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Preface

What is literary criticism for? What is its task and what is its value? As the number of interpretive studies increases to the point where reading what has been written on any major author becomes an unmanageable labour, such questions force themselves more insistently upon anyone concerned with the study of literature, if only because he must decide how to allocate his time. Why should he read and write criticism?

In one sense, of course, the answer is obvious: in the process of literary education criticism is both an end and a means, the natural culmination of study of an author and the instrument of literary training. But if the role criticism has been called upon to play in the educational system serves to explain the quantity of critical writings it does little to justify the activity itself. Nor does the traditional humanistic defence of literary education – that we do not learn about literature and how to read it but about the world and how to interpret it – make out much of a case for criticism as an independent mode of knowledge.

If there is a crisis in literary criticism it is no doubt because few of the many who write about literature have the desire or arguments to defend their activity. And for this the prevailing critical climate in England and America bears some responsibility. The historical scholarship which was once the dominant mode of criticism could at least, whatever its other faults, be defended as an attempt to bring supplementary and inaccessible information to bear on the text and thus to assist understanding. But the orthodoxy bequeathed by the 'New Criticism', which focuses on 'the text itself', which prizes that encounter and the resulting interpretations, is more difficult to defend. An intrinsic or immanent criticism, which in principle if not in

'Beyond' Structuralism: *Tel Quel*

Un système est une espèce de damnation
qui nous pousse à une abjuration perpétuelle;
il en faut toujours inventer
un autre, et cette fatigue est un cruel
châtiment.*

BAUDELAIRE

Although structuralists of all persuasions would argue that reading is a structuring activity and that one should study the processes by which meaning is produced, many would challenge the view of structuralism presented in Part Two of this book. They might particularly wish to oppose the notion that reading should be studied as a rule-governed process or as the expression of a kind of 'literary competence'. For the theorists associated with the review *Tel Quel*, the programme which I have presented might seem an ideological emasculation of all that was vital and radical in structuralism: an attempt to make it an analytical discipline which studies and describes the *status quo* instead of an active force which frees semiotic practices from the ideology that holds them in check. Their argument might run as follows:

The aspect of Chomsky's theory of language which you invoke in your account of structuralism is precisely that which we have rejected. His notion of 'linguistic competence' and his use of the 'intuitions' of the native speaker make the individual subject the point of reference, the source of meaning, the seat of creativity, and give a privileged status to a particular set of rules which govern the sentences that he takes to be well formed. The concept of literary competence is a way of granting pre-eminence to certain arbitrary conventions and excluding from the realm of language all the truly creative and productive violations of these rules.

* A system is a kind of damnation which drives us to perpetual abjuration. We are always forced to invent another, and this strain is a cruel punishment.

We are not likely, therefore, to accept the notion of literary competence, which would be even more prescriptive and repressive. The ideology of our culture promotes a particular way of reading literature, and instead of challenging it you make it an absolute and translate it into a system of rules and operations which you treat as the norms of rationality and acceptability. It is true that in its early stages structuralism envisaged the possibility of a 'literary system' which would assign a structural description to each text; but this, which is the only proposal that would justify talk of literary competence, is now recognized as an error. Texts can be read in many ways; each text contains within itself the possibility of an infinite set of structures, and to privilege some by setting up a system of rules to generate them is a blatantly prescriptive and ideological move.

The claim would be that the kind of poetics which Barthes proposed in *Critique et vérité* – an analysis of the intelligibility of works, of the logic by which acceptable meanings are produced – has been rejected or transcended in favour of a more 'open' approach which stresses the creative freedom of both writer and reader. Speaking of a change in structuralism, which in his own work corresponds to the passage from 'Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits' (1966) to *S/Z* (1970), Barthes notes that

in the former text I appealed to a general structure from which would be derived analyses of contingent texts . . . In *S/Z* I reversed this perspective: there I refused the idea of a model transcendent to several texts (and thus, all the more so, of a model transcendent to every text) in order to postulate that each text is in some sort its own model, that each text, in other words, must be treated in its difference, 'difference' being understood here precisely in a Nietzschean or a Derridean sense. Let me put it another way: the text is ceaselessly and through and through traversed by codes, but it is not the accomplishment of a code (of, for example, the narrative code), it is not the *parole* of a narrative *langue*. ('A Conversation with Roland Barthes', p. 44)

The argument is a curious one because it so closely resembles, given a difference in terminology, the attacks on structuralism from more traditional quarters. Those who oppose the idea of poetics do so in the name of the uniqueness of every literary work and the critical impoverishment that results from thinking of it as an instance of the literary system: the heterogeneity of readers and works, the possibili-

ties of literary innovation, prevent one from encompassing in a single theory the forms of literature and the meanings it can produce. No science can exhaust the modalities of creative genius.

This is not, in fact, very far from Barthes's suggestion that each text is its own model, a system unto itself. It does not have a single structure, assigned to it by a literary system, nor does it contain an encoded meaning which a knowledge of literary codes would enable one to decipher. Reading must focus on the differences between texts, the relations of proximity and distance, of citation, negation, irony and parody. Such relations are infinite and work to defer any final meaning.

However, Barthes's argument seems fundamentally ambiguous. Not only does he preserve the notion of code, which entails collective knowledge and shared norms; it is in *S/Z* that the concept reaches its fullest development: the codes refer to all that has already been written, read, seen, done. The text is ceaselessly traversed by codes, which are the source of its meanings. The text may not have a structure assigned to it by a grammar of narrative, but that is because the operations of reading enable it to be structured in various ways. If the text has a plurality of meanings it is because it does not itself contain a meaning but involves the reader in the process of producing meaning according to a variety of appropriate procedures. To reject the concept of a system on the grounds that the interpretive codes which enable one to read the text produce a plurality of meanings is a curious *non sequitur*, for the fact that a variety of meanings and structures are possible is the strongest evidence we have of the complexity and importance of the practice of reading. If each text had a single meaning, then it might be possible to argue that this meaning was inherent to it and depended upon no general system, but the fact that there is an open set of possible meanings indicates that we are dealing with interpretive processes of considerable power which require study. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the theories of the *Tel Quel* group and the arguments which they might bring to bear against the notions of a literary system and literary competence do, in fact, presuppose these notions which they claim to have rejected.

To show that this is so and that it is extremely difficult to go beyond the kind of structuralism which has been sketched in earlier chapters we shall have to consider in some detail *Tel Quel's* attempts at self-transcendence. The reasons for trying to go beyond structuralism are perhaps best set forth by Jacques Derrida in *L'Écriture et la différence*.

First of all, in the study of literature the notion of structure has a teleological character: the structure is determined by a particular end; it is recognized as a configuration which contributes to this end.

'How can one perceive an organized whole except by starting with its end or purpose?' (p. 44). Unless one has postulated some transcendent 'final cause' or ultimate meaning for the work, one cannot discover its structure, for the structure is that by which the end is made present throughout the work. The analyst of structure has the task of displaying the work as a spatial configuration in which time past and time future point to one end, which is always present. Derrida writes:

On nous accordera qu'il s'agit ici de la métaphysique implicite de tout structuralisme ou de tout geste structuraliste. En particulier, une lecture structurale présuppose toujours, fait toujours appel, dans son moment propre, à cette simultanéité théologique du livre.

(It will be readily granted that we have here the implicit metaphysics of structuralism or of any structuralist procedure. In particular, a structuralist reading, though it takes place in time, always presupposes and appeals to this simultaneity of the book as seen by God.) (p. 41)

The study of structure is in this sense governed by 'a move which consists of giving it a centre, of referring it to a moment of "presence" or a definite origin'. This centre founds and organizes the structure, permitting certain combinations of elements and excluding others: 'the centre closes the play which it inaugurates and makes possible . . . The concept of a centred structure is in fact that of limited or founded play' (pp. 409-10). This closure, it would be argued, testifies to the presence of an ideology.

This notion is not difficult to illustrate. When one speaks of the structure of a literary work, one does so from a certain vantage point: one starts with notions of the meaning or effects of a poem and tries to identify the structures responsible for those effects. Possible configurations or patterns which make no contribution are rejected as irrelevant. That is to say, an intuitive understanding of the poem functions as the 'centre', governing the play of forms: it is both a starting point - what enables one to identify structures - and a limiting principle.

But to grant any principle this privileged status, to make it the prime mover itself unmoved, is a patently ideological step. Notions of the meaning or effects of a particular poem are determined by the contingent facts of readers' history and by the various critical and ideological concepts current at the time. Why should these particular cultural products - what readers have been taught about literature - be allowed to remain outside the play of structure, limiting it but not

limited by it in turn? To make any postulated effect the fixed point of one's analysis cannot but seem a dogmatic and prescriptive move which reflects a desire for absolute truths and transcendent meanings.

The status of such centres' came to be seriously questioned, Derrida writes, 'at the moment when theory began to consider the structured nature of structures' (la structualité de la structure) (p. 411). The notion of a *système décentré* came to seem very attractive. Could one not alter and displace the centre during the analysis of the system itself? Though one would still require a point of departure, could not the movement of analysis include a critique of that centre which displaced it from the role of unexamined postulate? Structuralism or semiology thus came to be defined as an activity whose value lay in the avidity with which it scrutinized its postulates:

Semiotics cannot develop except as a critique of semiotics . . . Research in semiotics remains an investigation which discovers nothing at the end of its quest but its own ideological moves, so as to take cognizance of them, to deny them, and to start out anew (Kristeva, *Semiotikè*, pp. 30-1)

Although it is not clear how this programme of Kristeva's would affect an actual semiological analysis, one can at least imagine how language might be treated as a *système décentré*. Linguists have long taken as their point of departure certain 'normal' uses of language: the expression in grammatically well-formed sentences of determinate communicative intentions. Thought about language has thus, Derrida argues, taken place within a metaphysics of the *logos* which grants primacy to the *signifié* and sees the *signifiant* as a notation through which one passes in order to attain the thought. The special ways in which literature produces meaning were left aside as techniques of connotation. If we consider these seriously, structuralists might argue, we find a host of cases in which the signifier does not manifest a signified but exceeds it, offering itself as a surplus which engenders a play of signification. In order to perceive this excess we must take normal uses of language as the 'centre', but once we have grasped the phenomena which this centre excludes we must displace the centre from its role as that which founds and governs the play of linguistic structure and this can be done by taking seriously Saussure's theory of the diacritical nature of meaning and his contention that in the linguistic system 'there are only differences with no positive terms.' If meaning is a function of differences between terms and every term is but a node of differential relations, then each term refers us to other terms from which it differs and to which it is in some kind of relation. These relations are infinite and all have the potential of producing meaning.

One cannot then, the argument would run, begin by identifying the meanings which language produces and use this as a normative concept to govern one's analysis, for the salient fact about language is that its modes of producing meaning are unbounded and the poet exceeds any normative limits. However broad the spectrum of possibilities on which one bases an analysis, it is always possible to go beyond them; the organization of words in configurations which resist received methods of reading forces one to experiment and to bring into play new types of relations from language's infinite set of possibilities. As Mallarmé says,¹

les mots, d'eux-mêmes, s'exaltent à mainte facette reconnue la plus rare ou valant pour l'esprit, centre de suspens vibratoire; qui les perçoit indépendamment de la suite ordinaire, projetés, en parois de grotte, tant que dure leur mobilité ou principe, étant ce qui ne se dit pas du discours: prompts tous, avant extinction, à une réciprocité de feux distante ou présentée de biais comme contingence.

(The words of their own accord become exalted jewels, their many facets recognized as of infinite rarity and value to the mind, that centre where they hesitate and vibrate. The mind sees the words not in their usual order but projected around it, like the walls of a grotto, for so long as their mobility, that principle which makes them exceed whatever is said in discourse, is not exhausted. All are quick, before they fade away, to glitter, reflecting against one another, with distant, oblique and contingent flashes.)

Thus, with the 'réciprocité de feux distante ou présentée de biais comme contingence', the phrase 'Un coup de dés' gives us, in a mobile contingent sparkle, the differences that set off *coup* from *cou*, *coût*, *coupe*, *couper*; the series *un*, *deux*, *des*; the metathesis *des coups*; or, exploiting the English pun, the blows of the day or the cup of its radiance. The line can open in what Julia Kristeva calls the 'mémoire infinie de la signifiante' the play of all the things which it is not but which stand to it as distant, oblique mirrors. We can read in the phrase the *traces* of other sequences from which it differentiates itself and against which it asks to be set.

This text of infinite possibilities which serves as substratum to any actual text she calls the 'geno-text':

the geno-text can be thought of as a device containing the whole historical evolution of language and the various signifying practices it can bear. The possibilities of all language

of the past, present and future are given there, before being masked or repressed in the pheno-text. (*Semiotikè*, p. 284)

This is, in her view, the only kind of concept that can serve as centre to the analysis of poetic language, for it alone includes (by definition) all the possible varieties of signification that poets and readers can invent. Any other notion on which one attempted to found one's analysis would be undermined as soon as new procedures which it excluded were developed.

But it follows, as a direct corollary of its definition, that 'geno-text' is an empty concept, an absence at the centre. One cannot use it to any purpose since one can never know what it contains, and its effect is to prevent one from ever rejecting any proposal about the verbal structure of a text. Every combination or relation is already present in the geno-text and hence a possible source of meaning. There is no standpoint from which a proposal could be rejected. In the absence of any primitive notion of the meanings or effects of a text (any judgment of this kind would represent, in her view, an insidious foreclosure which tried to establish a norm), there is nothing to limit the play of meaning. As Derrida says, 'the absence of an ultimate meaning opens an unbounded space for the play of signification' (*L'Écriture et la différence*, p. 411). The fear that concepts which govern the analysis of meaning might be attacked as ideological premises has led the *Tel Quel* theorists to attempt, at least in principle, to dispense with them.

The primary practical effect of this reorientation is to stress the active, productive nature of reading and writing and to eliminate notions of the literary work as 'representation' and 'expression'. Interpretation is not a matter of recovering some meaning which lies behind the work and serves as a centre governing its structure; it is rather an attempt to participate in and observe the play of possible meanings to which the text gives access. In other words, the critique of language has the function of freeing one from any nostalgic longing for an original or transcendent meaning and preparing one to accept 'l'affirmation nietzschéenne, l'affirmation joyeuse du jeu du monde et de l'innocence du devenir, l'affirmation d'un monde de signes sans faute, sans vérité, sans origine, offert à une interprétation active' (the joyful Nietzschean affirmation of the play of the world and the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs which has no truth, no origin, no nostalgic guilt, and is proffered for active interpretation). There are, Derrida continues, two kinds of interpretation: 'the one tries to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which lies outside the realm of signs and their play, and it experiences the need to interpret as a kind of exile', an exclusion from the original plenitude that it seeks; the other accepts its active,

creative function and joyfully proceeds without looking back (*ibid.*, p. 427).

At one level it is not difficult to see the attractions of this approach, which tries to replace the anguish of infinite regress by the pleasure of infinite creation. Given that there is no ultimate and absolute justification for any system or for the interpretations flowing from it, one tries to value the activity of interpretation itself, or the activity of theoretical elaboration, rather than 'any results which might be obtained. There is nothing to which results ought to correspond; and so, rather than think of interpretation as a game *in* the world, whose results might be of interest if they approximate some truth outside the game, one must recognize that the activity of writing, in its widest Derridean sense of 'production of meaning', is the game or play *of* the world.

Nous sommes donc d'entrée de jeu dans le devenir-immotivé du symbole . . . L'immotivation de la trace doit être maintenant entendue comme une opération et non comme un état, comme un mouvement actif, une dé-motivation, non comme une structure donnée.

(We are thus from the very outset caught up in the unmotivated play of developing symbols . . . The lack of motivation of the traces which connect them should now be understood as an operation rather than a state, as an active movement, a process of de-motivating, rather than a structure given once and for all.) (*De la grammatologie*, p. 74)

That is to say, we must rid ourselves of that logocentric or theological fiction which, while recognizing the arbitrary nature of the sign, thinks of signs as having been established once and for all, by fiat, and henceforth governed by strict conventions. The fact that form is not a necessary and sufficient determinant of meaning is a continuing condition of the production of meaning. The sign has a life of its own which is not governed by any *archè* or *telos*, origin or final cause, and the conventions which govern its use in particular types of discourse are epiphenomena: they are themselves transitory cultural products. 'Can I say "bububu" and mean "If it doesn't rain I shall go for a walk"?' asks Wittgenstein. 'It is only in a language that I can mean something by something.'² This is true, in that I cannot use 'bububu' to express or communicate that meaning. However, I can establish, as Wittgenstein himself has done, a relationship between the two, and now, ironically enough, there is a language in which 'bububu' is traversed by 'If it doesn't rain I shall go for a walk.' It is not so much that 'bububu' has been given a meaning as that in the 'devenir-

immotivé du symbole' it has come to bear the trace of a possible meaning. The problem of language, in short, is not only a problem of expression and communication – models ill-suited to the most complex and interesting linguistic phenomena we encounter. It is, as Derrida would say, a problem of inscription and production, of the 'traces' borne by verbal sequences and the developments to which they can give rise. The verbal form does not simply refer us to a meaning but opens a space in which we can relate it to other sequences whose traces it bears.

But whatever the theoretical attractions of this view, it has its practical difficulties. The analysis of cultural phenomena must always take place in some context, and at any one time the production of meaning in a culture is governed by conventions. In the days when Wittgenstein was discussing the problem of meaning and intention one could not say 'bububu' and mean 'If it doesn't rain I shall go for a walk', whatever may be the case today. The semiologist can study the implicit rules which enable readers to make sense of texts – which define the range of acceptable interpretations – and he can try to change those rules, but these are different enterprises which the facts of cultural history alone would enjoin one to separate.

A single example will illustrate the problem: the adoption by the *Tel Quel* theorists of Saussure's theory of anagrams. Saussure was convinced that Latin poets regularly concealed key proper names in their verses, and he devoted considerable time to the discovery of such anagrams. But he thought the question of intention crucial, and his doubts on this score – he could find no references to the practice and the statistical advice he obtained was inconclusive – made him leave his speculations unpublished.³ Kristeva and others, who are not concerned with intentions, have seen in Saussure's work a theory which emphasized the materiality of the text (the *signifiant* as a combination of letters) and postulated 'the expansion of a particular signifying function, which dispenses with the word and the sign as the basic units of meaning, throughout the whole signifying material of a given text' (*Semiotikè*, p. 293). The text is a space in which letters, contingently arranged in one way, can be grouped differently to bring out a variety of latent patterns.

Clearly this is a possible interpretive technique: if we allow the analyst to find anagrams of key words which enrich his reading of the text we give him a powerful procedure for producing meaning. But it is also clear that at the moment 'ideological' constraints prevent one from reading in this way. If one attempts to remove these constraints one can only do so by making use of other principles which in their way are equally ideological. For example, Kristeva argues that Saussure was 'wrong' to look only for anagrams of proper names.⁴

If she means that one can find other anagrams in texts, that is certainly true, but on those grounds one could say that she is wrong to look only for anagrams of French words, and thus 'arbitrarily' to exclude the anagrams of German words which can be found in French texts or the anagrams of nonsense strings which can be found in any text (*Un coup de dés* as an anagram of *deepnudocus*).

Moreover, and this is the important point, anagrams can be used to produce meaning only if one relies on current interpretive techniques for dealing with whatever this mode of reading discovers. On finding an anagram of *rire* in Mallarmé's title *Brise marine* one can make something of it because one knows what one might do if the word itself appeared in the poem. There must be particular ways of relating anagram to text if any meaning is to result from the operation.

When Kristeva actually analyses part of a text she does in fact seem to be employing principles of relevance drawn from common procedures of reading. Thus, in discussing the sentence 'Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard', despite her claim that 'this sentence must be read in the register of resonances which make each word a point where an infinite number of meanings can be read', she does not make much use of these infinite possibilities. The nearest she comes to an anagram is the extraction of *bol*, *lira*, *ira*, and *lyra* from *abolira*, and she scarcely draws upon 'all the languages of the past and future' supposedly contained in the geno-text. Although she uses images from other poems to show how the word *coup*, 'by a series of retreats, extensions, escapes, could bring to the process of reading a whole thematic corpus that dwells in the text', she neglects such obvious associations as *cou*, *coût*, *coupe*, etc., which could lead in a variety of directions ('Sémanalyse et production de sens', pp. 229–31). In order to carry out something resembling an analysis she is forced to deploy quite restrictive conventions of reading. Without them interpretation would be impossible.

Indeed, precisely because of the unlimited freedom that her theory secures, it is the more important for her to apply some principles of relevance, if only in order to decide which of the infinite set of possible relations she is going to use. And she requires some way of integrating what has been selected. The attempt to 'free' the process of reading from constraints imposed by a particular theory of culture requires one to reintroduce some rather powerful rules to apply to the combinations or contrasts produced by random extraction and association. Anything can be related to anything else, certainly: a cow is like the third law of thermodynamics in that neither is a waste-paper basket, but little can be done with that fact. Other relations, however, do have thematic potential, and the crucial question is what governs

their selection and development. Even if 'emptied' by a radical theory, the centre will inevitably fill itself in as the analyst makes choices and offers conclusions. There will always be some kind of semiotic or literary competence at work, and the need for it will be greater if the range of relations with which it must deal is enlarged.

This Kristeva might not deny; she might say simply that the centre is never fixed, always constructed and deconstructed with a freedom which the theory seeks as an end in itself.

At every moment in its development semiotics must theorize its object, its own method and the relationship between them; it therefore theorizes itself and becomes, by thus turning back on itself, the theory of its own scientific practice . . . As the place of interaction between various sciences and a theoretical process always in the course of development, semiotics cannot reify itself as a science, much less as *the* science. It is rather a direction for research, always open, a theoretical enterprise which turns back upon itself, a perpetual self-criticism. (*Semiotikè*, p. 30)

This claim invokes quite unashamedly what one might call the myth of the innocence of becoming: that continual change, as an end in itself, is freedom, and that it liberates one from the demands that could be made of any particular state of the system. If as Barthes and Foucault have shown, the argument might run, our social and cultural world is the product of various symbolic systems, should we not refuse any privileged status to the conventions erected by the oppressive institutions of the moment and joyfully claim for ourselves the right to produce meaning *ad libitum*, thus securing by the process of perpetual self-transcendence invulnerability to any criticism based on positivistic criteria and levelled at us from outside?

This vision has its flaws. First of all, though it is true that the study of any set of semiotic conventions will be partially invalidated by the knowledge which results from that study (the more aware we are of conventions the easier it is to attempt to change them), one cannot escape this fact by appeal to self-transcendence. Even if semiology refuse to reify itself as a science it does not, for that, escape criticism. Whatever the past and future of the discipline, any particular analysis takes place at a particular stage, is an object with premises and results; and the possibility of denying these premises at the next moment does not make evaluation impossible or inappropriate.

Second, the notion of freedom in the creation of meaning seems illusory. As Foucault himself is quick to point out, the rules and concepts which underlie the production of meaning – 'so many infinite resources for the creation of discourse' – are simultaneously

and necessarily 'principles of constraint, and it is probable that one cannot account for their positive and productive role without taking into account their restrictive and constraining function' (*L'Ordre du discours*, p. 38). Something can have meaning only if there are other meanings it cannot have. One can speak of ways of reading a poem only if there are other imaginable ways that are inappropriate. Without restrictive rules there would be no meaning whatsoever.

Indeed, Derrida himself, never hasty to offer positive proposals, is acutely aware of the impossibility of escape, of the restrictions imposed by the very language and concepts in which escape can be bruited:

De ce langage, il faut donc tenter de s'affranchir. Non pas tenter de s'en affranchir, car c'est impossible sans oublier notre histoire. Mais en rêver. Non pas de s'en affranchir, ce qui n'aurait aucun sens et nous priverait de la lumière du sens. Mais de lui résister le plus loin possible.

(We must therefore try to free ourselves from this language. Not actually *attempt* to free ourselves from it, for that is impossible without denying our own historical situation. But rather, to imagine doing so. Not actually *free* ourselves from it, for that would make no sense and would deprive us of the light that meaning can provide. But rather, resist it as far as possible.) (*L'Écriture et la différence*, p. 46)

Freeing ourselves from our most pervasive ideology, our conventions of meaning, 'makes no sense' because we are born into a world of meaning and cannot even shun its demands without thereby recognizing them. And even if we could we should find ourselves amidst a meaningless babble, deprived of 'la lumière du sens' which makes discussion possible. What we must do is to *imagine* freeing ourselves from the operative conventions so as to see more clearly the conventions themselves.

Whatever type of freedom the members of the *Tel Quel* group secure for themselves will be based on convention and will consist of a set of interpretive procedures. There is a crucial difference between the production of meaning and arbitrary assignment of meaning, between plausible development and random association. They seek the former rather than the latter – they would not want to claim that their analyses are no better than any other – and to that extent are committed to working within conventions. Indeed, the notion that one can, as Sollers attempts to do, 'show' the revolutionary character of Dante's *écriture* or identify Lautréamont's true place in the history

of French literature means that one accepts certain standards of argument and plausibility.

What *Tel Quel* is in fact proposing is a change in semiotic competence rather than a move beyond it, the introduction of some new and creative procedures of reading. Such an enterprise is perfectly legitimate, and the interplay between their own theoretical and literary work may give them some chance of success. But by the very nature of things they can proceed only step by step, relying on the procedures which readers actually use, frustrating some of these so that some new ways of producing meaning are developed, and only then dispensing with others. They are very much in the position of Von Neurath's mariners, trying to rebuild their ship in mid-ocean, but instead of realizing that this must be done plank by plank they argue that the whole ship can be scrapped; the difference being that on a real ocean one sinks.

What I should like to argue, then, is that while structuralism cannot escape from ideology and provide its own foundations, this is of little importance because the critiques of structuralism, and particularly of structuralist poetics, cannot do so either and through their strategies of evasion lead to untenable positions. Or perhaps one should say, more modestly, that any attack on structuralist poetics based on the claim that it cannot grasp the varied modes of signification of literature will itself fail to provide a coherent alternative. In fact, both the naïve traditionalist critique, which asserts the uniqueness of the work of art and the inadmissibility of general theories, and the sophisticated *sémanalyse* of *Tel Quel*, which attempts to theorize a perpetual self-transcendence, fail in analogous ways. They both imply that the process of interpretation is random and haphazard: the former by omission (in its refusal to countenance general semiotic theories) and the latter by explicit glorification of the aleatory.

One must assert, on the contrary, that the range of meanings which a line of verse can bear depends on the fact that numerous other meanings are manifestly impossible, and that to ask by what *right* other meanings are excluded and to seek in answer more than a restatement of the operative conventions is to break out of culture into an area where there are no meanings at all. The reader is, as Barthes says, 'guidé par les contraintes formelles du sens; on ne fait pas le sens n'importe comment (si vous en doutez, essayez)' (guided by the formal constraints of meaning; one can't make sense in just any way whatsoever (if you don't believe me, try it) (*Critique et vérité*, p. 65). A simple point, perhaps, but one that has of late been unjustly neglected. One must reply also that the possibility of change depends on some concept of identity, that there must now be operative conventions for the production of meaning if they are to change

tomorrow, and that even our sense of the possibility of change therefore indicates that there are interpersonal symbolic systems to be studied. Rather than try to get outside ideology we must remain resolutely within it, for both the conventions to be analysed and the notions of understanding lie within. If circle there be, it is the circle of culture itself.

CHAPTER 11

Conclusion: Structuralism and the Qualities of Literature

L'endroit le plus érotique d'un corps
n'est-il pas là où le vêtement bâille?*

BARTHES

'I think that the name of structuralism should today be reserved for a methodological movement which specifically avows its direct link with linguistics', observes Barthes. 'This would be to my mind the most precise criterion of definition' ('Une problématique du sens', p. 10). The definition is apt, but as preceding chapters will have shown, it is scarcely precise. The approaches which it might include are extremely varied, both in their conception of criticism and in their use of linguistics. In fact, there seem three distinct ways in which linguistics has affected French criticism. First of all, as the example of a 'scientific' discipline, it suggested to critics that the desire to be rigorous and systematic did not necessarily entail attempts at causal explanation. An element could be explained by its place in a network of relations rather than in a chain of cause and effect. The linguistic model, therefore, helped to justify the desire to abandon literary history and biographical criticism; and if the notion that one was being scientific led on occasion to a misplaced arrogance, still the conclusion that literature could be studied as 'un système qui ne connaît que son ordre propre'¹ – a system with its own order – has been eminently salutary, securing for the French some of the benefits of Anglo-American 'New Criticism' without leading to the error of making the individual text an autonomous object that should be approached with a *tabula rasa*.

Second, linguistics provided a number of concepts which could be used eclectically or metaphorically in discussing literary works: signifier and signified, *langue* and *parole*, syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations, the levels of a hierarchical system, distributional and integrative relations, the diacritical or differential nature of meaning,

* Is not the body's most erotic zone there where the garment leaves gaps?

and other subsidiary notions such as shifters or performative utterances. These concepts can, of course, be employed either skilfully or ineptly; they do not in themselves, by virtue of their linguistic origin, produce insights. But the use of such terms may help one to identify relations of various kinds, both actual and virtual, within a single level or between levels, which are responsible for the production of meaning.

If these concepts are not used eclectically but taken as constituents of a linguistic model one has a third way in which linguistics may affect literary criticism: by supplying a set of general instructions for semiotic investigation. Linguistics indicates how one should go about studying systems of signs. This is a stronger claim about the relevance of linguistics than is made in the other two cases, and it is the orientation which has here been taken as characterizing structuralism proper.

But within this general perspective there are different ways of interpreting the linguistic model and of applying it to the study of literature. First there is the problem of whether linguistic methods should be applied directly or indirectly. Since literature is itself language it is at least plausible that linguistic techniques, when applied directly to the texts of poems, novels, etc., could help to explain their structure and meaning. Is this in fact a task which linguistics can perform, or must one apply its methods indirectly by developing another discipline, analogous to linguistics, to deal with literary form and meaning? Second, there is the question of whether linguistics, applied directly or indirectly, provides a 'discovery procedure' or precise method of analysis which leads to correct structural descriptions, or whether it offers only a general framework for semiotic investigation which specifies the nature of its objects, the status of its hypotheses, and its modes of evaluation.

If these two sets of alternatives are combined they provide a schematic résumé of four different positions. The first claims that linguistics provides a discovery procedure which can be applied directly to the language of literature and which will bring to light poetic structures. Jakobson's distributional analyses fall under this heading, and I have attempted to show that their inadequacies demonstrate the need to reject this particular use of linguistics. Rather than assume that linguistic description will reveal literary effects, one must start with the effects themselves and then seek an explanation in linguistic structure.

Greimas starts from the assumption that linguistics, and particularly semantics, ought to be able to account for meaning of all kinds, including literary meaning. But as his attempts to develop this semantics show only too clearly, linguistics does not provide an algorithm for the discovery of semantic effects. Indeed, the main conclusions

that emerge from a study of his theory are that meaning in literature cannot be explained by a method which works up from smaller units to larger ones; though the ultimate semantic organization of a text may be specifiable in linguistic terms, the process by which these effects are reached involves some complex expectations and semantic operations. Greimas's work, then, can be placed in the second category. It illustrates that, although linguistics does not provide a procedure for the discovery of literary structure, some of the complex operations of reading may at least be partially identified by an attempt to apply linguistic techniques directly to the language of literature.

Moving from the direct to the indirect application of linguistic models, we find two positions analogous to those of Jakobson and Greimas. The first assumes that linguistics provides discovery procedures which can be applied, by analogy, to any corpus of semiotic data. The problems encountered by Barthes's *Système de la mode* indicate that this kind of reliance on linguistic models may lead to a failure to determine what one is attempting to explain. In the study of literature this attitude characterizes Todorov's *Grammaire du Décaméron* and other critical works which assume that if one applies linguistic categories metaphorically to a corpus of texts one will produce results which are as valid as an account of a linguistic system, or that operations of segmentation and classification, applied to a corpus of stories, will yield a 'grammar' of narrative or of plot structure. When used in this way the linguistic model makes possible a wide variety of structural descriptions, and structuralists have occasionally sought to defend their use of the model by arguing that the results of methodological indeterminacy are in fact properties of literary works themselves: if a great many structures can be discovered it is because the work has a variety of structures. This orientation can lead, of course, to a rigorous irrelevance. Any principle or set of categories drawn from linguistics can be used as a discovery procedure, on the assumption that its use is justified by the linguistic analogy; and the problem of evaluation is thus rejected, evaded or ignored.

This problem can be solved only if one proceeds to the fourth position and uses linguistics not as a method of analysis but as the general model for semiological investigation. It indicates how one should go about constructing a poetics which stands to literature as linguistics stands to language. This is the most appropriate and effective use of the linguistic model, and it has the particular advantage of making linguistics a source of methodological clarity rather than of metaphorical vocabulary. The role of linguistics is to emphasize that one must construct a model to explain how sequences

have form and meaning for experienced readers, that one must start by isolating a set of facts to be explained, and that hypotheses must be tested by their ability to account for these effects.

The proposal that literary competence be the object of poetics will encounter some resistance on the grounds that anything resembling competence which one might identify would be too indeterminate, changeable, and subjective to serve as the basis for a coherent discipline. There is some justice to such objections, and it will undoubtedly be difficult to steer a middle course, avoiding on the one hand the dangers of an experimental or socio-psychological approach which would take too seriously the actual and doubtless idiosyncratic performance of individual readers, while still avoiding on the other hand the dangers of a purely theoretical approach, whose postulated norms might bear little relation to what readers actually do. But despite this difficulty, the fact remains that unless we reject the activities of teaching and criticism some conception of interpersonal norms and procedures of reading is unavoidable. The notion of literary training or of critical argument makes sense only if reading is not an idiosyncratic and haphazard process. Bringing someone to understand a text or to see an interpretation requires shared points of departure and common mental operations. Disagreement about a text is of interest only because we assume that agreement is possible and that any disagreement will have grounds that can be recognized. Indeed, we notice differences of interpretation precisely because we take agreement for granted as the natural result of a communicative process based on shared conventions.

It should be clear, then, that the notion of competence does not lead, as some structuralists might fear, to a reinstatement of the individual subject as source of meaning. The only subject in question is an abstract and interpersonal construct: 'Ce n'est plus "je" qui lit: le temps impersonnel de la régularité, de la grille, de l'harmonie s'empare de ce "je" dispersé d'avoir lu: alors *on lit*' (It is no longer 'I' who reads; the impersonal time of regularity, of the grid, of harmony, takes up this 'I' which is in fragments from having read; *one* reads) (Kristeva, 'Comment parler à la littérature', p. 48). The subject who reads is constituted by a series of conventions, the grids of regularity and intersubjectivity. The empirical 'I' is dispersed among these conventions which take over from him in the act of reading. Indeed, it is precisely because competence is not coextensive with the individual subject that the notion is required.

What is the role of a structuralist poetics? In one sense its task is a humble one: to make as explicit as possible what is implicitly known by all those sufficiently concerned with literature to be interested in poetics. Viewed in this way it is not hermeneutic; it does

not propose startling interpretations or resolve literary debates; it is the theory of the practice of reading.

But it is obvious that structuralism and even structuralist poetics also offer a theory of literature and a mode of interpretation, if only by focusing attention on certain aspects of literary works and particular qualities of literature. The attempt to understand how we make sense of a text leads one to think of literature not as representation or communication but as a series of forms which comply with and resist the production of meaning. Structural analysis does not move towards a meaning or discover the secret of a text. The work, as Barthes says, is like an onion,

a construction of layers (or levels, or systems) whose body contains, finally no heart, no kernel, no secret, no irreducible principle, nothing except the infinity of its own envelopes – which envelop nothing other than the unity of its own surfaces. ('Style and its Image', p. 10)

To read is to participate in the play of the text, to locate zones of resistance and transparency, to isolate forms and determine their content and then to treat that content in turn as a form with its own content, to follow, in short, the interplay of surface and envelope.

There is no structuralist method such that by applying it to a text one automatically discovers its structure. But there is a kind of attention which one might call structuralist: a desire to isolate codes, to name the various languages with and among which the text plays, to go beyond manifest content to a series of forms and then to make these forms, or oppositions or modes of signification, the burden of the text. 'One cannot begin the analysis of a text', Barthes says in an article entitled 'Par où commencer?',

without first taking a semantic view (of content), be it thematic, symbolic or ideological. The (immense) work which remains to be done consists of following these first codes, identifying their terms, sketching their sequences, but also of postulating other codes which are glimpsed in the perspective of the first. In short, if one demands the right to begin with a certain condensation of meaning it is because the movement of analysis, in its endless spinning out, consists of shattering the text, the first cloud of meaning, the first image of content. What is at stake in structural analysis is not the truth of the text but its plurality; the labour does not consist of starting from forms in order to perceive, clarify or formulate content (there would be no need, in that case, for a structural method), but on the contrary of scattering, of postponing, of gearing down, of

discharging meaning through the action of a formal discipline.
(*Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, p. 155)

In Balzac's *Sarrasine*, for example, the initial content consists of the narrator's amorous contract with a beautiful woman (she grants him an evening in order to hear the story), the explanation of the Lanty's fortune which the story offers, and the adventure of the young sculptor who falls in love with an opera singer, not knowing that she/he is a eunuch. This content is 'deconstructed', decomposed into the various codes which run through the text, and then the action of those codes becomes the main subject of analysis. How is meaning produced? What resistance does it encounter? What meaning can we find in the process of signification itself? What do the forms of the story tell us about the adventures of meaning?

il est mortel, dit le texte, de lever le trait séparateur, la barre paradigmatique qui permet au sens de fonctionner (c'est le mur de l'antithèse), à la vie de se reproduire (c'est l'opposition des sexes), aux biens de se protéger (c'est la règle de contrat). En somme la nouvelle représente (nous sommes dans un art du lisible) un effondrement généralisé des économies. . . . Cette métonymie, en abolissant les barres paradigmatiques, abolit le pouvoir de substituer légalement, qui fonde le sens. . . . *Sarrasine* représente le trouble même de la représentation, la circulation dérégulée (pandémique) des signes, des sexes, des fortunes.

(it is deadly, the text says, to remove the distinguishing trait, the paradigmatic opposition which permits meaning to function (this is the barrier of antithesis), life to reproduce (this is the opposition of the sexes), and wealth to be protected (this is the rule of contract). In short, the tale represents (we are in an art of the readable) a general collapse of economies. . . . This metonymy, in transgressing paradigmatic separation, abolishes the possibility of substituting according to rule, on which meaning is based. . . . *Sarrasine* represents the problems of representation, the wild (pandemic) circulation of signs, sex and wealth.) (*S/Z*, pp. 221-2)

This is the type of ultimate recuperation towards which a structuralist criticism moves: to read the text as an exploration of writing, of the problems of articulating a world. The critic comes to focus, therefore, on the play of the legible and illegible, on the role of gaps, silence, opacity. Although this approach may be thought of as a version of formalism, the attempt to turn content into form and then to read the significance of the play of forms reflects not a desire to

fix the text and reduce it to a structure but an attempt to capture its force. The force, the power of any text, even the most unabashedly mimetic, lies in those moments which exceed our ability to categorize, which collide with our interpretive codes but nevertheless seem right. Lear's 'Pray you, undo this button; thank you, sir' is a gap, a shift in mode which leaves us with two edges and an abyss between them; Milly Theale's 'pink dawn of an apotheosis' before the Bronzino portrait - 'Milly recognized her exactly in words that had nothing to do with her. "I shall never be better than this." ' - is one of those interstices where there is a crossing of languages and a sense that the text is escaping us in several directions at once. To define such moments, to speak of their force, would be to identify the codes that encounter resistance there and to delineate the gaps left by a shift in languages.

Fiction can hold together within a single space a variety of languages, levels of focus, points of view, which would be contradictory in other kinds of discourse organized towards a particular empirical end. The reader learns to cope with these contradictions and becomes, as Barthes says, the hero in the adventures of culture; his pleasure comes from 'the cohabitation of languages, which work side by side' (*Le Plaisir du texte*, p. 10). And the critic, whose job is to display and explain this pleasure, comes to view the text as the happy side of Babel, a set of voices, identifiable or unidentifiable, rubbing against one another and producing both delight and uncertainty. In section 7 of Crane's 'The Open Boat', for example, after being told that nature was 'indifferent, flatly indifferent', we find one of those curious passages which entices and escapes:

It is, perhaps, plausible that a man in this situation, impressed with the unconcern of the universe, should see the innumerable flaws in his life, and have them taste wickedly in his mind, and wish for another chance. A distinction between right and wrong seems absurdly clear to him, then, in this new ignorance of the grave-edge, and he understands that if he were given another opportunity he would mend his conduct and his words, and be better and brighter during an introduction or at tea.

Virulent irony? or an attempt to let irony have its say and then to salvage whatever remains? Who says 'plausible', 'absurdly', 'ignorance'? Why 'understands' rather than 'believes'? Does anything else belong with 'understands'? And above all, where does the last phrase come from? One can try to sort out the various moments of language; or one can elect to read in the passage the difficulty of going beyond what Barthes calls the 'fading of voices': they jostle one another but offer few holds to the process of naturalization.

Enigmas, gaps, shifts, thus become a source of pleasure and value. 'Neither culture nor its destruction is erotic', says Barthes, but only the gap between them, the space where their edges rub:

ce n'est pas la violence qui impressionne le plaisir; la destruction ne l'intéresse pas; ce qu'il veut, c'est le lieu d'une perte, c'est la faille, la coupure, la déflation, le *fading* qui saisit le sujet au cœur de la jouissance.

(it is not violence which impresses pleasure; destruction does not interest it; what it desires is a place of loss, a fault, a break, a moment of deflation, the fading which seizes the reader at the moment of ecstasy.) (*ibid.*, p. 15)

It is not surprising, therefore, that despite their expressed admiration for the most modern and radical texts, structuralists have been more successful in their discussion of works which contain large portions of 'shadow' ('a little ideology, a little mimesis, some subject'), works which make considerable use of traditional codes, and in which, therefore, they can locate the moments of indeterminacy, uncertainty, excess. It is precisely the traditional work, the work that could not be written today, that may most benefit from criticism, and the criticism which encounters the greatest success is one which attends to its strangeness, awakening in it a drama whose actors are all those assumptions and operations which make the text the work of another period. We do not save Balzac by making him relevant – by reading him, for example, as a critic of capitalist society – but by emphasizing his strangeness: the immense pedagogic confidence, the faith in intelligibility, the pre-individualistic conception of character, the conviction that rhetoric may become the instrument of truth; in short, the difference of his approach to the problems of meaning and order.

A criticism which focuses on the adventures of meaning is perhaps better suited than any other to what ought to be the major task of criticism: that of making the text interesting, of combating the boredom which lurks behind every work, waiting to move in if reading goes astray or founders. 'Il n'y a pas d'ennui *sincère*', says Barthes. One cannot, finally, be bored in good faith because boredom draws attention to certain aspects of the work (to particular modes of failure) and enables one to make the text interesting by inquiring how and why it bores. 'L'ennui n'est pas loin de la jouissance: il est la jouissance vue des rives du plaisir' (Boredom is not far from ecstasy; it is ecstasy seen from the shores of pleasure) (*ibid.*, p. 43). A boring text fails to be what one desires; if one were able to make it a challenge to one's desire, to locate an angle from which it could be viewed as

refusal or dislocation, then it would be *un texte de jouissance*; but when one views it from the shores of pleasure and refuses to accept its challenge, it becomes simply an absence of pleasure. A semiological criticism should succeed in reducing the possibilities of boredom by teaching one to find challenges and peculiarities in works which the perspective of pleasure alone would make boring.

Criticism usually ignores boredom. A model which enables one to speak of it or which makes it the background against which reading takes place strikes a realistic and salutary note. For one thing, the different rhythms of reading, which affect the structuring of the text, appear to result from that most compelling of imperatives: the desire to escape boredom. 'If you read slowly, read *every word* of a novel by Zola, the book will fall from your hands' (*ibid.*, p. 23). When reading a nineteenth-century novel we speed up and slow down, and the rhythm of our reading is a recognition of structure: we can pass quickly through those descriptions and conversations whose functions identify; we wait for something more important, at which point we slow down. If we reversed this rhythm we would no doubt become bored. With a modern text that we cannot organize as the adventures of a character, we cannot skip and modulate our speed in the same way without encountering opacity and boredom; we must read more slowly, savouring the drama of the sentence, exploring local indeterminacies, and working out the general project which they promote or resist: 'ne pas dévorer, ne pas avaler, mais brouter, tondre avec minutie' (*ibid.*, pp. 23–4). We cannot devour or gobble up but must graze, carefully nibbling each piece of grass. A criticism based on a theory of reading ought at least to have the virtue of being ready to ask, for whatever works it is studying, which operations of reading will be most appropriate to minimize boredom and to awaken the drama latent in every text.

Indeed, one might suppose that structuralism would attempt, as Barthes suggests, to develop an esthetics based on the pleasure of the reader ('the consequences would be enormous').² Whatever its other results, it would no doubt lead to the destruction of various myths of literature. We would no longer need to make organic unity a standard of value but might allow it to function simply as a hypothesis of reading, for we would be more aware that our pleasure often comes from the fragment, the incongruous detail, the charming excess of certain descriptions and elaborations, the well-constructed sentence whose elegance exceeds its function, or the flaws in a grand design. We might no longer need to assume that because an author selected all the words and sentences of his text they all deserve to be read with equal care but could recognize that our pleasure and admiration may depend on a variable rhythm of reading. If we did not revere the

literary work quite so much we might enjoy it rather more, and there is no surer road to enjoyment of this kind than a criticism which attempts to make explicit the conventions of reading and the costs and benefits of applying them to various works.

But pleasure is not the only value that a structuralist study of literature might serve. It is a concept that made its appearance rather late in structuralist discussions, as though it could only be offered as a value once one had defended the position in other terms. The basic claim would be that a criticism which studies the production of meaning casts light on one of the most fundamental human activities, which takes place in the text itself and in the reader's encounter with the text. Man is not just *homo sapiens* but *homo significans*: a creature who gives sense to things. Literature offers an example or image of the creation of meaning, but that is only half of its function. As fiction it stands in a peculiar relation to the world; its signs must be completed, reordered, brought into the realm of experience by the reader. It thus exhibits all the unhappiness and uncertainties of the sign and invites the reader to participate in the production of meaning so as to overcome or at least take cognizance of them. The opening sentence of a novel, for example, is a very bizarre thing: 'Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her.' The sentence offers an image of confidence, of fullness of meaning and organization; but at the same time it is incomplete; the reader must do something with it, must recognize the insufficiency of language on its own, and must try to bring it within an order of signs so that it may satisfy. Literature offers the best of occasions for exploring the complexities of order and meaning.

The structuralist or semiological project is ruled by a double imperative, intellectual and moral. 'Nous ne sommes rien d'autre, en dernière analyse, que notre système écriture/lecture', writes Sollers (*Logiques*, p. 248). In the final analysis we are nothing other than our system of reading and writing. We read and understand ourselves as we follow the operations of our understanding and, more important, as we experience the limits of that understanding. To know oneself is to study the intersubjective processes of articulation and interpretation by which we emerge as part of a world. He who does not write, Sollers would say – he who does not actively take up and work upon this system – is himself 'written' by the system. He becomes the product of a culture which eludes him. And thus, as Barthes says, 'the fundamental ethical problem is to recognize signs wherever they are; that is to say, not to mistake signs for natural phenomena and to

proclaim them rather than conceal them' ('Une problématique du sens', p. 20). Structuralism has succeeded in unmasking many signs; its task must now be to organize itself more coherently so as to explain how these signs work. It must try to formulate the rules of particular systems of convention rather than simply affirm their existence. The linguistic model, properly applied, may indicate how to proceed, but it can do little more than that. It has helped to provide a perspective, but as yet we understand very little about how we read.

Chapter 10 'Beyond' structuralism: *Tel Quel*

- 1 S. Mallarmé, 'Quant au livre', *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Mondor and Jean-Aubry (Paris, 1945), p. 386.
- 2 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 18.
- 3 See J. Starobinski, *Les Mots sous les mots: les anagrammes de Ferdinand de Saussure*.
- 4 J. Kristeva, *Semiotikè*, p. 293. Cf. 'Linguistique et littérature' (Colloque de Cluny), pp. 69-71.

Chapter 11 Conclusion: structuralism and the qualities of literature

- 1 See F. de Saussure, *Cours*, p. 43.
- 2 R. Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte*, p. 94. For a sketch of the varieties (neuroses) of reading, see pp. 99-100.

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