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INTRODUCTION

The Role of the Reader

0.1. How to produce texts by reading them

0.1.1. The text and its interpreter

The very existence of texts that can not only be freely interpreted but also cooperatively generated by the addressee (the 'original' text constituting a flexible *type* of which many *tokens* can be legitimately realized) posits the problem of a rather peculiar strategy of communication based upon a flexible system of signification. "The Poetics of the Open Work" (1959)[1] was already haunted by the idea of unlimited semiosis that I later borrowed from Peirce and that constitutes the philosophical scaffolding of *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976) (hereafter *Theory*). But at the same time, "The Poetics of the Open Work" was presupposing a problem of pragmatics.[2] An 'open' text cannot be described as a communicative strategy if the role of its addressee (the reader, in the case of verbal texts) has not been envisaged at the moment of its generation *qua* text. An open text is a paramount instance of a syntactic-semantico-pragmatic device whose foreseen interpretation is a part of its generative process.

When "The Poetics of the Open Work" appeared in 1965 in French as the first chapter of my book *L'oeuvre ouverte,*[3] in a structuralistically oriented milieu, the idea of taking into account the role of the addressee looked like a disturbing intrusion, disquietingly jeopardizing the notion of a semiotic texture to be analyzed in itself and for the sake of itself. In 1967, discussing structuralism and literary criticism with an Italian interviewer, Claude Lévi-Strauss said that he could not accept the perspective of *L'oeuvre ouverte* because a work of art "is an object endowed with precise properties, that must be analytically isolated, and this work can be entirely defined on the grounds of such properties. When Jakobson

and myself tried to make a structural analysis of a Baudelaire sonnet, we did not approach it as an 'open work' in which we could find everything that has been filled in by the following epochs; we approached it as an object which, once created, had the stiffness—so to speak—of a crystal; we confined ourselves to bringing into evidence these properties."[4]

It is not necessary to quote Jakobson (1958) and his well-known theory of the functions of language to remind ourselves that, even from a structuralistic point of view, such categories as sender, addressee, and context are indispensable to the understanding of every act of communication. It is enough to consider two points (picked almost at random) from the analysis of Baudelaire's "Les Chats" to understand the role of the reader in the poetic strategy of that sonnet: "Les chats . . . ne figurent en nom dans le texte qu'une seule fois . . . dès le troisième vers, les chats deviennent un sujet sous-entendu . . . remplacé par les pronoms anaphoriques *ils, les, leurs* . . . etc."[5] Now, it is absolutely impossible to speak apropos of the anaphorical role of an expression without invoking, if not a precise and empirical reader, at least the 'addressee' as an abstract and constitutive element in the process of actualization of a text.

In the same essay, two pages later, it is said that there is a semantic affinity between the *Erèbe* and the *horreur des ténèbres*. This semantic affinity does not lie in the text as an explicit linear linguistic manifestation; it is the result of a rather complex operation of textual inference based upon an intertextual competence. If this is the kind of semantic association that the poet wanted to arouse, to forecast and to activate such a cooperation from the part of the reader was part of the generative strategy employed by the author. Moreover, it seems that this strategy was aiming at an imprecise or undetermined response. Through the above semantic affinity the text associated the cats to the *coursiers funèbres*. Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss ask: "S'agit-il d'un désir frustré, ou d'une fausse reconnaissance? La signification de ce passage, sur la quelle les critiques se sont interrogés, reste à dessein ambigue."

That is enough, at least for me, to assume that "Les Chats" is a text that not only calls for the cooperation of its own reader, but also wants this reader to make a series of interpretive choices which even though not infinite are, however, more than one. Why not, then, call "Les Chats" an 'open' text? To postulate the cooperation of the reader does not mean to pollute the structural analysis with extratextual elements. The reader as an active principal of interpretation is a part of the picture of the generative process of the text.

There is only one tenable objection to my objection to the objection of Lévi-Strauss: if one considers even anaphorical activations as cases of cooperation on the part of the reader, there is no text escaping such a rule. I agree. So-called open texts are only the extreme and most provoca-

tive exploitation—for poetic purposes—of a principle which rules both the generation and the interpretation of texts in general.

0.1.2. Some problems of the pragmatics of communication

As is clearly maintained in *Theory* (2.15), the standard communication model proposed by information theorists (Sender, Message, Addressee—in which the message is decoded on the basis of a Code shared by both the virtual poles of the chain) does not describe the actual functioning of communicative intercourses. The existence of various codes and subcodes, the variety of sociocultural circumstances in which a message is emitted (where the codes of the addressee can be different from those of the sender), and the rate of initiative displayed by the addressee in making presuppositions and abductions—all result in making a message (insofar as it is received and transformed into the *content* of an *expression*) an empty form to which various possible senses can be attributed. Moreover, what one calls 'message' is usually a *text*, that is, a network of different messages depending on different codes and working at different levels of signification. Therefore the usual communication model should be rewritten (even though to a still extremely simplified extent) as in Figure 0.1.

A more reasonable picture of the whole semantico-pragmatic process would take the form (Figure 0.2) already proposed in *Theory*, where, even disregarding both the rightmost quarter of the square (all the 'aberrant' presuppositions) and the lower components (circumstances orienting or deviating the presuppositions), the notion of a crystal-like textual object is abundantly cast in doubt.

It should be clear that Figure 0.2 is not depicting any specially 'open' process of interpretation. It represents a semantico-pragmatic process in general. It is just by playing upon the prerequisites of such a general process that a text can succeed in being more or less open or closed. As for aberrant presuppositions and deviating circumstances, they are not realizing any openness but, instead, producing mere states of indeter-

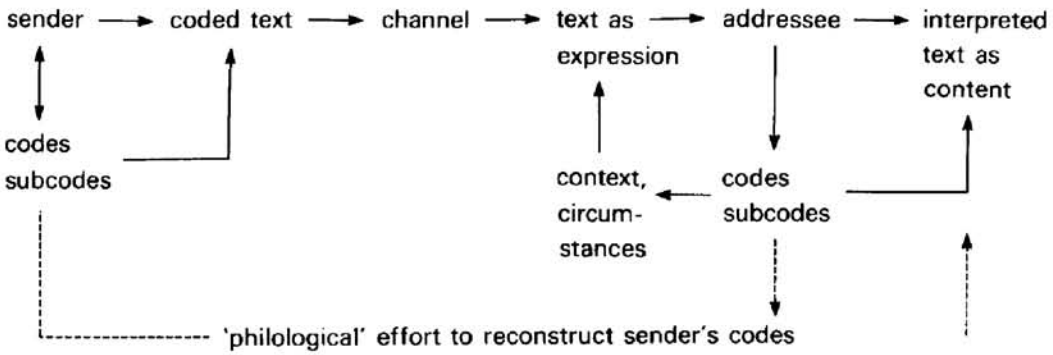

Figure 0.1

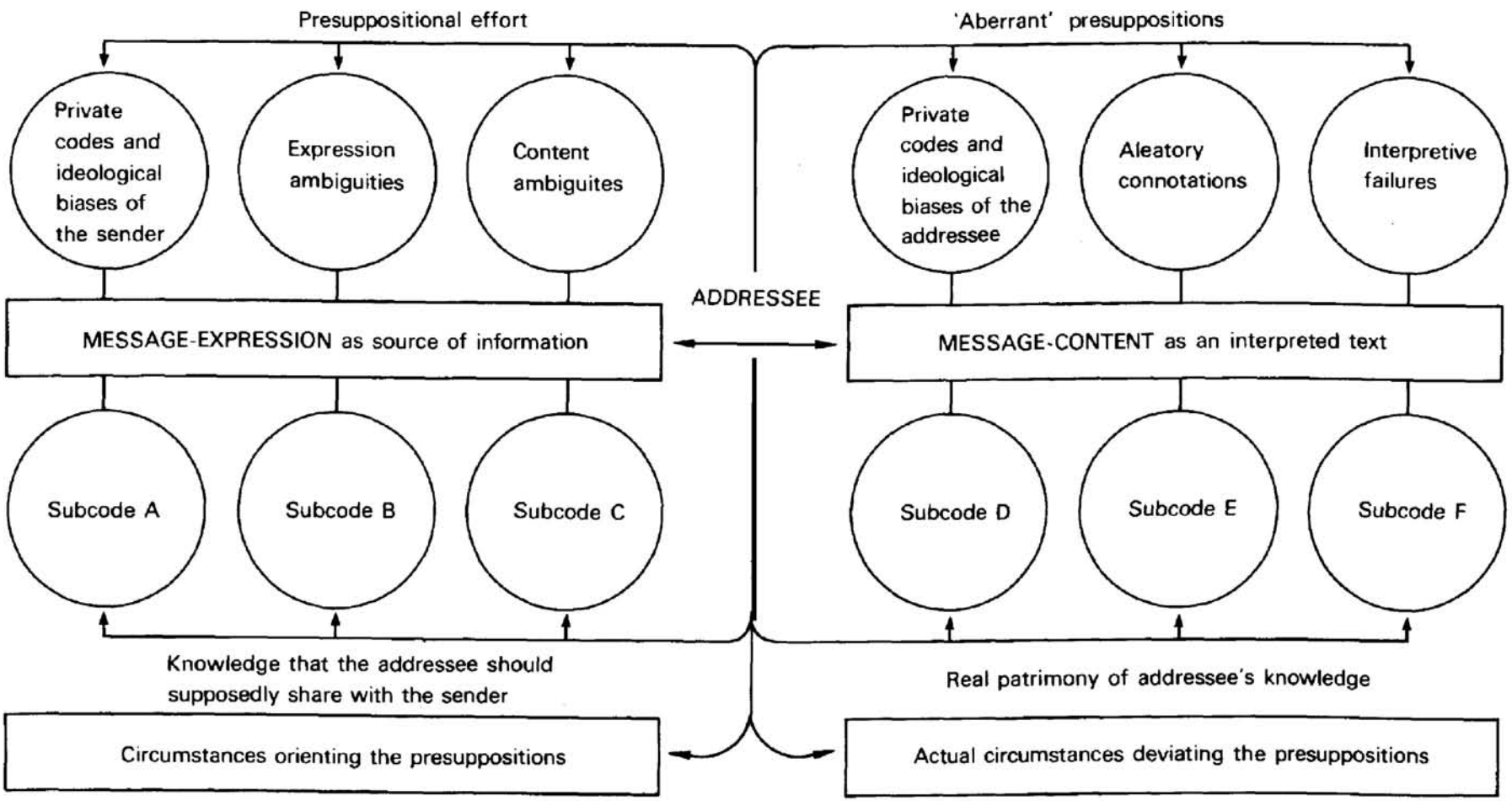

Figure 0.2
Reprinted from *A Theory of Semiotics*, p.142.

minacy. What I call open texts are, rather, reducing such as indeterminacy, whereas closed texts, even though aiming at eliciting a sort of 'obedient' cooperation, are in the last analysis randomly open to every pragmatic accident.

0.2. The Model Reader

0.2.1. Producing the Model Readers

To organize a text, its author has to rely upon a series of codes that assign given contents to the expressions he uses. To make his text communicative, the author has to assume that the ensemble of codes he relies upon is the same as that shared by his possible reader. The author has thus to foresee a model of the possible reader (hereafter Model Reader) supposedly able to deal interpretatively with the expressions in the same way as the author deals generatively with them.

At the minimal level, every type of text explicitly selects a very general model of possible reader through the choice (i) of a specific linguistic code, (ii) of a certain literary style, and (iii) of specific specialization-indices (a text beginning with /According to the last developments of the TeSWeST . . ./ immediately excludes any reader who does not know the technical jargon of text semiotics). Other texts give explicit information about the sort of readers they presuppose (for example, children's books, not only by typographical signals, but also by direct appeals; in other cases a specific category of addressee is named: /Friends, Romans, Countrymen . . ./). Many texts make evident their Model Readers by implicitly presupposing a specific encyclopedic competence. For instance, the author of *Waverley* opens his story by clearly calling for a very specialized kind of reader, nourished on a whole chapter of intertextual encyclopedia:

(1) *What could my readers have expected from the chivalrous epithets of Howard, Mordaunt, Mortimer or Stanley, or from the softer and more sentimental sounds of Belmore, Belville, Belfield and Belgrave, but pages of inanity, similar to those which have been so christened for half a century past?*

But at the same time text (1) *creates* the competence of its Model Reader. After having read this passage, whoever approaches *Waverley* (even one century later and even—if the book has been translated into another language—from the point of view of a different intertextual competence) is asked to *assume* that certain epithets are meaning «chivalry» and that there is a whole tradition of chivalric romances displaying certain deprecatory stylistic and narrative properties.

Thus it seems that a well-organized text on the one hand presupposes a model of competence coming, so to speak, from outside the text, but on the other hand works to build up, by merely textual means, such a competence (see Riffaterre, 1973).

0.2.2. Model Readers for closed texts

We have seen that, pragmatically speaking, this situation is a very abstract and optimal one. In the process of communication, a text is frequently interpreted against the background of codes different from those intended by the author. Some authors do not take into account such a possibility. They have in mind an average addressee referred to a given social context. Nobody can say what happens when the actual reader is different from the 'average' one. Those texts that obsessively aim at arousing a precise response on the part of more or less precise empirical readers (be they children, soap-opera addicts, doctors, law-abiding citizens, swingers, Presbyterians, farmers, middle-class women, scuba divers, effete snobs, or any other imaginable sociopsychological category) are in fact open to any possible 'aberrant' decoding. A text so immoderately 'open' to every possible interpretation will be called a *closed* one.

Superman comic strips or Sue's and Fleming's novels belong to this category. They apparently aim at pulling the reader along a predetermined path, carefully displaying their effects so as to arouse pity or fear, excitement or depression at the due place and at the right moment. Every step of the 'story' elicits just the expectation that its further course will satisfy. They seem to be structured according to an inflexible project. Unfortunately, the only one not to have been 'inflexibly' planned is the reader. These texts are potentially speaking to everyone. Better, they presuppose an average reader resulting from a merely intuitive sociological speculation—in the same way in which an advertisement chooses its possible audience. It is enough for these texts to be interpreted by readers referring to other conventions or oriented by other presuppositions, and the result is incredibly disappointing (or exciting—it depends on the point of view). This was the case of Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris,* which, written initially in a dandyish mood to please cultivated readers, aroused as a result a passionate process of identification on the part of an illiterate audience; when, on the contrary, it was written to educate such a "dangerous" audience to a moderate vision of social harmony, it produced as a side effect a revolutionary uprising.

For the saga of Superman and for the *acta sanctorum* of James Bond, we lack comparable sociopsychological evidence, but it is clear that they can give rise to the most unforeseeable interpretations, at least at the ideological level. My ideological reading was only one among the possible: the most feasible for a smart semiotician who knows very well the

'codes' of the heavy industry of dreams in a capitalistic society. But why not read Superman stories only as a new form of romance that is free from any pedagogical intention? Doing so would not betray the nature of the saga. Superman comic strips are *also* this. And much more. They can be read in various ways, each way being independent from the others.

0.2.3. Model Readers for open texts

This cannot happen with those I call 'open' texts: they work at their peak revolutions per minute only when each interpretation is reechoed by the others, and vice versa.

Consider, in the essay on the semantics of metaphor (Chapter 2), the interplay of possible interpretations foreseen by Joyce apropos of the trial of Shaun. Consider, even at the reduced scale of a laboratory model of poetic language (in Chapter 3, on Edenic language) the way in which a productively ambiguous message leaves Adam and Eve free to reconsider the whole of their semantic universe, but, at the same time, makes them bound to the indecomposable unity of their alternative interpretations.

An author can foresee an 'ideal reader affected by an ideal insomnia' (as happens with *Finnegans Wake*), able to master different codes and eager to deal with the text as with a maze of many issues. But in the last analysis what matters is not the various issues in themselves but the maze-like structure of the text. You cannot use the text as you want, but only as the text wants you to use it. An open text, however 'open' it be, cannot afford whatever interpretation.

An open text outlines a 'closed' project of its Model Reader as a component of its structural strategy.

When reading a Fleming novel or a Superman comic strip, one can at most guess what kind of reader their authors had in mind, not which requirements a 'good' reader should meet. I was not the kind of reader foreseen by the authors of Superman, but I presume to have been a 'good' one (I would be more prudent apropos of the intentions of Fleming). On the contrary, when reading *Ulysses* one can extrapolate the profile of a 'good *Ulysses* reader' from the text itself, because the pragmatic process of interpretation is not an empirical accident independent of the text *qua* text, but is a structural element of its generative process.[6] As referred to an unsuitable reader (to a negative Model Reader unable to do the job he has just been postulated to do), *Ulysses qua Ulysses* could not stand up. At most it becomes another text.

It is possible to be smart enough to interpret the relationship between Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin as the umpteenth variation of the Oedipus myth without destroying Rex Stout's narrative universe. It is possible to be stupid enough to read Kafka's *Trial* as a trivial criminal

novel, but at this point the text collapses—it has been burned out, just as a 'joint' is burned out to produce a private euphoric state.

The 'ideal reader' of *Finnegans Wake* cannot be a Greek reader of the second century B.C. or an illiterate man of Aran. The reader is strictly defined by the lexical and the syntactical organization of the text: the text is nothing else but the semantic-pragmatic production of its own Model Reader.

We shall see in the last essay of this book (Chapter 8) how a story by Alphonse Allais, *Un drame bien parisien,* can be read in two different ways, a naive way and a critical way, but both types of readers are inscribed within the textual strategy. The naive reader will be unable to enjoy the story (he will suffer a final uneasiness), but the critical reader will succeed only by enjoying the defeat of the former. In both cases—anyway—it will be only the text itself—such as it is made—that tells us which kind of reader it postulates. The exactness of the textual project makes for the freedom of its Model Reader. If there is a "jouissance du texte" (Barthes, 1973), it cannot be aroused and implemented except by a text producing all the paths of its 'good' reading (no matter how many, no matter how much determined in advance).

0.2.4. Author and reader as textual strategies

In a communicative process there are a sender, a message, and an addressee. Frequently, both sender and addressee are grammatically manifested by the message: "*I* tell *you* that. . . ."

Dealing with messages with a specific indexical purpose, the addressee is supposed to use the grammatical clues as referential indices (/I/ must designate the empirical subject of that precise instance of utterance, and so on). The same can happen even with very long texts, such as a letter or a private diary, read to get information about the writer.

But as far as a text is focused *qua* text, and especially in cases of texts conceived for a general audience (such as novels, political speeches, scientific instructions, and so on), the sender and the addressee are present in the text, not as mentioned poles of the utterance, but as 'actantial roles' of the sentence (not as *sujet de l'énonciation,* but as *sujet de l'énoncé*) (see Jakobson, 1957).

In these cases the author is textually manifested only (i) as a recognizable *style* or textual *idiolect*—this idiolect frequently distinguishing not an individual but a genre, a social group, a historical period (*Theory,* 3.7.6); (ii) as mere actantial roles (/I/ = «the subject of the present sentence»); (iii) as an illocutionary signal (/I swear that/) or as a perlocutionary operator (/suddenly something *horrible* happened . . ./). Usually this conjuring up of the 'ghost' of the sender is ordered to a symmetrical conjuring up of the 'ghost' of the addressee (Kristeva, 1970).

Consider the following expressions from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, 66:

(2) *Consider for example the proceedings that we call "games." I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games.* . . . Look and see *whether there is anything common to all. For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to* all, *but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that.*

All the personal pronouns (whether explicit or implicit) are not indicating a person called Wittgenstein or any empirical reader: they are textual strategies. The intervention of a speaking subject is complementary to the activation of a Model Reader whose intellectual profile is determined only by the sort of interpretive operations he is supposed to perform (to detect similarities, to consider certain games . . .). Likewise the 'author' is nothing else but a textual strategy establishing semantic correlations and activating the Model Reader: /I mean board-games/ and so on, means that, within the framework of that text, the word /game/ will assume a given semantic value and will become able to encompass board-games, card-games, and so on.

According to this text Wittgenstein is nothing else but *a philosophical style*, and his Model Reader is nothing else but his capability to cooperate in order to reactualize that philosophical style.

In the following paragraphs I shall renounce the use of the term /author/ if not as a mere metaphor for «textual strategy», and I shall use the term Model Reader in the terms stipulated above.

In other words, the Model Reader is a textually established set of felicity conditions (Austin, 1962) to be met in order to have a macro-speech act (such as a text is) fully actualized.

0.3. Textual levels

0.3.1. Narrative and nonnarrative texts

To say that every text is a syntactic-semantico-pragmatic device whose foreseen interpretation is part of its generative process is still a generality. The solution would be to represent an 'ideal' text as a system of nodes or joints and to establish at which of them the cooperation of the Model Reader is expected and elicited.

Probably such an analytical representation escapes the present possibilities of a semiotic theory: this has been attempted only apropos of concrete texts (even though the categories provided *ad hoc* were aiming at a more universal application). The most successful examples are, I think, Barthes' (1970) analysis of *Sarrazine* and Greimas' (1976) of Maupassant's *Deux amis*. More detailed analyses of shorter textual frag-

ments (such as Petőfi's, 1975, on *Le petit prince*) are clearly conceived more as experiments on the applicability of the theory than as approaches to a deeper comprehension of a given text.

When trying to propose a model for an ideal text, current theories tend to represent its structure in terms of *levels*—variously conceived as ideal steps of a process of generation or of a process of interpretation (or both). So shall I proceed.

In order to represent as 'ideal' a text endowed with the highest number of levels, I shall consider mainly *a model for fictional narrative texts.*[7] This decision is due to the fact that most of the essays collected in this book deal with narrativity. However, a fictional narrative text encompasses most of the problems posited by other types of texts. In a fictional narrative text, one can find examples of conversational texts (questions, orders, descriptions, and so on) as well as instances of every kind of speech act.

Van Dijk (1974) distinguishes between *natural* and *artificial* narrative. Both are instances of action description, but, while the former is relating events supposedly experienced by human or human-like subjects living in the "real" world and traveling from an initial state of affairs to a final one, the latter concerns individuals and actions belonging to an imaginary or 'possible' world. Obviously, artificial narrative does not respect a number of pragmatic conditions to which natural narrative is, on the contrary, submitted (in fiction, for instance, the speaker is not strictly supposed to tell the truth), but even this difference is irrelevant to my present purpose. So-called artificial narrativity simply encompasses a more complex range of extensional problems (see the discussion on possible worlds in Chapter 8).

Therefore my model will concern *narrative texts in general* (be they artificial or natural). I presume that an idealization of textual phenomena at a higher rate of complexity will serve also for more elementary textual specimens.

Undoubtedly, a fictional text is more complex than a conversational counterfactual conditional, even though both are dealing with possible states of affairs or possible courses of events. There is a clear difference between telling a girl what might happen to her if she naively were to accept the courtship of a libertine and telling someone (possibly undifferentiated) what in eighteenth-century London *definitely* happened to a girl named Clarissa when she naively accepted the courtship of a libertine named Lovelace.

In this second case we are witnessing certain precise features characterizing a fictional text: (i) through a special introductory formula (implicit or explicit), the reader is invited not to wonder whether the reported facts are true (at most one is interested in recognizing them as more or less 'verisimilar', a condition in turn suspended in romance or

in fairy tales); (ii) some individuals are selected and introduced through a series of descriptions hung to their proper names and endowing them with certain properties; (iii) the sequence of actions is more or less localized in space and time; (iv) the sequence of actions is considered finite—there is a beginning and an end; (v) in order to tell what definitely happened to Clarissa, the text is supposed to start from an initial state of affairs concerning Clarissa and to follow her through certain changes of state, offering to the addressee the possibility of wondering about what could happen to Clarissa in the next step of the narration; (vi) the whole course of events described by the novel can be summarized and reduced to a set of macropropositions, to the skeleton of a story (or *fabula*), thus establishing a further level of the text which should not be identified with the so-called linear text manifestation.

Nevertheless, a counterfactual conditional differs from a piece of fiction only insofar as in the first case the addressee is requested to cooperate more actively in the realization of the text he receives—to make on his own the story that the text has simply suggested.

In the course of the following paragraphs, I shall also examine some cases in which a nonnarrative text seems not to fit my model. We shall see that we can either reduce the model or expand certain virtualities of the text. It is usually possible to transform a nonnarrative text into a narrative one.

Certainly, narrative texts—especially fictional ones—are more complicated than are many others and make the task of the semiotician harder. But they also make it more rewarding. That is why, probably, today one learns about textual machinery more from the researchers who dared to approach complex narrative texts than from those who limited themselves to analyzing short portions of everyday textuality. Maybe the latter have reached a higher degree of formalization, but the former have provided us with a higher degree of understanding.

0.3.2. Textual levels: A theoretical abstraction

The notion of textual level is a very embarrassing one. Such as it appears, in its linear manifestation, a text has no levels at all. According to Segre (1974:5) 'level' and 'generation' are two metaphors: the author is not 'speaking', he 'has spoken'. What we are faced with is a textual surface, or the *expression plane* of the text. It is not proved that the way we adopt to actualize this expression as *content* mirrors (upside down) that adopted by the author to produce such a final result. Therefore the notion of textual level is merely theoretical; it belongs to semiotic metalanguage.

In Figure 0.3 the hierarchy of operations performed to interpret a text is *posited* as such for the sake of comprehensibility. I have borrowed many suggestions from the model of Petőfi's TeSWeST (*Text-Struktur*

Welt-Struktur-Theorie)[8] even though I try to introduce into my picture many items from different theoretical frameworks (such as Greimas' actantial structures). What seems to me interesting in Petőfi's model is the double consideration of both an intensional and an extensional approach.

Petőfi's model establishes rigidly the direction of the analysis, whereas my diagram (Figure 0.3) does not necessarily reflect the real steps empirically made by the interpreter. In the actual process of interpreta-

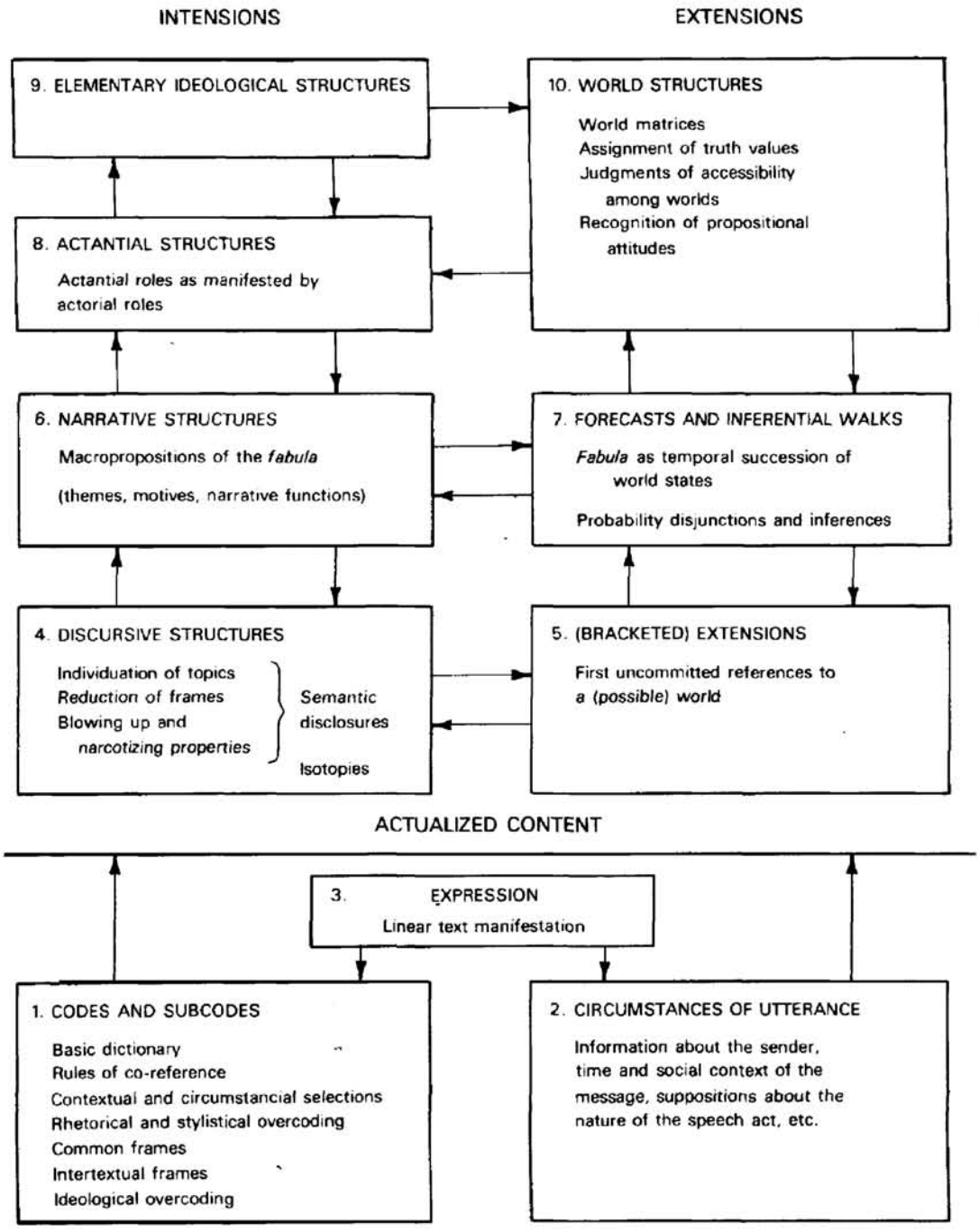

Figure 0.3

tion, all the levels and sublevels of my diagram (which are in fact mere metatextual 'boxes') are interconnected in a continuous coming and going. The cooperation of the interpreter at the lower levels can succeed only because some hypotheses which concern upper levels (and vice versa) are hazarded. The same happens also for a generative process: frequently an author makes decisions concerning the deep semantic structure of his story only at the moment in which he chooses at the lexical level, for merely stylistic reasons, a given expression. Likewise the arrows do not mark any idealized temporal and logical process of interpretation, but rather show the interdependences among 'boxes'.

Figure 0.3 thus considers (metalinguistically) levels of possible abstraction at which the cooperative activity can take place. Therefore, in order to avoid any misunderstanding, instead of speaking of textual 'levels' (a metaphor which inevitably risks suggesting a hierarchy of concrete operations), I shall speak of 'boxes', so referring only to specific points of my visualized theoretical postulation.

The only way in which Figure 0.3 presumably portrays a concrete case of textual interpretation is in the fact that it necessarily starts from box 3 (linear text manifestation) and that one cannot jump from box 3 to the others without relying at least on box 1 (the system of codes and subcodes indispensable to transforming the expression plane into the content plane).