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The Semiotics of a Symposium

Derrida, Baltimore and More*

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This paper is divided into three sections, distinct yet connected thematically to the 1966 Structuralist Symposium at Baltimore. The first section looks at Derrida's celebrated text, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' and its key arguments with the focus on the metaphoric idiom and figurations. The second section is about the other participants of the Symposium--or to adapt a theatrical/poststructuralist term--players other than Derrida and the nature of their interventions. After all, Derrida was the last speaker in a four-day Symposium. The third section is about the Baltimore Symposium as a whole, its pre- and after-lives, its semiotic over/under-texts, its symbolism, signifiers, ironies, paradoxes and absurdities.

I

Derrida's paper, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', though the last presentation in the entire symposium, later became its 'primary' event. Much has been said about its historic, path-breaking impact. I shall limit myself to its diction and figurative implications. Derrida's essay has as an epigraph, a quotation from Montaigne: "We need to interpret interpretations more than to interpret things," the relevance of which will be recognised only towards the end of the essay.

The text opens rather tentatively with a reference to an event: "Perhaps something has occurred in the history of the concept of the structure that could be called an 'event'" (Derrida 351) The word is put in italics in the first instance and used three times in as many sentences. Derrida adds that the exterior form of this event would be that of a 'rupture' and a 'redoubling', a figuration that is sustained throughout the essay. He then plunges into his most important argument -- that of the 'structurality of the structure', of the structure and the nature/position of the centre in/outside it. The pre-rupture history of the structure is described as a 'linked chain of determinations', which is summed up using the now famous phrase 'being as presence'. The event of rupture/disruption/redoubling/repetition came about when "the structurality of the structure had to begin to be thought, the moment when language invaded the universal problematic" (354).

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Invasion is a political term and brings to mind entire discourses, histories and narratives. The political idiom is continued in the next statement as well: “the absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and play of signification infinitely.” Thinking the structurality of the structure now gets another term, simple yet explicitly political-- decentering. Derrida identifies three historical/personal landmarks that contributed to this act of subversion -- Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger. Derrida calls their discourses ‘destructive’ and notes that they are “trapped in a unique circle... (which) describes the form of the relation between the history of metaphysics and the destruction of the history of metaphysics.” However Derrida does not consider his method as ‘destructive’. During the discussion that followed his presentation and in response to a question from Jan Kott, he says: “I believe that I was quite explicit about the fact that nothing of what I said had a destructive meaning. Here or there, I have used the word deconstruction, which has nothing to do with destruction” (Macksey 2007: 270-271). But actually he does not use the word deconstruction anywhere in the text. Derrida’s usual method is to show how texts deconstruct themselves and the best example perhaps is what he does with Levi-Strauss in this essay. His lengthy critique of Levi-Strauss in particular and Structuralism in general, turned out to be fatal for the movement. It also subverted the very purpose of the Baltimore symposium, which is to celebrate its achievements. The beginning of Post-Structuralism is usually identified with this moment and ‘event’.

An important metaphoric argument that Derrida makes in the essay is the distinction between the engineer and the bricoleur. The engineer, Derrida argues, is a myth, a theological notion of totality and perfection, something like the idea of god. Whereas the bricoleur is the lesser mortal, the imperfect doer, who manages with the means (and tools) at hand. We are all bricoleurs, none of us are engineers. In fact, the engineer is only a myth produced by the bricoleur, and the distinction breaks down, “as soon as we cease to believe in such an engineer”(Derrida 1978: 360). Roland Barthes (who, at the Baltimore seminar, was still the Structuralist) would later talk about a similar ‘anti-theological’ perspective in his famous essay, ‘The Death of the Author’ (first published in 1967), a text that bears the distinct stamp of Derrida’s influence: “We know now that the text is not a line of words releasing a single theological meaning (the message of the author-God)” (Lodge 1988: 170). Also “by refusing to assign a ‘secret’, an ultimate meaning, to the text,... writing liberates... an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary...” (171). For Derrida though, the nature of the linguistic field (and thereby all writing) excludes totalisation because this field is in effect that of play. Play (jeu), a field of infinite substitutions, a movement of supplementarity, the disruption of presence. And to this notion of play, there could be two kinds of response. The first is the Rousseauistic mourning of a loss or absence. It is metaphysical, idealistic, nostalgic, negative and guilty. Levi-Strauss and other Structuralists betray an inclination to this approach. As against this, comes the second approach—the Nietzschean response which is joyous, affirmative, adventurous and indeterminate. Poststructuralism is usually identified with this response (369). There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play. Hence the statement by Montaigne as epigraph. It is only

here in the last paragraph, while talking about the difference and irreducibility of the two interpretations, that Derrida rather casually introduces his all-important term *différance*. Derrida's essay concludes with the description of a monstrous birth: "Here there is a kind of question, let us still call it historical, whose *conception, formation, gestation, and labor* we are only catching a glimpse of today. I employ these words, I admit, with a glance toward the operations of childbearing—but also with a glance toward those who, in a society from which I do not exclude myself, turn their eyes away when faced by the as yet unnamable which is proclaiming itself and which can do so, as is necessary whenever a birth is in the offing, only under the species of the nonspecies, in the formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity" (370). Twenty years later, speaking at another symposium on 'the states of theory', he would talk about the destiny of his monster child:

It is more and more often said that the Johns Hopkins colloquium was ... an event in which many things changed ... on the American scene ... What is now called "theory" in the country may even have an essential link with what is said to have happened there in 1966. I don't know what happened there What is certain is that something happened there which would have the value of a theoretical event, or of an event within theory, or more likely the advent of a new theoretical-institutional sense of "theory" ... --this something only came to light afterwards and is still becoming more and more clear today. ... Monsters cannot be announced. One cannot say: "Here are our monsters," without immediately turning the monsters into pets (Carroll 1990: 80).

The deconstructive childbirth should necessarily be a kind of rupture/doubling or a second coming. It's interesting to note that W B Yeats' famous poem about 'The Second Coming' ends with a similar image of a monstrous birth:

... somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun
Is moving its slow thighs ..
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? (100)

Richard Macksey (Professor at the Humanities Center of the Johns Hopkins University), who presided over the Symposium and who gave both the 'Opening' and 'Closing' remarks also uses the lion image. His opening lecture had a curious, metaphoric title, 'Lions and Squares'. The latter term is from board games, particularly chess, and inspired by (or anticipating) Derrida's 'play'. He gives a lengthy analysis of 'the game model' which ends with Wittgenstein's concept of language-game (*Sprachspiel*). A statement by the philosopher is quoted: "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him", that is, the lion's perspective of life and the world. Macksey's opening remarks conclude with the hope that "the sessions ahead may reveal a few lions among us" as well as "reveal a little of the lion in each of us." (13-14). Macksey also had the last word in the Symposium. In his 'concluding remarks', while talking about the achievements of the Symposium, he mentions Derrida (perhaps, a lion among the rest) in particular: "to consider such

radical reappraisals of our assumptions as that advanced by Monsieur Derrida on this final day” (320).

II

Let’s now look at the participants and players of the Symposium other than Derrida. There were 15 colloquists and more than 100 participants from nine different countries. The Structuralist masters Claude Levi-Strauss and Roman Jakobson were conspicuous by their absence. Both were invited to the event but did not attend. Michael Foucault was also expected, but he too opted out. The French contingent had many stars, and probably Roland Barthes, the great Structuralist/Semiotician, was the most famous. He presented the paper ‘To Write: An Intransitive Verb’ (which is grounded in the Structuralist logic, method and idiom) as also took part in discussions occasionally. Jean Hyppolite was perhaps the oldest person in the hall. The senior Master, Foucault’s teacher and the greatest Hegelian around, was making his last academic appearance with another lecture on Hegel. He died soon after and the Book of the Conference was dedicated to his memory. Hyppolite also raised important objections to Derrida’s arguments in ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’ and the heated debate the two had after its reading was certainly the first of numerous such debates and quarrels.

Jacques Lacan who later became a global celebrity, was making his first appearance in an American conference. His paper titled ‘Of Structure as an Inmixing of an Otherness Prerequisite to Any Subject’ was short, but significant nevertheless. The symposium also gave him an interesting metaphor for the Unconscious and he talks about it vividly in the paper:

When I prepared this little talk for you, it was early in the morning. I could see Baltimore through the window and it was a very interesting moment because it was not quite daylight and a neon sign indicated to me every minute the change of time, and naturally there was heavy traffic, and I remarked to myself that exactly all I could see, except for some trees in the distance, was the result of thoughts, actively thinking thoughts, where the function played by the subjects was not completely obvious....”

Lacan then adds, “The best image to sum up the unconscious is Baltimore in the early morning (Macksey 2007: 189).

There were other European Structuralists as well including Tzvetan Todorov, Lucien Goldmann, Georges Poulet, Jean-Pierre Vernant and Charles Moraze. The host scholars at Johns Hopkins Baltimore included Richard Macksey, Rene Girard and Eugenio Donato. Paul De Man did not have any paper, but took part in the discussions, at times rather aggressively. Richard Schechner was an active participant who put several questions to the speakers, mostly from a theatrical perspective. Jan Kott too took part in the discussions, while Edward Said was one of the youngest attendees of the Symposium. Alan Bass, studying at Johns Hopkins at the time, was a leader of the Student Committee. He would later become a major translator of Derrida.

III

In 1970, when the ‘Book of the Conference’ was first published (in a case-bound edition) it used the very title of the seminar (‘The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of

Man') on the cover, along with an interesting subtitle ('The Structuralist Controversy') that the editors chose. Two years later when the book was brought out in a paperback edition, the subtitle was promoted as the main title, thereby marking the quarrel itself as (a historical event and) the most important part of the seminar. This is only one of the many ironies and paradoxes that the seminar contained. That a programme envisaged and projected as Structuralism's greatest triumph in America ended up as its very nemesis is perhaps the keenest. By the time Derrida read what was the last paper of the four-day exercise, Structuralism was all past (*passé*) and Post-Structuralism got officially inaugurated. Another great irony is that this famous decentering project of Derrida was announced in a newly opened 'centre', the Johns Hopkins Humanities Center. However neither the Centre nor the University could afford the huge expenses of this grand Symposium and therefore had to rely on a generous sponsorship grant (\$30,000) from the Ford Foundation. The radical journal *Telos* criticised this fact, calling attention to the interests and ideology of the Foundation as well as the dubious role it played during the Vietnam War. Feminists can easily point out the sexist hint in the title (*The Sciences of Man.*)

Moreover, the proposed objective of the Symposium—as reflected in the title—was not achieved. Richard Macksey admits this in his concluding remarks. While the plurality of critical languages were considered and acknowledged, the intention of constituting as a frame for discussion, the general methodology of the human sciences was defeated, mainly because many of the scholars did not agree upon a common critical terminology. Lacan and Goldmann even quarrelled over the term 'subject' (Macksey 2007: 121).

The year 1966 had multiple significances historically and academically. For the Johns Hopkins University at Baltimore, it was the 90th anniversary of its inception. For the whole world, 1966 marks the 900th anniversary of the Battle of Hastings (fought on a single day in the very month of October in which the French army led by William, the Duke of Normandy, defeated the Anglo-Saxon army of King Harold). 14 October 1066 is marked in history as the day of the French conquest of the English-speaking world. The consequences of this historic event include the end of English aristocracy, the liberation of the Catholic Church in England, the massive exodus of the English elite and perhaps the most apparent and decisive one, the absolute transformation of the English language.

The Baltimore Symposium of 18-21 October 1966 is often considered as another attempted invasion (albeit intellectually) of the English-speaking world by the French. As David Lodge points out, it was here that "the American academic world experienced at first hand the challenge of the new ideas and methodologies in the humanities generated by European structuralism." He also calls Derrida's text as belonging to "a historic moment in the traffic of ideas between Europe and America" (107). Derrida's theory of deconstruction 'arrived' in America just at the right moment to attract the right kind of critics (Norris 1991: 91) and dominated the academic world for the next couple of decades (the best example being the highly influential 'Yale school' of criticism with such important names as Paul De Man, Hillis Miller, Harold Bloom and Geoffrey Hartman). A prolific writer and speaker, Derrida travelled widely until his death in 2004 (also in October), disseminating ideas and arguments and impacting a number of

disciplines and practices. Derrida's critical language has certainly invaded the human sciences and changed their discourses forever.

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