REALITY AND REPRESENTATION

It seems that anthropological structuralism is gaining itself a rather casual bad reputation, sullied as it is by the over-weening ambition of Lévi-Strauss's cosmic objectivity, the apparently mentalistic aridities of symbolic classification, and the surface opacity of much structuralist and post-structuralist theory. In the previous issue of this journal Shelton argues that Saussurean structuralism produces an 'intellectual theory which only emphasises the relations between signs and reduces their practical function to that of communication or knowledge' (1977:171). Classificatory systems are 'divorced from their contextual reality' (ibid:172), and contradiction is ignored 'in favour of ideal abstraction' (ibid:172).

These remarks are made in review of Bourdieu, who himself says that:

> The language of rules and models, which seems tolerable
> when applied to "alien" practices, ceases to convince as
> soon as one considers the practical mastery of the
> symbolism of social interaction --. tact, dexterity, or
> savoir-faire -- presupposed by the most everyday games of
> sociability and accompanied by the application of a
> spontaneous semiology, i.e. a mass of precepts, formulae,
> and codified cues (1977:10).

Bourdieu claims to be rooting out an objectivist structuralism which locks social life into 'reified, reifying models' (ibid). He emphatically asserts, however, that his work 'is not a new form of sacrificial offering to the mysteries of subjectivity' (ibid:4). We can, I think, sympathise with his project, while suspecting that his design, at least in this aspect of its ambition, proceeds little further than its annunciation. He says:

> The science of practice has to construct the principle
> which makes it possible to account for all the cases
> observed, and only those, without forgetting that this
> construction, and the generative operation of which it
> is the basis, are only the theoretical equivalent of
> the practical scheme which enables every correctly trained
> agent to produce all the practices and judgements of
> honour called for by the challenges of existence (ibid:11).

We begin to suspect, perhaps, that to 'escape from the ritual either/or choice between objectivism and subjectivism in which the social sciences have so far allowed themselves to be trapped' (ibid:4) requires more than a determination to effect that escape, coupled with resolute assertions of its imminent achievement.

We can leave this quasi-Marxist critique for the moment, and return to the most recent issue of JASO, where Scobey, speaking of Lévi-Strauss's structuralist project, says:

> What is odious ...is not structuralism per se or the notion
> of depth analysis, but rather the claim to a structuralist
> science (1977:150).

We are told that: 'The figure of the scientist is not sufficient response' (ibid:148), but rather the anthropologist must acknowledge 'his personal place in the events that led to his crisis' (ibid).

Going back a little further, we find ourselves informed that 'both structuralism and the search for universals are basically anti-semantic concerns' (Chapman 1977:59). This was said in review of Crick's book (1976), prefacing a statement of his to the effect that 'structuralism opts for syntax rather than semantics' (1976:45). Crick himself, while concerned to show that functionalism 'left out this most basic human characteristic of humanity' (Pocock 1977:596), had similar criticisms to make of much structuralist endeavour.

It is not my purpose here to contest these assertions. They are all, indeed, each in its own way, incontestable. Nor do I intend to argue that they are all in some sense representative of a unified critique. This is obviously far from true, with a wealth of fundamentally cross-grained avenues of argument opened up. The marxist statements and those from a soi-distant semantic anthropology in particular pose as mutually opaque. My only purpose in starting with these kinds of criticism of structuralism is to draw attention to how familiar they are. We are exhorted to seek 'context' and renounce 'abstraction', to forsake 'rules and models' in favour of the 'practical', 'everyday', 'spontaneous semiology' conjured up by the 'challenges of existence'. We are asked to put back 'humanity', reinstate 'meaning', and acknowledge our 'personal place'. Structuralism is variously accused of denying history, totality, change, life, meaning, and of concealing beneath its claims an intellectual or ideological substructure (whether this is dubbed 'scientist', 'objectivist', 'bourgeois' or whatever) which stands between us and our object of study, and denies us any adequate formulation of our problems.

The familiarity of this may just be a measure of my advancing age. Nevertheless I think it would be fair to say that the faults that we are now finding in structuralism are precisely the faults that were being found in functionalism ten and twenty years ago, faults that structuralism in some way or another promised to repair.

What has happened? The same old debate is going on, and all our carefully constructed plans for its dissolution have merely been subsumed by it, chewed for flavour and tossed aside.

Structuralism brought with itself an appeal, an appeal to which mainstream British social anthropology responded with considerable enthusiasm, to study the social ephemera to which functionalism had assigned only a derivative, secondary and dependent role. We can quote from one of the definitive theorists:

> We shall be able to distinguish between instrumental
> imperatives - arising out of such types of activity
> as economic, normative, educational and political -
> and integrative imperatives. Here we shall list
> knowledge, religion, and magic. Artistic and
> recreational activities we shall be able to relate directly
> to certain physiological characteristics of the human
> organism,... (Malinowski 1944:38).

The exotica of myth, ritual and symbolism (to employ a triad that is now built into course descriptions and publishers' lists), rather than being merely expressive, integrative and validatory of the more solid social phenomena, became, for structuralism, objects of study in their own right.

It was with the investigation into myth, ritual and symbolism -- that exotic triad of expressive activities -- that structuralism made and held its appeal. We can think of the Mythologiques, Purity and Danger, Totemism, The Savage Mind, Right and Left, and so on. These works, that belong to a self-consciously structuralist tradition, often effect within themselves a conventional division of labour wherein they leave to others the examination of economics, politics, and social structure. Much of the implicit intellectual ideology that made apt this division of functions between the 'symbolic' anthropologist and his empiricist partner, between those who studied representations and those who studied underlying realities, can be found in the alliance/descent debate, or in debate about just what a symbol was, and what a symbolic equation was supposed to be doing. It is here, where charges of 'idealism' flourished, that we can locate the source of the division of labour which I am discussing. Inappropriate as these charges often were, it must be said that structuralism did not do much, in its practice, to refute them, or to deny the conventional coherence of this division of labour, wherein structuralism took to itself the 'classificatory ephemera', and left to others the 'material referent'.

It seems clear that structuralism has all along run the risk of being the idealist department of social anthropology, the top floor where clouds floated past the windows. This is apt, not just within criticisms levelled at structuralism by 'sceptics of a more materialist persuasion' (Ovesen 1977:151) that it was 'an essentially idealist or mentalist undertaking' (ibid), but by structuralist practice itself, which often, by choice of subject, accepted the justice of such criticism and rendered it apt.

I think, therefore, that to consider structuralism to have consisted only in its scientific ambitions is, while not misplaced criticism, at least misrepresentative of how structuralism slotted itself into a predominantly empirical pre-existing tradition. It also obscures the nature of the appeal that structuralism made. British anthropologists in the fifties and sixties had their own scientistic, objectivist, abstracted system of context-divorced models and would not willingly have espoused another that presented itself as such. It was as a release from this sterility, into the free air of meaning, that structuralism came. It is of some ethnographic interest here that when I began studying anthropology, in 1970, my experience of structuralism was as of some exciting if unfulfilled promise, entirely in tune with all the other exciting if unfulfilled promises that the late sixties held. A thoroughgoing relativism became a theoretical vehicle for liberalism, and the autonomy of alien classificatory structures provided a location for this relativity. Structuralism in its 'fundamental structures' guise was obviously a potential threat to this. Arguments like the Berlin and Kay hypothesis (1969), that colour categories were determined by a structural universality rather than being subject only to the relativistic self-determination of their own arbitrary classificatory structure, were ill-received where relativism had become an attitude of mind. Roy Willis, in a seminar given in Oxford in 1977, told how personal a threat such determinisms were to his view of the world -- determinisms that did, as it were, make him fear for the freedom of man. Just as Sartre retreated in horror from the fundamental structures

of Lévi-Strauss, so did a relativism derived from the inalienable autonomy
of symbolic structures retreat before the threat of universals, fundamentals
and biologisms.

There are clearly two very important threads running through structuralism
-- one, the Lévi-Straussian fundamental structures of the human mind, the
cosmic objectivity, and the other, the exultation in the mutual opacity of
self-determining conceptual systems. These can of course be integrated in
various ways and at various levels, but they are both unquestionably there,
and have, I think, rather different implications for determining the kind
of public reaction that we might expect structuralism to get. Both strands
are present in Crick's book, although the emphasis is essentially on meaning,
on conceptual structures, on semantic exploration, on humanity as humanity,
on man as the meaning-maker and so on. Crick lets slip the occasional, even
slightly thoughtless, appeal to deep structures that are, as it were, syntact-
ical rather than semantic. He expresses, for example, the desire to:

> sink beneath cultural terms which are not safely
> used in anthropology to an analytical level of
> sufficient depth that satisfactory commensurability
> between cultures can be obtained (1976:113).

This strongly evokes the Lévi-Straussian ambition of an objectively secure
intellectual isomerism before which cultural autonomy will dissolve. It
should be said in fairness to Crick that this is exceptional in a work otherwise
devoted to the problems in the analysis of meaning that a quasi-positivist,
quasi-behaviourist social science ignored and engendered. There are various
rather complicated reasons why these two facets of structuralism should be
capable of disguising themselves as a unity, and I will limit myself here to
observing that behaviourism is not empiricism is not crude ethnocentrism is
not bone-headedness, but that all these, attributed to a previous intellectual
order, were read into one another to create a unity, such that it was possible
to line up oppositions like behaviour to ideas, and surface reality to
grammatical depth, to attribute a virtue to the study of the second of each
pair, and to proceed into a meaning that was, at the same time, a profundity
beyond the reach of ordinary man.

I think that the vision of a structuralist science exposing the crystalline
clarity of inalienable and eternal structures of the mind is not very important
to Crick, is not very important to understanding the enthusiasm that structuralism
generated in British social anthropology, and is not even very important to
a perfectly rewarding reading of Lévi-Strauss, or destructive of what we
choose to find valuable in his work. Structuralism came on the scene as a
relief from the bogus positivisms of conventional social science, positivisms
that treated the expressive aspects of life as ephemera. Structuralism
provided a way of dealing with these phenomena that, if still reductive, was
reductive to an essentially fictional, and thus theoretically unconstraining,
space. Symbolism could now evoke its clarity from within itself, or from
the mind, which turned out to be more or less the same thing, when the uncon-
scious became structured like a language. The creative spirit was freed from
the necessity, more or less crudely conceived, that its productions should
contribute to the support and validation of the social structure, a social
structure that was itself external, constraining, and empirically realisable.

The point can perhaps be summed up by the use of a now well-worn phrase -- the shift from function to meaning can very easily be read as the shift from functionalism to structuralism. This is in many ways a serious misrepresentation, but there is certainly no other flamboyant -ism that we can attach to the concern with meaning, and the manifold misreadings that allow the conflation of structure with meaning, and permit of their co-existence with other more positivist modes, are still very much with us. Briefly, I think that structuralism has been allowed its place in the social sciences in contract with a theory of symbolism which it ought thoroughly to undermine, but which has nevertheless subsumed it, and restricted it. I will not elaborate this at the moment, but will proceed to give some idea of the nature of that 'pre-structuralist' theory of symbolism, wherein symbolism becomes a specialist field, and semantic anthropology a slightly exotic idealist dabbling.

I will go to a Mediterraneanist for my first example to illustrate this problem, partly because the retreat into the 'symbolic' is a disease particularly endemic in European anthropology at the moment, and partly because I am familiar with the material. I have no doubt that we could find the same argument resounding in a traditional manner throughout contemporary anthropology. Peter Loizos, speaking of politics in a Greek Cypriot village, says that:

> Rules for control do not always work, the existence
> of norms does not prevent deviation. Furthermore,
> they are not free-floating -- the anthropologist
> must show cause why such rules exist (Loizos 1975:291).

This is familiar enough -- rules exist because reality causes them; reality can nevertheless, in its irreverent and mischievous way, defy the rule by deviating from it, and so on. We are asked:

> So if a village has an operating and efficient norm which
> states that neither conflict should be restrained, this
> norm needs a two part expl nation: why did it emerge, and why
> does it persist? (ibid:292).

This is a world we can all recognise, if without pleasure. Norms and deviation, rules and reality, and their like, confront one another as the idealist to the realist, as abstraction to historical fact. Am I alone, I wonder, in finding in the word 'norm' a drug to make my heart sink? Within this traditional epistemology Loizos then remarks in what is something of a _non sequitur_ within an otherwise perfectly well-ordered argument:

> Here it is worth remarking that certain fashionable
> structuralist approaches to linguistic categories appear to
> run the risk of setting language free of any important social
> action, in such a way that social change would be impossible
> to pin down. The definition of politics used by the villagers

is required by critical social processes, and we can
predict that if social relations change, the category
'politics' will change too; but the categories cannot
be understood without prior analysis of social
relations (ibid:294).

To this upsurge of feeling he appends a note, thus:

Ardener (1971) has done his best to drive a wedge between
what he insists are two incompatible approaches to
analysis; but his short sighted syntagmatic functionalist
is an obvious straw man, and this seriously undermines
the rest of his argument. By blowing the trumpet too
loud, he risks deafening his listeners, or at least
driving them away (ibid:301).

I do not make this last quotation in order to examine the arguments in detail,
but in order to draw attention to the arbitrary and largely misdirected
vehemence of the attack. The work contains no other theoretical considera-
tions of this order, no other concessions to the demands of a polemic that
nevertheless obviously agitates the soul; it is otherwise a pleasant,
interesting and untroubled analysis.

The point that I wish to make, a point indeed without any great novelty,
is that to phrase a critique of the 'study of categories', as Loizos would
have it, in this way, is thoroughly to misunderstand its nature. It is
important to note, however, that through 'fashionable structuralist approaches'
of the study of 'categories' we are going to risk losing the linguistic forms
altogether, as the categories float heavenwards, loosed from reality and
social action, and as social change, which has presumably followed the
categories into the aether, becomes impossible to pin down. The category,
the representation, the expression, the rule, the ideal, and the unreal, are
not to be understood without a prior knowledge, and I would emphasise prior
knowledge, of social relations, village reality, the rumbustious real life
with its 'deviation from the norm' -- without a prior knowledge of all that
is immediately accessible and complete in itself, open to the discerning
gaze. Just how a social relation can be apprehended other than through some
knowledge, limited or otherwise, of the system of categories by which it is
constituted, just how it can be 'expressed' to the anthropologist (I employ
the same idiom) or expressed to his reading public, without this idealist
pollutant, we are not told. And supposing that we are not told because there
is no telling, then what priority can we possibly give to the 'social relation'
in such a situation? And the answer must be -- none.

Staying with Mediterranean anthropology for the moment, we can take
another example of what is essentially the same confusion from Juliet du
Boulay's Greek Mountain Village. She renders this confusion as a historicist
tragedy for all Western society rather than as a method for gathering a sound
ethnography -- nevertheless the idea is basically the same. She describes
an isolated community where the old ways, religion and custom are still
maintained, and she speaks of its gradual absorption into the larger society
of modern Greece as the:

...change from traditional and symbolic thinking to
modern and secular thinking (1974: 6).

It is a conventional rhetoric that we can readily recognise that lines up
the opposition of traditional to modern with the oppositions of the symbolic
to the literal and of the sacred to the secular. This in itself invokes a
host of misrepresentations, in my opinion, but it is recognisable. Du Boulay
goes a step further, however, and collapses the second pair of dualities into
one. The term literal is dropped from the pair symbolic/literal, and the
term sacred from the pair sacred/secular, and the two remaining terms are
brought together as an opposition of the symbolic to the secular. This
opposition is then rendered historical flesh, and the whole of the history
of Western thought is generalised as the decline of symbolic mystery into a
creeping and meaningless secularity. It might seem unfair to take so
seriously what is, after all, a rather casual usage -- usage that does not,
for example, see itself as a contribution to a theoretical debate on the
nature of symbolism as such. It is this casual ease, however, that is of
interest.

I have drawn the implication that the change from symbolic to secular
thinking necessarily invokes a loss of meaning. If this seems to be reading
in too much, let me quote du Boulay once more. She says of her Greek
mountain village that:

> ...whatever may have been its limitations and its defects,
> there is no doubt that when it was integrated to a living
> tradition it gave to life both dignity and meaning --
> qualities which are conspicuously lacking in the type of
> society that threatens to succeed it (ibid:258).

We do, after all, know what she means, and the sentiment is one that it is
not difficult to sympathise with. Nevertheless I think that most of us would
agree that the opposition of the symbolic to the secular as of meaning to
non-meaning is not properly exhaustive or divisive of any society or any
historical development. We can all, for example, reasonably allow that
language, say, is in some sense 'symbolic', but that it is still 'secular',
and at the same time avoids meaninglessness. Nevertheless, this deft
elision of epistemological dualities, which I have illustrated through du
Boulay's otherwise excellent ethnography, is extraordinarily common. It is,
indeed, constitutive of the field of folklore studies, and of many aspects
of Celtic studies. This system of overtly analytical dualities pervades
also, in more and less subtle ways, the works of many of those whom we might
see as founding fathers (e.g. Arnold, Renan, Tönnies, Weber, Nutt, Lang,
Durkheim, Frazer, Tylor, Eliade, Lévy-Bruhl, and so on). Throughout their
works, and throughout Celtic studies and Folklore studies, the peasant, the
savage, the traditional, the artistic, the folk, and the community are
credited with a metaphorical competence which puts their statements into
a realm where they gain a rich wealth of mystery and meaning missing for
those who, as it were, perceive the world direct: we poor benighted moderns,
in a secular world that is literal, non-symbolic, immediately accessible --
meaningless. I have not space to enlarge upon the extraordinary ability
that this kind of thinking has to order the world around it and conjure up
its own validations. If we look to the radical symbolism contained in
McDonald's article elsewhere in his journal (see M. McDonald 1978), it is
perhaps no surprise that the more florid produc ions of Scottish Nationalist
propaganda invoke such concerns, measuring a distance from the empiricist
Anglo-Saxon to invoke a community redolent with meaning.

We can also profitably remember the historical depth which this kind
of thinking has in the consideration of other peoples, times, and places --
thinking wherein language in its infancy becomes figurative, metaphorical,
deriving from the movement of the passions, and only in its maturity becomes
a function of the rational intellect, a reliable system of nomenclature.
Adam Ferguson, in An Essay on the History of Civil Society, said of the
savage:

> Whether at first obliged by the mere defects of
> his tongue, and the scantiness of proper expressions, or
> seduced by a pleasure of the fancy in stating the analogy
> of its objects, he clothes every conception in image and
> metaphor (1767:264).

The savage:

> ... delivers the emotions of the heart, in words suggested
> by the heart, for he knows no other (ibid:266).

Dr. Hugh Blair, who was instrumental in putting the muse of the Scottish
Highlander before the eye of educated Europe, in the form of Macpherson's
Ossian, said of the people who inhabited 'those times which we call
barbarous' (1765:4) that:

> Prone to exaggerate, they describe every thing in the
> strongest colours; which of course renders their speech
> picturesque and figurative. Figurative language owes
> its rise chiefly to two causes; to the want of proper
> names for objects, and to the influence of imagination
> and passion over the forms of expression (ibid).

He says further that:

> As the world advances, the understanding gains ground
> upon the imagination; the understanding is more
> exercised; the imagination less (ibid:5).

And from this we must conclude, as does du Boulay, that metaphor and figurative
speech -- meaning -- will slip away from us into the past, if they do not
elude us, as Loizos warns, by floating away into the sky.

The point, I hope, is beginning to be made, that there is a depth of
historical and conventional coherence to an epistemology which sees the
symbolic as: the religious, the passionate, the imaginative, the primitive,
the expressive, the figurative, the representative, the metaphorical, the
classificatory, the analogue, the image, the ritual, the mythical. This
range of concepts is opposed to and thus defined by: literality, knowledge,
understanding, scientific awareness, reality, social structure, the self-
evident, the secular, the modern, language as nomenclature, and so on.
Each one of these conjures up its own opposition, and they are not in any
sense a system of simply congruent dualities, referring as they variously do
to modes of enquiry, modes of expression, historicist necessities, professional
specialisations, and so on. It may, indeed, seem strained to link, say, the
metaphorical and the primitive in this way, and oppose them to logic and
modernity. We might say, for example, that 'metaphorical' was a technical
term concerning a vertical axis of substitution in linguistic analysis, defined

in opposition to the horizontal metonymic axis of linearity and contiguity, and that it had nothing to do with ways of life. The spatial metaphors of linguistic analysis are thoroughly incorporated, however, in the following assessment of Gaelic life by J.L. Campbell, one of the foremost of Scottish Gaelic scholars:

> The consciousness of the Gaelic mind may be described as possessing historic continuity and religious sense; it may be said to exist in a vertical plane. The consciousness of the Western world, on the other hand, may be said to exist in a horizontal plane, possessing breadth and extent, dominated by scientific materialism and a concern with purely contemporary happenings (Campbell 1968:7).

The linearity of logic and the modern mind, and the metaphorical nature of the folk tradition, are expressed by Sanderson, who says of the 'fairy faith' in Gaelic Scotland that:

> ...its major function is to afford an explanation of the inexplicable and the unknown, for those whose modes of thought operate more by patterns of association than by logic and the verifiable sequence of cause and effect (Sanderson 1976:46).

It is within the pervasive fabric of this system of epistemological dualities, within which the symbolic has its conventional place, that we articulate problems of ethnocentricity, of objectivity versus subjectivity, of rationality, of facts and values, and other social-science chestnuts of this order. It is in our interest, therefore, to examine the space in which these arguments exist, not perhaps to secure any theoretical advance, but merely to prevent ourselves from making endless journeys whose only destination is the starting point for the journey back.

We can perhaps go back to the ambiguities that I noted in the possible interpretation of the structuralist project, and invoke Saussure in order to link this to the question of the nature of the symbolic.

The concept of la langue, a system in which signs acquire their value by their location in a system of opposition, a system of relations, can be variously subjected to moral judgement. For Bourdieu it becomes a static trap, where meaning is divorced from the domestic comfort of its context, and cruelly rendered subject to an alien and intellectualist objectivity. The system defined by its own internal structure becomes, as such, necessarily incapable of change and thus inadequate to an essentially human creation. This is certainly one well established way of looking at it. The stasis and restorative equilibrium of a system defined by the opposition of its parts was, of course, central to the functionalist conception of the necessary stability of a society, with its inevitable 'integration'. On the other hand, there is no necessary reason to equate the structure of a system defined by the opposition of its parts with stability, as anyone who has built a card house must know. For those who seized on the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, its divorce at last from the tiresome constraints of the real world, la langue became a shimmering ideality, where reality suffered no violation but the ever-changing, ever-open, ever-exuberant motion of its own ever-indefinite self-definition.

Which of these pictures seems immediately the more obvious is a matter, perhaps, for individual taste. It is clear, however, that the pictures are mutually opposed in interesting ways. In particular, the one will put structuralism back among the heartless and reductive sciences, along with mentalism, intellectualism, and the fundamental structures of the human mind, and the other will preserve la langue for us as a guardian of the inalienable human spirit, of the world in which myth, ritual, and symbolism will be answerable only to themselves. The arbitrariness of the linguistic sign becomes, by the same token, both its divorce from a rich meaningful world into scholastic abstraction, and conversely its blessed release from the crudities of empiricism.

Both of these interpretations, however, carve out their security within a traditional metaphysical space -- a space that the object of their interpretation, in this case, was introduced to reconstruct. And I would be disposed to argue that the reason that we now seem to be having the same debate with structuralism that first established the claims to attention of structuralism vis-a-vis functionalism is that the ideology of representation, the 'metaphysics of presence' (Derrida 1976:49), the theory of symbolism which Saussure wished to deny, is still present at all levels in our intellectual discourse. Having spent our holidays pursuing with relief our studies in myth, ritual and symbolism, we have begun to feel the need of an access of hard reality -- back to school and the three R's. Having studied for a time the representation, the ideology, the symbolic, the false-consciousness, the metaphorical, we can return to the ground, the literal, and the self-evident. Hence, I think, the persistent appeal of a Marxist anthropology, to put back the stern and responsible reality that was purged, along with functionalist anthropology, during the cultural revolution. It is not, I think, defence against this to argue that Marxism is aiming to grasp the reality which is precisely not self-evident -- the dualisms of fact and fancy, and the inadequacies of a theory of symbolism as representation, are fully present in any possible version of a theory which invokes the science/ideology couple, or the infrastructure/superstructure relation. Having given our minds to the study of 'categories', we are urged as well to consider their underlying 'social relations'.

I think that this misguided notion of what 'symbolism' is has allowed us to locate in the structuralist project all the sentiments appropriate to an artistic enterprise in the pursuit of the ineffable. Equally, beneath this structuralist ideality, we have contrived to retain our grip on the 'real' world. Symbolic anthropology becomes thereby a sub-field of anthropological endeavour, and the sumbolic becomes a gloss of the exotic that otherwise mundane reality is permitted to clothe itself with on special occasions. Journals devoted to the symbolic flourish, courses are taught, Roland Barthes commits us to the study of trivia. Europeanists, if they cannot find the wholesome wholeness of a peasant community to englobe, leave the study of the 'real', 'serious' aspects of their subject societies to the economist, the political scientist, the sociologist, and take as their sphere of competence the expressive ephemera that nobody else wants. We study customs, ideologies, systems of representation, conceptual systems, attitudes, and so forth, leaving the trenchant and the tangible to others. Facts and values, action and attitudes, behaviour and norms, history and myth, actual and ideal and all their homologues march through our work, spawning the problems whose answer they become. Those who should have helped us sometimes fail to do so. Lévi-Strauss tells us that:

> I do not at all mean to suggest that ideological
> transformations gave rise to social ones. Only the
> reverse is in fact true. Men's conception of the
> relation between nature and culture is a function of
> modifications of their own social relations...We are
> ...merely studying the shadows on the wall of the cave
> without forgetting that it is only the attention we
> give them which lends them a semblance of reality
> (1966:117).

And Leach, doubtless wearing his functionalist hat, tells us that:

> The student of social structure must never forget
> that the constraints of economics are prior to the
> constraints of morality and law (1961:9).

We can go back to the Saussurean sign, and to the system of signs wherein
meaning is a function of elements in their mutual opposition rather than
being a quality of the signs 'in themselves'. I have tried to give some idea
of the potential for ambiguity contained in the 'now fashionable anthro-
pological view that elements in the system define themselves in opposition
to all other elements in the system' (E. Ardener 1971:xxxvi): it can become
at once the essential ingredient of Derrida's arch and winsome 'differance',
and of Bourdieu's tyrannical 'objectivism'. We can give these possibilities
another expression by examining the internal architecture of Saussure's sign,
its signifier and signified. Saussure's contribution:

> ... was to stress that language is not a simple labelling
> device...:as if there were only objects in the real world
> waiting to be given 'names'. He did this by talking of a
> linguistic sign as consisting of two components: the
> 'signifier' and the 'signified'. Saussure's 'signified'
> is, however, not reality but a 'concept' (ibid:xxxiii).

Reality, then, at least for the purposes of language, has been thoroughly
drawn into the sign: the world of signs is one whose relation to the 'real'
world is in a vital sense 'arbitrary'. The only 'significant' reality
resides in the sign. The only world is that of the level of signification,
already and inalienably incorporated in a system without which it is nothing.

This is readily interpretable as a philosophical terror, a dangerous
relativism that 'sets language free of any important social action', an
idealist anarchism not to be tolerated. Saussure was himself concerned
to refute charges that arbitrary meant 'random', saying:

> The word arbitrary...must not give the idea that the
> signifier depends on the free choice of the speaking
> subject...; We mean that it is unmotivated, that is to
> say 'arbitrary' in relation to the signified, with which
> it has no natural attachment in reality' (1949:101).

Cherishing as we do the solidity of our world, we can remember the patients
that Douglas described in <u>Purity and Danger</u>:

> Mrs. Abercrombie put a group of medical students through
> a course of experiments designed to show them the high
> degree of selection we use in the simplest observations.
> 'But you can't have all the world a jelly,' one protested.
> 'It is as though my world has been cracked open,' said
> another. Others reacted in a more hostile way (1966:50).

We might find ourselves 'dreading that we are living in a philosophically
"idealist" universe' (Ardener 1975:12).

The arbitrariness of the linguistic sign is clearly strong poison,
particularly so when taken within the philosophical conditions of the
everyday, where language is in very deed a system of nomenclature, reality
instantly accessible, fact and fiction clearly separable, and so on. Yet it
is within this everyday world, whose depth of imagery I earlier invoked, that
structuralism, in spite of the arbitrariness of its sign, has been permitted
its existence. Hence the roundabout of problems on which we ride. We have
quietly allowed Saussure's duality signifier/signified to elide with precisely
those dualities it sought to undermine, with the epistemological tyrannies
contained in the sign as a representation of its other.

As students of the social, we have tended to treat language, vocal noises,
as the signifier of a social signified; and we have left the social lying in
its mute reality, for the 'categories' variously and distortively to express.
Even when we have stretched ourselves to permit the linguistic sign its
arbitrariness, we have found great difficulty in doing the same for the ritual
sign, the social sign, the 'symbolic' sign.

Within language itself we have permitted the maintenance of a system
of, so to speak, relative arbitrariness, with some signs (the literal) having
a direct and unproblemtical relationship to reality, and others (the meta-
phorical, the impressionistic) a relationship to this same reality of a
different order -- and this difference is contained as a difference of type
within the various possibilities of the relationship of a sign to the 'real'
world. Arbitrariness is not, however, something that one can have more or
less of, in this context. There is no room for a discrete 'metaphoric', any
more than there is for a discrete 'symbolic'. We can perhaps accept, now,
the proposition that 'all' language is metaphorical. This is an appealing
way out of certain of our problems. Any 'metaphorical' use of language
contains the echo and remembrance of all the possibilities of substitution,
as does all literal use -- there is no literal ground, susceptible to keen
and secure definition. 'Metaphor is the very movement of language', and
'language is its own hermeneutic' (McDonald 1978: 17).

Arbitrariness and the system defined by the oppositions of its parts
have done us good enough service to warrant their thorough application to
the many overlapping systems that we might choose to drawn under the aegis
of semiology. If we invoke arbitrariness in ritual semiotics, however, we
are crediting them with their own inviolable capacity for statement, that
is neither simply derivative from any other system nor susceptible to inter-
pretation through it. And that is where we start.

We have many ways of creating the dependence of one system on another, --
of the metaphor on the literal, of the symbolic on the real, of the parasitic
on the serious, of writing on speech. This last can serve as a general
illustration, since it has an obvious and common-sense validity that it is
paradox to provoke. Derrida is concerned, in _Of Grammatology_, to assert that

writing is not in some sense a merely inadequate and derivative representation
of speech (a view that Saussure held), but that it is rather, in its aspect
of permanence, a better model for the generality of signification than is the
phonic system. He says:

> The thesis of the arbitrariness of the sign... forbids
> that (the grapheme) be an 'image' of (the phoneme).
> Now it was indispensable to the exclusion of writing as
> 'external system', that it come to impose an 'image', a
> 'representation', or a 'figuration', an exterior reflection
> of the reality of language (1976:45).

Which is to say, I think, that to treat writing as a system of a different,
derivative excluded order from the phonic system, to treat writing as merely
representative of speech, is to contradict the essential theoretical insight
involved in the invocation of arbitrariness. Saussure says:

> Language and writing are two distinct systems of signs:
> the only raison d'être of the second is to represent
> the first (1949:45).

To which Derrida can be quoted in reply:

> One must therefore challenge, in the very name of the
> arbitrariness of the sign, the Saussurian definition of
> writing as 'image' -- hence as natural symbol -- of language.
> Not to mention the fact that the phoneme is the unimaginable
> itself, and no visibility can resemble it, it suffices to
> take into account what Saussure says about the difference
> between the symbol and the sign...in order to be completely
> baffled as to how he can at the same time say of writing
> that it is an 'image' or 'figuration' of language and
> (nevertheless (my addition)) define language and writing
> elsewhere as 'two distinct systems of signs'...For the
> property of the sign is not to be an image. ...In fact,
> even within so-called phonetic writing, the 'graphic'
> signifier refers to the phoneme through a web of many
> dimensions which binds it, like all signifiers, to other
> written and oral signifiers, within a 'total' system open,
> let us say, to all possible investments of sense (ibid).

We are therefore asked to engage in: '...the deconstruction of the transcen-
dental signified' (1976:49).

Derrida's opacity is often rather French, but there is justification in
his claim that to achieve this 'deconstruction' involves a running fight with
forms of expression that will conventionally take the argument into their own
hands and assert the opposite of what is intended (although Derrida does not
phrase the problem quite like that). Hence the prevalence of grammatical,
lexical, and orthographic conceits, hence the necessity of 'impressionistic'
language.

We can leave Derrida and writing, and go back to the ritual, mythical,
and symbolic. The problem facing us here is that in order to express these
systems we are obliged to unpack them into our verbal categories, a process
which often merely leaves us 'knee deep in polarities' (Ardener 1971:xliii).

What sort of meta-semiotic we should be dreaming of here is not clear, and it is perhaps not even to be expected that we could achieve a general theory of the non-linguistic, in other than the most general terms. We can at least do the non-linguistic semiotic the justice of granting it its autonomy, before we steal it again.

In this context it is perhaps worth mentioning some of the work in Oxford anthropology that effected the shift from 'function to meaning'. In Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic (1937), Nuer Religion (1956), and Divinity and Experience (1961), we find Evans-Pritchard and Lienhardt tackling the problem of expressing the meaning of ritual and symbolic systems in a manner that does not involve their reduction to other systems, -- to social structure, to needs, to emotions, to linguistic common ground -- nor, on the other hand, to the mysteries of subjectivity. Evans-Pritchard finally invoked the theologian, and Lienhardt encapsulated the problem as 'experience'. We have not gone much further in the method of expression of a non-linguistic semiotic than this -- drawing as many symbolic parallels as possible, shifting ground continually, and finally calling in the ineffable.

The most important point that I wish to make in this context is not that we can clean up our formulation of the problem of the non-linguistic, but that we can get some idea of the importance of the claim that 'society is like a language'. Reality is not, in the social anymore than in language, resident in an 'external' and objectively accessible world. It resides, rather, in the categories of its realisation, in the events that constitute the meaning of the social. What is abundantly clear is that ordinary language is not a simple expression of the social, the signifier of the signified represented by the social.

It is within this problem that we find the use of a concept like 'world structure' (see Ardener 1973 and 1975). It is not solely that we wish to render to each world its autonomy in order to guarantee a philosophical and social relativism. It is rather that we wish to express the reality of a social world in such a way as to secure the argument away from the persistencies of determination by the meaningless, the extra-structural, the 'real' -- away from the dialectics of myth and history, fiction and fact, value and action, and all their children. Far from being an attempt to structure in a reductive and static way, the concept of world-structure is an attempt designed precisely to lift the social, as it were, into the Saussurean sign -- to prevent it from becoming enmeshed within analytical dualities that will prejudice the disposition of significant reality within the system whose reality-defining specificities we are concerned to understand. This is not easy ground on which to exercise the imagination, and we cannot hope to do without 'language' in approaching world-structural performance, any more than can the performance itself. We cannot suppose that the relationship will be any more than indicative, however. Ardener expresses the problem as follows:

> ...the study of language is not on its own the key to these
> problems. ...Language...at one level 'expresses' the system.
> Yet language becomes a manipulable feature in the system,
> and introduces arabesques into it, which are due to auto-
> matisms in language itself. ...what we are discussing is
> not founded in language, but in a language-like but sluggishly
> moving continuum of social perceptions,...with language both
> expressing them and intruding into them through its own
> independent propensity towards change and restructuring (1975:11).

Bearing all the previous argument in mind, the crucial point is that 'A world
structure is neither empiricist nor idealist' (ibid:16). It is rather that
'the social as world-structure is reality-defining' (ibid). We have therefore
come some distance from a structuralist project that could allow a comfortable
and complementary co-existence with ostensibly more materialist modes of
enquiry. It should perhaps be made clear here that Saussure is not invoked
in order to secure the scriptural purity of a source to which we could return
to solve our problems. The problems that created the inadequacies of
structuralism, and at the same time allowed the responsibility for those
inadequacies to be located elsewhere, derive from very general intellectual
concerns. We cannot expect, therefore, to rewrite them by a simple invocation
of, say, the Saussurean sign. We should not try to solve all our problems
merely through their insertion into this technical and experimental, albeit
highly successful device. If we looked, say, for the signifier and signified
of the social, we would perhaps be making an error very like that made by
Lévi-Strauss in his early attempts to recruit linguistics to the cause of
anthropology, mistaking data-laden technicalities for essential insights
(cf. Levi-Strauss 1969:ch II, Ardener 1971:xlvii). When we say, therefore,
that the concept of world structure lifts reality into the Saussurean sign,
this is not simply to begin again on the road towards a better structuralism.
Through this use of Saussure as a crucial proto-structuralist source we can,
however, express the potential generality of the structuralist project, and
thus point all the more clearly to the failure of structuralism to take up
the ground that was offered. At the same time by staying with Saussure in
this way we do not, even while making such criticisms of structuralism,
thereby lay ourselves open to all the dismissive materialisms and empiricisms
that wait for the lowering of the guard.

One last point. I have argued that structuralism has gained itself a
spurious but conventionally strongly coherent place as the 'signs and symbols'
department of anthropology. I have also pointed to the different moral
reactions that the Saussurean langue can provoke. Empricist reactions to
the study of ephemera and outrage in the face of the nihilism of arbitrariness
can help us to understand the fervour with which the attempt to renounce the
old positivisms was greeted -- a fervour of violent denunciation on one side
and near-mysticism on the other. We can think of Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Derrida,
and, closer to home, Ardener, and realise how their publicity has flourished
within the traditional dualities wherein the positivisms and artistries of
our intellectual world are constituted. Indeed, the ability of the positivist
world to find mystery in these intellectuals is a parable of the capacity of
a dominant rationality to delimit its boundaries, and experience everything
coming from outside or across those boundaries as if through a thick fog --
a perception that in this case served to emphasise the rectitude of the
epistemological structure that brought it about, the positivism that was
prudishly shy of uncertainties, ambiguities, and the like. This inevitable
bipolarity in the reaction to 'the new anthropology' finds an analogous
expression in the various reactions that an exercise in deconstruction can
generate. We have seen how the world can become a jelly, dangerously random,
flying off into space, and inhabiting an idealist universe. We can imagine
criticisms of 'impressionism', 'subjectivism', 'poetic language', and charges
of triviality, of playing with 'mere words'.

It seems that we are happy enough, as anthropologists, to see the strange
made strange to itself, in order that it be rendered familiar to us, but we
are less happy to see the familiar made strange to us, in order that we can
know it better. Faced with an enterprise in deconstruction, we are all of
us familiar, in different ways, with the reaction that retreats with narrowed

eyes, levelling charges of nihilism, negativism, and generally improper conduct. We are willing to make fools of other peoples by bringing home tidy ethnographies. We are less happy to make fools of ourselves.

It is, I think, both inevitable and strategically useful that one of the most popular readings of an exercise in deconstruction will be as an 'artistic', 'non-serious', essentially ephemeral enterprise, more proper to, say, a department of English literature than to a department of social anthropology. This is a theme whose traditional conventions I have tried to spell out. The T.L.S. recently told us that the social sciences now appear 'like a rather fragile art form'. We can remember Evans-Pritchard's wistful conclusion at the end of a prolific life that he would better have been a poet in order properly to have expressed and interpreted one world to another. Martin Thom says:

> If we are to think about other cultures it is obviously
> vital that we understand the Unconscious rules of formation
> that delimit the terrain upon which our knowledge claims
> scientificity for itself. I am thinking here of the work
> of such thinkers as Foucault and Derrida, who in their
> attempt to 'make strange' the very categories that are
> the scaffolding of our social being, necessarily resort
> to the shimmering surface of a poetics (1975:79).

Whether or not we need to dub this shimmering surface a 'poetics', it certainly seems to be the case that one of the most effective and economical ways of asking questions of our rationality that it will not ask of itself is through the use of modes of expression that will appear as 'comic' or 'artistic' or both.

Anthropology has reluctantly suffered a loss of ambition, no longer claiming either the status of natural science, or the status of neutral medium wherein widely disparate cultures could meet without prejudice to one another's position in the world. This loss of ambition would, however, be thoroughly misinterpreted within the conventional scheme to whose breakdown it has contributed if it were to be read as an abandonment of 'rigour', leaving us only with a fluffy and lightweight 'fragile art form'. If there is 'art' there, it partakes of all the devious pragmatism of the artful, and if there is reckless, headlong metaphor, it arises from an attempt to under-stand the motion of the roundabout whose movement intoxicates us all. This intoxication, at its most total when we are least aware of it, is not of course something that we can shake off by good intentions. Sobriety will continue to elude us. 'We are caught up in the world and we do not succeed in extricating ourselves from it in order to achieve consciousness of the world' (Merleau-Ponty 1976:5), and when Merleau-Ponty tells us that 'we are condemned to meaning' (ibid:xix) we are not to take this to mean that we are condemned to insubstantiality, or to an existence in the glimmering surface of a poetics, or to a condition that history might suddenly decide to annul.

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