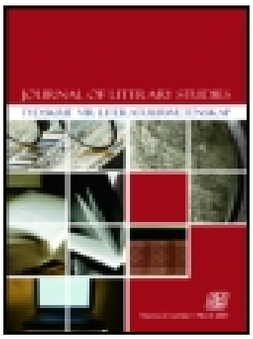

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A Speculation on the Nature of Texts

Alan Brimer

Summary

This essay briefly rehearses the argument for thinking of texts as culture-bound phenomena which exist only in the value-laden act of reading. It discriminates between the material world and the knowable world, and situates writing in the first and text-production in the second. It suggests limits to the relativity of text-production in terms of the limited cultural contexts in which it takes place. On the basis of these ideas it goes on to consider the practice of teaching literature in South Africa today and argues against the notion that relatively uninformed readings by South African students are less valid than conventionally informed Eurocentric readings. Finally it draws conclusions about the validity of the demands university teachers of literature sometimes make on their students.

Opsomming

In hierdie essay word daar kortliks (her)besin oor die argument dat tekste gesien word as kultuurgebonde verskynsels wat slegs bestaansreg verkry binne die waardebelade leeshandeling. 'n Onderskeid word getref tussen die materiële en die kenbare wêreld; vervolgens word die skryfproses in die eerste en teksproduksie in die tweede onderskeiding gesitueer. Beperkings word veronderstel op die relatiwiteit van teksproduksie, beskou teen die agtergrond van die beperkte kulturele kontekste waarbinne sodanige produksie plaasvind. Met hierdie idees as grondslag word daar vervolgens gekyk na die huidige praktyk van letterkundeonderrrig in Suid-Afrika. Daar word stelling ingeneem teen die opvatting dat betreklik oningeligte lesings deur Suid-Afrikaanse studente minder geldig sou wees as konvensionele, dit wil sê Eurosentries-ingeligte, lesings. Ten slotte word 'n aantal gevolgtrekkings gemaak oor die geldigheid van die eise wat universiteitsdosente en letterkundeonderwysers soms aan hulle studente stel.

This is chiefly a theoretical speculation derived from seeing the way people read, and my own eclectic reading of some current theoretical writing. I do not believe it would be helpful to document in conventional scholarly fashion the many obvious sources of my ideas, salient among which are Mikhail Bakhtin, and some of the Reception Aestheticians, Jauss and Fish especially. If it is necessary to pin the essay down more precisely, the reader could think of it as a response to the relevant portion of the final chapter of Tzvetan Todorov's *Literature and Its Theorists* (1988: 184–188), in which he briefly considers Deconstruction and Reception Aesthetics, lumps them together as poststructuralist nihilism, and rejects them.

1

We need to discriminate between the material world and the known world. For our purposes the material world exists prior to our knowledge of it, and is available to us only through the act of knowing it, and all knowledge is culture-bound.

A stone, or whatever is signified by the word "stone", or whatever pre-exists that culture-bound act of signifying, exists in the material world prior to our knowing it – which is why we can fall over it in the dark. Our

knowledge of it consists of sense-impressions which we interpret as they occur, culminating in our classification of the object as a "stone". We do not know the material object but only our knowledge of it, from which we infer the existence of the material object. If experience comes to us only in the form of knowledge and all knowledge is culture-bound, all experience (including that which derives from the material world) is culture-bound.

A book exists in the world. It is a man-made artifact (a product of knowledge, the act of inscription, and the printer's skills) and therefore a cultural object. But it also exists in the material world. We can fall over it in the dark, but we can know it (even a material object) only in culture-bound contexts, one of which suggests that a book is not only an object in the material world but also that it implicitly contains a text. It is this last item of belief that I set out to refute here. What a book contains is writing. A text is solely an object of knowledge, whereas books and writings exist in both the human world and the material world.

The word "writing" is frequently used to mean a variety of different things in different contexts. For the purposes of this argument I need to limit the meaning of the word to the material indications of writing, that which we see when we open a book prior to the process of interpretation. And my use of the word "text" is also limited, to that which we register as we read. I regret having to straitjacket common words in such an awkward way, but I need to use them as technical terms for the purposes of my argument.

In itself writing belongs to the material world only, but in so far as we see it, it belongs to our world as well, as a page, as black and white, as marks and background, as language known or unknown, as philosophy, theology, history or fiction, as autobiography or novel, as Fielding or Fowles, as *The Magus* or *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. We know the text, as against the writing, in terms of the overlapping of multiple, pre-existing categories of related knowledge, all of which are culture-bound. A text, then, is not contained in writing or in a book, but is produced by the act of reading and is entirely culture-bound.

To use the word "culture" like this is to use it in a very broad sense, but that does not entail imprecision. "Culture", here, is a set of interrelated human systems of knowledge, beliefs, aspirations, assumptions, tastes and inferences drawn from experience of social life, including reading and listening to other people. Each individual is, by virtue of the multiplicity of the social roles he or she plays in life, a member of a number of disparate cultural sets – perhaps a wife and mother, a tennis player, a member of a particular South African racial group, a Marxist literary critic, and so on – each of which entails subscription, conscious or subconscious, to a set of values and assumptions proper to that role and the group of people who play that role in a particular place and time. Some cultural assumptions will coincide from set to set, but others will be in conflict with one another. What is thought of as a person's individuality is therefore culturally determined and involves fractures and conflicts which will become apparent only when there is confusion as to which of the multiple roles a person plays is to be foregrounded in response to a particular situation. An individual unthinkingly responds to a situation in

terms of a role (and the values attached to it) suggested by the situation. Each of these partially overlapping cultural systems may be thought of as a point of view, and without a point of view neither the individual as part of the material world nor the knowable world can exist. As Nelson Goodman puts it in *Ways of Worldmaking*:

> If I ask about the world, you can offer to tell me how it is under one or more frames of reference, but if I insist that you tell me how it is apart from all frames, what can you say? We are confined to ways of describing whatever is described. Our universe, so to speak, consists of these ways rather than of a world or of worlds.
>
> (Ayer 1982: 259)

As we always see from a point of view, or know as members of cultural groups, the processes whereby we see or know are so habitual that they seem transparent to us, and we are inclined to live as if we saw and knew the material world itself. To put this differently, we half believe that values and meanings exist as part of the material world. The lexical system of a language, in so far as it is recorded in a dictionary, would be an instance supporting such an attitude. But on scrutiny we find that such a habit of mind is only a useful fiction enabling us to cope with day-to-day existence. A proper dictionary does no more than record culture-bound lexical practices diachronically, and what it records is available to a reader only as text. A reader of a dictionary or any other kind of writing is bound to read in terms of the already known. He or she automatically reads the sheet of black marks on a white background as meaningful through setting up a grid of cross-references within a system consisting of appropriate sets of cultural knowledge, thus producing sets of lexical items relating to each other syntactically, sentences, paragraphs and so forth. In relating these systems the reader produces the intertextual quality of texts, which is both synchronic and diachronic, and is also heteroglossic. Where a text seems to be primarily monoglossic (all texts are in fact both "closed" and "open"), this would be because an individual responds to a situation (unthinkingly) by ordering the cultural groups to which he or she belongs into a hierarchy based on apparent relevance. A university lecturer is more likely to read a novel as a Marxist critic than as a mother, or a tennis player.

Analogous processes are involved, in reverse, in the act of producing authorial texts and then writing, the phenomenon in the material world. Cultural experiences become authorial texts which become material phenomena. And the specifics of these processes, in any one instance, are unknowable to a reader except through contact with writing: through the reading of primary or secondary writing, including criticism, biography and history, which are categories of textual – and therefore cultural – knowledge. A reader has no unmediated contact with authorial experiences or authorial texts, which exist for a reader only as sets of inferences drawn from the culture-bound act of reading, and therefore derive from the reader's own cultural contexts.

It follows, then, that a text is not to be confused with writing. I would postulate on the basis of what I have said that a text exists in a hypothetical locus, the site of interaction between writing and a reader. A text does not give rise to a reading; a text is a reading. Writing is only one of the factors that give rise to a text, along with the multiplicity of assumptions pertaining to the cultural groups to which each reader (each producer of a text) belongs.

We ordinarily behave as if we assumed that meanings were contained in words on a page, but such behaviour is no more than a utilitarian short circuit of the processes that take place. Our cultural experiences teach us the alphabet, in terms of which we seem to recognize the letters and words of the writing. In fact we do not "recognize" words in the same way as we recognize a face. What we do is to constitute the marks on the page as letters of the alphabet within the frame of a culturally ordained paradigm. Then, or simultaneously, within the frame of other, similar paradigms, we constitute the letters into sets of lexical items in syntactic relations, which we constitute into texts of specific kinds, which partially or wholly match culturally ordained notions of the possibilities available for various kinds of texts. The reader is not free to do anything the reader likes with writing. A reader's freedom is curtailed by cultural constraints which make the act of reading possible. To describe a text as a hypothetical locus of interaction between writing and a reader is therefore to suggest that the meanings of which a text is made are limited both by the shapes of the marks on the page and by the complex of culture-bound skills, areas of putative knowledge, impulses and values of which the reader consists.

The usual objection to this line of thought is that it gives rise to total relativism and ultimate chaos. But of course Stanley Fish's notion of communities of readers applies (without his concomitant notion of an ideal reading, which he himself criticizes occasionally) and prevents the onset of chaos. The fact that each reader belongs simultaneously to a large number of (partly conflicting, partly coinciding) communities suggests that while total coherence in text-production is impossible, total incoherence is equally impossible. The first would be possible only if at least two readers were totally identical in every way, and the second only if there were a reader somewhere in the world who was utterly unique (who belonged to cultural groups each of which consisted of only one member). A text, a reading, is always culturally bound, and we are therefore faced with the need to contemplate the existence of a number of texts produced in response to a single piece of writing, but not an infinite number of texts. The relativity of text-production is thus strictly curtailed.

An outcome of this argument that I find rather pleasing is that it conflates the acts of reading, interpretation and criticism, the differences between which have frequently been seen to be problematic, by situating them within the processes of text-production and therefore within culture-bound contexts, which are always value-laden. Motivated by a special purpose such as the need to write a critical article for publication, a reader may fairly automatically put on one of his hats rather than any of the others available on the hat stand – but the others are there too, and slip on and off his head willy-nilly.

All reading is value-laden, and values are heteroglossic, depending on the selection of communities of which the reader is a part; but they are ordered into a hierarchy by the reader's desire to respond to a specific reading situation. Reading, interpretation and criticism are contiguous activities, and we will not find one of them without finding the others as well, though one of them will fairly automatically be foregrounded. By the same token, a text produced by a critic owing allegiance to a particular school of criticism will be comparable to a text produced by one belonging to a diametrically opposed school, not because of any inadequacy in the two acts of criticism, but because critics are people owning many hats. Perhaps this was obvious all along, though.

Another outcome of this argument is that it would seem to put paid to vulgar Marxism and some aspects of its derivatives. If one accepts the position argued above, that the material world is not directly accessible to one, it follows that history, politics and economics are accessible only in already mediated forms and always have textual qualities, whether or not they take the form of writing. To produce a critique of a literary text in the context of unmediated events and systems is therefore impossible, and when one attempts to do so one is always engaged, instead, in an act of interpretation based on other, multiple acts of interpretation, all of them bound to times and places and points of view determined by a host of partly coinciding and partly conflicting cultural (including ideological) contexts which themselves are available to us only textually. A critical practice or system of thought that leaves these things out of account would seem to lack rigour.

2

Of more immediate interest, I believe, are the implications of these ideas for those of us who teach literature in South Africa and are faced daily with the confounding array of cultural groups to which our students belong, and hence with a confounding array of readings produced by our students. These ideas validate the various texts produced by our students in terms of the set of cultural groups to which each student belongs. They empower a lecturer to accept a reading of a Shakespearean play, for instance, by a student with little or no knowledge of the English Renaissance, as they conflate the play and the reading for each individual student. Think: all of us read from a perspective of relative ignorance. For instance, since the destruction of the great library at Alexandria much of the history and culture of the ancient world has been lost to us; yet that fact has not deterred us from reading the extant writing of the period in the contexts of what has been preserved, and our readings are valid despite the opacity to us of the ancient world, as long as we take validity to mean text-production in the context of the known and knowable rather than the unknown and unknowable. Total, ideal validity is unattainable, Casaubon notwithstanding. It would entail infinite regression into everything ever written, said, thought, felt and done in the world, whether obviously relevant or not, and would entail ideal objectivity, the eschewal of a point of view, without which nothing can be seen. No matter how fully informed an

expert may seem to be in a field, the expert is stuck with the inevitability of the incompleteness of his or her knowledge, and the inescapable need to constitute texts and the world as objects of knowledge, from particular points of view. If we accept these limitations on our own production of texts (and can we fail to do so?) it follows that we should accept the limited relativity of our students' text-production as well.

Usually a student's freedom as a reader is curtailed by the constraints not only of the student's own culturally-ordained skills as a reader but also by the imposition on the part of a lecturer, acting in accordance with common academic practice, of cultural contexts and areas of putative knowledge of which the student may be relatively ignorant, such as knowledge of the English Renaissance (in the case of a Shakespearean play), or a body of significant criticism of the play, or of modes of critical production. If a lecturer is empowered by the argument of this essay to accept a student's unaided reading of the play, the lecturer is also validly empowered by his or her position as a teacher to suggest its modification in terms of cultural contexts unknown to but accessible to the student. And what the lecturer chooses to do in this regard will afterwards be yet another culture-bound determinant of the nature of the play for the student. Given that a student has not mistaken the shapes on the page and has been true to his or her own cultural contexts, the student's unaided reading cannot be a misreading. But the introduction of the student to cultural contexts previously unknown to him or her can modify the unaided reading in the direction of more standard readings, while not skewing the reading to such an extent that it is untrue to the student's more primary cultural contexts.

I have written elsewhere at some length on the subject of what are commonly called misreadings. Here I shall give only a single instance of what I mean when I say that a student's unaided reading cannot reasonably be construed as a misreading.

Ted Hughes's poem "October Dawn" images the coming of a latter-day ice age which "Squeezes the fire at the core of the world" and would seem to have little to do with weddings and funerals. But it begins with the statement "October is marigold", and in Hindu culture marigolds are used in the garlands and prayer-rituals concomitant with weddings, funerals and other social functions. Many of my students of Indian extraction, when asked to produce unaided readings of the poems, took the word "marigold" to signify that the poem related to some such function, and consequently read as much of the poem as they could in this cultural context. (The "fire at the core of the world", for instance, was related to the fire lit on such occasions.) If reading entails the constitution of meanings in the contexts of the already known (which is culture-bound), and the notion of validity in reading is operative only for communities of readers, these students had read the poem validly. Supplying them, after the event of their first reading, with additional information pertaining to Hughes's cultural affiliations and the common stock of images and themes of others of his poems modified their reading of "October Dawn" significantly and validly in terms of the new areas of knowledge at their disposal, but did not for them nullify the particular

richness of the first three words of the poem. Theirs was not a misreading. The fact that the poem *was* read in this way, and by a significant number of readers of common cultural stock, demonstrates that the poem *can be* read in this way. The word "misreading" is something of a misnomer, not only because it implies the existence of a single, correct reading which (absurdly) would have to exist independently of any actual reader, but also because it suggests a false notion of the reading process. Some readings can justifiably be called relatively informed readings, and others relatively uninformed (relative to standard notions of the type of information most apposite to a particular case), but all readings are explicable in terms of the contexts from which they arise, and are valid in those terms.

Of course there will be marked differences between "informed" readings and "uninformed" readings, not in terms of the hypothetical absolute value of the readings, as all values are socially determined, but in terms of the quantity and kind of information that underpins each reading, and the values attached to the information. Each student, having lived through a number of years as a member of various cultural groups, will have a body of information at his or her disposal. Some of that information may coincide with our own, and some of it may coincide with the body of information demanded of students conventionally in academic establishments. When a student reads in the context of information corresponding largely with our own and relates items in that body of knowledge that we had not previously related, we respond with a sigh of satisfaction: "How true!". When a student reads in the context of information new to us, we may well respond differently, perhaps with disappointment and distaste or with surprised excitement: "How fresh!". All reading is value-laden, and our reading of students' work inevitably gives rise to value judgements.

Such judgements applied to students' text-production are made primarily in terms of historically derived values inherent in the heterogeneous cultural group of university academics who teach literature. I say "primarily" because each of us belongs to other groups as well, and therefore applies other values as well, without always knowing that we are doing so. The group of lecturers in literature is a single group constituted by its conditions of employment, the nature of the work performed, and its subscription to the university culture. But it is also heterogeneous as there is space within the single group for subsets of people such as Marxist critics, poststructuralists, Leavisites or whatever, each subset consisting of people who subscribe to a more or less single body of ideologically charged ideas. As far as I know, few members of one of these subsets would insist that a student subscribe or pretend to subscribe to the body of ideas shared by the members of that subset. If we are Marxist critics, we do not, I hope, insist that our students write as Marxist critics. But, also as far as I know, most members of the encompassing group of lecturers in literature insist that students subscribe to the body of ideas and values pertaining to that group as a whole – that a student should constitute a text and write in the persona of a twentieth-century literary critic, with all that that entails, including the use of what we consider to be relevant information. This need not necessarily be a bad thing to do, as long as we are

aware of the fact that we are exercising fairly arbitrary power over our students, and attempt honestly to justify to ourselves our use of that authority in terms of the choices we make as teachers, and the values attached to them. For instance, if we choose to insist on Eurocentric writing, notions, values, and bodies of information, and treat these as being *ex cathedra*, in the South African situation we are plainly guilty of neocolonialism. If we relativize Eurocentric notions for ourselves and our students we are not guilty; but the choice could still be considered inappropriate in our situation, as some Eurocentric notions do not relate organically to the cultural contexts in which South African students live and read. If meanings derive from the already known and values derive from the values attached to the already known, entirely alien information will be meaningless and of no value to our students, and therefore not worth teaching.

To ask a student to read in terms of what is for him or her useless information, for the purpose of getting a degree, is to invite the student to act hypocritically, and to fail in our duties as teachers. We may perhaps claim that such a reading is more justifiable (not more valid) than another deriving from a student's living cultural contexts. But we are then erecting an artificial standard of justifiability based on contexts which were once or still are alive for other people elsewhere, but which have little purchase on a South African student. To make such a claim would be to falsify the nature of the reading process in service of an unworthy ideal.

Many of us will have found ourselves in the bind of overtly demanding that students read in their own right rather than derivatively, and yet failing to reward student work that does not conform to institutional practices – which sometimes means, in effect, work that is insufficiently derivative. This contradiction should lead us to the insight that our expectations are in fact institutionally determined, and this insight may suggest to us that our institutions can decide otherwise than as they do at present.

This is not to suggest that the choices we make should automatically exclude all Eurocentric material on the grounds that it is useless to our students. South Africa having been variously colonized over the centuries, many aspects of our heterogenous culture derive ultimately from Europe and continue to influence the ways in which our students see the world and behave in it. The suggestion is that we should carefully consider Eurocentric material in terms of the extent to which it impinges on our students' living cultural contexts and their unaided readings. For instance, at least one Shakespearean play remains part of the common stock of knowledge of virtually all the students who arrive at a South African university. It will be peripheral to their daily concerns, but still marginally alive in them. Through their knowledge of that play we can usefully introduce them to others, and while introducing them to others we can usefully introduce them to notions of the English Renaissance. But such notions need to be carefully selected for their relevance to the students' living cultural contexts and the readings embedded in them, if the fresh information is to act as a genuine aid. Ultimately, then, Shakespeare and the English Renaissance being read in South African

contexts, they become South African phenomena, and part of the life experience of South African students.

By the same token one could conceivably progress from Shakespeare to Chaucer and select Chaucerian material that speaks to students fairly directly of some of their own concerns, such as love, sex, sexism, and so forth. And one could select appropriate aspects of background information, always relevant to what goes into students' unaided readings, to expand the base of their knowledge, enrich their views of the world, and enrich their readings.

To do these things would not be in conflict with our vision of our students as South Africans, from whom we may pertinently require a progressively more detailed knowledge of many facets of South African culture and the writing that pertains to it, as whatever we teach would be produced in South African contexts, from a South African perspective, and informed by South African values.

Departments of literature, if this holds good, are therefore free to determine their expectations of students from level to level, time to time, and place to place, but would do well to determine their expectations relative to the sets of cultural groups to which their students belong. If they were to do so, they would be acknowledging the limitations imposed on the act of reading by our common inability to know a world unmediated by culture.

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