentary’ among certain sections of the audience even while they provide the opportunity for pleasures among others (969).

With Aragorn and Legolas, the case is very different. Aragorn is a secondary character in Tolkien’s novel, with his emotional life mostly confined to an appendix, and Legolas features as a minor character whose relationship to Aragorn is expressed in largely feudal terms; since the films are centred on combat action, however, Aragorn the ‘heroic warrior’ (Thompson 2007:63) and Legolas the ‘kung fu fighter’ (ibid.) are central characters therein, and the relationship between them is arguably situated within the traditions of the ‘buddy film’ genre. Martin Barker’s (2005) paper on favourite characters in *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* may provide a way of contextualising A/L slash in the movie characters’ wider (non-slashing) reception. We can see from Barker’s figures that, while sexual attractiveness was not the reason most likely to be given for either of these characters’ being chosen as a favourite in his survey, they were (overwhelmingly) the two characters whose being chosen as favourite was most likely to be given this reason: 35 respondents out of 100 for whom Legolas was a favourite explained this by reference to his attractiveness, as did 17 out of 100 for Aragorn, but only seven out of 100 for Pippin, the character next most likely to have his

were arrived at by a simple count of entries in the index; no allowance was made for cases where a single entry covered multiple installments of a single story, or for cases where multiple installments of a single story were covered by multiple entries.

being chosen as favourite explained in this way.¹⁰⁶ An additional point of interest can be seen where Barker notes that, while ‘choice of Frodo as favourite character is clearly the most strongly associated with [claimed] knowledge of the books... choices of Aragorn and Legolas are least associated.’ (364) This may perhaps reflect that, as mentioned above, these two characters are positioned very differently in the films than they are in the book, from which the celebrated physical beauty of the two actors is, moreover, inevitably absent. In view of the data analysed here, however, it would be interesting to have more information about responses nominating *both*, and Barker’s paper does not provide this. Although survey responses nominating more than one character as favourite were filtered out of Barker’s sample, his findings might be taken to suggest that could be a substantial constituency of *Lord of the Rings* viewers for whom the personal qualities and sexual attractiveness of *both* Aragorn and Legolas would be a keynote in self-explanations of their commitment to the films, and for whom the films (as opposed to the book) would be the primary frame of reference. An interest in the personal qualities and sexual attractiveness of male televisual characters is, of course, fundamental to slash fiction, many of whose classic pairings are of action heroes from the ‘buddy’ tradition (Napoleon/Illya, Starsky/Hutch, Bodie/Doyle, etc). As we shall see, however, A/L shippers are able to construct a far more nuanced filmic basis for the slash relationship than I have done here.

¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, Barker comments that ‘quite a number’ of explanations that were coded otherwise (for example, the name ‘Orlando Bloom’) may actually have been ‘implicit references to his [Legolas’s] attractiveness’ as a reason for choosing him as favourite (372).

3.3 A discursive rereading of reader response

The relationship between reader, text, and meaning has been discussed extensively in literary studies, media studies, and many other fields. In recent decades, theories of reception have tended to place themselves in one of two camps, which Stephen Mailloux (1989) styles 'textual realism' and 'readerly idealism'. Theories of the latter type give priority to the reader and assume that reading creates meaning from the text. On this assumption, any text can mean anything, depending on the manner in which it is read. Theories of the former type give priority to the text and assume that reading discovers meaning in it. On this assumption, there are constraints on what a text can mean, and these constraints are to be found within the text itself. Slash would appear to be an interesting test case. Do slashers create or discover homoerotic meanings? I propose that the problem be approached from a different angle (at least temporarily): rather than see the reader/viewer and/or the text as controlling variables, we can look at how representations of texts/works and of readers or viewers are invoked by real readers and viewers in written and spoken discourse on texts/works. Although this may appear to sidestep the issues, I would argue that it enables us (a) to better understand such discourse, (b) to guard against the temptation to elevate discursive strategies into theories of reading, and (c) to propose theories of reading that will account for (rather than replicate) discourse on texts. This chapter therefore follows a similar pattern to the previous one, but begins to consider the act of reading in more depth – a move that is taken further in Chapter 4.

The commonsense model of textual reception is of a private mental process. The viewer or reader processes the text on an inner, psychological level, making sense of it and experiencing emotional reactions to it: this is what viewing and reading is assumed, at

heart, to be. At an optional subsequent stage, the viewer or reader reports on the sense he or she has made and the emotional reactions he or she has experienced, and perhaps also discloses the parts of the text that gave rise to these sense-makings and emotional experiences: this verbal stage is not viewing or reading, it is only a report on that supposedly prior activity. When the report and the disclosure are both carried out, this is what IA Richards calls a ‘full critical statement’ (1960[1924]:23). The underlying philosophy of mind is also a commonsensical one, and thus Jorg Gracia (2000:45) anticipates no controversy when he defines ‘understandings’ of texts as ‘acts that take place in the minds of the members of the audience’. Given such a paradigm, the possibility seems to arise of reconstructing the private mental process of reception in all its cognitive detail, or of showing how the real properties of the text gave that process shape. As discussed in Chapter 1, the latter course was attempted by IA Richards and is now associated with certain contemporary stylisticians. The former course was at one time attempted by Jonathan Culler (1975:31), who argues in his early work for the need ‘to render as explicit as possible the conventions responsible for the production of attested effects’, where ‘effects’ are the mental states involved in reading, and are (by analogy with historical linguistics) ‘attested’ when there is evidence that they occurred (i.e. when there exist reports of them). This reflects the way in which we usually talk about films we have seen and books we have read. It is the assumption behind much audience ethnography (for example, Morley 1999a[1980]), and also underlies what I have described as empirical literary studies (see Chapter 1): statements made by viewers and readers are taken as public reports on hitherto private sense-makings and emotional experiences, and there is a causal chain from text to reception to report on reception. Where the viewer or reader is not trusted to speak for him- or herself, it again comes into play, with vaguely defined mental processes such as ‘identification’ being used to link a

given text to a set of putative effects.¹⁰⁷ In cultural studies, it is embodied in Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding theory, already discussed in Chapter 1: as David Morley came to see it, '[t]he encoding/decoding metaphor is unhappily close to earlier models of communication, insofar as it can be taken to imply some conception of a message which is first formed (in the author's mind?) and then, subsequently, encoded into language for transmission.' (1992:121)

I would now like to discard these commonsensical assumptions, in order to show what may be achieved by an analysis which does not make them. The commonsense relation of text to mental state to verbal response is directly analogous to the commonsense relation of reality to mental state to action. This is turned upside down in discursive psychology, which looks instead at how representations of 'inner' and 'outer' worlds are constructed in discourse: as Edwards and Potter (2001:15) put it, discursive psychology 'focuses on what people are doing and how, in the course of their discourse practices, they produce versions of external reality and of psychological states'. I believe that we could usefully apply this paradigm to the things people say and write about texts they have consumed or the works which those texts embody. Take the following excerpt from a *Guardian Books* review of a novel by Ian Sansom: 'With such fine ingredients, it's strange that *The Case of the Missing Books* didn't grab me at the outset, but it drew me in soon enough, and I ended up thoroughly enjoying it' (Ardagh 2006:16). Here, the

¹⁰⁷ See Barker (2005). Barker summarises the assumptions of much film and media scholarship as follows: 'certain media/cultural – typically, fictional – forms contain “textual” mechanisms that work to entrap their audiences.... As audiences are entrapped, they go through three processes: they lose self-consciousness; they become engaged in the story *as if they were the character* to whom they have become attracted; and they thus, perhaps fleetingly but perhaps longer term, take on the point of view (including moral perspectives) of that character. In extremis, they might lose “the line” between fiction and reality, and absorb the character's attitudes into the rest of their lives.' (356-357)

reviewer represents, on the one hand, the text and its objective characteristics – those ‘fine ingredients’ – and, on the other, himself as a reader of the book; and he achieves this in the course of a narrative: initially not being *grabbed*, but eventually being *drawn in*, and ultimately having a *thoroughly enjoyable* experience. Whether this corresponds in any objective way to events preceding the writing of the review need be of less interest to us here than the rhetorical function it fulfils: that of qualified praise.

This reviewer is not, of course, interpreting the book for the readers of *The Guardian*, he is only recommending it. What function might representations of text and reader or viewer have in interpretation? In general, viewers and readers do not wish it to appear that they are the source of the meanings they attribute to texts and works: thus, it is not so much that reading does, or does not, create meaning (as in the idealism/realism debate), as that it aspires never to appear to do so in the current instance. Recall the discussion of understanding and misunderstanding in Chapter 1. If I attribute a meaning to a work, then to accept that a text of that work was the source of that meaning is to accept my interpretation as a true one (provided, of course, that one accepts the text in question as an adequate text of the work). On the other hand, you may reject my interpretation by representing me (or my assumptions) as the source of the meaning I attribute to the text: that is, you may accuse me of a mis-reading or (as scholars of religion would have it) of eisegesis (to deny the adequacy of the text would enable you to reject my interpretation of the work without *necessarily* impugning my skills as an interpreter).¹⁰⁸ Thus, Eric Livingston (1995:99) observes that, in literary studies, an

¹⁰⁸ I emphasise the word ‘necessarily’ because my skills as an interpreter may in fact be impugned if the *conventional* separation between textual scholarship and literary criticism is not in force.

McGann (1985) goes against the grain in promoting a form of literary interpretation that ‘take[s] its ground in textual and bibliographical studies’ (80).

‘instructed reading’ (i.e. an expert interpretation) appears ‘anonymous to authorship, a property of the text, a discovery for any competent reader to see’;¹⁰⁹ and Michel Foucault (1981:57-58) argues that ‘commentary’s only role, whatever the techniques used, is to say at last what was silently articulated “beyond”, in the text’. In many cases, the most basic link possible link between text and interpretation – that of quotation – will satisfy oneself and others that an interpretation is adequate, particularly if the meaning of the quotation gives the appearance of according in some obvious way with the meaning asserted for the text as a whole. However, this strategy is vulnerable to the accusation that the quotation is ‘selective’ (ie. that other quotations could have been made that would contradict the asserted meaning) or that it is ‘out of context’ (ie. that the meaning or significance the quoted portion of text bears in context of the interpretation is not one that can reasonably be ascribed to it in context of the text in which it originated). Moreover, there are times when different things seem obvious to different people, and there are also times when a non-obvious interpretation is desired precisely for its non-obviousness. To some extent, this is the foundation of institutional reading practices: exegesis, deconstruction, and textual analysis are all valued to the extent that they reveal what is not immediately apparent about a text or fragment thereof. Criticism is so replete with devices by which obvious meanings can be overturned that some of them have themselves become obvious. ‘It’s a symbol of...’, ‘it’s a metaphor for...’, ‘what the author is really trying to get across is...’, ‘there’s a subtext...’. Any number of other devices may be employed, such as appeal to the circumstances of the work’s authoring, or to codes that may be supposed to operate

¹⁰⁹ ‘Misreading’ may, for the same reason, be valued in contexts where individual personality is valorised (eg. Bloom 1975). Attridge’s (2004) notion of ‘creative reading’ might be considered an intermediate position.

within its texts. All of these involve the discursive construction of further representations. And all can be woven into a narrative of interaction between reader and text.

That such strategies could occur in fan discourse might seem unlikely to many academics, but fans can be extremely sophisticated in their practices of consumption and commentary. Indeed, as Merrick (1997:55) observes, fans are in many ways like academics, since ‘the process of interpretation is for both an avenue for making statements about their own identity and positioning within their respective communities, for both it is a site of pleasure (and a certain amount of power)’. Many academics who write on fandom are themselves fans, but perhaps the most intriguing blurring of the boundaries between fandom and academia occurs where the terminology and techniques of textual analysis and critical theory are appropriated for use within fandom – see Matt Hills (2002:15-21) on the ‘fan-scholar’.

Before we move on to close consideration of an example of such fan discourse, I would like to focus on an example that is in many ways its reverse. The following piece of spoken discourse is excerpted from a recording of an introductory undergraduate tutorial on Oscar Wilde’s play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The tutor is a teaching assistant in the third year of her PhD studies, and the students are in their second semester of undergraduate study. In their contributions to the lesson, students not only reject the institutionally-sanctioned ‘decoding’ of homosexual meanings in the play (as modelled in one of that week’s lectures), they also reject the institutionally-sanctioned means of rejecting interpretations, ie. with textual evidence.

Although I must confess to a certain degree of impatience with this form of literary criticism, I do not interpret the students' resistance to it in terms of their rejection of what I in previous chapters identify as the post-New Critical approach to literary study, but in terms of what Benwell and Stokoe (2002) find to be a behaviour typical of undergraduate students *regardless* of the subject being studied, ie. a general reluctance to engage in discussion tasks and resistance to 'academic' or 'intellectual' identity (Benwell and Stokoe's data included tutorials in Science and Engineering subjects, for example). As for the tutors, Benwell and Stokoe observe that

they... are entitled to speak authoritatively, and yet they do not employ such strategies... It is possible that this may be... an attempt to 'democratise' a traditionally hierarchical institution in order to yield more fruitful results from students... However, the resistant moves of students... suggest that they are not, in fact, taking up the interactional opportunities to take more control of the tutorial agenda, and 'more fruitful results' do not appear to be forthcoming. Rather than [sic] producing a 'democratised' context, the shift in participant roles does not appear to advance the pedagogic project.

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Accordingly, the tutor in the following extract uses something like Joyce Purdy's (2008) recommended booktalk strategy of 'structuring situations where students can engage in collaborative talk' about and around works (50) – a clear democratising move – but the direction in which this collaborative talk moves is towards the closing down of interpretative possibilities and away from the close analysis of the work and its historical context. As in the tutorials analysed by Benwell and Stokoe, the tutor generally responds

to this resistance with politeness and humour, constantly maintaining her students' 'face' (Goffman 1967, Brown and Levinson 1987). That 'resistance' is not automatically progressive (see Chapter 1) can be seen from the fact that student resistance is achieved, at one point, through performance of distaste for 'gay' lifestyles, and, at another, through explicit invocation of homophobic ideology.¹¹⁰ That dominance is not automatically reactionary can be seen from the fact that the tutor abandons her strategy of politeness and assumes a dominant hierarchical role in order to silence this homophobia. The interaction is quite extended, so I have broken it up into short segments which are not completely contiguous, summarising some of the intervening discourse.

T . okay? . anyone else got a thing they disagreed with
that they'd like to talk about? (5 sec pause) Monica?
S7 ehm . well it's kind of going back to what you were
saying it kind of touches on that . but the whole
(coughs) homosexuality thing I couldn't (sniffs) I
actually couldn't find much evidence in the play . to
. suggest that . like when I read it I didn't
S (very quiet) mm mm

¹¹⁰ Moreover, Benwell and Stokoe suggest that students' resistance to engaging in the collaborative production of knowledge may be explained in terms of their being encouraged by the higher educational funding policies of the Major and Blair governments to see themselves as consumers shopping for knowledge conceived as a *product* to be *supplied* (2002:449). In this case, the students would appear to be rejecting the knowledge-product (in the form of the lecture's propositional content) *along with* this tutor's attempt to involve them in knowledge production; disparagement of a product is, however, in no way incompatible with acceptance of one's role as consumer.

S7 so I kind of disagree with that . but then I don't
 know why . so many people . think that and . I can't
 . see it=

S6 =I think when you hear like a general view about
 something you think . "oh . I'm meant to agree with
 that" . but . I don't really find anything either .

S (very quiet) mm

S2 no that's what I mean . cuz that's what I was .
 thinking when I first saw it and read it I didn't .
 really . read anything into the homosexua-
 homosexuality element but . after the . lecture . I
 was like . (affects surprise) "oh . okay" (laughs)

The tutor's question is clearly informed by principles of student-centred learning, making the students' ideas, rather than her own, the focus of attention. Less obviously, it would seem calculated to prompt the students to engage with the work in question by critically entering into existing debates on the subject of that work – which I have argued elsewhere to be the characteristic mode in which works are approached in an academic context (Allington 2006). Rather than model the procedures of literary criticism, then, the tutor is attempting to get the students to carry them out themselves: although in my research I found many staff in the department to employ this strategy to some degree, it seemed most pronounced among teaching assistants. It might be interesting to speculate as to the reasons for this. One explanation could lie in the training course the teaching assistants had received, which placed particular emphasis on student-centred learning; another might be that they enacted their low status in the department by adopting a less powerful role in the classroom. Interestingly, the pattern

was different for third and fourth year classes in which it was often the case that designated students gave presentations – temporarily assuming, in effect, the monologic voice of the tutor (in my sample, invariably a member of the department rather than a teaching assistant) – and in which there were points at which students debated with one another with apparent spontaneity (see Chapter 4 for an example), thus failing to enact (or enacting less consistently) the resistance noted by Benwell and Stokoe (2002), perhaps because they were more invested in the classes (only a minority of students taking first year English literature modules are registered for degrees in English). By comparison, first and second year students never debated with one another unless instructed to do so – an instruction issued only by teaching assistants. It would be interesting to review the situation now that first year classes in English literature at that particular university are taught solely by teaching assistants.

This particular tutor's question meets with immediate resistance in the form of an almost painfully long silence – no-one volunteers a response, forcing her to (undemocratically) nominate a specific student to respond. The student's response initially appears to resemble a literary-critical position on *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in that her statement that she had been unable to 'find much evidence in the play' for 'the whole homosexuality thing' might be taken to imply that she has examined the evidence and found it wanting. However, she qualifies this statement with 'like when I read it I didn't', which carries no such implication: she is not claiming to have examined the evidence, only to have read the play and not noticed any. The problem, as she presents it, is one of opinion versus perception: 'so many people *think that* and I can't *see it*'. S6 and S2 jump in to support S7,¹¹¹ S6 suggesting that conformity ('I'm meant to') to group

¹¹¹ As noted above, first and second year students do not spontaneously debate with one another in my data. However, they do (as in Benwell and Stokoe's [2002] data) spontaneously produce

consensus ('a general view') would be the only reason for agreeing that there are homosexual meanings in the play, where this consensus (and not the play) is identified as the source of such meanings, and S2 is emphatic that the supposed homosexual meanings came to her not while *watching* or *reading* the play (ie. not from the play itself) but during the lecture (ie. from the lecturer).

S6 and S2's utterances are also the first instances of reported speech which we have had a chance to examine. Reported speech is usually divided into two kinds, with direct speech (which we see here) being discourse that affects to report 'both form and content' of an 'original utterance', and indirect speech (which we shall see shortly) being discourse that affects to report 'content' alone (Baynham 1996:68). As Mike Baynham emphasises, direct speech does not typically reproduce an 'original utterance' verbatim, being rather 'a rhetorical device with its own distinctive claim to truth.' (66) In S2's case, what is reported is a private thought supposed to have occurred to her after the lecture, and in S6's, no specific occasion is referred to: it is an example of what Greg Myers (1999:386) calls 'typified reported speech': utterances presented 'to be taken as emblematic of broader attitudes.' As Myers argues, direct speech usually 'serves to provide evidence... arising from the depiction, the conveying of how it was said as well as what was said' (ibid.), such that 'it is the enactment that has the effect and calls on other participants for response' (396): here, S6's 'oh I'm meant to agree' indicates the recognition of pressure to conform, and S2's performance of her past *surprise* ('oh okay') indicates that nothing in her reading and watching of the play had prepared her for the lecturer's interpretation. The latter adds support to the assertion of groundlessness for the homosexual interpretation in the play itself, and the former

utterances both in support of one another's acts of resistance, and (as we shall see) in disparagement of individual students' performances of academic identity.

identifies the rejection of this interpretation with resistance to conformity. In the following, the tutor is presented with a radical challenge to academic practice:

S4 and also I don't want to so much . homosexuality in
 it . I don't want to think that these . two
 characters . do have . that kind of . life . don't
 want them to be like that so I don't see it like that
 and I don't read it like that . but . y'know . I can
 do . if . somebody . persuades me to .

T okay . so the kind of [personal reactions you=

S [(laughs nervously)

T =might have to the play might sort of influence the
 kind of . reading into it you're going to do=

S4 =yeah

S4's initial utterance here does not even resemble an interpretation of *The Importance of Being Earnest*: it is simply an assertion of the student's will – note the repeated use of the word 'want', with sentence stress falling upon it each time: 'I don't want... I don't want... don't want... so I don't see... and I don't read'. This is a complete rejection of academic practice – not only in English Studies but elsewhere – in that it is resolutely irrational, offering no possibility for rational engagement. The student states that she is capable of reading the play otherwise *if* someone can persuade her to do so, but she offers no suggestion of any basis on which such persuasion might occur, in that her reason for reading as she does is simply her own expressed distaste for 'that kind of life'. Indeed, by insisting that seeing or not seeing homosexual meanings is a matter of how one *wants to* read, this student locates meaning *entirely* in the head of the reader, and thus rules out all possibility of literary-critical discussion.

Even faced with such a challenge, the tutor's responds (as in Benwell and Stokoe's [2002] data) in such a way as to protect the student's face, here through the use of indirect reporting – or 'reformulation' – of the challenging utterance. Baynham (1996) finds that, in adult education classes, teachers use 'reformulations' (ie. indirect speech) whereas students tend not to, and Myers (1999:394) finds that, in focus groups, what he calls 'formulations' (ie. reformulations or indirect speech) are used 'largely, but not exclusively... by the moderators'. In both cases, they are used by powerful interlocutors to establish what less powerful interlocutors meant by what they said – though it is important to see that what somebody meant by what he or she said is not an objective property of his or her speech but a matter of claim, counter-claim, agreement, and negotiation. The tutor's strategy can thus be seen as an exercise of power, although one which avoids confrontation: she begins by positioning herself in agreement with the student ('okay'), then produces a formulation that she identifies with what the student meant, but which (unlike what the student actually said) she is able to agree with.

This would appear to be a common pedagogical strategy. Baynham, for example, shows a numeracy teacher reformulating student utterances and 'in so doing... shifting them in the direction of a more mathematical discourse' (1996:72). In this literature tutorial, reformulation seems to be used in something like the same manner: the tutor reformulates the students' utterances to establish what they *should* have said, bringing it closer to the kind of thing that a literary critic *would* have said. This is not simply a matter of linguistic form: this tutor, for example, consistently reformulates expressions of resistance to the task in hand as expressions of general principles of literary criticism, as when (here), she reformulates the student's refusal of rationality ('I don't want') as a theory of reader response ('so the kind of personal reactions you might have to the play might sort of influence the kind of reading into it you're going to do'). Given that the

student accepts this as a reformulation of what she meant (albeit with a minimal ‘yeah’), this can be regarded as an example of the kind of gentle, face-saving correction that a different tutor, quoted in Chapter 1, employed in recognising a (spoken) reference to a West End musical as a (thought) reference to a Modernist poem.

T well what are the arguments then . this . idea of homosexuality in the play where does it . come from . what sort of . things is it that people are picking up on? . any ideas? (4 sec pause) puzzled shaking of heads

S (unvoiced laugh)

T blank looks all around . (5 sec pause) [no?

S2 [I guess it's just . taking the . life of Oscar Wilde and putting it [into . uhm . the character of . is=

S [(sniffs)

S2 =it Algernon? . uhm . yeah . (unvoiced laugh) uh and just kind of thinking well . he . doesn't . maybe . s- . it's just dependent on the actors who portray them . if the actors who portray them . are acting . kind of . gay . then . you will . perhaps . be motivated to think that but . if they're not . if they're playing it straight . then you won't think that

The use of humorous comments – here, ‘puzzled shaking of heads’ and ‘blank looks all around’ – in order to mitigate the damage to student face which would result from

repeated questioning (not to mention the damage to the tutor's face which has certainly resulted from her being ignored) appears to be a common strategy in undergraduate teaching. Benwell and Stokoe present similar data, in which a tutor has to prompt students repeatedly 'in response to long pauses in which no activity or student uptake takes place', and then resorts to humour to 'defuse [a] potentially confrontational situation' (2002:440). In fact, the challenge to the tutor's authority was much greater in that case than here: in that extract, not only did students respond to tutor instructions with silent inactivity, three of them announced that they had not done the required reading for the class: an act of resistance made all the more pronounced by the fact that this reading had been set for them by the tutor himself, in a lecture preceding the class. The significance of student resistance in this case should not be underplayed, however, since what they are expressing such reluctance to do (with two very long silences and a laugh) is to engage with the idea of 'homosexuality in the play' in terms of 'arguments' for that position, ie. to engage with it as literary critics with a case to make. Moreover, the response the tutor finally receives again avoids examining *The Importance of Being Earnest*, rejecting the queer reading not by finding homosexual meanings not to inhere in the play but by locating them somewhere else: firstly, in 'the life of Oscar Wilde' (from where they have to be *put into* the character of Algernon), and secondly, in unspecified actors' 'acting kind of gay' and thus 'motiv[at]ing you] to think' the characters they portray are homosexual.

S1 eventually provides what the tutor seems to be looking for, noting that there are 'a lot of secrets and double entendre and meanings' in the play and making a connection between this and the fact that, at the time when the play was written (unlike today, when she states, 'it's just not an issue any more or it's much less of an issue'), 'you couldn't openly be gay'. The tutor states that this is 'a possible reading', but S8 objects by asking

‘does this mean that every time a homosexual writes a book or a poem or a play then it always has to come back to his own sexual predilections’ (implying that this reading has nothing to do with what is in the play, and everything to do with an arbitrary interpretative process). The tutor begins with apparent assent, but reformulates what she has assented to as a general critical principle in accordance with the arguments of Wimsatt and Beardsley (1946; discussed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation): ‘right it’s important to be cautious of... things we know about the author’. This strategy of initiating what amounts to a disagreeing utterance with an agreeing formulation is used by S8 (in the tutor’s case, ‘right’, in S8’s, ‘I’d say that also about it’) in his riposte, which the tutor interrupts as it becomes overtly offensive:

S8 . I’d say that also about it and it was widely known even before he . I mean that Oscar Wilde . took the case to court . mm uh . y’know he wasn’t taken to court for being homosexual he took . the Marquis of Queensbury to court . but it was widely known he was a homosexual it wasn’t a secret . but he . perhaps the man in the street didn’t know he was a homosexual but certainly among the literati and among the aristocracy and among the people at Oxford and so on . y’know it was a sort of open secret . and it was the same for . eh n . there were always homosexuals . * * * * . talked about them . in a . * * * * * sort of . clandestine or semi-clandestine and so on there was . y’know most people find their practices repulsive and they’re [aware of it=

T [(loudly) well
S8 =[(laughs)
T [that's a very controversial position to argue and
we're definitely not going to get into the morality
of particular societal views like that . here

This is theoretically important, because it shows that, contrary to what some of the writers quoted in Chapter 1 would seem to assume, resistance – here to academic identity, and the academically-approved way of using literary works – may as easily be regressive as progressive: S8 continues to resist interpreting *The Importance of Being Earnest*, this time by launching into what is clearly working up to be an anti-gay harangue (which he later resumes after the tutor has left the room). Interestingly, its relevance initially appears to be that of a refutation of S1's suggestion, denying that homosexuality had to be 'secret' at the time of writing (note that this denial is founded not on the content of the play but on the life of the author), but S8 moves, via the notion of an 'open secret', to the assertion that homosexuality had to be 'clandestine or semi-clandestine', which might be taken to support S1 and to contradict his initial position. However, this is only the case if S8 is engaging S1 in literary-critical debate, ie. if what is at stake for him is the context in which *The Importance of Being Earnest* should be interpreted. As an instance of the phenomenon whereby '[s]tudents police each other's utterances for signs of intellectual superiority' and thereby ensure the rejection of academic identity (Benwell and Stokoe 2002:449), S8's contribution is coherent, since it contradicts S1 not only at the beginning, but throughout: late in his speech, S8 rejects S1's liberal assertion that being gay is 'just not an issue any more' with his use of the present tense ('find') to refer to anti-homosexual sentiment, and there is a marked contrast between 'you couldn't openly be gay' ('you' is here impersonal and could refer

to anyone; 'gay' is the self-identifier used by most homosexuals) and 'most people find their practices repulsive' ('their' implies not just anyone, but an objectified out-group; 'repulsive' is an extremely perjorative term; the focus is not on identity but on 'practices', ie. sexual activities). S1's position implies the possibility of interpreting *The Importance of Being Earnest* on the basis of a sympathetic understanding of the plight of late-Victorian homosexuals who 'couldn't openly be gay'. This not only supports the interpretative position taken in the lecture and the interpretative practice promoted by the tutor, it also assents to the liberal attitude to sexuality that both assume. S8, on the other hand, implies that the *normal* attitude to homosexuality ('y'know most people') understands it solely in terms of *repulsive practices*, which in turn implies that S1's position is abnormal and suggests that it is not normal to go looking for homosexual meanings in this play (as she seems to be willing to follow the tutor and the lecturer in doing). Indeed, after the tutor temporarily exits the room, S8 enters into a lengthy speech about Wilde's homosexuality and the 'myth' that homosexuals were 'persecuted', concluding with the description of homosexuality itself as an 'unsavoury subject'.

Having interrupted S8, the tutor returns to the (New Critical) idea that 'it's perhaps not that important that Oscar Wilde wrote it' and that 'what's important is the play itself'. In a quick-witted rejoinder, a different student accepts this position, constructing on its basis an argument against looking for *any sort* of 'deeper meaning' in the work in question:

S4 mm I mean it can just be read as a light comedy . and
 . like there's nothing wrong with that . you don't
 have to read deeper meanings into it . I don't think
 . it's not necessary to do that with a play like this

T right . well that's an interesting point to raise if
you all turn to uhm * you've got the Norton here

Here a reference to the illocutionary character of the work (see Chapter 2) is combined with a normative appeal to the uses appropriate to works 'like this' and can be connected to the suggestion by one of the reading group members quoted in Chapter 2 that it might be 'a little bit absurd' to discuss books seriously if they were clearly not 'serious' in intention; the implication that there are types of work into which it *is* necessary to 'read deeper meanings' is not, however, developed further in the current discussion. The idea of not reading a certain way because one does not 'have to' appeals to a notion of volition in reading: this is the same student who earlier insisted that she does not find homosexual meanings in the play because she does not *want* to. Furthermore, the way of reading that *would* find such meanings is described as 'read[ing] deeper meanings *into* it', ie. as eisegetical and therefore suspect.¹¹²

The tutor's response is a brief example of 'positive politeness' (Brown and Levinson 1987) that leads quickly into a move to bring the class *physically* back to the text, ie. by asking them to open it. By this point, the students' resistance to interpreting the work has been so successful that only one argument for *or against* the 'queer' reading has been produced that actually refers to the detail of the work: S1's reference to 'secrets and double entendre and meanings' (which was quashed by S8). The tutor does

¹¹² Cf. Liebes and Katz (1991[1989]), who asked audiences of *Dallas* the question (amongst others) of 'What is the programme / the producer trying to say?' (210) As they write, '[i]n the domain of messages, the Americans tend to be resistant. Not only do they offer fewer messages than any of the other ethnic groups, they also protest that *Dallas* can have no message for them since it is just entertainment, only escape.' (211) See Chapter 1 for further discussion of this study.

eventually manage to get the students to engage in something resembling academic interpretative discourse, although by the undemocratic means of placing them in groups and ordering them to find textual evidence to support or refute the queer reading.

3.4 Fan interpretations of cult media texts

From her analysis of the types of text that have been most conducive to slash reading, Sara Gwenllian Jones (2002:89) concludes that '[s]lash arises out of cult television's intrinsic requirement of distance from everyday reality, its related erasure of heterosexuality's social process, and its provision of perceptual depths that invite and tolerate diverse speculation about characters' "hidden" thoughts and feelings'. This is both insightful and provocative, but, as an attempt to infer reception from what is received, it forestalls the 'more open dialogue' that Green, Jenkins, and Jenkins (1998:14) hoped to promote between fans and academics – a dialogue that does not really begin, at least within slash reception study, until Elizabeth Woledge's use of the encoding/decoding model '[t]o understand the interpretive practice of K/S... on its own terms' (2005:237-238). Even there, however, it goes little further than translating fan terms into academic ones – a deceptively straightforward process, since, as we shall see, fans already use something very like the encoding/decoding model for their own rhetorical purposes. Woledge (2005:244) reconstructs the 'K/S decoding' of Star Trek as follows:

recognition of the homoerotic possibilities in Star Trek can be accomplished by analysis of looks and gestural codes, and this is the point from which K/S fans begin their decoding. Discussions between K/S fans frequently focus on where these ambiguous moments can be found.

This is more than the use of reader discourse to support a theory of reading (although that is in itself an important step forward). It is the recognition that reader discourse has something to teach the theorist. Nonetheless, I believe that the discourse in question is left under-analysed (I write ‘I believe’ because it is quoted from rather sparsely and in isolation, making it difficult to determine the argumentative meaning of individual statements; cf. Billig 1991:17). From the perspective adopted in this chapter, the passage quoted above seems more like an example of reader discourse than an analysis of it: although employing a more academic register than the above-quoted book review, like it, it is a narrative of engagement between reader and text that serves a rhetorical purpose. Note how it represents the text: homoerotic possibilities are there to be recognised in it. And note how it represents K/S fans: as beginning with what is in the text. Thus, Woledge’s reconstruction of the K/S decoding process legitimates K/S, representing Star Trek, and not K/S fans, as the source of the idea that Kirk and Spock have sexual feelings for each other. Moreover, I would suggest that it functions as a more cautious (and more theorised) extension of the same ‘[d]iscussions between K/S fans’ referred to in support of it: the central claim involved in both – that there is a ‘homoerotic subtext’ revealed in the way certain male characters look at one another – has become so familiar within fandoms that it is even possible for slashers to speak of such looks as ‘subtexty’. I would not oppose Woledge’s claim that such looks inspire K/S, but I find it less intriguing than the unanswered question of how and why K/S fans (including Woledge) establish these looks as the inspiration of K/S. There might, for example, be potential for comparison between talk of this kind and Hills’s (2002) notion of the ‘discursive mantra’. Discursive mantras are formulaic constructions that circulate within fandoms and provide ready-made answers to the question ‘Why are you a fan of...?’ They are ‘defensive mechanisms designed to render the fan’s affective

relationship meaningful in a rational sense, ie. to ground the relationship solely in the objective attributes of the source text and therefore to legitimate the fans' love of "their" programme' (Hills 2002:67).

Thus, what slash fans seek in their discussions of 'looks and gestural codes' might be a grounding for slash consumption practices in the objective attributes of what is consumed, and, by the same token, a legitimisation of those practices. Given the ideological emphasis our society places on authorship, perhaps the strongest legitimisation slash consumption could receive would be an endorsement from the creators of the texts being slashed. The notion that the director of a film or series *planned* for it to be consumed as an erotic representation of homosexual love would thus acquire a tremendous appeal: under the ideology of the auteur, it amounts to the implication that the non-slashing majority have actually misread the text. The notion of 'subtext' can thus be used to give a minority reading greater legitimacy than that subscribed to by the majority: the subtextual meaning then becomes the real meaning, and a 'disassociation of ideas' (Perelman 1979:23-24) has been accomplished. Woledge does not follow this route, instead suggesting that the K/S 'decoding' is neither more nor less defensible than the majority 'decoding'.

Woledge addresses an audience who are likely to begin from a position of scepticism with regard to Star Trek's homoerotic subtext, and so her justifications are easily understandable – but what function might such justifications fulfil within fandom? Academic criticism must also be backed up with evidence, but this occurs in a context where a critic must interpret a text differently from other critics if he or she is to be published. Why justify an interpretation that is already held by those to whom one makes one's case? John Shotter's (1991) 'rhetorical-responsive' theory of personal

identity stresses the importance of the individual's status as a socially situated and defined 'first person' even when engaged in lone activities, and the psychological need that this implies for any individual to be able to justify his or her own actions to a potential 'second person'. If this may be extended to the activity of reading, it would suggest the continuing relevance of social norms even when text is consumed as a solitary activity. These norms might then lead to anxiety where the lone reader or viewer suspects that he or she may not be able to justify his or her mode of textual consumption to a fellow reader or viewer.¹¹³ Slashers, of course, are not entirely alone, since they have contact with other slashers via mailing lists, websites, and other social networks. But, on a day-to-day basis, they will be surrounded by people who would be likely to consume the same texts very differently. This could then provide an incentive for slashers to communally reiterate and refine justifications of their mode of consumption, periodically arguing away one another's doubts. And furthermore, it should be remembered that no fandom is homogeneous: groups of slashers 'ship' (favour) different pairings, such that there are *Star Trek* slashers whose OTP ('one true pair') is not Kirk/Spock but (for example) Spock/McCoy.

It would, however, be unwarranted to assume that mere defensiveness was all there was to it. As we shall see in the following section, the certainty that slash is valuable does not necessarily require the certainty that it reconstructs a meaning intended by the creators of the texts being slashed. Justificatory discourse is likely to provide an additional, socially cohesive role, since producing or giving assent to confirmations of what a group 'already knows' (here, that certain same-sex characters have sexual or

¹¹³ Cf. Barker (2006:125): 'Audiences often have to find pleasure *in the face of* disapproval, dismissal, and derogation by commentators. In other words, they are often aware of being categorised and judged.'

romantic feelings for one another) would seem an excellent opportunity to perform one's identity as a member of that group. Vouching for the validity of the proofs or declaring that they confirm what one had intuitively perceived may function as acts of solidarity when done communally. It becomes one more way in which an audience of online fans 'constructs itself extensively as a mediated and textual performance of audiencehood' (Hills 2002: 181, emphasis removed).

Moreover, the search for proofs may be seen as a specific instance of the 'intense dedication to the faintest detail of the story world' (Brooker 1999:52) that characterises all fan consumption. For its fans, a cult text is a source of intrigue and frustration, implying a world beyond itself but confirming little about it; Jones (2002) sees slashing as typical of the imaginative entering-into which all cult texts invite. And finally, discourse of this type enables slashers to annotate the canon texts, re-packaging them for their own and one another's consumption. Where this takes the form of screenshots or quotations interwoven with commentary or discussion (as in a LiveJournal page referred to in the discourse analysed in Section 3.5), the slash reading of the 'canon' text becomes inscribed into a version of that text. The resulting text may be consumed as erotica in its own right, but it will also function as a set of instructions for consuming the 'canon' text as erotic: it informs the slasher of where to find the slashy moments, and of how to slash them.

3.5 Analysis: 'How come most people don't see it?'

I would now like to turn to some data with which to exemplify the points made in Section 3.3: a complete thread of postings to a message board attached to a well-established *Lord of the Rings* slash archive. Details have been removed to increase anonymity, and images within the text have been replaced with descriptions thereof. The

postings were made pseudonymously on what was at the time an open-access forum, and are reproduced here without permission (see Chapter 1 for discussion of ethical issues involved).

Posted by [A], 1 October 2005, 03:21 pm

At the first time I saw RoTK, I was absolutely blown away by Aragorn's coronation [image: crowned emoticon] scene, I actually said out loud in the theater: 'Oh, Legolas is the bride! cool!', it was totally there for me. this scene made me at last 100% convinced that the whole Aragorn/Legolas relationship isn't just in our perverted minds but a real subtext planted by Peter Jackson & co.

It reminded me of the wonderful documentary:

'The Celluloid Closet', this movie chronicles the way movies have portrayed homosexuals for the past 100 years. In the 50's or so, during a period of severe censorship, the only way for movies to show a gay relationship was through hidden subtext.

I think that if 'The Celluloid Closet 2' was to be made, it would focus on slashy mainstream movies like: Spiderman, star wars & LoTR *gasp*.

I feel that with LoTR being a blockbuster mainstream movie, Peter had say whatever he wanted to say in a hidden way, hence Legolas being delightfully bridish... [image: emoticon with big grin]

But when I asked about 10 friends of mine who are intelligent, and open minded people only 2 (!) of them agreed with me that this scene shows a rather different and queer aspect of A/L relationship. I don't get it [animated image: banging

head against wall] how come most people don't see it?! I am trying to be as objective as I can about as many things as I can, so I have to ask:

Is it possible, that our longing to slash characters makes us see what we want to see, even if it ain't really there?!

Pardon the Carrie Bradshaw tone... but I would really love to hear your opinion...

Love,

[A]

The first thing to be noted about this posting is the enthusiasm of the discussion that it occasioned. Not every attempt to start an online conversation is so successful. As Hills (2005:79) concludes from his research on horror fandom, fan postings that do not 'resonate with subcultural knowledge' are likely to elicit hostile responses or simply 'languish unanswered', and '[t]he skill that posters are required to display when initiating threads of discussion is thus that of articulating shared assumptions within the fan culture'. This does not mean that, to successfully initiate a thread, a poster must reiterate previously successful formulas for the initiation of threads (although this does often occur, as the many variants on 'Which is your favourite slash pairing?' can testify). What it means is that a posting must engage with the obsessions and concerns of the fan community if it is to receive the torrent of replies that will confirm it as what Hills (2005:79) calls 'a successful "doing" of being' a fan. I would suggest that what sets such torrents in motion is the opportunity that the initial postings provide for subsequent posters to 'do' the being of fans, which we shall see happening here.

[A] begins her post with a representation of herself at the time of watching *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* for the first time, perhaps because her initial response

to the film may carry the implication of greater authenticity than subsequent and more considered responses, particularly given her spoken articulation of this response at the time: to speak 'out loud' in the cinema transgresses social rules, suggesting a reaction too strong to be contained (compare comments on direct speech in Section 3.2). All this is in marked contrast to Penley's (1991:137) claim that K/S slash arose 'as fans recognised, through seeing the episodes countless times... that there was an erotic homosexual subtext there, or at least one that could easily be made to be there'. The ideal presented here is the converse, a subtext 'planted by' the director, Peter Jackson, which can be recognised at first glance: resistant or oppositional reading/viewing is not valued. The possibility that Aragorn and Legolas's love might be an *unreal* (imaginary, unintended) subtext is a clear cause of anxiety: what came 'at last' was a thing awaited. Thus, while Cherry (2006: unpaginated) seems much impressed with female fans of Star Wars for (in her analysis) pro-actively inventing subtexts as a means of 'provid[ing] the romantic and/or sexual gratifications they desired – yet were denied – in the original', this *Lord of the Rings* fan wants confirmation that her romantic and sexual gratifications originated in the original text, and not in the 'perverted minds' of herself and her fellow fans.

It is also noteworthy that the film is represented as an artefact to which known individuals have deliberately given particular properties: Fiske (1989:125) sees this as an intellectual, highbrow mode of viewing opposed to that of 'popular culture'. This is important for the implicitly elitist justification provided for the interpretation, which presents the A/L subtext as a message from the director that had to be encrypted into a form incomprehensible to the ignorant mass audience of a 'blockbuster mainstream movie'. The problem is that, even after the code has been explained to them, the slasher's non-slashing peers still do not decode it as she does. Nonetheless, it remains

the majority reading that is anomalous and in need of explanation, hence the question ‘How come most people don’t see it?!’ This illustrates the rhetorical gulf between writings on slash produced inside fandom, and those produced outside it. Studies of slash that address an academic audience implicitly attempt to answer the opposite question: ‘How come some people do?’

Posted by [B], 1 October 2005, 03:31 pm

Well, it is most certainly possible, but it would seem that since there is more than one person who considers it, the suggestive aspect of these relationships would be material.

But about the other people not seeing it, I don’t think it’s as a result of the suggestion not being there, I think it’s more of a reaction to your expressing something different and for most people, still fairly taboo. Then again, I could just be wrong and there could never be a relationship to start with. But I don’t think so.

The first argument offered here – that if more than one person sees something, it must be real – is vulnerable to refutation by simple inversion: if more than one person does not see something, it cannot be real. Thus, the perceptions of those who do not see the subtext have to be pronounced invalid, here by reference to the idea of a taboo against homosexuality. This technique for ‘disqualifying the recalcitrant’ (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969[1958]:33) is effective here because a very progressive consensus on male homosexuality has emerged among slashers, superseding the residual

homophobia noted by Jenkins (1992:219): a division can thus be made between slashers and non-slashers in terms of the acceptance and rejection of male homosexuality.¹¹⁴

Posted by [C], 1 October 2005, 05:50 pm

I suppose one could think of it as an inside joke, for lack of a better term. The creator/director/actors/etc. know about the existence of slashers, and, those who don't fight it or ignore it, try to give a nod to us for our enjoyment, while still keeping it vague enough that someone who wasn't looking for it wouldn't notice. Examples include the infamous coronation scene and the blown kiss in the POA movie. While we slashers would like it even more if there was wild man/hobbit/elf/etc-sex in the movie/book/whatever, it would repel other viewers. The creators find a middle ground, putting in some hints here and there to keep the slashers watching and perving, while allowing those who are not slashers to be blissfully ignorant enjoy the show as well.

Eh, my two cents.

Here, an alternative solution is proposed: the legitimacy of alternative readings. This recalls Woledge's (2005) strategy, although here the text is represented as intentionally polyvalent – see Stein (1998) on the enforced 'deniability' of homosexual implications in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Like the earlier solutions, this represents slashers as detecting 'hints' that ordinary viewers do not detect but that are not imagined; however, it goes further by representing the creators of cult texts as having inserted those hints for slashers – thus, slashers are a special group of consumers not only because of their

¹¹⁴ For example, the 'we aren't gay, we just love each other' cliché, familiar from earlier slash fandoms such as that for the LWT series *The Professionals* (see Stasi 2006), is very rare in *Lord of the Rings* slash.

sensitivity and progressiveness, but because they have been singled out for attention by the creators of mass media texts. Note also how this poster performs her own group identity as a slasher through an expression of shared desire ('we slashers...').

Posted by [D], 1 October 2005, 08:04 pm

I honestly didn't see it until someone with a pervier mind than me pointed it out.

I just saw it as Legolas being the best man at his closest friend's wedding.

shrugs

Here, cold water is poured on the notion of a subtext. Interestingly, this is done through representation of the slasher's viewing of the film prior to engaging in slash reader discourse, with the same suggestion of authenticity invoked for the opposite purpose by [A]. The connection between text and meaning is destroyed by narrating 'a pervier mind' as the source of the meaning.

Posted by [E], 2 October 2005, 04:55 am

of course Legolas is Aragorn's bride [animated image: emoticon raising a toast] I agree with [C]; whenever I see a film with my brother and I find a hint of slashiness I start grinning and he doesn't get what I'm grinning about [image: emoticon with big grin]

Though I'm not so sure those slashy little things are always there on purpose. We slashers sometimes tend to interpret things differently than non-slashers of course.

This posting makes the minority status of slash interpretation a virtue. To see homosexuality where others do not see it becomes, even more clearly than in [C]'s posting, the mark of a special group. Whether or not the 'slashyness' of a text was intended by its creators seems relatively unimportant, and interpretative differences between '[w]e slashers' and everybody else become a matter of course.

Posted by [F], 2 October 2005, 06:48 am

I'd just come across my first LOTR slash stories (less than a year ago . . .) but thought they were just the product of people's overheated erotic imagination – then I was raving about the films in general to an academic friend and without breaking stride she started talking about the 'homoerotic subtext' . . . Didn't say anything, not wishing to look a complete idiot, but rushed home and watched the entire DVD-EE again, as soon as I could. Talk about scales falling from eyes, loud crashing noises as any number of pennies dropped.

Now can't see the films or the books any other way.

[F]

This posting presents a different narrative of interaction with text. The slasher represents herself as having initially thought that Lord of the Rings slash was the product of 'imagination' (i.e. a misreading). It was only once the slash interpretation had been authorised by an expert interpreter that she at last admitted its validity: her current inability to 'see the films or the books any other way' is thus the judgement of a viewer who had had no investment in slash hitherto, and was therefore an impartial judge. The citing of this expert's opinion performs the additional function of aligning the activity of

slashing with the critical practices of an educational elite, adding a further dimension to the 'slashers/masses' dichotomy that has been taking shape since [A]'s initial posting.

Posted by [G], 2 October 2005, 08:20 am

This has been posted on [message board] before but maybe some guys missed it.
And no, it's not all just in our heads!

[http link]

This posting links to a highly persuasive (although somewhat tongue-in-cheek) fan-scholarly analysis that I shall be examining in a future paper, and which is taken to prove that Aragorn and Legolas's homosexual relationship is in the text (not 'just in our heads'). Thus, although the analysis itself does not employ a narrative of reader or viewer response, it can be incorporated into such a narrative as a representation of the text's 'objective' characteristics. With its instantly recognisable 'film studies' literacy, it may implicitly perform an analogous role here to [F]'s 'academic friend', although there are no further allusions to the possible elite status of slash. It is structured as a series of captioned frames captured from both the widescreen edition *and* the extended edition DVDs of *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* in order to present a maximum of visual detail, some of which is scarcely visible to the naked eye and has to be digitally enlarged and enhanced.

Posted by [H], 2 October 2005, 11:39 am

I don't think it's our over . . . uh . . . zealous imaginations. I wasn't thinking about slash when I saw FotR, but it seemed a bit that way, you know? And then I entered the realm of LotR slash, and now I slash like hell!!

But even my ex-husband, who has no idea about any of this, told me after RotK that he thought Sam and Frodo were gay and that they should be together. This man is about as straight and traditional minded as you can get!

Plus, there is no reason to make Legolas look like that and walk up with a train and everything. It could've been done differently, but a director gains the effect he/she wants by subtle details. And we all know PJ is into details; it's what makes a good director. I think that if it was not for the purpose of making Legolas and Aragorn seem like they were meant for each other (which they are), it at least was not just coincidence.

Here, we find yet another representation of initial consumption: 'I wasn't thinking about slash'. The implication is that, if she had been, then her mind might have been the source of the meaning, but she was not, so it cannot. Further support is provided by the incorporation of a representation of another viewer's response: having had 'no idea about any of this', the slasher's husband was an impartial judge, and any homosexual meanings he perceived must have originated in the text, since his 'straight and traditional' mind could not possibly have been the source of such ideas.

It is tempting to pick apart the generalisation that appears to underpin the implied syllogism that follows: after all, the director of *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* was not simply 'a director', but the director of *Bad Taste*, *Braindead*, and *Meet the Feebles*, three films in which effects are achieved through anything but subtle details. But this would miss the point somewhat: like academic criticism, fan interpretation involves the presumption of potential significance for any detail that can be perceived,

and critics and fans alike may attribute this significance to the will of an all-intending author/director.¹¹⁵

Posted by [I], 2 October 2005, 01:31 pm

[image: laughing emoticon] Honestly, I think it's about 80% in our pervy little heads. The other 20% is us seeing perfectly normal attraction of friends for friends and men for other men.

Yes, I think man/man is actually NORMAL. To be attracted to folks of the same gender is perfectly natural, as far as I'm concerned, but a lot of people get totally panicked when they even think about it, so it just gets all messed up. I blame religious zealots for that.

In China you see women walking along hand in hand, and young guys walking down the street arm in arm, hanging over each other's shoulders, and no one thinks anything of it. But that's a Buddhist culture, and there's a much better integration, historically, of the male and female in people's minds and in their culture. Westerners have it pretty much screwed up.

So, no, I don't think there are secret homoerotic messages in LOTR. But I do believe there are some very natural moments of male/male affection, which is

¹¹⁵ Cf. Livingston (1995:59): 'through critical reading, a text is always found to be a reasoned and reasonable object; its finest details reveal the rational motives for their existence.' The word 'always' is an exaggeration – Livingston has in mind a particular kind of criticism, and never discusses divergences from it (such as deconstruction) – but this strategy for close reading is as recognisable in literary and (especially under the 'auteur' tradition) film studies as it is in fandom.

nice. It's particularly accurate when you consider the 'brothers in arms' effect, how close men become going through a war together. Perfectly normal.

Now if you'll excuse me . . . Dave as requested my assistance in tying up Viggo, and they're both getting a bit impatient. [image: emoticon with protruding tongue]

Like [D], this slasher is clear that the A/L subtext originates with slashers rather than in *The Lord of the Rings*. Paradoxically, her justification for this appeals to the same contextual factor as [B]'s justification of the opposite position: homophobia. She demonstrates that this opinion does not interfere with her identity as a slasher by humorously representing herself as a participant in an RPS sex scene involving the *Lord of the Rings* actors Viggo Mortensen (Aragorn) and David Wenham (Faramir). The notion of normality appealed to suggests the problems of aligning slash with queer theory (for example, Stein 1998): at issue in this discussion is not the performativity of sexuality, but the question of whether Aragorn and Legolas are lovers or 'just friends'.¹¹⁶

Posted by [F], 2 October 2005, 04:45 pm

[quotes last paragraph of [I]'s posting]

¹¹⁶ Indeed, the ascription of this normality – this *perfect* normality – to the experience of 'men... going through a war together' must also discredit the utopian interpretation of slash as 'an explicit critique of masculinity' (Jenkins 1992:219). Critiques of masculinity *do* circulate within slash fandoms, but, as Jenkins realises ('fan writers also accept uncritically many ways of thinking about gender that originate within the commercial narratives' [ibid.]), so do highly conservative gender ideologies: as here.

If you find your hands over-full, I could always dash over and put my fingers on the knots to make sure they don't slip... if that would help?

[F]

That [I]'s scepticism does not create a crisis can be seen from [F]'s endorsement of her performance of slasher identity, tentatively writing herself into the same RPS scene. That slashers see homosexual desire in mainstream movies is contentious; that they enjoy the fantasy of 'boy on boy' is something that all here can agree on (*Lord of the Rings* femslash is very rare).

Posted by [A], 4 October 2005, 10:07 am

[quotes G's posting]

I have seen it before, and found it really cool and reassuring in a 'Yay! I am not hallucinating!' kind of way.

I agree with most of it, but I felt that in some points she was making, she interpreted the facts in a very wishfull thinking way, and really lost her objectivity in the cinematic analysis she was trying to do. None the less she did an amazing job, and I am going to put a link to it in my site. I have to say that one of the ten friends I asked about the wedding scene, was a gay male, and he said something similar to what [I] wrote...

This would appear to support much of what has been argued in this chapter: the analysis is valued for its reassurance that the source of the homosexual meaning is the text; it is criticised for loss of objectivity, but this entails that there was objectivity to be lost.

Nonetheless, this posting is no less troubled than [A]'s first, and it refutes [B]'s

proffered solution of the original dilemma by representing another viewer who did not see the subtext, this time ‘a gay male’. Taboo cannot easily explain a male homosexual’s non-recognition of a text as a representation of male homosexuality.

Posted by [J], 4 October 2005, 07:24 pm

[A]: That is FUNNY! [quote from website linked to by G] lol

This response to the analysis values it as an artefact in its own right, rather than for what it might be taken to reveal about the ‘canon’ text. To do this, this slasher represents herself reading the analysis (‘lol’, i.e. ‘laughs out loud’) rather than watching the film.

Posted by [K], 5 October 2005, 04:09 am

[A], you are very observant* but looking at the [website] link of yours, have you also noticed that Legolas’s eyes? His pupils are dilated, showing sexual interest. Ooooohhh, you’ve set me off now . . . more Leggy/Raggy slash fics!!! [image: Legolas] [image: heart] [image: Aragorn] [animated image: emoticon emitting hearts]

The analysis now acquires two functions beyond those that it has held hitherto: a cue to the discovery of further erotic details for which one must be even more ‘observant’, and a reinforcement of commitment to A/L. Thus, it is received as ‘epidictic oratory’, or preaching to the converted, which aims at the ‘amplification and enhancement’ of values already adhered to by the audience (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969[1958], 51). The slasher’s own adherence to these values (and therefore her group identity) is emphasised through her use of the familiar (to A/L shippers) pet names ‘Leggy’ and ‘Raggy’ to designate Legolas and Aragorn.

Posted by [D], 5 October 2005, 05:50 pm

Of course, one could argue that the interpretation of any/all affection between two people as sexual attraction is a direct product of the ingrained cultural homophobia of america. This country is very much a large 'personal space' culture – touching and affection is frowned upon as 'inappropriate' because it's 'always sexual' even in non-sexual context, like an elementary school teacher giving a student a hug. There are places they can get fired for that now, you know, because it's 'inappropriate' and might be misinterpreted as pedophilia. I blame the psychiatry industry (and dipshits like Freud especially).

I think we're all poorer as human beings for it. I like slash and all, but I'd be careful about picking threads from the books and movies as canon homosexuality (not that you ever needed canonicity for writing slash!).
Anyhow, it's not a trend I'd support.

So yea, there's my 1 1/2 cents...

[D] returns to express a similar view to [I], and to make explicit the implication that the meanings claimed in slash readings may have originated in homophobia. Like [I], [D] is careful to represent her identity as a slasher as uncompromised by her scepticism ('I like slash and all'), but what is of perhaps greater interest here is her representation of the mode of reading required to back up slash interpretations as reliant on selective quotation or quotation out of context ('picking threads'), a powerful refutation discussed in Section 3.2. This promotes a different conception of slash, in which it is understood as creative rather than interpretative, and therefore as not requiring the justifications proposed by other posters: 'not that you ever needed canonicity for writing slash!'

3.6 Concluding note

This chapter has so far presented a fairly coherent narrative, a relatively untroubled case for certain understandings and against others. It has achieved this by discussing only representations, by adopting the anti-realist position promoted by discursive psychologists and – in media studies – Matt Hills. There are good reasons for adopting this position, and I am not entirely giving it up. But, while the following chapter shall make much of Hills's notion of 'pleasure-as-performative' (2005), here I will subvert it in advance by asking whether pleasure might not (possibly, perhaps) be felt as well as performed. I shall not go so far as to suppose that *Lord of the Rings* fans enjoy watching *The Lord of the Rings* – heaven forbid! But I will venture to speculate that the people who produced the discourse analysed above *enjoyed* producing that discourse. This is not a matter of pleasure-as-performative, as it would be if I was discussing [I]'s use of a laughing emoticon as a performance of pleasure-taking. It is a matter of wondering, 'Hey, I wonder if they had a good time posting those messages?' It certainly seemed like fun. Is that such a leap of faith?

So there: I'll say it and be damned: there are pleasures in slashing. Although we can infer from the popularity among them of *Velvet Goldmine*, *Brokeback Mountain*, *Queer as Folk*, and indeed *Torchwood* (see Section 3.2) that many slashers would have appreciated explicit homosexuality in *The Lord of the Rings*, its presence would have diminished the possibility for those pleasures. None of the interpretative discourse here would have been possible had Aragorn and Legolas been easily readable as 'gay', which in turn would have meant fewer opportunities for speculation, the exercise of readerly expertise, and the construction of slasher identity as something valuable and distinct. It is easy to see why, as Janet Staiger (2005:156, citing Ross 2002) contends, 'some

minorities enjoy maintaining subtexts as just that: subtexts'. The discussion analysed here suggests an *erotics of the barely perceptible*: it is the uncertainty of the ground on which the slash interpretation rests that gives that ground its fascination.

The discursive turn has given psychology a new object for investigation: the representation of psychological states in discourse. At the same time, it insists on rigorous agnosticism as to the 'real' nature of those states, taking interest only in discourse. That a number of psychologists (for example, Frosh 1999; Hollway and Jefferson 2005) should have expressed frustration with such self-imposed limitations is understandable; for better or for worse, 'doing discursive psychology' means *refraining from doing* much of what psychology has traditionally been assumed to be. It would seem likely that many scholars of reception will feel the same way about the sort of work that has been recommended in this study, which has only considered what reader discourse reveals when considered as a form of social activity, ducking the issue of its referential content. Are we to deny that [A] spoke aloud in the cinema, that [F] was 'converted' by an academic, or that [D] failed to see the potential for a symbolic reading of Orlando Bloom's costume until an acquaintance spelled it out? Within the limits of this chapter, it is of no significance whether these things actually happened: accounts of such events can be analysed as events in their own right, and, as Silverman (1993:209) argues, 'for sociological purposes, nothing lies "behind" people's accounts'. But this will clearly not do for the mainstream of reception study, which is interested not in what viewers and readers do through representing their practices of textual consumption, but in the practices themselves.

At the risk of alienating the very theorists who have been my inspiration, I would like to suggest that discourse analysis of the type carried out here might also be of use to those

working outside the discursive paradigm: it not only identifies forms of interference between the reception scholar and the phenomenon of reception, it suggests that this ‘interference’ is interesting in its own right, and perhaps even a site of reception: works can be seen as received not only in minds, but also in social interactions.

But what of those theorists whose primary object is the subjective experience of reading, and who must therefore continue to focus their attention on individual minds? The considerations raised here may seem irrelevant to their endeavours, unless one or both of two assumptions can be made. The first of these is that the processes involved in the viewing of the *Lord of the Rings* films by the producers of the discourse analysed above must have been such as could facilitate the production of that discourse. These processes are not merely of the brain and eye: they are physical (repeat viewing), technical (use of freeze-frame and scene selection), economic (cinemagoing, purchase of variant DVD editions), and social (watching in company, noticing other people’s reactions, participating in discussion). And then there are indeed those brain and eye processes – attention to particular details, for example – but those will have been mediated through the others. On the one hand, this means that we cannot deduce from the fact that somebody mentions a detail that he or she spontaneously noticed that detail by him- or herself: it may have been pointed out – and, if the person in question is reading from the virtual crib-sheet of fan general knowledge, it may not, strictly speaking, have been noticed at all (at least by the mentioner). But on the other hand, it also means that the contributors to discourse on a work may be *mediating their own* brain and eye (and other) processes by contributing to that discourse. It was attention to this possibility that prompted Bethan Benwell and I to view readers’ statements about their reading as means by which they organise their lives of the mind relative to one another (under

review; quoted in Chapter 1 of the current study): where the life of the mind is understood to be something not entirely private.

This leads us to the second assumption, which is that the subjective experience of consumption is mediated through the representation of such experience in discourse: that the experience of consuming a text may be influenced by the consumer's obligation to represent that experience to others at a later stage *or* by others' prior representations of that consumer's likely experience ('If you liked *Brokeback Mountain*, you'll love *The Lord of the Rings*'; cf. Barker 2004, discussed Chapter 1). Such possibilities are raised by Lynne Pearce (1997:89-93, 215), problematic though her methods are from a strictly discursive point of view,¹¹⁷ and are suggested by the very ubiquity of reader discourse: as Long (1992:191) observes, '[m]ost readers need the support of talk with other readers, the participation in a social milieu in which books are "in the air"'.

It should also be remembered that, for many readers (including both fans and academics), engagement in discourse on a work does not merely follow or precede the silent consumption of its texts (as suggested above), but alternates and interweaves with it, so that textual consumption is a long-term relationship composed of repeated readings or viewings framed by revisited discussions or, equally, of revisited discussions framed by repeated readings or viewings. These readers' subjective experience of a work would necessarily be the subjective experience of participating in simultaneous and intimately-connected careers of reading/viewing and discussion. As Martin Barker puts it,

audiences' encounters with films do not begin and end with opening titles and closing credits. Encounters begin as the first layers of knowledge and interest are sedimented in; and they 'close' with the processes, after viewing, in which

¹¹⁷ See Chapter 4 for further discussion.

people review, discuss, argue, and settle – into a relatively stable form – the meaning and significance of the filmic experience.

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If anything is clear, it is that the subtleties of the discourse analysed here will be lost to view if we misconstrue it as what so much of it claims to be: straightforward reporting of prior encounters with texts. Taking such discourse seriously, then, does not necessarily mean taking it at face value: fan discourse, and discourse more generally, possesses a level of complexity that will remain invisible so long as we continue to treat it solely as a window onto something else.

Nonetheless, to assume that discourse is all we can learn about by studying discourse – a presumption of opacity, the very inverse of Woledge’s apparent (but unarticulated) presumption of transparency – may arguably fail to do justice to discourse, which – after all – exists partly to gesture beyond itself. The next chapter turns again to the stories people tell of their encounters with texts, to read them in more detail and to ask: even if we cannot see *through* discourse to a reality on its other side, can we not at least see *in* discourse the attempt to comprehend a reality comprehensible in no other way? This is to develop my solution to the problem of meta-theoretical regress, touched upon in Chapter 1: to see my research subjects as themselves reception scholars in the very moment that they yield up each datum of reception. But before we can attempt such theoretical flights, we must return to earth: or rather, to the difficulties that such an approach may solve.

4. Telling stories about readers: a narratology of reading¹¹⁸

4.1 Introduction

In his manifesto, ‘Texts, printing, readings’, Roger Chartier (1989:158) conceives the history of reading in terms of ‘the collection of actual readings tracked down in individual confessions or reconstructed on the level of communities of readers’, and thus places individuals’ reports of their own reading at the methodological centre of the discipline. It is therefore interesting that two of the most most noted histories of British reading produced in recent years – Jonathan Rose’s *The intellectual life of the British working class* (2002[2001]) and William St Clair’s *The reading nation* (2004) – have taken diametrically opposed approaches to this form of data. Though he does not claim it to be untrustworthy in the majority of cases, St Clair dismisses it from consideration (2004:4-6), while Rose, though admitting it to be imperfect (2002[2001]:2), bases a great part of his argument upon the assumption of its transparency.¹¹⁹ Are these the only alternatives? I would like to suggest a more nuanced approach to such data: re-conceptualising confessions, etc, not as *anecdotal evidence of reading* (with the stress either, with St Clair, on the ‘anecdotal’, or, with Rose, on the ‘evidence’), but as a sort

¹¹⁸ This chapter is adapted from Allington (forthcoming)

¹¹⁹ Many of Rose’s overall conclusions are supported by a range of relatively objective data and therefore reliable; the argument of this chapter may, however, have consequences for the interpretation of the substantial part of Rose’s data whose factual veracity *cannot* be checked (see the fifth section of this chapter for a fuller discussion).

of narrative: the *anecdote of reading*.¹²⁰ This approach is not in itself novel within the historical study of reading: as we shall see, a number of reader historians have analysed the ways in which a writers ‘employ references to reading when constructing and presenting an identity through autobiography’ (Flint 1993:191). What *is* novel here is the attempt to develop a systematic application for Lyons and Taksa’s principle that ‘[t]he potential of oral history is fully realised only when its novel-like quality is exploited’ (1992:15), and applying it to all anecdotal evidence, rather than to oral testimony alone: in other words, to propose a *narratology of reading*.

This involves turning one’s academic back on the quest to find in anecdotes of reading documentary proof either of past acts of reading or of their immediate cognitive or emotional consequences. To some extent, this approach has been premiered in the previous two chapters: claims to having been hurt by reading a book or to having ‘seen’ an interpretation of a film while seated in the cinema, eyes to the screen, were analysed in the context of evaluative and interpretative discourse on the book and the film respectively, and were recognised as playing functional roles, including as argumentative support for higher level claims (bad book, homoerotic film). In this chapter, however, the anecdote of reading will be shown (a) to have rhetorical consequences beyond the evaluation and interpretation of specific works (although, given this dissertation’s focus, these shall remain central), and (b) to possess internal complexities that reward further investigation. To put it another way, this means treating the following warning as a challenge:

¹²⁰ I use this term to refer to any mention or description of events that include or imply consumption of or response to text – including the refusal to read – particularly where the specific claims made cannot be substantiated through hard evidence. The term is a convenience, and no claim is made that such mentions and descriptions constitute a single genre.

As a means of assessing reception, diffusion, impact, and influence, records of individual acts of reading are less useful than they may at first appear. Once a mental experience has been put into a text, even as simple a text as a note in a diary, it requires historical and critical interpretation. Why were certain reactions to reading recorded and not others? Who were the implied readers for those texts, and what did the writer hope to achieve? What horizons of expectations did the authors bring to their reading and writing? The words themselves need to be historicised. In describing the effects of their reading, the readers describe, recommend, and condemn.

St Clair 2004:400

What is at stake is the narrative representation of reading. I am aware that, to certain historians of reading, what I propose may seem some dreadful post-structuralist excess (particularly when I cast it in terms of discourse analysis and historiographic theory), but it is really no more than an extension of something we quite readily do in our day-to-day life. For instance, when the then Leader of the Commons, Jack Straw claimed to find Salman Rushdie's books 'difficult' and never to have finished any of them – a confession that might seem to reveal something fairly straightforward about a British politician's reading habits – a *Times* journalist saw in it nothing more than Straw's 'making the point that, since Rushdie's work is not his cup of tea, neither is Rushdie, and nor, by extension, is his knighthood – nothing to do with me, guv, so please keep voting for me, Muslim constituents.' (Knight 2007:15)

As in the previous chapter, I adopt a broadly discursive psychological approach. However, the current chapter attempts to move beyond the presumption of exclusive tacticality inherent in most implementations of discursive psychological thinking by

attending to the *cognitive* function of anecdotes of reading: the extent to which their formulation may serve to *make sense of* the texts and the reading experiences not only constructed but *referred to*: that is, by recognising that, whatever else they are, anecdote, autobiography, testimony, etc may be themselves attempts (however confused, fragmentary, or impartial) to establish the nature and meaning of past events (including events of reading) that can *only* be discussed in the proxy form of representations.¹²¹ This theoretical position makes of any history that works with anecdotal sources a ‘metahistory’, or critique of attempts to write or tell historical narratives, for which reason, a further importation, this time from theoretical historiography (White 1973), becomes necessary. There are irresolvable tensions between the theories here brought to bear on the anecdote of reading, but, as I hope to demonstrate, these can be productively played out in the practical activity of analysis.

4.2 Audience research: memory

Except in cases such as marginalia or focus groups, where a stretch of discourse on a text or on the reading of that text is produced in the presence of the text in question, the

¹²¹ What is sometimes called the ‘postmodern’ critique of history has at times involved the claim that reference to past events is in some respect anomalous: ‘If linguistic analysts define words as signs or signifiers that denote objects in their stead, then “history” certainly fits this definition twice over.... no-one can point to the past in the same way that one can point to a horse or a tree (or even a picture of them) as the objects to which the words “horse” and “tree” refer.’ (Berkhofer 1997:148-149) But this critique is founded on a misunderstanding: the words ‘horse’ and ‘tree’ (as opposed to, for example, ‘Shergar’ and ‘Goethe’s Oak’) do not ‘denote objects’ that could ever have been pointed at, and, though words may be *used* to refer to particular ‘objects’ (‘a horse or a tree’, as Berkhofer writes), the speech act of referring (Searle 1969:26-33) is in no sense dependent on the possibility of ostensive definition for the referring expression.

referent of such discourse will always be something accessible to the speaker or writer only through memory. Thus, as Janet Staiger observes, scholars of reception ‘use memories for almost all their raw evidence.’ (2005:186) This realisation has formed an important discussion point in mass media reception study: Staiger (191), for example, encourages an acquaintance with the work of cognitive psychologist Ulric Neisser (1981), who famously deduced the existence of three distinct memory processes from a comparison of White House official John Dean’s Watergate testimony and the (much later released) recordings of the same Oval Office conversations that he had, in that testimony, claimed to recall. These three processes comprise ‘verbatim recall’ (precisely recalled details of what was said and what happened), ‘gist’ (recalled summaries of the same), and ‘episodic memory’ (recall of themes which remained invariant throughout a series of events).

The implicit theory of remembering is that a person recalls, and then recounts. Given such a dichotomy, one naturally assumes that there are two distinct sets of causes affecting the content of autobiographical accounts: those arising in the brain, and those arising in the social environment inhabited by the brain’s owner, and in which it may, for example, may be conventional that ‘incidents are selected to contribute toward the foreseen moral of the tale.’ (Staiger 2005:193) Commonsensical though this may seem, it is hard to see how, in any real-world situation, one may definitively attribute features of a given individual’s testimony to the former set of causes. Indeed, in their critique of Neisser, discursive psychologists Edwards and Potter (1992) argue that John Dean’s ‘efforts at remembering are... indistinguishable from his mode of accounting’ (44), and conclude that the features of Dean’s testimony that Neisser’s brain-orientated hypotheses purport to explain can better be explained as attempts on Dean’s part ‘to enhance his reliability as a prosecution witness, to bolster his own disputed version of

things, and to mitigate his own culpability under cross-examination.’ (48) Thus, it might be better to describe reception scholars as working with *accounts of remembered events* than as working with memories *per se*, unless ‘a memory’ is taken to mean an account of a remembered event. This being the case, the problematics of memory may be subsumed into the more general problematics of situated storytelling, a move which is suggested by Annette Kuhn’s (2002) use of such terms as ‘memory talk’ and ‘memory text’ to describe the data from which she constructs her oral history of cinemagoing, and by Lyons and Taksa’s (1992) theories of autobiography. My claim is not, of course, that all stories are told with the hard-bitten calculation of a public servant facing a tribunal, but only that memories are stories told in social situations and for social purposes. As Potter and Wetherell (1987:34) put it, ‘[i]t may be that the person providing the account is not consciously constructing, but a construction emerges as they merely try to make sense of a phenomenon or engage in unselfconscious social activities like blaming or justifying.’ While, within oral history, psychoanalytic theories have been proposed to explain how witnesses’ memories of historical events can be ‘scrambled and entangled’ by official or popular accounts of those same events (Thomson 1990:77), it would certainly be easier to explain this invasion of memory by text if memories are viewed as performances, either improvised or habitual, produced in particular situations for particular purposes and drawing on a range of potential sources in order to achieve interpersonal effects: popular films and official histories become grist to the storyteller’s mill.¹²²

¹²² A particularly good example of this sort of process is provided by Robins and Cohen (1978) in their anthropological study of urban British working class youths. As they put it, ‘towards the end [of one story], media imagery spills out of its context and “takes over the account”’ (102), but I would prefer simply to say that the storyteller *employs* media imagery to make the point of his account all

Thus, although processes internal to the brain will indubitably limit the memory texts that an individual is able to produce, it may be unwise to see these processes and the past events referred to as the sole (or even perhaps the primary) determinants of the memory texts themselves. As Stokoe and Edwards (2006:60) argue, rather than assuming that ‘ “life stories” and experiences are readily available to “dump” from memory’, analysts should attend to ‘what, in their daily lives, people are *doing* when they tell stories and, therefore, what stories are *designed* to do.’ Although there are difficulties with the appeal to the notion of design (unfortunately implying, as it does, that such stories must be narrated in accordance with a preconceived plan), this may be, for the purposes of reader history and other forms of reception study, the most fruitful approach to memory.

We are not the passive bearers of our memories of reading. In a study of women’s memories of Hollywood stars, for example, Jackie Stacey (1994a:70) notes that ‘[w]hat gets remembered and what gets forgotten may depend not only on the star’s career, and changing discourses since the time period specified, but also upon the identity of the cinema spectator’, but the performance of such rememberings and forgettings can also be viewed as an *active* response to those discourses and an *active* construction of that identity. Indeed, Stacey subsequently came to view each respondent’s rememberings as the creation, in dialogue with herself as they imagined her, of ‘a contrast and mediation between [the] past and present selves represented in [their] accounts’ (1994b:326). This can be sharply contrasted with Dorothy Hobson’s dismissal of the ‘observer’s paradox’: ‘since many of the viewers talked about programmes which they had seen when I was not there, nor did they know that, months or years ahead, they would be talking about the more dramatically clear: ‘So it’s the poor mugs blind at the front that gets the first chunk of lead and all their face just going splut all over the place and all you hear is chop chop and little groans and grunts, and little kids crawling out with half their jaws missing.’ (ibid.)

them, it can be said that the effect which those programmes had had upon their audience had not been affected by my presence.’ (1982:107) To state that the researcher’s presence cannot have affected the ‘effect’ of a text upon its consumers *in the past* is to forget that this ‘effect’ is a discursive representation constructed by those consumers in dialogue with the researcher.

4.3 Audience research: accounting

That there exists no report of an event – does this mean that it did not happen, that it happened but was not witnessed, that it was witnessed but was not retained by the brain of the witness, or that, despite being retained, it was not reported? And if the latter, was this due to censorship, to embarrassment, to tact, or to modesty, or simply through seeming so unimportant as not to be worth mentioning?

In a fascinating study of written responses to a Mass-Observation question on the subject of crying in the cinema, Harper and Porter (1996) provide examples of respondents of both sexes who identified tears as a *feminine* response to films. Based on respondents’ reporting of their own tears (or lack thereof), Harper and Porter conclude that ‘men and women had fundamentally different attitudes to crying in the cinema, and these attitudes influenced their behaviour’ (157). But it is hard to imagine that these attitudes could alter an individual’s propensity to cry without altering that same individual’s propensity to report him- or herself as having cried; indeed, Harper and Porter seem to suggest as much with their statement that ‘far fewer men [than women] *were prepared to cite* topics which could bring a tear to their eyes’ (157, emphasis added). Thus, the more secure of Harper and Porter’s discoveries relate not to behavioural responses to films (for which the Mass-Observation reports constitute

anecdotal evidence) but to ways of talking about such responses (for which they constitute *the phenomenon itself*).¹²³ This is a common experience in qualitative social science research; as David Silverman (1993:203) argues, ‘[t]he phenomenon that *always* escapes is the ‘essential’ reality’ pursued’, but ‘[t]he phenomenon that can be made to *reappear* is the practical activity of participants in establishing a phenomenon-in-context.’ And not only should this ‘practical activity’ hold great potential sociological and historical interest for scholars of reception,¹²⁴ the *lack* of such activity may be argued to hold *equal* interest. Andrew Hobbs (2007) argues that the reason why there exists little written evidence of responses to local newspapers in 18th Century Lancashire is that these newspapers were considered too unprestigious a reading matter to remark upon in writing: on the one hand, this can be seen as an impediment to research, but, on the other, it can be seen as a discovery about the culture of reading in that time and place.

A no less conspicuous absence is that of *Don Juan* from Rose’s (2002) account of British working class reading. Rose mentions this early 19th century bestseller only twice: once in passing, in a long list of reading matter extracted from a working class woman’s autobiography (2002:85), and once when he quotes from the autobiography of

¹²³ One male respondent recalled that he had been deeply moved by a film but had concealed this at the time. His confession to having falsely presented his emotional response *immediately after* its occurrence must surely de-stabilise (which is not to say discredit) attempts to take as factually true his later presentation of that same emotional response (and, indeed, its very concealment).

¹²⁴ In his study of television viewers (see chapter 1), Morley argues that, even if we are to suppose that his ‘respondents had misrepresented their behaviour... offering classical masculine and feminine stereotypes which belied the complexity of their actual behaviour’, we should still consider it ‘a social fact of considerable interest that these were the particular forms of misrepresentation which respondents felt constrained to offer of themselves’ (1986:166).

‘a housepainter’s son who became a Cambridge don’ (374). The former mention goes by without further comment, the latter with the assertion that, reading *Don Juan* as a child, the reader in question had done so ‘through a prepubescent frame, of course’ (ibid.). Rose seems to draw no conclusions from this, but the clear implication is that the working classes did not read *Don Juan* very much, and that, if they did, it will not at all have been for its scandalous sexual content. Although we can have no objective evidence regarding the latter idea, the former seems unlikely, since we know that, within two years of its completion, *Don Juan* sold in its hundred thousands in editions of ‘tiny books, crammed pages, [and] tiny print’ that were ‘affordable by clerks, artisans, and others hitherto excluded from modern reading.’ (St Clair 2005:7) This would seem a good illustration of Jacqueline Pearson’s (1999:13) maxim that ‘[e]ven autobiographical accounts... may not be the transparent historical record they seem’ as ‘[t]he temptation to suppress facts, even to tell outright lies, was sometimes strong’; indeed, Pearson suggests that the reading of *Don Juan* was a ‘fact’ particularly likely to be suppressed (ibid.). Thus, we should perhaps think of other reasons than simple truth telling for which an old Cambridge don might have insisted that, as an eleven-year-old boy in a working class family, he ‘saw nothing in’ that infamous work ‘but comic adventures, sunny shores, storms, Arabian Nights interiors, and words, words, words.’ (Burton 1958:95, quoted Rose ibid.)

Alasuutari found from analysis of interview data that the admission of having watched certain types of programme seemed to require an apology or justification, and that the watching of those same types of programme was often actively denied: on the basis of this, he proposes a ‘moral hierarchy’ of television, with current affairs programmes at

the top and soap operas at the bottom (1992:568).¹²⁵ ‘When you listen to people taking about their viewing habits and about their favourite TV programmes’, he observes, ‘it immediately strikes you how profoundly *moral* this issue is’ (561) – but morality is only the beginning of it, as one realises when one remembers Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984[1979]) conception of *habitus* as the complex of behaviour and aesthetic preference associated with membership of a particular socioeconomic group. As can be seen from research such as Jackson et al’s study of how readers of men’s magazines distance themselves from this low prestige form of text (2001:114-116), this applies at least as much to reading as it does to viewing. Indeed, Elizabeth Long (1986) observes a hierarchy of taste common to all the (middle class, and all-female) reading groups in her initial study, noting that ‘[n]o group considers romances, for example, to be discussable’ (598). This point is intuitive enough to have been made in passing by a number of writers,¹²⁶ and its implications for the interpretation of anecdotes of reading are clear from Lyons and Taksa’s wry comment that ‘[w]hile interviewees were happy to impress us with their familiarity with Dickens, they were not so forthright about their excursions into the world of popular thrillers and romances.’ (1992:56)

¹²⁵ Compare Morley’s (1986:166) summary of masculine and feminine associations in his interview data:

<i>Masculine</i>	<i>Feminine</i>
Activity	Watching television
Fact programmes	Fiction programmes
Realist fiction	Romance

¹²⁶ Potter and Wetherell (1987:31) provide the slipping into conversation of a reference to one’s reading of Goethe as a typical example of how ‘[t]o present yourself as a wonderful human being’; Scollon (1998:109) suggests that ‘the act of displaying one’s reading matter for others to see would be analogous to driving the latest prestigious car or living at the right address’.

Miscalculations in this regard could be potentially dangerous. It is sometimes suggested, for example, that Al Gore's expressed affection (on *Oprah*) for Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* may have deepened his reputation as an intellectual out of touch with ordinary Americans, and thus (perhaps) indirectly contributed to his winning the presidential election by an insufficiently large margin to prevent George W Bush from being declared the victor. Whether or not this is true, it reminds us that there are situations in which the best-calculated display may be of the least ambitious reading matter.¹²⁷

Indeed, five years after Gore's failure at the polls, members of the British parliament were expressing a marked preference for Harry Potter and *The Da Vinci Code* (Williams 2005). And in some contexts, it might be difficult to admit to reading anything at all: Lyons and Taksa argue that, for many of their male respondents, '[t]he myth of the Great Outdoors produced the assumption that reading was somehow incompatible with playing football or tennis, going surfing, or indulging in other physical or sporting activities', while many females 'viewed reading as an individual indulgence, which could conflict with their perceived duty of service to a family group.' (1992:191)

From such a starting point, two analytic approaches to the anecdote of reading can be proposed. The first aims to discover generalities about the place of text, texts, or text

¹²⁷ Cf. Hawkins (1990) on Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*: 'in differing social and institutional circles... there is a stigma attached to any writers or works that you might be, or once have been, required to read in a course. All of them are presumed to be equally boring and irrelevant. Therefore not to know, and above all defiantly not to care, and certainly not to want to know who Christopher Marlowe was, would be a mark of status, a source of pride.... Can you imagine John Wayne playing a character with a first-hand knowledge of the works of *Christopher Marlowe*?' (12-13) If it is 'traditionally taboo for an All-American Male to display *any* artistic or intellectual knowledge, passions, or interests' (13, emphasis added), how much more so must it be when the object of his knowledge, passion, and interest is *French*.

types in society. Just as Alasuutari (1992) is able, from statistical analysis of his interviewees' avowals or disavowals of taste for particular types of contemporary television programme, to place those types in a hierarchy of respectability, so can one do the same for books in any given historical period, *based on that period's documentary anecdotes of reading*. Indeed, one can go further than Alasuutari, since Bourdieu's association of different standards of taste with each class fraction suggests the possibility of multiple hierarchies co-existing simultaneously. Read from this perspective, one of the most interesting aspects of Rose's study is its revelation of a succession of rivalries between competing hierarchies of books within the reading tastes of the British proletariat (which Bourdieu appears to approach as a single, undivided entity; see Peterson and Simkus [1992], Bryson [1997], and Tampubolon [2008], discussed in Chapter 1, for further accounts of why status group *alone* is not enough to explain taste): Rose finds the same 'distinct correlation between conventionality and manual labour' as does Bourdieu, with working class tastes in literature 'consistently lagg[ing] a generation behind those of the educated middle classes' (117), but additionally shows that there were sharp generational distinctions between working class *contemporaries* (120) and suggests the possibility of regional differences within the working classes, with proletarian readers in the north possibly having more conservative tastes than those in London (138-140). Interestingly, Rose finds evidence to suggest that this divide between provincial and metropolitan readers may not have extended to the middle classes (117).¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Like St Clair (2004), Rose considers the primary reason for proletarian aesthetic conservatism to have been the prohibitive cost of texts of works by living authors (Rose 2002[2001]:120-122,128). Rose considers this to have been an 'obstacle to the working class reader, but not an insurmountable one' (120), since second-hand texts, 'prepackaged collections of classics' (128), and (in the twentieth century) Everyman editions of works old enough to have passed into the public domain (134) were

Lyons and Taksa discover an equally fascinating hierarchy to be implied by their interviewees' recollections of poetry: the most popular poets were Shakespeare, the Romantics, and the Victorians, where '[f]or most interviewees, English romantic poetry meant one poet: Wordsworth, and indeed, one poem: "Daffodils"' (Lyons and Taksa 1992:62), and where the Victorians meant, above all, Tennyson and Longfellow. In particular, '[n]o modern or modernist poet disturbed the peace serenely occupied by Shakespeare, Wordsworth, or the Victorians... None mentioned Eliot or Pound, or even Yeats or Hopkins.' (65) Lyons and Taksa are able to explain this by reference to the institutions through which poetry was disseminated: the hierarchy reflects (a) the values of the educational system, as evidenced for example in the tendency of Anglican schools in particular to give out volumes of English poetry as prizes, (b) the activities of the Shakespeare Society, founded in Sydney in 1900, (c) Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*, which included 41 poems by Wordsworth but only two by Coleridge and none by Blake ('[n]o respondents... remembered Blake, and only three recalled encountering Coleridge' [62]), and (d) the popularity of Tennyson and Longfellow in social and educational recitals. On the whole, the Australian poets remembered were those promoted in the

cheaply available. St Clair, on the other hand, views such sources of *obsolete* texts rather less optimistically, fulminating against 'private intellectual property in the hands of the text-copying industry' (2004:438) on the grounds that it results in '[t]he impoverished mental and physical life historically suffered by constituencies of low-income readers, whose access to modern knowledge was limited by price' (2004:446). While, from a strictly utilitarian point of view, this may seem exaggerated with regard to literature – what, after all, does it matter whether readers amuse themselves with the poetry of their own age or with that of a previous one? – we should think carefully before dismissing it. If one result of such 'impoverishment' was that, having been exposed only to outdated models of style, working class writers were less likely to succeed in print or to make an impression on posterity, then this will have been no trivial matter. St Clair's point becomes all the more pressing when we recall that the same situation will pertain for non-literary texts.

Anglican and Catholic school curricula, eg. Henry Lawson, Henry Kendall, and AB Paterson, the only notable exception being CJ Dennis, whom some informants ‘freely criticised... for the same reasons which denied him an entrenched place in schools’ (71), ie. his use of an orthographic representation of working class Melbourne speech.¹²⁹

Understood thus, anecdotes of reading become non-anecdotal but indirect evidence in the history of reading. This is because they are in this case to be interpreted as evidence not of what they *refer to* but of what they *orient to*, ie. socially shared rules and norms that can be inferred to have been operative in the anecdotalist’s community. For example, that members of a certain group deny enjoying a particular text may be *anecdotal* evidence that is not enjoyed by them, but it is also evidence (neither direct nor anecdotal) that the text features low on the group’s moral hierarchy, or even that moral or aesthetic aversion to it is (or is a function of) an in-group marker.

The second approach treats individual anecdotes of reading as distinct social actions. Whenever a person mentions or describes his or her own reading, he or she is taking the highly reflexive step of creating or implying a representation of him- or herself, whether this is for a limited audience (eg. in a letter), a general one (eg. in a memoir), or for the self and posterity alone (eg. in a private diary). This is simply a fact of being human (which is to say, of being a member of human society), and has been discussed in the previous chapter. Moreover, as discussed in chapter 2, the illocutionary character of the act of writing ensures that every text (and work) is to some extent generic.

¹²⁹ That, decades later, this hierarchy should remain intact may suggest that a generational group’s tastes are defined early on, remaining relatively constant thereafter. On the other hand, it may simply suggest that, once the informants had left school, and once the recital had ceased to be a significant social institution, poetry completely vanished from their lives, so that they ceased accumulating cultural capital in this regard.

This turn I propose from anecdote as source of information on action (here, reading) to anecdote as action is informed by critical work within the social sciences. In an article entitled ‘Rescuing narrative from qualitative research’, Atkinson and Delamont (2006:164) bemoan the fact that ‘[a] great deal of what passes for qualitative – and even ethnographic – research is grounded in the collection of personal narratives.’ This is a specific case of what Silverman decries as ‘the assumption that lay accounts can do the work of sociological explanations.’ (1993:200) This problem can be seen to some extent even in highly sophisticated and reflexive work, as when Clifford Geertz meditates on a story involving a Jewish merchant, some Berber and Marmushan tribesmen, and the French Foreign Legion, somewhat belatedly revealing that the story was told to him decades after the event by the merchant in question: Geertz astutely describes the story as ‘*a fictiō* – “a making”’ (1993[1973]:16), but recognises only his *own* hand in this making; in other words, he leaves out of his analysis the question of what the merchant was doing in telling the story to him. Discourse analysts – and particularly those influenced by conversation analysis – have learnt to pay particular attention to the *action* of storytelling. Thus, Atkinson and Delamont argue that ‘when social scientists collect narratives, whether life histories, biographies, myths, atrocity stories, jokes, or whatever, they need to focus on the social and cultural context in which such tales are told, and to recognise that all cultures or sub-cultures have narrative conventions’ (2006:165), and Bamberg argues that narratives must be analysed for the ways in which they ‘index who is speaking/writing, from which position, and for what purpose.’ (2006:141) These principles are vitally important to the analysis which will be carried out in this chapter, although I hope to transcend the phonocentrism of the scholarly

traditions from which they derive: where Georgakopoulou writes that ‘it is in the details of talk (including storytelling) that identities can be inflected, reworked, and more or less variably and subtly invoked’ (2006:125), for example, I will apply this principle not only to spoken but to written storytelling, and where Bamberg argues that one should recognise ‘that particular descriptions and evaluations are chosen for the interactive purpose of fending off and mitigating the interpretations of (present) others’ (2006:145), I will ignore the parenthetical qualifier and attend to the wider argumentative context.

Without condoning total scepticism with regard to an individual’s ‘confessions’ of reading (more of which later), we can still insist on sensitivity to the moral significance of the details and to their utility in the construction of a *habitus* (or the impression of one). This should apply not only to the brute question of *what* is represented as being read, but also to a multitude of more subtle questions, such as *why* (for distraction, for knowledge, under obligation, on a friend’s recommendation), *how* (with interest, with boredom, with annoyance, in floods of tears), *under what circumstances* (in school, in bed, on the train, while watching television), and *with what effects* (becoming a fan of the author, losing all interest in the topic, being inspired to take up writing as a career, falling asleep from boredom). Even such an apparently simple notion as ‘reading for pleasure’ can be subjected to detailed analysis. Stacey argues that memories of pleasures ‘are produced in relation to the *idea* of a judgement of such pleasures’ (1994b:327); researching the online interactions of horror fans, Matt Hills provocatively claims that ‘pleasure-as-performative is always a cultural act, an articulation of identity: “I am the sort of person who takes this sort of pleasure in this sort of media product.”’ (2005:ix)¹³⁰

¹³⁰ Less provocatively: ‘What we choose to engage in as audiences... is a part of how we conceive of ourselves.’ (Barker 2006:125)

The power of pleasure to define a person is exploited by Alasdair Gray in a scene from his novel, *Lanark*, in which textual consumption (together with other recreations) dramatises the *distinction* between two working class boys:

Coulter showed him a magazine called *Astounding Science Fiction*... Thaw shook his head and said, 'I don't like science fiction much. It's pessimistic.'

Coulter grinned and said, 'That's what I like about it. I was reading a great story the other day called *Colonel Johnson Does his Duty*. This American colonel is in a hideout miles underground.... there's only one other man left alive in the world, and he's in a city in Russia. So he gets into this plane and flies to Russia.... It's eight years since he's seen another human being, he's going mad with loneliness, see, and he's been hoping to talk tae another man before he dies. The Russian comes out of the building and Colonel Johnson shoots him.'

'But *why?*' said Thaw.

'Because he's been trained tae kill Russians. Don't you like that story?'

'I think it's a rotten story.'

'Mibby. But it's true tae life. What do you do after school?'

'I go to the library, or mibby a walk.'

'I go intae town with Murdoch Muir and big Sam Lang. We stage riots.'

'How?'

‘D’ye know the West End Park?’

‘The park near the Art Galleries?’

‘Aye....’

...

Thaw said, ‘That’s anti-social.’

‘Mibby, but it’s natural. More natural than going walks by yourself. Come on, admit you’d like tae come with us one night.’

‘But I wouldnae.’

‘Admit you’d sooner look at that comic than read your art criticism.’

Coulter pointed at the cover of a neighbour’s comic. It showed a blonde in a bathing costume being entwined by a huge serpent. Thaw opened his mouth to deny this, then frowned and shut it. Coulter said, ‘Come on, that picture makes your cock prick, doesn’t it? Admit you’re like the rest of us.’

Thaw went to the next classroom alarmed and confused.

Gray 1991(1981):163-165

Thaw’s *habitus* is centred around pleasures that Coulter regards as unnatural. He suggests that he only knows where the park is because it is near the Art Galleries.

Coulter’s *habitus*, on the other hand, may involve what is (in his judgement and in

Thaw’s) ‘anti-social’, but he asserts (and Thaw seems to suspect) that is more ‘natural’

(recall Frow's [1995] critique of Bourdieu's romantic view of the 'naturalness' of working class culture, discussed in chapter 1). The issue of the pleasure that each takes in reading provides a more nuanced distinction between them: the very feature that Thaw attributes to science fiction in order to explain his dislike, Coulter is happy to call 'what I like about it'. Coulter's selection and paraphrase of a specific story (possibly Gray's invention) is particularly interesting: 'I was reading a great story the other day', he begins, and it is clearly meant as an example of how enjoyable the (alleged) pessimistic nature of science fiction can be. It is a story whose point (at least in his rendition of it) is precisely its pessimism, and when he asks Thaw, 'Don't you like that story?', he challenges him to cross the distinction that has been constructed between them. Thaw declines, so Coulter provides him with a justification of his position: the stories he takes pleasure in may indeed be 'rotten', but they are 'true tae life' (the natural again). And this justification coincides not only with Coulter's contrast between his own natural pleasures and Thaw's unnatural ones, but with his suggestion that Thaw is being untrue to himself: *trying to make himself think* he's superior, pretending to prefer art criticism to erotica in order to avoid *admitting* that in fact he is 'like the rest of us'.¹³¹

If one can contribute to a representation of oneself by representing oneself in the act of

¹³¹ Such considerations should be borne in mind even when we are dealing with non-narrative forms of reader-historical evidence, such as readers' marks and marginalia: Wiggins (2007) observes that, particularly where the books in question were likely to be seen by other people than the annotator, these may have been used to *display* decorous reading practices. A reader might have underlined parts of a text in order to create the impression that these were the parts of that text that he or she paid particular attention to, for example.

reading, one may also do the same for others. Such considerations lend an extraordinary complexity to historical accounts of reading, an interesting case in point being the responses to the reading-related questions in a survey of rural culture in France, completed in 1790 by members of the provincial bourgeoisie: as Chartier (1988:165) concludes, ‘all the respondents arrange their observations so as to bring out an ideal configuration, positive or negative (or positive *and* negative) of the rural personality, and... propose, consistently but unconsciously, traits that fit with the portrait that they intended to trace’. Chartier does not *entirely* dismiss the survey responses as a historical source regarding the phenomenon that they purport to record, but is far more confident in describing them as a very different kind of source: one that ‘teaches us how literature provincials represented peasant reading, for themselves or for others.’ (ibid.) Awareness of such issues informs Katie Halsey’s analysis of accounts of Jane Austen’s reading by her brother, Henry Austen (1818), and nephew, James Edward Austen-Leigh (1870), both of whom ‘choose to mention, of the eclectic array of literature Jane Austen read, the books that function as evidence for the person they say she was.’ (Halsey 2004:25)

4.4 Narrative sense-making and dialectic reasoning

Although I would suggest that the above should be borne in mind by analysts of reception, the reductiveness of the theory of discourse to which it appeals should not blind us to the possibility of further levels of complexity. In particular, it is important to avoid the *presumption of exclusive tacticality* (see Chapter 1) implicit in certain discourse approaches, including the above: it is surely unwarranted, for instance, to see in every expression of feeling only a ploy, as feelings are not only claimed and attributed, but also *felt*. Discourse, including narrative discourse, may aim at sense-making as well as at self-promotion and the manipulation of others (even if it aims at

sense-making *through* self-promoting and manipulative acts, or vice versa). This potential exists in all discourse, and should be recognised as much in a diary note as in a learned treatise on a distant historical period. Thus, though I would agree with Bamberg (2006) that ‘in the business of relating the world that is created by use of verbal means to the here and now of the interactive situation, speakers position themselves vis-à-vis the world out there and the social world here and now’ (144), I take issue with his argument that ‘[w]hen we study narratives, we are neither accessing speakers’ past experiences nor their reflections on their past experiences’ (ibid.): I would insist that one reflects on one’s experiences by relating representations of them ‘to the here and now of the interactive situation’, and that this is in no way incompatible with positioning oneself ‘vis-à-vis the world out there and the social world here and now.’ Something like this is suggested by Stephen Frosh (1999) in a critique of discursive psychology. He gives the example of a trainee clinical psychologist who came to him for a supervision meeting after what had been (for her) a very upsetting counselling session with a six-year-old sexual abuse victim:

at the time of the experience, the main event was not a discursive, linguistic one which could be transformed into a piece of knowledge. It was just an event, what Lacanians could be excused for calling the ‘breakthrough of the Real’... something extra-discursive and unnameable, a threat, an abjection, a piece of life.

Retrospectively, we make discursive sense of it, in the supervision session, in this piece of writing.

Like Frosh, I would see talking and writing as tools for sense-making reflection, although I recognise that reflections (and representations) are always mediated by the tools by which they are accomplished, and by the ‘interactive situation’ in which they are accomplished. I would further argue that, if talking and writing are tools for sense-making reflection, then tools for the study of talk and writing become tools for the study of such mediated thought processes. In this section, I would like to reflect on two important scholarly tools of this type. Both originate in the heyday of Structuralism and embody the totalising ambitions of that movement; however, once their limitations are recognised, they can generate a great deal of insight with regard both to specific anecdotes of reading and to anecdotes of reading in general.

The sociolinguist William Labov defined oral narrative as ‘one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred.’ (1977:359-360) Labov and Waletzky (1967) identify the most important functions performed by these clauses as ‘orientation’, ‘complicating action’, ‘result’, and ‘evaluation’. Labov (1977: 366) argues that, of these, ‘perhaps the most important element, in addition to the basic narrative clause’ (ie. a clause describing an event with a temporal relation to the other events narrated) is the last of these four: ‘the means used by the narrator to indicate the point of the narrative, its *raison d’être*: why it was told and what the narrator is getting at.’ As he continues, ‘[p]ointless stories are met (in English) with the withering rejoinder, “So what?” Every good narrator is continually warding off this question; when his narrative is over, it should be unthinkable for a bystander to say, “So what?”’ (ibid.) As Labov explains (370-375), there are many ways in which evaluations can be incorporated into a narrative: the narrator can explicitly state his or her evaluation to the narratee (‘external evaluation’), or can attribute this evaluation to his or her past self or any other character

in the narrative, doing this either directly, through quotation or paraphrase of thoughts or speech ('embedded evaluation'), or by implication, through a description of behaviour ('evaluative action'). Jonathan Culler rightly points out that this means that '[f]or every report of an action, there is the possibility that it should be thought of as evaluative, determined by the requirements of significance, and not as the narrative representation of a given event' (2001[1981]:206-207), but wrongly (I think) sees these as mutually exclusive possibilities between which the analyst must choose. Rather than make such an artificial choice, it seems to me that it would be more consistent with Labov's (1977) position to recognise that any 'narrative representation of a given event' will be 'determined by the requirements of significance', and potentially evaluative in function.

Let us consider a real example. In the following excerpt from an advanced undergraduate seminar on contemporary Scottish literature, a (Scottish) student uses the story of her husband's reading (and non-reading) of Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* in order to resist the (non-Scottish) tutor's painstakingly academic interpretation of that novel; her resistance, however, provokes opposition from a second (also Scottish) student. This resistance can be compared to that faced by the tutor in Chapter 3, but it should be noted that there is no resistance here to participation in discussion: the two students who speak in this extract do so spontaneously, and, moreover, the second does so in what may be hearable as defence of the tutor's point of view. This would seem, as I suggested in Chapter 3, to be explicable in terms of the students' greater investment in the course: unlike the first year students now taught exclusively by teaching assistants but at the time of recording taught by both teaching assistants and members of staff, the majority of these students will have been studying for single or joint honours degrees in English, they will have chosen this particular English course from among a range of

others, and their success in assignments carried out on this course will have a direct impact on the degree they eventually receive. It is also very possible that the two students in question both felt themselves to have a particular investment in the reception of what is, after all, the most famous work of Scottish literature to have been published in recent years. In other words, the student who speaks first is arguably resisting not academic identity, but a particular conception of 'Scottishness' that has been associated with the book (something that, as we shall see, the tutor had explicitly orientated to).

I have attempted in my transcription to represent orthographically the student's use of a blend of Scottish English and Scots, which I would suggest is important, given that novel in question draws on both these languages, and that this had been the subject of intense discussion earlier in the seminar. The student's sociolinguistic choices can arguably be heard as a part of her argumentative stance, ie. a contestation of Welsh's right to speak on behalf of Scottish people.

T very quickly . more about the Scottishness of this
book . I wanted to leave this till last because of .
otherwise we'd have talked about . the whole time .
this is the bit . the SNP used in their soundbite now
which is I say embellished . in the film . this is on
page one ninety

(pages rustling)

T um . he's running down his . his hometown . Leith
here . (reads) a place ay dispossessed white trash .
in a trash country filled ay dispossessed white trash

. some say that the Irish are the trash ay Europe .
that's shite . it's the Scots . the Irish had the
bottle tae win thir country back or at least maist ay
it . ah remember gettin wound up when Nicksy's brar
down in London described the Scots as 'porridge wogs'
. now ah realise that the only thing offensive about
that statement was its racism against black people .
otherwise it's spot on . anybody will tell you the
Scots make good soldiers (ends reading) . he goes on
to make this famous speech about 'it's t- shite being
Scottish' . and that it's the Scots' fault for being
colonised by 'effete arseholes' like the English . um
. so . there's a- a very powerful . idea that
Scotland is colonised . in the book . which is still
a very big part of its appeal . that this is speaking
for . the oppressed . in a certain kind of way . but
at the same time . in the novel . um we have Mark's
brother . Billy .

S mm

T who's given that name very purposely

S mm

T and who's given the big . Loyalist funeral very
purposely as well . um who's seen as a victim of
imperialism . but also as a tool of imperialism . cuz
he's uh . a kind of mindless . not very attractive

character . who's been killed . presum'ly by the IRA
. in Northern Ireland . so . there's [a kind of
S [(coughs)
T doubleness in Scottish identity that . Welsh is
honouring here . I think it's simplistic for either
the SNP . or Labour to . claim it as a British book
because . it's alive to some of those contradictions
about national identity . um that have obsessed a lot
of other Scottish critics . um .
S6 tha's what ah don' like about Irvine Welsh, 'is 'is
that that element ay it the 'is 'is own politics if
ye like 'is 'is g- you ye picked up'n'the
sectarianism is it ma husband bought it like so many
first . an' that was it . he shut it "ahm no readin'
that" .
T yeah?
S6 yep . an' so- 'e- uh- a- as ahm sayin' then he's
narrowin' his market in that department as well right
an' [you ye think
T [(laughs) he's offending everybody equally
[though isn't he (laughs)
S6 [yeah he does an' he an' he done an interview n the
Daily Record years ago where he was on about homs an'
hick toons up and doon this nation an' eh well ahm
quite proud t'be Scottish ah don' think it's shite
t'be Scottish ah wouldn't like bein' anything else

T mm

S6 eh an' that's it i- in that sense ay the word but ah think a lot ay . that comes across as Irvine Welsh's . knowin' it's him . 's [his politics

S5 [he's very proud t'be Scottish as well though d'ye not think is- is he not [just is he-

S6 [well ah think he'd be prouder t'be Irish

The ground for the tutor's interpretation of *Trainspotting* was scrupulously prepared, and should be attended to in detail in order to compare it with S6's response: note the tutor's glossing of the anti-Unionist speech from the book's narrator with the comment that 'in the book' (see Chapter 3 on the importance of attributed sources of meaning) there is the 'idea that Scotland is colonised'. He follows this by contrasting it ('but at the same time') with the idea that there is also 'in the novel' (again) a character (the narrator's brother) who is 'very purposely' (see Chapter 2 and the second analysis in Chapter 3) given the name 'Billy'¹³² and 'very purposely' (he use these words twice) given, after a military death in Ireland, 'the big Loyalist funeral'. It is for *these* reasons, according to the tutor, that the character is 'seen as a victim of imperialism but also as a tool of imperialism'. The structure of meanings the tutor attributes to *Trainspotting* is thus closely tied to its textual details; moreover, the centrality of *contradictoriness* to

¹³² The tutor does not explain the significance of this name, perhaps considering it unnecessary.

'Billy' is a name with strong Loyalist connotations. King William III and William, Duke of Cumberland both went down in history for suppression of the Scottish Highlanders and for victories over the (originally Scottish) Stuart family and their supporters; both have been popularly remembered under the name of 'Billy'.

this structure indicates a level of complexity far beyond the merely propagandist: it may even be the kind of meaning that Stanley Fish (1995:27) claims critics since the Romantic period have assumed ‘literary productions’ to be ‘saturated with’: ‘a special kind of meaning that can only be teased out by interpreters with special skills’. The tutor’s choices of illocutionary attribution (see Chapter 2) are also interesting:

Trainspotting ‘honours’ and ‘is alive to’ what he calls ‘doubleness’ and ‘contradictions’, and these verbal constructions imply a degree of subtlety and indirectness that is congruent with the other aspects of his presentation. Through these contradictions, moreover, *Trainspotting* is pre-embedded in a corpus of critical writings: the ideas of Scottish critics are not imposed upon the book; rather, the book was written with such an awareness of them that its author can be counted *as* a critic (‘*other* Scottish critics’), the book itself (perhaps) as a work of criticism.

If the tutor is modelling an approach to literary works, it is entirely at odds with that which S6 adopts when she discusses *Trainspotting* as a statement of its author’s politics. This interpretation is supported by a reference to the author’s statements in a tabloid newspaper interview (establishing journalism, and not critical writings, as the relevant intertextual field) and through the production of an anecdote of reading featuring S6’s husband. Consisting of only four clauses – ‘ma husband bought like so many first’, ‘that was it’, ‘he shut it’, and ‘ahm no readin’ that’ – just two of which describe events, this anecdote is too short to comprise a complete narrative in Labov and Waletzky’s (1967) terms. However, it qualifies for a ‘minimal narrative’, ie. ‘a sequence of two clauses which are temporally ordered’ (Labov 1972:361): these are the first and third clauses, describing the buying and shutting of the book.¹³³ ‘That was it’ is an external evaluation,

¹³³ Although several clause-types from Labov and Waletzky’s (1967) original framework are not represented in this narrative, we can still usefully apply labels from that framework: ‘ma husband

a comment from the narrator that explains the point of the narrative: ‘that’ seems to refer anaphorically to ‘sectarianism’, and ‘it’ appears to mean something like ‘the thing he reacted to’. The direct speech (see Chapter 3) ‘ahm no readin’ that’ is an internal evaluation, an enactment of the force of the narrator’s husband’s reaction and therefore of the importance of the narrative point. And the closing of the book would appear to be an evaluative action, *dramatising* the husband’s felt revulsion. Though S6’s anecdote may simply appear to report a string of past, reading-related occurrences (her husband bought and then closed *Trainspotting*) and a past, reading-related utterance (her husband pronounced upon *Trainspotting*), it is produced in accordance with generic expectations for oral narratives, and two thirds of what it reports functions to establish its ‘point’. Although S6 cannot, therefore, be understood as providing an objective chronicle of past reality (which is, in any case, an impossibility), she can still be understood as trying to establish the sense of her own and her husband’s feelings about *Trainspotting*, as much to her own satisfaction as to that of the other people in the room, the point of the narrative coinciding with this sense: which would appear to be – as S5’s objection and S6’s rebuttal of the objection make clear – that a good, patriotic, non-sectarian Scot would neither write nor willingly read a book like *Trainspotting*.¹³⁴

bought it like so many first’ may be considered the ‘complicating action’, and ‘he shut it’ the ‘resolution’. Labov and Waletzky do not consider reported utterances, such as ‘ahm no readin’ that’, to be events.

¹³⁴ The way in which S6 invokes sectarianism is interesting, because she attributes the invocation to the tutor (‘ye picked up’n’the sectarianism’). The relevance of sectarian issues to the section which had been read out – in particular, to the words ‘the Irish had the bottle tae win thir country back or at least maist ay it’ – was not in fact ‘picked up on’ (at least in speech) by anyone else. Renton’s identification of Scottish resistance to *English* domination with Irish resistance to *British* domination is rather more controversial than is often recognised outside Scotland, particularly given the close

I have so far been discussing anecdotes of reading in terms of oral narrative, but oral narrative and written history have much in common at the cognitive level (that is, as attempts at sense-making), and both would appear to involve generic conventions. The generic quality of history is emphasised by Hayden White (1973), who found the narratives produced by the great nineteenth century historians and philosophers of history to be structured by a relatively small set of rhetorical or poetic devices. Importantly, this does not mean that those historians subjected historical facts to decoration or distortion, but that they made rational attempts to explain them and to extract lessons therefrom through the application of those devices. White originally catalogued these as comprising four modes of emplotment (romance, tragedy, comedy, and satire), four of argument (formist, mechanist, organicist, and contextualist), four of ideological implication (anarchist, radical, conservative, and liberal), and four of trope (synecdoche, metaphor, metonymy, and irony). Although there is no space here for a full exposition of these, the type of analysis White promotes can be exemplified with a short example, here from the history of reading.

The creativity of the reader grows as the institution that controlled it declines. This process, visible from the Reformation onward, already disturbed the pastors of the seventeenth century. Today, it is the socio-political mechanisms of the schools, the press, or television that isolate the text controlled by the teacher or the producer from its readers. But behind the theatrical decor of this new orthodoxy is hidden (as in earlier ages) the silent, transgressive, ironic, or poetic activity of readers (or television viewers) who maintain their reserve in private and without the knowledge of the ‘masters’.

historical and genealogical links between Catholic and Protestant communities in Central Scotland and their counterparts in Northern Ireland.

Here, the emplotment is romantic, with the heroic reader battling against and triumphing over the institutions who would limit his or her freedom, and the ideological implication is anarchist, with all institutional authority portrayed as requiring destruction for the sake of an immanent utopia. Despite this historian's description of schools, etc, as 'mechanisms', the overall argument is organicist, with the growth of one power and the decline of another seen as inexorable natural processes. And the trope is fundamentally one of metaphor: readers are rebellious slaves; clerics, teachers, and critics are their tyrannical masters.

In refutation of the allegation that his system equates history with fiction through implying that these poetic devices could be applied to past events at random, White insists that, in order to be a history at all, a narrative account must, for example, 'suggest that the plot type chosen to render the facts into a story of a specific kind had been found to inhere in the facts themselves', and that there will be cases where 'we would be eminently justified in appealing to "the facts" in order to dismiss [a given emplotment] from the lists of "competing narratives"' for the construction of histories from those facts (1997:395). There being no hard-and-fast rules as to how this is to be done, it seems that each attempted emplotment must be judged on its own merits as an attempt to establish the meaning of a particular set of events. Some postmodernist historiographers have made much of the evident lack of 'explicit rules of historical inference' (Munslow 1997:100), but such rules exist nowhere outside the artificial worlds of formal logic. Lacking a 'specific logic of value judgements' (Perelman 1979:56), all who seek to establish the sense of events are dependent upon 'the plurality of interpretative strategies contained in the uses of ordinary language' (White 1973:429).

Why should this be? Experimental psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1962, 1978) argues that the higher mental functions are possible *only* through the mediation of socially acquired symbol systems such as natural language, a theory that returns with yet further experimental support in the essays collected by Gentner and Goldin-Meadow (2004). Other symbol systems might include the formal languages of mathematics and logic, which benefit from an eradication of ambiguity but whose usefulness evaporates when ‘we reason in a discussion, or in an intimate deliberation, when we give reasons pro or contra, when we criticise or justify a certain thesis, when we present an argument’ (Perelman 1979:56). Social psychologist Michael Billig (1996[1985], 1997) argues that rational thought and other mental processes are learnt through participation in conversation. Thus, not only the medium in which we think, but also the techniques by which we use that medium, may be derived from the messy business of social interaction, which is (in a quite independent scientific tradition) widely considered to be precisely the thing that provides us with the necessity to think: ‘[b]iologists explaining the origins of intelligence largely concur that the most powerful amplifier of intelligence is sociality, especially in the need to infer what others want and intend so that one can react and plan accordingly.’ (Boyd 2006:597) At the same time as this ironises reason by recognising that it is discourse, it dignifies discourse by recognising that it may be reason. Interpersonal strategies are all that a human being has with which to think, and so long as a human being thinks, he or she does so in an interpersonal context, knowing that he or she may always be wrong, that another may be right, that everything will look different from another point of view. Lack of such interpersonality would then equate to the impossibility of thinking. One might even be reminded of Adolf Eichmann, the logistics manager of the Final Solution, whose ‘inability to speak’ was, in the analysis of

Hannah Arendt, ‘closely connected with an inability to *think*, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else.’ (1994[1963]:49)

White’s examples of devices for historical reasoning can thus be seen in context of other learnt strategies for talking and thinking, particularly since White himself does not present them as a definitive list. The four modes of argument White deals with, for example, are very general as compared to the complex range of possibilities explored by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969[1958]), and though there may be something culturally basic about the four emplotments of comedy, tragedy, satire, and romance, the possibility of narrative structures that do not fit easily into this schema should not be overlooked. To take a striking example, in the highly self-reflexive (and somewhat tormented) anecdote of reading that is Lynne Pearce’s (1997:89-91) account of her evolving relationship to the works of Jeanette Winterson, reading experiences are emplotted into the schema that Pearce argues best fits them: an inexorable Barthesian progression from enamoration to disgust that is, for all its bathos, not quite satirical.

4.5 Reader history: re-examining two classic studies

there is no reason to suppose that consistency in accounts is a sure indicator of descriptive validity. This consistency may be a product of accounts sharing the same function; that is, two people may put their discourse together in the same way because they are doing the same thing with it.

Potter and Wetherell 1987:34

Robert Darnton (1984) writes that ‘[i]n going through Rousseau’s *Nouvelle Héloïse* mail, one is struck everywhere by the sound of sobbing’ (242); he goes on to explain this sobbing as ‘a response to a new rhetorical situation’, created by Rousseau, in which

‘[r]eader and writer communed across the printed page, each of them assuming the ideal form envisioned in the text.’ (249) Surely these many descriptions serve to corroborate one another, forming evidence that Rousseau's contemporaries really did, in the privacy of their own hearts, respond to his epistolary novel just as its prefaces had requested? Not necessarily. Addressed to the author and to his publisher, these letters can be seen as attempts to obtain replies from – and even audiences with – the celebrated Rousseau; what better way than to claim to be the very reader for whom Rousseau had, in his prefaces, asked? Moreover, even without the possibility of receiving the attentions of a great writer, there is still the desirability of appearing to be the reader for whom a great book was written (see Pearce [1997:47,163-169] on the jealousy of reading), and, as Jane Austen knew, where sensibility is lauded, there will always be something to be gained from its exhibition.

This same principle may give us cause to question Rose's interpretation of the many accounts he quotes of working class readers transformed by their reading of ‘great books’ – like Kate Flint, we may begin to wonder at the reasons an autobiographer may have had ‘for wishing to foreground certain aspects of herself through those texts which she chose to present as having been crucial to the development of her personality.’ (1993:187) For example, one of Rose's readers describes his experience of literature in terms of ecstasy and fireworks, and says of Keats, Shelley, and Tennyson that they ‘swamped the trivialities of life and gave [his] ego a fullness and strength in the luster of which noble conceptions were born and flourished.’ (Garratt 1939, quoted Rose 2002[2001]:43) Though this is presented as the experience of a factory worker who later (as Rose subsequently explains) became a journalist, it must be remembered that Rose is quoting a text written by not by a factory worker but by a journalist. Thus, where Rose concludes that a factory worker's ‘reading of the great books made it intolerable [for

him] to continue as a cog in the industrial machine' (ibid.), it might be more plausible to state that a journalist used his past reading of those books as an explanation or justification of his step up from the working to the middle class: Rose observes a note of 'contempt for his workmates' (42) in this individual's approving response to Carlyle but treats this contempt as belonging exclusively to the reading worker, rather than the writing professional, whose contempt for industrial workers could be interpreted as more crudely class-based. Conversely, where a millworker-turned-Labour-Party-activist tells of his own early exposure to the same author, writing '[t]he more I read of Carlyle's heroes, the less attraction they had.... I had in me the feeling that the common people should not be driven, and the more Carlyle crowned and canonised a ruling class, the more I felt I was on the side of the common people' (Brockway 1946, quoted Rose 2002[2001]:47), we might be inclined to find in this account of a very different (though equally transformative) experience the explanation or justification of a very different course of action *vis-a-vis* the class into which he was born. Like Stacey's (1994b) middle-aged respondents, these two autobiographers construct, through the production of anecdotes or memory texts, a past self in relation to a much older present self, and do so in imaginary dialogue with the readers they anticipate. The relation they construct is one of transformation, and the cause to which they ascribe this transformation is the reading of canonical texts. Why the canon? Perhaps (as Rose suggests) it is inherently transformative. Or perhaps a culturally significant effect demands a culturally significant cause, at least in the rhetoric of (auto)biography. It will certainly be difficult (if it is not actually impossible) to separate the role that reading played in the real life represented in a text from the role that representations of reading play in the text itself. And when we deal with a range of texts, each of which represents reading and a life similarly, it may

be that these do not so much corroborate one another as shift our analytic problem from text to genre.

There is no reason to doubt that Rose's readers thought about themselves differently after reading Carlyle, any more than to suppose that no tears were brought to the eyes of Darnton's by Rousseau. But what can be seen as evidence that a text has been used (or responded to) in a certain way, can also (and with a greater degree of certainty) be seen as itself a use of (or response to) the text. Thus, while it may be the case that a young millworker used the works of Carlyle to radicalise himself, it is undeniably the case that a Labour Party activist later used those same texts to justify or explain his radicalism by telling a story about how he had read them as a young millworker. This is a much less abstract sense of the word 'use', and therefore (if the impertinence may be forgiven) a more practical application of Rose's own principle that reading can be understood in terms of the ideological work 'performed by the reader, using the text as a tool.'

(2002[2001]:15)

4.6 Analysis: Responding to Rushdie in Bradford and London

It is this sort of approach that we must take to the anecdotes of reading to be found in Roy Kerridge's article 'Verses and worse' (1989) in the politically and culturally conservative British weekly magazine *The Spectator*.

This journalistic piece tells a story of intercultural harmony and intracultural conflict through a series of episodes centred around responses to *The Satanic Verses*, and strings these episodes together with the narrative device of a trip from London to Bradford, a city whose significance to the affair was established by the book burning incident that was discussed in Chapter 1. Some of these episodes incorporate multiple anecdotal

accounts of response to text, but the rhetorical unity of the whole is very striking.

Kerridge's narrative has many generic features for a *Spectator* article: the 'old fogey' persona of the narrator, the 'opinion-travelogue' hybrid form, the lament over the state of modern society, and the expression of scorn both for popular culture and for the avant garde would all have been as familiar to the magazine's readership in the late 1980s as they still are today. Of greatest interest to this investigation, however, are the ways in which the anecdotes of reading which constitute the narrative's main episodes are made to function within this generic structure. Four are contained in the article's dense initial paragraphs:

'I think Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* is a wonderful book!' a literary young lady told me, her eyes shining.

To my amazement, she had actually read it! She had long ago broken away from her Muslim background. It occurred to me that the *Verses* may be intelligible only to someone steeped in Mohammedanism. *Lenin in Zurich* is one of Solzhenitsyn's lesser novels. Russian communists find it shocking yet fascinating to read this irreverent account of Lenin's life, irritability, headaches, and all. An incident that a Western reader would hardly notice may turn out to be a demythologised account of an adventure taught with reverence to every Soviet boy and girl. Salman's Ayatollah-like Mohammed may be exciting forbidden fruit for apostate Muslims, but he strikes no chord with any Westerner I have ever met.

Kerridge 1989:19

In addition to an explanatory aside about Soviet readers, there are three primary anecdotes of reading in the above: the story of a young woman from a Muslim

community, the story of every Westerner Kerridge has ever met who has read *The Satanic Verses*, and the story of Kerridge himself, initially (and in common with all his peers) unable to understand the book, but subsequently (having encountered said young woman) receiving what he took for an insight into the work. This can best be interpreted in conjunction with Kerridge's next anecdote of reading.

A bookshop in an out-of-the-way part of London is doing a roaring trade in *The Satanic Verses*, fresh boxes arriving every day, and selling almost as quickly as they are unpacked. Many of the bookshop's new customers are *very* unlitrary-looking people, who appear to regard the *Verses* as a tract in 'Paki-bashing'.

'Have you got your *Verses* yet?' a huge Irishman in a trench coat roared to his friend.

'Sure, I'm just getting them now!'

ibid.

Comparison of the two reveals an important respect in which Kerridge's narrative, taken as a whole, is very unlike the histories analysed by White: since the chronological organisation of the individual episodes in relation to one another is purely a function of Kerridge's movement between the locations in which they take place, these episodes have little or no causal relationship to one another (it is neither apparent nor important whether it was the 'literary young lady' or the 'huge Irishman' who spoke first, though both clearly did so in different locations and before Kerridge's journey to Bradford). Nonetheless, Kerridge is careful to provide each episode with its own explanation, and in doing so to suggest (through synecdoche) an overall explanation of the complex event that was the initial reception of *The Satanic Verses* in Britain. In every case, the

explanation proceeds in the formist mode, identifying the attributes of each group or representative group-member that Kerridge encounters so that, by the end of the article, a taxonomy has been produced to cover each of four classes of readers of *The Satanic Verses*: ‘Westerners’ who like it and ‘Westerners’ who do not, members of Muslim communities who like it and members of Muslim communities who do not. As we can see from the above two episodes, the characteristic property of members of the first of these four classes is that they are racists (elsewhere in the article, Kerridge admits that anti-racist members of the Socialist Workers’ Party may admire *the author*, but insists that they have not read *the work*), while the characteristic property of members of the third class is that they are apostates. These properties explain a positive reaction from Westerners to a book that (since they cannot understand it) strikes no chord with them, and from members of Muslim communities to a book that (in Kerridge’s analysis) presents Mohammed as an Ayatollah-like caricature. Kerridge provides two further characteristics for the *Satanic Verses*-loving Muslim that reduce the possibility of metonymically transferring to her (and thus her type) the glamour of a Glasnost-era dissident: she is childish (‘young lady’ is a typical address from an adult to a child, and her eyes *shine* with *excitement* at ‘forbidden fruit’) and possibly pretentious as well (‘literary’ is an ambivalent designation in the Anglo-Saxon world).¹³⁵ Dislike is thus

¹³⁵ For comparison, see Sadik Jalal Al-‘Azm’s argument (1994) that, as a ‘Muslim dissident’ with ‘family resemblance to the celebrated literary-critical dissidents of the Communist countries’ (1994:255-256), Rushdie *himself* deserved far more earnest support than he actually received in the West. Though Al-‘Azm’s defence of Rushdie depends rather more heavily on the latter’s ‘family resemblance’ to Joyce and Rabelais, it is significant that it *begins* with the instantly emotive (given the historical context; it first appeared just two years after the publication of Kerridge’s account and the fall of the Berlin wall) Communist connection. The anecdote Al-‘Azm makes of his *own* relationship to the book also makes for an interesting comparison: ‘the parts of *The Satanic Verses*

presented as the default response of both Westerners and members of Muslim communities to *The Satanic Verses*, with the attributes of the novel itself here providing the explanation.

As I argue in Chapter 3, in cases where meaning is attributed to a text, to represent the attributor (and not the text) as the source of the meaning is to accuse the attributor of a mis-reading. The response whose explanation is the nature of that to which the response is made, is seen as truer, more appropriate than the response whose explanation is the nature of the responder. One ‘should’, ‘therefore’, dislike *The Satanic Verses*, and Kerridge implies this thesis through anecdotes of reading in which the responses of various ‘types’ are represented. The more rational side of his argument is backed up by the metonymical transference to Rushdie and his work of the (uniformly negative) qualities he attributes to their admirers: qualities that might then metonymically adhere to anyone else inclined to praise *The Satanic Verses* or its creator. What *Spectator* reader would want to be tainted by association with childish apostates, bellowing racists, and that Trotskyist anachronism, the Socialist Workers’ Party? In the following episode, which takes place in the hallway of a mosque in Bradford, this explanation is elaborated by Kerridge in dialogue with another of the secondary characters.

which drew greatest orthodox censure and provoked most hostility are exactly the ones which speak to me most personally. They review in their own funny manner the maturing mental experiences, doubts, intellectual anxieties, and soul-searchings of a young Arab “Muslim” struggling to live the life of his century and not of some other century.’ (289) What Kerridge implies is the result of childishness, Al-‘Azm narrates as the result of childhood’s end. Writing from a pro-American perspective, Pipes (2003[1990]:49) implies that Rushdie is childish when he describes his ‘characteristics’ as ‘quite the opposite’ of ‘ “mature,” “reasonable,” or “proper”’ (ie. the Arabic meanings of his name).

A tall serious young man in Western clothes stopped in amazement when I asked him to give the readers of *The Spectator* his views on *The Satanic Verses*. Once he had satisfied himself that I wasn't joking, he spoke in passionate torrents, prefacing every other sentence with the phrase 'We Muslims'. Clearly, he had given the matter much thought.

'According to Islamic law,' he said, 'Salman Rushdie would have to be tried in an Islamic state. He could not be tried here. It is certainly not lawful for any Muslim individual to kill him. The English newspapers have given a one-sided view of the whole affair. We Muslims are offended. We follow Islamic law, and would never agree with the demand to kill Rushdie. We merely want the book banned, as it causes great injury and insult to our people.'

'I quite agree! It should be withdrawn from circulation,' I remarked.

'Thank you! We Muslims are not afraid of criticism! In fact, we welcome it as an opportunity to propagate our faith. We accept genuine scepticism, expressed in good quality literature, not cheap fiction....¹³⁶ It is very suspicious how popular the book has become among Westerners. How can they understand it? Myself, I am a British-born Muslim, and I can follow Rushdie's brand of English, which can only be clear to someone with a knowledge of Eastern language.'

¹³⁶ See Chapter 1 on the contrast between the literary and the non-literary, here 'good quality literature' and 'cheap fiction'. This speaker seems to regard it as self-evident that *The Satanic Verses* falls into the latter category. Cf.: 'The Islamic campaign would be more understandable if Rushdie's novel were in any way trashy. But its literary merits are not in doubt.' (*The Independent*, 16 January 1989, p.16)

‘Well, *I* couldn’t understand it. Some people seem to be buying it because they think it’s a kind of National Front book.’

‘That’s right! They are jumping on the bandwagon to launch an attack on Islam!...’

‘Did you know that *Mrs* Rushdie has now written a novel attacking Christianity?’ I asked.

‘No!’ he cried, and swayed, almost stunned by the news.

19-20

True to Formist form, Kerridge begins this anecdote with a description of this reader of *The Satanic Verses* (accorded a respect that Rushdie-admiring Asians are not, ‘young man’ carrying none of the condescension of ‘young lady’) that will, through revelation of his essential properties, explain his response to the book. Attending prayers at a mosque, he is not an apostate. Serious, he will not be excited by forbidden fruit. A wearer of Western clothes, he will hold views untainted by extremism. As we soon learn, he is responding *as a Muslim*, and one who, having given the matter much thought, will have perceived the book’s true nature. Moreover, he brings expert knowledge to its reading, and pre-emptively articulates the thesis that, since *The Satanic Verses* cannot be understood by Westerners, racism must be the cause of any Western enthusiasm for it. Kerridge then introduces the theme that will dominate the rest of his narrative, namely that there is a widespread attack, not on Islam but on the traditional values of all cultures,¹³⁷ thus making of *The Satanic Verses* a synecdoche

¹³⁷ A similar assertion was made by the Ayatollah Khomeini in his initial denouncement of *The Satanic Verses*: see Chapter 2 of the current work.

(note the evaluative action of his interlocutor's *swaying*). This leads to another anecdote of reading, a recollection of events that take place well before the others described, tied into the overall story with the implication that it is Kerridge's meditation in a Bradford café:

Cartoons, in my view, do more harm than literature. Thanks to cartoons, a whole generation looks on Ronald Reagan as a cowboy and on Mrs Thatcher as a blood-crazed witch. I once came across a cartoon book, on sale in most shops, called something like *The Comic Adventures of God*.¹³⁸ It depicted a foul-mouthed God with an idiot son and a smooth PR man, Gabriel. I'm sure some of my readers are laughing already, as such cartoons epitomise all that is most popular in British humour. I sent a copy of the book to Mary Whitehouse, urging her to prosecute the artist, but her secretary replied to say that it could not be done. The artist was a fine draughtsman, and if 'freedom of expression' had not tempted him into the mire, he might have created something worthwhile.

Without accursed 'freedom of expression', Rushdie might have been forced to learn how to write a half-decent book.

Finishing my tea...

20

The evaluations with which the paragraph quoted here begins and ends may be seen either as external or as embedded; much as in the novelistic technique of free indirect discourse, Kerridge creates an ambiguity between himself-the-narrator and himself-the-experiencer: between having these thoughts while writing and having had them while

¹³⁸ I have been unable to trace this work.

drinking tea in Bradford. The bulk of the paragraph consists, however, in the recounting of events prior to the remainder of Kerridge's narrative, a digression whose relevance is established through the evaluations with which it concludes: the first condemns the nameless draughtsman, the second, Salman Rushdie, but the similarity between the condemnations suggests an analogy between the condemned. Labov (1972) suggests that suspension of the primary action, of which this is a particularly clear example (the flashback, the narrator's immobility, the lack of an interlocutor) is itself an evaluative device, increasing the force of the narrative resolution when this is what it directly precedes (as is the case here).

The point of the narrative, namely the essential badness of freedom of expression *per se*, is politically extremist, and so the manner in which Kerridge presents it has to be carefully managed: an article that began with the words, 'Without accused "freedom of expression"...' would seem the work of a fanatic, but, presented as a response to texts and to other people's responses to text, it comes to seem much more reasonable (and even more so when the very next phrase after 'half-decent book' is the sedate – and stereotypically British – 'Finishing my tea'). In this way, 'accused "freedom of expression"' becomes the slogan not of a dangerous fascist but of an affable old chap who only wishes that artists and writers would get on with their jobs and stop upsetting people. The presupposition that *The Satanic Verses* is not even 'half-decent' has become secure by this point, since there is no-one to oppose it but an overexcitable girl, a 'Paki-bashing' Irishman, and a bunch of ridiculous Trotskyists who haven't even read the book. The article ends with yet another compound anecdote of reading, in an episode that contrasts responses to *The Satanic Verses* with responses to an informal storytelling session:

Finishing my tea, I popped round the corner and visited my friends the Khan family.

‘Come in. Where have you been?’ old Mr Khan and the boys greeted me.

Soon I was sitting on a sofa eating meat and chapattis prepared by the grown-up daughter of the house, Mussarat, or ‘Happiness’....

...

‘A bad book,’ Mr Khan continued. ‘Yet your government supports it!’

‘Please don’t blame me for that,’ I cried.

‘No, no,’ he assured me. ‘You like tea? My wife can make English tea.’

...

‘My dad knows a man in Pakistan who goes up into the mountains and talks to djinns,’ Mussarat told me earnestly. ‘Djinns can be bad. They have horns on their heads, you know, and really strange feet.’

Several ghost and djinn stories later, we all grew quite frightened.

ibid.

At last, then, *The Satanic Verses* is replaced by the traditional lore of earnest, grown-up, chapatti-cooking Mussarat Khan (such a contrast with the ‘literary young lady’!), and all is well. To some, this happy ending may seem incongruous. According to the immediately preceding sequence, things have got so bad that even such unambiguously benevolent figures as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan are under attack, and not

even God can be protected from dangerous cartoonists. Why then the symbolic feast? What is the cause for celebration? Why is there not, rather, a call to arms?

Firstly, there are generic considerations. In the context of a *Spectator* article, an apocalyptic ending would be incongruous. But, more importantly, there is the ideology of the piece: not the belligerently radical conservatism of what would become America's 'Religious Right', but old-fashioned British conservatism, ie. the conviction that all will be for the best if as little as possible is changed. Taking the article as a whole, it is plain that the overall emplotment used by Kerridge is that of Comedy: a readerly marriage of Christian and Muslim civilisation, brought about by shared rejection of *The Satanic Verses* and shared appreciation of traditional Pakistani folktales. As White (1973:9) observes, it is with festivities that comic accounts of events traditionally terminate, marking 'reconciliations of men with men', in which 'seemingly inalterably opposed elements in the world... are revealed to be, in the long run, harmonisable with one another, unified, at one with themselves and the others.' Roy Kerridge is happy to eat chapattis, Mrs Khan is able to make English tea, and everyone is in favour of a good ghost story. The argument becomes explicit in the article's final paragraph, the narrative's only overtly external evaluation:

Salman Rushdie might sneer, but in folklore there are truths that transcend Christendom and Islam. Like the young man in the mosque, I would not condone physical attacks on Rushdie, but I would urge him to return to the traditional storytelling of Eastern villages. Some Western ways are not worth imitating.

ibid.

Thus, Kerridge has moved from his formist taxonomy of readers to an organicist argument: affable, rational conservatives from both Muslim and Western communities

will, his narrative suggests, naturally converge into an alliance, precisely because of their affability, rationality, and conservatism, and in such rapprochement may be found a solution, for Rushdie himself, seeing sense, may voluntarily renounce his ‘accursed “freedom of expression”’ and ‘return’ from the (Western) avant garde (only *imitated* by Rushdie the Oriental) ‘to the traditional storytelling of Eastern villages.’ This vision of things, with its reassurance that problems are about to resolve themselves naturally, is distinctly comforting, and also notably familiar: there is, as White (1973:29) notes, an ‘elective affinity’ between the comic mode of emplotment, the organicist mode of argument, and the conservative mode of ideological implication.

As we can see, a careful analysis of Kerridge’s narrative reveals some of the issues that were at stake for conservative British readers with regard to *The Satanic Verses* in 1989, and sheds light on some of the ways in which its reading was made to operate within the political discourses of the time. Other sources from the same period would appear, moreover, to suggest that Kerridge’s response was far from idiosyncratic: days after the publication of his article, for example, the representative of a group of conservative Christian politicians introduced a parliamentary bill that would, had it been passed, would have extended Britain’s blasphemy laws to protect non-Christian religions, and indirectly strengthened the hand of Christians wishing to exercise censorship of their own.¹³⁹ A curious footnote to the tale is that Rushdie’s next book, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), was in many ways the return to traditional storytelling that Kerridge had urged upon him, and yet can also be read as making arguments in defence of the very freedom of expression Kerridge attacks (Dragas 2006).

¹³⁹ See House of Commons Hansard Debates for Friday 30 June 1989, Column 1211

4.7 Concluding note

This chapter differs from the preceding two in that it offers a methodology for the detailed analysis of single texts, treating other texts as context. As such, it comes closest to literary-critical methods, which to some extent brings us full circle: instead of applying those methods to the texts of literary works (as a literary critic might), we apply something very like them to commentaries on literature. This is perhaps a paradox, since one of the motivating forces behind reception study has long been a disdain for textual analysis, and even for text:

it is necessary to abandon the assumption that texts, in themselves, constitute the place where the business of culture is conducted, or that they can be construed as the sources of meanings or effects which can be deduced from an analysis of their formal properties. In place of this view, so powerfully implanted in our intellectual culture, we shall argue that texts constitute sites around which the pre-eminently social affair of the struggle for the production of meaning is conducted, principally in the form of a series of bids and counter-bids to determine which system of inter-textual co-ordinates should be granted an effective social role in organising reading practices.

Bennett and Woollacott 1987:59-60

As the last three chapters have shown – and this one, I think, more than any of them – the above position is untenable, since that ‘struggle for the production of meaning’, those ‘bids and counter-bids’, take place very largely through texts and utterances that must themselves be understood partially through ‘analysis of their formal properties’. The ‘business of culture’ is not elsewhere. The above sentiments result, it seems to me,

not from a conviction that struggle for meaning takes place only ‘around’ texts (were that the case, they would surely not have been committed to writing), but from a (half) recognition of the point made in Chapter 2, ie. that literary works do not really communicate anything. I hope that the current chapter has demonstrated the need for textual analysis as a tool in reception study, provided that such analysis is carried out in order to reconstruct the ‘predicament’ (McDonald 1997, discussed in Chapters 1 and 2) of reader discourse (and thereby to contribute to an understanding of the predicament of the work received) rather than under the aegis of a post-New Critical approach.

5. Conclusion: is that all there is?

5.1 The problem of inner experience

the inner experience of ordinary readers may always elude us. But we should at least be able to reconstruct a good deal of the social context of reading.

Darnton 1990:131-132

Darnton’s observation on inner experience and social context expresses a continuing anxiety with regard to the scope and limitations of reception study, and one that this dissertation will have done little to soothe. An anecdote of reading, for example, might promise a view onto inner experience, but the last chapter has made of it something more like a painting than a window. One remedy, toyed with throughout this dissertation and suggested by theories of rhetorical psychology, would be to view public discourse on reading as a determinant of inner experience. A second, which has likewise been toyed with, would be to view inner experience as modelled on public discourse. The reason that I have done no more than toy with these ideas is that they are speculative.

A third remedy would be to reject the treatment of subjective, private experience as the *sine qua non* of reading and other forms of textual consumption: to shrug our shoulders at what Heather Jackson unapologetically calls ‘the ever-elusive holy grail of the historian of reading’ (2005:251). Cavallo and Chartier’s (1999[1995]:3) vision for a ‘comprehensive history of reading and readers’, for example, requires that we ‘consider the “world of the text” as a world of objects, forms, and rituals whose conventions and devices bear meaning but also constrain its construction’: a history of objects, forms, and rituals, and of an action (reading) that takes place in relation to them has no particular need for speculation about unknowable mental states. As we saw in Chapters 1 and 2, Ron Scollon (1998) discusses contemporary news media in terms of the potential for interpersonal interaction that their consumption creates, and, to some extent, this dissertation has done the same for literary texts; Pertti Alasuutari (1992:579-580) similarly treats television programmes of all types as shared points of reference that, much like ‘incidents on the street’, serve as ‘topics to talk about and examples from which we can reflect on our own lives and values’: an approach that also finds parallels here. To read or hear what people have written or said about reading and about texts is to observe them going about the business of being the people that they are. The social, then, is more than context, and should not be thought the poor cousin of inner experience, depending for our attentions on the promise of an introduction.

One might even go so far as to argue that it is strange for the inaccessibility of inner experience to be posed as a problem at all. The objection is never raised against political history that it gives no access to the inner experience of the signatories of the Magna Carta; economics does not tell us what it *feels like* to be a stockbroker or a debt slave. Perhaps there still lurks the notion that, somewhere in the brain of each of Milton’s seventeenth century readers was a seventeenth century equivalent of each twenty-first

century professor's 'reading' of *Paradise Lost*, and that these could in principle be compared, point for point.¹⁴⁰ It is an illusion. The academic 'reading' of a text is itself a text, and if we are to compare it with anything from the past, then that must also be a text. But woe betide us if, in making that comparison, we fail to attend to the textuality of either.

Much the same goes for the study of contemporary reading. It makes no sense to wonder what is the 'average' reader's 'interpretation' of *The Satanic Verses*, *The Lord of the Rings*, or, indeed, the lyrics to 'Memory', because interpretation is not something that crystallises in the mind and waits only to be x-rayed (or passed). Interpretation is something that we *do* (or do not do) in diverse contexts and for diverse reasons, and, consequently, in diverse ways – including when we compose that kind of text or utterance that is, in a contemporary academic context, referred to as an interpretation. The researcher's only comparative advantage when studying contemporary readers is that he or she can prompt them to *produce* interpretations: but (as we saw in Chapter 1) this is to induce them to carry out an activity that, otherwise, they might not have indulged in: it does not trigger a sort of 'screen dump' of independent mental processes.

And that is why this dissertation turns, again and again, to study *discourse*. But still, the question presents itself: *Is that all there is?*

5.2 The limitations of this study, and what those limits leave us

Briefly, no.

Although I have presented this dissertation as a clearing-up of theoretical problems before empirical work can begin, it has left some fairly sizable stones unturned in its

¹⁴⁰ See Gracia (2000:48) for an example of this fallacy.

quest to accomplish this. I would like now to outline what I consider to be the major problem remaining, and to discuss (in brief) what might be required for its solution. In full consciousness of the extent to which it is problematised by my previous arguments, I shall do this by reference to an anecdote of reading. Most problematically of all, it is (à la Pearce 1997) my own.

In May 2008, I observed a reading group whose organiser read aloud to the group members. When she read from John Steinbeck's *The Pearl* that particular passage where Kino sees, as in a vision, his baby son, Coyotito, grown a few years older and 'sitting at a little desk in a school', I struggled to hold back tears.¹⁴¹

What am I doing by presenting this anecdote to you? Presenting myself as a particular kind of person – yes, yes, we've been through all that. But forget for a moment that it's me. There he was – somebody, anybody – not laying claim to a particular feeling, but feeling it and, far from laying claim to it, attempting to conceal it. How can we know, if the concealment was successful? Fair enough, let's ignore for a moment that it's supposed to represent a concrete instance, a real situation. Let's treat it as a hypothesis. Can we be sure that nobody, anywhere, has ever felt an emotion and yet, rather than performing it, concealed it? (As opposed to performing the concealment of an emotion, whether in the way that an actor might do when mimicking the fighting back of tears, or in the way that I did when I included in my PhD dissertation an anecdote about myself trying not to cry.) Can we be sure that this never happened when somebody was reading, or being read to?

¹⁴¹ I struggle again as I type this.

I am being facetious, of course. We all know that this happens, just as we all know that we continue to feel even when there is nobody to perform our feelings to, and just as we know that extremes of feeling can make us forget the people around us. These things are not in doubt.

So what, then, are we to do with these undoubted things? What are we to do with the idea that somebody might have been powerfully moved by that passage from *The Pearl*? And what are we to do with the fact that we might even seem to have a fairly shrewd idea of *why* he was so moved? (Because of his own little son, for example, or because of the humbleness of what was, after all, Kino's most exalted dream, or because of the terrible dramatic irony that is there to be perceived by anyone who has read the book before and knows how it ends).

What we may do is this: just as we avoided the problem of metatheoretical regress by refusing to deny our research subjects the aim (amongst other aims) of trying to understand – just as we the researchers try (amongst other things) to understand – and in doing so admitted them, so to speak, to our own level, *so may we admit ourselves to theirs*. If we can attempt to understand their attempts to understand the subjective experience of reading, then we too can presumably attempt (like them) to understand that experience – and with similar tools, such as narrative.

What we cannot do is to treat that experience as an object, since it can be present to us only in the form of something other than itself, ie. a discursive representation (be it ever so conscientiously constructed). And this has certain consequences: I cannot, for example, expect anyone to treat the above anecdote as evidence for anything, and I would be a fool to treat my explanation of it as (even an attempt at) the description of a causal relationship between variables. We can speculate, and we can judge our

speculations by what seems to us to be their plausibility, their reasonability, their humanity, etc – and that is all (though it is much).

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