FROM RHETORIC TO DECONSTRUCTION
Lecture Nineteen: Poststructuralism and Deconstruction

Structure and meaning

There is a tendency in structuralism to regard the (verbal) structures (works of literature) as self-contained, ignoring their referential applicability. This position undermined by (irrepressible) evidence to the contrary, taken note of by structuralists; it is either resisted (Barthes) or accepted (Jakobson, Todorov, Genette, Culler).

Barthes. Consider the referential character of some of his codes in the analysis of Poe's "Valdemar": socio-ethnic, social. Or in *S/Z*, acknowledging that there is character/personality in fiction produced by connotative semes and symbols and proper names. "When identical semes traverse the same proper name several times and appear to settle upon it, a character is created." Semes are drawn to the magnetic field of the proper name, that is, into an evolving biographical tense. Yet when in *S/Z*, at climactic moment the misunderstanding about the castrato singer La Zambinella could be cleared up and is not because Sarrasine does not let her speak (cf. "'Listen, monsieur,' she said in a low voice. 'Oh, be still,' the impassioned artist said") Barthes dismisses the psychological explanation because we are not "searching for the truth of Sarrasine" but exploring the laws of narrative. S. is impassioned because the discourse must not end: "the character and the discourse are each other's accomplices."

Jakobson. The supremacy of the poetic function makes the referential function ambiguous, but does not eliminate it.

Todorov. Literature produces "a distanced and postponed verisimilitude" through its conventions.

For **Genette**, mimesis is a function of narrative discourse; perfect (dialogue) and imperfect (the illusion of) mimesis (discussed under Mood).

Jonathan **Culler**. "The process of selecting and organizing semes is governed by an ideology of character, implicit models of psychological coherence which indicate what sort of things are possible as character traits, how these traits can coexist and form wholes." Culler's concept of mimesis: vraisemblance (*Structuralist Poetics* [1975]).

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Postmodernism

The idea that verbal structures are not anchored in a reality extrinsic to them resurfaces in poststructuralism, which is part of the larger phenomenon of *postmodernism*. **Ihab Hassan**, citing Nietzsche's *The Will to Power* (1883-88), which predicted that the history of the next two centuries would see the advent of nihilism:

> A hundred years later [that is, now—A.S.] most of us will ruefully admit that God, King, Man, Reason, History, Humanism, the State, have come and gone their way as principles of irrefragable authority; and that even language, youngest divinity of our intellectual clerisy, threatens to empty itself out, another god that failed. We live in a time of political terrorism, moral improvisation, spiritual bricolage. (*The Postmodern Turn* [1987]).

Jean-François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition* (1979): fragmentariness of reality, the problematic nature of truth and the impossibility of grand narratives, that is, of rational, comprehensive analyses of the capitalist world-order. The proper artistic response: not the Modernists' (futile) pursuit of the beautiful ˙(what can be conceived can also be presented, and implying the possibility of order and perfect form in the realm of art) but the pursuit of the sublime (what can be conceived cannot be presented). No pre-established rules for the postmodern artist. "Those rules and categories are themselves what the work of art is itself looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done. Hence the fact that work and text have the character of an event [. . .]."

Poststructuralism/Deconstruction

The removal of limitations from structure. Ushered in by **Jacques Derrida's** "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (1966).

☛Discourse (here): language in use, not the static, quasi-objective concept of the structuralists, it recognizes the operations of subjective processes in language use.

In classical thought the assumption of a centre (= God and his hypostases) both within and outside the structure, arranging elements of the structure hierarchically; centre: the ultimate, secure ground of analysis. This limited the play of structure.

"The concept of a centered [*sic*] structure is in fact the concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude which is itself beyond the reach of play"; the sense-making process, in other words, the interpretation of structure: that is, of any entity falling into the realm of discourse (a piece of historiography, of literature, of art criticism, etc.) is limited by our positing or taking for granted an unchangeable centre, "a point of presence, a fixed origin" to which every possible aspect of the structure must be related in one way or another; arche and telos (beginning and end, and movement between).

Opposed to this is the new concept: structure with no centre and no hierarchical arrangements; concepts like truth and value useless; the result: the limitless play of structure. No limits to the play of signification (sense-making). This happened

> [at] the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, [at] the moment when, in the absence of a center [*sic*] or origin, everything became discourse [. . .] that is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. That absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and play of signification indefinitely. (Emphasis added)

Compare T. S. **Eliot**'s idea of what centre is and how it limits movement (thus the play of structure) in "Burnt Norton II" (1936) (*Four Quartets* [1943]):

Garlic and sapphires in the mud	Ascend to summer in the tree
Clot the bedded axle-tree.	We move above the moving tree
The trilling wire in the blood	In light upon the figured leaf
Sings below inveterate scars	And hear upon the sodden floor
Appeasing long forgotten wars.	Below, the boarhound and the boar
The dance along the artery	Pursue their pattern as before
The circulation of the lymph	But reconciled among the stars.
Are figured in the drift of stars	(Emphasis added)

The existential implications of Derrida's philosophy: we posit a centre, because, faced with the prospect of a contingent existence, we need "a reassuring certitude." In history, accordingly, there is no transition from one structure or system to another; change comes in the form of rupture, because the very condition of structural specificity necessitates the introduction of chance and discontinuity by "putting history between brackets," by deliberately ignoring the past, the origin and the cause of the new structure or system.

Demonstration of Derridean deconstruction provided in his own "Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce" (1984). A more accessible example: R. **Barthes**, "The Death of the Author" (1968): **"**To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing**."** Scriptor substituted for author; he is born simultaneously with the text, does not precede and does not exceed it. The structure can be followed at every point and at every level, "but there is nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced" = no ultimate meaning. "To refuse to fix meaning is to refuse God and his hypostases—reason, science, law."

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Signifier & signified and difference in Derrida (consider Lacan in this context). Différance (from Fr. différer: differ & defer) meaning that the difference between signifier and signified is nothing as this latter is but another signifier, only, this is not immediately apparent. Difference, at first assumed to exist, turns out to be mere deferring (delay) of the moment of realizing that it does not exist; where we supposed there was a signified—a presence—there is not; there is only a signifying trace (*Of Grammatology* [1967]).

The condemnation of phono- and logocentrism and linearity; calling into question the primacy of speech in the study (and uses) of language and privileging writing (visible and spatial) over speech (audible and temporal [linear]). Speech is associated with presence (the speaker) and control of meaning, thus suspect.But alphabetic (linear) writing (still teleological, suggesting an origin and an end) will not do either, nor will simultaneity. The ideal: pluridimensionality, in the manner of the mythograms of Leroi-Gourham, or the Chinese ideograms. The end of language and writing as we have it today? (*Of Grammatology*)