

1980: Structuralism and Poststructuralism

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The early 1980s in France were marked by the death of the major structuralists: Roland Barthes in 1980, Jacques Lacan in 1981, and Michel Foucault in 1984.¹ (Louis Althusser also exited from the scene in 1980, hospitalized in a psychiatric institution after killing his wife.) In the United States, however, the 1980s witnessed the assimilation of the work of these major figures, along with that of Jacques Derrida, as what came to be called “poststructuralism.” This is a curious conjuncture: Why should structuralism become poststructuralism in America? Frank Lentricchia blames Derrida. Describing the American critical scene in 1980, he writes, “Sometime in the early 1970s we awoke from the dogmatic slumber of our phenomenological sleep to find that a new presence had taken absolute hold over our avant-garde critical imagination: Jacques Derrida. Somewhat startlingly, we learned that, despite a number of loose characterizations to the contrary, he brought not structuralism but something that would be called ‘poststructuralism’” (Lentricchia 159).²

It is scarcely clear what Lentricchia has in mind in speaking of “the dogmatic slumber of our phenomenological sleep,” as if American criticism had been dogmatically yet unthinkingly phenomenological. In fact, there was little explicitly

¹ When Foucault’s *Les Mots et les choses* became a best-seller, a famous cartoon by Maurice Henry in the *Quinzaine Littéraire* (July 1, 1967) depicted Foucault, Lacan, Lévi-Strauss, and Barthes as natives wearing grass skirts sitting in a circle in the jungle: the circle of the major structuralists. Only Lévi-Strauss survived the 80s.

² It is worth noting that Derrida explicitly rejects the label “poststructuralism” (along with “postmodernism”): “These are catch-all notions into which the most poorly informed public (and most often the mass circulation press) stuffs nearly everything it does not like or understand, starting with ‘deconstruction.’ . . . I almost never use these words, except to say that they are inadequate to what I am trying to do” (Derrida, “Marx and Sons” 228-29).

phenomenological criticism around. In Lentricchia's own chapter on phenomenology, before discussing continental theorists such as Husserl, Sartre, and Heidegger, he mentions only the French critic Georges Poulet, and then J. Hillis Miller, whose books, *The World of Charles Dickens* (1958), *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers* (1963), and *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers* (1965), studied the imaginative world of these authors, adopting the methods of the Geneva School critics (Poulet, Marcel Raymond, Jean-Pierre Richard et al.), who conceived of criticism as identification with the imaginative experience of the author. But Miller's was a lonely voice: phenomenology was neither a dominant critical position nor a dogmatic one.³ In France where phenomenology was much more of a presence it was seen as opposed to structuralism, not poststructuralism.

The fact that Lentricchia posits, for criticism in the United States, an abrupt transition from phenomenology to poststructuralism, is certainly odd. Vincent Leitch, a better-informed analyst of the critical scene, opens his book *Theory Matters* with the observation that for many decades New Criticism was the ruling paradigm in America. "It was not until the mid-1970s that this oppressive formalism gave way to 'poststructuralism' (as it was oddly called)" (Leitch 3). Setting aside, then, Lentricchia's strange positing of a phenomenological slumber, we can pursue his other claim: that America was expecting structuralism and instead got something that would come to be called "poststructuralism." How could this happen?

It is a story worth exploring, for a number of reasons. First, although the major theoretical influences were French, the notion of poststructuralism never caught on in France.⁴ This suggests that the differences presumed to be so important in the American account may be the effect of some misprision. Second, even within the United States, there was considerable confusion about what might count as structuralist and what as poststructuralist. This is nicely reflected in two knowledgeable publications by Josué V. Harari. His 1979 anthology of poststructuralist criticism, *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist*

³ Reader-oriented criticism, which is generally considered phenomenological, in that it associates the meaning of the work with the experience of the reader and aims to describe that experience, is discussed by Lentricchia in his chapter on structuralism, so it is not what he has in mind. In any case, it too was a distinct approach, regarded as dubious and subjective, certainly not mainstream. And far from being displaced by poststructuralism in the early 1970s, it did not come into its own as a generalized method, with anthologies, readers, etc. until 1980. See, for example, *The Reader in the Text*, edited by Susan Rubin Suleiman and Inge Crosman; and *Reader-Response Criticism*, edited by Jane P. Tompkins.

⁴ "In France the label 'poststructuralism' as used in international intellectual discourse is unknown" (Angermüller 20). Johannes Angermüller also reports that a search in the Harvard Library catalogue "for the 'post-stru' syntagma yields 243 titles, of which 82 per cent are English and none is from France" (6).

Criticism, consists mainly of work by writers who already featured in his 1971 bibliography, *Structuralists and Structuralisms*: Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, Eugenio Donato, Michel Foucault, Gérard Genette, René Girard, Louis Marin, Michael Riffaterre, and Michel Serres. The work of these authors had not changed, only the label under which they were now to be grouped. Harari's articulation of the field effectively makes Claude Lévi-Strauss and Tzvetan Todorov the only true structuralists since they were not now counted as post-structuralists.

In 1980, discussing "The State of Criticism," William Phillips, editor of *The Partisan Review*, takes *structuralism* to designate recent theoretical criticism that rejects concern with history and with authors to concentrate on the text and readers' recreation of it (thinkers mentioned are Barthes, Derrida, Lacan, Sollers, Todorov, and Foucault) (Phillips 372-75, 379). Structuralism, broadly conceived ("poststructuralism" is not mentioned), seemed to consist of the theoretically oriented criticism (with the exception of Marxist criticism) that had come along after the New Criticism. In 1982, I noted in *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* that the charges levelled at structuralism were amazingly varied yet specific: some fault it for its scientific pretensions, its diagrams, taxonomies, its neologisms, its alleged claims to master and chart the elusive productions of the human spirit.⁵ Others charge it with relativism, irrationalism, a self-indulgent love of paradox and bizarre interpretations, a taste for linguistic play and a narcissistic relation to its own rhetoric. To some it meant rigidity, a mechanical extraction of certain patterns or themes that made every work mean the same thing. To others it seemed to allow the work to mean anything whatsoever, either by asserting the indeterminacy of meaning or by defining meaning as the experience of the reader. Since we have become accustomed to a distinction between structuralism and post-structuralism, it may be difficult to recall that, for instance, Raymond Picard's *Nouvelle critique ou nouvelle imposture* attacked Barthes's explicitly structuralist *Sur Racine*, which Barthes described as an anthropology of "Racinian man," not for seeking to be scientific or systematic, but for neglect of the plain meaning of words and the certitudes of genre and for indulging in anachronism and willful distortions of the text. Science or irrationalism, rigidity or permissiveness, destruction of criticism or inflation of criticism. The array of charges seemed to make structuralism an indeterminate radical force, upsetting traditional disciplinary assumptions and procedures. This confusion makes it all the harder to understand the nature of the alleged poststructuralist turn.

⁵ For a general discussion, see Culler, *On Deconstruction* 17-30.

It is useful, therefore, to return to the text to which this turn is most often attributed. In October 1966, Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato organized a conference at Johns Hopkins to “explore,” as they wrote in the introduction to the conference proceedings, “the impact of contemporary ‘structuralist’ thought on critical methods in humanistic and social studies” (Macksey and Donato, *Structuralist Controversy* xv). They invited major figures associated with structuralism in France, including Barthes, Lacan, Todorov, and Lucien Goldman—fifteen speakers in all—who addressed an audience of some one hundred scholars, young and old. While only a few of the papers explicitly discuss structuralism as a methodological movement or theoretical framework, they certainly offer pertinent examples of structuralist thinking, and they would amply have fulfilled the goal, as the organizers put it, of offering for the first time in America a consideration of structuralist thought as a cross-disciplinary phenomenon and exploring its diverse currents for an American audience. But the paper that came largely to define the legacy of the conference was Derrida’s “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” which offered in particular an exposition and critique of the methods and theoretical framework of Lévi-Strauss. So much so that while the conference proceedings were originally published in 1970 as *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, the volume was republished two years later with its former subtitle, *The Structuralist Controversy*, as its title, since it had come to represent a controversy about structuralism and its failings, and thus a potential turn away from structuralism. In *French Theory*, his history of French influences on modern American critical thought, François Cusset notes that this encounter, “which everyone would later read as a liminal scene, a founding moment” (Cusset 32), did not have immediate effects, and it would be at least ten years before the lines of investigation adumbrated here would be pursued and so-called poststructuralism could be constituted. But the conference was taken, both by those who were there and especially by those who only heard about it, as signaling that structuralism was in difficulty.

One could certainly argue that structuralism never got a fair shake in the United States, since just as it was becoming known, news of Derrida’s critique of Lévi-Strauss at the Hopkins conference started to spread, so that structuralism no longer seemed even the latest thing. People could then feel that they need not pay attention to it, or need only take from it what they found interesting. The eventual result, in the United States though not in France, was to treat what was significant in French thinkers as belonging to poststructuralism, which, for reasons to be explored, found a readier audience than structuralism ever had.

Let me, therefore, briefly say a word about what in fact I take structuralism to

be before looking at the critique to which the turn is often attributed. Such pioneering structuralists as Lévi-Strauss and Barthes emphasized the importance for structuralism of the linguistic model: Barthes defined structuralism as “a mode of analysis of cultural artefacts, originating in the methods of contemporary linguistics” (Barthes, “Science versus Literature” 897).⁶ And Lévi-Strauss argues in his seminal article, “L’analyse structurale en linguistique et en anthropologie,” that by following the linguist’s example, the anthropologist can hope to reproduce in his own discipline the phonological revolution, which had succeeded in identifying the fundamental distinctions that the sound system of a language uses to produce meaningful utterances—a system not consciously grasped by its users (Lévi-Strauss, “L’analyse structurale” 39-41). Barthes’ formulation, “the analysis of cultural artefacts,” is manifestly too narrow, since in anthropology and linguistics it is clearly a matter of accounting for meaningful events as well as artifacts. As Lévi-Strauss writes in his “Introduction à l’oeuvre de Marcel Mauss,” “particular actions of individuals are never symbolic in themselves; they are the elements out of which is constructed a symbolic system, which must be collective” (Lévi-Strauss, “Introduction” xvi). In modelling itself on linguistics, structuralism seeks to analyze the structures or systems that make possible meaningful events.

One could then say that under the heading of structuralism could be grouped a range of projects that resist the traditional humanistic enterprise of elucidating the meaning of a literary work and celebrating it as the accomplishment of an author and that seek instead to describe the underlying systems of forces and conventions that make such events possible. Such a structuralism could be seen as opposing both Anglo-American New Criticism, which bracketed the author to focus on the individual work itself (rather than the cultural practice), and a traditional “life-and-works” approach to literature, which focused on authors and their achievements.

The linguistic model was generative for a wide range of semiotic/structuralist investigations, and in the early days of structuralism, its scientific ambitions were manifest. Lévi-Strauss turns to linguistics as the only one of the social sciences “which can claim the name of science,” and he speaks of its ability to discover general laws (Lévi-Strauss, “L’analyse structurale” 37). Barthes imagines the possibility of a poetics as a science of forms, and everyone defined semiology as the science of signs. There is a problem of translation here that is responsible for some of the criticism and much of the animus provoked by structuralism in the Anglophone world. *Science* in French is systematic thought, not empirical, experimental

⁶ For discussion, see Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, ch. 1.

thought as we take science to be in English. For us “political science” expresses a hope—perhaps a forlorn hope—rather than a reality, but in French *les sciences humaines* is not an oxymoron, as “the human sciences” would be in English—if the expression did not make us think of biology.

In the field of literary studies, the hostility to the idea of a science of literature was responsible for much anti-structuralist feeling. Recall that the New Critics had largely defined the value of literature against science, or scientific thought. In treating the language of poetry as the language of paradox, Cleanth Brooks defines it in opposition to the language of science, which, he says, would deprive us of the irony and wonder of a poem, leaving us only with dry facts (Brooks 201, 210). But above all, the New Criticism had succeeded in establishing the presumption that the goal of literary studies is hermeneutics, the production of interpretations of literary works, so that even its quarrels with historicist and biographical critics became disagreements about which approach could yield better, truer interpretations. Structuralism, on the other hand, is in principle not hermeneutics but poetics. Like linguistics, it does not seek to discover new meanings but to understand the codes and systems of convention that enable works to have the meanings they do for readers. The question American literary scholars and critics most often asked of structuralism was whether all this apparatus of categories and concepts, and often of jargon and neologisms, could actually yield new and better interpretations of literary works. But unfortunately, practitioners and defenders of structuralism failed to reject the question, as they should have—the results might have been better. Instead of denouncing the question as based on a misunderstanding of their goals, structuralists often seemed to work to answer it and did in their writings often turn to interpretation. Thus, in *S/Z* Barthes begins by declaring that his analysis will explore the codes that underlie and are responsible for the intelligibility of Balzac’s novella, and that there will be no synthesis or recomposition of the text, no discovery of a hidden meaning; but in the end the temptations of interpretation are too strong for him and he concludes by declaring that the text is ultimately about the semiotic apparatus on which it relies. Barthes concludes, “it is fatal, the text says, to remove the dividing line, the paradigmatic slash mark which permits meaning to function (the wall of the Antithesis), life to reproduce (the opposition of the sexes), property to be protected (rule of contract)” (Barthes, *S/Z* 215).⁷ His attempt at poetics issues, after all, in something that sounds suspiciously like a new interpretation of this novella. And Gérard Genette’s *Narrative Discourse*, the

⁷ It is important to stress that in *Critique et vérité* (56-75), Barthes makes very clear the distinction between criticism, which seeks to discover meaning, and poetics or, as he calls it, the science of literature, which is interested in the conditions of meaning.

most systematic and comprehensive work of structuralist narratology, presents itself as a study of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Even though Proust is there for exemplification, Genette's study could be seen as a neologistic, pseudo-scientific interpretation of the novel. Structuralism viewed from the perspective of hermeneutics often seems like a jargon-ridden harping on what goes without saying, belaboring what we unconsciously grasp. The failure of structuralists working on literature to articulate repeatedly and emphatically the rationale of an anti-hermeneutic poetics must, I think, bear some of the responsibility for the resistance to structuralism as an allegedly "scientific" approach to literary works—as if structuralism aspired to be a science of interpretation. In these circumstances, writing identifying the aporias of an aspiring science of language or signs or texts found a welcome reception and was swiftly hailed as post-structuralist—moving us beyond a scientific structuralism before it had really been tried.

But let me turn to a key moment in the critique of structuralism, often held to inaugurate the turn. Derrida's "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," delivered at the Hopkins conference, is usually cited as a Nietzschean embrace of the infinite play (or "free play") of signification and a damning critique of Lévi-Strauss's use of the notion of structure, and hence of structuralism in general.⁸ For instance, even François Cusset, in his generally knowledgeable *French Theory*, writes that Derrida programmatically declares that it is urgent to embrace the Nietzschean option (Cusset 31).⁹ In fact, what we find is rather more nuanced. Derrida does not claim to be turning the page on structuralism; on the contrary, he begins with the announcement that an event has occurred in the thinking of structure, which until recently had always been tied to a center, to the notion of origin (and hence to a metaphysics of presence), an origin that founds and makes possible the play of substitutions and variation. With structuralism, it has now become possible, Derrida maintains, to think of the center as a function rather than as a given or an origin; so that we now can conceive of "a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences" (Derrida, "Structure" 411/280). For this new thinking of the structurality of structure that has occurred, Derrida cites the legacy of Nietzsche and Freud, but his principal exhibit is Lévi-Strauss, and he is manifestly thinking of structuralism in general.

⁸ For references to this essay, the first page number corresponds to the French text in *L'Écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967) and the second to the English translation by Alan Bass published in Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), which is more accurate than that published earlier in Macksey and Donato's *The Structuralist Controversy*.

⁹ For further discussion of Cusset's presentation of the issue, see below.

Although this event in the thinking of structure is momentous and involves a critique of metaphysics (the metaphysics of presence which hitherto determined the center as presence), Derrida stresses that there is no way of doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to disrupt metaphysics. We have no categories, syntax, lexicon that are not caught up in this system of thought (412/280). Therefore, Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger can be shown to be complicitous with the metaphysics they seek to evade. Heidegger treats Nietzsche in this fashion; “one could do the same for Heidegger himself, for Freud, or for a number of others. And today no exercise is more widespread” (413/281-82). Derrida is usually thought to have performed this exercise of demonstrating complicity on Lévi-Strauss in turn, but his casual reference to this widespread exercise certainly suggests that this is not what he sees himself doing and that a demonstration of complicity with metaphysics would certainly not constitute a devastating critique. What, then, are the implications of Derrida’s reading of Lévi-Strauss?

Derrida’s lengthy discussion of Lévi-Strauss praises ethnology as the privileged example of a structuralist science, based on its self-decentering. Western culture no longer treats itself as the center, but of course it cannot escape its character as a Western science: “Consequently, whether he wants to or not—and this does not depend on a decision on his part—the ethnologist accepts into his discourse the premises of ethnocentrism at the very moment when he denounces them. This necessity is irreducible; it is not a historical contingency.” But there are different ways of yielding to it, and the “quality and fecundity of a discourse are perhaps measured by the critical rigor with which this relation to the history of metaphysics and to inherited concepts is thought” (414/282).

In pursuing this thesis, Derrida takes up Lévi-Strauss’s engagement with the opposition between nature and culture and his discovery of the breakdown of the opposition through the scandal of the prohibition of incest, which is both natural, because apparently universal, and yet obviously cultural. Lévi-Strauss thus discovers that the language of conceptual categories bears within itself the necessity of its own critique. But, Derrida argues, there are two ways of carrying out this critique. “Once the limit of the nature/culture opposition makes itself felt, one might want to question systematically and rigorously the history of these concepts.” This is one option: “To concern oneself with the founding concepts of the entire history of philosophy, to deconstitute them, is not to undertake the work of the philologist or of the classic historian of philosophy. Despite appearances, it is probably the most daring way of making the beginnings of a step outside of philosophy” (416/284). The other option is to preserve these concepts, treating them as tools

within the domain of empirical investigation, while denouncing their limits or inadequacies, “in order to avoid the possibly sterilizing effects” of the first option (417/284). Lévi-Strauss adopts the second strategy: he exploits the “relative efficacy” of these categories and uses them “to destroy the old machinery to which they belong and of which they themselves are pieces. This is how the language of the social sciences criticizes *itself*.” In sum: he preserves “as an instrument something whose truth value he criticizes” (417/284).

Derrida shows that from his early work on kinship to the later work on myth Lévi-Strauss is committed to this “double intention.” But it does not seem too far-fetched to relate this double move to Derrida’s own frequent evocation of a double procedure, a double game—formulations with doubling or doubleness often surface when he tries to explain his own procedure, which cannot simply scrap the old concepts but must operate with them. Deconstruction must, he writes in “Signature Event Context,” “through a double gesture, a double science, a double writing—put into practice a *reversal* of the classical opposition *and* a general *displacement* of the system” (Derrida, “Signature” 329). It must work within the terms of the system in order to affect it: using the categories of the system in order to displace it. Derrida needs *signifier* and *signified* to critique the notion of sign, for instance—and the same is true for all of the binary oppositions of philosophy and of structuralism that are subjected to deconstructive analysis. There is no doing without them. There is no stepping outside; the systems must be breached from within.

Derrida goes on to characterize what he sees as the inadequacy of Lévi-Strauss’s form of self-critique, in *Mythologiques* in particular, where in admitting that his construction may be but a myth of mythology, Lévi-Strauss offers the very seductive “abandonment of all reference to a *center*, to a *subject*, to a privileged *reference*, to an origin” (Derrida, “Structure” 419/286). More than anyone else, he has “brought to light the play of repetition and the repetition of play” (426-27/292).¹⁰ The lack of center, origin, end, the assertion of the primacy of structure and thus of play, which should be conceived as prior to presence and absence, are nonetheless accompanied in Lévi-Strauss, Derrida argues, by “a sort of ethic of presence, an ethic of nostalgia for origins, an ethic of archaic and natural innocence, of a purity of presence,” which is even presented as the motivation of the ethnological project of recovering archaic societies and the lost value they represent or embody (427/292). Derrida calls this ethics and this nostalgia “this structuralist

¹⁰ Here, as in other such passages, *jeu* was originally translated as *freeplay*: “the freeplay of repetition and the repetition of freeplay.” See Macksey and Donato, *The Structuralist Controversy* 264. I discuss this problem below.

Ex-position
December
2018

thematic of broken immediacy,” the “*negative, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic side of the thinking of play,*” of which the Nietzschean affirmation of the joyful “play of the world and of the innocence of becoming” is the other side (427/292). It is here that comes the famous passage contrasting two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, sign, and play:

There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play [*échappe au jeu*] and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play [*affirme le jeu*] and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology—in other words, throughout his entire history—has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play. (427/292)

The implication seems to be—this is how people have taken this passage—that Lévi-Strauss and structuralism belong to the guilty, nostalgic side of interpretation while something new—call it “poststructuralism,” as people would come to do—is turned towards the future, affirming play and trying to pass beyond man and humanism. The choice seems clearly outlined. Cusset, in his account of the conference, claims that

between “the two interpretations of interpretation,” it is urgent to substitute, Derrida concludes in a programmatic tone, for the one that “dreams of deciphering a truth . . . which escapes play” one that, on the contrary, “affirms play and attempts to pass beyond man and humanism.” The point is clear: this lofty structuralism with its rarefied stakes, which the American university knew only in its narratological version (Genette and Todorov), was something that should be left behind in order to move toward a more playful [*réjouissant*] post-structuralism. The word will not make its appearance until the beginning of the 1970s, but all the Americans present at Johns Hopkins in 1966 realized that they had attended the live performance of its public birth. (Cusset 31; ellipsis in orig.)

The opposition between two sorts of interpretation was aggravated, aggrandized, by the fact that in the original translation of “La Structure, le signe, et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines,” the term *jeu*, in the text though not in the title,

was often translated as “freeplay,” though nowhere does Derrida’s thinking of meaning and interpretation justify such a choice. Although there are no *limits* that can be prescribed in advance, the play of meaning is never “freeplay,” but is always a product of numerous factors, always depends on prior structures.¹¹ But in fact, as I am not the first to notice, while Derrida deliberately, dramatically, creates the impression of a stark choice between a nostalgic humanism and a forward-looking affirmation of freedom—while he seems to offer this choice between apparently distinct alternatives (calling these two interpretations of interpretation “absolutely irreconcilable even if we live them simultaneously and reconcile them in an obscure economy” [427/293])—he then expresses the view that there can be no question of choosing.

For my part, although these two interpretations must acknowledge and accentuate their difference and define their irreducibility, I do not believe that today there is any question of *choosing*—in the first place because here we are in a region (let us say, provisionally, a region of historicity) where the category of choice seems particularly trivial; and in the second, because we must first try to conceive of the common ground, and the *différance* of this irreducible difference. (427-28/293)

Given these two interpretations of interpretation, one cannot effectively choose: we cannot, for instance, embrace the “freeplay” of meaning since meaning always depends on prior structures or associations; nor can we escape play by fixing on origins; language, with its play, always supervenes. One cannot, for example (to give a bit more concreteness to Derrida’s entirely appropriate disclaimer), choose to make meaning either the original intention of the speaker or the creation of the reader, even if one claims to do so. Such claims are very insubstantial, ineffective, masking a reintroduction of the internal division of meaning under some other guise. We cannot just reject one side of this double conception of interpretation and embrace the other but must, Derrida insists, attempt to think “common ground, and the *différance* [difference, differing, deferring] of this irreducible difference.” And he concludes by situating himself not as a leader of the movement towards a joyful Nietzschean future of free play, but as someone looking towards operations of birth, but also in the other direction, towards those who, in a society from which he does not exclude himself, turn away from a birth that can only be

¹¹ For discussion of this complex topic, see Culler, *On Deconstruction* 110-56

monstrous.¹²

At the very least, then, this is not a repudiation of structuralism and celebration of a future alternative. (In “Force and Signification,” Derrida declares, “Since we take nourishment from the fecundity of structuralism, it is too soon to dispel our dream” [Derrida, “Force and Signification” 4]—“Comme nous vivons de la fécondité structuraliste, il est trop tôt pour fouetter notre rêve”).¹³ Let me add, also, that the eloquence of this conclusion is made possible above all by an appeal to the undeniable thematics of nostalgia and of humanism in Lévi-Strauss. If Derrida were writing about other structuralists—Genette, Roman Jakobson, or Todorov, for instance—he would find it hard to speak of a nostalgia for origins or a guilty, Rousseauistic thematics of immediacy disrupted.

But still, there is a specific critique here that is easily lost sight of in the rhetoric of the conclusion, which has the strange effect of heightening the opposition even though the evocation of monstrosity ought logically to render the supposed alternative to structuralism less attractive, rather than make structuralism itself seem passé. I quoted earlier Derrida’s distinction between two different ways of pursuing the critique of the categories that organize both research and thought in general: on the one hand, the undertaking of a rigorous questioning of the history of concepts, as opposed to, on the other hand, a use of concepts as tools for research while articulating their contestable character, in a double operation. But the major difference between the two modes of critique might hinge on a term that comes up a couple of times in his discussion of Lévi-Strauss: *empiricism*. Lévi-Strauss is said to conserve these categories, not because he needs to do so in order to criticize them, but for “la découverte empirique.” He is studying some particular phenomenon—kinship systems, totemism, mythology, etc.—and wants to understand these systems. The rigorous questioning of the history of concepts, for which Derrida is known, yields a reading of texts—that is the form that Derrida’s enterprise takes—but not an account of particular cultural systems. In the end, given Derrida’s claim that Lévi-Strauss seeks to dispense with the center, *arche*, and *telos*, but inhabits that quest in the wrong way, the crucial difference may be between a thought that does not seek to study any cultural activity or system but only to produce a critique and displacement of concepts that have been used in such enter-

¹² The essay somewhat grandiloquently concludes with his situating himself among those who “turn their eyes away when faced by the as yet unnamable which is proclaiming itself and which can do so, as is necessary whenever a birth is in the offing, only under the species of the nonspecies, in the formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity [la forme informe, muette, infante et terrifiante de la monstruosité]” (429/293).

¹³ For the French original, see Derrida, *L’Écriture et la différence* 11.

prises, through a reading of theoretical texts, and a thought actively seeking to understand cultural phenomena, while subjecting the necessary concepts to critique. We may have here above all a difference between a hermeneutics turned away from center or origin—a transcendental signified—while it reads a text of some sort, in a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” as we have come to say (Derrida’s enterprise could be described in this way), and another enterprise, which is not a hermeneutics nostalgic for an origin or transcendental signified but a poetics, and which is not seeking to interpret at all but to understand the conditions of possibility of signification in a particular cultural domain.

**1980:
Structuralism
and
Poststructuralism**

Such a distinction helps to explain why it is that Derrida’s subtle and complex critique of the structuralism he hailed as an event and continued to inhabit might have caught on and given rise to a so-called poststructuralist turn, to which structuralist thinkers were assimilated. Cusset claims that in poststructuralism America invented an open-ended successor, “a far more malleable one with two distinct advantages: it had a much looser, and therefore more accommodating, definition, and it did not exist as a homogeneous category on the Old Continent” (Cusset 31). But there are more precise reasons for its success. Given the underlying presumption in Anglo-American literary studies that the task of the analyst is to produce richer, superior interpretations of texts, Derrida’s critique had the attraction of encouraging forms of interpretation that included a critique of fundamental philosophical categories, with a new vocabulary and some new assumptions about the goals of interpretation (no longer was it to be assumed that an interpretation should demonstrate the organic unity of a work, for instance). This sort of critical activity seemed at once more radical and more in keeping with the traditions of literary study than a structuralist enterprise that attempted to advance an understanding of the cultural systems and conventions that make meaning possible and that in principle does not seek to provide interpretations of texts. If this more difficult enterprise of poetics could be represented as in some way deluded, all the more reason to convince oneself that the world had moved beyond structuralism to something else.

This distinction between an enterprise devoted to the critique of fundamental concepts and one seeking to use these concepts (while critiquing them) to understand some particular domain also helps to explain why it is that Michel Foucault, despite his disclaimers, was always identified as a structuralist. He sought to reconstruct the underlying systems of disciplinary thought, the conditions of possibility of various historical forms of knowledge, and at one point even claimed to

be happy to be called a positivist.¹⁴ On the other hand, once we were thought to have taken a poststructuralist turn, Foucault's critique of the subject and focus on the role of power in the constitution of knowledge enabled him to be treated as a leading poststructuralist devoted above all to the critique of concepts rather than research into conditions of possibility of various discourses.

As my *On Deconstruction* amply demonstrates, I have vast admiration for Derrida's brilliant readings of the texts of philosophy and other discourses, but I do find his astute critique of structuralist projects, whether Saussure's or J. L. Austin's, or Foucault's, or Lévi-Strauss's, to be, in general terms, a critique of the possibility of a poetics from the viewpoint of a specialized, self-critical hermeneutics—a critique that declines to object openly to the project of trying to work out the principles of the functioning of language or of mythology, or fashion, or literature, but instead offers an insightful critique of the terms and procedures that seem necessary (whose necessity he admits) to the conduct of such investigations.

What America called poststructuralism, which assimilated much work of structuralist thinkers, distinguished itself through a caricature of structuralism as blindly scientific.¹⁵ But in practice the systematizing ambitions of structuralist projects usually led to the identification of anomalies, indeterminacies, whereas Derrida's deconstructive readings often seem particularly concerned with regularities, with structures that appear in discourses of all sorts, whatever the ostensible preoccupations of these discourses—structures that cannot be avoided by attempts at choosing.

Structuralist writings treat meaning as the effect of codes and conventions—often the result of foregrounding, flouting, parodying, or subverting these conventions. To describe the conventions, various sciences are posited—of literature, of mythology, a general science of signs—which serve as a methodological horizon for a range of analytical projects. Within each project, interest characteristically comes to focus on marginal or anomalous phenomena, which reveal the operative conventions by resisting or playing with and against them. Gérard Genette's systematic structuralist narratology, *Discours du récit*, is actually most interested in such anomalies as the pseudo-itératif in Proust—events narrated as happening repeatedly (every Thursday) but in such specific detail that logically they could not happen repeatedly (Genette 121-23). Structuralist literary studies have shown

¹⁴ Foucault writes that if “by substituting the analysis of rarity for the search for totalities, the description of relations of exteriority for the theme of the transcendental foundation, the analysis of accumulations for the quest of the origin, one is a positivist, then I am quite happy to be one” (125).

¹⁵ Angermüller observes, “while structuralism was often reduced to a caricature, poststructuralism rapidly became an umbrella term designating various strands coming from Continental Europe” (16).

more interest in avant-garde works that resist conventions—the *nouveau roman*, Sade, Mallarmé—than in well-formed works of the tradition, or when they focus on the traditional novel—say, Balzac—it is to show how it plays with and ultimately comments on the codes that make it possible.¹⁶

The strange result of the American positing of poststructuralism is that the vocabularies, procedures, and results of structuralist thinkers are preserved and celebrated but the frameworks of systematic projects are often bracketed or set aside, as if they had been discredited. But as I have argued, the intervention by Derrida that was seen, retrospectively, as constitutive of poststructuralism, does not in fact call for a movement beyond structuralism but offers two ways of proceeding within this framework, and it is unfortunate that the attractions of a negative hermeneutics have eclipsed the combination of systematizing projects with the necessary critique of the concepts they employ, which might advance our understanding of what is undeniable—the production of meaning in social and cultural activities.

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¹⁶ Barthes’s *Essais critiques* contain several essays on the *nouveau roman* and its successful outplaying of the conventions of the novel. His *S/Z* is an analysis of Balzac’s “Sarrasine.”

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