

Desperately Seeking Everett: Some Thoughts on Hermeneutic Reading

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Thou hast most traitorously
corrupted the youth of the realm in erecting a
grammar school; and whereas, before, our forefathers
had no other books but the score and the tally, thou
hast caused printing to be used, and, contrary to
the king, his crown and dignity, thou hast built a
paper-mill. It will be proved to thy face that thou
hast men about thee that usually talk of a noun and
a verb, and such abominable words as no Christian
ear can endure to hear.
—Jack Cade to his prisoner, *Henry VI, Part 2*

One of the major problems from which our students suffer, even at the higher levels, has to do with reading: reading with diligence, understanding, and, ideally, with the pleasure that attends discovery. True, many students have long been hermeneutical-readers-of-a-sort, going back, to take a famous example, to interpreting the Beatle's "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" as cipher for LSD, and they can Tweet parsimoniously, relying on prior communications and a shared lifestyle to flesh out their meaning. These are not demanding intellectual performances and remain confined to the trends and fashions of the given moment. The layered and imbricated responses to a

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larger world of meanings, symbols, allusions, and implications is another matter entirely.

The problem, as we know, has deep roots in a widely diffused media and technocyber environment that thins down and disperses the faculty of attention to complex written texts. As Mark Bauerlein writes in *The Dumbest Generation*, web exposure, digital habits, and screen reading hamper “abilities to concentrate upon a single, recondite text, to manage ambiguities and ironies, to track an inductive proof.”¹ E-literacy, he concludes, is not “a full-fledged intellectual practice” and assures only that “the minds of the young plateau at age 18.”² In effect, we are now dealing with a generation for whom Twitter has banished James Joyce to the remainder bin of culture. Speaking metaphorically, we might say that readerly expertise is currently measured by the number of characters that fit into a tiny screen rather than by the number of books that make up a personal bibliography.

The genuine solution to this predicament would involve a massive rethinking and consequent restructuring of a vast set of cultural assumptions about the world and the mind, about the value of reflection and the importance of historical knowledge. But since so profound an undertaking is not “on the books,” as teachers we can only work with effects and symptoms, unsatisfactory as such a belated approach may be. Yet in the current social and cultural milieu there is little alternative.

What I am about to propose is not intended as a binding or universal pedagogical ritual and there are no doubt other ways of engaging the student mind in addressing the problem of readerly destitution. In my own classroom practice, I generally begin for expository convenience by introducing students to a rather simplified but workable distinction between two “kinds” of reading/(writing): what I call “lexicality” on the one hand and “hermeneutics,” a term I use very loosely, on the other. Lexical reading, which is plainly denotative, is predicated on the ability to react empirically to pragmatic designators like numbers, names, and proper nouns arrayed along a simple syntactic armature that relies mainly on the copula as a predicator. It is described by John Willinsky in *The New Literacy* as “the other reading... that goes on outside of literature...the traffic jam of texts—notices, forms,

¹Mark Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future (Or, Don't Trust Anyone Under 30)* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2008), 148.

²Ibid., 66, 18.

accounts, reports, proposals, contracts, directions, manuals.”³ Lexicality entails full transparency and operates as what Michel Foucault in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* calls “horizontal language...which erases itself between message and reader.”⁴ By the time students reach college they should have no difficulty in mediating “lexical” texts although, of course, the reality is very different and the majority of them remain confined to the linguistic crèche, reading several years behind grade level.

Hermeneutic reading is connotative and interpretive, involving the ability to mediate what Foucault calls “vertical language,” which functions as “a mirror, wedged into the thickness of its discourse...[to] open the unlimited space” of its inherent nature and properties.⁵ Hermeneutic discourse is in part opaque and autotelic, semaphoring its own textuality and its relation to other texts as much as it does the world beyond the text, and may be understood as mobilizing three interrelated practices or capacities: (1) interpretive skill, (2) encyclopedic competence, and (3) schematic facility.

Hermeneutic readers should be capable of handling the transitive codes and contextual cues that differentiate literary texts from the tumult of lexical productions that deploy or convey meaning via empirical indicators and a limited set of simple grammatical rules. Which is another way of saying that students should strive to read *imaginatively*, the way Harry Chapin’s little boy in the song “Flowers Are Red” initially saw flowers, as disseminating all the hues of the rainbow—until, unfortunately, his teacher succeeded in drumming polysemy out of him and reducing him to monochromatic lexicality.⁶

I mention as an aside that it is quite useful to refer to *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* as a secondary source, since it is among the few books that students, or at least some of them, may be expected to have read on their own initiative.⁷ The distinction between lexical and hermeneutic discourse is approximately the difference specified in the text between the *Encyclopaedia Galactica* and the *Guide* itself, as for example in the competing descriptions

³John Willinsky, *The New Literary: Redefining Reading and Writing in the Schools* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 66.

⁴Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. and intro. Donald F. Bouchard (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 63–64.

⁵*Ibid.*, 63.

⁶Those interested can find the lyrics to “Flowers Are Red” at the Harry Chapin archive, <http://www.harrychapin.com/music/flowers.shtml>.

⁷Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* (New York: Del Ray Books, 1979).

of alcohol and in particular of that notable drink, the Pan Galactic Gargle Blaster. The *Encyclopaedia's* description of the influence of drink is its "intoxicating effects"; the *Guide* elaborates that it is "like having your brains smashed out by a slice of lemon wrapped round a large gold brick."⁸ Similarly, taking a homely instance from the *Hortico Flower Catalogue*, which I sometimes lug into class, the description of the Hart's Tongue fern—"light green leaves, in bunches; often wavy edged"—would qualify as "lexical" or "horizontal."⁹ Graham Stuart Thomas's description of Hart's Tongue in his *Perennial Garden Plants*, a companion volume, hovers toward the "hermeneutic" or "vertical": "Broad, undulating, rich green strap-shaped fronds produced in shuttlecock formation."¹⁰

Let us consider the three "components" of which hermeneutic reading consists. They will be found to imply one another but can be usefully distinguished for explanatory purposes.

Interpretive skill, a kind of microreading, requires that the reader should be adept at asking the appropriate questions of a text. As Whole Language founder Frank Smith has remarked to me, echoing his words in *Between Hope and Havoc*, "it is necessary to know *how* to ask questions (the appropriate language to put them in) and *when* to ask them. It is also necessary to know *what kinds* of question to ask in particular circumstances."¹¹

As an example of what I am getting at here, let us consider a few passages from William Golding's celebrated novel, *Lord of the Flies*, for many years a fixture on the high school syllabus and occasionally taught at the higher levels. The character named Piggy, fat, ungainly, and cerebral, is stereotypically bespectacled. His glasses, however, have been broken in a scrape with some of the boys—but broken in such a way that one lens remains intact. Why are the glasses not pulverized? Students generally reply by pointing out that the boys must have some means of lighting a fire, using the single lens to focus the sun's rays, but this response confuses motives with motifs, plot factors with thematic purposes, and does not take us very far in our inquiries. I then draw the class's attention to the gruesome manner of Piggy's death. Approaching the renegade tribe of savages led by Jack and his

⁸Ibid., 15.

⁹See Hortico Nurseries, <http://www.hortico.com/default.asp>.

¹⁰Graham Stuart Thomas, *Perennial Garden Plan* (1976; London: Frances Lincoln Limited, 2004), 381.

¹¹Frank Smith, personal communication with author, quoting his *Between Hope and Havoc: Essays into Human Learning and Education* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995).

henchman Roger in order to reason with them and to advance the cause of peace and reconciliation, Piggy is struck on the head by a boulder. The reader is left to contemplate the macabre scene of Piggy's brains oozing out on the rock surface, the result of his efforts at rational persuasion—a craniotomy very different in its purpose from the facetious definition in the *Guide*, where the power of alcohol on the brain is being metaphorically described. A new question now poses itself: is there a connection between the two textual “events” represented by the glasses and the boulder?

With enough time and some gentle prodding, these novice readers eventually come to the “speculative” conclusion that Piggy, the most “intelligent” of the boys, the “brain” and archetypal rationalist, is made by Golding to view life through one lens because he is unable to triangulate, to see in depth, to understand how human beings think, feel, and behave in a terrifying world that always escapes our attempts to pacify and control it. Piggy lacks perspective. It is the common symbol of rationality, the brain, which in a sort of bloody political justice is mutilated and exposed. Suddenly the novel begins to make preliminary analytic sense to students as they learn to isolate objects and episodes within the story and to bring an interrogative rather than a solar focus to bear upon on the various nodes in a supervening network of thematic and narrative effects.

But we still have a long way to go on our hermeneutic journey. Philosophical, historical, and literary references, as Charles Murray puts it in *Real Education*, involve “not just the linguistic ability to decode individual words, but also the logical-mathematical ability to infer, deduce, and interpolate,” that is, the ability to engage in sense-making.¹² Grappling with the text as macroreaders, we need to establish a larger cultural and literary context for the novel, which we proceed to do under the rubric of *encyclopedic competence*. Who is Piggy? Where can we locate him in the literary and philosophical domain in which *Lord of the Flies* writes down its address? What is his moral and pedagogical conception of human evil? Piggy clearly believes that evil is not the result of demonic possession or of some festering psychic substance that must remain inoperable or of the social and economic dispensations that presumably render class warfare inevitable. Quite the opposite. Evil is merely a function of ignorance that may be treated and dispelled through sober inquiry, rational discussion, and open dialogue.

¹²Charles A. Murray, *Real Education: Four Simple Truths for Bringing Schools Back to Reality* (New York: Crown Forum, 2008), 41.

Once people come to see that the “practice of evil” is counterproductive and does not profit them, they will be persuaded to behave differently—in fact, they will be *logically compelled* to transact, as the moralists say, in the mode of ethical reciprocity with their fellow man.

Whose philosophical position is this? In a fortunate class, perhaps one student, the resident logothete, will recognize the Socrates of the major dialogues, the sweet-tempered rationalist who equated evil with ignorance and knowledge with the good. And the class will now be in a position to begin tracking the anti-Socratic and anti-Enlightenment argument that Golding is developing in his signature novel. As we have noted, Piggy-Socrates (or Pigrates, as one student rechristened him) surveys the world through a single lens, oblivious to the fact that human beings are not only rational creatures but destructive and self-destructive beings as well. Unable to think stereoscopically, he misses the central and defining datum of human doubleness. (One may, perhaps, extrapolate to the current geopolitical milieu in which American foreign policy seems disturbingly Pigratic.)

We then proceed to draw something like a hermeneutic wheel, a heuristic device in which the novel is represented as the hub from which a (theoretically indefinite) number of referential spokes radiate outward to the circumference. At the various points of contact we find, apart from the *Republic*, Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*, whose major thesis is that human beings will not always act to their perceived advantage and are just as likely to pursue a deliberate course of self-immolation; Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* and Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation*, with their imaginative theories of ancestral and ontological guilt for a primal act of violence that continues to be acted out; Richard Hughes’s *A High Wind in Jamaica*, which claims that adolescents are a species apart and constitutively pathological—an idea Golding ironically extends to incorporate the adult world as well; and R.M. Ballantyne’s 1857 boys’ book, *The Coral Island*, in which three young men named Ralph, Jack, and Peterkin (i.e., Simon Peter)—from whom Golding drew the names of three of his principal characters—are marooned on a South Pacific island where, as true-born British sailors, they perform an unending series of lofty and benevolent deeds.¹³

¹³Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* (1864); Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (1913); Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (1818); Richard Hughes, *A High Wind in Jamaica* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1929); and R. M. Ballantyne, *The Coral Island* (1857; London: Puffin Books, 1982).

This last textual spoke then leads us to an appreciation of Golding's characteristic method that he employs in almost every novel: the adoption and ironic reversal of a prior text, sometimes reasonably well-known, as is the case with *The Coral Island*, or deeply obscure, as in *Pincher Martin* (1956), which is based on the little-known 1916 novel of that title by H.P. Dorling. (The *Robinson Crusoe* template that also lurks behind *Pincher Martin* is far too evident to require much in the way of glossing.) Golding almost always works from a particular source and proceeds to turn its thesis and atmospherics upside down or inside out. All these related texts are, or should be, *there* in the reader's mental encyclopedia as part of the intellectual context or *tacit structure of knowledge*—and not merely highlighted in HyperCard or Intermedia screen formats that only render visually explicit and part of an external system what should be *implicitly* diffused through the reader's mind. To help the student become aware of and absorb context—and acknowledge its importance—is a large part of the teacher's mandate.

This form of literary study, conducted under the headings of interpretive skill and encyclopedic competence, is more or less what I mean by “hermeneutic reading” and enables students to make productive sense of the texts they are given for interpretation. But they must be trained in its protocols and acquainted over and over again with its proprietary “methods” from early high school to late university if they are ever to become truly competent readers, cultivated, reflective, and in reasonable command of the cultural archive.

But there is still more work to be done. As we adventure along into hermeneutic territory, we familiarize ourselves with the importance of the third element or practice of the hermeneutic paradigm, *schematic facility*. Schemas (scripts, frames, scenarios,) may be defined as the latent zone or “matrix” of implications in which texts invariably repose. Although I do not regard schematic facility as qualitatively or conceptually distinct from the previous two categories of approach examined, it does provide us with a fine discrimination that helps us to understand what we do when we are thinking and reading hermeneutically. Jeremy Campbell in *The Improbable Machine* suggests that schemas come in two varieties: as “patterns of worldly knowledge” that extend and amplify information in order to turn fragments into wholes, which he calls “experiential,” and as “invented or discovered contexts” that supply missing information to make sense of enigmatic instances or events, which he denominates “hypothetical.”¹⁴

¹⁴Jeremy Campbell, *The Improbable Machine: What the Upheavals in Artificial Intelligence Research Reveal About How the Mind Really Works* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 92 *passim*.

I cite as an example of the first an occasion from my own experience. Shopping in the kitchen appliance section of our local grocery store, I overheard an immigrant housewife asking the assistant for *luminal oil*, a request that produced only head-scratching perplexity. But the contextual markers or cues were readily available to fill out the schema and complete the pattern: a prior difficulty with English on the part of the customer, the obvious fact that what she was looking for would be found in the kitchen appliance department, and that this particular item had something to do with cooking. The woman was clearly searching for a roll of *aluminum foil*. The shop assistant would have had to schematize, just as my students contemplating Piggy's glasses were being asked to *speculate*, to fill out the paronomastic and contextual schema.

Hypothetical frames demand a somewhat more strenuous and acrobatic turn of mind. Again, I do not see the "hypothetical" as *categorically* different from the "experiential" but rather as a more recondite and elusive form of inference and surmise. Hypothetical schemas are needed to make sense of what Bertrand Russell called "propositions of material implication," that is, to discern the logical relations in which propositions are juxtaposed solely on the basis of whether they are true or false or whose force of mutual impingement is initially invisible.¹⁵ Campbell's example is the conditional hypothesis: "If glass is a fragile material, then ships may float."¹⁶ How do the two halves of the proposition link up with one another? This question evolves into a valuable classroom exercise in hermeneutic flexibility. Conducted patiently and with a few intermittent hints, it produces an answer that is then seen to have been obvious once we have begun to think *laterally* (in Edward de Bono's phrase): the ship will not be launched until it is christened with a bottle of champagne.

But schemas also *restrict* the number of possible interpretations by legislating the supply of information according to the canons of plausibility derived from worldly knowledge and common experience. This is precisely why computers, which speak binary or AI, are so interpretively crude, a pack of hermeneutic primitives that would flunk out of kindergarten. They possess no experiential dimension to serve as a check on the production of hypothetical scenarios or contexts. Stephen Pinker in *The Language Instinct*

¹⁵Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell, *Principia Mathematica*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910), 7.

¹⁶Campbell, *Improbable Machine*, 94.

offers a resonant example of this restrictive deficiency. A computer will read the cliché, “time flies like an arrow,” in five different ways, unable to decide which is the most sensible interpretation:

- time proceeds as quickly as an arrow
- measure the speed of flies as you measure the speed of an arrow
- measure the speed of flies as an arrow would measure the speed of flies
- measure the speed of flies that resemble an arrow
- time-flies are fond of arrows¹⁷

The computer generates a surfeit of possible interpretations because it is very poor at schematizing the world into which it has been inserted but which it has neither experienced nor reflected upon of its own volition. It has no tacit knowledge. John Casti in *Complexification* gives as an example of cybernetic ineptitude the notorious Russian-English computer translation program that rendered the English idiom “out of sight, out of mind” as “blind and insane.”¹⁸ I have heard that a computer rendered the aphorism “the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak” into the Russian equivalent of “the vodka is agreeable but the meat has gone bad.” One recalls, too, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s embarrassment as she presented to her Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov what was intended as a lighthearted gift of a plastic reset button with the Russian word “peregruzka” printed on top:

“We worked hard to get the right Russian word. Do you think we got it?” Clinton said as reporters, allowed in to observe the first few minutes of the meeting, watched.

“You got it wrong,” Lavrov said, to Clinton’s clear surprise. Instead of “reset,” he said the word on the box meant “overcharge.”¹⁹

Her aides may well have used a computer translation.

Journalist Earl Fowler has reported on the hijinks of the infamous Macintosh spell-checker he has dubbed Quasimodem, which rendered *Mein Kampf* as “mean camp,” “Daedelus” as “Deadfalls,” and *Honi soit qui mal y pense* as “Honey soft quit male penis.” There appears to be no relief in sight.

¹⁷See Stephen Pinker, *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1995), 208.

¹⁸John Casti, *Complexification: Explaining a Paradoxical World Through the Science of Surprise* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 155.

¹⁹David S. Cloud, “VIDEO: Wrong Red Button,” *Politico* 44, March 6, 2009, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0309/19719.html>.

Even the highly touted Bottom Up connectionist or parallel processing system, which is supposed to rescue the rigid Top Down AI approach, is subject to the same schematic or commonsense-knowledge problem. As Casti points out, “in order for a neural net to share our human sense of generalization...it must share our idea of what constitutes an appropriate output, suggesting that it must share our experience, needs, desires and emotions, as well as have a humanlike body with appropriate physical abilities for movement, sensory inputs and the like.”²⁰ Thus even the Bottom Up self-organizing program, which has taken the AI and AL (Artificial Life) communities by storm, “will founder on...the reef of commonsense knowledge.”²¹

Sherry Turkle, lobbying in *Life on the Screen* for the new model of simulated identity, admits that “to a certain extent, knowledge is inherently experiential, based on a physicality that we each experience differently”—but also experience in common.²² However, the disclaiming qualifier, “to a certain extent,” is just plain wrongheaded. The “extent” is total. If that “extent” were limited and partial, were indeed merely “a certain extent,” the schematizing of experience on which thought depends would be intrinsically uncertain and evanescent and Turkle’s three hundred-fifty-page book would have weighed in as a ninety-nine-page weakling.

Schematic interpretation, then, whether experiential or hypothetical, involves the active recruiting of contextual frames and narrative scenarios to help us make sense of events, objects, utterances, propositions of material implication, and literary passages and texts. In the last case, context may not be so much implied as *permitted*, but only if a given set of *textual constraints* is observed, requiring a certain prior knowledge that both expands and limits our interpretive possibilities. The ability to deploy schemas with minimal, let alone increasing facility is precisely what E.D. Hirsch in such books as *Cultural Literacy* and *The Knowledge Deficit* has advocated under the heading of “background knowledge” in which so many of our students—and our former students—are calamitously inadequate.²³

²⁰Casti, *Complexification*, 160.

²¹*Ibid.*, 161.

²²Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1995), 238.

²³E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Knowledge Deficit: Closing the Shocking Education Gap for American Children* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007) and *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

Consider the American loan officer who was so lacking in the hermeneutic ability to pick up even the most obvious cues and to locate them in a larger cultural and historical context that she failed to report future 9/11 terrorist Mohamed Atta's interest in buying a crop-duster, despite the plethora of incriminating revelations he let slip (see www.historycommons.org for September 20, 2009). Although, had her superiors received the information, it may credibly be feared they would have been equally stymied. The American administration, clumsily canceling the missile defense shield over Eastern Europe *on the anniversary* of the Soviet invasion of Poland is another instance of poor contextual reading, this time of the historical codex.

Summing up the argument to this point, we may say that interpretive skill, encyclopedic competence, and schematic facility are patently interrelated and reciprocal determinants of cultural literacy, and constitute the essential and generative basis of what we are calling hermeneutic reading.

To provide my students with a capsule and diagrammatic instance of how this kind of constructive reading is done, I set them a whimsical test from Bruce Sterling's cyberpunk novel, *Islands in the Net*, involving data-pirates and techno-terrorists clashing in a threatening future.²⁴ At one point the novel's hero finds a scrap of paper containing the "Grenadian code." In order to anticipate the nature of the disaster he suspects is looming, he must decipher the following:

$$3A3V - O \setminus \dots = A - -S^{25}$$

Proceeding both interpretively and schematically, that is, by asking the right questions and supplying the missing data, students realize that the code works via a minus device: a crucial element is absent, which turns out to be nothing more than a vertical line that must be attached at the appropriate places, with the ellipsis specifying the three kerns of an N. The code then resolves into the statement BABYLON FALLS. A "lexical reading" tells us that Babylon was a city on the Euphrates founded in 2000 BC and that etymologically it means "gateway of the gods." A "hermeneutic reading" connects it to the Bible (Peter 5:13; Revelations 10:31, 14:8, 17:5, 18:2), to St. John's designation of persecuting Rome as the "whore of Babylon," and ultimately to the cultural amplification of the term to represent exile,

²⁴Bruce Sterling, *Islands in the Net* (New York: Arbor House, 1988).

²⁵Ibid.

captivity, decadence, oppression, ungodliness. In the novel, the reader becomes aware that Singapore, where the cipher is discovered, is about to be destroyed.

Or the class is set a short exercise from the poet Albert Goldbarth's word game, the *Flexicon*—no doubt based on physicist Richard Feynman's origami-like paper *flexagons* used as aids to topographical speculation—asking them to discern the context or schema that unifies the following list of apparently unrelated words.

Diminutive
Big
Unwritten
Invisible
Pulchritudinous
Unrecognizable
Fancy
Uncapitalized
Misspelled

At first the *Flexicon* tends to puzzle them greatly but eventually someone notices that “Diminutive” is a big word and “Big” is a diminutive one, “Pulchritudinous” is an ugly word, “Invisible” a visible one, etc. Trying to specify the general principle at work in clear language proves an even more difficult task. Finally we arrive at the consensus that each word possesses or implies the opposite of whatever property it denotes. To spiffy this up a bit, we apply a name to the new verbal category. I suggest “paradoxics,” “paralexics,” or “andithetons” (deriving this latter from the Greek word for “opposite”). One student felicitously proposes “negawords,” which the class, with my grudging approval, votes in as the best candidate.

At this point it is important to retrace our steps to ensure that students understand we are not treating of Platonic essences or absolute formal unities and that neither lexicality nor hermeneutics in the sense in which we are using these terms are pure concepts, but rather presuppose one another and are in a state of constant interaction. To this end my students were occasionally assigned the phone book as a primary text with the object of permitting them to discover for themselves how lexical items can exist in hermeneutic contexts. From time to time, as was my pedagogical hope, a bewildered young man or woman, realizing the task was unrealistic and

looking for an obvious shortcut, would stumble across what was until recently the last entry in the Montreal directory, a certain Zzzzzzzzeuss Zeke, reachable at 937-9797 and residing at 706 Laporte Street. Surely, the more erudite and prepared of the students would reason that an individual whose last name resembles that of an Olympian god and whose first name is the diminutive of a Hebrew prophet's; whose phone number is a play of three sevens (seven also being the number of Zs that introduce his cognomen) and three nines, all portentously mystical numbers; and whose address sums as thirteen while giving us in translation from the French "the door" or "the gate" (almost identical to the word "Babylon"), must signify in some more arcane and oracular sphere than that represented by a mere phone book. Is it possible that the humble directory is in fact a hermeneutic text, a repository of mysterious codes inviting schematic conjectures and encyclopedic resonances, or at least amenable to such interpretative operations, like the laundry list in Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*?²⁶ Unfortunately we will never know for certain. After threatening those intrepid students—who persisted in calling at any time of the day or night with various exquisite forms of torture—Zeke discontinued his service.

Conversely, a hermeneutic item may find itself firmly lodged in an apparent lexical context, a common practice in many different kinds of text and especially in newspaper headlines, which furnish exemplary classroom material. After the 1995 referendum on independence in Quebec, the narrow defeat of the Yes side was consistently reported in the newspapers as a "near victory." The phrase "near victory," as students gradually come to see, is rhetorically an attempt, either out of righteous conviction or political anxiety (depending on whether one is reading the partisan French or oppositional English papers, respectively), to disguise a modification as a datum, an interpretation as a given. A "narrow defeat" is the proper and accurate description of the results. Further, a narrow defeat is still, under the circumstances in question, a total defeat. For the fact remains that *in a referendum context* the pro-sovereignty camp was beaten as decisively by 50,000 votes as it would have been by 500,000 (i.e., a 1–0 score represents as complete a victory as 10–0). Thus, the two signifying orders, of explicit reference on the one hand and implicit allusion on the other, are mutually implicated, to our endowment or beguilement as the case may be.

²⁶Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum* (New York: Harcourt, 1989).

To conclude this lesson into the *penetralia* of mature and competent reading, which commonly extends over a period of several months, students also need to learn that lexical and hermeneutic texts—since, as we have seen, these do not constitute formal essences—are most saliently distinguishable by the ways in which they employ different informational economies governing the conveyance or evocation of meaning. “Lexicality” relies for the most part upon redundancy, that is, signs present in discourse to facilitate communication, in other words, semantic repetition the purpose of which is to reduce ambiguity to zero. (This last sentence is about 80 percent redundant and thus qualifies as manifestly “lexical.”) The brochure issued by the fitness center at my college advertises its amenities and services in part as follows (I italicize the redundant elements):

The center provides *a variety of courts for your needs*. Eight courts {in all}...*are available for use*. All of our courts have sanded floors for *improved play*...*Eight badminton courts are available for use in the gymnasium*...

And so on, for the rest of the paragraph, which would need to be restructured to read coherently.

The redundant items are redundant because they are strictly unnecessary from the point of view of informational content. They tell us nothing new. They follow from the first law of information theory that asserts that the information carried by one signal in a string of signals is an inverse function of the probability of that signal occurring. In other words, the more new information you pack into a sentence, the less communication you get out of it. The redundancy is there to ensure the message gets across. This paragraph, like the sentence I flagged above, is almost entirely redundant.

Of course, this is not to diminish the need for new or supplementary information. In a December 20, 2009, *New York Times* article, lexicographer Erin McKean cites a 1987 study in which children were given dictionary definitions of a word and instructed to use it in a sentence. One child, presented with the word “erode” and the definition “eat out, eat away,” wrote: “Our family erodes a lot.”²⁷ Here we note that the definitional redundancy, “eat out, eat away,” failed to ensure proper communication. Lexicality hinges chiefly on repetition but obviously requires a modicum of novelty and specificity to guarantee efficient transmission.

²⁷Erin McKean, “Redefining Definition,” *New York Times*, December 20, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/20/magazine/20FOB-onlanguage-t.html>.

Hermeneutic texts, on the other hand, depend upon patterning devices, or the circulation of motifs, metaphors, and symbols, which establish ambiguity as a structural principle and which require to be plugged into the cultural encyclopedia. To take a standard instance, when Hamlet replies to his revenant father: “Remember thee?/ Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat/ In this distracted globe...,”²⁸ the reader’s experience of the text is enhanced by recognizing the triple reference propagated by the word “globe”: the head (where “memory” may hold a seat), the Globe Theatre (where a playgoer with memory may hold “a seat”) and the world (in which people with memories and theatres full of playgoers may be found).

Or to take an example from Wallace Stegner’s *Mormon Country*: when a certain Everett Ruess, who vanished at the age of twenty-one into the outback of Utah, inscribed a message on a cave wall near Davis Canyon, “Nemo, 1934,” he baffled a search party composed of inveterate lexical readers.²⁹ A hermeneutic reading of the cryptograph would have yielded several interesting possibilities. Ruess may have been comparing himself to a lone-wolf pioneer-like Captain Nemo in *20,000 Leagues Under The Sea* or to Odysseus in the Cyclops episode who gives his name as Noman (Latin, *Nemo*)—a coded token that he intended to shed his identity and disappear. Or, perhaps, he may have been playfully tempting his pursuers with a disclosure of his purpose to make his way toward No Man’s Mesa near Navaho Mountain, an easy enough trek from Davis Canyon, in which case he would have been found in record time instead of vanishing into local legend.

Teaching students to become hermeneutic readers, if I may pursue the analogy, is like setting them on the trail that Everett Ruess has left behind in the cultural text, either to respect his literate intentions to escape mythically into freedom or, alternatively, to visit No Man’s Mesa, where a resolution of the mystery one way or another may shortly or eventually be expected—or, for all we know, ironically deferred. And this expedition, whether to destinations or to receding horizons, we may tenably accomplish by taking binocular care of our exegetical equipment, ensuring that both lenses of our reading glasses, the lexical and the hermeneutic, the pragmatic and the interpretive, remain polished and intact.

²⁸*Hamlet*, The New Folger Shakespeare Library, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), 1.5.102–5.

²⁹Wallace Stegner, *Mormon Country* (1942; Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 325.

But one has to be realistic. As likely as not, if I may put it this way, Piggy's allegoric glasses have been shattered to smithereens, and eyes that would see, eyes that would read, are effectively purblind or amblyopic. In this case, nothing much will help. "The notion that we know how to make more than modest improvements in their...reading performances," writes Charles Murray, "has no factual basis" and is only an expression of what he calls "educational romanticism."³⁰ Nevertheless, precisely because one never really knows, the effort must be made. Like many teachers, I have suffered my share of students who gave every indication of being utterly hopeless cases. And yet, to my great satisfaction, many of these responded to patient and prolonged "treatment" and rose to the challenge to transcend their own shortcomings or realize their latencies. They became readers and some even became good readers, pursuing an independent course beyond the curriculum.

Reading books with perseverance and comprehension is a prerequisite for reading the world in which, to quote Martin Heidegger, one finds oneself *geworfen*—"thrown." The world is a semiotic maze that students must learn to interpret and negotiate and find their way in, and teachers are not seeing eye dogs forever leashed to their wards' impairment.

³⁰Murray, *Real Education*, 66.