On Readers, Readerships and Reading Practices

I Contestations

This paper considers problems involved in the calculation of a readership for a text. Such a calculation is necessary to provide writing practices with a visibility beyond received aesthetic categories, and it must begin by asking what is meant by a “readership.” Under what conditions, according to what presuppositions, and within which problematics can we think about readerships? For example, within the terms of traditional literary criticism (of which secondary school and higher education English studies have been largely representative for the last half century — that is, under the conditions in which most of us have learnt “to read”), a “readership” is synonymous with a “reader,” and that reader is a figure without specificity. When mentioned at all, he falls completely in the shadow of the writer and his activities, as in E.M. Forster’s formulation: “the reader must sit down alone and struggle with the writer.” To the limited degree that the question of reading is made visible in this kind of criticism, it is held that we approach literature without any elaborate apparatus. “Principles and systems may suit other forms of art,” writes Forster, “but they cannot be applicable here” in “this man-to-man business.”

But the literary field is not without its internal divisions. Formalist theories argue that if “literature” is a term with any specificity, and if literary studies are to have any authority beyond assertion, then it must be because of the systematicity (or the formal and linguistic properties) of literary texts. If a literary text is understood like this — rather than as the more or less unregulated expression of a writer’s consciousness, or as a reflection or mediation of reality — then the set of values that literary critics operate with (man-to-man) to make their “subjective, censorious verdict,” can be replaced by syntactic and morphologic research to define the nature of a literary work, and perhaps to extract the intrinsic values from it. These values are intrinsic in the sense that they are derived from those logico-grammatical models (formal or generative grammars) which Russian formalists — and to a certain extent Anglo-American New Critics — understand as determining the formal properties of language. Reading is understood as the registration of these formal properties. Formalism marks the insertion of logico-grammatical models into the erstwhile humanist domain of literary studies, and thereby displaces traditional normative grammars constructed according to pedagogic strategy and the experience of language-users. By contrast, logico-grammatical models do not systematise experiences of language “after the event.” Instead, within a technical logic based on mathematical principles, they present the conditions which generate linguistic structure and make these experiences possible.

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Thus in formalist theories, language-users (both readers and writers) must be thought of as individuals engaged in the human business of making sense, but as bearers of a set of language functions which are derived technically rather than experientially. "Readers" — in so far as this term means individuals possessing irreducible human capabilities (consciousness, experience, feeling) — cannot be thought of in formalist theory as originating or foundational elements. In relation to formal grammars, actual readers figure only as the point of effectivity of the grammar, which represents the possibility of an actual experience of language. Reading, in this formalist problematic, remains an essentially undifferentiated practice, a setting in operation of the rules from which all instances of language are derived. Within formalism, it is commonly argued, the site of reading is ideally defined only by the exclusive criteria of a grammar claimed to be universal.

The charge of idealism is levelled against formalism by focusing on experience as the essential domain to which formal grammars must reveal their relation. And although formalism itself constructs its position in part by breaking with traditional grammar's relation to the historical experience of language-users (and thus obtains for formal grammars an autonomous domain of authority), it nevertheless argues a (reversed) relation of possibility between formal grammars and the domain of experience. A phenomenological critique challenges this conditional relation (in which experience is alleged to be an effect of a grammar) by citing the failure of formalism to account for the changing reception or personal experience of texts. Formalism, it is claimed, neither breaks with the traditional concept of the subject formed prior to language, nor provides an account of the insertion of texts into historical contexts via the mediation of specific, historically placed subjects. Ricoeur asks:

How does an autonomous system of signs, postulated without a speaking subject, enter into operations, evolve towards new states, or lend itself to usage and to history? Can a system exist anywhere but in the act of speech? Is it anything other than a cross-section of a living operation? Is language anything more than a system, that is potential but never completely actual, burdened by latent changes, apt for a subjective and intersubjective history?

By simply ignoring (except to deny it) the question of the subject being posed here, formalism is said to be "closed" to experience. In place of this conditional relation, phenomenology posits an essential, simultaneous, developing and interdependent relation between a subject's experience and formal grammars.

The attack on formalism in the name of the experiencing reader has been undertaken in recent literary theory by reader-response criticism. This criticism, in which the reader has become a site of systematic investigation, is characterised by the phenomenological assumption that the subject and object of knowledge are simultaneously interdependent. To consider the text without the reader, or to consider the reader and the text as finished or formed before their "encounter," is in this view to
misrecognise both entities, and to miss the work of reading which brings both into being:

In short, and to repeat myself, to consider the utterances apart from the consciousness receiving it is to risk missing a great deal of what is going on. It is a risk which analysis in terms of "doings and happenings" works to minimize.  

What does an analysis of doings and happenings run by a current phenomenology look like?

Whatever the size of the unit [sentence, paragraph, novel], the focus of the method remains the reader's experience of it, and the mechanism of the method is the magic question, "What does this do?" (Fish, p. 398)

The method . . . (1) refuses to answer or even ask the question, what is this work about; (2) it yields an analysis not of formal features, but of the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time; (3) the result will be a description of the structure of response which may have an oblique or even . . . a contrasting relationship to the structure of the work as a thing in itself. (Fish, 399)

This analysis does not ignore the internal features and relationships of a text, but denies their autonomy and the primacy of their logic. The syntactological relationships of a sentence will not then determine its meaning, as in a formalist analysis; meaning becomes instead an event, the dynamic unfolding of relations in an exchange between (amongst other things) these differentiated structures and the "mental life of the reader" (Fish, 406). This mental life is a variety of operations: it is "the formulation of complete thoughts, the performing (and regretting) of acts of judgment, the following and making of logical sequences" (Fish, 400); it is also the capabilities for a "kaleidoscope of perspectives, preintentions, recollections"; and it is the register of and response to "every linguistic experience [which] is affecting and pressuring" (Fish, 390). This mental life is in an endless process (or better, a hermeneutic spiral) of "becoming," in which each experience adds to and shifts the amalgam of possible responses to the next linguistic experience. The conditions of this "becoming" are the phenomenological concepts of space and time, the space and time of the subject moving in language. But what does this imply for a representation of the work of reading? In the "ideal freedom" of its "becoming," the reader is continuously present in time for the unfolding in time of the text: "when we put a book down, we forget that while we were reading, it was moving (pages turning, lines receding into the past) and forget too that we were moving with it" (Fish, 401). This forgetting is taken as the hallmark or principle of a criticism that takes the text in itself as its object: "it transforms a temporal experience into a spatial one" (Fish, 401).

For a criticism sensitive to the reader's responses it is rather a question of remembering. The "time of reading" is not simply the time measured by the divisions on a clock-face, but the time of affective participations. It is
time relative to empirical states of consciousness, to that collective phenomenon "memory" which projects, recollects, and is always "becoming" as its store of past responses is reshaped by new encounters with linguistic phenomena. This amalgam of psychological processes, caught up in the structures of the text, is the figure of the reader given in reader-response criticism.

The productive difficulties of this "remembering" of the spiral of "becoming" (in which knowledge and knower are articulated) are seen by reader-response theorists as opening up literary criticism to different knowledges, and so investigating the foundations of a critical reading operation:

It is true that the moment we try to understand literary works in relation to readers we take on troubles which do not arise so long as we look only at the works themselves. For not only is it always more difficult to understand or even talk intelligibly about a process or an interaction than about an object, but a concern with readers seems to lead us into matters of psychology and sociology which we would prefer not to regard as our province.

In other words, if we are to attend to readers and to readers' responses to texts, then it is incumbent on us to determine the precise constitution and functioning of readers by recourse to the disciplines of psychology, sociology, and (as current articulations testify) psychoanalysis. In fact, it is not this directive of reader-response criticism which will occupy us, but the precise constitution and functioning of the articulations of different knowledges in which the object or process "reading" is opened up to representation and analysis.

II Epistemological Claims

I will argue here that the directive to investigate readers is a directive to ask questions whose answers have been determined already. Whatever knowledges are called upon to "shed light on" the reader can only support and extend (or be demonstrated irrelevant to) a prior conclusion, because in the logic of this argument these knowledges are called up by an acceptance of the reader as an existential fact. They are harnessed to a particular concept of knowledge, where the relation of the conscious subject to the object is one of experience. We are given the phenomenological assumption as a tool to read with, but in fact it is what we are always reading for:

Herein lies the dialectical structure of reading. The need to decipher gives us the chance to formulate our own deciphering capacity — i.e., we bring to the fore an element of our being of which we are not directly conscious.

But what is the priority of this "perpetually becoming reader," who pulls texts into the flux of experience and the "event of meaning"? In fact, this
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"reader" clearly does something other than introduce philosophical, psychological and sociological knowledges to literary criticism: the figure of "the reader" as existential and knowable in these disciplines is constructed by the adjacency of these knowledges in what could be termed the discourse of reader-response criticism. The "obviousness" of this very human reader — its reality — is an effect of an accepted organisation of knowledge.

If the field of philosophical, social and psychical experience posed to the text in this discourse is thought of not as determined by any prior ontology but as the effect of a specific and shifting configuration of knowledges, then it is not necessary to describe reading (formulated as the activation of a set of techniques) as an ahistorical, formal or closed structure which needs to be supplemented by the domain of experience and opened up to it. That is, the phenomenological critique of formalism need not be thought of as definitive. If our concepts of knowledge and language (or, to be more precise, of the complex interrelations of signs which we can call "representations") are not thought of as mirroring the constitution of some universal human reader, then the particular phenomenological form of representation — the mutual construction of subject and object — cannot stand for a general field of representation or a generally applicable representational form: it is a single representational form, which holds no dictate over the form of other possible representations.

In the phenomenological form of representation, the text produces the condition of its own reading in the following way. The work of the aesthetic text resists any given subject. It always moves — in its "turns and twists" and "unwritten aspects" which draw the reader into play — towards the production of a new subjectivity: the condition of its reading. We have already questioned the primacy of this evolving subjectivity as the prior condition for reading, and suggested that it may be described more appropriately as the effect of a certain ordering of concepts. Now we can ask how else we might formulate the conditions of a reading, or (as it is the same question) the particular criteria for what counts as a text, if this representational form is not taken as defining a general problem of representation, and if the criteria laid down in formalist theory need not be posed in the dichotomy of structures "closed" or "open" to experience. This reformulation entails relegating the philosophical argument of idealism, by not repeating the claim of formal linguistics concerning the status of generative grammar as an a priori structure: we need not think of a generative grammar as the knowledge or structure necessary for recognition or representation. In order to do this we must first locate the mechanism or mechanisms that allow a phenomenological critique to provide a single general description of the problem of representation, and that transform the technically derived representations of linguistic structures gathered in a grammar into representations of the knowledge necessary for linguistic structures.

It has been suggested already that the particular subjectivity which reader-response criticism presumes is an effect of an accepted organisation
of knowledge; likewise, it is the effective presence of epistemological claims that underpin the claims of formal grammar. It follows that it is the activation of these epistemological claims in the linguistic analyses of both formal grammars and reader-response criticism that requires analysis, as these claims have so far defined the field in which the conditions of reading have been able to be thought. It should be added that this is also the case in Marxist accounts of literary criticism or reading. Briefly, this epistemological field provides for the organisation of particular knowledges (such as a knowledge of parsing procedures) under a theory of knowledge in terms of a relation of consciousness, in which the subject of knowledge (or knowledge process) either corresponds to or assimilates the object of knowledge. Particular knowledges are thus brought under the criteria of the general division in which the concept of knowledge is founded, and the necessary knowledge-relation in which the two distinct ontological realms ("thought" and "being") are assimilated. In other words, an epistemological relation forms both the "basic concepts" from which all others are logically derived, and the knowledge-relation which all subsequent forms of relation must mirror.

The epistemological base of reader-response criticism is clear from its explicit formulation of the subject of knowledge or experience as the condition for a knowledge (or experience) of texts. In a classical Marxist account, textual production and consumption are the functions of consciousness, explained in terms of its origin in social being. Lukácsian criticism — in which literature is located within the superstructure as a more or less refracted expression of a particular historical form of economic activities or base — is an instance of this explanatory schema.

In the Althusserian account of reading, which comes closest to displacing this epistemological discourse, superstructural forms (such as political and ideological discourses, of which literature would be an instance) are argued to be "relatively autonomous." That is, they are not thought of as expressive of a real economic base or social totality which is recovered in a subject’s consciousness, but as having their own specific effectivity. A discourse is treated not as an ideal expression but as the material determination of a problematic (or structure) of a discourse; that is, as a set of material elements organised to provide the horizons of concepts. In Althusser’s concept of “symptomatic reading,” the limits of a discourse are formulated according to the principle that what a discourse can’t "know" or reproduce is its own structure or activity. This formulation is permitted by the division between a discourse and its problematic (the problematic determines what is to count as knowledge, and thus determines the discourse). This division establishes a reader in a relation of knowledge to the problematic which exceeds the criteria provided by that problematic. Thus a zone of consciousness is maintained as the metacriterion for a problematic, and a knowledge (or science) can be formulated allegedly in advance of its problematic.

Formal grammar transforms its work from that of the adequate representation of linguistic structures into an epistemological enterprise. It
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does so by posing its interests within a division of the linguistic field into "the ideal" (competence, a speaker-listener's intuition) and "the actual" (performance). The demonstration that a generative grammar makes no appeal to the actual cognition of the subject (we do not need to know how "2x2-4" in order to produce "4": the iteration of the rule "2x2" produces the knowledge-effect "4") is thus taken to mean that generative grammar represents an ideal realm of the possibility of language.16 This ideal realm is given as the condition for actual representations or experience of language. This maintains the concept of the subject's actual experience of language, and puts the grammar in a definite relation of possibility to it. The general division between mind and being is thus repeated in formal linguistics in the division between ideal and actual: within this locus, the grammar emerges as a representation of the knowledge-process necessary for the knowledge of being. But the grammar functions as an epistemological relation only if its condition is given as the epistemological structure "ideal-actual" — that is, as a structure in which an allegedly essential hierarchy of knowledges can be ranged.

This epistemological structure has a number of other common designations in such oppositions as "deep structure:surface structure" (Chomsky, Greimas), "competence:performance" (Chomsky), "langue:parole" (Saussure), "structure:experience" and the Marxist "base:superstructure." The notion of surface structure (performance, parole and so forth) maintains the subject at the level of perception and experience; while deep structure, competence or langue demarcate a separate zone for a theory of the ideal subject, or for the subject's determinant conditions. This separate zone allows the subject to be represented as ahistorical — a sort of ideally zero subject. Representations of the ahistoricity of the subject make possible the unstable configuration of knowledges called structuralism, which depend on a strategy of supplementing ahistorical functional structures with an experiencing subject in a phenomenological circle of self-construction.

By mobilising the argument that a language can make infinite use of finite means,17 the categories of the ideal and the actual (and such corresponding oppositions as deep and surface structures, competence and performance) allow the massing of a number of different forms of representation as if they derived from one general form. But here we would want to ask, what are the conditions of these categories which allow such a unification? These categories are not given to us in an ontology available to our immediate recognition: we have to look to their elaboration in various texts, such as Chomsky's Aspects of the Theory of Syntax. Taking the associated examples of deep structure and competence, we find that Chomsky has difficulty in justifying these concepts. Most of the evidence for them is pulled from linguistic performance (which is treated as a self-evident and immediate category), and the rest comes from the circular procedure of calling on that which he is seeking to specify to specify itself:

Like most facts of interest and importance, this [the speaker-hearer's competence, or knowledge of the language] is neither
presented for direct observation nor extractable from data by inductive procedures of any known sort. Clearly, the actual data of linguistic performance will provide much evidence . . . (18)

It is important to bear in mind that when an operational procedure [for obtaining significant information about linguistic intuition] is proposed, it must be tested for adequacy . . . by measuring it against the standard provided by the tacit knowledge that it attempts to specify and describe. (19)

In addition to its circularity, the last formulation proposes a standard that we can have no access to except in the form of linguistic performance. So far the burden of proof for the "existence" of competence or deep structure rests on linguistic performance or surface structure. And this leads us to ask, if "tacit knowledge" is available to us only through its effects, then what useful sense can "tacit" have? As Wittgenstein suggests (using the example of "intuiting" the time):

The idea of the intangibility of that mental state in estimating the time is of the greatest importance. Why is it intangible? Isn't it because we refuse to count what is tangible about our state as part of the specific state which we are postulating?18

What "tangibles" is Chomsky failing to consider? He tells us that "no adequate formalizable techniques are known for obtaining reliable information concerning the facts of underlying linguistic structure" (19). But he also tells us:

A deep structure is a generalized Phrase-marker underlying some well-formed surface structure. Thus the basic notion defined by a transformational grammar is: deep structure M/d underlies well-formed surface structure M/s. The notion 'deep structure' itself is derivative from this. (136)

The base rules and the transformational rules set certain conditions that must be met for a structure to qualify as the deep structure expressing the semantic content of some well-formed sentence. (140)

The base and transformational rules — the techniques of grammatical notation, writing of phrase-markers, normalisation of sentences and surface structures — are the adequate formalisable techniques which, instead of giving "information about" deep structure, actually produce deep structures and their derivation. The "evidence for" deep structure is the production of it in the "performance" of the linguistic theoretician. Deep structure is not simply "contextualised" in the work of linguistic theoreticians; it exists nowhere but in the procedures they follow. Now, this is perfectly good evidence for deep structure as that which is derived from the basic notion defined by a transformational grammar. But it is not evidence for deep structure conceived as something that a transformational grammar expresses, namely the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language. In other words, the conditions of the category "deep
structure" lie within the "performance" (or techniques) of linguistics as part of the notational scheme operated by that linguistics. Although these techniques adequately produce deep structures, they are not evidence of the "mental reality underlying actual behaviour" (Chomsky, 4) which this linguistic theory is concerned to discover.

Without doubting the operation of "deep structure" as a functioning component of generative grammar, there is no reason to accept it as indicating an ontologically different zone from (and underwriting) surface structure — nor to imagine similarly that "competence" in any way precedes "performance." And it is the production of the ontologically different zone of knowledge or competence — which is allegedly generative of performance — that allows (at least in one form) the unification and generalisation of linguistic performance; or, to avoid working within this dichotomy, of what would be better called linguistic practices. This unification and generalisation of linguistic practices is brought into force in considerations of the object or process of reading at the point at which a subject is claimed as the necessary knowledge-support of language (a minimal competence) through whose singularity all texts must be referred.

The preceding consideration of the status of deep structure indicates a line of argument that would break with any of the general divisions activated by the repetition of an epistemological discourse which traps all analysis of language in an essentialism of one kind or another. Reader-response criticism is trapped in the essentialism of the subject open to experience, just as formalism is trapped in the essentialism of a language derived from universal, a priori rules. My argument is akin to and draws on Michel Foucault's re-ordering of historical analysis, and his plan to "eliminate ill-considered oppositions" which limit all historical forms to the replay of a few fundamental differences, such as the "regressive" and the "adaptive," and "inert" and the "living." When distinctions between "thought" and "language," "truth" and "history," "word" and "writing," and "words" and "things" are abandoned — and language is no longer conceived of as the exterior body to the "agile interiority of thought" — then the history of "things said" or statements can begin:

This task presupposes that the field of statements is not described as a "translation" of operations or processes that take place elsewhere (in men's thought, in their consciousness or unconscious, in the sphere of transcendental constitutions); but that it is accepted, in its empirical modesty, as the locus of particular events, regularities, relationships, modifications and systematic transformations; in short, that it is treated not as the result or trace of something else, but as a practical domain that is autonomous (although dependent), and which can be described at its own level (although it must be articulated on something other than itself).

When statements are no longer referred (through the category of performance or surface structure or experience) to the more fundamental opening or difference of a tacit knowledge or deep structure, then the differences, regularities and shifting distributions of statements are not
treated as the surface vagaries of form, but are available to analysis as the determinate features of a field which possesses its own historical particularity, and which cannot be unified a priori by epistemological claims. The history of things said is undertaken at the level of statements in their occurrence as an event in the systematic form of exteriority, which "may be paradoxical since it refers to no adverse form of interiority." The statement, in other words, is not located on one level which is the necessary effect or expression of another (such as content or intuition), but is located at a site constituted within an ensemble of discursive and non-discursive relations, which are not characterised by an "inside" or "outside."

At this point, seeing that the term "discourse" has been used already to mark a discontinuity between epistemology's account of itself and my own account of its "discursive mechanisms," some further remarks are appropriate on "discourse," "the statement" and "the non-discursive," since these terms are integral to the resisting of questions concerning "language" in the Foucauldian problematic.

The term "discourse"26 marks a break with the concept of the internal normativity or structure of knowledge practices, and also with the concept of the expressive or representative function of language. A discourse can be described as a systematic ordering of concepts. That systematic ordering is not secured or explained by any general order of discourse, conceived of either as referring to and representing a pre-discursive real, or as the enactment of invariable and universal rules or linguistic deep structures. In other words, discourses are not open to the explanatory, supplementary or critical agency of other discourses through the continuity of a relation (like that of species to genus) of all discourses to a theory of discourse. They are repeated in their discontinuities and specificities. Any contiguity of these discontinuous discourses is not of the order of a synthesising consciousness or recognition, but of a shared repetition of an ordering of concepts.

In turn, the ordering of concepts does not form the basis (according to a horizon of ideality) of a grouping of sentences, or an arrangement of propositions or of speech acts. A discourse is not composed of linguistic units, logical units or performative utterances (each matched with a stable meaning), but of statements; and concepts and objects emerge in the "correlative space" of the statement. The statement is not an elementary unity: it cannot be defined as a unit of a linguistic type (superior to the phenomenon of the word, inferior to the text); but . . . [as] an enunciative function that involve[s] various units (these may sometimes be sentences, sometimes propositions; but they are sometimes made up of fragments of sentences, series or tables of signs, a set of propositions or equivalent formulations); and, instead of giving a 'meaning' to these units, this function relates them to a field of objects; instead of providing them with a subject, it opens up for them a number of possible subjective positions; instead of fixing their limits, it places them in a domain of coordination and
coexistence; instead of determining their identity, it places them in a space in which they are used and repeated.  

A discursive formation or discourse can be better defined, then, as the group or family of statements which belong to a single formation, and which share an associated field or domain of coexistence with other statements. A discursive formation is also determined by its relation to non-discursive formations, such as institutions, political events, and economic practices and processes. Because the relation of the discursive to the non-discursive is not that between two discrete and homogeneous levels, the non-discursive is not the interior or exterior of a group of statements (to be regarded as the motivating force behind discourse, or that which is expressed in it). This is "because there is nothing specifically social which is constituted outside the discursive." A discursive formation is always in specific forms of articulation with the non-discursive formations which provide its horizons; and yet those horizons are not the limits of a pre-discursive real, for they are always organised discursively. In other words, the one thing we are not concerned with in analyses of discursive formations is the question of origins and finalities.

Lastly, in this brief outline, a relation should be noted between the term "discourse" and a term that will figure in later sections: "training." "Training" will be used in concord with the term "discourse" to indicate a move away from the idea of a subject or a consciousness which recognises what is knowledge, to a consideration of the operations involved when writers, readers and critics repeat the discursive conditions of particular knowledge-effects.

The Foucauldian problematic provides us with a field in which to analyse statements — their units, meaning and effects — free of the epistemological claims which organise them as a mirror of a general conception of knowledge and prescribe the possible forms of "being." In the Foucauldian problematic, the meaning, units and effects of discourses cannot be read off from an epistemology. Knowledges can never be recalled to a single, general form of knowledge. An epistemological discourse is a set of statements whose effects do not flow from their true representation of ontological realms of thought and being. Rather, their particular effects — among them the division of the field of knowledge into the "logical" and the "concrete," or the "ideal" and the "actual" — are produced by the repetition of the particular organisation of statements called "epistemology." Thus, when we say "we know x," this statement cannot be interpreted as expressing (fundamentally) another level of operations, which is the assimilation of one ontological realm by a different one. Saying "we know x" means we have repeated the specific rules (or the regularised set of statements) that have as their correlate "x." It means we have repeated the set of technical procedures required to produce the knowledge-effect "x."

Within an epistemological framework, "reading" is necessarily formulated as logically derived from the process of assimilation of, or correspondance to, the concrete by a consciousness. In this framework,
“reading” must be thought of as a form of recognition that is gained by retracing the steps of consciousness marked out in writing. As such, reading has the teleological function of recovering the form of consciousness (transcendental or empirical subject, grammar, a priori structure) at work in the writing, and the recognitions already provided for by this consciousness. Within this schema, true and insightful readings will finally return us the ontological figures that are the alleged conditions of our recognitions. Readings pursued within different epistemologies will yield different ontological figures. Traditional literary critical readings, which are predicated on an epistemology in which the space of the subject is occupied by a transcendental consciousness, will provide (implicitly or explicitly) the figure of the creative author, to whose perception the world is given through a self-constituted and unitary consciousness.

Reader-response criticism being explicitly phenomenological, and centred on a consciousness which evolves in the experience and simultaneous unfolding of linguistic structure, will discover as both the goal and condition of readings a unique (because historical) individual. Here the “time of reading” is treated as more than the recurrence of the “time of writing,” but the teleology is maintained nonetheless by the concept of the relation of consciousness to its object. In a Marxist literary criticism, on the other hand, where the place of the epistemological subject is occupied by different class consciousnesses, the reading of a text will be the recognition of the historical and material conditions of which consciousness is held to be an effect. These conditions are formulated in the overdetermining form of an economic base, or its determination in the “last instance.” Readings in a formalist problematic, however, where the knowledge process is represented by a grammar, will ultimately yield the ideal speaker-hearer’s competence or intuition — the condition that confirms the form of the grammar. The zero-subject of formal grammar is still a site which can be used to claim an existence for the grammar in excess of the techniques of the linguistics in which it operates.

Readings pursued within different epistemologies will yield different ontological figures as the conditions of the texts whose origins these readings purportedly trace. Should we take this to mean that these differences are the result of misrecognitions of “failed” knowledge-relations between a consciousness and its object (in this case, the form of knowledge)? If so, we are left with the unresolvable and fruitless contentions of “better and lesser minds” (or better and lesser grammars, or economic organisation, or whatever forms of consciousness). And in such a ranking of metalanguages, “reading,” at least as a plural if not properly differentiated practice, disappears into a common register in which the specificity of readings is marked only as their proportionate truth or falsity.

It is just such a history and its over-generalising, homogenising effects that the Foucauldian problematic allows us to avoid repeating. When discourses are not thought of as expressing or representing a knowledge-relation (or a failed knowledge-relation) between a subject of knowledge or
knowledge-process and its object, then "reading" cannot be thought of as mining a set of statements in order to re-cognise the knowledge-relations of which the statements are held to be a trace. Readings will cease to reveal their epistemological foundations when "reading" is no longer formulated epistemologically. "Reading," as the repetition of a regularised distribution of statements, does not stand in a species-genus relation to "knowing." As a set of practices, it occupies no ontological realm separate from the statements whose iteration it consists of. Reading does not consist of a thought process necessary for an object to be read. It is not accompanied by vision: "When I obey a rule, I do not choose. I obey the rule blindly."\(^{22}\) Reading is the quite technical repetition of statements at their own level and in their particular dispersion (their differences which articulate them upon other statements); it is this that produces definite knowledge-effects. In other words, in the Foucauldian problematic, reading is not predicated upon a subject — it is not conceived as the relation between a subject, or reader, and a text. Therefore, a "readingship" is not defined as the space of a reader qua subject of knowledge (or subject of language as Signifier in the psychoanalytic "subversion"), but as a space occupied by available and discontinuous, heterogeneous discursive forms. The reader is the bearer of these discursive forms according to various and changing institutional trainings which confer specific competencies.

III Discursive Unities

We can now say that to consider the question of the available readership for this essay means to consider the available discursive forms that function as its conditions of intelligibility. The importance of this distinction from how a readership might otherwise be conceived — as the embodiment of a synthesising gaze of the human, for instance, or the realisation of an inexorable telos of a grammar that represents intuitive knowledge — lies in its stipulation that the essay is not intelligible within the conditions of an explicit or implicit anthropologism. That is, the essay does not strive to make sense of linguistics, literary forms, pedagogies and so forth by relating them to the domain of "the human" as that which determines the true meaning of "subsidiary" knowledges, but rather to intervene in the practices which conduct the production of truths along these lines.

This stipulation cannot determine, of course, the forms of intelligibility which may be taken by this essay in all future readings, although it is clearly designed to form a particular readership by repeating the conditions of intelligibility in which it has read its pertinent texts and its own enterprise. This is precisely because there is no single general relation (for example, a knowledge-relation or a general problematic of representation) that links the conditions of production of a text to its conditions of consumption, and from which the latter could be read off the former. As the reading and repetition of certain discourses, this text — even if it institutes a slight shift in the relations of these discourses — is not
the record of an “origin” under whose shadow future readings fall.
“Discourse must not be referred to the distant presence of the origin, but
treated as and when it occurs.” As a reading — an ordered set of
statements within a determinate ensemble of discursive and non-discursive
relations — and not an object of knowledge to be taken or mis-taken by the
subject of knowledge, the consumption of “the text” or “book” is not an
instance of a stable unity being understood rightly or wrongly or
differently by subsequent readers:

The book is not simply the object that one holds in one’s hands; and
it cannot remain within the little parallelepiped that contains it: its
unity is variable and relative. As soon as one questions that unity, it
loses its self-evidence; it indicates itself, constructs itself, only on the
basis of a complex field of discourse.

When we say, “S/he has understood/misunderstood x,” we cannot be
talking about a person’s correct or incorrect perception of an object; what
we are indicating are shifts in that complex field of discourse, to be treated
as and when they occur.

But to return to that stipulation (and to determine from its
consequences the object or objects of this essay, and in what sense it has
objects): what is the postulate under which anthropologism arranges our
thought? Foucault has described it as the empirico-transcendental doublet
that is “man”: “a being such that knowledge will be attained in him of what
renders all knowledge possible.”

All empirical knowledge, provided it concerns man, can serve as a
possible philosophical field in which the foundation of knowledge,
the definition of its limits, and, in the end, the truth of all truth must
be discoverable. The anthropological configuration of modern
philosophy consists in doubling over dogmatism, in dividing it into
two different levels each lending support to and limiting the other:
the pre-critical analysis of what man is in his essence becomes the
analytic of everything that can, in general, be presented to man’s
experience.

The general implications of this configuration for the field of questions
surrounding “the text” have been drawn in the consideration of the
epistemological relations inscribed in accounts of representation. Now we
can detail some of the anthropological constraints in which our reading
and writing practices are formed: they are constraints because they limit us
to a single field of questions and objects whose decision is always
comprised in the sameness of the figure of man.

The anthropological configuration sets up conditions of intelligibility
for a text that are organised by the relations deployed by the concept of the
author or “author-function,” and of the book or text. They are organised
also by the relations deployed in commentary, in the unquestioned unities
of disciplines, and all the themes that multiply the theme of continuity:
tradition, spirit, influence, development origin, oeuvre. These concepts
and themes intersect and reinforce each other; they form an ensemble of reading and writing practices — a particular reading and writing apparatus.

The criteria for the attribution of texts which characterise modern literary criticism (and which are derived from the Christian tradition of valuing a text according to the holiness of its author) define "the author" as an historical figure in which a series of events converge; a standard level of quality; a stylistic uniformity; and a field of conceptual coherence. This historical figure and conceptual field function, in widely disseminated practices of criticism and reading, as a unifying principle for organizing experience, consciousness and writing as an expressive form. In Barthes's words:

the Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a before and after. The Author is thought to nourish the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child.14

The author-subject functions as the singular and whole relation of intelligibility between a field of reality and experience and a field of language. It is at the site of unifying synthesis of these unquestioned domains — field of subjectivity, field of reality, field of language — that a subject position is regularised in which to write and to read.

From this position, what is read and what is written take the form of commentary. Commentary treats language as the trace of a knowing subject and of its perception of an object. Articulating the field of subjectivity, the field of reality and field of language, commentary questions texts as to their fidelity to their dual origins: namely, to the thought or the consciousness that has stirred them, and to the true dimensions of the object that they describe. What does the text say, and does it say what its author intended it to say? Has the object been fully revealed in it? Commentary, even if it is full of praise for the text, always (in order to exist) finds it has failed: there is always a remainder left unexpressed and unrevealed by the text, because it is the nature of language in psychologistic interpretations to be just a trace of the real and the human. Commentary must continue in order to complete the restoration of the thought and the object which language is never "up to."15

In commentary, the visionary rights of an author to the truth hidden beneath language are instated once again.

The regularisation of this writing and reading modality is further accommodated in the concept of the text as a self-evident unity, in the field of language conceived as a natural entity, and in the concept of the discipline as a set of knowledge and language organised this time not by the author, but generically, according to its object. In this account of the organisation of knowledge, a discipline unifies reading and writing practices according to the object or objects that it is their function to express. Transformations or contradictions within the discipline (or shifts
in its relation to other knowledges) do not call into question the unity of the discipline or the ontological status of its object, but are accounted for by the themes of "development," "evolution" and "influence." Other breaks are made invisible by settling them in the grand flow of "tradition" or "the spirit of the age," thus maintaining the continuities necessary for "the essential" in man to be everywhere and always at work.

The account given so far of how the constraints of an anthropology operate in our writing and reading practices does not tell us how these practices are formed. They are certainly not the necessary outcome of "the essential" in man. The organisation of these allegedly self-evident unities — field of subjectivity (author, character, reader), field of reality (world, objects), field of language or representation (book, commentary, discipline) — does not occur in these fields or sites. Far from being self-evident, these sites are the discursive objects of particular trainings. The regularisation of a reading modality according to the general categories of text, context, authorship (which positions a text as an image of the world and an expression of an authorial or collective consciousness) occurs neither in "the world" (organised as various sites, such as text and authorship), nor in "the text" (according to a finite set of linguistic rules governing all possible subject-object relations). Nor does it occur in a phenomenological time of reading or realisation of the text, where a subject emerges from the negotiation of its structures. This regularisation occurs in the discursive practices of modern literary criticism, whose strategies are activated in recent and current school curricula as the expected and repeated way of reading. It is not only literary texts which are read in this way, but those of other disciplines in the curricula which are grouped around the integrative point of the English course. The effect of this, it is worth noting, is to aestheticise otherwise didactic texts. In other words, the mechanism of reader-identification with the author as subject (and as the only enunciative modality possible) is the result of a systematic education which produces a moral anthropology. By the repetition of questions, exercises (such as writing character-sketches) and examination structures, a systematic reading is produced of an author as a moral subject to be probed for a moral vision, and of character as moral character (as opposed to the object "character" in eighteenth-century reading practices, which is treated as an element of "scene," and in terms of its appropriateness to technical canons and norms, such as the dramatic unities of time, place and action).

The role of the name of the author is dictated by the practices of commentary and attribution, which are not formed around the "nature" of language as the inadequate expression of a knowing subject (and whose business it is to supplement), but in trainings in an accepted hierarchisation of texts and their strategic and multiple repetition. For example, commentary on a literary text would consist of an organisation of statements describing the text which privileged a set of statements about the author's biography, experiences, experiences writing the book, and the author's relation to an authorial canon — in other words, the mobilisation
of a number of texts. The reading of the author as moral subject depends also on the humanist division of language, in which language is given an expressive inside and a mimetic or reflective outside. This allows for an architecture of statements, in which the text emerges as the mediator of an expressed personal or moral vision of the author and a reflected history. The production of the reader (in an identification with the author and character as moral subjects) is made possible by the common moral ground for reader, author and character which was determined historically by the insertion of a particular set of practices for studying literature into the educational apparatus that emerged in England in the nineteenth century. This apparatus, or body of discursive and non-discursive practices, was calculated to produce a popular education which would improve the “moral stock” of the population, a “formal system of education which would support the framework of cultural relations appropriate to a fully national organism.” Within this apparatus, the study of English language and literature was “contracted to provide a common heritage, to act as the source of a common system of values, to embody universal human characteristics.” Doyle tells us that

the earliest instruction in the English language and literature was provided at University College, London from the 1820s. This — despite the new title — was similar to eighteenth-century Scottish Rhetoric and Belles Lettres. What was perhaps new, though, was an emphasis upon the use of literature as a vehicle for moral instruction, and as a liberal counterweight to the principles of pure utilitarianism upon which the new London foundation was based.

Proceeding according to the imperative which Arnold voiced as the need to extricate the “best self,” literary studies linked a rhetoric of dramatic characterisation to the techniques associated with the construction and interrogation of a moral self. In the main, this had been attached previously to church ritual, though it was gradually disseminated in such forms as the diary and autobiography. With their linkage, a common surface was provided for the formation of fictional characters, the moral character of the author, and of the student.

Just as it can be argued that the way in which the author-function and commentary organise reading and writing practices is determined not by the formal structure of a text or a phenomenology of enunciation but by a systematic training, so it can be argued that a discipline is not formed and maintained through a descriptive or exploratory relation to a pre-discursive ontology, but by the systematic organisation of statements and their place in a non-discursive formation. This provides, for example, the institutional certification of agents able to occupy and activate the enunciative modalities within a particular disciplinary discourse. “Disciplines constitute a system of control in the production of discourse, fixing its limits through the action of an identity taking the form of a permanent reactivation of the rules.” The continuity of the object on which a discipline “found” itself is maintained through the regular repetition of an associated field of statements, and the discursive objects
that emerge in the correlative field of those statements. Historical shifts in
the discipline of literary studies can be understood as shifts in the field of
statements that provide the criteria for what is to count as "literature" —
such as its shift from a place in the discourses of philology and classical
studies (as an object of "abstract" study) to its emergence in the late
nineteenth century in a discursive structure in which are aligned the
policing of the poor, the production of moral character, and the extension
of a national culture in a strategy of popular education.

The mobile principles of the author-function, the practices of
commentary and the structure of disciplines all function to unify
discourses in regular general formations. By placing them under the sign of
an individual or collective consciousness, or by making them apparently
complicit with a pre-discursive ordering of the world, such formations
obscure not only the materiality of discourses but also what Foucault calls
their "eventiality" (their-demanding attention as and when they occur, at
the point of their effectivity). By specifying reading as consisting in the
eventiality and materiality of discursive forms (rather than as a function of
a subject's perception), this paper aims to indicate the conditions under
which those discursive unities may be challenged. Such a challenge can
take the form of an intervention in the organisation of "Introductions,"
which (in a certain practice of scholarship in the human sciences) are used
habitually to expound the interests of the author, or to introduce the work
according to the lineaments of a central figure or object treated in the text,
or else to situate it in relation to a history of ideas or a history of man.
These techniques of neutralising and naturalising the text (by securing it to
an object or origin in "the existential-real") effectively deny its unavoidable
implication in the always contested domain of power-knowledge relations;
in other words, the fundamental politicality of the text is denied.

To speak of "textual politics" or "discursive politics" is to recognise
that knowledge never emerges in a pure form. By this I do not mean that it
emerges always in a context of power relations, but that the discursive
practices which are radically constitutive of knowledge relations are
radically constitutive of power relations simultaneously. Furthermore, to
talk of "discursive politics" is to delimit notions of the political to specific
practices — in this case, discursive practices and their effects in the domain
of the social to which they are linked. It is to direct analysis to the
particular administration of statements and discursive formations in
which theories and narratives are shaped, and which regulate what is to be
known and spoken of. The concept of "discursive politics," therefore,
marks an analysis that is concerned with the production of the truths by
which people govern themselves and others. "Discursive politics" finds its
place in the concept of a "micropolitics." This in turn shifts the concept of
politics away from party politics to the deployment of power relations, and
then analyses that deployment not in the familiar terms of a sovereign will
imposing its orders and restrictions from above, but in terms of "regimes of
practices" which operate in no fixed hierarchical order, but at every point
in the social domain. "To analyse 'regimes of practices,'" Foucault writes,
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"means to analyse programmes of conduct which have both prescriptive effects regarding what is done (effects of 'jurisdiction') and codifying effects regarding what is to be known (effects of 'veridiction')."

Now what we are considering are forms of intervention in the practices which effectively deny readings of a text in terms of its prescriptive and codifying effects, and which favour instead readings that posit it as an expression, explanation or extension of a subject's experience or "openness" to the world. How would we present a text in order to demonstrate that truth is not an external arbiter of our practices, but is produced within them? How would we present it in order to direct a reading which does not ask what the text "really" says, or judge it right or wrong, but which is concerned instead with the ways in which truths and falsehoods are made possible by the discursive practices which constitute it?

First, we would resist grounding the text in a subject or object that precedes or exceeds the discursive practices in which each emerges or becomes visible. If the text examines the work of an author, we will not treat statements written and distributed under the signature of (say) William Shakespeare or Sigmund Freud as the remarks of an "existential-realist" subject, or a subject of knowledge to be probed for its intention or mental rigour. The author-effects "Sigmund Freud" and "William Shakespeare" mark the activation of a set of reading practices. What we read cannot be returned to an origin because it never issued from one: it is caught up in (or rather, consists of) a series of heterogeneous and shifting relations. Similarly, if the text treats of a discipline or theory such as that of psychoanalysis (which has been so effective in extending the dimensions of the experiential reading and writing subject), we would need to establish that "psychoanalysis," "the psyche," "the unconscious" and "desire" do not name the objects of the text, but are better described as the discursive and non-discursive practices in which "psychoanalysis," "the psyche," "the unconscious" and "desire" are produced. To draw attention to this, we could call them the "discursive objects" of the text.

In such a text, explication and commentary could have only limited roles as undertakings played out within specific discursive formations, and not against such overarching unities as knowledge, reason and intuition. The Freudian unconscious, for example, would be "explained" not as the scientific discovery of a psychical region (an empirical fact waiting for science), but as a recognition-effect in the criteria which mark the Freudian problematic. Further comment can only consist in repeating this problematic. To repeat a discourse is not to represent it in a metadiscourse (and with the added legacy of its origin, or the "never-said" that escaped the discourse at its birth): to repeat a discourse is simply to repeat it.

To conclude, I would repeat that to consider and to calculate readerships does not involve searching for a better understanding or a clearer formulation of the principles which animate the individual subject.
Rather, it involves focusing on the work we do, the operations we carry out, and the rules we follow in order to read texts and to repeat them. It directs analysis to a description of trainings and a consideration of their effects.

2 Forster, p. 30.
4 Chomsky calls attention to this “absence” in formalist theory in Aspects of the Theory of Syntax (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1965), p. 140: “a generative grammar as it stands is no more a model of the speaker than it is a model of the hearer. Rather, as has been repeatedly emphasized, it can be regarded only as a characterization of the intrinsic tacit knowledge or competence that underlies an actual performance.” All further references to this work will be given in the text.
6 For a useful review of several of the strands of this criticism, see Steven J. Mailloux, “Reader-Response Criticism?” Genre, 10 (1977), 413-31.
7 Stanley E. Fish, Self-Consuming Artifacts (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1972), p. 397. All further references will be given in the text.
9 The concept of time-as-experience — popularised in the literary technique of “stream-of-consciousness” — was formulated by Henri Bergson: “There is one reality, at least, which we all seize from within, by intuition and not by simple analysis. It is our own personality in its flowing through time — our self which endures. We may sympathize intellectually with nothing else, but we certainly sympathize with our own selves” (An Introduction to Metaphysics, ed. and trans. T.E. Hulme [London: Macmillan, 1913], p. 8).
12 Iser, p. 68.
13 Fish presents this “fact of common sense” in the following way: “No one would argue that the act of reading can take place in the absence of someone who reads — how can you tell the dance from the dancer?” (p. 383). However, the concept and construction of “common sense” bear some examination: see Geoffrey Nowell Smith, “Common Sense,” Radical Philosophy, No. 7 (1974), pp. 15-16.
14 Iser, p. 51. The formulation of “unwritten aspects” in texts is an interesting and central move in these arguments. The supposition of absence is used to make a space for the reader (see Iser, p. 58). The essential and productive activity of consciousness allegedly resists translation into specifiable operations, and we are confronted with a residue that we can only apprehend as issuing from a void or out of itself.
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16 "A grammar of a language purports to be a description of the ideal speaker-hearer's intrinsic competence. If the grammar is, furthermore, perfectly explicit -- in other words, if it does not rely on the intelligence of the understanding reader but rather provides an explicit analysis of his contribution -- we may . . . call it a generative grammar" (Chomsky, p. 4).

17 Here, "competence" can be thought of as the finite set of rules which can be infinitely utilised in "performance." Chomsky notes: "a real understanding of how a language can (in Humboldt's words) 'make infinite use of finite means' has developed only within the last thirty years, in the course of studies in the foundations of mathematics" (Chomsky, p. 8). This he takes as the removal of the last barrier to the full-scale study of generative grammars, and not, as this new adjacency of mathematics and linguistics can be read, as the production of the conditions of possibility for a universal or generative grammar.


21 "Things said" are the discourses, susceptible to their own rules of formation and transformation, that a society produces along with (that is, in determinate relationships to) all else that it may produce.


23 Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, p. 121.


25 Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, p. 106.


28 Wittgenstein, para. 219.

29 Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, p. 25.

30 Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, p. 23.


35 On the "lack" of language, see Foucault, The Birth of the Clinic (London: Tavistock, 1976), p. xvi.


38 Holly Goulden and John Hartley, "'Nor Should Such Topics as Homosexuality, Masturbation, Frigidity, Premature Ejaculation or the Menopause be Regarded as Unmention-
41 I owe this example to two lectures given by Ian Hunter in the “Forms of Communication” main study, Griffith University, 1981.
43 “Eventality” or “eventalisation” means “First of all, a branch of self-evidence. It means making viable a singularity at places where there is a temptation to invoke a historical constant, an immediate anthropological trait, or an obviousness which imposes itself uniformly on all. Secondly, eventalisation means rediscovering the connections, encounters, supports, blockages, plays of forces, strategies and so on which at a given moment establish what subsequently counts as being self-evident, universal and necessary. In this sense one is indeed effecting a sort of multiplication or pluralisation of causes.” (Foucault, “Questions of Method,” *Ideology and Consciousness*, No. 8 [1981], p. 6.)
45 Foucault, “Questions of Method,” p. 5.