

*Offprint*

Notes and Queries, Vol. 29, No. 6

December 1982

*Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism.* Edited and with an introduction by JOSUÉ V. HARARI. Pp. 475. London: Methuen, 1980. Paperbound £4.95.

ANTHOLOGIES of structuralism are legion; yet this book by Josué V. Harari is not just another anthology. Harari thinks that it is high time to speak of structuralism in the past tense, and it is under the heading of 'post-structuralism' that he puts together fifteen

texts, all written after 1968. These texts, which either deal with literary criticism or *are* literary criticism, insist on the distance between their own position and what one could call classic structuralism.

But what is 'post-structuralism'? What Josué V. Harari has in mind is not a unified school – these texts are very different from each other – but rather a multiplicity of researches questioning some of the postulates of structuralism, and, in the first place, its concepts of sign and representation. This is how in his introduction he describes this mutation:

If structuralism has attempted, philosophically, a radical dismissal of the speaking subject, it has, on the other hand, never put the sign, in its essential structure, into question. The most fundamental difference between the structuralist and post-structuralist enterprises can be seen in the shift from the problematic of the subject to the deconstruction of the concept of representation.

This deconstruction is one of the major contributions of Jacques Derrida, whose famous text entitled 'The Supplement of Copula' is presented here as a 'deconstruction of Benveniste's deconstruction of Aristotle'. In fact, all the discourse of Western metaphysics is questioned by Derrida on the basis of a criticism of Benveniste's view that the constraints of the Greek language would have predetermined the system of Aristotle's categories. Through his refusal of a so-called projection of language upon the categories of thought, through a reflexion on the category of category and on the paradoxical status of the copula within the sentence, he questions the whole classic conception of the bipartition of the sign into a signifier and a signified.

The same questioning, but under a different form, is present in the text by Roland Barthes entitled: 'From Work to Text'. The Barthesian conception of the text differs from other structuralist conceptions by its refusal of a certain idea of the closure of the text. The text here is defined by 'its subversive force with regard to old classifications' (this is its 'social function'). It is a game, a production, a practice, an organism which grows and 'develops', a 'woven material' in which the distance between

author and reader is abolished. In such a complex game, the text is on the side of the signifier, but not of a signifier which would only be 'the first stage of meaning': it is rather an 'aftermath' (*après-coup*). Again, the conception of the sign is questioned.

A text by Gérard Genette, 'Valéry and the Poetics of Language', offers another aspect of this deconstruction of the sign. In the old debate upon language which first opposed Cratylus and Hermogenes, Saussure with his theory of the arbitrariness of the sign appears as a distant inheritor of Hermogenes. But this theory is, as it were, unable to account for poetical writing. Genette does not suggest a return to what he calls 'Cratylus's primary Cratylysm'. For him, the poetic function consists in compensating for this flaw in the words, separated as they are from what they signify, in making up for the arbitrariness of the sign, and, consequently, in rediscovering the harmony linking what the poem says and what it is, in artificially recreating that natural fit between words and things which Cratylus dreamed of.

But the deepest – and also the most devastating – deconstruction of the theory of the sign is to be found in Gilles Deleuze's text entitled 'The Schizophrenic and Language: Surface and Depth in Lewis Carroll and Antonin Artaud' (in the original: '*Le schizophrène et la petite fille*'). If one can sometimes be tempted by a parallel between some of Carroll's and of Artaud's texts, on account of their common use of nonsense, there remains however for Deleuze a considerable distance 'separating Carroll's language, which is emitted at the surface, from Artaud's language, which is hewn from the depth of bodies'. While Carroll plays perversely on the surface of words and sounds, Artaud lives through 'the schizophrenic problem of suffering, of death and of life'. For the schizophrenic, surface disappears as does the limit between the inside and the outside. The body is fragmented and dissociated. And, simultaneously, 'in this breakdown of the surface, all words lose their meaning'. The schizophrenic language cannot be defined by 'an incessant and mad sliding of the signifying series onto the signified series' 'in fact, no series remains at all; both have disappeared'.

Beside this fundamental criticism concerned with the theory of the sign, this anthology also attacks other aspects of structuralism. This is the case in particular with the idea that it is legitimate – and even necessary – for literary criticism to limit its scope to the formal study of the text itself considered independently from its context, its author, from history and society.

Thus Edward W. Said 'deplores the strategy which claims for textuality a privileged stake in the production of meaning' (Harari). He attacks Riffaterre's claim that 'the text is self-sufficient'. For him, in Harari's words, 'texts turn as much out to the world as they turn inward to textuality'. Said, however, is not content with a purely extra-textual study of the conditions of the production of the text: he wants rather to examine 'its participation in shaping the conditions of production of the interpretive activity which bears upon it'. The creation and circulation, the production and reproduction of discourse are in his eyes some of the agents of historical evolution. And the linguistic and textual constraints must be articulated with other types of determination.

This is also Michel Foucault's position. His important text entitled 'What is an author?' appears as an 'archeological' exploration – one of his favourite phrases – of the notion of authorship and of the connection between author and text. He shows that 'the author does not precede the works, he is a certain functional principle by which in our culture one limits, excludes and chooses'. In such a conception, the point is neither to exclude the author as does an intra-textual criticism, nor to go back to the classic biographical perspective, but rather to show that the author 'is a function by which certain discourses in a given society are characterized'. This function determines the relation between the text and political power. 'The author is (...) the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning'. The idea of authorship does not refer to a person but to a function. Some authors are 'founders of discursivity'. This is the case of Marx and Freud: the discursivity that they founded – in a sense, their text – goes on being written after them.

This question of political power is also

central in Michel Serres' 'The Algebra of Literature: the Wolf's Game', where, studying one of La Fontaine's fables, he questions the epistemology of the classical age and, beyond that, shows how the discourse of science is necessarily related to the structure of political power.

In a similar way, René Girard, starting from a study of Shakespeare, and in particular of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, shows how the mimetic relationship between the characters determines 'beyond the parameters of structural analysis' the dramatic game and the textual organization. According to Harari, for Girard, 'mimetic phenomena such as victimage and scapegoating are understood as real and originating events, thus implying that in his cultural scheme mimesis precedes representation and sign systems'.

The book also includes several other original contributions. Paul de Man rejects both the formalist aspect of structural criticism and the assimilation that it often practises between rhetorical and grammatical structures. Eugenio Donato studies *Bouvard et Pécuchet* as a sign of Flaubert's conception of history and temporality. Louis Marin offers a semiological analysis of Pascal's first *Discourse on the Condition of the Great*. Michael Riffaterre, studying Lautréamont, suggest that the focus of critical activity should be shifted 'from the text to the space between text and reader'. Neil Hertz studies the relationship between Freud's writing and life. Eugene Vance shows 'that the historical "crisis" or tragedy that the *Song of Roland* depicts doubles a deeper epistemological crisis that attended the passage from an oral (commemorative) to a written (signifying) culture' (Harari). Joseph Riddel concentrates on certain aspects of American poetic idiom.

One could find fault with the eclectic character of this book. Josué V. Harari himself insists that other choices would have been possible. And it is inevitable that a panorama of contemporary criticism should be so diverse.

However, most of these texts have a few essential directions in common: the criticism of representation (on which Harari is probably the first to put such clear emphasis), the insistence on the limits of intra-textual formalism, the rejection of the discontinuity between the role of the author and that of the critic

(‘Criticism is not a simple “adjunct” to the so-called primary text, but is a continuous activity which is intrinsic to and extends the text. Hence the critic is, as well, a *producer* of text.’), and, last but not least, the idea that ‘all criticism *is* strategic’ – hence the title of the book: *Textual Strategies*.

A more serious reservation would concern the label of ‘post-structuralism’ chosen by Josué V. Harari; some of the papers remain within structuralism while others adopt a perspective which has little to do with structuralism – so that the label refers the reader rather to a period – the seventies – than to a coherent methodology.

In his introduction, Josué V. Harari clearly shows that structuralist criticism had its source in the methods of structuralist linguistics. But, since then, linguistics has made enormous progress, and the classic structuralist concepts have been under considerable pressure with the development of transformational and generative grammars and the growing favour of pragmatics and discourse analysis. It is to be regretted that Harari practically ignores the effects upon literary criticism of these mutations inside linguistics. The ‘generative criticism’ is simply absent (cf. the works of Jean-Pierre Faye, the papers published in the journal *Change* – in particular numbers 16-17 –, and the issue of the journal *Langages* entitled *Poétique Générative*, edited by D. Delas and J.-J. Thomas (number 51)). One also misses the studies on argumentation, presupposition and pragmatics (cf. in particular Oswald Ducrot: *Les Mots du Discours* [Minuit, Paris]) and also those studies based on syntax and/or lexis attempting to establish ‘discourse analyses’ and ‘text grammars’, or again those statistical researches, recently renewed by the methodological progress of lexicometry (cf. on the whole question: Dominique Maingueneau: *L’Analyse du Discours* [Hachette, Paris]).

But Harari was not aiming at exhaustiveness. His anthology (in which each text is carefully presented, accurately translated and accompanied by a list of each author’s publications) offers a quite unique panorama which will be an excellent instrument for all those wishing to understand most of the methodological mutations of literary criticism of the last fifteen years.

JEAN-PIERRE SUEUR