



third edition

Deconstruction

Christopher Norris

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Deconstruction

'An inspiring and dazzling *tour de force* that revolutionised my thinking' Gary Day, *Times Higher Education Supplement*

Academic game? Dangerous weapon? The most important development in twentieth-century literary studies? Setting out to shake not only literary critical assumptions but the very foundations of Western thought, deconstruction remains one of the most controversial yet crucial strands of contemporary critical theory.

Since first appearing in 1982, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* has been acclaimed as by far the most readable, concise and authoritative guide to this topic. While in no way oversimplifying its complexity or glossing over the challenges it presents, Christopher Norris's book sets out to make deconstruction more accessible to the open-minded reader. The volume focuses upon the texts of Jacques Derrida which gave rise to this seismic shift in critical thought, as well as the work of Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller and Harold Bloom, the North American critics who have taken Derrida's project in their own directions.

Inherent in the very idea of deconstruction, however, is the need to revisit, rethink, reassess. In this third, revised edition, Norris builds upon his 1991 Afterword to add an entirely new Postscript, discussing the central topics and development in recent critical debate. The Postscript includes an extensive list of recommended reading, complementing what was already one of the most useful bibliographies available. More than ever in this new edition, *Deconstruction* is the book to revolutionize your thinking.

Christopher Norris is Distinguished Research Professor in Philosophy at the University of Cardiff, Wales, having until 1991 taught in the Cardiff English Department. He has also held fellowships and visiting appointments at a number of institutions, including the University of California, Berkeley, the City University of New York and Dartmouth College.

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Deconstruction

Theory and Practice

3rd edition



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CONTENTS

GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE	vii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ix
INTRODUCTION	xi
1 Roots: structuralism and New Criticism	1
<i>From Kant to Saussure: the prison-house of concepts</i>	4
<i>New Critic into structuralist?</i>	7
<i>Roland Barthes</i>	8
<i>Beyond New Criticism</i>	15
2 Jacques Derrida: language against itself	18
<i>Blindness and Insight: deconstructing the New Criticism</i>	22
<i>Language, writing, difference</i>	24
<i>Culture, nature, writing: Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss</i>	32
3 From voice to text: Derrida's critique of philosophy	41
<i>Phenomenology and/or structuralism?</i>	47
4 Nietzsche: philosophy and deconstruction	55
<i>Nietzsche, Plato and the sophists</i>	59
<i>Deconstruction on two wheels</i>	60

	<i>Writing and philosophy</i>	63
	<i>Beyond interpretation?</i>	66
	<i>Nietzsche and Heidegger</i>	67
	<i>Nietzsche's umbrella</i>	69
5	Between Marx and Nietzsche: the politics of deconstruction	73
	<i>Derrida on Hegel</i>	74
	<i>Marxism, structuralism and deconstruction</i>	77
	<i>Nietzsche contra Marx?</i>	82
	<i>Foucault and Said: the rhetoric of power</i>	84
6	The American connection	89
	<i>Deconstruction 'on the wild side': Geoffrey Hartman and J. Hillis Miller</i>	91
	<i>Paul de Man: rhetoric and reason</i>	99
	<i>Deconstruction at the limit?</i>	104
	<i>'Ordinary language': the challenge from Austin</i>	107
	<i>Harold Bloom</i>	114
	<i>Derrida and Bloom on Freud</i>	121
7	Conclusion: dissenting voices	124
	<i>Wittgenstein: language and scepticism</i>	127
	Afterword (1991): further thoughts on deconstruction, postmodernism and the politics of theory	134
	POSTSCRIPT TO THE THIRD (2002) edition	156
	NOTES FOR FURTHER READING (1982)	179
	BIBLIOGRAPHY (INCLUDING WORKS CITED)	190
	INDEX	225

GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

No doubt a third General Editor's Preface to *New Accents* seems hard to justify. What is there left to say? Twenty-five years ago, the series began with a very clear purpose. Its major concern was the newly perplexed world of academic literary studies, where hectic monsters called 'Theory', 'Linguistics' and 'Politics' ranged. In particular, it aimed itself at those undergraduates or beginning postgraduate students who were either learning to come to terms with the new developments or were being sternly warned against them.

New Accents deliberately took sides. Thus the first Preface spoke darkly, in 1977, of 'a time of rapid and radical social change', of the 'erosion of the assumptions and presuppositions' central to the study of literature. 'Modes and categories inherited from the past' it announced, 'no longer seem to fit the reality experienced by a new generation'. The aim of each volume would be to 'encourage rather than resist the process of change' by combining nuts-and-bolts exposition of new ideas with clear and detailed explanation of related conceptual developments. If mystification (or downright demonisation) was the enemy, lucidity (with a nod to the compromises inevitably at stake there) became a friend. If a 'distinctive discourse of the future' beckoned, we wanted at least to be able to understand it.

With the apocalypse duly noted, the second Preface proceeded

piously to fret over the nature of whatever rough beast might stagger portentously from the rubble. 'How can we recognise or deal with the new?', it complained, reporting nevertheless the dismaying advance of 'a host of barely respectable activities for which we have no reassuring names' and promising a programme of wary surveillance at 'the boundaries of the precedented and at the limit of the thinkable'. Its conclusion, 'the unthinkable, after all, is that which covertly shapes our thoughts' may rank as a truism. But in so far as it offered some sort of useable purchase on a world of crumbling certainties, it is not to be blushed for.

In the circumstances, any subsequent, and surely final, effort can only modestly look back, marvelling that the series is still here, and not unreasonably congratulating itself on having provided an initial outlet for what turned, over the years, into some of the distinctive voices and topics in literary studies. But the volumes now re-presented have more than a mere historical interest. As their authors indicate, the issues they raised are still potent, the arguments with which they engaged are still disturbing. In short, we weren't wrong. Academic study did change rapidly and radically to match, even to help to generate, wide reaching social changes. A new set of discourses was developed to negotiate those upheavals. Nor has the process ceased. In our deliquescent world, what was unthinkable inside and outside the academy all those years ago now seems regularly to come to pass.

Whether the *New Accents* volumes provided adequate warning of, maps for, guides to, or nudges in the direction of this new terrain is scarcely for me to say. Perhaps our best achievement lay in cultivating the sense that it was there. The only justification for a reluctant third attempt at a Preface is the belief that it still is.

TERENCE HAWKES

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My thanks to all those in Cardiff – especially Carol Bretman, Kathy Kerr, Karen MacDonaugh, Nigel Mapp, and Peter Sedgwick – whose comments and criticisms over the past few years have clarified my thinking and helped to locate the points most in need of further discussion in the Afterword. Also to Terence Hawkes for commissioning this volume, way back in the early ‘New Accents’ days, and for offering such a wealth of shrewd editorial advice. Any errors that remain are entirely his fault. Jacques Derrida has provided much help and encouragement since the book first went to press, and I hope he will find nothing to regret in this latest printing. My debts nearer home are (yet again) very partially repaid by dedicating this book to my wife Alison and daughters, Clare and Jenny. Finally, greetings to my cultural-materialist comrades in the Red Choir (Côr Cochion Caerdydd) for managing to unite theory and practice in the best possible way.

Cardiff
June 1990

THIRD EDITION (2002)

Ten years on and (again) I have to think of all the people – colleagues, students, friends, correspondents, astute critics of this book in its

previous edition – whose ideas, comments or companionship have left their mark in various ways. Since space is limited I shall not even try to name them all but just extend special greetings to Gideon Calder, Clive Cazeaux, Brian Coates, Gary Day, Paul Gorton, Geoff Harpham, Carol Jones, Christa Knellwolf, Dan Latimer, Radmila Nastic, Paul Norcross, Jessica Osborn, Marianna Papastephanou, Daniele Procida, David Roden, Duncan Salkeld, Sean Sayers, Maria Helena Serodio, Rita Stefansson, and Manuel Barbeito Varela. I should also like thank Robin Atfield, Andrew Belsey, Barry Wilkins and everyone in the Philosophy Section at Cardiff for having (just about ten years ago) welcomed a renegade literary theorist to their company. I trust that the various revisions to this book – plus the Postscript – will go some way toward justifying that act of faith.

Cardiff
August 2001

INTRODUCTION

Literature as well as criticism – the difference between them being delusive – is condemned (or privileged) to be forever the most rigorous and, consequently, the most unreliable language in terms of which man names and transforms himself.

(de Man 1979, p. 19)

This sentence by the critic Paul de Man is a fair sample of the kind of thinking about *littérature* which is currently termed *deconstruction*. It bristles with the sorts of paradox which that thinking finds at work not only in literary texts but in criticism, philosophy and all varieties of discourse, its own included. What can it mean to reject the distinction between literature and criticism as merely a delusion? How can a language be at once the most 'rigorous' and the most 'unreliable' source of knowledge? In what conceivable sense can man 'transform' himself through a process of naming somehow made possible by this rigorous unreliability? These are not problems that either resolve themselves on a more careful reading or require that we accept them (like the paradoxes of Christian theology) as lying beyond the utmost scope of unaided rational thought. Rather they operate, as more than one disgruntled critic has remarked of de Man, as a positive technique for

making trouble; an affront to every last standard or protocol of disciplined, responsible debate.

Deconstruction is a constant reminder of the etymological link between 'crisis' and 'criticism'. It makes manifest the fact that any radical shift of interpretative thought must always come up against the limits of seeming absurdity. Philosophers have long had to recognize that thinking may lead them inescapably into regions of scepticism such that life could scarcely carry on if people were to act on their conclusions. David Hume (1711–76) called scepticism 'a malady which can never be radically cured, but must return upon us every moment, however we may chase it away . . . Carelessness and inattention alone can afford us any remedy' (quoted in Russell 1954, p. 697). Deconstruction works at the same giddy limit, suspending all that we take for granted about language, experience and the 'normal' possibilities of human communication. Yet this is not to say that it is a freakish or marginal philosophy, the perverse sport of super-subtle minds disenchanted with the workaday business of literary criticism. Hume saw no way out of his sceptical predicament, except by soothing the mind with careless distractions (billiards was apparently the usual solace of his afternoons). Deconstruction is likewise an activity of thought which cannot be consistently acted on – that way madness lies – but which yet possesses an inescapable rigour of its own.

De Man complains that deconstruction has either been 'dismissed as a harmless academic game' or 'denounced as a terrorist weapon'. Both reactions are understandable, though both – as this book will argue – are equally wide of the mark. Deconstruction is the active antithesis of everything that criticism ought to be if one accepts its traditional values and concepts. Beneath all the age-old conflicts of critical method there has always existed a tacit agreement about certain conventions, or rules of debate, without which (supposedly) no serious thinking about literature could be carried on. That literary texts possessed meaning and that literary criticism sought a knowledge of that meaning – a knowledge with its own proper claims to validity – were principles implicit across the widest divergences of thought. However deconstruction challenges the fundamental distinction between 'literature' and 'criticism' implied by those principles. Moreover it challenges the idea that criticism provides a special kind of knowledge precisely in so far as its

texts don't aspire to 'literary' status. For the deconstructionist, criticism (like philosophy) is always an activity of writing, and nowhere more rigorous – to paraphrase de Man – than where it knows and reveals this condition of its own possibility.

This is to anticipate whole tracts of argument which will need rehearsing in detail if the reader is to be convinced. Meanwhile I take ambiguous comfort from Derrida's remarks (in *Of Grammatology*) on the strange and deceptive status of 'prefaces' in general. For one thing they are usually – as here! – written last of all and placed up front as a gesture of authorial command. They claim a summarizing function, a power of abstracted systematic statement, which denies the very process and activity of thought involved in the project of writing. Yet they also subvert, in deconstructive fashion, that authority of 'the text' which traditionally attaches to the work itself. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak puts it, in her own Translator's Preface to the English version of *Grammatology*:

the structure preface – text becomes open at both ends. The text has no stable identity, stable origin . . . each act of reading 'the text' is a preface to the next. The reading of a self-professed preface is no exception to this rule.

(Derrida 1977a, p. xii)

In this sense what follows is also a 'preface', a deferred involvement with the writings of Derrida, and not to be taken on trust as a handy and 'objective' survey of deconstructionist method. If there is one applied lesson to be taken away, it is the powerlessness of ready-made concepts to explain or delimit the activity of writing.

1

ROOTS: STRUCTURALISM AND NEW CRITICISM

To present 'deconstruction' as if it were a method, a system or a settled body of ideas would be to falsify its nature and lay oneself open to charges of reductive misunderstanding. Critical theory is nowadays a reputable academic business with a strong vested interest in absorbing and coming to terms with whatever new challenges the times may produce. Structuralism, it is now plain to see, was subject from the outset to a process of adaptation by British and American critics who quickly took heart from what they saw as its 'practical' or 'commonsense' uses. What started as a powerful protest against ruling critical assumptions ended up as just one more available method for saying new things about well-worn texts. By now there is probably a structuralist reading, in one guise or another, of just about every classic of English literature. A few minutes' search through the index of any learned journal is enough to show how structuralism has taken hold in the most respectable and cherished quarters of academic study. Old polemics are quietly forgotten because the ground has meanwhile shifted to such an extent that erstwhile opponents find themselves now in a state of peaceful alliance. To trace this history in detail would provide an instructive example of the capacity of Anglo-American

academic criticism to absorb and domesticate any new theory that threatens its sovereign claim.

Deconstruction can be seen in part as a vigilant reaction against this tendency in structuralist thought to tame and domesticate its own best insights. Some of Jacques Derrida's most powerful essays are devoted to the task of dismantling a concept of 'structure' that serves to immobilize the play of meaning in a text and reduce it to a manageable compass. This process can be seen at work in the reception of a book like Jonathan Culler's *Structuralist Poetics* (1975), regarded (not without reason) as a sound and authoritative guide to the complexities of structuralist thought. Culler's volume has been widely prescribed as student reading by critics and teachers who otherwise show small sympathy with current theoretical developments. Its appeal, one may fairly conjecture, lies partly in its commonsense dealing with problems of interpretative method, and partly in its principled rejection of other, more extreme kinds of theory which would question any such method. Culler makes no secret of his aim to reconcile structuralist theory with a naturalized or intuitive approach to texts. The proper task of theory, in his view, is to provide a legitimating framework or system for insights which a 'competent' reader should be able to arrive at and check against her sense of relevance and fitness. Culler's main claim for the structuralist approach is that it offers a kind of regulative matrix for perceptions that might otherwise seem merely dependent on the critic's personal flair or virtuosity.

His argument becomes strained when it tries to link this notion of readerly 'competence' with an account of the manifold conventions – or arbitrary codes – that make up a literate response. On the one hand Culler appeals to what seems a loose extension of the linguist Noam Chomsky's argument: that linguistic structures are innately programmed in the human mind and operate both as a constraint upon language and as a means of shared understanding. Thus Culler puts the case that our comprehension of literary texts is conditioned by a similar 'grammar' of response which enables us to pick out the relevant structures of meaning from an otherwise inchoate mass of linguistic detail. On the other hand, he is obliged to recognize that literary texts, unlike the sentences of everyday language, involve certain specialized codes of understanding which have to be acquired and cannot be

accounted for in terms of some universal grammar of response. Competence in these terms is a matter of trained intelligence, of justifying one's reading of a text 'by locating it within the conventions of plausibility defined by a generalized knowledge of literature' (Culler 1975, p. 127).

This is structuralism at its most conservative, an outlook that lends support to traditional ideas of the text as a bearer of stable (if complicated) meanings and the critic as a faithful seeker after truth in the text. Culler is non-committal as to whether these interpretative structures are unchangeably vested in the human mind or whether – as seems more likely – they represent the force of established convention, a kind of second nature to the practised reader. Whatever their status, they clearly imply some manner of check or effective restraint upon the freedoms of critical discourse. Hence Culler's doubts (in the final chapter of *Structuralist Poetics*) about the radical claims of those, like Derrida, who seem bent upon dismantling the very bases of interpretative method and meaning.

Deconstruction is avowedly 'post-structuralist' in its refusal to accept the idea of structure as in any sense given or objectively 'there' in a text. Above all, it questions the assumption – so crucial to Culler – that structures of meaning correspond to some deep-laid mental 'set' or pattern of response which determines the limits of intelligibility. Theory, from Culler's point of view, would be a search for invariant structures or formal universals which reflect the very nature of human intelligence. Literary texts (along with myths, music and other cultural artefacts) yield up their meaning to a mode of analysis possessed of a firm rationale because its sights are set on nothing less than a total explanation of human thought and culture. Theory is assured of its methodological bearings by claiming a deep, universal kinship with the systems of meaning that it proposes to analyse.

Deconstruction, on the contrary, starts out by rigorously *suspending* this assumed correspondence between mind, meaning and the concept of method which claims to unite them.

FROM KANT TO SAUSSURE: THE PRISON-HOUSE OF CONCEPTS

'Kantianism without the transcendental subject' is a description often applied to structuralist thought by those who doubt its validity. Culler's line of argument demonstrates the force of this slogan, showing itself very much akin to Kant's transcendental-idealist theory of mind and knowledge. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) set out to redeem philosophy from the radical scepticism of those, like Hume, who thought it impossible to arrive at any definite, self-validating knowledge of the external world. They had tried and conspicuously failed to discover any necessary link between mind and reality, or 'truths of reason' and 'matters of fact'. Thought seemed condemned to a prison-house of solipsistic doubt, endlessly rehearsing its own suppositions but unable to connect them with the world at large. Sensory evidence was no more reliable than ideas like that of cause-and-effect, the 'logic' of which merely reflected our accustomed or commonsense habits of thought.

Kant saw an escape-route from this condition of deadlocked sceptical reason. It was, he agreed, impossible for consciousness to grasp or 'know' the world in the direct, unmediated form despaired of by Hume and the sceptics. Knowledge was a product of the human mind, the operations of which could only *interpret* the world, and not deliver it up in all its pristine reality. But these very operations, according to Kant, were so deeply vested in human understanding that they offered a new foundation for philosophy. Henceforth philosophy must concern itself not with a delusory quest for 'the real' but with precisely those deep regularities – or *a priori* truths – that constitute human understanding.

It is not hard to see the parallels between Kantian thought and the structuralist outlook presented by a theorist like Culler. Both have their origins in a sceptical divorce between mind and the 'reality' it seeks to understand. In structuralist terms this divorce was most clearly spelled out by the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. He argued that our knowledge of the world is inextricably shaped and conditioned by the language that serves to represent it. Saussure's insistence on the 'arbitrary' nature of the sign led to his undoing of the natural link that common

sense assumes to exist between word and thing. Meanings are bound up, according to Saussure, in a system of relationship and difference that effectively determines our habits of thought and perception. Far from providing a 'window' on reality or (to vary the metaphor) a faithfully reflecting mirror, language brings along with it a whole intricate network of established significations. In his view, our knowledge of things is insensibly structured by the systems of code and convention which alone enable us to classify and organize the chaotic flux of experience. There is simply no access to knowledge except by way of language and other, related orders of representation. Reality is carved up in various ways according to the manifold patterns of sameness and difference which various languages provide. This basic relativity of thought and meaning (a theme later taken up by the American linguists Sapir and Whorf) is the starting-point of structuralist theory.

There are, however, various ways of responding to this inaugural insight. Culler exemplifies the Kantian response which strives to keep scepticism at bay by insisting on the normative or somehow self-validating habits of readerly 'competence'. Culler is in search of a generalized theory (or 'poetics') of reading which would fully encompass all the various means we possess for making sense of literary texts. Relativism is thus held in check by an appeal to the reader as a kind of moderating presence, a mind in possession of the requisite intelligence and the relevant codes of literate convention. One must, Culler argues, 'have a sense, however undefined, of what one is reading towards' (Culler 1975, p. 163). Interpretation is a quest for order and intelligibility amongst the manifold possible patterns of sense which the text holds out to a fit reader. The role of a structuralist poetics is partly to explain how these powerful conventions come into play, and partly to draw a line between mere ingenuity and the proper, legitimate or 'competent' varieties of readerly response.

What Culler is proposing in the name of structuralism is a more methodical approach to the kind of criticism that has long been accepted as a staple of academic teaching. The virtue of his theory, from this point of view, is the ease with which it incorporates all manner of examples from other 'prestructuralist' critics who happen to illustrate the conventions Culler has in mind. There is room within his generalized notion of literary 'competence' for various insights

which had often been arrived at without the benefit of any such systematic theory. This follows logically enough from the analogy he draws with Chomskian linguistics. To demonstrate the complex system of rules and transformations underlying a speaker's grammatical utterance is not, of course, to claim any *conscious* knowledge of that system on the speaker's part. Linguistic 'competence', as Chomsky calls it, is tacit and wholly unconscious except when brought to light by the linguist's peculiar and specialized activity. The 'transcendental subject' (or locus of thought and experience) in Kantian philosophy is likewise capable of exercising its *a priori* powers without being in the least aware of them.

Culler adopts the same attitude to critics whose intuitive approach is undeniably fruitful but lacks any larger, organizing theory of valid response. Typical is his treatment of a passage from William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, selected for what Culler sees as its all-but-conscious structuralist implications. The 'poem' in question (see Empson 1961, p. 23) is Arthur Waley's translation of a two-line fragment from the Chinese:

Swiftly the years, beyond recall.

Solemn the stillness of this spring morning.

Culler remarks how Empson's reading brings out the 'binary oppositions' (mainly the extreme contrast of time-scales) which give the lines their effect. This lends support to Culler's argument that, 'in interpreting a poem, one looks for terms that can be placed on a semantic or thematic axis and opposed to one another' (Culler 1975, p. 126). Such strategies arise from the reader's desire to maximize the interest or significance of a text by discovering its manifold patterns of meaning. A 'competent' reading is one that displays both the acumen required to perceive such meanings and the good sense needed to sort them out from other, less relevant patterns. For his notion of 'relevance' Culler appeals once again to a trans-individual community of judgement assumed to underlie the workings of literate response. Structuralism, with its emphasis on distinctive features and significant contrasts, becomes in effect a *natural extension* or legitimating theory of what it is properly to read a text.

Culler has no real quarrel with those among the 'old' New Critics who talked in terms of irony, paradox or (like Empson) types of ambiguity. These and other patterns of response he regards as enabling conventions, produced by the will to make sense of texts in a complex and satisfying way. Culler's relatively modest proposal is that critics continue to read in much the same manner but also reflect on the presuppositions that govern their various reading strategies.

Thus Empson's 'ambiguity' is found to rest on a principle of binary opposition, the presence of which, in structuralist terms, does more to explain its suggestive power. Such structures may not be objectively 'there' in the text but they offer (it is assumed) so basic and powerful a convention of reading as to place their validity beyond serious doubt. Culler's poetics, therefore, involves a double prescription or regulative claim with regard to literary 'competence'. On the one hand it presupposes an activity of reading grounded in certain deeply naturalized codes of understanding. On the other, it assumes that texts must offer at least sufficient hold – in the way of contrastive or structural features – for such an activity to take its own intuitive bearings.

NEW CRITIC INTO STRUCTURALIST?

Culler's implicit equation between 'structure' and 'competence' is precisely the kind of interpretative ploy that deconstruction sets out to challenge. The concept of structure is all too easily allowed to dominate thought and take on a self-sustaining objectivity immune to critical reflection. It is on these terms that structuralism has proved itself a not-too-threatening presence on the academic scene. Least of all does it now seem a menace – as traditionalist critics once argued – through its 'scientific' rigour and taste for abstraction. American New Criticism in its day attracted the same hostility from those who regarded its rhetorical bases – 'irony', 'paradox', 'tension' – as so many bits of monstrous abstract machinery. Yet it soon became clear that, so far from wanting to rationalize poetry or reduce it to logical order, the New Critics were bent upon preserving its uniqueness by fencing it off within the bounds of their chosen rhetoric. The poem as 'verbal icon', in William K. Wimsatt's phrase, became the rallying-point of a criticism devoted to the privileged autonomy of poetic language.

If system and structure were prominent in the New Critics' thinking, the aim was not so much to provide a rationale of poetic meaning – a logic of logical anomalies – but rather to build a criticism capable of warding off such rationalist assaults. New Critical method was rational enough in its mode of argumentation but kept a firm distance between its own methodology and the differently organized workings of poetic language. This distance was emphatically preserved by the rules of interpretative conduct which Wimsatt, philosopher-elect of the movement, raised to a high point of principle (see Wimsatt 1954). Chief among these was their attack on the 'heresy of paraphrase', the idea that poetic meaning could be translated into any kind of rational prose equivalent. The poem, in short, was a sacrosanct object whose autonomy demanded a proper respect for the difference between it and the language that critics used to describe it.

The New Critics' programme soon took hold as an eminently teachable discipline of literary study. Its erstwhile detractors were easily reconciled to a creed that scarcely challenged the proprieties of critical discourse. The same is true of structuralism in its early, scientific guise. Culler's arguments demonstrate the ease with which a structuralist gloss can be placed upon strategies of reading basically akin to those of the 'old' New Criticism. Academic discourse has little to fear from a 'scientific' criticism – however sweeping its claims – which holds out the promise of a highly self-disciplined knowledge of the text. Such a specialized activity can be allowed to take its place as one among many alternative methods, relied upon to beat its own disciplinary bounds.

ROLAND BARTHES

Culler's poetics of reading is therefore in accord with one prominent strain of structuralist thought. In the early writing of Barthes, among others, the aim was a full-scale science of the text modelled on the linguistics of Saussure and the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss. These ambitions were signalled by the widespread structuralist talk of criticism as a 'metalanguage' set up to articulate the codes and conventions of all (existing or possible) literary texts. Hence the various efforts to establish a universal 'grammar' of narrative, along with a typology of literary genres based on their predominating figures of

language. This view of structuralism as a kind of master-code or analytic discourse upon language is taken by Barthes in his *Elements of Semiology* (1967). Natural language, including the dimension of 'connotative' meaning, is subject to a metalinguistic description which operates in scientific terms and provides a higher-level or 'second-order' mode of understanding. It is evident, according to Barthes, that semiology must be such a metalanguage, 'since as a second-order system it takes over a first language (or language-object) which is the system under scrutiny; and this system-object is *signified* through the meta-language of semiology' (Barthes 1967, p. 92). This tortuous explanation really comes down to the belief in structuralist method as a discourse able to master and explain all the varieties of language and culture.

At least this is one way of construing Barthes's text, a reading that brings it into line with accepted ideas of the structuralist activity. There are, however, signs that Barthes was not himself content with so rigid and reductive a programme. If semiology sets up as a second-order discourse unravelling the connotative systems of natural language, why should it then be immune to further operations at a yet higher level of analysis? 'Nothing in principle prevents a meta-language from becoming in its turn the language-object of a new meta-language; this would, for example, be the case with semiology if it were to be "spoken" by another science' (ibid., p. 93).

Barthes is well aware of the dangers and delusions implicit in a discourse that claims the last word in explanatory power. The semiologist may seem to exercise 'the objective function of decipherer' in relation to a world which 'conceals or naturalizes' the meanings of its own dominant culture. But this apparent objectivity is made possible only by a habit of thought which willingly forgets or suppresses its own provisional status. To halt such a process by invoking some ultimate claim to truth is a tactic foreign to the deepest implications of structuralist thought. There is no final analysis, no metalinguistic method, which could possibly draw a rigorous line between its own operations and the language they work upon. Semiology has to recognize that the terms and concepts it employs are always bound up with the signifying process it sets out to analyse. Hence Barthes's insistence that structuralism is always an activity, an open-ended

practice of reading, rather than a 'method' convinced of its own right reason.

Barthes was alive from the outset to the problems and paradoxes involved in refining structuralist theory without introducing such premature claims of method. To enlist him on the side of deconstruction is perhaps misleading in view of his elusiveness from any theoretical standpoint. Barthes was a brilliant stylist and a highly original – at times even wayward – constructor of theories. His writing was self-conscious to the point where style became an intimate probing of its own possibilities, frequently suggesting theoretical insights but just as often foreclosing them through a sense of resistance to any kind of organized theory. His later texts maintain a dialogue not only with structuralism but with Derrida, Jacques Lacan and other post-structuralist thinkers whose influence Barthes both acknowledges and keeps at a certain protective distance. He remains susceptible as ever to the pleasures of system and method, the old fascination with structure as a totalizing order of thought. But he now seems to view such ideas as 'fantasmatic' images projected by desire upon the polymorphous surface of text, language and culture. The dream of total intelligibility, like 'structure' in its metalinguistic sense, belongs (he implies) to a stage of thinking that is self-blinded by its own conceptual metaphors. The element of rhetorical play is present everywhere. Its effects in critical discourse may be ignored, but they are not effaced by the structuralist 'science' of semiotics.

This ambivalent attitude to language and structure is one of the themes Barthes takes up in his fragmentary 'autobiography', translated into English in 1977. It might seem an act of supreme 'bad faith' to produce such a work while proclaiming, like Barthes, the 'death of the author' as a wished-for escape from the tyranny of subjectivity. But the reader is soon made aware that Barthes is not to be caught – by anyone except himself – with his textual defences down. He is, as always, shrewdly beforehand with the *hypocrite lecteur* who thinks to ensnare him with simplified versions of his own way of thinking. There is a consummately neat example in Barthes's recollection of an American student ('or positivist, or disputacious: I cannot disentangle') who took it for granted that 'subjectivity' and 'narcissism' were the same thing: 'a