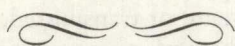


Reconstructing Literature



edited by
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Introduction

LAURENCE LERNER

In a society which does not stand still, one would not expect theories of literature to remain unchanged; so before trying to assess recent movements in literary criticism, we should perhaps begin by admitting that they are inevitable. The new movements of the last two decades, however, have caused more stir and challenged more preconceptions than is usual; they have also caused much bewilderment, to the point where a clear summary of the main issues is difficult and even, to some, suspect.

But since any contribution to the debate must begin by asking what it is about, I will make bold to suggest that an account of *la nouvelle critique* should be organized round two main ideas (I use the French phrase because 'New Criticism' has of course a precise and different referent in English; and since France has contributed so much to the movement, it can lend us a name for it too). The first is structuralism, which is defined by Barthes as the application to other disciplines of the methods of linguistics. For linguistics is surely the one discipline that must necessarily study structure and not content, for the simple reason that if it concerned itself with content it would be taking all human knowledge as its province, since all knowledge, with the possible exception of mathematical physics, is in language. The study of language cannot be concerned with the rightness or wrongness of what is said in language, but must deal with the rules of language itself, and that, since Saussure, has meant the establishing of differences. The study of anything else (marriage customs and kinship patterns, law, advertising or literature) as a language – that is, as a system of signs – must therefore mean the attempt to discover the structures that

make meaning possible within that system. In the case of literature, this will not differ greatly from the traditional study of literary conventions if the structures that are found are conscious; but once the critic looks for deep structures that operate below the awareness of writer and reader (as the deep rules of grammar, syntax and phonology operate below the awareness of competent speakers) then he will require a new terminology that will not, at first, seem to be using literary concepts. The quest for homologies between the devices of style and those of narrative organization, for instance, as carried out by Todorov, will seem to the old-fashioned reader to be using a barbarous and non-literary jargon, but the object of its pursuit is soon seen to be a specifically literary effect. Indeed, because structuralist criticism is not concerned with subject matter, it is in one way very literary indeed. Its aim, as Jakobson claimed, is to establish the nature of literariness; so that whereas the biographical, the sociological and the moral critics move continually from the universe of literature to that of society or the individual reader or writer, the structuralist will deny himself such excursions. His travels are from the nature of language in general to one particular kind of language.

The second central element in *la nouvelle critique* is its radicalism. Its practitioners are usually on the Left, and are often Marxists. They tend to claim that nothing is politically neutral, and that the purpose of criticism should be to reveal the ideological implications of the literary work: either to show how the apparent neutrality of the work conceals a commitment to the status quo, or to show how the professed conservatism of a great writer cannot prevent him from revealing conflicts in his society through contradictions in his world view. The former will normally take the form of a hostile critique, the latter of a sympathetic one, and the same writer (Shakespeare, Voltaire, Heine, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Eliot) may be seen by one critic as bourgeois and reactionary, by another as emancipatory and radical.

There is no necessary connection between these two tendencies. Both a conservative structuralism and a non-structuralist radicalism are easy to conceive: the former would study the deep structures of literary convention in the

belief that to understand them better can strengthen them (as the grammarian will not seek to overthrow the rules he discovers), and the latter would attack the status quo and advocate political revolution without using the analogy with language, or claiming that the very processes of representation have an ideological function – indeed, the radical may claim that semiotic analysis distracts from the urgent practical tasks of political change, just as he may see the often very obscure terminology of structuralism as a new form of elitism.

None the less, the two elements have often been joined lately, and their combination produces deconstruction, the form of criticism which sets out to analyse either a particular work or the very concept of literature so as to reveal its ideological basis. The deconstructionist, by calling our attention to the ideological prison of literary assumptions, and even of language itself, hopes to free us from it. He (or she) often regards the traditional conception of literature as elitist, and claims that its ideological function has been to maintain bourgeois hegemony; and by deconstructing it he rejects the view that literature is a 'natural' activity which criticism studies, in favour of the view that it is criticism which decides which texts shall be regarded as literary.

Such in brief is how the situation can be viewed. Is this book then intended as a counter-attack? The answer, I'm afraid, must be Yes and No. If I try to set down what all the contributors believe, the first and most important point will be that the age of reason did not come to a sudden end twenty years ago, and that *la nouvelle critique* has not rendered 'traditional literary criticism' suddenly obsolete. Indeed, there is no such thing as 'traditional literary criticism': to run together the enormous variety of critical positions and theories from Plato to Leavis into a single mass of overcooked rice pudding will prevent us from reading any of it with discrimination, and if a 'new' movement has to be seen as a rejection of all that has gone before, it will have to take up extreme positions that no one has previously been crazy enough to adopt. This is fine for a gossip columnist scenting battle and scandal in the hitherto remote lecture rooms of academies, but its effect on understanding can only

be reductive of both elements. The 'traditional' will be dead, the 'new' will be lunatic.

For suppose we tried to find a single basic contrast that would justify this crude division? We might begin from an attempt by George Steiner to be helpful:

Let me try and put very simply what the 'new way' of reading literature which we associate with such awkward words as 'structuralism' or 'semiotics' is fundamentally about. Instead of looking at a poem or passage from a novel in terms of what it says about 'the world out there', in terms of how the words represent or produce external experience, the 'structuralist' critic takes the text to be a complete experience in itself. The action, the only possible truth, is 'inside' the words. We don't ask how they relate to some supposed evidence 'out there', but we look at the manifold ways in which they relate to each other or to comparable verbal structures.¹

Perhaps this is as good an account in ordinary language as we are likely to get of this central point; and we can add to it a rather similar assertion by Antony Easthope:

Poetry is not to be read for truth or falsity of reference. . . . The poet as historical author is typically dead or absent; what we have as the poem is the message itself, *writing*. . . . Poetry consists *only* of artifice. . . . We never have the 'presence' of a poet; what we have is language, fiction, artifice, means of representation, poem.²

And Easthope couples this with an attack on the view of poetry as the expression of individual experience, and on the view that the reader 'recreates or relives this experience which is communicated to him or her'.

Does this then mean that 'traditional' criticism denied that poetry was artifice, or that the action of a poem was 'inside' the verbal structure? The first reply to this is that the doctrine of expression is not very old: it derives from the Romantics, and the consequent disparagement of the 'artificial' as that which lacks the expression of personal feeling only becomes prominent in criticism in the nineteenth century: 'artificial' is not a pejorative term for the Elizabethans, who had no difficulty in believing that poetry consists of artifice. But we don't even need to go back behind the Romantic movement:

The aesthetic experience cares nothing for the reality or unreality of its object. It is neither true nor false of set purpose: it simply ignores the distinction. There is no such thing as the so-called artistic illusion, for illusion means believing in the reality of that which is unreal, and art does not believe in the reality of anything at all.³

The 'objective orientation' . . . on principle regards the work of art in isolation from all . . . external points of reference, analyses it as a self-sufficient entity constituted by its parts in their internal relations, and sets out to judge it solely by criteria intrinsic to its own mode of being.⁴

Both these views sound very similar to what Steiner and Easthope see as central to structuralism. The first is from *Speculum Mentis* (1924) by Collingwood, who also held a view of art as the expression of emotion very close to the Romantic view which Easthope attacks; the second is from *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), Abrams' magisterial account of Romantic literary theory, and this 'objective orientation', which sounds even stronger than Steiner's statement ('the poem as heterocosm, a world of its own, independent of the world into which we are born') is supported from the central figures of the New Criticism, whom deconstructionists attack so vigorously.

And there is quite a different position that can lead to the view of literature as self-contained: that is the school of literary history that regards literature as an institution, and which we can represent by, say, the work of Leo Spitzer. Spitzer interprets literary works by relating them to tradition, and by reducing, if not eliminating, the personal element: thus his brilliant essay on Milton's sonnet 'Methought I saw my late espoused saint' attempts to remove the poet's blindness from the meaning of the poem by showing how well it can be understood in terms of conventions that were publicly available to poet and reader.⁵

There is a further complication. Not only is the view of literature as self-contained system represented in 'traditional' criticism, it is also attacked by the 'new'. Ellen Cantarow, for instance, attacks the 'literary professionalism' of the American university of the 1950s which tried to teach her to

eliminate her own feelings and talk about the form of a poem; instead of such 'objectivity' she pleads for a response which thinks about what the poem is saying 'about me, or about my friend's mother, or about my friend'.⁶ Ellen Cantarow represents what I have classified as non-structuralist radicalism, but she is so representative a voice of the revolutionaries of 1968 ('It was the fact of my womanhood, the war, the American education that made me a radical') that she can hardly be placed among the 'traditionalists'.

The division between those who see literature as a more or less self-contained system, and those who see it as interacting with real, extra-literary experience (that of the author, or of the reader, or the social reality of the author's or the reader's world) is a profoundly important one – perhaps as important as any other distinction: but it cuts across any division into two congealed rice puddings of the old and the new. Old-fashioned literary history and new-fashioned intertextuality fall on one side of the divide, as old-fashioned realism and new-fashioned demystification of literature fall on the other. And whatever other criterion was proposed for dividing the pre-historic (or pre-1960s) rice pudding from the new would equally mislead and oversimplify. For that reason we have avoided expressions like 'traditional literary criticism' in these essays. They are, rather, committed to the view that what makes a new movement valuable is its ability to re-animate old controversies by feeding in new social insights, a new psychology, or a new theoretical context. Psychoanalysis gave a new dimension to the very old doctrine of inspiration; and the view (derived from Foucault and Derrida) that there is no reality outside discourse gives a new dimension to the doctrine that literature is self-contained. If all language is self-contained because there is no external world for it to reach out to (a view that all the contributors to this book would reject), then the claim that literature is self-contained becomes more far-reaching, merely a particular case of a general rule.

Yet such an extension, simply because its philosophical claim is so absolute, may not make much difference to our way of seeing literature. If it were necessary to settle fundamental questions on the nature of reality before being able to understand and interpret literature, we would find

ourselves in the position of Browning's Grammarian, putting off living until he had first mastered the knowledge that was its necessary preliminary, and finding that he had put it off for ever.

There is another reason for refusing to believe that true literary criticism began in the 1960s: that is the relation between criticism and reading. It is not difficult to accept that a paradigm shift in physics can render earlier physics obsolete, because the phenomena which physics explains (the behaviour of matter) do not depend for their functioning on our understanding of them. But if a new and scientific form of criticism has now rendered the old kinds obsolete, what is its relation to reading? The claim that reading has in the past been a naive activity which we can now explain (replace?) by deconstructing it seems to go against all we know of literature. Almost everyone who reads likes to talk about what he reads: when that talk becomes systematic it is called criticism. Criticism has always been judged by whether in its enthusiasm for system it loses touch with the reading experience: when this happens, we have neo-classic systems which are eventually rejected as mere abstract schemata. Structuralism can only claim exemption from this danger by claiming that a scientific criticism can dispense with the concept of the reading experience. But structuralism's parent, linguistics, cannot study a language unless there are native speakers, whose experience provides the criteria for meaning; and the native speaker of literature is the reader who responds. Any systematic theory of literature must therefore base itself on understanding, which is as old as the literary work: it can reorganize such understanding (which is complex and changing) but it cannot abolish it.

Let us for instance take the idea of a code, much used by *la nouvelle critique*, and, indeed, the basis of Barthes' *S/Z*. In some circles it has become so accepted that interpretation is referred to as decoding. Is this a mere change in terminology? The defining factor in a code is that the meaning is hidden, so that we cannot understand without the key. Interpreting and decoding can merge into each other, but are not the same, as we can see if we think about learning a foreign language. At first, we need to decode: we understand nothing without

dictionary and grammar-book. Then, as we get to know the language, it gradually loses its code-like character. If we apply this distinction to literature, we will see that the code-like elements are those which cannot form part of our reading experience until we are taught them; perhaps they never can. A wholly innocent reader of a sonnet, not noticing how many lines there were, and not knowing that the number of lines had any significance, would have to have the sonnet form decoded for him. Are there any elements in poetry that remain encoded, even for the most sophisticated reader? In principle, the answer has to be No, since we can learn to notice anything, but there are certainly elements which the reader of any one period, or group, may never think of attending to. If Alastair Fowler is right in finding numerical patterns of astonishing intricacy in Renaissance poetry, then he is telling us that as far as we are concerned Surrey and Spenser wrote in code. A sophisticated Elizabethan might – just – have noticed that the first three stanzas of *Prothalamion* contain six rhymes each, stanzas 4–6 and 8–10 seven each, and stanza 7 five rhymes; but to go on and deduce a ‘double symmetry’, one of which places the bride at the centre and the other doesn’t, to relate this to two almost totally concealed ‘half-zodiacs’ and conclude ‘the half-zodiac of stanzas 8–10, like the 180 degrees mimed by the line-total, suggests the incompleteness of betrothal’ would mean that he would have to operate on the poem like a cryptographer.⁷

Decoding differs from interpreting in that it does not spell out to us the meaning of what we have read, it adds new elements to that meaning. If it were not for psychoanalysis, we could even say that it contributes precisely the elements we didn’t read, but once we dissolve the distinction between conscious and unconscious meaning, we must allow that what the decoder tells us could have been part of the reading experience – though if our reason for saying this is psychoanalytic, we shall only say it of elements that have some cathectic charge because they activate repressed material: which is very hard indeed to say of the fact that Surrey’s sonnet on Clere contains four personal and seven place names (of which three have family connections), offsetting the figure 7 by the ‘tetrad of alliance’.⁸

There are three possible positions on decoding, two tenable and one untenable. The first is that decoding, and interpreting the meaning of what we read, are opposites; that the former only begins where the latter leaves off. This would deprive it of all interest. The second is that decoding identifies elements in our reading of which we were unaware, and so increases self-knowledge: the decoding formula we use would then depend on the mechanism of concealment that we postulate – superego, class ideology, *mauvaise foi*, Apollonian dream, numerological game. The untenable position is that interpreting is decoding, and no other term is needed. That could only be true if no one had previously understood what he read. (This point is more fully discussed in Roger Scruton's essay, see pp. 44–52.)

What then gives this book its unity? One sympathizer who was not in the end able to contribute wrote to me: 'In some ways, my sympathy for the new ideas is a reaction against the dismissive contempt that seems to me to affect too many people in English studies.' Well, we can all I hope claim to have avoided *that*: for all the disagreement among the contributors about the merits of particular recent critics (from Holloway's very severe treatment of Barthes to Josipovici's admiration) everyone would agree that their views deserve a hearing and a reply rather than dismissal. But this is not much to claim: it is but common courtesy. What really unites the contributors is not their attitude towards the new but their attitude to the past. It should be possible to ask what *la nouvelle critique* has to teach us while at the same time refusing to abandon our belief in reason, in the possibility of meaning, in the conception of literature and in the need for value-judgements. We all share that refusal. In asking what we can learn from new and sometimes uncongenial schools of criticism, in accepting new jargon when (but only when) it seems necessary, we hope to show that we are not afraid of disagreement, but refuse to behave as if there is a war on.

Of course this will not satisfy the bellicose, on either side. The famous quarrel between Roland Barthes and Raymond Picard in the 1960s, which has been refought so many times by fresh combatants, is not going to be settled by diplomatic intervention. Since Picard described the work of Barthes as

'imposture' and accused him of 'escroqueries intellectuelles', it is hardly surprising that Barthes, in return, accused the criticism represented by Picard of 'éviter l'absurde au prix de la platitude' and of bestowing on the clichés of character 'une créance à la fois excessive et dérisoire'. But the interest of such a controversy does not, after all, reside in the insults. Suppose we step between the combatants, and try and listen patiently to both: should it not be possible to rehearse the issues without, to begin with, taking sides?

The controversy begins with Barthes' book *Sur Racine*, which is greatly indebted to the Marxist structuralism of Goldmann, and the 'psycho-critique' of Mauron. This book should probably not be described as structuralist; it is more concerned with giving 'un sens particulier à l'oeuvre' than in studying why interpretations are acceptable – that is to say, by Barthes' own terminology it is *critique littéraire* rather than *science de la littérature*. Its remarks on Racine's language (on his use of pronouns, for example) are suggestive rather than systematic. In so far as it finds systematic patterns, these are of images and concepts not verbal devices, and their significance is psychological. The main conclusion is that the basic subject of the plays is the 'lutte inexpiable du Père et du fils', which is also 'celle de Dieu et de la créature'. The psychoanalytic tendency is obvious.

In reply to *Sur Racine* Picard published his aggressively titled *Nouvelle critique ou nouvelle imposture* in which he attacked what he saw as a mixture of dogmatism and error. 'Toujours, jamais: les vérités dont le critique se fait le prophète sont absolues, universelles, définitives. . . . Une ou deux observations . . . lui suffisent pour passer à l'universel.' And even the one or two are sometimes attained by contorting the sense of the play. In *Bérénice*, how can Titus be said to turn his rival into a witness, when for most of the play he does not even know that Antiochus *is* his rival? How can Titus be said to have killed his father, even in wish, on the basis of the one line 'J'ai même souhaité la place de mon père', to which the context gives a quite different significance? The elements of sadism and Oedipal wish which Barthes finds in *Bérénice* are, for Picard, based on simple misreading. And Barthes' whole approach to a Racine play is suspect, because it

constantly translates literary structures into other kinds of structure, treating literature 'comme une collection de signes dont la signification est ailleurs, dans un *ailleurs* psychanalytique . . . ou dans l'*ailleurs* pseudo-marxiste d'une structure economico-politique, ou dans l'*ailleurs* de tel ou tel univers métaphysique. . . . Ainsi . . . l'oeuvre n'est plus dans l'oeuvre.' The task of responsible scholarship, as Picard sees it, is to save the work from this kind of reductivism.

Barthes returned to the attack with *Critique et vérité*, which addressed itself to the whole tradition of academic and 'bourgeois' criticism. It locates this as part of the traditional veneration for *le vraisemblable*, a tradition which has always treated the familiar as if it was the natural, and so condemned itself to banality and unadventurousness. Readers of Barthes will have no difficulty in recognizing one of his central concerns in this point. He then asserts that criticism, instead of tamely accepting what received language gives us, ought to recognize that literature itself is a *critique du langage*; and he concludes with the now familiar claim that a deep reading of a literary work finds, not a *signifié* but chains of symbols and homologies of relationship.⁹

I hope that is as fair a summary as can be managed in a page: now, almost as briefly, for comments. The first is that the restaurateur who tells you that all the rival establishments will poison you may none the less serve a good meal. Barthes' scorn for *la critique universitaire*, and his insistence on saying 'always' and 'never', do not detract from the positive elements, the fact that he does succeed in capturing something important about the feel of Racine's plays. *Andromaque*, *Britannicus* and *Bajazet* do indeed seem to be about the difference between *la chambre* ('reste de l'autre mythique'), *l'antichambre* and the world outside, and these highly general images seem to correspond to the generality of the language. We can respond to the evocative insights and shrug the dogmatism aside, very much as we learned to do with the New Criticism. I find that I read *Sur Racine* in much the same way as I read, say, Robert Penn Warren's essay on *The Ancient Mariner*.¹⁰ That essay is both very like *Sur Racine* and very unlike it. It is like it because it too aims 'not only to define particular symbolisms, but to establish the relationships

among them'. These symbolisms are under the surface, and in disinterring them Warren attacks all the critics who prefer to see the poem as 'fertile in unmeaning miracles': he believes that its greatness consists in a systematic deep structure. It is unlike Barthes in that the structures it disinters are philosophic, moral and even religious: the theme of sacramental unity, and the theme of the imagination. Yet they are just as much of an *ailleurs* as the themes of Barthes, and indeed how easy it always is to translate doctrines about the spiritual significance of the natural world (the 'one life') into doctrines about the deep places of the psyche, and how easily it might have been Barthes who wrote of the shooting of the Albatross 'the crime, as it were, brings the sun'. Now if we look for a Picard to Warren's Barthes, we shall find it in Humphrey House, who criticized him for his excess of coherence and system: 'it does not follow [from Coleridge's recognition of the unconscious element in the working of genius] that there was a latent precision waiting for critics to elucidate it.'¹¹ And sure enough, there are elements of system in Warren's explanation that are hard to swallow, such as the proposal that the Mariner is the *poète maudit*, or that the sun turning from 'god's own head' to the 'bloody sun' implies a fable of the Enlightenment 'whose fair promises had wound up in the blood-bath of the end of the century'. And it is possible to regard these sceptically without refusing some of the rich insights we are offered into the interplay of the underlying themes, and the way 'the hunting of the bird becomes the hunting of man.'

Here, from the heart of the New Criticism, is a very similar kind of essay to *Sur Racine*; and here too is a very similar critical controversy. Yet how different in tone: how muted the quarrel here is. Warren offers his interpretation with a certain amount of dogmatism, but also with a careful discussion of possible objections; and House never steps from criticism to insult, or has any difficulty in saying 'Mr Warren has permanently enriched our understanding of the poem'. It is all very tame and Anglo-Saxon, and of no interest to those who love a good fight. Yet the points of substance are much the same as in the Barthes-Picard battle of the books.

My next point is that Barthes does not belong with that

tendency in structuralism which seeks to discover the nature of literariness. It is not he but Picard who insists on treating literature as literature, not as anything else. It is Picard who, as we have seen, complains that Barthes is constantly translating literature into something else. Here we have a paradox. For Barthes, the entire system of signs that is our culture has no external referent, no *ailleurs*, for he holds the radical belief that there is no *signifié*; but when it comes to moving between different parts of that culture, it is he who wants to get outside the literary work, and Picard who wants to stay inside it. How old-fashioned this makes Barthes sound: it ranges him with what most of the great poets have always believed, that there is a world outside their art and that they are writing about it.

Finally, the objectivity of meaning. Picard has little difficulty in disposing, in his sturdy fashion, of the view that words can mean anything. If the critic is 'un être pleinement subjectif', why publish? 'Toutefois, s'il écrit sur Racine et s'il publie ce qu'il écrit, c'est qu'il juge que sa subjectivité est universalisable et qu'il croit à la valeur de ce qu'il apporte; communiquer, c'est déjà objectiver.' This seems so obvious as hardly to need saying: if meaning is purely subjective, there is no such thing as language. But every university teacher today has discovered that it does need saying: in the face of that student who keeps reappearing to tell us that all responses are valid because there is no fixed objective meaning, we have to point out that he is sawing off the branch on which he is sitting. Such crude relativism is no use to anyone: but was Barthes saying *that*? It is true that his more recent conception of the text which is *scriptible* rather than *lisible* does sometimes look like a semantic free-for-all, but in *Sur Racine* he is being much more careful. The impossibility of telling the truth about Racine which he asserts is the conclusion of a very careful discussion of the kinds of criticism on offer and needed, and it is not an assertion that anything goes, but that there are several languages available for talking about Racine; 'psychanalytique, existential, tragique, psychologique (on peut en inventer d'autres; on en inventera d'autres)' – and we could add, the philological language of Picard.

And if there is a crude relativism against which Barthes'

position must be protected, there is an equally crude positivism into which Picard is in danger of falling. For behind his complaints about Barthes' misreadings, there seems to lie a very clear-cut conception of the literary work: that it has one meaning, which scholarship can discover. Racine's plays, which belong to a genre governed by strict conventions, are not the inarticulate expression of unconscious conflicts: 'elles sont le triomphe de la création volontaire et consciente.' His belief in a literary creation that is 'volontaire et lucide' makes him impatient of ambiguity and of mystery: 'Nous sommes quelques-uns à être fatigués des ténèbres et des souterrains. . . . La profondeur d'une pensée est dans une intelligibilité qui se révèle à l'effort d'intellection, et non pas qui se dérobe. . . . Creuser une idée, ce n'est pas s'enfermer dans l'obscurité de ses abîmes, c'est mesurer en pleine lumière sa portée.' If Barthes is like Robert Penn Warren, Picard is like Yvor Winters: refreshing in tone, but willing to have no truck with the depths, throwing out not only a bathful of modernist water but also the baby of Romanticism. It is a neo-classicism that denies inspiration, and attributes literary creation to reason and will alone.

Between the two simple extremes, that all meaning is subjective and that every text has one fixed meaning, it is necessary to work out a tenable and (no doubt) complex position. In particular, we need to characterize the special ambiguity of literature. A poem or a play can adapt itself to other epochs and other readerships with far greater flexibility than can discursive prose. This leads some critical schools to speak of universality and others of ambiguity; it means that any theory of literature must attempt to describe both this flexibility and the constraints upon it. If Picard sometimes forgets the former, Barthes sometimes neglects the latter.

I hope it is now growing clear why I had to answer both yes and no to the question of whether this book is intended as a counter-attack to structuralism. It is rather an attempt to come to terms with a new phenomenon, while at the same time querying any simplistic division into old and new. Indeed, one further objection to the clear-cut division into contending schools resides in another belief to which all of us would subscribe: that (I cannot improve on Cedric Watts'