

CHAPTER 4

Structuralist Theories

New ideas often provoke baffled and anti-intellectual reactions, and this was especially true of the reception accorded the theories which go under the name of 'structuralism'. Structuralist approaches to literature challenged some of the most cherished beliefs of the ordinary reader. The literary work, we had long felt, is the child of an author's creative life, and expresses the author's essential self. The text is the place where we enter into a spiritual of humanistic communion with an author's thoughts and feelings. Another fundamental assumption which readers often make is that a good book tells the truth about human life – that novels and plays try to 'tell things as they really are'. However, structuralists have tried to persuade us that the author is 'dead' and that literary discourse has no truth function. In a review of a book by Jonathan Culler, John Bayley spoke for the anti-structuralists when he declared, 'but the sin of semiotics is to attempt to destroy our sense of truth in fiction... In a good story, truth precedes fiction and remains separable from it.' In a 1968 essay, Roland Barthes put the structuralist view very powerfully, and argued that writers only have the power to mix already existing writings, to reassemble or redeploy them; writers cannot use writing to 'express' themselves, but only to draw upon that immense dictionary of language and culture which is 'always already written' (to use a favorite Barthesian phrase). It would not be misleading to use the term 'anti-humanism' to describe the spirit of structuralism. Indeed the word has been used by structuralists themselves to emphasize their opposition to all forms of literary criticism in which the human subject is the source and origin of literary meaning.

The linguistic background:

The work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, compiled and published after his death in a single book, *Course in General Linguistics* (1915), has been profoundly influential in shaping contemporary literary theory. Saussure's two key ideas provide new answers to the questions 'What is the object of linguistic investigation?' and 'What is the relationship between words and things?' He makes a fundamental distinction between *langue* and *parole* – between the language system, which pre-exists actual examples of language, and the individual utterance. *Langue* is

the social aspect of language: it is the shared system which we (unconsciously) draw upon as speakers. Parole is the individual realization of the system in actual instances of language. This distinction is essential to all later structuralist theories. The proper object of linguistic study is the system which underlies any particular human signifying practice, not the individual utterance. This means that, if we examine specific poems or myths or economic practices, we do so in order to discover what system of rules – what grammar – is being used. After all, human beings use speech quite differently from parrots: the former evidently have a grasp of a system of rules which enables them to produce an infinite number of well-formed sentences; parrots do not.

Saussure rejected the idea that language is a word-heap gradually accumulated over time and that its primary function is to refer to things in the world. In his view, words are not symbols which correspond to referents, but rather are ‘signs’ which are made up of two parts (like two sides of a sheet of paper): a mark, either written or spoken, called a ‘signifier’, and a concept (what is ‘thought’ when the mark is made), called a ‘signified’. The view he is rejecting may be represented thus:

SYMBOL = THING

Saussure’s model is as follows:

$$\text{SIGN} = \frac{\text{signifier}}{\text{signified}}$$

‘Things’ have no place in the model. The elements of language acquire meaning not as the result of some connection between words and things, but only as parts of a system of relations. Consider the sign-system of traffic lights:

red – amber – green

signifier ('red')
signified (stop)

The sign signifies only within the system ‘red = stop / green = go / amber = prepare for red or green’. The relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary: there is no natural bond between red and stop, no matter how natural it may feel. When the British joined the EEC they had to accept new electrical colour codings which seemed unnatural (brown not red = live; blue not black = neutral). Each colour in the traffic system signifies not by asserting a positive univocal meaning but by

marking a difference, a distinction within a system of opposites and contrasts: traffic-light 'red' is precisely 'not-green'; 'green' is 'not-red'.

Language is one among many sign-systems (some believe it is the fundamental system). The science of such systems is called 'semiotics' or 'semiology'. It is usual to regard structuralism and semiotics as belonging to the same theoretical universe. Structuralism, it must be added, is often concerned with systems which do not involve 'signs' as such (kinship relations, for example, thus indicating its equally important origins in anthropology – see the references to Lévi-Strauss below, pp. 65, 68) but which can be treated in the same way as sign-systems. The American philosopher C.S. Peirce made a useful distinction between three types of sign: the 'iconic' (where the sign resembles its referent, e.g. a picture of a ship or a road-sign for falling rocks); the 'indexical' (where the sign is associated, possibly causally, with its referent, e.g. smoke as a sign of fire, or clouds as a sign of rain); and the 'symbolic' (where the sign has an arbitrary relation to its referent, e.g. language).

The most celebrated modern semiotician was Yury Lotman of the then USSR. He developed the Saussurean and Czech types of structuralism in works such as *The Analysis of the Poetic Text* (1976). One of the major differences between Lotman and the French structuralists is his retention of evaluation in his analyses. Literary works, he believes, have more value because they have a 'higher information load' than non-literary texts. His approach brings together the rigour of structuralist linguistics and the close reading techniques of New Criticism. Maria Corti, Cesare Segre, Umberto Eco (for a brief discussion of him as postmodern novelist, see Chapter 8, p. 199) in Italy and Michael Riffaterre (see Chapter 3) from France are the leading European exponents of literary semiotics.

The first major developments in structuralist studies were based upon advances in the study of phonemes, the lowest-level elements in the language system. A phoneme is a meaningful sound, one that is recognized or perceived by a language user. Hundreds of different 'sounds' may be made by the speakers of particular languages, but the number of phonemes will be limited. The word 'spin' may be pronounced within a wide range of phonetic difference, so long as the essential phoneme remains recognizable as itself. One must add that the 'essential phoneme' is only a mental abstraction: all actually occurring sounds are variants of phonemes. We do not recognize sounds as meaningful bits of noise in their own right, but register them as different in some respects from other sounds. Roland Barthes draws attention

to this principle in the title of his most celebrated book, *S/Z* (see Chapter 7, pp. 151-3), which picks out the two sibilants in Balzac's *Sarrasine* (Sä-rä-zēn), which are differentiated phonemically as voiced (z) and unvoiced (s). On the other hand there are differences of raw sound at the phonetic (not phonemic) level which are not 'recognized' in English: the /p/ sound in 'pin' is evidently different from the /p/ sound in 'spin', but English speakers do not recognize a difference: the difference is not recognized in the sense that it does not 'distribute' meaning between words in the language. Even if we said 'sbin', we would probably hear it as 'spin'. The essential point about this view of language is that underlying our use of language is a system, a pattern of paired opposites, binary oppositions. At the level of the phoneme, these include nasalized/non-nasalized, vocalic/non-vocalic, voiced/unvoiced, tense/lax. In a sense, speakers appear to have internalized a set of rules which manifests itself in their evident competence in operating language.

We can observe 'structuralism' of this type at work in the anthropology of Mary Douglas. She examines the abominations of Leviticus, according to which some creatures are clean and some unclean on an apparently random principle. She solves the problem by constructing the equivalent of a phonemic analysis, according to which two rules appear to be in force:

- 1 'Cloven-hoofed, cud-chewing ungulates are the model of the proper kind of food for a pastoralist'; animals which only half conform (pig, hare, rock badger) are unclean.
- 2 Another rule applies if the first is not relevant: each creature should be in the element to which it is biologically adapted. So fish without fins are unclean, and so on.

At a more complex level, the anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss develops a 'phonemic' analysis of myths, rites, kinship structures. Instead of asking questions about the origins or causes of the prohibitions, myths or rites, the structuralist looks for the system of differences which underlies a particular human practice.

As these examples from anthropology show, structuralists try to uncover the 'grammar', 'syntax', or 'phonemic' pattern of particular human systems of meaning, whether they be those of kinship, garments, haute cuisine, narrative discourse, myths or totems. The liveliest examples of such analyses can be found in the earlier writings of Roland Barthes, especially in the wide-ranging *Mythologies* (1957) and *Système de*

la mode (1967). The theory of these studies is given in Elements of Semiology (1967; see Chapter 7, p. 149).

The principle – that human performances presuppose a received system of differential relations – is applied by Barthes to virtually all social practices; he interprets them as sign-systems which operate on the model of language. Any actual ‘speech’ (parole) presupposes a system (langue) which is being used. Barthes recognizes that the language system may change, and that changes must be initiated in ‘speech’; nevertheless, at any given moment there exists a working system, a set of rules from which all ‘speeches’ may be derived. To take an example, when Barthes examines the wearing of garments, he sees it not as a matter of personal expression or individual style, but as a ‘garment system’ which works like a language. He divides the ‘language’ of garments between ‘system’ and ‘speech’ (‘syntagm’).

System

‘Set of pieces, parts or details which cannot be worn at the same time on the same part of the body, and whose variation corresponds to a change in the meaning of the clothing: toque-bonnet-hood, etc.’

Syntagm

‘Juxtaposition in the same type of dress of different elements: skirt-blouse-jacket.’

To make a garment ‘speech’, we choose a particular ensemble (syntagm) of pieces each of which could be replaced by other pieces. An ensemble (sports jacket/grey-flannelled trousers/white open-necked shirt) is equivalent to a specific sentence uttered by an individual for a particular purpose; the elements fit together to make a particular kind of utterance and to evoke a meaning or style. No one can actually perform the system itself, but their selection of elements from the sets of garments which make up the system expresses their competence in handling the system. Here is a representation of a culinary example Barthes provides:

System

‘Set of foodstuffs which have affinities or differences, within which one chooses a dish in view of a certain meaning: the types of entrée, roast or sweet.’

Syntagm

‘Real sequence of dishes chosen during meal; menu.’

(A restaurant á la carte menu has both levels: entrée and examples.)

Structuralist narratology

When we apply the linguistic model to literature, we appear to be in a methodological loop. After all, if literature is already linguistic model? Well, for one thing, it would be a mistake to identify ‘literature’ and ‘language’. It is true that literature uses language as its medium, but this does not mean that the structure of literature is identical with the structure of language. The units of literary structure do not coincide with those of language. This means that when the Bulgarian narratologist Tzvetan Todorov (see below, p. 70) advocates a new poetics which will establish a general ‘grammar’ of literature, he is talking about the underlying rules governing literary practice. On the other hand, structuralists agree that literature has a special relationship with language: it draws attention to the very nature and specific properties of language. In this respect structuralist poetics are closely related to Formalism.

Structuralist narrative theory develops from certain elementary linguistic analogies. Syntax (the rules of sentence construction) is the basic model of narrative rules. Todorov and others talk of ‘narrative syntax’. The most elementary syntactic division of the sentence unit is between subject and predicate: ‘The knight (subject) slew the dragon with his sword (predicate).’ Evidently this sentence could be the core of an episode or even an entire tale. If we substitute a name (Launcelot or Gawain) for ‘the knight’, or ‘axe’ for ‘sword’, we retain the same essential structure. By pursuing this analogy between sentence structure and narrative, Vladimir Propp developed his theory of Russian fairy stories.

Propp’s approach can be understood if we compare the ‘subject’ of a sentence with the typical characters (hero, villain, etc.) and the ‘predicate’ with the typical actions in such stories. While there is an enormous profusion of details, the whole corpus of tales is constructed upon the same basic set of thirty-one ‘functions’. A function is the basic unit of the narrative ‘language’ and refers to the significant actions which form the narrative. These follow a logical sequence, and although no tale includes them all, in every tale the functions always remain in sequence. The last group of functions is as follows:

- 25** A difficult task is proposed to the hero.
- 26** The task is resolved.
- 27** The hero is recognized.

- 28 The false hero or villain is exposed.
- 29 The false hero is given a new appearance.
- 30 The villain is punished.
- 31 The hero is married and ascends the throne.

It is not difficult to see that these functions are present not just in Russian fairy tales or even non-Russian tales, but also in comedies, myths, epics, romances and indeed stories in general. However, Propp's functions have a certain archetypal simplicity which requires elaboration when applied to more complex texts. For example, in the Oedipus myth, Oedipus is set the task of solving the riddle of the sphinx; the task is resolved; the hero is recognized; he is married and ascends the throne. However, Oedipus is also the false hero and the villain; he is exposed (he murdered his father on the way to Thebes and married his mother, the queen), and punishes himself. Propp had added seven 'spheres of action' or roles to the thirty-one function: villain, donor (provider), helper, princes (sought-after person) and her father, dispatcher, hero (seeker or victim), false hero. The tragic myth of Oedipus requires the substitution of 'mother/queen and husband' for 'princess and her father'. One character can play several roles, or several characters can play the same role. Oedipus is both hero, provider (he averts Thebes' plague by solving the riddle), false hero, and even villain.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, the structuralist anthropologist, analyses the Oedipus myth in a manner which is truly structuralist in its use of the linguistic model. He calls the units of myth 'mythemes' (compare phonemes and morphemes in linguistics). They are organized in binary oppositions (see above, p. 65) like the basic linguistic units. The general opposition underlying the Oedipus myth is between two views of the origin of human beings: (1) that they are born from the earth; (2) that they are born from coition. Several mythemes are grouped on one side or the other of the anti-thesis between (1) the overvaluation of kinship ties (Oedipus marries his mother; Antigone buries her brother unlawfully); and (2) the undervaluation of kinship (Oedipus kills his father; Eteocles kills his brother). Lévi-Strauss is not interested in the narrative sequence, but in the structural pattern which gives the myth its meaning. He looks for the 'phonemic' structure of myth. He believes that this linguistic model will uncover the basic structure of the human mind – the structure which governs the way human beings shape all their institutions, artifacts and forms of knowledge.

A.J. Greimas, in his *Sémantique Structurale* (1966), offers an elegant streamlining of Propp's theory. While Propp focused on a single genre, Greimas aims to arrive at the universal 'grammar' of narrative by applying to it a semantic analysis of sentence structure. In place of Propp's seven 'spheres of action' he proposes three pairs of binary oppositions which include all six roles (actants) he requires:

Subject / Object
 Sender / Receiver
 Helper / Opponent

The pairs describe three basic patterns which perhaps recur in all narrative:

- 1 Desire, search, or aim (subject/object).
- 2 Communication (sender/receiver).
- 3 Auxiliary support or hindrance (helper/opponent).

If we apply these to Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, we arrive at a more penetrating analysis than when using Propp's categories:

- 1 O searches for the murderer of Laius. Ironically he searches for himself (he is both subject and object).
- 2 Apollo's oracle predicts O's sins. Teiresias, Jocasta, the messenger and the herdsman all, knowingly or not, confirm its truth. The play is about O's misunderstanding of the message.
- 3 Teiresias and Jocasta try to prevent O from discovering the murderer. The messenger and the herdsman unwittingly assist him in the search. O himself obstructs the correct interpretation of the message.

It can be seen at a glance that Greimas' reworking of Propp is in the direction of the 'phonemic' patterning we saw in Lévi-Strauss. In this respect Greimas is more truly 'structuralist' than the Russian Formalist Propp, in that the former thinks in terms of relations between entities rather than of the character of entities in themselves. In order to account for the various narrative sequences which are possible he reduces Propp's thirty-one functions to twenty, and groups them into three structures (syntagms): 'contractual', 'performative' and 'disjunctive'. The first, the most interesting, is concerned with the establishing or breaking of contracts or rules. Narratives may employ either of the following structures:

contract (or prohibition) > violation > punishment

lack of contract (disorder) > establishment of contract (order)

The Oedipus narrative has the first structure: he violates the prohibition against patricide and incest, and punishes himself.

The work of Tzvetan Todorov is a summation of Propp, Greimas and others. All the syntactic rules of language are restated in their narrative guise – rules of agency, predication, adjectival and verbal functions, mood and aspect, and so on. The minimal unit of narrative is the ‘proposition’, which can be either an ‘agent’ (e.g. a person). The propositional structure of a narrative can be described in the most abstract and universal fashion. Using Todorov’s method, we might have the following propositions:

X is king	X marries Y
Y is X’s mother	X kills Z
Z is X’s father	

These are some of the propositions which make up the narrative of the Oedipus myth. For X read Oedipus; for Y, Jocasta; for Z, Laius. The first three propositions denominate agents, the first and the last two contain predicates (to be a king, to marry, to kill). Predicates may work like adjectives and refer to static states of affairs (to be king), or they may operate dynamically like verbs to indicate transgressions of law, and are therefore the most dynamic types of proposition. Having established the smallest unit (proposition), Todorov describes two higher levels of organization: the sequence and the text. A group of propositions forms a sequence. The basic sequence is made up of five propositions which describe a certain state which is disturbed and then re-established albeit in altered form. The five propositions may be designated thus:

Equilibrium¹ (e.g. Peace)

Force¹ (Enemy invades)

Disequilibrium (War)

Force² (Enemy is defeated)

Equilibrium² (Peace on new terms)

Finally a succession of sequences forms a text. The sequences may be organized in a variety of ways, by embedding (story within a story, digression, etc.), by linking (a string of sequences), or by alternation (interlacing of sequences), or by a mixture of these. Todorov provides his most vivid examples in a study of Boccaccio's Decameron (*Grammaire du Décaméron*, 1969). His attempt to establish the universal syntax of narrative has all the air of a scientific theory. As we shall see, it is precisely against this confidently objective stance that the poststructuralists react.

Gérard Genette developed his complex and powerful theory of discourse in the context of a study of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*. He refines the Russian Formalist distinction between 'story' and 'plot' (see Chapter 2, p. 34) by dividing narrative into three levels: story (*histoire*), discourse (*récit*), and narration. For example, in Aeneid II Aeneas is the story-teller addressing his audience (narration); he presents a verbal discourse; and his discourse represents events in which he appears as a character (story). These dimensions of narrative are related by three aspects, which Genette derives from the three qualities of the verb: tense, mood and voice. To take just one example, his distinction between 'mood' and 'voice' neatly clarifies problems which can arise from the familiar notion of 'point-of-view'. We often fail to distinguish between the voice of the narrator and the perspective (mood) of a character. In Dickens's novel *Great Expectations*, Pip presents the perspective of his younger self through the narrative voice of his older self.

Genette's essay on 'Frontiers of Narrative' (1966) provided an overview of the problems of narration which has not been bettered. He considers the problem of narrative theory by exploring three binary oppositions. The first, 'diegesis and mimesis' (narrative and representation), occurs in Aristotle's *Poetics* and presupposes a distinction between simple narrative (what the author says in his or her own voice as author) and direct imitation (when the author speaks in the person of a character). Genette shows that the distinction cannot be sustained, since if one could have direct imitation involving a pure representation of what someone actually said, it would be like a Dutch painting in which actual objects were included on the canvas. He concludes: 'Literary representation, the mimesis of the ancients, it not, therefore, narrative plus "speeches": it is narrative and only narrative.' The second opposition, 'narration and description', presupposes a distinction between an active and a contemplative aspect of narration. The first is to do with actions and events, the second with objects or characters. 'Narration' appears, at first, to be essential, since

events and actions are the essence of a story's temporal and dramatic content, while 'description' appears to be ancillary and ornamental. 'The man went over to the table and picked up a knife' is dynamic and profoundly narrativistic. However, having established the distinction, Genette immediately dissolves it by pointing out that the nouns and verbs in the sentence are also descriptive. If we change 'man' to 'boy', or 'table' to 'desk', or 'picked up' to 'grabbed', we have altered the description. Finally, the opposition 'narrative and discourse' distinguishes between a pure telling in which 'no one speaks' and a telling in which we are aware of the person who is speaking. Once again, Genette cancels the opposition by showing that there can never be a pure narrative devoid of 'subjective' coloration. However transparent and unmediated a narrative may appear to be, the signs of a judging mind are rarely absent. Narratives are nearly always impure in this sense, whether the element of 'discourse' enters via the voice of the narrator (Fielding, Cervantes) or a character-narrator (Sterne), or through epistolary discourse (Richardson). Genette believes that narrative reached its highest degree of purity in Hemingway and Hammett, but that with the nouveau roman narrative began to be totally swallowed up in the writer's own discourse. In our later chapter on poststructuralism, we shall see that Genette's theoretical approach, with its positing and cancellation of oppositions, opens the door to the 'deconstructive' philosophy of Jacques Derrida.

At this point, the reader may well object that structuralist poetics seems to have little to offer the practicing critic, and it is perhaps significant that fairy stories, myths and detective stories often feature as examples in structuralist writings. Such studies aim to define the general principles of literary structure and not to provide interpretations of individual texts. A fairy story will provide clearer examples of the essential narrative grammar of all stories than will King Lear or Ulysses. Tzvetan Todorov's lucid 'The Typology of Detective Fiction' (1966) distinguishes the narrative structures of detective fiction into three chronologically evolving types: the 'whodunit', the 'thriller' and the 'suspense novel'. He makes a virtue of the fact that the narrative structures of popular literature can be studied much more systematically than those of 'great' literature, because they readily conform to the rules of popular genres.

Metaphor and metonymy

There are some instances when a structuralist theory provides the practical critic with a fertile ground for interpretative applications. This is true of Roman Jakobson's study of 'aphasia' (speech defect) and its implications for poetics. He starts by stating the fundamental distinction between horizontal and vertical dimensions of language, a distinction related to that between *langue* and *parole*. Taking Barthes' garments system as an example, we note that in the vertical dimension we have an inventory of elements that may be substituted for one another: *toque-bonnet-hood*; in the horizontal dimension, we have elements chosen from the inventory to form an actual sequence (*skirt-blouse-jacket*). Thus a given sentence may be viewed either vertically or horizontally.

- 1 Each element is selected from a set of possible elements and could be substituted for another in the set.
- 2 The elements are combined in a sequence, which constitutes a *parole*.

This distinction applies at all levels – phoneme, morpheme, word, sentence. Jakobson noticed that aphasic children appeared to lose the ability to operate one or other of these dimensions. One type of aphasia exhibited 'contiguity disorder', the inability to combine elements in a sequence; the other suffered 'similarity disorder', the inability to substitute one element for another. In a word-association test, if you said 'hut', the first type would produce a string of synonyms, antonyms, and other substitutions: 'cabin', 'hovel', 'palace', 'den', 'burrow'. The other type would offer elements which combine with 'hut', forming potential sequences: 'burnt out', 'is a poor little house'. Jakobson goes on to point out that the two disorders correspond to two figures of speech – metaphor and metonymy. As the foregoing example shows, 'contiguity disorder' results in substitution in the vertical dimension as in metaphor ('den' for 'hut'), while 'similarity disorder' results in the production of parts of sequences for the wholes as in metonymy ('burnt out' for 'hut'). Jakobson suggested that normal speech behavior also tends towards one or other extreme, and that literary style expresses itself as a leaning towards either the metaphoric or the metonymic. The historical development from romanticism through realism to symbolism can be understood as an alternation of style from the metaphoric to the metonymic back to

the metaphoric. David Lodge, in *The Modes of Modern Writing* (1977), applied the theory to modern literature, adding further stages to a cyclical process: modernism and symbolism are essentially metaphoric, while anti-modernism is realistic and metonymic.

An example: in its broad sense, metonymy involves the shift from one element in a sequence to another, or one element in a context to another: we refer to a cup of something (meaning its contents); the turf (for racing), a fleet of a hundred sails (for ships). Essentially metonymy requires a context for its operation; hence Jakobson's linking of realism with metonymy. Realism speaks of its object by offering the reader aspects, parts, and contextual details, in order to evoke a whole. Consider the passage near the opening of Dickens's *Great Expectations*. Pip begins by establishing himself as an identity in a landscape. Reflecting on his orphaned condition, he tells us that he can describe his parents through the only visual remains – their graves: 'As I never saw my father or my mother... my first fancies regarding what they were like were unreasonably [our italics] derived from their tombstones. The shapes of the letters on my father's, gave me an odd idea that he was a square stout man...' This initial act of identification is metonymic in that Pip links two parts of a context: his father and his father's tombstone. However, this is not a 'realistic' metonymy but an 'unrealistic' derivation, 'an odd idea', although suitably childlike (and in that sense psychologically realistic). Proceeding to the immediate setting on the evening of the convict's appearance, the moment of truth in Pip's life, he gives the following description:

Ours was the marsh country, down by the river, within, as the river wound, twenty miles of the sea. My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things [our italics], seems to me to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening. At such a time I found out for certain, that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard; and that Philip Pirrip, late of this parish, and also Georgiana wife of the above, were dead and buried; and that... the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dykes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond, was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip.

Pip's mode of perceiving the 'identity of things' remains metonymic and not metaphoric: churchyard, graves, marshes, river, sea and Pip are conjured up, so to

speak, from contextual features. The whole (person, setting) is presented through selected aspects. Pip is evidently more than a ‘small bundle of shivers’ (he is also a bundle of flesh and bones, thoughts and feelings, social and historical forces), but here his identity is asserted through metonymy, a significant detail offered as his total self at this moment.

In a useful elaboration of Jakobson’s theory David Lodge rightly points out that ‘context is all-important’. He shows that changing context can change the figures. Here is Lodge’s amusing example:

Those favourite filmic metaphors for sexual intercourse in the prepermissive cinema, skyrockets and waves pounding on the shore, could be disguised as metonymic background if the consummation were taking place on a beach on Independence Day, but would be perceived as overtly metaphorical if it were taking place on Christmas Eve in a city penthouse.

The example warns us against using Jakobson’s theory too inflexibly.

Structuralist poetics

Jonathan Culler made the first attempt to assimilate French structuralism to an Anglo-American critical perspective in *Structuralist Poetics* (1975). He accepts the premise that linguistics affords the best model of knowledge for the humanities and social sciences. However, he prefers Noam Chomsky’s distinction between ‘competence’ and ‘performance’ to Saussure’s between ‘langue’ and ‘parole’. The notion of ‘competence’ has the advantage of being closely associated with the speaker of a language; Chomsky showed that the starting-point for an understanding of language was the native speaker’s ability to produce and comprehend well-formed sentences on the basis of an unconsciously assimilated knowledge of the language system. Culler brings out the significance of this perspective for literary theory: ‘the real object of poetics is not the work itself but its intelligibility. One must attempt to explain how it is that works can be understood; the implicit knowledge, the conventions that enable readers to make sense of them, must be formulated...’ His main endeavour is to shift the focus from the text to the reader. He believes that we can determine the rules that govern the interpretation of texts, but not those rules that govern the writing of texts. If we begin by establishing a range of interpretations which seem acceptable to skilled readers, we can then establish what norms and

procedures led to the interpretations. To put it simply, skilled readers, when faced with a text, seem to know how to make sense of it – to decide what is a possible interpretation and what is not. There seem to be rules governing the sort of sense one might make of the most apparently bizarre literary text. Culler sees the structure not in the system underlying the text but in the system underlying the reader's act of interpretation. To take a bizarre example, here is a three-line poem:

Night is generally my time for walking;
 It was the best of times, it was the worst of times;
 Concerning the exact year there is no need to be precise.

When we asked a number of colleagues to read it, a variety of interpretative moves were brought into play. One saw a thematic link between the lines ('Night', 'time', 'times', 'year'); another tried to envisage a situation (psychological or external); another tried to see the poem in term of formal patternings (a past tense – 'was' – framed by present tenses – 'is'); another saw the lines as adopting three different attitudes to time: specific, contradictory, and non-specific. One colleague recognized that line two comes from the opening of Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, but still accepted it as a 'quotation' which served a function within the poem. We finally had to reveal that the other lines were also from the openings of Dickens's novels (the *Old Curiosity Shop* and *Our Mutual Friend*). What is significant from a Cullerian point of view is not that the readers were caught out but that they followed recognizable procedures for making sense of the lines.

We all know that different readers produce different interpretations, but while this has led some theorists to despair of developing a theory of reading at all, Culler later argues, in *The Pursuit of Signs* (1981), that it is this variety of interpretation which theory has to explain. While readers may differ about meaning, they may well follow the same set of interpretative conventions, as we have seen. One of his examples is New Criticism's basic assumption – that of unity; different readers may discover unity in different ways in a particular poem, but the basic forms of meaning they look for (forms of unity) may be the same. While we may feel no compulsion to perceive the unity of our experiences in the real world, in the case of poems we often expect to find it. However, a variety of interpretations can arise because there are several models of unity which one may bring to bear, and within a particular model there are several ways of applying it to a poem. It can certainly be claimed for

Culler's approach that it allows a genuine prospect of a theoretical advance; on the other hand, one can object to his refusal to examine the content of particular interpretative moves. For example, he examines two political readings of Blake's 'London' and concludes: 'The accounts different readers offer of what is wrong with the social system will, of course, differ, but the formal interpretative operations that give them a structure to fill in seem very similar.' There is something limiting about a theory which treats interpretative moves as substantial and the content of the moves as immaterial. After all, there may be historical grounds for regarding one way of applying an interpretative model as more valid or plausible than another, while readings of different degrees of plausibility may well share the same interpretative conventions.

As we have noted, Culler holds that a theory of the structure of texts or genres is not possible because there is not underlying form of 'competence' which produces them: all we can talk about is the competence of readers to make sense of what they read. Poets and novelists write on the basis of this competence: they write what can be read. In order to read texts as literature we must possess a 'literary competence', just as we need a more general 'linguistic competence' to make sense of the ordinary linguistic utterances we encounter. We acquire this 'grammar' of literature in educational institutions. Culler recognized that the conventions which apply to one genre will not apply to another, and that the conventions of interpretation will differ from one period to another, but as a structuralist he believed that theory is concerned with static, synchronic systems of meaning and not diachronic historical ones.

The main difficulty about Culler's approach surrounds the question of how systematic one can be about the interpretative rules used by readers. He does not allow for the profound ideological differences between readers which may undermine the institutional pressures for conformity in reading practices. It is hard to conceive of a single matrix of rules and conventions which would account for the diversity of interpretations which might be produced in a single period about individual texts. At any rate, we cannot simply take for granted the existence of any entity called a 'skilled reader', defined as the product of the institutions we term 'literary criticism'. However, in his later work – *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (1983), and more particularly *Framing the Sign* (1988) – Culler moved away from such purist structuralism and towards a more radical questioning of the institutional and ideological foundations of literary competence. In the latter book, for

instance, he explores and challenges the powerful tendency in post-war Anglo-American criticism, sustained by its institutionalization in the academy, to promote crypto-religious doctrines and values by way of the authority of 'special texts' in the literary tradition.

Structuralism attracted some literary critics because it promised to introduce a certain rigour and objectivity into the impressionistic realm of literature. This rigour is achieved at a cost. By subordinating parole to langue the structuralist neglects the specificity of actual texts, and treats them as if they were like the patterns of iron filings produced by an invisible force. The most fruitful applications of the Saussurean model have been those which treat structuralist concepts as metaphors – as heuristic devices for analyzing texts. Attempts to found a 'scientific' literary structuralism have not produced impressive results. Not only the text but also the author is canceled as the structuralist places in brackets the actual work and the person who wrote it, in order to isolate the true object of enquiry – the system. In Romantic thought on literature, the author is the sentient being who precedes the work and whose experience nourishes it; the author is the origin of the text, its creator and progenitor. According to structuralists, writing has no origin. Every individual utterance is preceded by language: in this sense, every text is made up of the 'already written'.

By isolating the system, structuralists also cancel history, since the structures discovered are either universal (the universal structures of the human mind) and therefore timeless, or arbitrary segments of a changing and evolving process. Historical questions characteristically are about change and innovation, whereas structuralism has to exclude them from consideration in order to isolate a system. Therefore structuralists are interested not in the development of the novel or the transition from feudal to Renaissance literary forms, but in the structure of narrative as such and in the system of aesthetics governing a period. Their approach is necessarily static and ahistorical: they are interested in neither the moment of the text's production (its historical context, its formal links with past writing, etc.) nor the moment of its reception or 'reproduction' (the interpretations imposed on it subsequent to its production – see Chapter 3, for theories to do with this).

There is no doubt that structuralism represented a major challenge to the dominant New Critical, Leavisite, and generally humanist types of critical practice. They all presupposed a view of language as something capable of grasping reality.

Language had been thought of as a reflection of either the writer's mind or the world as seen by the writer. In a sense the writer's language was hardly separable from his or her personality; it expressed the author's very being. However, as we have seen, the Saussurean perspective draws attention to the pre-existence of language. In the beginning was the word, and the word created the text. Instead of saying that an author's language reflects reality, the structuralists argue that the structure of language produces 'reality'. This represents a massive 'demystification' of literature. The source of meaning is no longer the writer's or the reader's experience but the operations and oppositions which govern language. Meaning is determined no longer by the individual but by the system which governs the individual.

At the heart of structuralism is a scientific ambition to discover the codes, the rules, the systems, which underlie all human social and cultural practices. The disciplines of archaeology and geology are frequently invoked as the models of structuralist enterprise. What we see on the surface are the traces of a deeper history; only by excavating beneath the surface will we discover the geological strata or the ground plans which provide the true explanations for what we see above. One can argue that all science is structuralist in this respect: we see the sun move across the sky, but science discovers the true structure of the heavenly bodies' motion.

Readers who already have some knowledge of the subject will recognize that we have presented only a certain classical type of structuralism in this chapter – one whose proponents suggest that definite sets of relations (oppositions, sequences of functions or propositions, syntactical rules) underlie particular practices, and that individual performances derive from structures in the same way as the shape of landscape derives from the geological strata beneath. A structure is like a centre or point of origin, and replaces other such centres of origins (the individual or history). However, our discussion of Genette showed that the very definition of an opposition within narrative discourse sets up a play of meaning which resists a settled or fixed structuration. For example, the opposition between 'description' and 'narration' tends to encourage a 'privileging' of the second term ('description' is ancillary to 'narration'; narrators describe incidentally, as they narrate). But if we interrogate this now hierarchized pair of terms, we can easily begin to reverse it by showing that 'description' is after all dominant because all narration implies description. In this way we begin to undo the structure which had been centred upon 'narration'. This process of 'deconstruction' which can be set in motion at the very heart of

structuralism is one of the major elements in what we call poststructuralism (see Chapter 7).

Selected reading

Key texts

[For later works by and about Roland Barthes, see Chapter 7, 'Selected Reading'.]

Barthes, Roland, *Writing Degree Zero* [1953], trans. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (Jonathan Cape, London, 1967).

Barthes, Roland, *Elements of Semiology* [1964], trans. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (Jonathan Cape, London, 1967).

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Blonsky, Marshall (ed.), *On Signs: A Semiotic Reader* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1985).

Culler, Jonathan, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* [1975] (Routledge, London, 2002).

Culler, Jonathan, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* [1981] (Routledge, London, 2001).