

# Scholia Melancholia: General Hysteresis in Literary Studies

**Ivan Rabinowitz**

## Summary

“Scholia Melancholia” considers the phenomenon of temporal and cognitive delay in the human sciences in general and in literary studies in particular. It explores examples of this phenomenon in a variety of contexts, ranging from the imperatives of textual exegesis to the psycho-institutional consequences of literary interpretation. The article concludes with a brief assessment of the nature of literary-intellectual self-fashioning.

## Opsomming

“Scholia Melancholia” oorweeg die verskynsel van temporele en kognitiewe vertraging in die sosiale wetenskappe in die algemeen en in literatuurwetenskap in die besonder. Dit ondersoek voorbeelde van hierdie verskynsel in verskeie kontekste, vanaf die imperatiewe van tekstuele ontmaskering tot die psigo-institusionele uitkomst van literêre interpretasie. Die artikel sluit af met 'n kort evaluasie van die aard van literêre self-modellering.

Everything was just complicated enough to be academically viable ...  
Robert Ludlum, *The Cry of the Halidon*

For Tony Hancock  
*il miglior fabbro*

Intellectual maturity is destined to come late to literary studies, if it comes at all. Built into its disciplinary illusions, its institutional sediment of hopes and dreams and careers, is a powerful and pervasive melancholy, a realisation, both collective and individual, that it is founded on a conceptual lag, a fatal and irreducible gap between its professional effects and its intellectual causes. In the terminology I shall adopt for the purposes of this discussion, literary studies is founded on hysteresis, the lagging of consequences behind the cognitive and conceptual events which might be said to produce such consequences. Although the causes of contemporary ideas about the nature of literary investigation were set in motion centuries ago, the effects are only

just beginning to be named and catalogued in the form of “new” approaches and “theories”. This phenomenon is, of course, particularly well illustrated in South Africa, where the deconstructive bandwagon, first pointed downhill at Johns Hopkins in 1968, took more than twenty years to lurch into the pages of local journals and even longer to rattle and squeak its way into the subjacent minds of academics in departments of English. That home-grown parable of belatedness, although splendidly instructive, is only one of many instances of cognitive and conceptual hysteresis in literary studies. In the following study of the lagging of institutional effects behind their intellectual and conceptual causes, I shall attempt a provisional excursus into the explanatory mechanisms which inform the phenomenon.

In every instance of intellectual hysteresis there are historical, psychological, political, cultural and institutional conditions which inform the nature and structure of the phenomenon and which call for an explanation. I shall be looking in detail at the origin and growth of two of these conditions, the institutional and the psychological. In the course of my discussion, I shall try to provide an answer to two fundamental questions: (1) Why is the “discipline” of literary studies particularly susceptible to hysteresis? and (2) What is the fundamental process by which hysteresis occurs?

The short answer to the first question is that the “discipline” of literary studies, in common with other so-called disciplines in the humanities, does not possess, and is never likely to possess, regulative principles which may be adduced in support of its explanatory and axiological procedures. There is therefore no means of testing whether a postulate or judgement or interpretation, for example, is an invariant which has been logically carried through from the initial conditions of the enquiry. Instead of striving for a logic of invariance, literary studies has sought to valorise variance in the name of freedom of expression and the imaginative fecundity of the professional expositor. This has led to two types of hysteresis: intellectual hysteresis and institutional hysteresis. In the first type, intellectual hysteresis, the professional expositor is so befuddled by the potentially infinite fecundity and sheer variability of the act of interpretation that the sensation of imaginative plenitude easily overwhelms the regulative mechanisms of ordinary intellectual behaviour. Any postulate, provided it can be *asserted* to be connected in some way – not necessarily causally – to a given body of words, can be safely assumed to be a “substantiated” postulate, thus fulfilling the extremely flimsy evidence-norms of the discipline. What passes for a rational mechanism of verification, the vacuous and unstructured phenomenon generally known as “substantiation” in literary-critical and didactic circles, is in fact a trick of rhetoric, a lexical and figural stratagem

designed to disguise the arbitrary nature of literary interpretation. Because the expositor is deluded into believing that a mental activity akin to rational thought is taking place, the need for any further knowledge or form of enquiry falls away. For as long as it takes to say – or speculate about – what a body of words means or might mean or could mean by virtue of a specific orientation in literary studies, there is no need to entertain any ideas about experience or the world in general which might possibly have a transitive function. Exegetical ideas are frozen in an intransitive, timeless zone between loose association and tropological apotheosis, so that any trace of reason which might otherwise have infiltrated into consciousness is diverted, attenuated and obliterated. It is important to realise, however, that there is a natural resistance to the vanquishing of reason: in the interaction between the impulse to postulate a meaning and the impulse to think about something in particular, there is a temporal and cognitive delay which reflects a fundamental aversion and natural antipathy towards anything that disturbs, and so impoverishes, the mental ordering and grouping of our sensations. I shall discuss the nature, functions and consequences of both the tropological sleight of hand and the temporal and cognitive delay in detail after briefly defining the second type of conceptual lag, institutional hysteresis.

Hysteresis associated with institutional behaviour is extremely complex because it takes place both in closed individual worlds and in the sociological space defined by formal, rule-bound interactions and expectations. In broad outline, the hysteretic process begins with the generation of vital and credible ideas, moves into a state of ischuric desuetude caused by the retention of content at the expense of structure, and ends in misappropriation and banality. Of all types of temporal and cognitive delay, institutional hysteresis accords most closely with psychopathological processes, and is therefore best described in the specialised vocabularies developed for the representation and modelling of clinical symptoms. This raises a further issue. In any attempt to represent a sociocognitive process, a particular explanatory mechanism – be it tropological, stochastic or empirical – needs to be adopted in order to open an intelligible channel of enquiry. In the case of hysteresis, an abstract procedure inferred from an interaction between properties, not events, a hierarchical structure of explanation is appropriate, particularly since the explanatory vectors cannot be confined to a single modality. Institutional hysteresis, then, as defined by an explanatory mechanism of this type, exhibits the following phenomenological structure:

Ideas/notions/schemes encountered (1)

Reduction by

- disaffirmance of contextual/conceptual complexity (2)
- application of analogies (3)
- popular ingurgitation (4)

Dependence/subjection

- Biosymbolic ego-imaging (5)
- Abjection (6)

I shall be looking in detail at the kinds of relation between reduction and dependence/subjection. For the moment, however, it is important to note that the structure represented above does not purport to do justice to the institutional *consequences* of the process. Instead, it restricts itself to a schematic representation of the several interactions which, taken together, constitute a structure of regularities, a succession of arrangements which encodes the relations between diverse phenomena. Within this structure, there are, of course, both additive and relational configurations, including those responsible for transpersonal interactions.

In an economy of textual production, interpretation and the dissemination of aesthetic practices, it is easy, and necessary, to believe in the importance of the word as the sole and unrivalled bearer of complex articulations, discriminations and enunciations. To regulate the word, in such an economy, is to control an infinity of discriminations, both ontological and deontological, and to possess the phenotext, the matrix of diverse significations encompassing the discontinuities of desire and the metalanguages through which we represent, and configure, the pursuit of meaning. Nevertheless, the cult of the word is also a cult of innuendo, a shadowy pseudo-religion rooted in paranoia and the phantasms of cultural power. The longing to control the word is partially, but never completely, checked by the acknowledgement that the word is always other, always someone else's, always in heterogenous circulation along the chain of generation and signification. The fact that the word has a life of its own, that it is at once a possession and an imaginary construct, means that it is susceptible to sociosymbolic distortion, so that it can be made to substantiate an imaginary potency, making the unreal, the uncanny, seem both whole and wholly necessary, as in the totemic discourses employed in the rhetoric of "human resources" and "quality assurance". Little wonder, then, that in the

socialised space of the word, ideas fall prey to psychotic foreclosure and are made to participate in a parodic redesignation of their initial significance, particularly in the unstable topology of literary studies, where entire conceptual systems are governed, whimsically and metonymically, by the fiat of despotic nominalism and the mere invocation of established schema.

A striking example of this form of hysteresis is known to have accompanied the effects of the Arnoldian-Leavisite consensus when the notion of heterocosmic “organicity” held dominion over the minds and hearts of aspirant and professional expositors. The metaphor of organic integrity, borrowed from biology by Baumgarten and inflated into an iconic ideal, first by Coleridge and then by proponents of American New Criticism in the middle part of the last century, started its exegetical career in brilliant fashion, with the bold promise of pedagogical power and intellectual acuity. In the wake of lost spiritual beliefs and the collapse of a secure tradition of veneration for the great classics, the idea of a stable point of reference, a gold standard of aesthetic and instrumental harmony in which each part of the aesthetic artefact contributed to the greater glory of the semic commonwealth, reflected the political and social aspirations of a newly confident middle class yearning for self-recognition, and was soon to become a source of high consolation for students and teachers alike. The metaphor, an abridged fable of edenic repossession, with a splendid pedigree, did much to strengthen the faith and fervour of aspirant expositors. In partial fulfilment of the demotic ideals of New Criticism, it gave all such expositors – whether trained or untrained, informed or uninformed – a licence to propose grand and gushing analogies, excited narratives of textual harmony in which fables about “imagistic symmetry” and “conceptual and emotional wholeness” vied with accounts of the “forward progression of the poetic argument” and the “imagistic integrity” of the “well-wrought artefact”. It is worth remembering, however, that the metaphor itself was not a piece of gimcrack trumpery, but had been created with exemplary care and skill in the romantic period in an effort to give iconographic substance to an aesthetic ideal. Although pressed into service as an emblem of the promised land, the aesthetic domain of the poetic heterocosm which would enact – and safeguard – Western values, the metaphor of complex organicity was never intended to be a stay against confusion for generations of professional exegetes.

Originally thought to be adiabatic, though it proved to be sinister in retrospect, the metaphor played an integral role in self-serving mythopoeic systems such as those espoused by Modernist poets, and in the sentimental and essentially escapist sociopolitical delusions of the Southern Agrarians. For T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, T.E. Hulme and Irving Babbitt, for example, the

figure of the harmonious organism reflected, in iconographic form, the ideals of decorum and tradition so crassly destroyed by the narcissistic vacuities of Romanticism. As an autonomous imaginative heterocosm, the well-wrought poem – the transpersonal artefact supreme – emblematises, reflects and enacts the high moral and cultural achievements of the Greeks and gestures towards the possibility of reinstating high culture in the modern world while simultaneously affirming the ideals of Western civilisation. In contrast to the Romantic emblem of the aeolian harp, the Modernist phantasm of organic wholeness and integrity redirects the gaze away from the autotelic fiction of creative solipsism. Instead of the solipsistic, sensitive individual dedicated to the realisation of an innate sensibility, trailing clouds of glory, there is the perfectly cohesive construct, at once pure and active, forever making and remaking itself according to a compulsive inner principle of order dedicated to the actualisation of its bio-logical destiny.

To a very much greater extent than has been acknowledged, the contemporary idea of textual exegesis has been conditioned by this near-defunct remnant of protofascist paranoia. Through the effects of hysteresis, however, the fiction of organicity has been so sanitised by mimicry and so enfeebled by repetition that it appears to be a benign and thoroughly indifferent emblem of aesthetic aspiration. The phases identified in the phenomenological structure of hysteretic reduction – disaffirmance of context, application of analogies, popular in-gurgitation – are clearly exhibited in the decline of the metaphor from ideological emblem to hackneyed pedagogical incantation. In the first phase, disaffirmance of context, only a minuscule fragment of the original impulse involved in the generation of the idea, in this case the trope of complex organicity, is thought to be significant. As a result, the trope is split, stalled and bisected by opposing interpretations which dematerialise its referential ambit, rendering the original context of no consequence. The idea of organicity, far from gesturing towards a distant ideal requiring dedication and persistence for its eventual actualisation, is reduced to a surface phenomenon, a coalescence of apparently related images and symbols held together by their wish to advance a putative poetic argument. The personification “their wish” is, of course, yet another metaphor, a semiparodic echo of the extreme aestheticism summoned into being after the formulation of the New Critical fallacies, when the text was reputed to have an “intention” of its own, notwithstanding the remarkable success of the “intentional fallacy” and its more glamorous, continental cousin, the “death of the author”. Sublimated in the text itself, but expressed as textual intention, was the bifurcated wish of the expositor – the desire to be transmuted into the *theatrum analyticum*, where all is verbal semaphore and the impulses are

merely part of the analytical machinery, and the desire to make a difference in the world outside the text, the place of material forces and ethical desiderata. On one side of the bifurcation is the drive to show forth, to impress with verbal dexterity; on the other side is the wish to have a transitive presence, a state beyond the imaginary. At issue here is the status of interpretation as a legitimate cultural activity. If textual interpretation is to be theatre *plus*, if it is to have a moral dimension which perpetuates its social significance, it requires the sanction of the perfect figuration, a requirement met by the idea of harmonious integration. At the very least, the text must be capable of being made and re-made in the image of wholeness, not only for the sake of gesture and display, but in order to confer that *plus*, that moral justification, upon the expositor. Thus the figure of complex organicity is transmuted into a locus of fantasy, a textual automaton (or expositor's prop) which confers moral legitimacy upon the act of exegesis while allowing the original impulse – the drive to cultural cohesiveness – to play itself out into aphanisia.

The two remaining phases – application of analogies and popular ingurgitation – are discernible in the processes of introjection and avoidance through which the expositor seeks to exclude from consciousness the realisation that the activity of textual exegesis is essentially a form of psychological disturbance at odds with rational thought. The purpose of the figure of organicity is, in this context, to encrypt and transcode such knowledge by the application of figural cascades which avoid – and void – its realisation, or, at the very least, delay the process of realisation for as long as possible. Thus an absent text saturated with whatever vocabularies are currently in vogue is substituted for the Real, the sterile presence which opens itself to the gaze of the expositor. The figural cascades are a product of a scene scripted by the desire to overshoot language by constructing a surplus within which an illusion of freedom-in-imaginative-excursus can be established and maintained. Before it can be ingurgitated into the popular imaginary, the text must be made into a place of secrets, a site of surreptitious, grudging revelation in which fantasmic manifestations collaborate with the sign to produce an effect of uneasy plenitude and bizarre fecundity. Once it is ingurgitated in the popular imaginary – to the point where textual interpretation is accepted as a legitimate cultural phenomenon – the secret, introjected text functions cataleptically, as an automaton, to attract the gaze of the expositor in an endlessly repeated act of linguistic self-abasement – the melancholy iteration of the surplus and the sham.

Central to the hysteretic process is its capacity to force an abasement of primary impulses. Thus the figure of organicity, once a hallowed emblem of

cultural power, is reduced to a bland formula, the ritual chant of those whose professional lives depend on their *having something to say* about the behaviour of an aesthetic artefact. No matter whether the reigning trope is something called organicity, or the politics of the gaze, or film theory, or embodiment theory, the defining moment in hysteresis is the point at which significance yields to expedience; when vital and credible ideas – regardless of their ethical strengths or weaknesses – give way to the prattle of the befuddled devotee, the chant of the obsessional/professional expositor whose voice is not located in the field of investigation generated by the object to be interpreted but is always adjacent to it, frozen in a discursive space established by the originator of the idea. Banished, once this takes place, is the open, dialogic space of the text, its imagistic registers and oral ambivalences; into its place is inserted the fantasm of a mediated, copied, recirculated utterance, a phantom authority – a mock Derrida, a sham Lacan, a false Irigaray, a caricatured Levinas, a Blanchot, Leavis, Richards or Cixous. It is not as if these phantoms have the power to furnish us with categories of understanding with which we, in turn, reinvigorate and replenish our perceptions, as is commonly – and idealistically – alleged by those who wish to perpetuate the currency of the ventriloquised word. Rather, the phantoms dictate both our expectations and our goals, setting at nought what we might have wished to think and say. Without the phantoms, in fact, there *is* – in the popular idiom, literally – nothing to say, for they have so organised our experience that we are unable to conceive of our independence: it is simply inconceivable, incoherent, beyond the range of our conceptual schemes. At the moment of the wish, when we would wish to think, we are inserted into an imaginary structuration governed by the very formulations we wish to ignore, so that there is a libidinal investment in the body of the phantom. At such moments, we are unable to extrapolate the figure of the self from the figure of the phantom. We even wish to speak for it, using its words and inflexions in a brave effort to make ourselves intelligible to those who have made a similar – and generally irrevocable – investment in mimicry and illusion.

Before concluding this discussion of the phases of hysteretic reduction, it may be worthwhile to comment that there is a continuing epistemological and psychological price to pay for an investment of this kind. By continuing to believe that our ideas about the value of interpretation replicate realities that are external to the mind – that literary studies somehow correlates with something important in the world outside our mediated, perceptual awareness – we commit ourselves to an entropic process of endless self-justification by means of which we attempt to demonstrate the disciplinary integrity of what



is said and done in the name of “criticism”. Thus the reality of the discipline rests precariously on our ability to persuade ourselves and others – repeatedly and ceaselessly – that we are not trapped in a circuit of self-deception. Since we can never step outside our disciplinary illusions to check our representations, we are left with an abiding unease and the need to defend our delusions through increasingly elaborate, and increasingly irrelevant, modes of argumentation. Clearly, the assumption that literary interpretation is “relevant” because it “promotes critical thinking”, in addition to doing all sorts of unspecified things for our intellectual and mortal health, operates at so deep a level that it is immune to the consequences of self-reflection and inseparable from our conception of objective reality.

Of course, many versions of this argument can be advanced, not only to prove that literary interpretation has an intrinsic value, but that it has a cognitive, transitive value to which we should give priority. Yet, despite the ease with which such justifications can be summoned and presented, there are many instances in which the fragility of literary studies as a cultural construction threatens to undermine its disciplinary integrity. One such instance illustrates an important permutation of the hysteretic process and points to some of the ways in which the trajectory of hysteresis can be used to trace the logic of cognitive decay.

In the current knowledge-state of literary studies, there is a marked tendency to give preferential treatment to interpretations which accord with particular moral, cultural and social narratives such as those associated with gender studies and the so-called postcolonial condition. In order to correlate with this disposition, contemporary studies of the text attempt to demonstrate a close acquaintance with the extra-literary universe while performing conventional activities identified with textual scrutiny: “reading” words and phrases, saying things about stylistic arrangements and verbal ambiguities, analysing fissures and contradictions, and – more or less variously and individualistically – applying approved vocabularies to inferences drawn from the thematic disposition of the artefact. Implicit in this parallel expository behaviour is the assumption that students of literature are in possession of a reasonable degree of knowledge about whatever fields of investigation are invoked in support of the required textual allegories. In the milieu conditioned by New Criticism, for example, reading the text was thought to be a form of ideological and cultural resistance, making it necessary for textual expositors to purport to know something about ethics and sociology. In the days of the deconstructive turn, reading was thought to be a *practice* which enacted the connections between signification and the drives, making it necessary for expositors to purport to know something about

linguistics and psychoanalysis. And in the current milieu it is necessary for expositors to purport to know something about politics and history. What is significant, however, is that the reticular, circulatory rhetoric of literary exegesis is such that it is almost impossible to formulate a rational assessment of what is being said. Certainly a degree of indeterminacy is necessary and desirable in aesthetic discourse; but that does not mean that exegetical pronouncements should be rendered immune to objective assessment. And yet the extent of figural dependence, the extent to which textual exegesis is conditioned by recourse to a special language derived from a prior topology of representational practices, places the attribution of textual meaning beyond the reach of philosophical investigation. Because this topology has a privileged status by virtue of the cultural and social significance it has acquired since the advent of exegesis as a professional pursuit, it is seldom – if ever – subjected to scrutiny. Indeed, so close is the identification between exegetical language and exegetical practice that it is impossible to distinguish between a falsification of the practice and a sincere attempt to say something about the import and significance of someone else’s words. Leaving aside for the moment the question of the value and function of saying something about someone else’s words, it is obvious that anything, even the most esoteric or nonsensical of utterances, can become – or can be regarded as – a textual exposition. It is just a matter of what vocabulary the expositor chooses and what kind of expectations – lexical, social, ethical, institutional – the expositor wishes to fulfil. Once these conditions are satisfied, the question of validity recedes and another set of criteria takes its place. This set of criteria can be applied without regard to the actual existence of a text, since the activity of exegesis requires only that there is a spectral object which satisfies the conditions for exegesis, a fantasmic text which simply fulfils the desire of the expositor to be seen to be engaged in the activity of exposition.

Whether or not the activity is a simulacrum or a genuine instance of critical reflection, the outcome is the same since the expositor is responding to the *idea* of the text rather than to a neutral and stable entity. Indeed, the ontology of the text – its mode of being – is inscribed within the representational system chosen by the expositor and is therefore always specular, always a restaging of special forms of language behaviour. The need to adjust the performative axis so that it correlates with the cultural frame is, of course, the cause of another form of conceptual lag, the hysteretic disjunction between quotidian and professional usages. Because each exegetical epoch performs a transformative critique which strives to make a particular style of representation appear to be intelligible, each epoch institutes new ways of conceptualising and standardising what is postulated in the name of

interpretation. In one epoch, for example, figural postulations are closely identified with architectonics and the optics of spatiality: desires are “outside” or “inside”; the “gaze” traverses the mirror; “seeing” dominates “being”; figures are “framed” in ocular imagery; objects are “situated” between real and imaginary constructions. In another exegetical epoch, figural formulations are drawn from a desire to reject the familiar and to embrace the genealogy of ambivalence: time is “ruptured”; meaning is manifold; the difference between moments is un-decideable; there are transformations, deformations, ludic interludes and other divertissements for the delectation of the cognoscenti. Other epochs indulge in similarly transformative forms of discursive appropriation.

The central notion here is that there is a ratio between the effort needed to perpetuate a verbal-figural charade and the diminution of intellectual returns: the more the effort expended upon the banal activity of learning how to display the required vocabulary, the less the energy available for problem-solving and discovery. Because the process of learning how to deploy the figurations thought to be appropriate in the dissembling semantic environment of exegesis can never be adiabatic, there is always a loss of energy, both intellectual and ethical, with a consequent hysteretic disruption of the cognitive impulse. In this context, the hysteretic coefficient is not merely a neologism designed to lend figural substance to an abstract phenomenon: it names a very real deficit in the logic of higher critique, a lack which is involuntary demonstrated whenever previously separable “approaches” are brought together under the aegis of eclecticism and interdisciplinarity. Because figurative language has taken precedence over intelligibility, it is impossible to conceive of regulative procedures through which to exercise a modicum of rational choice: any metaphor can be mixed with any other metaphor to create a pervasive impression of novelty, acuity and insight. Thus drives consort with signifiers, signifiers enter into chiasmatic junctures, symptoms coalesce within subtle suturings, while knots enunciate negative foreclosure in the irruption of the sign. Or, more commonly in institutions which have yet to understand the professional benefits of the newer exegetical “turns”, form and content interpenetrate closely, diction is vigorous, patterns are shaped from the flux of actuality, and structural alliteration creates metrical harmonies which reflect and enact the deep commitment of the imagination. The fact that these metaphors yoke disparate and incommensurable domains together is taken as a sign of disciplinary and transdisciplinary maturity rather than as a demonstration of semantic dysteleology. The notion of the metaphysical conceit – the artful, far-sought verbal construction governed by contrariety – is the outstanding

feature in this form of hysteretic attrition. Practised as a largely unconscious habit, figural fecundity gradually overwhelms the dimly re-membered constraints of logic. Since the expression and circulation of novelty is the driving force of exegesis, it is to be expected that the expositor will pay more attention to the production of verbal burlesque than to its seemingly humdrum alternatives – for example, the need to direct interest back to matters worthy of serious scholarly attention such as the intellectual and aesthetic traditions which are thought to have inspired the great works of literature. Given the privileged status of interpretation, the simplest expedient is to abjure as anachronistic the injunction to know something about something in particular and to take up a line of work which demands only that one is able to postulate something tropological about nothing in particular. Such an occupation leads directly – and imperceptibly – to hysteretic obstruction, since there is, necessarily, a set of antecedent anxieties to resolve.

The effort of having to say something about nothing in particular is always wearisome, but in the case of literary studies it is deleterious to the point of being an unmitigated and unjustifiable folly. The aspirant expositor has first to overcome a natural desire to be of service in the world; then the expositor is compelled to do battle with impulses which are both in the highest degree incompatible with one another: the desire to give expression to intellectual acuity and the need to produce the euphuistic delirium associated with the profession of literary exegesis. Finally, our expositor, impressed with the justifications provided by colleagues eager to resolve their own anxieties about the exegetical condition, develops a necessary belief in the pedagogical, moral or social benefits of the activity. That tender love of “analysis” for its own sake or for the sake of an evangelical eruption such as “postcoloniality” or “gender studies”, that love of windbagging about what others have written, has to be kept from harm by pretending to be more sensitive, more moral, more concerned with righting social and cultural wrongs than any artist, philosopher or sociologist could possibly be. Whether the expositor grasps the truth of the exegetical predicament is irrelevant: there is always a residual anxiety to be countered, always an intimation of stupidity in the postexegetical afterglow of moral superiority. Nerved by a spurious but fervent belief in the value of such affectations, the expositor is unnerved by the sublime indifference shown towards textual interpretation by most of the civilised world. It is hard to relax one’s vigilance while creating the illusion that some metaphysically, socially, or culturally significant textual quality deserves to be prised loose from an indifferent body of words. There is always the fear of being found out.

There would seem to be only one way of dealing with this fear, and that is by becoming a textual epicure. Since it requires neither knowledge, scholarship, intelligence, nor any skill in reasoning, to compose statements about poems, novels and plays, or extracts from poems, novels and plays – especially when the phrases and formulations to be used have already been coined, deployed and printed in books and journals – it is relatively easy to give every word, phrase, sentence or other textual feature the status of a spectral object so that the text is made into an unresisting tableaux on which to dramatise the most trivial of impulses, potentialities and possibilities without fear of contradiction – or, in the case of certain approaches to the text, in the eager expectation of contradictions of a remarkably fecund kind which will serve to enhance the spectral reach of the words under scrutiny. While the nonexpositing population watches with bated breath, the expositor pulls all sorts of developments, moods, effects, contrasts, parallelisms, influences, declamatory forces, intertextual reverberations, gendered utterances, political castigations, social allegories, and other surprises out of an otherwise indifferent text. If texts could be bemused, as with drink, or through over-exposure to the Muses – and, of course, such an esoteric development is not beyond the bounds of possibility, since a time may come when a new school of advanced textual muddling takes possession of the literary-critical academy – then they would certainly be thrown into confusion by such acts of repetitive prestidigitation.

At least two important consequences for a theory of literary-critical hysteresis follow from this description of the nature of the textual epicure. The first concerns the notion of conceptual delay; the second has its origins in the institutional determinants of the units of measurement which are applied to the products of textual epicureanism. Of the two, the first is the most important since it bears directly on the question of the enfeeblement of cognitive processes, a progressively degenerative condition which is aggravated by repeated exposure to the circumstances, ontological, linguistic, and implicative, associated with the exegetical project.

Contemporary literary exegesis depends upon an act of submission. In an institutionalised recapitulation of the Renaissance approach to poetic and dramatic composition, imitation and convention are the prerequisites of all textual muddling. Just as the sixteenth-century poet might discover an individual idiom by submitting to the authority of French, Italian, Latin and Greek precursors, so the contemporary expositor finds a voice by speaking for – by representing, as it were – a mind more sublime than his or her mind, a mind more substantial, more significant, and better provisioned with delicate moods and muscular insights, or, in the case of the poststructural/bodypartist

efflorescence, better equipped with metaphysical pulsions and more liberally endowed with radically heterogeneous zones of semic instability. As Harold Bloom has shown, however, such acts of transumption exact a penalty: the vulnerable epigone feels harassed by the power of the precursor and is thought (in some circles) to experience a confrontation of a violently oedipal kind. It is likely, too, that the expositor-epigone is even more susceptible to such feelings of inadequacy since he or she is acutely aware of society's estimate of the value of exegesis. Not only does the expositor-epigone have to deal with formidable post-Freudian phenomena of the sort described by Bloom and Lacan, then, but he or she must do his or her best to confront a host of embarrassing questions. Apart from the obvious questions relating to the value of the enterprise itself, and these are legion, there is the philosophical question of semantic implicature. All theories of semantic implicature are extravagantly but covertly metaphysical in that they presuppose the validity and adequacy of antecedent consequence. Thus operators such as "suggests", "implies", "connotes", "means" and "conveys" are used to force a condition of continuous and cumulative tele-ological significance, as if there were an all-transcending point towards which language aspires. Even in a supposedly postmodern universe of little stories, where the authority of the surface-depth model is held to be defunct, there is a straining after something more than language, a metaphysical wish for a condition of enunciation which will lead inexorably to higher epistemologies of the self. The purveyors of this illusory wish are to be found wherever literary exegesis is thought to be a natural response to the presence of literary texts. Although the wish is always strongly dissimulated, transmuted into one of many little stories about the obligations of scholarship (and other injunctions drawn from the repertoire of the professional exegete), it continues to intersect with the narcissistic self-affirmation of the expositor. Since, for personal and professional reasons, the expositor desires to be in a determinate position in relation to other expositors, he or she must take care to add fresh points of teleological transcendence to the ever-evolving catalogue of things to do with a text. At the intersection of these desires – self-affirmation and its corollary impulse, the desire to present a suitably augmented self to others – is the specular misrecognition in which quite trivial and nugatory phenomena are imperceptibly elevated to the status of proper objects of knowledge. This is the locus at which hysteretic rupture takes place. Precisely because it is the desire for self-elevation which is the determinant of the expository impulse, the aesthetic object itself cannot serve as the primary basis for the properties attributed to it. Thus the text is reconstructed to satisfy the professional appetences of the interpreter, while

the means by which this act of reconstruction is achieved is ascribed to those who are reputed to possess higher epistemologies of the self: to Fanon, to Derrida, to Blanchot, to Levinas, to Deleuze, to Jauss, to Quine, to Krabozinski. In matters of textual exegesis, it seems, the means does indeed justify the end.

The hysteretic gap between the relatively glamorous means available to the expositor and the decidedly mundane ends achieved by these means compromises the confidence with which the expositor approaches the task at hand. In order to make the ends compatible with the means – to demonstrate, for example, that the hidden tedium and incomprehensibility of advanced (particularly continental) textual interpretation can be justified by virtue of its moral, social, cognitive and other benefits – the expositor is forced to construct a system of representations and self-fashionings which will articulate particular heuristic functions. These functions will, in turn, be used to articulate and justify emerging knowledge-claims, and to convert weak and often deeply flawed postulations into apparently self-evident lemmas whose validity is construed as having been guaranteed by common practice. Thus a system of ready-made construals replaces the obligation to gain information about the phenomenon being invoked. Examples are legion. Without having read or studied or made sense of or evaluated Richards's *Practical Criticism*, countless expositors have used a system of construals to convince themselves that they are "applying" Richards's "methods". Without having studied the political and social circumstances which informed Leavis's leavings, armies of expositors have universalised and appropriated his "approach" to literary interpretation and evaluation. Without having attempted to study and struggle through and evaluate at first hand Lacan's duping, parodic triangulations and strangulations of the divided subject, innumerable literary analysts and thesis writers have extruded unintelligible allegories mimicking – at the drop of a copula – the master's voice: Keats *and* Leavis: A Reading, Lacan *and* Coetzee, Coetzee *and* Lacan, Lacan *and* Shelley, Lacan *and* the Post-colonial Gaze in Selected Novels of.

The divide between, for example, Lacan's smugly dissembling (but at least original) allegories and the earnest outpourings of the trusting epigone mirrors the epistemic divergence between the phenomenon-creating role of cognitive experiment and the drab predictability of imitation. It could be argued that the actions and interactions of people such as Leavis and Richards and the two Jacqueses have added a little something to the literary-critical universe by generating a world of bogus phenomena to which their language and thought refer. But their epigones have done nothing at all.

Instead of trying to augment the value of what Putnam has called “introducing” or “baptismal” events (Putnam 1973: 213 ff.) by taking care to understand their referential contexts and their criteria of application, the professional epigone will take the line of least resistance, put up business-as-usual-signs, and pick up a copula with which to begin the gelatinising labour of textual interpretation: Keats *and* Someone, Coetzee *and* Someone Else, James *and* You-Know-Who. At the same time, the epigone will be content to subscribe to a regress theory of knowledge by which conceptual competence is vested in a coterie of experts who are entrusted with taking care of “true” and “authentic” bodies of ideas. Judgements about who is sufficiently authentic to be counted as an expert are primarily social in nature, but have material consequences in that they are governed by modalities of exchange in the nonfiduciary universe outside the text. For those who subscribe to a regress theory of knowledge (recently reinforced by silly relativism and the morbid stupefactions of the so-called postmodern condition), there is no need to do anything risky when it comes to finding out about a particular phenomenon or set of postulates. The custodians of the articles of faith – those who have written books about Derrida and Spivak and Blanchot and Levinas and Guattari and Bhabha – will save us from the *mise-en-abyme*, the dialectic of multiplying contexts which leads to more and more, and still more and more, to the point at which our only option is to return to the text and to gossip about its words. If Derrida, Spivak, Lacan, Blanchot and Bhabha have indeed introduced new modes of representation and analysis, they have delegated the responsibility of understanding these novelties to those who have no interest in such matters. How many epigones have bothered to investigate the cultural and philosophical sources for Derrida’s metaphors about language? How many expositors have thought it worth their while, from an intellectual perspective, to investigate the antic posturings of a Lacanian triangulation or a Freudian aparithmesis?

The stock response to such questions is to rise above them by declaring that they are meaningless, since it is hardly possible for a dyed-in-the-wool expositor to understand what they imply about the profession of interpretation. An expositor who is called upon to defend the value of literary exegesis displays all the symptoms of the confirmed monomaniac: he or she cannot confront the challenge directly, or reflect upon its implications with a sense of rational detachment. Instead, the expositor simply confirms, by protestation, assertion and affectation, the validity of the major premise of the foregoing: that the profession of literary interpretation requires neither knowledge, judgement, inferential logic in matters of argument, nor any other mental faculty associated with intelligible action. He or she will think of



nothing else but the gratification of getting hold of another book or play or passage to interpret, and will attend to no matters, however intellectually pertinent, except the dull, monoxylous business of fashioning words from other words and then writing them down. Oddly enough, expositors are seldom disconcerted; for their training in the art of saying things about nothing in particular has rendered them immune to self-reflection. One way of understanding the general hysteresis so produced, therefore, is to imagine the feelings of the hack expositor when he or she is forced to produce a commentary upon a text. There is an initial moment of misery when the imagined gap between what “others” might say (or might very well have said) and what strikes the expositor seems to be unbridgeable. Then there is a moment of hysteretic, specular engagement with those who are reputed to possess higher epistemologies of the self, when the textual votary calls upon a Name, renders verbal obeisance through mimicry, and awaits vouchsafement by a group of peers who may or may not condescend to acknowledge the merits of the “meanings” thereby uncovered. Whether or not these meanings are vouchsafed has nothing to do with empirical access as a source of knowledge and reference. Instead, the action of conferring advantage by approving of a meaning or set of meanings is an onanistic, autotelic response to a self-generating technology designed to confer legitimacy upon a monstrous form of intellectual laziness: the pretence that one does not have an obligation to negotiate mutually intelligible representations in a context defined by logically structured mensurative procedures.

If we make allowances for the expositor’s solemn posturings, and remember that a weighty tradition supports the opportunistic twaddle of the exegete, we may say that very little harm is done in the name of literary interpretation. The activity of “reading” John Keats or Henry James or Milton, with or without the hyperfigural vocabularies of the elect, holds its own as a fairly respectable habit. But to excuse the habit is to perpetuate it; and to perpetuate the habit is to condone the disjunction between what is professed and what is actually the case – the most damaging form of hysteresis, especially when years of exposure to the effects of the disjunction leads to the abandonment of reason. Nothing can be more anomalous, more intellectually bankrupt, than an expositor who pretends that the activity of drooling over a text and making up things to say about it is a form of scholarly research. Yet the expositor will invariably refuse to entertain the possibility that there is a vast difference between scholarship and the unchecked production of deliberately nonreferential sentences. For the over-exposed and thoroughly habituated ex-positor, the capacity to produce sentences

containing sound-shapes such as “In poem/passage/novel/ X, the relationship between Y and Z implies that there is ...” fulfils the conditions for literary scholarship, despite the fact that such sentences are both untestable and incoherent. Garnished with qualifiers and expletives (in the strict sense of the word: serving to fill out, tending or seeking to supply a loss) such as “Perhaps”, “Indeed”, “From this perspective”, and floating gaily on the pliable, allegorical *is* (“the text *is* situated/ *is* not unlike/ *is* the kind of/ *is* the figure of / *is* acting as the signifier of/ *is* the locus of an originary subjectivization”), such sentences are intended to produce a form of semantic ergot, a condition of gross and pernicious insensibility brought on by the narcotic influence of referential scatter. In this state of mental erethism, in which there is an abnormal desire to be pleased by that which can never be fully understood (a Lacanian “algorithm”, for example, or the Ricardian “sense” of a poem), textual exegesis flourishes, for it is possible (and sometimes downright necessary) to read and write literary commentaries entirely uncomprehendingly, without wishing to find out whether they have any meaning at all.

An awareness of the distinction between routine, gestural activity and genuine discovery arising from procedures such as retroduction and analogical reasoning is also missing in the mind of the expositor. Having grown accustomed to the sensation of not making sense (in any ordinary sense, that is), the expositor adjusts to the sham profundity, espoused by generations of literary critics, that an understanding of literary artefacts allows us to interrogate self-evident truths and to make sense of our common experiences and structures of feeling. Without knowing how or why or wherefore, the expositor comes to believe that literary interpretation, if sensitively pursued, facilitates an engagement with – and a critique of – the canons of appropriateness which regulate our apprehension of ethics, aesthetics and our old friend, the redoubtable “texture of lived experience”. Since so much weighty stuff is accomplished by the simple expedient of interpreting a text, every proposition (formerly called an “insight”), no matter how banal, is deemed to be a discovery. This means that every time an expositor reads a text with a view to saying something about its contradictions, its aporias, its imagery, its tone, its enactments of the gaze, its gender configurations, its absences, its binaries, its representations of the body, its exclusions, its negations, its traversings of the signifier, its delusions, its primal scenes, and what have you, a “discovery” is imminent, coming on shortly in the form of one or more sentences of the type indicated above. The average piece of textual exposition contains, by this logic, more

“discoveries” than are made in any given year in the obviously much less intellectually industrious field of the so-called hard sciences.

Given such a bizarre concatenation of arrogant, head-in-the-sand delusions, surely some form of abjection is at hand? If hysteresis is the lagging of consequences behind causes, then abjection is its active, chiasmatic double: the jettisoning of causes – personal, emotional and institutional – in an effort to conceal the true nature of the consequences. Because the consequences of literary exegesis are so paltry, so utterly trivial in relation to the consequences of rational thought, their sheer wastefulness torments the expositor, although the source of the torment is never recognised. Instead, the worry is deflected, set aside, or directed at a sham antagonist: capitalist society, the big lie of advertising, the artifices of commerce, globalisation, the loss of cultural speciation, and other ills. Expositors are well known for their protestations of moral rectitude and for their dependence upon a rhetoric of exclusion and negation which is usually taken to be one of the defining characteristics of “taste”. In order to sustain the illusion of being productively engaged in a form of significant cultural critique while reading a text, the expositor will take care to suggest that the exegetical “discoveries” have something to do with larger epistemological crises such as the nature and function of advertising, the ambiguities of words, the careful patterning of imagery, the symbolic mediation of gender, and the history of the transpersonal, constructed subject.

No mere compromise between the obviously trivial goals of literary exegesis and the wider concerns of society is possible: the exegete must make a bold statement of some kind (and must be seen to be making a bold statement of some kind), by indirection or assertion, about the way of the world, its ills and ideals. To see the process of hysteretic abjection at work, we have only to consider the disjunction between the high-flown teleological vocabulary of contemporary exegesis and the ramifications of that vocabulary in the wider world. On receiving intimations of the irreducible divide between exegetical self-fashioning and what is actually the case, the expositor becomes increasingly preoccupied with the social function of criticism, and casts the expository net wide in order to enmesh a variety of phenomena in need of improvement and repair, ranging from the plight of the colonial subject and the sad state of interpersonal ethics, to the fate of former nation-states. Then, when this preoccupation diminishes in the face of irrefutable evidence to the contrary, when it becomes clear that literary criticism can do nothing about anything, and is determined to do nothing about anything, the expositor declares that the function of interpretation is to interpret, that criticism has no transitive value, and that it is a fallacy to assert that the job

of exegesis is to promote, albeit at a considerable distance, the vitality of Western civilisation and the mind of Europe.

Such a disjunction requires a conscious effort of the mind, an extraordinary mustering of the energies of sublimation. On one side of the bifurcated wish is a wholly imaginary construction, protected only by institutional and professional arrogance and protestation, in which textual exposition represents an opportunity to recover a lost ego ideal; on the other side there is a phobic object, the realisation that textual exposition can never establish points of reference in the world outside the text.

In such a position of hysteretic perplexity, the interpreter adapts to conflict by taking the line of least resistance, strategically transmuting doubt and self-abasement into a condition of permanent disequilibrium, or, to extend the condition into the social sphere, into a preening, authoritarian pedagogy, where the game of imitating the master is replicated in the guise of instruction. Moreover, under the pretext of attempting to understand and make explicit the conditions and grounds that govern cultural and aesthetic phenomena, the expositor eagerly seizes upon anything that will elicit dissonance, be it a poem, a play, a novel, an anthology, an article written by a competing expositor, or a readable piece of cinema. The process of interpretation, therefore, is usually adversarial, entailing a scornful measurement of deficiency – unless, that is, the text under exegesis is currently in favour owing to its author's name, its subtlety, complexity, unintelligibility or sociopolitical stance. More commonly, however, interpretation is parasitic upon lack. The expositor, already ex-periencing aesthetic, personal and institutional abjection, needs the assurance that things are bad, that there are serious shortcomings that can be dealt with in a sublimely abstract manner (with any luck, at international gatherings of other expositors), and that the host community – a grateful wider world – needs his or her assistance and advice. Obsessively and repeatedly, the expositor, like a parasite manipulating the behaviour of its host, attempts to validate his or her behaviour in the eyes of the world by claiming, for example, that lawyers “engage in textual explication”, or that literary criticism “equips one”, in an unspecifiable manner, for some not-yet-quite-defined but none-theless phenomenologically vital activity.

These external, collective manifestations of hysteretic disjunction are reflected at the level of the individual expositor, who experiences similar dissonances and deficiencies in the pursuit of textual meaning. The dualism experienced by the expositor takes the form of an antithesis between the deeply suppressed knowledge that exegetical signification is a blank but institutionally sanctioned assertion of complicity with other expositors, and

the material and ego-driven need to proclaim its continued meaningfulness. Because demonstrable consensus with the views and habits of other expositors is necessary to ensure the propagation of the faith, however, the individual expositor submits to a prolonged act of glottophagia, a textual impersonation in which his or her reading of a text is swallowed and revocalised in the language of the current authority. The potentially subversive mediating identity of the expositor is obliterated in the act of “reading well”, so that even the ego-driven need to do something meaningful is interrupted and rendered impotent. Thus at the very moment of saying what a text means, or might mean, or is trying to mean, or wishes to mean, at the very moment of confronting the blank, the most powerful need is the yearning to be transubstantiated in complete faith into the collective exegetical body of the faithful, and to be recognised as having performed an act of “pure” interpretation in which all intimations of dissonance are resolved.

Such a state of advanced textual-exegetical delirium is seldom, if ever, achieved, since the scene of interpretation in which reading-productions are rejected and rewarded cannot guarantee an answering purity of response. In an institutional setting, local commitments and idiosyncratic conjugations of circumstance combine with the frail self-presence of the expositor to produce an extraordinarily high expectation of threat and dissolution. The hysteretic disjunction thus repeats itself as the exegete is forced to confront the manifold insecurity of having to enunciate significance in an unstable environment constituted by those who mirror – and embody – his or her own counterfeited subject positions. It is a melancholy prolepsis, a hysteretic affliction always already done. The fleeting prestige which rewards those who successfully impersonate the exalted enunciative activities of a sovereign speaking-subject can never compensate the expositor for the loss of an authentic sense of self with which to face the world.

## References

- Putnam, H.  
1973 Explanation and Reference. In: Pearce, G. & Maynard, G. (eds)  
*Conceptual Change*. Dordrecht & Boston: Reidel.