

ONE  
INDETERMINACY AND THE READER'S  
RESPONSE IN PROSE FICTION



In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art."<sup>1</sup>  
With this irony-edged demand Susan Sontag, in her  
essay "Against Interpretation," aimed at that form  
of textual interpretation which is concerned with  
finding out the meaning contained in literary texts.

What was originally a useful activity—the process whereby damaged texts were made legible, or intelligible, by supplying meaning to the damaged parts—has, according to Sontag, mushroomed more and more into a distrust of the perceptible form of the text, whose so-called hidden meaning supposedly can only be revealed through interpretation.<sup>2</sup> That texts have contents, which in turn are carriers of meaning, was until the arrival of modern art an almost untested assumption. Therefore interpretation was always legitimate if it reduced the text to meaning. The advantage of this was that meanings could be generalized, that they represented established conventions, and that they brought out accepted or at least understandable values. Interpretation served the purpose of conveying meaning, in order that comprehension might be assured. Texts had to be seen in the context of what was already familiar or comprehensible to the reader. The zeal of critics for classification—their passion for pigeonholing, one might almost call it—only subsided when some special significance of the content had been discovered and its value ratified by means of what was already common knowledge. Referral of the text to some already existing frame of reference became an essential aim of this method of interpretation, by means of which the sharpness of a text was inevitably dulled.

But how shall we then describe the dynamic character of a text? Can one, in fact, assess the keen disturbance so often experienced in reading serious literature? Some texts certainly have stimulating moments that disturb, and even provoke a certain nervousness in the reader—a reaction that Susan Sontag might describe as having to do with the "erotics of art." If texts actually possessed only the meaning brought to light by interpretation, then there would remain very little else for the reader. He could only take it or leave it. The fundamental question is, however, what actually does take place between text and reader? Is it possible to look into that relationship at all, or is not the critic simply plunging into a private world where

he can only make conjectures and speculations? It must be pointed out that a text can only come to life when it is read, and if it is to be examined, it must therefore be studied through the eyes of the reader. "Involvement of the reader or spectator as accomplices or collaborators is essential in the curious situation of artistic communication."<sup>3</sup> What, then, does the process of reading consist of?

Briefly, it might be described as the reader's transformation of signals sent out by the text. But if the act of reading is indeed the transformation of the author's signals, then one is bound to ask whether such a process can ever be described without recourse to the psychology of the reader. Then again, if one tries to draw a distinction between a text and the various possible forms of its transformation, one risks being accused of denying the identity of a text and of merely letting it dissolve into the arbitrariness of subjective perception. A text, the argument runs, must represent something, and the meaning of what is represented exists independently of every single reaction that such a meaning might arouse. To counter this, however, one might suggest that this "meaning," which is apparently independent of every realization of the text, is in itself nothing more than an individual reading experience that has now simply been identified with the text itself. Interpretations based on conveying meaning have always been along these lines, with a consequent dilution of the texts they dealt with. Fortunately, such interpretations have been contradicted from time to time, but for the most part only with the consequence that an equally restricted interpretation was ultimately set up in place of the one knocked down. The history of responses to literary works, which in turn is a history of variations, offers countless examples of this.

If it were really true—as the author of a certain well-known essay) on "The Art of Interpretation" would have us believe—that the meaning is concealed within a text itself, one cannot help wondering why texts should play hide-and-seek with their interpreters; and even more puzzling, why the meaning, once it has been found, should then change again, even though the letters, words, and sentences of the text remain the same. Isn't it here that the meaning-grinder begins to obscure the text, thus canceling out his own avowed intent—to bring clarity and light to the text he is examining?

Shouldn't the interpreter in fact renounce his sanctified role of conveying meanings, if he wants to open up the possibilities of a text? His description of the text is, after all, nothing more than the experience of a cultured reader—in other words, it is only one of the possible realizations of a text. If this is the case, we could then

maintain, at least tentatively, that meanings in literary texts are generated in the act of reading; they are the product of a complex interaction between text and reader, and not qualities that are hidden in the text and traced solely by that traditional kind of interpretation I have described. If the individual reader generates the meaning of a text, then it follows that these meanings will always appear individualistic.

There are many more questions one could ask of "The Art of Interpretation," but the nature of the problem is already tangible and can now be stated: If a literary text could really be reduced to one particular meaning, it would be the expression of something else—namely, of that meaning whose status is determined by the fact that it exists independently of the text. Put in extreme terms this means that the literary text would then be the illustration of this meaning existing outside itself. Thus the literary text would sometimes be read as evidence of the *zeitgeist*, sometimes as an expression of its author's neuroses, sometimes as a mirror reflection of social conditions, or what have you.

Of course, no one will deny that literary texts do contain a historical substratum; however, the manner in which literature takes it up and communicates it does not seem to be determined merely by historical circumstances, but by the specific aesthetic structure inherent in it. That is why we often have the feeling, when reading words of past ages, that we are actually transported back into those times and move in historical circumstances as if we belonged to them or as if the past were again the present. The preconditions for this experience are certainly provided by the text, but we as readers also play a part in the creation of this impression. It is we who bring the text to life. Obviously it must offer a certain amount of latitude, as far as its realization is concerned, for different readers at different times have always had differing apprehensions of such texts, even though the general impression may be the same—that the world revealed, however far back in the past it may lie, comes alive in the present.

At this point we can formulate our task in more precise terms: How can we describe the relationship between text and reader? We shall search for the answer in three stages. The first step will be to indicate the special qualities of a literary text that distinguish it from other kinds of discourse. The second step will be to name and analyze the basic elements that trigger the response to literary works. Here we shall pay special attention to different degrees of what I should like to call indeterminacy in a text and the various ways in

which it is brought about. In the third step we must attempt to clarify the observable increase of indeterminacy in narrative literature since the eighteenth century. If one supposes that indeterminacy embodies an elementary condition for readers' reactions, then one must ask what its expansion, above all in modern literature, indicates. Without doubt it changes the relationship between text and reader. The more texts lose their determinacy, the more the reader is shifted into the full operation of their possible intentions. If indeterminacy exceeds the reader's limit of tolerance, he will feel overburdened. He can in that case reveal attitudes that might lead to a rather surprising insight into what usually determines his reactions. At this point, the question arises as to what insights literature can open up into the workings of the human mind.

LET US NOW take the first step. How can we describe the status of a literary text? This first point is that it differs from any text presenting an object that exists independently of the text. If a piece of writing describes an object that exists with equal determinacy outside it, then the text is simply an exposition of the object. In Austin's terms, it is a "constative utterance," as opposed to a "performative utterance,"<sup>4</sup> which actually creates its object. It goes without saying that literary texts belong to the second category. There is no concrete object corresponding to them in the external world, although of course they produce their objects out of elements to be found in the external world.

This rough distinction of texts as statement and performance must, however, be still further differentiated if we are to arrive at a preliminary definition of a literary text. For there are texts that constitute something without being literary. For instance, all texts that present claims, state aims, define purposes, and formulate rules likewise produce new objects, but these objects achieve their existence only through the determinacy brought about by the text. Legal texts are the most obvious examples of this form of language. They lay down principles that are binding for the behavior of human beings. A literary text, however, can never set out anything factual of this nature. It is not surprising, therefore, that we call such a text fictional.

But is literature wholly devoid of reality, or is it perhaps imbued with a reality of its own, which sets it off from the linguistics of expository texts as well as from those texts that constitute general norms of human behavior? A literary text neither portrays nor creates objects in the way we have described; at best we can say

that it is the description of reactions to objects.<sup>5</sup> "All art originates," E. H. Gombrich once remarked, "in our reactions to the world rather than in the visible world itself."<sup>6</sup> This is why we recognize in literature so many elements that play a part in our own experience. They are simply put together in a different way—in other words, they constitute a familiar world reproduced in an unfamiliar form. Thus the intention of a literary text can never be completely identified with our experience. Instead, it presents reactions to and attitudes toward the world we live in, and it is these reactions and attitudes that constitute the reality of a literary text. If a literary text presents no real objects, it nevertheless establishes its reality by the reader's participation and by the reader's response. The reader, however, cannot refer to any definite object or independent facts in order to judge whether the text has presented its subject rightly or wrongly. This possibility of verification that all expository texts offer is, precisely, denied by the literary text. At this point there arises a certain amount of indeterminacy which is peculiar to all literary texts, for they permit no referral to any identical real-life situation.

When the reader has gone through the various perspectives offered him by the text, he is left with nothing but his own experience to judge what has been communicated to him. There are two extremes of reaction that can arise from the confrontation between one's own world and that of the literary work involved: either the literary world seems fantastic, because it contradicts our own experience, or it seems trivial, because it merely echoes our own. This shows clearly the significance of our own experience in the realization of a text, and here we have an initial insight into the specific nature of a literary text. First, it differs from other forms of writing in that it neither describes nor constitutes real objects; second, it diverges from the ordinary experiences of the reader in that it offers views and opens up perspectives in which the empirically known world of one's own personal experience appears changed. And so the literary text cannot be fully identified either with the objects of the external world or with the experiences of the reader.

This lack of identification produces a degree of indeterminacy which normally the reader will counterbalance through the act of reading. Here, too, there is scope for a wide variety of reactions on the part of the reader. The gaps of indeterminacy can be filled in by referring the text to external, verifiable factors, in such a way that it appears to be nothing more than a mirror reflection of these factors. In this case its literary quality fades into reflection. Alter-

natively, the indeterminacy of a text may be so resistant to counterbalancing that any identification with the world we live in is impossible. Then the world of the text establishes itself as being in competition with the familiar world, a competition that must inevitably have some repercussions on the familiar one. In this case, the text may tend to function as a criticism of life.

Indeterminacy can also be counterbalanced at any given time in terms of the individual experience of the reader. He can reduce a text to the level of his own experiences, provided that he projects his own standards onto the text in order to grasp a specific meaning. This, too, is a counterbalancing of indeterminacy which disappears when the subjective norms of the reader guide him through the text. On the other hand, a text may conceivably contradict our own preconceptions to such a degree that it calls forth drastic reactions, such as throwing a book away or, at the other extreme, being compelled to revise those preconceptions. This also constitutes a way of removing indeterminacy which always permits the possibility of connecting one's own experience with what the text wants to convey. Whenever this happens, indeterminacy tends to disappear, because communication has occurred.

Such basic reactions clarify the status of the literary text: Its main characteristic is its peculiar halfway position between the external world of objects and the reader's own world of experience. The act of reading is therefore a process of seeking to pin down the oscillating structure of the text to some specific meaning.

SO FAR, we have only described the literary text from the outside. We must now, in a second step, mention certain important formal conditions that give rise to indeterminacy in the text itself. At once, we are confronted with the question: what really is the substance of such a text? for it has no counterpart in the world of empirical objects. The answer is that literary objects come into being through the unfolding of a variety of views that constitute the "object" in stages and at the same time give a concrete form for the reader to contemplate. We shall call them "schematized views," after a term coined by the Polish philosopher Roman Ingarden, because every one of them is designed to present the object not in an incidental or even accidental way but in a representative manner. How many of these views are necessary to give a clear idea of the literary object? Obviously, a large number, if one is to get a precise conception.

This raises a highly relevant problem: each single view will generally reveal only one representative aspect. It therefore determines

the literary object, and at the same time it raises the need for a new determination. This means that a literary object never reaches the end of its multifaceted determinacy. In other words, a literary object can never be given final definition. This is borne out, for example, by the endings of many novels which often seem artificially imposed simply because the book must come to an end. Indeterminacy is then counterbalanced by the author himself with an ideological or utopian solution. There are other novels, though, which articulate this inconclusiveness at the end.

If we assume that the "schematized views" form a basic characteristic of the literary text, we must ask how they link up with one another. When they touch, the degree of connection is usually not stated but has to be inferred. Sometimes the sequence of views has the appearance of being discovered, resembling a cutting technique. The most frequent application of this device occurs where several plot threads run simultaneously but must be dealt with one after the other. The connections that develop among such views are, as a rule, not set out by the text itself, although the way in which they are related is important for the intention of the text. In other words, between the "schematized views" there is a no-man's-land of indeterminacy, which results precisely from the determinacy of each individual view in its sequence. Gaps are bound to open up, and they offer a free play in the interpretation of the specific ways in which the various views can be connected with one another. These gaps give the reader a chance to build his own bridges, relating the different aspects of the object which have thus far been revealed to him. It is quite impossible for the text itself to fill the gaps. In fact, the more a text tries to be precise (i.e., the more "schematized views" it offers), the greater will be the number of gaps between the views. Classic examples of this are the last novels of Joyce, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, where the overprecision of the presentation gives rise to a proportionate increase in indeterminacy. We shall return to this point later.

The indeterminate sections, or gaps, of literary texts are in no way to be regarded as a defect; on the contrary, they are a basic element for the aesthetic response. Generally, the reader will not even be aware of them—at least so far as novels up to the end of the nineteenth century are concerned. Nevertheless, they influence his reading, for the "schematized views" are continually connected with each other by the reading process. This means that the reader fills in the remaining gaps. He removes them by a free play of meaning-projection and thus himself provides the unformulated

connections between the particular views. This is borne out by the fact that a second reading of a piece of literature often produces a different impression from the first. The reasons for this may lie in the reader's own change of circumstances, but all the same, the text must be such as to permit this variation. On a second reading, one has considerably more knowledge of the text, especially if the first reading took place only a short time ago. This additional information will affect and condition the meaning-projection, so that now the gaps between the different segments as well as the spectrum of their possible connections can be applied in a different, or perhaps more intensive, way. The increased information that now overshadows the text provides possibilities of combination which were obscured in the first reading. Familiar occurrences now tend to appear in a new light and seem to be at times corrected, at times enriched. But for all that, nothing is formulated in the text itself; rather, the reader himself produces these innovative readings. This would, of course, be impossible if the text itself was not, to some degree, indeterminate, leaving room for the change of vision.<sup>8</sup>

In this way, every literary text invites some form of participation on the part of the reader. A text that lays things out before the reader in such a way that he can either accept or reject them will lessen the degree of participation, as it allows him nothing but a yes or no. Texts with such minimal indeterminacy tend to be tedious, for it is only when the reader is given the chance to participate actively that he will regard the text, whose intention he himself has helped to compose, as real. For we generally tend to regard things that we have made ourselves as being real. And so it can be said that indeterminacy is the fundamental precondition for reader participation.

We might illustrate this fact by observing one literary form that makes very special use of the technique of indeterminacy. This is the serial story, the text of which is delivered to the reader in carefully measured installments. When serialized novels appear in newspapers today—as is customary in Europe—advertising the serialization plays an important role in attracting an audience to the novel. In the nineteenth century this procedure was of paramount importance. The great realistic writers courted an audience for their novels by this manner of publication, and it was in this way that many of their finest works appeared.<sup>9</sup> Charles Dickens actually wrote his novels from week to week, and in between episodes he tried to find out as much as possible about the way in which his readers visualized the development of the story.<sup>10</sup>

The experience of the reading public of the nineteenth century is extremely revealing and highly relevant to our discussion: readers often preferred the novel read by installments to the identical text in book form.<sup>11</sup> The same thing can still be seen today, if one only has the patience to go through with the experiment, for most of the stories that appear in papers nowadays tend to belong to the genre we generally call "light literature," bordering on the trivial. The object is still, of course, to attract a large public. If we read such novels in installments, they may at least be bearable; if we read them in book form, generally they will finish us before we finish them.

Let us examine the circumstances underlying this difference. The serialized novel uses a cutting technique. It interrupts the action usually where a certain tension that has been built up demands to be resolved, or where one is anxious to learn the outcome of the events one has just read about. The dramatic interruption or prolongation of suspense is the vital factor that determines the cutting, and the effect is to make the reader try to imagine the continuation of the action. How is it going to go on? In asking this question, we automatically raise the degree of our own participation in the further progress of the action. Dickens was well aware of this fact, and that is why he considered his readers to be coauthors.<sup>12</sup>

One could draw up a whole list of such cutting techniques, which for the most part are more sophisticated than the primitive, though highly effective, method of suspense. Another way, for instance, of involving the reader in a greater degree of composition is the abrupt introduction of new characters or even new threads of the plot, so that the question arises as to the connections between the story revealed so far and the new, unforeseen situations. This is a matter of discovering links and working out how the narrative will bring the different elements together. In view of the temporary withholding of information, the suggestive effect produced by details will increase, thus again stimulating a welter of possible solutions. Such a technique arouses definite expectations that, if the novel is to have any real value, must never be completely fulfilled.

The serialized novel, then, results in a special kind of reading. The interruptions are more deliberate and calculated than those occasioned in the book-reader by random reasons. In the serialized novel they arise from a strategic purpose. The reader is forced by the pauses imposed on him to imagine more than he could have done if his reading were continuous, and so, if the text of a serialized novel makes a different impression from the text in book form, this

is principally because it introduces additional gaps, or alternatively accentuates existing gaps by means of a break until the next installment. This does not mean that its quality is in any way higher.

The pauses simply bring out a different kind of realization, in which the reader is compelled to take a more active part by filling in these additional gaps. If a novel seems to be better in this form, then this is clear evidence of the importance of indeterminacy in the text-reader relationship. Furthermore, it reveals the requisite degree of freedom which must be guaranteed to the reader in the act of communication, so that the message can be adequately received and processed.

At this point there arises another matter that we can only touch upon here. This is the question of the whole repertoire of structures that lead to indeterminacy in a text. Further, we should try to describe the elementary activities in the reading process, of which the reader may not be aware but which nevertheless do occur.

Of the many ways in which a reader's response may be guided, there is one that might serve as a brief illustration for the type of pattern whose function should be investigated. The example is the simplest of all, and therefore the most common one. We all notice in reading novels that the narrative is often interspersed with the author's comments on the events. These comments are frequently in the nature of an evaluation of what has happened. Obviously, the narrative contains elements that require such explanations. In view of our preceding discussion, we might say that here the author himself removes the gaps; for with his comments, he tries to create a specific conception of his narrative. So long as this remains the sole function of the commentary, the participation of the reader in the execution of the underlying narrative intention must diminish. The author himself tells the reader how his tale is to be understood. At best, the reader can only contradict the author's conception, if he thinks that he can extract different impressions from the work. However, there are many novels which do contain such comments and evaluations, and yet at the same time do not seek to interpret the story from one particular, consistent point of view, but vary considerably as far as perspectives and evaluations are concerned.

This device was already in use at the beginning of the eighteenth century and can be found in many novels whose historical basis is relatively uninteresting for us today. Our pleasure in reading such novels nevertheless does not suffer. In these novels, the author does not seem exclusively motivated to prescribe, by means of authorial intervention, the understanding of the narrative by the reader. The

great English novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which today seem just as alive as when written, belong to this category. In these works one has the feeling that the author's remarks are made with a view not to interpreting the meaning of the events but to gaining a position outside them — to regarding them, as it were, from a distance. The comments, then, strike one as mere hypotheses, and they seem to imply other possibilities of evaluation than those that arise directly from the events described. This impression is borne out by the fact that the comments on different situations often reveal different standpoints of the author himself. Are we, then, to trust the author when he makes his comments? Or are we not, rather, to test what he says for ourselves? Frequently the author's own comments seem to contradict what we have assumed from the events he has described, and if his comments are to make sense to us, we may feel we need further information. Has one perhaps read inattentively there? Or should one, solely on the ground of the reading, correct the comments of the author in order to find by oneself the evaluation of the events? Unexpectedly, then, the reader finds that he is dealing not only with the characters in the novel but also with an author who interposes himself as a mediator between the story and the reader. Now he demands the attention of the reader just as much as the story itself does.

The comments may provoke a variety of reactions. They can disconcert, arouse opposition, charm with contradiction, and frequently uncover many unexpected features of the narrative process, which without these clues one might not have noticed. And so such comments do not provide any definite assessments of the events; rather, they offer an assessment that contains different possibilities open to the reader's choice. Instead of offering the reader a single and consistent perspective, through which he is supposed to look on the events narrated, the author provides him with multiple viewpoints, the center of which is continuously shifting. These comments thus open a certain free play for evaluation and permit new gaps to arise in the text. The gaps now no longer lie in the recounted narrative, but between the narrative and the various ways of assessing it. They can only be removed, then, while or after judgment is passed on the existing process already described.

The comments provoke the faculty of judgment in two ways: while they exclude any unequivocal judgment of the events, they create gaps that in turn admit many differently shaded judgments; but these judgments are not completely arbitrary, because the author outlines by his comments the possible alternatives for the reader.



This particular structure therefore involves the reader in the evaluative process and yet, at the same time, it controls the reader's evaluation.

Let us briefly consider this reader manipulation using an example that could be considered almost an embodiment of this process. Given that an author wants to phrase his comments in such a way as not just to limit the scope of his reader's response but actually to guide him along one specific path, what is he to do? If our observations so far have been correct, we cannot expect the comments to lay down hard-and-fast rules for the response desired from the reader. The reader would react to these prescriptions, but not in the context of the planned purpose.

Now the example. It is the well-known passage in Dickens's *Oliver Twist* where the hungry child is in the workhouse and with the courage of despair dares to ask for more gruel. The supervisors of the workhouse are appalled by this monstrous insolence.<sup>14</sup> What does the commenting narrator have to say? Not only does he support them, but he even gives his reasons for doing so.<sup>15</sup> The reaction of the reader is unequivocal, for the author has formulated his comment in such a way that the reader simply has to reject it. In this manner, the reader's participation in the fate of the child can be brought to the level of actual engagement. The reader is torn from his comfortable seat and plunged into the situation. This is no longer a matter of filling a gap by making a judgment; here the reader is forced to reverse completely a false judgment. If he is to be brought into the action and guided along a specific path, then the text, paradoxically, cannot mean what it says. In this respect Dickens's episode represents an interesting borderline case of indeterminacy. For the same criterion applies here as normally obtains for indeterminacy: what is stated must not exhaust the intention of the text.

Literature abounds in structures like this. Many of them are more complicated than the teamwork between commentator and reader indicated here. One might consider the fact that we as readers are constantly reacting to the characters in a novel, while they never react in any way to our attitudes. In life, obviously, things are very different. What use do we make of the freedom from other people's reactions granted us by the novel? What function has this form of indeterminacy, which elicits our response to the characters, and then seems to leave the rest to us?

At this point we ought to consider above all the technical requirements of language which are responsible for directing the reader's response. We should, in the first place, break down a literary

text into its constituent elements, because for an analysis of its appeal it is necessary to spotlight the patterns of its construction. If such texts reveal for example, a cutting-montage or segmenting technique, it means that they permit relative freedom with respect to the concatenation of their textual patterns in the reading process.

If, on the other hand, they are structured according to a principle of contrast or opposition, the linkup of the textual patterns is rigidly prescribed. In the one case, a relatively high degree of "performance" is asked of the reader in view of a smaller amount of authorial prescription; in the other case, the opposite is true.

Furthermore, it is important to specify on what textual level and how frequently the gaps occur. If they crop up more often in the narrative strategy and less often in the actions of the characters, there will be different consequences for the communication process. Moreover, they are bound to work out quite differently if they occur in the role assigned to the reader.

But the frequency of gaps can also be significant for another kind of classification of textual levels. They may predominate on the syntactic level of the text—that is, in the recognizable system of rules responsible for marshaling the textual patterns into a premeditated order. They may predominate on the pragmatic level of the text—that is, in the intention pursued by it. Or they may ultimately predominate on the semantic level of the text—that is, in the generating of meanings, which is the readers' foremost task. Whatever the distribution of gaps on each of the respective levels, they will have different consequences for the process of steering the reader, the direction of which is to a large extent dependent on the specific textual level at which the gaps predominate. This fact can, however, only be mentioned rather than fully discussed here.

Let us now turn to the third stage of our analysis: the striking historical fact that since the eighteenth century, indeterminacy in literature—or at least an awareness of it—has tended to increase. The implications of this fact can be illustrated briefly in three examples taken from eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century English literature. There is no doubt that the same phenomena can also be found in the applicable texts of other literatures. The three examples are Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1741-42), Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848), and Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922).

Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* begins as a parody of Richardson's *Pamela*, in which human nature and conduct were for the most part rigidly fixed. Doubting the definability of human nature, and yet formulating a conception of it—this is the paradoxical starting point

of Fielding's novel. The construction is as simple as can be. On the one side is Abraham Adams, the hero, fully equipped with all the virtues of the Enlightenment; on the other side is a reality that ceaselessly attacks these virtues. From the standpoint of the hero, the world seems very bad; from that of the world, the hero is pig-headed and narrow-minded. Now it cannot be the intention of this novel to present the representative of moral principles as a pig-headed individual. At the same time, the world depicted here is no longer set out in accordance with the principles of morality, let alone dominated by them. What is to be discerned is a continual interaction between the two poles of virtue and world, which seems to imply a kind of reciprocal correction. But the nature of this correction is not laid out in the text itself. There is nothing but an interplay of relationships that has long since lost the determinacy recognizable in the two basic positions of hero and reality. This reciprocal correction aims at balancing out, and not at victory or defeat for the one or the other of the parties. Again, the nature of the balance is not set out in the text, but it can be imagined by the reader. Indeed, it may well be that it can only be imagined because it is not set down in words. In acting upon each other, the two sides reveal not so much their actual situation as their potential.

First, the text offers the reader nothing but a collection of positions which it presents in a variety of relationships, without ever formulating the focal point at which they converge. For this point lies in the reader's imagination, and in fact can only be created by his reading. The structure is very close to the reading experience that Northrop Frye has described as follows: "Whenever we read anything, we find our attention moving in two directions at once. One direction is outward and centrifugal, in which we keep going outside our readings, from the individual works to the things they mean, or, in practice, to our memory of the conventional association between them. The other direction is inward or centripetal, in which we try to develop from the words a sense of the larger verbal pattern they make."<sup>16</sup> This "hermeneutic operation" of reading intensifies itself to the degree that the novel renounces definition of its intention. However, the fact that the novel does not set forth its own intention does not mean that no intention exists. Where is it to be found? The answer must be that the reciprocal correction of the positions opens up a dimension that only comes into being through the act of reading. It is only in reading that there occurs an uninterrupted modification of the various positions involved. The hero keeps sailing forth into the sordid world of reality, and thus continually

provokes changing judgments on the part of the reader. But at the same time, the reader looks through the hero's eyes at the world, so that it, too, is subject to changing judgments. Out of these continually interacting elements, the reader's imagination can build up the pattern of the text — a pattern that varies according to the imagination that is forming it. So the reading becomes an act of generating meaning.

Fielding himself seems to have been fully aware of this construction, for the part that he allocates to the reader is determined by one vital task: the reader is to discover.<sup>17</sup> This demand can be understood historically and structurally. Historically it means that the reader, in discovering that overall pattern for himself, is made to practice one basic principle of the Enlightenment. Structurally it means that the effect of the novel is heightened if it does not provide the focal point of its positions and patterns, but allows the reader himself to remove the inherent indeterminacy.

The author-reader relationship, as developed in the eighteenth-century novel, has been a constant factor in narrative prose and is still in evidence, even though the author seems to have disappeared and the reader to be deliberately excluded from comprehension. While Fielding, referring to his readers, offers them this reassurance: "I am, indeed, set over them for their own good only, and was created for their use and not they for mine,"<sup>18</sup> Joyce, at the other end of the scale, drops only the ironic information that the author has withdrawn behind his work, "paring his fingernails."<sup>19</sup> The reader of modern novels is deprived of the assistance that the eighteenth-century writer gave in a variety of devices, ranging from exhortation to satire and irony. Instead, today's reader is expected to strive for himself to unravel the mysteries of a sometimes strikingly enigmatic composition. This development reflects the transformation of the very idea of literature, which seems to have ceased to be a means of relaxation and even luxury, making demands now on the capacity for understanding because the world presented seems to have no bearing on what the reader is familiar with. This change did not happen suddenly. The stages of transition are clearly discernible in the nineteenth century, and one of them is virtually a halfway point in the development: the so-called realistic novel, of which Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* is an outstanding example. Here, the author-reader relationship is as different from the eighteenth-century "dialogue" as it is from the twentieth-century demand that the reader find for himself the key to a many-sided puzzle. There is, however, a noticeable increase in indeterminacy in Thackeray,



although the author still provides his reader with unmistakable clues to guide him in his search. If indeterminacy regulates the gradual participation of the reader in the fulfillment of the text's intention, one wonders what an intensified participation can involve.

*Vanity Fair* consists partly of a story, in which are described the social ambitions of two girls in Victorian society, and partly of the commentary by a narrator who introduces himself as a theatrical producer, his productions being almost as extensive as the story itself. At the start of the novel, the "Manager of the Performance"<sup>20</sup> gives an outline of what the audience is to expect. The ideal visitor to "Vanity Fair" is described as a "man with a reflective turn of mind" (1:liv); this is an advance indication of what the reader has to accomplish, if he is to realize the meaning of the proceedings. But at the same time, the "Manager" offers something to everyone: "Some people consider Fairs immoral altogether, and eschew such, with their servants and families: very likely they are right. But persons who think otherwise, and are of a lazy, or a benevolent, or a sarcastic mood, may perhaps like to step in for half an hour, and look at the performances. There are scenes of all sorts: some dreadful combats, some grand and lofty horse-riding, some scenes of high life, and some of very middling indeed; some love-making for the sentimental, and some light comic business" (1:liv). In this way the "Manager" tries to entice different types of visitors to enter his fair—bearing in mind the fact that such a visit will also have its repercussions. After the reader has been following the narrator for quite some time, he is informed: "This, dear friends and companions, is my amiable object—to walk with you through the Fair, to examine the shops and shows there; and that we should all come home after the flare, and the noise, and the gaiety, and be perfectly miserable in private" (1:225). But the reader will only feel miserable after walking through the fair if, unexpectedly, he has come upon himself in some of the situations, thereby having his attention drawn to his own behavior, which has shone out at him from the mirror of possibilities. The narrator is only pretending to help the reader; in reality he is goading him.

His reliability is already reduced by the fact that he is continually donning new masks: at one moment he is an observer of the fair, like the reader (1:236, 2:431); then he is suddenly blessed with extraordinary knowledge, though he can explain ironically that "novelists have the privilege of knowing everything" (1:29); and then, toward the end, he announces that the whole story was not his own at all, but that he overheard it in a conversation (2:344,

404). Thus at the beginning of the novel the narrator is presented as the "Manager of the Performance" and at the end he presents himself as the reporter of a story that fell into his hands purely by chance. The further away he stands from the social reality depicted, the clearer becomes the outline of the part he is meant to play. But the reader can only view the social panorama in the constantly shifting perspectives that are opened up for him by this protean narrator. Although he cannot help following the views and interpretations of the narrator, it is essential for him to understand the motivations behind this constant changing of viewpoints, because only the discovery of the motivations can lead to the comprehension of what is intended. Thus the narrator regulates the distance between reader and events, and in doing so brings about the aesthetic effect of the story. The reader is given only as much information as will keep him oriented and interested; the narrator deliberately leaves open the inferences that are to be drawn from this information. Consequently, empty spaces are bound to occur, spurring the reader's imagination to detect the assumption that might have motivated the narrator's attitude. In this way, the reader gets involved because he reacts to the viewpoints advanced by the narrator.

When the "Manager of the Performance" introduces his characters at the beginning of the novel, he says of Becky: "The famous little Becky Puppet has been pronounced to be uncommonly flexible in the joints, and lively on the wire" (1:lv). That the characters are "puppets" is brought home to the reader throughout the novel by the fact that the narrator lets them act on a level of consciousness far below his own. This almost overwhelming superiority of the narrator over his characters—he often depicts them in the light of a knowledge that at best could only have been arrived at by anticipating future events—also puts the reader in a privileged position, though he is never allowed to forget that he should draw his own conclusions from the extra knowledge imparted to him by the narrator. There is even an allegory of the reader's task in the novel, when Becky is basking in the splendor of a grand social evening:

The man who brought her refreshment and stood behind her chair, had talked her character over with the large gentleman in motley-coloured clothes at his side. Bon Dieu! it is awful, that servants' inquisition! You see a woman in a great party in a splendid saloon, surrounded by faithful admirers, distributing sparkling glances, dressed to perfection, curled, rouged, smiling and happy:—Discovery walks respectfully up to her, in the shape of a huge powdered man with large calves and a tray of ices—

with Calumny (which is as fatal as truth) — behind him, in the shape of the hulking fellow carrying the water-biscuits. Madam, your secret will be talked over by those men at their club at the public-house to-night. . . . Some people ought to have mutes for servants in Vanity Fair — mutes who could not write. If you are guilty, tremble. That fellow behind your chair may be a Janissary with a bow-string in his plush breeches pocket. If you are not guilty, have a care of appearances: which are as ruinous as guilt. (2:112)

This little scene contains a change of standpoints typical of the way in which the reader's observations are conditioned throughout this novel. The servants are suddenly transformed into allegorical figures in order to uncover what lies hidden beneath the façades of their masters. But the discovery will only turn into calumny from the standpoint of the person affected. The narrator compares the destructive effect of calumny with that of truth, and advises his readers to employ mutes, or better still illiterate mutes, as servants, in order to protect themselves against discovery. Then he brings the reader's view even more sharply into focus, finally leaving him to himself with an indissoluble ambiguity: if the reader feels guilty because he pretends to be something he is not, then he must fear those around him as if they were an army of Janissaries. If he has nothing to hide, then the social circle merely demands that he keep up appearances; but since this is just as ruinous as deliberate hypocrisy, it follows that life in society imposes rules on all concerned, reducing human behavior to the level of playacting. All the characters in the novel are caught up in this play, as is expressly shown by the narrator's own stage metaphor at the beginning and at the end. The key word for the reader is "discover," and the narrator prods him along the road to discovery, laying a trail of clues for him to follow.

The aesthetic effect of *Vanity Fair* depends on activating the reader's critical faculties so that he may recognize the social reality of the novel as a confusing array of sham attitudes, and experience the exposure of this sham as the true reality. Instead of being expressly stated, the criteria for such judgments have to be inferred. They are the blanks that the reader is supposed to fill in, thus bringing his own criticism to bear.

W. J. Harvey describes the reading situation for the novel in similar terms as one involving "conditional freedom."

A novel . . . can allow for a much fuller expression of this sensed penumbra of unrealized possibilities, of all the what-might-have-beens

of our lives. It is because of this that the novel permits a much greater liberty of such speculation on the part of the reader than does the play. . . . The character moves in the full depth of his conditional freedom; he is what he is but he might have been otherwise. Indeed the novel does not merely allow for this liberty of speculation; sometimes it encourages it to the extent that our sense of conditional freedom . . . becomes one of the ordering structural principles of the entire work.<sup>21</sup>

The "Manager of the Performance" opens up a whole panorama of views on the reality described, which can be seen from practically every social and human standpoint. The reader is offered a host of different perspectives, and so he is almost continually confronted with the problem of how to make them consistent. This is all the more complicated as it is not just a matter of viewing the social world described, but of doing so in face of a rich variety of perspectives offered by the commentator. There can be no doubt that the author wants to induce his reader to assume a critical attitude toward the social reality portrayed, but at the same time he gives him the alternative of adopting one of the views offered him, or of developing one of his own. This choice is not without a certain amount of risk. If the reader adopts one of the attitudes suggested by the author, he must automatically exclude the others. If this happens, the impression arises, in this particular novel, that one is looking more at oneself than at the extent described. There is an unmistakable narrowness in every standpoint, and in this respect the reflection the reader will see of himself will be anything but complimentary. But if the reader then changes his viewpoint, in order to avoid this narrowness, he will undergo the additional experience of finding that his behavior is very like that of the two girls who are constantly adapting themselves in order to rise up the social scale. All the same, his criticism of the girls appears to be valid. Is it not a reasonable conclusion then, that the novel was constructed as a means of turning the reader's criticism of social opportunism back upon himself? This is not mentioned specifically in the text, but it happens all the time. Thus, the reader finds himself instead of society to be the object of criticism.

Thackeray once mentioned casually: "I have said somewhere it is the unwritten part of books that would be the most interesting."<sup>22</sup> It is in the unwritten part of the book that the reader has his place — hovering between the world of the characters and the guiding sovereignty of the "Manager of the Performance." If he comes too close to the characters, he learns the truth of what the narrator told him at the beginning: "The world is a looking-glass, and gives back to

every man the reflection of his own face" (1:12). If he stands back with the narrator to look at things from a distance, he sees through all the activities of the characters. Through the variability of his own position, the reader experiences the meaning of *Vanity Fair*.

As this basic fabric of the novel is not set out in words, the written text would then be nothing more than the shadow thrown by this unformulated base. This would mean, in turn, that the text is constructed in such a way that it provokes the reader constantly to supplement what he is reading. This act of completion, however, is not concerned merely with secondary aspects of the work, but with the central intention of the text itself. Whenever this occurs, it is clear that the author is not mobilizing his reader because he himself cannot finish off the work he has started; his motive is to bring about an intensified participation that will compel the reader to be that much more aware of the intention of the text.

If the reader of *Vanity Fair* connects the many positions offered him in the text, he will not find the ideal critical stance from which everything will become clear; he will, rather, find himself frequently placed in the very society that he is to criticize.

The reader of the Fielding novel had to coordinate or reconcile respectively two contrary positions and was expected ultimately to find the right balance. The multiplicity of gaps in *Vanity Fair*, however, makes it inevitable that the reader should reveal a great deal of himself if he makes use of the scope of comprehension offered him. Against the background of *Vanity Fair*, the indeterminacy of *Ulysses* seems out of control. And yet this novel only attempts to portray a single ordinary day. The subject, then, is considerably reduced when one thinks of the fact that Thackeray wanted to paint a picture of Victorian society, and Fielding, one of human nature itself. Clearly, the amount of indeterminacy does not depend on the size of the theme. Moreover, *Ulysses* contains nearly every device of description and narration that the novel has developed in the course of its relatively short history—and all this for the simple purpose of depicting complete ordinariness? Is it, perhaps, not so much a question of describing everyday reality as conveying the conditions under which it is experienced?<sup>23</sup>

If this is so, then the theme is only the initial impulse, and it is the attempts to deal with the theme that are all-important; for everyday reality does not, in this book, reflect some hidden meaning. In *Ulysses* there are no longer any ideals underlying the world portrayed. Instead, there is an unprecedented wealth of viewpoints and textual patterns which the reader at first finds confusing.

The "Aeolus" chapter is a striking example of the point in question. Bloom's visit to the newspaper office provides the framework for a curiously patterned form of narration. Two separate levels of the text are highlighted, which one might call, for the sake of convenience, the micro- and the macrostructure of the chapter. The microstructural level consists of a large number of allusions which basically can be divided into three different groups: (1) those dealing with the immediate situation, Bloom's effort to place an advertisement at the newspaper office and the events connected with it; (2) those referring to completely different episodes outside the chapter itself, sometimes relating to incidents already described, and sometimes anticipating them; and (3) those passages that seem to slide into obscurity when one tries to work out exactly where they might be heading. However, as these allusions are not distinctly separated but are in fact woven into an intricate pattern, each one of them tends to entice the reader to follow it. Thus the allusions themselves turn into microperspectives that, because of their very density, simply cannot be followed through to the end. They form abbreviated extracts from reality which inevitably compel the reader to a process of selection.

This is also true of the other stylistic pattern to be discerned within the microstructural stratum. Just as with the allusions, there is throughout an abrupt alternation between dialogue, direct and indirect speech, authorial report, first-person narrative, and interior monologue. Although such techniques do impose a certain order on the abundance of allusions, they also invest them with differing importance. An allusion by the author himself certainly has a function for the context different from one that is made in direct speech by one of the characters. Thus extracts from reality and individual events are not contracted merely into allusions, but, through the different patterns of style, emerge in forms that endow them with a varied range of relevance. At the same time, the unconnected allusions and the abrupt alterations of stylistic devices disclose a large number of empty spaces.

All this gives rise to the stimulating quality of the text. On the one hand, the density of allusions and the continual segmentation of style involve an incessant changing of perspectives, which seem to go out of control whenever the reader tries to pin them down; on the other hand, the empty spaces resulting from cuts and abbreviations tempt the reader to fill them in. He will try to group things, because this is the only way in which he can recognize situations or understand characters in the novel.

The macrostructure of the chapter lends itself to this need for "grouping," though in a peculiar way. Heading and "newspaper column" form the schema that incorporates the allusions and stylistic changes. The heading is an instruction as to what to expect. But the text that follows the caption reveals the composition above, and so in most cases does not fulfill the expectation raised by the heading. As the newspaper headlines refer to various incidents in the city of Dublin, the situation of Ireland, and so forth, they would seem to be concerned with everyday events, the reality of which is beyond question. But the column that follows frustrates this expectation, not only by leading commonplace realities off in unforeseeable directions, thus destroying the grouping effect of the headline, but also by fragmenting facts and occurrences in such a way that to comprehend the commonplace becomes a real effort. While the heading appears to gratify our basic need for grouping, this need is predominantly subverted by the text that follows.

In this chapter, the reader not only learns something about the events in Dublin on 16 June 1904, but he also experiences the difficulties inherent in the comprehension of the barest outline of events. It is precisely because the heading suggests a way of grouping from a particular viewpoint that the text itself seems so thoroughly to contradict our expectations of perception. It appears to defy transcription of the circumstances indicated and instead offers the reader nothing but attitudes or possibilities of perception relating to these circumstances. In exploiting these possibilities, the reader is stimulated to a form of activity that B. Ritchie, in another context, has described as follows:

The solution to this paradox is to find some ground for a distinction between "surprise" and "frustration." Roughly, the distinction can be made in terms of the effects which the two kinds of experiences have upon us. Frustration blocks or checks activity. It necessitates new orientation for our activity, if we are to escape the *cul de sac*. Consequently, we abandon the frustrating object and return to blind impulsive activity. On the other hand, surprise merely causes a temporary cessation of the exploratory phase of the experience, and a recourse to intense contemplation and scrutiny. In the latter phase the surprising elements are seen in their connection with what has gone before, with the whole drift to the experience, and the enjoyment of these values is then extremely intense. . . . [A]ny aesthetic experience tends to exhibit a continuous interplay between "deductive" and "inductive" operations.<sup>24</sup>

Now it does sometimes occur in this chapter that the expectations aroused by the headings are fulfilled. At such moments, the text seems banal,<sup>25</sup> for when the reader has adjusted himself to the nonfulfillment of his expectations, he will view things differently when they *are* fulfilled. The reason for this is easy to grasp. If the text of the column does not connect with the heading, the reader must supply the missing links. His participation in the intention of the text is thus enhanced. If the text does fulfill the expectations aroused by the heading, no removing of gaps is required of the reader and he feels the "letdown" of banality. In this way, the textual pattern in this chapter arouses continual conflicts with the reader's own modes of perception, and as the author has completely withdrawn from this montage of possibilities, the reader is given no guidance as to how to resolve the conflicts. But it is through these very conflicts, and the confrontation with the array of different possibilities, that the reader of such a text is given the impression that something does happen to him.

The innumerable facets of this everyday reality have the effect of seeming as if they were merely suggested to the reader for observation. The various perspectives as provided by the other chapters of the novel abruptly join up, overlap, are segmented, even clash, and through their very density they begin to ~~overwhelm~~ the reader's vision. The density of the presentational screen, the confusing montage and its interplay of perspectives, the invitation to the reader to look at identical incidents from many conflicting points of view — all this makes it extremely difficult for the reader to find his way. The novel refuses to divulge any principle for binding together this interplay of perspectives, and so the reader is forced to provide his own liaison. Then, inevitably, reading becomes a process of selection, with the reader's own imagination providing the criteria for the selection. For the text of *Ulysses* only offers the conditions that make it possible to conceive of this everyday world — conditions that each reader will exploit in his own way. Whenever this happens, consistent reading suggests itself and illusion takes over.<sup>26</sup>

Yet it is difficult to sustain this illusion in the reading process, for all the eighteen chapters of the novel are written in continually changing styles, so that the view conveyed by each particular style can only be regarded as a suggestion for observation. In what, then, does the achievement of the various modes of presentation consist? First, one can say that they bring to bear a form of observation which underlies the very structure of perception. For we "have the experience of a world, not understood as a system of relations which

wholly determine each event, but as an open totality the synthesis of which is inexhaustible. . . . From the moment that experience — that is, the opening on to our de facto world — is recognized as the beginning of knowledge, there is no longer any way of distinguishing a level of a priori truths and one of factual ones, what the world must necessarily be and what it actually is."<sup>27</sup> Through their countless offshoots, the different styles of *Ulysses* preclude any meaning directed toward integration, but they also fall into a pattern of observation that contains within itself the possibility of a continual extension. It is the very abundance of perspectives which conveys the abundance of the world under observation.

The effect of this continual change is dynamic, as it proves to be unbounded by any recognizable teleology. From one chapter to the next the "horizon" of everyday life is altered and constantly shifted from one area to another through the links that the reader tries to establish between the chapter styles. Each chapter prepares the "horizon" for the next, and it is the process of reading that provides the continual overlapping and interweaving of the views presented. The reader is stimulated into filling the "empty spaces" between the chapters in order to group them into a coherent whole. This process, however, has the following results: the conceptions of everyday life which the reader forms undergo constant modifications in the reading process. Each chapter provides a certain amount of expectation concerning the next. The gaps of indeterminacy which open up between the chapters, however, tend to diminish the importance of these expectations as a means of orienting the reader. As the process continues, a "feedback" effect is bound to develop, arising from the new chapter and reacting upon the preceding, which under this new and somewhat unexpected impression is subjected to modifications in the reader's mind. The more frequently the reader experiences this effect, the more cautious and the more differentiated will be his expectations as they arise through his realization of the text. Thus, what has just been read modifies what was read before, so that the reader himself operates the fusion of the horizons, with the result that he produces an experience of reality which is real insofar as it happens. Reality, then, is a process of realization necessitating the reader's involvement, because only the reader can bring it about. This is why the chapters are not arranged in any sequence of situations that might be complementary to one another; in fact, the unforeseen difference of style seems to make each chapter into a turning point as opposed to a continuation. And as the whole novel consists of such turning

points, the connections between the chapters appear as indeterminate gaps that in turn do not permit of any clear-cut link, so that the process of reading unfolds itself as a continual modification of all previous conceptions.

The novel opposes the desire for consistency which we constantly reveal when we are reading. Here we are confronted with a gamut of possible reactions. We may be annoyed by all these gaps, which arise in fact through the overprecision of presentation, but this would be like a confession on our part, for it would mean that we prefer to be pinned down by texts, foregoing our own judgment. In this case, we obviously expect literature to present us with a world that has been cleared of contradictions.<sup>28</sup> If we try to break down the areas of indeterminacy in the text, the picture that we draw for ourselves will then be, to a large extent, illusory, precisely because it is so determinate. The illusion arises from a desire for harmony, and it is solely the product of the reader.

This marks an important development. The realistic novel of the nineteenth century set out to give its reader an illusion of reality; in *Ulysses*, the high degree of indeterminacy has the effect of rendering illusory any meaning ascribed to everyday reality. The indeterminacy of the text sends the reader off on a search for meaning. In order to find it, he has to mobilize all the forces of his imagination. And in doing this, he has the chance of becoming a discriminating reader through the realization that his projected meanings can never fully cover the possibilities of the text. By exposing the limitations inherent in any meaning, modern literature offers the discriminating reader a chance to come to grips with his own ideas.

In some modern texts, this fact can be studied under almost experimental conditions. The works of Beckett are among those whose indeterminacy content is so high that they are often equated with a massive allegorization. The tendency to regard them as allegories is in itself a kind of exasperated form of meaning projection. What causes this exasperation, which can clearly only be pacified by imposing some meaning on the text? Beckett's works, with their extreme indeterminacy, cause a total mobilization of the reader's imagination; the effect of this, however, is that the totally mobilized world of imagination finds itself to be powerless when called upon to explain. And yet this impotence on the part of one's own imagination seems to be necessary if one is to accept Beckett's work at all, for the individuality of his text only becomes apparent when the world of our imagination is left behind. It is not surprising, therefore, that one's first reaction is to mount a massive operation

of meaning-projection in order to haul the texts back within the limits of normal thinking.

If fiction stubbornly refuses to reveal the sought-after meanings, then the reader will decide what it has to mean. But then one realizes that by imposing an allegorical or unequivocal meaning onto the text, one's approach tends to be superficial or even trivial. Should not this allegorization be seen as an indication of the nature of our current conceptions and preconceptions rather than as a means of explaining the text? If so, then such texts will show us the fundamental lack of freedom resulting from our self-imposed confinement within the world of our own ideas. In making his reader experience the embarrassing predicament of the failure of his understanding, Beckett opens up a road to freedom which can be embarked on whenever we are prepared to shed the preconceived notions that so far have dominated our outlook.

The works of Beckett provoke a desire for understanding which can only be satisfied if we apply our own ideas to the text, to have them duly rejected as redundant. It is precisely this process that both stimulates and exasperates us, for who likes to learn that his own ideas have to be subjected to a fundamental revision if they are to grasp phenomena that seem to lie beyond their scope?<sup>29</sup>

AT THIS POINT, we are on the verge of leaving our historical perspective of indeterminacy, which so far has revealed that an increase in degree results in a proportionally enhanced involvement of the reader, which in turn can range from bringing out the author's own premeditated yet unformulated intention of the text to a gradual entanglement of the reader with himself, whenever the removal of indeterminacy gives rise to the generation of meaning. Let us therefore, by way of conclusion, examine the consequences of the facts we have outlined. First of all, we can say that the indeterminate elements of literary prose — perhaps even of all literature — represent a vital link between text and reader. They are the switch that activates the reader into using his own ideas in order to fulfill the intention of the text. This means that they are the basis for a textual structure in which the reader's part is already incorporated.

In this respect, literary texts differ from those that formulate a concrete meaning or truth. Texts of the latter kind are, by their very nature, independent of the individual reader, for the meaning or truth that they express exists independently of any reader's participation. But when a vital element of a text is reader-participation, it is forced to rely on the individual reader for the realization of a

possible meaning or truth. The meaning is conditioned by the text itself, but only in a form that allows the reader himself to bring it out.

An important sentence in semiotics runs: within a system, the lack of one element is important in itself. If one applies this to literature, one will observe that the literary text is characterized by the fact that it does not state its intention, and therefore the most important of its elements is missing. If this is so, how is the intention to be fulfilled? The answer is: by the guided projections of the reader's imagination. Even though the literary text has its reality not in the world of objects but in the imagination of its reader, it wins a certain precedence over texts that seek to make a statement concerning meaning or truth; in short, over those that claim or have an apophantic character. Meanings and truths are, by nature, influenced by their historical position and cannot in principle be set apart from history. The same applies to literature, but since the reality of a literary text comes to life within the reader's imagination, it must, again by nature, have a far greater chance of outlasting its historical genesis. From this arises the suspicion that literary texts are resistant to the course of time, not because they represent eternal values that are supposedly independent of time, but because their structure continually allows the reader to place himself within the world of fiction.

What is it that makes the reader want to share in the adventures of literature? This question is perhaps more for the anthropologist than for the literary critic, but the fact is clear that people have always tended to enjoy taking part in the fictitious dangers of the literary world; they like to leave their own security and enter into realms-of-thought-and-behavior which are by no means always elevating. Literature simulates life, not in order to portray it, but in order to allow the reader to share in it. He can step out of his own world and enter another, where he can experience extremes of pleasure and pain without being involved in any consequences whatsoever. It is this lack of consequence that enables him to experience things that would otherwise be inaccessible owing to the pressing demands of everyday reality. And precisely because the literary text makes no objectively real demand on its readers, it opens up a freedom that everyone can interpret in his own way. Thus, with every text we learn not only about what we are reading but also about ourselves, and this process is all the more effective if what we are supposed to experience is not explicitly stated but has to be inferred. A piece of literature wishing to exercise an impact



and laying claim to some value has to comply with the basic requirement that Sir Philip Sidney tersely summed up in his *Defence of Poesie*: "the Poet . . . never affirmeth."<sup>30</sup> It is largely because of this fact that literary texts are so constructed as to confirm none of the meanings we ascribe to them, although by means of their structure they continually lead us to such projections of meaning. Thus it is perhaps one of the chief values of literature that by its very indeterminacy it is able to transcend the restrictions of time and the written word and to give to people of all ages and backgrounds the chance to enter other worlds and so enrich their own lives.

#### A Retrospective Note (1988)

This reprinting of "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction" includes some minor changes in phrasing for the sake of improving the essay's clarity but no changes that alter substantially the character of the original. In particular, I decided it would be unmanageable to change phrases that emphasize subjective response and textual "intention." These phrases misled some critics about the directions I was setting in the essay by creating some erroneous impressions. The formulations were part of the first statements of a problem that I deal with again at much greater length in the discussion of meaning assembly in *The Act of Reading*, a book that grew out of the essay. Toward the end of the essay, the impression is conveyed that meaning projection might be left entirely to the discretion of individual reader. The descriptions and comments that create that impression were not meant as a plea for subjectivism. I provide a more detailed description of how meaning is to be brought alive in the interview that follows in this volume, making it clear that the reader's response is neither subjective-only nor prestructured only, but the result of a guided interaction.

The suggestion that the intention of the text is not stated might be equally misleading. The phrasing was not meant to claim that the text itself produces its own intention, which — though authorial in origin — can only be ascertained by the inroads made into extratextual systems, by the way in which the encapsulated material is arranged within the text. This form of intentionality is traceable in the text, though not set out in words. I provide a more detailed analysis in my essay "Feigning in Fiction," in *Identity of the Literary Text*, ed. Mario J. Valdés and Owen Miller (Toronto, 1985), pp. 204–28.

## TWO INTERACTION BETWEEN TEXT AND READER



entral to the reading of every literary work is the interaction between its structure and its recipient. Therefore an exclusive concentration on either the author's techniques or the reader's psychology will tell us little about the reading process itself. This is not to deny the vital importance of each of the two poles, yet separate analysis would only be conclusive if the relationship were that of transmitter and receiver, for this would presuppose a common code, ensuring accurate communication since the message would only be traveling one way. In literary works, however, the message is transmitted in two ways, in that the reader receives it by composing it. There is no common code; at best one could say that a common code may arise in the course of the process. Starting out from this assumption, we must search for structures that will enable us to describe basic conditions of interaction; for only then shall we be able to gain some insight into the potential effects inherent in the work.

It is difficult to describe this interaction, not least because literary criticism has very little to go on in the way of guidelines, and, of course, the two partners in the communication process, namely, the text<sup>1</sup> and the reader, are far easier to analyze than is the event that takes place between them. However, there are discernible conditions that govern interaction generally, and some of these will certainly apply to the special text-reader relationship. The differences and similarities may become clear if we briefly examine types of interaction which have emerged from psychoanalytic research into the structure of communication. The findings of the Tavistock School will serve as a model in order to move the problem into focus.<sup>2</sup>

In assessing interpersonal relationships R. D. Laing writes: "I may not actually be able to see myself as others see me, but I am constantly supposing them to be seeing me in particular ways, and I am constantly acting in the light of the actual or supposed attitudes, opinions, needs, and so on the other has in respect of me."<sup>3</sup> Now, the views that others have of me cannot be called "pure" perception; they are the result of interpretation. And this need for interpretation arises from the structure of interpersonal experience. We have experience of one another insofar as we know one another's conduct;

but we have no experience of how others experience us.

In his book *The Politics of Experience* Laing pursues this line of thought by saying: "[Y]our experience of me is invisible to me and my experience of you is invisible to you. I cannot experience your experience. You cannot experience my experience. We are both invisible men. All men are invisible to one another. Experience is man's invisibility to man."<sup>4</sup> It is this invisibility, however, that forms the basis of interpersonal relations—a basis that Laing calls "no-things."<sup>5</sup> "That which is really 'between' cannot be named by any things that come between. The between is itself no-thing."<sup>6</sup> In all our interpersonal relations we build upon this "no-thing," for we react as if we knew how our partners experienced us; we continually form views of their views, and then act as if our views of their views were realities. Contact therefore depends upon our continually filling in a central gap in our experience. Thus, dyadic and dynamic interaction comes about only because we are unable to experience how we experience one another, which in turn proves to be a propellant to interaction. Out of this fact arises the basic need for interpretation, which regulates the whole process of interaction. As we cannot perceive without preconception, each percept, in turn, only makes sense to us if it is processed, for pure perception is quite impossible. Hence dyadic interaction is not given by nature but arises out of an interpretative activity, which will contain a view of others and, unavoidably, an image of ourselves.

An obvious and major difference between reading and all forms of social interaction is the fact that with reading there is no face-to-face-situation.<sup>7</sup> A text cannot adapt itself to each reader it comes into contact with. The partners in dyadic interaction can ask each other questions in order to ascertain how far their images have bridged the gap of the inexperienceability of one another's experiences. The reader, however, can never learn from the text how accurate or inaccurate his views of it are. Furthermore, dyadic interaction serves specific purposes, so that the interaction always has a regulative context, which often serves as a *tertium comparationis*. There is no such frame of reference governing the text-reader relationship; on the contrary, the codes that might regulate this interaction are fragmented in the text, and must first be reassembled or, in most cases, restructured before any frame of reference can be established. Here, then, in conditions and intention, we find two basic differences between the text-reader relationship and the dyadic interaction between social partners.

Now, it is the very lack of ascertainability and defined intention

that brings about the text-reader interaction, and here there is a vital link with dyadic interaction. Social communication, as we have seen, arises out of the fact that people cannot experience how others experience them, and not out of the common situation or out of the conventions that join both partners together. The situations and conventions regulate the manner in which gaps are filled but the gaps in turn arise out of the inexperienceability and, consequently, function as a basic inducement to communication. Similarly, it is the gaps, the fundamental asymmetry between text and reader, that give rise to communication in the reading process; the lack of a common situation and a common frame of reference corresponds to the "no-things," which brings about the interaction between persons. Asymmetry and the "no-thing" are all different forms of an indeterminate, constitutive blank which underlies all processes of interaction. With dyadic interaction, the imbalance is removed by the establishment of pragmatic connections resulting in an action, which is why the preconditions are always clearly defined in relation to situations and common frames of reference. The imbalance between text and reader, however, is undefined, and it is this very indeterminacy that increases the variety of communication possible.

Now, if communication between text and reader is to be successful, clearly the reader's activity must also be controlled in some way by the text. The control cannot be as specific as in a face-to-face-situation; equally, it cannot be as determinate as a social code, which regulates social interaction. However, the guiding devices operative in the reading process have to initiate communication and to control it. This control cannot be understood as a tangible entity occurring independently of the process of communication. Although exercised by the text, it is not in the text. This is well illustrated by a comment Virginia Woolf made on the novels of Jane Austen:

Jane Austen is thus a mistress of much deeper emotion than appears upon the surface. She stimulates us to supply what is not there. What she offers is, apparently, a trifle, yet is composed of something that expands in the reader's mind and endows with the most enduring form of life scenes which are outwardly trivial. Always the stress is laid upon character. . . . The turns and twists of the dialogue keep us on the tenterhooks of suspense. Our attention is half upon the present moment, half upon the future. . . . Here, indeed, in this unfinished and in the main inferior story, are all the elements of Jane Austen's greatness.<sup>8</sup>

What is missing from the apparently trivial scenes, the gaps arising out of the dialogue—this is what stimulates the reader into

filling the blanks with projections. He is drawn into the events and made to supply what is meant from what is not said. What is said only appears to take on significance as a reference to what is not said; it is the implications and not the statements that give shape and weight to the meaning. But as the unsaid comes to life in the reader's imagination, so the said "expands" to take on greater significance than might have been supposed: even trivial scenes can seem surprisingly profound. The "enduring form of life" which Virginia Woolf speaks of is not manifested on the printed page; it is a product arising out of the interaction between text and reader.

Communication in literature, then, is a process set in motion and regulated not by a given code but by a mutually restrictive and magnifying interaction between the explicit and the implicit, between revelation and concealment. What is concealed spurs the reader into action, but this action is also controlled by what is revealed; the explicit in its turn is transformed when the implicit has been brought to light. Whenever the reader bridges the gaps, communication begins. The gaps function as a kind of pivot on which the whole text-reader relationship revolves. Hence, the structured blanks of the text stimulate the process of ideation to be performed by the reader on terms set by the text. There is, however, another place in the textual system where text and reader converge, and that is marked by the various types of negation which arise in the course of the reading. Blanks and negations both control the process of communication in their own different ways: The blanks leave open the connection between textual perspectives, and so spur the reader into coordinating these perspectives and patterns—in other words, they induce the reader to perform basic operations within the text. The various types of negation invoke familiar and determinate elements or knowledge only to cancel them out. What is canceled, however, remains in view, and thus brings about modifications in the reader's attitude toward what is familiar or determinate—that is, he is guided to adopt a position in relation to the text.

In order to spotlight the communication process we shall confine our consideration to how the blanks trigger and simultaneously control the reader's activity. Blanks indicate that the different segments and patterns of the text are to be connected even though the text itself does not say so. They are the unseen joins of the text, and as they mark off schemata and textual perspectives from one another, they simultaneously prompt acts of ideation on the reader's

part. Consequently, when the schemata and perspectives have been linked together, the blanks "disappear."

If we are to grasp the unseen structure that regulates but does not formulate the connection or even the meaning, we must bear in mind the various forms in which the textual segments are presented to the reader's viewpoint in the reading process. Their most elementary form is to be seen on the level of the story. The threads of the plot are suddenly broken off, or continued in unexpected directions. One narrative section centers on a particular character and is then continued by the abrupt introduction of new characters. These sudden changes are often denoted by new chapters and so are clearly distinguished; the object of this distinction, however, is not separation so much as a tacit invitation to find the missing link. Furthermore, in each articulated reading moment only segments of textual perspectives are present within the reader's wandering viewpoint.

In order to become fully aware of the implication, we must bear in mind that a narrative text, for instance, is composed of a variety of perspectives, which outline the author's view and also provide access to what the reader is meant to visualize. As a rule, there are four main perspectives in narration—those of the narrator, the characters, the plot, and the fictitious reader. Although these may differ in order of importance, none of them on its own is identical with the meaning of the text, which is to be brought about by their constant intertwining through the reader in the reading process. An increase in the number of blanks is bound to occur through the frequent subdivisions of each of the textual perspectives; thus the narrator's perspective is often split into that of the implied author's set against that of the author as narrator. The hero's perspective may be set against that of the minor characters. The fictitious reader's perspective may be divided between the explicit position ascribed to him and the implicit attitude he must adopt toward that position.

As the reader's wandering viewpoint travels between all these segments, its constant switching during the time flow of reading intertwines them, thus bringing forth a network of perspectives, within which each perspective opens a view not only of others but also of the intended imaginary object. Hence no single textual perspective can be equated with this imaginary object, of which it forms only one aspect. The object itself is a product of interconnection, the structuring of which is to a great extent regulated and controlled by blanks.

In order to explain this operation, we shall first give a schematic description of how the blanks function, and then we shall try to illustrate this function with an example. In the time flow of readings, segments of the various perspectives move into focus and are set off against preceding segments. Thus the segments of narrator, characters, plot, and fictitious reader perspectives are not only marshalled into a graduated sequence but are also transformed into reciprocal reflectors. The blank as an empty space between segments enables them to be joined together, thus constituting a field of vision for the wandering viewpoint. A referential field is always formed when there are at least two positions related to and influencing one another; it is the minimal organizational unit in all processes of comprehension,<sup>2</sup> and it is also the basic organizational unit of the wandering viewpoint.

The first structural quality of the blank, then, is that it makes possible the organization of a referential field of interacting textual segments projecting themselves one upon another. Now, the segments present in the field are structurally of equal value, and the fact that they are brought together highlights their affinities and their differences. This relationship gives rise to a tension that has to be resolved, for, as Arnheim has observed in a more general context: "It is one of the functions of the third dimension to come to the rescue when things get uncomfortable in the second."<sup>10</sup> The third dimension comes about when the segments of the referential field are given a common framework, which allows the reader to relate affinities and differences and so to grasp the patterns underlying the connections. But this framework is also a blank, which requires an act of ideation in order to be filled. It is as if the blank in the field of the reader's viewpoint has changed its position. It began as the empty space between perspective segments, indicating their connectability, and so organizing them into projections of reciprocal influence. But with the establishment of this connectability, the blank, as the unformulated framework of these interacting segments, now enables the reader to produce a determinate relationship between them. We may infer already from this change in position that the blank exercises significant control over all the operations that occur within the referential field of the wandering viewpoint.

Now we come to the third and most decisive function of the blank. Once the segments have been connected and a determinate relationship has been established, a referential field is formed which constitutes a particular reading moment and which in turn has a

discernible structure. The grouping of segments within the referential field comes about, as we have seen, by making the viewpoint switch between the perspective segments. The segment on which the viewpoint focuses in each particular moment becomes the theme. The theme of one moment becomes the background against which the next segment takes on its actuality, and so on. Whenever a segment becomes a theme, the previous one must lose its thematic relevance<sup>11</sup> and be turned into a marginal, thematically vacant position, which can be and usually is occupied by the reader so that he may focus on the new thematic segment.

In this connection it might be more appropriate to designate the marginal or horizontal position as a vacancy and not as a blank; blanks refer to suspended connectability in the text, while vacancies refer to nonthematic segments within the referential field of the wandering viewpoint. Vacancies, then, are important guiding devices for building up the aesthetic object, because they condition the reader's view of the new theme, which in turn conditions his view of previous themes. These modifications, however, are not formulated in the text; they are to be implemented by the reader's ideational activity. And so these vacancies enable the reader to combine segments into a field by reciprocal modification, to form positions from those fields, and then to adapt each position to its successor and predecessors in a progress that ultimately transforms the textual perspectives, through a whole range of alternating themes and background relationships, into the aesthetic object of the text.

Let us turn now to an example in order to illustrate the operations sparked off and governed by the vacancies in the referential field of the wandering viewpoint. We shall have a brief look at Fielding's *Tom Jones* and again, in particular, at the characters' perspectives — that of the hero and that of the minor characters. Fielding's aim of depicting human nature is fulfilled by way of a repertoire that incorporates the prevailing norms of eighteenth-century thought systems and social systems and represents them as governing the conduct of the most important characters. In general, these norms are arranged in more or less explicitly contrasting patterns; Allworthy (*benevolence*) is set against Squire Western (*ruling passion*); the same applies to the two pedagogues, Square (*the eternal fitness of things*) and Thwackum (*the human mind as a sink of iniquity*), who in turn are also contrasted with Allworthy and so forth.

Thus, in the individual situation, the hero is linked with the norms of latitudinarian morality, orthodox theology, deistic philosophy, eighteenth-century anthropology, and eighteenth-century aristoc-

Contrasts and discrepancies within the perspective of the characters give rise to the missing links, which enable the hero and the norms to shed light upon one another, and through which the individual situations may combine into a referential field. The hero's conduct cannot be subsumed under the norms, and through the sequence of situations the norms shrink to a reified manifestation of human nature. This, however, is an observation that the reader must make for himself, because such syntheses are rarely given in the text, even though they are prefigured in the theme-and-background structure. The discrepancies continually arising between the perspectives of hero and minor characters bring about a series of changing positions, with each theme losing its relevance but remaining in the background to influence and condition its successor. Whenever the hero violates the norms—as he does most of the time—the resultant situation may be judged in one of two different ways: either the norm appears as a drastic reduction of human nature, in which case we view the theme from the standpoint of the hero, or the violation shows the imperfections of human nature, in which case it is the norm that conditions our view.

In both cases, we have the same structure of interacting positions being transformed into a determinate meaning. For those characters who represent a norm—in particular, Allworthy, Squire Western, Square, and Thwackum—human nature is defined in terms of one principle, so that all those possibilities that are not in harmony with the principle are given a negative slant. But when the negated possibilities exert their influence upon the course of events, and so show up the limitation of the principle concerned, the norms begin to appear in a different light. The apparently negative aspects of human nature fight back, as it were, against the principle itself and cast doubt upon it in proportion to its limitations.

In this way, the negation of other possibilities by the norm in question gives rise to a virtual diversification of human nature, which takes on a definite form to the extent that the norm is revealed as a restriction on human nature. The reader's attention is now fixed, not upon what the norms represent, but upon what their representation excludes, and so the aesthetic object—which is the whole spectrum of human nature—begins to arise out of what is adumbrated by the negated possibilities. In this way, the function of the norms themselves have changed: they no longer represent the social regulators prevalent in the thought systems of the eighteenth century, but instead they indicate the amount of human experience

which they suppress because, as rigid principles, they cannot tolerate any modifications.

Transformations of this kind take place whenever the norms are the foregrounded theme and the perspective of the hero remains the background conditioning the reader's viewpoint. But whenever the hero becomes the theme, and the norms of the minor characters shape the viewpoint, his well-intentioned spontaneity turns into the depravity of an impulsive nature. Thus the position of the hero is also transformed, for it is no longer the standpoint from which we are to judge the norms; instead we see that even the best of intentions may come to nought if they are not guided by *circumspection*, and spontaneity must be controlled by *prudence*<sup>12</sup> if it is to allow a possibility of self-preservation.

The transformations brought about by the theme-and-background interaction are closely connected with the changing position of the vacancy within the referential field. Once a theme has been grasped, conditioned by the marginal position of the preceding segment, a feedback is bound to occur, thus retroactively modifying the shaping influence of the reader's viewpoint. This reciprocal transformation is hermeneutic by nature, even though we may not be aware of the processes of interpretation resulting from the switching and reciprocal conditioning of our viewpoints. In this sense, the vacancy transforms the referential field of the moving viewpoint into a self-regulating structure, which proves to be one of the most important links in the interaction between text and reader, and which prevents the reciprocal transformation of textual segments from being arbitrary.

To sum up, then, the blank in the fictional text induces and guides the reader's constitutive activity. As a suspension of connectability between textual perspective and perspective segments, it marks the need for an equivalence, thus transforming the segments into reciprocal projections, which in turn organize the reader's wandering viewpoint as a referential field. The tension that occurs within the field between heterogeneous perspective segments is resolved by the theme-and-background structure, which makes the viewpoint focus on one segment as the theme, to be grasped from the thematically vacant position now occupied by the reader as his standpoint. Thematically vacant positions remain present in the background against which new themes occur; they condition and influence those themes and are also retroactively influenced by them, for as each theme recedes into the background of its successor, the vacancy shifts,

allowing a reciprocal transformation to take place. As the vacancy is structured by the sequence of positions in the time flow of reading, the reader's viewpoint cannot proceed arbitrarily; the thematically vacant position always acts as the angle from which a selective interpretation is to be made.

Two points need to be emphasized: (1) we have described the structure of the blank in an abstract, somewhat idealized way in order to explain the pivot on which the interaction between text and reader turns; and (2) the blank has different structural qualities which appear to dovetail. The reader fills in the blank in the text thereby bringing about a referential field; the blank arising in turn out of the referential field is filled in by way of the theme-and-background structure; and the vacancy arising from juxtaposed themes and backgrounds is occupied by the reader's standpoint, from which the various reciprocal transformations lead to the emergence of the aesthetic object. The structural qualities outlined make the blank shift, so that the changing positions of the empty space mark out a definite need for determination, which the constitutive activity of the reader is to fulfill. In this sense, the shifting blank maps out the path along which the wandering viewpoint is to travel, guided by the self-regulatory sequence in which the structural qualities of the blank interlock.

Now we are in a position to qualify more precisely what is actually meant by reader participation in the text. If the blank is largely responsible for the activities described, then participation means that the reader is not simply called upon to "internalize" the positions given in the text, but he is induced to make them act upon and so transform each other, as a result of which the aesthetic object begins to emerge. The structure of the blank organizes this participation, revealing simultaneously the intimate connection between this structure and the reading subject. This interconnection completely conforms to a remark made by Piaget: "In a word, the subject is there and alive, because the basic quality of each structure is the structuring process itself."<sup>13</sup> The blank in the fictional text appears to be a paradigmatic structure; its function consists in initiating structured operations in the reader, the execution of which transmits the reciprocal interaction of textual positions into consciousness. The shifting blank is responsible for a sequence of colliding images, which condition each other in the time flow of reading. The dis-

carded image imprints itself on its successor, even though the is meant to resolve the deficiencies of the former. In this respect images hang together in a sequence, and it is by this sequer the meaning of the text comes alive in the reader's imagination.

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