

Where does meaning get its fix?

A response to Rachel Malik's 'Fixing meaning'

The questions of pragmatic and intertextual accounts of communication raised in Malik's 'Fixing meaning' (*RP* 124) are not answered by suggesting a kind of complementarity between them or their complexification via the 'horizon of publishing'. This is arguably because, as the writer seems sometimes to acknowledge, the answers are not on the plane of interpretation but rather in the space of what *precedes* the individual interpreter.

Malik sees interpretation as the process through which the meaning of texts and utterances is fixed. She identifies two overlapping perspectives on how meaning is fixed, both of which depend on reading the context of communication. These are the inferential/pragmatic, agential approach and a (structural) semiotics of the text which locates the conditions of possibility – the framework – of inference. Malik argues that these perspectives or moments are compounded by another layer of reception, the intertextual work of editing and publishing which interposes itself between texts and the reading public, fixing and conventionalizing meaning through institutional power, a move which seems problematically to *decontextualize* reading.

The suggestion that interpretation, pure and simple, does all this work blocks the possibility that there may be different tropes of meaning in play which in Malik's discussion are not wholly disambiguated – for example, Dummett's distinction between a contextual gist or sense of communication and its identifying reference. The reference to how Bakhtin deals with otherness is a case in point here. If we concentrate on interpretation, then we lose a key moment of dialogics, which is that in which speakers or readers share a common meaning (sense) in the act of communication with the text or listener. In other words, the latter's meaning is *already internal* to the speaker/reader in some performative way prior to reflexive awareness. Obviously, it is not simply that interpretation is internal, as with the fixed stance of semiotic modes of decoding in intertextual accounts of communication. Rather, as Bakhtin, Merleau-Ponty, Dummett and others have argued in various ways, there is something intersubjective which precedes interpretation, a generic, indexical moment of culture through which the sense (not interpretation) of the spoken or written material is conveyed. It is, as Malik suggests at one point, a condition of communication. We can read because of what we already share with the speaker/text.

This, then, is to effect a reversal of a kind: the question becomes not 'how do we fix meaning?', but rather 'how do we unfix it?' Interpretation can be seen as a process of producing meanings, a way of individuating meaning as a property of self-reflexive individual readers, rather than a trope of meaning which is *constitutive* of the individual reader. Given that reading does proliferate, we must also see it as anchored or fixed by the constitutive context, the *generic* of the reader/reading. Hence in this view there is a trope of meaning which precedes interpretation. Consequently, Bakhtin's heteroglossia, for example, produces contradictions in dialogue which are not at this constitutive level problematic, as here they are the generic (ontic) categories of the dialogue itself. In other words, contradiction and ambiguity are a routine, familiar part of the structure of communication itself.

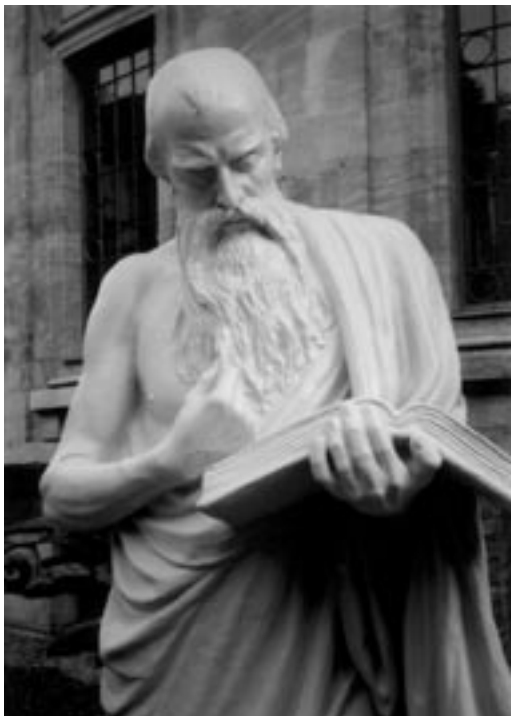
Therefore, although as Grossberg says (cited in Malik, p. 19) 'it is almost impossible to know what constitutes the boundary of a text', the question of textual boundaries at this contextual level is beside the point. The materials that enable us to make sense of the text are outside interpretation. These can be found *in* the text but also echo wider cultural

concerns; that is, the boundaries are not decisive because the writer's activity is coextensive with the wider environment of cultural process – the routine, everyday nature of cultural processes and identifications.

We can see this, for example, in Stuart Hall's account of diasporic identities. Jamaicans discovered their 'Africanness' in the 1970s through the Rastafarian texts that enabled them to recognize 'Africa' in their own biographies. Essentially, this excess meaning was something performed rather than identified. It had been displaced and made strange by the colonial experience. In translating this semantic excess into text the writing constitutes a feature of the practices it describes: 'Africanness' is a performative feature of the writing.

So the question of whether in order to fix meaning we have to know the circumstances of the production of text, the relation between one writer's work and another, is not here of primary importance; the routine, everyday context of production of meaning is as present in the text as it is beyond it. We don't need to look elsewhere for mediations, in the first instance, as these are accumulated within the work itself. The interpretive practices that are going on all around us are *themselves* the mediation process, the activity on which interpretation depends.

Malik argues that intertextuality blurs the boundaries between text and context and this makes it 'increasingly difficult to identify the text that is read either as concept and/or empirical object' (p. 19). It is argued that in Gordon Gecko's 'greed is good' statement a cultural context acts as implicature in order to get across its illicit, transgressive flavour. However, Malik suggests that this context is better read as a text. 'The reader constructs an intertextual relation between two or more utterances' here. This begs the question of what the reader is doing when he/she construct the intertextual relation, where he/she stands in order to do this. Arguably this point is the situating of the reader as the vehicle of interpretation, as a kind of culturally generic being. Clearly the utterances and the cultural context are not texts/utterances in the same way. One offers a conventional meaning whilst the



other informs it with the open-ended content of the cultural horizon. If contexts were to be treated as texts this would merely defer the question of how the reader-text relationship is constituted, and therefore of how meaning is fixed, to another context.

Presumably, following Grossberg, the intertextual relation here has to do with the excess of meaning offered by the context (fields of connotations). We need to know what this excess is and how this works as a specific ontological moment rather than something that gets elided with text. This moment is neither that of reading nor that of text but their contextual relation. Here we are perhaps concerned with that part of culture that gets pushed to the margins – the indexical features of communication, the residual, as Lefebvre styles it, which nevertheless invisibly enlivens and informs what *does* get said. These everyday linguistic routines are at once objectified in what gets said and also the open indexical structure which acts as potentially disruptive counterpoint to petrified language. Whilst Malik sees the moment of displacement in communication in her reference to class power relations (p.

21) as one of naturalization of the dominant account, nothing is said about how this fits into the ontology of communication, how the suppressed excess of meaning functions in relation to its codified, naturalized expression, how it draws on this, gets its fix, so to speak.

At the level of theory, the question of (intertextual) excess of meaning is seen by a cultural critic like David Morley as a threat to its social rooting, but it is celebrated by Grossberg as an antidote to textual determinism. In either case referential indeterminacy is

the point. Malik's description of the inferential and textual complexities of reading doesn't offer a way out of these intellectual polarities – that is, a way of stabilizing meaning. However, despite complexity, the interpretive process does come to a resting point, but clearly not one that can be described in versions of reader/text/utterance positions. Hence although there is here a vast array of procedures for reading, there's nothing *processual* to suggest *why* the dissemination of meaning is not endless.

In the real world readers can and do manage texts, intertextuality, an interchange of genres, and so forth, in the face of great complexity. This point cannot be overemphasized. So how do they do this? A phenomenological response would be that whatever complexity readers are faced with is 'simplified' by the conjunction between the generic cultural experience and the text which is read performatively through this. That is, the complex is always 'reduced' to the familiar in our structures of reception, to the categories of typical familiarity, in order to be slotted into our pre-existing routine ways of reading. Although this looks like a process of homogenization, the conjunction between text, situation and biography differentiates the experience of reception and produces a sense of 'the new'. This is a fairly commonplace observation, but its implication tends to be neglected. In this mode of reception, reading is a feature of the socially organized conditions in which it is done. This means that textual categories are 'dissolved' into the individual's cultural generic, as routinely classified items and so present no obstacle to the production of some kind of anchored reading because everything is assimilated to 'what it is like' in what Schutz called an 'open horizon of typical familiarity'. Hence we can appreciate complex artefacts, we get a sense (gist) of what they are about even if we have difficulty in articulating that sense via identification of text or genre.

In this view, interpretation *on its own* is a form of unfixing, as I think the drift of Malik's discussion shows. It is only when reading is seen in terms of the underlying shared cultural horizon that the possibility of interpretation becomes real.

Howard Feather

Reply

Howard Feather's response to my article and his own account of the interpretative process seem to rest on incompatible notions of both context and interpretation. Two issues are of relevance here.

First, the horizon of the publishable is not to be confused with the notion of a reader's circumstantial knowledge of the text's production history. It is what it is thinkable to publish in a given historical situation, and includes within it a diverse set of institutions and processes (commercial, educational, legal, etc.). As such, the horizon of the publishable is a condition of 'communication' and precedes both writing and reading. It therefore constitutes a set of strong and relatively stable contexts for both reading and writing. Context is not only, or most importantly, as Feather in part seems to suggest, the ephemeral, highly 'local' and unrepeatable dynamic within the interpretative process.

Second, Feather constructs an unnecessary polarization between 'conventional' or shared meaning and the non-conventional senses that constitute an excess or surplus of interpretative possibilities. Intertextuality, developed to include discursively governed patterns of inference, offers a way out of this too commonly posed opposition. There are not two orders of meaning, but a single intertextual continuum which encompasses the interpretation of both. There is therefore no excess to account for as Feather suggests, and the character of the shared meaning that he presumes remains a question. 'Conventional' or, as I would prefer, dominant interpretations are simply the most highly probable within what always remain an open-ended set of interpretative possibilities.

Rachel Malik