Structuralism, American Studies, and the Humanities

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So what about structuralism? A great deal of ink has been committed, especially in French, in search of a definition—without notable success. Access to structuralism still depends on anthologies representing a diversity of thinkers or on secondary surveys which must scurry back and forth among these same figures, some of whom deny that they are structuralists. The lack of a concise definition follows from the inescapable fact that structuralism is less a school of thought than a habit of mind or, better, a way of focusing the mind. The recurrent touchstone concepts of structuralist thinking are: binary oppositions as basic to thought on any subject, primary emphasis on synchronous functioning of systems as opposed to diachronic unfolding through time, the final importance of paradigms over syntagms. Through such emphases, all derived from the study of language, structuralism generates a significant reorientation of the intellectual procedures traditional in or at least typical of the Western, especially the Anglo-American tradition.

The reception of structuralism in the United States has been hampered by two major factors: prior uses of the term “structure” and the close association of structuralism with France and French intellectual styles. The first source of confusion resides in well-established habits of “structural analysis” in a wide variety of disciplines since the beginning of the century. As of 1968 Jean Piaget tried to preserve this earlier sense of structural study by reviewing the research into “structures,” particularly feedback mechanisms, in a wide variety of scientific and humanistic disciplines. Piaget’s own work is typical of the positivist orientation of earlier study of

structures; that is, he isolated through repeatable experiments the presence of certain stages of development of children’s minds which shape their possibilities of conceptualization and cognition. His widespread influence on American educational theory makes it clear that his sort of structural study is easily accepted in the United States.

Despite his synthesizing effort, however, Piaget is not a structuralist in the newer sense. The French classify his epistemological psychology as *structuralisme génétique* as opposed to the non-genetic type developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes. In major part the difference turns on an epistemological issue. Piaget and his fellow students of structure affirmed that the patterns they studied are verifiably *there*, in the human brain, the atom, the physical universe. The structuralists proper, on the other hand, focus their attention on the structuring vision of human beings, most particularly on the necessities of human thought imposed by its in-escapable medium—language. The pivotal figure here is Ferdinand de Saussure. By isolating the structures embedded in language conceived as a synchonous system, he opened up multiple reconsiderations of how language and language-like systems structure the world we think we see, study, or understand. By extending the study of structures into a conceptualization of how language works, Saussure in effect sponsored the emergence of structuralism, which in turn in recent years has spawned a variety of idiosyncratic “post-structuralisms.”

Before turning to Saussure and his signal contributions, it seems important to acknowledge that the very Frenchness of the structuralism he inspired has proved a barrier to American understanding and acceptance of this new focus of mind. In part the problems are simply those of the French language filtered through an English-speaking consciousness or world view. The ostensibly simple translation of French into English poses problems which are in part insuperable, in part merely mystifying. Edmund Leach, for example, points out a crux in Lévi-Strauss’s *Le Cru et le Cuit* where we find: “Nous ne prétendons donc pas montrer comment les hommes pensent dans les mythes mais comment les mythes se pensent dans les hommes, et à leur insu.”¹² This impersonal reflexive verb construction occurs often in French academic prose, and it serves to unnerve Anglo-American readers who demand precision in the line of thinking offered to them. The last part of this sentence has already been translated in two different ways and might be treated in a third fashion. Joseph H. McMahon reads: “how the myths think themselves out in men and without men’s knowledge,” whereas John and Doreen Weightman have: “how myths operate in men’s minds without

their being aware of the fact." A third possibility offered by Leach is: "how myths are thought in men." What is at stake is the degree of autonomy ascribed to myths conceived as structured systems, or, in other words, the degree to which Lévi-Strauss implies that the mythic structures he describes are really there. This delicate issue, which separates earlier study of structures from structuralism proper, remains cloudy in French. What begins as a translation problem ends as crucial for anyone with a strong empirical bent to his mind. Lévi-Strauss himself in the four volumes of his mythologies turns to music for his root metaphors, asserting that music expresses more directly than myth the basic and universal patterns that structure—however unconsciously—human consciousness. This assertion inevitably suggests to the empiricist that these structures are less "real" than aesthetic. The uncertainties of Lévi-Strauss' prose in this instance further a long French debate on the extent to which there can exist autonomous structures in human culture which operate apart from any individual consciousness. In the process structuralism gradually detached itself from the phenomenological and existential presumptions of subjectivity which had long dominated French thought. Though structuralists won that battle, partly through attrition, their occasional claims to an "objective" science have not proved very convincing—in any language. English, of course, has its own devices for avoiding perfect clarity, but they do not overlap with those habitual in French and hence may give the English reader of translated works either a clearer but interpreted version of the original or may simply leave him with a sense that he has been unable to follow the argument clearly.

Another linguistic feature of French intellectual life which poses problems is the relatively high status accorded in French academic prose to what in English can only be identified as a pun, i.e., the multiple playing on all the possible senses of a single term within a single discourse. For example, the translators of Jacques Derrida's "La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines," find themselves obliged to translate the key term "jeu" in no less than five English "equivalents": "play," "interplay," "game," "stake," and "free-play." The relatively smaller vocabulary of French as opposed to English has long encouraged the French tradition of witty humor based on puns, but the Anglo-American

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* See esp., "Overture," p. 3 above.

reader may feel the victim of intellectual sleight-of-hand if he encounters the original or else, once again, he remains subject to a translator's interpretation. Sometimes he encounters willful obfuscation. Another willing punster, psychiatrist Jacques Lacan, is so candid as to admit that he wants to make his discourse so difficult that there is "no other way out than the way in." Such highhandedness is more tolerated by French intellectuals than their English-speaking counterparts.

The French intellectual tradition sanctions still other maneuvers which American readers are likely to find arbitrary and highhanded. The French habitually begin a discourse by postulating an abstract framework which guides the development of the discourse. Examples may follow but usually as subordinate instances offered primarily to clarify the abstract schema rather than as worldly phenomena to be explored for their own sakes. In short, the reader steeped in traditional Anglo-American empirical orientation may well feel that French procedures are arbitrary and unconvincing. For those uneasy with the French intellectual tradition, Howard Gardner's The Quest for Mind: Piaget, Lévi-Strauss and the Structuralist Movement is a helpful introduction.7

Still further resistance to American acceptance of this key movement in recent French intellectual life must be blamed, alas, on cultural snobbery—the seldom spoken ethnocentric pride which assumes that any major intellectual advance in our era would, of course, take place in English. Such shortsighted ethnocentricity helps explain why the single most important work in the emergence of structuralism, Ferdinand de Saussure's Course in General Linguistics, though first published in French in 1916, had to wait until 1959 for its first English translation.8 That this tendency still receives a kind of semi-official sanction is implicit in the remarks of Prof. Leo Marx, then President of the American Studies Association, who in his paper delivered to the 1977 Boston convention coolly dismissed structuralism as a fad which flourishes in Paris and New Haven.

I have given considerable attention to these various obstacles to American assimilation of structuralism in hopes of clearing away some pointless underbrush. Even granted certain language problems, the highhandedness of some French intellectual procedures, and an instinct to congratulate our own traditions, I believe that structuralism is too important to be dismissed by anyone interested in American Studies. Other academic fields in the

Footnotes:


United States have developed fruitful conceptions comparable in thrust to structuralism. Think of general systems theory, game theory, and information theory or the individual contributions of such thinkers as Noam Chomsky, Marshall McLuhan or Northrop Frye. Thus seen as an approach to culture studies proceeding along lines successfully exploited in other disciplines, structuralism appears neither outlandish nor preposterous. It is time that American Studies investigate its promises and its problems.

The next step, then, is to isolate the basic tenets that direct the structuralist habit of mind and to trace their development through a few key figures, first and foremost Ferdinand de Saussure, Professor of Linguistics at the University of Geneva at the turn of this century. With characteristic Swiss modesty he felt too unsure of his theories to publish them during his lifetime so that the Cours de linguistique générale* had to be assembled posthumously by his disciples from student lecture notes. Saussure’s genius lay essentially in standing previous linguistics on its head. The great philological work of the nineteenth century had been to focus on diachronic language change and comparative grammar. Saussure insisted that the complementary emphasis on language as synchronic system was essential to understand the functioning of any natural language. At any given moment a language constitutes a system to be understood by the internal relation of its parts: phonetically, phonemically, morphologically, syntactically, semantically. In this way, Saussure launched the crucial structuralist emphasis on sign systems with language providing the primary model.

It is not appropriate here to summarize Saussure’s theory as a whole nor to trace the extensions of his thinking in linguistics itself (Russian Formalists, the Prague Circle, Roman Jakobson, and more recently Noam Chomsky), though Jan M. Broekman offers this in a somewhat ponderous introduction to his Structuralism: Moscow—Prague—Paris. The prime locus for structuralism in relation to American Studies lies not in language study itself but rather in the extrapolation of linguistic models into other dimensions of human culture. My procedure, then, is to attempt to make accessible the structuralist habit of mind by tracing out from Saussure a succession of postulates that constitute what we may as well call mainline structuralism.

The central concept in Saussure’s understanding of language is what he calls the “sign,” namely a particular conjunction of a signifier (usually a word-form) and a signified (concept or meaning). Already one notices a difference from the common American habit of using “sign” to refer only to Saussure’s “signifier.” For Saussure a sign exists only in the conjunction

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10 (Dordrecht and Boston: Reidel, 1974).
of both its elements. The connection between signifier and signified which is the sign, for Saussure, is not in any sense natural but arbitrary and conventional, fixed at any given moment in time and hence functional in a language by its relation to all the other sounds and meanings available in that language. Saussure, of course, recognizes that language change occurs, but he finds it unpredictable, whereas the synchronic study of any language allows the analyst to see how each language is unique in relation not only to other languages but to earlier or later states of itself.

Signs are distinguished from each other on the basis of difference, whether phonetically or semantically. For example, out of the total gamut of possible sounds that the human voice can utter, each language relies on certain distinctions between sounds which differentiate between signifiers: /beet/ is distinguishable from /peat/ by a difference of the initial sound, a difference between a voiced labial and a plosive. No matter how complex the language, all differences can presumably be reduced to a series of binary oppositions of this sort. Phonetic differences identify (to anyone who has mastered the language) phonemes which are the components of word-forms essential to distinguishing sense, hence to the grasping of signs.

Semantically the functioning of language is analogous: out of a presumed spectrum of all possible meanings, each language carves out certain notions which are attached to particular signifiers. On the level of meanings each sign is distinguishable from its near synonyms on the basis of some divergence or opposition of sense. Strictly speaking, there are no synonyms, a proposition poets and translators have affirmed for a long time. In terms of grammar and syntax Saussure's analysis is analogous, or more properly, homologous. Though native speakers of any language are likely to feel that their native categories are "natural," comparison between languages makes clear how common diversity is. John Lyons gives as an example how the English phrase, "The cat sat on the mat" contains an ambiguity that a translator into French would have to face. French grammaticalizes the difference between being in a certain position (être assis) and taking up the same position (s'asseoir); English does not.11

Saussure's overriding conception then is that each language is a self-contained system (on diverse levels) within which units are identifiable and functional only in relation to all the comparable units of the same language. Any individual language sound, word, or grammatical form is meaningless except in opposition to the alternative possibilities available in the language. In this way essences give way to relations, the individual entity to networks.

Saussure provides a suggestive explanation of differences between individual users of a given language at a given time by distinguishing between langue, the language itself, and parole, the individual instance of that language. Though the langue may only be describable as an abstraction from numerous individual instances of parole, the notion leads to a conception of language competence based on mastery of the rules of a langue rather than any given individual usage. Though this concept has been disputed at some length by linguists, it does provide a theoretical basis for going beyond a succession of individual cases to a general system whose structures are distinguishable and describable partly because they are presumed and shared by all who have mastered the language. Though linguists may labor long to describe any given langue with precision, all speakers of the language immediately grasp and respond to those rules within every utterance in that language. In short, Saussure's distinction should not be confused with that between an abstract form and a palpable content. The structures are immediately present and active in shaping every utterance. Though they may be described abstractly, they do not exist except in action.

Another of Saussure's distinctions is between the syntagmatic axis of language, the horizontal succession of word after word, and the paradigmatic axis, the vertical dimension in language which allows expressions to be substituted for each other in any given slot. Roman Jakobson was later to rebaptize these two as the metonymic as opposed to the metaphorical aspects of language. Thus in a simple sentence like "John loves Mary," any number of nouns or pronouns could substitute for "Mary"—"Sally," "rock music," "himself"—without modifying the structure of the sentence. The change would be in its meaning as modified by paradigmatic substitution. On the other hand, a change on the syntagmatic axis to "John is loved by Mary" modifies meaning by means of the change in succession of grammatical entities. As we shall see, the extrapolation of this distinction to apply to literature and other media that operate through time has proved stimulating.

Based on his understanding of language as system, Saussure went on to propose a new composite science of signs, now called either semiology or semiotics. Since humanity is par excellence the sign-using animal, he foresaw the possibility that all human activities might be understood as systems of signs. Structuralism as we know it today is largely the testing and refining of this proposition.

As semiology is pursued today it is closely related to structuralism by origin and by aim, but it tends to remain more theoretical in order to at-

tempt to encompass all types of signs. In the present context let Umberto Eco's *A Theory of Semiotics*\(^{13}\) stand as an indicator of the present state of European contributions to the art. His effort, which culminates much of the work done in French in recent years, concentrates too exclusively on the technical vocabulary to help the American Studies scholar who is interested in studying particularly American patterns of signs.

More promising is the work of Roland Barthes, who is multifaceted, articulate, and the most available of the French thinkers who have attempted practical applications of semiotic notions. *Mythologies*, which originally appeared in 1957, makes clear how his theoretical matrix derives from Saussure and offers more than 25 sprightly examples applied to French life, mostly to popular culture.\(^{14}\) His key term is "myth," which he uses to suggest a type of message-bearing speech which functions as a second-level language. Saussure's notion that a sign is the conjunction of a signified and a signifier is simply extended to a higher level of generalization beyond the realm of language proper: the sign becomes itself a cultural SIGNIFIER for which the semiotician seeks to define the SIGNIFIED which unites with it in the second-order SIGN. Thus, Barthes remarks, when he goes to the beach, he sees less the sea than a wide variety of messages: instructions to bathers, clothing (or its lack), even suntan strikes him as SIGNIFYING on the cultural level. In his brief journalistic essays that pursue signification in French culture, Barthes is often startling and "brilliant," that is, elegant yet unconvincing to someone looking to him as a possible model for American culture studies. One of the best or at least the best known of these essays sets out to define the "mythological" significance of professional wrestling in France. Boxing he sees as a competitive sport based on excellence which is open to betting on the outcome. Wrestling, on the other hand, is a form of theatre analogous to the *Commedia dell'Arte*. The essential roles delineate the interaction of Good and Evil, the latter embodied in a wrestler with a sloppy physique who pulls all kinds of dirty tricks only to find himself discomfited in the end by the reestablishment of a kind of rough justice—the "point" of the whole drama. Granted that Barthes' analysis is convincing and could pretty well apply to professional wrestling in the United States, what kind of model does his approach offer for American Studies? He has clarified a distinction between wrestling and boxing where one perhaps did not present itself to a reader's consciousness before, but the utility of such a distinction is not clear. An Americanist might plug it into another context, perhaps a sociological profile of American wrestling fans as opposed to boxing fans, or an explanation of the decline of wrestling as entertainment in

\(^{13}\) (Bloomington and London: Indiana Univ. Press, 1976).

the United States since the late 1940s when it was a staple on national television. Failing some such move outside the semiological world, it is hard to see how the most brilliant set of distinctions can enlighten American phenomena as such. At best, then, a Barthian analysis can serve to generate hypotheses to be tested by other, non-semiological methods.

Barthes himself hints at one other possibility: cross-cultural comparisons between French and American versions of the wrestling drama of Good and Evil. He asserts that the "Bad Guy" in American wrestling is defined in quasi-political terms: "always being supposed to be a Red," whereas the French equivalent is simply ethical in definition.15 Barthes, of course, was writing in 1957, but even so his sally seems above all ethnocentric and uninformed. More interesting, for example, would be an exploration of the homosexual implications of naming a wrestler "Gorgeous George." Cross-cultural comparisons may indeed help to reveal the specifics of American phenomena, but only when such studies are equally well informed about both cultures and the focus is carefully aimed at equivalent phenomena.

Structuralism, like semiology, emerges from Saussure's linguistics, but offers a less theoretical and more manageable approach to the functioning of cultural systems. A very few such studies of American culture have emerged within the United States. Hayden White contributed a resounding manifesto for structuralism in the study of popular culture since it is not only anti-historical and anti-essentialist but also anti-hierarchical.16 More recently Will Wright in Sixguns and Society offers a pioneering work which demonstrates both the promise and the problems of structural analysis of American popular culture.17 His concern is with the film Western, arbitrarily defined as those films which between 1930 and 1972 grossed more than $4,000,000 in the U.S. and Canada. This filter cuts out 64 films for study, a group which, because of inflation, is skewed towards the end of the period. The structuralism involved is a two-step procedure starting with a syntagmatic study of the component episodes of these Westerns, a procedure inspired by Vladimir Propp's component analysis of Russian folktales, first published in 1928.18 Once the story lines of the films have been reduced to a small number of variant sequences, Wright can distinguish two basic types: the Classical plot (with a variant he calls the Vengeance plot) which dominated from 1930 through the early 1950s, and the Professional plot, which takes over as of that time after a few transitional pieces. All the plot

15 *Mythologies*, 23.
17 (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1975).
types appear to turn on placing characters and events in relation to four basic bipolar oppositions: inside/outside (society); good/bad (nice/not nice); strong/weak; wilderness/civilization. Thus Shane, a typical Classical formulation, portrays the eponymous hero as outside society, as good, as strong, and as associated with the wilderness. Any such list of fundamental oppositions is necessarily arbitrary, but let us accept the presumption that this set of four oppositions is just long enough to account for everything significant in the 64 films. We must do so in order to inspect the second-stage paradigmatic structuralism Wright employs to read out the significance of the movement of Westerns from the Classical through the Professional model. Here he is in fact proposing a homologous parallel to the Western in the organization of the American economy as it is said to shift around the time of World War II from a free-scrambling market economy to a planned and managed economy. J. Kenneth Galbraith is the chief authority cited for dating and characterizing the nature of the economic shift to a world in which an elite of technocrats, sharply divorced from society as a whole, run the show. As a structuralist, Wright does not feel the need to show that a change in economic rules of the game causes a change in the formulae of the Western but merely claims that the two show parallel shifts in structure. That is, the Professional plot Western that dominates since the mid-1950s focuses on professional gunslingers whose loyalty is to carrying out whatever job they are paid to perform, regardless of the values, social or moral, that may be at stake. In parallel he can cite John Mitchell and other Watergate stars to suggest the extent to which professional loyalty to team has come to dominate moral or ethical concerns in the United States.

There are more problems in the paradigmatic read-out of the significance of Westerns than in the component analysis itself, which is likely to remain influential. I think Wright is correct to claim against Lévi-Strauss that the Western is a locus of significant stories, hence modern "myth" for Americans; the problem lies in how one identifies that significance. In particular it seems factitious to suggest that the Hollywood industry within a few years after the supposed creation of a managed economy could both produce films that reflected the new technocratic values and could make them extraordinarily popular. The popularity of these films, which led to their being selected for study in the first place, depends, after all, on the choices of large numbers of filmgoers who by definition are not sophisticated cultural analysts. Film viewers themselves, as Wright partially acknowledges, are likely to be conservative forces in relation to a popular genre—they themselves constitute the market for whose sake formulae are maintained with recognizable stability. Are we really to believe that as of 1950 the millions chose to see these films because they found dramatized therein the new tensions
and values appropriate to the new organization of economic and political life?

More credibly, one might suggest that the viewing public had long experienced the Western as a locus of nostalgia which was clearly out of step with the rules of the game of their economic lives and that the shift to the Professional plot in the 1950s represented a reduction of nostalgia (or dissonance if you prefer). A fuller study of the Western as a genre in print as well as on film, say from the 1860s on, would likely confirm such a generalization. Another way of making the same point is to say that Galbraith’s locating of a shift to a managed economy around the mid-1940s is convenient for his argument and Wright’s, but the modification of free-market capitalism in the United States begins decades before World War II. The grandfather of American technocrats, Frederick Taylor, flourished at the beginning of this century, and so on. Thus, Wright’s parallel between economic and institutional formulae and the rules of the Western is neat and clear but hardly final. The number of possible contexts in which homologous rule changes might be evoked approaches the infinite. The value of his work is less its inherent plausibility than its suggesting new interdisciplinary possibilities.

To avoid the problems generated by Wright’s procedure of placing two rule systems in parallel with each other, French structuralists and their followers have often tried to combine inductive studies in such a way as to exhaust an entire universe of discourse. Edmund Leach, for example, in Culture and Communication is reluctant to accept any of the competing theories of incest until all varieties of sexual offense are considered as a set with the total body of definitions and rules of sexual prohibition being examined in relation to each other. To the structuralist any individual practice or instance has significance only in relation to other comparable instances from which it is distinguished within any given cultural system. The individual instance, whether a genre like the Western or an individual work of art, “makes sense” in the context of which it is one manifestation of the possibilities inherent in the total system. In short, Saussure’s distinction between langue and parole surfaces again. Langue is the language complete with lexicon and rules of usage that is shared by all who have mastered that language, whereas parole refers to the particular embodiment of that language in the speech or writing of any individual practitioner. To define langue, of course, the structuralist will necessarily generalize from a number of particular instances, though he may never be able to say how many instances are sufficient to manifest all the rules of langue.

19 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1976), 75.
This structuralist habit of mind turns upside down the established habit of defining useful universes of discourse on the basis of an individual nation, person, or work of art. Here lies one of the reasons structuralism has produced more fireworks than light in the Anglo-American world. If structuralism is constantly tending to universalize discourse, what is the sense of limiting discussion to American literature, mythology, economics, or even total cultural identity as a nation? Any of these subjects, by structuralist principles, would be definable only in terms of other items on a comparable level of generality in which both items are examples of parole controlled by the rules of a langue. In short, structuralist thought is constantly threatened by infinite regress and, since infinity is unreachable, by arbitrariness which is inescapable if anything at all is to be said. Indeed, as Anthony Wilden points out again and again in System and Structure, the failure to distinguish clearly between levels of application has plagued structuralism all along.

This point can be dramatized in relation to American Studies by following a single example, remembering that a structuralist analysis minimally requires simply a universe which can be divided into a number of parts sufficiently large and diverse to be interesting. A structuralist interested in Melville, for example, could declare his universe of discourse to be one word of Moby Dick or one phrase or sentence which he would break up into its component sounds. His results would be primarily of interest to the linguist and as soon as he had completed his analysis, that component would invite comparison with others on the same level of generality. The study of word sounds would end in a study of sentences and thence to paragraphs and chapters. These latter foci might interest a traditional literary critic, though only in context of the work as a whole. Though Moby Dick as a whole would certainly provide complexity to satisfy almost anyone, the choice of an individual work of art as a universe of discourse seems no less arbitrary than the preceding possibilities. Existing literary criticism sanctions progressively larger frames of reference as well: Melville’s work during the 1850s, Melville’s work as a whole, the writers grouped by Matthiessen under the rubric “American Renaissance,” nineteenth-century American literature, American literature as a whole. But then why not American high culture as a whole, or American “civilization”? In short, established criticism practices its own form of arbitrary definition. To the structuralist habit of mind, all such limitations are equally arbitrary even though each level of focus invites a distinctive conceptualization, a separate set of terms to categorize the rules of system at the chosen level of generality. Any conclusions still provide a basis for calling forth the next larger universe of dis-

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course. The process might well continue on the same basis: Western civilization, world civilization (or mentality or mythology or political systems or whatever). Even the structuralist purist is likely to stop short of these maximum levels of generality because the logic of the enterprise out-runs the present conceivable of structures that could account for the interaction of parts on such grand levels of complexity. Nonetheless, formation in recent years of the Society for the Study of Comparative Civilizations (U.S.) signals that there are those ready to take on world-scale cultural analysis. Some science fiction is already imagining galactic-scale analysis.

The element in structuralist thinking which feeds the impulse toward such regress is its differentiation between elements on the basis of oppositions conceived of as essentially binary. Once again the root metaphor lies in language. We grasp one phoneme only by differentiating it phonetically from another phoneme; hence phonetic oppositions provide the rules which constitute the structures of phonemics, which in turn provides the structures of word morphology, and so on through as many progressively larger contexts as one might care to distinguish. The establishing of binary oppositions to explain the rules of operation on any given level of generality implicitly calls forth the next higher universe of discourse. The process can be stopped, but only arbitrarily.

This process of generating ever larger contexts also tends to break down as the level of investigation moves further and further from the relative stability and tangibility of language systems. Thus after diverse attempts to treat literature as langue within which any particular work could be seen as parole, this attempt has been abandoned even in France. The difficulty is that the world of literature is simply too complex to be reduced satisfyingly to a comprehensive system of binaries. A few examples may help to situate the problem. Literature obviously is made out of words, yet the attempt to cope with even a short poem by primary reference back to language structures has failed to convince many practitioners. The classic example is the essay by Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss on Baudelaire’s sonnet “Les chats.” Their effort has received a stiff rebuttal from Michael Riffaterre.

Since literature, particularly prose fiction, depends on evoking a dramatic situation with implied events, characters, and interactions, one obvious

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11 Inquiries about the Society may be directed to its Secretary-Treasurer, David B. Richardson, Department of Philosophy, Edinboro State College, Edinboro, PA 16444.


strategy is to attempt a codification of character types and motifs. Vladimir Propp's work on Russian folktales written at the height of the Russian formalist movement provides a promising example, but no one has successfully extended such analysis to literature as a whole. It is clear in advance that once the context of discourse is broadened, both the extent of the material to be studied and the complexity of patterns cancel the potential benefit.

Among the French structuralists who work with literature as well as popular culture, the most interesting and available is once again Roland Barthes, partly because he is willing to descend to the business of practical criticism most appealing to American scholars. Having abandoned the attempt to work out the total set of rules that govern literature as langue, Barthes in S/Z shifts his attention to the structuring vision of the critic explicating a single work, in this case a short story of Balzac entitled "Sarrasine," first published in 1830.24 His strategy is both syntagmatic and paradigmatic; that is, he approaches the work along its horizontal axis by dividing it into 561 segments which succeed one another in the reading process. For a short story of some thirty pages, 561 segments, varying from a phrase to a paragraph, may seem large. Barthes admits the arbitrariness by evoking the infinity of possible segmentation or the infinite play of codes of reading. Since it is impossible to say everything, better something than nothing. The codes he has in mind are five paradigmatic foci of interest in the story: the hermeneutic code involving the mystery of who Sarrasine is, the code of actions (roughly plot), the code of "semes" through which the reader grasps character, the code of symbols which reflects the interplay of bipolar opposites like dreaming/waking or masculinity/femininity, and the cultural code which reflects all the cultural allusions the reader is expected to recognize. The interactions and reinforcements between these codes are too complex to summarize here, but the basic thrust of Barthes' method is too important to leave aside. The act of reading is, according to him, inescapably one of movement in the reader's mind from syntagm to paradigm, from the story as it is perceived word after word to a segmentation or grouping of words which the reader labels in accordance with his interpretation. Recognizing the cultural signals of upper class life in early nineteenth-century Paris, the reader supplies the label 'rich' to the characters and the setting. Recognizing various clues concerning the interplay of opposites like masculinity and femininity, he comes closer to grasping the central mystery concerning Sarrasine, who is male but castrated. The story, to the reader's mind, is built up out of the paradigmatic labels he attaches to the particular segments his attention calls forth for recognition. They are what constitute his reading and determine his interpretation.

The procedure here is much more sophisticated than Lévi-Strauss' sole venture into familiar stories, his analysis of the Oedipus myth. Lévi-Strauss divides the story into four episodes treated as partial transformations of each other which, when added up, define the essential opposition of nature and culture which is at stake in the story. Here Barthes culls out 561 segments of varying lengths and types and labels the contribution of each in terms of one or more of the five codes he elaborates. Even so, admitting the arbitrariness of the number of segments and the potentially infinite interplay of codes does not make the problem go away. Criticism, in the name of structuralism, has overwhelmed the work of art it purported to clarify. Barthes devotes a book of 278 pages to a story of 30. Barthes' teacher and his successor in exhausting criticism, A. J. Greimas, devotes the 273 pages of his study Maupassant to a short story of 6 pages. What price criticism?

Barthes and still more Greimas are no longer interested in the story except as a pretext for studying the act of reading, a focus which is shared by the best informed and most convincing work of structuralist literary criticism in English, Jonathan Culler's Structuralist Poetics. This is a major work, likely to be cited for years as a signal contribution to literary studies. What it adds in the present context is an important attempt to halt the infinite regress and resulting arbitrariness endemic in structuralist thinking. Culler, in addition to well-informed critical digests of the contributions of Saussure, Greimas, Jakobson, and others, draws on linguistics in another perspective to establish a frame of reference that can claim to make sense of literature without undue arbitrariness. His strategy is to draw on the notion of linguistic competence as developed by Chomsky and others over recent years. Competence is a measure of the degree to which any given speaker of a language has mastered the rules of that language, the degree to which his parole acknowledges the langue within which he is expressing himself. By analogy there should be something called literary competence through which an individual, by mastery of what Culler calls "the institution of literature," qualifies himself to make limiting definitive statements about literary texts. Coding, encoding, decoding need not be infinite processes once one "knows" literature, its rules, its range of possibilities. Culler seeks "a poetics which stands to literature as linguistics stands to language." The goal is "a model to explain how sequences have form and meaning for experienced readers." The fundamental demand of the institution of litera-

28 Ibid., 257-58.
ture Culler gives as a demand for sense. All our postulates for reading derive from this basic insistence on comprehensibility. As a result, he can describe less basic encoding postulates, such as reading a poem for "a significant attitude to some problem concerning man and/or his relation to the universe." Writers and readers share such conventions, often unconsciously. The writer "cannot simply assign meaning but must make possible for himself [as reader of his own works] and for others, the production of meaning." To focus attention on a theory of literary discourse, an orientation invited by a structuralist approach, Culler has to play down the importance of criticism as an act of interpretation of individual works. His means of doing so is to suggest that the latter notion of criticism has a limited locus in time, as a 'post-Romantic' drive to demonstrate thematic unity. A structuralist poetics which sets out to define the rules by which not just any meaning can be generated from a work, corresponds to an earlier kind of formalism focused on rhetoric and genre, on the placing of an individual work within a tradition.

In evoking time limitations, Culler opens a Pandora's box particularly troublesome for structuralists—how to account for evolution over time in the world of literature or anywhere in human culture. Properly speaking, time does not exist in the world conceived by structuralists and hence such notions as "evolution" seem empty. From the moment of Saussure's linguistics onward, structuralists have relegated change over time to an earlier, nineteenth-century perspective keyed to individual entities and their history. The structuralist concerns himself above all with systems conceived as static in order to isolate the interrelation among internal elements. Time becomes a discontinuous medium within which systems suddenly jump to another state of organization or system, in language, literary criticism, or whatever. Here again structuralism stands established patterns of thinking on their heads, much to the distress of an articulate Marxist like Frederic Jameson. A few examples from different disciplines may suffice. For social anthropology Edmund Leach can claim that the most sensitive areas of concern are the transition lines from one social state to another. Ritual, taboo, and myth concentrate in boundary areas of uncertainty between two states, as the jump from unmarried to married. Foucault substitutes archaeology for history because to his structuralist vision the history is a series of strata as distinct as the layers found on the site of Troy; it pro-

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Ibid., 123.
Ibid., 115.
Ibid., 117.
Ibid., 119.
Ibid., 123.
ceeds by jumps and earthquakes whose motivations are either hidden or uninteresting. This perspective has received independent support from Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* which found sudden leaps between scientific paradigms to be typical rather than exceptional in the Western world. Structuralists tend to highlight discontinuities because as Edward Said points out in a perceptive essay, the basis of cognition itself they see as opposition, as difference, as separation.

Culler suggests that interpretive criticism seeking thematic unity in literature is time-bound to the post-romantic period, but he does not raise the next question which frames his own contribution as well as that of other structuralists. In short, what is the time-boundary of structuralism? It is too early to tell with certainty, but at least I can suggest some structural parallels between structuralism and various tendencies evident in the world today. Whether structuralism is associated with the political left as in France or the political right as in Germany, its focus on system is compatible with technocratic bureaucracies around the world and with their emphasis on the managing of systems, most often employing the computer as chief implement. In terms of the arts, structuralism functions remarkably like those happenings, cut-ups, or serial and deconstructed works of recent decades in music, the visual arts, and literature. By demolishing the traditional boundaries of genre, frame, or window, such works automatically transfer the reader’s or viewer’s attention from representation to the rules of the game which operate. Robert Scholes articulates some of the literary parallels in the last section of *Structuralism in Literature*.

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To identify structuralism as an intellectual mode which intimately reflects the present state of Western culture is not to dismiss it but to recognize that it too will undoubtedly prove to be limited in time. This essay comes into existence because up to now American Studies has not yet learned how to profit from the structuralist habit of mind which counterbalances the focus on essences and entities which has been the primary orientation of American Studies specialists now at work in the field. For all of its tendencies toward arbitrary procedures, its Gallic excesses, its sheer silliness in the hands of some unskilled practitioners, structuralism has, I believe, important contributions to make in four related dimensions of American Studies.

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First, structuralism inevitably generates theory because of its thrust toward isolating the rules of functioning that govern any system. While structuralist theory could not, for reasons explained earlier, become the exclusive theory of American or any other area studies, the exploration of concepts necessary to engage in debate with the structuralist cannot but help fill in the gaps in theory that have plagued this “discipline” from the outset. Americanists need help in defining the rules of their own game.

Secondly, even when it is not pushed into theorizing, structuralism is a powerful force toward generalizing which can counterbalance the tendency to play it safe by concentrating on minuscule manifestations of American culture that can be described in substantial detail. Anyone who doubts this need may consult a recent anthology of anthropological studies of contemporary America. Structuralism can never rest content with describing a phenomenon without attempting to extrapolate the rules of organization implicit in surface events.

Thirdly, because it is inherently a metadiscipline, structuralism offers a matrix for furthering interdisciplinarity in American Studies. Interdiscipline conflicts over the relative importance of literature, history, or sociology—to name a few contenders—seem trivial in the light of the structuralist thrust toward totalities and universals. A single example may suggest how powerfully a structuralist inspiration may mutually clarify fields usually studied and conceived distinctly. Leonard Bernstein’s The Unanswered Question takes from Chomsky’s post-Saussurian linguistics concepts of phonetics, syntax, and semantics which allow him a scintillating analysis of musical form with important sideglights on poetry as well.

Finally, structuralism invites a disengaged and potentially more objective view of American culture. It both reflects and furthers an experience of estrangement whereby customs, like language, no longer appear “natural” or “real.” Europeans, who live inescapably in a multi-cultural environment, generate such perspectives more easily than Americans, who grow up in the comforting but misleading environment of a relatively unified culture. A structuralist perspective helps to remind everyone that American cultural codes and the means for perpetuating them are not to be presumed as “natural” but to be studied for what they reveal of the specificities of the United States. In short, structuralism attacks ethnocentrism in its cross-cultural thrust.

At the very least, as we have seen, structuralism generates challenging hypotheses which, even if they must be tested by more traditional academic means, open new prospects for seeing America clearly and seeing it whole. Readers who want to test these propositions directly are best advised to begin with one or more of the five standard anthologies which purport to introduce the subject. I want to comment briefly on all five in order to sketch out in advance the particular slant and hence the probable value of each for beginners.

The paperbound edition of The Structuralist Controversy: The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man, edited by Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1972), is a slightly shortened reprinting in translation of the papers and proceedings at a Johns Hopkins symposium in 1966. As an anthology this collection exemplifies the furthest extent to which a work offered in English can remain embedded in the French origins of structuralism. Though much of the discussion and some of the papers remain totally linked to the Paris intellectual scene at the time, the collection has the merit of representing several older tendencies in French intellectual life in confrontation with structuralism. Georges Poulet speaks for the older phenomenological approach to literature associated with the School of Geneva. Lucien Goldmann demonstrates what he calls "genetic structuralist sociology." Roland Barthes proclaims his orientation at that time, which he identifies as "semiocriticism." Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan offers a paper which is more accessible than most of his writings, as does Jacques Derrida. In short, important structuralist thinkers are represented here but in a form too wedded to the French scene to offer easy access to American Studies specialists.

Structuralism, edited by Jacques Ehrmann (Garden City: Anchor, 1970), reprints the special issue of Yale French Studies devoted to structuralism in 1966. This anthology constitutes one step forward in making structuralist thought available to American audiences. It is essentially organized in pairs: a translation of a major French essay grouped with an essay originally in English which frequently introduces and situates the French contribution at least within its context of origin. One notable exception is Geoffrey Hartman's "Structuralism: The Anglo-American Adventure" which does make headway at comparative literary criticism. Nonetheless the dominant focus is still intensely French. Among the several disciplines represented literature predominates. The annotated bibliographies are helpful though now out of date.

The anthology on The Structuralists from Marx to Lévi-Strauss, edited by Richard and Fernande DeGeorge (Garden City: Anchor, 1972), attempts not only to sample important structuralists but also to relate the
movement to earlier thinkers who are better known in the U.S., namely Marx and Freud. The potential benefit of enhanced breadth of association is undercut by a poor selection from Marx and a part of Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* which makes clear how little he was a structuralist in the terms set forth in this essay. Both Freud and Marx have been claimed as ancestors by various structuralists, but both contributed little more than a sense that a thinker must penetrate beyond surface phenomena to more basic operating forces. The rest of this anthology is somewhat redeemed by the choice of important passages from Saussure, Jakobson, Barthes (especially "The Structuralist Activity"), Lévi-Strauss, and Foucault, but it does little better than its predecessors in making French structuralism available to a non-specialized American audience.

Michael Lane's edited collection, *Structuralism: A Reader* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), serves access much better, with an excellent introduction and the judicious inclusion of some Anglo-American essays illustrating how native practitioners in different disciplines perform analyses close to the concerns of structuralists. Still other essays, like that of Edmund Leach, show how structuralist concerns can be taken over and applied by someone still firmly rooted in the pragmatic habits of the Anglo-American tradition. Another wise editorial choice involves limiting the number of pages given directly to Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, and Roland Barthes in order to include lesser known essays which in fact clarify structuralism more than some of the obvious stars. R. S. Wells creates perspective on Saussure, M. Gaboriau treats Lévi-Strauss. This is a good anthology, well deserving reprinting.

The printed versions of the Wolfson College Lectures of 1972, published as *Structuralism: An Introduction* and edited by David Robey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), constitute the single most accessible set of essays on structuralism. Most are by young Englishmen who have made the effort to acquaint themselves with the French language and the structuralists who practice in it. The fruits are in most cases well-digested essays that open structuralist thinking to non-French non-structuralists. In particular I cite John Lyons' essay on the importance of linguistics to structuralism and Jonathan Culler's piece which later became part of *Structuralist Poetics*, itself still the best book on structuralism in English.

The remaining avenue of access is through the growing number of secondary works. The diversity of the structuralists themselves and the controversies they have sparked will probably call forth more such works as time goes on. A few recent contributions deserve mention. The latest, Terence Hawkes' *Structuralism and Semiotics*, provides a good summary of structuralist work in anthropology and especially literature, but for my
taste, it lapses too facilely into uncritical advocacy. Philip Pettit in *The Concept of Structuralism: A Critical Analysis* attempts to reduce the diversity among the structuralists to a common core concept whose radiations he traces out from Saussure's linguistics. This task is imposing—in both senses of the word—and Pettit brings to it wide reading reported in a brusque style. His conclusion is a schematic representation of the metaphysic evoked by structuralism. This is a worthwhile book, but not for beginners. The most economical access is still through selected essays by practitioners in disciplines reasonably familiar to the reader.

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40 (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975).