The Concept of Context and the Problem of Reading

If we are to succeed in rethinking the question of the emergence of Literature as a modern object and concept, we must first recast the notion of context. This might seem an odd or provocative thing to say given that most Marxist attempts to provide a theory of the social determination of cultural production do so largely in terms of the notion of social and historical context. However, if we are to produce an analysis capable of engaging with the institutions and apparatuses through which literary objects and literary meanings emerge, we shall have to find a new way of formulating the problem of the relative determination of subjectivity by social context.

Context is usually construed as a field of determinations which act on the production of literary texts, and affect the form they take. But the difficulty with an idea of context which sees it as a homogeneous, extrinsic domain into which texts are inserted is that it tends to retain the notion of the author’s consciousness or experience as the agency whereby social determination manifests itself in textual form. Consider, for example, Raymond Williams writing on the nineteenth-century novel:

The men and women who were writing . . . took from the disturbance of these years another impetus: a crisis of experience, often quite personally felt and endured, which when it emerged in novels was much more than a reaction to existing and acknowledged public features.1

In formulations such as this, the concept of context as a field of determinations is inseparable from the concept of experience and of an experiencing subject who (consciously or unconsciously) carries these determinations. Language (or the text) thus remains the expressive vehicle for a “structurally determined” consciousness. Consequently, the specific actions of various discursive apparatuses in producing textual meaning are ignored in favour of a more generalised concept of expressive mediation. As a result the text becomes a singular and homogeneous site, in which the author’s experience may be read off from the social context and vice-versa.

What problems are associated with this sort of contextualist analysis, a mode of analysis which is characteristic of much writing in the area of cultural studies as well as in sociologies of literature? One problem is that it constitutes the text as the expressive articulation of authorial consciousness and social determination. As a result it is never made clear that there are certain discursive devices whose reproduction constitutes the specific social agency of literary writing. In other words, contextualist analysis cannot account for the iterative character of textual production, nor can it conceive of the conditions under which re-iteration is secured.2 The result is that such things as techniques of writing, levels of literacy, the formation of audiences, forms of publication and dissemination, copyright law and the pedagogic construction of Literature can play only expressive
or repressive roles in relation to experience and social determination. Another problem with the contextualist analysis is that it allows the literary text (and hence "literature") a singular and ahistorical essence as the place where human consciousness confronts, and emerges from, the field of social determination. A third difficulty is that it homogenises and universalises the domain of the social which (either under the pressure of a continuist narrative history or of a functionalist sociology) appears as a general field of "real" determinations counterposed to an equally generalised domain of "thought" or "experience." This means that the dispersed emergence of "thought" and the determination of what will count as literary or aesthetic-moral "experience" in definite kinds of socio-discursive apparatuses fall below the horizon of analysis. Equally, the differential emergence of the social as an ensemble of institutional fields (which possess no single or necessary unity) is transformed by a philosophical representation of the social as the unified domain of the "real" determinants of consciousness.

A fourth and paradoxical problem is that Literature, as a shifting ensemble of discourses and apparatuses (pedagogic, commercial, legal), is itself unthinkable in terms of the concept of "context," precisely because the literary text remains above all the bearer of consciousness, or class experience. Consequently, literary commentary, as a definite collection of discursive practices, is maintained within the field of cultural studies as the means which determines what will count as a subject's or a class's experience of its time. A quick glance at literary readings of, say, "William Blake" shows that practices of commentary — and hence what is to count as the author's experience — are anything but singular or homogeneous. The final problem is that the articulation of a sociologicist conception of the social, and a humanist conception of the subject — within the concept of "context" — works to produce an extremely narrow range of effects for the literary text. Broadly speaking, literary language can only express or repress the emergent historical consciousness of a class or an author. Literary and cultural history is constructed accordingly as a single, repeatable, synchronic schema in which authors either find or fail to find a language adequate to their experiences or the experiences of a class. The divergent effects of literary languages, and the conditions in which they emerge, are thus elided in favour of a bi-polar conception of language as the bearer of both social structure and shared experiences and values. Here is Raymond Williams again:

I mean if we had to choose between that ordinary naming — the names we all know, that are there shared between us — and the private rhetoric, the invented and abstract symbolic language of the more critical fiction . . . I know how it would go for me: to where speech is, where community is; even and especially this suppressed repressed community . . . the words of an experience, an irreducible reality . . .

These are some of the reasons why the concept of "context" (as a field of determinations acting on subjects) can play no part in any attempt to rethink the problem of the social emergence and maintenance of
Literature. Instead, we might look to a reformulated concept of reading (removed from the sphere of commentary, or the recovery of expressed consciousness from expressive text) as one of the concepts necessary for an account of literary objects as products of socio-discursive ensembles. Once we conceive of meaning not as something to be recovered from its origin in an author's experience but rather as the shifting result of the activation of certain rules and practices of reading, we begin to construct a quite different account of the social emergence of Literature. Instead of searching for points of origin in which social structure is experienced and expressed once and for all, by an authoring consciousness, we can look instead to the divergent historical and contemporary apparatuses in which literary objects and meanings receive their shifting determination. In this way we put into question that moral-pedagogical construction of literature as a collection of texts inscribed with the consciousness (or conscience) of an age or a class.

Reformulated in this way, reading no longer names the reader's recovery of textual origins in an act of vision, but rather indicates the definite recognition-effects produced by the iteration of certain rules and discursive practices. We can thus analyse the emergence of divergent forms of literary object and meaning from the ensemble of apparatuses which constitutes the shifting contours of the institution of Literature. A minor instance of such an emergence is revealed in the following example which indicates the forms of textual recognition that result from certain rules and practices usually labelled "modernist." The operation of these rules and practices can be treated as a specific instance of a literary reading and the example thus enables us to start to probe the mechanisms of literary reading.

ygUDuh
  ydoan
  yunnuhstun
  ydoan o
  ydunnuhstan dem
  yguduh ged

  yunnuhstan dem doidee
  yguduh ged riduh
  ydoan o nudn

LISN bud LISN
  dem
gud
am

  lidl yelluh bas
tuds ween goin

duhSIVILEYEzum
This text is chosen because, although it turns up in anthologies of poetry and is discussed in books about poetry and bears the signature of a prominent twentieth-century poet (E.E. Cummings), it is not self-evidently a literary or an aesthetic text. In other words, it is quite possible to give it a non-literary reading. It is therefore a text which poses problems for its reading, a text which resists being read as literature. It stands on the border of the category of the literary, threatening to escape into the non-literary by becoming journalism or entertainment instead of literature. And this threatened escape into the non-literary calls into play certain rules, practices and speeches whose function is to claim the text for literature. The break-away text calls out the police-effect of the literary reading. Interestingly, it is when the rules and practices of the literary reading are performing this police-action at their border that they become visible. The purpose of this paper is to make evident, in this small instance, those rules and practices which are usually invisible.

Whether or not the “Ygudduh” text is Literature is not going to be argued here. The question we are dealing with is not the familiar one posed by the purchase of a Jackson Pollock painting: “Is it art?” The important question is not, “Is it Literature?” but “How does this text come to be read as Literature?” and “Under what conditions is the effect called the literary reading produced?” These are quite different questions: how is it that this text comes to be accepted as Literature, published, kept in libraries, studied in English departments, and written about in examinations that determine which people get admitted to universities and departments of Literature? Our concern is with the rules, the practices, the apparatus of reading in which a text is either constituted as literary or else is banished from the category of the literary. The question under discussion is: “What do people say and do when they say that a text is literary or give a text a literary reading?”

Initially the “Ygudduh” text looks meaningless. It has to be “sounded out” before it becomes meaningful. Now in order to draw a distinction between the non-literary and the literary reading, two possible constructions of the text may be entertained. In the first construction we treat the text as no more than the dutifully mimicked speech of a drunken bigot. Under this construction the author has simply transcribed a mundane fragment of ordinary speech and sneaked it into a book of poems. The second construction, on the other hand, is to treat this text as literature and give it various “literary” interpretations. This can be done by placing the text alongside some readings done of it, gathered at random from some available texts on the author of the “Ygudduh” text: E.E. Cummings. The first thing noted about the text in these readings is that it breaks the rules of spelling and syntax. But this breaking of rules of spelling and syntax is not seen as a defect. Quite the reverse. We could imagine a non-literary reading which treated the disruption of syntax and spelling as, simply, phonetic mimicry — as, for example, when the word “Australian” is written and pronounced “strine” to give the effect of ocker speech. But the literary reading claims that this breaking of the rules of spelling and syntax “permits the unexpected to occur,” allows the reader...
momentarily to have direct experience of the drunken bigot, to “step into his shoes,” to become this person; and that this is what makes the text literature. So Barry Marks comments as follows on what he refers to as Cummings’ “ugly” poems (that is, poems which are said to depict ugliness):

Men who insulate themselves from what they take to be ugly merely “seem” to be men. The only real man is the one who can surrender himself to the world as given.

The drunk, confessing the nausea in his stomach, is an image of the artist confessing the ugliness in his world. Marks then goes on to talk about Cummings’ “strange devices” which, he claims, fracture the reader’s expectations about the meaning of words and their relationship to one another so that he may see what the world is really like. Marks explains that most people:

believe that clarity of expression demands the correct words in correct sequence. Thus: “her hand felt soft when it touched me.” But modern painters in their rejection of vanishing point perspective say, with Cummings, that ordinary “correctness” simply will not do the job. If the artist would communicate what the touch of her hand really felt like, he must somehow break up traditional logical categories which, while they organise thought, inhibit perception.

Or, as Marks states earlier in his study,

Cummings has forced the reader to feel his language, to listen to his music, and to study his pictures; he has done everything possible to bypass the intellect, for thus only could he get us to enter experientially into the meaning of his poem.

We shall return to the operations behind this reading in a moment. Here, now, are parts of two commentaries on another Cummings poem, “The Grasshopper.”

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r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r
who
a)s w(e loo)k
upnowgath
PPEGORHRASS: eringint(o-
aThe):l
eA
!p:
S
rlvInG .gRrEaPsPhOs)
rea(be)ran(com)gi(e)ngly
,grasshopper;
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This works as a kind of anagram. The first account of the poem is by Eve Triem:

The poet, through spacings of word and letter and the unorthodox use of capitals, presents a grasshopper living in his muscles. At first he is invisible, coming from the grass to us only in the sounds reverberating from earth or pebbles. But as Lloyd Frankenburgh pointed out in his study of modern poetry, *Pleasure Done*: "these sounds — some soft, some loud, some intermittent — are rearrangements of his name; just as he rearranges himself to rub forewing and hind leg together. Then he 'leaps' clear so that we see him, 'arriving to become, rearrangingly, grasshopper.'" The reader has been, briefly, the grasshopper and that has extended his capacity for being alive.12

A second critic, Norman Friedman, writes on the same poem:

The important fact to grasp is that the spatial arrangement is not imitative in itself, as is the case in representational painting or drawing in which the lines and colors actually resemble some objects; it is rather that the spacing is governed by the disruption and blending of syllables and the pause and emphasis of meaning which produce a figurative equivalent for the subject of the poem, as the reader reads in time. As the reader gropes and fumbles his way along this jumble of syllables and letters, his mind is gradually building up the connections which normally obtain among them — "grasshopper, who, as we look, now upgathering into himself, leaps, arriving to become, rearrangingly, a grasshopper." When the reader has reviewed the entire poem once or twice, he recreates in his mind the very effect of a grasshopper leaping . . .13

The similarity between these two readings is evidenced in their respective concluding sentences: "The reader has been, briefly, the grasshopper and that has extended his capacity for being alive" (Triem); "When [he] has reviewed the entire poem once or twice, he recreates in his mind the very effect of a grasshopper leaping" (Friedman). The similarity between these two readings of "The Grasshopper" is not coincidental but signifies instead the presence of a rule for reading, a very familiar rule, although we might wonder why it is so familiar. How often have we read or written sentences such as, "The poet doesn't merely talk about x; he/she allows us to experience or become x"? The most recent theorists of this reading practice are Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser. For Fish, the literary text is defined by its ability to break with the ordinary grammatical and syntactic rules by which it is read, and this disruption of the rules allegedly permits the reader a direct, unmediated experience of the text and its themes. Of course there is more at stake in the cases of Fish and Iser. The dialectic that each, in slightly different ways, establishes between reader and text shows the use of traditional phenomenological figures in the practice of literary commentary. The notion that the act of reading marks the site of an unexpected or underdetermined event and thereby permits a superseding of existing rules and habits of reading is central to both accounts. Hence
the phenomenological figure of the “mutual becoming” of subject (reader) and object (text) is articulated to specifically literary accounts of the text as the domain of renewal and refinement of the alienated subject. Phenomenology, as one of literature's collateral fields, allows for a series of borrowings and adaptations which seem to rescue literary commentary from its more provincial moralisms while leaving intact the concept of experience and the notion of the text as the site of its recoverable expression.

We are now in a position to indicate a problem with this sort of understanding of the literary text and the literary reading. And it is the possibility of a non-literary reading which enables us to pose it. If a non-literary reading is possible — that is, if we can read the text as simply the phonetic transcription of a piece of unsavoury ordinary speech — then the literary reading clearly is not justified by the nature of the text itself: indeed the very concept of “the text itself” is called into question. In other words, the text does not tell us how to read it. The existence of the non-literary reading shows that we do not read the irregular spelling and syntax of the text automatically as a breaking of rules that allows for a direct experience of the object. Rather we read in this way by applying a particular rule: the rule that says “Read the jumbling of spelling and syntax as a sign of the breaking of rules that allows a direct experience of reality.” There are two conclusions to be drawn from this. First, we can note a paradox about “modernist” literary or aesthetic readings, which commonly treat the literary text as the site of a rule-breaking use of language, which in turn allows the reader direct experience of the text and its themes. This way of thinking about reading is itself the result of a highly specific rule — the rule that says, “Treat the deviations of language in literature as the erasing of rules and habits which then allows a direct encounter with the text and thereby with experience.” The paradox suggests that literary language and literary texts are the effects of the application of just such rules and practices of reading and writing (a point made very well by Macherey and Balibar in “Literature as an Ideological Form”). If this is the case, then we cannot think of different readings only as different subjective experiences of the text; instead, we must treat different readings as the result of the application of different rules and practices of reading.

The second conclusion to be drawn is that somebody who does not give the “Ygudduh” text a literary reading has neither missed something in the text nor failed to exercise some innate capacity for literary or aesthetic recognition. It simply means that such a person has not yet been trained in the rules and practices which produce the conditions of the literary intelligibility of the text, and has failed therefore to reproduce the rules and practices that determine the literary recognition of the text. Consequently, failure to do a literary reading need not indicate a failure to realise the literary meaning; it might mean simply that the reader has yet to be trained in the reproduction of certain rules. It might then be asked: “What is the justification for a training in such rules if it is not to realise a literary meaning latent in the text or reader?” What has been “missed” is a second set of texts outlining the rules and procedures which result in the literary-
effect and form part of a training in the discipline of Literature. Its job is not to reveal a hidden meaning but rather to alter the public deployment of a text and to transmit definite criteria of textual recognition in the form of a practice of commentary. What is missed when someone doesn’t read the text as Literature is the training that reconstructs not the object but its reader as a social agent defined (and certificated) by the possession of a special competence. Learning a rule about how to treat the jumbling of syntax is part of a specific training in an ideology of reading, an ideology which usually says, “Let’s have no more theories or ideologies; let’s go direct to the text itself.” And this is really to say, “Let’s have no more theories or ideologies except this one,” the one that tells you to go straight to the text at the same time as it sends you to another set of rules for reading that text. This is the ideological component of literary teaching and discourse.

At this point an imaginary interlocutor might object that all this amounts to is the commonplace that people read from different points of view: what a text means depends on the subject who interprets it, and this is why there can be no scientific description of texts or their reading. (Similarly, a proponent of the cultural studies approach might accept this summary of the preceding analysis, adding that it shows the subjectivism or idealism which follow from the problematising of “context”). Both objectors assume that if literary meaning cannot be the object of empirical description or empirical determination then it must be subjective. But these responses reduce the determining action of specific rules and practices (and public training in these rules and practices) to the mysterious origin of the individual human subject. They hinge on the metaphor of “different points of view,” which implies that different readings are generated by differences in the subjectivities of those who do the reading. This is to assume, however, that there is an object, the text, which can be seen from a number of different subjective positions. But is the “Yguddh” text an object that remains the same and visible from a number of different points of view? The fact that the non-literary reading is possible shows that the literary reading is not justified or destined by some aspect of the object which would become visible if we were to shift our point of view. The point is that what we can call knowledge of the text is altered when we are trained in the rules and practices of literary reading. But it does not alter because such a training allows us to see different aspects of the text, which is what the point-of-view metaphor implies. The fact that we now read the text differently is not the reason for our training in and reproduction of the literary rules: on the contrary, it is the effect of such training.

The new literary reading or recognition of the text is not a sign that we have seen something different, but the effect of a training in the reproduction of a different set of rules and practices of reading. These rules are not expressive of what we as individual subjects see or experience. Rather, their public iteration constitutes a particular kind of recognition and hence a particular kind of social agent. Instead of being a neutral vessel for the expression of a subjectivity, the rules form part of the means by
which definite competences and statuses are attributed to agents. This stress on the apparatus of reading enables us to reject the notion that different readings of a text derive from differences in the subjectivities of readers. Reading is not an unfettered process of affective surrender, in which the text simply “works” on one, producing an imaginative response. Neither are the rules of reading “institutional” in the sense of mediating the relations between a subject and the text. There need be no such single, general form of textual recognition, nor even of literary readings. A literary reading can consist in the practice of redeeming a piece of social detritus by iterating the rule that is used on the Cummings poem (the same rule would apply to Dada art and *objets trouvés*). The Cummings poem is a simple example. Other practices of literary reading might be quite different: for example, the complex practices of self-interrogation, moral scrutiny and public confession that constitute character analysis in readings of the nineteenth-century novel. Reading need have no common origin or transcendental/empirical essence in the cognitive capacities of a subject. Instead, “reading” names a dispersed field of practices whose iteration and articulation to a wider field of pedagogic, legal and economic ensembles determines the shifting object: Literature.

Finally, let us return to a question discussed earlier, since it is central to the preceding analysis. Have we missed something in the text when we don’t read it as literature? The answer has to be no. When we come to read the text as literature we don’t suddenly see something we’ve overlooked. There is nothing in the jumbled spelling and syntax which causes it to be read in the way the literary reading reads it. The jumbling of syntax can be read *and* written as Literature only because of the existence of an apparatus of reading and writing that contains the rules which produce the (modernist) literary-effect. The question, “What is an appropriate reading of the ‘Ygudduh’ text?” assumes incorrectly that the “Ygudduh” text is a unified object of meaning, and that readings can be judged by their approximation to the object. But to undertake this process of judgement, one would have to be able to look first at the text and then at its reading, to see whether they match. This cannot be done, because doing the reading (iterating this rule, adopting these commentaries), is how one looks at a text. One cannot first give it, as it were, a quick neutral glance without reading it, and then judge later whether a reading fits it or not. That is to say, one cannot justify the rules of reading by pointing to the text, because applying the rules of reading is how one points to it. This means that concepts like “the good reading” and “the good reader” can be applied only inside the framework of a particular set of rules which are themselves the conditions for producing the text as an object of meaning. Consequently, we need to replace the categories of the good reader and the bad reader with categories that refer to the available but quite limited apparatuses by which readings are done.

If this analysis is correct, it has interesting implications for critics and teachers of literature, whose function cannot be to provoke encounters between readers and texts but is rather to train people in a specific mode of textual consumption. The function of critics and teachers is not to raise
people to a privileged point of view from which the text can be seen as literature and from which the domain of the social can be seen from the undistorted perspective of a "fully human" experience. Rather it is to secure the iteration of certain rules and practices, by locating agents in the specific apparatus of writing and reading which produces both the literary text and its reader.

As Tony Davies argues in his article on "Education, Ideology and Literature," the word "literature" designates:

Not a neutral totality of imaginative or fictional writing, but an ideologically constructed canon or corpus of texts operating in specific and determinate ways in and around the apparatus of education. That ... is what literature actually means now and [has meant] in the past hundred years or so, and we must recognise this as a precondition of advancing beyond the literary ideology that continually reconfirms literature in its ideological function.15

This is quite close to the Balibar-Macherey point that "literature is inseparable from an academic or schooling practice which defines both the conditions for the consumption of literature and the very conditions of its production also."16 Keith Tribe has spoken of the need to "consider the nature of the institutions within which literary criticism adopts the form of a practice." In other words, we must recognise "that the role of criticism takes a special place in the educational apparatuses of specific social forms, promoting specific forms of circulation of writing and seeking to demarcate the literary from the non-literary."17

Of course, the example presented in this paper have only an indicative function. Neither conclusive nor even convincing by itself, it is meant to indicate the direction that analysis of the social emergence of Literature should take. What it shows is that forms of recognition and production of texts are not given in a universal form in the concept of the subject, whose socio-historical experiences are expressed in the text and transmitted to other subjects who then decode them. The Cummings example shows us that what is to count as a literary text and as literary meaning is determined (not expressed) by the articulation of definite rules and practices. Consequently, there can be no question of treating the text as a singular surface from which an origin in the author's historical experience or context can be read off. This does not mean that we forfeit the means for talking about the social conditions and effects of literature. It simply means that we refuse to treat "literature" as a historically continuous theoretical object with either a single origin (the author's historical experience and determinations) or a single essence (the textual mediation of subjectivity and social structure). Even so small an example as the Cummings poem enables us to remark on certain conditions and effects of literature in the curriculum, such as the transmission of techniques for the production of "surprise," the learning of rules of commentary which allow "rule-breaking" surprises to be recognised as a transcendence of fragmentary social languages, and the dissemination of techniques of recitation, introspection and public avowal that produce the
effect of self-discovery. These are elements by which specific ("modernist") literary objects are constructed in pedagogic institutions and make their bid for a specifically literary knowledge of the "person."18

It is within this sort of apparatus that an analytics of the emergence of literary objects must calculate its intervention. And this shows us why the analyses of a cultural studies or a sociology of literature grounded in the notion of "context" can make only a limited intervention in the institution of literature — which is not to deny the importance of such an intervention, particularly in countering the specific form of aesthetico-moral analysis associated with the name of Leavis. However, a "context" based cultural studies remains a mutation within the current ensemble of literary apparatuses. The location of the social subject as the expressive origin of the text depends on the maintenance of practices of commentary and rules of reading by which "the author's historical experience" is produced; and the continuing search for more radical or marginalised forms of experience (e.g. third-world literature, Australian and Commonwealth literature, women's writing) shows that the apparatuses in which such experience is produced are in no danger from the cultural studies movement.

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This article derives from a lecture given at Griffith University, subsequently revised in collaboration with Noel King.


2 Foucault uses "iterative" to characterise certain operations performed with words (or symbols, or techniques). He sees these operations as repetitions, having no single general determination or explanation in the nature of the subject or society. They are simply repeated, but only under quite definite conditions of repetition, reinscription and transcription — as this article attempts to demonstrate in a simple instance. See Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge (London: Tavistock, 1972), pp. 100-05 and 118-25.


4 Williams, The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence, p. 184.

5 See part one (pp. 13-69) of Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, Reading Capital (London: NLB, 1970), for this reformulation of the concept of reading, and Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, particularly the chapters on the formation of objects and concepts (pp. 49-49 and 56-63).

6 Cf. Pierre Macherey's remark in Red Letters, No. 5 (Summer 1977), p. 6: Nothing survives in the same form. In a very precise sense, Homer has not remained the same for us as he was in his own time. 'Homer' is something we discuss which is very important for us. He is a literary fact or phenomenon which we have to analyze. But is it the same phenomenon as that produced in Homer's time? Certainly not. Literary works are not only produced, they are constantly reproduced under different conditions — and so they themselves become very different.


Context and Reading

9 Ibid., p. 101.
11 E.E. Cummings, Complete Poems, I, 396.
16 Macherey and Balibar, p. 6.
18 The idea that there is a mode of knowledge appropriate to the whole person — as opposed to the lawyer, the mother, the historian, etc. — is not unique to literary criticism. However, this idea receives a definite specification relative to the techniques and relations that constitute the literary apparatus. One can say that the modern form of literary knowledge emerges during the nineteenth century with the unexpected dissemination of the image of the cultivated man of letters brought about by the expansion of the school system. Of course this dissemination was also a transformation, as knowledge of literature now emerged from the interface rhetorical and philological techniques made with the techniques of moral self-serenity and public avowal systematized in the school room. Henceforth knowledge of texts catalogued as Literature would be inseparable from the production of an endlessly repeatable knowledge of the self, refined and made whole by the allegedly meditative or anti-didactic character of literary language.