

Reception: texts, readers, audiences, history

Vol. 1 (Fall, 2008)

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John Frow, “Afterlife: Texts as Usage,” pp. 1-23

The study of textual reception works from an assumption that textuality is not fixed at a single moment in time; that the ontology of the text is thus historically dynamic; and, most radically, that rather than discrete and fixed texts we can speak only of textual processes, of which every moment is a textual variant. It assumes that these processes are open-ended, and that meaning and value are therefore unpredictable as the textualization process passes from one regime of reading to another. Finally, it follows Gadamer in assuming that neither readers nor analysts of reading are external to this process: “All encounter with the language of art is an encounter with an unfinished event and is itself part of this event” (Gadamer 99). In this paper I examine some of the consequences of these assumptions and some of the methodological problems raised by the systematic study of reception.

I begin by tracing, briefly and schematically, some moments of the reception of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s long poem “Jenny” – a text chosen for this case study in part because it raises the question of the conditions under which texts become and remain readable. The poem was first drafted in non-dramatic form in 1847-8; we have no surviving text. It was completely rewritten in 1859 or 1860 for publication in a volume that was to have been called *Dante at Verona and Other Poems*. The sole text of this version was transcribed in a calf-bound manuscript volume. When Rossetti’s wife died in 1862, however, he placed this manuscript volume in his wife’s coffin and it was buried with her. Seven years later – during which time Rossetti had written to various friends asking if they had copies of this and other poems – the coffin was exhumed (the text of “Jenny” had “a great hole through all the leaves”)¹ and the poem was further revised for publication in the 1870 collection simply entitled *Poems*.

“Jenny” is structured as the train of thought – partly interior monologue, partly perhaps spoken² – of a “young and thoughtful man of the world” (“The Stealthy School” 217) - as he sits in the room of the prostitute Jenny with her head resting on his knees; at some point he realizes that she has fallen asleep, but his meditation continues unchanged. Beginning with an epitaph from *Merry Wives of Windsor* IV, i,

63-64 – “Vengeance of Jenny”’s case! Fie on her! Never name her, child!” (where the continuation of Mrs Quickly’s words, “if she be a whore,” is conspicuously omitted) – the poem addresses

Lazy laughing languid Jenny,
Fond of a kiss and fond of a guinea,
Whose head upon my knee tonight
Rests for a while, as if grown light
With all our dances... (*Collected Poetry* 60,1-5)

Addressing her, the poem nevertheless treats her as an object as the speaker projects upon her his fantasies about prostitution and his confused oscillation between his feelings of shame, of disgust, and of sympathy. She is at once sensuously present

—

... your wealth of loosened hair,
Your silk ungirdled and unlac’d
And warm sweets open to the waist,
All golden in the lamplight’s gleam... (47-50)

— and a moral abstraction:

Yet, Jenny, looking long at you,
The woman almost fades from view.
A cipher of man’s changeless sum
Of lust, past, present, and to come,
Is left... (276-80)

This man speaking to and about (and in part on behalf of) a woman wonders repeatedly what is going on in her head:

Whose person or whose purse may be
The lodestar of your reverie? (20-21)

... I wonder what you're thinking of.
 If of myself you think at all,
 What is the thought?... (58-59)

and yet is at times confident that there is no mystery: “Ah Jenny, yes, we know your dreams,” he claims (364). The answer he thinks he knows is the desire for money, or perhaps Jenny’s awareness of the interchangeability of money and sexual desire. A recurrent motif of gold and gold coin runs through the poem to reinforce this equation. Jenny’s hair “Is countless gold incomparable” (11), her skin is “all golden in the lamplight’s gleam” (50); the comparison of Jenny with another, virtuous woman “makes a goblin of the sun” (206: “goblin” is slang for a gold twenty-shilling coin). For Jenny as for the speaker “golden sun and silver moon” are “counted for life-coins to one tune” (l224, 226). Her face is imagined as framed within a “gilded aureole” (230). And when the speaker finally leaves the room,

I lay among your golden hair
 Perhaps the subject of your dreams,
 These golden coins... (341-3)

I think I see you when you wake,
 And rub your eyes for me, and shake
 My gold, in rising, from your hair,
 A Danaë for a moment there. (376-9)

This half-mocking reference to his own role as Zeus is then taken up in a final, cynical reference to the venality of his relation to the prostitute:

Jenny, my love rang true! for still
 Love at first sight is vague, until
 That tinkling makes him audible. (380-2)

The theme of sexual venality is not thought in isolation, however, but structured by paired sets of oppositions running through the poem. One of them sets

up a contrast between Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary, neatly encapsulated in the line:

Poor shameful Jenny, full of grace. (18)

This pairing merges with that of the virtuous and the fallen woman. Jenny sleeps

Just as another woman sleeps!
 Enough to throw one's thoughts in heaps
 Of doubt and horror, – what to say
 Or think, – this awful, secret sway,
 The potter's power over the clay!
 Of the same lump (it has been said)
 For honour and dishonour made,
 Two sister vessels. Here is one. (177-84)

The poem then introduces the other, “my cousin Nell”, “the girl I’m proudest of”, who is yet Jenny’s sister under the skin. The two are

So pure, – so fall’n! How dare to think
 Of the first common kindred link? (207-8)

Prostitution can barely be spoken, and if it is, it is with the ambivalence of one who, for all his denunciation of “this which man has done” (242), can scarcely move beyond his sense of Jenny’s degradation. A convoluted metaphor presents Jenny as “a rose shut in a book/ In which pure women may not look” (253-4); and she seems herself a book, “half-read by lightning in a dream” (52). Jenny cannot speak and can barely be spoken; the speaker speaks her, but in a way that emphasizes his own complicity in her “case”:

And must I mock you to the last,
 Ashamed of my own shame...? (383-4)

As Helsinger puts it, “The speaker of … ‘Jenny’ only half grasps the evasions that shape his meditations on the prostitute who *is* the pleasure men consume while (he imagines) she herself shares – and can therefore embody – that morally suspect but consuming passion”(905). For Harris this is more generally an evasion of Jenny’s personhood which is carried by the structure of (silent) address itself and by her purely phantasmatic existence in the speaker’s thoughts; “the participants in this deathly still life cannot or do not engage with each other, linguistically or sexually. The prostitute sleeps; the protagonist keeps silence. Only money links them” (198).

“Jenny” was a favourite amongst Rossetti’s own poems. He is, of course, its first and most important reader, and his successive rereadings take the form of successive rewritings. These in turn evoke a public reception which we might conveniently date to late 1859 or 1860, when Rossetti showed a copy of the first major revision – the one that was soon to be interred with his wife’s body – to his friend and mentor John Ruskin. Ruskin hated it. He wrote to Rossetti:

I have read *Jenny*, and nearly all the other poems, with great care and with great admiration. In many of the highest qualities they are entirely great. But I should be sorry if you laid them before the public entirely in their present state.

I do not think *Jenny* would be understood but by few, and even of those few the majority would be offended by the mode of treatment. The character of the speaker himself is too doubtful. He seems, even to me, anomalous. He reasons and feels entirely like a wise and just man – yet is occasionally drunk and brutal: no affection for the girl shows itself – his throwing the money into her hair is disorderly – he is altogether a disorderly person. The right feeling is unnatural in him, and does not therefore truly touch us. I don’t mean that an entirely right-minded person never keeps a mistress: but if he does, he either loves her – or, not loving her, would blame himself, and be horror-struck for himself no less than for her, in such a moralizing fit.³

This is a mode of ethical criticism that treats and judges characters as though autonomous of their textual realization (and assumes that only a man can be a “right-

minded person”). In presenting its distaste for the poem’s sexual explicitness as a concern about its “too great boldness for common readers”(234), it shifts its own unease to a generalized other – an all-too common usage of the figure of the reader. And as McGann points out, “Though Ruskin meant this for a negative comment on the poem, it merely restates in judgmental terms Rossetti’s own comments on his “young and thoughtful man of the world”(*The Scholar’s Art* 93) [see below].

Ruskin’s distaste is repeated on a grand scale in an essay that appeared in late 1871 in *The Contemporary Review*, and again in pamphlet form in 1872. Published pseudonymously, “The Fleshly School of Poetry: Mr D.G. Rossetti” was a savage attack by the Scottish poet Robert Buchanan on Swinburne (whom he had earlier castigated as being “unclean for the mere sake of uncleanness”)⁴ and, more specifically, on Rossetti’s 1870 *Poems*. Buchanan claims not to be disturbed by the representation of sexuality itself; the “fleshliness” of this school, he says, “is a quality which becomes unwholesome when there is no moral or intellectual quality to temper and control it” (Maitland[Buchanan] 335). Rossetti’s poems display a “morbid deviation from healthy forms of life”, and contain “nothing virile, nothing tender, nothing completely sane” (“sane” presumably in the Latin sense of “healthy”; but perhaps not (Maitland[Buchanan] 337)). Of “Jenny”, which he calls “in some respects the finest poem in the volume” (Maitland[Buchanan] 335), he writes:

What we object to in this poem is not the subject, which any writer may be fairly left to choose for himself; nor anything particularly vicious in the poetic treatment of it; nor any bad blood bursting through in special passages. But the whole tone, without being more than usually coarse, seems heartless. There is not a drop of piteousness in Mr Rossetti. He is just to the outcast, even generous; severe to the seducer; sad even at the spectacle of lust in dimity and fine ribbons. Notwithstanding all this, and a certain delicacy and refinement of treatment unusual with this poet, the poem repels and revolts us, and we like Mr Rossetti least after its perusal ... we perceive that the scene was fascinating less through its human tenderness than because it, like all the others, possesses an inherent quality of animalism ... “Vengeance of Jenny’s case”, indeed! – when such a poet as this comes fawning over her, with tender comparison in one eye and aesthetic enjoyment in the other!

(Maitland[Buchanan] 344)

Rossetti responded later in 1871 with a defence of “Jenny” that stresses the poem’s dramatic form:

Nor did I fail to consider how far a treatment from without might here be possible. But the motive powers of art reverse the requirement of science, and demand first of all an *inner* standing-point. The heart of such a mystery as this must be plucked from the very world in which it beats or bleeds; and the beauty and pity, the self-questionings and all-questionings which it brings with it, can come with full force only from the mouth of one alive to its whole appeal, such as the speaker put forward in the poem, – that is, of a young and thoughtful man of the world. To such a speaker, many half-cynical revulsions of feeling and reverie, and a recurrent presence of the impressions of beauty (however artificial) which first brought him within such a circle of influence, would be inevitable features of the dramatic relation portrayed (217).

Buchanan went on to produce several even more vicious attacks on Swinburne and on Rossetti (calling him, for example, “an amatory foreigner ill-acquainted with English”);⁵ but his unmasking as a man hiding behind a pseudonym, together with the personal damage he did to Rossetti, who attempted to commit suicide the following year, harmed his own reputation far more than his review did Rossetti’s. Equally disturbing for Rossetti personally was the publication in June 1872 of Browning’s *Fifine at the Fair*, which he came to read as “a running commentary upon *Jenny*”, a poem which “because of its long and eventful career and the personal implications of its contents, had become identified by Rossetti with his own moral character”(DeVane 463).

What is significant about this controversy, and Ruskin’s private criticism which preceded it, is in part of course what it tells about the limits of the speakable in Victorian England, but more importantly, perhaps, the way it opens out the central interpretive question generated by or around the poem: the question of dramatic voice and the aesthetic distance it sets up between the moral positions of character and implied author. It’s not clear that Rossetti’s claim to have relativized the poem’s moral perspective to the figure of the protagonist is more than an ex post facto rationalization: Buchanan’s juxtaposition of “tender comparison” (i.e., between Jenny

and the moral context of prostitution) with “aesthetic enjoyment” seems to me to raise real questions about the poem’s treatment of the evasions practised by the speaker – questions that surface as a tension in later readings between praise of Rossetti’s control of the reader’s complicit identification with the young man,⁶ and a questioning of “the distinction between speaker and poet which has been so important in the critical history of the poem”(Sheets 320).

Although Rossetti’s poetic influence continued, with the strong support of William Morris and Walter Pater, to be felt through the aesthetic movement of the 1890s, his reputation as a poet has not survived the nineteenth century – or, to put this differently, he gradually becomes unreadable as literary modernism undertakes what McGann calls “the expulsion of Rossetti from cultural memory”(*Rossetti* xviii). (His sister Christina, by contrast, has continued to be read as a minor but significant poet.[See Chapman and Greer]). Blaming T.S. Eliot in particular for misunderstanding or misrepresenting Rossetti, McGann suggests that an alternative and possible trajectory of reception having to do with the affinity between Rossetti and Surrealism was simply never taken up by twentieth-century readers. He himself attempts a radical recuperation of Rossetti by means both of the multimedia electronic Rossetti Archive which he established at the University of Virginia with the aim of making the corpus of interconnected textual and visual materials widely available,⁷ and of the online interpretation game for multiple players, IVANHOE, one of the demonstration gameplays for which is based on “Jenny”(“Like Leaving the Nile” 127).

In spelling out the conceptual foundations of IVANHOE McGann enunciates a number of principles that are directly relevant to the argument about the constitution of textuality in and through reception that I am developing here. These include:

2. Textual objects arise codependently with interpretive action.
3. No textual object is self-identical (because it only appears when it gets measured/interpreted, and that act alters the object).
4. Interpretive actions are always performative/deformative (“Like Leaving the Nile 6).

How is the textual object “Jenny” performatively constituted in successive acts of rereading and rewriting, and in particular how is its continuing readability or unreadability determined? The modernist reading of Rossetti is, as McGann suggests, largely negative, directed in particular against an archaicising poetic language and the lack of connection between the poems’ medievalist fantasies and what we now take to be the major realities of the Victorian period: the industrial revolution, rapid technological change, urbanization, and imperialism.

Those poems that have continued to be read are, paradoxically, precisely the ones that Buchanan denounced, including “Jenny”; and the modernist reception of these texts, rather than being hostile, has been ambivalent in its response to their poetic form and their representation of sexuality. T.S. Eliot refers directly to “Jenny” in a section of the first draft of “The Waste Land” about the literary bluestocking Fresca (“women grown intellectual grow dull”), steeped in “Symonds – Walter Pater – Vernon Lee”:

Fresca! in other time or place had been
A meek and lowly weeping Magdalene;
More sinned against than sinning, bruised and marred,
The lazy laughing Jenny of the bard (27)

Ezra Pound wisely deleted the whole misogynistic passage. He himself engages much more seriously with “Jenny” in one of the poems making up “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” – a poem that exorcizes the preraaphaelite, archaicizing tone of much of Pound’s own early poetry (see West 63-67):

Yeux glauques

Gladstone was still respected,
When John Ruskin produced
“King’s Treasuries”; Swinburne
And Rossetti still abused.

Fœtid Buchanan lifted up his voice
When that faun’s head of hers

Became a pastime for
Painters and adulterers.

The Burne-Jones cartons
Have preserved her eyes;
Still, at the Tate, they teach
Cophetua to rhapsodise;

Thin like brook water,
With a vacant gaze.
The English Rubaiyat was stillborn
In those days.

The thin, clear gaze, the same
Still darts out faunlike from the half-ruined face,
Questing and passive....
“Ah poor Jenny’s case”...

Bewildered that a world
Shows no surprise
At her last maquero’s
Adulteries (189)

This poem converts Jenny first into Rossetti’s wife and model, Elizabeth Siddal, and then into one of Pound’s half-cultivated society matrons (“faun” and “faunlike” may pick up Buchanan’s phrase about “such a poet as this” who “comes fawning over her”); and it transforms Rossetti’s florid verse lines into the stripped-back concision of the “new style” Pound had developed in imitation of Gautier and under the influence, in part, of Ford Madox Hueffer (Ford); a style in which he then trained Eliot and Yeats. Kenner describes this paradigm shift (with reference to an earlier phase of Pound’s work) as follows:

to offer Rossettian tosh in 1911 was not to stride into eternal realms but to misconceive 1911. Pound had spent his time mastering not the speech

proper to exalted things but what he was to call in 1934 “the common verse of Britain from 1890 to 1910”, “a horrible agglomerate compost, not minted, most of it not even baked, all legato, a doughy mess of third-hand Keats, Wordsworth, heaven knows what, fourth-hand Elizabethan sonority blunted, half-melted, lumpy”. Ford’s vigorous critique terminated all notion of refining the common verse. It wanted abolishing (80).

Pound learns, then learns to discard, a language that derives in significant part from Rossetti (“Rossettian tosh”); in discarding it he pays tribute to the sexual forthrightness which is what he takes to transcend Rossetti’s Victorian and late-Romantic context. Rossetti becomes unreadable but retains a negative force in “Mauberley”.

In a final example I want to indicate how this negative force is invoked in a reading/rewriting of “Jenny” that is little more than a distant echo in the poem’s afterlife. The central character in James Wright’s 1968 collection *Shall We Gather at the River* is a prostitute named Jenny. (She also appears in two later collections and in manuscript materials.) Apart from the book’s flat dedication (“Jenny”) she first appears in “Speak”:

And Jenny, oh my Jenny
 Whom I love, rhyme be damned,
 Has broken her spare beauty
 In a whorehouse old.
 She left her new baby
 In a bus-station can,
 And sprightly danced away
 Through Jacksontown (157)

The whorehouse turns up again in “In Response to a Rumour That the Oldest Whorehouse in Wheeling, West Virginia, Has Been Condemned,” where the women pour down into the Ohio River to drown each evening, to reappear, “drying their wings,” the following dawn, on “the other shore”:

For the river at Wheeling, West Virginia,
 Has only two shores:
 The one in hell, the other
 In Bridgeport, Ohio.

And nobody would commit suicide, only
 To find beyond death
 Bridgeport, Ohio. (173)

In the final poem of this collection, “To the Muse”, Jenny is a Eurydice figure who has drowned in “the suckhole, the south face/ Of the Powhatan pit” – just possibly echoing Rossetti’s Jenny described as a

Poor handful of bright spring-water
 Flung in the whirlpool’s shrieking face. (“Jenny,” ll 16-17)

Wright’s Jenny/Eurydice (she is asked to remember “that frightened garter snake we caught/At Cloverfield, you and me, Jenny/So long ago”) lies dead – or rather, like the other Jenny, “sleeping” – at the bottom of the Ohio River. She is offered a kind of operation, carried out by “three lady doctors in Wheeling” to bring her back to life:

You come up after dark, you poise alone
 With me on the shore.
 I lead you back to this world.

But the speaker loses heart. This is a poem of despair:

... Oh Jenny.

I wish to God I had made this world, this scurvy
 And disastrous place. I
 Didn’t, I can’t bear it
 Either, I don’t blame you, sleeping down there

Face down in the unbelievable silk of spring,
 Muse of black sand,
 Alone.

I don't blame you, I know
 The place where you lie.
 I admit everything. But look at me.
 How can I live without you?
 Come up to me, love,
 Out of the river, or I will
 Come down to you.

It's a moving poem, although we should be wary of reading it autobiographically.⁸ Rather, Jenny figures as a generalized trope of lost possibility and of the poet's longing for death. Prostitution works here not as a moral and sexual conundrum, as it does for Rossetti, but as an ordinary part of Wright's industrial mid-West, creating the same ruined lives as its factories and mines. The poem is of a piece with the rest of Wright's poetic world.

In what sense, then, can we take this poem to be a reading (that is, a rewriting) of Rossetti's "Jenny"? The two poems have in common only a name and a trade, a "sleeping" woman, and perhaps the reference from "whirlpool" to "suckhole". Unlike Wright's muse, the first Jenny is neither beloved nor dead. I have found no trace in Wright's letters or in the secondary literature of his having read Rossetti's poem; Rossetti is not part of his personal canon. Indeed, the epitaph to "His Farewell to Old Poetry" invokes a quite different Jenny, Tristram Shandy's "my dear Jenny" (who may or may not be Tristram's "kept mistress").⁹ It may be, then, that we cannot invoke a connection at the level of conscious intention; but this does not preclude a connection at the level of genre or situation of address or *topos* (here combining Rossetti's prostitute with the Dickensian trope of the fallen woman who drowns herself in the Thames). At some level, I would argue, Wright's Jenny poems are indeed a part of the reception of Rossetti's text.

Right or wrong, that judgement is of course a function of my reading of the texts and the connection I posit between them. The reception history of this text is not

a given but arises “codependently with [my] interpretive action” (see McGann, “Like Leaving the Nile,” 6); there is no “proof” of such intertextual connections, only more or less informed hunches about what goes with what. But this raises the larger question of what the proper object of a reception study should be. The classic form it takes in “influence” studies is the afterlife – the set of effects on other writers – of an authorial oeuvre; this is problematic both because of the linear nature of the concept of influence, and because it constructs literary history as a history of persons rather than of forms. Shifting the focus to the afterlife of *texts* solves the second problem but not the first: the causal flow continues to be driven by a moment of origin which generates its own consequences. Readings, on this model, are the progressive unfolding of a structure of meaning which is inherent in the text but which is actualized only when dimensions of the text that were not apparent in its initial context of reception are brought to life in the passage to other contexts. I employed this model above when I spoke of the way the “fleshly school” controversy opened out the question of dramatic distance that was then taken up repeatedly in later readings. Jauß’s essay on “Racines und Goethes Iphigenie” explicitly posits *eine inhaltliche wie formale Schranke des nicht mehr Aktualisierbaren* (26): a limit to interpretation which is both thematic (the finite semantic structure of the Iphigenia myth) and formal (the freezing of the “classic” into an institution); the text itself, together with the materials from which it is built, imposes constraints on the uses that can be made of it (although Jauss does deduce from this the need to wrench the text away from its classicizing framework in order to make it readable again[26]).

The “limits of interpretation” posited here depend upon an account of reading as an essentially responsive process in which a discrete text acts upon pre-formed readers. In so far as readers are active in making meaning, their activity nevertheless takes place within constraints set by the inherent structure of the text. This account seems to me to reflect a scholarly ethos for which texts are normative entities and are to be respected as such. Much as we might like readings to conform to the evidence provided by texts, however, the reality is that this is never necessarily the case: the great attraction of empirical research into reading practices is that it displays the multifarious reality of uses rather than norms of good practice. These uses may radically displace those norms. Think, for example, of what happens when Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* is translated from an aesthetic to a religious regime of reading, shifting from an ethos in which a representation of the prophet Muhammad is the stuff

of comedy to one in which it is the stuff of blasphemy. We may disapprove of and contest such a reading, but this is beside the point: readings are not controlled by the text or by any one regime of reading. The task of reception history is in the first place to describe those readings in all their wildness.

Easier said, of course, than done; for a reading is not, in itself, available to scrutiny. Readings happen inside people's heads; to gain access to them we must rely on secondary manifestations most of which consist of one or another form of self-report and all of which are dependent upon translation of the micro-processes of reading into a particular language. That language is not a faithful reproduction of psychological processes but a conventional articulation of them, however much it may in turn shape those processes: any self-report of reading necessarily employs a time-bound critical vocabulary, and this introduces a certain displacement into our analysis of reading. Where we expect to find the idiosyncrasy of a personal encounter with the text, we find rather the conventions of a historically and culturally specific regime. We could, as an alternative to studying individual readings, choose to study readerships: that is, the correlation between a demographic formation and particular modes of encounter with texts. But in the forms that such a study usually takes – particularly the audience studies that are a central component of the study of the mass media – readerships become autonomous of texts, ready-formed independent variables which are not themselves shaped by the textual encounter.

If “textual objects arise codependently with interpretive action”(see McGann, “Like Leaving the Nile” 6), however, it is also the case that interpretive action arises codependently with textual objects. The men and women who marched through the streets of Karachi or London calling for Salman Rushdie’s death were constituted as subjects of social action by their encounter – tenuous and mediated as it may have been – with *The Satanic Verses*. Readers are formed by texts as much as texts are formed by readers. What matters is precisely the relationship between the two, and although this relationship is formed from moment to moment, it is nevertheless regulated by the regimes of reading that constitute texts, readers, and the manner of their encounter as a historically specific assemblage.

In this perspective, “the text” is not a discrete datum. It is perhaps the incarnation of texts in material form that lends them so powerfully the appearance of being fixed and stable, but this materiality itself changes; “Jenny” passes from

notebook to worm-eaten manuscript to the proud authority of print and a collected edition to electronically stored and manipulable information. Its incarnations change to reflect changes in its status and value, although without any necessary correlation between the form of its materiality and its social being. A text is a constantly and unpredictably changing process without an absolute beginning: as well as being read forwards into the future, “Jenny” reads backwards to the ekphrastic preoccupations of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (particularly to Rossetti’s sentimental genre painting, “Found” [1854], representing a fallen woman discovered cowering in shame in the city by her farmer husband, and to “Bocca Baciata” [1859], his portrait of a Renaissance courtesan modelled on his mistress, the former prostitute Fanny Cornforth), to Browning’s dramatic monologues, to Coleridge’s conversation poems, to the *topos* of the prostitute in the Victorian novel, to the poetic and religious mediaevalism that is so prominent a part of Rossetti’s work, and so on. A reception study should uncover both dimensions of the intertextual relations forming the poem. In Benjamin’s words:

For the dialectical historian concerned with works of art, these works integrate their fore-history as well as their after-history [*Vorgeschichte* ... *Nachgeschichte*]; and it is by virtue of their after-history that their fore-history is recognizable as involved in a continuous process of change. Works of art teach him how their function outlives their creator and how the artist’s intentions are left behind. They demonstrate how the reception of a work by its contemporaries is part of the effect that the work of art has on us today. They further show that this effect depends on an encounter not just with the work of art alone but with the history which has allowed the work to come down to our own age (261-62).

In the same way as the text dissolves into the fluidity of a process and a set of changing relations, the concept of the reader should yield to the concept of reading, understood as a normatively structured activity. Readers are an effect of systems, not their cause: at once rhetorically invoked by texts, shaped by norms of reading, and in turn modifying those norms and the texts that carry them.

From this point I would like to move to try to define three transformed and complementary objects that I take to be proper to the study of textual reception. The first is a set of *social relations structured by heterogeneous regimes of reading*. By this I mean that a text is differently constituted and enters into different kinds of relationship with readers as it is positioned within alternative frameworks of social understanding. To understand texts relationally in this sense is to assume that “Jenny,” for example, is the ongoing sum of the sense that is made of it – with the caution that this “sum” in fact contains quite incompatible interpretations and that it cannot therefore be harmoniously totalized. We could take the exhumed manuscript of the poem – a decaying text through which the worms have eaten a “great hole,” leaving it almost indecipherable and having to be painstakingly reconstructed – as a figure of those acts of decipherment, working on indeterminate materials, through which a coherent structure of sense comes into being. But insofar as our attention shifts from texts to those structures of sense, this means that rather than the text itself, however we conceive of it, the primary object of analysis should be the regimes through which the textual process is shaped. As I wrote many years ago in *Marxism and Literary History*,

[T]he categories of text, author, and reader have the status not of entities but of variable *functions*; they are products of determinate practices of reading, produced by, not given for, interpretation. These functions in turn mediate the textual transactions of real readers and writers, circumscribing both the actual operations each can perform and their representation of each other as textual functions (Coste 357). Writer and reader are not the fixed and isolated origin and conclusion of the textual process, nor is their relationship that of a constant factor to an uncontrolled variable (as is the case with Wolfgang Iser's oscillation between and, in practice, ultimate conflation of an “implied reader”, understood as an *overt* – “intended” – textual function, and a real reader external to the textual process).¹⁰ Both “writer” and “reader” are the categories of a particular literary system and of particular regimes within it, and only as such are they amenable to theorization. But these categories are therefore unstable, and they shift in value as texts are translated from one literary system to another. Finally, interpretation, and a limited and definite range of contradictory interpretive strategies, are themselves constituted as

determinate social practices within a specific historical regime. In short, the regime of reading is what allows readers to do work upon texts, to accept or transform readings offered as normative, to mesh reading with other social practices and other semiotic domains, and indeed to formulate and reformulate the categories of the regime itself (185-86).

A corollary of this relational view is that reception history must be a study of the life of forms rather than of persons (which is not to say that persons don't matter, but that we read them as elements in a system and as moments in the history of forms). Here we might refer to the challenge Moretti has posed to literary history in *Graphs, Maps, Trees*: the challenge to study it by way of large masses of data, thereby dispensing both with the individual text and its readings, and with the ideological functions of the proper name. The core methodological move Moretti makes is to take genres or forms as given and then to derive structures from large data sets based on them. Literary history can be conceived thus as an objective account of patterns and trends. Moretti does in fact recognize that quantitative research "provides a type of data which is ideally independent of interpretations... and that is of course also its limit: it provides *data*, not interpretation"(9). Thus he argues, correctly, that "a formal concept is usually what makes quantification possible in the first place: since a series must be composed of homogeneous objects, a morphological category is needed – "novel," "anti-Jacobin novel," "comedy," etc. – to establish such homogeneity"(25, n.4). But he proceeds nevertheless to ignore the crucial point that these morphological categories he takes as his base units are not pre-given but are constituted in an interpretive encounter and by means of an interpretive decision.

That interpretive encounter is a crucial moment of reception history if it is not to be an exercise in positivism, and it gives rise to a writing of history which is reflexively focused on the constitution of the text in an open-ended and unstable chain of interpretations rather than on a *continuum* of events driven by an inner dynamic. The corollary to this methodological *Ansatzpunkt* is that there is not one history but many, each grounded in and flowing from an interpretation and the structure of interest from which it derives.

The second possible object of a reception history is what makes it not strictly just a reception history: *the mutual shaping of production and consumption*. Radway argues that both the study of reading and research into audiences "have ontologically

defined the process of reception as a conceptually and temporally distinct act, different from and coming only after a prior act of textual production” (344, n.4). But every act of production is grounded in a reading of the textual situation that precedes it and is in turn renewed by new readings giving rise to new acts of production: this is why I took the poems of Pound or Wright to be at once and inseparably acts of writing and of reading. Thus, “if production is completed only with consumption, then, so far as literary texts are concerned, their production is never completed. They are endlessly *re-produced*, endlessly remade with different political consequences and effects” (Bennett 136).

Methodologically there is something to be said for taking new production as a stand-in for reception, since to do so is to focus on relatively objective transformations which can be taken as correlates for a process of reception that can otherwise be reconstructed only with great difficulty and in ways that are methodologically cumbersome. Textual production is shaped by structures of normative value and protocols of action based on them in which contemporary readers tend to participate, and those readers thus tend to conform to the model of reading embedded in texts. As the temporal or cultural distance from that first moment of reception increases, so does the text’s identity with itself start to be broken down as it moves into new phases of its life and new modes of engagement with its readers. In the case of small specialized fields such as avant garde poetic or musical culture – what Bourdieu calls the “restricted field”(115) – the fit between audience and regime may be so close that there is little discrepancy between actual readers and listeners and the norms of reading or listening figured in the text – with the consequence that these regimes become rather static. In either case – distance from or proximity to the normative frame of reading – new production registers either transformation or continuity without any necessary recourse to a mediating process of reading. This is roughly the method I have used here: taking the texts of Browning or Pound or Wright as indices of shifts in the reception of Rossetti’s poem. Yet this substitution should be seen as merely one tool in the mix of methodologies underpinning any rigorous study of reception. The empirical analysis of reading that should complement it has the great value of being able to produce results that shock or surprise precisely because it doesn’t fold actual into ideal readers, and doesn’t treat reception as a reflex of the conditions of production.

The third and final possible object of a reception study that I want to define is *the multiple temporalities of an open-ended textual process*. The moment of production is both a present act launched into an open future, and a working of the past as it is intertextually figured. The open-ended chain of reception transforms that initial constellation as it moves the text serially or laterally into unforeseeable contexts, performing and re-performing the text as a process of constant or intermittent textualization, a trajectory without goal. These multiple temporalities, in turn bound up with the social temporalities of their various moments, constitute the complex historicity of the text. And this historicity is ultimately a function of present interpretation and use. Metacommentary is itself a moment of the textual process; the historicities of the text flow backwards and forwards from the uses to which it is put.

¹ Rossetti, letter to Ford Madox Brown, in *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 753: the manuscripts “are in a disappointing state … there is a great hole through all the leaves of *Jenny*, which was the thing I most wanted.”

² On the question of the poem’s situation of address, see. Harris, p. 197.

³ Letter 121, John Ruskin to Dante Rossetti, *Ruskin: Rossetti: Preraphaelitism*, 233-4.

⁴ Anonymous review in *The Athenaeum*, August 4th 1866, of Swinburne’s *Poems and Ballads*; cited in Cassidy, p. 66.

⁵ Article in *St Paul’s Magazine*, March 1872; cited in Cassidy, p. 80.

⁶ For example, Cohen, 7: “The male reader, the female reader, and the narrator – we have all enjoyed Jenny’s favours and share the guilt of her sexual exploitation. That Rossetti manages this identification with the narrator even though we begin and end our visit with him thinking he is pompous, priggish, and self-absorbed, is a measure of the poem’s complexity.”

⁷ <<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/>>.

⁸ Wright claimed in a 1975 interview that “I was trying to write about a girl I was in love with who has been dead for a long time … I thought maybe I could come to terms with that feeling that had hung in my heart for so long” (Peter Stitt 52). The other appearances of Jenny in Wright’s oeuvre – “The Idea of the Good” in the “New Poems” section of *Collected Poems* (1971), “October Ghosts” in *Two Citizens* (1973), and ‘His Farewell to Old Poetry’ and “Three Poems in One Evening” in the unpublished collection *Amenities of Stone* (1961-2) – tell rather different and inconsistent stories, although, as Kevin Stein puts it, “In nearly every instance, Jenny appears as a deceased or inhuman form summoning Wright to join her in the world of the dead” {Kevin Stein 117}. “His Farewell to Old Poetry” concludes (with lines that closely resemble a passage from “October Ghosts” and also the concluding lines of “Three Letters in One Evening”):

Now my amenities of stone are done,
God damn me if I care whether or not
Anyone hears my voice, now you will not.

We came so early, we thought to stay so long.
 But it is already midnight, and we are gone.
 I know your face the loveliest face I know.
 Now I know nothing, and I die alone.

(Appendix 2 in Stein, *James Wright*, unpaginated.)

⁹ “More precious ... than the rubies,” “His Farewell to Old Poetry” in the unpublished collection *Amenities of Stone* (1961-2). The full phrase from *Tristram Shandy* is “more precious, my dear Jenny! than the rubies about thy neck” (Laurence Sterne 582); the question of whether Jenny is his “kept mistress” is posed on p. 76.

¹⁰ Iser, *The Implied Reader* and *The Act of Reading*, esp. 34-35 and 167.

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