

THE PRACTICE OF VALUE

ESSAYS ON LITERATURE IN
CULTURAL STUDIES

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CONTENTS

Preface	vii
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Part One Regimes of value

1 Literature as regime (Meditations on an emergence)	3
2 Afterlife: texts as usage	23
3 A pebble, a camera, a man who turns into a telegraph pole	47
4 Invidious distinction: waste, difference and classy stuff	69
5 The practice of value	87

Part Two The commons in information

6 Signature and brand	111
7 The archive under threat	133
8 An ethics of imitation	149

Part Three Disciplines

9 Is Elvis a god? Cult, culture, questions of method	169
10 Discipline and discipleship	187
11 On mid-level concepts	211

CONTENTS

Part Four Settlement

12	In the penal colony	233
13	A politics of stolen time	257
14	Settlement	279
	Notes	295
	Acknowledgements	323
	Index	327

PREFACE

In recent years the disciplines of literary studies and cultural studies have engaged in occasional hostilities but very rarely in productive engagement with each other's methodologies. Yet each offers a set of rich resources for the other in a period of disciplinary crisis across the humanities in general and within these two fields in particular. Literary studies brings a range of tools for the unpacking of figuratively complex texts and a theoretical flexibility which allows it to frame its object and its own activity as moments of a nexus of practices; cultural studies brings an urgent attention to the institutionally structured uses which constitute the social life of texts.

This collection of essays traces out an intellectual trajectory that has taken me from the theoretically oriented study of literary texts and literary systems, through cultural studies broadly defined as the study of the social relations of textuality, to my more recent studies of genre, fictional character and interpretive regimes, all of which have been marked by my passage through cultural studies.

That passage was always directly or indirectly concerned with asking about the conditions under which literary studies is possible. To put it briefly, I don't believe literary studies has a future if it remains concerned with the study of canonical literary texts in abstraction from the social networks that build and study that canon and its value. It will only constitute a genuine knowledge if it is able to redefine its

PREFACE

object as the complex of relations between texts, readers, frameworks of reading and a social infrastructure that together govern writing and reading, meaning and value; insofar as it is a historical knowledge, it must learn how to theorise the multiplicity of times that constitute textual historicity, and its own inscription into that history. Conversely, I don't believe that it will be fruitful for cultural studies to be confined to the study of popular culture or of social identities, the two dominant forms it has taken in recent years; it will evolve as a viable discipline only if its scope is comprehensive and its approach methodologically systematic.

The work that is represented here has been built around three core principles:

- 1 Although texts and things have definite material and formal properties or affordances, their meaning and value are not inherent and cannot be directly deduced from those properties.
- 2 Meaning and value are an effect of the operations performed upon texts or things by readers or viewers or users.
- 3 Those operations take place in relation to interpretive and axiological frameworks that are relatively durable, that are supported by and in turn support particular interpretive communities, and that are modified, however slightly, in each act of interpretation and valuation.

The central frameworks with which I deal are those of genre and of the regime of reading. Genre is the subject of a separate book,¹ and although generic concerns run through this volume, I won't discuss them further here. I do, however, want to spend a little time looking at the concept of the regime of reading, since I use it to organise many of these essays, even those (such as some of the more explicitly political essays of the final part) where its presence is merely implicit.

The concept of the regime of reading, which is one of the major explanatory categories in my first book, *Marxism and Literary History*,²

PREFACE

was taken from a 1974 essay by the French semiotician Mircea Marghescou.³ My use of it draws as well on the Russian Formalist concept of the literary system, especially as it was defined by Jury Tynjanov; H. R. Jauss's challenge to literary studies to recognise the multiplicity of uses of texts by developing a coherent theory of textual reception; and the Foucauldian concept of the reading formation as it was developed by Tony Bennett. In my later work (the book *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value* and the essay 'Gift and commodity' in *Time and Commodity Culture*),⁴ I introduced the corollary concept of the regime of value, drawing in particular on Arjun Appadurai's formulation of the concept in his introductory essay to *The Social Life of Things*.⁵

The concept of the regime is at one level a concept of the semantic codes that govern the status and possible uses of texts. At another level, however, it governs the constitution of 'text', 'writer' and 'reader' as functions within a system, and the limited range of interpretive or evaluative strategies made available by any particular regime. At a third level, finally, the concept has to do with the material and institutional conditions (the socio-technical assemblages) that facilitate and constrain the discourses of meaning and value that circulate within and between regimes.

In one sense, of course, the concept of regime seems to involve structural regularities and a certain semantic closure. My interest, however, is in the *conflicts* of interpretation and valuation that occur both within regimes and between them: the ways in which the precarious moment of closure is constantly contested and continuously reconstituted. Regimes can best be examined at their edges, the points where they come into conflict with other regimes. Appadurai's conception of the regime of value as a mechanism for 'the commensuration of two intensities of demand'⁶ requires no necessary depth of shared cultural knowledge between the participants to an exchange: in the case of transactions across cultural boundaries the shared knowledge may be minimal; and in a certain sense all negotiation of value takes place across cultural boundaries and at points of social tension. Moreover,

even where transactions take place within secure cultural boundaries, positional disparities between the participants may entail quite disparate perceptions of the value of the objects being exchanged. Regimes of reading and value never *fully* define the positions that may be occupied within them, nor do they ever fully contain them; in Michel Callon's phrase, every act of framing opens ambivalently both inward and outward, and every framing involves a greater or less degree of overflow.⁷

These principles seem to me to hold generally true of all interpretive or axiological judgements: what the 'mid-level' concept of regime makes possible is a way of understanding how interpretations and valuations are arrived at, the transactional and institutional dimensions of our dealings with texts, and the excess of our textual transactions over the frames that constrain and organise them. It seeks to come to terms with the problem of interpretive multiplicity and the relativity of value judgements without either imposing normative standards or excluding the position of the analyst from the account it offers. Since interpretation is always about contested value, and since the struggle over the value of a text or a thing is enacted across interwoven layers of time, let me add a further principle that informs my thinking in this book:

- 4 Every interpretive and axiological framework is the site of multiple temporalities.

It is this principle that constitutes the ethico-political dimension of interpretation: it understands the past as a function of present interests, and the present, in turn, not as a homogeneous presence but as shot through with all of the pasts a text or a thing brings to it and the futures through which it will pass.

The essays in this volume are thus centrally concerned with questions of value, and in particular with disparities of value and the negotiations that take place over those disparities. Their focus is the processes of 'continuous requalification and valuation' which enable things and texts

PREFACE

to circulate as goods within an economy of value.⁸ Value here takes many forms: the aesthetic value that is ascribed to texts; the economic value that accrues to intellectual property within certain legal regimes; the processes of social valuation that turn waste into worth and back again; the structures of valued knowledge that shape both the disciplines of knowledge and everyday life; and the political struggles over social and cultural difference that give rise, at their most intense, to the desolation of communities and the destruction of cultures. I hope the range of these essays can be taken as performing the continuity I see between struggles over value at each of these levels.

The book is organised in four parts, each of which approaches the social life of texts from a different but complementary perspective. The first part, 'Regimes of value', begins with 'Literature as regime (Meditations on an emergence)', which considers three moments of the emergence of the literary: in a novel by Joseph Roth and in *Don Quixote*; in Balzac's *Lost Illusions*; and in a poem by Frank O'Hara. In these texts the emergence of literature is understood both as an event that occurs within the act of reading, and as an institutionally consolidated structure of value. The concept of the regime of value is then elaborated as a way of understanding the historically specific relations between these two configurations of value. 'Afterlife: texts as usage' follows a poem by Dante Gabriel Rossetti through its later reception in order to theorise the constraints within which interpretation and the rewriting of texts take place and the multiplicity of temporalities involved in any act of historical understanding. The following two essays turn the concept of regime to an understanding of the social life of things. The title of the essay 'A pebble, a camera, a man who turns into a telegraph pole' refers to readings of thingness in a poem by Zbigniew Herbert, a novel by Richard Powers, and Murray Bail's *Eucalyptus*, and the essay itself seeks to replace ontological notions of thingness with a notion of the social ordering of things that I derive from actor network theory. Similarly, the essay on waste, 'Invidious distinction: waste, difference and classy stuff', examines how objects are assigned to regimes that organise

their value as aesthetic, as functional or as rubbish, and in addition that organise the paths by which they can pass between these categorisations. Finally, 'The practice of value' moves from the argument about regimes of value to a general meditation on judgement in everyday life and in the aesthetic sphere.

The second part, 'The commons in information', extends the discussion of value to the underpinning of the aesthetic domain by intellectual property law. The first essay here, 'Signature and brand', analyses the system of the signature, which organises both the aesthetic and the monetary value of works of art. The signature is an index of authorship and originality, and is closely tied to the brand name, which organises value in the world of commercial products, including the world of celebrity. 'The archive under threat' looks at the way libraries and what I call the 'library model of knowledge management' are being transformed by new digital technologies and by control of intellectual property rights in scientific publishing. 'An ethics of imitation' then returns to literature: in this case to a controversy over a novel by Graham Swift, *Last Orders*, in which a number of British newspapers interpreted my critical comments on its close relation to Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* as an accusation of plagiarism. I use the controversy as an opportunity to analyse the ethical constraints on the uses one text may make of another and the historical interpretive regimes that organise those constraints.

The third part, 'Disciplines', brings together in a more explicit way some of the reflections on the shape of disciplines and on the intersection of cultural and literary studies that have run through many of the previous essays. 'Is Elvis a god? Cult, culture, questions of method' examines the posthumous cult of Elvis Presley in order to undertake a critical evaluation of the failure of cultural studies to deal adequately with questions of religion. 'Discipline and discipleship' examines the transmission of knowledge to disciples in religious orders and in psychoanalysis as a way of understanding the structure of academic disciplines and their shaping by processes of transference and counter-transference. The last essay, 'On mid-level concepts', is a

PREFACE

critical analysis of the discipline of literary sociology, and tries to think about how that discipline might be renewed.

The final part, 'Settlement', draws together three essays which address the multiple temporalities around which everyday life and the political settlements that structure it are organised. 'In the penal colony' uses Kafka's story of the same title as a way of reading the dual histories of Port Arthur in Tasmania: as the site of a convict penal settlement and of a more recent massacre by a lone gunman. My interest is in the history of struggles over the uses to be made of the site and the memories inscribed within it. 'A politics of stolen time' examines the stories told by members of Australia's Indigenous stolen generation through the lens of narrative theory in order to ask how discursive injustice can be repaired. Finally, 'Settlement' takes up the figure of the stranger to explore the concepts of settlement and community; it examines the politics of migration and multiculturalism and the 'counterpolitics of foreignness',⁹ and reads a drawing by Tommy McRae in order to propose a counterfactual vision of what Australian settlement might have been.

Part One

Regimes of value

Literature as regime (Meditations on an emergence)

I

At the beginning of Joseph Roth's novel *The Radetzky March* a young infantry lieutenant, seeing the Emperor accidentally put himself in danger in the course of the Battle of Solferino, pushes him to the ground and receives the bullet intended for the Supreme War Lord. Many years later, now a captain and ennobled, Joseph Trotta finds in his son's school reader an account of this incident. What he reads, however, is a quite different story, in which the Emperor

had ventured so far forward among the enemy in the heat of battle that suddenly he found himself surrounded by enemy cavalry. At this moment of supreme danger a young lieutenant, mounted on a foaming chestnut horse, galloped into the fray, waving his sword. What blows he inflicted on the backs and heads of the enemy horsemen.

This mythical lieutenant is then pierced by an enemy lance, but is protected from further harm by ‘our young and fearless monarch’.¹ Reading this exemplary fiction Trotta is outraged – perhaps particularly at his re-assignment to the cavalry; he complains to the Emperor and retires from the army. The story is expunged from the textbooks, but not before Trotta has come to understand ‘that the stability of the world, the power of the law, and the splendour of royalty are maintained by guile’.²

This incident repeats that moment in Part II of *Don Quixote* in which the hero discovers the existence of a spurious account of his adventures, and expresses his fears ‘that if the author of that history of my exploits, which they say is now in print, chanced to be some enchanter hostile to me [*algún sabio mi enemigo*], he has probably changed one thing into another, mingling a thousand lies with one truth, and digressed to narrate actions out of the sequence proper to a faithful history’.³ Two contrary movements are at play in these passages. On the one hand, by being opposed to the spurious fiction which misrepresents Trotta’s or Don Quixote’s life, the prior and encompassing fiction is raised to the power of truth. On the other, this ‘faithful history’, now manifestly unable to control the penetration of (novelistic) life by secondary fictions, becomes even more intensely a fiction, fiction to the second degree, more true because more fictive; the narrative of a resistance to Literature has itself become a work of literature. When, later in this second part of the novel, Don Quixote discovers a spurious Part II (the forged continuation of Cervantes’ novel by Avellaneda), and indeed encounters characters from it, the novel’s theme of the unreality of the literary is further undone: it is now only at a great ironical remove that this initial demystifying step can be taken. It is in this double movement – merely adumbrated in Roth’s novel, but worked out in its full complexity in Cervantes’ – that the emergence of the literary can be traced: an emergence which is not only a punctual event (the initiation of ‘literature’ as a

category of modernity) but a repeated structure of thematised reflexive reference.

Now consider a second such moment of emergence. At a certain point in Balzac's *Lost Illusions*, the provincial poet and man of letters Lucien Chardon (now calling himself Lucien de Rubempré) writes a review of a play in which a leading role is played by the actress Coralie, to whom he has offered 'the virginity of my pen'.⁴ The review is a piece of puffery; Adorno describes it as 'the birth of the feuilleton', and says of it that its '“for the first time” quality gives that contemptible form a conciliatory charm'.⁵ Like the passages from Roth and Cervantes, this embedded text represents a moment of reflexivity, since it explicitly thematises journalistic corruption. Adorno thus understands this feuilleton as 'the work of art's reflection on itself. The work becomes aware of itself as the illusion that the illusory world of journalism in which Lucien loses his illusions also is. Semblance is thereby elevated above itself'.⁶ The literary text is at once like and unlike the piece of mass-produced journalism, sharing its commodified status but transcending it by virtue of its ability to recognise this status and take a critical distance from it.

But another and less redemptive way of reading this moment would be to see it as the crystallisation of a set of tensions that run through this novel, the first major European literary text to explore in a detailed and systematic way the commodity production of books. Two contradictory structures of value, centred on the relationship between Lucien and his friend David Séchard, organise the book. In the first, the literary (exemplified by the poetry of Chénier and of Lucien himself, and by the historical novels of d'Arthez, a self-portrait of Balzac) is counterposed to the corrupt world of journalism and of the book trade to which it nevertheless belongs. This world is governed by the figures of prostitution and of commercial calculation. For the cynical Lousteau, the literary world is a place of bribery, of 'spiritual degradation',⁷ and

of the buying and selling of reputations, a place in which venal journalists viciously attack work of merit and publishers treat books as short-term capital risks. As one ‘wholesale bookseller’ puts it to an anguished author, ‘Walter Scott’s novels bring us eighteen sous a volume, three francs sixty for the complete works, and you want me to sell your rubbishy books for more than that?’⁸ But the category of literature is undercut not so much by its immersion in this world, to which it is at least morally superior, as by its merely honorific status in the text: all the intensity of writing is to be found in the nether world of venal prose, not in the higher realms of apparently autonomous literary production. And this focus of the novel’s energy corresponds to the way, in a second structure of value, its fascination with David Séchard’s ambitions is developed. David is an inventor seeking a process for making cheap, good-quality paper from vegetable pulp. At a time of rapid increase in the production and marketing of books and newspapers it was, says the anonymous narrator,

vitaly necessary to adapt paper-making to the needs of French civilisation, which was threatening to extend discussion to all subjects and to take its stand on a never-ending manifestation of individual thought – a real misfortune, for the more a people deliberates the less active it becomes. And so, curiously enough, while Lucien was getting caught in the cogwheels of the vast journalistic machine and running the risk of it tearing his honour and intelligence to shreds, David Séchard, in his distant printing-office, was surveying the expansion of the periodical press in its material consequences. He wanted to provide the means for the end towards which the spirit of the age was tending.⁹

The contradiction is straightforward, but between that moralising ‘real misfortune’ and a ‘spirit of the age’ [*l’esprit du Siècle*]¹⁰ driven by technological advance and capital investment, the novel’s

sympathies are fully engaged with the latter. The ‘literature’ that emerges from this play of forces and values is neither the transcendent stuff of poetry and the ‘high’ historical novel, nor the mere corruption of journalism, but a writing which is torn between the two and whose defining character is its status, and its dissatisfaction with its status, as a thing to be bought and sold.

Let me finally propose a third moment of emergence of the literary. I find it in one of the canonical sites of (post)modernist lyricism, Frank O’Hara’s ‘The day lady died’, which is built around an opposition between two incommensurate temporalities.¹¹ The first is the mundane time of a chronicle of disconnected events. This chronicle (O’Hara’s ‘I do this and I do that’ genre) sets up several different ways of describing what time it exists in, and veers between them since none seems satisfactory:

It is 12.20 in New York a Friday
 three days after Bastille day, yes
 it is 1959

before moving into the empty punctuality of a train timetable (‘I will get off the 4.19 in Easthampton / at 7.15’). The ‘I’ of the poem gets a shoeshine, buys a hamburger and malted, buys some books: this is a ‘flat literalism’,¹² a recording of surfaces. The books the speaker buys or thinks of buying – a copy of *New World Writing* (‘to see what the poets / in Ghana are doing these days’), an illustrated Verlaine, Hesiod, Behan, Genet – are of the same order as the liquor and cigarettes he buys: packaged writing. It is only with the mention, five lines from the end of the poem, of buying ‘a NEW YORK POST with her face on it’, a reference to the unspoken death of Billie Holiday (the ‘Lady Day’ whose name is inverted in the singsong rhymes of the title), that the turn to the poem’s other temporality begins. This turn is completed in the final quatrain:

and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of
leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT
while she whispered a song along the keyboard
to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing

The sweat is because it's a muggy day (l. 7), but it also perhaps accompanies the 'thinking' that initiates the poem's second plane, that of a remembered time which breaks the episodic time of the previous stanzas and is their underlying reality. This is not the time of Holiday's death (that, too, belongs to the episodic present) but of the song 'whispered...along the keyboard' so that everyone 'stopped breathing', in a kind of death which does and does not resemble hers.¹³ The lyrical stasis of this time is generated above all by the ambivalent syntax and rhythms of the final line, which can be read in three different ways:

to Mal Waldron and everyone | and I stopped breathing

or:

to Mal Waldron | and everyone and I stopped breathing

or, in an unavoidably synthetic reading which, since the syntax is perfectly undecidable, combines the other two:

to Mal Waldron | and everyone | and I | stopped breathing.

The first of these readings moves the song out along the keyboard from the pianist to the whole audience, and then rests on the isolated response of the speaker ('I stopped breathing'). The second, with its isolation of the pianist as the recipient of the song and its simultaneous immersion of the speaker in the audience and separation of him from it ('everyone and I'), slows the line right

down at the end as the speaker takes part in a shared experience. The third, which I think is the only possible way of reading the line, is a 'torn' reading in which 'everyone' goes both ways at once (and in which 'I' perhaps functions ungrammatically both as a quasi-dative – the third recipient of the song – and as the subject of the verb). Again, this reading is slowed right down (we should probably add a further caesura between 'stopped' and 'breathing'), miming the loss of breath which meets the whispering of the song. The 'emergence' of the literary that I find here is the effect of this shift of planes from the mundane to the epiphanic moment of memory, and from the book as packaged writing to the breathed authenticity of the voice as it intimates death and its transcendence.

II

Each of these three different modes of emergence of the literary – as epistemological reflexivity, as sociological reflexivity, and as a shift from mundane time to the ecstatic moment – validly affirms a mode of its being (which is to say a mode of reading, and the forms of textual complexity that correspond to it). But the concept of literary emergence, as I have tried to indicate, specifies a dual temporality: on the one hand, it refers to the literary as an event that occurs within (or *as*) an act of reading; on the other, it refers to a structure of historical value which is variably consolidated in an institutional form. These two configurations of value are always potentially contradictory, since the stability of the latter threatens the status of the former as a momentary and always historically fragile achievement. It is surely clear enough that consolidated canonical formations are historically variable: the continuous reception of 'Homer' or 'Shakespeare' is a matter of constant reinvention within discontinuous frameworks of value and for changing social uses, rather than the constant recognition of a timeless worth. But it is equally the case that the sense of the literary as

fleeting realisation, with its ruptural relation to the ordinary time of writing, cannot be assumed to have a transhistorical force, since it is itself the achievement of a post-Romantic regime of reading. Thus when Thomas Keenan defines literature not as a collection of poems and novels but as ‘our exposure to the singularity of a text, something that cannot be organised in advance, whose complexities cannot be settled or decided by “theories” or the application of more or less mechanical programs’,¹⁴ he ignores the extent to which reading is indeed always organised in advance by the institutions of genre and by norms of semantic determinacy (including norms of indeterminacy).

To posit ‘the literary’ in these three rather different forms is not to posit a common structure, be it that of the self-awareness of language, of the embedding of social function in complex patterns of writing, or of a passage to redeemed authenticity; it is, rather, to ask whether there can be any ontological or functional unity to the category of the literary as I have used it here. The difficulty is not that the question ‘What is Literature?’ cannot be answered, but that many perfectly valid answers are possible. In almost all cases these answers are normative: the literary constitutes a distinct, unitary and special language game recognised contrastively in its relation to one or another non-literary languages, or non-literary uses of language, or non-literary levels of organisation of language, or indeed to canonical literary language itself. It is the opposite of scientific or philosophical statement (Richards, Lacoue-Labarthe), or the opposite of everyday language (Shklovsky); it is language of high intensity (Arnold) or of a high level of semiotic complexity (Eco); it is performative rather than constative language (Burke), language as *aporia* rather than communication; it is language aware of its own rhetorical status and its inherent liability to error (de Man), or a generalised principle of reflexivity, or it is its own impossibility. There is none of these definitions that does not embody a particularist structure of value (if only because of

the assumption of literacy or of the ability to thematise formal structure). Any attempt now to define the literary as a universal or unitary phenomenon necessarily fails to account for the particular institutional conditions of existence which underpin its assumptions, and falls thereby into the fetishism of a culture of social distinction and of the marketing regime it supports.

For, far from being a problem, Literature is alive and flourishing in the great world. Think of the John Keating character played by Robin Williams in *The Dead Poets Society*, tearing pages of formalist and 'official' criticism out of the poetry textbook in order to teach his boys that poetry is life, passion, authenticity, humanity. Think of *Educating Rita*, with its alignment of Literature with working-class feminist vigour pitted against a burnt-out academicism. Think of the valorisation of the literary in *Shakespeare in Love*, or *Orlando*, or *Shadowland*, or any of the recent Jane Austen adaptations. Think of the way the full Romantic concept of authorship continues to flourish in the brand-naming of popular authors or in the production of literary biographies or on *Oprah*, but also in the legal system, where authorship and originality continue to be the major support of copyright. In the café culture of upmarket bookshops, in the cultural promotion apparatus of festivals and chat shows and prizes, and in Hollywood's version of the art movie, Literature remains a timeless product of genius and feeling, directly apprehended in the heart by the empathetic reader. None of this is at all far from Harold Bloom's reverential resuscitation of the Bard, or Lentricchia's profession of an untheorisable love of literature, or what Eve Sedgwick calls 'the organization of liberal arts education as an expensive form of masterpiece theatre'.¹⁵ Indeed, the literary canon never went away: it was always there as negative theology in deconstruction, and the Norton Anthology has simply got fatter. Literary criticism remains an important part of a marketing system and of a highbrow taste culture it blindly serves.

III

There are no texts, readers, meanings or values separate from the institutional framework that determines their place, their use, their very mode of being.¹⁶ Texts and readers are in the first instance not entities but functions, values within a system, and texts and readings count as literary or non-literary by virtue of protocols which govern this distinction and specify the processes (the routine recognitions and the leaps of the heart) by which it is ongoingly realised. These protocols may require the reader to apprehend a text (or rather certain kinds of text and not others) as revealed religious truth, or to scrutinise it for layers of allegorical significance, or to treat it as the basis for a practice of ethical self-perfection, or to actualise rather than restrict its full informational potential.

Mircea Marghescou calls this framework regulating the informational potential of the linguistic code the *regime* of a text, and writes that ‘only a regime designating the textual function through opposition to its linguistic function and above all to other possible semantic functions could give form to this virtuality, transform the linguistic form into information’.¹⁷ In adapting this concept I take it to designate a semiotic apparatus that inspires and regulates practices of valuation and interpretation, connecting people to textual objects or processes by means of normative patterns of value and disvalue.¹⁸ But if it is not to be understood merely as a semiotic relation, the concept of regime must be more broadly defined as a socio-technical apparatus, the structured articulation of a set of knowledge institutions (the school, the church, the theatre, the press), a more or less professionalised custodianship of literary knowledge, a designated set of proper social uses, and a more or less supportive relation to hierarchies of caste or class, of gender, of ethnicity, and so on. Ontologically impure, the literary regime in this broader sense is composed at once of codes, practices, organised bodies of texts, a complex of architectures,

modes of authority, and the interaction and reciprocal definition of people and things.

In thus seeking to cut the ontological knot, the concept of regime shifts attention from an isolated and autonomous ‘reader’ and ‘text’ to the institutional frameworks which govern what counts as the literary, and the possible and appropriate manners of its use and valuation; it asks, not ‘What is this thing and what does it mean?’, but ‘Under what conditions and to what ends does this thing come into being, and what operations can be performed upon it?’ It describes relations rather than substances. The danger is that in this shift of focus this purely relational concept can itself come to be objectified as a static and final cause – as though values and interpretations could simply be read off from this prior and determinant structure as its necessary effects, and in such a way that the details of any textual engagement could be predicted in advance. It is against this kind of mechanical determinism that Keenan’s argument that we should not understand reading as the *application* of a code or program is directed. The literary regime has no reality beyond the shape it gives to acts of reading. It can be ‘recognised’ only by means of an interpretation; it must itself be read, and indeed its force resides entirely in its reinforcement (or its modification) in every act of reading. There is no ‘system’ separate from its actualisations.

To speak of a literary regime is to posit that it is one regime among others, existing in a relationship of overlap and difference with regimes of popular reading, of film, of television, of visual culture, of all the domains of activity that make up the realm of cultural practice and cultural value. No special privilege attaches to a literary regime except insofar as such a privilege can be enforced by political means; although it may define itself as different from and superior to the regimes of popular culture (for example), in fact it is only different. This difference is not, however, that of one social group from another (not, at

least, in complex modern societies); cultural regimes are relatively autonomous of social groups, and do not represent them in the sense of bearing or expressing their essential interests. Although they may recruit preferred constituencies, they are normally not reducible to them. Nor – to make a final qualification to the model of relational difference that I have proposed here – should any of this be taken to imply an absolute relativism, such that no regime either overlaps with or contests the values of another; on the contrary, the principle of relationality requires that we think in terms of a relative relativism, an articulation not of pure differences between fully self-identical formations but of partial, incomplete and constantly contested differences between formations which are themselves internally differentiated and heterogeneous. We ourselves are always positioned, and it is only as a necessary methodological abstraction that we can posit that all regimes should be considered axiologically equal. A literary regime is thus neither simply detached from other regimes, nor a homogeneous structure of value; it is a regulatory manifold which makes possible the free exercise of judgement within a limited but disparate range of interpretive possibilities.

IV

If this attempt to rethink the status of the categories of the literary, the text and reading is to have any value other than as a taxonomic exercise, it will be to the extent that it can help redefine and redirect what goes on in any good practice of reading. What it suggests, I hope, is that an informed and reflexive reading will find it both possible and necessary to *notice* different kinds of structure: the plane of its vision will move from a focus on a ‘text’ with ‘meanings’ to the relation between a text and the set of framing conditions that constitute its readability. In this relation, the ‘text’ is at once a closed aesthetic space, with lines of force

radiating inwards from the framing conditions that establish its closure, and a space of opening which begins to merge with its edges, its borders with the non-textual or the heterotextual. This is not, however, a relation between an 'inside' and an 'outside' or between a 'text' and its 'context', since the framing conditions are rather the margin that at once carries and unsettles that distinction. As the literary regime changes in its interaction with other systems it constantly modifies the valency of the framing conditions and of the textuality they govern; conversely, new readings or uses of a text become incorporated as structural conditions in the textual regime and thus gradually alter the 'context' of the text.

One way of imagining reading in this perspective is as a series of regressions, from 'content' to 'form' (at increasing levels of abstraction), to the level of 'technique' determining the decision to read in this way, to the 'literary' order that specifies these 'technical' decisions and the objects on which they will work, to the structure of value within which this order is hierarchically placed, and so on. A series of decisions about how and what to read is thus framed by this regression of frames, and it is this series itself that then becomes an object of attention. But it does not yield itself to a sociological or literary-historical description: the framing conditions of textuality are not to be thought of as general and objectively transposable structures which can be apprehended in their own right; they are extrapolations, from an act of reading, of a prior order that can be defined only a posteriori. Textuality and its conditions of possibility are mutually constitutive and can be reconstructed only from each other in a kind of hermeneutic bootstrapping which precludes conclusion and the perspective of a total understanding. This is the methodological implication of de Man's reminder that 'what we usually call literary history has little or nothing to do with literature and that what we call literary interpretation – provided only it is good interpretation – is in fact literary history'.¹⁹

'History' is the other major dimension of this interpretive focus on constitutive relations. I use the word here to designate very specifically the discrepancy between the conditions of writing and the conditions of reception of a text, either because of a temporal passage or because of translation from one regime to another. Any text which continues to be read over an extended period of time or beyond the bounds of its own culture will in some sense not be the 'same' text; its value and standing, the interpretive possibilities it is seen to offer, its intertextual relations, its social or affective force and the uses to which it can appropriately be put all shift unstably in this passage. At least two sets of framing conditions must then be included in the act of reading, in such a way that interpretation is governed neither by a moment of origin nor by an unreflecting application of contemporary relevances, but rather sets itself the task of mediating these two moments. A reading of O'Hara's 'The day lady died', for example, would attend both to the moment of the New York 'School' (itself however a retrospective construct), with its dual relation to high-modernist painting and to a camp aesthetic rooted in certain forms of popular culture, and to the canonisation of that 'third generation' of postwar American poetry (which I in turn would read in part through its influence on Australian poets such as John Tranter and John Forbes) and its relation to the problematically marginalised place of poetry in contemporary culture. The mediation of these two moments would then give rise to a restricted set of thematic possibilities (is this a New York poem? A poem about the blues, about African-American culture, about gay culture? A poem about art and its relation to death?) and to choices between them governed by particular, partly definable structures of interest.

This model of a relational reading corresponds, I want to argue, to the project of cultural studies, which I define in shorthand as a concern with the social relations of textuality. The concept of regime expresses one of the fundamental theses of work in cultural

studies: that no object, no text, no cultural practice has an intrinsic or necessary meaning or value or function; and that meaning, value and function are always the effect of specific (and changing, changeable) social relations and mechanisms of signification. The exclusion of the literary from cultural studies in favour of the devalued practices of popular culture was a strategic delimitation of the field against an older and more prestigious discipline which was perceived to be deeply committed to a fetishised object of study. But there is no reason of principle why this exclusion should continue to be sustained, and the time has now perhaps arrived for a rapprochement in which literary studies would learn to attend in a more routine manner to the social relations of signification, and cultural studies would in its turn be reminded of the constitution of its major explanatory categories in practices of reading.

V

To attend to the specific historical, material and semiotic conditions of existence of the literary is to open the way to the relativisation of the literary to other cultural regimes. With this detachment from final grounds, the structures of value organising each formation now lose their claimed universality: internally more or less coherent, they are nevertheless incommensurate and perhaps incommensurable with the axiologies governing other formations. In one sense what this aporia requires of us is an indefinite deferral of the moment of substantive engagement with literary texts as we seek, in a necessarily perpetual prolegomenon to literary studies, to define and account for those prior conditions governing the status, the relevance, the very possibility of the literary. In another, however, that moment has of course always already arrived, and it carries with it critical uncertainties about what can and should constitute literary study.

The moment of 'theory' in Anglophone literary studies was, almost in the same breath, the promise and the undoing

of the possibility of a systematic poetics. The post-structuralist complication of that project failed – for complex political and conjunctural reasons – to work as its continuation, and in its wake the discipline of literary studies has been split between a barely theorised ‘ethical’ criticism, the idiot scion of the classical and neoclassical pedagogies of literary precept, which generates an endless stream of thematic commentary around the category of the (unified or disunified) ‘self’; a deconstructive criticism now enfeebled and demoralised since the disgracing of de Man – an event, however, which perhaps only confirmed an exhaustion that had already firmly set in; a ‘political’ criticism whose routine practice is grounded in the category of identity and for which textuality is deemed to have an expressive or instrumental relation to race or gender or sexual preference; a historicist criticism, now more empiricist than Foucauldian, for which the literary archive has a merely documentary value; and a chattering bellettrism, which has more to do with gossip than with the systematic study of texts. In one sense, the discipline of literary studies is flourishing as never before; in another, it has become lost in irrelevance.

These are not just issues about disciplines, of course; they have to do with the structure of socially valued knowledge, with hierarchies of cultural value in an era of mass visual literacy, and with the transformation of the functions of the university. At a mundane level, the most important questions for literary studies – the questions that go to the heart of its connection to the world – have to do not with research and the higher reaches of disciplinary development but with school and undergraduate teaching and the question of what might count as useful knowledge for a literary propaedeutics. The answer to that question is, I believe, less the imparting of systematic information than the teaching of a practice – of ‘reading’ in the broadest sense – which would meet three conditions: it must be at once continuous with and richer than untutored practice; it must have a theoretical foundation

which can be generalised; and it must be able to be extrapolated from ‘literary’ texts to other discursive kinds. It would be at once a practice of intense scrutiny and intense connection, and it would be integrated with directly practical rhetorical skills of writing and arguing.

Those requirements for theoretical grounding and for a reach to non-literary discourses of course suppose a certain model of disciplinary coherence. Yet, while literary studies has provided an enduringly powerful paradigm of the rhetorical analysis of texts, it continues to find itself in almost complete disarray over the principles that would constitute its integrity as what Northrop Frye called ‘an impersonal body of consolidating knowledge’.²⁰ This disarray means that it is not possible to contemplate redeeming a sense of disciplinary wholeness and purpose by means of a theoretical program. Indeed, disciplinary coherence may not after all be as desirable a goal as the alternative values of theoretical openness and heuristic richness. It may be that the category of the literary itself is an obstacle both to the formation of a systematic knowledge of texts, and to that interdisciplinary dynamic and that sense of exploratory creativity that has characterised literary studies at its best in the decades since the ‘moment of theory’.

It is for this reason that I have stressed the ambivalence of the notion of an emergence of the literary. If that emergence is at every moment a hard-won achievement of the text, it is also what most fully problematises the category of the literary. Its dual temporality sets up a tension and perhaps a necessary contradiction between the interlocking dimensions of instituted value and reflexive awareness. Take the case, first, of *The Radetzky March* and *Don Quixote*. In Roth’s novel, the stability of the world, the very order of the world, the way things are [*der Bestand der Welt*]²¹ is maintained by a fiction, *Schlauheit* – ‘guile’ or ‘cunning’ – in which both the bureaucrats of the Ministry of Culture²² and Education and the Emperor himself, a servant of that order, are complicit. In

Don Quixote this order is twofold. On the one hand, the order of life is above all a simulacrum of that of the book: if Sancho has happened to bestow on Don Quixote the title of Knight of the Sad Countenance, this is because ‘the sage [*sabio*] whose task it is to write the history of my deeds must have thought it right for me to take some title’;²³ Don Quixote’s deeds are governed by an already existent future for which the present has the closure of a past. On the other hand, the order of the world is an essence lying beneath the enchanted surfaces of reality; this enchantment is again the work of ‘sages’ who turn giants into windmills. But what if this order and this false order are the same? This is the conclusion to which Don Quixote is forced when, learning that the history of his deeds is already in print, he surmises that ‘the author of our history is some sage enchanter’ [*debe de ser algún sabio encantador el autor de nuestra historia*].²⁴ We, too, however, are drawn to reach this conclusion, since the disenchantments performed by Part I of the novel themselves become a myth to be disenchanted by a further act of literature. Writing never escapes enchantment; enchantment and guile transform it into a universal principle of untruth.

Similarly irreconcilable tensions inform the other two texts I took to exemplify an emergence of the literary. *Lost Illusions* condemns the commodity production of literature at the very moment in which intellectual property rights – *droits d’auteur* – are becoming entrenched as the basis of the trade in writing, and it does so in a language whose rhetorical force is entirely engaged with the dynamics of contract and money. And ‘The day lady died’, moving between the packaged writing, the ‘little Verlaine / for Patsy with drawings by Bonnard’, and the nameless song of the dying singer, reaches its breathtaking final moment in a line which cannot be read in a grammatically or rhythmically coherent manner.

I would say that literature, ‘the literary’, refuses itself, if this formulation did not repeat so closely the essentialising definitions

that derive a general and ahistorical order from particular instances. These texts tell very different histories of the institution of the literary; but the refusal that is specific to each of them can be taken as a figure for the institution of a reading that would at once display and displace the literary regime and the relations of reading it enables.