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Priscilla A. Hayden-Roy

TILL EULENSPIEGEL'S TRANSGRESSIONS AGAINST CONVENTION: INTERPRETING THE PARASITE

With Peter Honegger's¹ discovery in 1971 that the Brunswickian tax collector, Hermann Bote, was the author of *Till Eulenspiegel* (TE), literary research was able to situate the chapbook in a more accurate and specific context than had previously been possible. Bote's other works, along with what we know of his life, indicate that he was a strong supporter of the Hanseatic cities and the ruling patriciate, that he opposed the political uprisings of the guildsmen as he experienced them in Brunswick, and that he espoused a view of corporate unity within the city through the perpetuation of the estates.² Many literary critics have concluded

1. Peter Honegger: Ulenspiegel. Ein Beitrag zur Druckgeschichte und zu Verfasserfrage. Neumünster 1973. In 1971 Honegger presented his findings at the annual meeting of the *Niederdeutscher Sprachverein* in Hildesheim. (See Hermen Bote. Bilanz und Perspektiven der Forschung. Beiträge zum Hermen-Bote-Kolloquium vom 3. Oktober 1981 in Braun schweig. Ed. Herbert Blume, Werner Wunderlich. Göppingen 1982, pp. 3–11, here p. 4.)

2. What belongs to Hermann Bote's oeuvre is still a matter of debate among literary critics. See the bibliography of Bote's works compiled by Detlev Schöttker and Werner Wunderlich (In: Hermen Bote, p. 135-139). Bernd-Ulrich Hucker (Bote, Hermen. In: Lexikon des Mittelalters. Vol. 2. Munich, Zurich 1983, cols. 482-484) presents a dissenting view of what constitutes Bote's oeuvre. For biographical essays on Bote, see Wolfgang Lindow: Herman Bote — Leben und Werk. Eine Einführung. In: Hermen Bote, p. 3-11; Gerhard Cordes: Bote, Hermen (Hermann). In: Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters. Verfasserlexikon. 2nd ed. Vol. 1. Berlin, NY 1978, col. 967-970; George C. Schoolfield: Hermann Bote. An Introductory Essay. In: German Studies in Honor of Otto Springer. Ed. Stephen J. Kaplowitt. Pittsburg 1978, p. 281-303. The study of Bote's social and political views opens onto the history of early modern

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that with *TE* Hermann Bote wished to exhort, albeit in an entertaining manner, members of his society to beware of the forces threatening to destroy its all too fragile order.³ This appears to undercut the validity of interpretations of Till as a plebian folk hero, or even a proto-proletarian revolutionary force.⁴ While the text itself can be construed to portray Till as a positive hero or an emancipatory force, authorial intention

Brunswick. See Max L. Baeumer: "Ohn Tumult/ ohn Schwermerey": Literarische Evidenz zum 'revolutionären' Charakter der Reformation in Braunschweig. In: *Wolfenbütteler Beiträge* 4 (1981), p. 59-110; Olaf Mörke: Rat und Bürger in der Reformation. Soziale Gruppen und kirchlicher Wandel in den welfischen Hansestädten Lüneburg, Braunschweig und Göttingen. Hildesheim 1983. Mörke (esp. p. 79-85) questions some of the findings of the earlier study by Werner Spieß: *Geschichte der Stadt Braunschweig im Mittelalter. Vom Ausgang des Mittelalters bis zum Ende der Stadtfreiheit (1491-1671)*. Braunschweig 1966.

3. See, for example, Werner Wunderlich: Einleitung. In: *Eulenspiegel- Interpretationen. Der Schalk im Spiegel der Forschung 1807-1977*. Ed. Werner Wunderlich. Munich 1979, pp. 7-14, here p. 11; Hans Wiswe: Sozialgeschichtliches um Till Eulenspiegel 11. Eine Nachlese. In: *Eulenspiegel-Interpretationen*, pp. 175-181, here p. 179; Max L. Baeumer: Die sozialen Verhältnisse und der sozialkritische Charakter der Volksliteratur im braunschweigischen Raum zur Zeit des 'Dyl Vlenspiegel'. In: *Eulenspiegel-Jahrbuch* (1985), pp. 33-47, esp. p. 38, 39, 46-47.

4. See, for example, Ingeborg Spriewald: Vom 'Eulenspiegel' zum 'Simplizissimus'. Zur Genese des Realismus in den Anfängen der deutschen Prosaerzählung. Berlin 1974. Spriewald finds in the chapbook a "Grundlinie des Opponierens und sozialen Protests" (p. 57) directed against "Obrigkeit und ständische Beengung" (p. 94). An interesting attempt to maintain the validity of authorial intention, while at the same time legitimating a view of Till as "Held der kleinen Leute" is found in Georg Bollenbeck: *Till Eulenspiegel. Der dauerhafte Schwankheld. Zum Verhältnis von Produktions- und Rezeptionsgeschichte*. Stuttgart 1985. Bollenbeck claims that Bote's subject material turned itself against his intentions: "Eulenspiegel ist für den traditionsorientierten Zoltschreiber akzeptabel, weil er als Außenstehender das morsche Ständergerüst scheinbar nicht gefährdet, er kann aber gerade deshalb, und dies widerspricht Botes Konzept, dessen Unterminierung aufzeigen." (p. 66) Thus he maintains that the reception history of *TE* provides just as valid interpretations of the work as authorial intention does.

rules that Bote would not have wanted to sow the seeds of discontent and rebellion among the lower classes with his socially displaced, itinerant prankster. If we raise the question of the book's reception in the 16th century, evidence indicates that our postulated authorial intention was communicated quite successfully to the chapbook's readership.⁵ Contemporary adaptations of *TE* by Hans Sachs and Fischart, for example, exploit the chapbook's moralizing, didactic potential.⁶ On the other hand, we also know that *TE* was placed on the index of forbidden books in 1569 published in Antwerp by the Duke of Alba in the name of Emperor Philipp II.⁷ This suggests that some authorities in the 16th century may have perceived the work to be seditious, although this certainly was not the author's intention.

This brings us to a fundamental interpretative question: does authorial intention determine the meaning of a text? The school of pragmatic linguistics known as speech act theory (SAT) is generally the first cited in defense of authorial intention. While initially developed to analyze spoken communication, John R. Searle⁸ has argued that the same principle obtains for fictional discourse: fiction is a sort of "pretended" discourse, he says, and "pretend" is an intentional verb. Thus the whole work of fiction derives from the author's intention to engage in this form of discourse. But the status of authorial intention has come under fire of late, particularly from the deconstructionists. The disagreement was first articulated in a debate between Jacques Derrida and John R. Searle, which was published in the first two issues of *Glyph*.⁹

5. Bollenbeck: *Till Eulenspiegel*, p. 170-203.

6. *Ibid.*, 192-198.

7. *Ibid.*, 201; Honegger: *Eulenspiegel*, p. 57 ff.

8. John R. Searle: *The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse*. In: John R. Searle: *Expression and Meaning. Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts*. London, NY 1979, p. 58-75.

9. Jacques Derrida: *Signature Event Context*. In: *Glyph. John Hopkins Textual Studies* 1 (1977), pp. 172-197; John R. Searle: *Reiterating the Differences. A Reply to Derrida*. In: *Glyph* 1 (1977), p. 198-208; Jacques Derrida: *Limited Inc a b c ...*. In: *Glyph* 2 (1977), p. 162-254. See also Manfred Frank: *Die Entropie der Sprache. Überlegungen zur Debatte Searle-Derrida*. In: Manfred Frank: *Das Sagbare und das Unsagbare*.

Derrida's article "Signature Event Context", originally presented as a lecture in 1971 at the *Congrès international des Sociétés de philosophie de langue française* in Montreal, initiated the debate. In this article Derrida calls into question the notion of context as a rigorous, scientific concept able to determine meaning. The empirical saturation of context is rendered impossible, he argues, by the very nature of communication, which depends on the iterability of its signs. Speaker intention is equally unable to provide an anchoring context. Here he takes issue with the "father" of SAT, John Austin, who in his seminal *How To Do Things With Words*¹⁰ excludes "non-serious" or "parasitic" language from his discussion of "ordinary" language, specifically the speech act he calls the "performative". The passage under question reads:

As utterances our performatives are also heir to certain other kinds of ill which infect all utterances. And these likewise, though again they might be brought into a more general account, we are deliberately at present excluding. I mean, for example, the following: a performative utterance will, for example, be in a peculiar way hollow and void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. This applies in a similar manner to any and every utterance — a sea-change in special circumstances. Language in such circumstances is in special ways — intelligibly — used not seriously, but in ways parasitic upon its normal use — ways which fall under the doctrine of the *etiolations* of language. All this we are excluding from consideration. Our performative utterances, felicitous or not, are to be understood as issued in ordinary circumstances.¹¹

Derrida objects that what Austin has excluded "as anomaly, exception, 'non-serious,' citation . . . is the determined modification of a general citationality — or rather, a general iterability — without which there would

Studien zur neuesten französischen Hermeneutik und Texttheorie. Frankfurt/M. 1980, p. 141-210; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: Revolutions that as Yet Have No Model. Derrida's *Limited Inc.* In: *Diacritics* 10 (December 1980), p. 29-49; Stanley E. Fish: With the Compliments of the Author. Reflections on Austin and Derrida. In: *Critical Inquiry* 8 (Summer 1982), p. 693-721.

10. J. L. Austin: *How to Do Things with Words*. J.O. Urmson, Marina Sbisa, eds. 2nd ed. Cambridge, Mass. 1975.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 21 f.

not even be a 'successful' performative."¹² He grants that while there is a "relative specificity" of performatives determined by speaker intention, a "structural unconsciousness . . . prohibits any saturation of the context."¹³

Searle responded in a brief article entitled, "Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida".¹⁴ He upholds Austin's distinction between "ordinary" and "parasitic" discourse as valid: "We do not, for example, hold the actor responsible today for the promise he made on stage last night in the way that we normally hold people responsible for their promises."¹⁵ And he defends Austin's exclusion as merely a "research strategy", arguing that ordinary language is "logically prior" to parasitic language, and that "relatively simpler problems" are justifiably the starting point for a "general theory of speech acts".¹⁶ To Derrida's denial that intention can "never be through and through present to itself and to its context",¹⁷ Searle counters: "In serious literal speech the sentences are precisely the realizations of the intentions: there need be no gulf at all between illocutionary intention and its expression. The sentences are, so to speak, fungible intentions."¹⁸

In another essay devoted to the "logical status of fictional discourse", Searle maintains that the work of fiction as a whole is a serious utterance: it conveys a serious "message or messages" through the performance of the pretended speech acts. These messages, he says, are conveyed "by the text but are not in the text", except in the case of "tiresomely didactic authors".¹⁹ Thus a "serious" message, not necessarily explicit within the fictional text, is communicated by "non-serious" or parasitic language. According to SAT, the interpreter must consider authorial intention in order to distill the serious message which anchors the text's meaning.

12. Derrida: *Signature Event Context*, p. 191.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 192.

14. See note 9.

15. Searle: *Reply*, p. 204.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 205.

17. Derrida: *Signature Event Context*, p. 192.

18. Searle: *Reply*, p. 202.

19. Searle: *The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse*, p. 74.

But in the case of Bote's *TE*, we are confronted with an array of problems that call to mind Derrida's objections to authorial intention as the determinant of meaning. The work immediately confronts us with maneuvers that Bote employed to defer his liability for the authorship of the work. First, he published it anonymously, hiding his identity in an acrostic that, as it turned out, would be overlooked for 460 years. Second, in the foreword the anonymous author, calling himself "N", further distanced the work from himself by placing the ground of its origin on other anonymous persons: in 1500, he says, "etlich Personen" asked him to collect the materials on the "behend listiger und durchtribener ... Buren Sun ... genant Dil Ulenspiegel".²⁰ So Herman Bote was not properly responsible for the work? But then a third problem surfaces: the "seriousness" of Bote's anonymous deferral itself becomes questionable when we consider that he was citing a standard literary form; moreover John L. Flood recently uncovered a specific source for Bote's introduction in the introduction to *Wigoleis vom Rade*.²¹ Bote's deferral itself is a non-serious citation, so that we are uncertain whether we are, by means of a double negation, deferred back to authorial intention, or removed a step further from it. Finally, the anonymous author purports that the work serves nothing other than a non-serious purpose: "Nun allein umb ein frölich Gemüt zu machen in schweren Zeiten, und die Lesenden und Zuhörenden mögen gute kurtzweilige Fröden und Schwänck daruß fabulleren."²² The author wishes to prevent his book from being attached to any program other than entertainment; he specifically denies that the book was written to annoy or criticize anybody. If we assume for the moment that Bote's maneuvers in the foreword serve as a sort of mask, behind which he hid his own identity and his "real" authorial intention (which for reasons we will consider later, he considered prudent to obscure), the next step would be to consider the

20. Ein kurtzweilig Lesen von Dil Ulenspiegel. Wolfgang Lindow, ed. Stuttgart 1978, p. 7.

21. John L. Flood: Der Prosaroman 'Wigoleis vom Rade' und die Entstehung des 'Ulenspiegel'. In: Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur 105 (1976), p. 151-165.

22. Dil Ulenspiegel, p. 7.

Till episodes themselves. We will see in the following discussion how an analysis based on SAT yields an interpretation in agreement with what we posited as Bote's likely authorial intention, as extrapolated from his other writings. But we will also see that the means by which Bote chose to exhort his society — the social outcast and parasite who transgresses against the whole spectrum of medieval society — yields alternative interpretations when the pranks, the parasitic or non-serious language of the outcast, are taken seriously.

Before we continue with these analyses, one more observation should be made concerning the debate between Derrida and Searle. Derrida responded to Searle's "Reply" in a lengthy second essay, "Limited Inc a b c ...",²³ in which he puts forward an "ethico-political" critique of speech act theory. He questions Searle's insistence that the terms "parasitic", "non-serious", "infelicitous", "impure", etc., employed by Austin are properly theoretical, or that they merely signify "logical dependence".²⁴ Derrida sees in this moral terminology an "ethico-political language"²⁵ that exposes the ideological foundations of SAT:

I am convinced that speech act theory is fundamentally ... a theory of right or law, of convention, of political ethics or of politics as ethics. It describes ... the pure conditions of an ethical-political discourse insofar as this discourse involves the relation of intentionality to conventionality or to rules ... [T]his "theory" is compelled to reproduce, to reduplicate in itself the law of its object or its object as law; it must submit to the norm it purports to analyze. Hence, both its fundamental, intrinsic moralism and its irreducible empiricism.²⁶

The distinction between "serious" and "non-serious" or "ordinary" language inevitably becomes political, insofar as the conventions defining "normalcy" are entrenched in social relationships of power. SAT designates as "pure", "felicitous", etc. only those speech acts which conform to the rules governing "right" conventional discourse. Derrida's notion of iterability, on the other hand, makes transgression against convention

23. See note 9.

24. Derrida: Limited Inc, p. 234 f.

25. Ibid., p. 240.

26. Ibid., p. 240.

a fundamental possibility of language: “Once this parasitism or fictionality can always add another parasitic or fictional structure to whatever has preceded it ... everything becomes possible against the language-police; for example ‘literatures’ or ‘revolutions’ that as yet have no Context and intention do indeed relatively specify the meaning of an utterance, but they cannot “govern the entire scene and system of utterance”.²⁸ Convention bolstered by the force of social relationships of power enforces a “normal” meaning and banishes the unconventional meaning as “fiction”. But this policing of language cannot guarantee “pure” speech acts. It is constantly under siege:

If the police is always waiting in the wings, it is because conventions are by essence violable and precarious, *in themselves* and by the fictionality that constitutes them, even before there has been any overt transgression . . .²⁹

This quotation brings us to the topic of this paper, the proper interpretation of transgression in Hermann Bote’s *TE*. Should we understand Till’s transgressions against society as an admonition to protect an all too precarious social order? Or can they be construed positively as a relativizer of social norms, insofar as they expose the violability of the status quo? SAT and deconstruction in competition with each other provide a useful heuristic device in understanding how Till’s transgressions generate opposing interpretations.

In his chapbook Bote portrays a broad spectrum of representatives of society, from poor to rich, artisans, nobility, ecclesiastical figures, and their interaction with Till, a socially marginalized vagrant, a *Gouckler* and *Spilman*. On the one hand we find the “inside” group protected by convention and occupying a position within the community; on the other hand, the outsider, the “non-serious” prankster, who survives “parasitically” by masking himself as a member of the “inside” group, only to be banished once his pranks expose him as a fraud. As a vagrant

27. *Ibid.*, p. 243.

28. Derrida: Signature Event Context, p. 192.

29. Derrida: Limited Inc, p. 250.

and *Gouckler* Till belonged to the socially declassed group of the dishonorable” (*unehrliche Leute*). The dishonorable and their progeny were denied membership in the guilds; they could not be legal heirs or guardians; they could not prosecute; they could not take oaths, and thus could prove their innocence only by ordeal. Their ranks included a surprisingly large spectrum of people: gravediggers, executioners, knackers, nightwatchmen, bathhouse overseers, barbers, millers, weavers, and shepherds.³⁰ Hermann Bote accentuated the tabu against Till even further by designating him a “Schalck”. Hans Wiswe has observed that the term had a considerably more pejorative meaning at the close of the Middle Ages than we find even by the eighteenth century.³¹ Luther translates the *polluti* in the Vulgate (Jer. 23: 1 1) as *Schelke*, and the *serve nequam* of Matth. 18:32 as *Schalkknecht*.³² In his *Schichtboik* Bote himself refers to those instigating the guildsmen’s uprising as *Schelke*.³³ The drastic discrepancy of social status between the actors in *TE* sets the stage for a confrontation between conventional language (as represented by the members of “proper” society) and a language of transgression (necessarily so, since Till intrudes into a space not proper to himself when he speaks). These confrontations typically occur when Till has been given a command by someone exercising authority over him. Such a situation is not infrequent, as Till often hires himself out to an artisan, in order to live “parasitically” for a few days under the guise of an apprentice or helper. The smooth functioning of the artisan’s shop is dependent first upon the recognition of the master’s authority, and second upon linguistic convention, by which the artisan’s commands are expressed, understood and carried out. Till violates the relationship between himself and his master by sidestepping the conventional meaning of the command and “obeying” a non-conventional meaning.

30. Werner Danckert: *Unehrliche Leute. Die verfehmten Berufe*. Berne, Munich 1963, esp. p. 9-20.

31. Hans Wiswe: *Sozialgeschichtliches um Till Eulenspiegel* 11, p. 176 f.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 177f.

33. Werner Wunderlich (“Till Eulenspiegel”. Munich 1984, p. 28) lists several examples of Bote’s use of *schalk* in the *Schichtboik*.

A typical example is found in the 20th episode, where Till hires himself out to a baker in Uelzen. The baker orders Till to sift flour during the night while the baker sleeps. According to Bollenbeck, ordering one's help to work unsupervised violated traditional guild law.³⁴ Till finds himself in this situation in many episodes,³⁵ and it uniformly provides him the opportunity to execute a prank. In light of Bollenbeck's observation, the punitive or vengeful function of the prank becomes clearer: with it Bote can warn contemporary artisans to uphold the traditional corporative ideal of work. In this episode Till lays a linguistic trap for the baker by protesting that he will need a light in order to obey his master's order. His master refuses to give him one; he will have to sift by the moonlight as the previous help has done. Till complies, "Hon sie dann also hin gebütlet, so wil ich es auch tun."³⁶ While the baker sleeps, Till holds the sifter out the window of the bakery, letting the flour fall in the moonlight onto the dirt courtyard. Several hours later the baker discovers his courtyard white with flour. "Waz der Tüffel! Waz machst du hie? Hat daz Mel nit mer kostet, wann daz du dez in den Treck bütelest?" he yells. Till responds innocently: "Hon Ihr mich es nit geheissen in dem Mon bütelen sunder Liecht? Also hab ich gethon."³⁷ The conventionally defined relationship of master to servant establishes the framework within which the utterances between Till and the baker are exchanged. The nature of their speech acts buttresses this relationship: the master gives directives, and the

34. "Zwar dingt in der Regel bis weit ins 15. Jahrhundert der Meister die gesamte Arbeitskraft des Gesellen, zwar kann die Arbeitszeit bis zu 16 Stunden dauern, doch halten Meister und Geselle die gleiche Arbeitszeit ein und bilden eine Werkgemeinschaft." (Bollenbeck: Till Eulenspiegel, p. 104.) Bollenbeck maintains that these episodes demonstrate a pervasive disintegration of a corporative means of production, symptomatic of the changing economic relationships in the late medieval/early modern period.

35. See episodes 20, 39, 47, 48, 56, 62 (also cited in Bollenbeck: Till Eulenspiegel, p. 104).

36. Dil Ulenspiegel, p. 61.

37. Ibid., p. 61.

servant promises to fulfill them. Let us examine these speech acts, using Searle's taxonomy.³⁸

The directive given by the baker to sift flour in the moonlight fits the following formula:

! ↑ W (H does A)

- ! = illocutionary point, in this case an attempt by the speaker to get the hearer to do something. This will be the typical initial constellation between master (speaker) and servant (hearer).
- ↑ = "direction of fit" — an upturned arrow indicates the world should be made to fit the words (as opposed to a declaration, where the direction of fit is words to world [↓]). In our case the world within the master's workplace is to be made congruent to the master's word: the bags of unsifted flour shall be fitted to the master's words, "Sift the flour".
- W = the sincerity condition which indicates the psychological state of the speaker. In this case the sincerity condition is Want — the master *wants* the flour to be sifted.
- (H does A) = the propositional content, or the actual task to be performed by the hearer. In this case, "Till sifts the flour in the moonlight", is the propositional content of the directive.

According to this formula the directive is broadly defined to include a spectrum ranging from ordering, to asking, to entreating.³⁹ Searle specifies within this spectrum by defining additional dimensions of variation, including that of social status differences between speaker and hearer. He observes that this variation determines whether the asking is a command (which presupposes a relationship of power/authority of speaker over hearer) or a request (which may well indicate the speaker's lack of power/authority over against the hearer).⁴⁰ This restriction is of utmost importance in the linguistic relationship between Till and the master artisan, for by it the perlocutionary force of the statement

38. John R. Searle: A Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts. In: Searle: Expression and Meaning, p. 1-29, esp. p. 12-15.

39. Ibid., p. 14.

40. Ibid., p. 5 f.

is socially legitimated. The hearer is bound to perform the command in order to receive from the speaker the material benefits upon which his (the hearer's) existence depends. The linguistic convention "master-commands-servant" is rooted in the socio-economic relationship between them and serves to perpetuate it. The only acceptable response to the command is the promise to obey, which alone guarantees the felicity of the master's statement.

Searle's taxonomy of the promise (commissive)⁴¹ will make clear what exactly the relationship between the baker's command and Till's promise is. The promise formula is as follows:

C ↓ I (S does A)

C = the illocutionary point which commits the speaker to some future course of action. In our case Till (now the speaker) commits himself to the fulfillment of the baker's command. Note again the significance of social status in this promise: Till's commitment is not autonomous or sovereign; it is a function of the command, the only response that can guarantee the felicity of the command.

↑ = again the direction of fit is world to words. However, now the speaker of the promise is also to be the agent of change.

I = the sincerity condition of the speaker of the promise is Intention: in our case Till indicates by the promise that he intends to perform the action described in the baker's command.

(S does A) = the propositional content of the promise: the speaker shall perform some future action "A". This action "A" must be identical to that stated in the master's command.

The servant's promise to obey his master's command is highly restricted. The illocutionary point of the utterance commits Till to what his position as servant compels him to do, i.e. obey his master. The propositional content of the promise is merely a repetition⁴² of that of the master's command, spoken now from the agent's point of view. The

41. *Ibid.*, p. 14f.

42. As we will see, herein lies the problem in the Till episode: for although

promise uttered in response to the master's command linguistically mirrors the social relationship between master and servant, where the servant is an extension and realizer of the master's will.

But obviously Till did not carry out the command as intended; the exchange of speech acts was, in the view of SAT, "infelicitous" or "defective". In his *Speech Acts* Searle outlines the "necessary and sufficient conditions for the act of promising to have been

he repeats the baker's command, he means something other than what the baker did. Here, too, lies a point of difference between Searle and Derrida. Derrida denies the possibility of any "pure" repetition with his notion of iterability: "Iterability supposes a minimal remainder (as well as a minimum of idealization) in order that the identity of the *selfsame* be repeatable and identifiable *in, through, and even in view of* its alteration. For the structure of iteration — and this is another of its decisive traits — implies *both* identity *and* difference. Iteration in its 'purest' form — and it is always impure — contains *in itself* the discrepancy of a difference that constitutes it as iteration." (Derrida: *Limited Inc*, p. 190.) Searle, on the other hand, misunderstands Derrida because he equates iteration with repetition. In summing up what a "sympathetic reading" of Derrida might yield, Searle states that he has pointed out "that the possibility of parasitic discourse is internal to the notion of language, and that performatives can succeed only if the utterances are *iterable, repetitions* of conventional ... forms. But neither of these points is in any way an objection to Austin. Indeed, Austin's insistence on the conventional character of the performative utterance in particular and the illocutionary act in general commits him precisely to the view that *performatives must be iterable, in the sense that any conventional act involves the notion of repetition of the same.*" (Searle: *Reply*, p. 207; emphasis is mine.) The distinction is at its profoundest a metaphysical one: Derrida's structure of iterability displaces the concept of identity that is at the base of any ontology. Spivak writes on this point: "One of the corollaries of the structure of alterity which is the revised version of the structure of identity is that every repetition is an alteration. This would put into question both a transcendental idealism that claims that the idea is infinitely repeatable as the same and a speech act theory that bases its conclusions on intentions and contexts that can be defined and transferred within firm outlines. Iterability is the name of this corollary: every repetition is an alteration (iteration)." (Spivak: *Revolutions that as Yet Have No Model*, p. 37.)

successfully and non-defectively performed.”⁴³ The first criterion is that “normal input and output conditions obtain”. Included in this condition is the Austinian exclusion of “parasitic forms of communication such as telling jokes or acting in a play”.⁴⁴ Till’s promise is disqualified from the start, precisely because his language is parasitic; with his promise he is setting up the joke he wants to play on the baker. To do this he discovers an ambiguity in the command as the baker formulated it. To “sift flour by the moonlight” can be interpreted to mean either “in the moonlight shining through the windows of the bakery” or “directly in the moonlight shining in the courtyard”. Convention and speaker intention seem to determine the context sufficiently as to render the directive unambiguous. But as Derrida has noted, “intention cannot govern the entire scene and system of an utterance.”⁴⁵ The strength of conventional meaning obscures the denotative space lying beyond the pale of social convention and functions as a host, by means of which Till’s parasitic meaning can infect the conversation unnoticed. According to Derrida, the risk of this sort of “parasitism” constitutes the “internal and positive condition of possibility” of communication in general. Moreover, to ban this sort of parasitism to “a kind of ditch or external place of perdition”,⁴⁶ as SAT would do, exposes the ideological foundation of this theory as merely a reproduction of the law it purports to be analyzing. Searle continues in his analysis of the promise, distinguishing it from a threat:

A promise is defective if the thing promised is something the promisee does not want done; and it is further defective if the promisor does not believe the promisee wants it done, since a non-defective promise must be intended as a promise and not as a threat or warning.⁴⁷

43. John R. Searle: *Speech Acts. An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge 1970, p. 54.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

45. Derrida: *Signature Event Context*, p. 192.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 190.

47. Searle: *Speech Acts*, p. 58. In his discussion of this passage Derrida employs the psychoanalytical notion of the subconscious to point out the “structural ambivalence” of every desire. (*Limited Inc*, p. 215 f.)

Seen in this light, Till’s “promise” to sift flour in the moonlight (meaning onto the courtyard) was a threat rather than a promise, for clearly the baker did not want his supply of flour ruined. SAT would indeed banish Till’s utterance into the domain of “defective” (or infelicitous) speech acts: first, because it was a parasitic promise, and second, because it was really a threat masquerading in the linguistic trappings of a promise. The law of non-defective promising simply retraces convention as it is reenforced by social relationships. And just as the parasitic promise must be banished as “defective”, so, too, Till must be excluded from “proper” society. Once the baker realizes he has been duped, he sends Till away, calling him a *Schalck*, and thereby attributing to him an identity opposite to that of the moral community. An analysis of this episode according to SAT brings the “ethico-political” dimension of the theory clearly to light: linguistic transgression as SAT defines it goes hand in hand with what constitutes a transgression in the eyes of the law, that is, the destruction of property. SAT reproduces in itself laws of power and property that govern society and language.

If we leave the internal fictional world of *TE* for a moment and consider the work itself as the utterance of its author, Hermann Bote, we must conclude that the interpretation yielded by SAT conforms with what we know about the author’s political views. Till’s transgressions stand as a warning to the artisans: by violating traditional guild practices, they may bring about the destruction of their business. If the corporative nexus is maintained, the parasitic *Schalck* will never be able to infect it. But a Derridian reading of the transgression sees parasitism as a condition of all communication, so that no boundary, traditional or otherwise, can banish the infection. By demonstrating the susceptibility of “normal” discourse to parasitic, “non-serious” discourse, the text calls the necessity of the normal into question and exposes it as mere convention, artifice. This is the first step in envisioning a new order, a new set of conventions. Clearly this revolutionary interpretation lies beyond Bote’s intention, but its possibility lies, so a Derridian interpretation would argue, in the structural ambiguity of Till’s transgression.

We find this same ambiguity in the many scatological pranks in *TE*, where we find the same tension between convention and non-convention at work. Let us consider by way of example the 77th episode, which

relates Till's stay at an inn in Nuremberg. Next door to the inn lives "ein frum man, der was reich und gieng gern in die Kirchen",⁴⁸ a staunch member of proper society who also wholeheartedly supports the social tabus directed against the dishonorable class. He "vermöcht sich nit wol der Spilleutt. Wa die waren oder kamen, da er was, da gieng er davon."⁴⁹ This rich man had the custom of giving an annual dinner for his neighbors, a sumptuous affair where food was lavish and the best wine flowed freely. If the neighbors happened to have out-of-town guests — merchants and the like — these were invited along as well, as long as they, too, were "frum", or honorable.⁵⁰ One of these feasts takes place while Till is in town. Till's innkeeper, a neighbor of the rich man, is invited. Till, his guest, is not, because the rich man sees from Till's dress that he is a "Gouckler und Spilman",⁵¹ i.e., dishonorable. Till is insulted, but decides to behave in a manner appropriate to the designation given him: "Bin ich ein Gouckeler, so sol ich ihm Goucklerei beweisen."⁵² He bores a hole through the wall of the rich man's house and, equipped with a pile of his own filth ("seins Trecks ein grossen Huffen"⁵³), blows the stench into the rich man's dining hall with a bellows as all the

48. Dil Ulenspiegel, p. 221.

49. Ibid., p. 221.

50. "Und diser Man lud seinen Nachburen, als er für ein Gewonheit het, und ihr Gäst, die sie hetten von frumen Leüten." (Ibid., p. 222.) It is interesting to note that the rich man considered merchants sufficiently honorable that he would invite them to his home. Bollenbeck (Till Ulenspiegel, p. 37-43) has noted that the traditional medieval prejudices against the merchant are muted in *TE*, because Bote, as a supporter of the Hanseatic cities, was relatively well-disposed to those representing a livelihood so essential to the Hanseatic economy. For this reason one must qualify Bote's "conservatism", insofar as his urban perspective includes certain "progressive", "bourgeois" aspects in distinction to the purely feudal interests of, say, the territorial princes. Bollenbeck's differentiated analysis adds an important socio-historical dimension to earlier, flatter ascriptions of "conservatism" to Hermann Bote.

51. "Sunder Ulenspiegel lud er nit, den sahe er für ein Gouckler und Spilman, die pflag er nit zu laden." (Dil Ulenspiegel, p. 222.)

52. Ibid., p. 222.

53. Ibid., p. 222.

guests are eating. At first everyone thinks the smell is coming from his neighbor. (This is an interesting comment, for it indicates that the smell is not essentially foreign to the illustrious crowd gathered there: even honorable people can smell bad.) As the odor becomes more powerful they search all corners of the room for its source. Finally the stench so overwhelms them that they are forced to leave the dinner. Here we see the results of Till's transgression: it pollutes the "inside" such that it must be evacuated. Till's innkeeper returns to his house, and after vomiting up his dinner (a more profound evacuation!), explains to Till how horrible the rich man's room had smelled. Till laughs and says:

Wolt mich der reich Man nit zu Gast laden und mir ginnen seiner Kost?
Ich bin ihm doch vil günstiger getrüwer wann er mir, ich gun ihm doch wol meiner Kost. Wär ich da gewesen, so hät es nit so ubel gestuncken.⁵⁴

Having insinuated his culpability in the prank, Till hightails it out of town. In his statement we see the same parasitic use of language as in the previous episode. The "Kost" Till so "generously and faithfully" grants the rich man is his own digested food, his excrement. According to SAT this parasitic use of language must be excluded from ordinary language, and we can see from the dialogue that follows that the rich man would also be glad to exclude Till from his presence:

Der reich Man sprach: "Lieber Nachbuer, der Doren und Spillüt würt niemant gebessert, darumb wil ich deren nit mer in meinem Huß haben. Ist mir nun dise Büberei also geschehen Euwers Huß halben, da kan ich nüt zu, ich sah Euwern Gast an für einen Schalck."⁵⁵

Till's prank corresponds to the expectations the rich man has of the socially declassed and reinforces his prejudice. He assumes an ontological source for Till's behavior: the prankster's actions correspond to his being, and the social definition of *Unehrllichkeit* correctly identifies this being. The only way to protect the "insiders", the *ehrliche Leute*, from the effects of this *Schalck* is to banish him from the "inside", from the "home".

But for the innkeeper, who is less well-off than the rich man, this is not

54. Ibid., p. 223.

55. Ibid., p. 223.

possible. He is dependent on the patronage of all people, be they honorable or dishonorable. While he, too, makes the distinction between the two groups, it is relativized by his own economic need. Unable to ban the *Schalck* from his house, his only option is live with the anxiety and increase his watchfulness:

Ulenspiegels Wirt sagt: “Lieber Wirt, Ihr haben wol gehört und ist auch also: für ein Schalck sol man zwei Liecht setzen, und das muß ich wol thun, dan ich muß allerlei halten. Einen Schalck muß man halten mit den Besten, so jemant kumpt.”⁵⁶

The innkeeper’s economic need effectively forces him to acknowledge the parasitic relationship of honorable and dishonorable, so that the presumed ontological divisions become shaky. This is still more the case when we consider Till’s assertion that, had he been invited to the dinner, had the tabu against his class been set aside, the prank would have been avoided. Seen from this perspective, Till’s prank reflects not who he *is*, but how he is *defined*. As he himself says, his action is merely an example of the *Goucklerei* “proper” to the *Gouckler*-essence assigned him by the rich man. And his being defined as declassed outsider serves the important societal function of guaranteeing the existence of an inside, “normal” group. The initial description of the rich man clearly shows the mutual dependence of the positive and negative contours of his piety. Positive piety: “do wont ein frum Man, der was reich und gieng gern in die Kirchen”; negative piety: “und vermöcht sich nit wol der Spilleut. Wa die waren oder kamen, da er was, da gieng er davon.”⁵⁷ The prank inverts the relationship of inside to outside, thus relativizing the boundaries and exposing “proper” behavior as mere convention. This is the political possibility Derrida sees in parasitic or fictional discourse, the “literatures” or “revolutions” against the “language-police”. Moreover, the structure of iterability insists that the determination of positive values (in our episode: “frum” “ehrlich”, etc.) is merely an hypostatization of convention. As Derrida reminds us:

The parasite is by definition never simply external, never simply some-

56. *Ibid.*, p. 223 f.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 221.

thing that can be excluded from or kept outside of the body “proper,” shut out from the “familial” table or house.⁵⁸

Again we can see how the two familiar interpretative possibilities would arise from this episode. If we follow the authorial intention as the “serious” and legitimate meaning, we will conclude that Bote desired to show the drastic implications of transgression against “normal” social propriety, to encourage those able to banish the dishonorable from their home to do so, and to exhort those who could not to “light two candles”, i.e. be on their guard whenever they were forced to have dealings with a *Schalck*. But if we legitimate non-serious language and find serious meaning also in the parasitical “joke”, then we see that Till successfully destabilizes conventional social norms.

In this episode we also begin to see a point of mediation between the two interpretations in the figure of the innkeeper. The financial relationship between Till and him relativizes the distinction between social insider and outcast. Critics have suggested that the frequently appearing theme of money in *TE* reflects the economic transition occurring in the late Middle Ages from an economy rooted in feudal bonds of obligation to a bourgeois market economy. Bote, it is argued, recognized the potential danger in this transition insofar as it tended to dissolve traditional corporative bonds.⁵⁹ His recommendation in the face of this social disintegration comes through the innkeeper’s admonition — by way of a traditional proverb — to be careful. But the very fact that economic relationships can threaten the old social order, the very fact that caution must struggle to enforce the distinction between inside and outside, indicates that Bote recognizes the fragility of the traditional order. His anxiety arises as he considers that his society could be cutting itself adrift from its anchorage in what he believed was a divinely instituted order.

This underlying anxiety seems to be able to account both for Bote’s intention to admonish, as well as the text’s structural ambiguity. His fear

58. Derrida: *Limited Inc*, p. 232.

59. Wolfgang Fritz Haug: *Die Einübung bürgerlicher Verkehrsformen bei Eulenspiegel*. In: *Eulenspiegel-Interpretationen*, p. 201-224; Bollenbeck: *Till Eulenspiegel*, esp. p. 29-32, 100-109.

that all societal norms are violable begins to undermine his intention to exhort, because there seems to be no position immune from the attacks of parasitism. The retributive function of many of the episodes — such as the two discussed above — suggests that if social norms are upheld, society will secure itself from Till's transgressions. This has led several critics to argue that the proper theme of the chapbook is not the figure of Till at all, but the perverseness of the world (*die Verkehrtheit der Welt*).⁶⁰ The theme of the “world upside-down” was pervasive in the sixteenth century, and was often utilized for its polemical force. Erasmus places Scholastic theology in the domain of Folly, implicitly defending the role of humanistic scholarship; Reformation propaganda places the papal tiara on the Whore of Babylon, implicitly giving an apology for the new, evangelical theology.⁶¹ To a large extent we can see the motif of the world upside-down similarly employed in service of Bote's social concerns: Till's pranks negate an already existing negation of what Bote perceives to be the “normal” order. But this model does not account for those episodes where Till's transgression is entirely unprovoked and does not serve to negate any vice. Here Bote seems to be considering that even proper, traditional behavior is unable to protect society from the force of disintegration as embodied in Till. In such episodes Bote cannot exhort his reader, and the model of the perversity of the world cannot provide an adequate interpretation. Exhortation cannot cure Bote's anxiety in the instances where there is no immune position that he can recommend to his reader.

60. Based on his discovery of Bote as the author, Peter Honegger was the first to ask, “ob das, was uns der Verfasser des Volksbuches von seinem Helden erzählt, als thematisch geschickt geordnete Nachricht über einen historisch nachweisbaren Till Eulenspiegel gemeint ist, oder ob nicht vielmehr der Ulenspiegel vor allem das wiedergibt, was sich der Verfasser über seine Umwelt gedacht hat. Es scheint, daß er uns mit einer genialen Satire über die Anmaßung und Dummheit seiner Mitmenschen unterhalten will.” (Honegger: *Ulenspiegel*, p. 126 f.) Alexander Schwarz (*Verkehrte Welt im Ulenspiegel*. In: *Daphnis* 15 [1986], p. 441-461) argues more stringently that the proper theme of *TE* is not Till, but the perversity of the world.

61. See R.W. Scribner: *For the Sake of Simple Folk. Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation*. Cambridge 1981, p. 164 f.

Consider the 88th episode, where a peasant finds Till lying under a tree, sick from having overimbibed and “einem todten Menschen gleicher dan einem lebendigen”.⁶² To the peasant passing by, market-bound, with a cart full of plums, Till moans:

Ach, gut Fründ, sich, hie bin ich so kranck drei Tag und Nacht on aller Menschen Hilff hie gelegen, und wa ich noch einen Tag also ligen sol, so möcht ich wol Hunger und Durst sterben. Darumb für mich umb Gots willen für die Stat.⁶³

Seeing Till's poor condition and figuring he would have to lie in his cart, the peasant at first refuses Till's request, saying he would ruin his plums. But Till insists he can ride on the front of the cart, so the peasant, a “frum Man”,⁶⁴ plays the role of good Samaritan and helps Till onto the cart. The story notes that the man was old, and it cost him considerable pain lifting Till. And he drove the cart slowly, to make his ailing guest more comfortable along the way. His reward? Till defecates on his plums, rendering them unmarketable.

It is unlikely that sixteenth-century readers, steeped as they were in the Bible, would fail to hear an allusion to the gospel account of the good Samaritan in this episode. But with what a peculiar twist! The peasant, initially torn between behaving according to his economic interests or to a traditional morality, decides for the latter, only to be “punished” for it. This episode demonstrates how deep-seated the anxieties generated by the increasingly shaky foundations of traditional society were. It penetrates even to the foundations of moral and charitable behavior; even they are not inviolable. Surely this was an unhappy conclusion for someone with Bote's moral convictions, and it begins to undermine his exhortatory intention in the chapbook. The transgressions in *TE* are not always fixed to a program of reform. Their shifting locus becomes symptomatic of a pervasive anxiety in the face of relativized or disintegrating “givens”.

62. Dil *Ulenspiegel*, p. 251.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 251 f.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 251.

Summary

Till is the projection of anxieties arising in the face of social instability. Bote, who was witness to just how fragile the given order of patrician rule in Brunswick was, was sensible both to its weaknesses and to its preferability to disorder. The shifting locus of perverseness in *TE* provides an adequate structure for Bote, who is critical of his society, but uneasy about the forces threatening to tear it apart altogether. The violability of the order is so profound, that at times there seems to be no position which can be defended against parasitic infection. Bote's admonitory intention thus begins to turn in on itself, and the chapbook assumes a highly ambiguous character. While vice clearly invites disorder, it seems that virtue, too, is subject to parasitic infection. No behavior, no place is immune. Till's transgressions relativize the given order from top to bottom, inside to out. It is impossible to distill from the chapbook's many episodes a consistent lesson or moral, because of the constantly shifting locus of perversity.

Derrida's understanding of iterability and parasitic language provides us with a useful heuristic device in defining ambiguity as a structural principle in the chapbook. It allows the work to vacillate between serious and non-serious language, between history and fiction. Interpreting according to authorial intention alone (SAT) flattens the work by identifying only Bote's admonitory voice, while overlooking how his anxiety tends to undermine the very norms he intends to uphold. However there are limits to this heuristic device. Derrida's polemic against Searle is part of a larger philosophical project criticizing certain tendencies within the Western philosophical tradition. He posits structural ambiguity as the condition of all discourse. But I have employed Derrida outside of this philosophical context. The structural ambiguity we have discussed in *TE* is not a function of the text's textuality. It is a function of this specific text: its genre, its author, its historical context. The book vacillates between fictionality and historicity by design. As the author writes in the foreword, the book consists of "Historien und Geschichten".⁶⁵ Claims to the hero's historicity — dates, specific places

65. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

where Till was born, lived, and died, even an alleged gravestone — are undermined by the willfully interjected anachronisms throughout the narrative,⁶⁶ and by the author's acknowledgement that he included material from other *Schwänke*. He even encourages his readers to add their own tales to the collection.⁶⁷ Derrida's observation that "at the 'origin' of every speech act there can only be Societies which are (more or less) anonymous, with limited responsibility or liability"⁶⁸ also helps us identify Bote's deferral of authorial intention in *TE*. But this deferral is not the Derridian deferral endemic to all writing. It is a literary convention with a specific historical function. We have seen that the volatile social conditions in Brunswick may well have led Bote to defer his authorial liability to a "Society" (*etlich Personen*) in order to protect himself. Bote's deferral of authorial intention also raises more far-reaching questions concerning the emergence of the early modern author as a subject in the early sixteenth century.⁶⁹ The vacillation in *TE* between "serious" and "non-serious" language is also specific to the work: the author employs citations out of context, or parasitic language, *intentionally* for its humorous effect. Derrida again gives us tools to identify this, to do interpretive justice to more than a single, "serious" meaning. But this vacillation, too, has a specific historical locus. Studies have touched on the problem of "komischer Gehalt" and "gehaltvolle Komik" in *TE*, casting it in terms of the contemporary understanding of the relationship between *ars iocandi* and *ars vivendi*.⁷⁰ It was believed that comical

66. Honegger: Ulenspiegel, p. 127-129.

67. Bote writes in the foreword that he included "etliche() Fabulen des Pfaffen Amis und des Pfaffen von dem Kalenberg"; he suggests that readers and listeners "gute kurtzweilige Fröden und Schwänck daruß fabulleren." (Dil Ulenspiegel, p. 7 f.)

68. Derrida: Limited Inc, p. 216.

69. Peter Seibert: Der 'tichter' und 'poeta' am Beginn der Neuzeit. Einige Bemerkungen zum frühreformatorischen Autorentypus. In: LiLi. Zeitschrift für Litdraturwissenschaft und Linguistik 11 (1981), No. 42, pp. 13-28.

70. Bollenbeck: Till Eulenspiegel, p. 187 f.; Heinz-Günter Schmitz: Physiologie des Scherzes. Bedeutung und Rechtfertigung der Ars Iocandi im 16. Jahrhundert. Hildesheim, NY 1972.

literature served the revivifying function of replenishing humors dried out by excessive worry. Works such as *TE* could drive away melancholy; Luther himself recommended *TE* as a means of avoiding the devil's *Anfechtungen*.⁷¹ In his foreword Bote suggests this medicinal purpose lies at the heart of the book, which he wrote, he says, "umb ein frölich Gemüt zu machen in schweren Zeiten".⁷² The philosophical context of deconstructive parasitism as it is employed against the intellectual constraints of "logocentrism", tends to valorize the disruptive potential of iterability. It finds in the transgressions against the "language police" emancipatory "'revolutions' that as yet have no model".⁷³ We found that Till's parasitic language mirrors the instability of the social order of the late medieval period. Bote intended to hold this mirror up as a warning, but it also reflects his uneasiness vis-à-vis the fragility, violability and changeability of the order. While later readers would valorize this potential, making Till into a positive hero, the historical context limits the parameters even of Bote's non-intentional message. This message — that the order is violable — is a fearsome possibility in the early sixteenth century, quite lacking the "Byronic chic"⁷⁴ it possesses today. Derrida helps us get at this non-intentional message by showing the limits of authorial intention as an interpretive tool, and offering an alternative model of structural ambivalence. The heuristic device by which we could avoid an interpretation overly-determined by context brings us to a non-intentional meaning which itself is specific to the work's historical context. If we wish to understand the significance of Till's transgressions in the early sixteenth century, we must conclude that

71. "Die beste Arznei wieder die Anfechtung ist, daß du deine Gedanken davon abwendest, das ist, redest von anderen Dingen, von Markofolo, Eulenspiegel und dergleichen lächerlichen Possen, so sich gar zu solchen Handeln weder reimen noch dienen." (Martin Luther, WA TR Vol. 1, No. 1089; cited by Bollenbeck: *Till Eulenspiegel*, p. 315; and by Schmitz: *Physiologie des Scherzes*, p. 4.)

72. *Dil Ulenspiegel*, p. 7. See Schmitz: *Physiologie des Scherzes*, p. 82.

73. Derrida: *Limited Inc*, p. 243.

74. The phrase was coined by Denis Donoghue: *Deconstructing Deconstruction*. In: *New York Review of Books* 27 (1980), No. 10, p. 41.

they were not revolutionary, but rather symptomatic of the anxiety caused by a fearsome disintegration of traditional corporative bonds. Of course this does not invalidate later interpretations of Till that valorize (or trivialize, as in children's literature) his transgressions. The iterability of the text opens diachronically to a multiplicity of meanings as the interpretive context shifts. But these, too, are to be understood in their historical specificity.