From Science to Literature

"Man cannot speak his thought without thinking his speech."
—BONALD

French university faculties possess an official list of the social and human sciences which constitute the object of a recognized instruction, thereby necessarily limiting the specialty of the diplomas they confer: you can be a doctor of aesthetics, of psychology, of sociology—not of heraldry, of semantics, of victimology. Thereby the institution directly determines the nature of human knowledge, imposing its modes of division and of classification, just as a language, by its "obligatory rubrics" (and not only by its exclusions), compels us to think in a certain way. In other words, what defines *science* (the word will henceforth be used, in this text, to refer to all the social and human sciences) is neither its content (which is often ill defined and labile) nor its method (which varies from one science to the next: what do the science of history and that of experimental psychology have in common?), nor its morality (neither seriousness nor rigor is the property of science), nor its mode of communication (science is printed in books, like everything else), but only its *status*, i.e., its social determination: the object of science is any material society deems worthy of being transmitted. In a word, science is what is taught.

Literature has all the secondary characteristics of science, i.e., all the attributes which do not define it. Its contents are precisely those of science: there is certainly not a single scientific matter which has not at some moment been treated by universal literature: the world of the work is a total world, in which all (social, psychological, historical) knowledge takes place, so that for us literature has that grand cosmogonic unity which so

delighted the ancient Greeks but which the compartmentalized state of our sciences denies us today. Further, like science, literature is methodical: it has its programs of research, which vary according to schools and periods (like those of science, moreover), its rules of investigation, sometimes even its experimental pretensions. Like science, literature has its morality, a certain way of extracting its rules of procedure from the image it assumes of its being, and consequently of submitting its enterprises to a certain absolute spirit.

One last feature unites science and literature, but this feature is also the one which divides them more certainly than any other difference: both are discourses (which was well expressed by the idea of the ancient *logos*), but science and literature do not assume—do not profess—the language which constitutes them in the same way. For science, language is merely an instrument, which it chooses to make as transparent, as neutral as possible, subjugated to scientific matters (operations, hypotheses, results), which are said to exist outside it and to precede it: on one side and *first of all,* the contents of the scientific message, which are everything; and on the other and *afterwards,* the verbal form entrusted with expressing these contents, which is nothing. It is no coincidence if, since the sixteenth century, the combined rise of empiricism, of rationalism, and of religious evidence (with the Reformation), i.e., of the scientific spirit (in the very broad sense of the term), has been accompanied by a regression of the automy of language, henceforth relegated to the status of "instrument" or of "fine style," whereas in the Middle Ages human culture, as interpreted by the *Septenium,* shared almost equally the secrets of language and those of nature.

For literature, on the contrary—at least for that literature which has issued from classicism and from humanism—language can no longer be the convenient instrument or the sumptuous decor of a social, emotional, or poetic "reality" which preexists it and which it is responsible, in a subsidiary way, for expressing, provided it abides by a few rules of style: no, language is the *being* of literature, its very world: all literature is contained in

the act of writing, and no longer in that of "thinking," of "painting," of "recounting," of "feeling." Technically, according to Roman Jakobson's definition, the "poetic" (i.e., the literary) designates that type of message which takes for object its own form, and not its contents. Ethically, it is solely by its passage through language that literature pursues the disturbance of the essential concepts of our culture, "reality" chief among them. Politically, it is by professing (and illustrating) that no language is innocent, it is by employing what might be called an "integral language" that literature is revolutionary. Literature thus is alone today in bearing the entire responsibility for language; for though science needs language, it is not, like literature, *within* language; science is taught, i.e., it makes itself known; literature fulfills more than it transmits itself (only its history is taught). Science speaks itself; literature writes itself; science is led by the voice, literature follows the hand; it is not the same body, and hence the same desire, which is behind the one and the other.

Bearing essentially on a certain way of taking language—in the former case dodged and in the latter assumed—the opposition between science and literature is of particular importance to structuralism. Of course this word, generally imposed from outside, actually overlaps very diverse, sometimes divergent, sometimes even hostile enterprises, and no one can claim the privilege of speaking in its name; the author of these lines makes no such claim; he merely retains the most particular and consequently the most pertinent version of contemporary structuralism, meaning by that name a certain mode of analysis of cultural works, insofar as this mode is inspired by the methods of contemporary linguistics. Thus, itself resulting from a linguistic model, structuralism finds in literature, the work of language, an object much more than affinitary: homogeneous to itself. This coincidence does not exclude a certain embarrassment, even a certain laceration, depending on whether structuralism means to keep the distance of a science in relation to its object, or whether, on the contrary, it is willing to

compromise and to spoil the analysis it wields in that infinitude of language of which literature is today the conduit—in a word, depending on whether it seeks to be science or writing.

As science, structuralism "finds itself," one might say, on every level of the literary work. First of all, on the level of contents, or more exactly, on the level of the form of contents, since structuralism seeks to establish the "language" of the stories told, their articulations, their units, the logic which links some to others—in short, the general mythology in which each literary work participates. Next, on the level of the forms of discourse: structuralism, by virtue of its method, pays special attention to classifications, orders, arrangements; its essential object is taxonomy, or the distributive model inevitably established by any human work, institution, or book, for there is no culture without classification; now discourse, or ensemble of words superior to the sentence, has its forms of organization; it too is a classification, and a signifying one; on this point, literary structuralism has a glamorous ancestor, one whose historical role is in general underestimated or discredited for ideological reasons: Rhetoric, grandiose effort of an entire culture to analyze and classify the forms of speech, to render the world of language intelligible. Finally, on the level of words: the sentence has not only a literal or denoted meaning; it is crammed with supplementary significations: since it is at once a cultural reference, a rhetorical model, a deliberate ambiguity of the speech-act, and a simple unit of denotation, the "literary" word has the depth of a space, and this space is the field of structural analysis itself, whose project is much greater than that of the old stylistics, entirely based as it was on an erroneous idea of "expressivity." On all its levels—that of the argument, that of discourse, that of the words—the literary work thereby offers structuralism the image of a structure perfectly homological (present-day investigations tend to prove this) to the structure of language itself; derived from linguistics, structuralism encounters in literature an object which is itself derived from language. Henceforth, it will be understood that structuralism may attempt to found a science

of literature, or more exactly a linguistics of discourse, whose object is the "language" of literary forms, apprehended on many levels: a new project, for hitherto literature has been approached "scientifically" only in a very marginal fashion—by the history of works, or of authors, or of schools, or of texts (philology).

New as it may be, this project is nonetheless not satisfactory—or at least not sufficient. It leaves untouched the dilemma I mentioned at the beginning, one that is allegorically suggested by the opposition between science and literature, insofar as literature assumes its own language—under the name of writing—and science avoids it, feigning to regard it as purely instrumental. In a word, structuralism will never be anything but one more "science" (several of these are born every century, some quite ephemeral), if it cannot make its central enterprise the very subversion of scientific language, i.e., cannot "write itself": how can it fail to call into question the very language by which it knows language? Structuralism's logical extension can only be to join literature no longer as "object" of analysis but as activity of writing, to abolish the distinction, born of logic, which makes the work into a language-object and science into a metalanguage, and thereby to risk the illusory privilege attached by science to the ownership of a slave language.

It remains therefore for the structuralist to transform himself into a "writer," not in order to profess or to practice "style," but in order to recognize the crucial problems of any speech-act, once it is no longer swathed in the kindly cloud of strictly *realist* illusions which make language the simple medium of thought. This transformation—still rather theoretical, it must be admitted—requires a certain number of clarifications—or acknowledgments. First of all, the relations of subjectivity and objectivity—or, to put it another way, the subject's place in his work—can no longer be conceived as in the palmy days of positivist science. Objectivity and rigor, attributes of the scholar which we still hear so much about, are essentially preparatory virtues, necessary to the work's moment, and as such there is no reason to mistrust them or to abandon them; but these virtues cannot

be transferred to discourse, except by a kind of hocus-pocus, a purely metonymic procedure which identifies *precaution* with its discursive effect. Every speech-act supposes its own subject, whether this subject expresses himself in an apparently direct fashion, by saying *I*, or indirect, by designating himself as *he*, or in no fashion at all, by resorting to impersonal turns of speech; what is in question here are purely grammatical stratagems, simply varying how the subject constitutes himself in discourse, i.e., gives himself, theatrically or fantasmatically, to others; hence they all designate forms of the image-repertoire. Of these forms, the most specious is the privative form, precisely the one usually employed in scientific discourse, from which the scholar excludes himself in a concern for objectivity; yet what is excluded is never anything but the "person" (psychological, emotional, biographical), not the subject; moreover, this subject is filled, so to speak, with the very exclusion it so spectacularly imposes upon its person, so that objectivity, on the level of discourse—an inevitable level, we must not forget—is an image-repertoire like any other. In truth, only an integral formalization of scientific discourse (that of the human sciences, of course, for in the case of the other sciences this has already been largely achieved) could spare science the risks of the image-repertoire—unless, of course, it consents to employ this image-repertoire *with full knowledge,* a knowledge which can be achieved only in writing: only writing has occasion to dispel the bad faith attached to every language unaware of its own existence.

Again, only writing—and this is a first approach to its definition—effectuates language in its totality. To resort to scientific discourse as to an instrument of thought is to postulate that a neutral state of language exists, from which would branch off, like so many gaps and ornaments, a certain number of special languages, such as the literary language or the poetic language; this neutral state would be, it is assumed, the code of reference for all the "eccentric" languages which would be only so many sub-codes; by identifying itself with this referential code, basis of all normality, scientific discourse arrogates to itself the very authority which writing must contest; the notion of "writing"

implies in effect the idea that language is a vast system of which no single code is privileged—or, one may say, central—and of which the departments are in a relation of "fluctuating hierarchy." Scientific discourse believes it is a superior code; writing seeks to be a total code, including its own forces of destruction. It follows that only writing can break the theological image imposed by science, can reject the paternal terror spread by the abusive "truth" of contents and reasonings, can open to research the complete space of language, with its logical subversions, the mixing of its codes, with its slippages, its dialogues, its parodies; only writing can set in opposition to the savant's assurance—insofar as he "expresses" his science—what Lautréamont called the writer's "modesty."

Last, between science and writing, there is a third margin, which science must reconquer: that of *pleasure*. In a civilization inured by monotheism to the idea of Transgression, where every value is the product of a punishment, this word has an unfortunate resonance: there is something light, trivial, partial about it. Coleridge said: "A poem is that species of composition which is opposed to works by science, by purposing, for its immediate object, pleasure, not truth"—an ambiguous declaration, for if it assumes the "erotic" nature of the poem (of literature), it continues to assign it a special and guarded canton, distinct from the major territory of truth. "Pleasure," however—we admit this more readily nowadays—implies an experience much wider, more significant than the simple satisfaction of "taste." Now, the pleasure of language has never been seriously considered; the old Rhetoric had, in its fashion, some idea of it when it set up a special genre of discourse dedicated to spectacle and to admiration, the *epidictic*; but classical art wrapped the *pleasing* which it claimed as its law (Racine: "The first rule is to please . . .") in all the constraints of the "natural"; only the baroque, a literary experiment which has never been more than tolerated by our societies, at least by French society, dared some exploration of what might be called the Eros of language. Scientific discourse is remote from this; for if it accepted the notion, it would have to renounce all the privileges with which

the social institution surrounds it and agree to return to that "literary life" Baudelaire calls, apropos of Poe, "the sole element in which certain *déclassés* can breathe."

Mutation of consciousness, of structure, and of the purposes of scientific discourse—that is what must be demanded today, precisely where the flourishing, constituted human sciences seem to leave less and less room for a literature commonly accused of unreality and inhumanity. But precisely: the role of literature is to *represent* actively to the scientific institution just what it rejects, i.e., the sovereignty of language. And structuralism should be in a good position to provoke this scandal; for, intensely conscious of the linguistic nature of human works, only structuralism today can reopen the problem of the linguistic status of science; having language—all languages—for object, it has very quickly come to define itself as our culture's meta-language. This stage, however, must be transcended, for the opposition of language-objects and their meta-language remains ultimately subject to the paternal model of a science without language. The task facing structural discourse is to make itself entirely homogeneous to its object; this task can be accomplished by only two methods, each as radical as the other: either by an exhaustive formalization, or else by an integral writing. In this second hypothesis (which we are defending here), science will become literature, insofar as literature—subject, moreover, to a growing collapse of traditional genres (poem, narrative, criticism, essay)—is already, has always been, science; for what the human sciences are discovering today, in whatever realm: sociological, psychological, psychiatric, linguistic, etc., literature has always known; the only difference is that literature has not *said* what it knows, it has *written* it. Confronting this integral truth of writing, the "human sciences," belatedly constituted in the wake of bourgeois positivism, appear as the technical alibis our society uses to maintain the fiction of a theological truth, superbly—abusively—disengaged from language.

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To Write: An Intransitive Verb?

1. Literature and linguistics

For centuries, Western culture conceived of literature not as we do today, through a study of works, authors, and schools, but through a veritable theory of language. This theory had a name, *Rhetoric*, and it triumphed in the West from Gorgias to the Renaissance, i.e., for over two thousand years. Threatened since the sixteenth century by the advent of modern rationalism, rhetoric was altogether ruined when rationalism was transformed into positivism, at the end of the nineteenth. By then, there was no longer any common zone of reflection between literature and language: literature no longer regarded itself as language, except in the work of a few precursor writers, such as Mallarmé, and linguistics claimed only very limited rights over literature, these being enclosed within a secondary philological discipline of uncertain status: stylistics.

As we know, this situation is changing, and it seems to me that it is in part to take cognizance of this change that our colloquium has been assembled: literature and language are in the process of recognizing each other. The factors of this rapprochement are various and complex; I shall cite the most obvious: on the one hand, the action of certain writers who since Mallarmé have undertaken a radical exploration of writing and who have made their work a search for the total Book, such as Proust and Joyce; on the other, the development of linguistics itself, which henceforth includes within its scope *poetics*, or the order of effects linked to the message and not to its referent. Hence, there exists today a new perspective of reflection—common, I insist, to literature and to linguistics, to

the creator and the critic, whose tasks, hitherto absolutely self-contained, are beginning to communicate, perhaps even to converge, at least on the level of the writer, whose action can increasingly be defined as a critique of language. It is in this perspective that I want to indicate by a few brief observations, of a prospective and not conclusive nature, how the activity of writing can today be expressed [*énoncée*] with the help of certain linguistic categories.

2. Language

This new conjunction of literature and linguistics, which I have just mentioned, might provisionally be called, for lack of a better name, *semio-criticism,* since it implies that writing is a system of signs. Now, semio-criticism cannot be identified with stylistics, even in a new form, or in any case, stylistics is far from exhausting it. It involves a perspective of an altogether different scope, whose object cannot be constituted by simple accidents of form, but by the very relations between the *scriptor* and language. This perspective does not imply a lack of interest in language, but, on the contrary, a continual return to the "truths," however provisional, of linguistic anthropology. Certain of these truths still have a power of provocation, in respect to a certain current idea of literature and of language, and for this reason, we must not fail to consider them.

1. One of the teachings of contemporary linguistics is that there is no archaic language, or that, at least, there is no relation between a language's simplicity and its age: ancient languages can be as complete and as complex as the recent ones; there is no "progressive" history of languages. Hence, when we try to recognize in modern writing certain fundamental categories of language, we make no claim to reveal a certain archaism of the "psyche"; we are not saying that the writer harks back to the origin of language, but that language is for him the origin.

2. A second principle, especially important with regard to literature, is that language cannot be considered as a simple

instrument—utilitarian or decorative—of thought. Man does not exist prior to language, either as a species or as an individual. We never encounter a state where man is separated from language, which he then elaborates in order to "express" what is happening within him: it is language which teaches the definition of man, not the contrary.

3. Moreover, from a methodological view, linguistics accustoms us to a new type of objectivity. The objectivity hitherto required in the human sciences is an objectivity of the given, which must be accepted totally. Linguistics suggests, on the one hand, that we distinguish levels of analysis and describe the distinctive elements of each of these levels, in short, that we establish the distinctness of the fact and not the fact itself; and on the other, it asks us to recognize that, unlike physical and biological facts, cultural facts are twofold, that they refer to something else: as Benveniste has observed, it is the discovery of language's "duplicity" which gives Saussure's reflection all its value.

4. These few preliminaries are contained in a final proposition which justifies all semio-critical research. Culture increasingly appears to us as a general system of symbols, governed by the same operations: there is a unity of the symbolic field, and culture, in all its aspects, is a language. Hence, it is possible today to foresee the constitution of a unique science of culture, which will certainly be based on various disciplines, but all devoted to analyzing, at different levels of description, culture as language. Semio-criticism will obviously be only a part of this science, which will always remain a discourse on culture. This unity of the human symbolic field authorizes us to elaborate a postulate which I shall call a postulate of homology: the structure of the sentence, object of linguistics, can be recognized homologically in the structure of works: discourse is not only a sum of sentences, it is, itself, one great sentence. It is in terms of this working hypothesis that I would like to confront certain categories of language with the writer's situation in relation to his writing. I am not concealing the fact that this confrontation

does not have a demonstrative force and that for the moment its value remains essentially metaphorical: but perhaps, too, in the order of objects which concerns us, metaphor has—more than we suppose—a methodological existence and a heuristic force.

3. Temporality

As we know, there is a linguistic temporality, equally different from physical time and from what Benveniste calls "chronicle" time, or the time of calendars and computations. This linguistic time receives extremely various contours and expressions in various languages—for example, certain languages like Chinook employ several pasts, including a mythic one—but one thing seems certain: the generating center of linguistic time is always the present of the speech-act [*énonciation*]. This leads us to ask whether there is, homologous to linguistic time, a time specific to discourse. On this point, Benveniste offers an initial clarification: in many languages, specifically Indo-European ones, the system is twofold: (1) a first system, or system of discourse proper, adapted to the temporality of the speaker, whose speech-act is always the point of origin; (2) a second system, or system of history, of narrative, appropriate to the recounting of past events, without the speaker's intervention and consequently deprived of present and future (except periphrastically), its specific tense the aorist (or its equivalents, like the French *passé simple*), precisely the one tense missing from the system of discourse. The existence of this a-personal system does not contradict the essentially logocentric nature of linguistic time we have just asserted: the second system merely lacks the characteristics of the first: one is linked to the other by the opposition *marked / unmarked*: consequently, they participate in the same field of pertinence.

The distinction between the two systems is not at all the same as the one traditionally made between objective discourse and subjective discourse, for we cannot identify the relation of the

speaker and the referent on one hand with the relation of this same speaker and the speech-act on the other, and it is only this second relation which determines the temporal system of the discourse. These linguistic phenomena were difficult to perceive so long as literature was regarded as the docile and "transparent" expression of either so-called objective (or chronicle) time, or of psychological subjectivity, i.e., so long as literature was placed within a totalitarian ideology of the referent. Today, however, literature discovers in the unfolding of discourse what I call certain fundamental subtleties: for example, what is told in the aorist does not appear immersed in the past, in "what has taken place," but only in the non-personal, which is neither history nor science nor even the *one* of so-called anonymous writing, for what prevails in this *one* is the indefinite, not the absence of person: *one* is marked; *he*, paradoxically, is not. At the other extreme of the experience of discourse, the writer today, it seems to me, can no longer be content to express his own present according to a lyrical project: he must learn to distinguish the speaker's present, which remains grounded in psychological plenitude, from the present of the locution, which is as flexible as that locution and in which event and writing are absolutely coincidental. Thus literature, at least in its explorations, is taking the same path as linguistics when, with Gustave Guillaume, it concerns itself with operative time, or the time of the speech-act itself.

4. Person

This leads to a second grammatical category, quite as important in linguistics as in literature: that of *person*. First of all, we are reminded by the linguists that person (in the grammatical sense of the term) seems to be universal, linked to the very anthropology of language. Every language, as Benveniste has shown, organizes person into two oppositions: a correlation of personality, which sets person (*I* or *you*) in opposition to the non-person (*he* or *it*), sign of what is absent, of absence itself; and,

within this first great opposition, a correlation of subjectivity sets two persons in opposition, the *I* and the *non-I* (i.e., *you*). For our purposes, we must make three oppositions, following Benveniste's lead. First of all, the polarity of persons, a basic condition of language, is nonetheless very special, for this polarity involves neither equality nor symmetry: *ego* always has a position of transcendence with regard to *you, I* being interior to what is stated and *you* remaining exterior to it; and yet *I* and *you* are reversible, *I* can always become *you*, and vice versa; this is not the case for the non-person (*he* or *it*), which can never reverse itself into person or vice versa. Second, the linguistic *I* can and must be defined in an entirely a-psychological fashion: *I* is nothing but "the person who utters the present instance of discourse containing the linguistic instance *I*" (Benveniste). Last, the non-person never reflects the instance of discourse, being situated outside of it; we must give its full weight to Benveniste's recommendation that *he* or *it* is not to be represented as a more or less diminished or distanced person: *he* or *it* is absolutely non-person, marked by the absence of what specifically (i.e., linguistically) constitutes *I* and *you*.

From this linguistic explanation we shall draw several suggestions for an analysis of literary discourse. First of all, we note that whatever the varied and often cunning forms (marks) person may take when we proceed from sentence to discourse, just as in the case of temporality, the work's discourse is subject to a double system, that of person and that of non-person. What produces an illusion, here, is that our classical discourse (in the broad sense) is a mixed one, which frequently alternates—at a rapid rate (for example, within the same sentence)—the personal speech-act and the a-personal one, by a complex interplay of pronouns and descriptive verbs. This mixed system of person and non-person produces an ambiguous consciousness which manages to keep the personal quality of what is stated, yet periodically breaking off the speaker's participation in the statement.

Second, if we return to the linguistic definition of the first person (*I* is the one who says *I* in the present instance of

discourse), we may better understand the effort of certain writers today (I am thinking of Sollers's *Drame*) when they try to distinguish, on the level of the narrative itself, psychological person from the author of the writing: contrary to the current illusion of autobiographies and traditional novels, the subject of the speech-act can never be the same as the one who acted yesterday: the *I* of the discourse can no longer be the site where a previously stored-up person is innocently restored. Absolute recourse to the instance of discourse in order to determine person, which with Damourette and Pichon we might call *nyn-egocentrism* (consider the exemplary beginning of Robbe-Grillet's novel *In the Labyrinth*: "I am alone here now")—this recourse, imperfect as its practice may still be, thus seems a weapon against the general bad faith of a discourse which makes or would make literary form merely the expression of an interiority constituted previous to and outside of language.

Last, let us recall this detail of linguistic analysis: in the process of communication, the course of the *I* is not homogenous: when I liberate the sign *I,* I refer to myself insofar as I am speaking, and here there is an act which is always new, even if repeated, an act whose "meaning" is always unprecedented; but upon reaching its destination, this *I* is received by my interlocutor as a stable sign, product of a complete code, whose contents are recurrent. In other words, the *I* of the one who writes *I* is not the same as the *I* which is read by *you.* This basic dissymmetry of language, explained by Jespersen and Jakobson by the notion of *shifter* or an overlapping of code and message, is finally beginning to disturb literature by showing it that intersubjectivity, or rather interlocution, cannot be accomplished simply by a pious wish about the merits of "dialogue," but only by a deep, patient, and often circuitous descent into the labyrinth of meaning.

5. Diathesis

There remains to be discussed one last grammatical notion which may illuminate the activity of writing at its very center,

since it concerns the verb *to write* itself. It would be interesting to know at what moment this verb began to be used intransitively, the writer no longer being the one who writes something, but the one who writes—absolutely: this shift is certainly the sign of an important change in mentality. But does it really involve intransivity? No writer, of whatever period, can be unaware that he always writes something; we might even say that it is paradoxically at the moment when *to write* seems to become intransitive that its object, under the name *book* or *text*, assumes a special importance. Hence, it is not, at least primarily, on the side of intransivity that we must look for the definition of the modern verb *to write*. Another linguistic notion may give us the key: that of diathesis or, as the grammar books put it, "voice" (active, passive, middle). Diathesis designates the way in which the subject of the verb is affected by the action; this is obvious for the passive; and yet linguists tell us that, in Indo-European at least, the diathetical opposition is not between active and passive but between active and middle. According to the classic example given by Meillet and Benveniste, the verb *to sacrifice* (ritually) is active if the priest sacrifices the victim in my place and for me, and it is middle voice if, taking the knife from the priest's hands, I make the sacrifice for my own sake; in the case of the active voice, the action is performed outside the subject, for although the priest makes the sacrifice, he is not affected by it; in the case of the middle voice, on the contrary, by acting, the subject affects himself, he always remains inside the action, even if that action involves an object. Hence, the middle voice does not exclude transitivity. Thus defined, the middle voice corresponds exactly to the modern state of the verb *to write*: to write is today to make oneself the center of the action of speech, it is to effect writing by affecting oneself, to make action and affection coincide, to leave the *scriptor* inside the writing—not as a psychological subject (the Indo-European priest could perfectly well be overflowing with subjectivity while actively sacrificing for his client), but as agent of the action. We can even take the diathetic analysis of the verb *to write* a little further. We know

that in French certain verbs have an active meaning in their simple form (*aller*—to go, *arriver*—to arrive, *rentrer*—to return, *sortir*—to leave) but take the passive auxiliary (*être*—to be) in forming the perfect tense (*je suis allé, je suis arrivé*); in order to explain this bifurcation peculiar to the middle voice, Guillaume distinguishes between what he calls a *diriment* perfect (with the auxiliary *avoir*—to have), which supposes an interruption of the action due to the speaker's initiative (*je marche, je m'arrête de marcher, j'ai marché*—I walk, I stop walking, I have walked), and an *integrant* perfect (with the auxiliary *être*—to be), peculiar to the verbs which designate a semantic whole, which cannot be delivered by the subject's simple initiative (*je suis sorti, il est mort*—I have left, he has died—do not refer to a *diriment* interruption of leaving or dying). *To write* is traditionally an active verb, whose past is *diriment*; but in our literature the verb is changing status (if not form): *to write* is becoming a middle verb with an *integrant* past, precisely insofar as *to write* is becoming an indivisible semantic whole; so that the true past, the "right" past of this new verb is not *j'ai écrit* but *je suis écrit*—as one says *je suis né, il est mort,* etc., expressions in which, despite the verb *être,* there is no notion of the passive, since without forcing matters we cannot transform *je suis écrit*—I am written—into *on m'a écrit*—someone has written me.

Thus, in the middle voice of *to write,* the distance between *scriptor* and language diminishes asymptotically. We could even say that it is the writings of subjectivity, such as romantic writing, which are active, for in them the agent is not interior but *anterior* to the process of writing: here the one who writes does not write for himself, but as if by proxy, for an exterior and antecedent person (even if both bear the same name), while, in the modern verb of middle voice *to write,* the subject is constituted as immediately contemporary with the writing, being effected and affected by it: this is the exemplary case of the Proustian narrator, who exists only by writing, despite the reference to a pseudo-memory.

6. The instance of discourse

These observations suggest that the central problem of modern writing exactly coincides with what we might call the problematics of the verb in linguistics: just as temporality, person, and diathesis define the positional field of the subject, so modern literature is trying, by various experiments, to establish a new position for the agent of writing in writing itself. The meaning or the goal of this effort is to substitute the instance of discourse for the instance of reality (or of the referent), that mythic alibi which has dominated—still dominates—the idea of literature. The field of the writer is only writing itself, not as pure "form," conceived by an aesthetic of art for art's sake, but much more radically as the only possible space of *the one who writes.*

It seems to me necessary to remind those who accuse such investigations of solipsism, formalism, or scientism that by returning to the fundamental categories of language, such as person, tense, and voice, we place ourselves at the heart of a problematics of interlocution, for such categories are precisely the ones where we may examine the relations of *I* and of what is deprived of the mark of *I*. Inasmuch as person, tense, and voice (so properly named) imply these remarkable linguistic beings known as shifters, they compel us to conceive language and discourse no longer in terms of an instrumental and consequently reified nomenclature, but as the very exercise of discourse: for example, the pronoun, which is doubtless the most dizzying of the shifters, belongs structurally (I insist) to discourse; this is, one might say, its scandal, and it is on this scandal that we must work today, in linguistics and in literature; we are trying to sound the depths of the "pact of speech" which unites the writer and the other, so that each moment of discourse is both absolutely new and absolutely understood. We can even, with a certain temerity, give this research a historical dimension. We know that the medieval *Septenium*, in its grandiose classification of the universe, prescribed two great sites of exploration: on the one hand the secrets of nature (*quadrivium*), on the other

the secrets of discourse (*trivium: grammatica, rhetorica, dialectica*); this opposition was lost between the end of the Middle Ages and our own time, language being considered only as an instrument in the service of either reason or the heart. Today, however, something of that ancient opposition is reviving: to the exploration of the cosmos corresponds, once again, the exploration of language, conducted by linguistics, psychoanalysis, and literature. For literature itself is a science—no longer of the "human heart," but of human discourse; its investigation, however, is no longer addressed to the secondary forms and figures which constituted the object of rhetoric, but to the fundamental categories of language: just as, in our Western culture, grammar was born only long after rhetoric, so it is only after having made its way for centuries through *le beau littéraire* that literature can raise the fundamental problems of language without which it would not exist.

Colloquium at Johns Hopkins University, 1966

Reflections on a Manual

I should like to offer some simple, even simplistic observations suggested by a recent reading or rereading of a manual of French literary history. While rereading or reading this manual, which closely resembles those I remember from the *lycée*, I asked myself this question: Can literature be anything else for us than a childhood memory? I mean, what is it that continues, what is it that persists, what is it that speaks of literature after the *lycée*?

If we were to make an objective inventory, we would answer that what abides (from literature) in adult, current life is: certain crossword puzzles, some televised quiz shows, the posters of the centenaries of some writer's birth, some writer's death, a few paperback titles, some critical allusions in the newspaper we're reading for altogether different reasons—looking for something altogether different from these allusions to literature. All of which has a lot to do, I believe, with the fact that we French have always been accustomed to identify literature with the history of literature. The history of literature is an essentially academic object which in fact exists only because it is taught; so that the title of our conference, "The Teaching of Literature," is for me almost tautological. Literature is what is taught, period. It is an object of teaching. It is generally agreed that at least in France no major synthesis—say of the Hegelian type—has been produced on the history of our literature. If this French literature is a childhood memory—and that is how I am taking it—I should like to see—this will be the object of a very limited and quite banal inventory—what elements this memory consists of.

First of all, this memory consists of certain objects which recur, which continually repeat themselves, and which we might

almost call monemes of the meta-literary language or the language of literary history; these objects are of course the authors, the schools, the movements, the genres, and the centuries. And then, around these objects, there is a certain—actually very limited—number of features or predicates which find a place and combine with each other. If we were to read the manuals of literary history, we should have no difficulty in determining the paradigmatics, the elementary structure of these features, which appears to be that of couples in opposition with an occasional mixed term; this is an extremely simple structure: for instance, there is the archetypal paradigm of our whole literature, *romanticism-classicism* (though French romanticism, on the international scale, seems a relatively poor thing), occasionally amplified into *romanticism-realism-symbolism* (for the nineteenth century). As you know, the law of combinative operations permits, with very few elements, the immediate production of an apparent proliferation: by applying certain of these features to certain of the objects I have mentioned, we produce certain individualities, or certain literary individuals. This is how the manuals always present the centuries themselves: in a paradigmatic fashion. Actually, it's odd how a century comes to have a kind of individual existence, but it is precisely our childhood memories which accustom us to make the centuries into individuals of a sort. The four great centuries of our literature are strongly individuated by our literary history: the sixteenth is overflowing life; the seventeenth is unity; the eighteenth is movement; and the nineteenth is complexity.

Other features are added which again can very nicely be set in opposition, paradigmatized. Here is a random sampling of these oppositions, these predicates which are fastened onto literary objects: there is "exuberant" opposed to "restrained"; there is "lofty art" or "deliberate obscurity" opposed to "expansiveness"; "rhetorical coldness" to "sensibility"—which overlaps the familiar romantic paradigm of *cold* and *warm*—or again the opposition between "sources" and "originality," between "labor" and "inspiration." What we have here are the rudiments of a

little roster of this mythology of our literary history, one which would begin by establishing those mythic paradigms of which French textbooks have always been so fond, perhaps because this was a good method of memorization or perhaps, on the contrary, because a mental structure that functions by contraries has a high ideological yield (we need an ideological analysis to tell us). It is this same opposition that we encounter, for instance, between *Condé* and *Turenne*, the great archetypes of two French temperaments: if you put them together in a single writer (Jakobson has taught that the poetic act consists in extending a paradigm into a syntagm), you produce an author who reconciles, for example, "formal art and extreme sensibility" or who manifests "a witty nature concealing a tragic sense" (such as Villon). What I am saying here is simply the sketch of what we might imagine as a kind of little *grammar* of our literature, a grammar which would produce stereotyped individuations: authors, movements, schools.

Second element of this memory: French literary history consists of dismissals we need to explore. There is—as we know, as has already been said—a whole *other* history which would be precisely the history of such dismissals. What are these "censorships"? First of all, the social classes; the social structure which underlies this literature is rarely found in manuals of literary history, we must turn to more emancipated, more highly developed critical works in order to find it; when we read these manuals, references to class structure may sometimes exist, but only in passing and as aesthetic oppositions. Actually, what the manual sets in opposition are class *atmospheres*, not realities; when the aristocratic "spirit" is opposed to the bourgeois and folk spirit, at least for previous centuries, it is the distinction of a refined taste which is opposed to good humor and realism. We also find, even in recent textbooks, sentences of this sort: "A plebeian, Diderot lacks tact and delicacy; he commits faults of taste which affect the sentiments themselves with a certain vulgarity . . ." Thus, class exists, but as an aesthetic or ethical atmosphere; on the level of the instruments of knowledge, these

manuals betray the flagrant absence of any economics or sociology of our literature. The second "censorship" would obviously be that of sexuality, but I shall not discuss it here, because it overlaps the much more general censorship which our entire society brings to bear upon sex. A third "censorship"—for my part, I regard it as a censorship—would be that of the very concept of literature, which is never defined as a concept, literature in these manuals being an object which is self-understood and never interrogated in order to define, if not its being, at least its social, symbolic, or anthropological functions; whereas in fact we might reverse this omission and say—in any case, I personally should be glad to say—that the history of literature ought to be conceived as a history of the idea of literature, and that such a history does not seem to exist, for the moment. Finally, a fourth "censorship," and not the least important, bears on "languages," as always. A language is a much more important object of censorship, perhaps, than all the rest. By which I mean a manifest censorship, the kind these manuals bring to bear on states of language remote from the classical norm. This is a well-known phenomenon: there is a vast censorship of preciosity, which notably in the seventeenth century is described as a sort of classical inferno: every French person, through the teaching of our school system, has the same judgment and the same view of preciosity as Boileau, Molière, or La Bruyère. This one-way indictment is repeated for centuries—and this despite what a real history of literature would readily make clear, i.e., the enormous and persistent success of preciosity throughout the seventeenth century, since even in 1663 a voluminous collection of *poésies galantes* by the Comtesse de Suze went into fifteen printings. Hence, there is a point to clarify here—a point of censorship. There is also the case of sixteenth-century French, what is called Middle French, which is rejected from our language, on the pretext that it consists of ridiculous novelties, Italianisms, jargon, baroque audacities, etc., without ever raising the question of what it is we have lost today in the great traumatism of classical purity. We have lost not only means of

expression, as they are called, but mental structures as well, for language is a mental structure. Here again, there is perhaps an indictment to be brought, one which should obviously begin with a condemnation of "classico-centrism," which in my opinion still marks our whole literature, specifically in regard to language. Once again, we must include these problems of language in the problems of literature; we must raise the great questions: When does a language begin? What does *to begin* mean for a language? When does a genre begin? What does it mean when we are told of the first French novel, for instance? It is evident that there is always, behind the classical idea of the language, a political idea: the language's very being, i.e., its perfection and even its name, is linked to a culmination of power: the Latin classic is Latin or Roman power; the French classic is monarchic power. This is why it must be said that, in our teaching, we cultivate, or we promote, what I should call the paternal language and not the mother tongue—particularly since, let me say in passing, we do not know what spoken French is; we know what written French is because there are grammars of good usage; but no one knows what spoken French is; and in order to know, we should have to begin by escaping our classico-centrism.

Third element of this childhood memory: this memory is centered, and its center is—as I have just said—classicism. This classico-centrism seems anachronistic to us; yet we are still living with it. Even now, we pass doctoral theses in the Salle Louis-Liard, at the Sorbonne, and we must inventory the portraits in that hall; they are the divinities which preside over French knowledge in its entirety: Corneille, Molière, Pascal, Bossuet, Descartes, Racine under the protection—this is an admission—of Richelieu. This classico-centrism goes far, then, since it always identifies literature—and this even in the discussions of the manuals—with the king. Literature *is* the monarchy, and invincibly the academic image of literature is constructed around the name of certain kings: Louis XIV, of course, but also François I, St. Louis, so that, ultimately, we are presented with a kind of shiny image in which king and literature reflect each other. There is also, in this centered structure of our literary history,

a *national* identification; these manuals of history perpetually advance what are called typically French values or typically French temperaments; we are told, for instance, that Joinville is typically French; what is French—General de Gaulle has provided one definition—is what is *"regular, normal, national."* This is obviously the range of our literature's norms and values. From the moment that this history of our literature has a center, it is obvious that it is constructed in relation to this center; what comes after or before in the structure is presented as harbinger or desertion. What is before classicism heralds classicism—Montaigne is a precursor of the classics; what comes after classicism revives or betrays it.

A last remark: the childhood memory I invoke borrows its permanent structuration, down through these centuries, from a grid which is no longer a rhetorical grid in our teaching, for that was abandoned around the middle of the nineteenth century (as Gérard Genette has shown in a splendid article on the problem); it is now a psychological grid. All academic judgments rest on the conception of form as the subject's "expression." Personality is translated into style: this postulate nourishes all judgments and all analyses concerning authors; whence, ultimately, the key value, the one most often invoked to judge authors: *sincerity*. For instance, du Bellay will be praised for having produced certain sincere and personal cries; Ronsard had a sincere and profound Catholic faith; Villon, a cry from the heart, etc.

These remarks are simplistic, and I am uncertain as to their value in a discussion, but I should like to conclude them with a last observation. To my sense, there is a profound and irreducible antinomy between literature as practice and literature as teaching. This antinomy is serious because it is attached to what is perhaps the most serious problem we face today, the problem of the transmission of knowledge; this is doubtless, now, the fundamental problem of alienation, for if the great structures of economic alienation have been more or less revealed, the structures of the alienation of knowledge have not; I believe that in this regard a political conceptual apparatus is not enough and that there must be, precisely, one of psychoanalytic analysis.

Hence, it is for this that we must work, and this will have many subsequent repercussions on literature and on what can be done with it in teaching, supposing that literature can subsist in teaching, that it is compatible with teaching.

Meanwhile, we can indicate certain points of provisional correction; within a teaching system which retains literature on its program, I see three immediate ones. The first would be to reverse classico-centrism and to "do" literary history *backwards*: instead of envisioning the history of literature from a pseudo-genetic point of view, we should make *ourselves* the center of this history, and if we really want to "do" literary history, organize this history starting from the great modern break; thus, past literature would be dealt with through present-day disciplines, and even in present-day language: we should no longer see first-year *lycée* students obliged to study a sixteenth century whose language they scarcely understand, on the pretext that it comes *before* the seventeenth century, itself beset by religious disputes unrelated to their present situation. Second principle: to substitute *text* for author, school, and movement. The text, in our schools, is treated as an object of explication, but an explication of the text is itself always attached to a history of literature; the text must be treated not as a sacred object (object of a philology), but essentially as a space of language, as the site of an infinite number of digressions, thereby tracing, from a certain number of texts, a certain number of codes of knowledge invested in them. Finally, a third principle: at every opportunity and at every moment to develop the polysemic reading of the text, to recognize finally the rights of polysemy, to construct a sort of polysemic criticism, to open the text to symbolism. This would produce, I believe, a considerable decompression in the teaching of our literature—not, I repeat, as teaching is practiced—that depends on the teachers—but as it seems to me to be codified still.

Colloquium at the Centre culturel
international de Cerisy-la-Salle, 1969

Writing Reading

Has it never happened, as you were reading a book, that you kept stopping as you read, not because you weren't interested, but because you were: because of a flow of ideas, stimuli, associations? In a word, haven't you ever happened *to read while looking up from your book*?

It is such reading, at once insolent in that it interrupts the text, and smitten in that it keeps returning to it and feeding on it, which I tried to describe. In order to write it, in order for my reading to become in its turn the object of a new reading (that of the readers of *S/Z*), I obviously had to try to systematize all those moments when one *looks up*. In other words, to interrogate my own reading was to try to grasp the *form* of all readings (form: sole site of science), or again: to devise a theory of reading.

I therefore took a short text (this was essential to the detailed scope of the enterprise), Balzac's *Sarrasine*, a little-known tale (but isn't Balzac defined precisely as Inexhaustible, the author no one ever reads all of, except by some exegetic vocation?), and I kept *stopping* as I read this text. Criticism ordinarily functions (this is not a reproach) either by microscope (patiently illuminating the work's philological, autobiographical, or psychological details) or by telescope (scrutinizing the great historical space surrounding the author). I denied myself these two instruments: I spoke neither of Balzac nor of his time, I explored neither the psychology of his characters nor the thematics of the text nor the sociology of the anecdote. Recalling the camera's first feats in decomposing a horse's trot, I too attempted to "film" the reading of *Sarrasine* in slow motion: the result, I suspect, is neither quite an analysis (I have not tried to grasp

the *secret* of this strange text) nor quite an image (I don't think I have projected myself into my reading; or if I have, it is from an unconscious site which falls far short of "myself"). Then what is *S/Z*? Simply a text, that text which we write in our head *when we look up.*

Such a text, which we should be able to call by a single word, text-as-reading, is little known because for centuries we have been overly interested in the author and insufficiently in the reader; most critical theories try to explain why the author has written his work, according to which pulsions, which constraints, which limits . . . This exorbitant privilege granted to the site the work comes from (person or Story), this censorship applied to the site it seeks and where it is dispersed (reading) determine a very special (though an old) economy: the author is regarded as the eternal owner of his work, and the rest of us, his readers, as simple usufructuaries. This economy obviously implies a theme of *authority*: the author, it is believed, has certain rights over the reader, he constrains him to a certain *meaning* of the work, and this meaning is of course the right one, the real meaning: whence a critical morality of the right meaning (and of its defect, "misreading"): we try to establish *what the author meant,* and not at all *what the reader understands.*

Though certain authors have themselves notified us that we are free to read their text as we choose and that they are not really interested in our choice (Valéry), we still find it hard to perceive how the logic of reading differs from the rules of composition. These, inherited from rhetoric, are still taken as referring to a deductive, i.e., rational model: as in the case of the syllogism, it is a matter of compelling the reader to a meaning or an issue: composition *channels*; reading, on the contrary (that text we write in ourselves when we read), *disperses*, disseminates; or at least, dealing with a story (like that of the sculptor Sarrasine), we see clearly that a certain constraint of our progress (of "suspense") constantly struggles within us against the text's explosive force, its digressive energy: with the logic of reason (which makes this story readable) mingles a logic

of the symbol. This latter logic is not deductive but associative: it associates with the material text (with each of its sentences) *other* ideas, *other* images, *other* significations. "The text, only the text," we are told, but "only the text" does not exist: there is *immediately* in this tale, this novel, this poem I am reading, a supplement of meaning for which neither dictionary nor grammar can account. It is this supplement whose space I wanted to explore in writing my reading of Balzac's *Sarrasine*.

I have not reconstituted a reader (you or myself) but reading. I mean that every reading derives from trans-individual forms: the associations engendered by the letter (but where is that letter?) are never, whatever we do, anarchic; they are always caught up (sampled and inserted) by certain codes, certain languages, certain lists of stereotypes. The most subjective reading imaginable is never anything but a game played according to certain rules. Where do these rules come from? Certainly not from the author, who does nothing but apply them in his own way (this can be inspired, as in Balzac's case); visible apart from him, these rules come from an age-old logic of narrative, from a symbolic form which constitutes us even before we are born—in a word, from that vast cultural space through which our person (whether author or reader) is only one passage. To open the text, to posit the system of its reading, is therefore not only to ask and to show that it can be interpreted freely; it is especially, and much more radically, to gain acknowledgment that there is no objective or subjective truth of reading, but only a *ludic* truth; again, "game" must not be understood here as a distraction, but as a piece of work—from which, however, all labor has evaporated: to read is to make our *body* work (psychoanalysis has taught us that this body greatly exceeds our memory and our consciousness) at the invitation of the text's signs, of all the languages which traverse it and form something like the shimmering depth of the sentence.

I can easily imagine readable narrative (the one we can read without declaring it "unreadable": who does not understand Balzac?). As one of those articulated lay figures that painters

use (or used to use) in order to "catch" the various postures of the human body; reading, we too imprint on the text a certain posture, and it is for this reason that it is alive; but this posture, which is our invention, is possible only because there is a governed relation among the elements of the text, in short a *proportion*: I have tried to analyze that proportion, to describe the topological disposition which gives the reading of a classical text both its contour and its freedom.

Le Figaro littéraire, 1970