

Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader
(1981)

Robert J.C. Young

Preface

In retrospect, it is clear that 'structuralism' was a much more diverse movement than its single name suggests. In fact, since the late 1960s, many of the figures associated with structuralism have produced work which is directly critical of structuralist assumptions. Whereas Todorov, Greimas, or the early Barthes, sought to elevate their work to the condition of a science, post-structuralist thinkers, such as Derrida, Foucault and Lacan, have questioned the status of science itself, and the possibility of the objectivity of any language of description or analysis, as well as the assumptions implicit in the Saussurian model of linguistics on which structuralism may be said to be broadly based. The effect of this work on contemporary theories of criticism has been considerable. Recently, its impact has begun to extend towards criticism generally, affecting the way we think about literature and, more specifically, the way we read.

Yet one of the problems of this sort of work for students of literature is its difficulty. *Untying the Text* has been designed from the first to make it more accessible. Its method is to present not a selection of the theoretical (i.e. philosophical, psychoanalytical, etc.) material itself, but examples of the work of various critics who have

absorbed and developed different aspects of this material to produce new theories of the text and new readings of specific texts.

To a large extent, therefore, this selection has concentrated on specific textual analyses, with the idea that if the reader at least knows the text that is being analysed, it will be much easier to recognise the extraordinary effects of this sort of work and its success in opening up literature in a new and compelling way. Each essay is also accompanied by suggestions for further reading which gives references to any particular theoretical writings that have been called into play, as well as to related critical work. I hope that this will prove more suggestive and digestible than a single bibliography.

The headnotes are provided as guides to the articles themselves. They attempt to put each article in its intellectual context, to give a short analysis of what it is doing, and to suggest interesting problems and questions which it may raise. Since the onus is on accessibility, various articles originally in French have been translated, and all references are wherever possible to translations in English. It is often the case that virtually a whole book has been translated, if one knows where to find different parts in different journals, and the aim here has been to provide this sort of information. In general it will become clear how much of the work in this field is produced, discussed and developed in journals.

In Chapter One I have tried, briefly, to indicate some of the main areas of the more specifically theoretical work in which post-structuralism is engaged. It should be stressed that my emphasis on the work of Derrida, Foucault and Lacan is not necessarily a generally recognised way of describing 'post-

structuralism'. There is not a great deal of consensus about what, if anything, post-structuralism is, apart perhaps from the recognition that it involves the work of Derrida. This is the result of the peculiar nature of an activity whose most characteristic aspect is its own refusal of a definition. Nevertheless, something has happened since what one might term the formal structuralist period; I have attempted to describe what seem to me to be the most important, interrelated areas of work, and to suggest why they have consequences for literary criticism. The work is interrelated, but it is not homogeneous. The essays that follow are divided into various sections, but it will be clear also that there is not an absolute separation between them. In general the title of each section should be taken as the mark of difference rather than as an indication of an opposing critical position.

'Reading', Barthes remarks in *S/Z*, 'is a form of *work*'. Although I have made every attempt to make this material accessible, this does not mean that it has become easy. It is reading itself which is difficult, not theory. There is no possibility of a 'non-theoretical' criticism. The only choice is between a criticism that is self-reflexive, that is aware of how and why it is doing what it is doing, and a criticism that is not. No criticism is without an implicit—if not explicit—theoretical position. Thus the complaint that is most often levelled against so-called 'theoretical' criticism—that it *imposes* its theories on to texts rather than reading the texts themselves—is in fact most applicable to so-called 'non-theoretical' criticism, whose preconceptions about how to read, and what to read for, are so fundamental that they remain unvoiced and unthought, and thus appear 'natural', 'intuitive', free of theory and 'abstract ideas'. Few people, in fact, could

claim to read more carefully, more patiently, than Derrida. Or as Harold Bloom put it recently, 'deconstruction *is* reading'.

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