Preface

Literature and information make an uneasy pair. For seventy years formalist criticism has instilled in us the idea that literary texts are not primarily messages bearing information but, rather, autonomous objects that put into question our everyday view of language as communication and that must be investigated on their own terms. Humanistic scholars, meanwhile, are likely to see in the concept of information a kind of knowledge so external to the individual subject as to be barely worthy of the term *knowledge* and certainly inappropriate to describe the personal and ineffable experience of knowing literature. The world of information, in one sense, is the computerized society, the electronic global village in which anything not translatable into machine language can be at most a quaint relic, surely not a legitimate part of knowledge. Trying to understand the place of literary texts in this world may seem a perverse or self-defeating exercise, for it means speculating on the role of literature in a postliterary culture.

Yet this is by no means the only sense in which we may speak of a world of information. Gregory Bateson liked to define information as any difference that makes a difference, and in this sense information fills and indeed constructs the biological and social and cultural worlds. Departures from sameness and contexts in which these departures have effects are part of all systems that exhibit adaptive or cognitive behavior, be they thermostats, frogs, corporations, or scholarly

disciplines. We now know how to read literary texts as systems of differences that make differences, and when Jacques Derrida, another strong theorist of difference, tells us that “there is no outside-the-text,” he reminds us that the differential phenomena we know as textuality do not stop at the boundaries of works but extend throughout the cultural and mental contexts in which works are possible. Texts do not represent something outside of and unlike themselves, nor do they function as autonomous, self-referential monads; they are formed and informative objects that make differences in a formed and informative world.

This book began to take shape when I brought together two lines of thought that had been distracting me from more conventional literary studies. The first was a sense that literature’s role in culture could best be thought of neither as a message nor as an object but rather as a source of differences. This approach implied abandoning—at least provisionally—the claim that literature is the vehicle of truths or teachings central to our culture and that the study of literature should thus have as its goal the successful reception of this central message that a civilization sends to itself over time. Displaced from the center to the margins of culture—a move that may in fact be inevitable in the information society—literature begins to look like a complex discursive form that can enrich thought and inspire new moves in the language games of society precisely because it differs from the communicative and instrumental modes of being-in-language that now seem culturally dominant. In other words, I came to think that in order to understand how important literature is and can be, it would be necessary to give up traditional assumptions about how important it is and has been.

While pursuing these reflections on what might somewhat grandiosely be called a “postmodern legitimation of literary studies,” I discovered information theory and in particular the theory expounded by Henri Atlan of self-organization from noise. With its parallels to statistical thermodynamics, information theory suggests ways in which the structure and dynamics of communication and informational systems can be seen as linked to the relational properties of the physical world. In the writings of Michel Serres in particular, this link implies a structural basis for interdisciplinary approaches that bring together the study of texts and modern scientific thought. Atlan’s formalism of self-organization from noise provides a framework for understanding how ordered complexity, information, even meaning, can arise from inter-

action with disorder. By *noise* is meant not loud or obnoxious sounds but anything that gets mixed up with messages as they are sent. Noise causes a loss of information in transmitted messages, but in organized systems in which message transmission is but a component function, the variety introduced by noise can come to be informative and meaningful in another, emergent context. The question of how there can be complex cultural meaning in spite of textual dissemination thus appears homologous to the question of how there can be complex natural structures in spite of the physical law of increasing entropy in a closed system.

Bringing together self-organization and the marginality of literature, I came to the assumptions that underlie the central arguments of this book: first, that literature is a noisy transmission channel that assumes its noise so as to become something other than a transmission channel, and second, that literature, so constituted, functions as the noise of culture, as a perturbation or source of variety in the circulation and production of discourses and ideas.

Only after working out the general form of these arguments did I realize that they were inseparable from the historical situation of literary studies. The idea that literature is an object of knowledge is a modern one; the academic disciplines devoted to its study are for the most part creations of the nineteenth century and can hardly be assumed to be immortal. Yet at the same time the study of literature can also be seen as a survivor of an earlier intellectual mode in which all study was essentially the study of texts, in which the written word was unquestionably taken to be a reservoir of knowledge. The discussion of literature's status as object or reservoir of knowledge, the attempt to bring insights from scientific disciplines to bear on cultural questions—these cannot be understood without reference to the history of literature's place in an increasingly divided world of knowledge.

What I am proposing here is not a method for the criticism or the interpretation of texts but a challenge to the idea that criticism and interpretation as traditionally understood are the only legitimate functions of literary studies. The kind of emergent meaning described here as self-organization from noise is not the same as received meaning; it is meaning constructed in a new context, situated at a different level within the overall cultural system. It is a kind of meaning that can be legitimately discussed only if we are willing to move away from the dead center of the literary disciplines, namely, from the implicit as-

sumption that literature is an object of knowledge. In a sense I am proposing a new kind of argument for what Richard Rorty calls strong textualism, what Harold Bloom calls strong misreading. Beyond that, it is also an argument for interdisciplinarity, for using literature in processes of intellectual invention whose aim is other than to know the literary text.

Given these ambitions, it is probably inevitable that *The Noise of Culture* should itself contain and produce cultural noise, enacting the kind of emergence of meaning from disorder that it describes. In it I summarize and attempt to transmit to the reader a great deal of intellectual material that is not part of the current cultural baggage of the literary disciplines, and because of my own shortcomings and the nature of the task, there will be plenty of interference in the channel. What will be noise for some readers, however, will be new information for others, and indeed, were I a perfect expositor, I would have to be a completely unoriginal one. Moreover, it can be argued that such external concepts as information and self-organization, which function as information in their home fields, become noise and thus a risky and uncertain source of invention when they enter literary studies. The book contains many arguments, but its goal is not to refute any existing theories on their own terms; it is rather to provide some materials from which new levels of explanation may emerge.

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All translations of quotations from foreign language sources are my own, except of course where I refer to a published translation. Words italicized in quotations were italicized in the original unless otherwise noted.

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