“In the quarter century since Terry Eagleton’s landmark study, Literary Theory: An Introduction (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), there have been dozens of books that aim at achieving a virtually encyclopedic chronicle of the various schools and methods of literary interpretation. Amidst this daunting array of thoughtful meditations on the myriad ways of characterizing the thing called “literature,” Herman Rapaport’s Literary Theory Toolkit presents a strikingly innovative perspective on theory and criticism that combines succinct and accessible accounts of the most significant approaches to the experience of literature with a unique and compelling orientation to both contemporary avant-garde experimental poetics and performance theory. This volume will establish itself as an indispensable resource for anyone interested in contemporary thinking about everything from Saussurean linguistics to Badiou’s relation to Derrida to Meryl Streep’s style of acting, from Milton’s politics to the crisis of thinking about community after the Holocaust. Rapaport’s Toolkit combines an original reflection on the theoretical act at large with a pedagogically useful and reliable synthesis of the enormous diversity of literary theories over the past century.”

– Ned Lukacher, University of Illinois at Chicago
Also Available

*Modern Literary Criticism and Theory* by M. A. R. Habib
*Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory* by Gregory Castle
* Literary Theory: Practical Introduction* (second edition) by Michael Ryan
* Literary Theory: An Introduction* (second edition) by Terry Eagleton
THE LITERARY THEORY TOOLKIT
A Compendium of Concepts and Methods

Herman Rapaport
## Contents

Preface                                      ix  
Acknowledgments                             xiii

1 Introductory Tools for Literary Analysis  1

  1.1 Basics of Literary Study                2  
    Comprehension versus Interpretation      2
  1.2 Common Critical Practices               4  
    Close Reading                            4  
    Contextual Analysis                      5  
    Application of a Critical Approach       7  
    Social Criticism                         10
  1.3 Literary Language                       14  
    Multiple Meanings                        15  
    Poetry and Plurisignation                16
  1.4 Hermeneutics                            19  
    Peshat and Derash                        19  
    Medieval Hermeneutics: The Fourfold Method 20  
    Sympathetic Analogies                    22  
    The Rise of Modern Literary Interpretation 25  
    Philosophical Hermeneutics               28  
    The Hermeneutic Circle                   30
  1.5 Major Twentieth-Century Schools of Critical Analysis  34
    Traditional and New Historicisms         34
    New Criticism                            36  
    Marxism                                  37
| CONTENTS |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Structuralism               | 38 |
| Phenomenological Literary Analysis | 39 |
| Psychoanalytic Criticism    | 41 |
| Reader Response Criticism   | 44 |
| Post-Structuralism          | 45 |
| 1.6 Socio-Political Analyses| 46 |
| Feminism                    | 46 |
| Social Constructivism: Berger and Luckmann versus Michel Foucault | 48 |
| Race Studies, Gay and Lesbian Studies, and Ethnic Studies | 54 |
| Cultural, Global, and Post-Colonial Studies | 58 |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2 Tools for Reading Narrative</th>
<th>65</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Story and Plot: Fabula and Syuzhet</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Order</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analepsis and Prolepsis</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Mimesis and Diegesis</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Free Indirect Discourse</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Interior Monologue</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6 Diachronic and Synchronic</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7 Intertextuality</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.8 Dialogism</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.9 Chronotope</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.10 Character Zone</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.11 Focalization</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.12 Narrative Codes</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3 Tools for Reading Poetry</th>
<th>98</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Tropes</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Elision</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Resemblance</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juxtaposition</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analogy</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allegory</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emulation</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imitation</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective Correlative</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Language Poetry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>The New Sentence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>Sound Poetry/Concrete Poetry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>Prosody</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Tools for Reading Performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Performance Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Realist Theatre: Total Acting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Konstantin Stanislavski</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Lee Strasberg (The Method), David Mamet (Practical Aesthetics), Mary Overlie (The Six Viewpoints Approach)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Epic Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Theatre of Cruelty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>Actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>Play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>Happenings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>Performance Art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>Guerrilla Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Tools for Reading Texts as Systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Aristotle and Form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>The Literary Work as Object of Rational Empiricism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>Saussurean Linguistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>Lévi-Strauss and Structuralism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>Roman Jakobson’s Communication Model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>Roland Barthes' Hierarchical Structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Functions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>Ideality and Phenomenology of the Literary Object: Husserl and Derrida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>Dissemination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>Structure as Rhizome: Deleuze and Guattari</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.10</td>
<td>Permutation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.11</td>
<td>Undecidability: Derrida, Gödel, Lacan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.12</td>
<td>Simulating Systems: Jean Baudrillard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Counterfeiting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CONTENTS

Production 218
Simulation 219
5.13 Multiplicity: Badiou 221

6 Tools for Social Analysis 225

6.1 The Public Sphere 228
Habermas and the Frankfurt School 228
The Public Sphere versus Hegemony: Laclau and Mouffe 233

6.2 Ideology 237
Political Ideology 237
Top-down Ideology 238
Ideology as Class Consciousness 239
Ideology as False Consciousness 241
Ideology as Semiotic Representation 244
Ideology as Social Interpellation 248

6.3 Theories of Power 250
Might Makes Right versus the Good Shepherd 250
Behaviorism: Stick and Carrot 259
Capillary Power 261

6.4 The Social Relation 263
Primitive Social Relations 264
Plato’s Republic and Aristotle’s Politics 265
From Divine Right to Social Contract 270
Marx on The Social Relation 275
Alterity: The Relation of Non-relation 277

Index 288
What we call literary criticism has traditionally been the study of literary texts by readers with special competencies in the study of writings by major authors. These competencies include detailed knowledge of the author’s life and times, excellent competence in the language within which an author has written, and knowledge of disciplines relevant to an author’s work, for example, religion, philosophy, or psychology. In addition, the literary critic has expertise in reading a wide range of authors from a number of different historical periods and therefore is familiar with literary conventions (standard practices), allusions (cultural references), and genres (literary types). Literary critics are also expert in the study of literary devices like metaphor, metonymy, irony, and paradox, which they may see as significant to the patterning or structure of literary works. Most importantly, however, literary critics are intuitive readers who perceive semantic and syntactic implications that escape notice by most others and use these implications to develop suggestive and coherent interpretations. In and of themselves such forms of literary critical expertise do not make up any kind of theory, since they just represent an ensemble of practices that literary critics have found useful in literary analysis.

When literary critics talk about literary theory, they are referring to a critical analytic that is aware of itself as a methodology and that is capable of self-reflexively calling its own assumptions into question. Theory has its roots in the methodological study of interpretation that goes back at least as far as Aristotle’s treatise “Of Interpretation,” though unquestionably this was hardly its inception. Interpretation theory asks the question of how we can know the difference between a true and a false interpretation, a reading that is good from one that is bad. How do we know we are construing meanings accurately? What are the limits of inferring meanings or developing textual implications? How do we know that a sentence is to be taken
ironically and not straightforwardly? What if our interpretation is not authorized by the writer who has maintained a very different interpretation? And what if our interpretation uses analytical tools not known to the authors or their contemporaries? Although these are very basic questions of method, the fact is that the history of criticism and theory has not decided them once and for all.

This book can be used in two ways, (i) as a *compendium* of major issues and developments in literary criticism and theory that can be consulted much as one consults an encyclopedia, and (ii) as a *companion* to major issues in literary criticism and theory that can be read linearly in terms of units or areas. Chapter 1 is a comprehensive overview of criticism basics and those areas and trends in criticism and theory that are most relevant for students of literature today. Readers are encouraged to read it straight through from beginning to end, if what they are seeking is a reliable introduction to critical practice and the state of criticism and theory right now. That said, its sections can be read in any order, should one be interested mainly in consulting individual topics.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 stress mainly “critical” tools that concern narrative, poetics, and performance, respectively. Sections in these chapters provide readers with concepts, methods, and analytics that critics have found useful for conducting analyses of each genre. Care has been taken to include some avant garde literature in order to extend our literary curriculum somewhat so that it can embrace a few works that are more rather than less difficult to interpret.

Chapters 5 and 6 stress mainly “theoretical” tools that address texts as systems and social theory, respectively. Chapter 5 concerns questions of redefining structure or system in ways that have required a paradigm shift (a Copernican Revolution, if you will) in the humanities with respect to how we analyze not only literature, but culture, history, economics, the social, and much else. Given that texts are signifying systems, how we analyze them depends upon what kind of system we imagine them to be and whether, from various theoretical perspectives, these systems are viable. Chapter 6 treats fundamentals in social theory that are rarely taught explicitly in language and literature departments but that need to be mastered if one expects to be successful in writing sociological literary criticism, something that has become quite dominant in some language and literature departments. The general sociological topics under discussion are ways of theorizing (i) the public sphere, (ii) ideology, (iii) power, and (iv) the social relation. These topics cover a very wide range of issues, among them,
hegemony, alterity politics, theories of community, social contract thinking, and much else. To this material one should add the lengthy section in Chapter 1 on the theory of social constructedness (1.6), which is developed there because it is so absolutely central to literary studies at the present time. In this section the reader will also find sub-sections on race studies, ethnic studies, global studies, and other sub-fields in social theory relevant to the languages and literatures.

Care has been taken to include a wide array of well known literary examples drawn from all historical periods. What is called practical criticism, the application of critical theory to specific texts, is a major feature of this book and it therefore may serve as a useful companion within courses in which an array of texts are being surveyed. Some emphasis has been placed on literature written before 1800, and readers will notice that attention has been paid to John Milton, whose work has the function of a guiding thread that runs through various parts of the book. Milton is ideal for my purposes, if only because Milton’s premise of rewriting the Adam and Eve story in the epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, is easy to grasp from the perspective of plot; because Milton is such a major practitioner of the art of literature and is therefore a cornucopia of wonderful literary examples; and because he wrote in a way that makes it easy to detach bits and pieces of his work for close examination. Also, over the past decade Milton has enjoyed a resurgence of popularity among readers, which suggests that he may be of intrinsic interest generally.

With respect to literature written after 1800, and much of that is, in fact, also covered, I have made some effort at points to emphasize work that is avant garde in nature. There are two reasons for this. One is that there has been a major renascence in avant garde literary writing in both Great Britain and the United States, much of it in the area of poetry, but much of it in narrative and performance writing, as well, and this by now vast literature has been generally underrepresented in most university curricula. So in a text such as this one, some exposure to this new work is in order. Given that this sort of work is difficult to interpret and requires tools of analysis that are non-traditional, it is useful to observe how innovations in critical theory can be used to address works that people by and large have difficulty accessing, something that speaks to the practicality of such critical analysis.

Readers may notice that this toolkit differs from many introductions to critical theory in that it includes a section on performance that covers not only the emergent field of performance studies but aspects of traditional theatre and some of the more interdisciplinary aspects of performance,
some of it based in the visual arts. Often overlooked in language and literature and even theatre departments is the immense work in performance that has been underway since the 1960s, particularly in New York City, where directors like Richard Foreman and groups like the Wooster Group have been producing breakthrough theatre for many decades. Furthermore, there has been much innovative work in the area known as performance art, which is often very language based, and therefore deserves acknowledgment. Then, too, many courses that include drama pay little or no attention to the craft of acting, which is a deficiency that is addressed in this chapter, as well.

Lastly, I need to comment on why so much of the theory in this toolkit is indebted to European developments, and particularly those that have occurred in France from the 1960s onwards. For the history of the Anglo-American reception of so-called French theory, readers may eventually want to consult my book, *The Theory Mess* (2001), which talks about the rather messy state of affairs that resulted when so-called high theory from Europe began to be disseminated in Great Britain and the United States. Problematic about the influx of Continental theory was (i) that it required a sophisticated education in types of philosophy, anthropology, linguistics, and Marxism that hadn’t been much taught in Anglo-American universities, (ii) that it called into question less sophisticated work that had gained respect in the UK and US, something that produced resentment and backlash, and (3) that when Continental theory arrived from abroad, it did so as a confusing and unmanageable torrent of vast corpora by major figures (Georges Bataille, Jacques Lacan, Emmanuel Levinas, etc.) and movements (The Frankfurt School, Hermeneutics, Structuralism, Phenomenology, Tel Quel, Semiotics, etc.). Of course, the question was whether this vast amount of critical theory coming from abroad could or even would be assimilated and instituted. That *The Literary Theory Toolkit* is still attempting that assimilating and instituting tells us something about the success or failure of past efforts, though it also speaks to the fact that Continental developments in criticism and theory form a major watershed in the intellectual life of the West. Just because we are in a new millennium we shouldn’t imagine that suddenly everything we learned about critical theory in the late twentieth century doesn’t count and can be ignored. In fact, much of what was developed then has as yet to be thought through and applied. In other words, that tool bag is much bigger and far more interesting than many people suspect, provided one puts in the effort of rummaging around and finding the tools.
I wish to thank Emma Bennett of Wiley-Blackwell for initiating and shepherding this project along. Her tenacity got me back on course. I am also grateful to those at Wake Forest University who read parts of the manuscript, and in particular to my medievalist colleague, Gale Sigal, who read it in light of its workability as a course companion. I am also very indebted to the three lengthy reader’s reports I received, which helped me get the manuscript into final shape. Much of what is presented in this book is a summa of many years of teaching in the various survey courses I’ve taught both in the United States and the United Kingdom in the areas of literature and criticism. Of course, it is because of the participation of students in those courses that this book could be realized. Lastly, I want to thank Aaron Rapaport, who by way of example got me back into the swing of writing while we were out in California, and Hanno and Angelika Rapaport for welcoming me to set up shop in their London flat, where I revised much of the text.

I am grateful to: Llewellyn Publishers for permission to print a modified version of “The Scale of the Number Four” table in Three Books on Occult Philosophy by Henry Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim, trans. J. Freake, edited and annotated by Donald Tyson. St. Paul, MN. Llewellyn Publishers, 2005; Anne Tardos, Executor of Jackson Mac Low’s estate, for granting permission to reproduce Jackson Mac Low, “People Swamp,” in its entirety; Laura Mullen for permission to quote at length from her poem, “Torch Song (Prose Is a Prose Is a Prose)”; to Jaime Davidovich for permission to reproduce a video still from “The Live! Show”; and, finally, to Hans Breder of the Hans Breder Foundation for permission to reproduce stills of “My TV Dictionary,” “Boxed In,” and of the performance artists Karen Finley and Coco Fusco with Nao Bustamante.
Introductory Tools for Literary Analysis

1.1 Basics of Literary Study 2
   Comprehension versus Interpretation 2

1.2 Common Critical Practices 4
   Close Reading 4
   Contextual Analysis 5
   Application of a Critical Approach 7
   Social Criticism 10

1.3 Literary Language 14
   Multiple Meanings 15
   Poetry and Plurisignation 16

1.4 Hermeneutics 19
   Peshat and Derash 19
   Medieval Hermeneutics: The Fourfold Method 20
   Sympathetic Analogies 22
   The Rise of Modern Literary Interpretation 25
   Philosophical Hermeneutics 28
   The Hermeneutic Circle 30

1.5 Major Twentieth-Century Schools of Critical Analysis 34
   Traditional and New Historicisms 34
   New Criticism 36
   Marxism 37
   Structuralism 38
   Phenomenological Literary Analysis 39
   Psychoanalytic Criticism 41

Herman Rapaport.
© 2011 Herman Rapaport. Published 2011 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
Comprehension versus Interpretation

*Comprehension* concerns the conceptual assembly of textual information in a way that is precise and literally accurate. In order to discuss a literary work, the critic needs to know how personages are described and characterized, how settings are depicted and what details they include and possibly exclude, what actions take place and in what order, and what sorts of figural details and narrative devices the author has included. A good comprehension of a literary work will also include the ability to identify points of view, major themes, and key allusions (references to historical occurrences, myths, or passages in other influential texts, for example, the Bible). Everything that falls under the term comprehension has to do with gathering and assembling of evidence that can be used for justifying interpretations. For literary critics comprehension exceeds mere competence in that it leads to noticing details that others have missed. Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis* is masterful in its capacity to select minute details that have major historical significance in the development of representational styles in the West. An even closer reader of literature was Paul de Man in his seminal article “The Rhetoric of Temporality” in which he demonstrates complexities with respect to how allegory and symbol function in the late eighteenth century.¹

In university, the teaching of literature tends to stress skills in *interpretation*. This exceeds mere literal comprehension and requires the ability to

see problems and offer hypotheses. For example, why is the order of events in a story told in a sequence that is unchronological, and why in the case of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, do we not begin with the materials of Book 6 (Satan’s revolt in heaven), which is much closer to the epic’s real beginning? Books 1 and 2 start us out right after the rebellious angels have fallen down into hell after their revolt. Or, why does William Faulkner in the novel *The Sound and the Fury* not have Caddy Compson narrate a section of her own? How does this silencing of woman function in the novel? As sexual repression, if not sexism? As the deliberate formation of a lacuna in the text that impedes our ability to totalize the narrations that are given? As a perspective Faulkner expects us to construct for ourselves, which then makes it much more a part of ourselves? To answer such questions requires interpretation. Here one is required to perceive a significant problem, conceptualize that problem, analyze textual evidence, and offer some hypotheses and solutions.

Literary interpretation occurs when critics begin asking questions about what they have observed. How critics pose questions and formulate problems tells us how original and insightful they are. In fact, what distinguishes a seminal book or essay from a run of the mill study is the originality of the way in which a problematic is conceptualized and the surprising results to which it leads. In recent decades, we have seen many studies that have recycled the same questions and problems by way of applying them to new works, and with predictable results. The study of how yet another literary heroine subverts patriarchy may contribute somewhat to the understanding of yet another literary text, but as an interpretive project it would hardly indicate much originality of mind, given the many essays and books that have executed this very same project albeit with other primary texts. The same could be said about the many studies coming out right now in which critics look for hybrid social identities in order to show how characters in literature “negotiate” race or ethnicity in a represented social context. In the past, critics who were looking for ambiguity or archetypes in literary texts were engaging in very much the same sort of prescribed literary interpretive practice: the imitation of institutionally sanctioned projects pioneered by innovative thinkers in the profession. Major examples of original critical projects in the twentieth century would include Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble.*

---

Four common types of critical practice are: close reading, contextual analysis, the application of a critical approach, and social critique.

**Close Reading**

Close reading concerns close attention to textual details with respect to elements such as setting, characterization, point of view, figuration, diction, rhetorical style, tone, rhythm, plot, and allusion. Often, close reading concerns the dichotomy between what the text literally says and what can be inferred. For example, we know in the case of Gustave Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary* that Emma Bovary is keyed to the color blue near the outset of the novel, but what does the author mean by this? What are we supposed to infer? Is the color blue thrown in by accident or does it actually point to something that has symbolic meaning? To know the answer to such a question, one has to notice, first of all, that the color choice is so consistent that it's likely Flaubert intended it. Next, one may notice from the context of what is being related that Emma's immature girlish interest in Catholicism is being thematized, which relates to the likelihood that in this context the color blue is likely to be symbolic of the Virgin Mary to whom Flaubert may well be comparing Emma with some irony, given that Emma will hardly turn out to be anything like the Virgin. Of course, this is an interpretation because a sequence of observations and logical connections had to be made by the reader in order to construct it. The proof of the interpretation, insofar as interpretations can be proven, is that it has explanatory power. It not only tells us what the color blue probably refers to, but how it functions to ironize Emma, to portray her one way while expecting the reader to see through that portrayal as misleadingly literal. Because there is so much evidence in the novel that supports this ironizing
tendency, the interpretation of the color blue seems credible, since it is consistent with what is at work elsewhere in the novel and since it connects elements that otherwise would go unexplained. We generally call this most typical sort of interpretation close reading, because the interpreter is looking very closely at even the most minor textual details in order to develop explanations for the question of why things are presented the way they are.

Contextual Analysis

Contextual analysis could be called the “connect the dots approach,” because essentially the technique involves the establishment of a context (or contexts) within which to situate and determine the meanings of a work by drawing direct connections between elements within the work and elements within the context. This is the approach used by literary historians who generally work up the following contexts for analyzing a literary work: (i) philological history of the language; (ii) the literary tradition that has influenced the work and to which the work “belongs”; (iii) the biography of the author; and (iv) the social, political, and cultural contexts likely to have a bearing on the work’s meanings. This type of study presumes that a work cannot mean anything in isolation. For example, the language of a literary work pre-exists it and determines what the words and sentences of, say, a novel, poem, or play would mean. Given that language changes over time, we would need to know the state of the language at any given time when a work was written in order to properly decode its meanings. Shakespeare’s plays, for example, are usually accompanied by copious footnotes that define words, many of which have fallen out of use or that meant something different at the time Shakespeare was writing.

Literary tradition is an important context too in that it donates the norms and forms that authors adopt and modify to suit their inclinations and needs. Shakespeare, Sidney, and Milton inherited the genre of the sonnet from Petrarch and his followers, and therefore it is useful to compare elements in their work to what can be found in the context of the sonnet tradition. After all, the differences may tell us something about what the authors intended and hence how to better construe the meanings. Knowing the biography of the author can help, as well, if what one is looking for is the primary intention an author had in composing a work. Henry James, for example, was quite self-conscious about leaving accounts of what experiences led him to formulate an idea or premise for writing one of his great
INTRODUCTORY TOOLS FOR LITERARY ANALYSIS

novels. Although the initial experiences he had differ from the final works that he completed, it is useful to see the direction in which he was headed and how the work germinated. Indeed, James’ Notebooks offer invaluable evidence for how the work was intended to be read and how we are to construe the meanings, if what we are after is Henry James’ intentions. Another good example would be Virginia Woolf’s Diaries.

The social, political, and cultural contexts within which authors have written are often quite vast, and literary historians naturally have to select something quite specific from these contexts in order to relate to a literary work. For example, a theme is often chosen. One might study the figure of the mermaid in Renaissance literature, drawing connections between the literary work and cultural context of the figure of the mermaid. One might study the writings of Franz Kafka in the context of Yiddish culture in Eastern Europe – its genres, themes, etc. Given that this Yiddish culture isn’t so well known to everyone, it can be illuminating to situate Kafka’s work within it. Or, one could study the fiction of Jane Austen in the context of British empire building. Here again a theme contextualizes and circumscribes (and hence controls) the interrogation of meanings in the work.

Such studies are the most typical of what professors of literature produce and they are most typical of the research on literature that one is likely to find in a university library. This approach has various limitations, and four can be mentioned here. (i) A contextual approach presupposes the meaning of a work lies outside the work per se, which suggests a certain extrinsic determinism at work, (ii) it presupposes that the meanings are fixed or frozen in a period of historical time, which suggests our experience of how a work speaks to us is subordinated to or cancelled out by its artefactual significance, (iii) it is based on the construction of contexts that may be highly selective and conveniently managed to yield the results for which the researcher is looking, and (iv) contextual analysis reduces works of literature to ordinary norms that were widely held in society; therefore, Hamlet isn’t seen as a unique work of art, but as merely a generic “revenger’s tragedy” whose innovations are idiosyncratic. Finally,

---

traditional historicism never gets beyond the circumstantiality of evidence. One would think that Milton’s *On Christian Doctrine* ought to explain *Paradise Lost*. Or that Edmund Spenser’s famous letter to Sir Walter Raleigh about Spenser’s composition of the *Faerie Queene* ought to explain this epic poem satisfactorily. But in fact such empirical evidence, even from the pens of the authors themselves, are merely circumstantial and turn out to be controversial given that there are so many ways in which to read them in relation to the texts that really interest us. In short, there are no smoking guns in historical analysis, which has the consequence of calling the whole approach to this sort of analysis in question (also see 5.2).

Application of a Critical Approach

Application of a critical approach is a more systematic example of interpretation in which a coherent body of thought (i.e. a theory) is mapped onto the literary work in order to explain its meaning. In its crudest form, this approach is blatantly allegorical. But if it has an advantage, it is that the researcher is working with a coherent body of analytical thought and not just making ad hoc determinations; plus the theory has been tested by others and has much more validity than an individual’s ad hoc guesses and rationalizations.

Because methods and approaches quickly devolve into routines and habits of thinking, it is not surprising that researchers will want to avoid anything that seems hackneyed and trite. No one in the late 1960s wanted to hear yet another paper on ambiguity in poetry, because by then the topic had become entirely depleted. Today, few academics want to hear yet another gendered analysis of “the gaze,” because they’re all too familiar with Laura Mulvey’s argument in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, which has passed into the domain of public knowledge. The same can be said for J.L. Austin’s notion of performative speech acts. By now educated people know that the minister’s act of saying “I pronounce you man and wife” before the couple he is marrying isn’t a description, but an enactment of a legal and binding contract.5

As to how theories are applied, it’s useful to take a more or less simple example. Some will recall that Sigmund Freud famously applied his theory of the Oedipus Complex to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, something that was developed by one of Freud’s followers, Ernest Jones.\(^6\) Freud (and Jones) speculated that Hamlet cannot easily kill Claudius, the man who killed Hamlet’s father, because Hamlet as an Oedipal child had originally wanted to kill his father in order to keep his mother to himself. The famous bedroom scene in which Hamlet speaks to his mother about having married the very man who killed his father is filled with jealousy that masquerades as moral uprightness. In fact, Hamlet is thought to identify with Claudius, because Claudius did what Hamlet himself wanted to do as Oedipal son. In this scene, Hamlet wants Gertrude to withdraw from Claudius, which is a repetition of the original Oedipal wish. The fact that Hamlet will eventually kill Claudius and that the play will end in a horrible bloodbath speaks to the Oedipal aggression that motivates the play’s psychology.

An application requires us to find considerable symmetry between the literary work and the theory. In the case of a Freudian reading of *Hamlet* the advantage is that the theory pulls the play together in a way that explains elements that otherwise would seem arbitrary or disconnected. In recent years, we have seen this put to good effect by Slavoj Žižek in his many books, which have often discussed popular cinema. Instead of using Freud, Žižek has turned to the theories of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in order to reveal psychological dynamics at work in popular culture no one has noticed or bothered to look for, given that for most people popular culture isn’t imagined to be intellectually respectable. Speaking of David Lynch’s film *Dune*, Žižek writes: “*Dune* is not ‘totalitarian’ in so far as it publicly displays the underlying obscene phantasmic support of ‘totalitarianism’ in all its inconsistency.”\(^7\) This obscene support is shown in terms of the monstrously large phallic sand worms with which a new totalitarian order has become allied.

The point, of course, is that there never was a purely symbolic Power without an obscene supplement: the structure of a power edifice is always minimally inconsistent, so that it needs a minimum of sexualization, of


the stain of obscenity, to reproduce itself. Another aspect of this failure is that a power relation becomes sexualized when an intrinsic ambiguity creeps in, so that it is no longer clear who is actually the master and who is the servant.  

Žižek’s attempt is to advance a theory of totalitarianism and its subversion that employs insights taken from Lacanian psychoanalysis that admittedly is complex and concerns a terminology that is quite specialized. In this case, Žižek is addressing the obscene supplement (the added element) that reveals itself as an inconsistency in the structure of power.

Those who are critical of applied theories, whether they be psychoanalytical, anthropological, sociological, or whatever else, will complain that to read cultural works or events in this way is to reduce them to neat models that are reductive (simplistic). Indeed, application of critical theory will be disappointing if connecting a theory to a work is merely “plug and play.” In this case, the transposition requires little of the one who performs it and often tells us just what we already know. This leads to the objection, once more, of predictability. Not only are the approaches made to seem conceptually predictable in terms of their itineraries, but the insights they yield can be figured out in the absence of reading someone’s painstaking analysis. When the Modern Language Association’s *Bibliography* began labeling articles with “feminist approach,” “dialogical approach,” or “Freudian approach,” they were more or less saying: “Don’t bother looking it up: you can figure the argument out for yourself.” But in the case of someone like Žižek – and this is what makes him a best seller – the applications are mostly unpredictable. Moreover, the examples work in such a way that they help explain and develop a theory (Lacanian psychoanalysis) that to many people makes no sense without a key. This last point is important: an application ought to work two ways. The theory should illuminate a work, and a work should illuminate a theory.

**READING**


Social Criticism

Interpretations of literature (of any period) are often politically motivated by critics who are reading literature for the sake of responding to current affairs in the world or for the sake of modeling a sociological theory. When a critic argues that John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is about imperialism, that Adam and Eve are like native peoples in America, and that Satan is like an imperialist conqueror, then we can be sure that the critic is more influenced by contemporary issues having to do with how we are dealing with the colonial past than by what Milton probably intended. Recent interest among Renaissance scholars in empire, self-fashioning, and “Otherness” is much more a direct reflection of contemporary interests in these issues than a reflection of concerns intrinsically significant to the period, which is to say, that as a rule interests of the present drive interests in the past.

Typical of the sociological approach is the work of Christopher Caudwell who in the 1930s read English literature in order to prove Karl Marx’s theories about class, base and superstructure (systems of industrial production versus bureaucratic social systems of control), and the rise of commodity culture. Caudwell was most interested in showing how a literary work both proves a theory and demonstrates that theory’s historical accuracy in predicting what sorts of art will appear in what sorts of social circumstance. In “English Poets: The Period of Primitive Accumulation” of 1937, Caudwell was making the argument that in Shakespeare there is a very direct and simple correspondence between work and world. Social class interests, the rise of the bourgeoisie, are thought to easily explain what are otherwise very complex literary works and characters. Caudwell was dismissed in his day as a philistine by critics who found the sociological allegorization of literature to be crudely simplistic and aesthetically insensitive, because Caudwell was mainly interested in socially stereotyping what he read and in discrediting much literature as “bourgeois” and therefore morally suspect and hence unacceptable. Noticeable in Caudwell and most sociological criticism of the Anglo-American sort is an emphasis upon morality in the context of social justice. Caudwell remarks,

Intemperate will, “bloody, bold and resolute,” without norm or measure, is the spirit of this era of primitive accumulation. The absolute-individual
will overriding all other wills is therefore the principle of life for the Elizabethan age.\(^9\)

This is morally problematic from the perspective of achieving social justice across all social echelons, which presumably Communism had committed itself to as a more enlightened form of social organization. Sociological critique, under either Marxist or other countercultural pretexts, has generally emphasized questions of inequality, relations of social power, and victimhood. In short, sociological critique is often about “haves and have nots,” “perpetrators and victims,” or, as it is often put, “masters and slaves.”

Of course, there is much literature that has been written in order to protest social injustice, for example, Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times*, Émile Zola’s *Germinal*, Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*, and Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*, just to name a few. This should remind us that one of the chief motivations for writing literature has been political protest and advocacy, the writing of stories about contemporary life whose purpose is to make the reader identify with the plight of victims and against the rapaciousness of victimizers so that consciousness about our social surroundings will be morally raised. Literary critics are not only interested in developing the consciousness raising element of the literature, but also tend to point out that a literary work observes social relations rather better than sociological theory, given that the theory is largely abstract and conceptual, whereas the literature is concrete and particular.

Among the objections to sociological critique is that it tends to reduce a text to *content analysis*, which is to say, discussion of the storyline (the ostensible content). Like the journalist, the sociological critic is mainly interested in who, what, when, where, and why. This puts the text on an equal footing with social content of everyday life, hence erasing the difference between real life and a depiction of that life. So called literary language (the “formalist” complexities of figuration or style, say) tends to be overlooked for the sake of talking about the “issues,” which for the past several decades have focused on relations of power between social groups and how those result in prejudice, stratification, and injustice.

Whereas in the 1930s, sociological critique in Anglo-American circles was largely slanted from a Marxist perspective that focused on the concerns raised by Caudwell, in the 1970s a shift occurred whereby sociological critique was taken up by feminists who reversed a decades old practice of privileging aesthetics (formalist concerns) over moral concerns having to do with social justice. The New Critical interest in writers like T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, D.H. Lawrence, Ernest Hemingway, and many others had strategically overlooked aspects of their works that were socially prejudicial (Lawrence’s and Hemingway’s sexism) or that were politically objectionable (Pound’s fascism). In the 1970s that began to change with the influence of Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* (1968), a book that, while initially dismissed by the mainstream, had opened the alternative of judging literature from a predominantly moral standpoint. This challenged and eventually overturned the critical practice of allowing avant garde innovation to trump what has come to be known as “political correctness.”

After a plethora of books began appearing on the woman question, sociologically oriented critics began investigating questions of race, gay and lesbian identity, ethnicity, and Western-non-Western social relations (post-coloniality, diaspora, etc.). In the 1990s an interest in what came to be called global studies emerged within which questions of human rights have come to the fore. Also studies in popular culture, which gained respectability under the moniker of Cultural Studies, began toeing the leftist ideological line of sociological criticism by emphasizing the “constructedness” of social identity in terms of how various groups engage in certain cultural practices.

Emphasis upon social constructivism has become more or less a dogma within social criticism and leads to an interesting inversion with respect to literature. The real social world is treated very much as if it’s a fiction, whereas the fictional world of literature is treated as if it’s tantamount to the real. This chiasmus is made possible, given that the real world and fiction are both viewed as “constructions” (“signifying practices”). People who are critical of this view note that it is compatible with “postmodernism,” which is seen by some as a relativist cultural ideology that assumes

---

10 Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (Boston: New English Free Press, 1968). Notice that the press that published Millet’s book was not an academic press. Feminist literary readings were not considered legitimate within the academy at that time.
everything is a fiction. Although sociological critics tend to stay away from avant garde art (and the postmodern in particular), it is the case that in both literature and the visual arts many artists have been fascinated with radicalizing practices of simulation that insist upon the constructedness (or fictionality) of culture and society.

A well known philosophical source for both the avant garde and sociological theory is Friedrich Nietzsche’s “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense.”

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, in short a sum of human relations which have been subjected to poetic and rhetorical intensification, translation, and decoration, and which, after they have been in use for a long time, strike a people as firmly established, canonical, and binding: truths are illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions, metaphors which have become worn away by frequent use and have lost all sensuous vigor, coins which, having lost their stamp, are now regarded as metal and no longer as coins. ¹¹

This suggests that human reality is a rhetorical construction, an illusion of which we have forgotten that it is an illusion.

This view underwrites a concept of postmodernity as inherently simulative, but is also of major importance to Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), a founding sociological text for recent theories of social construction. Of no less significance have been the writings of Michel Foucault, which are even more directly indebted to Nietzsche’s thinking in the passage above, but that have interspersed a history of bureaucratic development which mediates and modifies Nietzsche by arguing that individual human failing isn’t the problem so much as the successful instrumentalization (or practical utilization) of knowledge via institutions that strategically adopt and manipulate rhetoric in order to project power.

1.3 Literary Language

Is there such a thing as literary language? In the earlier part of the twentieth century the Russian Formalists, Victor Shklovsky, Boris Eichenbaum, and Juri Tynianov were arguing that literary language deviates significantly from ordinary discourse. Shklovsky made the famous statement that literature is to be defined as the sum of its stylistic features. These features could be seen as deviations from practical uses of discourse. Ordinary, day to day uses of language are utilitarian in terms of making one’s intentions, requests, demands, and/or explanations clear to another person in the most down-to-earth ways. Literary language, by contrast, isn’t merely utilitarian. A sentence in Marcel Proust’s novels can be as long as a thousand words and will contain numerous embedded clauses in which one easily gets lost, something that from the perspective of an ordinary use of language isn’t pragmatic if what one wants is to make one’s meaning clear to another person. In the case of a police report of an accident, it is most utilitarian for there to be one logical, coherent, down to earth account of what happened in the most unambiguous terms. But in a novel by an author such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, one would be likely to get variants of the same account, each one puzzlingly different (5.10). As a whole these accounts would be so delicately incommensurate that one will start to wonder what if anything took place.

Victor Shklovsky famously spoke of literature in terms of “defamiliarization” (ostranenie) whereby normative representations are distorted in ways that make them unfamiliar and strange for the sake of destabilizing our automated cognitive responses to how we imagine things to be. Woolf’s interacting streams of consciousness in The Waves have a very odd effect.

---

on how we come to mentally see, hear, and feel; that is, they defamiliarize our ordinary experience of perception and the cognitions to which that experience leads. Art’s purpose is to revolutionize our perception in such a way that we won’t see the world as we ordinarily do. In this sense, it is as if literary language itself were a sort of revolutionary hero that reforms fallen (automatic, habitual) thinking.

Multiple Meanings

Some people are scandalized by the claim that what they’re reading in a poem or play can mean so many different things. After all, shouldn’t a text mean what it says literally? And if it doesn’t, isn’t there something wrong? This expectation is not naïve. The philosopher John Locke spoke of there being an abuse of language, by which he meant a perverse use of language that equivocates, ambiguates, and muddles up the sense. Metaphors and the like were clear violations of proper linguistic usage, in Locke’s estimation. Effective communication, according to him, required a use of language that prohibited any misunderstanding. Locke presumed that when we communicate with one another we’re essentially entering into a contractual situation: we’re to take what we say to each other as honest and true; there should be no ambiguity in what we say to one another, because that would introduce the possibility of deception.

This ideal sounds commonsensical enough, but the reality is that it’s very hard to make language perform in this way, a point that the eighteenth century novelist Laurence Sterne brought out in *Tristram Shandy*, a comical demonstration of how unrealistic Locke’s expectations were. For as Sterne shows, people can’t say one thing and not mean another, even if they try. There’s a discussion in the novel of why women prefer men with long noses, but it goes on for so long that the reader has to realize at some point it isn’t really noses that are being discussed but some other endowed part of the male anatomy. In other words, if something ordinary is discussed at too great a length, or with too much emotion, one starts to wonder if it is probably about something else. Further, Sterne is assuming that the reader cannot hold back from making all sorts of associations, in particular, naughty ones.

The concept of linguistic association was developed as well by others in the eighteenth century. And we can already see it in the comedy of manners by Richard Sheridan, Pierre de Marivaux, and others who played with the
idea that people have all sorts of idiosyncratic associations. The associations appear to have their own logic and form a sort of chain that can lead to all sorts of mischief and misunderstanding. A wonderful late twentieth-century imitation of this sort of comedy is the 1970s British television series *Fawlty Towers* in which a hotel operator, Mr. Fawlty (played by John Cleese) makes mental associations that always get the better of him and lead to catastrophically humiliating situations. Mr. Fawlty, as his name suggests, reads the wrong thing into what people say or do and jumps to all the wrong conclusions upon which, unfortunately, he takes action. Whereas the audience can see his mistake, the protagonist logically follows the train of his own fanciful associations based on what he experiences. Throughout, we can see things unfolding as they really are versus the protagonist’s entirely rational but absurdly fanciful chain of associations, which are so hideously mistaken. When the protagonist takes action in a way that reveals his mistake to everyone, he is obviously exposed and embarrassed, because the associations reveal a suspicious and petty mentality that has opted to think the worst of others. As in the genre of tragedy, the comedy of manners is based upon a protagonist who is stubborn (filled with hubris) and who sees things logically but incorrectly (someone like Oedipus Rex who is blinded to the truth). Whereas the main character’s actions at the beginning of the play aren’t devastating, they become increasingly problematic until the point is reached when a revelation of the truth will come that is catastrophic. Whereas in tragedy the catastrophe usually involves serious physical harm to the protagonist, in comedy it is embarrassment and humiliation that the protagonist suffers – in other words, something akin to social death. Unlike tragedy, comedy works with the duplicity of language – its multiple meanings and associations – and the ease with which one can misread or misinterpret what others are saying and the illusions and mistakes this can produce. The lesson of comedy is that we don’t necessarily know what others are thinking or saying, though we may think we do, and therein lies our hubris and the potential sorts of embarrassment this may cause.

**Poetry and Plurisignation**

Of course, readers of poetry have known about plurisignation (multiple meanings) and the ambiguities to which they can lead. Shakespeare’s sonnets are a sort of interpretive boot camp for studying multiple meanings
and how they can fashion lines that have a double sense. Central to plurisignation in both Shakespeare’s lyric poetry and plays is the pun, which is quite conspicuous in the popular culture of the turn of the seventeenth century, as evidenced, for example, by early Stuart libels directed at the Royal Court. Sonnet 152 is a typical example of the excesses to which double entendre could accede in the late sixteenth century. The sonnet begins with wordplay on swearing/forswearing.

In loving thee thou know’st I am forsworn,
But thou art twice forsworn to me love swearing,
In act thy bed vow broke, and new faith torn
In vowing new hate after new love bearing. 4
But why of two oaths’ breach do I accuse thee,
When I break twenty? I am perjured most;
For all my vows are oaths but to misuse thee,
And all my honest faith in thee is lost: 8
For I have sworn deep oaths of thy deep kindness,
Oaths of thy love, thy truth, thy constancy,
And, to enlighten thee, gave eyes to blindness,
Or made them swear against the thing they see: 12
For I have sworn thee fair: more perjured eye,
To swear against the truth so foul a lie. 13

To swear can mean to promise, to take an oath for an office (e.g. faithful lover), to affirm something, to pledge allegiance to someone; whereas, to forswear can mean to perjure or to abjure and renounce: to swear something off. The dominant sense of the opening concerns the admission that both the speaker and his mistress have renounced their oaths to other partners. In addition, the lady has apparently renounced the speaker, too. So she is “twice forsworn” in swearing her love to him. The lines,

In act thy bed-vow broke, and new faith torn
In vowing new hate after new love bearing

13William Shakespeare’s sonnets are easily accessible on the Internet, since they are in the public domain. For those who require a critical edition, see Helen Vendler, The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1997).
The poem speaks not only to the lady’s breaking her vows to her husband (the “bed vow), but also to “new hate” for the new lover, the speaker, after bearing him new love. However, the speaker himself admits breaking such vows of love all the time. The speaker says he is perjured most – that is, lying – when he makes vows that are only made to exploit his mistress: “to misuse thee.” Hence it is no wonder the mistress is angry at her new lover. Katherine Duncan-Jones notes that “to misuse thee” means “to treat you badly, by deception or otherwise; to exploit you sexually; to lie about you, misrepresent you.” She finds the latter meanings retroactively in lines 9–12.14 Reference to swearing against the thing the speaker sees speaks to all the lies he has been telling himself and others about how superb the lady is. He makes his eyes swear – in the sense of testify – against the thing they see. This testimony is perjury. Hence the legal rhetoric of the poem and the close:

For I have sworn thee fair: more perjured eye,
To swear against the truth so foul a lie.

The I has given false testimony that the lady is fair, and the “perjured eye” in fact is this “I.” And it has testified a foul lie against the truth that the lady is as corrupt as the speaker. But the word “lie” at the end obviously has more than one meaning too, for it refers not to just false testimony but to the speaker’s sexual congress with the woman. Throughout the poem the swearing of oaths of fidelity to one another broaches forscrewing, which makes the poet realize that swearing and forswearing can’t be sorted out. Also it turns out that loving and lying aren’t separable either. Lying in the sense of misstating the truth and in the sense of lying in bed with the woman are fused. To declare or swear one’s love while lying with the woman is to forswear it at the same time and therefore lie. Then, too, there is the braiding of “I,” “eye,” and “lie” that relates to sexual seduction but also to testifying falsely against (denying) what ought to be apparent to the eye: that the lady is anything but innocent and sweet. This, then, is just a start on how to begin looking at multiple meanings in a poem that breaks down commonplace logical oppositions, something that mirrors or corresponds to the act of love making itself wherein

a breakdown of difference is experienced in terms of sexual union. Shakespeare’s trafficking in multiple meanings is hardly unique: the poetry of Milton, Wordsworth, Hopkins, Dickinson, Eliot, Auden, Plath and many others require an openness of mind to multiple meanings in play that lead to multiple interpretive constructions that are to be played off against one another.

**READING**

Stephen Booth, ed. *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (1977)

---

### 1.4 Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the Ancient Greek word for interpretation and pertains to the philosophical study of interpretation as well as to the various methods of interpreting texts.

**Peshat and Derash**

Already in antiquity Rabbis were making a distinction between what in Hebrew is called Peshat (literal meaning) and Derash (non-literal meaning). Peshat: what does the text literally say? One would think this is relatively easy to determine, and it often is, but as it happens, words can mean more than one thing or have a rather lengthy etymological history of meanings that may need to be taken into account. In the case of ancient Hebrew, it is not always easy to conceptualize what a word meant, because the way we categorize concepts may not translate directly into ancient Hebrew. For example, our understanding of a concept like Being, which has its foundation in Ancient Greek thinking, won’t map well onto an ancient Hebraic understanding of such a concept, if it’s a concept at all (concepts (categories of thought) are ancient Greek notions too). Given that we may lack the living context for determining ancient meanings, we are often relegated to speculation of what words could have meant.
Derash: what lies beyond the literal meaning? We are told some things in the Bible but not others, which prompts us to ask questions. Why does God ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac? Why does Abraham imagine that the voice that is speaking to him is God’s and not that of an evil spirit? Why does Abraham see fit to follow God’s command when it could appear to us as cruel, irrational, and unjust? Again, why is Isaac’s name (He Who Laughs) tied together with his mother’s laugh at God’s proclamation that she will have a son, given her age? And does God threaten to sacrifice Isaac in revenge for this laugh of the mother? Readers of the Old Testament, Erich Auerbach among them, have noticed that this is not a text one can read without questions being elicited. To some it is even considered to be a “book of questions,” questions that require answers based on study and debate that in itself forces us to move beyond what the text literally and simply says. This requires Derash: non-literal interpretations. In Jewish tradition, these questions also sometimes require Midrash, inspired commentary by means of story amplification that is considered an extension of the Scripture. We see this in Christian tradition too, namely, the invention of stories that fill in the missing parts or sequels to the stories we are given in Scripture. Milton’s Paradise Lost and Thomas Mann’s Joseph and his Brothers fit this model. In fact, Milton’s poem has influenced people to the point that what they imagine to take place in the Old Testament is, in fact, only told by him.

READING

Shai Cherry, The Torah Through Time (2008)

Medieval Hermeneutics: The Fourfold Method

Medieval Christian theologians have also made the distinction between the literal and the figural. But they went a step further than the Rabbis in advancing the view that the literal meaning is always accompanied by non-literal meaning much in the way that a musical note might always be accompanied by another musical note above it. Instead of leading to a polyphony of sounds, one winds up with a polyphony of meanings as more layers of meaning are added one on top of the other. Medieval theologians called this stack of layers a “superstructure” and commonly compared it to architecture, not music.
In the twelfth century, Hugh of Saint Victor argued that scripture is like a building founded on rough stones that are smoothed out as one builds on top of them. “Even so the divine page, in its literal sense, contains many things which seem both to be opposed to each other and, sometimes, to impart something which smacks of the absurd or the impossible. But the spiritual meaning admits no opposition; in it, many things can be different from one another, but none can be opposed.” Hugh points out further that “The foundation which is under the earth we have said stands for history [this is akin to stones that are not always fitted] and the superstructure which is built upon it we have said suggests allegory.” This approach to interpretation insists upon the rationality of scripture: that things that don’t seem to make sense literally (historically) can be shown to make sense when transposed higher up into spirituality (by way of allegory). In reading 2 Corinthians 3:6, “The letter killeth, but the spirit quickeneth,” Hugh comments, “because it is certainly necessary that the student of the Scripture adhere staunchly to the truth of the spiritual meaning and that the high points of the literal meaning, which itself can sometimes be wrongly understood too, should not lead him away from the central concern in any way whatever.” Here Hugh is reading St. Paul as allegorically speaking of how to interpret Scripture, that is, of how to apprehend the spiritual within the literal meaning.15

The superstructural reading of the Bible was done in various ways throughout the Middle Ages, among them, in terms of a “four fold” method that was described by Dante in Il Convivio (circa 1307). Dante specified that there are literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogic levels of meaning. The literal “does not go beyond that enunciated by the fictitious word”; the allegorical is “a truth hidden beneath a beautiful falsehood: such as when Ovid says that Orpheus tamed wild beasts with his lyre and made trees and stones move towards him, which shows how the wise man makes cruel hearts grow tame and humble with the instrument of his voice, and how he makes those who have no feeling for science and art move according to his will …”; the moral has to be treated most carefully, Dante says, “So, for example, one may note in the gospel that when Christ ascended the mountain to transfigure himself he took three of the twelve Apostles with him. The moral sense of this is that we should have few companions in our most

secret undertakings”; and the anagogic level, Dante says, is “above the senses” and appears “when one expounds the spiritual meaning of a text,” which concerns “the supernal things of eternal glory.” Dante’s example of the anagogic is the comparison of the freedom of Judea after the exodus from Egypt with the freedom of the soul in its exodus from sin. Note that when Dante explained the allegorical level, he wasn’t referring to Scripture but to Ovid’s literary text, The Metamorphoses, a point that suggests literary and scriptural interpretation wasn’t distinguished. In fact, he was probably assuming his reader would know that Orpheus is a metaphor or “type” (a precursor) for Christ.16

What makes the Christian tradition of Biblical interpretation quite different from Rabbinical interpretation is the emphasis in Christianity upon the ideal of systematicity: the absolute rational coherence of all the levels into one large edifice or structure that resembles a building. Like Hugh, Dante refers to the building up of knowledge in a manner similar to constructing a large building on a foundation. The aim is to develop strata or orders that become increasingly more spiritual and immaterial as one ascends, which is something we see in Gothic architecture as one moves up from huge blocks of stone to spires that seem to dissolve into the sky above. Ideally, the four fold method enables one to see how the literal is translated into various spiritual dimensions that work up to the realm of God. Essentially, this presupposes a system of corresponding orders that move up from the material to the spiritual.

READING

Hugh of St Victor, Didascalion (twelfth century)

Sympathetic Analogies

The fourfold method of interpretation is, in fact, rather streamlined, given that people during the medieval and Renaissance periods were quite interested in bodies of knowledge that today we label “occult.” These bodies of knowledge were charted within complex tables of correspondence, such as follows:

### Table 1.1  From Second Book of Occult Philosophy, or Magic, Henry Cornelius Agrippa, Sixteenth Century.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intellectual World</th>
<th>Seraphim</th>
<th>Dominations</th>
<th>Archangels</th>
<th>Innocents</th>
<th>Four triplicities of intelligible hierarchies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cherubim</td>
<td></td>
<td>Powers</td>
<td>Raphael</td>
<td>Gabriel</td>
<td>Angels ruling four corners of earth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thrones</td>
<td></td>
<td>Virtues</td>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Uriel</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seraph</td>
<td></td>
<td>Tharsis</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ariel</td>
<td>Rulers of elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lion</td>
<td></td>
<td>Eagle</td>
<td></td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Consecrated animals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td></td>
<td>John</td>
<td></td>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>Gospels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire</td>
<td></td>
<td>Air</td>
<td></td>
<td>Water</td>
<td>Elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeds</td>
<td></td>
<td>Flowers</td>
<td></td>
<td>Earth</td>
<td>Elements of plants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary world of generation and corruption</td>
<td>Seraph</td>
<td>Cherub</td>
<td>Tharsis</td>
<td>Ariel</td>
<td>Rulers of elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man's world</td>
<td>Mind</td>
<td>Spirit</td>
<td>Soul</td>
<td>Body</td>
<td>Elements of Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intellect</td>
<td>Reason</td>
<td>Phantasy</td>
<td>Sense</td>
<td>Four powers of Soul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Choler</td>
<td>Blood</td>
<td>Phlegm</td>
<td>Melancholy</td>
<td>Humors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infernal world</td>
<td>Samael</td>
<td>Azazel</td>
<td>Azael</td>
<td>Mahazael</td>
<td>Princes of Devils</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Phlegethon</td>
<td>Cocytus</td>
<td>Styx</td>
<td>Acheron</td>
<td>Infernal Rivers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This table is extrapolated from a much bigger one by Henry Cornelius Agrippa, a German occult thinker of the sixteenth century who lived in many parts of Europe, Paris among them, and spent his time gathering together various forms of secret knowledge. The chart above is based on the scale of the number four. Of importance is that the various echelons are in sympathetic alignment. This means that entities, whether heavenly, earthly, or infernal work together in terms of their various powers, hence making something happen in the real world by way of alignment, which is the magician’s art. The assumption is that the universe is composed of sympathetic registers that have harmonic relations, much as note to note intervals do in music and that some of these intervallic relations among the cosmic registers (stones, plants, animals, angels, etc.) diffuse or purify away that which is corrupt (bloodstone was worn by Roman soldiers to ward off disease). But some relations strengthen or amplify what is weak; for example, the stone lapis lazuli was worn to summon higher intellectual powers.

Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is already very structurally complex in terms of how various books and passages interrelate within the epic as a whole. However, the epic can also be read in terms of occult correspondences, as well. The four angels, Michael, Raphael, Gabriel, and Uriel in the chart above govern the four corners of the world and are to be associated with the four gospels, Mark, John, Matthew, and Luke respectively. To read any one of these gospels is to be in touch with these angels at a higher sympathetic level of existence. At the highest level, Michael is generally associated with Seraphim, Raphael with Powers and Virtues, Gabriel with Archangels, and Uriel with Innocents. As it happens, Uriel shows his innocence in pointing out to Satan the way to Eden at the end of Book 3, but this also relates to his lining up with the categories of experience (he learns from experience that he made an error) and slowness. Gabriel is associated with the Saturnine, as well as with water, winter, prudence, and phlegm. His discovery and triumph over Satan in Book 4 relates to his steadfastness as a stern being who cannot be daunted by another’s emotional trickery and outward deception. Raphael is sent by God to teach Adam and Eve virtue, which is the angel’s occult characteristic; he also manifests reason, his respective power of the soul; and Milton also associates him with air, which is one of the four elements basic to astrological, alchemical, and medical

---

speculation (the four elements correspond to the four humors). Michael, who appears at the close of the epic to slowly usher Adam and Eve out of Paradise is associated with mind, intellect, faith, and justice, but also choler, and violence. Apparently, a reader familiar with angelology is supposed to know that it would be appropriate for Michael to appear after the fall. Finally, it is perhaps useful to know that astrologically Uriel is an earth sign (Taurus, Virgo, Capricorn); Gabriel is a water sign (Cancer, Scorpio, Pisces), Raphael is an air sign (Gemini, Libra, Aquarius); and Michael is a fire sign (Aries, Leo, Sagittarius).

Milton, we know, was quite aware of astrology and arranged his life in terms of astrological predictions of favorable and unfavorable times of the year. That he would blend this with Christianity may seem odd, but in the seventeenth century, intellectuals frequently entertained very different kinds of thinking at the same time. John Locke, a rational empirical thinker, also wrote on occult phenomena, Sir Isaac Newton, the well known physicist, practiced alchemy, but also wrote treatises on the Book of Revelations. Milton, a Protestant, seems to have had an interest in the occult. That said, the lesson for us is that literary meaning can be conceived in terms of a vast table of analogies or correspondences that function in terms of sympathetic thinking whereby a string of top-down associations function to strengthen or weaken the various forces that impinge upon individuals. Nevertheless, in Paradise Lost no matter how strong these forces are in concert, ultimately it is the free will of humankind that matters. In other words, Milton ultimately rejects analogical or sympathetic thinking for the sake of rational choice predicated upon faith in God. And yet, earth feels the wound when Eve falls; that is, the whole sympathetic system, within which Adam and Eve function, registers pain and starts to come apart. Hence, the intimacy among beings is shattered, something that becomes clear when Adam and Eve are expelled finally from Eden.

READING

Henry Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim, Three Books of Occult Philosophy (sixteenth century)

The Rise of Modern Literary Interpretation

Analogical thinking in the Renaissance, especially, led to a view of literature as something that encompassed at least the Old and New Testaments, Greek
mythology and literature, Latin history and literature, Arthurian tradition, other major medieval precedents (e.g. the *Moralized Ovid*), and folk culture. Dante Alighieri, Matteo Maria Boiardo, Ludovico Ariosto, Torquato Tasso, Edmund Spenser, and John Milton all wrote lengthy epic poetry of one sort or another that presumed a layering and hence cross-referencing of Judeo, Christian, Greek, Roman, and Medieval literatures.

Of course, writing literature on such a vast scale of textual analogies meant that literature was a rather unrestricted sort of enterprise. Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, for example, doesn’t quite deny its pretension to be on a par with Biblical scripture. Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* seems to be about everything that was ever written, or near to it. Elizabethan and Jacobean drama isn’t exactly very restricted, either. Shakespeare’s history plays are very broad ranging and are clearly about matters of state and history itself, not just dramatized entertainments that are narrow in scope. Taken as a whole, Shakespeare too is something of an epic literary writer whose works encompass history, comedy, tragedy, and irony. Also, much of the drama was based on analogical thinking, which took on allegorical force. Some plays by Shakespeare and his contemporaries are set in Italy and show intrigues at court that are really allegories of goings on in England. In other words, a sort of double reading is required wherein different analogical layers are being brought into correspondence. It is a tendency that is foundational to metaphysical poetry, as well, especially the tendency in John Donne, Henry Vaughn, and others to think in terms of macrocosm and microcosm.

Towards the end of the seventeenth century, however, analogical thinking contracts into satirical writing. That is, the correspondences suddenly are looked upon as silly and frivolous, even if they have the power to insult and impugn. Andrew Marvell’s poem “Upon Appleton House” is a transitional work, part metaphysical, part satirical. But John Dryden’s mock epic poem “Absolom and Achitophel” – about the English monarchy and intrigue at court – uses an improbable Biblical story of Absalom’s revolt against King David to illuminate the politics of the Duke of Monmouth (an illegitimate son of Charles II and a Protestant) who was eager to succeed Charles II, hence supplanting the rightful heir James, Duke of York. This came to a crisis in 1681 when legislation was spearheaded by the Earl of Shaftesbury in Parliament to exclude James, who was a Catholic, from succession. In the poem, Monmouth is Absalom, and, of course, he is mocked from beginning to end in terms at once elevated and base. The upshot of a work like this concerns the fact that suddenly a literary work has a rather
restricted political aim and that it is advanced as an entertainment with a moralizing edge whose readers are comprised of people in the public sphere who have the education to parse such a work. Whereas Shakespeare was writing about historical events in what to him was already some sort of deep past, Dryden was publishing a satire that addressed current events. The analogy with the Bible didn’t offset the directness of the criticism so much as it made Monmouth look all the more absurd. In other words, the more religious Dryden got, the more secular the poem became, because it is the nature of satire to invert relations. Poems like this, in the early 1680s, set the stage for literary production that focused more one dimensionally upon the present, though often with the aid of a satirical analogue, for example, Jonathan Swift’s invention of Gulliver’s travelogue (in *Gulliver’s Travels*), which imitates strange accounts of English travelers who have come back from far away adventures. In such works, the use of double or analogous reading is highlighted as artificial and distorting, not sympathetic, as it is in Spenser and Milton. Moreover, by the end of the eighteenth century, writers like Jane Austen will have junked the double reading model altogether in various works. *Pride and Prejudice* is about its ostensive content. It’s not an allegory about something else.

Satire and the realist literature that accompanied and/or followed from it were quite oriented in terms of what was then the historical moment of the present, a moment which the reading public shared in terms of direct experience. References to the Bible, to the Greeks, or to whatever other sort of body of writing were greatly subordinated to the experience or Bildung (development, formation) of the contemporary individual person or social group. Literature in the eighteenth century was becoming a far more restricted sort of communication in that it pertained much more to the here and now of lived experience. One read for pleasure, that is, for imaginative delight, but one also read for what Dr. Samuel Johnson called “improvement.” Johnson’s various prefaces to major writers – “Preface to Shakespeare” is a classic example of criticism in the eighteenth century that we would recognize as modern – survey major British authors in order to establish their canonical significance. Of importance to Johnson was the genius of the writer and how the writer’s gifts were employed for better or for worse. Johnson’s aim, in other words, was evaluative. However, he situated his evaluation within the parameters of a portrait of the writer and that writer’s achievements, hence emphasizing the uniqueness and particularity of an author’s output. What makes Johnson modern is that he has an understanding of a literary work as an art form that has to be understood
as a thing in itself. How an author crafts plots, characters, situations, and so forth interests Johnson to some very great extent, which is to say, technique matters. Central for Johnson is the understanding of the work in the context of the here and now. He is not interested in sympathetic correspondences or a four fold method of interpretation.

READING

Samuel Johnson, *Preface to Shakespeare* (eighteenth century)

**Philosophical Hermeneutics**

Hermeneutics, the ancient Greek word for interpretation, was revived as a discipline by religious thinkers in the Enlightenment. However, it has come to concern modern ways of approaching problems of textual interpretation that have been mediated by philosophy, in particular, the thinking of Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel, Wilhelm Dilthey, F. Nietzsche, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Hans Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, and Jacques Derrida. As a starting point, everyone defers to the work of the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher who argued that it wasn’t enough to know the etymology of words, the historical context in which a text was written, the genres upon which that work was based, the opinions of the author or his or her contemporaries, or even the very minute particulars of the text itself, for what that yielded was merely explanation, whereas what was required was something known as understanding.

Understanding concerned the critic’s experience of the work as a synthetic whole and not just a collection of parts. The whole exudes a spirit that the parts don’t have and this spirit is understandable in terms of the author whom the critic has come to know better than the author knew himself or herself. Unlike the author, who didn’t necessarily work through all of a text’s problems to satisfaction, the interpreter should have a much better grasp of what the problems were, why they couldn’t be resolved, and how they might have been overcome. The interpreter also should have a much better understanding of the contradictions and muddles that an author wasn’t able to fix or didn’t know existed.
Perhaps most important, Schleiermacher realized that when one is reading a literary text, one isn’t just reading language in general but a language that reflects individual thoughts that aren’t generic but extremely unique and only fully comprehensible by those who have an intimate knowledge of the author’s works. In other words, works have a psychological aspect that the interpreter can know only by way of becoming familiar with the consciousness that is represented by the language. Schleiermacher was saying, therefore, that interpretation isn’t simply a technical skill, but the cultivation of a sort of empathic wisdom regarding an author’s work. It is towards such an understanding of a text that in England early modern literary critics, such as Johnson and Joseph Addison, were already moving.

The idea that the lived experience of another can be known through the commonality of linguistic meaning was key to the thinking of the nineteenth century philosopher, Wilhelm Dilthey. Of importance is that these meanings are apprehended by us not just as referents but as sensations and that through reflection we can elevate these sensations to facts of consciousness that can be grasped as something in particular that enables us to experience the experiences of another. A good example of that might be the color blue in Van Gogh’s painting *Starry Night*. We obviously know that the color blue is referring us to the night sky. But that knowledge is merely abstract and empty without the sensation of the color, the thickness of the paint, and the swirling lines. Moreover, only through reflection can one translate these sensations into facts of consciousness (the self-awareness that one has experienced something in particular), which in turn can be grasped as a psychic experience that another could and probably may have had, as well. In terms of poetry, one would have to ask how words, phrases, and sentences convey sensations that particularize their referents in terms of experiences that are sharable but not necessarily common. During the mid-twentieth century, a group of literary critics who identified themselves as part of the Geneva School did, in fact, attempt to practice this sort of hermeneutic. They included Albert Beguin, Jean-Pierre Richard, Georges Poulet, Marcel Raymond, and Jean Starobinski. Gaston Bachelard, who wasn’t officially part of this group, exemplified a highly sophisticated ability to analyze the subjectivity of experience as a fact of consciousness that had objective significance. As a group, these critics are sometimes identified with the term “phenomenological criticism.”
INTRODUCTORY TOOLS FOR LITERARY ANALYSIS

READING


The Hermeneutic Circle

Schleiermacher and his followers in the German philosophical tradition discovered a very disturbing technical paradox with respect to interpretation that can be considered a tool for analysis, known as “the hermeneutical circle.”

Essentially it was noticed that the more detailed the textual evidence we consider, the truer our account, even if it will necessarily be less consistent and coherent than if we considered the text from a broader perspective in which fewer details were accounted for. Conversely, the broader and less detailed the examination of the whole, the more coherent and consistently plausible the explanation of it will be, though the less validity that interpretation will have, since an examination of the minute particulars will tend to invalidate its most general and consistent claims.

The paradox is that the closer one gets to the details of a text, the less likely it is to produce a satisfactory interpretation of any kind, though one is, in fact, closer to the truth of the literal particulars; whereas, the further one gets from the numerous details the more likely it is to produce a plausible and convincing interpretation that takes account of the whole as a totalizing truth, even if that comes at the price of ignoring or even distorting the details.

The conflict boils down to that of particulars versus universals, something that bothered nineteenth-century historians such as Leopold Von Ranke in “The Idea of Universal History” (circa 1830).

Philosophy always reminds us of the claims of the supreme idea. History, on the other hand, reminds us of the conditions of existence. The former lends weight to the universal interest, the latter to the particular interest.18

---

As for the philosopher Hegel, the question for Ranke concerned the teasing out of dominant historical tendencies that characterized the development of a national people as a spiritual people who are self-conscious of their past, present, and future. Primitive peoples, Hegel argued, have no history, only the particulars of day to day life. Ranke agreed: “Just as there exists the particular, the connection of the one to the other, so there finally exists totality … There is … something total in each life; it becomes, it exerts an effect, it acquires influence, it passes away.”¹⁹ But, of course, this can only happen to a people who are conscious that they have a past, present, and future that can be represented as a totality, in other words, as civilization, not just situation or mere emplacement (indigenous habitation for however much time).

The problem, of course, is that the totality has to be confronted with particulars that can affect and change it in order to ensure that the totality exists in time as a developing whole that produces and overcomes contradictions, rational limitations, and so on. But in so doing the particulars bring down the whole as a totalizing entity. Of course, this is but another way of positing the hermeneutic circle whereby the particulars invalidate the whole as a logical, rational totality, whereas the totality ignores and contradicts particulars in order to establish itself as a logical whole. This is a problem that Hegel thought he had solved by means of advancing what he called “the dialectic,” the idea that contradictions will be logically produced that then have to engage in a struggle by means of which they are sublated (pulled up) to a higher order wherein the totality is transformed and the contradictions resolved. Ever since the 1930s, French thinkers have argued that this solution was far too optimistic and that sublation is much more problematic than Hegel realized. Certainly, sublation doesn’t resolve the universal/particular problem, as the French critic and novelist Georges Bataille made very clear in many of his writings of the 1930s and after, and as the French philosopher Jacques Derrida reconfirmed in his work on Hegel in the 1960s and 1970s.

And yet, there is another possibility for dealing with the viciousness of the hermeneutic circle, something that Derrida more or less had shown without necessarily taking the step of addressing the hermeneutic circle itself. Speaking to Henri Ronse in 1967, Derrida said, “In what you call my books, what is first of all put in question is the unity of the book … One can take Of Grammatology as a long essay articulated in two parts … into

the middle of which one could staple Writing and Difference ... Inversely, one could insert Of Grammatology into the middle of Writing and Difference. This speaks to writing (i.e. Derrida's own texts) as a multidimensional object made up of multiple constructions that can be moved around so that one will recontextualize and reinscribe the other, so to speak. Following the philosophical work of the German phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, Derrida, while a student in the 1950s, had noticed that Husserlian phenomenology requires multiple constructions in analysis. Indeed, Husserl's writings too can be inserted into the middle of each other, much as Derrida was suggesting with respect to his own work. Additionally, that was also true for Sigmund Freud's writings, also of much importance to Derrida, in which the phrase, “multiple constructions in analysis,” is coined. In short, Husserl, Freud, and Derrida had figured out that instead of restricting oneself to the closure of a single work with a linear (or teleological) beginning, middle, and end and a central rationale or argument that governs the whole completely, one ought to be thinking in terms of multiple interpretations that construct the same materials differently or construct different materials that when put side by side reveal strong identities.

A brilliant example of this occurs in the work of Derrida during the mid-1980s with respect to a project on a polysemous German word, Geschlecht, which means sex, race, gender, family, kin, and stock. Derrida was to publish four essays, three of which made it into print. “Geschlecht I” was on sexual difference in Heidegger, “Geschlecht II” was on monstrosity and the figure of the hand in Heidegger’s What is called Thinking?, “Geschlecht III” (which didn’t get redacted but was given in lecture) investigated Heidegger’s readings of Trakl in On the Way to Language, and “Geschlecht IV” was on the topic of Mitsein (Being-with) in Heidegger’s early writings. Although these essays are on different topics, they all can be folded within one another in terms of their unfolding the many meanings that Heidegger gave to the word Geschlecht throughout the course of his life as a philosopher.

Without dwelling on the particular arguments, it is notable that these essays are essentially very different and very identical at the same time and that they evade the vicious circle of moving from particular to universal and back again, because they (i) refuse universalization – the reduction of all particulars to a central general rationale – and (ii) posit the possibility that there could always be more essays to come, because the particulars are hardly ever exhausted. What dictates the viciousness of the hermeneutic circle is simply closure, the positing of a finite limit within which everything ought to be made accountable according to a relatively simple rationale that by its very logocentric nature – its circular self-referentiality – is not able to convincingly present the difference between its universalizing claims and its evidentiary particulars, if only because logocentrism forces one to choose between a neat system of relations or all those particulars that won’t fit into that system.

Of course, Derrida is not the only person to have escaped the hermeneutic circle (i.e. logocentrism per se), for one can find strategies by other thinkers, such as Gilles Deleuze (rhizomatic writing, 5.9), Jacques Lacan (via topology theory, 5.11), Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak (her use of fragmentary development), and Slavoj Žižek (the collision of multiple perspectives and particulars versus the virtual sublation of a master logic). Of immense advantage is that by exiting the hermeneutic circle, one exits the thesis trap: advancing a thesis that is merely a point of view in a cavalcade of such views that others can repudiate in the interests of their own counter-claims. What speaks against the exiting of the hermeneutic circle (by academics, in particular) is that suddenly much more effort needs to be taken to read, assemble, assess, and hermeneutically process what someone has advanced.

One of the reasons Husserl isn’t better received in many quarters is that his writings are very much like an infinitely open series of writings that were revised many times over, each time advancing a somewhat different notion of phenomenology. Freud’s corpus isn’t altogether different in that it too is in a process of constant self-revision, or reiteration and difference that isn’t easily translated into universal claims, though many people have done precisely this in order to make the whole more comprehensible and influential. If the thesis approach to writing has a strength, it is that despite the inadequacy of dealing with particulars and universals, one does at least come away with a quick understanding of what the critic’s central positions are, something that makes debate easy and clear cut. The alternative is complex, open ended, rhizomatic writings, that, as in the case of Husserl,
are inconclusive and fraught with methodological inconsistencies and aporias. One encounters this too in other major figures like Novalis, Friedrich Nietzsche, Walter Benjamin, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, writers who worked with fragments that could be interleaved.

READING


1.5 Major Twentieth-Century Schools of Critical Analysis

Critical schools emerge when certain methods become adopted by a number of major figures who form part of what can be called a movement or school. This section will survey Historicism, New Criticism, Marxism, Structuralism, Phenomenology, Psychoanalytic Criticism, Reader Response Criticism, and Post-Structuralism. The following section (1.6) will survey sociologically inspired forms of criticism (feminism, constructivism, race, gay and lesbian studies, ethnicity, cultural studies, global studies, and post-colonialism). The overviews only touch on issues of central importance and are not exhaustive. However, given how major sociological criticism has become over the past 40 years, some aspects will be elaborated in some greater detail.

Traditional and New Historicisms

Traditional historicism claims that the meaning of a text is established by its historical context, which is seen as a rational totality that norms the text by means of revealing meanings in terms of publicly held understandings that can be found in the historical record. Because traditional historicism assumes that works are explained by their immediate historical contexts, these researchers are arguing that the work is a sort of artefact frozen in historical time, much like an object retrieved from a dig in Mesopotamia or Egypt. Hence the work cannot transcend its moment, which is odd when one begins to realize that quite essential to art is its ability to communicate
rather profoundly with audiences in any historical time without the aid of historical scholarship. Also suspect is the traditional historian’s idea that works of art would conform to the norms and forms of their historical period when, in fact, it is the tendency of major art to be innovative and therefore to break with establishment norms and forms, if not with the commonplace horizon of ordinary thinking that is advanced by the artist’s contemporaries. Indeed, history shows us that the last people who could have understood Rembrandt or Shakespeare very well would have been their contemporaries. But one saw this at work too as recently as the 1960s when art critics and the media were making fun of Andy Warhol’s paintings of soup cans and his deployment of “pop” images. Today Warhol is considered a major transitional figure in the history of late twentieth century American art.

The New Historicism, by contrast, is a movement begun in the 1970s and 1980s that argued the literary text shouldn’t be viewed as a privileged object at the center of a totalizing rational context, but that the text is itself a context among many different contexts that are neither totalizing nor rationally configured as a whole, given how contradictory and conflicted they often are in relation to one another. Unlike traditional historians, the New Historicists argue that history is discontinuous and that there is no coherent world picture at any given time (no Elizabethan World Picture, as traditional historicism has argued), because history is a site of conflicting social, political, and cultural processes, which are expressed as material practices, of which literary production is but one. All material practices turn out to be established in terms of resistance and power, but it is how resistance and power are strategized and deployed that matters. Unlike the traditional historicists, the New Historicists, Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher among them, were open to the idea that literary and non-literary texts were equal in terms of being material practices of power and resistance. What the New Historians shared with their predecessors, however, is the idea that the author traffics in shared social/cultural meanings which are being used, in the New Historical understanding, for the sake of renegotiating social values by means of entering a stream of ongoing social discourses that are part and parcel of the public sphere. This idea led to a rather predictable critical aim: the discovery of literary texts that were in the process of renegotiating social values with respect to a theme of importance to left of center intellectuals: social justice (or, simply, “power”). This critical aim mirrored the one launched by feminism during the 1970s and 1980s: the discovery of female writings that contested and renegotiated
social values deemed to be patriarchal. Again, power was of central concern, and it was hardly surprising that the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault on power had become of central importance to feminists and the New Historists.

**READING**


**New Criticism**

New Criticism emerged in the 1930s and still forms the bedrock of much literary analysis, whether people admit it or not. Unlike traditional historicism, New Criticism saw the internal workings of the literary text as its own context. Meaning was self-generated by the text as what the leading New Critic, Cleanth Brooks, called a “well wrought urn,” an autotelic object that constitutes its own forms of meaning that break with so-called ordinary language. Irony, paradox, ambiguity, imagery, symbolism, metaphor, and so on were known as “devices” that were said to break with ordinary uses of language that would be part of a work’s context; hence, it was mistaken to think that a work’s meanings could be established by way of imagining a stable external content based on commonsense public experiences of language use. This argument becomes quite self-evident when one looks at works such as James Joyce’s *Ulysses* or Ezra Pound’s *The Cantos*, which don’t map very well onto *ordinary* language, which is why the proverbial man in the street would have a tough time reading such works unaided.

The New Criticism is also known for advancing close reading, detailed attention to how a text is written and how it constitutes meaning at various levels. The strength of New Critical analysis is that it uses textual evidence as its primary source for analysis, but that it can make use of historical context in order to corroborate that textual evidence, if it needs to. New Critical analysis emphasizes the complexity of meaning, the study of structure and pattern in literature, and emphasizes the importance of immanent textual interpretation as opposed to contextual analysis. It is compatible with structuralism and post-structuralism as evidenced by its adaptability to narratology (the structuralist approach to narrative) and to
deconstruction (as shown by Yale School criticism in the 1970s – work by Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, Paul de Man, and Harold Bloom that advanced post-structuralist reading strategies). In fact, the New Criticism is still very much the default approach to much literary interpretation that is undertaken in the languages and literatures, however subordinated to other interests (historical, sociological, philosophical, psychological).

**READING**


**Marxism**

Marxism in the West is generally studied not in revolutionary terms – that is, as a preparation for outright violent social revolt – but as a critique of bourgeois society and the capitalist economy upon which it is based. Particularly after the demise of the Soviet Union in 1992 and the slightly earlier breakup of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, and after the remarkable shift in Communist China, at around the same time, to what is essentially an early stage of capitalist development, it’s unconvincing to argue for Marxist revolution today, given the obvious failures of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thinking in practice. Nevertheless, Marxism still holds considerable legitimacy as a critique of capitalism, and there is no reason to imagine it might not be reformulated and practiced in ways that might well succeed where earlier forms of it had failed.

The various forms that Marxism has taken include Diamat or dialectical materialism, an economic slant that was central to Leninist-Stalinist thinking, the study of class relations and class consciousness typified by the work of Georg Lukács (a Hungarian Communist), cultural Marxism, which was advanced by Leon Trotsky but developed more significantly by the Frankfurt School (Theodor Adorno, Marx Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, and Jürgen Habermas), existential Marxism, which is influenced mainly by the philosopher Hegel and was advanced in one form or other by Alexander Kojève, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Lacan, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and structuralist Marxism which at times overlapped with existential Marxism, but which is most generally associated with the writings of
Louis Althusser, Étienne Balibar, Jacques Rancière, Pierre Macherey, and Roger Establet in their major collaboration, *Lire le Capital* (abridged in English as *Reading Capital* with texts only by Althusser and Balibar).

In France, thinkers associated with the Tel Quel movement of the 1960s advanced a structuralist understanding of language in terms of Marx’s notion of a mode of production, something that Jacques Derrida saw as a site for “deconstruction,” hence posing a set of different structural alternatives for Marxist thought. More recently, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have emerged as major figures in terms of advancing updated understandings of cultural hegemony, which stem from the work of the Italian Marxist thinker, Antonio Gramsci. Hegemony is an alternative to the standard Marxist understanding of class conflict and poses a much more plastic and flexible understanding of social coalition. Also well known is work by Fredric Jameson, an American Marxist known for his concept of the “political unconscious” (literature as the hidden symbolic mediation of a perceived collective destiny of culture), and Slavoj Žižek, whose work blends Lacanian psychoanalysis with various forms of Marxist analysis, some of them harking back to Stalin and Lenin in the interests of putting certain social critiques into question, particularly, those of the “political correctness” movement (e.g. academic liberalism). Of major concern to literary critics has been “ideology critique,” discussed at length in 6.2.

**READING**

Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism* (1978)

**Structuralism**

Structuralism has its roots in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (circa 1915) and argues, essentially, that with respect to signifying systems the whole comes before its parts (5.3). Structuralism argues, moreover, that systems are constructed in terms of simple binary oppositions that establish patterns of identity and difference that encode signs and make them functional as meaningful elements within a system of differentiations and
equivalences. A radical claim made by structuralism is that the human subject does not invent language but is preceded by language and is born into it. That sounds odd, until one realizes that DNA is a semiotic system with properties rather like language and that our ability to converse was prepared for long before humans evolved, given that animals had most of the features of speech and the basic sociality to go with it long before we evolved. Because the “wholism” of structuralism is so at odds with how people have been habituated to think about language, the movement never became widely popular, though conceptually it really is more robust than, say, New Criticism or traditional historicism. The work by anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss is considered a major bulwark of structuralism, though structuralism has been practiced with considerable success by literary critics, among them, Roland Barthes, Gerard Genette, Philippe Hamon, Michael Riffaterre, Tzvetan Todorov, and Julia Kristeva. The advantage to structuralism is that it doesn’t begin with the assumption that literature is a semiotic representation of some independent mental reality (or content) that exists transcendentally either out in the world or in the writer’s imagination. In other words, structuralism abandons the mimetic fallacy of a pre-existing reality, whether mental or concrete, that the writer is translating into signs. Rather, structuralism argues that the reality effect of a text is produced by the sign system, not reproduced by it. This seems like a small difference, but in fact this shift has very significant consequences from an interpretive point of view. For one thing, it demystifies the idea that a novel is very much like a photograph of some independent reality.

READING

Roland Barthes, Elements of Semiology (1967)
Julia Kristeva, Desire in Language (1980)
Tzvetan Todorov, Poetics of Prose (1977)

Phenomenological Literary Analysis

Phenomenological literary analysis is usually associated with critics of the Geneva School: Albert Beguin, Marcel Raymond, Georges Poulet, Jean-Pierre Richard, Jean Rousset, and Jean Starobinski. But one sees it practiced too in various forms by critics such as Gaston Bachelard,
Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Blanchot, Hélène Cixous, Emmanuel Levinas, and Martin Heidegger. Phenomenological literary analysis is an orientation rather than a rigorous method; it assumes an understanding of consciousness along Husserlian lines as a mental set of processes that aren’t to be grounded, a priori, in a central controlling ego that self-consciously wills (intends) expression. Yet, phenomenological criticism does often resemble biographical criticism in that it searches for “themes” that are the signature of a particular artistic consciousness. Whereas Husserl didn’t believe in mental faculties, phenomenological critics do refer to the imagination (which is a faculty of mind) and some also tend to think in terms of an author’s psychology (the id is a sort of faculty), which puts them in close proximity with psychoanalytic literary analysis. Hence figures like J-B. Pontalis (a psychoanalyst who writes penetratingly about culture) tend to straddle the two domains.

These reservations aside, phenomenological criticism is concerned with the subjective manifestation of an author’s consciousness in words. Reading is considered the “consciousness of consciousness” (Marcel Raymond) and is itself a subjective act in response that must strive to imagine the psychic life of the writer, that is, his or her consciousness as a process of thought that is always in flux. How does this flux relate to the structure of authorial experience? According to Poulet, the thought of the critic should turn into the thought of the author. This view, which was shared by hermeneuts like Schleiermacher at the turn of the nineteenth century, is radicalized in that the process of identification is intersubjective (the interrelating and even merging of subjectivities). It’s not merely a matter of connaissance (that is, of simple familiarity). However, some phenomenological readers are also aware of their own consciousness, its themes (preoccupations, obsessions, concerns, interests), and how reading is the sharing of an experience that is deeply felt and expressed in words that have to be worked through by the reader in order to be fulfilled. Speaking of Marcel Raymond’s work, the critic J. Hillis Miller wrote that, “The self-consciousness with which Raymond seeks to identify himself … is … a primitive sense of existence, preceding the identification of any distinct objects, a state of mind more emotive than rational, scarcely differentiated as that of one particular self.”

In Gaston Bachelard’s work, the aim of the critic is to understand a text chiefly by way of empathic self-experience. For example, Bachelard

---

studied the literary image in terms of a psycho-dynamics that revealed a common structure of experience of a surprisingly intimate nature. The trait proper to the image, he said, is its suddenness and brevity. This it shares with language itself. Such perceptions are insights taken from Bachelard’s own experience and applied to what he read.

READING


**Psychoanalytic Criticism**

As we saw earlier, psychoanalytic criticism consists of the application of various theories developed by Freud to literature and culture, which can be seen as expressions of individual and collective psychology. Central to Freud’s contribution were the features of dream language that correspond to practices within imaginative written expression, in particular, displacement, condensation, secondary revision, symbolization, and projection.

*Displacement* is substitution rather like the figure of metaphor, but in displacement one forgets and disconnects the relationship between the analogy. In *Paradise Lost*, the female figure of Sin is the displaced, hellish, monstrous figure, guarding the gates of Hell that stands for Eve after the fall. Sin is displaced in that she turns up long before we are even introduced to Eve in the epic, as if Milton had repressed the connection.

*Condensation* takes place when a whole is encountered in terms of one of its split off parts that has become dissociated. The smile of the Cheshire Cat in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* that remains behind after the Cat vanishes is a condensation. Notable is that smiles don’t generally exist in isolation as things in themselves. Here the dissociative aspect of the condensation is most evident.

*Secondary revision* speaks to how people fill in their dreams with content as they recall them. This filling in is part of the dreamwork, too, Freud said. When we read, we “revise” the text by means of a tendency to fill in the gaps and render details in our own terms. How I imagine a street of St. Petersburg in Dostoyevsky’s fiction has as much to do with my imagination as it does with his description. Here day-dreaming facilitates the reading process.
Symbolization is discussed in “On Dreams” (1901). Freud wrote that “the majority of dream-symbols serve to represent persons, parts of the body and activities invested with erotic interest; in particular, the genitals are represented by a number of often very surprising symbols, and the greatest variety of objects are employed to denote them symbolically.” 23 This speaks to psychosexual symbolization, the idea of which in the beginning of the twentieth century scandalized polite society whose norms foreclosed the idea that sexuality might be a mental preoccupation. Freud insisted that whether something is a symbol or not required work with the patient in terms of making free associations and that not everything in a dream is symbolic. However, in the Grimms’ fairy tale of the frog and the princess, there is some agreement that the frog is a psychosexual symbol for the male scrotum. The incredulity with which people take this suggestion is a good indication that the symbol is a successful displacement that represses the unacceptable associations that one would have to make in the context of the frog asking for a kiss. (Freud would call our discomfort with this argument “resistance.”)

Projection is yet another form of dissociation in which one ascribes a characteristic to an other which one has oneself. If I ask someone, “Why are you so angry?”, it may well be me who is the angry party. In Herman Melville’s Moby Dick, there is considerable projection at work with respect to the white whale. Ahab projects a whole narrative on to the whale with which Moby Dick obviously has nothing to do.

Aside from Freud’s work on unconscious processes and his reading of literary texts (Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, etc.), there is well known work by Carl Jung, one of Freud’s followers who broke away to develop his own theories of symbolization. Jung’s ideas became popular after World War Two, particularly with respect to his development of archetypal analysis. He had postulated that the unconscious is collective and contains patterns of psychic energy that are realized in dreams as images. The images are universal symbols relative to psychological development and represent what are, ultimately, social-psychological relationships in the context of one’s life cycle (Lebenslauf). The archetypal image is primordial and supposedly a phylogenetic residue of inherited experiences. Archetypal critics such as Northrop Frye dispensed with the phylogenetic argument

and noted that primordial images and figures turn up in the history of literature with such regularity that the textual record really speaks for itself. Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* is a magisterial analysis of literary symbolism and types based on archetypal analysis. It had its heyday in the 1960s.  

Beginning in the 1970s there was a switch to Lacanian psychoanalysis. Jacques Lacan was a medical doctor who in the early 1950s began giving an extraordinary series of lectures (he called them seminars) that went on for some three decades and by the late 1960s attracted some hundreds of listeners. Lacan’s ideas had sources in surrealism, existential Hegelianism, and structuralism. Various slogans, which served as points of reference, still give the flavor of Lacan’s teachings: the unconscious is structured like a language, there is no Other of the Other, a signifier presents a subject to another signifier, and woman does not exist. These are provocative statements that obviously require substantial explanation. Two hallmarks of Lacanian criticism are (i) Lacan’s concept of the “mirror stage” (self-perception as misrecognition, self-perception as paranoid perception) and (ii) retroaction (that the subject comes to be a subject retroactively in the wake of the signification of an Other [e.g. Society]).

Much of Lacan’s thinking is inspired by philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre’s work on concrete relations with others in *Being and Nothingness* and by anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss’s work on the primacy of social structure – the order of the symbolic – in his *Elementary Structures of Kinship*. It is the hybridizing of these two major influences together with Freud that makes up the core of Lacanian thinking (6.3).

**READING**

Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1917)
Melanie Klein and Joan Riviere, *Love, Hate, and Reparation* (1937)
Jacques Lacan, “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis” (1953)

---

Reader Response Criticism

Reader response criticism was quite significant in the 1970s and had its source in Germany in the Konstanz School where Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser were active. Like the Geneva School, the Konstanz School was quite aware that a literary work doesn’t exist on the page, only instructions for constructing it exist there. Literary works, therefore, only truly exist insofar as they are constituted in the consciousness of a reader. But that said, how do readers actually constitute a text? What do we do with the instructions on the page? How do we handle aspects of a text for which information isn’t given? Wolfgang Iser famously spoke of gaps, blanks that the reader is required to fill in by means of implication, reason, fantasy, and so on. Jauss, who came out of a more conservative intellectual background, was quite interested in reconstituting an aesthetic experience of reading in the context of a historically determined understanding of what a text means. This goes back to the Biblical hermeneut’s question of how to understand a work in ways that go beyond mere historicism.

In America, Norman Holland, a psychoanalytical critic, investigated how readers read subjectively, arguing that reading a text properly never actually happens, given all the personal psychological issues we transfer onto the experience of reading. For example, it’s difficult to imagine reading a novel without identifying with or against certain characters. Whether we like a novel or not seems to have quite a bit to do with our own psychological make up, which is why, for example, feminism became very popular, given that it promoted literary readings women could identify with and get excited about in terms of their content. Reader response, hermeneutics, psychoanalysis, and phenomenology are sympathetic critical orientations. What tends to turn critics away from such approaches is that they are perceived to argue for reading as an arbitrary subjective act, which is problematic when one considers that in a research institution like a university, one is supposed to be getting at absolute truth, never mind the process of how one actually reads (5.7). During the 1980s, especially, Stanley Fish had great fun harassing the academy with his reader response approach that argued, essentially, that with regard to interpretations, might makes right. That is, only the institutionally powerful get heard and repeated in the classroom, given that academic readers respond to power, and not to the colleague in the office next door.
READING

Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (1980)

Post-Structuralism

To be sure, the term post-structuralism is an American neologism repudiated by everyone the term covers, but the term is quite helpful for the rest of us, because it refers to young French intellectuals of the 1960s and 1970s whose work was written in opposition to those aspects of structuralism that weren’t quite radical enough to effect a significant epistemic break with the past. An epistemic break or paradigm shift refers to a sort of Copernican Revolution in thought whereby deeply held assumptions of the past are unmasked as being false and fraudulent. Post-structuralism isn’t a single philosophy or doctrine or body of ideas that intellectuals held in common so much as it was indicative of a number of innovative attempts to pull away from formalist closure (bounded systematicity), the law of non-contradiction (either p or not-p), and a traditional logic of the particular in relation to the universal.

The thinkers most often associated with post-structuralism include Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Jean-François Lyotard, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Sarah Kofman, Jacques Lacan, Alain Badiou, and Jacques Derrida. Derrida’s concept of dissemination (5.8) was directed against closure, his understanding of undecidability in language broke with the law of non-contradiction, he dismantled the hermeneutical circle, and his emphasis upon singularity deconstituted a traditional understanding of the particular and the universal. Lacan’s emphasis upon mathematical topology theory (non-Euclidean geometry) also accomplished much the same thing by breaking apart a notion of bounded topos (or spatial field) while insisting upon it, hence making closure undecidable, while dealing with non-Euclidean topological figures (the Moebius strip, the Klein bottle) as mathematical sets that did and didn’t belong to one another, hence breaking apart the particular/universal distinction (5.11). Michel Foucault’s notion of power (6.3) deconstituted the particular/universal distinction as well, and his examination of series and genealogies negated closure. His
concept of “man” was at times undecidable in that he both presupposed and eliminated it. Most recently people have been studying the work of Alain Badiou which resorts to mathematical theory in order to harass the same distinctions (5.13). Although deconstruction is the word that Jacques Derrida coined in order to label his own particular analytical strategies, it more or less speaks to parallel tactics in work by many of his contemporaries.

**READING**

Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* (1988)

---

**1.6 Socio-Political Analyses**

Sociological Criticism has become extremely dominant over the past 40 years and consists of many subfields, some of which are themselves quite large, among them, *feminism and gender studies, gay and lesbian studies, race studies, ethnicity studies, cultural studies, post-colonial studies, and global studies*. All of these fields presuppose left-of-center political views, advocate for liberalization of society, dwell on identitarian issues, and celebrate difference (diversity); however, their main thrust is to address social injustices that stem from social inequality. In that sense, these subfields are very much heirs to the civil rights agenda in America of the 1960s, which was a watershed historical moment that called mainstream values, and the social structures they articulated, into question. From the standpoint of the humanities, social criticism addresses the accusation that humanists are navel gazers who don’t do anything that is socially useful. That, plus the emphasis upon linking the personal identity of the scholar with his or her respective subfield, has made social criticism a very compelling activity.

**Feminism**

Feminism is discussed here as well as in the following section on social constructivism. Feminism transitioned from a fringe social interest to a
mainstream academic discipline in the 1970s, reached its apogee in the 1980s, and transitioned into gender studies in the 1990s. Today it is somewhat in decline, though of all the subfields, feminism was most successful in institutionalizing itself in terms of the creation of formal women’s studies programs. Feminism has had the following main concerns: the critique of patriarchy, transformation of curricula in order that more female intellectuals be admitted to various canons of study, resolution of the question of whether “difference” is an essentialist distinction or not, and eventual acceptance of the thesis that social identities are “constructed” subject positions. The latter two points require some explanation, because much has followed from these determinations in the other subfields, which overlap to a great extent with feminism in terms of how social reality is conceptualized.

Around 1980 there was considerable debate as to whether, as the philosopher and novelist Simone de Beauvoir had put it in the late 1940s, women are born or made. To be born a woman is to be naturally and essentially female, feminine, womanly. To be made a woman is to be anti-essentially fashioned, constructed, or constituted as woman by social forces. To put this yet another way, the debate was over whether woman is nature or culture. Écriture feminine, which was a concept advanced by Hélène Cixous, the French intellectual and literary writer, presupposed an essential relation between writing and the innate nature of female sexuality (the female body). Luce Irigaray, a French linguist, philosopher, and practitioner of psychoanalysis, advanced a theory of the feminine that was grounded upon the female body as essentially unphallic, multiply erogenous, and fluid. For her the lesbian body is most essentially woman, most naturally female. According to this view, sexual difference is absolute and biologically determined, though obviously there will be variation among women. In America, meanwhile, Gayle Rubin in an article, “The Traffic of Women” (1975), posited a distinction between sex and gender (in French there is no corollary for these two terms: sexe refers to both), arguing that gender is a socially constructed identity that determines how sex is made manifest in society.27 How women are expected to dress, in what they are expected to be educated, how they are expected to function as wives, mothers, workers are all predicated on assumptions about what a woman is supposed to be in terms of social roles. Here too there is variation, but

the mainstream norms are fairly obvious. And, as feminists noticed, these norms ultimately benefited patriarchy (the “father knows best approach”) more than they benefited women.

The anti-essentialist view, as it happened, had some ideological implications more in tune with pragmatic political activism than did the essentialist view. Anti-essentialism led to visions of liberalized, non-conformist self-fashioning – the performance of gender made popular by Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble* of 1989. But politically it was also a variant of pro-choice, which in America was a slogan that referred to the right of a woman to have an abortion. There too nature was being overridden by culture. Whereas the essentialist arguments advanced by mainly Continental feminists were given a hearing and commented upon, the political direction of countercultural forces in the United States was such that freedom of choice would become, paradoxically, the essence of anti-essentialism. This, in turn, paved the way for the ascent of *social constructivism*, which argued that social reality, of which the objectification of gender is a part, can be “negotiated” (e.g. chosen, changed, overturned, revolted against) by way of performing the self in everyday social interactions that have the effect of changing perceived social reality (its typifications). Hence the slogan: “the personal is the political.”

**READING**

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949)  

**Social Constructivism: Berger and Luckmann versus Michel Foucault**

Two major sources of inspiration for embracing the *constructedness argument* are *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann and Michel Foucault’s trilogy, *The History of Sexuality* (*The Will to Knowledge, Uses of Pleasure, Care of the Self, 1976–84*). While by far the most referenced theorist is Foucault, in reality Berger and

---

Luckmann have probably had the most influence, given that their arguments are simpler and more in tune with Anglo-American pragmatics. Plus Berger and Luckmann were more directly counter-cultural in the 1960s sense, because their work was published and read in America in that decade.

Berger and Luckmann argued that our perception of social reality is relative to how that reality is “constructed” by parties motivated, not surprisingly, by self-interests. In their view, “taken-for-granted reality” is, in fact, a complex network of assumptions and objectifications that are promoted by religions, disciplinary bureaucratic agencies within society, class consciousness, the culture industry (book publishing, musical entertainment) and much else. Despite this, we “apprehend the reality of everyday life as an ordered reality. Its phenomena are prearranged in patterns that seem to be independent of my apprehension of them …” (21) Berger and Luckmann note that the reality of everyday life is lived as continuous, self-evident, and unquestionable and is shared with others as such. However, that reality is predicated upon “typifications” (a secretary, a professor, a CEO, or, a vacation).

The social reality of everyday life is thus apprehended in a continuum of typifications, which are progressively anonymous as they are removed from the “here and now” of the face-to-face situation. At one pole of the continuum are those others with whom I frequently and intensively interact in the face to face situations – my “inner circle,” as it were. At the other pole are highly anonymous abstractions, which by their very nature can never be available in face-to-face interaction. Social structure is the sum total of these typifications and of the recurrent patterns of interaction established by means of them. As such, social structure is an essential element of the reality of everyday life. 29

Representations of women in society (in other words, gendered identity) usually reinforce these typifications, because they are what people assume without question to be actual and therefore real. Feminists pointed out that such typifications also reinforce a social structure that is predicated on social injustice, a perceived inequality between men and women that leads to paying women lower wages for doing the same job as a man.

During the 1970s, feminists had become very interested in examining social stereotypes in order to show that social identities are, in fact,

29 Berger and Luckmann, p. 33.
“constructed” by means of the use of signs that can be manipulated to index subjective meanings that embed value distinctions. These distinctions establish social status. A stereotype is a social shorthand that indexes not only subjective meanings but the value distinctions they embed. A good recent example might be Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s pants suits, which index her belonging to a world of work made up chiefly of men who wear suits that include pants. Notice, there are no men in her world who would suddenly wear a skirt in order to mirror females. The pants suit she wears is clearly a sign that indicates her wanting equal status with men at the same time that it indicates her subordination (required conformity) to what feminists call patriarchy (in this context, a male dominated social superstructure). As a stereotype, the pants suit makes her “one of the boys” even while it reveals gender difference and the secondary status of women even in high office.

Central to the constructedness thesis, which over the past 15 years has become something of a sociological dogma within English departments, is the idea that people can contest and reconfigure social representations by changing their codes. There was a spoof on this back in the 1990s on an American television show, Saturday Night Live, in which an androgynous character known as “Pat” stumps everyone by speaking in such ambiguous ways that no one can figure out whether they’re talking to a male or a female. The more people try to pose questions that would require “Pat” to reveal whether he/she is male or female, the more they are confronted with annoyingly ambiguous responses, the point being that people can’t deal with not knowing what sex the person is to whom they are speaking. The skits demonstrate that social deconstruction of sexual difference might not actually transform social stereotypes with respect to sexual difference; rather, challenging gender difference winds up becoming a very frustrating impediment to socialization, given that face to face communication requires some social determinacy. After all, the addressee’s identity provides the context for selecting what we will and won’t say, let alone, how we will or won’t say something. At the very least, we don’t usually want to offend, alienate, or complicate relations with others, if it is going to make our lives more difficult.

Despite this, there are those within academia who have argued that stereotypes can be contested, reformulated, and used to transform social typifications and, ultimately, social structure. The most important figure to advance this argument has been Judith Butler, whose Gender Trouble argued for how social subjects are agents who can perform gender in ways
that both critique and modify the ways in which society accepts certain
gender stereotypes as part of the unquestioned social reality of everyday
life. Butler argues that through repeated performative practices in the social
sphere, certain behaviors with respect to gender become normatized and
come to be associated with a stable, objectified typification of gender. No
individual can call gender into question simply by adopting a certain
manner of performing it, but social groups may well do so. “Gender
bending” within certain social groups tests the boundaries of gender typi-
fications. Of course, the way in which gay men and lesbian women have
creatively manipulated aspects of gender coding is precisely the sort of
thing to which Butler was pointing. Feminism, queer theory, postcolonial
critique, ethnic and race studies, and the study of nationhood and national
identity have all been quite sensitive to Butler’s understandings of perfor-
mativity and identity construction.

As for the influence of Michel Foucault, which belongs more to the
world of so-called “high theory,” academics back in the 1970s were noticing
that he had made a major conceptual breakthrough in terms of thinking
of power as something distributed throughout society in terms of discipli-
nary regimes of regulating the self and others. Foucault saw that these
disciplinary regimes had always been institutionalized but that in the eight-
eenth century, bureaucracies were emerging that had become quite efficient
in linking power with knowledge, which was then exercised to discipline
the social order, both collectively and individually. Foucault’s most well
known work in the 1970s was his masterful *Discipline and Punish* (1975),
which was about the development of the modern prison in the eighteenth
and nineteenth centuries. 30 Foucault proved that bureaucracies mobilize
various rhetorics of discipline that then cross-over from one institution to
the other, for example, the educational and prison systems in France.
Moreover, Foucault pointed out that the various social objects of study (the
student, the criminal, the insane) were very much the “constructions” of
the various rhetorics of knowledge that sought to describe such social
subjects. Very much in line with structuralist thinking, Foucault argued
that the social subject is an effect of the bureaucratic language that sets out
to define him or her, not an a priori object that has an essence one either
represents correctly or not.

30 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House,
1979).
In an essay entitled “What is an Author?” Foucault argued that the author is a bureaucratic construction, too. Unlike a proper name, which moves from the interior of a discourse to the real person outside who produced it, the name of the author remains at the contours of texts—separating one from the other, defining their form, and characterizing their mode of existence. It points to the existence of certain types of discourse within a society and culture. The author’s name is not a function of a man’s civil status, nor is it fictional; it is situated in the breach, among the discontinuities, which gives rise to new groups of discourse and their singular mode of existence. Consequently, we can say that in our culture, the name of an author is a variable that accompanies only certain texts to the exclusion of others: a private letter may have a signatory, but it does not have an author; a contract can have an underwriter, but not an author; and, similarly, an anonymous poster attached to a wall may have a writer, but he cannot be an author. In this sense, the function of an author is to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society.31

In his trilogy on the history of sexuality, Foucault looked at disciplines of the self, which is to say, practices by individuals that concerned their own bodies and identities. Here too there is an exercise of power—over the self—that goes along with socially institutionalized discourses that depict the sorts of identity that such power is attempting to constitute, or constitutes de facto. Two major historical moments of interest to Foucault were, first, the discourses associated with “confession of the flesh” in the Middle Ages and the Counter-Reformation, and second, the proliferation of discourses about sexuality that occurred during the Enlightenment and that continued on up through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The first historical moment concerns self-examination and disclosure of what the individual keeps secret with respect to sexual practices, experiences, and so forth, whereas the second historical moment concerns the organized bureaucratic observation and classification of such practices, with the result that people are classified into “types” based on the logic, regularity, and systematicity of practices deemed to be sexual. It is by way of this...
second historical moment that the subject known as the homosexual is constituted or constructed, even if society would claim that the homosexual had merely been “discovered” or “understood.”

The Middle Ages had organized around the theme of the flesh and the practice of penance a discourse that was markedly unitary. In the course of recent centuries, this relative uniformity was broken apart, scattered, and multiplied in an explosion of distinct discursivities which took form in demography, biology, medicine, psychiatry, psychology, ethics, pedagogy, and political criticism.  

Of major importance is that according to Foucault the more or less unified theological set of discourses that related to sexuality in the Middle Ages and the period of Counter-Reformation were subjected in the Enlightenment to an epistemic break – that is, a radical paradigm shift – that inaugurated a decentering of discursive regimes: their dispersion and dissemination among a number of different areas of study. Thus,

there has occurred, since the eighteenth century, a whole series of tensions, conflicts, efforts at adjustment and attempts at retranscription. So it is not simply in terms of a continual extension that we must speak of this discursive growth; it should be seen rather as a dispersion of centers from which discourses emanated, a diversification of their forms, and the complex deployment of the network connecting them.

As in the case of the author concept, subjects of sexual discourse turn out to be the effects of this sort of discursive dispersion, which Foucault saw as quite massive and excessive. Like Berger and Luckmann, Foucault was arguing that social reality and the subjects within it are discursively constructed (that is, defined). But Foucault went further in suggesting that constructivism is itself the inevitable effect of institutionalized discourses of investigation that require methods of surveillance, examination, and analysis that necessitate the use of bureaucratic power over individuals.

In a lecture course of the 1970s, Foucault outlined how this fit in with questions of raison d’état (the logic of a state’s self-interests) and concerns about security (of individuals, populations, and of the state itself). Whereas

33. Foucault (1978), p. 34.
Berger and Luckmann mainly see the expression of power in terms of oppression whereby one social group cynically manages another in order to exploit it, Foucault demonstrated that this is far too simplistic and naïve an assumption and that power isn’t the unilateral expression of an elite – at least, not in modern Europe – but dispersed among a complex of bureaucracies that are themselves constituted in terms of discursive practices that are investigative and knowledge driven, and that *raison d’état* is the motive, not the greed of an elite, a greed that could never be influential enough to determine so many discourses and institutions. Here we can clearly see a structuralist objection to what in Berger and Luckmann is an “actor” driven model, one that presumes conspiratorial agency (patriarchy, corporations, the bourgeoisie, the super rich).

Whereas gender studies has embraced the approach developed by Foucault, feminists have tended more often to embrace the model advanced by Berger and Luckmann. Whereas Foucault saw literature as part of a very complex regime of discourses that were economic, historical, scientific, medical, sociological, psychological, and political, feminists within the languages and literatures have been far more focused on the study of literature, which they have used as a project to study women authors who have been historically overlooked or ignored, women the feminists have wanted to turn into the historical actors they were not allowed to be in the past – that is, agents of social influence and change. Consequently, feminists have been eager to delegitimize so-called patriarchal discourses by means of appealing to the idea that social reality is constructed and on account of that is a fiction, something that puts this discourse on a par with the very literary writings by women the feminists are trying to privilege, writings whose thinking ought to supersede patriarchy, in their minds. But, of course, there is a simpler and more straightforward way to consider this: feminists want women’s writings to bring about change in the public sphere.

**READING**


**Race Studies, Gay and Lesbian Studies, and Ethnic Studies**

These schools are quite indebted to Foucault in the sense that they don’t accept that sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity are transcendental,
essentialist categories. The order of race, sexual orientation, and ethnicity is revealing in that of the three race is the most physically marked whereas ethnicity can be the least physically marked (one can’t tell Irish Catholics and Protestants apart in Northern Ireland merely by looking at them). Gays and lesbians may or may not be noticeable depending upon how they comport themselves. Of course, race and ethnicity are combined with one another; and obviously sexual orientation enters into that relation as well. This raises the question of whether these three fields can be usefully separated out as individual domains, given how intertwined they are. What Judith Butler noticed in relation to gender is perhaps even more relevant to the race, sexual orientation, ethnicity nexus in that the freedom to perform one’s identity however one pleases appears to be rather more present in the case of ethnicity where people can choose whether to identify with a group or not. This freedom is often far more restricted with respect to race (say, in the case of color), a topic central to Nella Larson’s novel *Passing*, which concerns the unusual instance in which a person of color can pass for being Caucasian. Eve Sedgwick’s well known *Epistemology of the Closet* more or less deals with this issue too in terms of showing/hiding one’s sexual identity, in this case, relative to anxieties about disclosure and, contrariwise, modes of self-presentation that signal homosexual identity to those “in the know.”

34 Here again questions of personal freedom are of central importance. To what extent is the social subject free to determine his or her own identity? And what are the social, cultural, and political constraints and latitudes?

These areas of study presuppose notions of social constructedness along the lines Foucault set out concerning bureaucratized discourse practices engaged in the nexus of power/knowledge, something that relates to their historical orientation, given that historically notions of sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity have changed quite radically. With respect to sexuality, Foucault notices that with the rise of the bourgeoisie, norms are imposed with respect to normal matrimonial sexuality – heterosexual, monogamous, reproductive – versus “unproductive sexual activities.” The bureaucratic aim, Foucault says, was to “ensure population, to reproduce labor capacity, to perpetuate the form of social relations: in short, to constitute a sexuality that is economically useful and politically conservative.”

35 In other words, the very utilitarianism that led to the concept of “unproductive sexual

---

activities,” led to the formation of the homosexual as a category. Notions, such as “acts contrary to nature,” “debauchery,” and “perversion” became reference points, however vague, for discursive regimes tied to legislation, discipline, and punishment. People once considered peripheral – “children wise beyond their years, precocious little girls, ambiguous schoolboys, dubious servants and educators, cruel or maniacal husbands, solitary collectors, ramblers with bizarre impulses” – were suddenly the focus of investigative attention and the desire to diagnose and categorize what came increasingly under the concept of deviance. Such people bore the stamp of “moral folly, genital neurosis,” “aberration of the genetic instinct,” “degeneration,” and “physical imbalance.” Such terms have a very particular history, however fuzzy and transitional they may be. Indeed, the decriminalization and depathologization of homosexuality in Western nations during the late twentieth century is but another moment in a history of sexuality that, in this case, had undergone a shift: the moment homosexuals became an effective political faction that could talk back to power within the public sphere. The major lesson here is that organized political activism is required if social minorities are to have a say in how society will integrate them into itself. Civil rights demonstrations of the 1960s taught the same lesson with respect to race relations, and, with respect to ethnicity, it’s the case that Hispanics in America have put the brakes on governmental practices that would be persecutory for illegal aliens who have crossed over into the United States from Latin America.

A theorist quite relevant to ethnic and race studies is Hannah Arendt, who, in her groundbreaking *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1948) had undertaken a lengthy analysis of the relation of race and ethnicity to the granting and taking away of human rights in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. Central to her work is the danger of ethnicity trumping nationality and the citizenship that goes with it. The pan-German movement in the decades even before Hitler came to power was an attempt to delegitimize national borders and certain notions of political belonging to a social body predicated upon citizenship. This tendency worked in the service of imagining a Europe with new borders based on ethnic (if not racial) identity (Germanic Lebensraum). The disintegration of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union led to violent conflict precisely because the hysteria of ethnic identity (racialized blood

---

relations) was allowed to trump rationally organized national identities. Arendt had noticed that under Nazism the tendency to privilege ethnicity and race under the pan-German way of thinking made it possible, also, for groups that had national citizenship and hence national identity to be denationalized and their citizenships revoked in the name of race, which came to replace ethnicity as a social category. This led to deportation and mass murder of Jews and Gypsies in various concentration camps that were posing as transit stops for populations that were said to be undergoing “evacuation” and “relocation.”

According to Arendt,

Nations entered the scene of history and were emancipated when peoples had acquired a consciousness of themselves as cultural and historical entities, and of their territory as a permanent home, where history had left its visible traces, whose cultivation was the product of the common labor of their ancestors and whose future would depend upon the course of a common civilization. Wherever nation states came into being, migrations came to an end, while, on the other hand, in the Eastern and Southern European regions the establishment of nation states failed because they could not fall back upon firmly rooted peasant classes.37

Whereas in North America one tends to think of nations as absolutely fixed places to which people emigrate from all parts of the globe and mix in terms of what has been called “the melting pot,” many Europeans have known their regions to be ever changing with respect to borderlines and have been aware that populations tend to be on the move with respect to migration. The rather sizable Turkish population in Germany today is an example of this. What melts in the European melting pot in some rather visible instances has been the nation state itself and, of course, it is this push and pull between nation and ethnic populations that has given rise to considerable political instability, totalitarian reaction, and as a consequence unimaginable catastrophe. Here, of course, issues of nation, ethnicity/race, and diaspora come into play, as evidenced, once more, by war in areas of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

Cultural, Global, and Post-Colonial Studies

Cultural studies is not very easy to pin down as any one school, given that it refers to the study of, among other approaches, (i) a specific cultural, historical formation (Paris Dada, the Harlem Renaissance, the New York School of Abstract Expressionism, the Darmstadt School); (ii) critique of culture as an industry and context for industrialization and massification of populations (the Frankfurt School approach); (iii) the study of culture as a signifying system or semiotic (Roland Barthes’ study of popular culture in terms of “mythologies,” his study of the “fashion system”); (iv) Marxist critique of the media (the penetrating work of Guy Debord); (v) psychoanalytical critique of culture and society (most recently exemplified in work by Slavoj Žižek, for example, Looking Awry, A Plague of Fantasies, For They Know Not What They Do); (vi) analysis of the postmodern condition (by Fredric Jameson, Donna Haraway, David Harvey); (vii) the study of so-called sub-cultures, such as Dick Hebdige’s study of Punk culture or Trinh T. Minh ha’s examinations of Vietnamese exilic culture, and (viii) the writing of factual social and cultural histories that rectify misconceptions or incorrect assumptions about a subject—for example, Raymond Williams’ social history of advertising in The Long Revolution delves into the three centuries prior to 1900 in order to show that our assumptions about advertising and industrialization may well be factually inaccurate. Of course, it can hardly be surprising that cultural studies has merged with global and postcolonial studies, something that suggests cultural studies is perhaps always already at work, no matter what field we choose to study.

Global studies is extremely compatible with culturalist approaches in that globalization refers to recent changes of an economic, political, and

---

cultural sort that make it impossible for us to not realize that the globe has become a unified space linked by means of satellite communications; a continuous streaming of cargo planes, trucks, and ships; and the crossing of national boundaries by an industrial complex in a way that has impacted on the economic sovereignty of nation states, hence disempowering those who are economically disadvantaged when industry decides to phase out jobs in one part of the world and create those very same jobs somewhere else. Globalization, furthermore, has made it plain that capitalism has never really been transformed to the extent people had thought, because globalization is such a convenient strategy for industry to revert to the brutal capitalism of Marx’s day when industry engaged in wage slavery: paying barely enough to live on, working workers for unreasonable shifts (24 hours or more is not an atypical shift in non-Western parts of the world), and providing workers nothing in the way of security and benefits, let alone the opportunity to organize into unions and have a say in what happens in the workplace. Globalization, from this perspective, proves Marx and Engels to have been right, which has theoretical consequences in that it disproves Marxists who imagined capitalism had undergone profound transformations that made the application of classical Marxism (as set forth in works like *Das Kapital*) irrelevant.

Additionally, capitalism’s exploitation of “surplus labor” abroad and its having callously deserted work forces in first world nations, which had developed equitable labor standards in the workplace, reveals the inadequacy of culturalist forms of Marxist analysis that seem rather superficial and less relevant to the current global situation than the sorts of analyses usually associated with economics. In fact, this tension between classical and cultural forms of Marxist analysis has been at the bottom of various debates in the field, among them, issues concerning human rights and socio-economic justice.

Politically, globalization raises questions about the effectiveness of public spheres, particularly when corporations operate outside those spheres and escape their influence or jurisdiction. However, the European Union may be an instructive example of a different sort of globalized situation. Whereas the EU passes laws and makes policies that affect its member states, those states don’t always live up to their agreements and make exceptions where necessary, which suggests that national sovereignty may well take precedence over the EU’s governing powers. And yet, there could be no EU if member states didn’t cede sovereignty to it, such as occurs with respect to the euro, which is the currency in various (not all) EU member states and
as such regulated by the EU. In other words, sovereignty seems to be a give and take sort of affair within the EU.

Relative to this matter is the question whether there is an EU public sphere. It appears that in fact Europe has many public spheres that are embedded within the various nation states, all of them speaking their own national languages, having their own media (television, newspapers), and developing their own political ideologies and legislative mechanisms and outcomes. Yet all of these public spheres are outflanked by the globalizing architecture of the EU itself, which can be seen as a super-government with the potential to overrule any public sphere and nation at will or even a number of them. Certainly, demonstrations at various summits like the G8 are to some extent protests over the construction of super-governmental structures that will overrule any if not all public spheres – in such cases, to the benefit of the multinationals, if not to globalized restructuring of government generally. Given that literature and the arts as a whole have always addressed themselves in large part to ideas relevant to discussions within the public sphere, globalization poses a threat to the aims of those artists who wish to affect how people see the world and should respond to it in ways that have collective significance. This is very different from the idea, prevalent in Europe, that art is the treasure of past historical moments that can be capitalized as tourist attractions. Here the work of art as fetish object complements the high priced fetish objects in upscale boutiques of major highstreets.

Quite conspicuous is that the globalization of culture has promoted a one-size-fits-all consumer culture of luxury goods. Hello Kitty, Ferrari, and Louis Vuitton are part of the language of global culture and can be found in New York, Tokyo, Dubai, Sydney, or anywhere else one is likely to find upscale shopping outlets. This culture is obviously class based and grounded in status symbols that identify the super rich who are unfettered by national boundaries. As such, it signifies to those who aren’t so cosmopolitan that the good life has something to do with mobility, borderless living, existence outside the nation state, which, by the way, mirrors multinational corporate behavior, though it also broaches questions concerning nomadism as outlined by Deleuze and Guattari in their book *A Thousand Plateaus*.

This nomadism also speaks to a certain decentering and hybridizing of culture, as well. This is known as transculturalization and is evident in independent music making, recording, and distribution wherein quite a bit of musical collaboration and cross-over among cultures is in evidence, as if music itself were migratory. And, naturally, given the Internet, it is. Notice,
as well, the exporting of Anime books and videos to the West from Japan. In Anime one sees both a unification of all sorts of pulp fictional clichés drawn from the West that are imported into Japanese culture and subjected to a decentering in which we can see split off bits of different cultural traditions: for example, the presence of German text, American pin ups, Ninja warriors, British schoolboys, a French chateau, and a typically Japanese account of mutation following some nuclear catastrophe resulting in beautiful mutant pubescent girls with special powers. The emphasis upon monstrosity and mutation in this graphic fiction is itself a meta-commentary on Anime as culturally transient, hybrid, mutant, and ambivalently perverse. That it is being exported to the West as something Non-Western is, of course, an example of the defamiliarizing nature of the recursivity of transculturation: the return of the Same as Different.

Post-colonial studies, like global studies, is very interested in the question of “who calls the shots,” because, as in the case of globalization, colonial populations are being dictated to or having their circumstances determined by historical actors who exist outside their national boundaries and whose interests are largely exploitative. Whereas global studies is quite concerned with transit across the globe – that is to say, with mobility and its expression as power – post-colonial studies has been concerned with inter-cultural relations and their expression in terms of domination and subjection. The most major example of this is Edward Said’s foundational study, Orientalism, which examines inter-cultural relations between the West and the Middle and Far East.

Said was quite influenced by Michel Foucault’s work on knowledge/power, which was just emerging during the time when Said was at work on his book, and, of course, the constructedness thesis had been of paramount importance already then. But Said had also wanted to work in the manner of Erich Auerbach’s Mimesis whereby he could offer a detailed analysis of the historical embeddedness of representational styles within texts that were purporting to depict reality in a mimetic way when, in fact, this mimesis was a hodgepodge of conflicting and biased representations that were held together by the hubris of imperialist superiority and (via Foucault’s insights) its mechanisms of surveillance, categorization, valorization, and administration. Orientalism was the official name of the academic study that went hand in glove with projections of administrative power that held the colonized in a state of subjection. Central to Orientalism is the mentality that the Westerner knows the colonized better than the colonized know themselves. This amounts to a sort of theft of another person’s identity.
Also important has been the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who has been investigating discursive representations in relation to actual social subjects in non-Western societies and the complexities and contradictions that occur when the two intersect. How are non-Western subjects depicted epistemologically, politically, culturally, and historically? And how do all those depictions interfere with one another and cancel one another out in certain respects and not in others? To make matters even more difficult, Spivak herself mobilizes a vast array of critical discourses drawn from Marx, Freud, Derrida, Foucault, and Antonio Negri that in and of themselves are in rather visible conflict as well, as if to say that no analytic is innocent of representational impasses and defects. Unlike critics who attempt to set out some rather clear models whereby to show the vicissitudes of non-Western identity, Spivak describes the representational impasses in order to better expose a much more vexed discursive problem somewhat akin to Heisenberg’s principle, which holds that the very act of observation interferes with the reality one is trying to comprehend. In a famous essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak accuses both Foucault and Gilles Deleuze of imagining they can occupy a vantage point outside a system wherein exploitation occurs. She, by contrast, is showing that such a perspective is unavailable and that to imagine otherwise is to fall into the sort of colonizing discourse that one ought to avoid. Here, too, the question of knowledge/power is central.

A third major figure in post-colonial studies is Homi Bhabha who introduced a critique of Said, but also his great predecessor Frantz Fanon, both of whom, in Bhabha’s view, were too Manichean in terms of a good versus evil model. Hence Bhabha in The Location of Culture (1994) introduced the concept of an ambivalent psychological identification wherein colonizer and colonized both desire and feel repelled by the other at once. Identity, according to Bhabha, is a liminal psychological zone in which hybrid identifications take place. Given that this liminal zone is a psychic space within which considerable ambivalence is felt if not acted out, the relation between colonized and colonizer is perpetually in movement and typified by moments of resistance and, presumably, subversion. Indeed, the very fundamentals of mutual recognition are made quite

40 Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture (New York: Routledge, 1994).
complex in terms of this ambivalence whereby the colonized subject both does and doesn't recognize the authority if not the identity of the colonizer.

Bhabha's concept of *mimicry* has also been quite influential in that it speaks once more to the vicissitudes of recognition and identification, in this instance, with respect to how the colonized mimics the colonizer. In order to succeed that mimicry must be perfect but also be somehow different from what it is the colonizer does in order that the difference in status between colonizer/colonized be preserved. This is an impossible task for the colonized to fulfill, which reveals itself as a certain resistance to absolute compliance or undecidable sort of Derridean difference that has the potential of deconstructing recognition. Bhabha doesn't seem to be aware of it, but anti-Semitism in France during the early twentieth century made the criticism that French Jews speak French so perfectly that one can see they aren't really French, because a true Frenchman makes grammatical errors. Adolf Hitler makes a similar argument in *Mein Kampf* with respect to how well Jews supposedly only imitate German culture, because, in Hitler's view, they are merely parasitical and have no originality or genius. In other words, mimicry has also been quite embedded in racist discourses within Europe as well.

Post-colonialism and global studies share quite a bit in common, but it is probably best to end on the following observation. The kind of mobility that is easy and liberatory in a very advantageous way for the super rich within the context of multi-nationalism plays out very differently for populations who are very poor or who have been made homeless on account of armed conflicts. There, too, a certain nomadism obtains in terms of people crossing borders in order to find somewhere to relocate, but in such cases statelessness is a curse, not an advantage. Certainly illegal aliens are liberated from what were intolerable conditions when they migrate; however, living in foreign lands illegally is very much like living as a fugitive. One is constantly looking over one's shoulder and living in fear of being caught out. Rather than speak in terms of globalization in such cases, people speak in terms of diaspora, which is a very important dimension of post-colonial study, as it raises questions of human rights, of who gets the privilege to live multinationally, and of what it means to think in terms of borders. What one often sees in the distinction between global and post-colonial study is therefore something that hasn't been mentioned so far: class. At the end of the day, economic class is still a major factor in these sorts of social studies.
INTRODUCTORY TOOLS FOR LITERARY ANALYSIS

READING

Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1965)
Trinh T. Minh ha, *Woman, Native, Other* (1969)
Narrative theory has had several periods of intense development, beginning in the early twentieth century with the remarkable critical analyses written by the Russian Formalists, a group that includes figures like Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Eichenbaum, and Yuri Tynyanov. They were originally part of the Society for the Study of Language (Opayaz was its Russian
acronym), and members of another group, the Moscow Linguistic Circle, led by Roman Jakobson, who later became a central figure in the development of French structuralism. Also affiliated was a group organized around the now rather influential Mikhail Bakhtin, who only became known in the West well into the second half of the twentieth century. Russian Formalism is generally associated with notions such as functionalism (the study of the text as a concatenation of signifying devices), contrastive analysis (binary codification), organizational analysis (specifically, the text’s organizational deviations that produce effects of estrangement that challenge ordinary habits of perception), and comparative analysis (the specifics of literariness in relation to other forms of discourse). Bakhtin’s concepts of the chronotope (2.9) and the character zone (2.10) were especially innovative developments in the study of how narrative works.

The second major development in the study of narrative, and the one most familiar to us, occurred within the rise of a movement called the New Criticism. There, too, attention was paid to the specificity of the literary text as a thing-in-itself that was fundamentally estranged from other modes of discourse, if not from how we habitually encounter reality. The New Critics noticed that the literary text was verbally structured or patterned to such a high degree that ordinary contingencies encountered in real life do not factor in. Nothing is left to chance in a novel by Henry James. Everything has significance. This is not true in everyday life where it usually doesn’t mean anything whether we have eggs or cereal for breakfast. But precisely what Leopold Bloom eats and drinks in James Joyce’s Ulysses is extremely meaningful. The New Critics emphasized the concept of the literary work in terms of what Cleanth Brooks called a “well wrought urn” (1.5). Literature, from this perspective, is considered auto-teleic: a totality of cross-referential signifying elements, each of which has a precise and necessary function with respect to the whole. Narrative devices produced signifying effects that for the New Critics produced the possibility of multiple signifying constructions (interpretations) that could be played off against one another. Among these, irony and ambiguity were chief concerns. Generally, the New Critics adopted the commonsense narrative vocabulary of E.M. Forster in Aspects of the Novel: plot, character, setting, point of view. In that sense, they were far less innovative than the Russian formalists. Also, the New Critics embraced an organic understanding of the literary work as totality that was at variance with the mechanistic assumptions embraced by the Russian formalists and, later, by the French structuralists.
The third major moment in the development of narrative theory began with the rise of structuralism out of the fields of linguistics (Jakobson’s substantial body of work) and anthropology (Claude Lévi-Strauss’s adaptation of structuralist linguistics to anthropology) (5.4). Perhaps the dominant influence within the heady mix of these new innovations in Europe was the work of Ferdinand de Saussure back in 1915 that led to the understanding that we are not the cause of language but its effect (5.3). This counterintuitive argument smacked of nihilistic determinism to Anglo-Americans (that is, of a destructive form of causality beyond human control); however, it formed the basis of a sort of Copernican revolution in the 1960s with respect to analyzing narrative. In France this eventually led to investigations into various forms of discourse by the Tel Quel Group during the 1960s, a Paris based coterie that was organized around the publication of the avant-gardist journal *Tel Quel*. Theoretical work by Roman Jakobson, Roland Barthes, Tzvetan Todorov, Gerard Genette, Jean Ricardou, and Julia Kristeva (who was partly responsible for rediscovering Bakhtin in the West) opened up many new possibilities for narrative analysis, many of them still unknown and untried in Anglo-American academic circles. Roland Barthes’ *S/Z* (2.12) is but one of a series of approaches by Barthes and others intended to provide radical new ways of investigating how a literary narrative operates in terms of codes that produce signification. These theorists have also been quite aware of levels of production and integration within a text (5.6), and have also been quite innovative in terms of elaborating communications models that, as in the case of the Russian Formalists, lead to comparative analyses of literature in relation to other discourses. In Germany, too, innovations in narrative analysis by Franz Karl Stanzel, and later by Monika Fludernik, have occurred along functionalist and typological lines often bordering on the sort of linguistic analyses that most researchers in the languages and literatures in Anglo-American circles tend to avoid, given its extremely technical and abstract nature. This is a pity, because the turn in Anglo-American universities to “content analysis” (for example, the social and political “issues” raised by a story or novel) tends to overlook the workings of narrative as a complex articulation of signifying structures that not only structures the content but how we cognize that content.

2.1 Story and Plot: Fabula and Syuzhet

These terms have their source in Russian Formalism. *Fabula* (or *story*) denotes all the materials that an author is going to shape into a literary work. *Syuzhet* (or *plot*) denotes how the elements are going to be organized. With respect to plot, one is necessarily going to ask: What parts of the story will be selected, how much time will be spent developing each of them, which parts will be told chronologically, and which parts will be told out of chronological order?

In Salman Rushdie’s short story, “The Prophet’s Hair,” the author opens with the action of a brother who goes to a dangerous part of a town in Kashmir to hire a thief. He is beaten and robbed but returned to his home, after which his sister goes out on the same mission. She makes it clear to the people she encounters that if harm is done to her, there are people who will take swift revenge. The reader has no idea of what is going on in terms of the history that has led up to the actions on the part of the siblings, but the sister does inform us indirectly by telling her story to the thief who she is about to hire. The narrative technique of putting the reader in the midst of an exciting but unexplained series of actions that are later put into the perspective of an overall history of events is a standard way of avoiding the problem of boring the reader by starting out with background information told in chronological order. From the perspective of engrossing the reader, the author provides background information only when the reader has developed a burning curiosity to know this information. In short story writing, it is not uncommon for the syuzhet to start well into the chronology of the fabula and then backtrack to tell us the events that led up to the exciting actions with which the syuzhet began. After that, the syuzhet picks up with an exciting finish that has some surprising twists. Rushdie is quite a sophisticated story teller very much in the Dickensian tradition in which

what one at first assumes to be central to the fabula is but a consequential action, secondary to something more major. In “The Prophet’s Hair,” we find that the brother and sister aren’t, in fact, the main characters, and that the story’s main action concerns their father, a moneylender, who has accidentally found a religious relic of the prophet Mohammad that was stolen from a mosque. The relic, it turns out, has powers and consequences upsetting to the family, which is used to a secular way of life. Hence a thief is sought who can steal the relic from the father and thereby return everyone to life as they knew it. But unfortunately the plan backfires in a way that is almost farcical, leaving the reader to wonder what the moral of this fairytale-like story might be. In the end, the reader has a hard time rationalizing the fabula, given the disjointedness, sketchiness, and illogical consequences related by the syuzhet. This differs from the Dickensian model in which the ending is supposed to resolve the fabula’s twists and turns.

A rather more radical clash or asymmetry of fabula and syuzhet is quite noticeable in Toni Morrison’s Beloved, where it is clear that the actions, real and imagined, are presented unchronologically in a way that suggests everything could be happening at once, that all the events, however spread out in time, are occurring simultaneously. The foundational event upon which everything else is predicated is kept secret until near the end when it is revealed that Sethe has killed Beloved in order to save her from the slave catcher. From the perspective of her consciousness, whose reason has not survived the event intact, historical time has been shattered. Because past, present, and future are out of adjustment, things that are absent become present and vice versa. Beloved therefore is neither living nor dead, and consequently is everywhere and nowhere. Had Morrison organized the syuzhet (plot) chronologically, we would merely have had a tragic story based on an understandable crime of passion that we could objectify, rationalize, and accept for what it is. But in Morrison’s telling the story is unobjectifiable and traumatically unsettling. Its fundamental moral problem, the justification of infanticide in certain circumstances, cannot be resolved. In a novel such as this, content doesn’t exist in some conceptual realm that exists apart from its telling; rather, the content is inseparable from its telling – that is, the way in which the narration is structured.

In contrast to Beloved, see William Styron’s Sophie’s Choice, another novel on a forced infanticide, though presented in the context of the Holocaust. This novel takes pains to clearly differentiate past and present by alternating chapters that depict either the past, by way of analepsis (retrospection), or by depicting what is occurring in the present. This ordering
of the *syuzhet* reflects the fact that Sophie is rational and not at all mad, at least superficially. She does, however, choose a boyfriend who is a borderline psychotic. His madness is the split off part of Sophie’s psychology that she both forswears and avows, though in the place of another person who serves as the carrier of her psychosis. The order of the chapters, each of which neatly contains either the present or the past, imitates Sophie’s psychological defense mechanism of splitting off the now from the then, of “containing” time by chopping it up into sealed packages. Styron’s *syuzhet*, as it turns out, performs this defense mechanism.

For those interested in theatre, we should be aware of a typical form of emplotment in modern drama, which is typified by August Strindberg’s *The Ghost Sonata*. The play begins after the catastrophe has happened. Everything that is at issue in the play concerns some intolerable outrage that happened in the past. The purpose of the play’s action will be to dredge up this past, the *fabula*, and reenact its horror. In some plays, the motive is revenge (Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*), in others it is the compulsion to repeat (Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*), in others it is the compulsion to repeat (Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*), in others it is the compulsion to repeat (Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*), in others it is the compulsion to repeat (Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*), in others it is the compulsion to repeat (Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*), in others it is the compulsion to repeat (Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*), in others it is the compulsion to repeat (Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*), in others it is the compulsion to repeat (Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*). Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* is notable in that it threatens to explode into all out war among the characters, but instead characters ironize, sentimentalize, and reflect, while a house is being sold and a cherry orchard is being cut down, all to the pain of some of the characters. The horrific fabula that has preceded the play by several years is the accidental drowning of a boy, of which we hear very little. The early-modern model for this type of play is *Hamlet* in which all of the action is retroactive with respect to a trauma that has occurred before the play begins.

**READING**

Stephen Bann and John E. Bolt (eds) *Russian Formalism* (1973)

2.2 Order

Anachronies are elements that don’t follow a sequential chronology; they occur when something is told at a point that comes either earlier or later than it should. If *Beloved* were told straightforwardly, we would be told the history of Sethe right at the very beginning of the novel so that we could
understand why human relations in that fictional world are the way they are. Morrison, however, advances various anachronies that require us to mend a temporality that appears to be broken in order to get at the horror of what happened: that Sethe killed her own child rather than let her be taken from her. William Faulkner, who greatly influenced Morrison, was a major pioneer in ordering a novel by way of anachrony. For example, in the Benjy section of *The Sound and the Fury*, one is thrown into a jumble of temporal moments that takes considerable rereading and reordering to put in chronological sequence.

**Analepsis and Prolepsis**

Two types of anachrony are analepsis and prolepsis, terms advanced by the narrative theorist Gerard Genette that conform to the older terms flashback and flashforward.\(^3\) The difficulty with the older terminology is the idea that we’re being “flashed” at lightening speed into the past or the future. Plus the term flashback generally denotes a going back out of sequence to anterior sequences of events in order to provide some necessary background. This does not always characterize analepsis and prolepsis.

Both analepsis and prolepsis interrupt linearity as well as the reader’s sense of omniscience that would be reinforced by a strict chronology in which one sees everything unfold as it happens sequentially. Analepses offer opportunities for reverie or reflection on the part of characters that otherwise couldn’t occur. They also offer the opportunity for some elements of the plot to be considered so traumatic that only bits of them can be recalled. The temporality of recollection also matters. When a traumatic memory recurs, it can have an immense dramatic effect, especially when it is told to someone. In Styron’s *Sophie’s Choice*, we have fairly elaborate analepses (whole chapters depicting Sophie’s concentration camp experiences), but they are interleaved with episodes in the present in order to produce a sense of what the consciousness of a death camp victim might have been like in the years immediately after the defeat of Nazi Germany. Of course, there is a difference between material that is being presented as if it is lived in the present, and material that is recollected from the past. We’re not worried that Sophie will be killed in the death camp she describes, because we know she survived. This affects suspense. Also, because an analeptic scene is anachronic, it communicates itself as a fragment, but also as a figment – a

memory of what was, not the reality itself. If this is the case in Sophie’s Choice, it also occurs in the last novel of Proust’s Remembrance of Things Past when we discover that the beautiful pastoral location in which Marcel fell in love with Gilberte had been turned into a battlefield during World War 1. That passage analeptically takes us back to what now is even for the reader a memory of better times, one excerpted from the reader’s readerly experience.

As to prolepsis, an excellent example occurs in Milton’s Paradise Lost when Satan first tempts Eve by whispering in her ear. He comes to her while she is sleeping in the shape of a frog. The dream she has of the tree of good and evil in Book 5 is proleptic in that it will be repeated in Book 9 when Eve is consciously tempted by Satan in the form of a serpent. The discussion she has with Adam about her dream of eating the apples of the tree of good and evil also anticipates what will happen later in Book 9, for just as Adam lacks a certain sensitivity in response to what she has told him about the dream, in Book 9 he is also insensitive to her anxieties, which leads to their separation and her fall. Indeed, Eve’s dream is a double prolepsis in that Milton has also keyed Eve’s dream to Adam’s narrative in Book 8 to the angel Raphael about God’s taking him to a prospect to see the whole of Eden. Here the prospect reveals Adam to be elevated and enlightened in a proper way. Eve’s dream, by contrast, reflects a debased version of this elevation. “Forthwith up to the Clouds/ With him [Satan] I flew, and underneath beheld / The Earth outstretcht immense …” However, “suddenly / My Guide was gone, and I, methought, sunk down …” (11. 87ff.). Here, of course, the fall itself is foreshadowed. Indeed, Eve’s prolepses have a ritualistic, repetitive function, which Milton uses in Paradise Lost in order to imitate a relation between religious scripture and ceremony.

READING

Gerard Genette, Narrative Discourse (1988)

2.3 Mimesis and Diegesis

There are two Odysseuses in The Odyssey: the one who follows his adventures and the other who tells them to us.

– Tzvetan Todorov, The Poetics of Prose
Mimesis relates to showing, and diegesis to telling. This sounds simple enough, but historically the distinction is confusing on account of the fact that it has sources in both Plato and Aristotle that are in conflict with each other. Essentially Plato made the distinction between represented speech and direct speech; the first is an imitation, but not the second. Aristotle argued that both mimesis and diegesis are imitations but that the first is indirect, whereas the second is direct.

The more influential figure with respect to how modernist critics have understood mimesis and diegesis has been the novelist Henry James who famously referred to mimesis and diegesis in his critical writings and argued for the superiority of mimesis over diegesis, a distinction that was upheld by Percy Lubbock in his influential The Craft of Fiction and then later debunked by Wayne Booth in The Rhetoric of Fiction and David Lodge in “Mimesis and Diegesis in Modern Fiction,” for whom diegesis is a strength in the context of postmodern fiction.4

Speaking of Balzac, Henry James wrote that “the fusion of all the elements of the picture, under his hand, is complete – of what people are with what they do, of what they do with what they are, of the action with the agents, of the medium with the action, of all the parts of the drama with each other.”5 Central to James’ aesthetic is the idea that the author is a painter with words, someone who shows reality by means of keen observation and fuses all of its elements in a way that gives life to characters and scenes as if they existed independently of any reporter, fabricator, or teller (that is, the author). Of course, this is an illusion, because, as James points out, this effect can only be produced by someone who is very skilled at imitating reality. In James’ mind this indirect way of representing the world requires art, masterful skills of realist depiction that hide their intent – particularly, their moral intent – and allow things to appear as if they merely are what they are.

Diegesis, of course, breaks with such illusionism because in that case we simply have the author telling the reader what he or she is to take as reality. The diegetical text reports and leaves it up to the reader to provide the

---


illusion of a seamless reality in which all elements are fused. Essentially, diegesis is reportage that editorializes either explicitly and/or selects details in order to slant the narration. Notice Milton’s diegetical heavy-handedness in the following passage from Book 2 of *Paradise Lost*.

Till at last
Satan, whom now transcendent glory rais’d
Above his fellows, with Monarchal pride
Conscious of highest worth, unmove’d thus spake.

(ll. 426–29)

Here the description is diegetical because it consists of opinionated reporting (blatant telling) wherein the narrator is attempting to prejudice the reader, so that he or she won’t sympathize with a character who is the epitome of sinful pride.

A less heavy handed diegesis appears in Toni Morrison’s short story, “Recitatif.”

We sat in a booth by the window and fell into recollection like veterans.
“Did you ever learn to read?”
“Watch.” She picked up the menu. “Special of the day. Cream of corn soup. Entrees. Two dots and a wriggly line. Quiche. Chef salad, scallops …”
I was laughing and applauding when the waitress came up.6

Two women, one black the other white, are catching up on what they’ve been doing since they knew each other twenty years in the past. The simile “like veterans” demonstrates that the narration is opinionated. The narrator takes a delight in knowing that her friend can read, which says something about class identity and educational expectations. “I was laughing and applauding …” is a direct observation of the narrator’s own behavior that is also a pronouncement or judgment: that literacy is wonderful. Of course, Morrison isn’t presenting this sort of diegesis in a naïve manner: she expects that the reader may well catch on to the narrator’s attitudes, her way of managing the account. And there is the argument to be made

that since the diegesis is more or less revealing prejudices (say, a class prejudice in favor of literacy) that it’s more transparent and honest than mimesis, in which so much is implied and concealed.

By way of contrast note this passage from Henry James’ story, “Daisy Miller.”

“Here comes my sister!” cried the child, in a moment. “She’s an American girl.”

Winterbourne looked along the path and saw a beautiful young lady advancing. “American girls are the best girls,” he said, cheerfully, to his young companion.

“My sister ain’t the best!” the child declared. “She’s always blowing at me.”

“I imagine that’s your fault, not hers,” said Winterbourne. The young lady meanwhile had drawn near. She was dressed in white muslin, with a hundred frills and flounces, and knots of pale-colored ribbon. She was bare-headed; but she balanced in her hand a large parasol, with a deep border of embroidery; and she was strikingly, admirably pretty. “How pretty they are!” thought Winterbourne, straightening himself in his seat, as if he were prepared to rise.7

In this example the narration is presented as if it were merely a watching of how things unfold entirely independently of the narration. Where there are opinions, they are advanced by the characters, not the teller, except notably in one instance, and even there it is a bit unclear if we are being told something or if we are observing through the eyes of Winterbourne himself. “And she was strikingly, admirably pretty” could be taken as blatant editorializing by the teller (an instance of diegesis), but it also could be taken as a shift in focalization (observational orientation) that aligns us with Winterbourne’s impression (that is, his judgment) as he sees Daisy Miller approach him (2.11). This would be reinforced by the earlier perception, focalized through his eyes, that he saw “a beautiful young lady advancing.” Notice elsewhere how opinions are clearly owned by the characters. “My sister ain’t the best” is stated by the child, Daisy’s young brother. “American girls are the best girls,” Winterbourne opines. Or “How pretty they are,” Winterbourne thinks, the pronoun “they” lacking an explicit reference. He’s clearly impressed by this girl, and, of course, can he be

blamed? This is the subtle sort of manipulation that James has infused into this passage. He is telling us indirectly, by way of subtle inference, that any young man like Winterbourne should be very sexually attracted to this American girl in white muslin. And the fact that he’s about to “rise,” speaks to this somewhat, James leaving it to us to interpret what we think the reference to “rise” is supposed to be.

Given the fact that the New Critics would take up that strand of modernism that privileged organicism – the unity or fusion of elements into a successful form that appears as if it were an independent reality in and of itself – it follows that such critics would applaud the view that mimesis was vastly superior to diegesis. Mimesis, of course, is more difficult to carry off from a technical point of view, because instead of directly communicating instructions to the reader about what to think, the narrator has to advance innuendos, implications, or ambiguities in the hope that readers will decipher their hints.

During the 1960s and after, novelists have increasingly begun turning to diegesis in order to show the extent to which our perceptions of representations are grossly manipulated by various rhetorics. Thomas Pynchon’s novel offers many examples, all of them difficult to analyze. In *Mason & Dixon*, a novel that takes up the adventures of the famous surveyors who surveyed the Mason and Dixon line, Mason winds up in Chapter 13 at Cape Town, South Africa, and is accompanied by someone he doesn’t notice at first, Maskelyne, who explains he’s been strolling early, since he’s been up all night looking at the stars.

The Stars wheel into the blackness of the broken steep Hills guarding the Mouth of the Valley. Fog begins to stir against the Day swelling near. Among the whiten’d Rock Walls of the Houses seethes a great Whisper of living Voice.

“Shall we enter again in the Atlantick Whore-House, find Breakfast, and get to work?”

At this hour, Lanthorns through Window-Glass beckon ev’rywhere. “It certainly isn’t Cape Town,” Mason marvels. Sailors a-stagger, Nymphs going on and off Shift, novice Company Writers too perplex’d to sleep, Fish Mongers in Tandem with giant Tunas slung betwixt ’em consid’rately as Chair rides, Slaves singing in the local patois, Torches a-twinkle ev’rywhere, – and no Curfew.8

Historically, this is supposed to be occurring in the mid-eighteenth century, but obviously the rhetorical form of these statements doesn’t conform to anything from the eighteenth century that one is likely to find in the actual historical record of the time. “Fog begins to stir against the Day swelling near” is far more like modern poetry than eighteenth-century description. “To stir against the Day” is not idiomatic to the time period, and it’s even a stretch for us. Also quite odd is the unattributed remark about entering the whorehouse and finding breakfast. Who says this? Maskelyne? And what is meant by entering again? Mason just got off the ship. And, in fact, it is Cape Town. Why are we being told it isn’t? The passage is overtly diegetical, something that is especially emphasized in that it is not describing a reality that is a priori but one that the telling is constructing (making up). As in Pynchon’s well known Gravity’s Rainbow, the realism is rather tangential to the hallucinatory, surreal, and kaleidoscopic flow of irrational bits thrown in with what appears to be a diegetical insistence that everything pertains to historical realities, however morphed or torqued they may be. Indeed, the contractions in the passage above even pose as markers of some obsolete way of rendering spoken English. That is, the contractions attempt to show difference as historical distance. But, of course, one cannot read a novel like Mason & Dixon and not realize that what we are reading is faux history, a surrealization of the past that breaks open the closure of its temporality, hence allowing things from earlier and later periods to leak into it. How the diegesis in Mason & Dixon works to exaggerate, irrationalize, and contaminate its supposed historical present would be a key issue for anyone attempting to analyze this difficult novel.

READING

Henry James, The Art of Fiction and Other Essays (1948)

2.4 Free Indirect Discourse

Free indirect discourse is closely tied to the mimesis/diegesis distinction. One could think of free indirect discourse as occurring between mimesis and diegesis in a way that fuses them. Some believe that free indirect speech, which considers the writing of Gustave Flaubert as one of its main sources,
manages to efface the boundary between narrator and character. That sort of erasure was already detectable in the passage from “Daisy Miller” above in which the narrator’s remarks about the beauty of Daisy are seen and probably thought from the perspective of the character Winterbourne. Free indirect discourse goes further in that it is intended to show what someone is in the process of thinking to himself or herself as opposed to someone communicating something to another person. In other words, this discourse is interiorized and private, though it appears objective and sharable enough. Consider the following passage from Joyce’s “The Dead.”

He was trembling now with annoyance. Why did she seem so abstracted?

He did not know how he could begin. Was she annoyed, too, about something? If she would only turn to him or come to him of her own accord! To take her as she was would be brutal. No, he must see some ardour in her eyes first. He longed to be master of her strange mood.

– When did you lend him the pound? She asked, after a pause.

Gabriel strove to restrain himself from breaking out into brutal language about the sottish Malins and his pound. He longed to cry to her from his soul, to crush her body against his, to overmaster her. But he said:

– O, at Christmas, when he opened that little Christmas-card shop in Henry Street.⁹

Joyce, as is well known, had a hatred of using quotation marks and preferred to insert dialogue with dashes, because it de-emphasized the shift from the privacy of one’s own thinking to being part of a conversation with an other or others. In the passage above, we’re following Gabriel’s thought process, which is depicted as if someone were narrating what he was thinking, though in fact what we are reading are his thoughts per se. This almost frenetic train of thought is then punctuated by dialogue that is taking place on an entirely different level of conversation: chit chat about a loan of a pound. But this dialogue is interiorized, too, in the sense that it is interrupting and situating itself inside Gabriel’s train of thought as an annoyance, because really he wants to communicate about something else, but can’t. Then:

He was in such a fever of rage and desire that he did not hear her come from the window. She stood before him for an instant, looking at him

strangely. Then, suddenly raising herself on tiptoe and resting her hands lightly on his shoulders, she kissed him.\(^\text{10}\)

Here in parts the text reads very much like diegesis. The first sentence, apparently, is equivocal. This could be read as direct narration, but it could also be read in terms of what Gabriel is in the process of experiencing (thinking). This, then, forms the bridge to “She stood before him …” which is indirect and mimetic but also diegetical, for “strangely” is the narrator’s opinion. Indeed, this whole statement speaks to what we’re seeing objectively take place in the room. The same is true for the last sentence, though, it has to be said, both it and the sentence that came before could still be read in terms of what Gabriel himself experiences. It’s he who sees her stand, who experiences her rising on tiptoe, and who is being kissed.

Texts such as “The Dead” straddle diegesis, mimesis, and something approaching what Joyce would call interior monologue, the thinking process itself. In *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce takes this process back to its origins in preconscious free associative states both personal (in *Ulysses*) and collective (in *Finnegans Wake*). What made free indirect discourse so liberating for writers is that it ultimately broke down the difference between the telling and the happening of the events. Obviously, events have to be told in order for us to know they happened, but telling has to be gotten rid of if the happening is to appear directly as an event or phenomenon. Free indirect discourse eradicates the strict line of separation between the telling and the happening.

**READING**


---

### 2.5 Interior Monologue

Gerard Genette has argued that,

One of the main paths of emancipation of the modern novel has consisted of pushing this mimesis of speech to its extreme, or rather to its

\(^{10}\text{Joyce, (2006), p. 2351.}\)
limit, obliterating the last traces of the narrating instance and giving the floor to the character right away.

Genette then quotes Joyce’s comments on Edouard Dujardin’s *Les Lauriers sont coupés*, which founds what has become known as “interior monologue.” Joyce:

> The reader [would be] installed in the thought of the main character from the first lines on, and it is the uninterrupted unfolding of that thought which, [would] apprise us of what the character does and what happens to him.

Dujardin himself wrote that interior monologue is

> A discourse without an auditor and unspoken, by which a character expresses his most intimate thoughts, those closest to the unconscious, prior to all logical organization, or, simply, thought in its dawning state – expresses it by means of direct phrases reduced to their syntactical minimum, in such a way as to give the impression of a hodgepodge.  

Interior monologue differs from free indirect speech in that interior monologue is not merged with the voice of the narrator, whereas in free indirect discourse that merging does occur, as we saw above (2.4) in the example from Joyce’s “The Dead.” Genette points out that if in indirect speech the character can speak “through the voice of the narrator, and the two instances are then *merged,*” that in interior monologue the narrator is obliterated and the character *substitutes* for him.  

The Benjy, Quentin, and Jason sections of William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* are examples of interior monologue. For a weaving together of interior monologues, see Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*. In that text, the monologues are in quasi conversation with one another. Chapters are introduced by indirect descriptive narrations that could ambiguously function as interior monologue in the third person, though it might be a stretch to read them in this way. Stream of consciousness has been used as a term to describe interior monologues that are shapeless and appear to mimic dream states and other unconscious

---


processes. Faulkner is often cited as a stream of consciousness writer. But one needn’t write in run on sentences to get this effect, as Faulkner does. See, by way of contrast, Nathalie Sarraute’s novel Do You Hear Them?

READING


---

2.6 Diachronic and Synchronic

Two axes to be taken into consideration are the *diachronic* (elements placed horizontally in consecutive order) and the *synchronic* (elements placed vertically in simultaneous order). The *syuzhet* (the order of narrated events) will lay out events in a temporality that is at once diachronic and synchronic. Taken individually in relation to one another, the events, however they are ordered, have diachronic significance. One will try to establish when one thing happened in relation to another, given how important the temporality of cause and effect is to drawing inferences and establishing motives, and so on. Taken as a whole, however, the events make up a synchronic totality that can be thought of all at once in terms of correspondence, emulation, and analogy. In Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, diachrony is often arrested by synchrony as a moment years away from an event that happened in the past recalls it by supplying either some sort of correspondence or repetition that involuntarily awakens a memory that experientially brings back the past; fulfills and completes an earlier moment by supplying something later that was missing experientially at the time; or subtracts by means of exposing some sort of ignorance that Marcel had about something or someone.

In the last novel of *Remembrance of Things Past*, The Past Recaptured, Marcel meets Gilberte, who was the object of much adolescent ardor, and who is now a widow. Still conflicted that he never attempted to kiss Gilberte when they were teenagers, Marcel asks her what might have happened had he been bold enough, and he hears, much to his shock, that not only could he have kissed her, he could have done much else, as Gilberte and all her friends were sexually active at that time. Here the past and present fuse momentarily, as Marcel glimpses the reality of what he lived then as if for
the first time, given that a great illusion about Gilberte has now been shattered. She wasn’t the person he had taken her to be. This is a revelation, because it suddenly suggests that everything Marcel believed about his world as a young person may well have been mistaken. But it also reveals something about him, that he should have had more courage, even as it reveals something about Gilberte: that she took after her mother, Odette, who was well known for her free relations with men. Gilberte’s remark, therefore, calls up all sorts of memories that we now share with Marcel and causes us to synchronically resynchronize what we have come to believe along with Marcel, since he is our primary source of knowledge in the book.

Of course, as in the case of sonata allegro form (a well known musical form used by Beethoven and others), a recapitulation at the end of a novel will offer opportunities for synchronic ordering, whereas the beginnings of works tend to be more diachronic as this is the point where we become most aware of how one event is entailing another simply because this is the place where material is being laid out. Conversely at points near the end of a novel, one senses that diachrony has been swallowed up by synchrony. There should be nothing surprising about this: recapitulations, whether in literature or musical sonata allegro form, stress simultaneity, as this is where everything is supposed to come together. In short, it’s usual for the syuzhet to appear more diachronic at the beginning and more synchronic at the end.

But this doesn’t always happen. Chronologically the Benjy section of William Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury – it is the first section – is extremely chaotic, for Benjy, as it happens, has almost no apperception of time, which means that for him everything is quite synchronic. But readers with a good understanding of the novel can figure out in what precise past each event has actually taken place chronologically. Diachrony may be hard to reconstruct in the Benjy section, but it can be done with some effort. In this particular text, diachrony is a deep structure, a hidden chain of temporal relations that must be put together by the reader. Synchrony is superficial. Everything is being told by Benjy as if it is happening to him in the present or the simple past. That is, time is pretty much all one thing to him. Another way of putting this is to say that for Benjy there is no history, which is a key point to bear in mind, because this novel is largely about the South in relation to American history, or, more accurately, its non-relation to American history. What is this non-relation in temporal terms? It concerns a synchrony of time that repudiates chronology, a simultaneity of moments that refuses the kind of time that would situate Southerners after the defeat of the Confederacy. But this is madness or imbicility, which is what Benjy
personifies as a very mentally challenged child born to a Southern family that sided with the Confederacy and won’t accept defeat. There is diachrony in *The Sound and the Fury*, but the mentality of the Compson family, its situation, its practices of everyday life, and its world views are all poised to embrace a simultaneity of memories and events that are all embedded in the defeat of a way of life that was violently constructed, violently lost, and violently held on to even after it had passed away, something whose evidence we see in how the Compsons treat their African-American servants. Faulkner added notes to the novel in which he opined that Caddy Compson had taken up with a Nazi SS Man, a vision that again would reveal the extent to which members of the family would rather repeat the past of being slave masters than admit defeat and enter into diachronic time. In fact, many of Faulkner’s novels are constructed synchronically and articulate a certain political unconscious that is expressed in terms of historical simultaneity: people telling the same story differently, doing the same things differently, or desiring the same things differently. Quentin Compson, who is sent to Harvard by his folks, has the capacity to reflect diachronically upon his life and his world. But it drives him to suicide, because the diachrony is too hard to bear. That may be the problem in *Beloved* as well. The diachronic version of the story can’t be told because it’s actually far more painful in that it requires reflection and the taking of responsibility. But to get to this sort of diachrony one would first have to pass through synchrony if only to see its limitations.

**READING**

Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (1966)

---

### 2.7 Intertextuality

Intertextuality in its most general sense refers to a complex interaction of texts, an interplay of textual cross-referencing that inflects and reinscribes meanings. One can approach this from two perspectives: (i) the examination of indirect and direct textual cross-referencing from within the enclosure of a particular work (this is the traditional approach to the study of allusions) and (ii) the examination of a textual interplay within an open
field of textual relations, unbounded by any particular work, across which meanings are disseminated. An example of the first would be Dante's allusion to St. Augustine's City of God in Canto 13 of Purgatorio in the Divine Comedy. “O my brother, each one here is a citizen of a true city ...” Dante the pilgrim has asked one of the shades to step forth who when alive was from his own land, and the response he gets is that now they are all citizens of the true city, which St. Augustine explains as “God’s household.” “Therefore you are now no longer strangers and foreigners, but you are the citizens with the saints and members of God’s household.”  

Apparently, Dante expects us to consult St. Augustine in order to properly understand the relationship of the spirits being cleansed of envy to one another and to God. Here an antecedent text (The City of God) is required in order to interpret another (The Divine Comedy) properly. This requires an educated reader, which Dante fully expects.

The second understanding of intertextuality was suggested initially by Julia Kristeva in her path breaking study, Semiotika.

The poetic signified [meaning] returns to other discursive signifieds in a way that through the poetic enunciation other discourses are readable. Around the poetic signified is thus created a multiple textual space whose elements are susceptible of being applied to the concrete poetic text. We will call this space intertextual. Within intertextuality, the poetic enunciation itself is a sub-group of a larger group which is the space of applied texts. From this perspective, it is clear that the poetic signified cannot be considered to be establishing a unique code. It is the crossing point of many codes (at least two) which are found in a relation of negation, one in connection to the other.  

This passage requires some paraphrasing. Kristeva is saying initially that a meaningful element within a poetic text (the signified) points to other meanings in other discourses. The poem thus opens up the possibility of a multiple textual space whose elements can be put into relation with the poetic meaning. This multiple space is the intertextual. Kristeva argues further that the poetic text should not be privileged in terms of establishing a master code (a repeatable sequence of elements that rise above all other

---

codes), but that the poetic text should be seen as a crossing point or junction where codes come into relation, each negating the other to some extent. The term code isn’t defined, but apparently Kristeva means the system of signs into which a message is translated and conveyed. If one is writing a poem in English that is in an intertextual relationship with, say, a Latin poet like Ovid, then we have some issues with the codes, given that Latin is coded differently from English. But even different works in the same language will have issues with respect to codes: a poem may reference a very non-poetic science text in prose; a novel like Mason & Dixon by Pynchon may make use of idioms that play havoc with historical source texts. Parody, satire, comedy, etc. all tend to affect normative codes by means of stylistic variations that are capable of negating the norms by way of exaggeration, trivialization, reduction ad absurdum, and so on. That said, the code can also be viewed as the text per se in terms of what Kristeva considers its “productivity,” namely, “its movement across space,” its material productivity in terms of signs filling up pages (this requires codes like the alphabet), as well as its symbolic productivity in terms of the signs producing signifieds (meanings) that aren’t confined to the pages we read and that therefore have an “intertextual” dimension. That this dimension isn’t a bounded context but an infinite field of possible interplays of meaning puts Kristeva at odds with traditional literary historicism whose goal is to limit or bound contexts in order to ascertain a literary work’s “real” meanings. But does a literary work have an “absolute” or “real” meaning in the sense that $2 + 2$ has a true answer? When Jacques Derrida famously spoke of there not being anything outside the text, what he meant is that no text can be so marked off or delimited from other texts that one can make absolute truth claims about its meanings.

**READING**


---

### 2.8 Dialogism

*Dialogism* is a term that was coined in Russian by Mikhail Bakhtin, an enormously original and quirky literary critic who managed to survive
Stalinism and the hardships of the Soviet Union during the Second World War. Bakhtin argued that we shouldn’t assume individual expression to be foundational to how we think about literary writing, given that a literary text is a confluence of expressions that are embedded in language as a collective medium of communication that reflects social differences of region, class, gender, vocation, and so on. Any national language will show signs of its speakers having come into contact with speakers of other languages by way of conquest (conquering or being conquered), by way of peaceful coexistence and reciprocation with neighbors, by way of allowing the immigration of populations who speak other languages, and so forth. All of this contributes to an inmixing of languages that is ongoing and that inevitably winds up in literature. Bakhtin speaks to the intense struggle that goes on between languages and within languages. This is a struggle, he says, between languages and dialects, between hybridizations, purifications, restorations, mutations that relate to a long and winding path of struggle for the sake of a unity of literary language as well as for the unity of the system of genres that make it up. Bakhtin used the word polyglossia to refer to this struggle between different languages, and used the word heteroglossia to speak to the struggle within language between dialects, purifications, renovations, hybridizations, and so on. In the context of postcolonial studies, this relates to concepts of creolization, though Bakhtin himself didn’t address colonization per se.

Dialogism speaks to the enacting of linguistic struggles either externally between two speaking subjects or internally within the discourse of a speaking subject. A simple example of external dialogism occurs in Arthur Miller’s play, *The Price*, which has as one of its main characters a Yiddish native speaker, a long time New York resident, who is an octogenarian furniture dealer. His language, cultural and religious background, and eastern European roots all clash with the American attitudes and values of the protagonist, a gentile man who has to dispose of an apartment and its contents due to a death in the family. Obviously, points of view will be different, but key to the play is how the Yiddish syntax comes into collision with English in ways that manage to say things backwards and therefore render them both serious and funny at the same time. This is a resource – a syntactical capacity for speaking in unpredictably ironical or heartfelt turns – that the American English speaker entirely lacks, because his statements are conditioned by ordinary thought and speech patterns. That a normal (familiar) and abnormal (defamiliarizing) syntax come into dialogue is a formal contradiction and dissonance that nevertheless brings out
the essential human conditions of both the native American citizen and the Yiddish immigrant. Part of the audience’s concern in terms of watching the play is to see how “each speaker [must break through] the alien conceptual horizon of the listener, [and construct] his own utterance on alien territory, against his, the listener’s apperceptive background.” Bakhtin himself often pointed to parodic literary forms as instances of external dialogism and took a particular interest in medieval forms of social contestation via parodies, travesties, saturnalias, and so forth.

Internal dialogism speaks to socially embedded differentiations within sentences or longer discourses that are attributed to one speaker. Conflictual elements include: class-and-interest-group rhetoric (language of nobles, farmers, merchants, peasants), everyday chatter, literary and conversational styles, heroic and demotic language, ideological languages, and argot. Bakhtin specifies that the speech of a character or narrator is always an Other’s speech, a discourse picked up from others in society, so that when Timothy Price in Brett Easton Ellis’ American Psycho says, “I’m resourceful, I’m creative, I’m young, unscrupulous, highly motivated,” it is business jargon that he is speaking, just as when Pat Bateman, the narrator, describes him, everything is shown from the perspective of commercial consumer culture: “He continues talking as he opens his new Tumi calfskin attaché case he bought at D.F. Sanders. He places the Walkman in the case alongside a Panasonic wallet-size cordless portable folding Easa-phone (he used to own the NEC Porta portable) and pulls out today’s newspaper.”

In the novel, Price takes place as someone who has adopted the language (the sign systems, really) of Others in order to self-fashion himself as an enviable social subject (as a success). The narrator, it turns out, sees himself reflected in Price, because he sees the fetish value of not only what Price has but of what he is: wealthy, powerful, young, attractive, unattached, and in control. The narrator, Bateman, is himself in constant dialogue with logos, brand names, designer labels, and entire fashion systems, because these fetishize the body and turn it into a thing more or less equivalent to money in its material appearance as object of desire, which, interestingly enough, Bateman both loves and loathes, because as fetish the money-object shows its contempt and superiority for all who worship it.

What turns out to be rather odd is that Bateman has such an enormous fetish for fetishes, something that extends to the following description of his girlfriend.

She isn’t wearing the Karl Lagerfeld suit I expected, but she looks pretty decent anyway: a silk gazar blouse with rhinestone cuff links by Louis Dell-Olio and a pair of embroidered velvet pants from Saks, crystal earrings by Wendy Gell for Anne Klein and gold sling-back pumps.  

It would be hard to imagine too many men who would be likely to know the designer apparel of women just by casual observation, never mind that women similarly might be challenged to know that someone is wearing “crystal earrings by Wendy Gell for Anne Klein.” Verisimilitude aside, our protagonist is a very savvy shopper, so much so that he is very much a cross-gendered shopper. He has so much experience looking at women’s apparel in designer boutiques that he can immediately pick out something by Wendy Gell made for Anne Klein. That, as it happens, speaks to the internal dialogism of the description above, given that it has to be viewed from both a male and female perspective that interprets the body fetishistically. For the girlfriend, looking attractive is simply normative, though she has implicitly satisfied a certain fetishistic imaginary by selecting the black velvet pants. There is nothing too remarkable here, because it’s likely all her apparel has a certain fetish quality, if her shopping habits take her to expensive shopping locales. For Bateman, however, the clothes are specifically marked (labeled) as fetishes that he knows by name and that both stimulate him sexually and arouse contempt and even hate, something the girlfriend doesn’t suspect. Her innocence and his cruelty are therefore in a dialogical relation. Following the passage in which Bateman describes Patricia’s apparel, Bateman finds himself humiliated because he has claimed a power (a fetish status) he doesn’t have: getting a proper table for two at a very trendy, high priced restaurant. Her fetish appeal and his powerlessness to satisfy her desire sets off a psychopathic chain of thoughts in which Bateman is fantasizing murder, for the fetish has a persecutionary psychological effect: its worth is so great that everything and everyone else is simply inferior and impotent. And yet, this logic can be turned around so that, in fact, it can be shown that the fetish is but an illusion, one that torture and then murder will prove to be the case. Here again there is dialogism:

internally within the question of the fetish’s worth. Is it superior or inferior to the psychopathic self? This dichotomy underwrites much of the interaction between Pat (Bateman) and Patricia, their names themselves indicating they are in some sort of internal, narcissistic dialogical relation.

2.9 Chronotope

The chronotope refers to relations of space/time associated with a particular topos or setting in a narrative. Milton’s Eden, in *Paradise Lost*, is a chronotope insofar as it is defined in terms of two temporal moments, the prelapsarian temporality that precedes the fall, and the postlapsarian temporality that comes after the fall. Everything that happens in Eden if not to Eden is mediated by these two contrary temporalities, the prelapsarian moment being ahistorical, a time of pure presence and presencings, and the postlapsarian being historical, a time in which Eden is lost and recedes into the past even as human history begins and orients the parents of mankind to the future. Eden is temporally dialogical insofar as these two kinds of temporalization are mediating one another in the epic. But this is not all.

Milton introduces many temporal differences into the poem that cut across the dualism of prefallen and postfallen time. For example, if Adam and Eve experience Eden as timeless and ahistorical, they are told by the angel Raphael that, in fact, Eden is cosmogonically historical, given that it was just created at around the time the devils fell into the abyss. That suggests that before the fall, both Adam and Eve must have been aware of a temporality that is not some sort of pure now-time (the term is Martin Heidegger’s, *Jeztzeit*). But how can Adam and Eve be aware of a temporality of past, present, and future in the absence of a postlapsarian consciousness? Moreover, Adam and Eve tell histories. For example, they tell the history of their origin, something that Raphael hadn’t witnessed and is being told, by Adam, in order to fill him in on how man came to be. In other words, there is such a thing as a history of being in prelapsarian Eden of which Adam and Eve are naturally aware (it wasn’t taught to them). Time also has a trace structure in Eden. Long before Eve is tempted in Book 9, she is tempted by Satan in a dream that enacts her eating of the apple and her becoming ebullient as a result. The temporal trace of this moment carries over into Book 9 when, in fact, she acts out much of what occurred in the dream but
with noticeable differences. And if that isn’t enough, there is also a Pauline temporality of redemption at work in the poem as well, namely, that of the Old Man (Adam) who falls and the New Man (Jesus Christ) who will redeem all of mankind. And that too is instantiated in the place that is Eden, given the symbolism of the tree of good and evil and the cross of the resurrection that it implies. And there is still much else that could be mentioned, for example, the historical accounts given by the Archangel Michael in the last books and the temporality of the vestige to which Adam is referred, that is, the sense in which everything becomes a sign for something that in unfallen Eden was uncorrupted. The lesson in all this is that the topos of Eden is a complex temporal nexus in which an inmixing of various temporalities occurs that fractures the homogeneity of time in ways Bakhtin would have considered dialogic.

Another example of the chronotope concerns F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “Babylon Revisited” in which Paris after the American stock market crash becomes a site for individual sobering up after the excesses of the roaring twenties. A man, whose daughter has been in the custody of his ex-wife’s sister, comes back to Paris to take his daughter home with him, but cannot do so, because his excessive lifestyle just a couple of years before clouds the relationship he has with his daughter’s caregivers, whose consent he requires. Throughout the story, the city functions as the chronotope that brings past and present into an awkward and painful relation. Again, in Ernest Hemingway’s short story, “Soldier’s Home,” the parental house of a veteran who has just returned from the battlefields of World War I has chronotopic significance in that it mediates two times in the soldier’s life that he cannot reconcile, his life before serving as a soldier and his life as a returning veteran. Whereas his parents see the war merely as an interruption that should have had no bearing on their son’s re-entering the life he once lived in the house, the veteran cannot manage to resume the life he once had and feels totally alienated in the house and from his parents.

2.10 Character Zone

According to Mikhail Bakhtin,

A character in a novel always has … a zone of his own, his own sphere of influence on the authorial context surrounding him, a sphere that extends – and often quite far – beyond the boundaries of the direct
discourse allotted to him. The area occupied by an important character’s voice must in any event be broader than his direct and “actual” words. This zone surrounding the important characters of the novel is stylistically profoundly idiosyncratic: the most varied hybrid constructions hold sway in it, and it is always, to one degree or another, dialogized; inside this area a dialogue is played out between the author and his characters … that special type of novelistic dialogue that realizes itself within the boundaries of constructions that externally resemble monologues.  

Character zones also are noticeable in drama. (Bakhtin tends to over-privilege the novel as a literary genre.) In Aeschylus’s *The Libation Bearers*, much of what Orestes says is ventriloquized by his dead father, Agamemnon, who never appears on stage per se. The ghost of the father speaks through the son at almost every turn, and apparently possesses Elektra as well, which makes for hair-raising drama. Although the brother and sister are individuals, the play can be seen in terms of a dialogized merging of character zones dominated by the murdered father. In William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, one senses Candace Compson as a character zone, as well, that bleeds through things that Jason and even Quentin say, though she seems even more present in parts of the Benjy section. Also, there are many places where in Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* we recall the character zone of Albertine, even though she is not there and the narrator isn’t necessarily addressing her specifically. It is her style of saying things that gives her away. Beloved, in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, is also a rather striking example of a character zone without determinate borders.

Key to understanding character zone is Bakhtin’s reminder that, “the speaking person in the novel need not necessarily be incarnated in a character. A character is but one of the forms a speaking person might assume.” For Bakhtin, a character is essentially the “image of a language.” It is how language is performed.

READING


18 Mikhail Bakhtin, p. 320.  
Focalization is a term that has been advanced by narratologists like Gerard Genette and Mieke Bal and is often confused with point of view or narrative perspective. As Bal points out, these more traditional terms “Are … unclear on one point. They do not make a distinction between … the vision through which the elements are presented and … the identity of the voice that is verbalizing that vision.”20 Michael Toolan in *Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction* points out that the word “orientation” may be a helpful synonym for focalization. Toolan echoes Bal in noticing that “the nuisance perpetuated by the term ‘point of view’ is that it does nothing to discourage the conflation and confusion of two distinct aspects of narrative practice.” These are: (i) “The orientation we infer to be that from which what gets told is told,” and (ii) “The individual we judge to be the immediate source and authority for whatever words are used in the telling.”21

No doubt, in the Jason section of William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, we can be sure that what Jason observes is oriented from his personal perspective. In other words, the narrative reflects his point of view. But in Nadine Gordimer’s short story, “The Moment before the Gun Went Off,” the narration shifts in focalization. The story has an omniscient third person narration that is “not aligned” – in other words, the narration doesn’t emanate from a single consciousness or person. The opening sentence (A) is merely factual.

(A) “Marais Van der Vyver shot one of his farm labourers, dead.”

But the second sentence (B) is highly speculative and clearly is focalized from the standpoint of Van der Vyver’s thought processes, which are upset and defensive, even though the narration remains in the third person, something that is emphasized in the third sentence (C) that reestablishes third person distance.

(B) “An accident, there are accidents with guns every day of the week – children playing a fatal game with a father’s revolver in the cities where

---

guns are domestic objects, nowadays, hunting mishaps like this one, in the country – but these won’t be reported all over the world.”

(C) “Van der Vyver knows his will be.”

In (A) the focalization was entirely anonymous and factual, in (B) the focalization relates to Van der Vyver’s own self-justifying thought processes, even though he is not the narrator, and in (C) the omniscient narrator is telling us what Van der Vyver realizes, which means the focalization relates to the narrator’s direct knowledge of the perpetrator’s state of mind. Later, we are told that, “People in the farming community understand how he must feel.” This introduces focalizations that have their source in the white Afrikaner community, which in the story is ideologically supportive of apartheid. In the following passage we can see how politically inflected the narrative becomes from a social perspective not necessarily aligned with what the narrator believes.

This is the statement of what happened. Although a man of such standing in the district, Van der Vyver had to go through the ritual of swearing that it [the account of the accident] was the truth. It has gone on record, and will be there in the archive of the local police station as long as Van der Vyver lives, and beyond that, through the lives of his children, Magnus, Helena and Karel – unless things in the country get worse, the example of black mobs in the towns spreads to the rural areas and the place is burned down as many urban police stations have been. Because nothing the government can do will appease the agitators and the whites who encourage them. Nothing satisfies them, in the cities: blacks can sit and drink in white hotels, now, the Immorality Act has gone, blacks can sleep with whites … It’s not even a crime any more. 22

The collective racism of the community sympathetic to Van der Vyver orients or focalizes the narration at this point. This doesn’t mean that Van der Vyver or the omniscient narrator share these views, only that there are those who would view the protagonist’s situation from a racist orientation and that his case is therefore politically inflected, even though this may have nothing to do with how Van der Vyver regards himself as a social actor.

Indeed, the brilliance of this short story is demonstrated in terms of how subtly Gordimer shifts focalizations, thereby revealing a conflict of social meanings that is itself like a loaded gun ready to go off accidentally at any time.

**READING**


### 2.12 Narrative Codes

Roland Barthes, an enormously influential French critic who emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s, was influenced by the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and structuralism (5.3). Barthes experimented with the idea that a literary work is comprised of codes that produce meanings that construct rather than imitate their referents. Among his most appreciated works is *S/Z*, which is a sentence by sentence interpretation of a short story by Balzac entitled “Sarrasine.” We won’t concern ourselves with the story, but will consider the fact that Barthes analyzed the text by way of formulating five “codes” that one could apply to literary texts as a whole. In fact, these codes need to be augmented somewhat by adding others of our own making, but the five that Barthes provided are: action code, culture code, hermeneutic code, semantic code, and symbolic code. As it happens, what Barthes didn’t notice is that the dominance of some codes over others plays out differently in different novels and stories and that this is quite useful in terms of understanding their makeup, something that exceeds our scope here.

Initially, we need to understand that the codes are to be considered like parts in a musical score: we can analyze each separately, but we hear them all together. Barthes defines the codes as follows:

(i) **Action code**: actions that fall into various sequences, whose construction depends upon the reader who “amasses certain data under
some generic titles for actions (stroll, murder, rendezvous) ... The sequence exists when and because it can be given a name, it unfolds as this process of naming takes place, as a title is sought or confirmed; its basis is therefore more empirical than rational, and it is useless to attempt to force it into a statutory order; its only logic is that of the ‘already done’ or ‘already read’ – whence the variety of terms (numerous to few); here again, we shall not attempt to put them into any order.”

(ii) Cultural or Referential code: “references to a science or a body of knowledge.” Cultural code is what one needs to know in order to comprehend what an author is commonly referring to: Central Park in New York City, or Westminster in London, or the Eiffel Tower in Paris. Such knowledge may require us to know something about medicine, history, popular music, philosophy, or religions.

(iii) Hermeneutic code: concerns the “various (formal) terms by which an enigma can be distinguished, suggested, formulated, held in suspense, and finally disclosed (these terms will not always occur, they will often be repeated; they will not appear in any fixed order).” One could substitute “question code” for the less transparent term Barthes’ has offered, because this code concerns the fact that a literary text poses enigmas to which readers want answers, the most obvious being the “who done it?” form of the murder mystery.24

(iv) Code of semes (semantic code) speaks to semantic associations (connotations) that we’re likely to generalize in terms of a theme. Barthes, however, rejected the semantic closure that a theme imposes on a text – that is, the way in which a theme overly objectifies and even trivializes semantic networks – and therefore resorted to a rather abstract set of formulations for his code of semes. In Barthes’ terms, this code refers to a Saussurean approach to considering words in terms of their contextualized value vis-à-vis other words as opposed to direct reference to transcendental meanings. This code involves a process of naming that transforms “a synonomic complex” with “a common nucleus” into a theme, a generalized reference. “This transformation is erratic; it consists in hesitating among several names: if we are told that Sarrasine had ‘one of those strong wills that know no obstacle,’ what are we to read? Will,

energy, obstinacy, stubbornness, etc. The connotator refers not so much to a name as to a synonimic complex whose common nucleus we sense even while the discourse is leading us toward other possibilities, toward other related signifieds: thus, reading is absorbed in a kind of metonymic skid, each synonym adding to its neighbor some new trait, some new departure … This expansion is the very movement of meaning …”

Essentially, Barthes sees the code of semes (semantic code) in terms of connotative differends (finely tuned differentials) that the reader struggles to name, each reader coming up with different names that are not unrelated. It is quite possible for the signified of the semes to be a connotator of persons (characters). “Character is an adjective, an attribute, a predicate (for example, unnatural, shadowy, star, composite, excessive, impious, etc.). Even though the connotation may be clear, the nomination of its signified is uncertain, approximative, unstable: to fasten a name to this signified depends in large part on the critical pertinence to which we adhere: the seme is only a departure, an avenue of meaning.”

Character, Barthes is saying, is simply designated by a name that enables us to personify the attributes (code of semes) of subjects who are the source of actions in the action code.

(v) Symbolic Code: also called the symbolic field, “the place for multivalence and for reversibility; the main task is always to demonstrate that this field can be entered from any number of points, thereby making depth and secrecy problematic.” Symbolic code speaks to how logical oppositions (binary differentials) are being resisted: challenged, contradicted, pulverized, and so forth. Transgression, antithesis, mirroring, inverting, reversing, contradicting, and the making of logical impasses are features of the symbolic code. For Barthes, the story “Sarrasine” is, on the symbolic level, a text that disturbs classification. As to points of entry, Barthes is arguing that in Balzac’s story the same logical transgressions appear in various orders within the text: money, the body, and sex. In Nella Larson’s Passing, symbolic code concerns the impasses posed by the contradiction of being black but passing for white, which also concern issues like the economics of social mobility, the body, and sex.

---

As in “Sarrasine,” the question of secrecy plays a significant role in Larson’s novel.

An important point with respect to the codes speaks to Barthes’ concept of the writerly text, which stresses the performativity – the interpretive latitude – of the reader as an agency who makes choices from among any number of options. Barthes is assuming, therefore, that his S/Z is but one of many possible performances of the work. This contrasts with the usual model of studying texts as bodies of facts about plot, setting, and character that one has to understand correctly in some straitjacketed sense. Of course, one could make up more codes, say, gender code (determinacy versus indeterminacy); code of knowledge (how is something known by characters in the novel, how do we come to know things in the novel?); code of the real (elements that exist for the sake of verisimilitude only – Barthes’ concept of the “reality effect”); and so forth.

With respect to well known works, one could consider the oddity and dominance of action code of Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (it’s not your typical Hollywood action thriller), the prominence of hermeneutic code in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter (what does the “A” stand for? Does Prynne refer to William Prynne, the revolutionary?); culture code in Bret Easton Ellis’s American Psycho (the excessive reference to designer labels); semantic code in James Joyce’s “Oxen in the Sun” chapter from Ulysses (his stylistic imitation of the evolution of the English language); and symbolic code in Jean Racine’s Phaedra (it inverts the Oedipus Complex by having a woman interrupt the relation between son and father, rather than the son interrupt the relation between father and mother, as Freud would have it). By studying such works in light of Barthes’ codes one comes to understand them hegemonically in terms of code formations.

READING

Traditionally, literary tropes have been considered ornamental devices that supplement or supplant ordinary meanings in ways that both deviate away
from and add to what is being said. In Milton’s *Paradise Lost* there is a famous epic simile in Book 1 that compares the fallen angels to autumnal leaves that have fallen into the brooks around Vallombrosa, a locale south of Florence, Italy. The simile might well remind one of embroidery, which is to say, of an ornamental stitching of comparisons into the text. The simile occurs in the first book when Satan calls up his legions who “lay intrans’t …”

Thick as Autumnal Leaves that strow the Brooks  
In *Vallombrosa*, where th’ Etrurian shades  
High overarch’t imbow’r; or scatter’d sedge  
Afloat, when with fierce Winds *Orion* arm’d  
Hath vext the Red-Sea Coast, whose waves o’rethrew  
*Busiris* [Pharaoh] and his *Memphian* Chivalry,  
While with perfidious hatred they pursu’d  
The Sojourners of Goshen, who beheld  
From the safe shore thir floating Carcasses  
And broken Chariot Wheels; so thick bestrown  
Abject and lost lay these, covering the Flood,  
Under amazement of their hideous change.  

Clearly, Milton wanted to compress much information into this diversion away from Satan’s action, a prolepsis to a peaceful pastoral moment near a Catholic monastery in Tuscany. Psychologically, the purpose of this sort of epic simile is to forget the traumatic present by substituting something rather remote, natural, and pleasant in its place, in this case brooks bestrewn with leaves in autumn. As it happens, the simile is echoing similes of fallen leaves in Homer, Virgil, and Dante, which gives it a sort of ritual significance or, at the very least, the depth of literary precedent. And the simile generates a parallel simile within it that speaks to the destruction in Exodus of the Egyptians on chariots pursuing the Jews in the Red Sea. The basic associative chain is: Devils=Dead Leaves=Broken Chariot Wheels. What is remarkable is how Milton at the end of the passage manages “so thick

---

1 See the quotation from Nietzsche’s “Of Truth and Lying in a Non Moral Sense” in 1.2 for an alternative understanding of figuration. Jacques Derrida’s “White Mythology,” in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), develops this alternative view at length.

bestrewn” to have a double reference, to the wheels and the leaves, and in addition a third reference back to the ostensible object of our attention, “these” (the Devils strewn in Hell). Notice too that Milton wanted to inlay a bit of Greek myth in the midst of all this with reference to Orion, who, in one of the myths about him, walks on water, which makes one realize that he is a prefiguration of Christ and of God’s might and mercy.

This epic simile is quite an embellishment. It takes us far afield and puts together rather heterogeneous elements, a scene of falling leaves near a monastery, mention of Orion, the aftermath of Pharaoh’s defeat, and the devils abject and lost on the fiery lake at the foot of Satan. Of central importance in considering this and other figures, generally, is the fact that they tend to both compress and compare, and to lead away from and then lead back again to something.

Figures embellish and ornament a text, much as Milton’s simile does, but they also amplify and can multiply registers of reference. It’s hard not to notice that Milton’s simile is pithy: it’s very compact and dense and is made up of large and small fragments that do and don’t quite go together. Leaves and chariot wheels aren’t something we’d usually equate. But Milton makes this work by way of subordinating the power of association to the rhythmic patterning of the words. In other words, the lines build up rhythmic momentum and carry us along in a way that extends over the different elements of the content. Milton does this quite a bit in other parts of the poem, too. Bits that don’t really cohere more or less fit because the rhythm of the language overwhelms the discrepancies. Plus Milton is good at the figure known as syllepsis. He can let a phrase ambivalently refer to two objects but choose only one of them to advance. This occurs with “so thick bestrown / abject” which refers to both the broken army of Pharaoh and the devils before Satan, carrying onward from the latter reference.

At this point, it is helpful to offer a definition of a literary figure. It was formulated by a French scholar, Pierre Fontanier, in 1830. “Figures of discourse are the traits, forms, or turns that are more or less remarkable and that have a more or less happy effect by means of which discourse, in the expression of ideas, thoughts, or feelings, distances itself more or less from that which had been a simple and common expression.” Earlier, the Académie Française had followed an older tradition that goes back to antiquity in which a division was made between grammar (ordering isolated ideas) and rhetoric (propositional thinking, expressions used in discourse). On the grammatical axis, “an arrangement of words [gives] force or grace
to discourse,” and along the rhetorical axis “a turn of thoughts [creates] a beauty, an ornament in discourse.”

All of this supports what we have seen in the epic simile of the leaves of Vallombrosa. In fact, what one has there is grammar (the ordering of the narrated units: the brooks clogged with leaves, the Jews being pursued by Basirus (Pharaoh), the saving spirit of Orion (Christ), the broken chariot wheels, the languishing abject devils on a burning lake in Hell) and rhetoric, the parenthetical expression of these units as sequential propositions (thick as … where th’… or scattered … when with …). Both grammar and rhetoric are animated by sentiment or what Fontanier called “passion” (in our case, the rhythmic force). Of central importance is that all this is supposed to distance itself from simple and common expression. That it teaches, delights, digresses, beautifies, ornaments, embellishes, complicates, plays logical tricks, references far flung texts, says the impossible, obscures, tantalizes, seduces, compresses, ambiguates, and whatever else figures do is all to the good, especially when, as the Académie argues, the result is felicitous (heureuse).

As to particular types of figures that turn up in discourse, Fontanier covers pretty much everything imaginable in his Figures du discours. Here are just some of the examples he covers: abruption, adjunction, allegorization, alliteration, anacolouthon, catachresis, conjunction, counterfision (contrefision), correction, dubitation, enthymemism, epitropism, imprecation, license, litotes, metalepsis, metaphor, optation, paradox, paranomasia, preterition, repetition, syllepsis, synecdoche, topography.

Of interest should be that Fontanier’s understanding of these discursive devices requires a division into three types: figures that correspond (i.e. metonymy), figures that resemble (i.e. metaphor), and figures that connect (i.e. synecdoche). In the epic simile of the leaves of Vallombrosa, we have resemblance (the devils resemble leaves and broken chariot wheels with respect to their fallenness, brokenness, and death) and correspondence insofar as the devils and Pharaoh’s forces are both forces of evil and therefore actually connected by something they both have in common. In fact, Milton was probably thinking that Pharaoh’s troops are devils who will be doing mischief later in human history, and that Pharaoh will be none other than Satan disguised as the Egyptian leader. In addition we have Fontanier’s

---

3Pierre Fontanier, Les figures du discours (Paris: Flammarion, 1977), p. 64. For those who read French, this is the most complete book on literary figures one is likely to encounter. There is no comparable text in English.
idea of connection in the simile, given that all the parts belong to a topos Milton calls Hell. Everything is connected to Hell because it is all a part of it, Hell not being confined to a time and place. This is a crucial point, because it overturns the impression that Hell has a confined locus and temporality: that it is a place like other places. In terms of Fontanier’s notion of connection, we have an extension of a type or genre of thing into things that are “of” that genre and even generally representative of it. Here, again, the broken army of Pharaoh comes most immediately to mind.

Something that Fontanier doesn’t stress is the fact that figures in literature often have to do with transformation, the change of one thing into another, the swapping of appearances, one thing being displaced by another, and so forth. Milton was greatly influenced by Ovid, who was the great poet of metamorphosis. Throughout *Paradise Lost* the devils keep getting metamorphosed into one thing or another. In fact, the whole epic could be said to be about metamorphosis: changes in state. In that sense, the simile of the devils being seen as autumnal leaves isn’t quite as decorative as one might imagine, though it is and remains an embellished ornament, in any case, a digression in which the changes of identity or of state can be pushed quite a bit further than they could otherwise. Recall the Académie’s point: figures enable the poet to discourse in a way that is not commonplace (i.e. “normal”). In fact, that means figures enable the poet to indulge in transformational flights of extraordinary fancy and skill.

One point to underscore is that it’s not always too useful to think of figures as separate entities whose definition we memorize so that we can identify them when they pop up in poems, plays, and novels. Rather figuration is quite protean and overlapping. In Milton’s epic simile we saw the extended comparison that was introduced with the word “as.” This, obviously, is the epic *simile* itself; we saw ambiguity in the selection of that monastic site south of Florence which may be a nasty swipe at Catholicism or a tribute to Dante, Virgil, and Homer; we saw *metaphor* – one thing resembling another (devils = leaves = broken wheels); we saw *metonymy* – correspondence in which one entity is actually a part of another entity; and we saw *synecdoche* – the whole simile being a part of Hell that is representative of its various dimensions. We could have found *irony* in the comparison of the leaves, which are natural, peaceful, and predestined to die and the devils who are unnatural, troubled, and had the choice not to fall. And we could have noticed that Orion is a *personification* of the wind that walks and disturbs the waters. Or we could have noticed the use of *euphemism* and *epithet*: the Sojourners of Goshen.
Incidentally, reading by way of Fontanier, we would have to notice that Goshen, too, is a kind of Hell, that the Sojourners are doing exactly what the devils will not be able to do, and that they are doing exactly the inverse of what Adam and Eve will do at the end of the epic. That is, the Sojourners are leaving their Hell in Egypt for a promised land (a sort of Eden). Inversely, the devils will never get out of their Hell, and the parents of Mankind, in another sort of inversion, will be leaving Eden for a much less paradisial “World before them.” This inverse crossing is known as *chiasmus*. And in a way the Sojourners of Goshen do manage to figure or sign an invisible cross in terms of their crossing the paths of both the devils and the fallen Adam and Eve. And that would relate to *symbolism*.

In case one wonders why Milton’s epic, *Paradise Regained*, has lacked the popularity of the longer epic, it is because that later poem lacks the ornamentation and fanciful detail that Milton lavished on the story of the parents of Mankind. Probably, Milton envisaged the earlier poem as pre-Christian and therefore more in line with ancient epic devices, whereas *Paradise Regained* he imagined within a Calvinist aesthetic: pure, austere, minimal, pious, stripped of classical ornamentation and flights of fancy. Whether the Académie Française read Milton at all, I do not know, but I’m sure if they had, the determination would have been made that *Paradise Lost* has a felicity lacking in the more dour *Paradise Regained*.

**READING**


3.2 **Elision**

That poetry is often telegraphic and compressed can be a source of annoyance to readers who find it frustrating to be caught up in a verbal game of “keep away” in which the poet manages to tease us with half-spoken messages. Notice the following riddle poem (# 1489) by Emily Dickinson.
A Route of Evanescence  
With a revolving Wheel –  
A Resonance of Emerald –  
A Rush of Cochineal –  
And every Blossom on the Bush  
Adjusts its tumbled Head –  
The mail from Tunis, probably,  
An easy Morning’s Ride –

When Dickinson sent this poem to Helen Hunt Jackson in 1879, she wrote the following as a preface. “To the Oriole you suggested I add a Humming Bird and hope they are not untrue –.”

In collections of Dickinson’s poetry the poem is untitled, which suggests that editors are under the impression we’re supposed to be able to figure such poems out by ourselves, which may be somewhat unreasonable, given that Dickinson herself didn’t think people might be able to fill in the blanks. This speaks to a culture of poetry reading, not necessarily shared by Dickinson, in which the art of reading poetry is precisely that of supplying content that has been elided (withdrawn, kept back, skipped over). In “A Route of Evanescence” the subject of the poem is never mentioned, only some rather attenuated qualitative correspondences are given that have both metaphorical and metonymical significance. The route of evanescence itself is a metaphor for the darting around of the hummingbird; Dickinson seems to be asking whether hummingbirds make a route like other birds. The revolving wheel is a metaphor too, but it is also a metonymy. The wings in flight appear to be analogous to a revolving wheel (metaphor), but they are also a very distinctive feature of the bird itself (part for whole: metonymy). The emerald and red (Cochineal) are impressions of color that the poet sees as the bird feeds. There is then a shift to mention of the flowers upon which the bird is feeding, and one has to suppose we’re to guess what sort of bush this might be, or at least visualize something akin to what Dickinson had in mind. The bush is personified, that much is clear. Finally,

there is a comparison with mail carriers and reference to where the hummingbird has migrated from: North Africa. Given the bird’s speed, it’s “an easy Morning’s Ride,” but this is intentional hyperbole (exaggeration). It’s meant humorously.

What many readers may not be aware of is that Dickinson wrote different versions of the same poems and, at times, couldn’t decide on particular words. Line two of “A Route of Evanescence” had variants in the manuscripts with respect to the word “revolving” (“With a revolving Wheel”). Variants included “delusive wheel,” “dissolving wheel,” “dissembling” (“With a dissembling”), and “renewing” (“With a renewing”). In those last two instances no mention of wheel appears. It’s elided. Here we can see that Dickinson had various other possibilities in mind with respect to content that she suppressed by using the much more concrete and literal “revolving.” But that too is an elision: a sort of suppression of suggestions the poet had in mind and might have liked to work out had the poem allowed it. This speaks to fit. What can’t be fitted into a line? And what if that material is important to the conceptualization of the poem?

Here are a few lines from “Maroon” by Chelsey Minnis, a poem that shows the blanks, as it were, by means of punctuation.

…………….my bloodthirsty……………………….wet………………
……………………………………………………………………………….
……………………………………………………………………………….
………………….baby…………………………
………………….is…………an auburn…and…………bloody……beauty……………

Minnis writes what is clearly a typical narrative sentence broken up with ellipses. But one has to wonder, is our skipping over the dots not a mistake? Isn’t the narrative closure here deceptive? We would naturally assume “baby” to be the subject of the sentence, given its syntactic structure. But perhaps a sentence or two is missing here and what we take to be a continuation is a mistaken presumption. The dots in Minnis’ collection Zirconia, of which “Maroon” is a part, are not entirely unrelated to the dashes that Dickinson loved to use in her poems and letters: signs of absence.

In contrast notice how space functions in Jackson Mac Low’s “People Swamp” of 4–5 July, 1990.

---

People swamp flavor.

Iridescence knot ringdove end needle sieve.

Keeper encystment palliation aftervarnish creepiness instrument.\(^6\)

The obvious question here is whether these statements have anything to do with one another or not, let alone whether these are well formed propositions out of which a narrative could or should be constructed. “Swamp” could be a noun or a verb. In the first case one would be left with a nominative phrase or perhaps just three nouns. In the second case we would have a sentence with subject, verb, object. It sort of makes sense that way, but only sort of. In the second line the words “knot” and “end” also have this doubleness of being either nouns or verbs. But now there appears to be little gain in seeing them that way. However one considers the words grammatically, the sentence doesn’t quite manage to be a well formed statement. The same is true for line three. Is this poem just meaningless? Would it help if we knew what it’s leaving out? But how would we know if something is being elided here? By what test could we determine this?

In North of Intention, Steve McCaffery, himself a poet, quotes Leon S. Roudiez on the paragram: “A text is paragrammatic in the sense that its organization of words (and their denotations), grammar, and syntax is challenged by the infinite possibilities provided by letters or phonemes combining to form networks of signification not accessible through conventional reading habits.” McCaffery adds: “Paragrammatic wordplay thus manufactures a crisis within semantic economy, for whilst engendering meanings, the paragram also turns unitary meaning against itself.”\(^7\) The para-gramme in at least one of its manifestations posits a para-grammar, a pseudo-linguistic construct that elides conventional practices of making meaning – for example, the use of standard grammatical constructions. Rather, the paragramme constellates verbal entities or parts thereof in ways that redistribute linguistic combinations in ways that make up alternative


signifying economies that are, for the most part, antisemantic. If Mac Low elides something, it is the function of standard grammatical constructions, something that turns against semantics: the function of words as transparently meaningful entities and the function of lines as complete thoughts. Here there is no narrative that exists in the wings waiting for someone to decipher it by means of a verbal game of hints and winks. But does this only obtain with poets like Mac Low? Couldn’t we read Edmund Spenser and John Donne paragrammatically as well? As it turns out, yes. But this would require something other than a literary historical approach that assumes all poetry is a translation of an a priori story into elliptical form, an encryption of ordinary language into poetic language.

READING


3.3 Resemblance

As Fontanier noticed, poetry is largely the construction of resemblances, which accounts for the importance of figuration in poetry, but also relations of sound and sense. This section considers resemblance in terms of juxtaposition (adjacency), analogy (metaphysical conceit), allegoresis (allegory), emulation (sympathy), and imitation (mimesis). For a more in depth account of some of this, see Michel Foucault’s chapter “The Prose of the World” from *The Order of Things*. Foucault’s thesis is that in the later seventeenth century we can begin to see an “epistemic break” (or conceptual rupture) with Renaissance practices of signification that were analogy based, so that, for example, one shifts rather abruptly from a world in which everything is seen in hierarchical correspondence to a world in which one simply enumerates data statistically and then distributes it according to graphs whose purpose is to empirically measure and quantify the data. Whereas the Renaissance had a strong interest in qualitative relations among entities, which had moral and metaphysical significance, the Age of Reason had an overriding interest in quantitative relations among entities, which had statistical and empirical significance. The question that Foucault

---

didn’t resolve is whether the arts can ever make that leap. Paul de Man’s influential paper, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” suggests not. However, this is also just plainly apparent from reading many twentieth century poets: T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Sylvia Plath, and John Ashbery, among them.

Juxtaposition

Juxtaposition refers to how we make linguistic associations when poets simply put words, phrases, or sentences adjacent to one another. When Shakespeare juxtaposes swear and forswear – as in sonnet 152 – the result is a verbal matrix that serves as a sort of verbal engine for the poem as a whole. By juxtaposing these words, Shakespeare encourages the contamination of one by the other, which produces an overload of meanings (1.3).

As poetry became more compressed by modernist poets who had repudiated the rhetorical style of Victorian poetry, emphasis fell upon the juxtaposition of fragmentary motifs and images. Ezra Pound’s famous “In a Station of the Metro” is exemplary: it juxtaposes the image of faces in a crowd to petals on a wet, black bough. The mention of the petals on the bough is merely juxtaposed. Pound is not saying the petals are a metaphor for the faces. There’s no actual connection, just the association that we happen to make.

Robert Creeley’s “FIVE Eight Plus” (from the collection Windows (1987)) is composed of short juxtaposed bits that don’t make the sort of obvious association we saw in Pound. The following is just a short excerpt taken from the middle of the poem.

WINDOW
Up from reflective
table top’s glass the
other side of it.

AROUND
The pinwheel’s pink
plastic spinning
blade’s reversing.

Ego
I can
hear I can
see

Daytime
It’s got to be
lighter\textsuperscript{10}

No doubt, we can try to link the texts in small capital letters as if they were keys to some narrative progression, but this will be less successful than looking at the poem as a modular series of juxtapositions in which the sections relate out of sequence. One could relate Window with Daytime, for example. In such a case, the reader is actually selecting what goes with what by putting the sections together in whatever way makes sense to him or her. This is reminiscent of aleatory music of the post 1945 period in which composers were writing bits of music that musicians could play in whatever order they wished. Although no two performances of the piece would be the same, in all likelihood, the work still had its own recognizable sound texture. Suddenly, order wasn’t the determining factor of what a piece sounded like. Creeley’s poem participates in this kind of aesthetic.

Analogy

Analogy is easily seen in the poetry of John Donne. In “The Relique,” Donne compares himself and his mistress to holy relics that have been dug up at some future time after their deaths.

Then, he that digges us up, will bring
Us, to the Bishop, and the King,
   To make us Reliques; then
Thou shalt be a Mary Magdalen, and I
   A something else thereby;

In this case the analogy is transformative in that it makes the beloved into Mary Magdalen and Donne into Christ (the one to whom “something else” is referring). Donne can make that association, because the lovers have not consummated their love sexually, only Platonically. For “Difference of sex

no more we knew, / Than our guardian angels do.” In Donne, emulation is not sufficient, for he generally seeks a translation of one thing into another that is transformative. This occurs again, famously, in “The Flea” wherein Donne’s mistress is about to kill a flea in bed that has bitten both of them and therefore could be said to contain “three lives,” its own, Donne’s, and the mistress’s. “This flea is you and I, and this / Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is.” Here again the analogy has logical consequences that the poet extrapolates in order to amplify if not to exaggerate the transformative effect of the initial correspondence. Lastly, in Donne these correspondences are redemptive. The transformation into Mary Magdalen and Christ, as well as the transformation into the marriage temple would attest to this. But notice, too, the redemptiveness of analogy in “Air and Angels.”

Twice or thrice had I loved thee,
Before I knew thy face or name,
So in a voice, so in a shapeless flame
Angels affect us oft, and worshipped be.

What could be viewed as a sordid relation between anonymous lovers is redeemed by means of comparing the mistress to an angel. Again, the exaggerations and implausibility of these comparisons raises the suspicion that these analogies must be ironical or satirical and that therefore their redemptive effects are dubious, however tempting it might be to accept them at face value.

Allegory

The extension of analogy into an isomorphic set of correspondences that substitute for the literal sense is known as allegoresis, something that Donne is broaching in the poems above. Indeed, if one extended the analogies of the relic, the flea, and angels to any great extent, the poems would turn into full scale allegories. Typical of allegory is the thirteenth-century poem on the art of love entitled the Romance of the Rose (Jean de Meun and Guillaume de Lorris), in which a lady, allegorically personified by a rose, is being courted by a lover. A young man initially follows a stream to a large walled in garden, and upon the walls he contemplates personifications of various abstractions: hate, felony, avarice, covetousness, envy, sadness, and poverty, among them. That these figures decorate the outside of what is, in fact, a garden of delight, speak to those personal attributes that one should consider antithetical to pleasure and that therefore should be banished. These are the attributes that no lover ought to possess. Edmund Spenser’s Faerie
Queene, similarly, uses personifications in order to represent psychological human attributes, though in many cases the relationship between the person and the attribute are not in a simple one to one correspondence. Red Crosse Knight is a complex character that is not simply reducible to a religious redeemer figure, though he is certainly that, as well. Una, who represents the true church, is again not simply a walking abstraction. She is developed to the point that she is not just a convenient allegorical device whose function is to make an abstraction more comprehensible in human terms. Whereas Spenser’s allegorical depictions are readily comprehensible within both the Christian and Romance traditions, William Blake’s Jerusalem is a complex allegory that rewrites and revises the Judaic-Christian tradition in ways that reflect Blake’s idiosyncratic personal revelations. In such a case, the allegorical transparency of various personifications is diminished and readers are required to figure out precisely what Blake must have had in mind, since the meanings aren’t to be found in the cultural tradition.

Allegoresis occurs in more modern poetry as well. In T.S. Eliot’s The Waste Land, the medieval topos of the waste land functions as an analogue to the condition of Europe in the 1920s. At moments within the poem, Eliot is referencing Perceval by Chrétien de Troyes (twelfth century), therefore using its story as the allegorical analogue for the twentieth-century spiritual condition of Europeans. But also notice the recent poem Lip Service (2001) by the Language Poet Bruce Andrews, which is keyed to the cantos of Paradiso in Dante’s Divine Comedy. Dante writes the following near the end of canto 33:

As is the geometer who wholly applies himself to measure the circle, and finds not, in pondering, the principle of which he is in need, such was I at that new sight. I wished to see how the image conformed to the circle and how it has its place therein;

And Bruce Andrews nearing the end of Lip Service writes:

geometry at total, raptures diaphanous closeout diagram
generalizes fingers arraigned as chocolate,
   adorable base alias reality image refusal emboldens
   fetus using your body without your consent –
   its sweet front lathed with
   this is something else;  

Whether or how Andrews’ text is allegory or even just allegoresis is probably a matter for some debate; however, the fact that Andrews used Dante’s poem as a structural and thematic source (as he has pointed out and as we can see from the references in both poems to geometry) leaves open the question of whether we shouldn’t at least try to make the connection and pose the possibility that allegory is active, though not in ways we’re used to seeing in most poetry. Indeed, that there is an allegorical aspect to Andrews’ poem is perhaps self-evident, but whether it abides by any of the usual rules of allegorical procedure is open for discussion. It’s possible that what we have in Andrews’ poem is simply a number of tangential resemblances that posit the effect of allegory without its actually taking place.

**Emulation**

We have already discussed sympathetic analogies (1.4). This is what Michel Foucault was thinking of in terms of *emulation*, or what we can see in the sympathetic correspondences in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Note that Eve is in emulative correspondence with Satan. In other words, of all the creatures in Eden, she alone could be sympathetic to Satan’s condition when he was a revolting angel in heaven, given that just as Satan felt secondary to the Son, Eve feels secondary to Adam, something that the moment she senses it, irritates her. Now, this does not mean that Eve is analogous to Satan, which is Milton’s subtle point in the parts of *Paradise Lost* leading up to the fall in Book 9. For if she were, she would have been created evil, which clearly wouldn’t make sense in the Pauline tradition within which Milton is working.

Sympathetic emulation occurs, quite noticeably, throughout much of William Wordsworth’s poetry. In “The Ruined Cottage” (1880), an old man whom Wordsworth, speaking of the poem, once identified as a peddler, has been witness to the economic ruin of a family on account of economic changes within England. The old man tells the poet,

Sympathies there are
More tranquil, yet perhaps of kindred birth,
That steal upon the meditative mind
And grow with thought. Beside yon spring I stood
and eyed its waters till we seemed to feel
One sadness, they and I. (ll. 79–85)
Sympathy in this case concerns the man’s capacity to feel what the family feels by way of experiencing the waters of the spring that to him are in tune or sympathy with his thoughts. “They and I” is somewhat ambivalent, referring at once to the family but also to the waters (nature) and the man. Wordsworth himself said that had he not been educated he could imagine himself very much to be someone like the old man who relates the story of the ruined cottage.

In “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey,” emulation is very pronounced in terms of the poet’s relation to his sister Dorothy, whose journals are so central to an understanding of this poem’s intensity, given that it is through her (and her writings) that the poet is shown once more how to experience rapture in the presence of nature, an experience the poet can not have without Dorothy’s example as a being-in-nature who experiences its sublimity in the smallest details of vegetative life. In Dorothy Wordsworth’s *Grasmere Journals* we can read: “I never saw daffodils so beautiful they grew among the mossy stones about & about them, some rested their heads upon these stones as on a pillow for weariness & the rest tossed & reeled & danced & seemed as if they verily laughed with the wind that blew upon them over the lake, they looked so gay ever glancing ever changing.”

In such cases, consciousness is animated by nature’s emulation of what we might mistakenly assume to be exclusively human.

A final example of emulation is the close of Robert Lowell’s “Skunk Hour” (1959) when the poet notices a mother skunk and her kittens late at night rummaging through the garbage out in back of his house. What should be a low point for him in terms of the depression he feels and the situation he is in reveals a ray of hope in terms of something that stops quite short of analogy whereby the poet would be compared to being a skunk pure and simple. Rather, in stopping short of metaphor, Lowell emphasizes how the determined behavior of the skunk *emulates* something in the poet’s character that will save him: that he will not be scared off.

**Imitation**

Consider Ezra Pound’s poem about the Paris Metro mentioned above. In that poem the petals on a wet black bough do and don’t actually imitate

---

(resemble) the crowd that one sees entering and exiting the metro. What about “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” Shakespeare’s proposition in Sonnet 18 is that of a conceit that equates a period in a man’s lifecycle to a season, which can be done since the macrocosm of a human life is believed commonly in Shakespeare’s day to be equivalent to the microcosm of a year with its four seasons. But is the resemblance contrived? What about the opening stanza to “Lake Bud” by Ishmael Reed? Its subject is the great jazz pianist Bud Powell.

Lake Merritt is Bud Powell’s piano
The sun tingles its waters
Snuff-jawed pelicans descend
tumbling over each other like
Bud’s hand playing Tea For Two
or Two For Tea

Here the lake resembles the piano just as the pelicans resemble the hands: Tea for Two = Two for Tea. Of course, we have to perceive the imitative resemblance, which requires knowledge of what Powell’s piano playing sounds like.

Imitation can also be structural, and here we should be reminded of Milton’s mirror poems “L’Allegro” and “Il Penseroso” that are imitative in terms of structure as well as content. “L’Allegro” (the happy life) is the inverse of “Il Penseroso” (the melancholic life) in terms of content, but both are structurally symmetrical to a high degree. Structural imitation occurs, as well, in Dante and in Spenser. In recent examples of poetry, see work by Leslie Scalapino, whose first collection, Concerning How Exaggerated Music Is, demonstrates a high degree of structural imitation in the form of recursivity. This is a technique she has refined over some four decades to stunning effect.

READING

Michel Foucault, The Order of Things (1971)

14Leslie Scalapino, Concerning How Exaggerated Music Is (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1982).
3.4 Objective Correlative

T.S. Eliot, who was a critic as well as a poet, coined the term objective correlative, by which he meant an object, situation, or event (in the singular or plural) that functions as an adequate correlative to the poet’s emotions. A very good example is Matthew Arnold’s poem “Dover Beach” (1851) in which the beach at Dover is a concretely experienced place that has emotional correlatives. As a setting, Dover Beach has a metonymical relation to the much bigger place that is England, if not, Europe. Dover Beach is the stage, as it were, for setting up an experiential analogue to what it feels like to be a European living in a time of vulgar empirical demystification and social leveling. The poem famously ends with a premonition of ignorant armies clashing in the night. What makes the poem so successful is that the correlative of the beach to the feelings of the poet and his concerns is not just apt, but revelatory, given our historical hindsight. Indeed, many poets since have repeated this sort of Victorian poem, among them, T.S. Eliot, whose *The Waste Land*, however more fragmented in terms of setting, still employs the objective correlative of the waste land metaphor to approximate the spiritual condition and feeling of the poet. For a poem to be successful, according to Eliot, the objectification of the emotions has to be convincing; that is, it has to convey the inner state of the poet’s feelings and, one might suppose, his or her psychology.

Apparently, Eliot imagined the correlative must be sincere, plausible, realistic, and serious in intent. But is William Wordsworth’s objective correlative of the cloud plausible, realistic, and serious in “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud”? What about Emily Dickinson’s “I felt a funeral in my brain”? Is John Ashbery’s objective correlative sincere, let alone, plausible, realistic, and serious in “Caesura”? (“Job sat in a corner of the dump eating asparagus …” from *Shadow Train*). Indeed, Ashbery is quite a lesson in how far a poet can get in terms of mocking the objective correlative, but, Eliot might have countered, that is the objective correlative (the situation) for postmodern subjects.

The funny thing is, despite all the objections one could raise about what precisely makes up a successful objective correlative, we all know a bad objective correlative when we see or hear one. For example, consider the Country-Western lyric, “I flushed you from the toilet of my heart.” That’s not viable, is it? And yet, someone could argue that if the vulgarity of the correlative is so extremely insensitive that it ironically undermines the
sentiments regarding hurt feelings, we've in fact found a quite good correlative with respect to how people actually respond to betrayal: as hurt and angry; sensitive and insensitive.

What Eliot calls the objective correlative is, from another perspective, the controlling metaphor that captures the social subject's actual relation at a point in historical time to the world. Of course, the identity of this social subject will be defined in terms of gender, class, ethnicity (possibly), race (possibly), and nationality (almost certainly). Yet, if this social subject lacks a certain generality or averageness, the objectivity of the correlative, as one that a wide diversity of readers could identify with, collapses in on itself. Sylvia Plath, for example, is a social subject who was white, female, well educated, and a poet who was part of the American “poetry scene” of the 1950s and 1960s. Many thousands of readers can and do identify with her. Even those of us who aren't female can cross the bridge whereby her correlative makes sense as an experience we can imagine holding in common, for without that, the poetry would be merely sectarian.

As to the reference above to an “actual relation” to the world, it is important to point out that what Georg Lukács referred to as the requirement for realism in literature applies to poetry as well as to fiction – at least, in Eliot’s context. The objective correlative needs to be a controlling metaphor that discloses the social subject’s actual relation to history; otherwise, nothing that is said will have anything but subjective significance. When W.B. Yeats spoke in his poetry of the center not holding anymore, he perceived something quite major about what had changed with respect to people’s actual historical circumstance. Eliot’s waste land metaphor is a similar case in point. Eliot’s poem isn't saying that the poet feels as if he's living in a waste land; it is making the point that empirically Europeans had entered an age in which culture had turned into a waste land, because the culture was being turned into nothing more than the standard of living. In other words, culture is what people buy at the department store. There is nothing else, anymore. If this wasn’t absolutely true in the 1920s, the Frankfurt School (Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, et al.) was predicting it would come to pass in the period following the Second World War, which has largely happened, in fact.

Have artists found good objective correlatives as good as the waste land metaphor in the second half of the twentieth century? As noted, Ashbery makes fun of this type of thinking, and he is not alone. There appears to be a widespread impression today that the world is so complex and logically impenetrable that it would be foolish to imagine an artist could sort it out
by finding just the right correlative, the way Arnold did back in the 1850s, or, for that matter, the way Pablo Picasso did in the painting *Guernica* in 1939. But is this skepticism merely an excuse for not having managed to sort something out or not? Lukács thought that the worth of a literary writer was to be measured in terms of the extent to which he or she could understand society and history as a coherent totality and the special conditions that therefore pertained to the social subject as a historical personage. Whereas many contemporary writers may have abandoned this expectation, it turns out that the general public has not.

**READING**

T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* (1920)

---

### 3.5 Language Poetry

*Language Poetry* is an avant garde movement of the second half of the twentieth century that has had roots in the high modernist writing of Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, Paul Zukofsky, and George Oppen, though a major influence was certainly Jackson Mac Low whose own work was indebted to the sort of procedural compositional practices initiated by the composer John Cage in the 1940s and 1950s. Cage’s work crossed boundaries between music, writing, painting, and what later came to be known as performance art (4.10). Many of his pieces are essentially directions of a rather general sort that a performer is being asked to realize with the aid of a page of instructions.

Mac Low often included rather detailed and lengthy rules of composition, to which he generally adhered. “A Note on the PFR-3 poems” of 1938–1985 speaks of the use of a computer program to generate the poetry. An excerpt follows in which Mac Low addresses work he did at Information International, Inc., in Los Angeles in 1969 (!) “with the aid of their PFR-3, a programmable film reader connected to a DEC-PDP-9 computer”:

Their [computer] program allowed me to enter as “data” a list of “messages”: originally up to 100 single lines, each comprising at most 48 characters and/or spaces. Later longer messages, though fewer at most,
and ones having two or more lines, were possible. From any list the program randomly selected and permuted series of “message members” (characters, words, or strings of linked words, e.g., sentences, separated in the message by spaces) and displayed them on a monitor. When a lever on the control board was pushed, every tenth line appearing on the screen was printed out …

The poem itself has statements that read out as follows:

FURIOUSLY IDEAS COLORLESS SLEEPING GREEN DEMANDING FREEING BREASTS ROUNDED DEEPBOSOMED CRUNCHING ABSENTMINDED PLASTIC TASTY GRANDMOTHERS ARE HONEYMAKING ARE EUCALYPTUS DRAWING BEES

Readers unfamiliar with this sort of poetry immediately complain that “it makes no sense.” But in fact the lines are filled with suggestive words and odd juxtapositions that give rise to fantasies that pull together the disconnected bits by jumping over their asyntacticality. “HONEYMAKING … ARE EUCALYPTUS … DRAWING BEES” is really just very elliptical. And “FREEING BREASTS ROUNDED DEEPBOSOMED” isn’t at all hard to figure out. If “PLASTIC” is supposed to go together with “TASTY GRANDMOTHERS,” it’s a rather comical phrase. Mac Low himself argued that one had to adopt something akin to the Zen Buddhist conception of “no mind” when reading this kind of poetry. That is, one perceives each linguistic event as elements in themselves that arise and pass away without being gathered up into overarching meanings (sayings, propositions, arguments, stories).

When Language Poetry emerged, it constellated a number of significant talents: Ron Silliman, Charles Bernstein, Barrett Watten, Bruce Andrews, Clark Coolidge, Michael Davidson, Bob Perelman, Michael Palmer, Ray DiPalma, Steve Benson, Robert Grenier, Lyn Hejinian, Leslie Scalapino, Susan Howe, Carla Harryman, Rae Armantraut, and Hannah Wiener, just

16 Mac Low (2008), p. 143.
to name the more prominent figures. In the seminal early anthology edited by Silliman, *In the American Tree*, Mac Low questioned whether Language Poetry is any more language centered than any other literature, contrary to what some were proposing. He admitted that many of the writers depart from normal syntax, that "the subject matter shifts rapidly," and that indeterminacy and a de-emphasis upon the ego is noticeable. "Few of these works tell a connected story or support an explicit thesis," and there is "lack of narration or exposition." Moreover, Mac Low wondered, "Can these works be seen as imitations in any sense of the term?" He answers,

Seemingly no. Often one word, phrase, or sentence seems to follow another with little regard for the recognized imports of these signs and strings. Their concatenation seems governed not by their referents, or by relations among them, but by features and relations intrinsic to them as language objects. Indeed, some practitioners ... call such works "non-referential," and one of them has mounted a brilliant seemingly Marxist, attack on reference as a kind of fetishism contributing to alienation. ... [But] what could be more of a fetish or more alienated than slices of language stripped of reference? [...] Attention seems centered on linguistic details and the relations among them, rather than on what they might "point to."  

Mac Low specified, quite rightly, that referentiality was very much a part of Language Poetry, but that it was structured in such a way that instead of communicating itself as exposition, argument, or narration, the perceiver is required to construct larger wholes semiconsciously. "The mind moves beyond the language elements themselves, impelled by a complex mélange of denotations and connotations and of remembered language experiences and life experiences." In that sense Mac Low said such poetry was actually "perceiver-centered" as opposed to "language centered."  

Charles Bernstein and Steve MacCaffery have both been quite forceful on the point that Language Poetry should be thought of as superseding what they call Voice Poetry or, alternatively, Official Verse Culture, by which they mean the kind of poetry taught in Masters of Fine Arts Programs in the United States. Essentially, the model for this poetry is Plath's "Ariel,"

---

which is certainly a great poem. But the problem is that Plath perfected this sort of poetry and that already in the 1970s it was time to move on. An academy with poetry writing programs filled with students all trying to emote in poems that follow in the wake of Sylvia Plath or Robert Lowell doesn’t quite make sense some 50 years after these figures passed away. Language Poetry, by contrast, is not anachronistic aesthetically and attempts to innovate with language in quite radical ways that take it deep into realms of linguistic abstraction that aren’t imaginable within Official Verse Culture. But Language Poetry isn’t what lyric poets would consider expressive – at least not in the personal or psychological sense, if only because such poetry doesn’t believe in the authority of the self as a psychological being whose purpose or function is to express feelings. In other words, there is the concern that for the Language Poets there can be no objective correlative other than the various discourses in collision out there in the world. But is this sort of dialogism a sufficient condition for the writing of poetry?

A younger generation of poets who have brought lyric and language poetry together in interesting ways appear to have decided this issue for themselves insofar as they hold the possibility for an objective correlative open. A very strong example of this approach can be seen in Laura Mullen’s prose poem “Torch Song (Prose Is a Prose Is a Prose)” which brings diverse discursive formations together around one of those outrageously “senseless” crimes all too typical in America.

Re:Vision: As if made for a made-for-TV-movie the already tired scene played over and over: “She was so upset,” etc. (Question: How upset do you need to be to burn 137,000 acres?) The print is grainy. Did you see her, “in your mind’s eye,” with matches, crying so her hand shook too much to strike a light at first? Or do you picture her standing there, resolute, raising a lighter aloft like a concert-goer during the encore? “The only thing that is different from the one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything,” Gertrude Stein repeats (“Composition is Explanation”). The Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky dies in exile, his countrymen having refused his vision, even now some people say of his movies that there’s not enough story there. In The Mirror a drenched woman appears in the charred room of a gone house, a dream or memory, haunting the narrator. Homage: as if the word had a home in it. All the elements the
filmmaker loved and lovingly reassembled are here: the woman, the forest, the tears … a letter on fire.\textsuperscript{19}

Mullen’s poem is largely about “The Hayman Fire” that occurred in Colorado in the summer of 2002. The biggest fire that Colorado had ever seen, it was started by Terry Barton, a federal forestry officer who said that she was trying to burn a letter by her estranged husband. Barton was indicted on four counts of arson. Barton’s anger is the objective correlative that Mullen herself is setting alight in her poem, as the last sentence in the quotation demonstrates. The conflagration was a horrible tragedy for the state of Colorado, but it is also the objective correlative of the woman’s hurt and all the rage that women feel collectively in such situations. The act of burning some 137,000 acres is also one in which gross negligence, stupidity, and emotional overload meet as a response to the life world that, however mad, makes a certain sense as the only adequate response to it, given how anonymous, unfair, and uncaring that world is and how outraged and frustrated individuals feel as subjects who aren’t responded to and don’t see any other alternative than an apocalyptic response (suicide after murdering the whole family, campus rampages and massacres, the setting of massive forest fires). Mullen’s poetry is very much mediated by various discourses (media, academic, descriptive, lyrical) but keeps its distance from the kind of personalism and soul searching typical of Sylvia Plath, Denise Levertov, John Berryman, and their many imitators. Quite noticeably, Mullen doesn’t try to psychoanalyze or attempt to make sense of the absurdity of the forest ranger’s act. She respects the absurdity of the act and the events that led up to it even while offering decontextualized statements on other matters that do and don’t intersect with the life of Terry Barton, something that has the effect of challenging our ideas of what is and isn’t normal. “That’s the way fire does, it don’t have no rules to it. – Anonymous Firefighter, Summer 2002.”

READING

Charles Bernstein, \textit{A Poetics} (1992)

\textsuperscript{19}Laura Mullen, “Torch Song (Prose is a Prose is a Prose),” in \textit{Civil Disobedience} (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 2004), pp. 442–3.
The new sentence was advanced by the Language Poetry Movement and refers to decontextualized prose whose syntax is used as if it were prosody. Unlike the sentence you are reading right now, the new sentence has no specific referential focus. Ron Silliman provides a useful example.

He lived here, under the elm trees

versus

He lived here, under the assumptions.

Silliman points out that in the new sentence the sentence doesn’t resolve the syntax. Silliman’s list of descriptors for the new sentence reads as follows:

(i) The paragraph organizes the sentences.
(ii) The paragraph is a unity of quantity, not logic or argument.
(iii) Sentence length is a unit of measure.
(iv) Sentence structure is altered for torque, or increased polysemy/ambiguity.
(v) Syllogistic movement is (a) limited; (b) controlled.
(vi) Primary syllogistic movement is between the preceding and following sentences.
(vii) Secondary syllogistic movement is toward the paragraph as a whole, or the total work.
(viii) The limiting of syllogistic movement keeps the reader’s attention at or very close to the level of language, that is, most often at the sentence level or below.\textsuperscript{20}

Apparently, in poetry that employs new sentences, the paragraph is an arbitrary container of a number of sentences that are to be seen as just so many units in the aggregate. Therefore, the paragraph is just a unit of measure and has no function as a structure within which sentences are subordinated logically. By altering a sentence structure by torque, Silliman means that it is changed by the rearrangement/substitution of elements that break with grammatical expectations and rules. Carla Harryman’s sentence, “The back of the hand resting on the pillow was not wasted” is a

new sentence because the noun “hand” cannot logically take “wasted” as a
verbal descriptor, whereas “washed” or “wished for” would have been all
right. By syllogistic movement, Silliman means logic in terms of its pertain-
ing to the unit of the sentence itself. The primary logic doesn’t overrun the
sentence in order to unify a group of sentences, which focuses attention
upon words (the morpheme) or small groups of them. There can be a
secondary logic that works at the paragraph level or level of the whole,
however. Silliman’s example of a group of new sentences comes from
Harryman’s “For She”:

The back of the hand resting on the pillow was not wasted. We couldn’t
hear each other speak. The puddle in the bathroom, the sassy one. There
were many years between us. I started the stranger into facing up to
Maxine, who had come out of the forest wet from bad nights. I came
from an odd bed, a vermillion riot attracted to loud dogs.

In this example, the pronouns and deictic markers (there, on, of) help
establish a sense of normalcy against which the so-called torquing (or
deformations) take place. A more traditional term for this kind of writing
is *parataxis*, unsubordinated prose. To this, the new sentence is adding the
grammatical and idiomatic deformation of typical language use.²¹

**READING**


---

### 3.7 Sound Poetry/Concrete Poetry

Both concrete and sound poetry have their inceptions as self-conscious
artistic practices in Dada and allied movements within the European avant
garde of the early twentieth century. If in the case of concrete poetry the
visual dimension of the poem strives to achieve material autonomy, the
same can be said for sound in sound poetry. Whereas most of the poetry
one is likely to study can be considered a balance between sound pattering,

verbal design, and denotation, in both concrete and sound poetry there is a tendency to alter the balance in a way that denotation loses its centrality as “the sense” beneath which everything else is to be subordinated. “Thus Adam to himself lamented loud” (*Paradise Lost*, 10.845) is visually shaped in such a way that “loud” receives end placement. We can also see the two l’s in “lamented loud,” which visually reinforces the stresses that the beginnings of these words will receive. But all of this works in the service of the denotation, as does the sound, which puts stress on “loud,” as if to make that word imitate its sense. Sonically, “loud” is loud. Here, of course, we’re examining a very commonplace example of what New Critics called “sound and sense,” the expectation that the sound will imitate the sense. In sound poetry, the sonic aspect of the poetry becomes so autonomous that it discards denotation altogether, while retaining the capacity to connote in its absence.

For most readers, Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky” would be the poem that exemplifies the borderline between where sound and sense go their own ways. We can imagine what a Bandersnatch is, but there’s really no telling if we’d be right. Of course, Carroll allows us to “imagine” by means of borrowing from what we know, as if we were trying to find cognates among two different languages. “Frumious” sounds hectoring, probably because we can sense the word “furious” in it. “Jabberwock” is quite recognizable as a compound word with “wock” being a cognate for “walk.” But what about “talk”? “Jabber” itself is ambiguous because it refers to both jabbering (as in, jabbering and walking) and jabbing, which in the context of the poem appears the more likely meaning. The brilliance of this poem is how it keeps us betwixt and between language options, hence refusing us a definitive translation.

Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!

Steve McCaffery tells us that the sound poem came in various genres back in the days of Zurich-style Dada in 1916. Chief among them was the “simultaneous poem” and the “poem without words.”

---

poem was invented by Henri Barzun and Fernand Divoire and in it one could expect a sonic collage made up of “sound, text, discrepant noises, whistles, cries, and drums.” This contrasts with Hugo Ball, a major figure in Dada, who restricted himself to poems without words. Ball explained:

I have invented a new genre of poems, “Verse ohne Worte” [poems without words] or Lautgedichte [sound poems], in which the balance of the vowels is weighted and distributed solely according to the values of the beginning sequence.

Ball also wrote that

In these phonetic poems we totally renounce the language that journalism has abused and corrupted. We must return to the innermost alchemy of the word, we must even give up the word too, to keep for poetry its last and holiest refuge. We must give up writing second-hand: that is, accepting words (to say nothing of sentences) that are not newly invented for our own use.23

Such poetry was intended to defamiliarize and undermine ordinary language use and to reintroduce sense as something we intuit from hearing sounds whose ostensive meanings aren’t given. The sound poem, therefore, is very much like a foreign language whose sense we grasp through its sounds, even though we would be at a loss if someone actually required us to denote what was being communicated. Of course, onomatopoeia plays an important role in sound poetry to the extent that sounds are physical presences (in the form of vibrations) which prompt various associations: linguistic, psychological, etc.

Well known, too, is work by poets such as the Russian futurist Velimir Khlebnikov who is famously associated with the term zaum, a neologism in Russian that denotes transrationality. Russian futurism, much like Dadaism and Surrealism in Western Europe, had one thing in common, namely, the expectation that certain non-rational uses of language could trigger imaginative experiences that would break with conformist (that is, ideologically determined) ways of perceiving the world. Zaum enabled the

23Quoted in Steve McCaffery, 120–1.
individual to know that everyday consciousness must necessarily be a sort of false consciousness that represses creativity and the capacity to think differently than one’s neighbor. Klebnikov understood sound as material, hence arguing for sound poetry as a materialist approach to art that went beyond the bourgeois understanding of the sign in terms of a property relation in which the sign is in possession of its referent. In the context of Ferdinand de Saussure (5.3), one is reminded of that subtle interrelation between sound and thought before a moment when they are separated, the one brushing against the other at a moment when they are still fused. “Zangezi” (1923) was a theatrical piece by Klebnikov staged by Vladimir Tatlin and included various invented poetic languages related to birds and gods. And here, of course, one sees how natural it was for sound poetry to be translated into performance art.

Unquestionably the most celebrated sound poem per se is Kurt Schwitters’ *Ursonate* (1922–1932), of which there is a re-engineered recording available on compact disk. “Ursonate” (Primeval Sonata) is actually not as primeval as one might think. One can sense musical sonata allegro form in the piece; in fact, it’s even written in four movements, some of which are paced like movements in a classical sonata. Moreover, the piece is as much sung as it is spoken. It makes use of pitch as well as rhythmical repetitions, which establish cadence and momentum. If “Ursonate” suggests some sort of primeval European language, it is, in fact, modeled upon Germanic languages that would include German, Dutch, Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian. German and Swedish seem particularly pronounced, given Schwitters’ rather frequent use of the umlaut: rinnzkrrmüüüüi. Also pay attention to the rolled r and the use of the pf which is a characteristic of German pronunciation.

Rum!
Rrummpff? (G)
Rum!
Rrummpff t?
Rrrr rum!

Although one might suppose the poem to be nonsense verse, there are familiar words that pop up every now and then. “Rum,” in German, could mean the liquor we know as rum, or could be associated with “herum,” the adverb for “around.” In this sense, “Ursonate” often communicates like some earlier form of a language we already know and think we can
therefore decipher. The use of pitch, speed, repetition, reprise, cadence, and phonemic clusters generally associated with German, give “Ursonate” a highly crafted and purposeful sense that its sounds both advance and occlude in ways that are tantalizing for the hearer who can’t be sure whether he or she is listening to music or to language. Because “Ursonate” is a work of powerful expression in the absence of denotation, it has interested recent performance artists, who see it as foundational for work in which sound and sense are to be reconceptualized in aesthetic terms.

If sound poetry departs from usual expectations wherein sound and sense are brought into relation, concrete poetry departs from usual expectations wherein sight and sense are related. The following is a concrete poem modeled by myself on a work made by Francis Picabia, a visual artist of enormous originality who belonged to the European avant garde.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Figure 3.1  Concrete Poem.
The point of such an exercise in Dadaism is to show how much poetic information or stimulus we get in a purely visual form even before we begin reading a word of poetry. Even without seeing a single word, but merely lines in their stead, regular readers of poetry will probably sense a signifying effect, because of the many poems that they have read whose powerful meanings are conveyed in precisely such visual forms. In other words, this sort of poem reveals just how behaviorally conditioned we are in terms of pattern stimulation. Notice that here too verbal denotation has been discarded. The design, however, does explicitly refer to the typographical shape of typical poetry. And the lines also have connotative significance. The longer ones connote nouns, the shorter ones articles, conjunctions, and the like.

In fact, concrete poetry precedes the twentieth century. In a poem like George Herbert’s “Easter Wings,” the stanzas are put in the shape of angel’s wings. The 1633 edition of the poem situates each wing (each comprises one of the two stanzas of the poem) so that we’re required to read from top to bottom, or to turn the book sideways. We can see that the outer edges of the wings are longer, much as we would imagine angels’ wings to be, and it is clear, as well, that the visual element of the poem relates to mention of the lark. The first and last lines are the strongest, rhetorically, and Herbert is playing with amplification (the outer edges of the wings) and diminution (the place where the wings attach). He is also invoking the

Figure 3.2  George Herbert, from “Easter Wings” (1633).
opposition of flying and falling. In fact, the second stanza (not reproduced) will indicate that the second pair of wings are probably those of the poet who wants to attach his wings to that of the angel. Since each pair of wings gets its own facing page in the 1633 edition, the book’s binding would represent this suturing of the poet to the angel.

Also well known for their visual appeal are Guillaume Apollinaire’s calligrammes from the early part of the twentieth century. These are pictures drawn in outlines that are made up of words. Perhaps the most successful of these is “Heart Crown and Mirror.” The mirror is a large oval outline composed of words that make up a circular sentence in which the end leads right back into its supposed beginning. As one reads this sentence the relation of its parts changes as one goes round the oval. Inside the space that is supposed to be the mirror surface we can read the name Guillaume Apollinaire. In this and other calligrammes, the figure appears to have the function of destroying linearity, because the figure’s purpose is more allied to figuration (representing an object or objects) than to organizing the words into well formed propositions. And yet, the place of the words in terms of the figural pattern isn’t arbitrary either, and tends to have optical significance in relation to where other words are placed.

Significant instances of concrete poetry are to be found in Charles Olson’s *The Maximus Poems* and various books of poetry by Susan Howe, Hannah Wiener, and Douglas Messerli. Indeed, the moment poets such as Stéphane Mallarmé began experimenting with typefaces, font sizes, and spacing of words on the page, concrete poetry had been broached as an important dimension of new developments in the art of writing poetry. Certainly, what separates modern poetry (and its legacies) from earlier poetries of the past has been the considerable amount of attention paid to typographical layout and page design. Also of importance is the way in which page design has led to an interest in making artists’ books in which the difference between poetry and visual art is difficult to separate out. Tom Phillips’ *A Humument* (the entire book is accessible on the Internet) is a famous example in which each page of a novel has been drawn and colored over exposing only certain of the original words that when blocked out in this way read like poetry. Leslie Scalapino’s *The Tango* is an important poetic collaboration with artist Marina Adams in which the final product is an artist’s book in which what happens on the page visually is as important as what happens verbally.24

In poetry there is a close relation between line, syntax, diction, and rhythm. Notice how Milton, for example, uses an iambic pattern to restabilize a passage in Book 1 of *Paradise Lost* in which Satan is being described as holding a shield; it’s a parody of the shield of Achilles in Homer’s *The Iliad* on which there is a complex design. The Tuscan artist Milton references is Galileo.

```
the broad circumference
Hung on his shoulders like the Moon, whose Orb
through Optic Glass the Tuscan Artist views
At ev’ning from the top of Fesole
```

The regular iambic feet begin already at the end of the second line above with “whose Orb.” Notice that this is enjambed with the following line, that is, run together as if there were no break. Also notice how Milton stitches the diction together by repeating vowels. The “O’s” are quite dominant, but the “U’s” have their effect as well. What makes passages like this so interesting is how Milton both regulates and deregulates relations between rhythm, syntax, and line, such that one is moving between the effects of prose and poetry. “The broad circumference hung on his shoulders” is really a prose line. “Whose Orb through Optic Glass the Tuscan Artist views” is obviously iambic poetry (the repetition of two beats, the first short, the second long). Rhythmically, the iambic feet work to *slow down* the pace of the passage as well as to stabilize the rhythm so that there will be the possibility of counterpoint between regular/irregular. The enjambment, moreover, skews the balance in such a way that Satan’s wearing the moon as a shield is imitated in terms of its lopsidedness. One suspects the passage is mimicking Satan’s attempt to walk with this enormously heavy shield, a walking that is off balance but also in balance at certain moments. It is in passages like this
that one can see enormously subtle relations between sound and sense (which in this case is quite visual).

Everyone has been taught the “feet”: iambic (short-long), trochaic (long short), dactylic (long short short,) and anapestic (short-long long). But what is usually not taught in the lower schools, or even in university, is how the meter comes into conflict with main line stresses. When we read, we tend to stress the words whose meanings are important to the sense of the line, but these stresses may well conflict with the stresses hammered out by the meter, so that there is a counterpoint between how we read the line for sense and what the meter of the line itself is doing. Examples abound, but consider Ashbery’s line from “Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape,”

/ / / / / / / / /
Be of no help to you. Good-bye…

The iambic pattern appears above the line and the main-line stresses are shown in terms of the underlined words. Now it has to be said that how one distributes these main-line stresses varies in terms of how we ourselves read. You may stress something differently than I would, which is what makes this sort of analysis a bit idiosyncratic. That aside, we can see that in the line above the main-line stresses actually predominate, though the iambic rhythm runs along like a sort of musical beat in the background.

For a slightly more complex example, notice Christina Rossetti’s “I plucked pink blossoms from mine apple tree” which is iambic throughout. Notice, however, that the alliteration of “plucked pink” and the elongation of “my” into “mine” works against the iambic meter. In fact, the trade off between the “p’s” and the “b” of “blossoms” (the phonemes are in binary opposition, but still labial) carries through an emphasis on the mouth, as if Rossetti was thinking of some relationship between herself and Eve with respect to tasting apples. The poem is entitled “An Apple-Gathering.” Throughout, Rossetti pairs words in imitation of the speaker’s relation to her beloved: “Lilian and Lilas smiled in trudging by”; “Ah, Willie, Willie, was my love less worth”; “Laughing and listening in this very lane.” Added to this is the fact that readers will impose main-line stresses, as well, that will serve to help imitate the speaker’s discourse in terms of an ordinary type of speaking. In other words, the main-line stresses work to naturalize or normalize the artificiality of the poem’s rhythm and its alliterative pairings and reaffirmations. “I plucked pink blossoms from mine apple tree.”
No doubt, some would emphasize “blossoms” too since grammatically it’s the direct object. Yet, however we mark this line, the point is that main-line stresses are going to override the rhythm and even the alliteration, but that this isn’t in any way absolute, as the rhythm and alliteration are in counterpoint and exerting their own influence upon the overall aural texture of the lines.

To see a rather more complex example in the case of a contemporary work, here is a stanza by the British poet John Wilkinson.

I was. But she grinds in her condyl
all that’s known by heart
cloaks the tongue your counter-
poise would furl back. She refers
foreign calls to her program

This, at least, is how I read these lines in terms of the main-line stresses that have been underlined. Notice that “But she grinds in her condyl” (condyl is a medical term for a bone protrusion; perhaps a bone is out of joint here) is composed of two anapests and that these fall in line with the main-line stresses. That second line is more iambic (“that’s known, by heart” is two iambics). But in reading it, the line seems to have but one major stress – at the end. The enjambment with the next line breaks the rhythm up quite perceptibly. “Heart/cloaks” is spondaic (two stresses together). But notice, isn’t that enjambment really a caesura (a break)? Alternatively, couldn’t it be either? There’s some imitation of stress between “heart/ cloaks” and “furl back.” And “refers” imitates somewhat the ambiguity of the line break between “heart” and “cloaks.” We could read it as an enjambment and probably should, but I’m not convinced there isn’t the possibility of a caesura here. Given how the stanza reads in terms of its meaning, we needn’t be convinced necessarily that “refers” has to carry over to “foreign calls.” And yet the main-line stresses would suggest otherwise.

What we have in this stanza is a complex tapestry of inwoven metrical bits that mirror one another: iambics, anapests, spondees. We also have line breaks that manage to ambiguate the enjambment/caesura distinction, as well as metrical line stresses that mark out the places where meaning would appear to be most significant. Perhaps the reader has noticed that in this

---

poem we’re not so far from the world of Ron Silliman’s concept of the *new sentence* in which a complete thought never achieves the kind of referential resolution (semantic or logical) that enables us to correlate the meanings onto something altogether recognizable within the life world. And yet the stanza is held together by the commonplace dominance of a subject (in this case, “she”) that works to normalize grammatical expectations and to organize how words ought to relate, given ordinary language practices. However, this isn’t always strong enough to hold a mimetic sound and sense relation together, given that in spots the details conflict with the givens of the life world that we know. And yet, “She refers/foreign calls to her program” is a well formed sentence, and not a *new sentence*. This speaks to the sense one may get that in such poetry that the words slip into and out of mimetic correspondence so that one is in a kind of borderland region between proper and new sentences. Maybe a better way to put this would be to say that we’re in a liminal zone between mimesis proper and inter-lingual imitation. Ultimately, this takes us back into the work of Gertrude Stein in which a delicate balance exists between overt referentiality and the sort of inter-lingual wordplay that threatens to annihilate reference, not imitate it. Stein:

> Checking an emigration, checking it by smiling and certainly by the same satisfactory stretch of hands that have more use for it than nothing, and mildly not mildly a correction, not mildly even a circumstance and a sweetness and a serenity.²⁶

**READING**


Performance has become a field of study that is interdisciplinary in scope, including anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, communication studies, literary study, visual art, and the performing arts (theatre,
music, dance). The sociological/anthropological aspect of performance speaks to how human actions are successfully or unsuccessfully performed within a particular social sphere relative to one’s intentions or aims (interviewing to get a job, making new friends, settling a dispute). As sociolinguists have noticed, something as basic as a telephone conversation has implicit rules, and how we perform those rules gives information to the interlocutor about how competent or acculturated we are. Are we efficient in terms of returning calls? Can we structure a conversation so that it doesn’t run on for too long? Do we pick up on cultural cues? How competently and elegantly we perform social actions has consequences for respect and status.

Socially performed actions are often somewhat ritualized. Early work on this was done by an ethnographer, Ray Birdwhistell, who in *Microcultural Incidents at Ten Zoos* (1969) filmed families watching animals at zoos. Birdwhistell commented as he filmed, shouting, for example, “Look at the father! Look at the father!” Apparently, Birdwhistell saw the social performance of the father as key to the cultural performance of families watching animals at zoos. Another ethnographically orientated researcher is Erving Goffman, a sociologist who paid close attention to social scripts and how they were performed. Goffman took interest in the fact that something as ordinary as shopping is, in fact, a complex kind of performance that includes browsing, asking for help, selecting, and purchasing that are all part of a socially scripted routine or ritual that has come about through collective practice that everyone is expected to perform more or less competently. Goffman also took interest in the fact that stores have a front (which is public) and a back (which is private, “behind the scenes”) and that this is reminiscent of theatre in which there is the illusory glittering stage that the audience sees and the hidden space behind the stage where the far less glamorous workaday reality of mounting the spectacle is evident. Both actors and shop clerks perform for the customer in the public space, but let their hair down back stage. This suggests that ordinary life is more theatrical than we might generally suppose and that we’re used to spaces being bifurcated in such a way that acting in front of others in one space and being ourselves in another space becomes a usual part of how we perform ourselves in daily life. Obviously, putting on makeup, dressing for a social role, trying to chat people up, and so on, are extensions of Goffman’s understanding that ordinary life and theatrics are not unrelated.

In gender studies, much stress has fallen on performativity ever since Judith Butler published *Gender Trouble*, which emphasizes gender as, in part, a social performance. Butler’s work has put considerable emphasis
upon the body as a site of performativity that has the capacity to challenge and renegotiate social norms and expectations, hence having the capacity to liberalize social toleration. In the field of history, the New Historians, and Stephen Greenblatt in particular, called attention throughout the 1980s to the Renaissance as a period in which one could identify considerable “self-fashioning,” a performativity whose rules were established and codified in conduct books or that could be gleaned from looking at portraits of noblemen. Certainly, the public persona of influential people in the Renaissance required symbols of power such as armor or, in the case of Elizabeth I, opulent, fancy dress. Baldassare Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier*, written in the early sixteenth century, was a well known source of self-fashioning, and was what today we might consider a type of self-help book for those aspiring to be rich and famous. In some of the work of the philosopher Francis Bacon, self-fashioning relates to how one ought to behave publicly and privately in order to be most effective in positions of power, and this led him to psychologize, which is important, because it reveals the integration of self-fashioning with what Bacon would have considered to be human nature. Given that literary depictions relate directly to the performativity of identity in the context of literary depiction, which the New Historicians studied alongside many other forms of social depiction, hence integrating literature within historical context as one among a large number of “practices” for constructing social identity. Central to the New Historian slant was looking at representations as practices (performances, actions) rather than as mere symbolic display (texts, iconography).

Not coincidentally, both gender studies, of the sort developed by Butler, and New Historical approaches, as developed by Greenblatt, saw the body as a site of social discrimination that was being policed (observed, evaluated, and judged – approved/disapproved) in the public sphere. Whereas Butler tended to see performance of the body as a subversive activity that challenges public approval in order to liberalize what is and isn’t tolerated, the New Historical slant was looking at self-fashioning in terms of social conformism in the higher echelons of society and the power and control that implied.

In considering the performing arts, there has been considerable effort to widen performance practices, if not to reconceptualize what performance is. The key conceptual issue appears to have been whether it is possible to liberate an event from its representation and to what extent. Traditional theatre is problematic from this standpoint, because it is devoted to realistic
representations that convert events into concrete, symbolic manifestations in terms of setting, character, and plot. Also, events are fixed in terms of a script. Every word, action, or look is dictated by the playwright’s script and the director’s promptbook. And, of course, traditional theatre stages events by means of a complex apparatus whose purpose is to absorb events into a seamless looking illusion of reality: the so-called removal of a fourth wall by means of which an audience can voyeuristically look on to events that are supposedly private. Since the 1960s, directors like Richard Foreman (of the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre), Lee Breuer (of Mabou Mines), and Elizabeth LeCompte (of the Wooster Group) have attempted to deconstruct traditional theatre by disassociating many of its key elements in a manner that strongly resists the kind of realist illusion whereby events are indistinguishable from their representations. In the case of the Wooster Group, this has involved critiquing mass communication as a representational apparatus in order to show that traditional, mimetic theatre is itself strongly embedded in mass communication (as a society of the spectacle) and that a radical conception of theatre may well try to call into question the social-ideological role that representation has with respect to identifying, labeling, and showing events.

The emergence of performance art out of the Happenings movement of the 1950s has also been quite hostile to traditional theatre in many respects. For example, some performance artists have no theatrical or acting experience and have no interest in acquiring any; they are also not interested in privileging a script or basing a performance upon any sort of text whatsoever; and they may perform pieces that are not necessarily presented in front of audiences. A good example of this would be Chris Burden’s *Five Day Locker Piece* (1971) in which Burden hid in a locker space at the University of California at Irvine for five days. There was no acting involved, no script (only a concept), and no audience. However, there was documentation that the performance had happened, though the documentation can’t be considered an adequate representation of the piece whose event escapes appropriation. Performance art encompasses a rather vast territory that overlaps with video art, conceptual art, minimalism, musical composition, poetry, and even painting. In fact, some versions of performance art even appear more like theatre than not, as in the case of cabaret performances by Karen Finley whose scripts are published, or in the case of proscenium stage performances by musician/performer Laurie Anderson. Nevertheless, these, too, tend to put the representability of events into question. Anderson’s attack in *Home Land* (2007) on the capacity of
“experts” to identify a “problem” would be typical of the tendency to question how events are being represented in a highly technological culture. Indeed, Anderson’s multimedia approach to performance is itself an auto-critique of the technology of representation and its tendency to monumentalize and lend legitimacy to questionable ideas and assumptions that have their source in business and government.

Video art, especially, has been an important medium for disseminating performance art, and much of the most important performance art has only been available to most viewers by means of this medium. One thinks, for example, of the important performances done by Maria Abramović and Ulay in the 1970s, which are only accessible now as video pieces. But in video art performance can also pertain to the performative manipulation of video itself. Dara Birnbaum’s video art piece Wonder Woman (1978) re-performs American broadcast television’s character “Wonder Woman” by technologically manipulating image and mise en scène in order to call a mainstream representation of gender into question. A far more aggressive performative deconstruction of television and film was undertaken by the German-American artist Hans Breder in My TV Dictionary of 1986, a work that was largely improvised in studio. In fact, Breder’s photography, for

Figure 4.1  Hans Breder, “My TV Dictionary,” Video.
Permission to publish given by the Hans Breder Foundation which owns the rights.

1See “Only an Expert” by Laurie Anderson as performed on YouTube.
which he is well known, has consistently used models in a performative manner that challenges the difference between representation and performance. His photographs and videos of Anna Mendieta, the Latina performance artist, are a case in point.

In terms of broadcast television, Jaime Davidovich’s *The Live! Show* was a cable program in New York City that reperformed and demystified official network television broadcasting from a perspective close to Fluxus performances that had their source in George Maciunas, George Brecht, Dick Higgins, John Cage, and others. In adopting the persona of Dr. Videovich, Jaime Davidovich clearly delved into some of the more traditional parodistic aspects of theatre in order to call the realism of consumer-culture television into question. Here, again, performativity undermines representation’s claims to factual objectivity by showing how our sense and understanding of reality is being constructed by media whose bosses generally serve the interests of big business and the political status quo.

No doubt, the critique of representation by means of turning to issues of performance raises the question, yet once more, of social constructedness, which is so central to the thinking of Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, and the New Historians. That said, it is also important to consider representation in terms of what Guy Debord called the “society of the spectacle.”

The whole of life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.  

Debord’s understanding of this situation is based in economics, namely his perception that the spectacle is the direct expression and endpoint of “the dominant mode of [economic] production” within capitalism. The spectacle is not “a decorative element” added onto “the real world” but is “the very heart of society’s real unreality.”

In all its specific manifestations – news of propaganda, advertising or the actual consumption of entertainment – the spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model of social life. It is the omnipresent celebration of a

---

choice already made in the sphere of production, and the consummate result of that choice. In form as in content the spectacle serves as total justification for the conditions and aims of the existing system.\(^3\)

In this context, performativity and performance can become revolutionary, if they serve to dismantle the spectacle by enacting it otherwise, hence calling its fixed sense of reality (its plausibility, authority, and justification) into question. But, of course, modern art movements like cubism, surrealism, and constructivism have all shared this dream of radical demystification.

### 4.2 Realist Theatre: Total Acting

Aristotle argued that drama is essentially the imitation of an action that is serious and complete, but actors might be inclined to argue that acting

is the art of imitating characters. This is the commonplace mimetic understanding of acting, which assumes that the actor is someone whose essential task is to imitate others, whether they are to be animals, mythological characters, historical personages, legendary figures, or fictional characters. For most people, therefore, good acting amounts to a kind of disappearing act. For example, Meryl Streep imitates the character of Sophie so well in the film *Sophie’s Choice* (1982) that she literally becomes that person before our eyes and in so doing gives up her identity as Meryl Streep the actress. This is sometimes called “total acting.” In this form of acting, the character appears to “possess” the actor, something that audiences admire, because it has the appeal of a magic trick: a performance of the impossible. In fact, total acting immerses the whole of the actor – body, feelings, mind – into the portrayal of another whom the actor inhabits as if that other were the actor himself or herself. Essentially, total acting imitates how someone behaves in everyday life, something that requires a realistic everyday context in terms of scenery, props, and so forth. Such imitation also requires the audience to suspend its disbelief and accept the fantasy that, to use our example, Meryl Streep really is Sophie, even though the audience knows better.

What is known as *simple* acting makes less of an attempt on the part of the actor to impersonate a character in every aspect. This type of acting is often encountered in television comedy in which a well known guest celebrity pretends to be a character but doesn’t make a great effort to vanish into the role. Often the discrepancy between who the celebrity is in real life and the kind of person that celebrity is pretending to be is itself the main source of hilarity. Indeed, if simple acting has a virtue, it is that mocking the illusion of total acting offers a degree of ironic distance between actor and role that can be manipulated to advantage when made complicit with audience reception. However, simple acting could also be said to make a virtue of what is merely bad acting, the inability of the actor to render a role convincingly, which has become a television mainstay in the United States.

**READING**

Konstantin Stanislavski’s approach to acting may be summarized in his statement that, “if the actor doesn’t invest his own nature as a human being in the role, then what he creates will be dead.” Stanislavski was active in Moscow both before and after the Bolshevik Revolution, and was transmitted in the West mainly by word of mouth by those who had studied with him, though Stanislavsky did write up his ideas in books that over the years have been translated into English. Because Stanislavski struggled to get his thoughts into an effective form, and because his ideas were evolving over time, he revised his work quite often, which was a nightmare for his redactors, given the chaotic sprawl of some of his manuscripts, and given his tendency to repeat himself and recycle materials. An Actor’s Work, lucidly translated by Jean Benedetti, represents a recent attempt to redact and retranslate his major contributions for an English-speaking audience.

Stanislavski’s starting point was that in practice the mimetic concept of theatrical impersonation was shallow and unconvincing, since it was entirely based on the idea of applying conventional techniques of pretense whose purpose was either to fool audiences into thinking the actor has disappeared into the character, or to enlist the audience’s consent to accept the pretense that the actor’s impersonation is valid. In contrast, Stanislavski was opting for a much more psychologically based form of acting in which “the life of the role” is experienced by the actor as if there were no distinction between actor and character. Stanislavski saw acting as a search for the deepest inner workings of character that could only be unearthed by way of the actor’s willingness to tap into his or her own personal experiences. The search begins when at first an actor only partially assimilates the lines in a play in terms of intellect and emotion. This partial grasp, according to Stanislavski, evokes “a vague, intermittent flow of wants (will).”

In the beginning when the goal isn’t clear, the direction in which [inner drives] are moving is embryonic. Individual moments, which the actor grasped on his first acquaintance with the play cause the psychological inner drives into great bursts of purposeful activity. Thoughts and wants
appear in fits and starts. They are born and die, are then born again and
die again.4

We are told that if one were to draw a diagram of this process, we would
be looking at broken lines, fragments, and dashes. Just as a drawing, song,
or dance requires unbroken lines that connect points, notes, or movements,
“acting also needs an unbroken line. That is why I said to you that when
the line evens out, i.e. when it is unbroken, you can start talking about
creative work.”5 Stanislavski’s notion of line isn’t merely formal, because he
specifies later that he is talking about “lifelines,” lines of lived experience,
relevant to a character, that are continuous, which the actor has to recreate.
Indeed, “we need not one such line but a whole series of them, i.e. our
imagination, concentration, objects, logic, and sequence, Bits and Tasks,
wants, effort and actions, truth, belief, Emotion Memory, communication,
Adaptations and other Elements which are essential to creative activity.”6
Of cardinal importance is that if any of these “lines” are interrupted, “the
play, the performance stops dead.”

If that happens to the forward direction of the inner drives, say, for
example, to thought (the mind), then the human being/actor will not
be able to create his own representations and his appraisals of them but
just say words, which means he will have no idea what he is doing or
saying. If the line of will-feeling comes to a halt, the human being/actor
and his role will have no motivation, there will be no experiencing.7

By means of various exercises, Stanislavski aimed at getting the actor to see
that actions and feelings “form some kind of representation of the fairly
long line” that the actor has been encouraged to create out of all the bits
he or she had only partially grasped before.8 Indeed, this approach can be
called hermeneutical in the sense that Stanislavski was concerned with the
distinction, known to Friedrich Schleiermacher, which opposes explanation
to understanding (1.4). Explanation stands for one’s ability to recount

pp. 284, 309.
7 Stanislavski (2008), p. 287.
8 Stanislavski (2008).
information literally without having necessarily reflected upon it, whereas understanding stands for one’s reflective, psychological internalization of information in ways that make it experientially meaningful. As the quotations above indicate, Stanislavski believed that acting had to be deeply committed to understanding, so much so, that there is an argument to be made that acting is the quintessential hermeneutical practice.

**READING**


4.4 Lee Strasberg (The Method), David Mamet (Practical Aesthetics), Mary Overlie (The Six Viewpoints Approach)

Lee Strasberg’s name is associated with *Method Acting*, which emerged as a major influence in American acting in the late 1940s. “The Method” was influenced to some extent by the teachings of Stanislavski, but whereas Stanislavski had maintained that the essential focus for the actor should be on the major life task of the character, Strasberg emphasized emotion. Whereas Stanislavski thought that an actor should work on the moments of a particular action in order to realize the objective of a scene, Strasberg talked about “acting between the lines,” which placed considerable stress on prioritizing the emotional delivery of the actor over the rhetoric of the dialogue. How the actor moves, looks around, makes gestures, or audible sounds that are not textual in nature is considered by Strasberg to liberate the actor from the script, if not to destabilize the script’s formality. Method Acting maintained that roles should be strongly tinged with the individuality of the actor, whose personality strongly inflects the role... Indeed, Method Acting was crucial for Hollywood film production insofar as it encouraged the actor to assert his or her personality upon the role, as Humphrey Bogart did in *Casablanca* (1942) and Marlon Brando did in *The Godfather* (1972). American acting, according to Strasberg, was supposed to be spontaneous, emotional, and intense, not poised and formal. Central to Strasberg’s approach, and in this he broke with Stanislavski, is that the actor is not playing a character but is playing *himself*. Critics noticed that the Method privileged interiority, often neurotic self-conflict, and that this
worked well in plays such as Tennessee Williams’ *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, or Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, which was typical of naturalism (the depiction of harsh social reality). What Strasberg retained from Stanislavski was the insight that acting requires the actor to be private in public, something that led Strasberg to develop the “private moment exercise” in which privacy is defined as something we stop doing the moment someone enters the room. This emphasis upon the personal and the private has struck some theorists of acting as excessive.

More recent developments in performance practice include a pragmatic approach to acting that borrows ideas from Stanislavski but puts them in a rather different framework, that of American pragmatism as it was developed by William James. *Practical Aesthetics* is associated with the playwright David Mamet and argues that an actor’s lengthy soul searching won’t help solve what are, in essence, pragmatic problems that have to do with a scene’s script. What one does as an actor is what matters, not what one has worked out in one’s mind. Mamet doesn’t think that actors need to impersonate characters, because the only person one can be is oneself. Acting is doing, not feeling, and character is the illusion that is constructed by means of actions.

As in Stanislavski, the actor has to know the “through-line” that connects the character’s motivations to his or her actions. Also, as in Stanislavski, the actor has to know what it is the character not only wants to achieve, but what it is the character is actually *doing or not doing*. What is Hamlet trying to accomplish? What does he actually do? This approach to acting assumes that any scene ought to be understood in terms of what one character is attempting to get from another character. When Hamlet has his long conversation with his mother, Gertrude, what is it he wants her to say or do? The underlying perception is that in essence theatre is about individual desire and how that relates to others. Practical Aesthetics presumes that individual desires cannot be acted out on stage in the absence of their being tested on another character. In other words, theatre is in essence a reciprocal process in which the truth of one person’s desire is to be found in another character’s reactions.

Richard Foreman (of the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre), Lee Breuer (of Mabou Mines), and Elizabeth LeCompte (of the Wooster Group) haven’t actually developed a new school of acting, but they have developed methods of performance in their work that Mary Overlie, herself a director and faculty member of the Tish School of the Performing Arts at New York University, has dubbed Six Viewpoints. Overlie argues that traditional
theatre is made up of six viewpoints that avant garde directors now attempt to dissociate. These six elements include (i) space, (ii) movement, (iii) shape/design, (iv) timing, (v) emotion, and (vi) story. Overlie points out that each of these elements need not be hierarchically subordinated from space on up to story, but that, for example, one can alter space so that it is not merely a setting for something to happen inside, but an autonomous element that can be seen to be emotion itself. Speaking of shape, Overlie points out that actors need to have an awareness of how the body creates design when it is looked at by another. This is especially important if actors are to “have a more powerful presence on stage.”

The basic practice for isolating shape is called “Shape 1-1.” This should be practiced both solo and with a partner. To practice, the actor moves his or her body into a position, then stops tries to see the form, moves again, stops, sees, etc. In duet form, the actors move one at a time, each taking time to absorb the other and the collective, then change to a new shape.9

Key to this practice is the discovery that there is an intimate relationship between shape and time insofar as they are mediated by the body. As in Stanislavski, Six Viewpoints requires significant phenomenological awareness of oneself on stage, which can only come about through practices of self-observation. For example, “When you isolate shape as a separate focus, you find that constant activity is not required onstage.” Exercises exist for time in which time is discerned, not managed, just as exercises exist for emotion in which the actors discover that “the emotional content of the words may be revealed to a much greater extent if they do not follow the meaning of the words with their bodies. Eventually, the actor can begin to separate the actions from the words and float in a world of several focuses at one time …”10

Whereas traditional theatre is language based, the dissociative or deconstructive approach to contemporary theatre has been to emphasize either non-language centered approaches to performativity or language centered

---

10Overlie (2008), pp. 199, 204.
approaches that are anti-realistic and that resist sense making in terms of
dialogue, character, and plot development. It is in this context that Overlie’s
Viewpoints approach becomes quite relevant.

*HOUSE/LIGHTS*, directed by Elizabeth LeCompte (the Wooster Group)
in 1999 collaged Gertrude Stein’s *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* together
is that LeCompte used a television monitor as a stage within the stage and
framed it by live actors who at times show up within the televised image
on the monitor, hence breaking down the difference between what is live
and what is recorded. In a sense, the television monitor becomes a sort of
actor that is being played to and that plays along with. Text is performed
on stage and on the television monitor, but rather than a dialogue, what
we witness is parallelism, for example, a sexy female narrator telling a
story behind the monitor which is interrupted by an old film sequence
that does and doesn’t complement what was said before. If there are bits
of story to be grasped here and there, they have an autonomy that floats
free of any compelling plot line. In this theatrical context, actors really do
need to rely on the sorts of exercises Overlie suggests, because the actor’s
awareness of his or her own presence becomes very crucial to whether
movements, emotions, spatial orientations, and so forth will be executed
powerfully within a production in which all the seams are showing and
in which illusionism, because it is being demystified, won’t rescue the actor
from any shortcomings in technique the way that traditional theatre often
can by inviting the viewer to buy into the illusion as an overriding
preoccupation.11

**READING**


11 This section is heavily indebted to articles by Anna Strasberg (“Lee Strasberg Technique”),
Louis Scheeder (“Strasberg’s Method and the Ascendency of American Acting”), Robert Bella
(“Practical Aesthetics: An Overview”), and Mary Overlie (“The Six Viewpoints”) in Arthur
Bartow’s *Handbook*, cited above. Bartow’s book also has articles on Stella Adler, Uta Hagen,
and Jerzy Grotowski, and others who are of major importance to contemporary performance
practice. Also see what is a profound book on pedagogy in general, Stella Adler, *The Art of
Acting*, ed. Howard Kissel (New York: Applause, 2010). Adler was Marlon Brando’s acting
teacher.
4.5 Epic Theatre

Realist theatre, with its emphasis upon “total acting,” was anathema to the German playwright Bertolt Brecht who developed the antagonistic concept of epic theatre in the 1920s and 1930s. According to Brecht, the illusionism of realist theatre was ideologically suspect because its purpose was to anesthetize the bourgeoisie to social tragedy by turning it into entertainment. Problematic, too, was that realism reinforced complicity with the status quo, even when the status quo was unacceptable. Passive viewing, which was linked to the assumption that “the way things are” can’t be changed, ensured social/political inaction on the part of that segment of society that actually had the power to bring change about.

Epic theatre breaks with the illusionism of realist theatre. Where there is music, it sounds amateurish and bad; where there is dialogue, it doesn’t quite convince; the characters are relatively crude, which makes identification with them unlikely; the sets are makeshift environments that are flimsy, and they deny us the fantasy of a self-enclosed world whose fourth wall is missing. The actors, at various times, will speak of themselves in the third person and will read stage directions in order to break the illusion of theatre. Nothing is to be acted as if the content were “a given.” Alternatives to what is said are always supposed to be inferred. Furthermore, epic theatre does not offer a satisfying catharsis, for epic theatre is not supposed to be “resolved.”

Whereas in Shakespeare the diversity of speeches coming from various different social ranks would be synthesized – as in, say, within the character of Hamlet or Lear – in Brecht dialogue is not homogenized. The Brechtian audience therefore is in the role of mediating the dialogue in a rather self-conscious and critical manner, as opposed to passively taking in what characters on stage have processed for the audience. When, at the end of Arthur Miller’s play Death of a Salesman, a friend of the family says that no one ought to blame Willy Loman for killing himself in order that his wife get the life insurance, that character is psychologically “containing” the tragedy and explaining its moral significance to the audience. In Brechtian epic theatre, however, no character would be allowed to serve such a function, at least, not unironically, because the purpose of epic theatre is to deny the audience synthesis and the emotional comfort and character identification that synthesis makes possible. Also, Brecht doesn’t want the dialogue or the characters that speak to resolve issues in such a way that after the play is over, one can forget it and move on. Brecht refuses synthesis in terms
of creating stage props that make us realize we're seeing a performance, not a ready-made reality. He shifts the scenes around in different ways for different performances, and encourages the delivery of lines that make one realize there is a disjunction between what is said and the person who is speaking. In such a manner, the audience undergoes an “alienation effect” (the term is Brecht’s). By way of using posters or captions on stage, Brecht was also able to bring across a didactic element within theatre that interrupted its illusionism. Similarly in the collaborations between Brecht and composer Kurt Weill, songs were introduced not only to interrupt the plot, but to bring out the tawdriness and vulgarity of mass produced culture, which serves as the context for lived experience.

We can see the influence of epic theatre upon avant garde theatrical practices, for example, in Elizabeth LeCompte’s work. Her production of HOUSE/LIGHTS (1999), detailed somewhat at the end of the previous section, does not work with developed characters, but character types who are not entirely realized. As in Brecht, the apparatus of theatre is not hidden from sight. We are aware, therefore, that we are experiencing theatre not in terms of a final illusory product in which we become lost as mystified viewers, but experience theatre as a mode of signifying production whose live and technological processes we apprehend as dissonant constructions that are both associated and disassociated. We also become aware that the work has an open structure, much like epic theatre, in which the bits could be moved around or some of them deleted and replaced by other bits. In fact, the Wooster Group puts on various performances of the same work as work in progress. Elements of the work become de-narrativized or re-narrativized such that the story element begins to lose its centrality as master plan for the whole.

READING

Walter Benjamin, “What is Epic Theatre”? (1939)
Bertolt Brecht, “Epic Theatre” (1930)

4.6 Theatre of Cruelty

Developed as a concept by the playwright and thinker, Antonin Artaud (1896–1948), the theatre of cruelty attempts to reclaim exaltation and
force, which Artaud believes has been repressed in us by the inhibitions of culture. “We must believe in a sense of life renewed by the theatre, a sense of life in which man fearlessly makes himself master of what does not yet exist.” As opposed to dwelling within representation as the registration or recording of what exists around us, “everything that has not yet been born can still be brought to life if we are not satisfied to remain mere recording organisms.”

By life Artaud meant a “fluctuation” of being that exists beyond forms and that is wiped out the moment forms are adopted. The disintegration of social forms, the collapse of order, infringement upon morality, psychological disaster, and sickness of the flesh are attributes that Artaud relates to a clarity of somnambulant vision that has theatrical significance in terms of the playing out of a disaster. Yet our will operates “even in this absurdity” and “we do not die in our dreams.”

Artaud’s theatre of cruelty is, indeed, quite close to the descriptions of schizophrenic epistemology that Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari describe in their *Anti-Oedipus* as a libidinal disaggregation of body parts such that “desire, still in its own mode … causes flows to move that are capable of breaking apart both the segregations and their Oedipal applications – flows capable of hallucinating history, of reanimating the races in delirium, of setting continents ablaze”.

Using the suggestive vocabulary of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, the theatre of cruelty is nonlocalizable, dispersed, inter-communicated, a fragmented process of temporalization whose detached parts are vibrating and won’t devolve into a centered structure. Moreover, what one has in a theatre of cruelty are associated flows of inclusive disjunctions, a schizo-genesis whose origin is inappropriable in terms of its being a continual reappropriation. For Artaud, to experience this state is to suffer the cruelty of divesting oneself of everything that gives us comfort. That said, it has never been clear to anyone what precisely such a theatre would look or sound like, which may be part of the appeal of such a theory, but certainly performance pieces like Carolee Schneeman’s

---

“Meat Joy” (1964) or some of the edgier performance pieces of Karen Finley move in the direction of uncontained raw emotional expression that cannot be easily categorized. Also, Richard Foreman’s plays approach aspects of Artaud’s conceptions of theatre. As Foreman put it in the context of his play *Miss Universal Happiness*, “I’d been trying to achieve a state of Dionysian frenzy – I tried to evoke the detachment and illumination that can be found in the very center of the hurricane.”

**READING**

Antonin Artaud, *Theatre and its Double* (1958)
Jacques Derrida, “To Unsense the Subjectile” (1998)

---

### 4.7 Actions

In realist theatre individual actions have to make sense in terms of circumstance and choice. There is a reason why Willy Loman kills himself at the end of Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, namely so that his wife can cash in on his life insurance policy. Even in theatre such as Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, in which the world seems quite irrational and arbitrary, actions are motivated by the indomitable faith in the possibility that tomorrow will be better than today. However, once performance moves out of the theatre into other spaces, such as the street or the art gallery, actions tend to be seen much more in isolation as enigmatic happenings.

In the context of performance art, actions are at once symbolic and visceral; therefore, they can make an unusually strong impression upon viewers. In *Light/Dark* (1977), Marina Abramović and her partner Ulay kneeled face to face at the Kunstmuseum, Köln, in Germany and for 20 minutes alternatively slapped each other’s face quite hard until one of them stopped. The action was open ended and stopped only on impulse. Issues of gender, abuse, cruelty, violence, pain, will, mutuality, and the physical

---

presence of an action threatening to become unbearable to watch were all 
at stake in this simple performance piece. Whereas in traditional theatre 
we might have rising and falling action, or a surprising catastrophic 
moment, or some other form of development, in Light/Dark all we have is 
a repeated, monotonous action, though one that escalates with time in 
terms of the pain it inflicts upon the face. What does this action mean? 
What are the intentions of the performers who are performing these 
actions? At what point does the audience begin to doubt that its role should 
be merely to watch, as opposed to intervening in what at some point begins 
to look like torture? The mutual slapping can be viewed, certainly, as a 
symbol, but of what is it a symbol of? The action, in this case, appears to 
be more connotative than denotative.

Symbolism speaks to a thinking in and with images, that is, the symbol 
correlates something that we see, whether an object or an event, to an idea 
that is analogous, not literal. For example, for the ancient Egyptians, as a 
symbol the hand was analogous to a pillar, and the crocodile was analogous 
to fury and evil. These symbols, of course, were codified. The culturally 
literate were familiar with them and knew what they were supposed to 
stand for. But when we see actions in a performance such as Light/Dark, 
we don’t have a ready-made code to draw from even though we sense that 
the action of mutual slapping has to be analogous to something we should 
be able to name. In fact, Abramović/Ulay themselves pointed out that they 
were performing “Relation Work” in which they considered “vitality as an 
energy for physical motion, with the effort to direct movement towards 
physical limitations.” 16 Rather than point to a simple concept, the mutual 
slapping has to be seen as an activity that realizes vitality as a direct move- 
ment towards physical limitations. Rather than symbolizing this move- 
ment, the slapping actually is this movement. And yet, it appears to be in 
excess of this basic literality insofar as it is an image that corresponds to 
something analogous we have to imagine, even if the action as symbol is 
largely connotative and open ended.

At around the same time, Latina artist Ana Mendieta performed an 
action in 1972 of standing naked against a wall while holding a headless 
chicken that is bleeding to death and flapping its wings. This action appears 
to be quasi-religious, especially because visually it has immense power in 
terms of how the dying bird and the naked woman appear to be in some

16 Kristine Stiles, Klaus Biesenbach, and Chrissie Iles, *Marina Abramović* (London: Phaidon, 
sort of visceral communication, if not identification. The bird’s blood on Mendieta’s body is especially moving because it marks her and therefore bestows its presence – its life force – upon her. She is, as it were, bathed in the sacrificial blood of the animal, which, of course, has symbolic ties to indigenous South American cultures as well as to Christianity. In this case, the bird symbolism has spiritual analogies that aren’t unfamiliar. Most important is that the symbol of the bird evokes a direct relationship with the woman as if she, too, were a being that is no stranger to sacrifice. This is poignant now, because Mendieta would die in the mid-1980s, having either jumped or been pushed out of a window in a New York high rise. In the case of the performance that was videotaped in Iowa, the symbolism of the performative act is concrete, not abstract. And yet it is what psychologists would call “overdetermined” in the sense that symbolically it means more than it says by way of all the associations we can bring to it and how literally they are instantiated in the simple action of Mendieta holding a dying bird whose wings are flapping and whose blood is coming into contact with her body.¹⁷

An important source for action is the German artist Joseph Beuys who made what have become known as “action sculptures” in which the symbolism is codified in terms of a personal private symbolism that relates to Beuys’ biography. Beuys participated in many Fluxus performance festivals (Fluxus emphasized minimality and ephemerality), and typical of a performance made up of “actions” was Siberian Symphony: Part One (1963). “[Beuys] prepared a piano with little clay hills and hung a dead hare from the blackboard. By means of wire and pine twigs he formed an energy channel between piano and hare. Beuys then played sections of Erik Satie’s Messe des pauvres and Sonnerie de la Rose + Croix, dashing from time to time to the blackboard and writing phrases on it.”¹⁸ No doubt, one could call this a happening, but the piece was set up or staged to be a very self-conscious series of distinctly symbolic actions whose shamanistic dimension was clear: to put nature into contact with man made objects, the hare with the piano, and to open up an “energy channel” between the two. In

fact, shamanism became a central part of Beuys’ performative persona, which added a theatrical dimension to his work. The shaman, of course, is a spiritual leader from the world of primitive peoples who heals the community by means of performing magical actions that bring about transformations beneficial to individuals and society. The shaman, who Beuys associated with the role of artist, has special powers of intuition and is in communication with spirits, among them, animal spirit guides. Certainly, one could see Beuys’ larger installations as the stage sets within which his performances have taken place. But the point is not to argue over definitions as to whether we’re encountering installations, action sculptures, or theatrical sets, but to realize that Beuys “actions” traversed all of these possibilities.

Indeed, if we compare Beuys, Mendieta, and Abramović/Ulay, immediately noticeable will be their emphasis upon how a physical phenomenon (an action) involves relations of energy and contact that serve to charge an image with symbolic properties we might or might not be able to articulate. This speaks to what one might call the non-verbal aspect of an action: its refusal to emerge into full consciousness as a denotative signal or sign.

READING

Richard Foreman, Unbalancing Acts (1992)

4.8 Play

Play is a transformative practice whereby the function of actions takes on a mimetic value that becomes an end in itself. The influential theorist of performance, Richard Schechner, in Performance Theory, offers the following list of transformative procedures whereby an ordinary action or set of actions that would otherwise have a utilitarian purpose is transformed into a mimetic or imitative action or set of actions that become intrinsically interesting as if they were things in themselves. Here is a truncated version of Schechner’s list.
(i) The re-ordering of a sequence.
(ii) Exaggeration of elements of a sequence.
(iii) Repetition of elements in a sequence.
(iv) The breaking off of actions by means of stoppage or interruption and the intercalation of seemingly irrelevant actions: fragmentation.
(v) Exaggeration plus repetition.
(vi) Incompletion of actions: the stoppage of the “intention element” (beginning of an action that suggests a teleology – what comes next) or of a “completion element” (denial of closure or ending).\textsuperscript{19}

As Schechner points out, play develops rules and therefore contradicts the sense we have of there being something we might call “free play.” Also, these rules are transformative in that they make play serious, which contradicts the sense that play should be anything \textit{but} serious. When play is transformed absolutely into a set of codes that cannot be altered, we tend to see the emergence of something called the script: the directions for how play is to be played. Scripts can be diagrammatic, a series of rules or directions, but also word for word transcriptions of what is to be said and done. As play moves from impromptu performance to scripted performance we see the shift, too, from the oral to the written. This is especially evident in the area of performance art in which scriptless performances are later transcribed in order to be preserved as writing.\textsuperscript{20} In such a case, the “play” becomes very much a matter of what the performer does with the script or score. This occurs rather routinely in the performance of jazz. Jazz musicians have to introduce some individual “play” into a familiar standard song that realizes a playful potential within the song that differs from previous improvisations by other musicians in the past.

Examples of play in spoken performance would include Jaime Davidovich’s \textit{The Live! Show} (circa 1982), Paul Rubens’ television program \textit{Pee Wee’s Playhouse} (circa 1989), The HalfLifers’ (Torsten Zenas Burns and Anthony Discenza) video work, for example, \textit{Afterlifers: Walking and Talking} (2008), and Miranda July’s films, \textit{Nest of Tens} (2000) and \textit{Me and You and Everyone We Know} (2005), in which play is stressed to an unusual extent. Unfortunately, play has not received the attention it deserves in

\textsuperscript{20}Schechner (2010).
performance studies. For the noticeable and chilling absence of play, see Chantal Akerman’s early films, especially *Les rendez-vous d’Anna* (1978).

**READING**


## 4.9 Happenings

Happenings were performances conducted initially in the 1950s and 1960s that stressed the spontaneity of events as they were acted out, knowingly or not, by individuals who weren’t engaged in formal acting, but who were actants (doers) nevertheless. Chance is of central importance to the happening, because chance ensures that actions will be freed from premeditated acts on the part of the participants, that the event will be liberated from the structure in which it takes place. John Cage, the composer, is well known as a major figure for the development of the happening in New York City. Many of Cage’s compositions were happenings, the most famous being 4’33”, for piano (1952) where the performer sits at the piano before an audience and does nothing.

The critic Michael Kirby argued that happenings consist of what he called non-matrixed performing, that is, plotless, multifocal, and undefined performances in which the relation between the piece and the audience isn’t specified but left up to chance. In some happenings, the actions occurred in a way that no one person could observe the whole. Or the piece occurred without people within the happening realizing that a happening was in fact taking place. Unlike theatre, the happening doesn’t privilege a human situation that is developed in order to state something about life. In fact, the happening isn’t even a message centered activity. The happening makes no statement and doesn’t necessarily have any meaning. In a happening what is done (the action) isn’t of central importance, if it’s important at all. So there isn’t necessarily any content “to follow.” The relation between action, actor, and witness lacks the relation that it has in theatre (see Figure 4.3), namely:
Radical from the perspective of theatre is that in a happening the difference between performer and audience (actor/witness) breaks down considerably, if not completely. Also, a happening can be set up by means of a set of directions, but in fact it is quite alien to something that can be scripted. For example, no two happenings based on the same set of directions are going to be alike, though they may resemble one another. Epistemologically the happening is frustrating for those who witness them insofar as one cannot usually grasp what, in particular, one has been witnessing, since happenings escape objectification, often on account of their multi-focus (different things going on in different places all at once). For some, it helps to think of the happening as abstract theatre – that it is to theatre what abstract art is to representational painting. But, no doubt, theorists of performance would complain that this is misleading as it suggests that the happening is a subset of theatre.

Michael Kirby has pointed out that typical of the happening is that it is often composed in terms of a “compartmented structure.”

Compartmented structure is based on the arrangement and contiguity of theatrical units that are completely self-contained and hermetic. No information is passed from one discrete theatrical unit – or “compartment” – to another. The compartments may be arranged sequentially … or simultaneously …

Logically, the units do not explain one another and make up a coherent whole. Robert Wilson and Philip Glass’s Einstein on the Beach, though a clear instance of theatre (opera), drew from this aspect of the happening, as has Meredith Monk in her opera Atlas, though in these cases coherence is restored to a great extent in terms of what Kirby calls “information

\[\text{Figure 4.3 Fundamental Performance Triangle.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{21}Happenings and Other Arts, ed. R. Sandford (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 5.}\]
structure. "Atlas, for example, is about a young girl’s dreams of travel to exotic places. Also, in Monk the performers are not prohibited from becoming characters, though character in her case would be dual: one has the presence of actor as actor and actor as character simultaneously. The actor doesn’t disappear into the character. In the happening, it is usual that the performer merely performs a task. There is no use of time, place, or character; that is, there is no matrixing, as Kirby would say, of an imaginary locale in an imagined time that then interprets action and requires the actor to fill in context, such as how the action tells us something about the person who performs it in terms of characterization. A good example of non-matrixed actions are those of William Wegman’s dog, Man Ray, in videos made in the early 1970s that show happenings in which the dog spontaneously acts. Of course, using Man Ray was a brilliant idea, because by definition a dog cannot act in the traditional theatrical sense, though Hollywood’s animal trainers and film editors would have us believe otherwise. An example of a televised happening – these are rare – is “Boxed In,” which was performed by myself and the artists Hans Breder and Lucio Pozzi with students at the University of Iowa in 1993, among them Karen Koch. This was a non-matrixed performance that combined improvised text and spontaneous actions within a televised studio space; the performance was transmitted live to the Iowa City community.

Figure 4.4  “Boxed in,” Live Televised Happening, Iowa City, 1993. Left to right, Herman Rapaport, Karen Koch, Hans Breder. Permission to publish given by the Hans Breder Foundation which owns the rights.
As to the origin of happenings, Kirby and others locate it in the Dada movement during World War One. “Non-matrixed performance and compartmented structure” were basic to Dada actions, which were born in the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich in 1916, but were continued after the war in Paris, especially. Eric Satie, André Breton, Max Ernst, Francis Picabia and many others were involved in happenings.

**READING**


### 4.10 Performance Art

Paul Couillard has usefully described performance art from the perspective of someone who has mounted performance art pieces on a regular basis within a gallery space in Toronto, FADO Performance Inc.

The phrase “performance art” is problematic, since performance art is a self-defining medium. Theoretically, any artist – or non-artist, for that matter – can call what they do “performance art.” Unlike media like painting, sculpture, or photography, which can be defined fairly easily by their form and how materials are used, “performance art” is more a set of constantly contested practices that have a variety of historical, cultural, and aesthetic lineages. Because of this constant evolution, what was understood as performance art in 1965 might sit more comfortably today as a music concert, or a dance, or a piece of theatre. […] FADO defines performance art in relation to the root elements of the medium time, space, the performer’s body and the relationship between performer and audience. We are most interested in works that are innovative in that their use of one or more of these elements, including those that are multi-disciplinary. We focus on artists who have chosen performance art as a primary medium to create and communicate provocative new images and new perspectives. […] FADO’s job is to present modest-budget projects that address aspects of live presence, but don’t fit into
Performance art as a late twentieth-century phenomenon had many influences stemming from radical art movements like Dada, sound poetry (Kurt Schwitters’ action of reciting bird language under a tree in Hanover prior to World War 2) but also from more traditional forms of acting associated with broadcast television and film. Performance art may be formally staged as theatre or occur within what we might consider theatre, for example, productions by the Wooster Group. A good recent example would be performance artist Lynn Book’s “The Annotated Hippolyte et Aricie,” which was a performance art piece that opened Gina Crusco’s remake of Rameau’s eighteenth-century opera, Hippolyte et Aricie, in New York City’s Peter Norton Symphony Space (2010). Laurie Anderson’s 1980s productions of her epic performance art work, United States, which was performed on stage but also in more cabaret-like venues, had elements of epic theatre in that the various bits could be rearranged from performance to performance. Also, the technology called attention to itself as both an amplification of and an interference with what Anderson was delivering. As in the epic theatre tradition, United States made one critically aware of social issues having to do with power, ideology, and representation. And, as in the Brechtian tradition, United States had an element of flimsiness that called attention to the plausibility or legitimacy of the discourse, if not of technology (the capacity of the vocorder to alter voice pitch in order to make one sound more authoritative).

Spalding Gray’s well known Swimming to Cambodia was produced through the Wooster Group in the 1980s and consisted of a monologue recited from behind a table. It could be compared to Samuel Beckett’s Krapp’s Last Tape in this regard, though the Beckett play calls for more moving around by the actor. Also Karen Finley and Holly Hughes are well known for performing in clubs that offer a cabaret like set up and deliver monologues that challenge social norms. Hughes’ work can be laconic and self-ironizing in ways that subvert authority and her work has a comedic element that is entertaining. Finley’s performances have actually offended certain members of US Congress who denounced them for being obscene and unacceptable.

However, they are largely attempts to say the raw unspeakable truth about sexual relations that no one dares to admit. Finley’s work is both aggressively exhibitionistic in terms of exposing every sexual taboo she can think of and, at the same time, morally outraged and accusatory. Precisely where the line is between condemning and acting out the obscenities she often exhibits is impossible to tell. What seems to horrify her is the uncontrollable violence of the sexual drives and the extent to which they would run rampant if there were no powerful social forces of suppression to keep them in check. As in traditional theatre, Finley counts on catharsis to expose and expunge these forces of predation. Her message is, in fact, a humanistic plea against abusive behavior.

Finley is one among a large number of female performance artists for whom “the stage” – that is, the place where the action happens – may well be the female body itself. One senses this already in the work of Carolee Schneemann whose orgiastic happenings of the 1960s occur in a space that is metaphorically her body. In other words, there is a microcosm/macrocosm relation between body and space: the body is in metonymical relation to the space in which it takes place. In Schneemann’s piece Meat Joy all the people who are sexually romping around with Schneemann become part of her body in the macrocosmic sense whereby the female body becomes...
the entire space in which performance happens. That seems to be the case in Finley's work, as well. When she strips off her clothes and drenches herself in honey, there is the implication that she becomes the site of a performance or acting out that stages the audience's desires and reactions – that is, its own “psycho drama” in terms of which the audience cannot fail to play out its own libidinal theatre. One can imagine that the controversial playwright Frank Wedekind might have had this in mind in his play *Lulu* (*Die Büchse der Pandora* (1904)), as well. But there the female body is still kept under control by the forces of male repression and not allowed to swallow up the whole play into itself, though in Alban Berg's masterful operatic transformation of the play, the music appears to be taking us in the opposite direction.

Of course, many female performance artists have focused upon how femininity is socially constructed, and certainly Martha Rossler's famous video art pieces, *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) and *Vital Statistics* (1977), are rather glum presentations in which the viewer is encouraged to adopt a critical attitude with respect to how gender is codified. Other striking examples occur in what RoseLee Goldberg calls “performed photography,” which was invented, perhaps, by Cindy Sherman in the late 1970s when she adopted the framework of “total acting” and “disappeared” into various stereotypical representations of women as Sherman imagined them. Her early black and white images of herself posing as white middle-class women conforming to socially identifiable codes of dress, gesture, and bodily comportment raised issues of how performance and representation come into relation. Goldberg reminds us that gender has been revealed as hideously constrained by stereotypes, as in the case of the male performance artist Yasumasa Morimura who in 1996 constructed and photographed “Self-Portrait (Actress) after Vivien Leigh 1” in which he is made up to look like Vivien Leigh in *Gone with the Wind* (1939), the oddity being not just the image's trans-gender element (Goldberg says this relates to Kabuki) but the placement of the figure before a simulated Japanese landscape with cherry blossoms and pagoda.23 Here, of course, we're confronted with aggressive but yet subtle code-switching that has an uncanny effect in the Freudian sense of confusing the familiar and the unfamiliar. Again, the Brechtian principle of estrangement becomes noticeable, though one felt it too in Sherman's early work, given that she was eerily the same but different in

23The photograph is reproduced in Rose Lee Goldberg, *Performance: Live Art Since the 60s* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), p. 123.
each self-portrait that she took. In such work, of course, the body is still a sort of stage – except that here it stages the contestation of gender codes. Performance art is often shown on video and as video in museum spaces. But it is also performed live within museums, as well. Most famous for such performances are Marina Abramović and Ulay (Uwe Laysiepen). Abramović has said that,

Theatre is the absolute enemy. It was something bad, it was something we should not deal with. It was artificial. All the qualities that performance had were unrehearsable. There was no repetition. It was new for me and the sense of reality was very strong. We refused the theatrical structure. The performances were always in an empty space with no lights, and even the video recording was one-to-one. I would ask for the camera to be put in one static position, and then left.24

Indeed, the absence of a theatrical set puts considerable emphasis upon the bodies of the performers and their actions. In Relation in Space (1976) Abramović and Ulay performed an hour-long piece in which their naked bodies crash into each other repeatedly at increasing speed. In Relation in Time the artists tied their hair together and sat for 17 hours back to back. In such work, physical endurance, not the contestation of codes, is a major element that bears on the presence and presencing of the performance as an event that has a temporality that can be measured in terms of, say, effort and pain. In the spring of 2010, Marina Abramović performed for about a month at MoMA in New York City. She sat at a table and stared straight ahead of her. People could line up in order to sit across from her for as long as they wished. Here, again, simplicity, endurance, concentration, and will were a major part of the performance, which, if we think about it, isn’t entirely different from traditional acting.

Another example of performance art in a museum setting is Dan Graham’s Performance, Audience, Mirror (1977) that put audiences in front of a mirror while Graham commented on how people in the audience looked as he talked into a microphone, thereby making people feel very self-consciousness. For participants, the question was how these remarks corresponded to what they saw in the mirror, if not how people envisioned

themselves. Also, the piece raised the question of what is and isn’t socially taboo. For example, is it all right to put in words how someone appears in front of a group in which they are present? To what extent is shame (failure to meet a representational ideal) going to intervene more or less automatically? Performance art of this sort is epistemological in the sense that it sets up a sort of experimental situation in order to trigger cognitive responses that raise issues with respect to perception, ideation, and representation—in this case, self-representation versus being represented by an other. Here, of course, emphasis falls upon the interactivity of the audience with whatever is being performed or set up by way of an installation, for example, the mirrors.

If direct experience has been a major preoccupation for some performance artists, indirect, mediated experience has mattered most to others, which is why video and photography have been so much a part of the performance art world. Joan Jonas was originally a sculptor who in the 1970s made video that was epistemologically performative. For example, she explored the epistemological disorientation of the face when it is both reflected in a mirror and played back by a television monitor at once (Right Side Left Side, 1972). But Jonas also started making installations in which to perform. Reading Dante (2009) is a recent installation currently viewable on YouTube’ that was constructed for the Venice Biennale, and consists of a semi-darkened viewing space for wall-sized video that montages numerous different video clips that relate by way of what Jonas calls “free association.” In addition, Jonas performs live by reading text from Dante’s Commedia and by performing actions in front of the screen on which the video appears.

This work is theatrical both in the cinematic sense of establishing a darkened place in which to watch a moving image and from the perspective of looking at a live performance. Unlike theatre, the total effect isn’t seamless. In fact, all the various bits of the work, including the environment one is in, don’t quite cohere and, as in much of Jonas’ other work, there is a sense of general mismatching of elements. The performed actions in front of the screen do and don’t go together with the video. Jonas’ physical action of what appears to be sweeping, for example, is of a very different order than her action within the video of drawing. There is also quite a bit of emphasis on play and fantasy, for example, her simulation of traffic by means of using toy cars, and an emphasis upon the random, for example, a wandering dog in the video. The looseness of the overall bits in relation to one another bear upon a fragility that the drawing reinforces, and the
whole is given a very personal touch that resists grandiosity or virtuosity, something that puts Jonas in a different category from Laurie Anderson, whose work started to become commercialized in the late 1980s, as in the case of her concert film, *Home of the Brave* (1986). In contrast to Anderson’s strong cultural critiques, Jonas’ drawings were sometimes done on a chalkboard in order that she could emphasize their impermanence as declamations. Erasure, substitution, and revision seem to be a main feature of her work, which gives it a temporary, eventful quality.

Yet, in Jonas, as in Anderson, performance is subsumed into the apparatus of a kind of “total theatre” experience, even if it takes considerable distance from traditional theatre. Something more or less analogous outside the museum venue would be operas like Robert Wilson and Philip Glass’s *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), or Meredith Monk’s *Atlas* (1991) in which, again, performative bits are brought together without being heavily integrated into a seamless illusion, despite a tendency toward being a total theatrical experience. This relates, as well, to some of the performances of work written by Richard Foreman for his Ontological-Hysteric Theatre in which there is considerable control over a production – the inclination is towards total theatre – but in which the production itself doesn’t feel as if it is strongly integrated as it might be in more traditional theatre and hence resisting it to some very significant extent.

**READING**


---

### 4.11 Guerrilla Theatre

Guerrilla theatre and performance is politically motivated and represents an intervention into some aspect of the public sphere in order to contest social values and prejudices that have major political consequences for certain groups of people within society. Guerrilla performances often involve politically committed collectives, like the Guerrilla Girls, who may show up without notice in a politically sensitive arena in order to perform “unthinkable” or “unspeakable” actions that expose the hypocrisy and brutality of the dominant social order. Women, gays, and lesbians, in particular,
have been very active in terms of displaying the social fault lines of prejudice in order not only to protest bigotry and the social oppression it brings about, but in order to polarize the public sphere for the sake of consciousness raising and the political radicalization of those who could be more actively engaged in the political process of delegitimizing illiberal social behavior. Guerrilla theatre can be presented in many forms: on a proscenium stage, in the round, as a happening, as a political action, and so on. Some guerrilla performances do not demarcate themselves in ways that the public is aware that the actions they are seeing are, in fact, part of a political performance. The performances of Guillermo Gómez-Peña and

Figure 4.6  Coco Fusco, “Stuff,” Intermedia Studios, University of Iowa, 1996. Permission to publish given by the Hans Breder Foundation which owns the rights.
Coco Fusco, for example, depend upon the public’s not being aware that what they are seeing is a live simulation of anthropological differences (Gómez-Peña and Fusco assume the identity of native people south of the American border) whose exaggerations grotesquely expose the general ignorance of the public (that is, the audience) about matters having to do with race, ethnicity, and cultural difference. Whereas Gómez-Peña and Fusco are performance artists, their work is theatrical when it is deliberately and elaborately staged, for example, in the case of Gómez-Peña and Fusco simulating Stone-Age people from South America who are kept in a cage with all sorts of outrageous stage props for visitors to see in a famous American museum of natural history. That Westerners seem nonplussed to encounter a human being in such a circumstance is both hilarious and politically damning. The Viennese Actionists (among them, Hermann Nitsch and Otto Mühls) are famous for their blood sacrifices and also make up a sort of guerrilla theatre in that their work is intended to do violence to bourgeois values to the point that the state is forced into reacting to wild, politically confrontational events that escape ordinary ways of cognizing reality.

READING

Leslie Hill and Helen Paris, Guerrilla Performance and Multimedia (2001)
5 Tools for Reading Texts as Systems

5.1 Aristotle and Form 170
5.2 The Literary Work as Object of Rational Empiricism 174
5.3 Saussurean Linguistics 178
5.4 Lévi-Strauss and Structuralism 182
5.5 Roman Jakobson’s Communication Model 187
5.6 Roland Barthes’ Hierarchical Structures 189
   Functions 192
   Actions 194
   Narration 195
5.7 Ideality and Phenomenology of the Literary Object: Husserl and Derrida 197
5.8 Dissemination 203
5.9 Structure as Rhizome: Deleuze and Guattari 205
5.10 Permutation 208
5.11 Undecidability: Derrida, Gödel, Lacan 210
5.12 Simulating Systems: Jean Baudrillard 216
   Counterfeiting 218
   Production 218
   Simulation 219
5.13 Multiplicity: Badiou 221
One could think of the twentieth century as a great age of systems theory. Quantum mechanics, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, analytical philosophy, cubism, constructivism, surrealism, objectivism, cybernetics, genetics, structuralism, deconstructionism, Marxism, Lacanianism, chaos theory, and postmodern architecture are only some examples of areas in which innovative systems approaches to entire disciplines have been central. In the arts and humanities, modernist and postmodernist movements have been concerned with questions of organization and structure that debunk traditional realist and rationalist understandings of art and the world. As is well known, modern art was typified by the introduction of new styles whose formal constructions sometimes scandalized a public that was of the view that a proper work of art can only be modeled on the reality that we actually see and the conventions that we already know that have been handed down over the centuries. The way that Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque formally and systematically rearranged reality on their canvases, the way that Dada performances departed from conventional theatre and cabaret, the way that Arnold Schoenberg and other atonal composers departed from traditional harmony, and the way that imagism in poetry broke away from the rhetorical style of the Victorians were all shocking to early twentieth-century audiences, because such work presupposed new systems of signification by means of which the elements of art were being arranged and expressed. In conceptual areas such as psychoanalysis, philosophy, linguistics, and social theory, new analytical systems were being advanced that broke with standard assumptions about agency, coherence, and correspondence: the idea that all processes are caused by agencies, whether unselfconsciously natural or self-consciously human, that all phenomena can be rationally explained by means of an air-tight form of logical argumentation, and, finally, that our understanding of agency and phenomena will map exactly upon the world that we inhabit. Cubism and Surrealism were a slap in the face to that kind of thinking, given their hostility to traditional realist notions of correspondence, as was psychoanalysis, that in a way not so remote from surrealism called self-conscious agency into question, if not the application of ordinary logic to human behavior. Generally, the types of philosophies developed by Ludwig Wittgenstein, Theodor Adorno, Georges Bataille, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, Gilles Deleuze, and Alain Badiou were all struggling to come to terms with systematicity in ways that did not succumb to forms of totalizing logical coherence, or Logocentrism, as some have called it.
Our concern is literature. If critical theory has had one major impact that we shouldn’t ignore, it is that innovations in critical theory have to a very large extent discredited traditional notions of literary form and analysis that rely upon rationalist conceptions of agency, coherence, and correspondence as well as the totalizing logocentric system they construct. This chapter begins by discussing traditional approaches to the literary text as system and then introduces some of the more innovative approaches that have been at the center of the critical-theory revolution that began in the late twentieth century. Apart from questions of method, it has been the case that the newer innovations in critical theory have made it possible for interpreters of literature to develop far more original readings than are possible by going down oft travelled routes that have been explored at great length by researchers in the past.

5.1 Aristotle and Form

The ancient Greeks had established that art is a felicitous conjunction of idea with form. But what are the formal options? And are certain forms better than others? Aristotle was probably the first thinker to fully appreciate the concept of the closed system wherein each part is naturally suited to function in the service of each other part. In the treatise *Parts of Animals*, Aristotle spoke of living species in terms of “total form” and noted, “Similarly, the true object of architecture is not bricks, mortar, or timber, but the house; and so the principal object of natural philosophy is not the material elements, but their composition, and the totality of the substance, independently of which they have no existence” (645a1–645b1). Crucial for Aristotle was the understanding that the parts of a total form exist on account of necessity. Everything that is part of the organism is required because of the function it serves relative to the system as a whole. Aristotle pointed out that this was a major insight in that it broke with predecessors who believed that the essence of an organism had to do with the essence of the material that made it up, whether it be water, earth, air, or fire. Contrary to his predecessors, Aristotle imagined the organism to be a system or total form that was to be thought of as an instrument “for the

sake of doing something” (642a1). This aim or final end, as Aristotle called it, is survival and reproduction, something that biological life has in common with art in that art also depends upon reproduction (performance, study, etc.) if it is to survive in cultural life and not be forgotten. But this last point is only implicit in what Aristotle wrote.

Well known is that Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which is mainly a treatise on tragedy, takes the view that literary genre is akin to a biological organism in that both are total forms whose parts exist by way of necessity in order to establish a system in which each part serves the needs of the other parts in some way. Moreover, the parts of the system are arranged in a fixed order that establishes the function of each part with respect to the others and enables the form to behave like an instrument that can perform certain tasks by organizing or coordinating actions (this is known as behavior) for the sake of a successful outcome. Of course, works of art are not organisms, but Aristotle thought that their forms had features that in principle weren’t entirely unrelated to the natural world. It is in that sense we have inherited the idea that works of art can have what is known as organic form, by which is meant the properties of a closed system whose parts by necessity serve to reinforce one another for the sake of a final end. In the case of tragedy, Aristotle famously defined that end as catharsis, a purgation and cleansing of the emotions.

Aristotle’s idea of total form meant that a literary work should have a definite beginning, middle, and end. This is more radical than it sounds, because in less advanced societies myths didn’t have determinate beginnings, middles, and ends, but were endlessly elaborated and told in all kinds of variations that were infinitely supplemented and transformed. This lack of total form is as true for the preindustrial societies that the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss studied in South and North America as it was for Aristotle’s distant ancestors. Judging from Robert Graves’ compilation published as *The Greek Myths*, even in Aristotle’s day there were any number of variations and entirely different tellings of the same stories, suggesting that everywhere the variations in content were overriding strict tellings that were determining content in relation to form, the exceptions of Homer and the Greek tragedians notwithstanding.2

It is generally accepted that the transition from myth to literature occurred via ritual where formal arrangements of actions were structured in terms of beginning, middle, and end and began to determine the significance of those actions as well as the ways in which the order of those

actions could bind and unbind emotional energies. Aristotle understood that tragedy in its poetic cultural form has ritual as a not too distant ancestor. And in the case of what to Aristotle were modern tragedies, authors had considerable control over the form of the action, whereas participants in rituals did not. It is this freedom of the playwright to control the form that led Aristotle to ask which of the plays he had seen constituted the most proper form of tragedy.

In asking himself this question, he concluded that his first choice was *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles. Aristotle preferred this play because its form has a definite beginning, middle, and end, and because the middle of the play contains a turning point (the *peripeteia*) where the direction of the action undergoes a change in the audience’s expectations from hopefulness to apprehension. In other words, in the center of the play something happens that makes the protagonist no longer entirely viable in our estimation, something that the rest of the play will increasingly make us realize until it becomes evident even to the hero. This rising action followed by falling action in the center of the play creates an organic sort of unity framed by the beginning and the end. Geometrically, the form is significant in that it is triangular (equalateral), the beginning and end forming the ends of the base and the middle at the apex. In other words, the simplicity of the form and its ideality (a triangle was considered an ideal mathematical object whose proportions provide “measure”) reflect a logical fundamental structure found in nature.

![Aristotelian Tragic Form](image)

*Figure 5.1* Aristotelian Tragic Form.
Of importance is that the formal features of the play, which include a recognition or revelation (anagnorisis) on the part of the hero followed by a catastrophe near the end, take charge of the mythic materials and structure them in ways that create numerous conceptual and emotional tensions along a teleological line (the base of the triangle). In short, Sophocles shapes the mythic materials into art: a formally controlled use of language that uses a simple logical form to produce specific effects in the audience supplemented by means of various poetic devices that the author has invented or borrowed. It’s this freedom to express formal control over the materials that characterizes the poetic writer as someone who is doing something very different from the person who is just recounting variants of mythological stories or from the group that is ritualistically planning to act out a script. Most important, perhaps, is that Aristotle’s view imagines literature to be a discrete, finite thing with its own essence, a form that has determinate properties and that, as such, has agency: the agency to move us intellectually and passionately. Crucial is that it is not character or actions alone that make drama great, but their fusion into an overall form or structure that has a teleology endemic to the borrowed natural form of the equilateral triangle. One progresses up the left slope of rising action to the apex or turning point and then works down the right slope towards the catastrophe and its abatement. In this sense, literature can be considered an “ideal object” in Plato’s sense (which, of course, Aristotle well knew), one that exists above the line, drawn in Book 6 of The Republic that divides the physical from the metaphysical.

Aristotle himself saw literature as an imitation of life, not as it is in terms of all its murky particulars and accidents, but as it appears in a more elevated and pure form in which the essential, invariant structures relating to human action are revealed. This, in fact, contrasts with Plato’s view that literature is an imitation of an imitation (to him the physical world is already an imitation of something more formally pure and essential) and therefore entirely corrupted. Renaissance thinkers who rejected Plato’s iconoclasm referred to Aristotle’s idea of literature as being that of a “golden world.” This Aristotelian view was accepted by Sir Philip Sidney, Shakespeare’s contemporary, and married the notion of literary form in terms of a genre or species akin to an organic life form (a perfect system) with its idealized status as an ideal object, something at once better systematized and more elevated than the ordinary life it depicts.
Rationalism is generally associated with three Continental thinkers, René Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, and Gottfried Leibniz, whereas Empiricism is generally associated with three British thinkers, Bishop Berkeley, John Locke, and David Hume. These two philosophical orientations can be seen as opposed, in that Rationalism argues the knowledge we gain by way of reasoning is superior to the knowledge we gain from direct experience, which is merely anecdotal and not entirely reliable. Empiricism, to the contrary, argues that the only knowledge we ever get is through direct experience of the world around us and that how we rationalize that experience can always be debated and reconfigured. Despite this fundamental disagreement between the two schools, over the past 500 years scientists have developed a method of investigation known as the scientific method that brings together Empiricism in terms of the direct experience of data collection and examination and Rationalism in terms of the rational analysis of findings and the construction of hypotheses, theories, or models whose purpose is to accurately explain the relations and workings of the data. Scientific method presumes that both direct experience and reasoned theorizing will function as a significant source of dependable knowledge upon which further research and investigation can build.

Central to the scientific method is the rationalist presupposition that objects of knowledge are themselves rational and coherent because the world at large is considered to be rationally systematic. Hence the scientific theories or models will necessarily be rationally coherent and systematic, as well. This presupposes the possibility of a correspondence whereby reality (data, objects, works) and theory (the systematic explanation of the data) correspond to map onto one another exactly. Given the assumption that the objects of study are rational and coherent (recall Albert Einstein's remark about God not playing dice with the universe), scientists have been quite keen on making sure that models, among them, mathematical models, present no logical contradictions, inconsistencies, leaps, or gaps, because that would suggest the model has not accounted for everything and hence
has not completely and accurately described its objects of analysis, which by definition are systematically coherent. When we hear today about astrophysicists attempting to develop a “unified theory of everything,” what they are talking about is the fulfillment of an empirical-rationalist method of scientific analysis that believes all data can eventually be integrated into a coherent super-model that will reveal the “truth” of what is all around us in terms of universal constants or laws that we will be able to use to practical advantage – which is to say, as technology: the practical application of scientific discovery to human development.

This discussion of the scientific method is relevant to literary criticism, because the study of literature within universities emerged in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries out of other fields – linguistics, rhetoric, and history, in particular. Not surprisingly, given the success and influence of science, such fields in the humanities were also developing scientific research models that in turn would influence literary research, which initially took on a forensic (or scientifically investigative) dimension. In fact, forensics was even required, because as late as the turn of the twentieth century a great deal of basic empirical research (that is, research based on careful examination of texts and their contexts) was needed in order to establish fundamental facts about even major works of literature, let alone, establish reliable editions of them. For example, the study of Geoffrey Chaucer’s work still required careful philological examination of his Middle English in order to establish precise meanings for his vocabulary.

Forensic literary research is rational-empirical in that it presupposes literary works to be coherent artefacts that are embedded in coherent historical contexts, and that if there are incoherencies, inconsistencies, or contradictions having to do with these literary objects of study, they must have to do with a flaw in data collection (there must be data out there we don’t know about) or with a flaw in the critic’s reasoning (his or her model). In other words, enormous faith is put in the expectation that objects of study are thoroughly explainable, given that they are of a world that is by its very nature logically and rationally open to intuition and analysis. This leads to the assumption that there will always be some absolutely systematic and logically coherent explanation that will universally and therefore truthfully account for all the data pertinent to a literary work, given enough empirical investigation and proper rationalization.

In the field of literary study, this approach is implicitly taught in practically all classrooms and is what most everyone associates with the term “scholarship.” In defiance of this notion, Harold Bloom in the mid-1970s
began talking about influential interpretations in terms of what he called
strong “misreadings,” that is, intentional swerves away from traditionally
agreed upon understandings of what a literary work meant and how those
meanings were configured. Essentially a misreading in Bloom’s sense is a
seemingly irrational interpretation that retroactively turns out to be quite
profound, because it reorganizes the priorities of a literary system. The
rational-empirical approach, as Bloom knew, erred in imagining that there
is only one proper systematic account of a text when, in fact, many systems
are possible, provided one reprioritizes the elements within it. A simple
example would be William Blake’s remark that judging from *Paradise Lost*,
Milton must have been of the Devil’s party without knowing it. This insight
redistributes the value structure of the epic in a way that plays havoc with
the empirical-rationalist assumption that because Milton was a devout
Christian no identification with the Devil would be possible. Blake’s “strong
misreading,” as Bloom would put it, reveals a very conflicted poem, given
that if Milton was a devout Christian, he unknowingly revealed an alle-
giance with the poem’s Satanic forces. This recalibrates the valuation of
good versus evil in a way that plays havoc with an otherwise rationalist
understanding of the poem that adopts an unquestioned Christian model
of ethics.

Bloom’s theory of misreading, when read from the perspective of English
studies, contrasted the revolutionary, Promethian critic, who disrupts and
revalues systems in a way that destroys their rational coherence, to those
scholars who spend their time agreeing rational arguments based upon the
assumption that they are dealing with a single system of interlocking rela-
tions that is coherent and that can be empirically proven. The notion of
“misreading” in Bloom’s mind applied most appropriately to thinkers such
as Nietzsche and Freud, or, in his more immediate context at Yale University,
to a critic such as Paul de Man, a Belgian émigré who taught alongside
Bloom, whose *Allegories of Reading* (1978) went far in terms of showing
the naivety of rational-empiricism. However, Bloom’s idea of misreading
also crossed over into feminist circles, because feminists realized that
rational-empirical scholarship had traditionally assumed certain gender
relations to be rational when in fact the feminists thought they were merely
prejudiced and patriarchal. In the 1980s, especially, a feminist politics of
“misreading” overtook Bloom’s original conception of the term, as tradi-

---

buzz-word of the 1970s and 1980s in literary studies.
tional literary history was challenged by studies whose “misreadings” (in fact, they were thought of as “corrections”) invalidated traditional scholarly assumptions about sex and gender.

In addition to Harold Bloom’s insight that it is always possible to rearrange (i.e. “revise” was Bloom’s word, “decenter” was the post-structuralist term) the priorities of a structure in order to reread it in ways at once shocking and illuminating, there are two other critiques of the rational-empirical approach from a literary critical standpoint that come to mind. The first critique argues against rationality, the second against the realist philosophical assumption inherent in the rational-empirical approach.

Paul de Man had shown in meticulous detail that literary works systematically produce conflicting orders of signification that at various crucial junctures come into collision and cancel each other out in ways that seriously undermine the rationality of a text in various of its infrastructures, hence making it impossible to interpret the whole definitively. Hence there is no possibility for rational-empirical agreement on what a work means, because the logical way meaning is produced in the text prohibits such an outcome. In short, De Man proved that literary texts, at least certain major ones, weren’t entirely rational. It is a demonstration we can see elsewhere in the work of both Walter Benjamin on Goethe and Theodor Adorno on Hölderlin.

However, if the literary work isn’t sufficiently rational, it also isn’t entirely an object of empirical observation in the realist sense whereby experience relates to a phenomenon that exists independently of the experiencing subject. In 5.7 a phenomenological account of reading is described. It strongly suggests that contrary to what we usually imagine, a literary work isn’t realist in the sense of being an object whose existence is free standing. Despite what we imagine when we buy novels at the bookstore, literary works are not objects that are contained between the two covers of a book, for only the instructions for how we are to cognize the work are there. Indeed, literature has been memorized by poets, as in the case of epic poets such as Homer and perhaps even Milton, which would speak to the point that perhaps literature really is just in one’s head, outrageous as that may sound. But even without going that far, phenomenology demonstrates that the literary work is very much a mental construction – really, a complex interplay of constructions that emerge as we decode written signs. At some point one objectifies the reading in one’s mind as if it were a concrete object that could be analyzed in realist terms as a thing-in-itself. However,
the insistence upon assuming the work is an object whose reality is independent and free-standing is an illusion that conveniently forgets all about the process of reading. This point challenges the confidence rational-empiricists have in the objectivity of the literary work as thing-in-itself. Granted, there is a text, and we can agree as to what it explicitly says. However, the literary work is not simply given to us as a text pure and simple. Rather, it has to be apprehended and performed by the reader’s acts of consciousness in order to be realized bit by bit.

**READING**

Roman Ingarden, *Cognition of the Literary Work of Art* (1973)

---

**5.3 Saussurean Linguistics**

In 1915, Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye, and Albert Riedlinger brought out a compilation of lecture notes taken from Ferdinand de Saussure’s course offerings in general linguistics (1906–1907; 1908–1909, 1910–1911) delivered at the University of Geneva in Switzerland. This publication was entitled *Course in General Linguistics*, and although it was highly important to various researchers working in the field of linguistics between the two world wars, it wasn’t until the 1950s and 1960s that the *Course* had its most revolutionary impact on the human sciences in Europe, and, then later, in Anglo-American intellectual centers. According to Saussure, the most important features of language are:

---

4 Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. A. Sechehaye, et al. trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966). This translation is recommended above more recent ones that have managed to totally obscure the original. Also, it turns out that Saussure’s long-lost original manuscript was found in the 1990s. It has been published in French as Ferdinand de Saussure, *Écrits de linguistique générale*, ed. Simon Bouquet, Rudolf Engler, and D’Antoinette Weil (Paris: Gallimard, 2002). Historically, it is the redaction by A. Sechehaye et al. that is the more significant, given its immense influence on French thinkers in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.
(1) highest degree of arbitrariness; (2) social institution: dependence on the whole of the social community that uses the language, (3) immutability: independence from individual acts of volition or social legislation, (4) no predetermined units: lack of any a priori delimitation in the linguistic form of expression; (5) productivity: unlimited semantic possibilities with a limited inventory of signs; (6) acoustic manifestation. 5

A central lesson of Saussure is that one cannot reasonably think of words and ideas as if they corresponded to a body/soul distinction. It will not do to think of words as if they were matter, whereas ideas were spirit. The purpose of the Course is largely to demonstrate why this is so and the consequences this has for revolutionizing linguistics as a discipline. Not only did Saussure’s ideas have linguistic consequences, but they struck a blow at what some French thinkers in the post-World War 2 era would consider two rather common fallacies in the humanities as a whole: (i) the making of a metaphysic (body versus soul) out of language, and (ii) advancing a pragmatic view of language based entirely upon its referential function as a tool with which to do things.

Saussure himself admitted that it is tempting to imagine thoughts or ideas on one plane and sound formations on another plane and then to connect the ideas up with the sound formations. But he shows that, in fact, this is naive. Thoughts (apart from language) and sounds (the ones we hear when someone speaks Japanese or Yoruba or English) are really but a nebulous mass. “Philosophers and linguists have always agreed in recognizing that without the help of signs we would be unable to make a clear-cut, consistent distinction between two ideas. Without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language.” But, “Against the floating realm of thought, would sounds by themselves yield predelimited entities? No more than ideas. Phonic substance is neither more fixed nor more rigid than thought …” In defining the upshot of this insight, Saussure says:

The characteristic role of language with respect to thought is not to create a material phonic means for expressing ideas but to serve as a link between thought and sound, under conditions that of necessity bring

5Winfried Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana, 1995), p. 59. The list was compiled by Peter Wunderli, a contemporary of Saussure.
about the reciprocal delimitations of units. Thought, chaotic by nature, has to become ordered in the process of its decomposition. Neither are thoughts given material form nor are sounds transformed into mental entities; the somewhat mysterious fact is rather that “thought-sound” implies division, and that language works out its units while taking shape between two shapeless masses [sounds/thoughts].

Saussure proposed two analogies to help visualize this insight: imagine how air comes into contact with the flat surface of water and imagine how when air pressure changes, the water develops waves. “The waves resemble the union or coupling of thought with phonic substance.” His point is that instead of a link between two different things (sounds/thoughts) there is a change of state in which sounds and thoughts are transformed into something else: language. The second analogy compares language to a sheet of paper. “Thought is the front and the sound the back; one cannot cut the front without cutting the back at the same time; likewise in language, one can neither divide sound from thought nor thought from sound.” Were we to divide the two by force of mental will, we’d only have “pure psychology” or “pure phonology.” Language would be excluded.

Saussure famously names one side of the sheet of paper the signifier and the other side the signified. The signifier is the sign considered from the perspective of sound, the signified is the sign considered from the perspective of thought. When taken together, they comprise the sign.

One could be forgiven for thinking this division into signifier and signified reintroduces the very dualism Saussure set out to eradicate. However, Saussure cautions that we should not be thinking dualistically in this way, because that would isolate the sign from the system in which it appears: “It would mean assuming that one can start from the terms and construct the system by adding them together when, on the contrary, it is from the interdependent whole that one must start and through analysis obtain its elements.” Saussure is pointing out that language is not the result of particulars being posited that are then networked into a whole. Rather, the whole pre-exists the parts and determines their meaning by way of establishing values, in contrast to presuming direct reference a priori. In other words, language as system is a priori.

---

6Ferdinand de Saussure (1966), p. 112.
Here Saussure developed a position that would be very influential for structuralists of the 1950s: the holistic view of language as a system that is composed of “interdependent terms in which the value of each term [sign] results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others.” Claude Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist studies of kinship in North and South American myths are entirely based on the idea that values produced by kinship structures require the simultaneous presence of interdependent terms. For Saussure himself, the lesson for linguists was that the referential relationship between the sound form (the signifier) and the thought (the signified) must be subordinated to how each sign (signifier + signified) is determined in relation to other signs as to its value. This value, according to Saussure, is governed by what he calls a paradoxical principle, namely, that values rely upon “(i) a dissimilar thing that can be exchanged for the thing of which the value is to be determined; and (ii) of similar things that can be compared with the thing of which the value is to be determined.” Saussure uses the example of a 5 franc note: that it can be exchanged for bread (something different) but also that it can be compared with and exchanged for something similar and equivalent, one franc coins. Likewise, a word can be exchanged with an idea and compared with other words.

The value of a word, Saussure says, is not fixed through reference to an idea through having “this or that signification.” Rather, “one must also compare it with similar values, with other words that stand in opposition to it. Its content is really fixed only by the concurrence of everything that exists outside it [the word].” Saussure’s conclusion is that at issue is referentiality as “signification,” on the one hand, and being part of a system in terms of “value,” on the other hand. Saussure’s examples of this include one about the English word sheep and the French equivalent mouton. They may signify the same thing in terms of reference, but they have different values, because the English use both the word sheep, which is Germanic in origin (Schaf), and mutton, which derives from the French word mouton, the one referring to the animal, the other to its meat when cooked and served. In other words, the “value” of the word sheep in English is mediated by the fact that it is different from but similar to the word mutton. Obviously, mutton restricts the meaning of the word sheep, given

---

10 Ferdinand de Saussure (1966), p. 115.
11 Ferdinand de Saussure (1966).
that one can talk of the animal in more contexts than one can talk of the
dish. There is also cultural value, which Saussure didn’t mention: sheep is
the vulgar Germanic word for a commonplace barnyard animal, whereas
mutton is the refined Gallic word for a culinary delight one doesn’t want
to associate with the slaughtered beast. In other words, mutton is a euphe-
mism. French lacks the mutton/sheep distinction.

As Winfried Nöth has lucidly pointed out, “For Saussure, nothing existed
(structurally) beyond the signifier and the signified. His semiology oper-
ated totally within the sign system. Since only a semiological system gives
structure to the otherwise amorphous world, the referential object is
excluded from semiotic consideration.”13 Followers of Saussure, among
them Émile Benveniste in Problems of General Linguistics, have not always
upheld this principle and have argued for a tertiary model in which signi-
fier, signified, and referent are in play.14 Indeed, Saussure’s own description
of how language works in the Course isn’t cogent without the referent, a
concept that the reader will inevitably supply.15 Saussure’s defenders have
argued that this modification hardly invalidates Saussure’s chief insights.
In Saussure’s recently discovered original writings, we read that the only
thing that is real in language is that of which the speaker is conscious.16
Presumably reference would come under that rubric.

READING

Jonathan Culler, Saussure (1976)

5.4 Lévi-Strauss and Structuralism

The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss worked for much of his career on
the myths of native peoples in South and North America. Like various other
anthropologists, Lévi-Strauss was of the view that reality can only be con-
ceptualized to the extent that someone can encode its elements into com-

14Emile Benveniste, Problems in General Linguistics (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami
15See Gerhard Helbig, Geschichte der neueren Sprachwissenschaft (Reinbe: Rowohlt, 1974),
cited by Nöth.
16Écrits de linguistique générale, p. 192.
prehensible structures that are consistent and have explanatory force. When preindustrial cultures engage with nature they develop what are, in fact, very complex codes and, even more astonishingly, map those codes homolo-
gously onto their social behavior, something that works in the reverse, as well. In a key essay, “Introduction: History and Anthropology,” Lévi-Strauss writes that “we are dealing with systems of representation which differ for each member of the group and which, on the whole, differ from representations of the investigator.” What Lévi-Strauss wrote up in his many books on primitive myths would certainly not have been recognizable to the people to whom those myths belonged. Following Franz Boas, Lévi-Strauss pointed out that one should pay attention to the “unconscious nature of cultural phenomena” and that “by comparing cultural phenomena to language from this point of view” one comes to understand how just as the structure of language remains unknown to those who speak it before the introduction of the study of grammar, it is the case that the structures of social existence as a whole are unknown to those who practice and live by their rules.

Lévi-Strauss studied kinship, cooking, manners, art, and mythology. In each, he presumed the idea that terms should be seen as relations between terms and not as independent entities; it is these relations that form a logical system whose laws are to be deduced. In Saussurean parlance, these kinship terms are *signs* that have value, though it is a value to be deduced by the anthropologist, given that the native informant is unaware of its existence, much less its function. The strength of Lévi-Strauss’ method is that he was able to reduce vast quantities of information down to very basic logical models that had the sort of formulaic rigor that one finds in physics and mathematics. For example, in performing a structural analysis of kinship among the Cherkess and Trobriand, Lévi-Strauss offers the following law that accounts for all the surface features in each culture’s kinship system: maternal uncle and nephew are to the relation between brother and sister as father and son are to the relation between husband and wife. From this law, all the surface features concerning kinship in these cultures can be generated.

With respect to myths, Lévi-Strauss was looking for similar laws. In a famous analysis of the Oedipus myth, Lévi-Strauss posited the following: that the myth is really about blood and soil relations that conform to four categories divided into two parts: (i) *blood relations* ((a) overrated kinship relations (b) underrated blood relations); (ii) *relations to soil or autochthony*

---

It is easy to see that (a) and (b) as well as (c) and (d) are opposed pairs, and their relationality as “distinctive features” (key oppositions that make up a system) constitutes value. In the well known schema that Lévi-Strauss designed, examples of blood and soil relations are given that correspond to Saussurean signs that we can relate in terms of identity and difference. These signs are called the mythemes of the myth, which can be read left to right or top to bottom if our purpose is to tell the myth.

Table 5.1 The Structural Distribution of Mythemes in *Oedipus Rex.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overrated kinship:</th>
<th>Underrated kinship:</th>
<th>Of the earth:</th>
<th>Arisen from earth:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>incest</td>
<td>murder</td>
<td>monsters</td>
<td>maimed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Autochthony is the condition of being born of the earth as opposed to being born to a mother and is to be found in myths of Native American peoples as well as within Greek myths.
Telling the myth is one matter. But if we want to understand the myth, “then we will have to disregard one half of the diachronic dimension (top to bottom) and read from left to right, column after column, each one being considered as a unit.”19 In other words, if we read these mythemes as significant events in the order of the story, we will find ourselves reading left to right and down. Then the chronology (or diachroney) of the story will be revealed. For example, Cadmos seeks his sister, he kills the dragon, the Spartoi kill each other, etc. But if we read across and consider each mytheme in terms of the four categories only, we will achieve a synchronic (or simultaneous) understanding in which we’ll see the logical relations between mythemes, such as “Oedipus kills the sphinx” equates to the monster’s denial of autochthony to man; and “Oedipus equals swollen foot” equates to affirmation of autochthony to mankind.

Lévi-Strauss’s argument for treating autochthony so centrally is that it too relates to kinship, but in terms of being born from the Earth. “In mythology it is a universal characteristic of men born from the Earth that at the moment they emerge from the depth they either cannot walk or they walk clumsily.”20 For support Lévi-Strauss cites the “bleeding foot” and “sore foot” associated with the chthonian Shumaikoli, a mythological figure of the Pueblo people in North America. We can see quite easily that, in fact, what we have in Lévi-Strauss’s mapping of the mythemes are two kinds of kinship: kinship to one’s own kind (human beings) and to the earth, which is mother to monsters, as well, and is therefore to be considered Other. Clearly, one can see a dichotomy between culture (human kinship) and nature (kinship to the Earth). Lévi-Strauss, oddly enough, doesn’t bring these features out, nor does he admit overtly to a reduction whereby we wind up engaging relations of blood and soil. What makes Lévi-Strauss’s account a bit puzzling, of course, is that Oedipus can’t be born of a mother and also be born of the earth (autochthonous). But this, in fact, is the contradiction that is core to the myth’s logic, something that Lévi-Strauss notes when he tells us that column four is to column three what column one is to column two. Oedipus’s relation to his mother is equivalent to his relation to the Earth (which is logically unsustainable) and both of these relations are being negated – but not successfully. Oedipus killing his father hardly undoes his overly close relation to his mother, and the sphinx’s riddle hardly undoes Oedipus’ autochthony.

The lesson to be drawn from the Oedipus interpretation is as follows:

The myth has to do with the inability, for a culture which holds the belief that mankind is autochthonous ... to find a satisfactory transition between this theory and the knowledge that human beings are actually born from the union of man and woman. Although the problem obviously cannot be solved, the Oedipus myth provides a kind of logical tool which relates the original problem – born from one or born from two? – to the derivative problem: born from different or born from same? By a correlation of this type, the overrating of blood relations is to the underrating of blood relations as the attempt to escape autochthony is to the impossibility to succeed in it. Although experience contradicts theory, social life validates cosmology by its similarity of structure. Hence cosmology is true. 21

To critics who complain there were too few mythemes in the model to be convincing, Lévi-Strauss advances that Oedipus’ self blinding relates to his crippled condition and therefore fits in column four and that with respect to Jocasta’s suicide this mytheme fits in column three because it is an auto-destruction. Lévi-Strauss doesn’t go so far as to say this would characterize her as monstrous, but perhaps this identification with monstrosity cannot be avoided.

According to Lévi-Strauss, structurally we should read the Oedipus myth synchronically in terms of all its variants (“the myth consists of all its variants”), and indeed there are many to choose from, including Freud’s. “We shall then have several two-dimensional charts, each dealing with a variant, to be organized in a three dimensional order [he means charts on sheets of paper or index cards that can be stacked laterally and thumbed through] so that three different readings become possible: left to right, top to bottom, front to back (or vice versa). All of these charts cannot be expected to be identical, but experience shows that any difference to be observed may be correlated with other differences, so that a logical treatment of the whole will allow simplifications, the final outcome being the structural law of the myth.” 22 In other words, all these variants are to be factored down to one basic logical model. This, in fact, describes quite well the work Lévi-Strauss did on South and North American myths, which he

21 Structural Anthropology, p. 216.
22 Structural Anthropology, p. 217.
studied rather exhaustively, working in some cases with 60 or 70 quite different variants. The advantage, he felt, was that this is more empirically valid than picking out myths that appeal to the research, as Sir James Frazier did, leaving out all the extraneous information that didn’t fit in with one’s expectations or correlations.

Methodologically, one might wonder if the treatment of the Oedipus myth in terms of blood and soil isn’t also front loaded with some sort of prejudicial expectation: that a myth be about kinship relations and that it conform more or less to the sorts of myths Lévi-Strauss was studying in the Americas, myths that couldn’t sort out whether one is born from One (the earth) or Two (man and woman). How, in fact, do we know that this is so relevant to the Oedipus myth that it should be provided a deep structure or logic that seems to derive from the Pueblo? Or is Lévi-Strauss right in assuming, given his vast knowledge of primitive myths from all corners of the world, that the Oedipus myth seems all too familiar for one who is extremely practiced in this sort of study? Has Lévi-Strauss detected a genre of story telling in Oedipus that Aristotle and probably even Sophocles couldn’t have grasped, given that they were already so far removed from the origins of the myth that they would have to become anthropologists to see it?

**READING**

Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (1963)

---

**5.5 Roman Jakobson’s Communication Model**

Jakobson was first and foremost a linguist of considerable talent who personally knew and influenced Lévi-Strauss, given that they were both exiled in New York City during the World War 2. As a young man in the early twentieth century, Jakobson published among a number of pioneering Russian intellectuals. He later became of significance to the well known Prague School of linguistics in the 1930s, and after that became of central importance to the rise of French structuralism, if not to the Parisian movement known as Tel Quel during the 1960s. Among Jakobson’s most well known contributions is his seminal paper “The Speech Event and the
Functions of Language,” wherein Jakobson considered a communication to be a “speech event” consisting of six elements. Imagine a cross with addresser at the left of the horizontal bar and addressee at the right of it. Down the vertical bar imagine the terms context, message, contact and code.

In order for an addresser to communicate with an addressee, there has to be, first of all, a contact or channel by means of which signals in the form of signs can be sent. Often, voice fulfills this role. The signs, of course, have to be encoded, for example, in terms of phonemes and their rules of concatenation. And the code, in turn, has to serve as a vehicle for a message – something the addresser means or intends to say to the addressee – that often requires a context, information that situates the message in a way that enables us to figure out what it is referring to.

Jakobson associated the addresser with an emotive or expressive function (“I hate you!”) and the addressee he associated with a conative function (“She’s angry about something”). Contact is associated with the phatic function, the opening of a channel of communication, such as saying “testing: one, two, three” into a microphone to make sure it’s “on.” Incidentally, saying empty phrases, like “Right …” or “Well …” or “Uh huh” is often more about the phatic function (that a channel is being opened or kept open with an addressee, say, on the telephone) than anything we might call a message. All of these factors of speech are comprehensible in terms of code, which has a metalinguistic function. For example, when Jakobson studies the difference between the words mama/papa in various languages, he is extrapolating a code that involves maximum contrast and reduplication, a code that, for example, a baby has extrapolated from a stream of sounds (babbling). Code is the abstract program (the metalanguage) without which language couldn’t be processed (or loosely speaking, computed). Finally, the message itself is given a poetic function, since messages are stylistically inflected, however conventional or original. If you say, “that’s not acceptable” and I say “that’s not okay,” we have each stylistically inflected the same message.

If we switch for a moment to a consideration of Toni Morrison’s novel Beloved, it is clear that the baby, who is named Beloved, is an absent/present addressee whose emotive function determines a poetic that makes up

Beloved’s message to the addressee, Sethe. However, the function of contact is largely in question, as the dead don’t speak and can’t, in fact, directly contact people the way Beloved supposedly does. What is the contact or channel by means of which Beloved’s speech is delivered? What is the phatic function in this novel? That is a rather interesting problem that typical narrative analyses won’t be able to conceptualize very easily. Clearly, the emotive function of the addresser may be overriding contact, but how does that work, precisely? Alternatively, how does context work in this novel? Is context (reference) a matter relating to the plot of infanticide alone? Or does it concern many other elements of the novel, as well? What is the function of the addressee as conative function, that is, as the one who must come to know what the addresser is doing and wants? In a situation when a young baby cries mama, it’s the mother who has to supply the meaning of the cry, who has to show baby what the cry was for by objectifying it in terms of a response. Who is capable of doing this in *Beloved*? What about the reader? Can he or she supply this conative function? Rather than read *Beloved* in terms of character identification (the “what would you do if you were in her situation?” approach) it might be considerably more productive to look at the novel as a communication in Jakobson’s sense in order to analyze its communicative functions.

**READING**

Roman Jakobson, *Selected Writings* (1971)

### 5.6 Roland Barthes’ Hierarchical Structures

A central concern in Roland Barthes’ writings on literature and semiotics concerned Ferdinand de Saussure’s distinction between *langue* and *parole*, language and speech. Language, Barthes said in his pamphlet *Elements of Semiology* (1964), was everything that relates to language minus speech. Language is collective and institutionalized; it cannot be modified by any individual. Speech, however, is an individual act of selection and actualization. Language tells us what can be combined or used, whereas speech shows us what has been combined and used by individuals. In Saussure code is related to language, message to speech. For Barthes the difficulty
would always be whether one could ever determine precisely where language and speech form two different categories. I may say something my own way (speech), but can I ever depart from speaking in linguistically comprehensible forms (language)? That “one always tries to speak more or less the other’s language”\textsuperscript{24} indicates that utterances are inherently socialized and collectivized in practice. And yet can one say an utterance has nothing individual or unique to it?

With respect to narrative, Barthes was interested in the fact that there are always all kinds of narratives swirling around us, given that narrative is universal, but that when we narrate something we are performing an utterance (speech) that will select and combine things from them. But, Barthes wonders, are the selections and combinations random, “merely a rambling collection,” or do they share “a common structure”? In particular, Barthes was interested in ascertaining how smaller units of narrative integrate with larger ones at a higher level and how narrative can be seen as a hierarchy in which lesser strata subordinate themselves to and integrate themselves with elements on the echelon just above them.

Among Barthes’ most significant essays is “Structural Analysis of Narratives” wherein utterance or parole refers to any particular narrative (or message) that is told by someone and langue refers to all the millions of narratives one could think of (code, common structure). Thinking in terms of common structure, Barthes turned to the idea that “structurally, narrative shares the characteristics of the sentence without ever being reducible to the simple sum of its sentences: a narrative is a long sentence …” As such, narrative has tense, aspect, mood, and person. Narrative characters, too, conform to elementary functions of grammatical analysis (by means of actantial typology, an idea proposed by the linguist A.J. Greimas). In short, literature and language are fundamentally identical. Language holds up the “mirror of its own structure” to literature and vice versa.\textsuperscript{25}

Sentences, Barthes notes, are made up of linguistic levels: phonetic, philological, grammatical, contextual that exist in a hierarchical relationship. The phonemes are distributed within words in a particular manner – bladder, bandage, banner, banana, etc. – but are integrated at a higher level of meaning (the word itself) which is then absorbed within the sen-


tence: “Full fathom five my father lies …” Here the fricatives (the fs) are repeating and reinforcing something, namely the subject of the sentence, father. There is lateral distribution of the fricatives, but they do integrate upwards to emphasize the importance of father, too. “Distributional relations alone are not sufficient to account for meaning.” Rather, structural analysis requires an understanding of levels of language use, each one being what Barthes calls an “operation.”

A very simple example at the narrative level is in order. The children’s story of Chicken Little consists of her declaration that “the sky is falling, the sky is falling,” followed by a “how do you know?” by various gullible interlocutors, which is then followed by the testimony: “I saw it with my eyes, I heard it with my ears, and a piece of it fell on my tail.” The same dialogue is repeated over and over as Chicken Little and all the friends she has encountered meet yet new friends to tell the incredible story to, until they meet up with Foxy Woxxy who leads them off to tell someone in charge but who, in fact, leads them into his den where he proceeds to eat them all up. The repetitions of Chicken Little’s story constitute the distribution of the narrative events and Foxy Woxxy’s final act of eating everyone up is the event that integrates all the others into itself, such that we wind up with the moral or capstone of the story, which has something to do with the stupidity of imagining preposterous dangers when a real danger is looking you in the face. In fact, the sky was falling, but not in the way Chicken Little

\[^{26}\text{Barthes (1977), p. 86.}\]
and her friends imagined. In this example the repetition of the same dialogue works much like the repetitions of the fricative in the Shakespeare quote above from *The Tempest*. The repetitions are distributed horizontally but are gathered up at the end vertically by an event that doesn’t repeat what was happening at a lower level (in this case, a lower level of intelligence and awareness).

Barthes looked at narrative itself in terms of “three levels of description” which he termed (i) the level of functions, (ii) the level of actions, and (iii) the level of narration.

Functions

Functions are distributed categories of the smallest narrative units. “The essence of the function is … the seed that it sows in the narrative.” If Chicken Little says that “the sky is falling,” that has the function of being taken up at a higher level as a stupid thing to imagine and as symptomatic of a simple minded individual. The seed of the story’s conclusion is already planted by this remark. Barthes’ example is, of course, much more sophisticated. Gustave Flaubert tells us about a parrot in *Un Coeur simple,* “because this parrot is subsequently to have a great importance in Felicite’s life; the statement of this detail (whatever its linguistic form) thus constitutes a function or narrative unit. Key to functions, Barthes says, is that they are correlates to something at another level, either higher or lower and that they do not necessarily coincide with “actions, scenes, paragraphs, dialogues, interior monologues” or with “psychological divisions (feelings, intentions, motivations, rationalizations of character).” Barthes’ example here is taken from Ian Fleming’s *Goldfinger:* “Bond picked up one of the four receivers” in Secret Service Headquarters during night duty. “Four” makes up a functional unit,

referring as it does to a concept necessary to the story (that of a highly developed bureaucratic technology). In fact, the narrative unit in this case is not the linguistic unit (the word) but only its connoted value (linguistically, the word /four/ never means ‘four’); which explains how certain functional units can be shorter than the sentence without ceasing to belong to the order of discourse: such units then extend not beyond

the sentence, than which they remain materially shorter, but beyond the
level of denotation, which, like the sentence, is the province of linguistics
properly speaking.  

Essentially, Barthes is saying that the word “four” connotes something
beyond the sentence if not sentences having to do with technology, impor-
tance, power, responsibility, and omniscience that relates to Bond as a
character who is in contact with dangerous earthshaking events only known
to British secret agents of the highest caliber. This, then, is integrative at the
level of Fleming’s discourse, though the word four speaks to a certain distri-
bution – the repetition of four phones in front of Bond. In S/Z, Barthes
will consider this function in terms of a semantic code. Typical of such a
code or function (as Barthes called it in the essay on structural analysis) is
that in the case of Bond’s phone, there is “no bearing on the sequence of
actions in which Bond is involved by answering the call: it finds its meaning
only on a level of a general typology of the actants (Bond is on the side of
order).” Moreover, “indices, because of the … vertical nature of their rela-
tions are truly semantic units … they refer to a signified.” If we go back
to “Full fathom five my father lies,” we can see more easily that a function
does two things: it operates (here in terms of repetition), and indicates (by
way of indexicality – i.e. the f’s indicate father by correlating with the
word’s first letter). In more complex instances some of these functions
would have “cardinal” importance with respect to the narrative as a whole,
while others would be merely “catalysers”; they bind relations, but without
any major consequence.

Having looked at function semantically, Barthes also treats it syntacti-
cally. In the Chicken Little example, the question is: what is primary, the
chronology of the events leading up to Chicken Little’s demise, or the
logical form of the story? “Is there an atemporal logic lying behind the
temporality of narrative?” Barthes answers: “one could say that temporality
is only a structural category of narrative … From the point of view of nar-
rative, what we call time does not exist, or at least only exists functionally,
as an element of a semiotic system. Time belongs not to discourse strictly
speaking but to the referent; both narrative and language know only a
semiotic time, ‘true’ time being a ‘realist,’ referential illusion … It is as such

that structural analysis must deal with it." Barthes leaves the matter there and doesn’t explain further. But apparently he must have been of the view that reading doesn’t essentially have to unfold in “real time.” One could read Milton’s *Paradise Lost* out of order and finish it in, say, years, not weeks. We think the text has a temporality because we tend to read consecutively and in relatively compressed time spans, especially in a university context. But when we analyze a text, we don’t respect consecutive order and don’t reconstitute the temporality of the reading. Really, a text is a static set of instructions for reading. Time has nothing to do with it, according to Barthes. If there is time in narrative, Barthes thinks it functions in terms of an order or sequence.

**Actions**

Actions unfold *as sequences*. The phone rings, Bond picks it up, listens, says something, etc. The label “phone conversation” tags the sequence as distinct and enables us to see its function relative to other actions – talking with someone on the street, overhearing someone else speak on a phone, etc. Here it maintains a distributive horizontal relation. But hierarchically the phone conversation is absorbed at a higher level in terms of a larger sequence, namely, “investigation” that is made up of more various actions. This can be schematized as follows:

![Figure 5.3 Hierarchical Narrative Elements](image-url)
Rather than make the presupposition that characters in literature are people just like us, Barthes preferred to think that characters were signifiers that are designated as participants in a represented action. In this sense, characters are labels that name descriptors that the author relates to an action. Bond isn’t a real person like us; rather, he is a signifier for a collection of textual attributes that reference picking up the phone and speaking. What we take for literary agency is known as an *actant*, not a character. Ideally, the actant has a grammatical and not a psychological function in the narrative. “It will – perhaps – be the grammatical categories of the person (accessible in our pronouns) which will provide the key to the actional level,”\(^{31}\) but for that to be realized we need to be reading at the level of narrative communication. About actions themselves Barthes has little to say, but in *S/Z* he will develop something he calls the “proairetic code” which has to do with the naming of sequences of actions discussed above. In *S/Z*, Barthes does say that “it is useless to force [the sequences of actions] into a statutory order; its only logic is that of the ‘already done’ or ‘already read’ – whence the variety of sequences … and the variety of terms … ; here again, we shall not attempt to put them into any order.”\(^{32}\) This is something of a climb down from “Structural Analysis of Narratives” in which Barthes was suggesting hierarchical analysis. Apparently, Barthes had different possibilities in mind for how he imagined the systematization of a literary text.

**Narration**

Barthes argues that narrators are not real people but “paper beings” and that we cannot treat narrators as if they were flesh and blood individuals. The “person” of the narrator (first person, third person, omniscient) is a semiotic construction (a sign work). The same is true of the author insofar as he or she is considered a figure embedded in the text: “the writer.” With respect to narration, Barthes argues that “the apersonal is the traditional mode of narrative, language having developed a whole tense system peculiar to narrative … designed to wipe out the present of the speaker.”\(^{33}\) Rather than assume a kind of person who is narrating, one should look to the

---


\(^{33}\) “Structural Study of Myth,” p. 112.
The manipulation of verb forms out of which an illusion of person is projected. In examining Fleming’s *Goldfinger*, Barthes notices that, in fact, there is an oscillation in quick succession between a personal and personal narration.

His eyes, grey-blue looked into those of Mr. Du Pont who did not know what face to put on for this look held a mixture of candor, irony and self-deprecation.

“Psychology” in the novel requires a shifting back and forth between the personal and the apersonal. “Psychology cannot accommodate itself to a pure system ...” This suggests that “the very content of the person is threatened,” that in fact it would be a mistake to assume “personhood” in terms of narration, however psychologically compelling.35

Narration of the sort Barthes is describing is itself distributed throughout the text along the lines demonstrated above in which Barthes ascribes the labels personal/apersonal to bits of narration in *Goldfinger*. However, this is integrated both at the level of Jakobson’s communication model involving addressee/ addressee (which is central to Barthes’ thinking) and at a higher narrative level that has to do with form. “The ultimate form of the narrative, as narrative, transcends its contents and its strictly narrative forms (functions and actions).” Beyond that starts the “world,” that is, “other systems (social, economic, ideological) whose terms are no longer simply narratives but elements of a different substance (historical facts, determinations, behaviors, etc.).”36

If the discourse of the novel is integrated at the level of narrative form, that entire form is in turn integrated upwards within what Barthes calls “other systems” which, he points out, are not mere extensions of novelistic discourse, but other sign systems with other rules and features. “Just as linguistics stops at the sentence, so narrative analysis stops at discourse – from there it is necessary to shift to another semiotics.”37 Because novelistic “discourse” isn’t just language in general, but rather a particularly localized set of linguistic practices, we engage it in terms of what Barthes calls a situ-

34“Structural Study of Myth,” p. 113.
35“Structural Study of Myth.”
36“Structural Study of Myth,” p. 115.
ation, that is, the conditions that make up the practice of reading (looking at books in the bookstore, reading on the train, thinking about what one has read, etc.). The situation is a set of circumstances relative to other situations we’re in: shopping, travelling, relaxing, vacationing. In this case, the novel is integrated into the higher level of, say, reading on the airplane in order to pass the time, or reading for a classroom assignment. Here again, emphasis is put on the contrast between distribution (say, reading time that is horizontally stretched) and integration (studying for a test, which has to fit in a schedule of other activities).

READING


5.7 Ideality and Phenomenology of the Literary Object: Husserl and Derrida

Edmund Husserl, who founded phenomenology at the turn of the twentieth century, was immensely influential for many thinkers, among them, Martin Heidegger, who was a student of Husserl. In France, Jean-Paul Sartre, Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jacques Derrida were all well versed in Husserlian thinking. In fact, the young Derrida was trained to become a specialist in Husserlian philosophy and took his point of departure in the 1960s, as a mature philosopher, from aspects of Husserl’s thinking. Husserl is too complex to summarize in a few sentences, but one of the main aspects of his thinking has to do with criticizing epistemologists (philosophers concerned with questions of cognition) for the tendency to prematurely objectivate and conceptualize mental processes – if not the phenomena they engage – within their studies of how consciousness operates. A crude but easier way of putting this would be to say that Husserl was critical of reification (the utilitarian practice of reducing processes to mere things for the sake of technological manipulation). When we speak of ideas, concepts, approaches, methods, and so on, we are, in fact, categorizing phenomena for the sake of objectifying them for ease of use (reference, logical relating, contextualization). And, of course, this is largely what education aims to do, namely, to bundle information in
such a way that we can conceptualize it for the sake of managing and using it, as if complex ideas were but tools for use. This has its advantages, but it tends to overlook the fact that there are actually very complex processes at work that are open ended and ever shifting. For example, there really isn’t such a thing as a reading of a novel or a poem, because reading actually has no closure, but is a process involving consciousness and all its reflective capacities that are constantly revising, amplifying, reducing, relating, or, in a word, reprocessing information. I may have read *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë decades ago, but there is a sense in which that reading is still active in my mind (though certainly I will have forgotten parts of that reading experience) whenever someone references the novel and discusses it. We may write an interpretation of a novel and call that a reading, but that is a misleading use of the word “reading,” because were we to come back to our essay at some time, we would most likely be tempted to revise it, given that our reading process hasn’t really come to an end. Not only is there no such thing or object as reading, but there is an argument to be made that there is no such thing as a novel or poem, either. But to see this, we will need to talk about reading a bit more from a Husserlian point of view.

Reading is not a thing but a process whereby consciousness constitutes an imaginary object that is presented to it by means of signs that require decoding. This object is not presented to consciousness as a fully given thing in the here and now but as a potential mental construction that is disclosed temporally in a succession of moments that are oriented by sense, that is, the way in which the reader is constructing the meaning of what he or she is reading as the moments of apprehension, themselves in flux, stream by. Because words follow one another linearly in sentences, and because sentences follow one another linearly, as well, consciousness ordinarily defaults to teleological sense making, which enables the logical presentation of the progression and regression of represented events. This presentation of succession and regression enables the reader to think more readily in terms of a time line, a temporal present, past, and future. But, of course, consciousness is vagrant and therefore constructs relations by way of associations that will depart from any strict logic. For example, it will remember things more or less involuntarily or recall some things and not others. Consciousness is also prejudiced. A reader may not enjoy or like reading descriptions, or a reader may prefer incidental to main action, and so on.
Reading is not just mechanical decoding, but actual lived experience to the extent that it requires consciousness to actively bestow sense. To some significant extent, this requires correlating a text’s meanings to the reader’s own past experiences, as well as to the capacity for imagining experiences that have not and perhaps even cannot happen to the reader. These recalled and imagined experiences insofar as they are capable of being synthesized into a predominant sense (feeling/meaning) can well be apprehended at a higher level of reflection as a thematic, that is, an objectification to which one can give a name: anomie, alienation, despair, pride, joy, compassion, love. Themes are known in Husserlian phenomenology as “identifying syntheses” that are subject to judgment: rational critique. Indeed, the basic processes of reading are all subject to identifying syntheses insofar as consciousness has the capacity to group, structure, and identify particulars, even to the point of positing their formal essence as an object of consciousness, a unity that consciousness knows with some reliability (via principles, logical coherence, normativity).

This broaches the idealization of the literary work. In Formal and Transcendental Logic, Husserl writes that “A certain ideality lies in the sense of every experienceable object, including every physical object, over against the manifold ‘psychic’ processes separated from each other by individuation in immanent time – the processes of an experiencing life … In it consists the ‘transcendence’ belonging to all species of objectivities over against the consciousness of them. …” In other words, at some point the object of consciousness, which as literary text eventually amounts to nothing other than the whole of the text itself, is cognized as an experiential object that is idealized as a free standing transcendent entity over and even against the psychic processes that initially constituted it. What was internal to consciousness is transformed by way of idealization into something external to consciousness. But how precisely does this happen? Apparently, through all the “syntheses of manifold experiences” the object becomes more and more concretized as a thing that has an identity, or, as Jean-Paul Sartre famously put it, an en soi (an “in itself”). That is, the object is increasingly objectified to the point that it appears to have its own nature, essence, functioning, reason for being, and identity. Hence it has to be idealized de facto as a thing in itself and not anymore as a mere readerly construction.

Literature as idealized object is what researchers are claiming to study when they write scholarship on this or that poem, novel, or play, for in their eyes, literary works have reached this stage of external independence by means of readings that have already taken place by prior generations of readers, as in the case of, say, Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* or Lord Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*. However, we need to realize that however autonomous the literary work may appear, that however independent of consciousness it may seem, such idealized objects are in fact “no realities.” And that bears on assumptions that poems and novels are just ordinary things like apples and oranges when in fact they are concepts of type that relate to idealized objects.

We will come back to what Husserl has to say about idealized objects not being real, because at this point it will be instructive to consider Jacques Derrida’s early critique of the idealization of the literary work, which has Husserl in mind, but draws from other sources as well. Derrida notices that as in the case of Ferdinand de Saussure’s insight that linguists have naively made a body/spirit identification with respect to the word, literary historians have tended to idealize literary works as a whole in much the same way. In the oft anthologized essay “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” Derrida argues that the idealization of the literary work actually presumes a geometry or form that gives it a thing-like appearance. This structure is a circle that has a fixed center that permits “the freepay of its elements inside the total form.” Moreover, the center of the work is untouchable (akin to something sacred) because it is the presence of the work’s spirit, something that is both immanent and transcendental to the work, its essence. As such this spirit or essence – the work’s *Wesen* (in Heidegger’s sense of essence as being) – escapes the very structure it organizes. “The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality *has its center elsewhere*. The center is not the center.” Derrida elaborates that “It would be possible to show that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated the constant of a presence – *eidos*, arché, telos, *energeia*, *ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject), *aletheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, or conscience, God, man, and so forth.”


40 Macksey and Donato (1972), p. 249.
tions) that are all part of what Derrida calls metaphysics. These objects, it would appear, project a region around themselves that Derrida is calling a structure, a structure whose structurality these objects both require and absent themselves from. And this, Derrida says, is fundamentally illogical even if otherwise the structure would appear to be entirely coherent and consistent. What makes the center an idealization is that it is the bearer of perfection (ousia (being), aletheia (truth), arché (origin), God). Or, as in the case of consciousness and conscience, it is the bearer of a kind of thinking that has spirit about which there is something divine (spiritual, morally right, virtuous, truthful, revelatory). Such idealized entities are and aren’t of the work itself, because they both inhere in the work and transcend it at the same time. They are and aren’t connected to the work as structure, therefore.

According to Derrida, the futility of writing literary criticism about works of literature that are treated as idealized objects (that is, as logocentric structures, or organic structures in the Aristotelian sense) is that one is necessarily required to explain the freeplay of the work in terms of what lies beyond everyone’s grasp in the sacred center, the work’s truth. As object for research, this truth is what researchers are after. But if, on account of turning literature into an idealized object, the truth escapes the very structure it organizes, if the truth is that idealization of the work as a whole that makes it unanalyzable from the point of view of the truth, then literary criticism as conventional research is clearly a misguided enterprise.

Here, now, is our delayed Husserlian pronouncement on idealized objects, which I have postponed until this point in order to show how different Husserl’s concerns were from Derrida’s.

Something real, already there, within the sphere of the surrounding world is suitably treated, is rearranged or transformed [with respect to, say, consciousness apprehending a physical object that is placed before it]. In our case [of idealized objects], however, we have before us irreal objects, given in real psychic processes – irreal objects that we treat and, by acting, form thus and so, with a practical thematizing directed to them and not at all to the psychic realities.41

41 *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, p. 167.
Apparently, for Husserl the problem isn’t that idealized objects are metaphysical, that their truth escapes the very structure of truth posited by the ideal that is truth, but that these idealized objects are irreal. So that instead of directing our thematizing at the psychic realities that concern consciousness, we are projecting those themes into an object as if it were a veridical thing that exists a priori for consciousness to encounter. This is not a metaphysical problem, for Husserl, but an epistemological one that has to do with misrecognition.

Last, the reader may have noticed in passing that Derrida lumped consciousness in with idealized metaphysical concepts. Consciousness too, according to Derrida, would absent itself from the very structure that it organizes. But this is precisely what Husserl is arguing against in the passage above when he talks about the irreal object. Consciousness does posit structures from which it would absent itself, idealized structures like literary works. Objectification necessarily entails this sort of structuration by way of idealization. However, in Formal and Transcendental Logic, Husserl argues that we must be on our guard against falling into the trap of thinking that an idealized object exists a priori for consciousness to encounter, as if it were some self-evident thing to be known. The ideality of the object is a construction of consciousness and must not be hypostatized as a thing in itself.

In the 1960s, Derrida was quite eager to posit the idea of decentering. The structure, he said, should be decentered so that an infinite freeplay of signification could be opened up. But already in Husserl, what was called the epoche (the strategic tactic of demobilizing certain epistemological conceptions or putting them out of play) was a move designed to disarticulate the ego and the thing in order to decenter consciousness and get rid of (i) an epistemology of the faculties (central to Kant); (ii) simple empirical subject/object relations (central to British empiricism), and (iii) the problem of idealization (central to the ideology of science). In this, we can clearly see in miniature the itinerary that Husserlian phenomenology had set out for itself.

READING

For Derrida the decentering of logocentrism opened up onto the dissemination of language, and, of course, it was language that in Derrida’s thinking had replaced phenomenology’s concern with consciousness. Indeed, this is the motive for the early Derrida’s famous substitution of voice by writing, his exteriorization of thought by means of substituting the sign in its place. By externalizing thought as sign and consciousness as language (e.g. writing or écriture), Derrida was able to push beyond the gravitational pull of the cogito as that which resides at the center of a logocentric understanding of a text as if it were its intention and hence its truth.

However, Derrida also posited the insight that even the center of a logocentric structure is not the idealized unity we think it is, either in terms of “place,” “self-presencing,” or “conceptual identity.” Rather, that center is a series of differentiated terms that by means of substitution and repetition threaten the self-identity and coherence of the center itself. So if the region governed by a center is suddenly decentered, then the interplay of signification is broadcast or disseminated ad infinitum. At least, that is the hypothesis in Derrida’s “Structure, Sign, and Play.”

In the essay “Dissemination,” which tries out some new angles on the concept of dissemination, Derrida was commenting on Philippe Sollers’ novel Nombres, which is, not by accident, a decentered text in which the singularity of elements has been broken up into multiplicities that have been “released”: multiplied, divided, doubled, pluralized over what appears to be an abyss, a region beyond regioning, which is to say, an anti-region. “Numerous and plural in every strand of its (k)nots (that is, (k)not of any subject, (k)not any object, (k)not any thing), this first time already is not from around here, no longer has a here and now; it breaks up the complexity of belonging that ties us to our habitat, our culture, our simple roots.”

To decenter a text is already “the release,” the “trigger” that sets off pluralization (the scattering of mutant verbal replicants) by means of withdrawing presence (truth, authenticity, the real, spirit) as a thing in itself that stops the ricochet of signification by bringing it to book, so to speak.

---

Rather the decentered text posits simulations of presence, of a “feigning to present,” as Derrida puts it. The metaphysics of original and copy is dashed (mimesis is rescinded) and in place we have an infinite multiplication or broadcasting of signifying elements that do not reconverge upon themselves reflexively in order to articulate a whole, given that dissemination precludes metalanguages other than repllicants or simulations that only partially account for what is occurring. This, one has to suppose, would include Derrida’s advancing of serial models like the trigger, the rift, the scission, and so on.

Furthermore, dissemination also does not properly begin. There is no inaugural event, present to itself, because dissemination retracts any “decisive beginning, any pure event that would not divide and repeat itself.” Rather, what starts is “plied and multiplied about itself, elusive and divisive; it begins with its own division, its own numerousness.” This start may as well be a cut, a tearing into discourse more or less at random, “the arbitrary insertion of the letter-opener.” Instead of opposition, there is “co-implication that is utterly internal and irreducible.”

There is no first insemination. The semen is already swarming. The ‘primal’ insemination is dissemination. A trace, a graft whose traces have been lost. Whether in the case of what is called ‘language’ (discourse, text, etc.) or in the case of some ‘real’ seed-sowing, each term is indeed a germ, and each germ a term. The term, the atomic element, engenders by division, grafting, proliferation. It is a seed and not an absolute term. But each germ is its own term, finds its term not outside itself but within itself as its own internal limit, making an angle with its own death. It would be possible to reconstruct the network through which Numbers is infiltrated by references to all kinds of atomistic theories, which are also theories of sperm. Let yourself be guided, in Numbers, through the vocabulary of germination or dissemination, by the word ‘group’ — the set of elements dispersed. Swarm. Numbers are caught in a mathematicogenetic theory of groups.

Dissemination is also called a proliferation which would never have begun, a swarming that is at once some thing and many things, identity and difference. Instead of conceiving a text as a circular region with a center,

---

Derrida is imagining a text as a swarm, or as a dispersion or diffusion which is some thing (like a cloud) and some things (like droplets). Here, according to Derrida, there is a speaking from all sides, a speaking that is decentered, dispersed, floating, multivalent, choral.

READING


### 5.9 Structure as Rhizome: Deleuze and Guattari

The rhizome is the metaphor Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari used in *A Thousand Plateaus* to discuss decentered (or “acentered”) structures. As in the case of Derrida’s conception of dissemination as swarm, it is interesting that yet other biological terms are being invoked, the rhizome as opposed to the tree. Traditionally, organic metaphors were used to suggest the coherence and closure of forms, since life forms are capable of being looked at as autonomous systems that have a steady state and are self-sufficient, given an environment that supports their needs in terms of light, temperature, food, and shelter. Romanticist ideology of the early nineteenth century imagined, quite independently of Aristotle, that the literary work was supposed to imitate organicism, that the more organic the work, the better. However, in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, French thinkers were imagining biological metaphors that negated the organicist ideology of self-containedness. Deleuze and Guattari argued against “arborescent systems that in their view were hierarchical systems with centers of significance and subjectification, central automata like organized memories.” In contrast to these centered systems, Deleuze and Guattari posited the concept of the rhizome that conformed, in their minds, to “acentered systems, finite networks of automata in which communication runs from any neighbor to any other, [and in which] the stems of channels do not preexist, and all individuals are interchangeable, defined only by their state at a given moment – such that the local operations are coordinated and the final, global result synchronized without a central agency.”

conception of dissemination, Deleuze and Guattari, a decade later, were imagining “an acentered multiplicity” without “any copying of a central order.” In other words, they too were imagining a non-mimetic acentered process. Whereas dissemination applied to some rather rarefied textual examples, such as the experimental writings of Philippe Sollers known as the _nouveau nouveau roman_ (the new new novel), Deleuze and Guattari had no trouble mapping the rhizome onto “the American rhizome: the beatniks, the underground, bands and gangs, successive lateral offshoots in immediate connection with an outside.” They cite Walt Whitman’s _Leaves of Grass_ as rhizomatic, but also “the rhizomatic West, with its Indians without ancestry, its ever-receding limit, its shifting and displaced frontiers.” In America, “the flow of capital produces an immense channel, a quantification of power with immediate ‘quanta,’ where each person profits from the passage of the money flow … In America everything comes together, tree and channel, root and rhizome. There is no universal capitalism, there is no capitalism in itself; capitalism is at the crossroads of all kinds of formations, it is neocapitalism by nature.”

Structurally, in the rhizome every point connects with every other point; its particular traits are not typified by sameness; it mobilizes “regimes of signs” and even nonsigns; it is neither one nor many, “It is not the One that becomes Two … it is not a multiple derived from the One, or to which One is added (n + 1). Dimensions, not units, make the rhizome up, and these are called directions in motion.” Anti-Aristotelian, the rhizome has no beginning and end, but is all middle. “It constitutes linear multiplicities with n dimensions having neither subject nor object, which can be laid out on a plane of consistency, and from which the One is always subtracted (n − 1).” This last point, we should note, is crucial for a reading of Alain Badiou, who is very concerned with sets and multiplicities in precisely this sense. Deleuze and Guattari also specify that “unlike a structure, which is defined by a set of points and positions, with binary relations between the points and biunivocal relationships between the positions, the rhizome is made only of lines: lines of segmentality and stratification as its dimensions, and the line of flight or deterritorialization as the maximum dimension after which the multiplicity undergoes metamorphosis, changes its

---

nature.” Rhizomes, moreover, are antigenealogical and have a short term memory or “antimemory,” and like the biological entity, the rhizome of Deleuze and Guattari “[is] operated by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots.” 49 Whereas a tree is a thing that has being, the rhizome is all manner of becoming.

In Deleuze and Guattari’s writings, terms like nomadism, schizoanalysis, deterritorialization, and plateau (“any multiplicity connected to other multiplicities”) crop up. As they put it, a concept isn’t a container, a word that contains an idea, but a line, and such lines are like number systems that are connected to a dimension of a multiplicity, which they define as a stratum, a chain, a convergence, and so on. Essentially, the argument is that a concept is a relation within an acentered network of multiplicities that has particular dimensions: plateaus, chains, convergences, ruptures, and lines of flight, just to name a few.

There is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity (the author). Rather, an assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities drawn from each of these orders, so that a book has no sequel nor the world as its object nor one or several authors as its subject. In short, we think that one cannot write sufficiently in the name of an outside. The outside has no image, no signification, no subjectivity. The book as assemblage with the outside, against the book as image of the world. A rhizome-book, not a dichotomous, pivotal, or fascicular book. Never send down roots … 50

This is theory writing in a performative mode wherein Deleuze and Guattari are trying to write rhizomatically (or schiz-analytically) in terms of switching over to another verbal connection, the assemblage, that temporarily becomes yet another synonym in a string of metaphors for the rhizomatic multiplicity they have been talking about. Indeed, the point they’re trying to make is that the usual division society makes between reality, book, and author is a convenient static structure and that other structures are possible, among them, the assemblage, in which connections drawn from each of these orders (real, book, author) have the effect of making these orders inoperational and perhaps not even thinkable, thereby canceling these

49 Deleuze and Guattari (1987).
orders out. Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* may well be the novel one might want to apply to this kind of theoretical structure, given its obvious rhizomatic structure as a work.

**READING**


---

**5.10 Permutation**

Permutation refers to multiple repetitions and rearrangements of a sequence of distinct elements. The practice is commonplace in music. Arnold Schoenberg’s atonal method of musical composition was based on the capacity for tone rows to undergo permutation according to strict rules of combination and recombination. In the minimalist post-atonal music of Terry Riley, Philip Glass, and Steve Reich, permutation is brought about through very gradual changes within repeated patterns. In this music, introducing change by means of slight alterations has an additive function and gives the illusion of linear compositional development, when, in fact, the sequences are largely circular and subject to being constellated as synchronic parallel activities that have an overall textural effect. In popular musical styles, such as Electronica and Trance, permutation plays a very major role as found bits of music are reprocessed and minimally modified in “mixes.” Here again, relatively static patterns, subject to incremental permutation, are layered (structurally counterpointed) or unlayered as tracks are added or subtracted. In Terry Riley’s *In C* (1964), a modular composition made up of permutating fragments, players can make on-the-spot decisions that will change what will be played and when, though these decisions do not, in fact, alter the overall musical experience of the work, given the fact that permutation lends itself to openness of form: on-going events that are not governed by a strict linear developmental structure.

Permutation in literature is sometimes reminiscent of minimalist music. Leslie Scalapino’s poetry, for instance, puts strong emphasis upon synchronic structure wherein an obsessive compulsive tendency to repeat is alleviated by accounts that vary the details and even the order of presentation.
And, as she hurried past me, with her jaw thrust forward, I saw, since she had also lifted her lip (drawn it way back on her gums), the roots of her teeth. Her incisors. Her canines.

[...]

she pinched my arm. Though I believed (looking at her sideways, and seeing only that her lips were parted slightly, with her snout breathing softly)\(^{51}\)

Permutation is observable in fiction, too, where it introduces repetitions, inconsistencies, distortions, lacunae, substitutions, and transpositions. Notice the following three extracts from Alain Robbe-Grillet’s novel, *In the Labyrinth*.

[1] Outside it is snowing. Outside it has been snowing, it was snowing, outside it is snowing. The thick flakes descend gently in a steady, uninterrupted, vertical fall – for there is not a breath of air – in front of the high grey walls whose arrangement, the alignment of the roofs, the location of the doors and windows, cannot be distinguished clearly because of the snow.

[2] It has been snowing; and the snow has not yet melted. It forms a rather thin layer – an inch or so – which is quite regular, however, and covers all the horizontal surfaces with the same dull, neutral whitish color … The doors are closed. The windows show no figure either pressed against the panes or even looming farther back in the rooms. The flatness of this entire setting, moreover, suggests that there is nothing behind these panes, behind these doors, behind these house fronts.

[3] The white flakes, falling thick and fast, suddenly change direction; vertical for a few seconds, they suddenly become almost horizontal. Then they stop suddenly and, with a sudden gust of wind, begin to blow at virtually the same angle in the opposite direction, which they abandon after two or three seconds … making new, almost horizontal parallel lines that cross the circle of light from left to right toward the unlighted windows … All the ground floor windows, one after the other, show exactly the same amount of snow which has drifted toward the right in the same way.\(^{52}\)


Basic to all these descriptions is the experience of a demobilized soldier on a snowy day in a deserted city. Each description differs but is essentially made up of the same elements, though with some variation. There is some difference as to whether the snow is falling vertically or horizontally or both. Is there wind or is there “not a breath of air”? Both are advanced. In the first description we have walls, above which windows cannot be seen very well. In fact, both doors and windows are obscured by the snow. But in the third description there are ground floor windows to be seen that have “exactly the same amount of snow which has drifted to the right.” The second description also presupposes a good view of the windows, which are said to reflect an absence of anyone within. But how would the narrator know whether anyone is within or not if he didn’t have a much better look at them than the first description suggests is possible? There is the obvious possibility that these descriptions relate to three different places at three different times, but the question of how can we be sure remains. Also, do we know that what we’re being told in the novel is actually happening or is it someone hypothesizing something that could have happened or might happen to someone else? With each telling, the narrative is changed somewhat and we are left with versions that are inconsistent.

**READING**


### 5.11 Undecidability: Derrida, Gödel, Lacan

During the 1950s and 1960s, the New Critics had taken considerable interest in literary features that transgressed logical contradiction, in particular, ambiguity, irony, and paradox. No doubt, one of the reasons that Derridean deconstruction appealed to American critics who had been trained in the New Criticism is that undecidability, as Derrida developed it, seemed to be a higher order term that included these literary devices. Whereas the early Derrida appeared to take some pains to avoid identifying undecidability with ambiguity, irony, and paradox, the later Derrida gave way, somewhat, and began using paradoxical statements as guiding threads of undecidability in some of his works: for example, “O friends, there is no friend,” in *The*...
Derrida’s conception of undecidability is generally associated with his formulation of *différence*, a neologism that “marks” the limit where identity and difference are no longer effective as determinable polarities by means of which one can tell whether something is the same as or different from something else. *Différence* both inheres within the logic of metaphysics and yet harasses metaphysics from without, given that *différence* is and isn’t thinkable from within the metaphysical tradition itself on account of the fact that *différence* repeals the law of contradiction central to metaphysical thinking, namely, that something can’t be both absolutely identical and different at the same time. Ludwig Wittgenstein, in *The Tractatus*, didn’t argue for undecidability, but he did say that propositions that prove a case for either tautology (x=x, identity) or non-sequitur (p ≠ q, difference) don’t really tell us anything of interest and hence aren’t especially useful, whereas statements that fall somewhere between these apodictic poles are of immense significance and usefulness. Undecidability in both its strong (Derridean) and weak (Wittgensteinian) senses negate the decidability of established logic, which presumes all knowledge has to be based on being able to determine the veracity of propositions in a more or less Boolean fashion (yes, no). Hence logicians ask: Is x the case or not? Although logicians delight in coming up with all sorts of examples that elude determinability, they assume that where these arise someone hasn’t yet figured out a proper logic that can account for odd ball cases, as opposed to saying, in effect, that such cases are undecidable and therefore threaten the cogency of logic as an enterprise. Logicians will complain that opting for undecidability is a lazy response to what is ultimately a very difficult problem: the construction of a logic that will account for whatever proposition we bring to the table for consideration. But what if logically coherent systems are by their very nature incapable of doing this? The work of the scientist Kurt Gödel, well known to those who propose undecidability as a legitimate option, speaks to this possibility.

Undecidability is often associated with Gödel’s arithmetical incompleteness theory. Simply put, Gödel argued that any well formed theory (expressing basic arithmetic) won’t be both consistent and complete. One can establish an arithmetical statement that is true for a consistent well formed theory, but that statement won’t be provable within all the terms of the theory itself. A variant of this states that for any formal theory that includes arithmetical truths as well as truths concerning formal provability, the
theory will generate a statement of its own consistency only if the theory is inconsistent. It is this relation between consistency and inconsistency that characterizes the theory as a proof for the existence of undecidability. Some have generalized this latter formulation to say, in effect, that all theories generate statements of consistency only because they are themselves inconsistent.

Another theorist with an interest in undecidability is Jacques Lacan who was fascinated with mathematical topology theory. When Lacan visited the United States in 1966 he talked about the Moebius Strip, which is a geometrical mathematical construction in which a rectangular surface is twisted and shaped into a figure eight on its side. The odd thing about this figure is that none of the modifications made to the rectangle change its essential properties as a mathematical construct.

In a seminar of December 15, 1965, Lacan taught that the Moebius strip “has no surface” because it is “pure edge.” He pointed out that not only is there a “single edge” to the strip’s surface, but that if it is split down the middle (cut with scissors along the dotted line above) there is no longer a Moebius strip insofar as the strip becomes the cut. So already here there is undecidability, for the strip is both edge and surface but also neither, and it is both strip and cut but also neither. How is it that the strip is in essence “the cut itself” as well as the surface that is uncut? The law of contradiction is self-evidently not in play in any of these examples. If Lacan will invoke the Moebius strip as the structural support of what makes up the human subject’s psychology as something that can be divided, undecidable is the difference between surface/edge, surface/cut, Moebius/non-Moebius, whole/part, and front/back. Indeed, the Moebius strip already prior to cutting makes front/back entirely undecidable in that one has both two and only one surface, and, as Lacan cautions, perhaps not even that one surface, but simply an edge. Cutting the strip, however, modifies it in a way that it gets two faces or sides, which is contradicted by the point that, really, all we have is another Moebius strip in which the two are actually one. So there again the law of contradiction breaks down.
Clearly, Lacan’s interest in the Moebius strip concerns a turning to Non-Euclidean geometry in which figures don’t conform to our usual understanding of what is and isn’t geometrically possible in terms of surfaces, volumes, congruities, and so forth. Figures that seem entirely different to the eye are, in fact, the same. The Moebius and the Torus (a donut shaped object) are mathematically interchangeable; in fact, their simplest originary topological form would be the rectangle. In “Of Structure as an Inmixing,” the enigmatic lecture Lacan gave at a famous conference on structuralism at Johns Hopkins University in 1966, he stated with respect to the Moebius figure:

You can see that the line in this instance may be considered either as one or as two lines. The diagram can be considered the basis of a sort of essential inscription at the origin, in the knot with constitutes the subject. This goes much further than you may think at first, because you can search for the sort of surface able to receive such inscriptions. You can perhaps see that the sphere, that old symbol for totality, is unsuitable. A torus, a Klein bottle, a cross-cut surface, are able to receive such a cut. And this diversity is very important as it explains many things about the structure of mental disease.  

As for textual application, the three versions of undecidability proposed by Derrida, Gödel, and Lacan require different treatments.

(i) In “The Pharmacy of Plato,” (from Dissemination (1972)) Derrida seized upon the word pharmakon in Plato’s dialogue, Phaedrus, as a complex word whose various meanings (drug, medicine, poison, philter, remedy, recipe) are undecidable in that it is impossible to determine whether a pharmakon is harmful or beneficial. Derrida’s analysis is lengthy and complex and involves kindred terms. However, the upshot of his analysis is that Plato’s diction poses instances of undecidability that have major consequences, in this case, having to do with the status of writing versus speaking in which writing is seen as a pharmakon, a remedy for memory loss that is also a poison insofar as writing encourages us not to remember, since we can always look something up in writing, which replaces the need to memorize. The instability of the word pharmakon matters because it shows Plato was actually far more undecided about writing as a medium than his dialogue might otherwise suggest.

(ii) Gödel’s understanding of undecidability concerns how consistent propositions are generated by an inconsistent theory. An obvious example concerns what some have been calling “states of exception,” an idea taken from the German legal theorist Carl Schmitt.\(^{54}\) Schmitt developed the idea that no state can be consistent with itself in the absence of being able to declare a state of exception. This state of exception is something inconsistent within the state that leads to a certain consistency of the state in terms of how it governs by means of formulating rules, policies, laws, and so on. Only by way of inconsistency is consistency established. Franz Kafka was a literary writer with a strong sense of this kind of undecidability, which he expressed in a number of works, the parable “Before the Law” and the short story “In the Penal Colony,” in particular. In “Before the Law” the law is to be considered both divine and inconsistent (this law is meant for the very person to whom it is forbidden), but the man who stands before the law is consistent in his being-there (Dasein), and can be said to be an effect of the law: the consistency that the law’s inconsistency enables. The penal colony is a society observed by an anonymous explorer who enters the colony at a time when exceptions to the law are being made in order to enforce overall legal consistency. This consistency, however, is entirely inconsistent with itself. In both texts, it is the difference between consistency/inconsistency that breaks down logically at various points and gives way to an undecidability not so far from Gödel’s sort of thinking, were one allowed to apply it outside the realm of arithmetic. “In the Penal Colony” everything is usual and exceptional at once in ways that don’t enable us to know right from wrong, proper from improper. In “Before the Law” it’s not clear that there is a law or that the man even has anything to do with the law. His being consistent isn’t consistent in that there is no standard by which we could measure it. The man just is and then he dies. He is no more the same or different from anyone else.

(iii) Lacan’s topological undecidability can be applied to the division/non-division between conscious/unconscious, but it can also be applied to

\(^{54}\)See Carl Schmitt, Political Theology, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). In this text Schmitt formulates the notion of exception, but he doesn’t seem to be interested in its undecidable qualities; rather, he is attempting to justify why countries have to resort to states of emergency in dealing with problems that the law cannot cover without causing the state self-harm. Recent debates in the United States about the prosecution of terrorists under constitutional law or not bear precisely on Schmitt’s issue.
language, which in some instances can be looked at as having a proper front side (the language that we know and speak) and an improper back side (a language that we don’t know, one that is obscure, absurd, funny, and out of control). Lewis Carroll depicted a language behind the looking glass in which everything that is proper and familiar in front of the mirror appears to be distorted and improper behind the mirror, something to which Lacan sometimes referred. But the major example for Lacan was the example of language in Moebius form that could be found in James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*. There we see a word like “etymology” rendered as “Adamelegy” or the word “alchemist” rendered as “alshemist” (all shame is; Seamus), or the word “memorize” rendered as “mumorise” (miming by heart). Phrases like “Somone’s in the Kitchen with Dinah” get distorted into “Summon In the House-sweep Dinah?”

Scientist Ernest Rutherford’s splitting of the atom is embedded in the following where splitting the atom and splitting up words occupy a sort of Moebius-like relation.

The abnihilisation of the etym by the grisning of the grosning of the grinder of the grunder of the first lord of Hurtreford explodotonates through Parsuralia with an ivanmorinthorrorumbler fragoromboassity amidwiches general uttermosts confussion are perceivable moletons skaping with mulicules while coventry plumpkins fairlygosmotherthemselves in the Landaunelegants of Pinkadindy.

Here it is as if a strip of language got twisted and we see it at once as upside down and right side up, though, of course, what we’re reading is a single surface that the reader has to cut (to recall Lacan) in a way that reveals the difference between ordinary English and Finnegans-Wake-speak. But the problem here is that one cannot actually separate the two entirely and that we find, as well, that the surface and the cut are, in fact, identical: that is, the cut (the reader’s interruption) enacts the very surface it is trying to untwist. Especially the longer word filaments require snipping: plumpkins/plump-kins; fairlygosmotherthemselves/fairly-go-smother-themselves; Landaunelegants of Pinkadindy/London elegants of Piccadilly (Pick-a-dandy?). However, the way in which we cut up the text is not to be dissociated from the Moebius-like language of the *Wake* itself.

Jean Baudrillard was perhaps the first Marxist critic to fully realize that in the late 1960s and early 1970s Western nations would make a transition from the heavy industrial production of things to the light industrial production of the representation of things. Baudrillard noticed that comparatively clean noiseless information technology within office buildings was going to replace the dirty smoke stack technology of heavy industrial production. According to Baudrillard, already by the middle of the twentieth-century commodities were essentially modes of signification insofar as individual items had a semiotic meaning, given that they functioned like signs in a system that indicated (i) the social standing of the consumer – the type and model of automobile one owns communicates one’s economic status – and (ii) the exchange value of the item relative to other items of its kind – a commodity within a line of products, such as cameras, automobiles, china, etc. Here the commodity functions as a sign in which a signifier refers to a signified, “where a formal difference, a distinctive opposition (the cut of clothes, the style of an object) still refers to what we might call the use value of the sign – to a differential profit, to a lived distinction (signified value).” But what happens when “the sign form describes an entirely other organization” in which “the signified and the referent are abolished to the benefit of a single game of signifiers”? Baudrillard argues that in such a case, “the code no longer refers to any subjective or objective ‘reality,’ but to its own logic: it becomes its own referent, and the use value of the sign disappears to the benefit of its commutation and exchange value alone.” In other words, “the sign no longer designates anything, it reaches its true structural limit, it only refers to other signs.” Moreover, “the whole of reality becomes … a structural simulation.”

In “The Precession of Simulacra,” Baudrillard went somewhat further by exploring the consequences of what happens when a model precedes the

---

reality it depicts. “Simulation is characterized by a precession of the model, of all models around the merest fact – the models come first, and their orbital (like the bomb) circulation constitutes the genuine magnetic field of events.” He argues further that “facts no longer have any trajectory of their own, they arise at the intersection of the models; a single fact may even be engendered by all the models at once.”58

A good example of Baudrillard’s notion of simulation is the performance art work of Guillermo Gómez-Peña, an artist from Mexico who has developed a practice called “reverse anthropology” in which he puts himself on display before audiences as a fantastical social subject south of the US border (4.11). The performance is a hoax or trick that is being played on unsuspecting visitors who take the performer, the performance props, the costumes, and overall installations literally for whatever the viewers imagine them to be. Gómez-Peña deliberately simulates rituals, cultural specimens, artefacts, and anthropological information in order to show how concocted cultural models dictate “facts” or “realities” that people will take at face value as a priori truths. In other words, to the general public the precession of even the most dubious of simulacra is indistinguishable from carefully researched scientific representations of anthropological reality. The idea that facts cannot speak for themselves but require interpretive models speaks to the inevitable precession of simulacra required for decoding whatever it is the viewer is asked to survey. Crucial to the performance art of Gómez-Peña is that the datum or fact has no independent status apart from its enactment either as information, the displaying of artefacts, or outright performativity. In other words, there is no escaping the precession of simulacra in terms of displaying, explaining, and enacting “other” cultures. Baudrillard’s remark that “we are in a logic of simulation which has nothing to do with the logic of facts” is directly applicable to Gómez-Peña’s “reverse anthropology,” given that its simulacra exploit illogicality. This is especially easy to do in the case of concocting cultural displays, because human behavior is often so opaque and illogical when observed by a foreign culture that it seems one can get away with representing pretty much anything as “fact.” Indeed, the writings of Montaigne on “cannibals” in the sixteenth century and Montesquieu on laws and customs in the eighteenth century were aimed, precisely, at establishing universal norms whereby a Westerner could grasp the facts of other cultures in a realistic manner that was grounded in reason, not fantasy.

Furthermore, in the influential “Orders of Simulacra,” Baudrillard argued that three orders of appearance have followed one another since Shakespeare’s time: (i) counterfeiting, (ii) producing, and (iii) simulating.

**Counterfeiting**

The counterfeit is the “first order” of imitation that belongs to the late Renaissance tendency to imitate in ways that expose both the inferiority and superiority of the simulation. Note, for example, the masque tradition in Jacobean England in which the simulation is strongly identified with aristocratic superiority and invincibility, if not with global dominance and empire. Baudrillard singles out the use of stucco during the Baroque as a synthetic medium for imitating pretty much everything. Remodeling nature in ways that are synthetic is key to Baudrillard’s idea of the counterfeit simulation whose emphasis falls upon how culture both appropriates and redefines nature to such an extent that nature as such vanishes. All we have are its simulations, something that became quite evident in the making of formal gardens in the late seventeenth century and, of course, throughout the century that followed. Essential to counterfeiting, however, is direct resemblance. The eighteenth-century English garden was to have “informality without accident,” according to William Shenstone. Here the borderline between the authentic and the inauthentic is both insisted upon and erased.

**Production**

Producing or production is the “second order” that concerns an imitation lacking direct resemblance. The highly industrialized mechanical looms used for weaving in factories imitate and improve upon wooden looms once used in the home, but what is being imitated here is not the old wooden looms but the labor that goes into the finished product. What is being simulated and exceeded is mechanical efficiency. The devices that do this simulating in no way have to imitate anything from life. For example, a machine need not imitate a human hand in order to move bottles around. A more efficient vacuum cleaner need not imitate a less efficient one as if they were all predicated on some absolute natural form that had to be adhered to. Machines imitate a certain kind of work, which means that
whatever the machines look like, the end product has to simulate what a worker would have done by other means: cutting, weaving, pouring, firing, etc. Oddly, what Baudrillard doesn’t consider is that, in fact, the end products of machine-produced goods are themselves counterfeits: the oriental style rug made in Germany in the early twentieth century is a cheap imitation of rugs made by hand in the Middle East, the machine-made shoe is a cheap imitation of hand-made shoes, and so on. Also, materials counterfeit one another – for example, plastic counterfeits metal. Baudrillard does, however, notice that in terms of mass production the serial relation between objects (say, the mass production of the same Mickey Mouse figurine) obliterates the original/counterfeit distinction. Hence “objects become undefined simulacra one of the other.”59 Over time, these objects even obliterate the difference between machine made and hand made as the machines themselves become better at imitating skilled labor. The counterfeit is thereby no longer of significance, given that seriality has overtaken it. This view was elaborated somewhat by Walter Benjamin in a celebrated essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” a consideration of simulation and the aura written by Benjamin in the 1930s.

Simulation

Simulating or simulation concerns the so called “third order” of imitation in that it refers to the reproduction of codes, for example, cybernetic programs.

At the limit of an always more extensive abolition of references and finalities, of the loss of resemblance and designation, we find the digital program-sign, whose value is purely tactical, at the intersection of the other signals (corpuscles of information/test) and whose structure is that of the macro-molecular code of command and control.60

The computer program is invisible, encrypted, and buried (for example, in microchips) and functions as a generator of information based on binary code whose effect is to translate all information into yes/no, or +/−

59 Simulations, p. 97.
60 Simulations, p. 104.
oppositions. The computerized test becomes the model for processing all data. Webpages don’t serve us. They test us, and send the information of those tests back to Google or whoever else is putting “cookies” onto our machines by remote control.

They [the programmers] have already tested “reality,” and have asked only questions that “answered back” to them. They have broken down reality into simple elements that they have reassembled into scenarios of regulated oppositions, exactly in the same way that the photographer imposes his contrasts, lights, angles on his subject …

Long before the Internet became a reality, Baudrillard had seen that the cybernetic world would reduce users to nothing more than decisions that can be tabulated and, possibly, predicted, which is something that Google now does quite well when it asks us “did you mean x?” when we input something in the search box that only approximated what we were looking for. The user, apparently, is nothing more than a statistical model of probabilities that can be anticipated rather than represented in a way that seems much closer to simulation (cybernetic interaction that shadows/simulates our behavior) than to outright imitation or depiction. But this, Baudrillard cautions, is the death of discourse, the end of “real interrogation.” Rather, what we are left with is a statistical model, an accounting of our past decisions and prediction that we’ll remain statistically consistent, given that human beings are creatures of habit: of making the same decisions over and over again. But this isn’t a discourse, it’s merely a rule of thumb. Simulation in this case is an imitation of what it is we’ve done as a recipe for predicting what we will do; it’s the assumption that we are nothing more than the history of our past decisions and that this history can be the model for determining who and what we are to whomever puts cookies on our machines for data collection. And, of course, the data miners will have to develop models to model the decision making, which, as Baudrillard would explain, precedes the reality of the social subject that these very models would be trying to map. In short, our statistical decision-making tree precedes us.

But, if all this is the case, what would the literary applications of the three orders be? Consider the following: (i) Counterfeiting in Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, Milton’s *Comus*, and Andrew Marvell’s “Upon

---

61 Simulations, p. 120.
Appleton House.” (ii) How mass production factors in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, John Dos Passos’ *U.S.A.*, and Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*. And (iii) how precession of the simulacrum may factor quite significantly in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* which is a simulacrum of a slave narrative. This simulacrum is programmed to give back the answers that have been fed into it a priori.

**READING**


### 5.13 Multiplicity: Badiou

In his books, *Being and Event* and *Logics of Worlds*, Alain Badiou is concerned with the problem of the One versus the Many, and he has argued for the priority of multiplicity over the One, arguing that if there is no One, there is yet an operation that unifies and posits a One. This One is considered beyond being, because it is a conception or abstraction that cannot actually be demonstrated, only decided ad hoc. This suggests to Badiou that unification or oneness can be considered an event, or act: the intercession of someone’s will to determine that something is One and not a multiplicity. Badiou’s interest appears to be in that of examining the nature of categories, which he translates into a discourse on mathematical set theory. Is a set one thing or many things? From Badiou’s point of view, sets actually contain subsets and subsets of subsets to the point that something will both *be* and *not be* of the set in which it is found. But, too, he will see the elements in a set to be both finite and infinite, calculable and yet beyond reckoning. Such elements transcend finitude, he claims, because of the endless combinations and recombinations among them, provided the set is of a great enough complexity. That we count a multiplicity (say, a

---

mammal, or a virus) as a single entity, as one thing, is a constraint on multiplicity that enables it to be presented or given an appearance that is unified and singular. To call the One into question is, in Badiou’s view, a means of taking away something (the idealized notion of the whole) that then reveals another order of things that concerns the multiple, which mathematics is better able to describe than, say, the ontology of Aristotle which begins with things and then categorizes and conceptualizes them as unities. This means of providing a bounded concept within which to place entities (for example, various felines under the concept of cat) is based on the assumption that the particulars and the general are, in fact, congruent and that it would be proper to say the particulars rightly come under the rubric of the general: its definition of the particulars. This is known in set theory as an “intensional” understanding of a set as an assemblage of objects that are embraced by an idea, concept, or category. All felines are cats, all mammals give live birth, all green plants photosynthesize would be propositions of an intensional sort with respect to sets or collections of things. Badiou, however, subscribes to an “extensional” theory of sets in which any sort of thing can be included, so that a set is determined by its entities, not by some controlling idea or concept. This model of sets departs from the closure imposed by intensionality. What brings the extensional elements into relation is not predetermined by the idea that names the set, but remains an open question. Indeed, selecting a relation between elements within the set can be entirely arbitrary.

This last point already suggests the usefulness of this approach to literary interpretation insofar as the words in a literary work can be viewed either “intensionally” or “extensionally,” that is, as either essentially belonging to the largest set on the page, the whole text that comes under the rubric of its title (say, Great Expectations, Dubliners, American Psycho), or related by whatever combination, however arbitrary (this would, paradoxically, include intensionality as well). In fact, literary critics do read texts extensionally. For example, during the 1960s, French critics were making the point that Joyce’s morpheme “riverrun” at the start of Finnegans Wake was a pun on the French phrase “rêve et un” (dream plus one). “Intensionally” one would have to prove essentialistically that the French phrase really belongs in a set that includes “riverrun,” but “extensionally” we could be looking at an ad hoc choice whose principle is decided by chance: that someone in Paris noticed that if one pronounced “riverrun” with a French accent, the word could well rime with “rêve et un.” “Rive” (which is part of the word “river” in English and signifies a river bank in French) and “rêve”
appear to be related by way of extensionality so that one can exploit the possibility that riverbank and dream are related. The theory of extensional sets allows for a totally open ended development of words as the particulars of a set, that open-endedness having to do with how we happen to construct rules whereby to establish how one element belongs to another (rive \( \in \) rêve; or, \( a \in b \)).

Word associations, as it happens, are largely extensional, as are most of the connections literary critics make when they read a text. However, the work of the critic is generally to construct sets within which these choices can be said to belong together logically. For Badiou the hermeneutical decision to group words or represented actions or whatever else in a literary work comprises an arrangement in sets by way of a contingent construction that counts as an “event,” a performatory act by the critic, that organizes, distinguishes, and clarifies, but that also subtracts from all the other possibilities, hence negating them; the “event” of criticism ultimately obscures or eclipses the multiplicities by grounding or even entirely forgetting them for the sake of what the critic has to present: his or her interpretive state of affairs. As Alberto Toscano, in an essay on Badiou, notices rather lucidly: the consistency of a representation forecloses what otherwise could be considered an infinite dissemination, a multiplicity not “ordained into property or determination.” However, in order for communication to make use of language productively, pure multiplicity has to be subtracted from the field of language.

In his book *On Samuel Beckett*, Badiou argues that Beckett is “oriented towards an economy that I would readily call ancient, or categorical.” Indeed, Badiou notes that in Beckett there is conspicuous subtraction and addition of multiplicities: the “I can’t go on” and “you must go on,” the vociferation of multiple articulations and the “almost nothing” on the “edge of breathing.” These are two sets that belong to a bigger set that concerns impossibility, impasse, and deadlock.

We are entirely trapped in the impasse. The cogito is literally unbearable, but it is also inevitable. The solipsism that is given over to the process of identification is interminable and pointless, it can no longer sustain

---

writing, but neither can the place of being welcome us. This is why Beckett’s texts from this period are texts for nothing.\textsuperscript{65}

For Badiou, the nothing is a category, just as the impasse is a category, or the cogito is a category. They are all part of a bigger set, no doubt having to do with being and nothingness, but the point here is that Badiou’s reading is not aimed so much at mobilizing the freeplay of multiplicities (compare to Derridean dissemination) as in establishing what the phenomenologists used to call regions, clearly delineated sets that organize categorical distinctions and relationships. Badiou’s project is organizational and, one has to suppose, structural and logical. But in Badiou’s work this by no means indicates an interest in logical confinement or closure. In Beckett’s texts, he says, there is an “infinity of the sensible world,” an excess that potentially infinitizes what is in the sets.\textsuperscript{66} This is a profound advance in literary criticism in that it discredits the idealistic notion that there will be a totalizing interpretation that “gets a text right,” the assumption being that there can only be one proper interpretive configuration and that it ought to be able to account for everything in the text logocentrically (5.2).

\textbf{READING}

Alain Badiou, \textit{Conditions} (2008)

\textsuperscript{65}Badiou (2003), p. 15.

\textsuperscript{66}Badiou (2003), p. 33.
6 Tools for Social Analysis

6.1 The Public Sphere 228
   *Habermas and the Frankfurt School* 228
   *The Public Sphere versus Hegemony: Laclau and Mouffe* 233

6.2 Ideology 237
   *Political Ideology* 237
   *Top-down Ideology* 238
   *Ideology as Class Consciousness* 239
   *Ideology as False Consciousness* 241
   *Ideology as Semiotic Representation* 244
   *Ideology as Social Interpellation* 248

6.3 Theories of Power 250
   *Might Makes Right versus the Good Shepherd* 250
   *Behaviorism: Stick and Carrot* 259
   *Capillary Power* 261

6.4 The Social Relation 263
   *Primitive Social Relations* 264
   *Plato’s Republic and Aristotle’s Politics* 265
   *From Divine Right to Social Contract* 270
   *Marx on The Social Relation* 275
   *Alterity: The Relation of Non-relation* 277
This chapter will cover four broad topics within which most social theory relevant to the languages and literatures takes place: conceptualization of the public sphere, ideology critique, theories of power, and definitions of the social relation. A fifth major topic, social constructivism, has already been covered at length (1.6). In that same section, sub-disciplines such as feminism, ethnic studies, race studies, global studies, and so forth have been discussed. And, of course, these are the disciplinary areas of research to which the topics in this chapter need to be applied. Application, however, raises two issues. First, we can’t make an informed application in the absence of knowing the different ways in which a social concept has been conceptualized, if not aspects of the concept’s intellectual history, which is what each of the four sections provides below for their respective topics. Second, in terms of application we need to be aware that we will necessarily have to negotiate what are, in the aggregate, theories that are in conflict with one another. For example, there is no one synthetic account of the public sphere, ideology, power, or the social relation that will ameliorate all the different theoretical models that have been proposed. This can make application rather difficult. Indeed, this speaks to my suspicion, developed elsewhere, of there being a “theory mess” in the Humanities, by which I mean considerable confusion and misunderstanding relative to the various theoretical constructions that are in conflict and how these should be applied.¹ Nowhere is this more apparent than in research that adopts social theories without bothering to consider how conflicted they are relative to other theories that are just as robust. Simply incorporating the social theories of a thinker because they are trendy doesn’t insure one against the possibility that other theories might be much more illuminating when applied, or that the trendy theory of the moment may well be seriously flawed from other philosophical points of view. In short, one needs to put whatever social theory one is studying into the context of a much broader intellectual history that will encourage critical thinking rather than blind conformity. That said, I encourage everyone to be in fashion, to get with the trends, but to do so responsibly from an intellectual point of view. Let’s take on board that when it comes to social theory, there are many different assumptions and conceptions in play.

Taken together, the topics in this chapter speak to elements that are foundational to an understanding of the political, which inherently makes (i) assumptions about governing in relation to a public sphere, (ii) assump-

tions in the form of views and ideas (ideology) about social orders and their legitimacy, whether these are entire systems or parts of systems, (iii) assumptions about power and its expression, and (iv) assumptions about social relations and contracts (obligations, required or expected).

Of importance, with respect to the political in terms of literary study, we should bear in mind that politics is both formal, in the sense that it requires formally constituted groups who are invested with the capacity to make policies or laws that can be enforced, and informal, in the sense that the political enlists everyone’s allegiances, given that political decisions bear on perceived individual interests. In literary works, what we often witness is this informal aspect of the political. For example, Gabriel Conroy in James Joyce’s story from *Dubliners*, “The Dead,” is suddenly confronted at a holiday party by Miss Ivors who gently points out to Gabriel that he’s a “West Briton,” by which she means a sell-out to the British, because he is an Irishman who publishes book reviews in a newspaper that is politically aligned with England. Gabriel himself isn’t sure that his writing book reviews for this paper can be considered political, because he himself doesn’t feel aligned with England. And yet Miss Ivors draws him out enough in conversation to admit that he has no nationalist feelings for Ireland and that he’d rather go on vacation to the European continent than visit the Aran Isles on the west coast of Ireland.

—And haven’t you your own land to visit, continued Miss Ivors, that you know nothing of, your own people, and your own country?

—O, to tell you the truth, retorted Gabriel suddenly, I’m sick of my own country, sick of it!

In this exchange, a politics of allegiance and interest emerges on account of Miss Ivors’ gentle but firm probing, a politics that Gabriel may not have realized he had been supporting, but one that Miss Ivors can objectify for herself to the point that she leaves the festivities in disgust with a farewell said in Gaelic, which clearly reveals her politics in a very self-conscious and positioned manner that goes so far as to make a distinction between acquaintances whose allegiances are either with her or against her. It’s at this point that an informal politics starts to look rather more formalized, particularly because it leads to action: Miss Ivors’ political disassociation with the people at the holiday party. Although she is alone, we know that her action implies group solidarity with other nationalists who would have done the same in her situation. Here the slide from representation (talking...
about things) to performance (taking action that has social consequences) reveals how in fiction an informal politics begins to undergo a sea change whereby formality is introduced on account of someone making a decision to act on the basis of a principle or law. In “The Dead” one could certainly speak about the holiday party in relation to the public sphere, Gabriel’s false consciousness, relations of power (Miss Ivors’ power to disassociate herself), and questions of the social relation, in this case, as a linguistic one: “And haven’t you your own language to keep in touch with – Irish? asked Miss Ivors.”

### 6.1 The Public Sphere

**Habermas and the Frankfurt School**

What we call literature is a direct consequence of the rise of the modern public sphere during the Enlightenment. Indeed, the concept and practice of literature as we understand and study it today is the product of the emergence of the public sphere, something that is reflected in Jürgen Habermas’ *The Structural Transformation of the Social Sphere*. Habermas explains the beginning of the modern public sphere in terms of how an essentially feudal order undergoes transformation with the rise of the bourgeoisie in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In late seventeenth-century France, court festivities and events, to which artists and intellectuals were invited, were transformed into the culture of the *salon*. “One sees here the first signs of that combination of the economically unproductive and politically functionless urban aristocracy with eminent writers, artists, and scientists (who frequently were of bourgeois origin) typical of the *salon* of the eighteenth century.” Yet in this late seventeenth-century context, “it was still impossible … for reason to shed its dependence on the authority of the aristocratic noble hosts and to acquire that autonomy that turns conversation into criticism and *bons mots* into arguments. Only with the reign of Philip of Orléans, who moved the royal residence from Versailles to Paris,

---

did the court lose its central position in the public sphere, indeed its status as the public sphere.”

In a short period of time, “the town” took over the cultural functions of the court, hence transforming the public sphere. Royal ceremonials give way to bourgeois social intimacy, and bourgeois intellectuals, often of anything but noble background, rose to prominence, capturing the attention of other intellectuals in what soon became the institution of the coffee house, where an emerging discourse, “critical debate,” was fashioned around the discussion of literature and art, which was extended “to include economic and political disputes, without any guarantee (such as was given in the salons) that such discussions would be inconsequential, at least in the immediate context.” The “coffee house not merely made access to the relevant circles less formal and easier; it embraced the wider strata of the middle class, including craftsmen and shopkeepers.” Key to this transition was informal and formal literary criticism, the latter published in highbrow magazines (feuilletons).

Within today’s university culture, it is hard to imagine that literary criticism might be a major form of social discourse within the public sphere, given that it has become very professionalized and quite removed to the halls of academe, as has the “smart discourse” that makes up the discussion of art and much else that was up for debate among eighteenth-century bourgeois interlocutors. So it is important to recall the role that cultural debate had in initially transitioning the public sphere from court to coffeehouse and the extent to which culture became a central concern, given its relevance to social relations among individuals. Whereas cultural, social, and political matters were once discussed mainly behind closed doors at court, they suddenly became everyone’s business.

A major aspect of the emergence of the public sphere in the very late eighteenth century concerns the advent of public opinion. Whereas Machiavelli in the fifteenth century imagined opinion to be essentially a matter of a ruler’s reputation, and hence a question of the ruler’s legitimacy, by the late eighteenth century, opinion became a matter of public consensus that spoke to power in terms of judgment and will relative to issues of public concern that went far beyond that of a ruler’s reputation.

---

4 Habermas (1991), p. 31. Incidentally, Philip of Orleans was not King of France. But this does not negate the main point Habermas is making.

Whereas in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance the opinion of leaders was often based on spectacle and pomp, and wasn’t reasoned, by the late eighteenth century, public opinion was capable of being a rational force, given that public opinion could now rationalize historical events and motivate historical change. Of course, this presupposed a public that had some kind of power to affect the state, which in fact became possible, thanks to the rise of the bourgeoisie as a dominant class within society. Here, of course, we need to be mindful of something Habermas develops at length: that the concept of there being a public sphere is essentially a concept that is the effect of a class, a concept that some thinkers would argue is merely an illusion posited by class ideology that would like to imagine the possibility of a rational, participatory, and democratic society in order to prop up the legitimacy of the bourgeoisie as society’s dominant class.

Habermas is aware of this criticism, but takes the view that not only is the public sphere a reality – and not an illusion, merely – but that it is our best hope for living within a participatory democracy. As Habermas has noticed, for enlightenment thinkers – the American founding fathers among them – dialogue among mutual acquaintances sets up the precondition for free speech and freedom of opinion by means of establishing formal equality and the precondition that each member in a discussion give up his or her right to be right. Only by assuming the liberal idea that one has no right to be right can opinion formation occur. But this requires a cooperation principle, namely, that there will be sufficient mutual understanding in order for each participant to be genuinely included in a discussion. That said, individuals not only have the right to hold opinions, but their differences of opinion should not be the basis for persecuting, ostracizing, or incriminating individuals. This speaks to the enlightenment idea of a universal participation in reasoned debate that leads to the establishment of social, political, and economic norms that work in the interest of the “common good,” provided one can agree on what this common good might be. For Habermas, this kind of thinking leads to a “rationalization of society” that works against prejudice (identitarian politics), superstition (metaphysics), opportunism (exploitation), relativism (obviation of norms), and inequality (might makes right).

With respect to the arts, a transformation occurred during the eighteenth century wherein cultural events, such as theatre and concerts, started to differ from court festivities and worship, given that within an open public
sphere they were accessible to everyone who could afford them for an admission fee, hence making them commodities. “Released from its functions in the service of social representation, art became an object of free choice and of changing preference. The ‘taste’ to which art was oriented from then on became manifest in the assessments of lay people who claimed no prerogative, since within a public everyone was entitled to judge.” This laid the groundwork for a debate about who is genuinely qualified to judge. Is the public at large the critical authority, or should the public take direction from connoisseurs?

Whether art was best judged by trained experts or members of the general public turned out to be at the heart of conflicts around the reception of modern art, which often had set out to alienate the general public and the critical principles by which it judged some art good and other art bad. The fact that connoisseurs of art failed to convince the public of the value of modern art meant that such an education had to be carried out elsewhere, for example, in the university where the reception of art can be more closely guided and mediated by those “in the know.” But the migration of art appreciation to the university, which took place mainly in the 1950s, has meant that art has largely withdrawn itself from the public sphere as a discourse (analysis, conversation, debate) even if, in the case of visual art, the works themselves are housed in public museums, which, of course, do their best to “educate” an often bemused public.

However one analyses the situation of modern art, whether it be literature, music, or visual art we are considering, one has to be concerned about the extent to which art has become quite marginal to the public sphere as opposed to what Hegel once called a “world historical” phenomenon. Art, as Hegel saw it, had world historical consequences of a major sort, and movements in modern art – surrealism and cubism among them – have imagined themselves to be consequential in precisely this sense. However, art’s marginalization within the public sphere tells quite another story. Here, of course, parallels with other intellectual movements, critical theoretical movements among them, are easy to see. Despite all the major paradigm busting that critical theory has done over the past 60 years, it hasn’t had much presence within the public sphere, with the exception of scandal reportage (the young Paul de Man’s collaboration with fascism; Louis Althusser’s murder of his wife; Martin Heidegger’s affair with Hannah Arendt; and so on). But scandal, of course, is the means whereby people

and their ideas are delegitimized and kept out of the public sphere—hopefully, for good.

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who led the Frankfurt School and were active in the 1940s, had argued that the marginalization of serious art in the West was actually being engineered by an entertainment industry that had self-consciously degraded art to the status of an amusement for those who want to be passively “entertained” (as opposed to being actively, intellectually stimulated). They argued that the sound film best represents a mass produced art that “leaves no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience.” “Those who are so absorbed by the world of the movie—by its images, gestures, and words—that they are unable to supply what really makes it a world, do not have to dwell on particular points of its mechanics during a screening.”7 As Adorno and Horkheimer saw it, just as the factory had become automated, so had entertainment. Hence the public was being encouraged to lose all critical sense of what it was reading, watching, or listening to. Adorno and Horkheimer rightly saw that the culture industry was mass producing social conformity in place of reasoned social consensus. The demotion of art as an object for critical introspection to art as unthinking amusement and mere entertainment was, in Adorno and Horkheimer’s view, a deliberate attempt on the part of capitalism to discourage the formation of a public sphere characterized by people who could arrive at making intelligent judgments about the culture around them. No doubt, capitalism’s primary incentive to dumb down society is political, on the one hand, and economic, on the other hand. A public that cannot think issues through will not catch on to the machinations of politicians and the dominant groups who elect them, and a public that cannot arrive at cultural judgments is less likely to question the extent to which culture has been gradually reduced to essentially the standard of living (the Super-Store).

Adorno and Horkheimer, therefore, would have criticized Habermas for his faith in reason in the public sphere as a viable locus for debate, opinion formation, and historical action, given that the culture industry, for example, has advanced a largely irrational mind set. Jean Baudrillard and other students of the media have observed that the public sphere is now largely a media simulation and that this has been brokered by government in collaboration with big business in order to make sure that the public’s awareness is restricted to very simplistic ideological debates in which

complex issues are reduced to black and white alternatives that reinforce party politics. Furthermore, what Guy Debord called the “society of the spectacle” is the unfolding in images and sound of a televised pseudo-world collaged together from footage that is continually being collected by news agencies from around the globe. “The spectacle appears at once as society itself, as a part of society and as a means of unification. As a part of society, it is that sector where all attention, all consciousness, converges.” But, Debord also notices, “this sector is the locus of illusion and false consciousness; the unity it imposes is merely the official language of generalized separation.” The society of the spectacle is the public sphere insofar as it is the locus where social consciousness converges to observe what is happening out in the world at large. Debord calls this sphere a “world view transformed into an objective force,” a world picture that has been actualized⁸ (4.1). What the spectacle challenges, precisely, is what Debord calls social practice or what for Habermas would amount to the practice of critical discourse in the public sphere performed by the citizenry at large. Broadcast television substitutes appearance (seeing is believing) and its own ideological commentary for what Debord and Habermas would see as public-social life (active interpersonal communication and negotiation). Just as for Adorno and Horkheimer it appears that the critical aspect of the arts has been converted into the lowest forms of unthinking entertainment, so for Debord and Habermas the society of the spectacle, itself a product of the capitalist sphere of assembly-line production (news as assemblage), deprives the public, once more, of the capacity if not the motivation to discourse critically within a proper public sphere in which people meet in order to discuss matters face-to-face, as opposed to “yelling at the TV set.”

The Public Sphere Versus Hegemony: Laclau and Mouffe

A problem with Habermas’ thinking about the public sphere is that it presumes a highly delineated public zone in which one is either privileged to participate or not. For a different view of the public sphere, it is useful to study Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s path-breaking work of the 1980s entitled Hegemony and Socialist Strategy in which they argued that the public sphere is an articulation of diverse discourses, many of which

are contradictory, and represent “fragments of a lost structural or organic totality.”

Of interest is that Laclau and Mouffe see fragmentation taking place at precisely the time Habermas argues for his Kantian notion of a rational public sphere. Citing the nineteenth-century German poet Friedrich Hölderlin, they speak of two notions of organization: an articulation that is contingent and “external to the fragments themselves” and a mediation according to which “both the fragments and the organization are necessary moments of a totality which transcends them.” Hegel, according to Laclau and Mouffe, advances the “cunning of reason” as mediation and the contradictions that reason eventually displays as contingent articulation. Hegelian discourse, they say, reveals itself as “a series of contingent and not logical transitions.” And “it is precisely here that Hegel’s modernity lies: for him, identity is never positive and closed in itself, but is constituted as transition, relation, difference.”

From there, Laclau and Mouffe argue that “we must begin by renouncing the conception of ‘society’ as founding totality of its partial processes.” In their language, society is an open field of differences that cannot be “apprehended through a system of mediations” (for example, rational thinking or constitutional principles). This means, in turn, that society has no essence and hence no identitarian features that are not precarious and impossible to fix or anchor down as things in themselves.

In attempting to describe society one is likely to confront what Laclau and Mouffe call an asymmetry. “This is the asymmetry existing between a growing proliferation of differences – a surplus of meaning of the ‘social’ – and the difficulties encountered by any discourse attempting to fix those differences as moments of a stable articulatory structure.” In plain language, they are saying that there is so much happening in society that it cannot be rationally depicted. This is not false, if one considers their point that no society or economy can be validly reduced to being a universal theoretical object that exists on some ideal plane, because if that were possible, everything would be taking place by necessity (that is, the necessity of how the system works), whereas in reality there is contingency and historical consequences on account of contingency, because the system is not

---

11 Laclau and Mouffe (1985).
a universal object but an *overdetermined* field in which many elements are disaggregated, for example, the relational character of identities that are themselves contingent, contradictory, and open ended.

Social articulation, as Laclau and Mouffe understand it, is defined in terms of a discursive practice that seeks to establish “a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice.”\(^{13}\) Discourse, moreover, is therefore defined as the structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice.

Whereas Habermas saw the social sphere as rational and dialogical in the sense of the direct face-to-face participation of citizens, who actually talk to one another, Laclau and Mouffe make a discursive reduction whereby “Our analysis rejects the distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices. It affirms: (a) that every object is constituted as an object of discourse, insofar as no object is given outside every discursive condition of emergence; and (b) that any distinction between what are usually called the linguistic and behavioral aspects of a social practice, is either an incorrect distinction or ought to find its place as a differentiation within the social production of meaning, which is structured under the form of discursive totalities.”\(^{14}\) Translation: everything is discourse. Two surprising corollaries are that (i) this discourse has no subject (no author that is the discourse ‘s origin), but only subject positions (positions from which one could speak within the discourse), and (ii) that society cannot be the object of this discourse, because this discourse does not have a universal object to which it refers.

In place of a public sphere, we have seen that Laclau and Mouffe have posited an open discursive field that is overdetermined; however, in order to broach the question of how one manages politically in such a field, they introduce (really, by way of necessity) their concept of hegemony, which they see as an advance over the conceptualization of hegemony by the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci.

The general field of the emergence of hegemony is that of articulatory practices, that is, a field where the “elements” have not crystallized into “moments.” In a closed system of relational identities, in which the meaning of each moment is absolutely fixed, there is no place whatsoever for a hegemonic practice … It is because hegemony supposes the

---

\(^{13}\)Laclau and Mouffe (1985), p. 105.

incomplete and open character of the social, that it can take place only in a field dominated by articulatory practices.\textsuperscript{15}

In addition, the “hegemonic subject” has to be at once inside and outside the various articulated moments and must exist between subject positions “located within certain discursive formations.”

“The two conditions of a hegemonic articulation are the presence of antagonistic forces and the instability of the frontiers which separate them.”\textsuperscript{16} In fact, “Only the presence of a vast area of floating elements and the possibility of their articulation to opposite camps – which implies a constant redefinition of the latter – is what constitutes the terrain permitting us to define a practice as hegemonic.”\textsuperscript{17} Indeed, without a sense of what is equivalent, what is antagonistic, and what would make up a frontier between equivalence/antagonism, hegemony cannot be discussed. This raises Antonio Gramsci’s concept of the “war of position” within hegemonic relations whereby, say, new social identities can be formed by repositioning oneself along a frontier where identities/differences are in play. Unlike Gramsci, Laclau and Mouffe insist that they abandon the class model as well as the idea that there is but one hegemonic center to be fought over by means of a war of position.

In terms of supplying examples for the kind of hegemonic situation Laclau and Mouffe have in mind, one might think of the extent to which various American celebrities (rock stars, movie stars, former political leaders, business tycoons) have been occupying a frontier between the first and third worlds with respect to philanthropic activities that encroach upon activities that used to be reserved for the US State Department. In fact so much money is being given to third world states for specific purposes that one begins to wonder whether a hegemonic relation between the rich and famous and the United States government isn’t beginning to emerge in which it is the private donors who are starting to control aspects of foreign policy by means of a war of position in which they are taking the lead as shapers of public opinion and even of foreign policy in terms of doling out aid. This has been quite pronounced, for example, in the role that Hollywood celebrities have taken in shaping the representation of and response to the earthquake disaster in Haiti in 2010.

\textsuperscript{15} Laclau and Mouffe (1985), p. 134.
\textsuperscript{16} Laclau and Mouffe (1985), p. 135.
\textsuperscript{17} Laclau and Mouffe (1985), p. 136.
6.2 Ideology

Ideology is a vast topic that has its source in the French Enlightenment. As there are many different conceptions of ideology, the topic is broken down into the following categories: political ideology, top-down ideology, ideology as class consciousness, ideology as false consciousness, ideology as semiotic representation, and ideology as interpellation. Two major critics who have written on ideology at length are Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton. Anyone seriously interested in the topic will want to consult their works.

Political Ideology

Political Ideology refers to socially-politically shared beliefs among groups within the public sphere. In modern democratic societies, ideologies are usually a patchwork of different systems of belief that coalesce into political views and platforms that may attain representation in terms of formal party politics. In such a case, we speak in terms of political ideologies, which presuppose objectified world views and propose or uphold a model for how a society should be constituted and governed. Because such ideologies derive their ideals from a number of cultural sources, it is not uncommon to see those sources lay a claim to these ideologies and even usurp them to some extent. This is the case in societies wherein religious doctrines are so foundational to the ideals of political ideology that it becomes impossible to separate church and state. In those societies, it is tempting for religious leaders to take charge of political ideology in the name of their religious ideals. However, this sort of usurpation can also occur when, say, the corporate community takes charge of the political ideology in order to maintain economic ideals that prop up the interests of big business, among them, laissez faire and the profit motive. In other words, ideologies are not simply a bundle of concepts that people believe: they are the direct
expression of competing social institutions and interests that are demanding representation as common ideals.

**Top-Down Ideology**

Top-down ideology refers to the approach to ideology by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels who argued that the ideas of the ruling class are the ideas that rule society. In their view, the very class that owns and rules the modes of industrial production (the base) also rules the modes of intellectual conception and its institutionalization (the superstructure). As an organized, coherent account of reality, ideology functions as a system of social control that is based on typifying phenomena (events, people, situations, motivations) in such a way that everyday life becomes instantly recognizable in terms of what is normal and what is unusual. In taking certain typifications for granted, what may be an entirely ideological construction is accepted as usual and even natural.

Often, typifications are objectifications of value, which means that typifications are based upon not only value differences, but upon a preference or bias for some values over others. To take an obvious example, in terms of typifying masculinity versus femininity a large number of value differences are at issue, and what characterizes a so-called proper man or a proper woman, in the eyes of society, depends upon value biases that over time are objectified, taken for granted, and then treated as if they were natural. Westerners notice this quite strikingly in comparing Western to non-Western norms.

A problem with the concept of top-down ideology (the feminist concept of patriarchy is a variant of it) is that ruling elites actually do not have a monopoly upon ideology. If they did, everyone would take the monopoly version of reality at face value and never question it. Ruling elites may promote an official ideology of the state, but there is a long history that shows how ruling ideologies have been satirized and mocked by much of the society to whom this ideology was directed. Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian theorist, wrote on this subject, noting how official discourses meant to represent reality in one way or other were often mocked by ordinary people who had little confidence in officials or the ruling class (2.8). Moreover, Bakhtin demonstrated that in medieval society occasions even had to be provided for this sort of social backlash to be expressed in the public sphere during carnivals and festivals. With respect to the writings of
François Rabelais, Bakhtin argued that for Rabelais “it is necessary to destroy and rebuild the entire false picture of the world, to sunder the false hierarchical links between objects and ideas, to abolish the divisive ideational strata … Thus, in Rabelais the destruction of the old picture of the world and the positive construction of a new picture are indissolubly interwoven with each other.” Bakhtin, who was writing in the Soviet Union during its bloodiest years, was clearly opposing Marx and Engels’ idea that ideology is in fact a monopoly of the ruling elites.

During the Vietnam war, ordinary Americans began to question the top-down ideology of the US government with respect to justifying the invasion of a poor country in South East Asia in the throes of civil war. Entertainers, in particular, began to parody government officials and their speeches, offering lines like, “Be the first one on your block to send your son home in a box.” The war provided an opportunity by top-down ideology for the public to objectify, critique, and demonstrate against a world picture as constructed by political and military elites fighting a so-called “cold war” with communism. Once a large segment of the public could objectify the illogicality, paranoia, and futility of holding to such a world picture, especially given the sacrifice the government was expecting American families to make, it was possible to delegitimize the top-down ideology and offer alternative ways of thinking about society, culture, and politics.

Ideology as Class Consciousness

The top-down model of ideology enacted by the state for the sake of social control is, of course, a class based ideology insofar as it advances the cause of the ruling elites or upper class. However, when class consciousness is mentioned by Marxists, it usually refers to either the bourgeoisie or the working class in terms of their self-perception within the totality that makes up their economic, social, and political existence. What thoughts and feelings do people of a certain class have with respect to their individual situations within society as a whole?

Ideology as class consciousness has been studied at length in Great Britain. E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams are major figures who had an interest in working class ideology. Thompson’s writings on the working

class emphasized subjective experience and turned away from simplistic notions of social domination. This has led to later interests by later critics in what choices people make in order to resist ideological domination. Williams, too, understood class consciousness in terms of how values and perceptions were intangibly organized in terms of the social subject’s experience, which, in Williams’ view, could be discussed in terms of a “structure of feeling.” This is the particular sense of life that social subjects experience and share intersubjectively. How people think and feel has to do with how they think and feel about the occurrences and things that make up their life world, a point that follows from Edmund Husserl’s famous remark that to be conscious is to be conscious of something. Experience of one’s life world is to some great extent class based insofar as that experience reflects the material/economic circumstance of the social subject as a member of a social group or class that shares this circumstance – as the experiential life world itself. This concerns typification. Experience is ideological insofar as it isn’t unique to the individual and, in fact, has been objectified and valorized by others of one’s class in terms of how that class imagines its situation, rightly or wrongly, to the whole of society.

Williams argued for an organic popular spirit that would contribute to the structure of feeling particular to a class and hence to help objectify a certain kind of world experience (that of the phenomenological “life world”). A literary example along these lines can be offered. In James Joyce’s Ulysses, Leopold Bloom takes an interest in a girl whose life circumstance and experience is both typical and yet unique insofar as she’s living them in the present.

Gerty wished to goodness they would take their squalling baby home out of that and not get on her nerves, no hour to be out, and the little brats of twins. She gazed out towards the distant sea. It was like the paintings that man used to do on the pavement with all the coloured chalks and such a pity too leaving them there to be all blotted out, the evening and the clouds coming out and the Bailey light on Howth and to hear the music like that and the perfume of those incense they burned in the church like a kind of waft.¹⁹

No one can say these perceptions are logically coherent – they are ad hoc – but they have an aesthetic dimension that favors the distant sea, the paint-

ings on the pavement, the clouds coming out, and the music and incense at church. Taken together, these structure feeling and point to a way of life that someone is living in the mind as she reflects on the life world that is available (and hence normal) to her. What also makes this experience ideological is that it typifies the desire to exceed the limits of class, to be liberated from the younger children, and experience life from the sort of aesthetic perspective that would be more readily available to the upper-middle class or wealthy class, something that represents an awareness of one’s being socially constricted in terms of one’s own class. In other words, Gerty’s thoughts speak to her situation as a member of a social class that is necessarily shared by others of her class, who, like Gerty, can “dream.”

**Ideology as False Consciousness**

There has been much debate about the viability of the notion of false consciousness, particularly since it presupposes a certain arrogance on the part of those who think they’re capable of distinguishing between true and false, as if they’re not enmeshed in the same ideological traps as everyone else. Essentially false consciousness pertains to misrecognition by a class of people of its true situation with respect to the totality of society. This view was advanced by Georg Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* and, despite critiques of it, has also been rather foundational to the writings of both Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek, though in some very modified ways. 20

Lacan’s famous essay, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” is mainly about misrecognition within identity formation that occurs at what Lacan called the “mirror stage” when a child first perceives himself or herself (at roughly 6 months) as a “subject” (really, an independent Cartesian subject) in the mirror, not realizing that what he or she sees is an image in reverse. The mirror image “symbolizes the I’s mental permanence, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination.” 21 Nowhere does Lacan speak of this as false consciousness, but obviously his point is that from the onset of establishing its imago on a reflective surface, the social subject is, de facto, in a state of

misrecognizing itself, just as the working-class subject or middle-class subject misrecognizes itself in the mirror that is class identification, if not in the mirror that is society generally. In the 1970s, Jean Baudrillard took this further in thinking about what he called “the mirror of production” within which we misrecognize ourselves, that mirror having to do with mass produced consumer goods in whose ideological reflection we see ourselves.\textsuperscript{22}

SlavojŽižek’s work is largely a series of didactic exercises in showing us the extent to which we misrecognize not only ourselves but pretty much everything we encounter. Žižek is very keen on the Marxist perception that everything we see is as if through a camera obscura in which things are presented to us upside down. Lacan’s mirror and Marx and Engels’ camera obscura (from \textit{The German Ideology}) are quite similar in this regard in that they are both used as analogies for talking about a constitutive misrecognition or false consciousness that is at once individual and collective. Žižek’s position as critic has been consistent: to demystify false consciousness and rectify misrecognition by inverting the subject’s structure of interpreting what he or she sees by way of providing us with some corrective lenses, namely, Lacan’s theoretical models.

In Žižek’s \textit{Interrogating the Real}, we are told that the recent cultural infatuation with Buddhism in the West encourages people to grasp epistemology upside down. It’s not the case that there is “no self,” as the Buddhists teach, but that, as Lacan teaches, the self is barred. According to Žižek, rather than think in terms of the non-being of self, one has to think in terms of the being of an absence that “serves as the unrepresentable point of reference, as the ‘I’ to which mental events are attributed.”\textsuperscript{23}

Žižek takes up a much more complex example of this camera obscura (or upside-down) effect when he explicates Lacan’s analysis of how Immanuel Kant’s moral philosophy is a species of false consciousness that can be unmasked once we realize that it inverts the thinking of the Marquis de Sade that speaks Kant’s “truth.” But how can de Sade’s appallingly immoral defense of sadism reveal the truth of Kant’s morality? Žižek explains, “Kant’s categorical imperative [that is, his absolute moral obligation] is a superegotistical law which goes against the subject’s well-being.” In other words, “moral law is a fierce order which does not admit excuses – ‘you can because you must’ – and which in this way acquires an air of

\textsuperscript{22}Jean Baudrillard, \textit{The Mirror of Production} (St. Louis, MO: Telos Press, 1975).

mischievous neutrality – of mean indifference.”24 Kant’s failure to admit or to have seen this dimension of his thinking – that it has a potentially sadistic aspect that has been observed in totalitarian regimes by Žižek and others – reveals a certain false consciousness at work within Kant’s philosophy. In Lacan’s essay, “Kant with Sade,” enlightenment mystification is exposed. As Žižek puts it: “According to Lacan, Kant ignores the other side of this neutrality of moral law, its meanness and obscenity, its mischievousness which goes back to the jouissance [ecstatic pleasure] behind law’s command.”25 However, what Kant ignores is everywhere present as the way in which duty gets performed: as one’s being an instrument of the will of an Other that says, “you can, because you must.” Hence “in the Sadean scene, near to the executioner and his victim, there is always a third, the Other for which the sadist practices his activity, the Other whose pure form is that of the voice of a law which addresses itself to the subject in the second person, with the imperative, ‘Fulfil your duty!’”

Rather more direct in terms of discussing the camera obscura effect are Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in The German Ideology, which is an important source for Žižek’s fascination with reversibility.

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life … Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc. – real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms. Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process. If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.26

According to Marx and Engels, upside down is the notion that material activity follows from our ability to conceptualize it, as if people first thought up a whole system of ideas and then applied them to the real world in terms

24 Žižek (2005), p. 121.
of material activity. We forget that “Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.”27 Imagined subjects thinking imagined things is typical of idealism, which abstracts ideas in such a way that they no longer have any connection to real living individuals involved in material activities. And this alienation of concept from reality, to put it simply, is what Marx and Engels are calling ideology: the elevation of abstract ideas over concrete matter, as in the case of Socrates’ idea that what we can’t see (the pure forms) is more real than what we can see, feel, and touch (ordinary things). This sort of obvious contradiction, typical of metaphysics, whereby the unseen is more real than the reality around us is, for Marx and Engels, the essence of false consciousness, that camera obscura that insists the upside down view of things is the correct one. That this upside down view (idealism) has the status of objective power over how people live their lives suggests not just that everyone is living under the illusions of idealism but that these illusions are structured into the life world in such a way that none of us can easily see them for what they are: the illusions of an abstracted phantom-like thought system that presents itself as more real than the actual lived conditions that make up concrete reality.

**Ideology as Semiotic Representation**

During the heyday of French theory at the journal *Tel Quel* (during the 1960s), intellectuals posited that language could be considered a “mode of production” in the Marxist sense. That meant treating language not so much as a fully formed discourse, but rather as a series of operations at the level of the sign. Structuralist linguists like Roman Jakobson had already demonstrated that sign systems are coded in terms of binary oppositions and that these oppositions function like rules by means of which significations are generated. These rules, in fact, not only ensure the production of signs, but ensure that this production reproduces a certain logic that guarantees the standards and consistency of the product, say, a particular series of signs.

In “‘Why ‘Mama’ and ‘Papa,’” Roman Jakobson wanted to know why it is that in so many languages the first words out of a baby’s mouth are precisely words repeating “ma, ma, ma” and “pa, pa, pa” to both identify

---

and distinguish between mother and father.\textsuperscript{28} We know that babies produce signs in the form of sounds that can be decoded and responded to by parents and, of course, by others, as well. That the baby repeats precise sounds (these are like precisely made widgets off an assembly line) and learns how to make them into objects (distinct sound formations) that can be exchanged for smiles, kisses, hugs, and so on, already speaks to a very simple example in which sound-signs are treated as \textit{a mode of signifying production} whose result is the making of a thing that receives something in exchange.

Moreover, that mode of signifying production depends upon phonetic rules of sound making (a distinct code or program) that concern binary oppositions, in particular, the plosive “pa” versus the bilabial “ma.” Furthermore, babies learn the general rule that vowels follow consonants. In addition, the production of the signifiers mama/papa comes at the end of a long babbling stage in which there is the rule: “one utterance-one sentence-one word-one morpheme-one phoneme-one distinctive feature. The mama-papa pair is the vestige of that stage of one-consonant utterances.”\textsuperscript{29} Not to be forgotten, however, is that all this needs to be submitted to the rule of repetition (assembly line type speech). “At the transition from babbling to verbal behavior, the reduplication may even serve as a compulsory process, signaling that the uttered sounds do not represent a babble, but a senseful, semantic entity.” In other words, repetition indicates to the baby and to others that baby is producing language, not just making sounds. “The phonemes are to be recognizable, distinguishable, identifiable … they must be repeatable.”\textsuperscript{30} Of course, the mama/papa distinction not only represents the production of language by means of rules and the fashioning of repeatable signifiers, \textit{but it interpellates the baby within the cultural/ideological concept of the family}, which is communicated to the child, first of all, in terms of the mother/father difference and all the ideological connotations that this entails. That the baby “belongs” to the mother and the father will be reinforced as it repeats what it will come to know as names.

In the 1950s, Roland Barthes had proposed a model of signification in which language is doubled in some form by what he called myth, a synonym for ideology. In \textit{Mythologies}, Barthes introduced a binary opposition like

\textsuperscript{29}Jakobson (1990), p. 309.
\textsuperscript{30}Jakobson (1990).
that of mama/papa in the form of a distinction between boxing, which he associated with Protestantism, and wrestling, which he associated with Catholicism. According to Barthes, boxing is ideologically Protestant because it is spare, technical, and emphasizes work, whereas wrestling is Catholic because it stresses spectacle, mystery, and ritual. These stereotypes, however crude, are an example of how the production of a game by means of a complex arrangement of rules, signs, and actions connotes something different that is mythic or ideological, namely the correspondence of boxing with the Reformation and wrestling with the Counter-Reformation. Typical of a Catholic culture, wrestling is said to show signs of theatricality: the excessively powerful body; the clearly designated roles; the staged “turning point,” as the villain, who is winning by cruelly beating up the hero, suffers a sudden change in fortune when the hero, almost knocked out, gets a second wind and begins to get his revenge. In terms of signs, Barthes noted that “The physique of wrestlers makes up a fundamental sign that contains the germ of the entire fight,” which is seen as “a fight between Good and Evil.”

Boxing, on the other hand, is considered relatively untheatrical; it is mainly a skilled demonstration of excellence that is technological (efficient, calculated, rational). Here the difference between strength/weakness, which is merely a question of physical power, replaces the moral difference between good and evil.

For Barthes, the various oppositions (or differences) produce a signifying structure that can be drawn out, hence revealing a complex network of ideological relationships that many people would never have imagined were there, but that nevertheless exist as some sort of subconscious process of signification that is repeating distinctions familiar to everyone: minimal/excessive, rational/irrational, skill/trickery, happenstance/ritual, unscripted/scripted, etc. What is especially interesting to Barthes is that taken as a myth, the distinction between two sports repeat something ideological in history that most people would never think of: the conflict in European countries brought about by the Reformation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In 1950s France, this war over religion is merely residual and has been transformed into something within the popular culture that is trivial: the difference between boxing/wrestling.

Key to this approach to cultural study is that for Barthes social semiotics is rational and therefore decipherable as if it were a language all to itself. But Jean Baudrillard’s *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* argues against

---

the rationalism of Barthes’ type of semiotic analysis by noting that “a frantic semiology of the mass media” is being produced at all times in order to manage the consumption of consumer goods by the masses. However, the masses “are a stronger medium than all the media,” which is why “to their amazement, economists have never been able to rationalize consumption.”

A desperate attempt has been made from all sides (official propaganda, consumer societies, ecologies and sociologies) to instill into them sensible spending and functional calculation in matters of consumption, but it is hopeless. For it is by sign/value and the frantic stake in sign/value (which economists, even when they try to integrate it as a variable, have always seen as upsetting economic reason), that the masses block the economy, resist the “objective” imperative of needs and the rational balancing of behaviors and ends. Sign/value against use value, this is already a distortion of political economy.

While this may seem to work well for those who want to make a quick fortune, Baudrillard cautions that, in fact, this distortion of political economy is “the end of the economic, cut off from all its rational definitions by the excessive, magic, spectacular, fraudulent and nearly parodic use the masses put it to. An asocial use, resistant to all pedagogies, to all socialist education …” The reduction of things to signs (that simulate those things) leads to an overproduction or multiplication of signs for the sake of media dissemination. This, in turn, leads to an overproduction of things that the signs encourage us to consume. Problematic is that at some point the status of sign/thing shifts, so that instead of the thing being shown as a representation that makes us want to buy the thing, the sign as representation becomes the thing that we want to buy but can only have as mere thing. So that it’s as if the thing were the simulation of the sign and not the other way around. If people have Hello Kitty addiction – the obsession with decorating everything around them with Hello Kitty products – it is because they are trying to consume the dissemination of an image, which is to say, overproduction itself.

32Baudrillard (1983), p. 44.
Ideology as Social Interpellation

We already saw ideology, in the context of Roman Jakobson, as social interpellation with respect to how a baby enters the family by way of distinguishing between “ma” and “pa.” But the idea of interpellation wasn’t rigorously conceptualized by Jakobson; rather, it was developed importantly by Louis Althusser in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.”

I shall then suggest that ideology “acts” or “functions” in such a way that it “recruits” subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or “transforms” the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: “Hey, you there!”

Althusser adds that when a person turns around to face the one who is hailing, that person “becomes a subject. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was ‘really’ addressed to him …”

According to Althusser, we don’t exist as independent social subjects outside of ideology who can pick and choose what bits of ideology to accept or reject. Rather, we are hailed by ideology and required to respond to it as a subordinate.

The existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing … what thus seems to take place outside ideology (to be precise, in the street), in reality takes place in ideology. That is why those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical denegation of the ideological character of ideology by ideology: ideology never says, “I am ideological.”

This argument demolishes the distinction between false consciousness and true consciousness, because it makes the claim that all individuals are “always-already a subject” that is hailed by ideology. Whether we are aware of it or not, we are born into a state whose laws are based on ideological

---


assumptions that interpellate us. Hence we can’t proclaim our innocence in terms of not knowing the law before a judge, because as a social subject we’re supposed to know what the law demands of us.

Althusser’s model of interpellation was derived from Jacques Lacan’s “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire” in which the subject is hailed by an Other who calls out, “Chè vuoi?” or “What do you want?” This question puts the subject on notice that he or she has a desire and that it concerns concrete relations, as Sartre would have said, between a self and an other, say, the customer at a restaurant and the waiter who serves. But, of course, this isn’t so much about ideology as it is about subject formation in terms of there being a “dialectic of desire” among persons. But Althusser transforms this by assuming that the Other occupies a symbolic position of authority in the social order that is symbolically constitutive of the subject and that has the capacity to subjugate the subject by way of reminding him or her that one takes place in a world that makes demands on the subject that go beyond our everyday wants and desires. Ideology, in other words, is the personification of the social order in its capacity to single us out for reasons that have to do with its very replication as a system of laws, policies, rules, beliefs, and attitudes. It is to this “big Other” (the phrase is Lacan’s) that Allen Ginsberg was talking back in his lengthy poem “America,” which can be taken as a direct address to the “big Other” that is American ideology (its politics and culture). Here are just the opening four lines.

America I’ve given you all and now I’m nothing.
America two dollars and twentyseven cents January 17, 1956.
I can’t stand my own mind
America when will we end the human war?  

READING

Fredric Jameson, Ideologies of Theory (2008)

Ever since Michel Foucault began writing a theory of power in the 1970s, there has been considerable interest in power as a topic relevant to literary study, given the interest in social domination and subordination and how that relates to questions of race, class, and gender. Historically, we can easily trace the emergence of various theories of power over the centuries, and while all of them are persuasive to some extent, no one of them satisfactorily replaces all the others.

**Might Makes Right versus the Good Shepherd**

Clearly, the most simple and immediate conception of power is that of “might makes right.” In Sigmund Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*, this is the right (that is, the liberty) of the primal father whose power is based simply upon his great physical strength. Freud was thinking that early humans probably behaved very much like primates or even sea lions in terms of their sociality and sexuality. In this world there is a dominant male who keeps all the females to himself, hence fulfilling the Darwinian expectation that nature selects the strongest of the species for reproduction in order that the offspring will be fittest for survival. However, because individuals in human society are endowed with intelligence and cunning, the sons of the primal father will not allow his tyranny, because their sex drives override whatever submissiveness the primal father exacts. Hence they band together and carry out their wish to kill the father and share the women among themselves. (Strangely, Freud doesn’t consider female desire in this scenario.) This collective action on the part of the sons is also an expression of might makes right, though it harbors within it its own negation, that is, the guilty feeling that murdering the father was a terrible wrong that went against nature. To compensate for this sense of wrong, the primal father is elevated to the status of a god who is then worshipped and to whom everyone is again loyal. Might makes right is therefore symbolically restored to its original tyrannical status in an imagined religious context, but has been forever curtailed and restricted in the world in which people actually live. In short, whereas might makes right appeals to the imagination as the most authentic expression of power, in actual practice it is found to be intolerable. From a Freudian point of view this speaks to
that has to be imposed on the kind of pleasure that would follow from the absolutism of might makes right. In sum, the wish for this kind of pleasure in fantasy is always put into check by some form of social repression that in real life prohibits the absolutism of might makes right from taking place.

In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Friedrich Nietzsche had preceded Freud in opining that in human society the weak (he includes women) will violate Darwin’s principle of survival of the fittest by conspiring to topple the strong by way of cunning and banding together. Then retroactively they will justify their treachery by invoking principles that will become the basis for a moral order. Hence physical strength is trumped by establishing rules of conduct, and ideas in the form of principles and eventually laws wind up being more powerful than physical might. Nietzsche was of the view that might makes right was universally expressed by every living being as a matter of simple competition. Once this is inhibited, Nietzsche thought, the instincts that were outer directed in terms of an absolutism of might were turned inward where they could be elaborated as fantasy: the wish to act despotically, to give free rein to one’s impulses. But this despotic wish would over time be disciplined by social morality whose repressive effect is to make the individual feel bad about having despotic wishes and fantasies. This motivated Nietzsche’s concept of “bad conscience,” the guilt (or “self-tormenting”) one has for feeling what, in Nietzsche’s view, ought to be quite natural: the instinctual drive to dominate absolutely for the sake of a boundless pleasure that feels no guilt or remorse because it is beyond good and evil. Unfortunately, this originary power, which is that of nature (of the biological) as unpressed survival of the fittest, can never express itself in what was devised to curtail it, namely human society, except as a horrific break with the social. That is to say, a break with morality, laws, commitments, duties, arrangements, and contracts that form a network of enforced behaviors, which are themselves grounded in the expression of power by means of the *restricted* and *calculated* (just) application of forces with an idea towards an end: bringing individuals in line with social norms and forms. For Foucault, this is where the study of bureaucracy comes into the picture. As Michel Foucault realized, essential to this overall account of might makes right is not that the concept of might makes right is unworkable as a legitimate theory, which is the Platonic view, but that we have to see current social expressions of power – for example, bureaucratic power – in terms of a response to and transformation of the might makes right.
concept of power. Foucault’s seminars on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France often addressed this transformation.

The Nietzschean approach, if we may call it that, differs considerably from the Platonic argument in *The Republic* which states that might makes right is simply impractical, because if the despot only serves his own interests (the despots in Plato’s account are all male), he will ruin the very State in which he lives and therefore will ruin himself. This view wasn’t original to Plato but had already existed long before Plato was born: in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Israel. For all these societies shared in the concept of the “good shepherd” who looks after the flock, not just himself. In *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault discusses this good shepherd model of governance, which originated in the Near East, migrated to ancient Greece, and via Plato and the Bible, took hold in early Christian societies where it would grow into a major medieval doctrine. Foucault summarizes the features of this model at length, but here are some of the central attributes he notes: (i) “The shepherd’s power is not exercised over a territory but, by definition, over a flock, and more exactly, over the flock in its movement from one place to another. The shepherd’s power is essentially exercised over a multiplicity in movement.” In short, whereas the Greek god is territorial, the Hebrew deity (the shepherd) wanders. (ii) “Pastoral power is fundamentally a beneficent power …its only *raison d’être* is doing good …” The essential aim of such power is “salvation of the flock.” This is an exercise of power akin to the violent conquest of enemies, the display of omnipotence through symbolism, and the prudent governance of a society, but its emphasis is decidedly spiritual. Moreover, such power is what Foucault calls the “power of care.” The shepherd cares so zealously that he puts the well-being of the flock ahead of himself. Unlike the despot in Plato, the good shepherd provides for the flock; he does not make the flock tremble before his power, as that is detrimental to the flock’s well-being. (iii) “Pastoral power is an individualizing power.” That is, the shepherd not only has to look after the flock as a whole, but after each individual within the flock. He must correct the sheep that act in ways that are not for their own good, which the shepherd does by acting as the proper model of rectitude. The shepherd is powerful insofar as his example reveals itself to be salvific and therefore one that has to be followed by way of emulation. As Foucault

---

points out, this imitative model of governance was crucial to how the Catholic church looked upon power during the Middle Ages.

Comparing this with the Nietzschean and Freudian accounts above, we can see a psychological transformation of the might makes right impulse by way of social repression and the formation of bad conscience whose result is ambivalent in the sense that the impulse to act despotically is never really stamped out and always threatens to return in some form or other (which historically it has), whereas in terms of the good shepherd model what we see is a reversal whereby the despot (who only cares about himself to the point that he may do harm to the community) is simply rejected and replaced by the good shepherd (who only cares about the flock, not himself).

Master/Slave Dialectics and the Recognition of Power: Hegel, Kojève, Sartre, Lacan

The master/slave dialectic could be viewed as a reworking of the might makes right version of power. G.W.F. Hegel developed his theory of master/slave in The Phenomenology of Spirit in which he saw it as an early stage in human development, though, of course, he was well aware of slavery as an institutionalized practice in the New World as well as in parts of Africa. Of no small importance is that Hegel’s theory became of interest to French intellectuals in the 1930s who revised and amplified Hegel’s insights. Alexandre Kojève, a Soviet émigré, delivered lectures in Paris during the 1930s that strongly influenced Jean-Paul Sartre’s Being and Nothingness and, later, Jacques Lacan’s Écrits. In the lectures, Kojève made the dialectic of master/slave central to Hegel’s entire project, because Kojève wanted to map this onto the Marxist understanding of class as a dialectical struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.

Kojève’s interpretation of Hegel was momentous because he saw that Hegel’s major insight concerned a theory of power that was based upon mutual recognition. Whereas Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud had a theory of might makes right grounded in the biology of animal dominance and the instinctual pleasure that physical domination releases, Hegel

took the view that for human beings mutual social recognition trumps instinctual satisfaction. Kojève points out that Hegel agrees that in pre-historical times individuals would engage in fights to the death (that is, in might makes right) with other individuals in order to prove which of the two is superior. However, Hegel realized that this struggle to the death always concerned risk. (This is something Freud and Nietzsche hadn’t considered.) The dominant or superior combatant confronts the possibility of being negated (that is, killed) in the fight for supremacy, and Kojève suggests that Hegel surmised this couldn’t be very pleasurable. Moreover, once one has killed one’s rival, there is only a dead body that remains. If there is victory, without the defeated person’s recognition that the victor is master, this victory is hollow and unsatisfying. Hegel concludes that the fundamental desire of the combatant is not to experience primal instinctual release in a risky fight to the death, but to simply defeat one’s opponent decisively enough to be recognized by the defeated and the witnesses as a social subject who has prestige. At issue, then, is that the truth (or value) of one’s being is mediated by the recognition of another, a point that would become central for Sartre’s existential philosophy of the 1940s and Lacanian psychoanalysis of the 1950s and 1960s and that, in turn, has become very influential for literary theory generally.

Kojève emphasizes that for Hegel the need for recognition is especially crucial to the dyadic master/slave relationship, which, as Kojève observes, substitutes for the more primitive fight to the death, which is riskier and less satisfying for the victor. Since, in terms of suppressing others, to have risked one’s prestige for nothing would be unacceptable, the master requires not only that the slave recognize him, but that the slave function as a mediator through whom the master comes to recognize himself master and ruler: as the one who possesses the power to make things happen. In Hegel’s view, the truth of the master is therefore reflected in the consciousness of the slave, which is, however, nothing more than a dependent, slavish consciousness as opposed to an independent one. Whereas in the original moment of enslaving another, the circumstance of victory over the slave establishes the master’s prestige independently of anything the slave may think, the requirement at a later time that a slave recognize the master as master is now mediated by a consciousness upon whom the identity of the master depends, a consciousness that is not entirely without the freedom to think otherwise than what the master wants to hear. Because the master cannot risk the independence of the slave, if one expects to hold slaves, the master’s self-image is dependent upon a consciousness that is slavish and therefore
is always to be doubted. Hence the master cannot be extricated from a form of recognition conditioned by false consciousness, which the master both doubts and relies upon, given that no other option is available to him.

The slave has a somewhat better self-understanding in that the very material conditions of the slave’s existence tell him or her to what extent he or she is recognized to be of value by the master. The fact that one is a slave means that one is needed and that it is even possible that the master cannot exist without the slave. Yet, the slave has never wanted to be a slave, actually has no abiding attachment to the master, and is always ready for a change in social position. Moreover, because the slave has mastery over the practical, material world, he or she is one who, unlike the master, could be self-sufficient if freed. Through work, consciousness “comes to itself” as something independent, as something that is not merely slavish consciousness. Through the consumption of things an other has made, the master becomes entirely dependent upon the slaves and loses the capacity for gaining know-how by means of working in the world at large. The master, who is supposedly very powerful, is in fact enslaved by the very world of which the master is master. But the slave can imagine transforming the world and, in time, will do to the world what is done with material things. These things will be transformed, but this time in order to liberate the slave and thereby realize his or her freedom as an independent consciousness. Whereas the master cannot detach from the world and must perish with it, the slave can transcend this world and survive as a free man or woman. This transformation is dialectical in that we can see how over time the mediation of the master by the slave leads to a reversal whereby the master becomes more and more dependent (powerless) and the slave becomes more and more free (powerful) merely by living out the initial circumstance of their relationship as master and slave. Hegel claims, therefore, that relations of position change even if the positions themselves do not.

Jean-Paul Sartre, who read Hegel and listened to Kojève’s account, applied the master/slave account of power relations to everyday life (“concrete relations with others,” he called it). Though it may seem odd to impose master/slave relations upon everyday life, there is an argument to be made that Hegel’s analysis of power and recognition was actually more applicable to Sartre’s modern Parisian world than it was to actual slavery, which doesn’t seem to be so happily dialectical. Indeed, Kojève’s thinking ran along these lines to the extent that for him Hegel mapped rather well onto the vicissitudes of class conflict in big European cities, the point being that in Hegel the master/slave dichotomy is probably just a heuristic abstraction
of an imagined stage of human development, not a concrete social situation. That caveat aside, typical in Sartre’s application of Hegel is the account of shame in which the subject discovers an aspect of its being not through reflection but by way of an other who observes one’s shameful act. “I have just made an awkward or vulgar gesture … I simply live it … But now suddenly I raise my head. Somebody was there and has seen me. Suddenly I realize the vulgarity of my gesture, and I am ashamed.” By the very appearance of an Other one passes judgment on oneself and becomes very much like a thing or object and, as such, powerless before the Other. “Shame is by nature recognition,” Sartre says. “I recognize that I am as the Other sees me.” At this moment, the Other is master (superior). The “me” is subordinate (inferior). The me even sees itself as subordinate from the Other’s point of view, something that involves an identification with the Other’s superior position: the wish to be in that person’s shoes, not one’s own. But, Sartre points out, “nobody can be vulgar all alone.” In fact, there is something shamefully vulgar about the Other’s choice to recognize something shameful in another person. It is as if the Other were looking for something vulgar, because he or she had an appetite for it, or takes delight in it. The person who enjoys the superiority of being the one who recognizes something shameful about another is himself or herself dependent upon enjoying the vulgarity that is being pointed out, something that is itself vulgar and hatefully shameful, and that makes the Other subordinate (inferior). If the Other reveals one to have behaved shamefully, one may well be taken aback in embarrassment, but one may also recover enough self-dignity to be able to realize that the Other’s recognition was itself a reductive and demeaning objectification, that it concerns a meanness or pettiness that is itself quite base and that willfully misrepresents the people it execrates by means of distortion and reductive objectification. Because the Other’s recognition is therefore moot, the Other is no longer in a position of superiority and deserves little respect.41 In Sartre, such self/other relations will see-saw as psychologically elaborated positions of power (strength/weakness) that trade places. For the self is constantly being mediated (recognized) by others, something that involves shifts of power relations (one’s dominance, one’s subservience vis-à-vis others) that are constitutive of the flow of our mental constructions. If power, in Sartre, is constantly in flux, it is because recognition is phenomenological: an intersubjective process

whose mental constructions are predicated upon an encounter with an Other whose thoughts we have to imagine in response to our own.

Sartre’s account in *Being and Nothingness* on the existence of others had an immense impact on the thinking of Jacques Lacan. The major Sartrean lesson for Lacan was that we need to return to Hegel whose “brilliant intuition is to make me depend on the Other in my being.” Lacan would speak of this dependency in terms of what he called the Imaginary, which is essentially a term for intersubjective mental processes in which our thinking is mediated by what we imagine others to be thinking, perhaps in response. If someone is selecting a jacket in a clothing store, it is natural for that person to wonder how wearing this garment will look to others. Hence that person depends on the Other, as if that Other were as important as the self in terms of making the selection. And perhaps, in some cases, this Other is even more important. But this means that the Other, who is an imaginary sort of agent within us, is quite powerful, given that it exercises authority over us. Freud termed this the super-ego. However, Freud didn’t contextualize it within a Hegelian inspired phenomenology of intersubjective relations.

Sartre, for his part, never went so far as to adopt a structuralist understanding of the subject as an effect of a deterministic signifying system that in the 1950s Lacan would call “the Symbolic order.” Whereas for Sartre self/other relations were fluid and impromptu, hence enabling power relations to see-saw more or less ad hoc, for Lacan these relations are structured in advance. In fact, Freud’s theories were enlisted into this structuralist orientation insofar as Freud argued that there were invariant structures like the Oedipus Complex that psychologically pre-structure interpersonal relations. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud also suggested that the unconscious programmed signification in devious but decipherable ways that had considerable affinities with how literary language works (for example, in terms of substitutive practices typical of metonymy and metaphor). Whereas we experience Sartre’s ad hoc imaginary relations on a day to day basis, these never escape what Lacan called the Symbolic order in which Freud’s thinking plays an important part.

However, the Symbolic order also drew considerable inspiration from Claude Lévi-Strauss’ theory of kinship structures and their relation to language. Of immense significance to Lacan was Lévi-Strauss’ essay on shamanism, “The Effectiveness of Symbols” (1949), because it is there that

Lévi-Strauss comes closest to Lacan’s formulation of the unconscious as a symbolic order that has structure (logic) but no content. Lévi-Strauss: “[The unconscious] is reducible to a function – a symbolic function, which no doubt is specifically human, and which is carried out according to the same laws among all men, and actually corresponds to the aggregate of these laws.” Furthermore, “the unconscious … is always empty – or, more accurately, it is alien to mental images as is the stomach to the foods which pass through it. As the organ of a specific function, the unconscious merely imposes structural laws upon inarticulated elements which originate elsewhere – impulses, emotions, representations, and memories.” Lastly, Lévi-Strauss specifies that the “unconscious structures [preconscious content] according to its laws and thus transforms it into language … These laws are the same for all individuals …”

In “Language and the Analysis of Social Laws” (1945), Lévi-Strauss also suggested that “language structure and kinship systems” might well be caused “by identical unconscious structures.”

Lacan, for his part, did not hesitate to connect these dots. He posited a Symbolic order whose laws were the same for everyone and that were imposed structurally (that is to say, logically) upon inarticulated elements that came from elsewhere. Central to Lacan’s thinking was the anthropological insight that the unconscious as symbolic order produced both kinship and language as communication systems and that these systems (their codes, recall, are all structured according to a universal logic) are fundamental to telling us who we are as individuals relative to other individuals, if not groups. But if our identity is predicated on the Symbolic order, that means this order also must tell us something about power: our status as subjects who are inherently in strong or weak positions, given where we are in the symbolic structure. Recognition in this case is not Imaginary – it doesn’t depend upon what others happen to think – but Symbolic (structurally positioned, programmed).

Three major examples in Lacan of how Imaginary power relations are mediated by positions of power in the Symbolic order occur in the following texts: “Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty: A New Sophism” (1945), “Seminar on the ‘Purloined Letter,’” (1957), and Seminar 17: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis (1969–70). Summaries of these texts would require lengthy expositions that exceed our scope, but investigation

---

of any of them will quickly reveal that Lacan was exploring the interrelation between what Imaginary options one has in deducing one’s power vis-à-vis what an Other reveals about his or her thinking processes and the Symbolic order that one finds oneself within. In the essay on logical time, a prisoner can gain freedom if he is the first to logically deduce whether a disk placed on his back is either white or black. There are five disks, three white, two black, and three prisoners. This is the Symbolic order the prisoner has to accept. However, he must correctly deduce his color without letting the others know what he has deduced or that he is ready to be the first to spring himself from jail. This is the power move within the Imaginary order he finds himself within. In the essay on Edgar Allan Poe’s story, “The Purloined Letter,” the circulation of an important letter has the effect of changing the extent to which certain individuals are powerful or weak with respect to a political order. Depending upon how one is positioned by the structure in relation to where the letter is, one is either weak or strong. This, then, constitutes the story’s Symbolic power structure. The Imaginary order, in contrast, has to do with certain characters jockeying for power by attempting to take advantage of others in order to get the letter into their possession. In Seminar 17, Lacan famously describes four discourses – the discourse of the master, the hysteric, the university, the analyst – for which he has logical formulae made up of four terms in which each term rotates from one position to the other as we progress from discourse to discourse. In this seminar Lacan is interested in how the subject is positioned in terms of an Other within these four discourses and how this determines his or her real power, as opposed to the patient’s recourse to the Imaginary for the sake of manipulating others to his or her advantage.

READING

Alexandre Kojève, Introduction to the Reading of Hegel (1969)

Behaviorism: Stick and Carrot

Whereas European theories of power are often indebted to Hegelian thinking – here Michel Foucault is largely an exception – in the United States, particularly, the power model most often taught within sociological
contexts is that of “stick and carrot.” This theory has been discussed rather famously by the sociologist Talcott Parsons and employed very conspicuously by the United States government when dealing with “rogue nations.”

“Stick and carrot” assumes the behaviorist model in which organisms seek out pleasure and avoid pain. When applied to social groups, it is assumed that institutional practices of rewarding certain kinds of behavior and punishing other kinds of behavior will result in dictating desirable outcomes by those who are in a position to reward and punish. Crucial to this model is impersonality: the application of incentives and disincentives is never made in a personal manner but fashioned in such a way that they are experienced environmentally in terms of either pleasure or pain. The credit card company that sends out automatic phone messages to people who are late on their payments is impersonally prodding the card holder into paying up. Since paying is, in many cases, less painful than putting up with the inconvenience of these calls, and their threats concerning legal action, the credit card company is assuming customers will opt for carrot as opposed to stick. In this case, the tactic isn’t really personal, so much as it is purely administrative and institutional: what is annoying us isn’t so much a person acting out of personal motives as it is a process that is interfering with our behavior (of not paying). Of interest in such an exercise of power is that social recognition isn’t of any psychological significance to the institution, which is just following procedures designed to reward or punish. Credit scores have nothing to do with how others “think” of us; they’re just numbers calculated by autonomous formulas that affect computers used in determining credit worthiness.

When “stick and carrot” has been considered abroad, as in Lacan’s Seminar 7: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, it has been ridiculed as naively unpsychological. For example, who is to say that someone might not be a sadomasochist who enjoys the harassment and doesn’t construct the pleasure/pain dichotomy the way most people would? What if rogue nations were run by sadomasochistic or otherwise perverted leaders who don’t conform to normal behavioral models? In case we find this outlandish, consider Saddam Hussein, who, for whatever reasons, apparently didn’t grasp the stick and carrot approach coming from Washington DC.

Anglo-American humanists have by and large embraced the power theory of Michel Foucault who subscribed to neither the “stick and carrot” or “master/slave” theory of managing power. Foucault’s position has been that power is the bureaucratic implementation of knowledge in terms of praxis. Bureaucracy comes about in earnest in the seventeenth century when states emerge that are capable of imagining their own self-interest as autonomous entities whose aim is to survive intact. This was known as *raison d’état* wherein the state becomes intelligible as a system of logical sub-systems that have their own objects of knowledge, routines, disciplines, and practices; each discursive sub-system develops its self-studies or sciences within which their “ologies” are mapped out. Of fundamental importance is the idea that governmental reason exists (compare to “might makes right” thinking) as a means to make the state intelligible to bureaucrats and hence to enable one to regulate, strategize, objectify, conceptualize, and connect. “What the intervention of *raison d’état* must arrive at is the state’s integrity, its completion, consolidation, and its re-establishment if it has been compromised …” Again, “the state is essentially and above all the regulatory idea of that form of thought, that form of reflection, of that form of calculation, and that form of intervention called politics: politics as *mathesis*, as rational form of the art of government.”47 However, Foucault goes a bit further when he argues that, in fact, the state is “the preservation of forces; it is the preservation, maintenance, or development of a dynamic of forces,” which Foucault says was implemented in two ways, via the military for the sake of national defense and the police for the sake of securing civil order. How is the state to secure itself within a world where there are other states? That is, how does the state secure itself in terms of what lies outside its borders? And, of equal importance, how is the state to secure all the elements that exist within it? How are all the forces that are involved in these two tasks kept in balance?

Foucault demonstrated that internal to the state were social issues that bureaucracies had, first of all, to conceptualize and, second of all, to regulate. Criminology, psychology, demography, hygenics, urban planning, education, and much else had to be developed not only as newly born sciences but as disciplines whose practices had to be established and tested. In the case of madness, Foucault demonstrated that madness first had to be conceptualized and that competing concepts were in use at various times, that institutions for dealing with madness had to be invented, and that various sorts of madness had to be revealed and defined, and, then, that practices of dealing with the insane had to be developed, many of them experimental and not all of them particularly congruent. That the insane asylum and the prison shared institutional similarities (the insane were at times locked up with criminals) spoke to questions of how various practices pertaining to one group of people might be applied to another. In the case of prisons and schools, disciplinary practices were sometimes shared, migrating from one institutional site to the other.

Foucault is famous for having coined the term “biopower,” which relates to the sort of governmental reason that not only wants to see everything but to determine and control everything, including biology. The Nazis infamously practiced biopower, which Foucault saw as but an extension of what had been started in the eighteenth century with respect to the state’s desire to control population: to root out disease, physical degeneracy, madness, criminal behavior, illiteracy, indigency, and so on. Ultimately, biopower is the result of trying to dominate life for reasons having to do with the state itself. As Foucault put it in the context of Nazi Germany, biopower concerned the state’s exercise of power to either take or give life, nothing more or less. That is, it was an exercise in power for power’s sake alone.48

Lastly, Foucault is well known for having advanced the idea of capillary power, namely, the idea that power is more decentralized and diffuse than one might otherwise imagine. Power is a delicate but substantial network of representations, jargons, narratives, beliefs, concepts, practices, and disciplines that migrate between and within institutions that are always in the process of developing new disciplines and their refinements. Power is not concentrated in one person or group in society, but is distributed within the length and breadth of that society’s institutions, disciplines, and practices. In fact, power is even self-imposed to the extent that it has been

internalized by individuals in terms of practices that relate to the self: sexual, culinary, vocational, aesthetic, and so forth. In line with structuralist thinking, Foucault ultimately had been arguing that modern power is the distributed effect of what a society does in line with raison d’État; it is not an agency in its own right.

READING

Steven Lukes (ed.) *Power* (1986)

6.4 The Social Relation

Much contemporary criticism has turned to questions of social identity that presuppose a more fundamental concept that usually goes unexamined: the social relation. Without understanding the basics of how the social relation has been conceptualized, it is problematic to write on social issues, because so much depends on assumptions about what a social relation is. As will become evident, these assumptions vary quite significantly, and not only from philosopher to philosopher, but from historical epoch to historical epoch. Also, it is useful to know something of the history of the social relation as a concept if one wants to troubleshoot how various social critics approach their subject matter.

Notable is that conceptions of the social relation mirror, somewhat, conceptions of language. In Plato’s dialogue “The Cratylus” the discussants Cratylus and Hermogenes posit two general language theories, (i) that a word speaks the essence of the thing to which it refers and is, strictly speaking, participating in the essence of things, a view that Martin Heidegger would echo thousands of years later when he posited that “language is the house of Being,” and (ii) the Wittgensteinian argument, advanced by Plato’s Hermogenes, that words are to be considered arbitrary signs whose use (with respect to referencing things) is fixed by social agreement (convention).49 Analogously, there appears to be quite a bit of implicit debate with

respect to the social relation as to whether it is predicated on some essential connection by blood (consanguinity) or whether it is established by means of social agreement (contract). Also in recent years, there has arisen some controversy over whether we can assume there is something we could view as “common” to members of a society, for example, a “common interest,” or whether members of society are to be considered primarily in terms of their alterity (“Otherness”), a view stemming in part from Emmanuel Levinas’ philosophy. In France the alterity thesis has raised some questions about whether one can, in fact, assume the possibility of “community,” and Derrida, in following Levinas, has wondered about whether basic types of the social relation aren’t deeply aporetic (undecidable), as revealed by the paradoxical refrain, “O friends, there is no friend.” Lastly, the social relation, which in some accounts has to presuppose the human, if not humanity, has come under scrutiny from those who would begin to question an anthropocentric understanding of the social relation that forgets about our ontological relation to the environment. Can the social relation be considered essentially a human relation any more, given the existential threat that our exploitation of the environment is now posing?

Primitive Social Relations

We know that the social relation precedes the advent of homo sapiens. In the wild, primates exist in groups wherein they interact in a way that establishes reciprocal relations mediated by a hierarchy of individual dominance (social organization). Whether these relations are to be considered truly social or not in human terms can be debated, but at least we can see some primitive elements of sociality at work: living in groups, psychological attachment, hierarchical stratification, reciprocal behavior (grooming), and group identity formation (awareness of who does and doesn’t belong to the group). Primates even display rudiments of social control in terms of bringing individuals into line with the hierarchy through displays of anger (screching) and engaging in physical combat. Among chimpanzees, for example, the group’s integrity as a unit takes precedence over the deviant behavior of any of its members; this integrity may even require expulsion of individuals who cannot manage within the group.

Human societies share these traits, but unlike primates, human beings are capable of complex linguistic communication, and, as Claude Lévi-Strauss and other anthropologists have noticed, even so-called primitive
societies have complex symbolic forms of organization that are based on configurations of kinship. Whereas in primate groups the social relation is mainly visceral, in primitive human societies the social relation is already abstract, because the identity of an individual is symbolically constructed in advance of that person’s being born into the world (see the account of Lacan in 6.3). Another way of putting this would be to say that individuals in such societies are essentially the embodiment of social relations whose meaning is determined by the total system of social organization. That system, in turn, functions like a social pact or constitution for such a society, which to its members is a given that is thought to be rooted in the nature of things. Whatever one wants to call the total system of symbolic relations, it is superstructural insofar as it programs identities, roles, social relationships, and the division of labor into specific tasks, rituals, and cultural traditions: ways of decorating the body, of cooking, etc. What Claude Lévi-Strauss called the “savage mind” is this totalizing system of symbolic relations, which he examined in detail by examining the many myths he collected in South America while living among indigenous peoples in that region. Central to his research was the finding that primitive people don’t simply attempt to sustain themselves in terms of satisfying basic needs, but that they require something far more ambitious, which is the establishment of elaborate symbolic structures for not only self-organization within communities but for understanding the relations among things in the world within which they live. That the social relation is symbolically embedded within these systems is key to understanding how such peoples are essentially social beings. Lévi-Strauss decoded the social relation within myths by revealing the complexity of symbolic structures that were constitutive of the social relation as something that had to be recognized within a total system of social relationships that made up a particular society in terms of its culture overall (see 5.3). This, however, typifies a collective or communal society, something that was transcended with the rise of early civilizations.

Plato’s Republic and Aristotle’s Politics

Plato’s Republic and Aristotle’s Politics have been foundational texts for social theory. Plato was already very influential for Aristotle, who devoted quite a bit of effort to criticizing Plato’s text. Part of what separated them is that while Aristotle is very much concerned with the politics of power, Plato
is concerned with the economics of need. In *The Republic*, Book 2, Socrates inquires into the nature of the city. “Come, then, let us create a city from the beginning … Its real creator, as it appears, will be our needs” (369c). Socrates continues: “The first and chief of our needs is the provision of food for existence and life … The second is housing and the third is raiment and that sort of thing” (369d). Striking about this founding of the city is that it presumes a social subject who lacks (and needs/wants) what Marx would have called commodities, a notion that suggests a social subject who cares about things first and the social second. This becomes quite clear when Socrates defines the city as the “provision of all these things,” a provision that in turn requires not only labor, but the division of labor into specialized jobs, given that a city will require numerous people and jobs that make up a network of inter-dependent relations whereby the needs of one person can be met by another through a system of exchange, the marketplace. Leading up to that point, Socrates asks, “Within the city itself how will they share with one another the products of their labor? This was the very purpose of our association and establishment of the state” (370c).

Apparently, the city is that socially constructed space within which the social relation can be expressed in terms of sharing the products of labor in terms of “buying and selling.” The city will be “a market place, then, and money [the] token for the purpose of exchange.” All this exists, recall, for the purpose of fulfilling needs, for abolishing lack, which is foundational to the social relation. Apparently, sociality is instrumental and utilitarian insofar as each person is dependent upon the other for satisfying something that is missing. Oddly enough, Socrates doesn’t have anything to say about the fact that the more vocations he enumerates with respect to the fulfilling of needs, the more needs there seem to be. Nor does anyone in the *Republic* seem to notice that there is a distinction between a need and a desire and that whereas the former is utilitarian (we have to have food and shelter to survive), the latter is not (we may easily desire something for which we have no need).

Also telling is that unlike Aristotle, Socrates isn’t interested in kinship, families, clans, tribes, dynasties or anything of that sort. Apparently in his model city there are no primary social bonds that are based on consanguin-
ity. Socrates is also not interested in anything approximating what we would identify as a public sphere within which ideas are rationally presented and debated, though perhaps it was assumed that this is already a part of the marketplace, that just as people exchanged commodities, they would exchange ideas, as well. What makes one doubt this assumption, however, is that nothing is said of there being a representative political order that would formally establish and enforce laws according to the dictates of public, rational debate. Rather, Socrates jumps from his discussion of the division of labor and fulfillment of needs to appointing a “guardian” or “guardians” who will protect the state, a type of person, it turns out, who emulates the qualities of a good hound, a remark that anticipates by many hundreds of years, the German jurist Carl Schmitt’s distinction between friend/enemy.

“You surely have observed in the well-bred hounds that their natural disposition is to be most gentle to their familiares and those whom they recognize, but the contrary to those whom they do not know.” After getting his interlocutor’s assent, Socrates adds: “The thing is possible … and it is not an unnatural requirement that we are looking for in our guardian” (376). Another parallel between the guardian and the hound is this: “The sight of an unknown person angers him before he has suffered any injury, but an acquaintance he will fawn upon [even] though he has never received any kindness from him. … That is an exquisite trait of his nature and one that shows a true love of wisdom.” Glaucon, who has stepped in to help Socrates advance his theory, observes the logical glitch here and therefore asks, “In what respect, pray?” And Socrates replies, “that he distinguishes a friendly from a hostile aspect by nothing save his apprehension of the one and his failure to recognize the other. How, I ask you, can the love of learning be denied to a creature whose criterion of the friendly and the alien is intelligence and ignorance?” (376b). This is a particularly interesting passage in the context of current discussions of power and the state, recalling Carl Schmitt’s arguments concerning how the foundation of the social relation is necessarily predicated upon the ability to distinguish friend from enemy. The hound intuitively loves the one who is designated as friend (intelligence, learning, wisdom) and repudiates the one who is designated to be hostile and hence an enemy (ignorance, stupidity). Crucial is that Socrates has purposely chosen to identify the guardian with an animal, which raises the point that in fact the guardian’s relationship to the state isn’t that of a genuinely social relation insofar as the hound isn’t part of a human order of interrelationships. The guardian, like the watch dog, is a
threshold figure on the boundary of familiar/alien, friend/enemy, but also wisdom/ignorance. It is this liminal figure of guardianship, part animal, part human, that instinctively defends those who are its friends from its enemies, that instinctively knows the good from the evil, and that instinctively can differentiate between intelligence and ignorance, and, presumably, right from wrong. It is the guardian as watch dog that maintains a social relation very much the way dominant primates do in their groupings: by means of instinctual expressions of affection and anger.

But this is not all. Socrates’ account is mainly about differentiation and division, ultimately, between mine and yours, familiar and alien, within and without that mimics the property relation, which requires one to know what is theirs from what isn’t. The social relation, in other words, is essentially the same thing as the property relation in the polis or city, but one that is mediated by the guardian who can tell the difference between what does and doesn’t belong to the property that is the city itself, the word property referring in its double sense to place and the things that are properly of that place.

Whereas in the anthropological accounts of preindustrial peoples we often engage with a total system of social relations based on blood that determines the social meaning of each social subject in advance of his or her being born, in Plato’s Republic we are asked to consider relatively independent individuals who are trying to fulfill needs that are grounded in their own atomized experience as social subjects who are industriously attempting through exchange to acquire property whose function is both to provide one with luxuries and with the means to produce. This view appears quite in line with later capitalist understandings of society in which the social subject as individual is so prominent.

Aristotle, unlike Plato, is sensitive to questions of family, kin, and community. His very first sentence in the Politics points out that “every state is a community of some kind …” This suggests that communities precede states and that states are inflected by the sorts of communities that have founded them. Plato’s Republic has no sense that a state might begin as a community; rather, it begins as a marketplace, which is quite a different assumption. Like Plato, however, Aristotle believes that when people organize themselves into communities, cities, and states that they do so “in order to obtain that which they think good.” In Aristotle, achieving the good is the basis of the social relation within any social group. Fundamentally this accounts for why people band together: they cannot survive alone and need each other in order to exist, which is obviously what they think is good.
Unlike Plato, who in the Republic seems to have surprisingly little interest in relations between men and women, Aristotle notes that in its most elementary form social bonding will occur among men and women for the sake of continuing the race (“that the race may continue”). Originally, men and women do so not out of choice, but because like animals and plants, humans “have a natural desire to leave behind them an image of themselves” (1252a1). Aristotle adds that humans also have the natural inclination to continue an order (presumably seen in nature) in which there are rulers and subjects, or, as he rephrases it, masters and slaves. The most basic social relation, then, is grounded in terms of power and not need, as was the case in Plato.

Indeed, Aristotle sees the difference between dominance and subservience in managerial terms. The master “can foresee by the exercise of mind” and the slave “can with its body give effect to such foresight” which is always attentive to the good. Hence master and slave, ruler and ruled, husband and wife have a common purpose and interest: to exist, to produce, to fulfill wants. Aristotle, in fact, distinguishes between the slave and the wife, saying that the wife is more cooperative and useful to the husband than the slave, because presumably she is not being coerced, but has every reason to cooperate with her ruler, as it is in her interests and those of her children to do so. Already here we can see the birth of government.

That the family, the clan, the village, and the state evolve one from the other is basic to Aristotle’s account. In fact, the state is considered the “end” of a social evolutionary process that has its basis in nature. “Hence it is evident that the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal.” The state, in other words, is the teleological end point in which the social relation is exposed as essentially a political relation based on a relation of power (ruler/ruled). That this power in its most fully developed form has to be just is crucial to Aristotle’s thinking, because “Justice is the bond of men in states.” Drawing from Plato’s analysis in the Republic, Aristotle cautions that “Man, when perfected, is the best of animals, but, when separated from law and justice, he is the worst of all.” The bond of men in states, therefore, is justice prescribed by a law that ensures the good (1253a1ff). Politics and the “bond of men” (the social relation) are therefore closely identified.

Although for Aristotle power relations between rulers and ruled (masters and slaves, husbands and wives, fathers and children) are ultimately derived from nature (in the Politics, everything is justified in terms of ultimately originating in nature, which means, therefore, natural law), these relations
are slightly differentiated as we move up the echelons. In relation to the
master the slave is incapable of deliberation (thinking), in relation to the
husband the wife, who can deliberate, has “no authority,” and in relation
to the father the child is merely immature. Therefore, the ruler need not
follow any of them. Or, again, the rule over a slave is to be tyrannical, the
rule over a wife constitutional (the husband lays down the law to her), and
the rule over a child royal (the child heeds the father in reverence). But, of
course, these are merely degrees of self-assertion, though each nevertheless
presumes a different type of social relationship. One tells the slave what to
do without justification, one lays down the rule to the wife, one rules the
child by way of requiring unquestioned loyalty and love. Yet, none of this
would be workable if the ruler were corrupt, abusive, or evil, for Aristotle
insists that the ruler must be able to both command and obey, to direct in
a way that obeys those laws that ensure good outcomes. In short, the ruler
must come under a rule, which is that of the good, and knowing what that
rule is comprises the ruler’s first duty to himself and to others. Most impor-
tant of all, therefore, the ruler must be good and therefore excellent as a
person, by which is meant ethical and wise, given that the good is always
superior to the bad, if only on pragmatic grounds. Apparently, the social
relation isn’t just predicated on needs and the division of labor that they
require, but upon how that relation was mediated by power (ruler and
ruled) and the virtue of the one who wielded it.

From Divine Right to Social Contract

During the Middle Ages, the social relation is cast in terms of feudalism, a
political-economic system based on owing service and receiving land from
a central authority, the king. In this system, which is largely organized in
terms of consanguinity, the king symbolically and literally holds all the land
in a realm and exchanges (or grants) large tracts of that land to nobles who
pledge their allegiance (and knights) in the service of defending the realm.
These nobles, who are related by blood to the king, lease out parts of their
land to the knights, who lease out parts of that land to people lower down
the social hierarchy. In medieval Spain, the nobility contracted with Jews
to manage land that had been taken back from Muslim invaders, giving
these managers certain rights and privileges. For Jews, the social relation
with the feudal order was based on an explicit social contract, not involving
blood relations, wherein the social subject owes obedience, allegiance, and
service to the king in exchange for rights and privileges. In such cases, however, dependency upon the king was far more precarious in that the contract could be rescinded at any time and the dependent population wiped out or sent away and its property expropriated, something that happened in 1492 when Jews were expelled from Spain altogether.

*Magna Carta* in England, as is well known, refers to the great charter in which nobles in 1215 demanded certain rights under law independent of the king’s direct authority. In other words, the nobles and implicitly those under them were asking for due process under laws that even King John would have to follow. Hence a social subject emerges that was subject not just to the king, but to the law that the king symbolically and literally was supposed to embody and guarantee. This did not, however, entirely depart from the traditional assumption that a king has a divine right to rule, something that in the seventeenth century would increasingly come into conflict with subjects wanting to be subject to a law of the land that was established by consensual legislation. Shakespeare’s history plays are in large part an inquiry into aristocratic rulership and how it is necessarily mediated by medieval society as a civil order that cannot abide absolutism stripped of consensus and due process. In Shakespeare’s plays we can see stirrings with respect to the public sphere as a civil/political concern. We can also see quite a bit of interest in how various social echelons relate, as Shakespeare’s plays include social figures from all levels of society, from servants onward up to kings. In his work the social relation is mediated by the social body as a whole, one that can be knocked off balance and become supernaturally affected when its leaders perpetrate evil acts. In this social world, moral retribution is collective, much as it was in the plays of Aeschylus and in the mindset of the medievals (if the Pope excommunicated a king, the whole population was excommunicated too).

In contrast, the following passage by John Milton in “Of Tenure of Kings and Magistrates” (1649) indicates the way in which Reformation England looked upon the feudal assumptions that were still guiding King Charles I in the second quarter of the seventeenth century.

No man who knows ought, can be so stupid to deny that all men naturally were borne free … born to command and not to obey … *Till from the root of Adams transgression, falling among themselves to doe wrong and violence, and foreseeing that such courses must needs tend to the destruction of them all, they agreed by common league to bind each other from mutual injury, and jointly to defend themselves against any that gave*
disturbance or opposition to such agreement. Hence came Citties, Townes and Common-wealths. And because no faith in all was found sufficiently binding, they saw it needful to ordaine som authoritie, that might restrain by force and punishment what was violated against peace and common right. This authoritie and power of self-defence and preservation being originally and naturally in every one of them, and unitedly in them all, for ease, for order, and least each man should be his own Judge, they communicated and deriv’d either to one, whom for the eminence of his wisdom and integritie they chose above the rest, or to more than one whom they thought of equal deserving: the first was call’d a King; the other Magistrate. Not to be their Lords and Masters . . . but, to be thir Deputies and Commissioners, to execute, by virtue of their intrusted power, that justice which else every man by the bond of nature and of Cov’nant must have executed for himself, and for one another . . . These for a while govern’d well, and with much equity decided all things at thir own arbitrement: til the temptation of such a power left absolute in their hands, perverted them at length to injustice and partialitie.  

Milton saw kings and magistrates as servants of the people. Their authority is “derivative, transferr’d and committed to them in trust from the People, to the Common good of them all . . .”  

In other words, Milton assumes a social contract that has been established by the people wherein certain individuals are given authority to manage society for the sake of the common good of everyone. Monarchy is a perversion of this republican contract, because it is conspicuous usurpation and tyranny predicated on rapacious greed and violence (that is, might makes right). The people therefore have a right to rebel and take society back into their own hands in order to appoint proper managers whose interest is that of the people, not that of a feudal lord (a tyrant). This, of course, is fundamental to the Puritans, who under Oliver Cromwell revolted against Charles I and executed him in 1649. This pleased Milton for whom the social relation is one predicated upon republicanism, that is, upon the autonomous freedom of individuals to negotiate their social order for the sake of common interests,
among them, freedom itself. Not to be overlooked is the emphasis this placed upon individual conscience as the arbiter of the social relation, for example, as expressed in Milton’s tracts on divorce in which whether one remains married or not depends upon the reflections and determinations of individual conscience. Milton was ahead of his time in many of these views, but the age of reason would catch up with him – in France!

In 1762 Jean-Jacques Rousseau published *The Social Contract* in which a philosophy of the social relation is set forth in terms of human rights. The relation of master and slave, Rousseau says, is not a proper social relation at all, because there is no social relation where subjects are deprived of rights. All one has is an accumulation of people, not an association of them.

There will always be a great difference between subjugating a multitude of men and ruling a society. If a series of men, in succession, are made to submit to one other man, all I can see in them is a master with his slaves, however many of them there may be; I cannot see a people and its leader. It could be said to be an aggregation, but it is not an association; there is no public good, no body politic. The one man, even if he were to have subjugated half the world, is still only an individual; his self-interest, separate from that of the rest, is still only private interest. If this same man comes to his end, his empire after him is scattered and dissolved, as an oak breaks up and falls into a heap of ashes after being consumed by fire.53

Rousseau is adamant that under a might-makes-right form of rule there is no social relation to the extent that no body politic exists in which people have the right to negotiate, contract, and agree on their relationships with one another. Indeed, for Rousseau this right to negotiate a contract is a *natural right*. In the beginning (that is, before human development) each individual had that right (that is, the liberty or freedom), but each person also came up against an insurmountable problem: one’s ability to do things (one’s power) is restricted and one requires the aid of others. If force and liberty are fundamental instruments of self-preservation, they may not be sufficient in the case of each individual to survive (or survive comfortably). The problem, according to Rousseau, is to “find a form of association” that

will not either disempower the individual or deprive him or her of freedom. The problem is to “find a form of association which will defend and protect, with the whole of its joint strength, the person and property of each associate, and under which each of them, uniting himself to all, will obey himself alone, and remain as free as before.” Rousseau continues by arguing that the propositions of the contract all come down to one act: “the complete transfer of each associate, with all his rights, to the whole community.” And “should the social pact be violated, each associate thereupon recovers his original rights and takes back his natural freedom, while losing the freedom of convention for which he gave it up.” However, in entering into the social contract we willingly relinquish both freedom and power to the social group in order to gain more security and order that in many respects ought to wind up making us more free and powerful than we were before, albeit it within a society that has laws, magistrates, and police.

Each in giving himself to all gives himself to none, and since there are no associates over whom he does not acquire the same rights as he cedes, he gains the equivalent of all that he loses, and greater strength for the conservation of what he possesses. If therefore we set aside everything that is not essential to the social pact, we shall find that it may be reduced to the following terms. *Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will; and we as a body receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole.*

A social relation, therefore, is founded on the right to give oneself over to the whole, a right every person at the founding of a society originally had. This is extant as the social pact itself, which is characterized by the consent to appoint and obey rulers, to legislate and follow common laws, and to recognize that each individual has what are still certain inalienable rights, given Rousseau’s idea that even after consenting to form a society, one’s freedom (the right to act in accordance with one’s own will) is to be preserved. As in Milton, stress falls upon individual conscience and liberty. Whereas in feudalism the social relation is instituted in a top-down manner, here the social relation is instituted in a bottom-up manner and requires a notion of “the people” in which social authority is ultimately grounded. Of crucial importance with respect to social contract thinking is that the French Revolution of 1789 made possible the historical moment when “the

---

54Rousseau (1994), 55.
people” would take to the streets in order to reclaim a social authority and legitimacy that only it could grant. Key to the concept of “the people” as the sole agent capable of legitimizing political authority was Rousseau’s notion of the right to incorporation by means of social contract, something that implied the people’s consent as foundational to the existence of a society. Nothing could be more remote to a medieval understanding of sovereignty in which consent is overruled by loyalty that takes its place not as a choice but as an obligation about which there should be no debate. In Rousseau, of course, we can immediately glimpse the power of the public sphere as a sphere of consent and commonality that in everyday terms translates into a culture of public approval versus disapproval that bears on a continual testing of the social contract’s validity and the social relations that arise out of it.

Marx on the Social Relation

It is Plato, interestingly enough, who anticipates Karl Marx’s argument that the social relation is the expression of productive forces at a stage of economic development in history whose basis is material in nature. Marx saw that productive forces require a certain social form in order to exist as forces that can be reproduced day in and day out. “For example, the privileges, the institution of guilds and corporations, the regulatory regime of the Middle Ages, were social relations that alone corresponded to the acquired productive forces and to the social condition which had previously existed …”55 In this sense, a social relation has to be formally instituted within society in order to implement the productive forces. For example, one requires a guild and all the hierarchical social relations within it in order to pass on the complex techniques of building cathedrals. Social relations change, however, as the “economic forms in which men produce, consume, and exchange” come and go. Criticizing Monsieur Proudhon’s understanding of economy, Marx wrote with characteristic sarcasm,

Monsieur Proudhon has very well grasped the fact that men produce cloth, linen, silks, and it is a great merit on his part to have grasped this small amount! What he has not grasped is that these men, according to their abilities, also produce the social relations amid which they prepare

cloth and linen. Still less has he understood that men, who produce their social relations in accordance with their material productivity, also produce ideas, categories, that is to say, the abstract ideal expression of these same social relations. Thus the categories are no more eternal than the relations they express. They are historical and transitory products.\textsuperscript{56}

In capitalist society, the social relation is established in the treatment of products as commodities. As in Plato, what brings us into social relation is the exchange of commodities for money, something that under industrialization reduces individual private labor to what Marx calls the standard of homogeneous human labor. The life-process of society, Marx said, is based on the process of material production that merely requires workers who freely decide to associate for the sake of making things. \textit{If there is a social relation in such a case, it is only one that is the effect of a productive process by means of which things are produced}. Again, as in Plato’s state, clan, family, tribe, community, and so on are irrelevant as preconditions for the processes of production. By the 1800s, however, the commodity being produced does, in fact, function as the measure by means of which the worker’s labor is given a value. Moreover, it is the commodity that determines the worker’s identity, his or her usefulness to society, in short, his or her value as a social subject. In \textit{Grundrisse}, Marx writes that capitalist society is contradictory in that “The mutual and universal independence of individuals who remain indifferent to one another constitutes the social network that binds them together.” In short, the social relation within bourgeois society amounts to the fact that there really is no social relation at all. “Social coherence,” Marx wrote, is “expressed in exchange value.”\textsuperscript{57}

Marx’s observation relates to the fact that in capitalist society people don’t have to know one another, share similar backgrounds, or be related in any way, because the production process is all based on the exchange value of goods, not upon who or what the worker is. This recalls the famous passage in \textit{The Communist Manifesto} when Marx and Engels say that the bourgeoisie has pitilessly torn apart all pre-existing bonds except for that of “naked self-interest and callous cash payment.” In the “icy water of egotistical calculation,” the bourgeoisie has “resolved personal worth into

\textsuperscript{56}Marx (1844–1847), p. 211.

exchange value.” Moreover, the bourgeoisie has “stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honored and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage laborers.” By constantly revolutionizing the processes of production, the bourgeoisie sees to it that no other bond can exist but that of exchange value, because any social form that is set up to enable such modes of production are constantly being disrupted.

Much of this thinking is revised later by Marxists who were interested in social classes and their struggles. In fact, Marx and Engels at the beginning of the *Manifesto* famously say that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.” At the very least, this suggests that perhaps not everyone in bourgeois society is as isolated and socially deracinated as Marx sometimes argues. Of course, class struggle comprises the revolutionary aspect of Marx and Engels’ thinking, that is, the means whereby they could imagine a social transformation of economy. But class would require theorization about what relates and identifies people in terms of their economic circumstances and the social positioning that this enables, something that over time would change quite rapidly in the West when very affordable mass produced items began leveling class differences to some great extent, a tendency aided by the availability of credit in the form of unsecured loans, something that didn’t exist in the early twentieth century. Once the apparent differences between the classes began to vanish from plain sight, the social relation lost its self-evident dialectical potential from a class based point of view. But this was to be replaced by the search for other social relations that had far more potential for oppositional political action, hence the turn to issues such as “the woman question” and “race.”

**Alterity: The Relation of Non-Relation**

We have seen in 6.3 how Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* paid careful attention to the social relation as a process in which one becomes aware “of the Other in my Being” as a dialectical partner in the process of apprehending and interpreting one’s individual situation vis-à-vis others in the world. And we have seen how Jacques Lacan objectivized this process in terms of what he called the Imaginary in which, for example, one had to match wits...
with others in order to gain an advantage. This speaks to “the Other in my Being” whose internal workings one tries to predict in order to get, say, a higher salary, or a better office at work, provided this other is one’s boss. But Lacan also had another conception of alterity (otherness): “the big Other.” This is not the boss who sits before us whose mental processes we can imagine, but the radical alterity or otherness of this person, the difference of this person as someone who is unknowable, unfathomable, and unreachable.

A literary example of this big Other, and French intellectuals have been fascinated with it, is Herman Melville’s character Bartleby the Scrivener (from the story by that name), a clerk who takes up residence in an office as a copyist who gradually disappears from sight as an “other” and turns into an “Other” – the big Other that no one can fathom or deal with anymore, because the demand of this Other is as inscrutable as it is implacable. Indeed, the demand of this big Other, which imposes itself upon everyone despite its opacity, requires recognition and even submission at the same time that it breaks the very social relation that enables its demand to be communicated. In Melville’s story we not only witness the manifestation of the big Other in the form of a lowly copyist, but we come to grasp this big Other as a singularity, which is to say, as an entity whose particularity cannot be compromised, given its radical alterity (difference). This in turn establishes what one can easily see in the story to be a relation of non-relation.

Lacan’s notion of the big Other is, of course, embedded within his own very influential school of psychoanalysis. However, parallel notions of radical otherness have been posited in allied areas – philosophy in particular. The major figure in that realm is unquestionably the Jewish thinker Emmanuel Levinas, who, very much like Sartre, wrote an enormous amount of work whose developments exceed the scope of anything that could be presented here, but whose most influential ideas we necessarily need to consider. Levinas had a somewhat dual career as a Talmudic scholar and thinker and as a leading academic French philosopher. His inception as a philosopher occurred with the publication of his doctoral thesis in 1930 entitled The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology. Levinas, who attended the courses of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger in 1928–1929, paid attention to the lack of very much mention of intersubjectivity, that is to say, of the Other. And this, in turn, led him to formulate an intellectual itinerary for himself that, despite radical modification, was to guide him throughout his life.
The reduction to an ego, the egological reduction, can be only a first step toward phenomenology. We must also discover "others" and the intersubjective world. A phenomenological intuition of the life of others, a reflection by *Einfühlung* [empathy] opens the field of transcendental intersubjectivity and completes the work of the philosophical intuition of subjectivity.  

This itinerary pointed in the direction of what Sartre would attempt in the late 1930s as well as in the direction that Husserl’s student Edith Stein had already taken in her doctoral thesis on empathy under Husserl’s direction during World War 1. But rather than proceed as they did, Levinas went off in a completely different direction by radicalizing if not negating the two central terms that he introduces, “others” and “Einfühlung” (empathy). In fact, it would take Levinas decades to work this new direction out, and the intellectual journey is quite complex; however, he eventually comes around to positing the concept of an Other who is asymmetrical and non-thematizable, who interrupts my (or anyone else’s) consciousness and thereby causes me to become aware of (to be “awakened” to) myself as an ethical person. For Levinas, the effect of the Other upon me is not just abstract or conceptual, but visceral. I *feel* the Other’s presence, predication, trauma, joy, and so on, which unsettles my existence, because it requires me to open up to an alterity: a difference or otherness that isn’t symmetrical and therefore not knowable.

Again, Bartleby the Scrivener is useful as an example, because in Melville’s story it is his presence that everyone feels in an asymmetrical way, which is disturbing, if only because one cannot imaginatively project oneself upon him by way of empathic identification. Indeed, Bartelby “interrupts” the existences of the office workers, exposing their ethics both to him and to one another, precisely because he is unfathomable and transcends objecti-

---


61 Edith Stein requires a brief note. *On the Problem of Empathy* was completed in 1916. In 1998, Stein was elevated to Sainthood in the Catholic Church, where she is remembered today as St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. Although Jewish by birth, she converted to Catholicism and led an exemplary life as a nun. Deported to Auschwitz in 1942, she died in the gas chamber. Before her conversion she was an assistant to Husserl. She herself was a significant thinker who long before Levinas had seen the glaring absence of an intersubjective dimension within Husserl’s work.
fication. In that way he is entirely singular in his being – someone who cannot be typified and who cannot be assimilated. Moreover, just as Levinas says that the ethical person is necessarily going to be obsessed with the Other, everyone around Bartleby is obsessed with his presence, behavior, and difference, that is, with the relation of his non-relation. However, if empathy is not available, still possible is a phenomenological intuition of the life of others, provided we radically redefine intuition as an openness to radical alterity and the life of others as asymmetrical.

In *Otherwise Than Being or beyond Essence* (1981), Levinas wrote that his central project had become that of replacing recognition as a chief philosophical concern by means of introducing the ethical problem of responsibility in its stead. Recognition for Levinas was suspect if only because it pre-judges an Other by way of typification and thereby puts representation ahead of ethical action. For Levinas it is not fundamentally ethical to first size someone up and then decide whether to help them or not – for example, in escaping a flood or fire. Preferences about gender, race, class, ethnicity, appearance, nationality, religion, and so on should not factor in our decision to behave responsibly toward an Other. But Levinas goes further in suggesting that the imperative to act responsibly comes even before any thought of whether one has a relation with the Other or not, as if responsibility were so fundamental a notion that it precedes the social relation itself.

Levinas’ analysis of what he calls the visage (or face) speaks to this radical ethical stance, for according to him, each human being shows a face to the world that is absolutely Other in its particularity. Indeed, we have an absolute responsibility to respect and heed this otherness of the Other that is disclosed in the face. According to Levinas, an immense violence is done once we claim to recognize, comprehend, or assimilate the other.

The notion of the face … brings us to a notion of meaning prior to my Sinngebung [positing of meaning] and thus independent of my initiative and my power. It signifies the philosophical priority of the existent over Being, an exteriority that does not call for power or possession, an exteriority that is not reducible, as with Plato, to the interiority of memory, and yet maintains the I who welcomes it.62

---

The face represents that exteriority of Otherness that cannot and should not be comprehended in terms of one’s own initiative, power, or naming.

Whereas Thomas Hobbes in the seventeenth century had formulated the principle that citizens of a nation ought to see themselves in terms of commonality — that is, in terms of their similarity or sameness — Levinas’ philosophy of the Other posits the notion of a singularity or particularity that is to be defined in terms of non-commonality. This emphasis on non-commonality also breaks, of course, with Thomas Paine’s notion of common sense and Thomas Jefferson’s emphasis upon human equality, if not Habermas’ concept of the rational society that presupposes modern democratic thinking. In fact, Habermas has asked what kind of community is possible in which everyone is an Other to everyone else. How can a community exist in which everyone is asymmetrical, opaque, singular, or, as Levinas puts it, unthematizable? Levinas’ response to such questioning was that his conception of the Other is a transcendental concept in the Husserlian sense of coming prior to the actual establishment of the human subject as a socialized being who is necessarily symmetrical, codifiable, understandable, and so forth. This Other, Levinas believed, exists primordially as part of the human condition and isn’t conspicuous until that moment one is awoken by an ethical shock that has its source in our relation/non-relation with this primordial condition of Otherness.

Given Levinas’ religious interests in Torah and Talmud, one shouldn’t be surprised to realize that Levinas’ thinking about the primordial Other is reminiscent of how within Judaic tradition some have imagined their relation to God, namely, as a relation/non-relation. Martin Buber, for example, spoke in terms of an eclipse of God, which was his metaphor for the relation/non-relation. “The prophets of Israel,” Buber wrote, “have never announced a God upon whom their hearers’ striving for security reckoned. They have always aimed to shatter all security and to proclaim in the opened abyss of the final insecurity the unwished-for God …”

By insecurity, Buber means that for Jews there isn’t a relationship with God that can be posited with any certainty. Levinas would agree with Buber that God is even unwished-for in the sense that one has no idea of what to expect, which, of course, follows what is reflected in Biblical texts.

Buber’s *The Eclipse of God* responds to European Jews who during World War 2 cried out to God for help in the most extreme and horrific circumstances and were met by silence and absence. In inquiring into this silence,

---

Buber is led to the metaphor of God being in eclipse, which Levinas finds unsatisfactory. In “Loving the Torah more than God” (1955), Levinas says that “The path that leads to the one God must be walked in part without God.” Levinas continues:

True monotheism is duty bound to answer the legitimate claims of atheism. The adult’s God is revealed precisely through the void of the child’s heaven. This is the moment when God retires from the world and hides His face. In the words of Yossel ben Yossel: “He has handed men over to their savage instincts … And since these instincts rule the world, it is natural that those who preserve a sense of divinity and purity should be the first victims of this rule.

In what is a direct response to Buber’s eclipse of God metaphor, Levinas says that “the God who hides His face” is not “a theological abstraction or a poetic image.” Rather, “it is the moment in which the just individual can find no help. No institution will protect him.” In short, “the individual can prevail only through his conscience, which necessarily involves suffering.” What this means to Levinas is that horrific and catastrophic as the Holocaust was, it could not force God to refuse his renunciation of manifestation, which requires “the full maturity of the responsible man,” which for Levinas is the essence of Judaism. One of the consequences of this thinking, which is why we had to make this brief detour into post-Holocaust religious contemplation, is that not only does God hide his face, but that community falls apart. “The just individual can find no help.”

What Levinas has indicated here and elsewhere in terms of an absence of community relates, by way of the more technical philosophical aspect of Levinas’ writings, to allied thinkers such as Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot who were imagining a community of those who have no community or what Blanchot called “the unavowable community”—a “community beyond intelligibility.” Not just the social relation but community as a whole is now to be considered in terms of relation/non-relation. This direction in French philosophy was later picked up by Jean-Luc Nancy who attempted to theorize it in a book entitled *The Inoperative Community* (1991). Addressing Blanchot, Nancy writes,

---

Community necessarily takes place in what Blanchot has called “unworking,” referring to that which, before or beyond the work, withdraws from the work, and which, no longer having to do either with production or with completion, encounters interruption, fragmentation, suspension. Community is made of the interruption of singularities, or of the suspension that singular beings are. Community is not the work of singular beings, nor can it claim them as its works, just as communication is not a work or even an operation of singular beings, for community is simply their being – their being suspended upon its limit. Communication is the unworking of work that is social, economic, technical, and institutional.  

Nancy, in following Levinas, argues that communities are made up of singularities – that is, of Others in radical alterity – that do not simply bond or fuse, but that withdraw from the community in various ways, hence seeing to it that community is inoperative in terms of the sort of teamwork model that, say, communism had in mind in the 1930s. Communication, while it can bond people and work to cement social relations within a community, also works against cohesion by means of criticism, complaint, deflection, and what Jacques Rancière has been calling dissensus (the opposite of consensus). Whereas people may engage within community, they also disengage with it and, quite often, exist in a state of isolation even while existing within community. In this state of isolation one begins to notice one’s singularity. And yet by singularity Nancy means something more than just individual particularity.

Community means … that there is no singular being without another singular being, and that there is … an originary or ontological “sociality” that … extends far beyond the simple theme of man as a social being … It is not obvious that the community of singularities is limited to “man” and excludes, for example, the “animal” (even in the case of “man” it is not a fortiori certain that this community concerns only “man” and not also the “inhuman” or the “superhuman,” or, for example, if I may say so with and without a certain Witz [witticism], “woman”: after all, the difference between the sexes is itself a singularity in the difference of singularities).

In all such cases of singularity – of finite or concrete particulars – we have the manifestation of alterity that taken in the aggregate doesn’t work together, but that breaks up as the “passion” (or “ecstasy” – the language is Bataille’s) of each singularity takes hold. Hence if there is a relation between the singularities it is a relation of non-relation.

Nancy’s book was an important attempt to theorize community in terms of a relation/non-relation, though much more influential have been various books written by Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben whose work, while mindful of Nancy, gave this topic some new slants. Derrida wrote at length about the relation of non-relation, for example, his relation/non-relation to Judaism in a talk entitled “The Lesson of Derrida,” his relation/non-relation to the French language in Monolinguism of the Other, his relation/non-relation with the university in “Time of the Thesis,” his relation/non-relation with others in The Politics of Friendship (1994), whose refrain is, appropriately, Aristotle’s remark, “O friends, there is no friend.” There’s a similar paradoxical refrain in Monolinguism of the Other that insists, “I only have one language; it is not mine,” as if to say, he has no relation to the only relation with language that he has, language being required for establishing social relations. Derrida’s voluminous writings on pardon, the gift, hospitality, the promise, forgiveness, and the signature are essentially all about a relation/non-relation of the social relation and how this ultimately bears upon notions of community that are predicated on assumptions of a contractual nature, which all societies share, to some very great extent. Perhaps the central essay for this line of thinking is Derrida’s “Before the Law” on Franz Kafka’s parable in The Trial of the man who is made to wait before the law. Many affinities with Levinas’ Jewish thinking are revealed in this essay, which marks an ethical turn in Derrida’s thinking already in the early 1980s. Derrida’s investigation of paradoxical non-relations within particular relations (friendship, hospitality, etc.) is, in the main, much more convincing than Nancy’s generalizations about community, given that Derrida is, not unlike Sartre, investigating concrete relations with others as opposed to making sweeping claims about community in the aggregate that run into


obvious challenges from not only enlightenment thinkers like Paine and Jefferson, but from more recent thinkers like Habermas.

Finally, Giorgio Agamben has become very well known for extending the conception of the relation without relation and the community without community, though he does so in the context of the most appalling dystopia one can imagine. Remnants of Auschwitz (1999) focuses on the figure of the walking dead, the Muselmann. Death camp inmates, who had been physically beaten, malnourished, and dehydrated entered into a state deprived of the will to live. As the Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi wrote: “One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand.”

This kind of person represented the ultimate horror of someone who had under duress supposedly passed beyond being human and, as such, beyond hope. For Agamben this situation speaks to a limit or threshold where a person in limbo between life and death is at once “a medical figure or an ethical category, at times a political limit or an anthropological concept.” Agamben says that such a person is

an indefinite being in whom not only humanity and non-humanity, but also vegetative existence and relation, physiology and ethics, medicine and politics, and life and death continuously pass through each other. This is why the Muselmann’s ‘third reality’ [the state between life and death] is the perfect cipher of the camp, the non-place in which all disciplinary barriers are destroyed and all embankments flooded.

Apparently, the SS were sadistically exposing the limit at which human being and social relation no longer have any coincidence or overlap. This suggests, therefore, that there is a threshold beyond which a prisoner no longer has anything in common with what Agamben thinks of as humanity in its familiar sense in which every human being is essentially social and, as such, socially related and relatable. The living-dead of Auschwitz became exceptions to this rule (the “state of exception” is a major preoccupation of Agamben’s); they were beings like us (indeed, camp inmates in better health feared deterioriating into their state of existence) who were, nevertheless, exceptions in that they were not considered human (social beings) anymore. Agamben then argues, by way of Martin Heidegger, that death only has

meaning in terms of the social relation, something that speaks to burial of
the dead as ancestors or family, which seems to stretch back into pre-his-
torical times. It is this fundamental social relation that the Nazis had
stripped from its victims. Agamben is interested in the *Muselmann*, because
in that case one has testimony from survivors that such people were pro-
duced by the inhuman conditions of the camps and were experienced by
everyone as entities who had no social existence anymore and hence fell
outside the social relation. Hence one hesitates, as Primo Levi put it, to call
their death a death. This, then, pushes analysis of community without
community to a horrific extreme that, of course, raises many questions with
respect to, say, Levinas’ remarks about individual responsibility in a world
where there is no help and in which God hides his face.

Given such extreme analyses of the social relation in France over the last
20 years or so, liberal humanist conceptions of the social subject have
returned in Anglo-American universities for the sake of putting more tra-
ditional, commonsensical definitions in place. Whether this is a correction
or a woeful regression to a more simplistic philosophical way of thinking
could be debated. Works by Martha Nussbaum, Seyla Benhabib, Judith
Butler, Julia Kristeva, and many others have backed off from post-structur-
alist positions on the “death of the subject,” the “radical alterity of the
Other,” and the “non-relation of the relation.” Emphasis is now placed on
human rights and what Hannah Arendt, the leading influence upon the
resurgence of liberalism today once called “the human condition.” Yet, such
clichés aside, Arendt herself argued that “Nothing entitles us to assume that
man has a nature or essence in the same sense as other things. In other
words, if we have a nature or essence, then surely only a god could know
and define it, and the first prerequisite would be that he be able to speak
about a ‘who’ as though it were a ‘what.’” If indeed we don’t know “who”
we are, and if only a god could tell us, then how could we know what rela-
tion we actually have to one another? Arendt points out that were we to
look for answers in the conditions of human existence (life itself, worldli-
ness, mortality, the earth) we can “never ‘explain’ what we are or answer
the question of who we are for the simple reason that they never condition
us absolutely.” What is known, however, is that all human activities are
“conditioned by the fact that men live together,” that, in other words, men
and women *are* social beings.71

11, 22.
Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951)
Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (1969)
Index

Abramović, Marina, 163
Abramović, Marina, and Ulay
(Laysiepen, Uwe), 138, 152, 154;
Light/Dark, 151–2;
Relation in Space, 163
Adams, Marina, 129
Addison, Joseph, 29
Adorno, Theodor, 37, 169, 177, 238
Aeschylus, 91
Agamben, Giorgio, 289; Remnants of
Auschwitz, 285–6
Agrippa, Henry Cornelius (of
Nettesheim), 23–4
Akerman, Chantal, 156
Althusser, Louis, 38, 231;
"Ideology," 248–9;
Reading Capital, 38
Anderson, Laurie: Home of the Brave,
165; Homeland, 137–8; United
States, 160
Andrews, Bruce: Lip Service, 111–12,
118
Apollinaire, Guillaume, 129
Arendt, Hannah, 231; The Human
Condition, 286; Origins,
56–7

Ariosto, Lodovico, 26
Aristotle, 72, 73, 140, 170–3,
187, 284; “Of Interpretation,” ix;
Poetics, 172–3; Politics, 265, 266,
268–70
Armantrout, Rae, 118
Arnold, Matthew: “Dover Beach,” 115,
117
Artaud, Antonin, 149–51
Ashbery, John, 108, 115, 116–17, 131
Auden, W.H., 19
Auerbach, Erich: Mimesis, 2, 61
Austen, Jane, 6; Pride and Prejudice, 27
Austin, J. L.: How to Do Things with
Words, 7

Bachelard, Gaston, 29, 39, 40–1
Bacon, Francis, 136
Badiou, Alain, 45, 46, 169, 206, 221–4;
On Samuel Beckett, 223–4
Bakhtin, Mikhail, 66, 67, 85–9, 90–1,
238–9
Bal, Mieke, 92
Balibar, Etienne, 38
Ball, Hugo, 125
Bally, Charles, 178

Herman Rapaport.
© 2011 Herman Rapaport. Published 2011 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
Balzac, Honoré de, 73;
   “Sarrasine,” 94, 95, 96
Barthes, Roland, 39, 58, 67,
   189–97, 247; Elements of Semiology, 189; Mythologies, 245–6;
   “Structural Analysis,” 190–7
Bataille, Georges, xii, 169, 284
Barzun, Henri, 125
Baudrillard, Jean, 216–21; In the Shadow, 246–7; Mirror of Production, 242; “Orders of Simulacra,” 218–21; “Precession,” 216–7
Beckett, Samuel, 223; Waiting for Godot, 151; Krapp’s Last Tape, 160
Beguin, Albert, 29, 39
Benedetti, Jean, 142
Benhabib, Seyla, 286
Benjamin, Walter, 34, 37, 177, 219
Benson, Steve, 118
Benveniste, Emile: Problems, 182
Berg, Alban, 162
Berger, Peter and Luckmann, Thomas: The Social Construction of Reality, 13, 48–9, 54
Bernstein, Charles, 119
Berrymen, John, 121
Beuys, Joseph, 153–4; Siberian Symphony, 153
Bhabha, Homi: Location of Culture, 62–3
Birdwhistell, Ray, 135
Birnbbaum, Dara: Wonder Woman, 138
Bishop Berkeley, 174
Blake, William, 111, 176
Blanchot, Maurice, 40, 282
Bloom, Harold, 37, 175–7
Boas, Franz, 183
Bogart, Humphrey, 144
Boiardo, Matteo, M., 26
Book, Lynn, “Annotated,” 160
Booth, Wayne, 73
Brando, Marlon, 144
Braque, Georges, 169
Brecht, Bertolt, 148–9
Brecht, George, 139
Breder, Hans: Boxed In, 158; My TV Dictionary, 138–9
Breuer, Lee, 137, 145
Brontë, Charlotte, 198
Brooks, Cleanth, 36, 66
Brothers Grimm, 42
Buber, Martin: Eclipse of God, 281–2
Burden, Chris: Five Day Locker Piece, 137
Butler, Judith: Gender Trouble, 3, 48, 50–1, 55, 135–6, 286
Cage, John, 117, 139, 156
Carroll, Lewis, 41, 215;
   “Jabberwocky,” 124
Casablanca (dir. Michael Curtiz), 144
Castiglioni, Baldassare, 136
Caudwell, Christopher: “English Poets,” 10–11, 12
Chaucer, Geoffrey, 175
Chekhov, Anton: Cherry Orchard, 70
Chrétien de Troyes: Perceval, 111
Cixous, Hélène, 40, 45, 47
Cleese, John, 16
Clinton, Hillary, 50
Conrad, Joseph: Heart of Darkness, 97
Coolidge, Clark, 118
Couillard, Paul, 159–60
Creeley, Robert, 108–9
Dante, Alighieri, 26, 99,
   102, 114; Divine Comedy, 82, 111;
   Il Convivio, 21–2
Darwin, Charles, 251
Davidovich, Jaime: The Live! Show, 139
Davidson, Michael, 118

de Beauvoir, Simone, 47
de Man, Paul, 37, 231; “Rhetoric,” 2, 108; Allegories, 176, 177
de Meun, Jean, and de Lorris, Guillaume: Romance of the Rose, 110
de Sade, Marquis, 242–3

Debord, Guy: Society, 139–40, 233

Deleuze, Gilles, 33, 62, 169
Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari, Félix, 45; Anti-Oedipus, 150; Thousand Plateaus, 60, 205–7

Derrida, Jacques, 28, 38, 46, 62, 169, 197, 202, 205, 210–11; “Before the Law,” 284; “Dissemination,” 203–5; “Geschlecht” (i–iv), 32–3; Monolinguisum, 211, 284; Of Grammatology, 31–2; “Pharmacy,” 213; Politics, 211, 264, 284; Positions, 31; “Structure,” 200–1, 203; Writing and Difference, 31

Descartes, René, 174

Dickens, Charles: Great Expectations, 222; Hard Times, 11

Dickinson, Emily, 19, 115; “A Route,” 103–5, 115

Dilthey, Wilhelm, 28

DiPalma, Ray, 118

Divoire, Fernand, 125


Dos Passos, John, 221

Dostoyevsky, Fyodor, 41, 42

Dryden, John, 27; “Absalom and Achitophel,” 26

Dujardin, Edouard: Les Lauriers, 80

Duncan-Jones, Katherine, 18

Dune (dir. David Lynch), 8

Eichenbaum, Boris, 14, 65


Ellis, Brett Easton: American Psycho, 87–9, 97, 221, 222

Establet, Roger, 38

Faulkner, William: Sound and the Fury, 3, 71, 80–1, 82–3, 91

Fawly Towers (dir. J.H. Davies et al.), 16

Finley, Karen, 137, 160, 161, 162

Fish, Stanley, 44

Fitzgerald, F. Scott: “Babylon Revisited,” 90

Flaubert, Gustave, 77; Madame Bovary, 3–4; “A Simple Heart,” 192

Fleming, Ian: Goldfinger, 192–3, 194, 196

Fludernik, Monika, 67

Fontanier, Pierre, 100–2, 103

Foreman, Richard, xii, 137, 145, 165; Miss Universal Happiness, 151

Forster, E.M.: Aspects, 66

Foucault, Michel, 13, 36, 38–9, 45, 51, 55, 62, 112, 250, 251–2, 259, 261–3; Discipline, 51; History of Sexuality, 48, 53–4; Order, 107; Security, 252–3, 261–2; Society Must, 262; “What is an Author?” 52

Freud, Sigmund, 8, 33, 41–2, 62, 253, 254; Interpretation, 257; “On Dreams,” 42; Totem and Taboo, 250–1

Frye, Northrop: Anatomy of Criticism, 43

Fusco, Coco, 166–7
Gadamer, Hans-Georg, 28
Gallagher, Catherine, 35
Genette, Gerard, 39, 67, 71, 79
Ginsberg, Allen: “America,” 249
Glass, Philip, 208
Gödel, Kurt, 211–12, 213, 214
Godfather (dir. Francis Ford Coppola), 144
Goethe, J. W. von, 177
Goldberg, RoseLee, 162
Gómez-Peña, Guillermo, 166–7, 217
Gone with the Wind (dir. Victor Fleming), 162
Google, 220
Gordimer, Nadine: “The Moment Before the Gun Went Off,” 92–4
Graham, Dan: Performance, Audience, Mirror, 163–4
Gramsci, Antonio, 38, 235, 236
Graves, Robert, 171
Gray, Spalding: Swimming to Cambodia, 160
Greenblatt, Stephen, 35, 136
Grenier, Robert, 118
Guerrilla Girls, 165
Habermas, Jürgen, 37, 228–33, 235, 281, 285; Structural Transformation, 228–33
Hamon, Philippe, 39
Haraway, Donna, 58
Harryman, Carla, 122–3
Hartman, Geoffrey, 37
Harvey, David, 58
Hawthorne, Nathaniel: Scarlet Letter, 97
Hebdige, Dick, 58
Hegel, G.W.F., 28, 31, 37, 231; Phenomenology, 253–5, 256, 257
Heidegger, Martin, 28, 32, 40, 89, 197, 231, 278, 285; “Letter,” 263
Hejinian, Lyn, 118
Hemingway, Ernest, 12; “Soldier’s Home,” 90
Herbert, George: “Easter Wings,” 128
Higgen, Dick, 139
Hillis Miller, J., 37, 40
Hitler, Adolf: Mein Kampf, 63
Hobbes, Thomas, 281
Hölderlin, Friedrich, 177, 234
Homer, 99, 102, 177; The Iliad, 130; Odyssey, 72
Hopkins, Gerard Manley, 19
Horkheimer, Max, 37, 238
Howe, Susan, 118, 129
Hugh of Saint Victor: Didascalia, 21
Hughes, Holly, 160
Hume, David, 174
Husserl, Edmund, 28, 33, 40, 197–200, 278; Logic, 199, 201–2
Irigaray, Luce, 45, 47
James, Henry, 5–6, 73; “Daisy Miller,” 75–6, 78
James, William, 145
Jameson, Fredric, 38, 58
Jefferson, Thomas, 281, 285
Johnson, Samuel, 29; “Preface to Shakespeare,” 27–8
Jonas, Joan, 164; Reading Dante, 164–5
Jones, Ernest: “Hamlet,” 8
Joyce, James, 80; “The Dead,” 78–9, 80, 227–8; Dubliners, 222; Finnegans Wake, 79, 215, 222–3; Ulysses, 36, 66, 79, 97, 221, 240–1
Jung, Carl, 42–3
Kafka, Franz, 6; “Before the Law,” 214, 284; “In the Penal Colony,” 214
Kant, Immanuel, 28, 242–3
Khlebnikov, Velimir, 125, 126
Kirby, Michael, 156, 157, 158, 159
Koch, Karen, 158
Kofman, Sarah, 45
Kojève, Alexandre, 37; Introduction, 253, 254
Kristeva, Julia, 39, 45, 67, 83–5, 286
Laclau, Ernesto and Mouffe, Chantal, 38; Hegemony, 233–7
Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe, 45
Larson, Nella: Passing, 55, 96
Lawrence, D.H., 12
LeCompte, Elizabeth, 137, 145, 149
Leibniz, Gottfried, 174
Lenin, V.I., 38
Les rendez-vous d’Anna (dir. Chantal Akerman), 156
Levertov, Denise, 121
Levi, Primo, 285, 286
Levinas, Emmanuel, xii, 40, 45, 169, 197, 264, 283, 286; “Loving the Torah,” 282; Intuition, 278–9; Otherwise Than Being, 280; Totality and Infinity, 280–1
Locke, John, 15, 25, 174
Lodge, David: “Mimesis,” 73
Lowell, Robert: “Skunk Hour,” 113, 120
Lubbock, Percy, 73
Lukács, Georg, 37, 116, 117; History and Class Consciousness, 241
Lyotard, Jean-François, 45
Mabou Mines, 137, 145
Mac Low, Jackson, 106, 107, 117, 119; “A Note,” 117–18; “People Swamp,” 105–6
Macherey, Pierre, 38
Machiavelli, Niccolò, 229
Maciunas, George, 139
Mallarmé, Stéphane, 129
Mamet, David, 145
Mann, Thomas: Joseph, 20
Marcuse, Herbert, 37
Marivaux, Pierre de, 15
Marvell, Andrew, “Upon Appleton House,” 26, 220
Marx, Karl, 10, 59, 62, 266, 275–7; Grundrisse, 276
Marx, Karl, and Engels, Friedrich, 59, 238; Communist Manifesto, 276–7; German Ideology, 242–4
McCaffery, Steve, 119, 124; North, 106
Melville, Herman: “Bartelby,” 278, 279–80; Moby Dick, 42
Mendieta, Ana, 139, 152–3, 154
Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, 37, 169, 197
Messerli, Douglas, 129
Miller, Arthur: Death of a Salesman, 70, 145, 148, 151; The Price, 70, 86–7
Millet, Kate: Sexual Politics, 12
Milton, John, 5, 19, 26, 27, 177, 273; “L’Allegro, Il Penseroso,” 114; Comus, 220; On Christian Doctrine, 7; Paradise Lost, xii, 3, 7, 10, 20, 24–5, 26, 41, 72, 74, 89–90, 99–103, 112, 124, 130, 176; Paradise Regained, 103; “Of Tenure,” 271–2
Minh ha, Trinh T., 58
Minnis, Chelsey: “Maroon,” 105
Monk, Meredith: Atlas, 157, 158, 165
Montaigne, Michel de, 217
Montesquieu, 217
Morimura, Yasumasa: “Self-Portrait,” 162
Morrison, Toni: Beloved, 69, 70–1, 83, 91, 188–9, 221; “Recitatif,” 74
Mühl, Otto, 167
Mullen, Laura: “Torch Song,” 120–1
Mulvey, Laura, 7
Nancy, Jean Luc, 45; Inoperative Community, 282–4
Negri, Antonio, 62
Newton, Sir Isaac, 25
Nietzsche, Friedrich, 28, 34, 252, 253, 254; “On Truth,” 13, 99; Genealogy, 251
Nitsch, Hermann, 167
Noth, Winfried, 182
Novalis, 34
Nussbaum, Martha, 286
Olga’s House of Shame (dir. Joseph Mawra), 147
Olson, Charles; Maximus, 129
Ontological Hysteric Theatre, 137, 145, 165
Oppen, George, 117
Overlie, Mary, 145–7
Ovid, 85, 102; Metamorphosis, 22
Paine, Thomas, 281, 285
Palmer, Michael, 118
Parsons, Talcott, 259–60
Perelman, Bob, 118
Phillips, Tom: Humument, 129
Picasso, Pablo, 169; Guernica, 117
Plato, 73, 173, 275, 276; Cratylus, 263; Republic, 252, 256–9
Poe, Edgar Allan, 259
Pontalis, J-B, 40
Poulet, Georges, 39
Pound, Ezra, 12, 108, 113; Cantos, 36
Pozzi, Lucio, 158
Proudhon, P-J, 275–6
Proust, Marcel, 14; Remembrance, 72, 81–2, 91
Pynchon, Thomas: Gravity’s Rainbow, 77, 208; Mason & Dixon, 76–7, 85
Racine, Jean: Phaedra, 97
Rancière, Jacques, 38, 283
Ranke, Leopold von: “Idea of Universal History,” 30, 31
Raymond, Marcel, 29, 39, 40
Reed, Ishmael: “Like Bud,” 114
Reich, Steve, 208
Rembrandt, Harmenszoon van Rijn, 35
Ricardou, Jean, 67
Richard, Jean-Pierre, 29, 39
Ricoeur, Paul, 28, 197
Riedlinger, Albert, 178
Riffaterre, Michael, 39
Riley, Terry: In C, 208
Robbe-Grillet, Alain, 14; In the Labyrinth, 209–10
Ronse, Henri, 31
Rossetti, Christina: “An Apple Gathering,” 131–2
Rossler, Martha: *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, 162; *Vital Statistics*, 162
Rousset, Jean, 39
Rubin, Gayle: “Traffic,” 47
Rushdie, Salman: “Prophet’s Hair,” 68–9
Rutherford, Ernest, 215

Said, Edward: *Orientalism*, 3, 61
Saint Augustine: *City of God*, 84
Sarraute, Nathalie, 81
Sartre, Jean-Paul, 37, 40, 197, 254, 278, 284; *Being and Nothingness*, 43, 253, 255–7, 277, 279
Satie, Erik, 153
*Saturday Night Live* (dir. Lorne Michaels), 50
Saussure, Ferdinand de, 38, 67, 126, 189; *Course*, 178–82
Scalapino, Leslie, 118; “Concerning,” 114, 208–9; “Tango,” 129
Schechner, Richard, 154–5
Schleiermacher, Friedrich, 28, 29, 30
Schmitt, Carl, 214, 267
Schoenberg, Arnold, 169, 208
Schwitters, Kurt, 160; *Ursonate*, 126–7
Sechehaye, Albert, 178
Sedgwick, Eve: *Epistemology*, 55
Shenstone, William, 218
Sheridan, Richard, 15
Sherman, Cindy, 162
Shklovsky, Victor, 14, 65

Sidney, Sir Philip, 5, 172
Silliman, Ron, 118, 119, 122–3, 133
Sinclair, Upton: *The Jungle*, 11
Sollers, Philippe, 206; *Nombres*, 203–4
Sophie’s Choice (dir. Alan Pakula), 141
Sophocles: *Oedipus Rex*, 172–3
Spenser, Edmund, 27, 107, 114; *Faerie Queene*, 7, 26, 110–11, 220
Spinoza, Baruch, 174
Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, 33; “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 62
Stalin, Joseph, 38
Stanislawski, Konstantin, 142–4, 145, 146
Stanzel, Franz Karl, 67
Starobinski, Jean, 29, 39
Stein, Edith, 279
Stein, Gertrude, 117, 133; *Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights*, 147; *Tender Buttons*, 133
Steinbeck, John: *Grapes of Wrath*, 11
Sterne, Laurence: *Tristram Shandy*, 15
Stevens, Wallace, 108
Strasberg, Lee, 144–5
Streep, Meryl, 141
Strindberg, August: *Ghost Sonata*, 70
Styron, William: Sophie’s Choice*, 69–70, 71–2
Swift, Jonathan: *Gulliver’s Travels*, 27

Tasso, Torquato, 26
Tatlin, Vladimir, 126
Thompson, E.P., 239
Todorov, Tzvetan, 39, 67
Toolan, Michael, 92
Trakl, Georg, 32
Trotsky, Leon, 37
Tynianov, Juri, 14, 65

Van Gogh, Vincent, 29
Virgil, 99, 102
Warhol, Andy, 35
Watten, Barrett, 118
Wedekind, Frank, 162
Wegman, William, 158
Weill, Kurt, 149
Whitman, Walt, 206
Wiener, Hannah, 118, 129
Wilkinson, John: “In the losing light, see, your head,” 132–3
Williams, Raymond, 239, 240; The Long Revolution, 58
Williams, Tennessee: Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, 145
Williams, William Carlos, 117
Wilson, Robert, and Glass, Philip: Einstein on the Beach, 157, 165
Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 34, 169, 263, 264; Tractatus, 211
Woolf, Virginia, 6; Waves, 14, 80
Wooster Group, xii, 137, 145, 149
Wordsworth, Dorothy: Grasmere Journals, 113
Wright, Richard: Black Boy, 11
Yeats, W.B., 116
Žižek, Slavoj, 33, 38, 58, 241; For They Know Not, 50; Interrogating, 242–3; Looking Awry, 58; Plague, 8–9, 58
Zola, Émile: Germinal, 11
Zukofsky, Paul, 117