



# interpreting cultures

LITERATURE, RELIGION, AND  
THE HUMAN SCIENCES

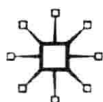
jonathan hart

# Interpreting Cultures: Literature, Religion, and the Human Sciences

Jonathan Hart

江苏工业学院图书馆  
藏书章

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INTERPRETING CULTURES

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First published in 2006 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN™

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010 and

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England RG21 6XS

Companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN-13: 978-1-4039-7128-9

ISBN-10: 1-4039-7128-5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hart, Jonathan Locke, 1956—

Interpreting cultures : literature, religion, and the human sciences /  
Jonathan Hart.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-4039-7128-5 (alk. paper)

1. Literature—Philosophy. 2. Literature—History and criticism.

3. Literature and history. 4. Civilization. I. Title.

PN49.H343 2006

801—dc22

2005045624

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: May 2006

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America.

P R E F A C E   A N D

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A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

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It often takes me a great deal more time to write a book than I would like. This is probably a fairly widespread phenomenon. In this labyrinth, I have tried to wind a thread from introduction to conclusion without the journey being too full of rectilinear hedgerows or too much a garden of forked paths.

Whereas the book seeks some unity through interpretation of culture(s), especially but not exclusively in terms of recognition, and with regard to literature, religion, and the human sciences, it is not something straightforward in the linear movement of a single-minded argument. It is meant to be suggestive and heuristic, a tentative book with a series of linked (but not locked) hypotheses and possibilities. This is the possible realm of the actual world and its fictions, theory as a way of seeing, not as a one-eyed vision of the world. This is not a system to put the lock on my readers. Here is one person seeing and one person interpreting culture(s) for a reader with a different pair of eyes. I hope we will meet in some enabling and helpful space of intersubjectivity. We are moving objects in a paradox of objectivity even as we are the subject of our subject.

Different readers will garner different experiences from this book. As usual, I hope to reach an array of students, colleagues, and members of the general public. This is always a fine line to walk, perhaps a trapeze or high wire as much as a thread, but I think that books are as much of an engagement as a conversation or a seminar, so I am always pleased if each reader takes something from my books. Books teach. Teaching is an interaction, an engagement, perhaps a kind of love letter. So I am trying once more, recognizing the improbable and probable shortcomings along the way, to write something that is as inclusive as possible. All of

us are subject to the shadows of Plato's cave or, with Ariadne in the labyrinth, find it difficult to see as well as we would like. Insight is hard to find. This whole book is an "essay" to discuss topics vital to people outside as well as inside the university: those with an interest that allows a break from something else, or those starting intensive study and those who, as expert as they are, might find a few new tatters to turn to threads of their own. For all these readers, my hope is that they spin their own silk. Virgil points to paradise, but cannot proceed there though Dante can, and it may be, in this purgatory of culture and its signs, that all I can do is point to Virgil and Dante. Along the way, I can also show other figures that swim around Beatrice and all of us. Rodin placed the thinker at the top of his gates of hell in a maze of figures. That might have been optimistic for the katascopos, even if the creator does not even have the place of the thinker. What I am attempting to essay is to present perspectives without one that brings everything into one stable focus, like the kaleidoscopes we turned into a pattern as children. The points of view of the reader will bring a new perspective to the interpretation of cultures.

Culture and interpretation are something that seep into us from all directions from an early age. Over the years, I have tried to acknowledge some of those who have helped me along the way, and I still wish to thank those I have in earlier books. Here, I would especially like to remember the course of Northrop Frye and Jay Macpherson I audited all those years ago on the Bible and mythology, showing how slow I can be to bring something to fruition. My thanks to Terence Cave, who was a Distinguished Visitor at Alberta, and shared with me his fine work on recognition and other topics. To Ross Chambers, another Distinguished Visitor to Alberta, many thanks for his suggestive ideas on culture and interpretation and for his inspiring example.

More generally, I would like to thank my schoolteachers who taught me many subjects, including literature, history, and geography, in English and French, and, above all, to John Bickell, who pursued the study of Canadian literature in the classroom when it was not the fashion. My thanks also to Timothy Findley, Robertson Davies, and others who encouraged my own poetry decades ago now. As a student, I was once at a meeting at University of Toronto where Robertson Davies felt obliged to come to defend Canadian literature as part of the curriculum. It was also a pleasure to audit classes given by Marshall McLuhan, who included Canada in his global village, and, with his permission, to read his Ph.D. thesis. My study places Canada in a multilateral context, especially, but not exclusively, in the Atlantic world, but also a temporal

essays or articles, my thanks. In particular, my thanks to the organizers and hosts of the conference on Philosophy and Literature at George Mason University, where I presented a brief paper on recognition (I decided not to publish this or the considerably longer work, which appears here for the first time in any form); to Balachandra Rajan and Elizabeth Sauer for inviting an earlier version of my essay on Canadian colonial history in context; to Klaus Martens and his colleagues at Universität des Saarlandes for inviting me to a splendid conference on poetry (including poetry readings) and an earlier form of the essay on Canadian women writers; to Charles Stang for providing an invitation for a briefer and earlier essay on T.E. Lawrence and the Shaws; to Dorothy Figuiera and colleagues at the International Comparative Literature Association for inviting me to wonderful executive meetings—where I presented a brief paper on the topic, an earlier version of the essay on poetry in the age of technology, which has been revised here; to Michael Trussler and his colleagues for publishing my earlier essay on poetry and mythology (and to Christian Riegel for his interest in this essay); to David Boyd and Imre Salusinszky, at University of Newcastle in Australia, for inviting a different version of my essay on Northrop Frye as a writer and for publishing a version in their collection on Frye; to Philip McGuire for inviting me to write on television drama and to speak on it on a couple of occasions at Michigan State University, and, most germane here, on a production of Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, and to James M. Welsh and his fellow editors for their interest in and publication of an earlier version; to Nat Hardy and his coeditors for inviting an essay on Irish poetry and another review of Paul Muldoon; to Jüri Talvet for issuing an invitation for the keynote of a conference on the novel at Tartu and for publishing a previous form of this chapter. Any specific acknowledgments to these works may be found in the notes to each chapter. This book has involved revision, framing the "argument," and an extension and an extensive revision of the notes. In the rewriting, I have been searching with Ariadne for the thread in the labyrinth of interpretation and culture.

For those who have shown support and have taught me through example, I thank all of you, especially Anne Barton, Catherine Belsey, Jean Bessière Mary Baine Campbell, Nicholas Canny, Margaret Ferguson, Stephen Ferguson, Philip Ford, Thomas Healy, Shelagh Heffernan, Robert Kroetsch, Thomas McAlindon, Kenneth Mills, Steven Mobbs, Christopher Norris, Peter Sinclair, Irene Sywenky, Gordon Teskey, Pauline Thomas, and Michael Worton. I also wish to remember Thomas M. Greene and Edward Said, who led seminars in which I



space that is related to a biblical and classical milieu and to European culture. My thanks to Doug Cole, Bill Byrick, and others at Sainte-Marie-among-the-Hurons, where I worked during the 1970s in various roles, including staff supervisor (although we also dressed up as French carpenters, blacksmiths, and Jesuits—much to the amusement of actual Jesuits who visited this historic site), for allowing me, even during the summer months, the privilege to pursue this history of encounter between the French and the Ouendat, and to reconsider and reinterpret the battle with European diseases and the final destructive war with the Iroquois in the 1640s.

This book was written over a long period. It often takes others to encourage, respond, and help to shape ideas. At Toronto, I learned much from many, but in particular I wish to thank Michael Sidnell who was exemplary in his teaching of modern drama and to Brian Parker, who with as much wit as wisdom led me into the ways of American drama and encouraged my interest in Shakespearean and other forms of drama. At Harvard, Daniel Aaron, Alfred and Sally Alcorn, G. Blakemore Evans, Marjorie Garber, Stratis Haviaris, Seamus Heaney, Barbara Johnson, Harry Levin, Donald and Cathleen Pfister, and Jan Ziolkowski were especially inspiring and supportive. My thanks to Peter Burke and Anthony Pagden at Cambridge for their encouragement of my historical work on the Atlantic world. At Princeton, my particular thanks to Jeremy Adelman, Sandra Bermann, Anthony Grafton, Michèle Lamont, Dale Miller, Kenneth Mills, Nigel Smith, and Harold Shapiro for their support, along with others, of my interests in history and literature, and especially in Canadian culture in a wider context of the Americas, the Atlantic world, and elsewhere. At Alberta, Ronald Ayling, E.D. Blodgett, Patricia Clements, Patricia Demers, Milan Dimić, James Forrest, Michael Lynn-George, Nicole Mallet, Juliet McMaster, Peter Meekison, Robert Merrett, Edward Mojžeko, Gordon Moyles, John Orrell, Winnie Thom, Robert Wilson, Linda Woodbridge, and others were welcoming and supportive in my first years there. My continued thanks to the University of Alberta for its long-standing and ongoing flexibility and support for my teaching and research. To the librarians at these four universities, where I have spent the most time of any universities, and at the British Library, the Bodleian, the Bibliothèque Nationale, the Archive d'Outre Mer, the John Carter Brown Library, and elsewhere, I reiterate my thanks to you, which I have set out in earlier books. To the curators of the exhibits I have seen in museums and galleries in North America, Asia, Australia, and Europe (too many to list), my gratitude.

To all those who have invited me to give related talks in various places in different parts of the world or have given me invitations to write

participated at the School of Criticism and Theory (SCT). Robert Stepto and Valerie Smith, also at SCT, helped to develop my interest in African culture in the Americas. Many thanks, too, to those who have been so supportive at Palgrave. More specifically, it has been once more a great pleasure to work with my editor, Farideh Koochi-Kamali, and her associates, Julia Cohen, Elizabeth Sabo and Lynne Vande Stouwe. At Newgen, I thank Maran Elancheran and his colleagues for their work on production. For permission to reproduce Roy Kiyooka's splendid painting, "Toronto Boarding House 1950," my thanks to Kiyoo Kiyooka and the Kiyooka family, the Alberta Foundation of the Arts Collection (AFA), and Barbara Johnson of the AFA. Further thanks to Alan Brownoff for making me aware of that work. This painting suggests an urban landscape, with all its suddenness and transitoriness, that has come to dominate the industrialized world. It is of a boarding house in Toronto, a city in which I have spent a lot of time, but gestures beyond this locale.

Thanks to my parents, George and Jean, whose interest in art, drama, literature, history, and other subjects has been an example for me. They met playing in *Macbeth*, and my mother's painting and my father's writing keep inspiring me as they still create in their eighties and nineties. They continue to lead me to leads. To my brothers and sisters, Charles, Gwendolyn, Deborah, Alan, and Jennifer, my thanks and appreciation for continuing in this spirit. All their commitment to arts and creativity have been a delicate but exuberant gift. Finally, thanks to my wife, Mary Marshall, and our twins, James and Julia, who have been with me for so much of this journey and who inspire love and gratitude. For Julia in particular—she who loves language, drama, literature, and culture, this work is dedicated. *Cyrano* follows his own threads, imaginary and otherwise, as we all might, at best in the service of love.



## C O N T E N T S

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<i>Preface and Acknowledgments</i>	vii
------------------------------------	-----

Introduction	1
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### **Part 1 Recognitions**

Chapter One	Discovering Recognition	21
1.1	Gaining Recognition or Discovery across Faculties	21
1.2	Recognizing the Background: Embarrassment, Mythology, and Ideology	23
1.3	Biblical Instances	27
1.4	Classical Examples: Epic, Tragedy, Comedy	33
1.5	Some Philosophical Instances	45
1.6	History: Exempla from Crossing Cultures	54
1.7	Psychology and Some Psychoanalytical Examples	60
1.8	Tentative Conclusions	70

### **Part 2 Readings: History and Poetics**

Chapter Two	History and Empire	75
2.1	Texts and First Contacts	75
2.2	Narratives of the New World	77
2.3	English Colonial Hopes	79
2.4	Permanent Colonies	80
2.5	British and French America: Consolidation and Contestation	81
2.6	British America: From Triumph to Loss and Continued Tensions	83
2.7	Canada as and at a Crossroads	86

Chapter Three	Recognizing Canadian Women and Women in Canada	89
3.1	Seeing Double	89
3.2	Elizabeth Bishop	93
3.3	Native Poets and Poets and Natives	95
3.4	African Canadian Writers and the Double Bind/Doubly Blind	98
3.5	More Dualities	100
Chapter Four	Writing and History: T.E. Lawrence and Bernard and Charlotte Shaw	106
4.1	A Writer and Not	109
4.2	From the Shaws' Lawrence to the Posthumous Film and Back Again	117
4.3	The Shavian Belief in Lawrence	122
4.4	The Sack of a Hero	127
4.5	The Recognition of Charlotte Shaw	131
4.6	The Wound	134
4.7	Publish and Perish	135
4.8	Seeing among the Pillars or a Genius of Publicity	139
Chapter Five	Poiēma, Theoria, and Tekhnē	142
5.1	Poetics of Communication	143
5.2	Theory	144
5.3	Poetry and Poets	147
5.4	Technology	149
5.5	Poetry Then and Now	152
Chapter Six	Poetry and Mythology: Coda	158
6.1	Mythos	158
6.2	Mythology and Ideology	159
6.3	Some Possibilities for Poetry	161
6.4	A Poetry that Moves, or through the Vanishing Point	163

### **Part 3 Readings: Writers, Images, and Poets**

Chapter Seven	Creating the Word: Northrop Frye and Writing	167
7.1	Finding a Context	167

7.2	Looking for Self-Expression	169
7.3	The Paradoxical Visionary	176
7.4	Critic and Writer	179
7.5	The Road Not Taken	181
Chapter Eight	Seeing Inside Willy Loman's Head: The Tragedy of the Commoner on Film	185
8.1	A Kind of Tragedy	186
8.2	The End of the Play and the End of Tragedy	187
8.3	Requiem	190
8.4	Can Films Get Inside of This Salesman's Head?	191
Chapter Nine	Placing Ireland: Some Lyric Poets	194
9.1	W.B. Yeats	196
9.2	Seamus Heaney	204
9.3	Paul Muldoon and Mary O'Malley	206
9.4	Some Further Meditations	208
Chapter Ten	Being Novel, Almost and Not	210
10.1	Some Fictions	211
10.2	Traveling Mimesis or to See or Not to See	214
10.3	Expanding and Moving Fictions	219
10.4	Recognition and Misrecognition Once More	222
Conclusion		223
Notes		239
Index		317

## *Introduction*

It is not easy to see. Samson with or without eyes is a figure that suggests the distinction between physical sight and vision, between perception and perceptiveness. He learns wisdom as we do through his story. The same could be said for Oedipus, whose blindness with eyes leads to an insight that causes him to blind himself. Samson and Oedipus come to blindness through different routes, but they wrestle with the gap between appearance and reality, delusion and wisdom. Ways of seeing in nature, culture, and science vary in a kind of shifting labyrinth over time. The nature of eyes and brain changes at different rates than that of cultural perception and mind. To recognize something is neither easy nor singular. Recognition is something gained with various faculties, even with an eyeless insight, and across differences in experience and fields of expression or disciplines. Interpreting culture is a reading of the world and of words and images of, in, and about that world. Humans are interpreting animals. We make stories, theories, arguments, and, in turn, interpret those. Culture is a kind of lived interpretation. People and peoples are involved in an interpretation of interpretation. Where fact ends and interpretation begins is difficult to know.

Early on, I sensed that a premise in logic contains conclusions, so that the relation between early and later assumptions is as interesting as it is problematic. Where nature ends and nurture begins is something people have wondered about for such a long time. Culture, recognition, and reading (interpretation) seem to stay the same and change. Body and brain in humans have evolved slowly, whereas the mind has attempted to adapt to the ever-quickenening change of technology. Perhaps we have Stone Age bodies and brains thrown into the swirl of technology. We the medium may change with the world as medium in some kind of interplay. This book discusses recognition in the arts and human sciences, a way of seeing in the world of a particular culture or nexus of

cultures in the Atlantic world—continental Europe, Britain, Ireland, the Americas—in texts and images made by people of African, Native American and European descent.

The recognition of recognition here is that this way of seeing, although cognate with observation and discovery in science, is not identical to it. Owing to the prestige and power of science in our culture, it is tempting to elide difference. The art of writing, perhaps even of reading and interpretation, in the arts and human sciences is not always a matter of progression. The interpretation in this book leads to a more provisional recognition because Arthur Miller is not necessarily making progress over Shakespeare or he over Aeschylus. Nor do the drama critics who write about them necessarily leave each other behind in a kind of history of a discipline that is a curiosity or the domain of the history of science. Nor do these critics and theorists use what works or has been proven through testing, thereby leaving the rest to historians, who examine dead knowledge. Drama and dramatic criticism and theory, any more than poetry and poetics, are probably not given to the same dynamics as physics. On the other hand, it is possible, but not desirable, to freeze science in its early stages or those understandable to humanists rather than to consider the ever-more intricate ways of seeing or theories in the natural sciences and the very creativity that endows scientists as artists. Science is not simply the domain of positivism. Rather than look into the great variety of recognition and interpretation in the sciences, I would like to note how easy it is to parody or reduce different cultural practices and intellectual methods and how counterproductive that can be. Instead, it would be interesting for scientists to see whether recognition and “reading” in the arts and human sciences have implications for, or affinities with, ways of seeing and interpreting in the natural sciences. To recognize and to interpret are such complex activities that even a book such as this that concentrates on a few aspects and possible underlying affinities mainly through specific examples in the arts and human sciences cannot cover the topic even in those domains let alone in science itself. The interplay of all the realms of science and of arts, however difficult, is a desirable goal.<sup>1</sup> Mutual misunderstanding can lead to a dangerous or daunting gap whose division does not move people forward in new recognitions of problems or in facing the ethics of genetics, computers, medical, and pharmacological technologies separate from the cultural knowledge and wisdom gained from recognitions and interpretations in literature, religion, and fields that study the human beyond the physical. Culture has some play with materialism whether it is in the sciences or arts.

The roots of the terms in my title are suggestive. *Interpreting* derives from *interpreter*, which comes from Latin by way of French, and means to expound, translate, explain, and understand. Its roots suggest spreading between or spreading out. The etymology of *culture* is through the Old French, *couture*, which derives from Latin *cultūra* or cultivation. To interpret culture is to understand the fruits of labor or of communities, it is to explicate sacred and secular texts. *Recognition* is, etymologically from the Latin, a thorough acquaintance with, investigation, getting to know once again. *Reading* derives from the verb to “read,” which has many meanings in Teutonic languages. The original senses of the Teutonic verb meant taking care or charge of or having or exercising control over something and taking or giving counsel. These significations also occur in Old English and the sense of “advise” still survives. Considering or explaining something obscure or mysterious is shared by these various languages. However, “the application of this to the interpretation of ordinary writing, and to the expression of this in speech” happens only in English and Old Norse.<sup>2</sup> Reading is an interpretation not simply of literary texts but of everyday works and of ordinary speech. Its ancient cognate roots seem to involve thought and accomplishment. Moments of coming back to knowing, thinking, and seeing what texts, speech, and images grow up over time, what is a cultivation of speech and signs, will be the main focus of *Interpreting Cultures*.

*Culture* is as contested a term as interpreting/interpretation, recognition, or reading. As Clifford Geertz has said, “The trouble is that no one is quite sure what culture is,” and he adds that it is not simply contested with multiple definitions and uses, but is fugitive and an unlikely idea to build a science around—“Almost as bad as matter.”<sup>3</sup> Despite the imprecision and protean nature of culture, literature, philosophy, and anthropology all pay it great heed while embodying it. The semantic haze and maze of culture can involve a gap between theory and practice, so that whereas I discuss definitions of various terms in the body of this book, I also examine texts and images in specific contexts and try to garner something from instances of recognition and through readings or interpretation from my own limited perspective culturally but also in terms of my training and practice as poet, literary scholar (critic, theorist), and historian. I have limited the examples to the Atlantic world that I have lived in most, trying the difficult task of reading or recognizing the otherness of other cultures but also of my own culture or adjacent cultures. This is an attempt to discover who I am or think I am and who others are and think they are. This is being a stranger in one’s own land as well as in another’s. As Bertolt Brecht assumed—and he advocated the

estrangement or alienation effect in drama as a counterpoint to Aristotle's *mimesis*—a pocketful of theories help to explain the world and the world of art. As Geertz observed, we cannot go native (I would say go back and go there), but we can understand other frames of meaning even if we cannot feel their feelings or think their thoughts—"enact their lives."<sup>4</sup> Plato, Aristotle, and Longinus might argue that we can, at least in fictions, feel the feelings and think the thoughts of the characters. Plato thought that a danger. Geertz seems to see things in a similar way to Brecht—frames of understanding, and not private emotions, are the focus. Brecht counters all this empathy and sympathy, the *anagnorisis* leading to *catharsis*, with an emphasis on distance and science. His epic theatre is meant to appeal to reason because it is comprehensible and not to empathy because feelings are limited and private.<sup>5</sup> Part of what the spectators in the audience are supposed to do is to consider alternatives and embark on decisions as part of their witnessing or seeing of the play.<sup>6</sup> Brecht's theatre, the theory of which is most fully expressed in *Kleines Organon für das Theater* (1949), attempted to place the present in a historical context, to allow for distance between the actors and their roles (*Verfremdungseffekt*), the emphasis on estrangement as a means of emphasizing change.<sup>7</sup>

Recognition is originally related to *mimesis* (imitation, representation). Whereas Plato's ideas are reflected shadows of the material world that art imitates, Aristotle expands that imitation to creation, a fulfillment or supplement and not simply an embellishment.<sup>8</sup> As Francis Cornford notes (speaking about Plato's *Republic*, 392 C–398 B), *mimesis* is a form of dramatic representation: "The Greek schoolboy was not allowed to repeat Homer or Aeschylus in a perfunctory gabble, but expected to throw himself into the story and deliver the speeches with the tones and gesture of an actor."<sup>9</sup> This is an imaginative embodiment or identification with the character that affects the actor and the audience permanently. Plato's *mimesis* includes imitation and the copying of natural sounds in music. Plato, as Cornford notes, extends *mimesis* to something akin to what we mean by "representation" in English, uses *mimētes* as we would artist, and thinks that the work of art is a likeness or image (*eikon*) of the original, holding up a mirror up to nature. Socrates argues that knowledge cannot be gained by studying the poet's picture in words or representation of life—his portraits of heroic characters—because poets do not work with a conscious intelligence but from inspiration, using a beautiful language without understanding its meaning, so that they cannot instruct us through descriptions of chariots or of war.<sup>10</sup> Long before the skepticism of David Hume, the theories of estrangement



of Bertolt Brecht or the deconstruction of Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man, there was a suspicion of mimesis. In fact, key people among the early Church fathers and their Christian successors were antimimetic or showed, in the phrase of Jonas Barish, an antitheatrical prejudice.<sup>11</sup> Here, mimesis is a kind of imitation that leads to an illusion that leads away from reality, so the Platonic inheritance of this strand of Christianity is apparent here. Aristotle is more hopeful than the Platonic Socrates over the possibility of gaining knowledge from art. His discussion of tragedy admits that simple plots (ones he favors less than complex plots) can lack *peripeteia* or *anagnōrisis*. Aristotle defines *peripeteia* as “a [sudden] change [over] of what is being done to the opposite” and *anagnōrisis* as “a change from not-knowing to knowing,” and gives the example of Oedipus as the finest instance of recognition. Such an example will involve *katharsis* (catharsis), a purging of pity or terror.<sup>12</sup> Emotion in Aristotle, as opposed to in Plato, Brecht, and Geertz, is something important to knowledge even if the audience comes to purge pity and terror (the first an empathy, the second a revulsion or moving away). There are various kinds of recognitions that occur by signs and tokens, made up by the poet through recollection and logical inference: Aristotle favors the recognition that comes from the shock of surprise. Aristotle discusses recognition in the context of tragedy and his observations have come to be applied and extend to other kinds of literature and beyond drama and literature themselves into a wider realm of culture. A number of types of recognition occur in Aristotle’s *Poetics* let alone in Western culture, so that if I use recognition as a singular, it is because it is a collective noun and not a singular singularity.

To return to Hume, in his *Treatise of Human Nature*, it is possible to see his interaction with Plato, for the mind only has perceptions present to it and these consist of immediate impressions and ideas that replicate faintly these impressions.<sup>13</sup> Whereas Hume faces perceptions in the present, Jacques Derrida denies the existence of perception.<sup>14</sup> Paul de Man was able to talk about allegories of reading and about blindness and insight, so that reversal and recognition could also have analogues in deconstruction or poststructuralism.<sup>15</sup> Northrop Frye’s double vision, Roland Barthes’s double sign, and Derrida’s double writing might well differ on the notion of the integration and disintegration of texts, but recognition and misrecognition through reading and interpretation concern them all.<sup>16</sup> What is a double bind or double blindness and what is prophetic vision might be a question that goes back to Plato and carries on through philosophy and literary criticism or theory. Barthes’s view of Balzac’s realism is not unlike Plato’s of the poets, at several removes from

reality. Barthes's Balzac copies painting, which is already a copy of the world. In Barthes's text, the reader is also meant to see double between Barthes's words and Balzac's.<sup>17</sup> Each estranges and denaturalizes the other in a kind of reverse Aristotelianism that Brecht also practiced. Derrida has also attempted to shake up the way we see the world of texts and the textual world, so that just as Plato uses the allegory of the cave to suggest the tentative, tenuous, reflective, and shadowy world of human perception, understanding, and reality, Derrida and others challenge the readiness or shape of knowledge with their theory and philosophy. Derrida saw two interpretations of interpretations, one that dreams of deciphering an origin or truth and another that affirms play and looks ahead to something beyond humanism and full presence.<sup>18</sup> One philosopher's insight might be another's blindness. Metaphors of light and dark, so widespread in religious, literary, and philosophical texts, are ways of seeing for some and means of blinding for others. Tropes and representations are intricate and refractory.<sup>19</sup> In this book, I attempt to call attention to recognition and readings in their multiplicity across faculties, periods, cultures, and contexts, so that readers, can make of them what they will. Reading can mean many things. For Wolfgang Iser, reading has a dialectical structure, involves the capacity to decipher, and involves "discovery" not simply of the unformulated meaning but of the possibility of formulating the different readers' selves through a discovery that had previously appeared to elude each consciousness.<sup>20</sup> Interpretation and reading are for readers to decide: they would have to assume that they could recognize recognition or that one person's subjectivity can be communicated to another's despite the difficulties of representation and reading or interpreting.

It might be argued that any play, written text, or image is an artifact of the past. History, as an experience, is something that stresses this pastness. The past, as R.G. Collingwood said, is not a given fact that historians can apprehend empirically through experience, which leads him to advocate that "the historian must re-enact the past in his own mind."<sup>21</sup> Even though the idea of perception and of individual communication and understanding are fraught with difficulty, Collingwood suggested dramatic embodiment as something that might bring together the disparate views on writing, recognition, interpretation, and reading. Whether or not Aristotelian empathy or Brechtian estrangement provides the main emphasis in representation/antirepresentation, the dramatic has been part of the Platonic dialogue, Aristotle's analysis of tragedy, Freud's discussion of Oedipus, and other key episodes in recognition. My book concentrates on recognition across boundaries and on readings or