DAVID LODGE

Working with STRUCTURALISM

Essays and Reviews on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Literature

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Preface

Literary criticism is at present in a state of crisis which is partly a consequence of its own success. One might compare its situation to that of physics after Einstein and Heisenberg: the discipline has made huge intellectual advances, but in the process has become incomprehensible to the layman – and indeed to many professionals educated in an older, more humane tradition. This incomprehensibility is not simply a matter of jargon – though that is a real stumbling block; more fundamentally, the new criticism, like the new physics, often runs counter to empirical observation and common sense. It therefore tends to alienate and exclude the common reader.

By the 'new criticism' I do not of course, mean the New Criticism – that now venerable Anglo-American enterprise extending from Eliot, Richards and Empson to, say, Ransom, Brooks and Wimsatt, which tried, with considerable success, to refine and systematise the common reader's intuitive reading of literary texts – but the European tradition of literary theory and critical practice that is loosely called 'structuralist'. Originating in the linguistics of Saussure and the work of the Russian Formalists in the revolutionary period, developed by the Prague School of linguistics and poetics in the 1930s, and nurtured through the 1940s and 1950s by *émigré* scholars in the USA, this tradition of thought about language, art and sign systems in general has provided the methodological impetus for an exciting new wave of research in the humanities in the last two decades. Emanating principally from Paris in the 1960s, this wave spread out in all directions; in the East, opening up long neglected riches in the Russian Formalists and their modern successors, the Soviet semiologists; in the West, being welcomed enthusiastically by those for whom the wells of the New Criticism had run dry.

Nobody professionally involved in the world of literary scholarship and academic criticism in England or America can deny that the most striking development of the last twenty years has been this massive swing of attention towards Continental structuralism. There are, of course, still strongholds of dissent and resistance, still plenty

of academics in England and America (and elsewhere) who have convinced themselves that if they keep their heads down long enough the whole structuralist fuss will blow over; or who, more valiantly, man the periodical ramparts in defence of empiricism, humanism, the New Criticism or whatever.* But if the allegiances of the brightest young university teachers and graduate students are any guide, that battle has already been lost (or won, according to your point of view), and the question is what to do in the aftermath: how to work with structuralism, not only in the sense of applying it when it seems useful to do so, but also in the sense of working *alongside* it, recognising its existence as a fact of intellectual life without being totally dominated by it. I have called this book *Working with Structuralism*, but it might as well have been called *Living with Structuralism.*

Since the old criticism, like the old physics, appears to work perfectly well for most practical purposes, the common reader (and common student) understandably does not see why (s)he should be bothered to master the difficult new one. For the professionals who know how to operate the structuralist methodology, however, there is no question of going back to something less precise, less powerful and less productive. The consequences have been damaging, both inside and outside the academy. Inside, there is an increasing gap between teaching and research, the same individual giving bland, old-fashioned tutorials on *Middlemarch* in the morning, and in the afternoon reducing it to something resembling algebra, or a treatise on phenomenology badly translated from the French, for the edification of a small peer group. Outside, there is an increasing discontinuity between the language of academic criticism and the language of ordinary reviewing and literary journalism, so that the latter is no longer refreshed and stimulated by exposure to whatever the best and brightest academic minds are thinking (or vice versa). This discontinuity is particularly marked in England, whose literary intellectuals have always been hostile to literary theory. Structuralism offers a very broad target to their animosity; and one would have to go back to the eighteenth century to find a time at which writers and literary journalists were as united in their fear and loathing of academic criticism as they are now.

The essays and review articles gathered in this volume are the work of someone who is actively involved in the practice of university teaching, academic criticism, literary journalism and writing novels: and anxious to preserve connections and continuity between these different

*See, for example, Howard Erskine-Hill, 'Scholarship as Humanism', *Essays in Criticism*, January 1979, and various articles by George Watson collected in his *Modern Literary Thought* (Heidelberg, 1978).

discourses. The various items were written for a variety of occasions and audiences, over a period (the 1970s) when I personally experienced the impact of structuralism; and they represent my effort to assimilate that influence without paying the price of incomprehensibility to all but a small group of initiates. (Whether I have succeeded or not, others must judge.)

'Structuralism' is a very elastic label, stretched over a wide range of intellectual activities, but one might distinguish two main branches at present. One is the extension of what I would call classical structuralism. It is concerned with the analysis and understanding of culture as a system of systems, of which language is usually taken as the ideal model for explanatory purposes. This structuralism aims to do for literature – or myth, or food or fashion – what grammar does for language: to understand and explain how these systems work, what are the rules and constraints within which, and by virtue of which, meaning is generated and communicated. It is essentially formalist, and aspires to the status of science. The second branch of structuralism, perhaps more properly called poststructuralism, is ideological in orientation. It combines the anti-empirical methodology of classical structuralism with ideas derived from Marxism, psychoanalysis and philosophy, to analyse cultural institutions, such as literature, as mediations of ideologies. This structuralism is polemical and *engagé*. Jakobson, Lévi-Strauss, and Todorov would be representative figures of the first branch of structuralism; Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida of the second. Some individuals – notably Roland Barthes – have contributed at different times to both schools of thought, but ultimately these are opposed in aims and methods, and are often highly critical of each other. The structuralism 'applied' in this book is almost exclusively of the first kind. I have always been more interested in formalist than in ideological criticism – perhaps because as a novelist I would prefer to be on the sharp end of the former; and I am not at all sure that poststructuralist discourse is susceptible of being assimilated and domesticated in a critical vernacular. To open a book or article by, for instance, Derrida or one of his disciples is to feel that the mystification and intimidation of the reader is the ultimate aim of the enterprise.

Structuralism of the classical, formalist kind is, as it were, only accidentally mystifying and intimidating. It works at a high level of abstraction and uses a specialised jargon because its bent is essentially theoretical; but my own interest in it (no doubt reflecting an incorrigibly empirical English mentality) has been in applying its concepts and methods to concrete critical tasks. The essays in the first section of this book are mostly exercises of this kind, some concerned with the analysis and interpretation of particular texts, others with broad topics in literary history. The first essay gives a condensed and somewhat

simplified account of ideas expounded more elaborately in my book *The Modes of Modern Writing* (1977); and the fifth essay locates the argument of that book in the context of current debate about the ideology and methodology of historiography in general and of literary history in particular. The three essays in between are concerned with the formal analysis of narrative – especially of realistic fiction – an area in which structuralism has proved a particularly fertile influence. Two of these essays stand in a symmetrical relation to each other, and not merely because both are concerned with very short stories that have one rather important element in common. In the first of these essays, a structuralist method of analysis is applied to a cryptic text by an acknowledged modern master of narrative in order to test the power of the method; in the second, it is applied to a text of acknowledged triviality in order to study the system of narrative itself. In general, structuralism is probably most effective in such contexts – where literary value is either taken for granted or is irrelevant to the main object of inquiry. But between these two essays I have included one (on *Hard Times*) which addresses itself more directly to a question of evaluation.

Several of the concepts and terms introduced in this first section of the book recur in subsequent sections – for instance, in the essays on Hardy as a cinematic novelist, on the New Journalism, and on 'psychobabble'. My increasing interest in Hardy, evidenced by the three essays on his work, itself no doubts reflects the influence of structuralist criticism, for no novelist demonstrates more strikingly the operation of that fundamental aesthetic principle Jakobson calls 'equivalence'. In Hardy's elaborate and ingenious – and sometimes tortuous – patterning of his novels, we see that 'projection of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination' taken to the very limits of what the classic realist novel could tolerate without collapsing and re-forming into the modernist novel.

Other essays collected here show little or no trace of structuralist ideas, and some, like the mainly biographical studies of Evelyn Waugh in Part III, run directly counter to the spirit of that movement. I make no apology for this. The range of questions that may validly be posed about literature and literary texts is very wide, and no single method will answer them all. The eclecticism of this book is its point – and, I hope, its justification.

Acknowledgments

Most of the pieces collected here have been published before in slightly or substantially different forms, and some have been revised more than once. 'Modernism, Antimodernism and Postmodernism' was an inaugural lecture and was published as such by the University of Birmingham; 'Analysis and Interpretation of the Realist Text' was originally presented as a paper to a conference organised by the Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics at the University of Tel Aviv, and was subsequently published in the institute's journal, *Poetics Today*; 'How Successful is *Hard Times*?' is an adaptation of a contribution to a volume of essays on this text, edited by Graham Storey for the British Council; 'Historicism and Literary History' was originally a paper delivered at the MLA Convention of 1978 and subsequently published by the journal *New Literary History*; the essay on *The Woodlanders* is an abridged version of my introduction to the New Wessex edition of Hardy's novel, published by Macmillan; 'Thomas Hardy as a Cinematic Novelist' started as a note in the journal *Novel*, and in its present form appeared in *Thomas Hardy after Fifty Years*, edited by Lance St John Butler and published by Macmillan; 'Pessimism and Fictional Form' was originally a recorded talk for the Open University and in its present form was published in *Critical Approaches to the Fiction of Thomas Hardy* edited by Dale Kramer, published by Macmillan; 'Evelyn Waugh: Habits of a Lifetime was originally published in the *New Review* and now incorporates part of an earlier essay, 'The Arrogance of Evelyn Waugh' published in the *Critic*; 'The Fugitive Art of Letters' was first published in *Evelyn Waugh and His World*, edited by David Pryce-Jones and published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson; 'Ambiguously Ever After' was delivered to the Royal Society of Literature as the Joyce Brown Memorial Lecture, 1978; 'Turning Unhappiness into Money' was originally published in *Encounter*; '*Crow* and the Cartoons' was first published in the *Critical Quarterly*; 'Tom Wolfe and the New Journalism' was first published in the *New Review*; 'Where It's At' was originally published in *Encounter* and, in its present form, in *The State of the Language*, edited by Christopher Ricks and Leonard Michaels,

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I am grateful to many people, inside and outside my own Department at Birmingham University, with whom I have profitably discussed the topics dealt with in these essays. Special thanks are due to Deirdre Burton, whose interest extended to helping me find an appropriate title, and even a jacket design, for the book: in this, as in much else, personifying everything the word 'colleague' should mean.

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Part I

Applying Structuralism

1 Modernism, Antimodernism and Postmodernism

One prejudice against professors of English is that there is nothing particularly difficult about what they profess. The other is that in trying to make it appear difficult, they spoil the innocent pleasure of ordinary people who know what they like and enjoy reading. It is all too easy to find examples of this attitude to academic criticism. Let me quote a celebrated modern writer, D. H. Lawrence:

Literary criticism can be no more than a reasoned account of the feeling produced upon the critic by the book he is criticising. Criticism can never be a science: it is, in the first place, much too personal, and in the second, it is concerned with values that science ignores. The touchstone is emotion, not reason. We judge a work of art by its effect on our sincere and vital emotion, and nothing else. All the critical twiddle-twaddle about style and form, all this pseudo-scientific classifying and analysing of books in an imitation-botanical fashion, is mere impertinence and mostly dull jargon.

I suspect that quite a few of my readers may have a secret – or not so secret – sympathy with Lawrence's sentiments; but I must try to persuade them that he is wrong – or at least, wrong in his conclusion. For the passage I quoted, which opens Lawrence's 1928 essay on John Galsworthy, is deeply characteristic of the author in the way it becomes increasingly polemical and extreme as it goes on. The opening proposition is fair enough: 'Literary criticism can be no more than a reasoned account of the feeling produced upon the critic by the book he is criticising.' But I would maintain – and I think most academic literary critics would share this view – that if the critical account is to be, in Lawrence's word, 'reasoned', it must involve the classifying and analysing which he dismissed so contemptuously, and even a certain amount of jargon.

No book, for instance, has any meaning on its own, in a vacuum. The meaning of a book is in large part a product of its differences from and similarities to other books. If a novel did not bear some

resemblance to other novels we should not know how to read it, and if it wasn't different from all other novels we shouldn't *want* to read it. Any adequate reading of a text, therefore, involves identifying and classifying it in relation to other texts, according to content, genre, mode, period, and so on. The fact that a literary taxonomy can never be as exact as a botanical taxonomy does not affect the basic principle: the classification of data into larger groups and categories – if only Animal, Vegetable and Mineral – is a primary act of human intelligence without which neither Nature nor Culture can be made intelligible. Likewise, even if we agree with Lawrence that the essential core of literary criticism is the effect of a book upon an individual reader, the fact that this effect, or 'feeling' as he calls it, is produced by language and by language alone, means that we cannot explain how it works unless we have some understanding of 'style and form'. In short, without some notion of literature as a system – a system of possibilities of which the corpus of literary works is a partial realisation – Lawrence's advice to critics to rely on their 'sincere and vital emotion and nothing else' is itself very likely to produce critical twiddle-twaddle, particularly from critics with less interesting sensibilities and more limited rhetorical skills than he possessed.

What I propose to do here, in a necessarily simplified and schematic fashion, is to suggest some ways in which the enormous mass of texts that make up modern English literature can be ordered and classified. It is, if you like, the sketch of a literary history of the modern period – which I take to be now about a hundred years old – but a history of writing rather than of writers, a history of literary style, fashion, or mode, of what contemporary French critics call *écriture*; and it will reflect my own particular interests in being biased somewhat towards the novel, in occasionally stepping over the boundary between English and American literature, and in applying concepts and methods of analysis drawn from the European structuralist tradition in linguistics and poetics.

I have already invoked that tradition in describing literature as a system of possibilities, of which the corpus of literary works is a partial realisation, for this is essentially the distinction made by Saussure between *langue* and *parole*, a language and individual speech acts in that language. Saussure defined the verbal sign, or word, as the union of a signifier (that is, a sound or written symbolisation of a sound) and a signified (that is, a concept) and asserted that the relationship between *significant* and *signifié* is an arbitrary one. That is, there is no natural or necessary reason why the sound *cat* should denote a feline quadruped in English and the sound *dog* a canine quadruped, and the English language would work equally well if *cat* and *dog* changed places in the system, as long as all users were aware of the change. This nucleus

of arbitrariness at the heart of language means that it is the systematic relationships between words that enable them to communicate rather than the relationships between words and things; and it exposes the idea of any *resemblance* between words and things as an illusion. Since language provides a model for all systems of signs, the idea has profound implications for the study of culture as a whole. In brief, it implies the priority of form over content, of the signifier over the signified.

One way of defining the art that is peculiar to the modern period – which I shall distinguish by calling modern*ist* – one way of defining modernist art, and especially modernist literature, is to say that it intuitively accepted or anticipated Saussure's view of the relationship between signs and reality. Modernism turned its back on the traditional idea of art as imitation and substituted the idea of art as an autonomous activity. One of its most characteristic slogans was Walter Pater's assertion, 'All art constantly aspires to the condition of music' – music being, of all the arts, the most purely formal, the least referential, a system of signifiers without signifieds, one might say. The fundamental principle of aesthetics before the modern era was that art imitates life, and is therefore in the last analysis answerable to it: art must tell the truth about life, and contribute to making it better, or at least more bearable. There was always, of course, a diversity of opinion about the kind of imitation that was most desirable – about whether one should imitate the actual or the ideal – but the basic premise that art imitated life prevailed in the West from classical times till the late eighteenth century, when it began to be challenged by Romantic theories of the imagination. It was temporarily reinforced by the considerable achievement of the realistic novel in the nineteenth century, but by the end of that century it had been turned on its head. 'Life imitates art', declared Oscar Wilde, meaning that we compose the reality we perceive by mental structures that are cultural, not natural in origin, and that it is art which is most likely to change and renew those structures when they become inadequate or unsatisfying. 'Where, if not from the Impressionists,' he asked, 'do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gaslamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows?'

But if life imitates art, where does art come from? The answer given is: from other art, especially art of the same kind. Poems are not made out of experience, they are made out of poetry – that is, the tradition of disposing the possibilities of language to poetic ends – modified, to be sure, by the particular experience of the individual poet, but in no straightforward sense an expression of it. T. S. Eliot's essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' is perhaps the best-known exposition of the idea, but variations on it can be found easily enough in the writings of Mallarmé, Yeats, Pound and Valéry. It produced poetry of the kind we

call Symbolist with a capital 'S' – poetry that distinguishes itself from ordinary referential discourse by violently dislocated syntax and bewildering shifts of register, poetry in which denotation is swamped by connotation, in which there are no narrative or logical climaxes but instead vibrant, suggestive, ambiguous images and symbols.

The emergence of the modernist novel was a little slower and more gradual, because of the impressive achievement of the realistic novel in the nineteenth century. What seems to happen, first in France, and then in England in the work of James, Conrad, Joyce, and in his own idiosyncratic way Lawrence, is that the effort to capture reality in narrative fiction, pursued with a certain degree of intensity, brings the writer out on the other side of 'realism'. The writer's prose style, however sordid and banal the experience it is supposed to be mediating, is so highly and lovingly polished that it ceases to be transparent but calls attention to itself by the brilliant reflections glancing from its surfaces. Then, pursuing reality out of the daylight world of empirical common sense into the individual's consciousness, or subconscious, and ultimately the collective unconscious, discarding the traditional narrative structures of chronological succession and logical cause-and-effect, as being false to the essentially chaotic and problematic nature of subjective experience, the novelist finds himself relying more and more on literary strategies and devices that belong to poetry, and specifically to Symbolist poetry, rather than to prose: allusion to literary models and mythical archetypes, for instance, and the repetition of images, symbols, and other motifs – what E. M. Forster described, with another gesture towards music, as 'rhythm' in the novel.

This characterisation of modernist poetry and fiction is familiar enough; but not all writing in the modern period is modern*ist*. There is at least one other kind of writing in this period which, for want of a better term, I have designated in my title as antimodernist. This is writing that continues the tradition modernism reacted against. It believes that traditional realism, suitably modified to take account of changes in human knowledge and material circumstances, is still viable and valuable. Antimodernist art does not aspire to the condition of music; rather it aspires to the condition of history. Its prose does not approximate to poetry; rather its poetry approximates to prose. It regards literature as the communication of a reality that exists prior to and independent of the act of communication. To Wilde's half-serious assertion that our perception of fog derives from the Impressionists, the antimodernist would reply that on the contrary it derives from industrial capitalism, which built large cities and polluted their atmosphere with coal-smoke, and that it is the job of the writer to make this causal connection clear; or, if he must dwell on the picturesque distorting visual effects of fog, at least to make them symbols of a more fundamental denaturing of