SAUSSURE AND THE APPARITION OF LANGUAGE: THE CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

By Samuel Weber

When faced with a given position, the Germanic player (Tarrasch, Maroczy, Schlechter) tends to ask himself this question: How is this position like every other position? The Russian tends to ask: How does this position differ from every other position?

N. I. Grekov, Soviet Chess

A sign for de Saussure is twofold, made up of a concept (signifié) and an acoustic image (signifiant), both psychical entities. Without the concept, he says, the acoustic image would not be a sign. The disadvantage of this account is, as we shall see, that the process of interpretation is included by definition in the sign!

Ogden/Richards, The Meaning of Meaning

In a recent article J. Hillis Miller discusses a problem that seems destined to play an increasingly important role in contemporary American literary theory and criticism:

The assimilation of new work in one language by readers of other languages tends to be delayed by the time it takes for the work to become well enough established to make the labor of translation seem desirable and economically feasible. Kojève's book on Hegel, for example, was a good many years ago assimilated into the development of 20th-century thought. It has just now been published in English and will have a new life in the context of current American revival of interest in Hegel.¹

The temporal delay to which Miller refers, becomes all the more crucial when it no longer simply separates "work in one language" from its "assimilation" into another, but rather marks the radical separation of that original work from itself. And yet, this is pre-

¹"Deconstructing the Deconstructers," Diacritics, Summer 1975, p. 25.

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cisely the case of that movement of thought conveniently, if impre-
cisely, labelled "Structuralism." Its reception in English, beginning
in the mid-sixties, has coincided with its decline and even demise, at
least in the French-speaking world, where it developed its most
sweeping claim to be a coherent and comprehensive system of de-
scription and analysis. Today it would be easier to find "struc-
turalists" in Copenhagen, Tartu or Providence than in Paris, where
the term is liable to be taken as an insult rather than an honor. This
state of affairs, while important in situating our own reception of
Structuralism as being, in some sense, a posthumous one, should
not be misconstrued as providing a judgment of the movement it-
self. What it does suggest, however, is that the significance of Struc-
turalism may reside more in the effects and disruptions it has pro-
duced than in its attempts to impose itself as a positive system of
thought. If the brief life of Structuralism, at least in France, will
prove to have been as necessary as the transformations which it has
undergone, then this cannot but influence the manner in which we
approach it today, after the fact. We will have to pose the question
of the structural instability of Structuralism, thus envisaging at least
the possibility that its rapid transformation has been the result not
of extraneous events but of its innermost impulses.

In the aftermath of Structuralism, then, and on the eve of its
assimilation—a certain assimilation—into the American universe of
discourse, let us attempt to reopen the question of the structure of
Structuralism by returning to the one text which by common con-
sent forms the seminal work of the movement: Saussure's *Cours de
linguistique générale*, first published in 1916, three years after Saus-
sure's death, and translated into English in 1959. Already in its
very form, Saussure's *Cours* posed what was to be one of the chief
concerns and problems of Structuralism: the status of systematic
theory. For the editors could not simply rely on the relatively scanty
lecture notes left by Saussure in reconstructing what they hoped

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2"Perhaps something has occurred in the history of the concept of structure that
could be called an 'event' [having] the exterior form of a rupture and a redoubling,"
writes Jacques Derrida at the beginning of "Structure, Sign and Play" (reprinted in
The Structuralist Controversy, Baltimore, 1972, p. 247; the French text is to be found
in *l'Ecriture et la différence*, Paris, 1966). The profound indebtedness of this article to
the writings of Derrida in general, and in particular to his reading of Saussure in *De
la grammaïologie* (Paris, 1966), is here gratefully acknowledged.

3Course in General Linguistics, (New York, 1959) translated by Wade Baskin; page
references will be to this edition, although I have taken the liberty of retranslating
wherever necessary.
would comprise "an organic whole" (xv); they also consulted the notes of his students in producing "this work of assimilation and reconstruction." No doubt that their labor of assimilation, whatever its deficiencies of detail, was faithful to the intention of the Geneva linguist. And yet it is no less doubtful that the difficulty of "assimilating and reconstructing" the thought of Saussure derived not simply from the actual absence of a coherent manuscript but from the texture of that thought itself. Let us attempt to unravel some of its strands.

What vitiates much discussion of Saussure is the tendency to reduce the Cours to a body of propositions concerning the nature and function of language while disregarding the context within which that thought defines itself. This context is unmistakably indicated in the very first words of the Cours:

The science that has been developed around the facts of language passed through three stages before finding its true and unique object. (p. 1)

If Saussure begins—in the simulated diachrony of the Cours—in this manner, by describing the history of the science of language, it is no accident. For his founding and unwavering concern will be to establish linguistics as an authentic and rigorous science. And if this seems so self-evident as to be trivial, it nonetheless determines the entire movement of thought articulated in the Cours. More immediately, it defines the central problem to be dealt with: the delineation of the "true and unique object" of linguistics, something hitherto neglected by his predecessors. "Without this elementary operation, no science can develop a method." (3) But if scientific method depends upon the prior identification of its object, what does this identification depend upon? It is in his response to this question that Saussure begins to delineate the specific problematics of linguistics, as opposed to sciences based on observation. For if an autonomous science requires an "integral and concrete" object, then the first thing to be recognized in dealing with language is that it does not offer such an object to mere perception. The phenomena of language do not present a unified aspect to the observer. The object of language is not accessible to empirical perception. If "other sciences work with objects that are given in advance," this is not the case of linguistics. Where the science of language is concerned, "far from the object preceding the point-of-view, it would seem that it is the point-of-view which creates the object." (8)
This assertion marks out the epistemological space of Saussure's theoretical effort, and to neglect its far-reaching implications has inevitably meant to misconstrue the status of his arguments. Thus, the celebrated distinctions of language (le langage), the language-system (la langue) and speech (parole), are not to be taken as descriptions of observable aspects of language: they are products of a point-of-view seeking to construct its object in a manner which will enable linguistics to establish itself as an autonomous science; that is, as a self-contained and coherent system of analysis and classification. If neither language in general—"le langage"—nor speech are considered by Saussure to be the privileged objects of linguistics, this is the result of a point of view which includes a notion of what science ought to be no less than a desire, an intention, to limit language to those aspects which are accessible to scientific study.

This applies neither to the totality of language nor to speech: both are hybrid phenomena and lack the unique and unified essence that an authentic science requires from its object. Language as a whole is "many-sided and heterogeneous," involving the physical, physiological and psychical domains, pertaining at once to the individual and the social; it eludes definitive classification, "for we cannot discover its unity." (9) Speech, on the other hand, involves equally a variety of factors—including the psychical-physical aspects of phonation no less than the individual volition of the speaker—all of which "have no place in linguistics except through their relation to the language-system." (18) By contrast, only la langue, the language-system, can be construed as being "a self-contained whole" (9), and, hence, as endowing language as such with "unity". (11)

The attributes of the language-system include, first of all, its homogeneity, as opposed to the hybrid character of language and speech. Secondly, it is "the social side of speech, outside the individual," (14) ratified by collective consent or convention. Thirdly, both its homogeneous and social aspects are concretized in its character as a system of signs, "in which the only essential thing is the union of meanings and sound-images," which Saussure will go on to term the signified (signifié) and the signifier (signifiant). And

*I prefer to translate la langue by language-system rather than, as Baskin does, simply by language—although neither term is entirely correct—for reasons which will become apparent in the course of this essay.*
finally, although it is a theoretical construct, the language-system, as a system of signs, has a tangible reality.

Thus, the semiotic aspect of language, while constituting only part of the larger whole of linguistic phenomena in general, is what endows language with its essential properties. This essence of language, however, is not limited to language, for it is part of a more general realm of semiotics; hence, from this determination of the semiotic essence of language it follows that “the linguistic problem is above all a semiological one.” (17) And yet, if language, or rather “linguistics, is only a part of the general science of semiology,” (16), it is nonetheless a privileged part, for “nothing is more suited (plus propre) than the language-system to render intelligible the nature of the semiological problem.” (16) To escape the vicious aspects of this “circle,” Saussure proposes to study “the language-system itself,” uncontaminated by “other things, other points of view.”

If this brief recapitulation of Saussure’s opening remarks, in which his overall theoretical project is delimited and his notion of language adumbrated, is useful, it is so for at least two reasons. First of all, it displays with clarity certain aspects of what, some fifty years later, will become fundamental tenets of Structuralism, and which include: i) the rejection of mere empirical observation or data as inadequate in establishing the object and method of science; ii) the tendency to construe science as a mode of description and of classification, as a taxonomy involving a semiotic system conceived as a closed, homogeneous and discrete medium; iii) the conviction that the laws which govern the functioning of the sign-system are independent both of the individual subjects participating in it and of the specific material embodiment of the sign; and finally, iv) the assertion that the object of semiotics is dependent upon a prior point-of-view, involving a certain conception of the structure of science and of its object. If this last aspect defines the possibility and necessity of structural linguistics, at least for Saussure, it also—and this brings us to our second point—opens the question of the status of this inaugural and constitutive point-of-view. It is this question, or rather the manner in which Saussure appeared to ignore its implications, that aroused the ire of Ogden and Richards in *The Meaning of Meaning*:

This author (Saussure) begins by inquiring, “What is the object at once integral and concrete of linguistic?” He does not ask whether it has one,
he obeys blindly the primitive impulse to infer from a word some object for which it stands, and sets out determined to find it.  

Yet, even if one had never read a word of Saussure, who perhaps more than any of his contemporaries had a profound distrust both of traditional linguistic discourse, and of the word as a linguistic form, the very strictures of his nominalist critics should have raised certain doubts as to the imputed "blindness" of the Geneva linguist. After condemning him as a naive realist, Ogden and Richards conclude that he was not realist enough:

Unfortunately, this theory of signs, by neglecting entirely the things for which signs stand, was from the beginning cut off from any contact with scientific methods of verification.  

We will have occasion to return to the "blindness" of Saussure's point-of-view.  

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It is, of course, his elaboration of the semiotic system of language which remains the distinctive feature of Saussure's linguistic theory. Yet to get at the specific originality of his conception it is first necessary to clear away some dead wood, which, despite its being dead—or perhaps because of it—has proved to be a persistent obstacle in obscuring the nature of that originality. One of the best known and most quoted features of Saussure's semiotic theory is doubtless the one in which he is also the least innovative: that of the "arbitraire du signe." For inasmuch as this notion is simply held to state that the signifying material of the sign bears no intrinsic or natural resemblance to what it signifies, it subscribes to the most venerable traditions of Western thought concerning the nature of the sign. Already implicit in the writings of Plato, the notion of the arbitrary relation between sign and signified becomes quite explicit in Aristotle. In his tractatus, "On Interpretation," for instance, he writes:

Spoken words are the symbols of psychic states and written words the symbols of spoken ones. Just as all men do not have the same written language, so they do not have the same spoken one, whereas the psychic

*Ibid., p. 6.
states that these expressions directly designate are identical for all men just as are the things reflected in those states. (16a)

Although he does not mention it explicitly, Aristotle clearly implies the arbitrariness of linguistic signs by distinguishing two kinds of relationship of representation or symbolization: on the one hand, that of resemblance, obtaining between things and psychic states, which is natural and universal; on the other hand, a relation of signification or designation, the arbitrariness of which is demonstrated by the multiplicity and nonuniversality of the different spoken and written languages. As opposed to the mental image of the things themselves, the linguistic sign, whether spoken or written, is thus non-natural and "arbitrary," and it is Aristotle who can thus be regarded as the first theoretician of the "arbitraire du signe." Moreover, as though to make matters worse, the Aristotelian model seems already to anticipate the Saussurian division of the sign into signifier (i.e. the spoken or written sign) and signified (the mental image). Saussure’s terminology, as Jakobson has pointed out, goes back to that of the Stoics, but the conception itself is virtually as old as Western philosophy. If there is something distinctively innovative in Saussurian semiotics, it will have to be sought elsewhere than in the notion of the arbitrariness of the sign, at least interpreted in a conventional manner. Let us return, therefore, to Saussure’s discussion of the “Nature of the Linguistic Sign.”

The chapter so entitled begins with a critique of the traditional conception of language as a nomenclature, a notion that Saussure finds entirely inadequate. The linguistic sign, he asserts, does not unite “a thing and a name, but a concept and an acoustic image,” (66) or, as he will go on to call them, a signified and a signifier. The discussion which follows, concerning the arbitrariness of the sign, its linear character, its mutability and immutability, is curious, because it does not indicate in what sense Saussure is challenging the notion of language as nomenclature. For if he is only concerned with replacing the extralinguistic referent by a mental representation—the “concept” or “signified”—this would by no means radically call into question the underlying category of denomination as the basic structure of the linguistic sign, no more than had the mainstream of Western philosophy from Aristotle to Hegel. For the fundamental category of that tradition has always been that of representation, with its logical and ontological implication of the priority of the thing named, as extralinguistic referent,
over the process of naming itself. In this view, what is named is held to be present to itself before all representation, as self-identical and constituted anterior to and independently of its designation by signs. The very notion of the arbitrariness of the sign, its non-naturalness, is only conceivable in contrast to a non-arbitrary relation of resemblance, such as that linking the thing represented to its mental image. The conception of language as denomination thus does not depend upon whether or not the sign designates the object directly, as in proper names, or mediately, via a mental image, the signified, but rather whether the designatum is construed as being constituted and self-identical prior to its representation through the sign.

In the chapters which follow Saussure’s initial rejection of the conception of language as nomenclature, the traditional model of language as representation remains unshaken. Saussure’s use of the notion of arbitrariness remains conventional and limited, designating only the fact that in each individual sign the specific composition of the signifier bears no intrinsic resemblance to the signified. Yet as a form or function, every signifier is by definition the signifier of a signified, whose identity is prior to the process of signification. Thus, despite or even by virtue of the theory of the “arbitraire du signe,” the formal conception of language as representation remains intact for the first 150 pages of the Cours, in which Saussure repeatedly defines the “concrete linguistic entity” as “the signifier of a certain concept,” of a meaning (un sens), which in turn “authorizes the delimitation” and determination of signifiers (104–5). Confronted by language we can only establish what a signifier is, its limits, because we know the meaning expressed; the signified, which is represented, enables us to delimit the signifier, which represents it—and not inversely. And since the concrete linguistic entity is thus dependent upon the meaning it represents, the latter is ontologically and linguistically prior to the former, which it “authorizes.”

Indeed, it is only when Saussure proceeds from his description of what the sign is—a concrete linguistic entity—to how it works, that this representational-denominational conception of language is put into question. And this step coincides with his introduction of the notion of “linguistic value.” As always, the significance of a theoretical innovation is inseparable from the context, problems and even conflicts which lead to it. The difficulty with which Saussure sees himself confronted will already be familiar to us, for it is nothing
other than the problem, where language is concerned, of sight itself: that of discerning just what comprises the "real objects" and "concrete entities" of a system, such as that of language, which eludes simple perception and yet which is, in some sense, the product of a point-of-view.

Nor is it entirely fortuitous that this problem of perception, or observation, of linguistic data is linked by Saussure to the verbal form itself, to the word. For if language is to be a transparent object of theory, the word will have to be—explicitly or implicitly—its privileged element. If language is to be transparent as the representation of meaning, its concrete reality will have to be situated in the word. And yet, when Saussure confronts this question, he finds the verbal form entirely incapable of providing the object he is seeking. The semantic unity of the word, he argues, conceals a variety of elements. The French word, "mois," can be pronounced in different fashions—as in "le mois de décembre" and "un mois après"—so that mwā and mwās, although the same word, can hardly be considered as being a single concrete or identical unit. Thus, Saussure concludes, the semantic unity of the word is too abstract to account for the concrete elements of language.

If there are, nevertheless, such elements in the language-system, which, however, are not directly perceptible, they emerge only when the linguistic entity is determined not with reference to a fixed meaning, but within another kind of system, that Saussure compares to a chess game, in which the identity of a particular piece is only intelligible in terms of its function within the whole. Identity thereby appears as a function of the position of the sign with regard to other signs, and Saussure names it "value." The notion of value thus comes to replace that of identity or entity for Saussure:

We see, then, that in semiological systems like language, where elements hold each other in equilibrium in accordance with fixed rules, the notion of identity blends with that of value and vice versa. (110)

Thus, without pretending to have disposed of the word as a linguistic problem—"for in spite of the difficulty of defining it, the word is a unit that imposes itself upon the mind (as) something central in the mechanism of language"—Saussure finds himself compelled to move beyond it in his search to disengage the essential and effective reality of language. And it is only in his elaboration of the notion of linguistic value that the elusive and imperceptible phenomenon of
language begins slowly to emerge. Out of the deceptive clarity of false appearances, language looms up as what Saussure calls "a system of pure values," as distinct from meanings as from sound. If Saussure has hitherto seemed to regard meaning as the arbiter of linguistic reality, his discussion of value begins to cast doubts upon the authority of this arbiter:

Psychologically our thought—apart from its expression in words—is only an amorphous and indistinct mass. Philosophers and linguists have always agreed in recognizing that without the help of signs we would be unable to distinguish two ideas in a clear and consistent fashion. Taken in itself, thought is like a nebula in which nothing is necessarily delimited. There are no preestablished ideas and nothing is distinct before the apparition of the language-system (l'apparition de la langue). (111–112)

It is worth remarking that here, precisely at the point where he seems to move decisively beyond the philosophical and linguistic tradition, Saussure feels obliged to invoke the authority of that very tradition to justify his move. That invocation should not, however, obscure the radicality of his conception. For if it is doubtless true, as he asserts, that "philosophers and linguists" have almost always concurred in attributing to language an indispensable function "in distinguishing two ideas in a clear and consistent fashion," they have still distinguished between the process by which ideas are distinguished from one another, involving language, and the process by which they are constituted in themselves, which has been construed as transcending language, de jure if not de facto. What Saussure is asserting here, by contrast, is not simply that language is indispensable for the distinction of ideas, but for their very constitution. For if "thought is like a nebula," apart from its articulation in language, and if there are no "preestablished ideas" antedating such articulation, then the traditional conception of language as the representation or expression of thought is undermined, at least implicitly. Far from meaning authorizing the delimitations of language, as Saussure had previously asserted, it would seem that language, on the contrary, makes possible the delimitation of meaning, since without language and "in itself, thought is like a nebula in which nothing is necessarily delimited." Meaning is therefore not constituted by the reference to extralinguistic entities, Aristotle's prágmata, but rather

7The French word, apparition, denotes primarily appearance, manifestation. If I have chosen to translate it as "apparition", the reasons guiding my choice will appear in due course.
in and through the semiotic process itself. Yet if this process can consequently no longer be conceived according to the traditional model of representation, how can it be conceived?

Before he attempts to respond to this question, Saussure complicates it by rejecting what might seem to be the most likely answer. For if the linguistic process is not grounded in its referential function, and if verbal discourse is regarded as in some sense the privileged part of the semiotic process, then it would seem plausible to situate that process within the material medium of that discourse, namely that of sound:

Confronted with this floating realm (of thought), can sounds in themselves be held to offer entities which are circumscribed in advance? No more so than ideas. Phonic substance is neither more fixed nor more rigid (than that of thought); it is not a mold into which thought must of necessity fit its forms, but rather a plastic material which in turn divides itself into distinct parts in order to furnish thought the signifiers it requires. (112)

Thus, if the phonic medium or material conforms to the needs of thought, this is not primarily by virtue of any intrinsic quality it possesses, but only as the material of the semiotic process of language. And this perhaps explains what has been one of the most controversial of Saussure's distinctions: that of the language-system and speech. For inasmuch as speech involves not simply the actualization of the language-process as such, but its determination or rather localization within the medium of sound, Saussure's distinction of langue and parole responds to his conviction that the process of linguistic articulation is not structurally related to the phonic medium. This is why any discussion of Saussure which equates "signifier" with acoustic or phonic image makes the mistake of identifying what for Saussure is a formal quality with a particular material embodiment.8

How, then, are we to describe or situate language? In any case,

8In order to eliminate the ambiguity which leads even Saussure to speak often as if "signifier" and "acoustic image" were identical—instead of the latter being simply one particular material embodiment of the signifier—the Danish linguist, Hjemslev, saw himself constrained to introduce a new distinction, that of "form" and "substance", in order to distinguish the particular material medium of signification—for instance, phonic—from the form of the signifier, which as such is bound to no single "substance". On this development see Derrida's discussion in De la grammaiologie, p. 84ff.
the model of representation—or, as Saussure writes, “expression”—will no longer do:

The characteristic role of the language-system with respect to thought is not to create a phonic and material means for the expression of ideas but to serve as an intermediary between thought and sound. . . . (112).

Language is not a representation or expression of thought by sound, but rather an intermediary. And yet this first attempt at a positive description of his object immediately involves Saussure in new difficulties. As opposed to the notions of representation or expression, in which one constituted sphere: sound, takes the place or stands for another: thought, the term “intermediary” suggests that the relation of the two is much more complex. However, if an intermediary is necessarily situated between two distinct spheres, it is evident that this can hardly be reconciled with Saussure’s description of those spheres as being entirely amorphous before and apart from . . . their “intermediary,” the semiotic process. Yet this is only an extension of a more radical problem: for if sound and thought lack all definition in themselves, are entirely inarticulate and unarticulated before the process of articulation, can they be held to “exist” as sound and thought? Inasmuch as Saussure asserts that language is indispensable not merely to the distinction, from without as it were, of thought and sound, but more radically to their constitution from within, his postulation of an independent sphere of sound and of thought, existing apart from language, becomes untenable. If “thought (is) chaotic by nature,” if it is forced “to determine itself by decomposing itself” through language, and if the same holds true for sound, then the attempt to define language as an intermediary, situated between these two chaotic elements becomes highly questionable. The “intermediary” of language must therefore be situated not between thought and sound, but among them. In conformity with the meaning of the word, “inter-,” language as intermediary, or as intermedium⁹ marks the intrusion of a

⁹Among the meanings of intermedium the O.E.D. lists: “1. Something intermediate in position; an interval of space. 2. Something intermediate in time; an interlude; an interval of time. 3. An intermediate agent, intermediary, medium; also abstr. intermediate agency, mediation.” The first two meanings are considered to be obsolete.

The confusion of the spatial and the temporal interval, combined with the fact that these meanings are historically obsolescent, renders the word an appropriate sign for the ambiguous position of la langue.
certain exteriority within the interiority of the medium, be it sound or thought.

Saussure is well aware that his description of language as intermediary involves something rather mysterious:

There is, therefore, neither materialization of thoughts nor spiritualization of sounds, but instead something rather mysterious, in that the "thought-sound" implies divisions and in that language elaborates its unities by constituting itself between (entre: also among) two amorphous masses. (112)

It is only at this point, vis-à-vis a certain mystery, that Saussure begins to disengage that "true and unique" object of linguistics: the language-system. By excluding the "extraneous" spheres of sound and sense, he appears to have paved the way for a rigorously autonomous science of language, delineating a space which will be uniquely linguistic. By not referring to anything outside of itself, the object that Saussure has isolated might appear to be self-identical. And, indeed, Saussure begins his discussion of this "object" in terms which would suggest its closed, self-contained and comprehensive quality. The name which he gives to this object is: value.

The idea of value ... shows us that it is an illusion to consider a term as simply the union of a certain sound with a certain concept. To define it thus would be to isolate it from the system of which it is a part; it would mean assuming that one can begin with the (individual) terms and construct the system as the sum (of its parts), whereas, on the contrary, one must begin with the whole in order to obtain, through analysis, the elements it comprises. (113)

Saussure thus introduces the notion of value in a context which would suggest that it involves a closed and autonomous system, a self-referential whole. And indeed this has been one of the aspects that has been used to identify Structuralism as a mode of holistic thought. However, the category of totality, as such, is entirely inadequate to characterize Structuralist thought—Hegel's celebrated dictum, Das Wahre ist das Ganze, does not make him a Structuralist. It is imperative to study the manner in which Saussure elaborates the "system of value," the crux of his conception of la langue. Can a system which is an intermedium involve a (w)hole?

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Saussure begins his discussion of linguistic value by distinguishing it from "signification":

When one speaks of the value of a word, one thinks in general and above all of the property it has of representing an idea, and indeed, this is one of the aspects of linguistic value. But if this is the case, how does this value differ from what is called signification? Are these two words synonyms? We do not think so, although it is easy enough to confuse the two, not so much because of the analogy of the terms as of the delicacy of the distinctions that they mark. Value, taken in its conceptual aspect, is doubtless an element of signification . . . and yet, it is necessary to elucidate the question of (their difference) if one is to avoid reducing language to a simple nomenclature. (114)

If "signification," despite a certain vagueness, appears to designate the representational, denominational, referential and semantic aspect of language, it is in elaborating his notion of "value" that Saussure will call that aspect into question. Not by rejecting it outright, but by reinscribing it in a process of articulation which it no longer dominates. For it is not signification, according to Saussure, which produces value, but value which enables language to signify. In order for signs to function as representations, they must delineate themselves with regard to other signs: "Its content is only truly determined in concurrence with what exists outside of it" (115). If the French word, "mouton," can be considered as having the same "signification" as the English, "sheep," their value is nonetheless distinct inasmuch as the usage of "sheep" is limited in English by the existence of the word, "mutton," which is lacking in French. We are thus confronted not "with ideas given in advance but with values emanating from the system." The ideational or "conceptual" aspect of signs is thus determined not as the representation of an extralinguistic meaning or of a referent, but as a quality which is purely differential, defined not positively by its content, but negatively by its relations with the other terms of the system. Its most exact characteristic is to be what the others are not. (116)

Without the interplay of differences, which constitutes the system of value, "signification would not exist." And if this is true of the significative function of language, it is no less applicable to the signifier than to the signified: "What is crucial in the word is not the sound itself," nor its meaning, but the "phonic (and semantic) differences that permit this word to be distinguished from all others, because these differences support its signification." (118)
It is only when this has been established that the full import and uniqueness of Saussure's notion of the "arbitraire du signe" begins to emerge. For "arbitrary and differential are two correlative qualities," according to Saussure, and this entirely transforms the traditional notion. Arbitrariness is no longer a notion governed by that of representation: it no longer designates the fact that the sign is composed of two dissimilar, heterogeneous elements—the signifier and the signified—but instead, points to something far more radical. If the sign is arbitrary, it is because the moment of identity in language, be it signifier or signified, is only conceivable as an after-effect of a play of differences in the "system" of value. The moment of difference is no longer localisable between two fixed elements, the signifier which represents, and the signified which is represented, for the simple reason that all determination, all fixation of identical elements, depends upon the differential relations of the system of value.

But what sort of a system does value, as difference, constitute? For Saussure, there is no doubt that the differential system of value is the only true object of linguistics, because it is the only one that is sufficiently homogeneous and uncontaminated by impure and extraneous elements to found the study of language as an autonomous and rigorous science.

And yet, if "in language there are only differences, without positive terms," (120), how are those differences to be determined, localised or delineated. As "pure" difference, value cannot be identified with any particular embodiment, either ideational or semiotic. The phonie medium of verbal discourse, which alone enables us to distinguish "language" from other systems of signification, can no longer be regarded as an essential aspect of semiotic value.

When I simply affirm that a word signifies something, and when I mean by that the association of an acoustic image with a concept, I am performing an operation that is, to a certain degree, exact and gives us an idea of the reality involved, but I am by no means expressing the linguistic fact in its essence and its scope. (117)

But where, then, are we to find the "essence" of the linguistic fact? And if it is determined as involving "differences without positive terms," can we justifiably limit its "scope" to the positive phenomenon of "language"? In other words, can we invoke the ideational and phonic material of a "system" of pure difference to limit that system? If "la langue" is "a form and not a substance," (122) can substantial elements be used to distinguish it from other "systems"?
In using the category of difference to determine what is most proper to the innermost essence of language, Saussure has inadvertently but decisively called that "essence" into question. The appearance of the language-system begins to resemble its apparition, not as intermediary but as intermedium. And this elaboration of the arbitrary quality of the sign in terms of the differential relations of value confronts Saussure once again with the crucial problem of delimiting the language-object, without which a science of language cannot hope to constitute itself.

* * *

The manner in which Saussure responds to this dilemma will prove decisive, not only for his own theory and for structural linguistics, but for Structuralism tout court. Repeating a gesture as ancient and as persistent as Western metaphysics itself, he endeavors to determine difference as opposition, but with an abruptness that testifies not so much to a solution of the problem as to its acuity. The theory of the intermedium becomes the intermedium, the interval of theory:

Everything that has been said previously indicates that within the language-system there is nothing but differences. Even more important: a difference generally supposes positive terms between which it is situated; but in language (la langue) there are only differences without positive terms... But to say that everything in la langue is negative only holds if the signified and the signifier are taken separately; once we consider the sign in its totality, we find ourselves in the presence of something positive in its kind... Although the signified and the signifier are, each taken separately, purely differential and negative, their combination is a positive fact; indeed, it is the only type of fact involved in language... Two signs, each comprising a signified and a signifier, are not different, they are only distinct. Between them there is only opposition. The entire mechanism of language, with which we shall be con-

10From the diacritical method of the Stranger, seeking thus to track and to trap the Sophist in Plato's dialogue of that name, to the dialectical "method" of determinate negation of Hegel, western philosophy has sought to constitute and to consolidate itself by mastering difference by specifying it as distinction or diversity (Hegel's Verschiedenheit, as opposed to Unterschied, which thereby is determined, and aufgehen, as Gegensatz, opposition). In the Sophist, the discussion of the status of difference, in which the celebrated partridge of Parmenides is performed, leads necessarily to the question of language and its relation to truth and untruth: that is, to philosophy. On the Sophist see the remarkable article by Jean-Luc Nancy, "Le Ventriloque", in: Mimesis, Des Articulations (texts by S. Agacinski, J. Derrida, S. Kofman, Ph. Lacoue-Labarthe, J.-L. Nancy, B. Pautrat), Paris, 1975, 271–338.
cerned, is based on oppositions of this kind and on the phonic and conceptual differences that they imply. (120–121)

Beginning with as radical and uncompromising a determination of the priority of difference over all positive categories in language—and at this point our translation of "la langue" by "language-system" becomes as problematic as Saussure's systematic intent itself—he suddenly invokes the complex "totality" of the sign in order to reintroduce a "positive" entity into la langue, involving not the indeterminable play of differences but determinate oppositions, which will now be considered as antedating ("implying") phonic and conceptual difference and, hence, as the basis of the "entire mechanism of language."

That this move is necessary, if there is to a science of language, at least considered as a description and classification of determinate differences, is undeniable. And the progress of Structuralist linguistics, above all in the field of phonology (or phonemics), attests to the fecundity of Saussure's move. However, what should be evident by now is that this move by no means ends the game, even if it was to prove decisive for many aspects of orthodox Structuralism, in which taxonomic description in terms of binary opposition becomes a privileged method of analysis. And yet, if the game has continued, it is because the limitation of difference to opposition is as arbitrary as the sign itself, which, according to Saussure, acquires value through the multiplicity of the differential relations it entertains with everything "outside and around" it. And if the relation of signification, the positive combination of signified and signifier in the "totality" of the sign, does, as we have read, involve an "assertion" which is not simply wrong, since it gives us "an idea of a reality," nothing in Saussure's previous analysis of value justifies elevating the positive "totality" of the sign to the basic element of the mechanism of language. Indeed, the sign taken as a whole—ultimately, the word—"in no way... expresses the linguistic fact in its essence and its scope." The play of differences, in and through which the signifier and the signified are determined, cannot be restricted to the interaction of individual, already constituted signs. Except, perhaps, by a certain "point-of-view."

* * *

"Far from the object preceding the point-of-view, one should say that the point-of-view creates the object." At the beginning of
the *Cours*, the point-of-view which guides its course seems simple enough: in order to establish linguistics upon a strictly scientific basis, it is imperative to delineate its veritable object. For a science to be autonomous, its object must be integral, homogeneous and self-contained, purified of all extraneous factors. However, this leads Saussure to identify the essence of language with the “system of pure values,” constituted by exclusively differential relations, “without positive terms.” Yet this very purity of language, as differential articulation, tends to dislocate its identity and to delimit its scope. For if the value of a linguistic sign, both as a whole and in its elements (signified and signifier), is determined by the network of relations and of differences with all that is “outside and around” it, how is it possible to circumscribe the interplay of differences or to confine it to a determinate space? The question of delineating the object of linguistics converges with that of the point-of-view of the linguist. What, then, is this point-of-view?

Saussure’s response is not simple: for there are two points-of-view, which, although not mutually exclusive, are nonetheless not simply different but opposed: “The opposition between the two points-of-view—synchronic and diachronic—is absolute and suffers no compromise.” (83) After his distinction of language from speech, Saussure now elaborates the “second bifurcation” of linguistics (98): synchrony and diachrony. These terms, which do not simply characterize an object in itself but the perspective and approach of a science in organizing its materials, are defined by Saussure thus:

Synchronic linguistics will be concerned with the logical and psychological relations linking coexistent terms and forming a system, such as they are perceived by an identical collective consciousness. Diachronic linguistics, on the contrary, will study the relations linking successive terms not perceived by an identical collective consciousness and which replace each other without forming a system among themselves. (99–100)

It is synchronic linguistics alone which will be able to describe the “laws” that govern the operation of language qua system. That is, only synchronic linguistics will study the *langue as langue*, as “a system of pure values determined by nothing outside of the momentary state of its terms.” (80) Synchronic linguistics, by organizing its material according to the simultaneity of its differential relations, *creates* the theoretical boundaries of the closed system of value, of the
langue as the totality of oppositions between its integral elements, the positive signs. The “laws” it describes are as necessary as they are precarious. They are necessary because they derive from the internal structure of the language-system; but they are precarious because they have no power to defend themselves against change, against diachronic “events” considered to be extraneous to the structure. These events are caused by speech, they are entirely “accidental and particular” (93)—one would be tempted to call them “arbitrary,” which Saussure does not—reflecting no law or significance outside of themselves, and yet they can have “imperative” force, altering first individual elements of the system, and thereby transforming the system as a whole. Diachronic events can force a system to change into another, but can never impose one of its own.

In order to elucidate this crucial distinction, Saussure employs the now celebrated comparison between “the play of language (le jeu de la langue) and a game of chess” (88). Saussure’s chess-game may not have found a place in the annals of chess, but it has certainly entered those of linguistics, and of Structuralism. And since he asserts that a chess-game is “like an artificial realization of what language presents to us in a natural form,” (88) let us follow his discussion of it:

First of all, a state of the game corresponds closely to a state of language. The respective value of the pieces depends upon their position on the chessboard, just as in language (dans la langue) each term derives its value from its opposition with all the other terms. (88)

And yet, already this first point of comparison raises the same question we have met in discussing Saussure’s reduction of linguistic difference to opposition: Is it permissible to describe the “position” of the respective chess pieces in terms of opposition? It might be, were it not for a problem which begins to emerge as Saussure proceeds in elaborating the comparison:

In the second place, the system is always momentary; it varies from one position to another. It is true that the values depend also and above all on an immutable convention, the rules of the game, which exist before the beginning of the game and persist after each move. This rule, accepted once and for all, also exists in language: it consists of the constant principles of semiology.

Here, despite Saussure’s intention, it is the difference rather than the similarity which is striking: for the laws of the language-game, those “constant principles of semiology,” obtain only in regard to its
discrete, synchronic states; the rules of chess, on the contrary, which are no less constant, to be sure, organize not the functioning of an isolated position but the transformation of one into another, which corresponds rather to diachronic events than to synchronous states. Let us see how Saussure attempts to resolve, or rather to avoid the problem:

The move of a piece is a fact which is absolutely distinct from the preceding and the succeeding equilibrium. The change effected pertains to neither of these two states; only these states are important. In a game of chess any particular position has the unique characteristic of being entirely detached (affranchie) from its antecedents; how one has arrived at it is a matter of total indifference. . . . In order to describe this position it is entirely irrelevant to recall what has happened ten seconds before. (89)

All this might be true if the state or position in a chess-game were, in fact, a single, self-contained entity, a purely synchronic state. That is, if chess were not what it is: a game, un jeu. Yet it is precisely its quality as game which tends to disappear in the Saussurean comparison. For, if the game of chess involves not merely the learning of its simplest rules, governing the movement of pieces, or even the characteristics of individual positions, but the study of entire strategies, it is first of all because what appears in Saussure’s discussion to be a self-identical “state” or position is structurally divided, split off from itself. For the significance of any particular position on the chess-board is inseparable from the fact that there are two positions involved, and that there is always the question of who has the next move? This small fact, involving nothing less than chess as game, disrupts the entire comparison of Saussure (and perhaps more as well). For it introduces the diachronic dimension of difference and alterity into what appears to be the closed system of the synchronic state; as part of a game, the position in chess is inherently both a response and an anticipation, involving the calculation of strategies which are neither entirely necessary nor entirely arbitrary.11

11A historical, “diachronic” event, which may be related to Saussure’s conception of chess, can be seen in the domination of the game’s theory and practice, during Saussure’s lifetime, by the so-called “New School” of Steinitz and Tarrasch, with its emphasis on “positional” play. This school of chess was soon to be challenged and supplanted by the more dynamic play of the Russian School of Chigorin and Alekhine, with its stress upon strategy, struggle and innovation. In the eyes of this school, “Steinitz and Tarrasch elevated their principles into infallible dogma without
Saussure is by no means blind to this diachronic aspect of the chess-game, and indeed, it is the sole point in which he admits that his comparison is deficient:

The chess player has the intention of operating a shift and effecting an action on the system; whereas language (la langue) premeditates nothing. The pieces of language are displaced, or rather modified, spontaneously and fortuitously. . . In order for the chess game to resemble the play of language in all points we would have to imagine an unconscious or unintelligent player. (89)

And yet even here, in his own evaluation, Saussure is not entirely in conformity with his “comparison”: in order for it to be similar, we would have to imagine not simply “an unconscious or unintelligent player,” but moreover one who was playing the game with himself. For what separates the game of chess, as game, most profoundly from Saussure’s synchronic system of language, is not the presence or absence of a conscious intention, but the unity and singularity of that consciousness. In order to be true to itself, and at the same time to be the true and proper object of linguistics, Saussure’s language-game would have to be one that plays with itself.

Which, strangely enough, is precisely what Saussure implies that it does, or at least tries to do. For in his comment on this final aspect of the comparison, in which he contrasts the conscious chess player with the unconscious participant in the language-game, Saussure concludes by emphasizing the autonomy of the synchronic state with regard to the linguistic subject:

If the diachronic facts are irreducible to the synchronic system that they condition when the change is intentional (that is, in the game of chess—S.W.), they will be even more so when they pit a blind force against the organisation of a system of signs. (127)

In a gesture which will become one of the hallmarks of Structuralism, the status of the conscious subject appears to be entirely subordinated to the operation of the semiotic system. And yet the

considering whether they applied in every given concrete position in its creative, dynamic development . . . Tarrasch’s most serious mistake was his failure to comprehend the dynamic nature of the struggle in chess, the unique process of transition from one stage of the game to the next. In every game of chess the players must repeatedly take concrete decisions, often based not on the principles but on exceptions to them.” A. A. Kotov: Shakmatnoe nasledie Alyokhina (Alekhine’s Chess Heritage), Moscow, 1953, 35–6 (cited by D. J. Richards, The Soviet School of Chess, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1965, pp. 138ff.)
ambiguities of this reduction of the subject, which persist in much of Structuralism—albeit unawares—are strikingly legible in Saussure, and nowhere more than in his discussion of the synchronic state. For, if we recall the passage already cited, in which Saussure distinguishes and defines the synchronic as opposed to the diachronic in linguistics, we must recognize that the opposition of coexistence and successivity is not sufficient to describe their difference. The simultaneous system of values must also be "perceived by an identical collective consciousness," whereas the diachronic series of terms is "not perceived by an identical collective consciousness." On this point Saussure never wavers. If the essence of language, the synchronic state of the language-system, la langue, is inaccessible to direct perception, it is, nonetheless, not merely the phantasm of the linguist, but a "reality" in its own right. And if one pursues the question of the status of this "reality," Saussure's response, although perhaps surprising, is unequivocal:

Synchrony knows only one perspective, that of the speaking subjects, and its entire method consists in gathering their testimony; in order to know to what extent a thing is a reality, it will be necessary and sufficient to discover to what extent it exists for the consciousness of subjects. (90)

This response is surprising, because the consciousness of the speaking subject has hitherto been identified not with the synchronic aspect of language but with its diachronic dimension, in which "everything derives from speech (la parole)" (98). And yet here Saussure asserts the contrary, since it is precisely the diachronic factor which acts as a "blind force," devoid of all consciousness.

Moreover, Saussure's description of the nature of this consciousness complicates matters even more. For the consciousness, which defines not only the structure of the synchronic state, but its priority over the diachronic, is none other than that of the "speaking subjects" or "masses," which Saussure has hitherto assigned to the hybrid and subordinate sphere of the parole. Now, however, these speaking subjects return in order to establish the priority of the synchronic aspect of the language-system:

On this point it is evident that the synchronic aspect takes precedence over the other, since for the mass of speakers it is the true and only reality. (90)

12I have endeavored to demonstrate some of the contours and consequences of the Structuralist repression—and the ensuing "return"—of the conscious subject as practiced by a contemporary critic of Proust. Cf. "The Madrepore", MLN, Vol. 87, No. 7 (1972), 915–961.
Thus, a remark that Saussure made at the very beginning of the *Cours*, and which his commentators have often interpreted as being superseded by his distinction of *langue* and *parole*, returns to resist efforts to explain it away; namely that "language (*la langue*) is not an entity and only exists in speaking subjects (5).

The question is crucial, because in determining the essential reality of language with reference to the consciousness of speaking subjects, Saussure also establishes the priority of the synchronic perspective for linguistics itself. If it is "the true and only reality" for the "mass of speakers," "the same is true for the linguist." (90) Indeed, the one follows from the other:

The first thing that strikes us when we study the facts of language (*langue*) is that for the speaking subject their succession in time is nonexistent: he is confronted with a state. That is why the linguist who wishes to understand this state must disregard everything that has produced it and ignore diachrony. He can enter the mind of speakers only by completely suppressing the past. The intervention of history can only falsify his judgment. (81)

We thus find ourselves confronted with a paradox in Saussure's argument: on the one hand, the language-system, as opposed to speech, is said to function independently of the consciousness and volition of the speaking subject; but on the other hand, the synchronic essence of that system, as opposed to its diachronic aspect, is defined precisely by its presence to the consciousness of the mass of speakers, to the identity of the collective consciousness of the linguistic community. It is only this reality for the speakers' consciousness that makes it accessible to that of the linguist as the true and proper object of the science of language. And indeed, it is only in linguistics that the identical collective consciousness of the language-community actualizes itself as self-consciousness, since in the individual speakers that consciousness is only present in a state of virtuality.\(^{13}\)

Yet if this actualization, if linguistics is possible, as a science, it is

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\(^{13}\)The "paradox" we are seeking to retrace in Saussure's argument is in no way alleviated by his distinction between the consciousness of the speaking subject, qua *individual*, which is said to choose and combine freely in the act of speech, and that of the *collective* mass of speakers, which forms the repository of the *langue*. For the paradox persists in the indeterminacy of the relation between the two subjects, individual and collective. If the latter is only obtainable, for the linguist, by the collection of individual linguistic "testimony", this "collected"/collective consciousness supposes an essential continuity between the individual speech-act, as product of subjective volition and consciousness, and the collective consciousness of the linguistic community, in which the *reality* of the language-structure is said to reside.
only by virtue of the fact that the linguist and the ordinary speaker both participate in the same reality of language. What, then, is the nature of this reality?

As we have seen, Saussure vacillates on this point. After determining value as a play of pure difference, one which becomes increasingly difficult to limit or to localize as specifically linguistic in nature, he redetermines linguistic value as opposition, obtaining in the relations not of individual signifieds and signifiers, but of whole signs. In thus redefining the basic and concrete linguistic entity as the totality of the sign, Saussure implicitly makes a judgment as to the fundamental “reality” of language. Historically, this supposition has been so widely held that it might appear to be entirely self-evident if Saussure’s own discussion of the nature of linguistic articulation had not put it into question. It involves nothing less than the conviction which is at the basis of the conception of language as representation, a conception that Saussure’s notion of difference strongly undermines: namely, that language is a means of understanding and of communication. Although he nowhere discusses this conception as such, it is clear that wherever Saussure affirms the point-of-view that regards language as a positive phenomenon—as a system of oppositions—he assumes it. In his discussion of syntax, for instance, which he holds to have no reality apart from the “sum of concrete terms,” he concludes that “the very fact that we understand (comprend) a linguistic complex . . . shows that this sequence of terms is the adequate expression of the thought.” (139)

And yet, if Saussure’s determination of the semiotic process, by which both thought and sound, or whatever the material of the signifier may be, become articulated, implies anything, it is that the play of differences, of language as intermedium, can only be limited by a point-of-view that is necessarily arbitrary, because it is itself ineluctably situated within the sphere of that play. Like every other articulated identity, the “point” of the synchronic point-of-view—whether that of the speaker engaged in communication or of the linguist—is an arbitrary after-effect of an interplay of differences that would seem to be intrinsically illimitable. And this, in turn, places the problem of diachrony, and Saussure’s critique of it, in a modified perspective; namely, in the modification of perspective itself. For if Saussure is critical of the historical bias of the school of comparative grammar founded by Bopp, it is because its lack of discrimination between synchronic and diachronic caused it to project a continuity onto linguistic transformations that ignored
that nature of *what* was being transformed. Against this, Saussure argues for the necessity of defining the point-of-view of the observer and its role in delineating its object. His delineation of that object, however, dislocates and displaces the pertinence of *every* point-of-view, including his own. What he describes and seeks to dismiss as the absurdity of the diachronic perspective, begins to emerge as the ultimate consequence of his theory of difference:

It would be absurd to attempt to sketch a panorama of the Alps by viewing them simultaneously from various peaks of the Jura; a panorama must be taken from a single point. The same applies to language: one can neither describe it nor fix norms of usage except by placing oneself in a single state. When the linguist follows the evolution of language, he resembles the moving observer who goes from one peak of the Jura to another in order to record the shifts in perspective. (82)

If Structuralism, and above all, Saussure, will have demonstrated anything in their course (*Cours*), it is that “one can neither describe” anything “nor fix norms of usage” except by assuming a single, fixed point-of-view, which, however, is in a constant “state” of motion that we can never entirely arrest. Saussure’s *Cours* describes the necessity of those “shifts in perspective” and thereby places Structuralism, long before its inception, already “beyond” itself, moving towards the heady air of *other* Alpine peaks:

“Thou shalt learn to comprehend the perspectival in every value-judgment; also the element of stupidity in regard to opposing values and the entire intellectual sacrifice with which every pro and con is bought. . . . Thou shalt see the problem of hierarchy with your eyes, and how the power and right and scope of perspective grow together to reach new heights. Thou shalt”—but enough, the free spirit now knows, which “thou shalt” he has heard and heeded, and also, what he now can do, what only now he—*dare* . . . .14

If Saussure begins and ends with the affirmation of the point-of-view, the “blind force” of his descriptions, very different from the simple blindness for which he was dismissed by Ogden and Richards, *points* towards the affirmation of perspective, towards that ineluctable necessity of seeing simultaneously from different points-of-view, which is most fully articulated in the texts of Nietzsche.

And yet if it is Nietzsche, who increasingly dominates that

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movement of thought in which Saussure, and perhaps Structuralism in general, will have survived, albeit transformed, its own demise, the rereading of the *Cours de linguistique générale* can help to guard against an “assimilation” which only reproduces what it pretends to discard. If “the intervention of history” is not to “falsify” our judgment, as Saussure feared it would, it will not be by excluding it from our “point-of-view,” but rather only by patiently retracing the manner by which it has shaped, and continues to determine and to limit “our” perspectives:

Would it not be possible, that the origin of our apparent “knowledge” (*Erkenntnisse*) is to be sought solely in *older value-judgments*, which have been so firmly incorporated that they have become part of our basic constitution? So that actually only *recent* needs now go hand-in-hand with the *result of the oldest needs*? . . . Our “dissatisfaction,” our “ideal” etc. is perhaps the *consequence* of this incorporated piece of interpretation, of our perspectival point-of-view. . . .

If this were so, then the affirmation of the ineluctability of perspectival and of interpretation would converge with the manner in which our very “own” point(s)-of-view have been shaped by a “blind force” of which we are perhaps only now becoming aware. “We cannot see around our corner,” but perhaps we can glimpse the corner from which we see. . . .

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15*Aus dem Nachlass . . .*, Werke III, 878–79.