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Book Reviews

Criticism Editors

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Language, Semiotics, and Criticism

Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary, by A. J. Greimas and J. Courtés, trans. Larry Crist and Daniel Patte and James Lee, Edward Mc-Mahon II, Gary Phillips, Michael Rengstorf. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982. Advances in Semiotics Series. Pp. xviii + 409. $45.00.

Several years ago, in an issue of *New Literary History* devoted to Soviet Semiotics and Criticism which appeared about the same time as A. J. Greimas's and J. Courtés's *Semiotique: Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*, Wlad Godzich wrote in an afterword that "although semiotics aspires to be a science, i.e., a homogeneous and coherent discourse capable of self-correcting and incremental development, semioticians know that its medium is language, the locus of uncertainty, lies, heterogeneity, and incoherence." [1] Now Indiana University Press, in its Advances in Semiotics Series, has brought out a fine translation of the Greimas/Courtés dictionary, *Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary*, which aims to offer to English readers the same attempt at homogeneity and coherence and self-correction that the authors attempted in the hundreds of cross-referenced definitions and articles of this ambitious work. The translators define this ambition in explaining, in the "Translators' Note," why they refrained from using current English equivalents to many of the concepts defined in the work. *Semiotics and Language*, they write,

> brings together in a consistent theoretical framework many very disparate partial theories and proposals stemming from a great variety of fields, which until now have been perceived as discrete or even divergent aspects of semiotic research. But to do so it was necessary for the authors to establish a terminology that would transcend all those projects, a terminology that is tantamount to a metalanguage. (p.viii)

The establishment of a metalanguage leaves out the *discourse* Godzich speaks of, although the elaborate system of cross-reference which Greimas and Courtés offer begins to approach, as I shall argue, some sense of discourse.

Still, the *Analytical Dictionary* is an important and handsomely produced book. The translators wisely chose to repunctuate and break up some of the more unwieldly sentences in the articles of the dictionary, and for a project so large and with so many hands, there are remarkably few minor inconsistencies in diction and style. If the *Analytical Dictionary* will not create the kind of coherent and homogeneous metalanguage both its authors and its translators hope for, it will create at least the locus of common denomination —the "common ground" the authors speak of—which will aid understanding in important ways. In discussing the dictionary, I will try to indicate some of these ways and argue, more broadly, the place of semiotics and its relationship with criticism *Semiotics and Language* suggests.

In my discussion and use of *Semiotics and Language* bold face type will mark items quoted from the dictionary, and I have occasionally left in the as-

terisks that designate cross-reference. I have not reproduced the lists of cross references that appear at the end of each article, and I have deleted the parenthetical French terminology and the numbered paragraphs. The French edition presents the English equivalents of its terminology parenthetically, and the translators have added an appendix with the French and English equivalents, marked when they have changed the English. The choices of equivalents are sound and wise—only in one or two difficult cases might I quibble; most are as felicitous as the use of "disengagement" to replace "shifting out" with which *Semiotique* translates *débrayage*. And the "Selected Bibliography" prepared by Edward J. McMahon II will prove to be among the most useful aspects of what will be a much-used book. One such use is the following discussion of the *Analytical Dictionary* and its relationship to structuralism, post-structuralism, and literary criticism.

i

The aim of *Semiotics and Language*, as the authors write in their "Preface," is the establishment of "a common ground upon which [many diverse contemporary semiotic] theories could be brought together, compared and evaluated" (p. xi). Such an aim, as the authors note, is personally—and I will argue "theoretically"—unambitious, even if it is a task that is practically of the highest and most honorable ambition. The aim is that of taxonomy rather than the construction of a global theory, which, the authors write, "would have required an effort of discoursive strategy all out of proportion with our present goal" (p. xii). *Semiotics and Language* defines **taxonomy** as "classification itself, i. e., the procedures of systematic organization of observed and described data," and the whole of the *Analytical Dictionary* with its arbitrary (i.e. alphabetical) listings and its elaborate structuration of cross-references attempts this kind of taxonomy. **Taxonomy**, the dictionary asserts, is already a function of the social sciences:

> The analysis of discourse with a scientific goal (in the social sciences) has revealed that the cognitive activity found therein consists mainly in **taxonomic doing**. This sort of doing involves constructing semiotic objects (elements,* units,* hierarchies*) with the help of recognized identities and alterities. This taxonomic construction constitutes a genuine prerequisite for the development of a scientific metalanguage.

At the center of this project is the elaboration of structuralism as such. **Structuralism**, as the *Analytical Dictionary* defines it, "is presented especially (and perhaps wrongly: see Language, natural) as a taxonomy." The authors suggest that this is perhaps wrong because "**natural languages** are to be distinguished from other semiotic systems by their combinatory* power which is due to what is called double articulation* and the processes of disengagement.*"

With the term **combinatory** we reach a central term in the structuralist enterprise and a concise definition of the procedure of the *Analytical Dictionary* with its double taxonomic procedure of constructing and defining semiotic objects by defining the relationships between them:

1. Derived from the medieval *ars combinatoria*, **combinatory princi-**

ple is seen as a discipline, or rather as a mathematical calculation, which enables a large number of combinations of elements to be formed from a small number of simple elements. . . .

2. The concept of a combinatory principle is in some way related to that of generation, since it designates a procedure whereby complex units are generated from simple units. . . .

A combinatory, then, is a kind of analytical dictionary, one that combines taxonomy with relationship. Such a combinatory, like *Semiotics and Language*, can "generate" discourse in just the way I am generating discourse here by following the cross-references of the dictionary: "the most profitable way of using the dictionary," the translators suggest, "is perhaps to plunge in, according to one's own needs, curiosity, or simple hazard, and then follow the authors' suggestions concerning their system of cross-reference" (p. ix).

Such a project of cross-reference is what Lévi-Strauss calls "the search for a middle way between aesthetic perception and the exercise of logical thought" which is the result of the "combinatory" called music.[2] This is the heart of the structuralist activity. Thus, Lévi-Strauss writes,

> I had tried to transcend the contrast between the tangible and the intel-
> ligible by operating from the outset at the sign level. The function of
> signs is, precisely, to express the one by means of the other. Even
> when very restricted in number, they lend themselves to rigorously or-
> ganized combinations which can translate even the finest shades of the
> whole range of sense experience. We can thus hope to reach a plane
> where logical properties, as attributes of things, will be manifested as
> directly as flavors or perfumes; perfumes are unmistakably identifiable,
> yet we know that they result from combinations of elements which, if
> subjected to a different selection and organization, would have created
> awareness of a different perfume. (p. 14)

This description presents the central assumption of structuralism, what Lévi-Strauss distinguishes from formalism's "opposition to material other than itself": "*structure* has no definite content; it is content itself apprehended in a logical organization conceived as a property of the real."[3] Lévi-Strauss, as I have tried to show in the introduction to the forthcoming translation of Greimas's *Structural Semantics*,[4] offers a basic model for Greimas's semantics, and a considerable number of articles in *Semiotics and Language* describe concepts developed in Greimas's structural semantics.

Still, in the dozen years between the *Analytical Dictionary* and *Structural Semantics* Greimas (and Lévi-Strauss for that matter) has reconceived his project: under **structural semantics**, the *Analytical Dictionary* notes "its methodological experience has made possible new reflections on the theory of signification and has opened the way to semiotics." The difference, in great part, is the narrowing of object and ambition: "thus, the great illusion of the 1960's," the dictionary continues, "—i.e., the possibility of providing linguistics with the necessary means for an exhaustive analysis of the content plane of natural languages—had to be abandoned, since linguistics had gotten engaged, often without realizing it, in the extraordinary project of a complete description of all cultures, even embracing all of humanity." In 1966

Greimas's claims were even larger than these: "supposing," he writes in *Structural Semantics*, "that the main axiological models of our universe were described; . . . we could foresee the possibility one day of constructing and setting in place functional models capable of bending individuals and collectivities toward new axiological structures" (VIII.3.c). In the *Analytical Dictionary* (1979), the formulations are more tentative and the ambitions less global. Under **semiotic theory**, the dictionary notes:

> its first concern, therefore, is to render explicit the conditions for the apprehension and production of meaning. . . . Considering structure as a network of relations, semiotic theory will have to formulate a semiotic axiomatics that will be presented as a typology of relations (presupposition, contradiction, etc.). This axiomatics will permit the constitution of a stock of formal definitions, such as, for example, semantic category* (minimal unit) and semiotics itself (maximal unit). The latter includes, following Hjelmslev, the logical definitions of system (the "either . . . or" relation) and of process ("both . . . and"), of content and expression, of form and substance, etc.
>
> The next step consists of setting up a minimal **formal language**. . . .

As this suggests, the articulation of semiotic theory *needs* a dictionary, the kind of combinatory that Greimas and Courtés offer here: "these few remarks," this paragraph on semiotic theory concludes, "are meant to give only a general approach that appears to be necessary for the construction of a semiotic theory. The elements of our semiotic project are scattered throughout this work."

ii

That is, as I mentioned already, taxonomy has replaced theory, dictionary discourse. What happened? Structuralism has its origins—in Saussure, in Jakobson—in binary opposition: *langue/parole*, synchrony/diachrony, marked/unmarked. As the *Analytical Dictionary* says under **binarity**, "a set of historical and pragmatic factors has given binary structures a privileged place in linguistic methodology." Yet from the beginning these oppositions have always seemed to generate middle terms: in *Structural Semantics* Greimas takes great pains (following Brøndl and, the *Analytical Dictionary* notes under **binarity**, Jakobson himself) to show that Jakobson's phonological opposition of marked vs. unmarked features has to be modified in semantics with oppositions which are not simply the presence or absence of some feature, but an opposition which exists without a positive pole (e.g. male vs. female), and to do so he postulated what became his **semiotic square**, which posits, as the *Analytical Dictionary* says, "the existence, beyond the realm of binarity, of a more complex elementary structure of signification." Saussure, also, makes this "middle" essential to his definition of language—"in language there are only differences *without positive poles*"[5]—and even Jakobson, in his *Dialogues* retrospectively narrating his career, asserts that the concept of the "compatibility between the two aspects of time, simultaneity and succession . . ." creates the "possibility of viewing the phoneme as a bundle of concurrent distinctive characteristics."[6]

The generation of the middle term is best seen in the "generation" of the semiotic square which Greimas found necessary for the development of his *Structural Semantics*, and which he and F. Rastier made explicit two years later in "The Interactions of Semiotic Constraints." The **semiotic square**, the dictionary says, is the "result of the establishment of the relation 'both . . . and' between contrary terms," and this relationship was essential to Greimas's study of semantics in discourse beyond the limits of the sentence as it is to the simultaneity and succession Jakobson speaks of or to the *Analytical Dictionary*'s definition of **discourse** which can be understood "as made up of articulations which are both taxonomic and syntactic." The *and of Semiotics and Language*, added by the translators, marks the discursive middle the dictionary defines and maps.

The middle term, I believe, is best characterized by the category disengagement vs. engagement which, we have seen, is part of the *Analytical Dictionary*'s definition of natural language. **Disengagement**, to paraphrase the dictionary, creates differences between the situation of utterance—"I-here-now"—and the representations of the utterance: "the language act thus appears as a split which creates, on the one hand, the subject, the place, and the time of enunciation and, on the other, the actantial, spatial, and temporal representation of the utterance." In *Structural Semantics* Greimas describes (without naming) the engagement/disengagment of language this way:

> Linguistic activity, creative of messages, appears first as the setting up of hypotactic relationships between a small number of sememes: functions, actants, contexts. It is thus essentially morphemic and presents a series of messages as algorithms. However, a systematic structure—the distribution of the roles to the actants—is superimposed on this hypotaxis and establishes the messages as an objectivizing projection, the simulator of a world from which the sender and receiver of a communication are excluded. (VII.3.d)

As morphemes language *presents* a situation: it is essentially a speech act. As a system, however, language *represents* a world "from which the sender and receiver . . . are excluded."

It is this "systematic," *representative* aspect of language which led Lévi-Strauss to study myth as a privileged discourse—myths by their very nature are collective, anonymous discourses which make *disengagement* an essential attribute—and led him to criticize Propp's *morphology* of the folktale. "As language," Lévi-Strauss writes, folktales

> naturally use grammatical rules and words. But another dimension is added to the usual one, because rules and words are used in narratives to build images and actions which are both "normal" signifiers, in relation to what is signified in the text, and elements of signification, in relation to a supplementary signifying system located at another level.[7]

The structuralist enterprise, then, opposes systems to morphemes, level to level, in a binary opposition that presents no middle term. It opposes the *logic* of system to the *grammar* of morphemic language.

Yet although it offers no middle term, one readily suggests itself, and Grei-mas's project of making the structural study of myth into structural semantics reinforces the suggestion. It is, of course, the third term of the trivium, *rhetoric*. Rhetoric is the characterizing difference between "structuralism" and "post-structuralism"; it is the "science" of the mixture of morphemes and systems. If *systems*—representative, generative, *logical*—characterize structuralism, and *morphemes*—presentational, contextual, *grammatical*—characterize speech-act theory, then it is no accident that Derrida attacks Lévi-Strauss at length for his logical inconsistencies and argues with John Searle about the limitation of contexts in his language studies.[8] It is no accident because post-structuralism is essentially *rhetorical*: it seeks, as Newton Garver has written in his Preface to Derrida's *Speech and Phenomena*, to use discourse rather than logic "as the ultimate criterion of meaning."[9] Such a use of discourse emphasizes what Greimas calls in *Structural Semantics* the "bi-isotopic" nature of language; what he and Courtés call the "disengagement" from an implicit context of natural language. When Greimas describes "linguistic activity" in two mutually exclusive modes—"morphemic" and "systematic," what he calls elsewhere in *Structural Semantics* "a double formulation of the same content—topological and deictic" (VIII.2.g)—and when he and Courtés choose a cross-referenced dictionary over both "a theoretical discourse" and a simple dictionary, *rhetoric* is situating itself in the place of logic and in the place of grammar. Rhetoric opts for a "both . . . and," not *rather than*, but *along with* the exclusions of binarity. *Semiotics and Language* is not a post-structuralist work as such, yet its narrowing of its ambition as it widens its scope to examine **discourse** as a whole clearly bears a trace of its opposite.

> The fact that the term discourse is progressively identified with se-miotic process and that it is even used to designate, metonymically, one or the other entire semiotic system or semiotic process raises the problem of the definition of the semiotic system (as both object of knowledge and object constructed by the description).

The *Analytical Dictionary*, then, acknowledges the problematic nature of se-miotics: to identify *discourse* and *semiotics* is to move from logic and grammar to rhetoric and while *Semiotics and Language* does not make this identification, its very title entertains and includes the possibility of doing so.

That possibility is also partially realized in its presentation as a cross-referenced dictionary. Wallace Stevens describes this presentation and answers, again partially, my question of "what happened?"

> When I was a boy I used to think things progressed by contrasts, that there was a law of contrasts. But this was building the world out of blocks. Afterwards I came to think more of the energizing that comes from mere interplay, interaction. Thus, the various faculties of the mind co-exist and interact, and there is as much delight in this mere co-exis-tence as a man and a woman find in each other's company. This is a rather crude illustration, but it makes the point. Cross-reflections, mod-ifications, counter-balances, complements, giving and taking are illimit-able. They makes things inter-dependent, and their inter-dependence sustains them and gives them pleasure.[10]

Rhetoric studies energy—the cross-referencing, counter-balancing that mark and make energy—and despite its alphabetical listings and the *scientificness* of style in which "the individual subject of research is thus inserted into a syntagmatic chain that transcends that subject and thus thereby presents itself as a social scientific discourse . . . a 'clean' language (or metalanguage) the terms of which are well defined and unequivocal," the *Analytical Diction-ary* offers, like so many poems of Stevens, the rhetorical pleasures of ener-getic intellect.

<div align="center">iii</div>

Here we have arrived at the final question of my title, the relationship be-tween semiotics and criticism. The *Analytical Dictionary* defines the French *langage* of its title as **Semiotic System and/or Process,** and the "and/or" of this cumbersome Greimas/Courtés translation puts it in the ambiguous mid-dle of rhetoric I have been describing. Under **Semiotic System and/or Pro-cess,** the dictionary states:

> On the basis of the intuitive conception of the semiotic universe taken to be the world which can be apprehended in its signification prior to any analysis, we can justifiably postulate that this universe is an articu-lation of signifying sets or semiotic systems which are juxtaposed with or superimposed on one another. . . . all semiotic systems are bi-planar, which is to say that the means by which they are manifest is not to be confused with what is manifested. . . . Furthermore, every semiotic system is articulated. As a projection of the discontinuous on the continuous, it is made up of differences and oppositions.

Here, I believe, the *Analytical Dictionary* comes as close as it ever does to a homogeneous and coherent definition of literary criticism. What distinguishes semiotics from structuralism is its postulation of **hierarchies** of semiotic sys-tems, the relationships among which create the kinds of energetic interplay-ing that Stevens describes. Not only are there the "contrasts" of the projection of the discontinuous on the continuous, there is also the "energy" of the "both . . . and" of projection itself—the projection of the continuous on the discontinuous—which originates in the arbitrary choice of the level on which the distinctions will be described. Discussing the relationship between semiotics and criticism, Godzich argues:

> If signification cannot be restricted to any given semiotic system, and even less to a level or element of it, then the semiotic description of a text, both in terms of its inner processes and of its cultural functioning, cannot be restricted to the description of its immanent organization. With the concept of culture, semiotic analysis escapes the dangers of formalism; with that of text, those of structuralism. It recognizes the need to study the relations of structures of different hierarchical order: "switching from one level to another may occur with the help of re-writing rules, in which an element represented on a higher level by one symbol is expanded on a lower level into a whole text."[11]

In criticism, the middle terms of rhetoric constantly shift as the poles be-

tween which they exist—language/context, system/process, genre/work—themselves shift. In "The Voice of the Shuttle: Language from the Point of View of Literature" (1969), Geoffrey Hartman makes the kind of argument I am suggesting here, offering an explicit use of rhetoric to create the place of criticism between the logics and grammars of language that *Semiotics and Language* presents. "So far," he writes,

> we have learned that figures of speech may be characterized by over-specified ends and indeterminate middles, that this structure may explain the shifting relations of concrete and abstract poetics, and that (I add this now) the very elision or subsuming of middle terms allows, if it does not actually compel, interpretation.[12]

That is, interpretation projects the continuous on the discontinuous; it fills the **gaps** of language to produce discourse. It does this by a process of *disengagement* at another level from its texts. That level could be phonological as in Jakobson, functional as in Propp, the superimposition of a systematic structure as in Lévi-Strauss and Greimas's own actantial analyses, the reversal of binary oppositions as in Derrida's deconstruction, or the privileging of antinomic clusters as in Barthes' "pleasure." Criticism, then, is what the *Analytical Dictionary* calls **discoursivization**:

> the putting to work of certain operations of disengagement and engagement. As such they belong to the domain of enunciation. They need to be subdivided into at least three subcomponents: actorization, temporalization, and spatialization, the effect of which is to produce an organized group of actors and a framework, both temporal and spatial, in which will be inscribed the narrative programs originating in the semiotic (or narrative) structures.

Criticism generates discourse by developing the middle through the discoursivization of interpretation in the various ways the dictionary describes. It focuses on the discontinuities of the gaps in discourse in order to situate and inscribe those gaps at another level, in another semiotic system and/or process.

Later in his essay, Hartman expands his diacritical figure for rhetoric to the most comprehensive of systems:

> Human life, like a poetical figure, is an indeterminate middle between overspecified poles always threatening to collapse it. The poles may be birth and death, father and mother, mother and wife, love and judgment, heaven and earth, first things and last things. Art narrates that middle region and charts it like a purgatory, for only if it exists can life exist; only if the imagination presses against the poles are error and life and illusion—all those things which Shelley called "generous superstitions"—possible. The excluded middle is a tragedy also for the imagination. (p. 348)

What Hartman is doing—what criticism does—is to **textualize** experience, to create the "manifestation" in "a representation of one or another of the levels of the generative trajectory" that discourse gives rise to. Criticism inter-

prets the discontinuous by discovering (or superimposing) system in (or on) morphemes at a particular level. It generates middles.

The rhetorical figure for this generation is *tmesis*, a term of central importance to Roland Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text*, whose rhetoric is antithetical to an analytical dictionary. Barthes' terms, *pleasure, bliss, tmesis* itself, do not appear in *Semiotics and Language*, and his definition of "text"—as a "*Tissue*. . . worked out in a perpetual interweaving: lost in this tissue—this texture—the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretion of its web"[13]—is as far from the *Analytical Dictionary*'s definition—**text** "designates an entity prior to its analysis"—as possible. Both Barthes and the dictionary identify text and discourse, but while the *Analytical Dictionary* recognizes it as an occasion for logical or grammatical analysis, Barthes makes it an occasion for his own figurative weavings.

Yet those weavings recall the discourse of *Semiotics and Language* as I have described it even as his title recalls Stevens' description of energy. Such recall, I believe, can help delimit the critical usefulness of the *Analytical Dictionary*. At the end of "The Voice of the Shuttle," Hartman offers a fanciful figure to describe the interpretation of criticism which also describes language from the point of view of literature: "Interpretation is like a football game. You spot a hole and you go through. But first you have to induce that opening. The Rabbis used the technical word *patach* ('he opened') for interpretation" (p. 351). *Semiotics and Language*, in its very taxonomic form, offers such inducements to opening by making the "holes"—the gaps—apparent. Moreover, in its perpetual weaving of the metalanguage of semiotics, it suggests—but suggests only—new ways of understanding literary texts and new contexts for situating our old understandings. The *Analytical Dictionary* defines **meaning** as "undefinable," yet suggests that "two approaches to the problem of meaning are possible: it may be considered either as that which permits the operation of paraphrasing or transcoding, or as that which grounds human activity as intentionality." These approaches are systematic and morphemic respectively, contrary "grounds" that are both inscribed in the human sciences. Thus the semiotic project of *Semiotics and Language* demonstrates the multiplicity of ways ("levels") of understanding and the richness of discourse; it offers the honorable, if unambitious, project of suggesting that we can at least apprehend, if not comprehend, in its vasteness as well as its detail, our mind's and our language's working. In its "signifying whole" (see **discourse**), *Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary* offers what Stevens calls in "The Well Dressed Man with a Beard" the "yes" after the "no," "a speech / Of the self that must sustain itself on speech," and the strange rhetorical pleasure of the intellect —"douce compagna, honey in the heart"—the generator of discourse, of Stevens' last line: "It can never be satisfied, the mind, never."

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Notes

1. "The Construction of Meaning," *NLH*, 9 (1978), 389.

2. *The Raw and the Cooked,* trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York, 1975), p. 14.

3. "Structure and Form: Reflections on a Work by Vladimir Propp" (1960), in *Structural Anthropology,* vol. 2, trans. Monique Layton (New York, 1976), 155.

4. A. J. Greimas, *Structural Semantics,* trans. Daniele McDowell, Ronald Schleifer, Alan Velie, with an introduction by Ronald Schleifer, to be published in Fall 1983 by the University of Nebraska Press (Lincoln, 1983). Reference to this work will be by Chapter, Section, Subsection.

5. *Course in General Linguistics,* trans. Wade Baskin (New York, 1959), p. 16.

6. Roman Jakobson and Krystyna Pormorska, *Dialogues,* trans. Christian Hubert (Cambridge, 1983), p. 59.

7. "Structure and Form," p. 142

8. In *Of Grammatology,* trans. G. C. Spivak (Baltimore, 1976), Derrida deconstructs Lévi-Strauss's "logic"; in "Limited, Inc.," trans. Samuel Weber, *Glyph,* 2 (1977), he deconstructs the limitation of Searle's contexts.

9. "Preface," *Speech and Phenomena* (Evanston, 1973), p. xiii.

10. *Letters of Wallace Stevens* (New York, 1966), p. 308. See also Campbell Tatham, "Beyond Structuralism," *Genre,* 10 (1977).

11. "The Construction of Meaning," p. 393; Godzich is quoting Yu. M. Lotman, B. A. Uspensky, V. V. Ivanov, V. N. Toporov, A. M. Piatigorsky, "Theses on the Semiotic Study of Cultures (as Applied to Slavic Texts)," in *The Tell-Tale Sign,* ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Lisse, 1975), p. 81.

12. In *Beyond Formalism* (New Haven, 1970), p. 339.

13. *The Pleasure of the Text,* trans. Richard Miller (New York, 1975), p. 64.

Re-reading English, edited by Peter Widdowson. London and New York: Methuen, 1982. Pp. x + 246. $13.95, cloth; $7.95, paper.

For the past year or so, I have been noticing signs that the 'sixties may be returning. Grace Slick rejoined the Jefferson Starship, the Kinks and Neil Young are touring again as did, with more fanfare, the Who and the Rolling Stones. I've seen people in braids and in headbands, in peasant skirts, in dashikis—even a tie-dyed tee-shirt (albeit with sweatpants and running shoes). There are, too, those analogies between El Salvador and Viet Nam, and even though the Pope and Joan Didion have visited Central America with messages of hope or despair, so have more and more American "advisors" intent on keeping this cornerstone of a "strategically significant" part of the world from "falling into the hands of the communists." It should not be surprising, then, to find a book like the one under consideration, *Re-reading English,* the latest offering from Methuen's New Accent series, and to experience once again the uncanny sense that, as Crosby, Stills and Nash once sang (and are singing again) "we have all been here before."

To read this book is not unlike hearing the "live" version of the Rolling Stones' "Under My Thumb." That re-recording "covers"—as disc jockeys say —an earlier version but with differences which make it not just another

"blast from the past." It is, like the earlier version, a "site on which various meanings and effects may be produced according to the determinations within which the work is inscribed" (p. 275), a fact doubly underscored by Mick Jagger's wry substitution of "woman" for "girl" in the lyrics. That substitution of course winks at a decade of feminist outrage at this anthem of male resentment, and in repeating the lyrics with a difference, the substitution signals the ways in which experience was and is still constituted and also indicates an ironic rapprochement—if not a synthesis—as the latest turn of the dialectic (or the latest "re-production" of the text) finds Jagger a jet setter who still is and always was just a bad boy who loves to tease. Interestingly, however, the quintessential bad boys, Hell's Angels, have recently resurfaced after many years of more legitimate forms of organized crime, with a threat on Jagger's life for his part in the Altamount fiasco of a decade ago. *Re-reading English* may be an indication that other aspects of the 'sixties, too, are returning to remind us that there is yet unfinished business.

Although this collection of essays gathers together younger British scholars from the relative obscurity of the red brick and polytechnic schools who may be unfamiliar to American audiences, there is nonetheless a familiar and distinctive ring to many of the articles included. There is an uncovering of a "hidden history" of English studies which finds that English as a discipline benevolently oppresses (or "prescribes" and "polices"); there are arguments for interdisciplinary studies, nontraditional teaching formats and curriculum revision which would include writing not usually considered "literature"; there are attempts to graft new theories (or anti-theories) onto radical politics which at worst produce offhand judgments— "[Derrida's] thinking is patently unmaterialistic, . . . his deconstructive procedure, if subversive, is incompletely dialectical, offering no guarantee of progressive acceleration or transformation" (p. 67)—or egregiously simplified readings—"As Derrida makes clear, the poet as historical author is typically dead or absent . . . Philip Sidney as experiencing subject has been absent since 1586; *Astrophil and Stella* is words, not experience" (p. 114); there is even an old fashioned "vulgar marxist" attempt to prove one poem better than another because its author "is writing about something learned at first hand" (p. 213). But the interests shared by almost all of the writers here—a radical skepticism concerning English as a discipline, the notion of the subject, the "ideal text," the canon, "common sense"—brings something new to the political concern about what it is that English departments do or ought to do. What is new primarily is that the very romantic gestures of the 'sixties with its libertarian (if any) marxism are now being called into question. This means that the ground on which positions were articulated—authenticity vs. alienation, humanism vs. technocracy, self vs. structure, subjectivity vs. objectivity, spontaneity vs. authoritarianism—has either been swallowed up in what is now seen as a general discursivity which produced false oppositions, or has been transvalued in theory, stamped "nostalgia" and relegated to the dustbin of (at least, literary) history.

There are a number of fine essays in this collection and two in particular— Derek Longhurst's approach to Shakespeare studies and Carol Snee's essay on "period studies"—demonstrate how post-structuralist skepticism and a political commitment can work well together. Longhurst examines Shake-

speare's place in the "National literature" and in literary education by calling into question that "Shakespeare" who is presumed to be the trans-historical presence embodied in his texts. Longhurst discovers Shakespeare's importance not in the texts, but rather in their insertion into cultural debate and educational policy and practice, and in the material contexts (theatre, television, publication) of their reproduction. By reflecting the politics of the influential Newbolt Report on education (1921), for example, this "Shakespeare" legitimates the model of education the report prescribes; in criticism, too, as Longhurst shows, a "Shakespeare" is typically invented to stand behind the texts and thus legitimate the critic's aesthetic and political stance. Carol Snee argues for an interdisciplinary ("period studies") approach as a corrective to the ideology implicated in English studies, signalled by the notions of the "ideal text," the "subject" and "common sense" and the restrictive use of history as background. She cinches her argument with a clever reading of a political report from the 1930s, demonstrating the critical uses of rhetorical analysis in historical research and, in this particular case, the way rhetorical maneuvering—shifts in tone and register, selection of information and structure—figures government policy as a necessary consequence of self-evident reality rather than a "reality" generated to fit an unexamined political prescription.

In addition to these two essays, I would also recommend Catherine Belsey's examination of the "partial" criticism of F. R. Leavis in "Re-reading the Great Tradition" and Tony Bennett's argument for a "politically motivated criticism" in "Text and History." Peter Humm's "Television and New Fiction" is solid media criticism which might be used effectively to help refine marxist models of textual "re-production." John Hoyles and Wendy Mulford each direct important theoretical questions to critics interested in the convergence of marxism and aesthetics, and marxism and feminism, respectively. Peter Widdowson's introduction, Tony Davies' attack on "common sense" and Peter Brooker's romp through post-structuralism(s) are also useful theoretically, and American audiences will probably find the three essays on the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, the Open University, and the Council for National Academic Awards informative and helpful in contextualizing much of the theoretical debate and curricular reforms argued in the remaining essays.

The essays in this collection are not without their problems, however, and few escape the contradictions which attend this grafting of political and aesthetic discourses. Nor does a theory which aims to uncover the politics implicated in aesthetic discourse help. The post-structuralist thought presented in these essays (much of which is already dated) does not so much resolve old problems—e.g., the "meaning" of "economic determinism," or the proper attitude towards modernism—as overlay more questions—critical, institutional, ontological—which bring with them their own ideological problematics. An additional problem with these essays is that they are all in one way or another haunted by the ghost of Leavis, and critical positions and debates tend often to replicate the contradictions in the Leavis attack on Cambridge which Francis Mulhern chronicles in The Moment of Scrutiny. These features are perhaps symptoms of the provincialism Terry Eagleton, for one, has diagnosed in British marxism and may account for the incessant sniping at "Leavisites,"

the worry about committing errors of "left-Leavisism," the honorific non-examination of Raymond Williams, the obsession with Cambridge and the nervous fascination with continental criticism which cannot dislodge a sturdy faith in non-discursive "facts of material history."

Significantly missing from these essays is a presentation—whether a materialist analysis or some understanding—of the place of English departments in English society and politics. There are, to be sure, assertions that English departments are "sites on which meanings are produced" and claims—inferred from the work of Basil Bernstein or interpreted from official reports—that the values reproduced in literary criticism (and English departments and universities) provide a subjective justification for a dominant ideology; but none of the writers (including those who deal with the three alternative institutions) investigates who attends what schools and why, or attempts to qualify the claims that English departments somehow have a determining effect on the production of cultural (let alone political) meanings, much less questions the classical marxist figure of "production" or the appropriateness of such a figure for the activity of reading, writing or teaching. As a result, the writers tend to flounder when it comes to making proposals, even if some of them are aware of this difficulty: "Jobs do come first. But what, we should still ask, comes next?" (p. 74).

Not surprisingly, there is an almost audible grinding of gears when the rhetorical critique, driven by post-structuralist skepticism, slips into a language of political commitment (actually, reformism) which is, finally, unsure of its status as theory or ideology. To my mind, only Longhurst, who remains at the level of critique, and Peter Humm, whose essay is finally more interested in form and perception than in an overt political motivation, manage to escape. Carol Snee is finally doing rhetorical analysis; it achieves its political end only because she waffles on the nature of this conservative report's "mystification": she wants to argue that it produces a reality consonant with its politics, but actually argues that it *misrepresents* a reality more accurately described by others. Tony Bennett gathers together an array of literary and social theorists who all seem to be saying similar and familiar things, but whose pronounced differences—to say nothing of the political implications of their rhetoric—are elided in the rush to conclude with Benjamin: " 'He who cannot take sides should keep silent' " (p. 235). Catherine Belsey's concise and thorough criticism of Leavis comes closest of all the contributors to exorcising his presence, but the criticism then turns oddly and she proceeds to display almost every symptom in her own reading of *Daniel Deronda* that she diagnoses in Leavis's. Widdowson begs a bushel of questions with his contention that it is necessary "to occupy that space in the higher education curriculum which English has hitherto held and which, in the present situation, we cannot afford to lose . . . [because] it is a space, within the crucial institution of education, in which intellectual work can go on to reappropriate that institution." (p. 14).

Despite a few lapses and some serious theoretical problems, however, this volume contains a number of fine pieces of criticism as well as a few sharp formulations of imporant aesthetic and political questions. And even the faults—which most contributors are generally self-conscious about if not fully aware of—are signs of the anxiety of politically committed academics,

and as such should help to provoke a re-examination—once again—of our social role as teachers and critics.

Wayne State University   John Franzosa

English Reformation Literature: The Tudor Origins of the Protestant Tradition by John N. King. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982. Pp.xvi + 539. $37.50.

In *English Reformation Literature* John N. King maps a part of that strange, blank space—for most people a *terra incognita*—which lies between Wyatt and Spenser. He identifies the historical conditions of writing, not just as background but as political and institutional determinants. He presents the protestant reformation as the overriding ideological pressure—those matters over which people were prepared to be killed and to kill. And he observes that modern attitudes to Edwardian writing are informed by inappropriate criteria of literary sophistication which derive from dominant ways of reading the Elizabethans and Jacobeans. All this is very worthwhile; the drawbacks with the book all concern Professor King's reluctance to pursue to their full consequences his historical, political and ideological insights. If I dwell upon these drawbacks that is because they involve the sharper challenge to critical orthodoxy and are of more general interest. For those who want to know about Edwardian literature and its history John N. King's book is unrivalled and other reviews will no doubt say that.

King shows that Edwardian writing is founded on different premises from the Elizabethan and Jacobean literature which our culture takes to be one of the summits of human creativity. It manifests an intense and forthright commitment on the overwhelming ideological issue of the time; indeed, some held that literature is justified only when it is related to such a commitment. Consequently much of the writing is polemical, and a further factor tended to make it rather straightforwardly so. Any emergent ideological position will produce radical adjustments of literary forms. In the present case this effect was the greater because the reformation centered upon new attitudes to a major text, the Bible: protestants found in what they regarded as literal reading of the Bible the only authority which could counter that of the Church. This carried over into writing, producing great attention to biblical story, a straightforward approach to theme, and a plain, unadorned style.

Thus Edwardian writing places firmly on the agenda the issue of literature and propaganda. King exposes it thoroughly in his account of the use by Cromwell and Somerset of all the resources of writing to create unprecedentedly elaborate and purposeful propaganda machines, altering the existing patronage arrangements and addressing new readerships. He shows also that writers cooperated enthusiastically in these programmes, using all the available tactics from libel to obscenity to manipulation of evidence. Yet King does not confront the dominant critical assumption of our time: that literature and propaganda are fundamentally opposed modes, so that even if writing appears to be politically engaged, yet in so far as it is "literature" it "tran-

scends" such concerns. This assumption has been challenged recently in work influenced by Althusser, Macherey and Gramsci, which has argued that "literature" is a construct which obscures the extent to which celebrated writing—of for instance the Elizabethan and Jacobean period—was involved with strategies of ideological control in the interests of the government and/or the upper classes. But King allows this issue to slip away from him; in the mainly literary chapters a remark like the following, about *Jacob and Esau*, is unusual: "As the doctrinal core of the play, these hymns exalt the new covenant theology by singing praise that implicitly identifies the ruling faction with the wisdom of God" (p. 303). The absence of a theory of contextuality leads King on the one hand to the crude assertion that the *Homilies* may be read "as a summary of the world view of Sidney and Spenser, Shakespeare and Donne" (p. 126), and on the other hand to the claim that "Crowley transcends particular religious controversies to produce enduring art" (p. 320) and to the use of vague concepts like "the catholicity of aristocratic taste" (p. 218).

Insights in matters of language and form are also not followed through. King describes sympathetically the influence of "Erasmus's insistence that the Word be spoken in the language of the people in such a way as to level class distinctions" (p. 55). But he does not sustain this sense of the politics of language. He defends John Bale from charges of scurrility and salaciousness not by insisting on the political appropriateness of demotic invective, and perhaps on Bale's experience of exile and the torture and killing of his friends; but by declaring that Bale is not as crude as other people, that he does exercise certain conventional literary skills, and that "His polemical art makes up in sheer force and power for what it lacks in humanistic polish and finesse" (p. 65). In similar vein, we find an anonymous playwright blamed for losing "the perennial battle to make good characters sympathetic" (p. 300), as if such determinedly engaged writing should be expected to envisage the strategy which might persuade a modern reasonable academic; and Luke Shepherd praised for "his refusal to reduce composition to artless scriptural paraphrase," in almost open contradiction of King's earlier justificatory explanation of why "Protestant biblical poetry relied on close literalistic paraphrase of specific texts" (pp. 252, 212).

The irony is that whilst he is regretting, albeit hesitantly, the sophisticated elaboration of theme and manner which is conventionally valued in other kinds of literature, King hardly develops complexities deriving from the ideological context and the need to negotiate a new relationship with old forms. He is bland on the theology of protestantism, and though he writes of its "dilemmas" and "complicated paradoxes" he posits an all too easy resolution of them "in the inner temple of the heart" (p. 160). Again: "The only resolution of this paradoxical circle of doubt and fear comes through the Bible and the phenomenological experience of the quest for truth" (p. 156). In certain circles it is usual to discover in texts contradictions, fractures, fissures and sutures, and that can of course become a thoughtless convention. But King would benefit from a touch of this, for he allows his texts to sound unproblematic and bland. We get no sense that coherence of belief and utterance is something for which these writers, or some of them, struggled through language. It is the same with issues of form. We read that "The complexity of

courtly tradition encompassed secular love lyrics as well as satires that mocked the same lyrics as foolish objects" (p. 224), but there is little investigation of the strains which this might involve; it is left at the level of complexity, tradition and the encompassed. Once more: "The plain style and verse forms adopted by the gospellers come from the very same tradition of popular art that they attacked" (p. 214)—but this is perceived as "accommodation" rather than a clashing of divergent forms and attitudes which might well manifest itself in personal and artistic disjunctions whose hard-won closures might be examined.

These strictures apply especially to the chapters on poetry and drama— though much interesting material is surveyed there. The chapters on Robert Crowley and William Baldwin work better. There is a good account of how Crowley "kidnapped" *Piers Plowman*, "converting it, through his preface and marginal notes, into a powerful revolutionary attack against monasticism and the Roman Catholic hierarchy" (p. 322), and the topic is neatly completed by Andrew Bostock's comments in his copy, repudiating Crowley's glosses and reasserting the poem's Catholicism. Through Baldwin King begins to address the fact that the reformers called continually upon the humanistic Erasmus (though he never mentions the fundamental dispute between Erasmus and Luther about the freedom of the will). Even so, although King sees that "formal and structural imitations of Erasmian texts are devices for concealing the intellectual conservatism of his text," King sees this as "coexistence" and "harmonization" (pp. 363, 361). But we do get a good sense of Crowley and Baldwin as committed to the whole range of cultural work for their cause— printing, editing, compiling, sermonising, confuting, prefacing and theorising. Here we can observe a programme of literary activity which amounted, in a phrase which King's treatment only partly justifies, to a "cultural revolution" (p. 16).

English Reformation Literature is significant finally for how we regard later writing. King's comments on later texts are often rather vague, but he draws attention to anticipations of Sidney and Spenser which should modify current ideas of their intellectual context and he evokes well the very different atmospheres in which Edwardian and Elizabethan court writing occurred. There is an important section on the extent to which early Elizabethan culture was dominated by writers, printers, events and texts deriving from the Edwardian period, and King makes (perhaps overstates) the case that we need not go to Luther and Calvin for the roots of Elizabethan theology since it was already domesticated in Edwardian times. King has mapped the salient features of this territory but there is still more to be done.

Sussex University   Alan Sinfield

The Colors of Rhetoric: Problems in the Relation between Modern Literature and Painting by Wendy Steiner. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1982. Pp. xiv + 263. $25.00

In *The Colors of Rhetoric*, Wendy Steiner considers the "programmatic ten-

sion between artistic medium and represented world" that exhibits itself in interartistic comparisons between painting and literature throughout the history of criticism, taking a novel turn in the modern period, when painting is no longer expected to imitate the appearances of reality. "By claiming that a poem is like a painting," Steiner writes in her preface, "one is no longer stressing their mirroring function but their paradoxical status as signs of reality and as things in their own right"; in the rest of her book she addresses herself to showing what this statement means and how the state of affairs it describes has evolved.

Chapter 1 follows the history of the critical controversy about the relation of poetry to painting with regard to periodization, the use and significance of images, of "visual appeal," the space vs. time distinction, the question of "pure" art and literature, and related matters. One of the most valuable aspects of the book is Steiner's working through the tangled web of sign theory as it pertains to the arts: the "relativist" position of Gombrich, Goodman, and others, as opposed to the "universalist" stance of such critics as Meyer Schapiro. The expertise in sign theory of the concrete poets, Max Bence, especially, affirms the relevance of the theoretical to the practical. Steiner shows how modern critics and some artists have subtilized but not entirely resolved Lessing's space/time distinction, and scrutinizes the structuralists' project of organizing all cultural artifacts into structures reflecting those of natural languages as it provides more refined ways of talking about the analogies between poetry and painting.

Steiner's demonstration of the usefulness of structuralist and semiotic theory is an analysis of William Carlos Williams's "Hunters in the Snow," from *Pictures from Brueghel*, which illustrates, she avers, "the brilliance of Williams's interartistic virtuosity." Although her analysis does in fact go far beyond those of earlier commentators on the poem (for example, Joel Conna-roe's in *JML* [1971]), it does not convincingly support the thesis that the poem is in some sense an "equivalent" of the painting. Regardless of Williams's intention, which is in any case unclear, the poem more properly can be said to epitomize Williams's interpretation of the painting rather than to imitate it.

Following up the problem of the relationship of the art medium to reality, as sense making, Steiner pursues its opposite, Nonsense, in Chapter 2. "In the Renaissance and baroque periods, the point of contact between paintings and poems was their subject matter and the assumed iconicity of the artwork to this subject matter." This division of form from content is denied by many modern critics (though not "untenable" to all, as Steiner seems at one point to be saying). However, the unity of form and content in the "thing" of an art work in any medium may make it meaningless: "the unparaphrasable sign is a sign of silence." Nonsense has become "one of the greatest themes and modes of modern literature . . . the self-containment theory of art so pervasive . . . [may be] a theory of nonsense" (pp. 93–94).

Taking nonfiction prose as the "standard" for literature analogous to that of "pictorial realism," Steiner returns to the seventeenth-century ideal of the "plain style," with its theoretical ideal of linking words to "things," thereby eliminating homonymy and synonymy (and thus reducing ambiguity). The *Alice* books provide numerous examples of the "nonsense" to which such

universalist language theories tend. Nonsense literature is seen as a "warning of where runaway science and art"—i.e., science and art that attempt to use language in purely self-referential codes—can lead. Because nonsense literature frequently comes with illustrations, and the illustrations function "like the metaphor" in dramatizing "contradictions," Steiner devotes the last two sections of her chapter (some forty pages) to illustrations of nonsense texts (Gorey) and purely pictorial nonsense (Escher). "Escher's nonsense keeps the authority of both the representational system and the represented world in play. It also balances the proof of their fit (in the realism of individual details in prints) against their discrepancy (in the figure created out of the synthesis of parts). This semantic dialectic is the very essence of nonsense, and in Escher's case it focuses on the tension between process and stasis—the classical boundary between the verbal and the visual arts" (p. 164). Merging mathematical and conventional realism, polyperspectivalism, and the "paradox of reflexivity" are Escher's way of "making the impossible a logical outcome of the possible."

Cubism, then, in Steiner's Chapter 3, "Cubist Historiography," is a serious nonsense, an overturning of realist conventions that occurred approximately simultaneously in art and literature, characteristic of the "mainstream" art of the modern period. Steiner considers stylistic parallelism, relations between particular painters and writers, and comparison of ideologies. She finds the same sorts of paradoxes as in the nonsense of Escher, and asserts that cubism "dramatized . . . the meaning of the break with the past as a reevaluation of knowledge, history, and representation" (p. 193). "The plot of cubist history and historiography is neither a quest nor a picaresque wandering. It is a kaleidoscopic play: a constant reevaluation of the relations between concepts and particulars, the creation of unity out of elements whose heterogeneity is not masked but preserved, a contemplation of meaning itself in the constantly changing contemporary structures that we form out of elements of the past. The cubist work, cubism as a period, and a period conceived of cubistically are all scrutinies of the process of knowledge itself" (p. 196). The validity of Steiner's claim is established not by analysis of Williams, Stein, Joyce, Eliot, or Pound (apparently she thinks that case already well-established by earlier criticism, including perhaps her own *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance*), but by a scrutiny of concrete poetry, the clearest "working out of a cubist ideology," with examples by Henri Chopin, Eugen Gomringer, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Carlfreidrich Claus, Jiří Kolár and others (mostly from Emmett Williams's *Anthology of Concrete Poetry*). Unfortunately, in explaining how the concrete poems "work" Steiner is in the thankless position of a person explaining jokes (to a lesser extent this is a problem with the analysis of Gorey and Carroll, earlier). Analysis of the concrete poems tends to expose many of them as trivial, jokes for the intellectual elite as Gorey is jokes for the merely sophisticated, Steiner admits that "as logicians verge on nonsense in pursuing a language of pure and unambiguous reference, the concretist verges on it in pursuing an art with a purely object status" (p. 216), but the fact does not disturb her unduly.

The virtues of *The Colors of Rhetoric* are substantial in its tracing of the history of the interartistic comparison and its demonstration of the role of semiotics and structuralism in approaching the interarts analogy. What Steiner

regards as the value of the latter in showing the complexity of the issues of interartistic comparisons could also be seen as disarray among the theorists, as well as a hint that no satisfactory theory of such comparisons is yet available. Her respect for the fanciful (for example, Dora Vallier's theory of the correspondence of vowels and colors) is perhaps inspired by a wish for some general theory that will link the "phonemes" of art and poetry, but it tends to undermine her argument. Steiner does not propose a new theory, though her demonstration of a structuralist/semiotic reading of the Williams/Brueghel pairing does suggest a better way to talk about the relations between a poem and the painting on which it is based than previous ways I have seen. Nevertheless, there are at least four other twentieth-century poems on "The Return of the Hunters" in English, and several in German, and the skeptic might well wonder if Steiner's method might not as readily be turned to showing how those very different poems are also "equivalent" to the painting. None, incidentally, not even Williams's, would likely be regarded as "cubist."

Another interesting aspect of the study is the inquiry into the relation of nonsense-making to sense-making in the verbal and visual media. Here again Steiner offers not a new theory so much as an inquiry into the state of contemporary theory and a demonstration of salient points.

Steiner's push for acceptance of cubism as the definitive artistic matrix of modernism (i.e., we ought to call the early twentieth century "cubist" as we call the seventeenth century "baroque") is curiously understated, and the demonstration here is weakened by her not tackling more directly the significant, "paradigmatic" works of visual and literary cubism. The proposal of concrete poetry as the culmination of the "purist," self-reflexive theories of cubism suffers from the same debility as many structuralist/semiotic demonstrations: they seem to work only with relatively trivial artifacts, artifacts at the brink of popular rather than elite art.

Steiner's familiarity with and ability to move dextrously among a great range of modern critical positions is impressive (and essential to what she is doing), and her flair for the memorable phrase contributes to the readability of her text. Her book is a valuable one for its careful evaluation of the possible grounds for attempting interartistic studies. However, in occasionally going too far to show her range, she strains the reader's credulity: her appendix on Chaucer's "Franklin's Tale," from which she gets her title, is a self-indulgence that begins with a dubious proposition—that the Franklin thinks "colors of rhetoric" are ways of lying (i.e., nonsense, in the terms of the study)—and continues by leading far astray from the main thrust of the book's argument. This digression, and a few odd factual distortions (Brueghel left only five paintings of the seasons, not six) are distracting but do not vitiate the considerable strengths of the study.

Ohio State University   Suzanne Ferguson

Reading Georges Bataille: Beyond the Gift by Michele H. Richman. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982. Pp. xii + 177. $15.00.

One of the most remarkable things about Georges Bataille is that he is not widely-read in this country. Perhaps the most pervasive influence on French intellectuals of the late 50's and 60's, partly because of the revolutionary claims made for him by *Tel Quel* contributors, Bataille had an enormous impact on the modes of Continental theory now so important to American critics. In *Positions*, for example, Jacques Derrida declares that a number of his major texts ("La mythologie blanche," "La dissémination," "La pharmacie de Platon," and others) are "explicitly situated" as readings of Bataille. Roland Barthes, whose choice of the story "Sarrasine" for analysis in *S/Z* follows Bataille's classification of it as "excessive" and "multiple" (in the Forward to *Le Bleu du ciel*), also writes of Bataille: "everything he *inscribes describes* me" (*Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*). It is a suggestive oddity that American critics, so concerned lately with the genealogy of theoretical movements, should have ignored Bataille (Frank Lentricchia does not mention him even in passing in *After the New Criticism*; neither do Jonathan Culler and Frederic Jameson in their overviews of French theory). Bataille's invisibility in America is especially strange when one recognizes how the semantic "scandals" celebrated by certain modern theorists are indebted to Bataille's concept of profitless expenditure, or *dépense*—for Bataille has provided a theory of unrecuperated excess that affirms transgression, rather than labor or knowledge, as the central humanizing act available to man.

Although Michele H. Richman does not take up this question directly in her excellent work—the first booklength study of Bataille written in English —she does supply a few implicit answers. For one thing, to a much greater degree than the work of many who have been influenced by him, Bataille's *oeuvre* transgresses established categories—not just generic or philosophical (is he a surrealist, existentialist, Hegelian, Marxist, or Nietzschean?), but those of intellectual style as well. In an academic climate that is still parochial, or at least drearily professional in its standards for legitimizing "interdisciplinary" works, Bataille's collection of erotic novels, inflammatory essays on philosophy, and epigrammatic treatises on subjects as unlikely as economics and cave painting, can only be perceived in America as hopelessly inchoate, or, worse, as simply the perverse work of an *écrivain maudit*. As Richman points out, Bataille is thereby reduced to a literary cliché: the man who equates literature with evil. In this regard, Richman does an admirable job of locating the oppositional logic fundamental to all of Bataille's disparate productions. By defining the poles of limitation and transgression in Bataille's ever-shifting intellectual contexts, Richman clarifies his work as the performance of a set of dialectical principles, rather than the direct formulation of an abstract theory—which is, nevertheless, clearly present. Through a meticulous yet quite graceful survey of Bataille's intellectual "situations," Richman traces the framework within which his authorial *dépense* must be understood: his polemic with André Breton; his encounter with fascism; his re-writing of Mauss, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Marx. In the course of this rigorous overview, Richman's book itself becomes not merely a historicizing of Bataille, but a

full-fledged re-reading of nineteenth and twentieth-century philosophy in the light of Bataille's theory of transgression.

More importantly, though, Richman emphasizes that there is a moral proj-ect in Bataille's work, a moral project often repressed by theorists who trans-form the profound ambiguity of transgression in Bataille into a kind of intellectual chic. One suspects that Bataille's moral preoccupations may be something of an embarrassment for his French progeny, and may even be the reason why their references to him are flattering but somewhat glancing (deceptively so, for those unfamiliar with Bataille's stature in France). For Ba-taille, the attraction of transgression lies in its very fatality, and he recognizes such fatal attraction as a dilemma that must find social resolution. Necessar-ily, transgression must be tamed by becoming a structure of shared experi-ence. Bataille uses historical models to argue that, in the inevitable human compromise with this fatality, transgression is always regulated and distrib-uted, fairly or unfairly (which is to say, in Bataille's terms: "nonre-strictively" or "restrictively"), in any given culture. Further, as Richman makes quite clear, Bataille advocates a specific—and highly ritualized—form of social order to redress abuses in the distribution of *dépense* in capitalist cultures. His vision is both ritualistic and collectivist (which is why Sartre quarreled with him). Recognizing the essentially hybrid nature of *dépense*, its affinity with both freedom and obligation, Bataille constructs a model of so-cial order that restores transgressive eroticism to human exchange through a moral codification of *dépense*.

In this context, some of Richman's very best work lies in her exposition of Bataille's attack on the "will to autonomy," in whatever form it takes. Most notably, she points out that Bataille attacks the modern over-valuation of art and philosophy, and of discourse in general. Though fundamentally anti-Nietzschean in his belief in the necessity of language as an avenue to *dé-pense*, Bataille has only contempt for the labor of discursive activity insofar as it isolates subjects and becomes an end in itself. In general, *Reading Georges Bataille* is dedicated to demonstrating that Bataille promotes the communica-tion of *dépense* between individuals within an order that generalizes trans-gression. For, outside of that order, Bataille maintains that the quest for *dépense* "leads a man in isolation to incomprehensible and sometimes even stupid behavior" (*Oeuvres complètes*, II, 13). And although Richman does not formulate any such connection herself, it seems evident that the ideological assumptions underlying Bataille's theory of ritualized *dépense* cannot easily be reconciled with the spontaneous politics we have lately seen arise out of deconstruction—to name just one awkward discontinuity in the dissemina-tion of Bataille's thought. As evidence of the disjunction here, Richman her-self bravely urges us "to participate in the moral project Bataille assigned to all cultural activity—the creation of values consistent with the categories of the general economy" (p. 7)—"general economy" being Bataille's term for a system of human exchange that includes the profitlessness of *dépense*.

Finally, there remains a contradiction in Bataille's legacy that Richman her-self glosses over, in her eagerness to note his presence in the work of Der-rida, Barthes, and others. Because of its penetration by Saussurean linguistics, modern literary theory—working with a strict economy of the subject within representation—seems to exclude Bataille's conception of a purely biological

source (as in *La part maudite*) for the dialectic of *dépense*. Bataille attempts to conceive the subject fully outside of discourse, and only in that essentialist context can the ambiguity—as well as the morality—of transgression in Bataille be fully expressed. For the goal of *dépense* is ultimately imagined by Bataille as an unmediated expense, the restoration of a biological imperative to cultural and psychological orders. Richman's relatively uncritical approach to Bataille (freely avowed) leads her to avoid hard questions about this and other assertions in his work, which are just possibly troublesome enough to keep the mystification of Bataille more comfortable than full analysis might be.

One might complain of a few other things in Richman's book. There is an occasional density, or even opacity of phrasing. And her decision not to introduce Bataille's concepts discretely, though it does respect what she calls the "totality" of his thought, turns the book into a discussion of Bataille for those already familiar with him, thereby limiting what usefulness it may have as an introduction. But despite these problems (and they are slight), Richman has written a provocative and timely book, which should contribute to our understanding of the issues at stake when literary interpretation bases itself in theories of transgression. If her work suffers the same inattention we have turned on Bataille himself, the fault will not be Richman's. She has written what ought to be an indispensible and much-consulted book.

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Cinema and Sentiment by Charles Affron. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1982. Pp. xi + 202. $20.00.

To those outside of scholarship in the popular arts the value of *Cinema and Sentiment* will not be obvious, but for those in frequent contact with "classic" American movies, Charles Affron's new book is essential reading. Affron is not an especially thorough scholar or careful film esthetician. He is, however, a formidable analyst of the way sentiment works in movie melodramas; here, as in his *Star Acting*, Affron has made a solid contribution to the understanding of bourgeois esthetics. To those who prefer not to recognize the importance of popular arts these esthetics might not be worth understanding. But for those who care about film history, bourgeois esthetics must be a central concern: they are the only esthetics the movies have had for most of their history.

Affron takes on the issue of sentiment openly and directly. Unlike a good number of film theorists who tread carefully through film history trying to establish the centrality of such unsentimental directors as Hawks or Wilder while avoiding the mushiness of unapologetic romantics such as Frank Borzage, Affron centers his analysis on films that would normally be dismissed as "weepies." A clear sense of Affron's open handling of sentiment can be seen by even the quickest overview of the excellent frame blow-ups used to illustrate the text's arguments. They are almost all variations of "looking

longingly"—sometimes at a lover, sometimes past the frame edge into off-screen space; in *Stella Dallas* there is even "smiling through tears," as Stella, voluntarily separated from her child, watches the kid's wedding, possible only because of the mother's sacrifice. If this seems a bit much, a bit much is the book's subject. Affron knows fully that standard critical values would require treating beagle-eyed expressions as bathos, not as pathos. To cope with that, Affron turns to the theories of Derrida and Lacan as analytic tools, arguing that the romantic wishes and values in films ranging from *Broken Blossoms* to *Stella Dallas* can best be understood in terms of Lacan's theory of the "mirroring" stage of psychological development. Though Affron is not purely a Lacanian—he borrows well from Bachelard, Mitry, Braudy, McConnell and Stanley Cavell—Affron's notions of the psychology and ontology of cinema are derived from Lacan's souped-up neo-Freudianism. By aligning the lump-in-throat situations of the Hollywood weepie with what in Lacan's system is the central pivot of personal development, Affron both explains the popularity of sentimental melodrama and gives a convincing analysis of how it works.

Affron's real achievement—getting the reader to concentrate fully on film situations that would embarrass in any situation other than the darkness of the theater—is partly a matter of intellectual sleight of hand. To follow Affron's arguments one must engage a complex of concepts that change meaning slightly from situation to situation; for example, a concept such as "absence" functions somewhat differently in Cavell's and Braudy's senses of the ontology of film than it does in Derrida's or Lacan's psychological theories, and to keep track of which sense Affron is using at a given moment requires careful attentiveness. Sometimes the attentiveness is repaid by insight; sometimes it is not. But whether there is direct payoff or not, the more important result is that intellectual inhibitions are lowered, allowing material beyond (or beneath) usual thresholds to be taken seriously. One ends up wanting to argue with Affron about situations that would otherwise be shrugged off as quirks of bourgeois taste. Affron's yoking of Paris with Paramount is a grand alliance of disparate romanticisms. The intellectual romanticism of Derrida and Lacan provides a conception of personality in terms of crises and dilemmas in which the stakes are high and the cards never adequate; this provides a cerebral counterpart to the less fashionable romanticism of popular film. Not surprisingly the romantic psychology of Lacan meshes smoothly with the romantic esthetics of American thinkers such as Leo Braudy and Stanley Cavell. Reading Affron, one wonders if his real achievement is not the discovery of deep affinities between intellectual romanticism and the psychology of shaggy dog stories.

Affron's book is important enough that one wishes it were better. Affron is good at what he does but his range, and perhaps his knowledge, are maddeningly limited. His subject is film melodrama. But does he know anything about melodrama's larger traditions or history? One doubts it; there is little evidence in any of Affron's books that he even knows much about film history. Sentiment is certainly as much a factor in Chaplin's films as in Borzage's; the ending of *Stella Dallas* is after all merely a variant on a longstanding convention. Perhaps it is too much to expect that a brilliant explicator also display a knowledge of history. But it is not much to expect that

a scholar know the basic works in a field. Affron gives no evidence whatever of having read any work on melodrama besides Peter Brooks' *The Melodramatic Imagination.* That A. Nicholas Vardac, Frank Rahill, and John Fell have written standard (but still provocative) books on the history of melodrama is something Affron does not bother himself with, even in footnotes or bibliography. Affron is the sort of writer who would condescend to read *The Journal of Popular Culture* only if it came out in a French edition. Affron was a scholar of French literature who switched to film in the 1970s. He knows little about what was written before his conversion. He knows almost nothing about film technique—he laughably asserts that the sound tracks of films are effectively identical with "natural" sound. Any sound man, editor, or mixer in the business will groan at his silly equating of sound tracks with natural sound—especially in a book about the 1930s and 1940s. *Cinema and Sentiment* is too much a film book written by someone trained only in literature, someone untrained in seeing and hearing accurately. Affron is good when he sticks with his subject, uses trendy ideas to legitimize *outré* films and feelings, and stays near the French literary tradition of the *explication de text.* He is laughable when he goes beyond that.

But one ought not to expect a final or standard work on a subject from an innovator. Affron gives us a good start on his subject. He opens up important territory. He does what he does very well. For now that is something for which we should be grateful.

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Three Faces of Hermeneutics: an Introduction to Current Theories of Understanding, by Roy J. Howard. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1982. Pp. 177. $5.95.

Roy Howard's *Three Faces of Hermeneutics* is intended for two kinds of readers: those in need of an introduction to European hermeneutic theory, and those interested in the relation between hermeneutics and analytic philosophy. The book begins with a historical sketch of hermeneutic theory from Dilthey to the present, and then moves to a description of three forms of contemporary hermeneutics: analytic hermeneutics (von Wright, Winch), psychosocial hermeneutics (Habermas), and ontological hermeneutics (Gadamer). The book ends with a short interpretive essay identifying commonalities among the three hermeneutic schools.

Howard's descriptions are, for the most part, clear. And the chapter on analytic hermeneutics introduces von Wright and Winch, two philosophers who are not usually included in surveys of current hermeneutic theory, in an interesting way. It is in this chapter, too, that Howard's confrontation of hermeneutics with analytic philosophy is most pointed and provocative. The chapters on Habermas and Gadamer, however, are less successful. Howard's understanding of the work of the Frankfurt School, Habermas' theoretical base, is sketchy—it is crude and misleading to say that the institution that sponsored Adorno and Horkeimer had a "strongly empiricist approach," as

Howard does. As a result, Habermas' appropriation of positivism is taken at face value, rather than being understood as a radical revision of positivist theory. The chapter on Gadamer is less problematic, although it is confined to a summary of *Truth and Method*. Unaccountably, there is no mention of the Habermas-Gadamer debate.

Readers interested in the relation of analytic philosophy to hermeneutics will find sections of Howard's book useful. Those interested in an introduction to general hermeneutic theory, especially as it relates to literary criticism, will do better with Richard Palmer's *Hermeneutics* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1969; rptd. 1980), or for an introduction to Habermas, with Thomas McCarthy's *The Critical Theory of Jurgen Habermas* (Cambridge: MIT, 1978).

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