Chapter 1
Creatures of difference

A question of meaning

When Lewis Carroll's Humpy Dumpty discusses the question of meaning with Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*, which of them is right?

Humpy Dumpty engages Alice in one argument after another, just as if dialogue were a competition. Having demonstrated to his own satisfaction, if not Alice's, that unbirthday presents are to be preferred because people can have them more often, he adds triumphantly, 'There's glory for you!'

Torn between the desire to placate him and good common sense, Alice rejoins, 'I don't know what you mean by "glory".' So Humpy Dumpty explains:

'I mean "there's a nice knock-down argument for you!"'

'But "glory" doesn't mean "a nice knock-down argument,"' Alice objected.

'When I use a word,' Humpy Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less.'
fly, but they are not ducks. Glory is not a nice knock-down argument.

Language makes dialogue possible, but only on condition we use it appropriately, subscribing to the meanings already given in the language that always precedes our familiarity with it. As this exchange demonstrates, there is no such thing as a private language. Humpty Dumpty has to 'translate' his before he can communicate with Alice.

Language and knowledge

Language, understood in the broad sense of the term to include all signifying systems, including images and symbols, gives us access to information. Command of a new knowledge very often amounts to learning the appropriate use of a new vocabulary and syntax. To the extent that anyone understands economics, they demonstrate the fact by using its terms and arranging them in an appropriate order. A grasp of psychoanalysis means the ability to exchange words such as 'unconscious', 'repression', or 'transference' effectively. Mathematics, science, and logic have their own symbolic systems, and qualified practitioners of these disciplines know how to inhabit them. The examination system is above all a way of policing the profession, making sure that those who qualify to join it understand how its language or symbols are conventionally employed.

Film directors and advertisers, meanwhile, know the meanings conveyed by pictures of vulnerable children or sleek sports cars. Language in this broad sense is also a source of social values. In learning to use words like 'democracy' and 'dictatorship' appropriately, for instance, Western children find out about political systems, but they also absorb as they do so the value their culture invests in these respective forms of government. For better or worse, Western children learn early on, without having to be explicitly taught, that dictatorship is oppressive and democracy so
precious that it is worth fighting for. In many cultures, the flag is the visual indicator of a national identity that must be defended - by force, if necessary.

Language and cultural change

If language, in other words, transmits the knowledges and values that constitute a culture, it follows that the existing meanings are not ours to command. And yet is it possible that the disdainful Humpty Dumpty has a point after all? To reproduce existing meanings exactly is also to reaffirm the knowledges our culture takes for granted, and the values that precede us - the norms, that is, of the previous generation. Examination papers in Economics, Mathematics, or Film Studies are set and marked by existing practitioners, experts in the field, whose job it is to mark down misunderstandings and misuses of the conventional vocabulary. In this sense, meanings control us, inculcate obedience to the discipline inscribed in them. And this is by no means purely institutional or confined to the educational process. A generation ago campaigns for women's rights recognized (not for the first time) the degree to which 'woman' meant domesticity, nurturing, dependence, and the ways in which anti-feminist jokes, for instance, reproduced the stereotypes of the helpless little girl or the ageing harridan. The question feminists confronted was precisely who was to be Master, as Humpty Dumpty puts it.

In this particular case, however, his formulation was self-evidently not one we could adopt: the term 'Master' would hardly help the feminist cause, but 'Mistress' would not easily take its place, since it carried sexual connotations that detracted from the authority we were looking for. The right word in a new situation does not always readily present itself. Language sometimes seems to lead a life of its own. Words are unruly: 'They've a temper, some of them,' Humpty Dumpty goes on to observe.

In this case, the masculine and feminine values were not symmetrical - and nor, of course, was the culture. Without supposing this was the only change necessary, we none the less set out to modify the language, annoying conservatives with coinages like 'chairperson' and 's/he'. We refused to laugh at misogyny, and ignored the taunts that we had no sense of humour. For a time, dialogue did indeed become the kind of competition Humpty Dumpty's conversation exemplifies. Perhaps in a way it always is.

Language is not in any sense personal or private. But individuals can alter it, as long as others adopt their changes. What, after all, do great poets, philosophers, and scientists do, but change our vocabulary? Shakespeare invented hundreds of words. New disciplines do the same. In the course of the 20th century, science successively named 'electrons', 'protons', 'neutrons', and 'quarks'. Poststructuralism is difficult to the extent that its practitioners use old words in unfamiliar ways, or coin terms to say what cannot be said otherwise. This new vocabulary still elicits some resistance, but the issue we confront is how far we should let the existing language impose limits on what it is possible to think.

Poststructuralism and language

Poststructuralism names a theory, or a group of theories, concerning the relationship between human beings, the world, and the practice of making and reproducing meanings. On the one hand, poststructuralists affirm, consciousness is not the origin of the language we speak and the images we recognize, so much as the product of the meanings we learn and reproduce. On the other hand, communication changes all the time, with or without intervention from us, and we can choose to intervene with a view to altering the meanings - which is to say the norms and values - our culture takes for granted. The question is just the one Humpty Dumpty poses: who is to be in control?
This Very Short Introduction will trace some of the arguments that have led poststructuralists to challenge traditional theories of language and culture, and with them traditional accounts of what it is possible to know, as well as what it is to be a human being. Poststructuralism offers a controversial account of our place in the world, which competes with conventional explanations.

The importance of language

Most of the time the language we speak is barely visible to us. We are more concerned with what it can do: buy us a train ticket; persuade the neighbours to keep the noise down; get us off the hook when we've done something wrong. And yet few issues are more important in human life. After food and shelter, which are necessary for survival, language and its symbolic analogues exercise the most crucial determinations in our social relations, our thought processes, and our understanding of who and what we are.

Even food and shelter do not come into our lives undefined. Menus that offer 'succulent, corn-fed baby chicken, drizzled with a tingling lemon sauce' probably take this principle to extremes, but for me, I remember, 'scrag end stew' was a lost cause from the beginning.

Houses, too, are characterized in language, and not only by estate agents. We might want to live in one we could justifiably call old, or quaint, modern, or minimalist, but we might feel less enthusiastic once we had come to think of the same property as decrepit, poky, tatty, or bleak. Paint manufacturers know that we are more likely to coat our walls in a colour marketed as 'Morning Sun' than in one called 'Custard', even when the pigmentation is exactly the same.

In this sense, language intervenes between human beings and their world. There is a party game that involves blindfolding one player as a prelude to guessing what foods are placed on his or her tongue. Whether consciously or not, guessing means classifying in accordance with the system of differences the language already provides: is it sweet or savoury? hot or cold? bland or bitter?

Poststructuralism proposes that the distinctions we make are not necessarily given by the world around us, but are instead produced by the symbolizing systems we learn. How else would we know the difference between pixies and gnomes, or March Hares and talking eggs like Humpty Dumpty, come to that? But we learn our native tongue at such an early age that it seems transparent, a window onto a world of things, even if some of those things are in practice imaginary, no more than ideas of things, derived from children's stories.

Are ideas the source of meaning, then? That was once the conventional view, but our ideas are not, poststructuralists believe, the origin of the language we speak. Indeed, the reverse is the case. Ideas are the effect of the meanings we learn and reproduce. We learned our idea of Humpty Dumpty (if we did) from nursery rhymes, Lewis Carroll, and John Tenniel, who illustrated the *Alice* books.

In its account of how we become meaning animals, and the role meaning plays in our understanding of the world, poststructuralism represents a modern challenge to traditional beliefs.

Meaning

What is meaning? Where do meanings come from? Perhaps the question finds more focus in relation to a specific instance. What, then, does the word 'modern' mean in the sentence at the end of the last section? What precise timespan does 'modern' cover?

The answer seems to vary with the context. As a description of the poststructuralist challenge to inherited beliefs, it may mean nothing much more specific than 'new'. Modern history, on the other hand, generally concerns the period since the 17th century. And yet we
think of modern languages as distinct from the classical languages, while modern furniture almost certainly belongs to the 20th century or later. In these instances 'modern' defines no common chronological period: modern history belongs to about the last five hundred years, modern languages to perhaps the last thousand, and modern furniture to no more than the last hundred or so. The modern challenge of poststructuralism itself is a product of the last few decades.

The term 'modern', in other words, has no positive content, but owes its meaning to difference: what is modern in these instances is respectively 'not medieval', 'not ancient', 'not antique', or simply 'not traditional'. But at least in all these cases 'modern' distinguishes a period that is more recent than another. Modernism, however, denoting a style in art and literature, and associated with the first half of the 20th century, is probably no longer the latest thing, while in the compound 'postmodern', so widely used to define our own era, modernity has explicitly become, paradoxically, a thing of the past.

Nevertheless, although it seems to refer to no fixed period, we are usually able to understand and use the word 'modern' without difficulty. How? In the *Course in General Linguistics*, first published in 1916, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure proposed that 'in language there are only differences *without positive terms*, and this observation initiated a train of thought that would be taken up by a succession of figures in a range of disciplines during the course of the following century. Poststructuralism begins with an account of how we are able to mean, and goes on to conceive of human beings as animals distinctively possessing – and formed by – this capability. We are, that is to say, creatures of difference.

Meaning, Saussure proposed, did not depend on reference to the world, or even to ideas. On the contrary. He argued that, if the things or concepts language named already existed outside language, words would have exact equivalents from one language to another, and translation would therefore be easy. But as all translators know, nothing could be further from the truth. *Toto, sois sage* we dutifully intoned in my French class when I was eleven, 'Toto, be good'. But even at that early stage, we sensed that *sage* and 'good' were not always interchangeable. 'A good time' in French, we knew, would not be *sage* at all, since the term implied sense or wisdom. We were, in addition, using a mode of address that had no English translation. The second person singular that exists in so many European languages (*tu, Du*) can cause native speakers of English endless embarrassment when we try to communicate in other tongues, since it carries connotations of intimacy or hierarchy that can cause offence if used inappropriately.

Genders and tenses do not necessarily correspond from one language to another. The morning' is masculine in French (*le matin*), feminine in Italian (*la mattina*). French has the past historic, a special tense for telling stories. Some languages include more than one plural form. Differences that are given in one language have to be mastered, often with difficulty, by those whose mother tongue divides up the world in another way.

We are compelled to conclude either that some languages misrepresent the way things are, while our own describes the world accurately, or that language, which seems to name units given in nature, does not in practice depend on reference to things, or even to our ideas of things. Instead, the units that seem to exist so unproblematically may be differentiated from one another by language itself, so that we think of them as natural, just as we may perceive the continuous spectrum of the rainbow in terms of seven distinct colours.

A century ago many European nations were ready to impose their own classifications on other cultures, where imperial conquest made this possible. But the multicultural societies that have resulted from the decline of empire are willing to be more generous
in their recognition of other accounts of the world, which is to say, other networks of differences.

A language represents a way of understanding the world, of differentiating between things and relating them to one another. The Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o wrote his first works of fiction in English. Later, it came to seem to him that this practice concealed too much to the influence of the former colonial power, and the continued economic and cultural neo-colonialism of the West. However 'African' the content and themes of his early novels, the novel itself was a European genre, its structure reproducing a Western pattern of thought; moreover, the English language could not do justice to Kenyan perceptions of the world. He then began to write in Gikuyu, drawing on indigenous forms of narrative and drama.

**Difference, not reference**

The simple inference that meaning is differential, not referential, has profound implications for our understanding of the relations between human beings and the world, and many of them remain controversial even now. The history of poststructuralism is the story of the way Saussure's ideas were taken up by later generations, especially in France, and particularly after the Second World War, when the history of National Socialism – and of French collaboration with it – seemed to demand an explanation that existing theories of culture were unable to provide. The key term in this story is 'difference'.

**Saussure and the sign**

Traditionally, words had been thought of as signs. The sign seemed to represent a presence that existed elsewhere, to stand as the sign of something. In everyday English we still refer to the meaning 'behind' the words, as if meaning existed somewhere on the other side of speech or writing. Saussure's work changed that. For him, meaning resides in the sign and nowhere else.

In order to make the point clear, Saussure divided the sign in two: on the one hand, the signifier, the sound or the visual appearance of the word, phrase, or image in question; on the other, the signified, its meaning. In ordinary circumstances the distinction is purely methodological: we rarely see a signifier which does not signify, or mean something. But an unknown language consists entirely of signifiers in isolation. We hear sounds and assume that they signify, since we see native speakers apparently communicating, but to us they mean nothing. Or we see a page of impenetrable written characters.

If you don't happen to know Greek, this is a pure signifier:

λόγος

In its written form it makes this shape; spoken aloud, it makes a particular sound: logos. And if you do know Greek, it brings with it a signified which has no exact equivalent in English, but ranges between 'word', 'idea', 'meaning', and 'sense'. Changing the shape very slightly – and silently – by capitalizing the initial letter, we turn it into Λόγος and the signified changes to something like 'God' or 'Reason'.

Neither element of the sign determines the other: the signifier does not 'express' the meaning, nor does the signified 'resemble' the form or sound. On the contrary, the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary. There is nothing dogey about the word 'dog'. There can't be, since the French recognize much the same characteristics in 'un chien'. Even in languages with a shared European history, Schwein, maiale, porc, and pig have more or less the same signified. Children learn to distinguish the meaning when they learn the signifier. To use a term appropriately is to know what it means.

Grown-ups go on learning new signifiers, and the process is
Q. Why use the jargon term 'signifier'? Why not just say 'word'?

A. Because words are not the only signifiers. Traffic lights, arrows, and zebra pedestrian crossings signify. So do gestures: pointing, shaking hands, punching the air. Yawns, gasps, and screams are all signifiers — in the sense that they may be interpreted by those around us, even if we didn’t intend them to be. Paintings signify. Sometimes a group of words constitutes one signifier: ‘How are you?’ is not most usefully broken down into its component words; rather, it represents a single greeting, registers an interest — and probably doesn’t in practice invite a list of symptoms, except in the doctor’s surgery.

nowhere clearer than in the realm of ideas. We do not have the idea of poststructuralism first, and then go on to discover the name. Instead, we learn the appropriate use of the term in the course of internalizing its meaning. ‘Whether we take the signified or the signifier,’ Saussure argues, ‘language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system.’

René Magritte’s word-paintings wittily exploit the arbitrariness of the relationship between the signifier and meaning. Children used to learn to read from primers that showed pictures of things with their names underneath, to teach them what the written signifier meant. Magritte’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1935) is composed of four such pictures, but only one of them, the valise, is appropriately labelled.

And yet, suppose ‘bird’ really signified ‘jug’? What difference would it make?

Ferdinand de Saussure, 1857–1913

Professor of Linguistics in Paris, he moved to the University of Geneva in 1906, where he began to give the lectures that would constitute the *Course in General Linguistics* (1916). Dissatisfied with the conventional historical (diachronic) character of the discipline, Saussure chose to analyse the workings of language in its existing (synchronic) form. If objects or ideas were knowable outside the signifiers that distinguished them from each other, Saussure argued, terms would have exact equivalents from one language to another, but since translation is so often a quest for approximations, meaning must depend on difference, not on reference to things or concepts. The *Course* was put together by his students after his death. Ironically, one of the figures who exerted the most influence on what would become poststructuralism was thus not in the conventional sense the author of his own book.

Magritte places his misnamed objects against what the frame indicates are windowpanes. But these panes are painted black; the window is opaque; it does not allow us to see a world of things on the other side of it. And this is just as true in the case of the rightly named valise as it is of the other images. Both the signifier and the image are on the same side of the glass, if glass it is. Here language is not a window onto the world.

Or perhaps, instead, Magritte’s window should be seen as a blackboard, traditional source of instruction about the world, where the words are chalked below the images? If so, it is surely an ironic one: the children in this class are being grossly misled.

But then again, is it ironic after all? Common sense would say so,
but common sense did not do justice to Humpty Dumpty, who
turned out to have a point. Couldn’t we see The Interpretation of
Dreams as treating the words and images as two kinds of signifier:
one textual, the other pictorial? Isolated visual signifiers are
familiar to us, after all, in the form of road signs or brand logos.
What are paintings themselves but assemblages of visual signifiers?

If we read the picture that way, we could create our own
connections between the sets of signifiers in Magritte’s painting. Is
there, perhaps, an unforeseen parallel between time and the wind:
both in flight, both imperceptible? Or could this door, half-
enclosing a wistful horse, be a stable door? Is there an untold story
here? The painting does not answer either question; instead, it
keeps its options open or, in poststructuralist terms, preserves the
secret of its final signified.

The primacy of the signifier

Poetry, too, works by proposing parallels, inviting the reader to
make surprising connections between apparently distinct signifiers.
Ezra Pound’s delicate Imagist poem ‘On a Station in the Metro’
surely deserves the attention it has elicited by drawing an analogy
that depends on the conjunction of unpredictability with perfect
visual appropriateness:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

And yet, you might object, these faces and petals are more than
signifiers. Surely they exist, as things? We ‘see’ their referents in
their absence, in our mind’s eye, and that is the source of our
pleasure in the poem?

Yes, in a way. But what the poem does is isolate these images, so
similar and yet so different, from the ‘noise’ that would surround
them in actuality. The signifier separates off the comparison it

2. René Magritte’s The Interpretation of Dreams parodies a reading
primer. Is it also a visual-verbal ‘poem’?
creates from the distinct experiences as they might exist in a world of reference, and in the process produces a set of associations — the delicacy and vulnerability of faces, say — that surely relegates the reality of crowds and trees to the very edges of our interest. These associations depend (of course) on differences — between large crowds and small faces, dark boughs and pale petals, or the contrast between substantial and fragile things. Above all, there is nothing remotely referential about the strange spectrality which is the effect of the word ‘apparition’, before we reach the ethereal ‘petals’.

That haunting quality is also an effect of the fact that we read these words as poetry: the two lines isolated on the white space of the page; the near-rhymes ‘crowd’ and ‘bough’, ‘Petals’ and ‘wet’. Rhythm plays its part: the authority of the three last stressed syllables is contrasted with a much lighter pattern in the first line, where several short syllables are repeatedly followed by one long one.

Julia Kristeva calls this signifying capability which is not derived from the meanings of the words ‘the semiotic’. It evokes, she maintains, the sound produced by the rhythmic babbling of small children who cannot yet speak. The semiotic exists prior to the acquisition of meaning, and psychoanalysis links it with the drive towards either pleasure or death. These sound effects, as they reappear in poetry, are musical, patterned; they disrupt the purely ‘thetic’ (thesis-making) logic of rational argument by drawing on a sense or sensation that Kristeva locates beyond surface meaning.

One more instance. William Carlos Williams’s highly patterned poem ‘The Red Wheelbarrow’ seems to assert the materiality of the objects it names:

- a red wheel
- barrow
- glazed with rain
- water
- beside the white
- chickens

There are no comparisons this time. Instead, you might want to insist, the poem offers the clearly defined colours and shapes of referential things. Surely, it sets out to transmit the things themselves to our imagination, and ‘so much’, it begins by claiming, ‘depends/upon’ their solid existence in a substantial world?

And yet, if we look again, there is another way to read this short, simple text. The red and white in this poem are unqualified, and thus bright, shiny, ‘glazed’. If this is a farmyard, it is one without shadows, or mud. Indeed, we might more readily ‘see’ a toy

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Julia Kristeva, 1941—

Born in Bulgaria, she has spent most of her adult life in France — as a practising psychoanalyst, as well as Professor of Linguistics at the University of Paris VII. Kristeva established her influence with Revolution in Poetic Language (1974), which identified the radical political potential of poetry, especially the sound patterns that disrupt linear thought. She is a prolific writer, whose works include novels, as well as explorations of the implications of psychoanalysis for literature and culture. Her most influential books include Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection (1980), Tales of Love (1983), and Strangers to Ourselves (1988).
wheelbarrow, or a scene in a children's picture book. The poem seems to depict an innocence and purity not to be found on any real farm and, at least according to one possible interpretation, 'so much depends' on our ability to conceive of that lost but childlike world. Here the rhythms are simplicity itself, each short 'verse' repeating with minor variations the metrical pattern of the one before. On this reading, the red wheelbarrow of this poem issues from language, not from the world of things.

'The Death of the Author'

How can we decide which reading to settle for? Traditional criticism would say we should ask the author, and if the author is dead, as in this case, we should read biographies, diaries, or letters until we can guess what the author might have intended. Poststructuralism, however, disagrees. If language is not ours to possess, but always pre-exists us and comes from outside, and if poems issue from language, not from the ideas which are language effect rather than its cause, there is no final answer to the question of what any particular example of language in action ultimately means.

That does not imply, on the other hand, that it can mean whatever we like: Humpty Dumpty is wrong to think that language is entirely subject to our whim. A purely private language does not permit dialogue, and so hardly qualifies as a language at all. But a specific instance of signifying practice can mean whatever the shared and public possibilities of those signifiers in that order will permit.

In 1968, a year of insurrection and manifestos, when Renault workers and students took temporary control of the streets of Paris, Roland Barthes coincidentally proclaimed, in an essay which had just appeared in French for the first time, what he called 'The Death of the Author'. His argument depends on the fact that the significant is a 'shifter': it moves from speaker to speaker as each lays claim to it. In linguistic terms, the author is never more than the figure produced by the use of I, just as we constitute ourselves subjects of the sentences we speak by the same means. If I say 'I am hungry', I may be all sorts of other things too, but as far as the meaning of my words is concerned, I am no more at that moment than a hungry person. 'Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing', Barthes insists.

Roland Barthes, 1915–80

Professor of Literary Semiology (a title he chose himself) at the Collège de France. The work that made him famous was Mythologies, published in French in 1957 (see Chapter 2). But his most influential work of literary criticism was S/Z (1970), a brilliant close reading of a Balzac short story, which turns out to be much more complex - and more interesting - than we might at first have thought. His writing is always dazzling: witty, stylish, apparently mischievous and yet persuasive, serious in its implications, for all the extravagance of the manner. Among the most pleasurable of his books, A Lover's Discourse: Fragments (1977) offers a series of brief dramatic monologues demonstrating the tears and tantrums - and the derivativeness - of the state of being in love. Even this most individual and personal of conditions, the book indicates, is 'citational', learned from the love stories we have read or seen at the movies. 'Every other night on TV', it points out, 'someone says: I love you.'
Citationality

How, then, do works of art signify? By their difference, of course! It is not only at the level of the individual word, phrase, or image that meaning depends on difference. Magritte’s painting alludes to old-fashioned school primers, and crucially differs from them. To see what is being ‘cited’ in the picture is to grasp part of what we call the ‘point’, which is to say, the meaning. The painting’s primer does not work; its ‘window’ resembles and differs from the windows we know; its ‘blackboard’ is not an ordinary blackboard.

Moreover, The Interpretation of Dreams also alludes to a long tradition of Western painting, invoking the conventions of Renaissance realism in its convincing depiction of individual objects, but locating itself as modernist by putting them in unlikely places. In the same way, Imagist poems depend for their meaning not only on the combinations of individual words that compose them, but also on their intertextual allusions, resembling and yet breaking with the lyric tradition, which so often establishes a ‘speaker’, or at least a mood or state of mind. The Red Wheelbarrow is like a fragment of a poem; on the other hand, it differs from a fragment by offering a statement that appears complete.

We should not, therefore, try to get ‘behind’ the work, Barthes argues. There is nothing there. Instead, ‘the space of writing is tangled over, not pierced’ (and the metaphor suggests that the question for intention generates a kind of violence). We should look at the text, Barthes urges, not through it. And his manifesto concludes with a ringing declaration: ‘the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author’.

The reader

Roland Barthes wants us to read the text itself, not something else that we imagine would provide a clue to it, or a guarantee of the correctness of our interpretation. But he is not arguing for subjectivism, the view that the text’s personal associations for me, as an individual reader, whatever they might happen to be, will do as an account of its meaning. Instead, his reader is not an individual, not a real person at all, but ‘the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost’. Such a ‘space’ does not exist, except as an ideal type, a timeless, utopian, model reader. In practice, some of us will see some of the possibilities, some others, and the text itself keeps its secret about which is ‘right’. Indeed, it becomes unclear just what ‘right’ would mean (though it’s still possible, if we don’t know the words, or we don’t pay sufficient attention to them, or we miss a citation or mistake the genre, to be wrong).

Popular usage

Is poststructuralism just concerned with art and literature, then? A new way of approaching high culture? Not at all. Any arrangement
of signifiers, it proposes, can be treated as undecidable in the same kind of way. Even the simplest instances of signification may do more work than we necessarily realize. I grew up in a world of posters which affirmed in large letters, 'Guinness is good for you!' Since I was too young to like beer in those days, I didn't give them much thought. Now, however, I wonder just what was being claimed.

It's true that stout was held to be full of nutritional value, and was often treated as a health drink, especially by middle-aged women. And Guinness was stout. But is that the whole story? The posters also showed comic cartoon animals in bright colours. Weren't these visual signifiers associating the drink with pleasure, laughter, the exchange of jokes? Weren't the adverts indicating that enjoying yourself was 'good for you', taking you out of yourself, as we might once have said? And was it the sociability of the pub, or the alcohol that would make you see the world in the bright primary colours the posters themselves? Either way, the claim of the images, or the words and the images taken together, was that Guinness was 'good for' your world picture, brightening the way things looked. The advertisers, I now think, were exploiting the plurality of the signifier, withholding the gratification (or do I really mean the banality?) of a final signified.

If so, the simplicity of the Guinness slogan is as deceptive as the simplicity of 'The Red Wheelbarrow'. And in both cases, the reader produces an interpretation that has no final guarantee elsewhere.

Chapter 2

Difference and culture

A world of myths

Traditional domestic cleaning products that use bleach or ammonia make war on germs, or 'kill' dirt. By contrast, what was new in the imagery of household detergents, available for the first time just after the Second World War, was that they separated the dirt from the fabric decisively but without 'violence'. Their ideal role is to liberate the object from its circumstantial imperfection. Roland Barthes proposes, driving out alien bodies, expelling the enemy of whiteness, as it recognizes the superior virtue of washing powder. Their function is keeping public order not making war. Adverts for skincare products, he argues, are 'similarly based on a kind of epic representation of the intimate', but here the moisturizers infiltrate the depths and 'penetrate' the skin from outside, subverting its own propensity to wrinkle and reinstating its natural beauty.

Though Barthes does not explicitly say so, the implication is that these advertisements make their case by silently citing the imagery of the Cold War. Overt violence now gives way to a conflict based on espionage and infiltration. The political aim is to exile the left from the Free West on the one hand, and on the other to destabilize the communist states, inciting their own citizens to recognize the virtues of the free market and transform their society from within.
Chapter 3

Difference and desire

Death in Paris

In a miserable lodging house in February 1868 Abel Barbin died of carbon dioxide asphyxiation by means of a charcoal stove. Abel, who was 29 years old and worked in a railway office in Paris, left a memoir which testifies both to his high intelligence and to the desolation that led to his suicide. It appears that he was caught between two jobs, neither of which matched his abilities or took account of his experience. Friendless in the capital and frequently unemployed, convinced that he had no chance of the companionship and sexual satisfaction marriage would offer, he saw his existence as useless to others and crushing to himself.

Abel, who was baptized Adelaide Herceline Barbin, had grown up as a girl. She had spent most of her life in all-female institutions and, after coming top in the examinations, had gone on to teach in a girls' boarding school. There she fell in love with a woman teacher, gradually recognizing, to her own surprise, the nature of this passion, which was consummated in due course. The two shared a bed for many months, until the suspicions of those around them, and the falseness of their position, prompted Adelaide Herceline to consult a priest, who passed her on to the medical authorities. The doctor found a person of slight but broadly masculine appearance, with rudimentary versions of the genital organs of both sexes. There was no womb.

In 1860, at the age of 21, Adelaide Herceline was re-registered officially as Abel, and lived from then on as a man. The early parts of the memoir, somewhat literary and sentimental, nevertheless clearly depict a childhood of relative social integration and considerable academic success. In telling Abel's story, however, the text becomes rambling, repetitive, and sometimes incoherent. Even so, it is clear that Abel feels alone and disgraced, unable to return to those who have known him as a woman. More aware, now, of what is expected sexually, he sees no hope of a future relationship to match the first. Meanwhile, the jobs he applies for all demand experience. Abel's experience has been as a schoolmistress, but at this time a career as a teacher in a girls' school was not an option for a man. Hungry, he is reduced to asking his poverty-stricken mother for money. This, we may construe, is still more humiliating for a son than it would be for a daughter.

Socialized, culturally constructed in a world where sexual roles were dramatically polarized, Herceline Abel cannot survive as either a woman or a man. Having been recruited as a woman by the meanings of femininity she has done her best to inhabit, she cannot simply become a different, masculine subject, sharing and reproducing the meanings that make possible male bonding and conventional male behaviour.

The polarity between the forms of subjectivity appropriate to men and women could hardly have been more extreme than in mid-19th-century bourgeois and provincial France. It is easy to see, though the author of the memoir cannot theorize it, how difficult it would be, both socially and psychologically, to become a member of the opposite sex in such circumstances.

Virginia Woolf made high comedy out of the reverse transformation in her novel Orlando in 1928. Waking up to find herself suddenly, as
if by magic, a woman, after growing up as a man, Orlando has to learn to cope with the difficulty of getting around in skirts, retreating where she has been accustomed to pursue, choosing whether to yield or refuse when she has previously learned to insist. Now she finds that women are not 'obedient, chaste, scented and exquisitely apparelled by nature'. Instead, they can only acquire these virtues 'by the most tedious discipline', and Orlando reluctantly sets about the task.

Herecule Barbin's predicament was no joke, however. It was not eased by the insistence of her priest and the medical profession that she must be reassigned to her 'true' sex. Sexually relaxed though we seem to ourselves to have become, our own society still does not feel comfortable with intersex babies, and the doctors generally take it upon themselves to determine the 'true' sex of such children, often if the 'adjustment' is minor, without consulting their parents.

Western culture decrees that there are two sexes; the English language, as the inscription of a culture, offers two pronouns, one masculine and one feminine, and subjects are expected to identify with one or the other. The most scrupulously non-sexist parents have no choice but to speak of their children as 'he' or 'she', and children generally do their best to become what language tells them they are.

Brought into line

We are now more open to the possibility of same-sex relationships or, indeed, bisexuality. But the idea that an act is either homosexual or heterosexual, that a person is gay, straight, or bisexual, only confirms that we think in terms of two sexes and two subject-positions, one of which must be appropriate in every case. 'It' is often ungendered, but in most European languages, when people speak about themselves, they match the pronoun with either masculine or feminine adjectives.

These days we are less inclined to dress our babies in either pink or blue. Plenty of yellows and greens are available to sidestep the issue (though department stores still stock pretty pink dresses and jaunty blue romper suits). But if women wear unisex trousers without comment, men in skirts can still raise eyebrows. Though things are changing fast, certain behaviours, attitudes, and values continue to be thought of as predominantly masculine or feminine.

Free subjects?

Gender-identification is one instance among many of the fact that people in liberal societies are free subjects, entitled to speak and write, to proclaim their views, however eccentric, and to challenge the existing order if they wish, but only on condition that they also subject themselves to certain culturally defined norms. Of course, anyone can always refuse to conform. But refusal often gets people labelled as freaks or loonies, and correspondingly discredits the challenges they deliver in the eyes of those they address them to. The man in a suit commands assent more readily than the homeless bag-lady shouting at the traffic.

In the memoir, though it was literally Abel who did the writing, the narrative voice that recounts the convent girlhood is not characteristic of a man. Lives are narratable as coherent in terms of the categories language makes available. The story of Herecule, as told by Herecule herself, makes sense. But at the point in the story when she ceases to be the subject language and culture have made of her, the writing collapses into incoherence. Neither a woman nor a man, in the sense that Abel has no male experience, habits, bonds, ways of thinking of himself, or in short, no history, this newly created subject can say 'I', but without being able to attach to it an intelligible sentence beyond something like '. . . am poor, lonely, and very unhappy'.

Identity can be conceived of as a set of psychological characteristics, or as a social role, as recognition of the appropriateness to oneself of
Poststructuralism

Q. Isn’t the term ‘subject’ redundant, when we already have ‘identity’?

A. ‘Subject’ can be more precise than ‘identity’ as a way of thinking about the issues. First, as a grammatical term, it places the emphasis squarely on the language we learn from birth, and from which we internalize the meanings, including the meanings of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ our culture expects us to live by. Second, it builds in the ambiguity of the grammatical term itself: I am free to say and do what I like to the degree that I accept a certain subjectivity to those cultural norms. And third, it allows for discontinuities and contradictions. I can adopt a range of subject-positions, and not all of them will necessarily be consistent with each other. ‘Identity’ implies sameness: that’s what the word means. Subjects can differ—even from themselves.

Foucault

Michel Foucault, who collected the documents concerning Herculine Barbin, devoted most of his work as a historian of ideas to analysing the effects of culture in permitting us to give an account of ourselves. The categories we all recognize not only make this account possible, but also call us to account, and by doing so bring us into line with the norms and proprieties that culture itself constructs. Societies recruit us as subjects, subject us to their values, and incite us to be accountable, responsible citizens, eager, indeed, to give an account of ourselves in terms we have learned from the signifying practices of those societies themselves.

Foucault’s Discipline and Punish, first published in French in 1975, considers the ways in which societies have penalized those who rejected their norms. In absolutist France, for instance, criminals were publicly tortured and executed, and the book begins with a detailed and thoroughly gruesome account of the punishment of a regicide in 1757. Foucault immediately juxtaposes this with a list of regulations of an institution for young offenders in the mid-19th century. The rules prescribe the exact distribution of their time: up at six; five minutes to dress in silence; another five to make their beds; work until ten and then a meal, after washing their hands; school at twenty to eleven for two hours; and so on, until bed-time at half-past eight. If the public execution was a spectacle in which the state demonstrated its cruel power to punish those who challenged the sovereign, the institution looks more humane, more lenient, and more constructive. And so, of course, in an obvious sense, it is. But its agenda is a discipline that subjects the inmates, body and soul, to a regime designed precisely to construct them as conforming citizens, which is to say subjects, in both senses of that term, who learn to work by themselves in submission to the values of their society.
Resistance

Which of these two regimes allows more scope for resistance? Ironically, the first, Foucault argues. Punished in public, criminals, who behaved courageously sometimes became popular heroes. Ballads were circulated giving their side of the story. Crowds occasionally turned on the executioner. But hidden away and trained to internalize new disciplines, prisoners were more effectively brought into line, to emerge as docile subjects, the fight drilled out of them.

All relations, Foucault argued, are in this sense relations of power. Parents and teachers subject children when they socialize them. Professions set exams and in the process define the knowledges required to join them. Anyone who tells or shows anyone else how to do something is exerting power over them. This is not a matter of intention or wish. The transmission of knowledge involves instruction; learning entails submission.

Norms, then, are culturally produced and, to the degree that they exert a discipline, represent a form of oppression. In Foucault's account, power is creative: it produces ways of being and ideals to aspire to. His last two books, contributions to the massive history of sexuality he planned but never completed, analysed the classical 'arts of love' that provided codes for the intensification of pleasure by the construction of an 'ethics' of conduct. The 'good' life recruited subjects as if for their own benefit, inciting them to internalize a discipline that invisibly subjected them to its account of what constitutes the good. Every morality, regardless of its content, Foucault argues there, consists of two elements that belong together, 'codes of behavior and forms of subjectivation'.

But does this mean we cannot resist our own subjection? No, of course not, though there might be a price to pay. There is by definition no power without the possibility of resistance, Foucault insists, and the word carries heroic overtones for a generation that remembered with admiration the dangers incurred by the refusal of the French underground to submit to the German occupation. Resistance is power's defining difference. Crime itself is a refusal of the law; eccentricity is a repudiation of norms; vice is a rejection of conventional ethics. Power is not a thing or a quantity we possess or lose, but a relation of struggle. Foucault's own work is full of doomed heroes: murderers, madmen, and suicides who struggled against their own subjection. His life, especially latterly, was lived beyond the limit of respectability. He died of AIDS.

Sexual 'norms'

Among Foucault's most influential propositions was the argument put forward in the first volume of The History of Sexuality that homosexuality did not exist until the 19th century.

But surely the Greeks practised homosexuality? Not exactly, Foucault would reply. Certainly, men had sexual relations with boys or men, just as they have done in many other cultures. But they were not in consequence classified as homosexuals, invested with a subjectivity that was seen as the origin of their sexual practices, and regarded as deviant or perverse. The Greeks did not consider themselves in any way defined by their sexual habits.

The effect of the relatively recent process of classifying sexual subjects, Foucault indicates, was twofold. On the one hand, it tended to limit the range of available forms of pleasure. Once you feel an obligation to come out, if only to yourself, to decide whether you are gay or straight, you declare a preference that constrains your choices, however unconsciously. On the other hand, as soon as the category exists, you can identify with it, and then defend it, insist on your rights, and join forces with others who feel oppressed by the norm, invoking what Foucault calls a 'reverse discourse' as the basis of resistance to the norm itself.
Michel Foucault, 1926–84

From 1970 Professor of History of Systems of Thought at the Collège de France. His studies of madness, medicine, punishment, and sexuality had in common a preoccupation with the power relations involved in the control of what constitutes reason, knowledge, and truth.

In Foucault's account, things generally start badly and get worse. Our own more humane forms of discipline recruit subjects more effectively than overt displays of power. Graeco-Roman civilization recommended the care of the self as a way of enlisting subjects, but since the Enlightenment a bleaker 'self-knowledge' has taken the place of this ideal.

Resistance, however, is the inevitable corollary of power, he affirms, the difference without which it has no meaning.

Psychoanalysis

Poststructuralism is not a system, nor even, when you look at the details, a unified body of theory. How could it be? Its key term is difference.

Louis Althusser, who urged that, as the destination of ideology, subjects 'work by themselves' to reproduce it, unless they deliberately resist, was a Marxist. Michel Foucault, who broadly agreed with Althusser's account of the subject, rejected Marxism as another kind of 'discipline', a self-proclaimed 'truth' that recruited subjects to its own norms. Foucault was deeply suspicious of all such truths. On similar grounds, he also deplored psychoanalysis, because it co-opted us in the name of the truth of our innermost being, understood to be sexual. It was, after all, the reassignment of Herminone Barbin to her 'true' sex that destroyed her.

Foucault's is a familiar way of reading Freud, but not the only possible one. Post-War Paris was a place of many rereadings. If Roland Barthes reread Lévi-Strauss in the light of Saussure, Althusser even more explicitly reread Marx in the light of psychoanalysis to produce his account of ideology. But his version of psychoanalysis was already itself a Lacanian rereading of Freud. No wonder no one agreed with the exact details of anyone else's view!

Jacques Lacan did not promise the truth, nor did he see sex as the origin of identity, but he did reinterpret Freud in the light of Saussure (and Lévi-Strauss) to delineate a subject which was itself the location of a difference. Lacan's subject is divided against itself; 'other', he says, 'than it is'; dissatisfied – and desiring.

The subject of desire

Why is it that the big love stories, those that become legendary when so many are forgotten, tend to be the ones with unhappy endings? Most people in Western culture probably know the stories of more than one of the following: Dido and Aeneas, Antony and Cleopatra, Tristan and Isolde, Lancelot and Guinevere, Romeo and Juliet, Anna Karenina, Gone With the Wind, Brief Encounter, Casablanca. (Do you? How did you score? Two is promising; five is good; all nine and you could write a book.)

Why do we remember them? Why have some of the oldest ones been recycled so many times in opera, novels, and films? Is it that unfilled desire for some reason strikes a particular chord? Lacan would say so.

For Lacan, the human being is an organism-in-culture, and the disjunction that implies is the source of all our troubles. We are born organisms (of course), and we become subjects. How? By internalizing our culture, which is inscribed in the signifying practices that surround us from the moment we come into the world. We turn into subjects in the process of learning language,
which means that we become capable of signifying. This is an advantage: we can ask for what we want instead of crying helplessly, and go on to catch the right bus, write emails to our friends, make political speeches — or read Lacan, of course, according to taste.

But the language that permits all this is irretrievably Other. Lacan uses a capital O to distinguish the Otherness of language and culture from the otherness of other people, though of course it is from other people that we learn and internalize the Otherness of the signifier. They, too, however, are its products.

The big Other is there before we are, exists outside us, and does not belong to us. In the course of asking for what we want, for instance, we necessarily borrow our terms from the Other, since we have no alternative if we want to communicate. In this way, the little human organism, which begins with no sense of a distinction between itself and the world, gets separated off from its surroundings and is obliged to formulate its demands in terms of the differences already available in language, however alienating these might be.

Something is lost here — experienced, perhaps, as a residue of the continuity with our organic existence, or as wishes that don't quite fit the signifiers that are supposed to define them. Lacan calls what is lost the real. The real is not reality, which is what culture tells us about. On the contrary, the real is that organic being outside signification, which we can't know, because it has no signifiers in the world of names the subject inhabits. The real, repressed because it has no way of making itself recognized in our consciousness, returns to disturb and disrupt our engagement with a reality that we imagine we know. Unable to use the existing language, the lost real makes its effects felt in dreams, slips of the tongue, puns, jokes, or symptoms marked on the body, illnesses or disabilities that seem to have no physiological cause.

The general effect of the lost but inescapable real of our organic being is a dissatisfaction we cannot specify. A gap now exists between the organism and the signifying subject, and in that gap desire is born. Desire, Lacan says, is for nothing nameable, since it is unconscious, not part of the conscious language gives us. But it is structural, the consequence of the gap that marks the loss of the real, and thus a perpetual condition. Although desire is unconscious, most of us find a succession of love-objects, and fasten our desire onto them, as if they could make us whole again, heal the rift between the subject and the lost real. In the end, they can't — though, of course, it's possible to have a good time in the process of finding that out.

Prohibitions

Lacanian psychoanalysis takes from Freud the idea of the forbidding Father (with a capital F, because this figure is a structural position rather than the actual person who roams with the kids or helps them do their homework). Lacan is enough of a Freudian to retain the idea that children want everything (including their mothers). The lynchpin of the culture they must learn to obey is the Father, who says 'no' to most of what they want (especially their mothers). Lacan inscribes this point in a pun that works only in French. When we learn language, we submit to the Non/Nom that the Father bequeaths us, his 'no', as well as his name.

In a sense, 'good' subjects take on both, inheriting the Father's values along with his name, which is to say, we take up a place in society on condition that we reproduce its signifying practices, derived from the big Other. Lacan calls this the symbolic order: 'symbolic' because signifiers are symbols; 'order' because language is a discipline that recruits and forbids in one breath.

Venus

Lacan would have approved of Titian's Venuses. I once went to an exhibition of Titian's paintings, with no particular expectations,
except that it would be pleasurable. In the event, I walked slowly round the gallery in a daze, came out at the end of the exhibition, and immediately joined the queue to go round again. I had never seen so much desire in a single space. Even the portraits seemed to stare wistfully out of the canvases, at an angle to the spectator, as if they could see something in the distance that they couldn’t have and we couldn’t name.

*Venus Blindfolding Cupid* shows the goddess of love punishing her son for shooting his arrows apparently at random. Ironically, her action is only likely to make things worse: a blind Cupid will surely act even more anarchically. But Venus does not appear to be concentrating on her task. She looks off to the left, apparently at nothing in particular, her expression suggesting that her daydream does not give her much satisfaction.

Meanwhile, the other winged putto looks sadly over her shoulder, perhaps pitying Cupid, or possibly foreseeing his own fate.

Maybe Venus herself is the victim of Cupid’s arrow here. It wouldn’t be the first time. In Shakespeare’s narrative poem *Venus and Adonis*, she falls in love with the beautiful but indifferent Adonis, who prefers hunting. The poem draws attention to the paradox of her role: ‘She’s love, she loves, and yet she is not loved’. As the goddess of love, Venus is not only the supreme object of desire, but its subject too, capable of more than mortal longings. The poem ends by making the story into a fable of the origin of desire’s pain. Disappointed, Venus curses love, and as the personification of the condition, she has the power to make her curse come true. From now on, she announces, passion will always be full of anguish.

Lacan thought so too. There is, he insisted, no such thing as perfect sexual rapport. But the desire he saw as an inevitable component of the human condition was necessarily erotic. In Lacanian theory it is not some fundamental sexual imperative that motivates desire, but the *loss of the real*, which leaves an *incompleteness*, a *lack*. We can see, Lacan argues, how sexual relationships come to ‘occupy’ the field of desire, since they involve the signifier at its most lyrical, as well as the organism at its most sensitive, but they are not its source. Indeed, they are not its
Jacques Lacan, 1901–81

Psychoanalyst who radically reinterpreted Freud in the light of linguistics and anthropology. His *Écrits* (1968) are extraordinarily elusive, cryptic, and dense at first reading. Lacan’s annual Seminars, conducted in Paris from 1953–4 onwards, have been gradually appearing in print, first in French and then in translation. These are less obscure, but only marginally so.

The writings and these oral deliveries were addressed to psychoanalysts, whose job it was, Lacan believed, to listen extremely attentively to what their patients said. The role of the analyst is to hear the voice of the unconscious, which makes itself audible through the censorship of consciousness in riddles, allusions, elisions, and omissions. Lacan’s own riddling manner mimics the utterances of the unconscious.

For his admirers, the style makes his texts themselves into objects of desire. ‘This time,’ I always think, ‘I’m going to get it straight.’ If only.

But it becomes easier. And it is worth it. Lacan was enormously well read and highly intelligent. His incidental comments on painting, architecture, tragedy, for instance, are often worth whole volumes of more ponderous scholarship.

solution either, since the signifier and the organism often pull in different directions.

Perhaps in the end the most compelling passion, the one that is never satisfied, is the desire for knowledge, the longing to push back the limits imposed by the symbolic order.

Strangers to ourselves?

Facing exile, Thomas Mowbray in Shakespeare’s *Richard II* complains that in a foreign country his tongue will become like a musical instrument that has lost its strings.

Julia Kristeva’s book *Strangers to Ourselves* is about foreignness. It begins with a moving, poetic account of what it’s like to be an immigrant, cherishing ‘that language of the past that withers without ever leaving you’. You improve your skills in the new language, but it’s never quite *yours*, and you lack the authority that goes with unthinking fluency. You are easy to ignore, and thus easily humiliated. Increasingly foreign to those you have left behind as well, you become a kind of cultural orphan, never *at one with anyone anywhere*.

At the same time, immigrants may suddenly find the prohibitions they have grown up with suspended as the power of the symbolic order is lifted. ‘They become liberated’, other than they are. But are they freer? Or just more solitary?

Why do we fear foreigners, people from other cultures, asylum seekers? Well, for one thing, they demonstrate that there are alternative ways to be, that our own ways are not inevitable, and therefore not necessarily ‘natural’. Disparaging the others seems to make some people feel better. Besides, the encounter with foreigners calls into question the ‘we’ that is so easily taken for granted.

This badly needs to be called into question, Kristeva concludes. Psychoanalysis indicates that we are all foreign to ourselves. In the first place, there is something everyone has left behind:

A child confides in his analyst that the finest day in his life is that of his birth: ‘Because that day it was me – I like being me, I don’t like being an other.’ Now he feels other when he has poor grades – when
he is bad, alien to the parents' and teachers' desire. Likewise, the unnatural, 'foreign' languages, such as writing or mathematics, arouse an uncanny feeling in the child.

And in the second place, we are all inhabited by a stranger, whose ways are unknown to us, and contest the values we (think we) take for granted:

The foreigner is within us. And when we flee from or struggle against the foreigner, we are fighting our unconscious - that 'improper' facet of our impossible 'own and proper'.

In these circumstances, one object of desire, especially familiar in a colonial and postcolonial world, is identity itself. Many people, especially those subject to a history of imperial oppression, experience a longing to belong. And who, in a globalized world, is not at the mercy of institutions, corporations, a language defined or controlled elsewhere? Since the 19th century, nationalism has offered to restore a true identity that has been all but erased.

Jacques Derrida considers this issue in Monolingualism of the Other, first published in French in 1996. His own special case is French Algeria, where he grew up as a Jewish child in the 1930s. Ironically, Arabic was taught in the schools there as if it were a foreign language. Hebrew, meanwhile, was not taught at all. French was the young Derrida's first language, although this too was the property of others: it belonged in the faraway country of France.

And yet, in a sense, Derrida argues, his own case was exemplary for all of us. Culture is always 'colonial', in that it imposes itself by its power to name the world and to instil rules of conduct. No one inhabits a culture by nature. As a matter of definition, no culture comes naturally. We are all exiles. Moreover, the culture we belong to is never beyond improvement, never quite what it should be.

Don't nationalists identify with the nation as it once was, or as it one day might be? Isn't perfect identity always the property of others?

At the same time, in the current world order we do well to remember that not all exiles are politically equivalent. Some people are more exiled than others . . .

Scandal

With Kristeva's proposition that we none of us know quite who we are, with Derrida's affirmation of our inevitable exile, Lacan's view that our dissatisfaction is structural, and Foucault's emphasis on resistance, poststructuralism has tended to have a certain radical edge. But no aspect of it has been more scandalous than its account of the subject. Constructed to a high degree by the big Other, subjected by meanings outside its control and even its consciousness, divided against itself as the effect of a loss, the subject of poststructuralism is neither unified nor an origin, and is thus a far cry from the unique individual who has traditionally represented humanity in the Free West. Western institutions, electoral systems, and the economy all assume that human beings are the independent source of meanings and choices. The freedom prized so highly is freedom to be whatever consciousness makes of us. In other words, Western 'common sense', itself a cultural construct, conspires to convince us that we are what we think.

The belief goes back nearly four centuries to René Descartes, the philosopher who affirmed, 'I think, therefore I am'. In a quest for the ultimate truth, Descartes set out to strip away any beliefs he could not be certain of. He was left with one conviction which, he claimed, could not be doubted: that, as the person doing the doubting, he at least must exist. On that basis, he was able to rebuild a philosophical system which, he insisted, owed nothing to outside authorities.
The Cartesian cogito played a major part in promoting the scientific and rational development of the Enlightenment in the 18th century. These days, most philosophers would have some reservations about Descartes, but his famous phrase has become part of current Western common sense. Its effect is to conflate the self with what thinks. To become primarily a consciousness, and that consciousness, in turn, is seen as the origin of 'my' ideas and values.

Poststructuralism, I have already suggested, questions the view that consciousness is an origin, treating it rather as an effect of signification. I owe to the big Other the meanings and differences that permit me to think at all. Psychoanalysis deepens the scandal by redoubling consciousness with unconscious processes that exercise other determinations, according to an agenda we don't even recognize. The free individual is no longer either individual or free.

Mind and body

Descartes believed that, whereas he was a mind, he had a body. The two were radically distinct from one another. The organism had its own mechanical processes and reflexes, but reason was wholly independent of physiology. If we now take for granted that psychological tension causes headaches, or stress affects our immune system, we owe that recognition in part to psychoanalysis, which as early as the 1890s began attributing physical symptoms to unconscious desires.

But psychoanalysis does not on that account settle for the idea that a human being is best understood as an undifferentiated 'whole'. On the contrary: the relation between the organism and the subject is an uneasy one, to the degree that we become subjects at the price of an organic loss. This loss is not simply a single event in the past, but repeats itself throughout human life, and we subsist, as an uneasy confluence of organic impulses and cultural values, each at the expense of the other.

The term 'subject', then, is not just a jargon word for 'self'. While what we mean by 'the self' (or 'person' or 'individual') is generally the whole package, the subject is divided both within itself and from the organism. As what speaks or writes, the subject is, on the one hand, conscious (rational, deliberate), and on the other hand, unconscious (motivated by desires that make themselves known only indirectly in dreams, slips, jokes, or symptoms). What is more, unconscious desires frequently conflict directly with conscious wishes: that is why they are not admitted to consciousness. Meanwhile, this composite subject is inseparable from the body – when the organism dies the subject ceases to exist – but at the same time, it is distinguishable from the body, if only to the extent that each is conceivable only at the price of the loss of the other. As pure organism, I would not be a subject. At the same time, I cannot ever be pure subject, because I remain an organism.

We are born human beings, in that we are the offspring of two human parents; we become subjects as a result of cultural construction and what culture represses, namely, the lost but inextricable real.

It's a hard life

With all these divisions in place, it's not much fun being a subject, at least some of the time, for any of us. No wonder, then, that Abel Barbin decided he had had enough.

Hercule's body was more masculine than feminine; but as a subject, her cultural construction was more feminine than masculine. Falling in love, bringing the subject and the organism into joint action, created a crisis. Assigned to what the doctor called his true sex on the basis of his body, Abel was required to create a new subjectivity overnight. It couldn't be done, and he became confused, incoherent, depressed. If psychoanalysis is right about the unconscious, we none of us know quite what we mean when
we say T. Abel had this problem to the power of ten. Life in such circumstances seemed unliveable, and he put an end to it.

Oppositions

As the last paragraph makes particularly clear, using the oppositions the symbolic order provides makes some things impossible to say with any accuracy. We cannot do justice to Herculein/Abel's story in terms of the names or pronouns on offer. How should we name this figure who, to compound the confusion, calls herself Alexina in her memoir? And should we say 'he' or 'she'? 'his' or 'her?' I have uncomfortably used the feminine forms for the early life and the masculine forms for the period after the reassignment. But the two stages were not in practice as clearly distinct as that.

The hermaphrodite, Jacques Derrida might say, deconstructs the opposition between masculine and feminine, just as psychoanalysis, I would want to add, deconstructs the opposition between mind and body.

But deconstruction is another story, and deserves a new chapter, beginning with the relationship between difference and truth.

Chapter 4

Difference or truth?

Objective knowledge?

Jeanette Winterson's novel Written on the Body has an unnamed narrator whose gender is never revealed. Since this is a love story, the question is, you might think, material. The other central figure is a woman. Is this relationship heterosexual or lesbian? The novel doesn't say, though it drops hints that point sometimes this way, sometimes that.

Some readers, resisting the Death of the Author, argue that since the book is written by a woman, the narrator must be a woman. They presumably ignore the fact that 300 years ago Daniel Defoe impersonated a woman in Moll Flanders, or that substantial parts of Dickens's Bleak House are recounted by Esther Summerson. Emily Bronte, meanwhile, included narrators of both sexes in Wuthering Heights, beginning by impersonating Mr Lockwood. The difference is that in the modern (or postmodern?) novel, we can't be sure.

Sometimes it's genre that's in question. Toni Morrison's Beloved centres on a woman whose dead baby returns to disrupt her world. Are we to take this child's existence literally, or is she a psychological projection, a way of acknowledging the implications for the African-American present of the unresolved past of slavery? Is the novel