CHAPTER III

From Semiotics to Deconstruction and Post-Modernist Theories of Textuality

1. Code in Semiotic Theory: the Nature of Semiotic Theory

In general terms semiotics is the theory of signs. But in practice semiotic theory achieves its most distinctive importance in two particular areas, both of which we have yet to consider more adequately with reference to our discussion of textuality. The first area concerns the nature and status of the *codes* through which texts communicate meanings. The second concerns those forms of *non-verbal social behaviour* which, through the presupposition of a code, become signifying messages. All texts presuppose code. The text of a medical prescription, for example, has been encoded by a medical practitioner in accordance with the conventions of the profession, and invites a pharmacist to de-code it for action in the light of these shared conventions. A music score has been encoded by a composer, and waits to be de-coded by an orchestra or singers in a musical event.

In these examples, however, the *code* is not the items of information which constitute the "message". The code is the sign-*system, lattice, or network, in terms of which* the linguistic choices which convey the message are expressed. The musical code which enables the composer to specify the production of a particular note for a particular length of time is not the note itself (which would be the message); but the stave or staff of five parallel horizontal lines (together with the clef and the specified areas where possible choices about key signature and time would be supplied) which constitute the *structure in terms of which* given notes can be chosen and their properties specified.

Complex texts may presuppose several different layers of code. For example, the Apocalypse of John at one level presupposes the range of possible lexical and grammatical choices available in hellenistic Greek (albeit the Apocalyptist's Greek presses the code at times to its limits!) But it also operates on the basis of a system of conventions used by earlier apocalyptic.[1] Some allusions to earlier texts such as Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Daniel are not merely reminders about earlier traditions. Sometimes they perform not a stylistic but a *semiotic* function, providing yet another

level of encoding in terms of which a message is to be read. In these cases we have examples of what Julia Kristeva in her work on semiotics has called *intertextuality*. She writes "The term intertextuality denotes this transposition of one (or several) sign system(s) into another; but since this term has often been understood in the broad sense of 'study of sources' we prefer the term *transposition* because it specifies that the passage from one signifying system to another demands a new articulation. . . ."[2]

To make a mistake about the semiotic code, therefore, violates the text and distorts its meaning. Language in the Apocalypse of John about "one hundred and forty-four thousand" (Rev.7:4) presupposes a code which is different from that which generates meaning in the case of mathematical propositions. In the code of mathematics, the network of choices operates in terms of a contrast which opposes or excludes "one hundred and forty-four thousand and one" or "one hundred and forty-three thousand and ninety nine." But the text of Revelation presupposes contrastive networks which signal differences between completeness and incompleteness with reference to a history of traditions about "twelve" which have become familiar enough to represent a convention among certain communities. Where horses' heads seem to become merged with heads of lions (Rev. 9:10) the code which is presupposed is not that of empirical visual observation and description. The "measuring" of the temple (Rev.11:1,2) may perhaps involve several layers of signifying systems of intertextuality, as John Court's exegesis may imply.[3]

The culture-specific nature of codes is underlined when we examine the second feature to which we referred in semiotics, namely the role of non-verbal behaviour. The conventions of apocalyptic can be no more strange to the modern western world than the code which forms the basis for the operation of traffic lights might seem to the ancient world. The existence of such a code (based on arbitrary colour-contrasts) gives rise to extended and metaphorical applications. A modern pietist might say: "I prayed, and God gave me a green light". Flowers in their natural habitat do not usually convey a message. But if they are woven into a wreath, and sent to a funeral, they become a *sign* of sympathy and respect, on the basis of a shared social code. To mistake the code, and to send a funeral-wreath to a wedding would be to commit a social gaffe, comparable to interpreting the Apocalypse as empirical description. Clothes can become signs which convey given signals on particular occasions. Negative signals can be generated by a given choice of clothes either because someone makes a mistake, or because they consciously revolt against the shared conventions of the social group which holds them.

Roland Barthes has explored, with interesting effects, a wide range of non-verbal social behaviour which has the capacity to generate signs on the basis of code: film, furniture, cooking, sport, the use of political slogans,

dress-fashions, beards, perfumes, advertising, striptease, cars, and photography.[4] In these examples the *code* is not the particular choice of a particular car or item of clothing, but the network of possible options in relation to which a particular car or choice of clothing becomes "significant". Umberto Eco makes a parallel point. He asserts: "To communicate is to use the entire world as a semiotic apparatus. I believe that *culture* is that, and nothing else". For example: "I am speaking through my clothes. If I were wearing a Mao suit, if I were without a tie, the ideological connotations of my speech would be changed."[5]

It might seem that we have already exposed the "radical" character of code for meaning and for the interpretation of meaning. But we have barely begun. The very serious philosophical issue which all this raises for Roland Barthes and others is the relation between language and the world, or more especially, the relation between language and social culture. In the thought of Barthes and of Julia Kristeva semiotic theory constitutes a meta-language or second-order critique of language and signs.[6] In Julia Kristeva's words, "No form of semiotics can exist other than as a critique of semiotics."[7] What such meta-reflection suggests for Barthes is that the effect of semiotic theory is radically to unmask the status of codes which are often assumed to mirror the world as no more than particular *habits of mind* or *cultural constructs*.

If, however, language-operations depend on linguistic codes, Barthes argues, this principle applies to all language as such. People assume that language mirrors the external world. They trust language to allow the possibility of objectivity. But its relation to the world is culture-bound and arbitrary. At this point Barthes borrows the terminology and some of the ideology of Marxism. Bourgeois cultures utilize this confused "mystification" whereby they and the masses remain subject to the illusion that we encounter "nature" or "objectivity" in the systems of the culture. The task of the semioticist is to unmask this pseudo-objectivity; to "decipher" a meaning-network which "conceals" or "naturalizes" what amount to no more than conventions. Mystification is a tool whereby bourgeois cultures transmit their own values under the guise of objective truth. The consequences which follow from all this are radical: the subject-matter of language and texts remains intra-linguistic; they do not describe states of affairs about the external world; texts and meanings are endlessly fluid and plural.[8]

We must ask, however: are the implications of modern semiotic theory as radical as Barthes and others maintain? The pre-history of semiotics can be traced back into classical antiquity. Hippocrates stressed the role of signs in medical diagnosis and prognosis. Aristotle distinguished between necessary signs (for example, fever as a sign of illness) and those which depended only on probability (whether fast breathing constituted a sign of fever). Augustine noted the capacity of signs to point beyond themselves, and like Locke, viewed linguistic signs as identifying markers of thoughts or ideas. Hobbes and Locke held theories about the nature of signs in language. Nevertheless the pre-history of the subject throws up none of the most sensitive issues.

The two major innovative thinkers who founded semiotics as a modern discipline were Charles S. Peirce (1839–1914) and Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913). The Swiss linguistician Saussure never envisaged that his work would lead to the kind of conclusions advocated by Barthes, Derrida, and the post-structuralist deconstructionists, even if Derrida insists that Saussure's work logically implies the outcome when it is "radicalized". Indeed the immediate impact of Saussure's work lay in the founding of modern general linguistics as a sober scientific discipline of linguistic description. John Lyons expresses the mainstream view in that discipline that Saussure is effectively the founder of the subject.[9]

Nevertheless, Saussure did insist on three fundamental principles, which we shall shortly explore. First, he insisted on what he called "the *arbitrary* nature of the sign" as a key principle.[10] Second, he argued that language functions as "a system of interdependent terms".[11] Meaning is generated by relations of *difference* within this system. For example, in a sub-system of colour-words, "orange" derives its meaning from its difference from its next-door neighbours in the continuum, "red" and "yellow", rather than from pointing to oranges on trees. Third, Saussure distinguished between concrete acts of speech (*parole*) and the language-system (*langue*) which represents a purely *formal or abstract* structure; a network of possibilities out of which concrete utterances could be generated. *Langue* does not "exist" in the external world.

More than fifty years after Saussure's death, Jacques Derrida was to radicalize his principles of *arbitrariness* and *difference* into an anti-metaphysical view of language, thought, and the world. "Difference" becomes a key anti-ontological category. What Barthes describes as the process of "mystification" whereby the merely cultural is endowed with pseudo-objectivity is an illusion easier to maintain, Derrida suggests, in oral speech than in writing or written texts. Only vocal or oral utterance can appear to support the illusion of "a metaphysics of presence", centred on the word, as if the word itself mirrored the world and reality. But writing calls attention to the absence of the writer, and invites a greater plurality of interpretations of possible meanings. If language is a differential network, and if differences generate meanings, we should focus not on linguistic "entities" ("Logocentrism") but on the differences between signs. It then becomes an operative principle of interpretation for Derrida that *differentiation* (Fr. *différence*) leads to and invites *defer-ment* (Fr. *différance*).[12] We can never reach any "final" point in the interpretation of meaning. One

semiotic process leads on to another, and none is grounded in "reality" or in the external world.

These claims will bring us back to Saussure, when we attempt to revaluate the implications of the three principles which he expounds. But a preliminary comment is also invited on the influence of Charles S. Peirce. Peirce is often associated with the philosophy of pragmatism, although in Peirce this principle related primarily to his work on meaning, and less explicitly to theories of truth, as was the case in William James. Nevertheless, several principles formulated by Peirce were to have very broadly parallel effects to those of the "radicalization" of Saussure. First, Peirce stressed the fallible character of all human knowledge, beliefs and statements. Beliefs amount largely to "habits of behaviour". Second, thinking or thought has to do with the use of signs. Yet signs point beyond themselves to other signs and sign-relations. Finally, meaning is to be seen primarily in terms of meaning-*effect*. It is here that Peirce's pragmatism has its most far-reaching effects. What is important and "cashable" about meaning is its bearing on the conduct of life.

Recently Robert S. Corrington has put forward a detailed case for the view that Peirce laid the foundations for American hermeneutics, or for a hermeneutical tradition which is distinctive of modern American philosophical thought.[13] He traces a tradition in America which, it might be argued, is comparable to the radicalization of Saussure in Europe. Corrington stresses that for Peirce there is "no 'pure' given". He adds (with an additional allusion to Josiah Royce): "Reality consists of signs and sign relations". This emphasis must be coupled with Peirce's pragmatic interest in meaning-*effects*. Against such a background, audience-criticism and reader-related theories of textuality, hermeneutics, and literary theory find ready hospitality. The fundamental question which these two parallel trends in Europe and in America raise, therefore, is: are these "radical" implications the genuine and inescapable implications of mainstream semiotic theory? To begin to answer this question we must look more closely at the work of Saussure, and at its effects in semiotics, linguistics, and biblical interpretation.

2. Need Semiotics Lead to Deconstructionism? Different Understandings of the Implications of Semiotic Theory

Saussure insists that, as a first principle, "the arbitrary nature of the sign" constitutes an axiom which "dominates all the linguistics of language; its consequences are numberless".[15] It is arbitrary, for example, that French speakers use two words, *bon marché*, where English speakers use one, *cheap*.

It is also arbitrary that English splits up the colour-spectrum semiotically in such a way that this language has one word for "blue", while Russians have to decide whether to use *goluboj*, "light blue", or *sinij*, "dark blue". French speakers have to choose between *brun* and *marron* for a segment of the spectrum which in English is merely "brown". It is arbitrary that Latin and Greek use the one-word forms *amo* and *philo* or *ero*, where English and German use two-word forms: *I love* and *ich liebe*. Such grammatical categories as substantive verbs, or adjectives, Saussure comments, represent abstract distinctions of habit, convention and convenience. They are not imposed by the nature of the world: "they are not linguistic realities".[16]

In the second place, every linguistic sign that carries meaning does so by virtue of its being part of a *system or structure* which generates the value, force, or meaning of its component elements through the interplay of similarities and differences within the system. Saussure writes: "Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value (*la valeur*) of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others."[17] He illustrates the principle from the "value" of a given piece in chess. This depends on the state of the whole board, and draws its operational significance from its relation to other pieces in the structure of the game. Meaning is generated and assessed not by how a sign-unit mirrors or fails to mirror some entity in the external world, but by how it relates to other sign-units within the system.

The lattice of the system has a vertical and a horizontal axis. Meanings are generated by relations and differences along each axis. Fundamental differences are generated vertically by the possibility of *alternative choices* of words where the use of one excludes the use of the other. They may have the same syntactic function, but different meanings. Such words stand in *paradigmatic* relations to each other. For example in the context of speech about traffic signals, "red" and "green" stand in paradigmatic relation to each other as alternative linguistic choices which could be slotted into the same space in an appropriate sentence. Each draws part of its meaning from its contrast to the other. But there is also a horizontal axis of difference. Both "red" and "green" are colour-words, but they are different from the verbal forms "see", "notice", "signal". These other terms provide the horizontal context, or *syntagmatic* relationship into which the colour-words can be slotted as adjacent terms in a sentence. Part of the meaning of "red" is that in syntagmatic terms, it is the kind of word which can be the object of the verb "I see", and an adjective applicable to "signal". It makes sense in the chain of language: "I see a red signal". Part of its meaning in paradigmatic terms, is drawn from its difference from "green". Both axes entail *differences*.

This brings us to the third main principle from Saussure which concerns us. The speaker does not verbally or orally explore the entire repertoire of

alternative possibilities from which he or she may choose, each time an utterance occurs. The lattice or structure of differing but inter-related terms, represents not a concrete actuality but an *abstract potentiality* until a speaker actualizes a particular choice in a concrete use of a specific piece of language. Saussure drew attention to this distinction by consistently using the term *langue* for what he called "the storehouse" of language; *langue* consists in the abstract of "a collection of necessary conventions". On the other hand, he uses the word *parole* to denote a *concrete act* of speech; one which is made possible on the basis of *langue*. *Langue* represents the formal, abstract, structure; *parole* represents the specific, concrete, utterance.

I have discussed the work of Saussure and its implications for biblical studies in greater detail elsewhere.[18] Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole* remains fundamental both in linguistics and in semiotics. In semiotics it marks the difference between a sign, or more strictly the use of a given sign on a given occasion, and the differential network of relations between signs on the basis of which the given sign itself bears meaning. The distinction between *langue* and *parole* in Saussure's "semiology" corresponds to Roman Jakobson's later formulation of the contrast between *code* and *message*, and is parallel to Charles Peirce's distinction between *type* and *token*. *Tokens*, in Peirce's semiotic theory, are particular, even unique, physical objects or events located at a given place in space or time. *Types* are patterns or abstract classes of which *tokens* constitute actual instanciations.

What is the relation between signs, signification, and the external world in C.S. Peirce's semiotic theory? His semiotics are complex, but they entail the following principles. Peirce distinguished three possible modes of relation between a sign and what it signifies. If a sign functions purely as an *index*, the relationship may be primarily of a physical or quasi-physical cause-effect kind. For example, a weather vane carries a message about wind direction. An index "is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of its being really affected by that Object".[19] Signs which function as *icons* are related to their objects by similarity of structure. For example, a map, diagram, or representational picture corresponds either isomorphically or at least by "fitness", to the elements of what it portrays and their relation to each other. Signs which function as *symbols* Peirce stresses, have no such causal, quasi-physical or "fitness" characteristics: in this respect their use as signs is arbitrary, or at least due to regularly *habituated patterns* of association. Here a process of pattern-recognition involving *type* allows the interpreter to perceive a relation of meaning: "A symbol is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of a law, usually an association of general ideas, which operates to cause the symbol to be interpreted as referring to that Object. It is thus itself a general type or law, that is, a *Legisign*".[20]

Peirce viewed semiotics as a branch of logic and philosophy. But are *types* and *legisigns* products of logical necessity, or generalizations based

only on regularities and associations of habit observed as contingent data of experience? Here Peirce's thought becomes more complex, and is capable of more than one possible interpretation. The complexity is partly due to Peirce's insistence that indices, icons, and symbols are not three distinct *kinds* of sign, but three distinct *modes* by which signs operate which may be simultaneously present, or present in varying degrees. But the most crucial difference among implications drawn from Peirce reflect a contrast between a fundamentally pragmatic, behavioural and functional semiotics, and one which takes more seriously his concerns about logic and the place which he accords to the inter-subjective judgments of the community. In due course we shall note, in this connection, Karl-Otto Apel's understanding of his semiotics.

Charles W. Morris is generally regarded as Peirce's successor in American semiotic theory. Morris developed a theory of signs in terms of what he called goal-seeking sign-behaviour. Some of his models are drawn from stimulus-response situations in behavioural psychology. His central formulation of a theory of meaning turns on a "disposition to respond". He developed from Peirce a more clear-cut distinction between areas within semiotics: *syntactics* concerns internal relations between signs; *semantics* concerns the relations between signs and that to which they point; while *pragmatics* concerns the relations between signs and human sign-*users*. But whereas in 1938 Morris understood pragmatics to involve "the relations between signs and *interpreters*" (my italics), in 1946 he was concerned to re-define this in more behaviourist terms as "the origins, uses, and effects of signs within the behaviour in which they occur".[21] This behaviourist emphasis signals a great gulf between Morris and Peirce, as Sándor Hervey rightly argues.[22] Peirce saw semiotics as a branch of logic which raised questions about types, patterns, constraints, and principles. Morris's primary interest lay in empirically observable semiotic acts, processes, speech-tokens, and meaning-effects, and the responses which they produced. Philosophically his sympathies lay with the anti-metaphysical logical positivism of Rudolf Carnap.

This functional emphasis on meaning-*effect* finds expression in the American tradition in a wide variety of forms. It underlies approaches to meaning in linguistics (Leonard Bloomfield, 1933); behavioural psychology (B.F. Skinner, 1957); philosophy of language (partly, W.V.O. Quine, 1960; fully, Richard Rorty, 1979); and audience-orientated literary theory (Norman Holland, 1975; Stanley Fish, 1980).[23] It underlines the claims put forward by Robert Corrington about the foundation of a distinctively American philosophical hermeneutic in Peirce and Royce. Ideas are fallible; there are no "pure" givens; knowledge depends on signs which point to other signs; "laws" appear at first sight to be derived from logic, but turn out to be only habituated patterns of behaviour which generate associations

of ideas. The only ontology of which Corrington can speak is "the ontology of the community".[24]

Later in this chapter we shall note how the radical interpretation of Saussure carried out in the French philosophical and literary tradition of Barthes and Derrida is developed in American literary theory by Paul de Man, Harold Bloom and Geoffrey Hartman and in American theology by J.D. Crossan, Mark Taylor, and Carl Raschke. Crossan speaks of "the necessity of a break-out from ontotheology".[25] Carl Raschke sees texts as "neither message nor medium".[26] Textual meanings are "liberated" into infinite fluidity to point beyond themselves in the "melting" of the "lattice of 'signs' which has been fixed . . . by habits".[27] Mark C. Taylor draws on Saussurean difference, Derrida's *différance*, and Hegel's "negativity" to formulate a postmodern theological perception in which "'biblical' revelation" can find no place.[28] In an excellent study of postmodernism David Harvey observes: "Fragmentation, indeterminacy and intense distrust of all universal or 'totalizing' discourses . . . are the hallmark of postmodernist thought."[29]

All the same, there are other ways of responding to Peirce's semiotics. In Europe the most important thinkers for semiotics and hermeneutics who have drawn partly on Peirce include Karl-Otto Apel and Julia Kristeva. If Christopher Norris is right in comparing "the same giddy limit" of scepticism in Jacques Derrida and David Hume, then it is all the more notable that for Karl-Otto Apel, Charles Peirce is "the Kant of American philosophy".[30] In 1952 Jürgen von Kempski had examined parallels between Peirce's work on the relation between logical form and categories of habituated experience with Kant's work on the relation between categories and judgments. Apel examines Peirce's work not only in the context of Kant, but in relation to theories of language in the later thought of Wittgenstein and of Gadamer. In all three writers, he concludes, especially when taken together, there is a convincing case that "the achievement of inter-subjective agreement" constitutes the pre-condition for effective sign-operations and communication.[31] Gadamer's emphasis on the trans-cultural horizons of tradition and community and Wittgenstein's work on public criteria of meaning combine to harmonize with a conception which, Apel believes, is centrally implied by Peirce and Royce. This "regulative principle", Apel writes, is "*that unlimited community of interpretation which is presupposed by everyone who takes part in critical discussion* (that is, by everyone who thinks!) *as an ideal controlling instance*".[32]

Apel's inter-subjective community is not an empirical culture-bound community which has simply generated a cultured code of its own by habit and convention. This "ideal" community embodies "various nations, classes, language-games and life-forms".[33] The "habits" to which Peirce refers cannot be reduced simply to " an object of the empirical social sciences".[34] To speak disparagingly of merely "conventional" elements of cognition betrays an individualistic rather than inter-subjective standpoint. In speaking of "everyone who thinks" Apel has in his view not "consensus" but broad criteria of rationality. Wittgenstein imagines a critic confusing the two issues in this way. He writes: "'So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?' – It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life. If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments. This seems to abolish logic, but does not do so."[35] Apel does not claim that Peirce produced an adequate hermeneutic. But he offers what he calls "the transcendental hermeneutic interpretation of Peirce's semiotics" in which the focus is on "the interpreting community as an interacting community."[36]

Several writers have commented on the subtlety of Peirce's thought, and its consequent capacity to be interpreted in various ways, with various indirect effects.[37] The "semiology" of Saussure has, to no less an extent, been applied and interpreted in different directions. His most immediate impact was to set the agenda for modern linguistics which he provided with a programmatic foundation. In spite of Derrida's accusation of Saussure's "blindness" about "writing", Saussure bequeathed to linguisticians the traditionally-agreed principle that spoken language is primary. Phonological description represents a recognized area of the subject. Saussure's working distinction between diachronic and synchronic description also constitutes a principle of linguistics. But most important of all, the three key principles which we outlined above remain operative in the discipline, although without the philosophical implications drawn by Derrida. First, because linguistic signs are arbitrary or conventional, linguistics remains a *descriptive*, not prescriptive, discipline. Second, the distinction between *langue* and *parole* remains fundamental, and is sometimes expounded (in Chomsky's terminology) in terms of a contrast between linguistic competence and linguistic performance. Third, and most important, because language (*langue*) is a system of relations, or a set of inter-related systems, all linguistics is in principle *structural* linguistics, although this term is sometimes reserved for more formalist approaches in linguistics.

This emphasis on structure began to acquire the status of a doctrine (structuralism) as well as a tool of method around 1929, when the Prague Linguistic Circle formulated the principle on the basis of Saussure that linguisticians should begin not with individual "facts" of language, but from the system which gave them their significance. The linguistics model was no longer item-centred, but relation-centred. Less explicitly, trends which were later to culminate in a structuralist approach could be detected in Eduard Sapir's book *Language* (1921) published in America, and in the Russian formalism of Viktor Shklovsky and others. In 1931 J. Trier

formulated the axiom of field semantics that "only within a field" and "only as part of a whole" does a word carry meaning.[38] In the year that L. Bloomfield published his book *Language* (1933) N. Trubetzkoy from the Prague Circle argued that structuralism in linguistics could provide a model for other academic disciplines.

These rapid theoretical developments which emerged from 1929 to 1933 were taken further in the 1950s by Roman Jakobson and by Claude Lévi-Strauss. In 1956 Roman Jakobson diagnosed problems of speech aphasia in terms of Saussure's two structural axes of syntagmatic (horizontal) and paradigmatic (vertical) relations. Patients found difficulty *either* over the selective (paradigmatic, metaphoric) axis, *or* over the combinatory (syntagmatic, metonymic) axis, but seldom if ever over both. In Jakobson's terminology, a "message" is a *combination* of elements, *selected* from the possibilities offered by "*code*".

Structuralism was finally applied to other disciplines and brought to the centre of the stage in Claude Lévi-Strauss's book *Structural Anthropology* (1958). He asked "whether the different aspects of social life . . . cannot be studied with the help of concepts similar to those employed in linguistics."[39] Linguistics and social phenomena are "the same" in the sense of being a language which structures or codes. In his doctoral dissertation he had examined kinship terms. Rules of kinship and rules of language, he concludes, "are caused by identical unconscious structures".[40] His work, Julia Kristeva comments, "reconfirms the equivalence between the symbolic and the social."[41] The structure is a relation of relations: brother-sister, husband-wife, father-son, uncle-nephew. Controversially, Lévi-Strauss sees the network as a marriage-system, which generates a kind of "logic" about the availability or "value" of women for marriage, or what he calls their "circulation".[42] Lévi-Strauss finds examples of code and signification in marriage laws, ceremonies, rituals, and even methods of cooking. Many binary oppositions (cf. Saussure's associative or paradigmatic relations) are culturally significant: left hand *vs.* right hand; raw *vs.* cooked; examples of spatial opposition such as earth *vs.* sky, land *vs.* sea, dry *vs.* wet, city *vs.* desert.

Lévi-Strauss's widest interest, however, was in the structure and significance of myth. Here the fundamental oppositions include life *vs.* death; man *vs.* God; good *vs.* bad. Whether or not we know the codes of a given culture "a myth is still felt as a myth by any reader anywhere in the world."[43] Myth is deep structure, a universal narrative model freed from temporal and cultural conditioning. Myth itself is anonymous. Yet particular mythological stories and folk-tale texts, including the "mythemes" or constituent-units of which myths are composed, depend on structures that are culture-relative. There is an element of ambivalence in Lévi-Strauss about whether all codes or systems are culture-relative, or whether trans-cultural universal features

dictate the code that is presupposed at least by myth as such. Despite Lévi-Strauss's appeal to the difference between the scientific objectifying perceptions of the "engineer" and the more meta-critical perspectives of the *bricoleur*, this ambivalence is noted by Derrida and by such commentators as Leach, Lentricchia, and Scholes.[44] Leach ascribes it partly to Lévi-Strauss's desire to effect a synthesis in social anthropology between the approaches of Malinowski and of Radcliffe-Brown.

This earlier phase of structuralism, however, which traced formal or quasi-universal structural categories in texts and in other phenomena soon gave way to a recognition of the implications of community-relativity and convention. In chapter XIII, section 3, I discuss the formalist notion of narrative-grammar developed by A.J. Greimas and applied repeatedly in biblical studies of the 1970s, especially in earlier volumes of *Semeia*. In section 4 of chapter XIII I trace the transposition of structuralism into semiotic accounts of reading-competencies and of reading-processes, based on the social conventions of matrices of meaning-systems inherited by given communities.

Two approaches to biblical texts may be mentioned here, as representing perspectives which are distinctive, but not unrelated to these issues. Northrop Frye's book *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (1982) is "structural" rather than "structuralist". The Bible, he argues, reflects traces of "a total structure", with a beginning and an end, in which a structure of recurring patterns becomes evident.[45] Images such as the city, the mountain, bread, wine, garden, tree, oil and fountain recur so often as to indicate "some kind of unifying principle". The biblical texts reflect a unified structure of narrative and imagery.

Erhardt Güttgemanns, by contrast, offers a fully structuralist approach, which appeals repeatedly to Saussure and to Saussure's contrast between *langue* and *parole*.[46] Terminologically, the designation "generative poetics" sounds like a post-structuralist and literary theory of the productivity of intertextual play. But Güttgemanns looks to the *formal* model of Noam Chomsky's generative transformational grammar, and this, in turn, looks to the *logical-universals* of Descartes and of mathematical method; not to the contingent particularities of social history and art. Güttgemanns describes his approach as "a new method of linguistic textual analysis that is applicable to all human texts".[47] "*Langue* is ontologically pre-given to speaking *parole*."[48]

None of the varied semiotic or structural approaches which we have reviewed, however, demands the kind of transposition of more traditional approaches to textuality which Barthes, Derrida, and other deconstructionists believe is necessitated by the work of Saussure and his successors in semiotics. Even allowing for the *critical* turn, in which Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva see *semiotics as a critique of semiotics*,

the conclusions which deconstructionists draw *rest not simply on semiotic theory alone, but on an intermixture of semiotics and post-modernist, often neo-Nietzschean, world-view.*

Here an illuminating parallel suggests itself. In 1936 A.J. Ayer published his book *Language, Truth, and Logic*, which became very influential in Britain in the 1930s and 1940s. One component in its widespread appeal was its common-sense empirical approach, which British readerships have always found congenial. But its influence was due to a more profound reason. Ayer *seemed* to argue for logical positivism on the basis of an account of language and meaning, put forward as the result of description and observation. In practice, however, his book served to promote the *philosophical doctrine* of positivism by *clothing it in linguistic dress*. Only by the early 1950s, nearly twenty years later, had this issue become sufficiently clear to the popular mind for its spell to be broken. This possible parallel suggests that we ask again: what elements of deconstructionist theories of texts and language genuinely rest on principles of *semiotics* rather than on a doctrine or world-view which is *clothed in semiotic dress?*

3. Roland Barthes: From Hermeneutics through Semiotics to Intralinguistic World, and to Text as Play

At least four factors play a part in shaping the theories of textuality which we find in Roland Barthes (1915–1980). First, the earlier Barthes is strongly motivated by socio-political concerns of a radically "left" or broadly neo-Marxist sympathy. Second, the influence of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, as the three great "masters of suspicion", inspire a range of models of socio-critical hermeneutics in the context of a general war against hermeneutical "innocence", and Barthes's work constitutes an example of those who draw on Freudian and Marxist traditions or terminology. Third, his view of the relation between perception and language and the notion of intra-linguistic world should be seen against the background of the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Fokkema and Kunne-Ibsch (1978) make this point, and Dwyer's study of Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein (1990) adds plausibility to it.[49] Barthes notes that Merleau-Ponty was the first to introduce Saussure into French philosophy; but Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Saussure is acknowledged by many to be idiosyncratic and uneven. This may have influenced Barthes's use of Saussure and the nature of appeals to Saussure in deconstructionism. Fourthly, Barthes presses semiotic theory into the service of his political and literary concerns, entering into explicit dialogue with Saussure and extending the notion of "code" along similar lines to Lévi-Strauss.

From the publication of his first book, *Writing Degree Zero* (Fr.1953) Barthes combines a standpoint in literary theory with what we shall describe later in this study as a *socio-critical model of hermeneutical theory*. In this model texts which may appear to have a relatively neutral objective, or innocent status are unmasked in a process of interpretation as supporting *interests* in maintaining given power-structures and power-relations within a society, culture, or religion. *Writing Degree Zero* examines the literature of French classicism from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, offering the *hermeneutical* diagnosis that what seemed at the time to give it a quality of inherent "rightness" was not some natural or objective feature but its status as an expression of the bourgeois life and values of the time. With the break-up of the classical style, Barthes traces subsequent developments, arguing that even attempts at a "style-less" (zero degree) writing cannot but become yet another "style". Neutral writing is impossible. Even the goal of "lucidity" or "clarity" in seventeenth-century France is not a natural virtue but "a class idiom", reflecting the élitism of privilege. Barthes confirms this diagnosis in his later book *Criticism and Truth* (1966).[50]

All this raises fundamental *hermeneutical* questions, although it is a socio-critical hermeneutic of a particular kind. In accordance with hermeneutical principles, Barthes unmasks what he regards as the naïve innocence of French literary theorists who detach questions of this kind from what, in hermeneutical theory, we should call the historicity of language: the capacity of language to be conditioned by the historical horizon of the writer and by the historical horizon of the reader or interpreter. As we have suggested, a Marxist background shapes Barthes's concerns about ideologies and bourgeois culture; while the legacy of Nietzsche encourages questions about power and iconoclasm. Barthes endorses whole-heartedly the Freudian exposure of the "innocence" of any academic activity which fails to take account of psychoanalysis and the unconscious. Freud's work would play a major part in the deconstructionism of Jacques Lacan and in Julia Kristeva's semiotics.

Barthes took this hermeneutical iconoclasm further, at a more popular level, in his next-but-one book *Mythologies* (Fr.1957). Here he unmasks as illusory the supposed descriptive objectivity of a variety of phenomena. He examines photography, in which both the clothing and posture of the subject and the conventions and methods of the photographer convey messages over and above bare description.[51] He considers the cover of a magazine, where the picture of a black soldier saluting the French flag attempts to re-inforce imperialist assumptions in the Algerian situation.[52] He discusses the spectacle of wrestling, where the action serves more as a ritual than as a genuine contest.[53] This book has been written, Barthes tells us frankly,

out of "a feeling of impatience at the sight of the 'naturalness' with which newspapers, art, and common sense constantly dress up reality . . . I resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn."[54]

The last section of the book, sub-titled "Myth Today" serves to make two broad and basic points. First, Barthes argues that "myth", in the sense in which he has used the term, is a semiological system. Here he introduces Saussure to his readers. The face-value of the myths depend on one level of signification; but if they are placed within "a greater semiological system", we perceive a second-order meaning which unmasks them.[55] There is a parallel here, Barthes suggests, with Freud's interpretation principle of a second-order of meaning which lies below the surface. In both cases we can "decipher" what is signified.[56] Second, myths themselves appear to be neutral or non-political. But the "deciphering" of myth, virtually by definition of the role of myth as a tool of the Establishment or the bougeoisie, will be undertaken by members of the political Left.

Semiotics, or "semiology" (to use Saussure's term) offers, or seems to offer, an explanatory model for de-coding, de-mystifying, or de-ideologizing, not only language but cultural phenomena. Lévi-Strauss, in this very year, was preparing his *Structural Anthropology* for the press. At the risk of beginning to over-stretch what Roman Jakobson meant by "code", Barthes sees semiotics as performing a task at two levels: the descriptive and the meta-linguistic. First the traditional codes which generated *prima facie* messages embodied bourgeois values. A description of the semiotic process could unmask the illusion of objective innocence as such that it was. Second, semiotics seemed to offer a meta-language: a system of language-description which somehow stood outside the language which it was describing. At both levels semiotics seemed to offer a tool for Barthes's literary and political concerns.

The text in which Barthes follows Saussure most closely is his *Elements of Semiology* (Fr. 1964) He follows and expounds Saussure's arguments about system, about syntagmatic and associative or paradigmatic relations, about oppositions and differences within the system, and enters into dialogue with linguisticians who have sought to refine Saussure's work, especially Jakobson, Hjelmslev and Martinet. Barthes is careful about how he substitutes such systems as the garment-system, food-system, furniture-system, and architecture-system for systems that were otherwise purely linguistic.[57] For example juxtapositions in clothing or in items of furniture represent the syntagma, and allow for associative or paradigmatic choices. But Barthes carefully allows for the possibility that choices sometimes depend in life on other factors. Thus someone's choice between a long skirt and a short skirt may either have semiological significance, or be due to considerations about protection from the weather.[58]

Oppositions in a paradigmatic field may be simple binary patterns, like the talking drum of the Congo tribes, which has two notes; or like dots and dashes of the morse code, or digital systems of computers. Or we can have multilateral proportional oppositions, like the combinations of colour-variations and oppositions of circle and triangle in the Highway Code.[59] Marked and unmarked terms in a privative opposition can be explained in more than one possible way (e.g. in the examples dog/bitch, man/wife, nurse/male nurse, the first term is the unmarked or "neutral" term in the opposition). For Barthes, this is the "zero degree" of the opposition which is "a significant absence" in "a pure differential state".[60] Binary oppositions are not the only ones. Barthes points out that Saussure did not conceive of the associative or paradigmatic field as only binary, and approves of Martinet's conclusion that "binarism" is neither universal nor dictated by nature rather than culture.[61] In such cultural systems as clothing fashions Barthes argues that the network of contrasts is polysemic. Barthes points out that the applications of these linguistic and semiotic models to social life is something which Saussure envisaged, and of which he therefore would have approved.[62]

All this remains compatible with traditional semiotic theory. Semiotics still serves a *hermeneutical* theory in which language-uses are still grounded in the historicity of language-using communities. The emphasis in the later writings, from 1966 onwards, on meaning and interpretation as an endless succession of semiotically-generated variants has not yet become explicit. But Barthes begins to foresee the logical problem entailed in the idea of ascribing to semiotic theory the status of a meta-language which deciphers and de-codes everyday language and literature. He is not satisfied, as the Marxist literary theorist Fredric Jameson is, to view Marxism as the final great "interpretive master code" which forms the "untranscendable horizon" of all textual interpretation. For Barthes foresees the possibility of the criticism of his work which is in fact put forward, in spite of Barthes's later shift in emphasis, by Sándor Hervey. Commenting on "the paradox of 'semioclasm'" Hervey declares, "In a nutshell the irony is that Barthesianism has been overtaken by the necessary fate of successful ideologies; it has become a dogma."[64] A meta-language can in theory become a vehicle for new mythologies and new traditions. Hence Barthes argues that there is no reason in principle why one meta-language should not be scrutinized and "deciphered" by another. In principle there can be an infinite series of semiotic layers, in which no "final" reading or semiotic system can be reached. Meanings must therefore be infinitely plural.

Some identify the moment of a shift in thought in Barthes with the publication of *Criticism and Truth* in 1966.[65] This work constitutes a counter-reply to Raymond Picard's criticisms of his earlier book *On Racine* which had appeared in 1963. Picard had argued that the "new"

"new criticism" turned language into a game of chance by imposing the primary meanings of Racine's words as they would have been understood in the seventeenth century, and substituting such "readings" as might be suggested by the subjectivities of psychoanalytical or other extrinsic frames of reference. In the first part of his reply, Barthes argues on hermeneutical grounds. What appears to be "evident truth" depends on hermeneutical frames of reference, and depends on interpretative "choices".[66] But in the second part he goes further. He declares, "Each age can indeed believe that it holds the canonical meaning of the work, but it suffices to have a slightly broader historical perspective in order for this circular meaning to be transformed into a plural meaning, and the closed work to be transformed into an open work. The very definition of the work is changing: it is no longer a historical fact . . . *The work is not surrounded, designated, protected, or directed by any situation, no practical life is there to tell us the meaning which should be given to it.*"[67] If we ask about the reader's situation, rather than the author's, "this situation, as it changes, *composes* the work and does not rediscover it."[68]

Barthes has now shifted his ground away from the hermeneutical suspicion which is grounded in historicality. He appeals to *generative* models in linguistics and in semiotics as models to be applied to texts and literature. In these disciplines, we may note, these generative models concern possibilities of *production* and *composition* at the level of the *langue*; not the understanding or interpretation of *parole*, or "message". Barthes is aware that he is moving between different semiotic levels. The theoretical justification for such movement, if it exists, can be found in the five pages in *Elements of Semiology* which discussed staggered systems, connotative semiotics and meta-language. Barthes's hypothetical and theoretical claims about an infinite series of connotative and meta-linguistic language-layers show that this shift from history to formal language-system had been envisaged in principle two years earlier in 1964. If we begin with a language-system of denotation, this gives rise to a system "above" it of secondary connotation. But the language-system which we use to undertake a description and critique of the denotation language-system constitutes a meta-language "below" it. Theoretically, it would be possible to account for the meta-language in terms of a meta-metalinguistic system at a still lower level. Like mirror-images in a mirror, the layers could be repeated endlessly in either direction, except that the layers do not constitute representational images, but sign-systems based on arbitrary sign-relations.

Barthes explains this in the following terms. He writes: "In connotative semiotics the signifiers of the second system are constituted by the signs of the first;[69] this is reversed in meta-language: there the signifiers of the second system "takes over" a first language. But "nothing in principle prevents a meta-language from becoming in its turn the language-object of a new meta-language".[70] As history advances, there could be "a diachrony of meta-languages, and each science, including of course semiology, would contain the seeds of its own death, in the shape of the language destined to speak it."[71] Hence the objective function of the "decipherer" has only a relative and provisional objectivity, because it is subject to the history which renews languages.

This may partly answer the difficulty outlined by Sándor Hervey as the "paradox of semioclasm", except that semantic pluralism is now the new dogma. But the application of the linguistic and semiotic model in this way no longer involves matters of linguistic science; it has brought us into the domain of philosophy. For when *linguisticians* speak of "connotation" as *secondary implication*, the assumption is retained that the denotative system remains the primary one. Likewise, metalinguistic systems *serve* the primary language-system under consideration in terms of the inter-subjective judgments of the language-using community or linguistic observers. But a constant flow of movement in which each meta-language is perceived to change its level to that of primary language banishes the realities of the inter-subjective world, and places language, rather than the inter-subjective world, at the centre of the system. Linguistic *method* has now become a linguistic *world-view*. Whether or not this happens to be right or wrong, it is no more a semiotic *method* than it is a scientific *method* when positivists turn scientific method into a scientific *world-view*. *To replace inter-subjectivity by intertextuality is a philosophical, not a semiotic or linguistic move.*

Fokkema and Kunne-Ibsch are probably correct when they suggest that, as we have noted, Barthes is to some extent indebted to a view of perception and its relation to language which has been inspired by Maurice Merleau-Ponty.[72] Even though he puts it forward "at the risk of some misunderstanding" Robert Detweiler's rule-of-thumb contrast between phenomenology and radical structuralism is helpful: the effect is "not to discover how consciousness forms a system of being and meaning, but how system forms the being and meaning of consciousness."[73]

Barthes has now gone further than his intention in *On Racine* "to amputate literature from the individual".[74] In his book *S/Z* (1970) he compares unfavourably those types of literature which project "a view", or some standpoint located in history, which "writerly" (*scriptible*) texts in which signifiers have free play, and readers are thereby invited to participate in the *production* of the text. In such texts *language itself* has become the object of study, rather than what is said, or even what is heard through language. Barthes begins *S/Z* with a repudiation of those versions of structuralism which see universals in narrative grammar. This signals a move from his references to "the typology of actants proposed by A.J. Greimas" and to T. Todorov and to V. Propp in 1966.[75] In contrast to this approach Barthes now declares that "all the stories in the world" do not add up to

one universal narrative grammar; to pursue the notion of single narrative model is "exhausting" and "undesirable". In *S/Z* Barthes examines a short story by Balzac called "Sarrasine" with a view to achieving two aims. First he wants to show that Balzac's view of life or "reality" was already encoded and produced by his own linguistic and semiotic world. Second, he wants to de-code or to trans-code the story at various levels in a way which will release it to become a "writerly" text; one which is capable of generating a plurality of meanings in the production of which readers can share.

The contrast between "readerly" and "writerly" texts reflects Barthes's earlier distinction (1960) between the kind of writer who uses language for extra-linguistic purposes (the *écrivant*) and the kind of writer who writes language "intransitively" as a purely linguistic activity (the *écrivain*). In the writing of the *écrivain* meaning is plural, and therefore "postponed". John Sturrock comments that in Barthes's view the *écrivain* will "cede initiative to words". He continues: "the text is a sort of verbal carnival . . . a linguistic spectacle, and the reader is required to enjoy that spectacle for its own sake rather than to look through language to the world."[76] James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* represents an example of the *écrivain's* activity. In this sense, it is *text* rather than a *work*.

In *S/Z* Barthes deconstructs the apparently content-orientated nature of Balzac's "Sarrasine" by two methodological devices. First, he does away with Balzac's own divisions of his story in terms of paragraphs or episodes. The story is read in a single linear continuum, broken up into a succession of 561 "lexemes" or reading-units.[77] Second, he introduces not one "code" but five: a hermeneutic code, a cultural code, a symbolic code, a semic code, and an actional code.[78] The symbolic code is probably closest to anything implied by Saussure's *langue*, Jakobson's *code*, or the use of code in Lévi-Strauss. It constitutes a system of contrasts and categorizations presupposed by the temporal progress of the story. The semic code represents a particular and variant example of the symbolic code. The hermeneutic code is a network of questions which are resolved as the momentum of the narrative approaches its closure. The actional code relates to successive stages of the action. Finally, the cultural code is virtually an epistemological category. It represents a system of knowledge and values which are "accepted", stereotyped, or perceived in the story as "common knowledge".

These devices transform "Sarrasine" from the work of an author, Balzac, into a *process* of the *production* of meaning in which many voices, including successive readers, are involved. It matches exactly Barthes's definition of textuality in his 1971 essay "From Work to Text". He writes: "The Text must not be thought of as a defined object . . . The Text is a methodological field".[79] He continues: "The Text is experienced only as an activity, a production. It follows that the Text cannot stop."[80] In harmony with Derrida, Barthes asserts, "The Text, on the contrary, practises the infinite deferral of the signified".[81] This infinity of deferral is *not* to be identified, Barthes insists, with the mere corrigibility of a "hermeneutic process of deepening, but rather with a serial movement of dislocations . . . variations . . . an *irreducible* plurality.[82] As Barthes repeats in his book *The Pleasure of the Text* (Fr. 1973), the "I" or the "subject" who was the author has become a "paper" entity only, who has "come undone", as if a spider were to become dissolved into its web.[83] The Text itself now "plays", in all its pluralities of possible meanings, and the reader "plays twice over: playing the text as one plays a game", namely to "re-produce" the Text; and "playing the Text as one would play music".[84] Barthes compares the notion in post-serial music of the hearer's becoming "co-author" of the score.

4. Difficulties and Questions: the Inter-Mixture of Semiotics and World-View

All this is part of a heavily political agenda. In traditional Protestant bourgeois capitalism a privileged élite, namely authors, expressed ideas which presupposed traditional codes of values and patterns. These ideas were gathered to form a privileged "canon", and regarded as "classics" of literature or religion. The bourgeoisie delegated to professional "interpreters", who formed another élite, the task of safeguarding "the" meanings of the texts in question. But post-modern theories of literature and semiotics allow us to dispense with these models, according to Barthes. The author, as human subject "comes undone"; texts do not convey messages; they are simply processes which cannot stop; in which *anyone* is invited to participate. They are cut off from authors, from situations, and from the extralinguistic world, to constitute an infinite open system of endless signification. Barthes concludes, "As an institution the author is dead: his civil status, his biographical person have disappeared".[85]

We have already put forward the argument that Barthes's work after 1966 goes well beyond the principles suggested, let alone demanded, by the semiotic theory of Saussure and his successors in linguistics. This later emphasis in *S/Z* and in *The Pleasure of the Text* however, turns Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole* on its head. For it is *langue* as an *abstract* and theoretical construct which generates *possibilities*; *parole*, which *presupposes a speaking subject* constitutes the actuality in language *using* situations. It is not the case, in Saussure, that *parole* can be generated by a subjectless system, in isolation from the *constraints* on possibility imposed by the purposive *choices of the speaking subject*.