

flawed characters. Neither blacks nor Southern whites will find themselves portrayed in a way that promotes a glow of warm contentment. Wolfe keeps his distance from both, and many of his characters are cruel caricatures. True, each one is a genuine and recognizable Southern type, but there is such an absence of positive types that a rounded picture does not emerge. Nevertheless, there is a brutal integrity in his observations.

Wolfe perhaps comes closer to a tragic, rather than a satiric, effect in his rendering of the interior racial dialogue

of the South, a centuries-old phenomenon that has almost always been sentimentalized in American lore and literature. In the last scene, following the inevitable violent climax, an aging patrician and a reluctantly radical black patriarch are left to confront each other. "I belong to a day that is past!" laments the patrician. "An' wheah do I belong?" responds the black man. Wolfe's bitter detachment and lack of easy sentimentality doubtless explains why the play was never produced on Broadway and why it has remained largely unknown. □

A Dubious Discourse

Christopher Norris: *Deconstruction: Theory & Practice*; Methuen; New York.

Antony Easthope: *Poetry as Discourse*; Methuen; New York.

by Gary S. Vasilash

In 1963 Roland Barthes recommended: "watch who uses *signifier* and *signified*, *synchrony* and *diachrony*, and you will know whether the structuralist vision is constituted." When Barthes put that remark into an essay entitled "The Structuralist Activity," he was at the peak of his career as a structuralist. Yet, as is clear from that suggestion, as well as from the other signifiers that have both syntagmatic and paradigmatic (two more to look out for) relationships in that text, structuralism was a hard-to-define exercise. In the succeeding 20 years things have become less murky and more clear—at least with regard to the ophthalmologic condition of structuralism. But just when most were finally able to peg the clues as they presented themselves, the poststructuralist age leaped full-grown from Jacques Derrida's head.

Christopher Norris is able to write in

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a tone that is undoubtedly meant to evoke the *ubi sunt* formula for the briefest moment: "Barthes was a brilliant stylist and a highly original—at times even wayward—constructor of theories." The past tense of the verb in that sentence signifies more than the fact that M. Barthes has been tucked away in his grave since 1980. This is evident if the syntagmatic chain of that utterance (another word to monitor) is examined. Antony Easthope is a great one for using all of the words noted so far, so his explanation of this aspect is in order:

[T]he syntagmatic chain is not to be identified with the sentence. Sentences pertain to the syntactic rules of a language. . . . The syntagmatic chain does operate within the sentence but it also operates beyond the sentence in the way sentences become cohesive as discourse. [Keep an eye on *discourse*.] For example 'I hate pigs' is a sentence correctly generated within the rules of English syntax. Extension of the syntagmatic chain with another sentence (such as either 'However, I like horses' or 'Last week I got busted') would firmly identify the chain as belonging to agricultural or to bohemian discourse.

Now, this means that "meaning" can be found in the syntagmatic chain, even if that chain, by the rules of conventional

grammar, is a fragment. A sufficiently long chain—and how long is never clear—becomes a discourse. This should come as no surprise to anyone. Conversation is full of fragments, though people tend not to notice them. Some of the dialogue in Ford Madox Ford's novels caused outrage in his day because he rendered this aspect of communication. Now we yawn.

Another reference from Easthope is necessary: "Conscious intention is brought about along the syntagmatic chain where meaning 'insists' but this place is always produced as an effect of the Other [another], which remains outside it and so to that extent unconscious." "The Other" is a term that's often used by the followers of one Jacques Lacan. Lacan, a psychoanalyst, used it before he joined Barthes in the Other in 1981. Although it is getting fairly crowded in here (a metaphor, I should note, that identifies the graphematic aspect of this discourse: language, as Derrida has it, is a thing, therefore it has dimensions), another name must be introduced: Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure, a linguist, died in 1913, though he is the man to blame for much of the current jargon. More precisely, some of his students are to blame, for they compiled lectures and notes to create *Course in General Linguistics*, which has become something of a bible in the hands of certain otherwise agnostic Frenchmen.

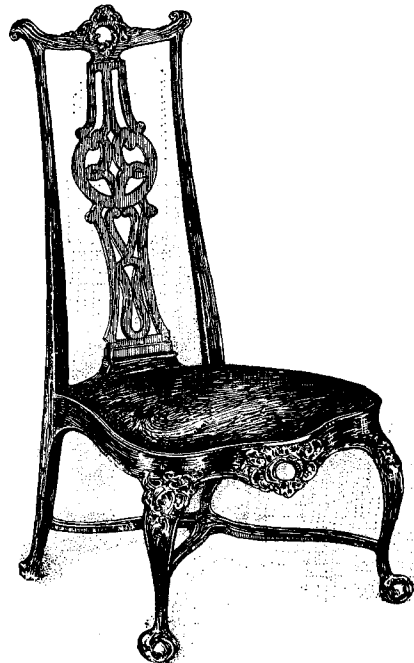
Saussure promoted several types of categories. He distinguished between the noteworthy (in the sense of Barthes, that is) *langue* and *parole*. The former is essentially a system: language. *Parole*, then, is a speech act (don't let *speech* fool you; writing is the primary concern today, though it wasn't for Saussure) within that language. Then there are the signifier and the signified. If you watch those two little words long enough, you'll see that they become virtually as high as the Eiffel Tower, as broad as the Louvre, and as fulsome as the Seine in critical, philosophical discourses. To cheat by making things as simple as possible, I'll say/write that the signifier is the word

and the signified the concept. The argument goes that you can't have a signified without a signifier, which is a nice trick as it serves to foreground words ahead of ideas for those who are inclined to take the trump. (Pardon the interruption, but chances are, "trick" and "trump" undoubtedly stand out in the preceeding so much that they, unlike the other words, called attention to themselves as signifiers. And that is what much of this is all about.) Now, although the concept of words as *things* begins to sound like what Gulliver was introduced to in the school of language at the Grand Academy of Lagado (e.g., "since words are only names for *things*, it would be more convenient for all men to carry about them such *things* as were necessary to express the particular business they are to discourse on"), it isn't precisely the case. One could carry about a pocketful of words for a short discussion or a satchelful for a long one and the agenda wouldn't necessarily come out as planned. One signifier can have numerous signifieds. Signifiers are, so it's claimed, *there*, and signifieds are arbitrarily welded to them. An important feature of this *langue-parole*/signifiers-signified scheme is that context becomes vital, in the life-giving sense. Saussure maintained that a signifier meaningfully exists only in relation to other signifiers. Thus, the concept of the syntagmatic chain becomes slightly more clear: elements are lined up, hooked together, and supportive of the others. There's more to it, of course, but now we must attend to the Other. The Other is what's not there. For example, as Foucault and Blanchot (two names to add to the now-burgeoning list) would have it, death is the Other that life isn't. The Other for this sentence is the many words not used but possibly implied by the 17 here. Or, in Easthope's words, "the island is only there because the sea is withdrawn." What lesson can be drawn from this? Context! Context! Context!

The quotation from Christopher Norris once again: "Barthes was a brilliant stylist and a highly original—at times

even wayward—constructor of theories." On the face of it, the eulogy is most kind. However, what about the Other? In this case, determining what it is is fairly simple, given two things: (1) the use of the word *constructor* and (2) the title of Norris's book: *Deconstruction: Theory & Practice*. Norris, wielding Derrida's disintegrating fescue, eliminates Barthes limb by limb, signifier by signifier in a fairly brutal manner. It must be pointed out, though, that Norris is forced to take large chunks at a time due to the space limitations imposed by the publisher (see, words can take up lots of room). Although it is still a bit early in the day to say *bonne nuit* to M. Barthes, it is obvious that his shadow is dissolving in the salons of the City of Light.

Deconstruction is currently one of those words that evoke among "more conventional" critics and scholars a response that is not unlike that of a mother with a child at an R-rated film. When the R-rated scene appears, she inevitably covers the child's eyes. In time, of course, the child becomes an adult and must face those scenes unshielded. *Structuralism* once had the same power; it was cowered from. Things have changed. Norris says with bitterness in an opening



salvo, "What started as a powerful protest against ruling critical assumptions ended up as just one more available method for saying new things about well-worn texts." Structuralism is now rated PG. And with good reason. Two things were initially held against structuralism. One was that it presented itself in a quasi-scientific guise. For many academics in the literary community, the debate between the two cultures is over—not completed, just over. *Literature* is not to be subject to equations, they maintained. So that was that for structuralism. Why this resistance passed is hard to establish. Perhaps the popularity of structuralism was infectious; perhaps literary scholars became enamored of pocket calculators and digital watches during the 70's and so figured that technology was okay.

The second objection remains one and, what is more, deconstructionists have taken up the baton. Barthes, among others, one of whom is Derrida, said that the "author is dead." This was apparently more shocking than Nietzsche's infamous bon mot. Blood pressure levels rose throughout university literature departments in the West. The implication of such a statement was that the guardians of the great and not-so-great authors were performing a pointless task. But that isn't the case. As everyone knows, a joke is killed when it is methodically explained; its magic is suddenly evacuated. A true novel, play, or poem can be explained and dissected over and over and over again yet still remain pregnant with meaning. The reason behind these two cases is that a joke merely has a horizontal dimension (A then B then C) while literature is multidimensional. Consider Shakespeare. With the amount of scholarship that has been performed on his works (and no one has *proved* that the man we know and love is really the right guy) it would seem that their meaning would have been established once and for all long ago. But no, that's not the case. For example, new interpretations of *Hamlet* emerge on a regular basis. Why—because of Shakespeare? No—because of the various interpreters who apply their knowl-

edge and skills to the play. Clearly, *Hamlet* doesn't have the same meaning for audiences in 1983 that it had for those who witnessed its opening in 1602. What we see today are not the author's intentions: how could he have imagined this world? There exists a difference. The author is "dead" because the reader is "alive" to make meaning. Everyone does it all the time. Each person reading this text will construe it differently from another; my readings will change as the words go from pencil to ink to type. Does this mean that *all* interpretations of any given work are equally valid? In a sense, the answer is yes. All writing—and literature, in particular—is protean; it can never be explained with complete exactitude: once you think you've got it, it slips away and changes: or you change. Things get very scary to conventional readers when an affirmative answer is given to the question of whether all of this doesn't mean that the author's explanation is really no better than that of a person from Yale or the Collège de France. Why this is so can be explained fairly simply if the preexisting material nature of signifiers is taken as a given: the author is unable to say what he really means. Or, it can be argued that the author, by making his work public, loses certain rights: once the manuscript is out of the desk drawer and onto the bookshelves, everyone has an equal crack at it. Doesn't this then lead to interpretative anarchy? Taken to an extreme, it does. But common sense must be applied, in the same way that it must be when making measurements: Euclid works better than Einstein, even though the latter is, as far as we know, more correct.

Deconstruction, so Norris would lead one to believe, is rated X and ever shall be. He and Antony Easthope are among the best representatives for what's worst about modern critical theory. Norris is obviously smug; he thinks he knows it all. Norris writes, "For Nietzsche, as for Derrida, the project of absolute knowledge [i.e., Western philosophical speculation] was deluded at source by

its forgetfulness of how *language* creates and capriciously misleads the processes of thought." To deconstruct. And to risk misinterpretation throughout: misreading is more common than you can imagine. One of Derrida's main concepts is *différance* (list still out?). Basically, referring back to the before-mentioned material nature of words, this means that a writer's intentions are not necessarily mani-



fest in his text because the signifiers are *things* and from the whole collection of *things*, the author must make a selection, even though the fit isn't just right—sort of like a pair of shoes that are too big or too small: the shoes are still serviceable. Derrida suggests, it seems, that the written "nature" (my word), the graphematic structure (his) of language is primary: even a man making a speech must "pick his words." *Différance* comes in in that the writer must *defer* to language and in that his meaning (and the reader's reading) must *differ* from the written text. Derrida's clever word game insists that approximations are as close as anyone can get: there's no such thing as the real thing.

Now here's why no one needs to shy away from deconstruction. Like any good scholar, Derrida performs close readings

of texts (as do his American heirs, such as de Man and Hartman). Derrida has read the canonical works of Western philosophy and has indicated what he perceives as the shortcomings of what are accepted beliefs. The shortcomings stem from the fact that Plato and all of the rest had to work with language. Of course, Derrida gives the philosophers their due as cunning men, and so he claims that the "truths" are really ruses. He deconstructs their game; he shows how the tricks work. The tricks are typically based on rhetoric. Deconstruction, then, is just another means through which its adherents can propose that ultimately we can *know* nothing. That isn't exactly original. While often boring, deconstructive readings can be amusing and can even provide insights. Thus, while it is still "adults-only" fare, it isn't particularly risqué. What is surprising about Norris's handling of the subject is his reverential approach to Derrida. Derrida is, for him, the Last Word. We know that that is impossible, deconstructively speaking.

Easthope, another Derridian epigone, is less smug. But he is more radical, though in the standard political sense. Although he is most familiar with the main figures in poststructuralist thought and provides some workmanlike explanations, he sounds as if he was suckled by Gramsci. That is, *Poetry as Discourse* is essentially an examination of the history of English poetry from a standpoint that can be discerned (to borrow an approach from Barthes) from this sentence: "A poem obviously is an example of *parole*, an utterance constructed according to and within the system of a language." Easthope, however, grinds an axe more than he deconstructs. His thesis is buried among the signifiers that should now constitute the list of words to watch for, but it shines out like glowing swamp gas:

English poetic discourse since the Renaissance is the product of history, ideologically determined. In this respect it is an epochal form, coterminous with the capitalist mode of production and the hegemony of the

bourgeoisie as the ruling class. It is therefore a *bourgeois* poetic discourse.

Easthope sets out to prove that iambic pentameter is the most insidious tool for keeping the masses downtroddened

Twinkle, Twinkle

Daniel Graham: *High Frontier*; Tor; New York.

Thomas Karas: *The New High Ground*; Simon and Schuster; New York.

James Canan: *War in Space*; Harper & Row; New York.

by Alan J. Levine

These three works deal with aspects of what will be a crucial problem of the next generation: the exploitation of space travel and its effect on the arms race. Daniel Graham's *High Frontier* advocates convincingly an all-out space effort for both military and economic purposes. James Canan's book is a straight reportorial account of the American side of the arms race and the military aspects of space. Thomas Karas, while giving a comparable description of the military in space, pours cold water on the ideas expressed by Graham and other space-power advocates.

It is no accident that *High Frontier* has the same title as Gerard K. O'Neill's splendid exploration of the prospects for space industrialization and colonization by the development of orbiting settlements. O'Neill envisages the eventual use of lunar and asteroid sources of raw materials in space to develop whole new industries and energy supplies. Eventually, perhaps, most of earth's industry could move out into space. General Graham looks toward a similar future, though his attention is focused on the

since capital was developed. To return to the chiropodic metaphor. It becomes clear that literary theories are like feet. They are wonderful devices for going places. They can also get stuck in one's mouth, *vide* Easthope. □

first stages of O'Neill's projected scheme—with a heavy dash of political realism. O'Neill looks forward to space as a demilitarized field of purely civilian progress. Graham regards it as an inevitable arena of military competition.

But that is not necessarily a bad thing. For, Graham argues, space may be the means of breaking the United States, and humanity as a whole, out of the doctrine designated by the acronym MAD (Mutual Assured Destruction). MAD is based on the thesis that nuclear war will inevitably lead to the destruction of both sides. No *effective* strategic defense is possible, or perhaps even desirable, and the attempt to build a defense against nuclear attack will merely "destabilize" the situation. No first strike can cripple the opposing side enough to remove the threat of retaliation, so a war of aggression by the Soviets is impossible. The safest situation is one wherein both sides recognize that they can destroy each other and are content with this situation. Though MAD proponents don't quite claim we are living in the best of all possible worlds, some of their notions imply it.

It is an open question whether the insane situation described as MAD is simply a logical result—more precisely a natural *stage*—of the nuclear-arms race, or simply the result of a stupid doctrine which could and should have been wholly avoided. Graham seems to incline toward the latter view. Whatever the truth of this assessment, however, MAD is now clearly obsolete as a doctrine, or a description. Multiple warheads, super-accurate guidance systems, and the Soviet buildup have made a successful Soviet first strike against America's land-

based missiles feasible.

For Graham, the answer to the threat is not the development of new offensive weapons systems, but the resumption by our military forces of something resembling their traditional function. Instead of regarding the American civilian population as hostages doomed to annihilation if somebody is sufficiently aggressive, we should try to defend ourselves. The first step is a "quick fix," the development of a "point defense" of our missile bases by ground-based devices using currently available technology. This would throw a degree of uncertainty into Soviet calculations and deter a Soviet first strike in the near future. A number of alternative systems are possible, including one adapting a rapid-fire antitank weapon already carried by Air Force planes. The next steps involve the creation of two successive "generations" of space-based general defensive systems. Ultimately a network of orbital energy weapons—probably lasers—would protect us.

All these programs, Graham argues, should be tied together and developed in concert with the drive for the economic utilization of space. The development of a replacement for the shuttle and a military space-plane are required. These High Frontier programs should be managed in a new way and freed of the inefficiency of bureaucratic red tape. This inefficiency—amply documented by James Canan—is not only deplorably wasteful but incredibly dangerous. The time span for the development of new weapons systems is now an average of 13 years as compared to four to six years in the 1950's, and the difference cannot be accounted for just by the increasing complexity of weapons.

The specifics of Graham's program may not be valid—and it is clear that there are a lot of difficulties to be overcome in making energy weapons work and protecting them from attack—but the High Frontier idea is one of very few positive answers offered for our country's defense problems. It provides the op-

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