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## After theory

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In French literary studies the reign of “Theory” has come to an end and its demise has left a void. This article proposes that literary studies be founded on anthropological considerations. In order to justify this approach the insufficiencies of theory are first shown to be rooted in dualistic rationalism. Poetry concerns the whole experience of human beings, and three aspects of their irreplaceable individuality and unity are explored: verbal image, rhythm and voice. Since poetry is essentially human it needs to be studied in an interdisciplinary context.

### Ná teorie

In Franse literatuurstudie het die heerskappy van “Teorie” tot ’n einde gekom en het daar gevolglik ’n vakuum ontstaan. In hierdie artikel word voorgestel dat literatuurstudie op antropologiese prinsipes gebaseer moet word. Ter begronding van hierdie benadering word eers die tekortkomings van teorie wat wortel in rasionalistiese dualisme aangetoon. Digkuns betref die totaliteit van menswees en drie aspekte van die onvervangbare individualiteit en eenheid van elke mens word verken: verbale beeld, ritme en stem. Aangesien digkuns essensiël menslik is, moet dit interdissiplinêr bestudeer word.

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It is common knowledge among literary scholars that in the period after the Second World War, the traditional humanities have gradually been replaced by the so-called human sciences in programmes and research. In order to confer scientific status on their disciplines, practitioners felt it necessary to found their activities on the principles prevalent in the natural sciences, which obey the absolute and universal law of determinism. During the sixties and seventies this tendency gave birth in France to a kind of tyranny of what was termed *Théorie* with a capital T. The phenomenon has exerted an extraordinary fascination for literary studies in the Anglo-American academic world. In France, however, the theoretical era has come to an end, mainly due to the deaths of its most prominent representatives. The old guard is gone, and their disappearance has left a certain void which good old philology, phenomenology and the new genetic criticism have not been able to fill.<sup>1</sup> We are witnessing a kind of disarray which has been given the name of post-modernism. This is mere speculation since no paradigm is held to be binding, and we know that speculative consideration about any subject can give rise to endless and often esoteric controversy.

However, the object of this speculation, the reality about which literary scholars speculate, cannot itself be held to be mere speculation: poetry is an essential human activity by means of which human beings explore and manifest their own possibilities as living self-conscious individuals, exploring what it is to be affected by their own lives. I reserve the term poetry for all creative use of language, whatever form this creative enactment of the powers of the mind may take, be it poem or novel, play or essay, and even any meaningful dialogue which opens up the possibility of a real encounter, an encounter through which an individual is enriched and at the same time enriches the individual or the parts of the world or the environment which are met. If the infant, the little human being who cannot yet speak, were not a poet in his/her own way, s/he would not manage to take his/her place in the community. These verbal forms are not a fringe benefit of culture or a gratuitous pastime on the outskirts of the deadly serious human activity of creating wealth — poetry is not

1 The reign of theory has not gone uncriticised or without resistance, as may be seen from the works of Descombes (1978 & 1983) and Compagnon (1999).

merely an activity in which one indulges in one's spare time if one does not want to transform this time into money.

I want to formulate my conviction as simply but as strongly as possible: man is a poetic being. If he ceases to be a poet, to be creative, then he ceases to be human. My contention of course has to be justified. The precarious state of literary studies is there for all to see. Unfortunately, the current predicament of literary studies has been brought about by its theorising practitioners. Therefore, before embarking on my own defence of poetry, I want to understand what in fact this "Theory" was, what it pretended to do and where it went wrong.

## 1. Theory and the human sciences

It is generally acknowledged that the model for theory in the human sciences was provided by structural linguistics: its conception of language as a system of signs was applied to cultural phenomena (so called because they do not occur in nature) such as myth, marriage, the subconscious and the forces of production. These cultural theories then had a boomerang effect on literary studies, which came to treat poems as if they were a self-reflecting performance of the informational function of language; a symptom of some hiccup or other in the subconscious; a product of the interplay between the forces of production, a Molotov cocktail or damp squib in the struggle of the classes — all applications or manifestations which could be explained by these so-called structures. A structure, then, was defined as a determining but invisible deep-lying system of relationships between a limited and closed set of prime elements. The structuralist was deemed able to discover the laws governing these relationships. In fact the term structure designated what strictly speaking should have been called a system. We will return to this notion of structure later.

The basic presumption of structuralist human sciences is that all human behaviour is secretly determined by underlying impersonal, blind, senseless forces which serve as the real explanation of what is happening in so-called cultural or human phenomena. When we do something we do not really know what we are doing or why we are doing it. We are merely drifting along on the surface of blind, opaque

matter governed by universal and therefore inescapable determinisms. This view of human behaviour claims to be based on the epistemology of the classical natural sciences. Access to these determinisms is gained neither through introspection (since there is nothing inside) nor through intuition but via theory, conceived as a closed set of concepts which accounts for whatever happens to occur in what we erroneously insist on calling personally motivated behaviour.

It may immediately be questioned whether behaviour can be held to be of the same fabric as atoms or molecules, but this was in fact the not always openly admitted presumption of structuralism. It is clear that if there is to be no escape from these determinisms, there can be no place or space for any creative activity whatsoever. But is the human being really a result of inescapable determinisms? It seems to me that poetry is one of several human activities which bears witness to the fact that human beings are able to disengage themselves from their environment and their past as well as to reinvent solutions which in turn can create new situations in which they can deploy their creative powers.<sup>2</sup>

Poetry in my sense of the word is the enactment of our creative powers through language. In order to argue this contention I will first submit structuralistic theory to a critique in the Kantian sense of the term. Central to this critique, of course, will be the structuralistic concept of language. I shall discuss this against the background of a revised notion of structure formulated in ontological terms in order to unlock the creative powers of language and to show that articulated language is the medium in which creative or primary imagination operates and that it constantly has to reinvent the structural links between human consciousness and the world. I shall include in this discussion a reflection on the notion of living being. My position regarding the pertinence of literary study is quite clear: in order to make it more pertinent it is necessary to found it on

2 A creative or primary imagination, which is the basis on which perception and thought can take place, is active in the human mind. Thereby we are able to solve problems, not only by inventing solutions but by changing the conditions giving rise to the problems. Castoriadis's entire oeuvre is devoted to this topic. He developed his concept of primary imagination by reinterpreting crucial passages in Aristotle's *Peri psyches* (Castoriadis 1986: 327-63).

anthropological principles. The object of anthropology is to gain some insight into the being that is called human. I will formulate my own conception simply and provisionally as follows: a being is human only insofar as it is self-conscious and constantly able to reinvent itself. Poetry is the most powerful way in which a human being can perform that task. As human beings, we respond to our own ontological necessity, which is not some kind of obligation or determinism but a calling to realise the possibilities that we find in ourselves (Marcel 1949). To do this, human beings apply creative and inventive powers which manifest themselves through language — the three most important aspects being rhythm, metaphor (verbal image) and the voice.

## 2. Mind and matter

For the natural sciences, matter as such is clearly definable. But the mind (or consciousness) which operates this definition cannot be included in the matter so defined. What then is consciousness? Positivist science has coined a term to designate and deal with what according to its own principles cannot be: it is called an “epiphenomenon”, a non-reality which can be observed concomitant to real phenomena (Jonas 1987). Needless to say, this term is in itself a contradiction: either there is or there is not a phenomenon, and that which appears together with it can neither be more or less phenomenal nor a non-phenomenon. Epiphenomenalism is, in fact, theoretical suicide. Indeed, scientific theory in the hard and natural sciences is based on the principle of constancy and reversibility and therefore only matter can exert power and have causal effectiveness; what is produced by matter must itself be material and have the same productive powers, otherwise the principle of reversibility is transgressed. The mind and consciousness are denied all real power since they are immaterial. But how can matter produce something that is not material? We do not know. Nor do we know how an immaterial epiphenomenon such as our mind could set in motion a material body (Weizsäcker 1940). But if one holds to the epiphenomenal theory, mind and consciousness are illusions of illusions, nothingness reflecting nothingness. Such a theory of consciousness and mind is not very useful when one deals with living creatures (human creatures among

them): every living being is to some extent self-centred and self-affecting; it senses that it is and its being is affected by itself. But this awareness concerns the whole of a living organism in which all constituting elements interact within an all-encompassing structure in which they cohere and function. A living organism is first of all an individual in a situation of exchange or interaction with what it is not, with what surrounds it, with its environment. Through this interaction, the organism interiorises external elements and raises them to a higher degree of organisation, allowing initiative, self-control and interactivity with surrounding organisms. An organism is itself but this self is also linked to other selves, can link with what is outside itself in a relationship of mutual or reciprocal transformation. This relation is what I would call a “structure” in the real and useful sense of the word. To facilitate a fuller understanding of this notion of structure some ontological remarks are necessary.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Textualism

From the preceding remarks it is clear that structuralism remains trapped in the rationalistically based dualism that opposes matter (*res extensa*) to mind (*res cogitans*). The history of rationalism is a constant battle between materialism and idealism. Materialism recognises as real only things or entities which are positively verifiable: what remains unverifiable is not permitted the status of being. Idealism, on the other hand, will recognise as real only that which is posited by the human mind: the real is that which human reason can account for. I use the term “reason” here with reference to its Latin origin: *ratio* meant “cause” as well as “account”. Rationalist dualism poses the problem of the relationship between these two realms. This problem has always been formulated in terms of representation, a problematic notion which inevitably sites human consciousness in the incapacity to reach the reality of things or beings and goes so far as

3 The subject is biologically founded in the individual living organism which is self-regulatory and has relational autonomy based on cognitive or computational powers. The fact that an individual organism defends itself by means of its immune system is sufficient proof of its relative independence: it is not totally enslaved by the network of relations in which it is situated. Cf Morin 1999: 144-54.

to cut the subject off from itself. Even the subject becomes an illusion if, in order to give an objective account of itself, it may not base itself on introspection or intuition. If one considers that consequent materialism very publicly claimed the death of God then it follows quite logically that the subject can not stake too much of a claim to existence either — in France, in particular, the sixties and seventies witnessed the so-called death of the subject and its caretakers have not stopped gloating about it. It is easy to understand that deconstruction is merely the final consequence of such thinking. If all that appears is the product of unconscious forces then there is no meaning, no sense to what happens. If one takes a text as such a happening, as the result of the blind determinisms at work in reality, then it is only too easy, and even permissible, to make it say whatever one likes, since all meaning can only be illusion, mere immaterial image or *fata morgana* in the desert of our non-fulfillable desires.

To deconstruct verbal phenomena and make them mean the opposite of what they seem at first sight to represent is a tempting enterprise. Whether out of a sense of taking part in some competition or game, it becomes acceptable to try to show that *Das Kapital* is a treatise written in justification of a capitalist social system, and *Mein Kampf* a Zionist manifesto. In such a deconstructionist perspective reality, especially lived and meaningful experience, ceases to be the basis of real communion with fellow human beings as soon as language is involved. One of the reasons why this is possible and practicable in texts resides in the decision to treat individual texts as though they were entities whose only links would develop in the ad-linguistic realm of all other texts,<sup>4</sup> devoid of any relationship with their origin or with any outside reality, as if a kind of arche-text had initiated its own making, as if it were an integral part only of the ma-

4 The adjective “ad-linguistic” qualifies a view of language held by philosophers who have taken the linguistic turn by which all referential value of language is negated. According to this position the human mind would endlessly wander around from sign to sign without ever gaining access to reality. This view is only possible within a dualistic framework wherein the mind is radically separated from matter and has to operate with immaterial representations in order to explain matter. As I endeavour to show, this model does not do justice to the real situation of a living organism in the world (Hottois 1981).

terial substratum on which it appears or of the situation in which it surfaces. As all theorists know, this type of thinking is called textualism. Foucault was its main proponent and it was developed to its ultimate conclusion by Derrida.

The principle on which textualism is based is, in fact, void. If one says that there is nothing but the text then this sentence can only mean that in order to know what the text is about one has to look in the text and not outside or around it. But the text itself has referents or a referent and the single meaningful question to be asked can only concern the possibility of the text's changing the nature of its referent(s). If it does, then there is no difference between fact and fiction, between truth and untruth. This conclusion does not stand the test of reality and it is not proven that all reality would be the result of texts. In any case, since the text is considered to be a self-enclosed entity, how could it have any effect on what is external to it?

Needless to say, this concept of the text as a closed entity is based on the structuralist definition of language as a closed system of signs.<sup>5</sup> Such a conception is problematic since in reality only mental systems can be held to be well defined, while language is certainly not the result of a well-defining decision and its execution by the human mind. Paradoxically, in order to satisfy the criteria of natural science, structuralism becomes a pure immaterialism that ignores its own origin in rationalist dualism. The status of what is real becomes problematic from the moment we fall into the dualistic trap set by the rationalism of Descartes. The main challenge is to avoid this trap because whatever one can say, playfully or not, it is quite obvious that Hitler's *Mein Kampf* has had real consequences in history, consequences almost too ghastly to contemplate, as has been the case with the communist applications of Marxist theory. So there is a link between language and reality. And it must also be stated that if one de-

5 Structuralist linguistics is a deliberate deformation of what Saussure really had in mind. As his lecture notes and manuscripts show, he was interested in understanding the organised way in which language changes through its usage in a speech community but he was never able to develop a consistent theory about language in transition (Fehr 2000). In any case, it is obvious that structuralist human scientists have continuously misused his terminology, despite the fact that this abuse has been denounced by linguists since 1970 (Mounin 1970).



clares the death of the subject then human beings are liberated or stripped of their responsibility; nobody can be held accountable for his own actions any more, and a despot is as valuable as a good Samaritan. I acknowledge that this critique of textualism has been formulated in a slightly provocative way. However, I am very strongly convinced of the urgent need for a reaction against its demoralising effect, especially on the young who tend to give up all too readily in their quest for meaning. But speaking more fundamentally, I want to propose that we need to revise our notion of what is. In other words, we have to rethink our ontology.

#### 4. Structural ontology

Ontology is that branch of philosophy that tries to ascertain the meaning of being. Whereas Oriental ontology is based mainly on the notion of nothingness, the West has centred its ontology on the notion of Being. Until the end of the Middle Ages in the Western world all ontological speculation was substantialistic: “what is” was conceived of as a substance, that which can stand on its own, separately and as something in itself because it was created as such and nothing except its creator could alter it. This ontology rendered quite a number of phenomena inexplicable, such as change and death. It also had problematic implications, the most disturbing being that in order to maintain some kind of coherence for his creatures, the creator was not free to intervene in what he himself had created. This reasoning flew in the face of a conception of divinity as a superior or highest being endowed with the power of omnipotence. At the end of the Middle Ages William of Ockham came to the conclusion that creation had to be contingent, opening the way for human endeavour to intervene in the world.

The intuition that beings are contingent thus led to a functional ontology: beings were no longer seen as substance but as functions one of another. In order to understand such a contingent universe it became necessary to conceive of it as a system whose constituent parts are held together by knowable laws of relation and interdependence. Everything had to have its reason, but then science was condemned to a search for these reasons or determinisms from which there could be no exception or escape, otherwise this world and being in general

would become unknowable, or irrational. The ultimate achievement of this search by the human mind for the reason behind what is would then be a total coincidence of the mind that can identify its own absolute knowledge and the known reality. According to Hegel this would happen once the mind has recuperated itself through natural history. This fortunate situation has not yet come to pass. For our purpose, however, it is sufficient to see that structuralist thinking is founded in this systemic version of functionalist ontology.

The structuralist definition of language as a system of signs allowing communication is clearly an application of this systemic ontology. As has been shown, this systemic definition of language has been applied to all so-called “cultural” phenomena observable wherever people are to be found. People are thereby caught in a web of functions tearing their unity as living organisms into separate elements roughly classified into the two rationalistically defined realms of body and mind. In reality, however, these two realms are not separable. Systemic ontology condemns beings to total exteriority; living organisms, however, have a certain interiority which is not totally separate from the rest but organised around its own centre and able to contract relationships with its environment — such relationships being not of total dependence or determinism but of exchange. This insight puts us in a position to develop a notion of structure which would not trap us within dualistic antinomies.

As has already been suggested, there is one reality, at least for living human beings, which renders impossible any radical separation between object and subject, or even any clear division between inside and outside. That reality is our own body, our body proper as it is called in phenomenology. We are incarnated beings engaging in a mutually transforming exchange with what is not us. As an organism, our body is certainly matter but it is living matter, matter in which a will to be formed, to form and to transform is at work (Schelling 1988).<sup>6</sup> This chiasmic relationship between my own inti-

6 In his controversy with Fichte over absolute consciousness and knowledge, Schelling pointed out that in order to understand the formation (taking form) of matter a formational will or capacity to be formed must be accepted. He thereby exploded the German idealism in which rational dualism had attained its apotheosis (Schelling 1988).

macy and that which surrounds it constitutes a dynamic structure in which the contracting elements are linked in a mutually transforming exchange. This structure can be called co-creative since the exchanging elements constitute a whole that is more than the sum of its components. Since it is dynamic and self-developing over time, this structure is not only temporal but also historical: man has been changed by his environment and in turn has changed the world. As a consequence this structure has to be continuously re-invented.

Within Being there exist profound dimensions of different nature which in their discovery are at the same time created. These dimensions are of course not merely material. Through and beyond them living matter is transfigured into spiritual matter. It would be useful if we could restore the Latin adverb *trans* which combines the ideas of pervading and transcending. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century more and more of these dimensions have been discovered and developed but in almost every case their originator tended to absolutise them. An example is faith, with its counterpart despair, to which it is irrevocably linked: this dimension was discovered and created by Kierkegaard. Others include labour (Marx), the unconscious (Freud), dialogue (Buber), hope (Marcel) and so on. The manner in which these dimensions have been uncovered and explored — brought to the surface, as it were, and actively practised — is quite important: for instance, Kierkegaard developed the dimension of faith from a position of despair. And so it was for all these dimensions which attracted attention and came to be opened up by the awareness of their absence or lack which established a need for them, their ontological necessity. In that sense they are partly human creations — human beings invented them (to invent deriving from *invenire*: to get to something and find it) because they were already there to be found and developed (Rombach 1971).

## 5. Beyond dualism

Situated at the centre of our being is primary or creative imagination: man can invent new dimensions in and to what already is (Castoriadis 1986). Phenomenologically speaking, the creative power of imagination is based on the fact that we can and necessarily do have an image of reality (in anticipation I may reveal that this image is the basis for

what is called metaphor, which I prefer to call verbal image). The formation of images is linked to the situation of our mind (or consciousness) in a body, which means that we can never see the totality of something; that our view is always situated at one point and at a certain moment in time, but that we spontaneously create the globality of things and processes within the horizon in which they reveal themselves. Primary or creative imagination is active in both time and space: it allows us to envisage the globality of things inside space and of happenings in time; the latter are experienced as episodes, having beginning and ending within the continuous flow of time. Experienced reality is not based on a chaotic heap of bits and pieces that we subsequently shape into form: our perception is active in that it shapes what is perceived in the act of perception itself (Weizsäcker 1940). What appears to us does so as form in time, in other words, as rhythm which I define provisionally as the coming into shape or form of movement, or the form which flux takes.

It is important to note that the images we create are not representations in the rationalist sense of the word. In rationalism representations are concepts constructed according to the operating laws of reason, concentrating on only certain aspects of things which can be abstracted from them and placed in the timeless and spaceless realm of reason. But these images remain bound to the temporal and spatial horizons, in which they are found or invented; they are units of experience or of sensation, "percepts" and not concepts; they can and must always be reinvented in concrete situations. Since they are units they can be articulated and can become verbalised experience. Finally, because our minds are indissolubly linked to our bodies, our relationship with the world will be unique. The irreplaceable and irreversible nature of that relationship with the world is manifest in our voices. What is currently called prosody is in fact the set of means that allows even a written utterance to reinvent the human voice from which it originates. The world itself is thereby voiced. The meaning which the world gains in its relation of exchange with the human mind is made manifest. Therefore verbal images, rhythm and the voice, which are the main characteristics of all creative usage of language, are anthropologically founded. They are human features which cannot be dealt with in a dualistic manner.

## 6. Verbal image

First of all the verbal image, otherwise called metaphor. Our view of what appears to us is always necessarily situated in our body; we can never see the totality of things; we only have a percept of them, which stands for their totality. Therefore it is not possible for human beings not to have an image of things. From their infancy human beings are able to draw such images, which do not constitute a replica of the thing but manifest the relationship between mind and thing, the latter being perceived from a personal perspective and in a certain mood. In the image we do not see only the thing or feel only the mood of the viewer but the relationship between them, which is a structure in our sense of the word. Classical conceptions of an image and its verbal counterpart, the metaphor, prevent us from understanding this ontological structure and it is therefore necessary to revise them.

Since most theories of metaphor adopt Aristotle's definition as substitutive, I will show that this substitutive interpretation falls short of all the implications his definition contains if it is replaced in the context of his own thought. Aristotle states that metaphor consists in the substitution of one word for another (*Poetics* 57b7). What happens then is a transfer of meaning that gives rise to a figural or non-literal use of a word. However, later in the same passage Aristotle observes that the Greek vocabulary does not have words for all things and thereby destroys his own substitutive theory (if one were to conceive of it as merely static). Metaphorising cannot be reduced to a substitutive verbal process. In the text of his *Poetics* (59a7) Aristotle insists that finding a metaphor (transferring or reinventing a word's meaning) is a personal matter which cannot be taken away or learned from somebody else. A good metaphor is based on a personal view of resemblances between portions of reality, without in fact excluding the differences between them. The view which we have of beings does not exhaust them; they always appear against a background or within a horizon that constitutes a realm in which they can remain different because they can be viewed from an infinite number of perspectives. I would call these views "percepts" in contradistinction to concepts, which try to fix things by eliminating their concrete perceptual and sensory qualities in favour of abstracted aspects that extract them out of the world in which they are experienced and

situate them in some logical category. Percepts, on the other hand, grasp beings within the horizon in which the interplay between resemblance and difference continues to reveal their complexity in relationship to personal sensation. The relationships held together in a verbal image are focused in an individual whereas the common aspects forming the basis for a concept are located in the impersonal realm of reason. Since it is based in sensation, a verbal image remains a process that at all times can be reactivated and remains a tool for reinventing the world. This is done in a playful manner, as Aristotle says at the beginning of his *Metaphysics* where man is defined as a mimetic animal. "Mimesis" is not the mere duplication of what already is, but a medial activity: the Greek verb is *mimesthai*, a verb indicating that the action is turning back to the agent and thereby transforming it.

The preceding remarks allow us to state that a good metaphor is dynamic and can always be reinvented and recreated in concrete situations, from different perspectives within different horizons. It incites a movement of the mind whereby new aspects are discovered or rediscovered which enrich our perception and experience of the world. It is the activity of what Aristotle calls primary imagination: in his treatise *On the soul* (Book 3) the Stagirite posits this primary imagination or "fantasia" without defining it or situating it precisely in the inner space of the human soul. It is clear, however, that primary imagination is neither the producer and retriever of defective images stored in memory, nor an agency active in the preparatory process whereby the intellect conceives its abstract concepts or ideas. The main aspect of metaphor to be retained here is its dynamic nature: metaphors become *tropoi* — a noun derived from the verb *strefein*, which means "to turn or twist around towards something" or, in this case, to turn or twist the mind towards reality (Jenny 1990: 35-41). A metaphor, a good one that is, forces us to go back and look at reality as it really is. Its understanding is not based on the verbal meaning of the words but on a new and investigative look at things in the world. The process just described is in fact the same as that which we call perception. Since our mind is located inside a body and always operates from a point of view it is constantly necessary to look from several points of view in order to make sure we are right in our

perception. Thus perceiving becomes a kind of story since it evolves in time. We can err in our perceptions but by turning back to what we have perceived we can correct this error — without, of course, ever being able to achieve in one glance a total view of what is. Metaphors are structured in the same way as the ontological structure in which we exist in the world: they manifest the structure of our being in the world and the being of the world in us.

## 7. To grasp

The chiasmic relationship between body and world can be illustrated by a survey of some fundamental semantic fields in the Indo-European lexicon. It might be objected that there are other types of languages such as Ouro-Altaic, Indo-Chinesian, Hamito-Semitic, Bantu and Malaio-Polynesian (Lohmann 1964) but it is in our Indo-European realm that the subject-object opposition has found its most consequent linguistic development in its lexicon and syntax. The deep structure of modern Indo-European languages corresponds to the dualistic rationalism in which we currently find ourselves trapped. Nevertheless, if one researches the reconstructed history of these languages one will find that nearly every root is at the beginning of a double configuration of words and expressions, one concerning what we can call material phenomena in the world and the other expressing interior movements of feelings and thoughts.

Generally speaking, the Indo-European etymon is a metaphor manifesting this structure, in which a consciousness's awareness of the world and of its processes is transported into the world which in turn makes an impression upon the awareness, seizing and shaping it. To grasp is not only to handle or a movement of the hand, but also a mental process whereby our mind takes hold of its content in order to possess and manipulate it (the latter word incidentally contains the Latin *manus*, hand). There is a direct link between the mental and the bodily grasping, taking hold of, reality.

In the context of the preceding remarks it is useful to note that neurology has established that the nerve centres controlling the movement of the hand are more extensively developed than those which control the lower limbs used for locomotion. The hand has had

this superior status since human beings adopted the upright stance, liberating their arms and hands from locomotion. Standing up also provided human beings with a horizon and with the necessary distance from their immediate environment. In other words, they could start to grasp their environment not only with their hands but by the attention they could muster mentally. The two movements remain fundamentally analogous: our material grasp is rarely total, and takes objects or processes by their parts, as does our mental grasp, sorting out resemblances and differences. Moreover, our hand is the first means of directing our attention and that of our counterparts towards parts of the world we intend to thematise within the horizon in which they appear to us. Thus we are able to express our desire and grasp what is at a distance. To grasp, then, is to seize and to point to reality, both bodily and mentally.

From a more recent discipline concerned with the observation of human behaviour, ethology,<sup>7</sup> comes a confirmation of the importance of this pointing with the finger in the process by which an infant learns to speak.

From the point of view of etymology, it must also be noted that Indo-European contains another root at the source of terms designating the hand, namely “mear”, which is the origin of the Latin word *manus*. This root gives rise to words and expressions concerning the exercise of power or command. If grasping corresponds to the closing of the hand in order to seize, the open hand corresponds to showing and giving. The hand grasps and gives, hides and manifests, functioning at the intersection between inside and outside, mediating between our soul and the world. But what is even more meaningful is that the root “mear” also produces the term “mouth”, thus establishing a clear link between the expressive function of the hand and that of the human face, as well as the human capacity to articulate feelings and thoughts.

7 We refer here to the work of Cyrulnick (1995), who establishes without doubt the need to take into account the whole of a living being, be it animal or human, as it reacts and adapts to its condition in the world and society. But only human beings can create symbolic links with the outside world. Speech is based on symbolic behaviour and not on expressive or informational needs (Ruyer 1964: 95-9).



Concrete illustrations of this relation can be found, for instance, in the “tree-alphabet” that Robert Graves (1962) studies in his *White Goddess*: this alphabet, based on the characteristics of a number of trees, is also transcribed into a finger alphabet with each articulation of the five fingers representing a letter. A most illuminating illustration of the point I want to make can be found in the famous hands painted on the walls of the cave of Gargas, apparently representing fingers in different stages of amputation (Leroi-Gourhan 1983: 222-41). But a more attentive study has shown that in fact the absence of articulations corresponds to the bending of the fingers and that as such they represent signs which hunters used to communicate with their fellows in a silent manner so as not to disturb their prey. In poetry, too, we find the verbal image of the hand playing a central role. Thus the modern French poet Pierre Reverdy uses the hand as a symbol for the illuminating role of light: it renders visible the expansion and progression of light as it radiates from a centre (Attal 1969: 101-32). In doing so the hand manifests a mysterious force, the presence of a spiritual nature.

To understand this metaphor we have to take a good look at our hand: the clenched fist can be opened so that the fingers radiate from the centre of the palm as light radiates from a centre. So when Homer speaks of the rosy-fingered dawn he refers to the expansion of light from a centre. Incidentally, this is exactly the example Aristotle (*Poetics* 57b25) gives of a catachresis (a “figurative” term for a reality for which the Greek language had no literal word). Lausberg (1960: 288-91) observes that there is no verb to designate the expansion of light and that the term designating the sowing of grain must be used. Sowing was, of course, done with the hand, which first grasped the grains in the fist and then threw them out by opening the fingers in a centrifugal movement. In reflecting on the image of the hand we are not dealing with figures of speech or combinations of senses; we are in the process of grasping what the hand is for us as human beings — an organ which permits and shapes some aspects of our structural relationship with the world.

What I have done here is not to elaborate a theory of metaphor but to reflect on the ontological structure (in our sense of the word) of the hand, phenomenologically speaking — exploring its eidetic

image. To conclude this reflection I refer again to Aristotle: in his treatise *On the soul* he draws an analogy between the hand and the soul, saying that just as the hand is the tool of tools, the soul is the form of forms. This comparison is not arbitrary but based on a structural analogy between the hand and the soul.

## 8. Rhythm

In discussing the verbal image I dealt with the spatial relation between the body and the world. The notion of rhythm concerns our being in time. Most people will associate with the word "rhythm" a regularity sufficiently obstinate and clear to be noticed, or the form of a movement, as in sport where one hears commentators say that a tennis player or a fast bowler has not yet found his rhythm. This use of the word is in fact apposite to our purpose: it is based on the insight that the player (or his body?) knows how to perform a certain movement but does not succeed in enacting it properly and effectively. The same principle applies in poetry. Understanding a poem depends on a correct feeling for its rhythm, not in the sense that certain regularities determine its shape or form, but in the sense that its meaning as a whole is distributed in time; that this meaning takes its time, and that this time is formed, or made of a certain configuration: this configuration is what I call rhythm. The prosody of the poem is certainly part of this configuration, but only part: its function is not only to establish regularity or harmony but to force the reader to abandon any merely intellectual attitude to its configuration. Prosody appeals to his sensibility; indeed, a rhythm is felt or must have been felt before it can be analysed or broken up into measurable parts. It is possible to argue the correctness of this intuition on the basis of an investigation of the history of the notion of rhythm.

## 9. History of rhythm

The notion of rhythm has been the topic of heated debate in French literary studies for some time now. Seminal to this debate has been an article by the linguist Benveniste (1966) on the notion of rhythm in its linguistic expression. Benveniste sets out to go beyond the Platonic definition of rhythm as the form which a movement takes, un-

leashing an almost uncontrollable extension of its scope, by adducing the etymology of the word. *Rhythmos* is linked to the verb *rhein*, meaning the rhythmic or regular flow of water. But a survey of its usage in all sorts of texts reveals a wide range of connotations.

From the start “rhythm” is the type of term which designates a complex reality, or rather points to the complexity of various phenomena, from the waves of the sea to a particular form of handwriting. The first occurrence seems to be a fragment of Archilochos (712-648 BCE) — the first subjective poet according to Nietzsche — who is quoted as having said (Diels fr 67a):

Do never exult openly in victory nor abandon yourselves to lamentations in defeat; but take pleasure where it can be found, do not worry excessively about misfortune and grasp [understand] that rhythm maintains humanity.<sup>8</sup>

In Greek the verb *echein* (which I translate by “to maintain”) is polysemic, its meaning ranging from “to hold and to have (power, possibility, capacity to do, etc)” to “behold, contain, include, etc”, therefore the process designated by it is complex and partly determined by its context. Despite its broad scope the meaning of the term *rhythmos* never left the human realm; it was never used to indicate cosmic regularities in themselves (here the term *harmonia* was used, or *kosmos*). Even if its meaning varies from more or less fixed form (*schema* as diagram, *echein* as “to have or maintain in one’s possession”) to flux (*rhein* as “to flow”) it always concerns features of living human beings, the human order in its relationship with the cosmic order conceived as an all-inclusive unity or totality. We must not forget that to the Greeks the cosmic order was eternal whereas sublunar developments were marked by change and decay. So what we call living organisms experienced this cosmic order in a particular way, in its continuous transformation on the level of experience. Rhythm would then be order as lived by human beings. Therefore the notion of “rhythm” could refer to the continuous way in which man exists within that cosmic order although being exiled from it by his own mortality. As

8 Ne jamais exulter ouvertement dans la victoire, ne jamais s’abandonner chez soi aux lamentations de la défaite; mais prendre plaisir où il se trouve, ne pas s’en faire avec excès pour le malheur et saisir le rythme qui maintient l’humanité dans ses attaches (Sauvane 1999: 8).

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developing form, rhythm reflects this situation of inclusion and exclusion inside a changing order.

The implications of this allow me to consider rhythm to be not a static form resulting from some formational power but a form which itself has this power. The image of a stream can exemplify this idea of a forming form: as the stream progresses in its own swirling movement of flux and reflux, it transforms the land through which it flows, tracing and leaving traces of its passage in the continuous process of erosion and sedimentation. Rhythm is neither an empty form nor a mathematically calculable or representable isometric of proportions or durations, but the way in which living matter takes shape and place, is reshaped by the world and in turn reshapes that world. In this sense man is a rhythmic being, capable of being conscious of this continuous process of assumption of difference inside identity. Needless to say, rhythm is felt in the flesh and the blood; feeling a rhythm is tantamount to feeling how I am my body, and thus it is not a purely mental or intellectual feature of my being. A poem in its general sense is thus a verbal enactment of man being and having his body proper, because he himself is his own body participating in the cosmic order. This enactment is performed by the voice (an idea to which we shall return).

How then does this rhythm manifest itself in a particular language? Every natural language has a deep structure (not the one Chomsky invented) that is shaped not only by its syntax and lexicon but also by its music (its specific rhythm in the sense of accentuation and the dynamics of its sentences or utterances). I am not going to venture to discuss many languages. French will have to suffice as an example for the moment, but I am convinced that all languages have their own rhythm.

## 10. Rhythm in French

French is an oxytonic language: the dynamism of its sentence structure accelerates towards the end of sentences and in rhythmic word groups or syntagms the accent always falls on the last pronounced syllable. In contemporary French, linguists have identified what they call a tendency to the "major cadence": the heavier word clusters are generally placed at the end of the sentence. This pulsional order con-

tradicts the so-called natural or progressive order that is based on the logical structure of an affirmation, an order that is supposed to endow the French language with clarity and even universality. In the natural order (called natural because man is an animal by nature equipped with reason) the grammatical subject always precedes the predicate that governs the various complements. The segmented sentence, on the other hand, jumps, as it were, right to the emotionally or rhematically most important word and represents this word in the following progressive phrase by the relevant pronoun.

One example will suffice. I take it, at random, from the study on rhythm that I considered when discussing the history of that notion: “Le ‘rythme’ qui semble effectivement régler la vie des humains, Archiloque peut dès lors le voir à l’oeuvre en toute circonstance” (Sauvane 1999: 13). I translate literally: “The ‘rhythm’ which seems effectively to regulate the life of human beings, Archilochos can therefore see it at work in all circumstances”. The first segment in fact expresses not the subject but the object of the sentence of which Archilochos is the grammatical subject. Rhythm as defined in the opening segment is represented in the syntactically complete sentence by the pronoun “le”. By so doing, the author bisects his sentence, interrupts the natural order and thereby confers on subject and object equal rhythmical and mental importance. The apparent incompatibility between natural or progressive order and pulsional dynamism in real spoken French is solved in this type of bilateral sentence which I call the segmented sentence.

The segmented sentence forms part of the deep structure of the French language since it can be found as early as the first French poem, namely the *Song of Roland* (the earliest text we have at our disposal, probably composed in the last quarter of the eleventh century). But more to our purpose: we may note that this segmented structure corresponds exactly to the structure of French verse. In general it is true that the prosody of poetry cannot contradict the profound structure of a language. In French, the main types of verse are the decasyllable and the dodecasyllable or alexandrine. Their structure is segmented in the sense that they are composed of two more or less equal halves held together by a central caesura, making the whole able to manifest a basic and profound pulsion situated in the body

and not expressive of any idea or concept. This structure is also used in everyday language and in prose: it can be found at all times in the most controlled and literary prose. But more generally speaking, a sentence is not only a notional or logical unit but a rhythmical one: its components do not cohere only on a logical or syntactical or informational level. When we begin an utterance we project a trajectory so that the interlocutor is immediately aware of that intention and senses when a sentence will end: without this projection we would only witness a series of sounds or words without coherence or sense. What holds these elements together is of a rhythmical nature. The German term for sentence may be useful here. *Satz* means sentence and at the same time leap: a sentence is a leap into the future, and the whole is a way or shape in which time is held together and acquires sense. We must not forget that the latter word etymologically combines the notions of meaning and of direction. Prosody, then, is the way in which time is organised according to sense (meaning and direction) and thereby acquires density; ceasing to be a string of atomic moments, it is time lived and experienced in a body, time which is going somewhere. Each sentence in its context is an event and constitutes an interruption in the flow of time. It can therefore be the beginning of something new; it opens up new possibilities, not only in real life but also in the language it uses to manifest sense or meaning. An integral component of this event, of this surging forward of meaning is, of course, the voice that utters the sentence. As is the case with verbal images and rhythm, our voice is inseparably linked to our living body.

## 11. Speech

Wherever in history we find evidence of writing it is clear that phonation or speech has preceded it. This observation is also valid as far as the development of infants is concerned. Humans are beings who have a voice. The question of what a voice is, however, concerns a most complex reality. Indeed, a voice is not an object, it is not a bodily organ but the result of what humans can do with certain organs whose function was and is not primarily that of producing articulated sequences of sound (Goertler 1972). I use the past tense on purpose here because our vocal apparatus has been found to be the result of an

extraordinary recycling process in the evolution of living organisms. It must immediately be added that this insight into the genesis of the human voice has important implications, the most important being that our vocal apparatus does not correspond to a limited function in the body but in fact offers the possibility for the whole of the living body to manifest itself to the external world in an articulated manner. Speech is the enactment of what we are as persons, as individual incarnated beings. In discussing the ontological status of humankind, I stated that human beings, insofar as they come to existence, have to respond to what I called an ontological necessity: to the appeal of being. One will only do this by enacting that response: one has to act out what one is and show where one is on the path of one's own becoming. The continuity of our individual being is manifested in our voice. Having a voice distinguishes human beings from other living creatures and having my voice, being a person (in the sense of *personare*, which of course is a kind of etymological pun but says what it means) distinguishes me from my fellow human beings. There are thus two stages in my discussion of the voice: first to establish the uniqueness of the human voice and then to show the role which articulated utterances (or speech) play in the manifestation and consolidation of a person.

## 12. Voice

As has been stated, the voice is not an organ in itself: we can certainly measure its tone, pitch, strength and so on but never its expressivity or its presence. Our voice is our most individual characteristic. Many organs are involved in producing articulated sounds, some of them being the result of successful evolutionary recycling and one of the most important an original creation. This latter is the most interior of them all. During the third month of its life in the uterus, the human foetus develops a blastema in the larynx, a feature that no other living creature possesses. It is to this blastema that the vocal chords will be attached. It allows for an exceptionally wide range of tensions in the vocal chords and thereby transforms our larynx into a highly complex instrument capable of a great variety of vocal sounds. Moreover, the glottis in the human larynx is situated at a lower level than in primates, allowing for more subtle control of the movement

of air through the vocal apparatus (Reichholf 1991: 214-5). This is how a human voice can be so expressive and moving, even before it is used in articulate speech. The pharynx, the space in the throat between the larynx and the nasal cavity, where, with the palate as a sound base, phonation in effect takes place, is unique to humanity. But the larynx itself — and this is the ingenuity of recycling — is in fact a development of the gills which a living organism needs and needed while in water. These gills were linked to the bowels, which are controlled by the vegetative nervous system that is at the same time responsible for the emotional side of our life, hence the link between our vocal instrument and emotion. Our voice manifests our emotions as they are embedded in the depth of our body, and on the basis of this expressive power verbal expression, articulate manifestation develops. The larynx is, so to speak, our inner face. The human face is situated on top of a kind of storied building rising from the throat, where the larynx is situated, to the pharynx at the back of the mouth, and to the face. The face is also special because, situated on top of our body, it allows binocular vision. All these features of our body make our voice something special: it really stands for the whole of what is going on in our body lived as a totality, the result being the possibility for human beings to manifest their presence, in ontological terms, to respond to the call of being. How is this voice linked to the continuity of our being? In order to understand this link we have to leave the domain of evolutionary anatomy and provide a phenomenological description of what happens when we hear and speak.

### 13. Voice and absolute subjectivity

The articulated sounds we produce result from the way in which our vocal organs pressurize and relax the flow of air through the upper part of our body. Articulated sounds result from the action of these organs on a void in a movement of contraction and expansion; in other words, articulation takes place in a rhythm of systole and diastole (as heart and our lungs), a binary rhythm of opening up to the world and returning to the interior space of our body where our experience of the world, sensation and emotion, are located. But more important is the fact that these two movements are not merely suc-



cessive in time but mutually anticipatory, each from inside itself opening up to the following contrary one. The process links two reciprocally inducing movements. This rhythm of combined and mutually inclusive flux and reflux, of import and export rather than change or simple return to a base is the bodily execution of all lived verbal enactment (Maldiney 1987). At the same time this structure (an inductive relationship between mutually transforming elements) is evident in all verse form, from *versura* to *parallelismus membrorum*. The term *versura* designates the particular bilateral structure of the segmented sentence and its prosodic counterpart, one segment opening up towards the next, and the latter returning to its rhythmic predecessor. Meaning and sound induce one another, bring one another out. But the reverting movement retains that which has been reverted, incorporating it not in a dialectical synthesis but in a living and creative cell.

With regard to structuralist linguistics it is important to stress that such a rhythm does not result from a choice between alternatives and therefore does not fall under the competence of linguistic analysis or theorization of *ex post facto* metrical “constraints”. Rhythm does not remain trapped in the web of binary differences out of which the system of language is supposed by structuralist linguistics to be composed. Moreover, it is quite clear that language is not pitted against voice, or the other way round: our voice is human not because it is so articulated but because of the typical movement of aperture and closure, of diastole and systole. Our voice is the manifestation of our living body which is inseparable from what we call our mind — both are one in our soul. This term is used here in its non-religious sense: our soul is in us the power to witness what is going on in and around us. Recalling the Latin adverb *trans*, we can say that our soul is the dimension in us *trans* which we are in the world and *trans* which the world is in us. As a consequence the tonality of the world resounds in the human body, which in turn exteriorises that “echo” in a movement of *mimesis* or recreation through the voice, which may be said to be a phonetic articulation of reality. Through the human voice the world itself acquires its voice. The process of *mimesis*, as has been pointed out, is not one of mere imitation, duplication or simu-

lation, but a transforming process of both sensed reality and our own interior world.<sup>9</sup>

The full potential of this recreational or, more accurately, “co-creational” process resides in the fact that our hearing is not merely passive, but both active and passive. I do not produce the sounds which reach me from the external world, and I cannot close myself to them either — there is no membrane or organ, such as the eyelid, which would allow me to close my ears. On the other hand, in order to hear I have to follow actively and keep the various sounds together which thereby acquire sense and direction, but at the same time I am able to reproduce them voluntarily on the basis of the impression they make on me. These bodily processes of hearing and speaking, listening to an appeal and responding can be so complex because they are part of, or are situated within the realm of absolute subjectivity which is my body. This subjectivity can be called absolute insofar as it is mine only, it is my body-proper, and I can not have sensations by means of any other body than my own. This body transforms what would otherwise be total dispersion into order (Henry 1975), thereby expanding my bodily capacity for experience and sense. At the same time, literally, to speak and to sing, but also to listen and be attentive, imply taking the initiative for organising time. Thereby my voice confirms me in my own duration through its spiritualisation: my voice is not an object but manifests my soul. Otherwise stated: sounds produced by me are immaterial but marked by me; although they do not adhere to my body they nevertheless manifest my presence. Furthermore, while I speak I hear myself from both in- and outside. My voice comes out of me but at the same time remains inside me. Therefore my voice is the basis for memory: during its own operation it requires me to go beyond separated moments in order to produce a coherent sequence which is the sentence. Active integration and attention are required: what is produced, even if one wants to consider it purely from a materialist point of view, is irre-

9 The anthropologist Jousse developed this notion of *mimesis* as long ago as the 1920s and 1930s but he has been largely ignored until recently, partly because he published hardly anything: for him orality was the essence of human language. Some of his work has now been translated into English and the archives containing his lecture notes are in the process of publication (Jousse 1997).

versible. Hearing unites the inside and the outside (inside my body I receive sounds coming from outside which I have to keep together in my attention), thus this process occurs in duration, keeps time and is the basis for reminiscence (Rossi 1962). It is also linked to bodily organs, therefore I remember, I can go back to it in the members of my body where my experience has been integrated in my brain and nervous system. My body is not an instrument allowing me to sense and perceive; it is what I sense and perceive, feel and experience. Therefore my or your subjectivity is absolute: nobody can deputise for you or me. I have to be myself. And nobody can die in my place, there where I am myself. This fact, however, does not prevent me from wilfully and skilfully contracting relationships with what I am not. But this alterity is in me and I am in it. ... But what has all this to do with a poem?

#### 14 Conclusion

I will conclude with an anecdote (Svembro 1974). When Pindar went to consult the oracle in Delphi the priests asked where his sacrificial goat was, since he had not brought one along. Pindar answered by saying that he had brought them a “paeon”, a poem. This was not mere arrogance: Pindar could say so because a poem is an articulated being, as an animal or a human being is. It could be objected that we read poems nowadays in their printed form and that writing, the fact that they are written and printed, changes everything: the printed word can never manifest absolute subjectivity. However, the fact of the matter is that reading a poem is necessarily performed in absolute subjectivity. Unless the business of poetry is restricted to an interface between two computers, subjectivity will always be involved. From its written or printed form we can enact a poem, we can decide to do so, and those who decide not to do so cannot tyrannically decide that I do not have the right or the capacity to do so. A poem is not a coded object but an experience incarnated in language which can be re-enacted in the recreative act of reading. This experience is not subjective but intersubjective. The sense of a poem is not in it, or in me, nor is it a futile extension of matter: sense originates in a complex relation between mind and world through a body with which absolute subjectivity is linked. In its response to alterity this subjectivity can

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enter into dialogue with other subjectivities so that sense arises out of this dynamic structure. This sense is not impossible. Poetry is about human beings, by human beings for human beings, and the more we know about humankind the better we can read a poem. Trying to found poetry in itself is fruitless because language cannot be isolated from the people who use it, or from the reality about which they enter into dialogue. Therefore literary studies must necessarily be inter-disciplinary and try to reassemble what rationalist dualism has carved up and packaged in methodologically sealed pieces and slices. As has been shown, structuralist thinking is inescapably founded in rationalist dualism and therefore cannot deal competently with the true nature of humanity. A human being is not a mere amalgam of body and soul. As an individual he or she is capable of innovation and can make sense of his or her own existence.

Poetry in the broadest sense is the way in which this sense brings individuals together, so founding a community.

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