

Contents

De Consolatione Philosophiae

Cogito Interruptus

Language, Power, Force

In Praise of St. Thomas

The Comic and the Rule

Cogito Interruptus

Some books are easier to review, to explain, or comment on aloud, than they are simply to read; because it is only by applying yourself to a gloss that you can follow their argumentation without distraction, their implacable syllogistic necessities, or the precise knots of relation. This is why books like the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle or the *Critique of Pure Reason* have more commentators than readers, more specialists than admirers.

And there are, on the other hand, books that are extremely pleasant to read, but impossible to write about: because the minute you start expounding them or commenting on them, you realize that they refuse to be translated into the proposition "This book says that." The person who reads them for pleasure realizes he has spent his money well; but anyone who reads them in order to tell others about them becomes furious at every line, tears up the notes he took a moment before, seeks the conclusion that comes after his "therefore," and cannot find it.

Clearly it would be an unforgivable sin of ethnocentrism to consider "not thought out" a Zen tale that follows ideals of logic different from those to which we are accustomed; but it is also certain that if our ideal of reasoning is summed up in a certain Western model, consisting of "whereas" and "inasmuch as," then in these unreviewable books we find illustrious examples of cogito interruptus whose mechanism we must bear in mind. Since cogito interruptus is common both to the insane and to the authors of a reasoned "illogic," we must understand when it is a defect and when a virtue, and (against all Malthusian custom) a fertilizing virtue, what's more.

Cogito interruptus is typical of those who see the world inhabited by symbols or symptoms. Like someone who, for example, points to the little box of matches, stares hard into your eyes, and says, "You see, there are seven . . .," then gives you a meaningful look, waiting for you to perceive the meaning concealed in that unmistakable sign; or like the inhabitant of a symbolic universe, where every object and every event translates into sign something hyper-Uranian that everyone already knows but wants only to see reconfirmed.

Cogito interruptus is also typical of those who see the world inhabited not by symbols but by symptoms: indubitable signs of something that is neither here below nor up above, but that sooner or later will happen.

The reviewer's torment lies in the fact that when a person stares at him and says, "You see, there are seven matches," the reviewer is already helpless to explain to others the scope of the sign or the symptom; but then when the same person adds, "And consider also, if you want to dispel any doubt, that four swallows flew past today," then the reviewer is really lost. None of this means that cogito interruptus is not a great prophetic, poetic, psychological technique. Only that it is ineffable. And it takes real faith in cogito interruptus—and a wish that readers

understand me—for me to venture to speak of it, no matter what. In discussions of the universe of mass communications and of the technological civilization, cogito interruptus is very fashionable among those whom, on other occasions, we have called the Apocalyptics, who see in the events of the past the symbols of a well-known harmony, and in those of the present the symbols of an inescapable fall (but always through clear references:

Every girl in a miniskirt is entitled to exist only as a decipherable hieroglyph of the end of the world). This view was unknown until today to the so-called Adjusted, who, on the other hand, do not decipher the universe but live in it without problems. Still the attitude is observed by a category we could define as the Hyper-Adjusted, or pentecostal Adjusted, or still better as Parusiacs, affected by the Fourth Eclogue Syndrome, megaphones of the golden age.

If the Apocalyptrics were the sad relatives of Noah, the Parusiacs are jolly cousins of the Magi. Recent Italian translations allow us to consider together two books that, in different ways and decades, have had a great success and are listed among the texts to be consulted for any discussion of contemporary civilization. Art in Crisis: The Lost Center by Hans Sedlmayr is a masterpiece of apocalyptic thought;

Understanding Media by Marshall McLuhan is perhaps the most enjoyable and successful text offered us by the Parusiatic school. The reader who deals with both of them is prepared for a dialectical kermesse, an orgy of comparisons and contradictions, in order to see how differently two men reason who see the world from such radically opposed standpoints; but instead he realizes that the two men reason in exactly the same way, and, what's more, they cite the same supporting arguments.

Or rather, they cite the same events, one seeing them as symbols and the other as symptoms, one enduring them with grim, lamenting significance, the other with a light-hearted optimism, one writing on paper edged in black, the other on a lacy wedding invitation, one prefacing it all with a minus sign, the other with a plus sign—both, however, neglecting to articulate equations, for cogito interruptus demands that symbols and symptoms be flung by the handful, like confetti, and not lined up, bookkeeper style, like little balls on an abacus.

Art in Crisis dates from 1948. Fairly removed historically from the days of wrath when they burned works of degenerate art, it still retains (we are discussing the book, not the author's biography) some fiery echoes. And yet anyone ignorant of Sedlmayr's position in the context of the historiography of ideas, reading the first chapters now, would find himself following a discussion (conducted sine ira et studio) of the phenomena of contemporary architecture, from the English gardens and Utopian architects of the Revolution, seen as supporting documents for a diagnosis of the period.

The cult of reason that generates a monumental religion of eternity, a taste for the mausoleum, whether gardener's house or museum, that reveals a search for chthonic forces, occult and profound relationships with natural energies, the birth of an idea of the aesthetic temple from which the image of a determined God is absent; and then, with Biedermeier, a move away from the great themes of the sacred and a celebration of the cozy, the private, the individualistic; and finally, the birth of those secular cathedrals, the Universal Expositions.

From the worship of God to the worship of nature, from the worship of form to the cult of technology: This is the descriptive image of a "succession." But the moment this succession is described as "decreasing," the diagnostic conclusion becomes a part of the description: Man is plunging downwards, because he has lost the center. If you are clever enough at this point to skip several chapters of the book, many traumata of reading will be eliminated, because in the concluding chapters Sedlmayr supplies the key to understanding the symbols he handles in the middle chapters. The center is man's relationship with God.

Once this affirmation is made (Sedlmayr, who is not a theologian, doesn't bother to tell us what God is, or what man's relationship with Him consists of), it becomes possible even for a child to conclude that the work of art in which God doesn't appear and in which there is no dialogue with God is a godless work of art. At this point there is a wealth of begged questions: If God is "spatially" up above, a work of art that you can look at even upside down (Kandinsky) is atheist.

To be sure, Sedlmayr would have only to interpret in another key the same signs that he singles out in the course of Western art (Romantic demonism, Bosch-type obsession, Brueghel grotesques, and so on) to conclude that man, in his whole history, has apparently done nothing but lose the Center. But the author prefers to cling to philosophemes worthy of the rector of a seminary, on the order of "in any case we must bear firmly in mind the principle that, as man's essence is one and the same in all times, so also that of art is one, however different its external manifestations may seem." What can be said to that?

Having defined man as "nature and supernature" and having defined supernature in the terms in which Western art depicted it for a certain period, the author obviously concludes that "this detachment is thus presented as contrary to the absence of man (and of God)"—inasmuch as the essence of both is deduced from a special iconographical interpretation that has been made of it once and for all.

But to arrive at these pages of laughable philosophy, the author has bid for the admiration of the literate masses and through some exemplary pages of tea-leaf reading.

How do you read tea-leaves? For example, you become terrified by the tendency of modern architecture to ignore the site, to confuse up with down, and your dejection reaches its nadir with the arrival of the cantilever, "a kind of materialistic canopy." The cantilever trauma pervades all of Sedlmayr's discussion: This horizontalization of architecture, which allows, between one floor and another, the emptiness of glass walls, this renunciation of vertical growth (except by the superimposition of horizontal levels) seems to him the "symptom of a negation of the tectonic element" and of "detachment from the earth." In terms of construction science, it never occurs to him that a skyscraper can stand up better than the apse of Beauvais, which kept collapsing until they had the idea of leaving it alone without adding the rest of the cathedral to it.

After identifying architecture as a special kind of relationship with the surface, Sedlmayr observes the breakdown of architecture and puts his head under his wing. The fact that some men built in spheres rather than cubes or pyramids, from Ledoux to Fuller, leaves him gasping; like the madman's seven matches, the spheres of Ledoux or Fuller seem to him unmistakable signs of the end of architectonic time. When it comes to

seeing in a sphere the epiphany of the loss of the center, Parmenides and Saint Augustine would not agree; but Sedlmayr is also prepared to switch archetypes in midstream if it will enable the events he chooses as symbols to mean what he has already known from the beginning.

As he moves on to the figurative arts, the caricatures of Daumier or of Goya seem to him the entrance of disfigured and demented man, as if Greek vase painters had not allowed themselves analogous pleasures and perhaps with less motive than the satirists of nineteenth-century progressivism. With Cézanne and Cubism, the clever reader will be able to anticipate the considerations Sedlmayr draws from this reduction of painting to a visual reconstruction of experienced reality; as for the rest of contemporary painting, the author is dazzled by apocalyptic signs such as the deformations "like those to be seen in a concave mirror" and photomontage, typical examples of "extrahuman views." There is no point in replying that, since I am the one who sees in the concave mirror, which I have made, I consider this way of seeing just as human as the cyclopic deformation of the Renaissance perspective box: This is old stuff.

But, for Sedlmayr, the image of chaos and death precedes the signs that he reports. Obviously nobody doubts that the phenomena listed by Sedlmayr really are the signs of something; but the task of the historiographer of art and of culture in general consists precisely in correlating these phenomena in order to see how they respond to one another. Sedlmayr's discussion, however, is paranoid because all the signs are made to refer back to an unmotivated obsession, philosophically alluded to; and therefore between the sphere that symbolizes detachment from the earth, the cantilever that exemplifies renunciation of ascent, and the unicorn that is the visible sign of Mary's virginity there is no difference.

Sedlmayr is a belated medieval man who imitates far keener and splendidly visionary decipherers. And the reason why his discussion is a distinguished example of cogito interruptus lies in the fact that having posited the sign, he nudges us, winks, and says "You see that?" And thus he identifies in three lines the trend toward the formless and the degenerate in modern science, and then (certifiable extrapolation) he deduces that the organ of degeneration is the intellect, whose weapons are symbolic logic and whose visual organs are microscopy and macroscopy; and, after mentioning macroscopy, Sedlmayr adds, in parentheses: "Here, too, note the loss of the center." Well, Professor Sedlmayr, I don't note; and you're cheating. If nobody else dares say it, I will: Either you must explain yourself or there is no difference between you and the man who tells me that the Ace of Spades means death.

Now let's open McLuhan. McLuhan says the same things as Sedlmayr: For him, too, man has lost the center. Only his comment is: High time. McLuhan's thesis, as everyone knows by now, is that the various achievements of technology, from the wheel to electricity, should be considered media and therefore extensions of our corporality. In the course of history these extensions have caused traumata, blunting and restructuring our sensibility. Interfering or replacing, they have changed our way of seeing the world, and the change that a new medium involves makes irrelevant the content of experience that it can transmit. The medium is the message; what is given us through the new extension matters less than the form of the extension itself.

Whatever you may write on the typewriter will always be less important than the radically different way in which the mechanics of typing will have caused you to consider writing. The fact that printing led to the

widespread diffusion of the Bible depends on the fact that every technological achievement is added to what we already are; but printing could have developed in Arab countries, to bring the Koran within everyone's reach, and the kind of influence printing has had on modern sensibility would not have changed: the shattering of the intellectual experience into uniform and repeatable units, the establishment of a sense of homogeneity and continuity that generated, at a distance of centuries, the assembly line, and presided over the ideology of the mechanical age, as well as the cosmology of infinitesimal calculation.

"Clock and alphabet, shattering the universe into visual segments, put an end to the music of interdependence"—they produced a man capable of dissociating his own emotions from what he sees aligned in space; they created the specialized man, accustomed to reasoning in a linear way, free with respect to the tribal envelopment of the "oral" epochs, where every member of the community belongs to a kind of undefined unit that reacts compactly and emotionally to cosmic events.

The press (to which McLuhan had dedicated perhaps his best work, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*) is a typically hot medium. Unlike what the adjective might suggest, the hot media develop a single sense (vision, in the case of the press) to a high power of definition, saturating the receiver with data, stuffing him with precise information, but leaving him free as far as his other faculties are concerned. In a way, the hot media hypnotize him, but fixing his sense on a single point. On the contrary, cool media supply information of low definition, oblige the receiver to fill in the gaps, and thus they engage all his senses and faculties, they make him a participant, but in the form of an overall hallucination that involves him completely. Press and movies are hot; television is cool.

With the advent of electricity certain revolutionary phenomena occurred: First of all, if it is true that the medium is the message, independently of content, then electric light was presented for the first time in history as a medium absolutely lacking in content; in the second place, electrical technology, replacing not an individual organ but the central nervous system, offered, as its primary product, information. The other products of mechanical civilization, in a period of automation, rapid communications, credit economy, financial operations, became secondary to the information product. The production and sale of information has overcome even ideological differences; at the same time the advent of television, the medium that is cool par excellence, destroyed the linear universe of mechanical civilization, inspired by the Gutenbergian model, reestablishing a sort of tribal unity, like a primitive village. Just as television does not foster perspective in art, so, according to McLuhan, it does not foster linearity in living.

"Since TV, the assembly line has disappeared from industry. Staff and line structures have dissolved in management. Gone are the stag line, the party line, the receiving line, and the pencil line from the backs of nylons." The visual sense, extended by phonetic literacy, stimulated the analytic habit of perceiving "the single facet in the life of forms" and enabled us to isolate the single incident in time and space, as happens with representational art. "Iconographic art," on the contrary, "uses the eye as we use our hand in seeking to create an inclusive image, made up of many moments, phases, and aspects of the person and thing." Such an "iconic mode" is not "visual," it is rather "tactual," total, synaesthetic, and involves all senses.

"Pervaded by the mosaic TV image, the TV child encounters the world in a spirit antithetic to literacy." The young people born with TV "have

naturally imbibed an urge towards involvement in depth that makes all the remote visualized goals of usual culture seem not only unreal but irrelevant, and not only irrelevant but anemic." It is abundantly clear that this kind of involvement has nothing to do with the content of TV messages; the quality of the program is irrelevant (chapter 31 of Understanding Media).

Speaking of automation (chapter 33), McLuhan insists on the fact that "our new electric technology now extends the instant process of knowledge by interrelation that has long occurred within our central nervous system." Such a phenomenon ends the mechanical age that started with Gutenberg. "With electricity as energizer and synchronizer, all aspects of production, consumption, and organization become incidental to communication."

This collage of quotations summarizes McLuhan's position and, at the same time, exemplifies his techniques of argumentation, which – paradoxically—are so illustrative of his thesis that they undermine its validity. We will try to make this clear.

Typical of our time, all-enveloping and shared, is the domination by cold media, one of whose properties, as we have said, is to present figures in low definition, not finished products but processes, and thus not linear successions of objects, moments, and arguments, but rather a kind of totality and simultaneity of the data involved. If this reality is transferred to methods of exposition, we will have discussion not through syllogisms, but through aphorisms. Aphorisms (as McLuhan reminds us) are incomplete and therefore require profound participation. Here his method of argumentation corresponds perfectly to the new universe in which we are invited to integrate ourselves—a universe that to men like Sedlmayr would seem the diabolical perfection of "loss of the center" (the notion of centrality and symmetry belong to the era of Renaissance perspective, supremely Gutenbergian), but for McLuhan it represents the future "broth" in which the bacilli of contemporaneity can develop to a degree unknown to the alphabet bacillus.

This technique, however, involves certain flaws. The first is that for every affirmation McLuhan aligns another, opposed to it, assuming both as congruent. In this way his book could offer valid arguments for Sedlmayr and for all the apocalyptic bunch as well as for the Adjusted & Co.; excerpts could be quoted by some Chinese Marxist who wants to excoriate our society; and there are demonstrative arguments for a theoretician of neocapitalistic optimism. McLuhan doesn't even worry about whether all his arguments are true; he is content that they be. What might, from our point of view, seem contradiction is, to him, simply copresence. But, since he is writing a book, McLuhan can't elude the Gutenbergian habit of articulating consequent demonstrations.

The consequentiality is Active, however; he offers us the copresence of arguments as if it were a logical succession. The speed with which he moves from the concept of linearity in business organization to the concept of linearity in the texture of a stocking is such that the juxtaposition cannot help but seem a causal nexus.

All McLuhan's book is there to prove to us that the "disappearance of the assembly line" and "disappearance of net stockings" must not be connected by a "therefore"—or at least not by the author of the message, but rather by the receiver, who will take care of filling in the gaps in this scantily defined chain. But the trouble is that, secretly, McLuhan wants us to put in that "therefore," also because he knows that, out of

Gutenbergian habit, as we are reading the two data lined up on the printed page, we will be forced to think in "therefore" terms. So he is cheating just as Sedlmayr cheats when he tells us that microscopy means loss of the center, and as the madman cheats when he points to the seven matches. McLuhan requires an extrapolation, and imposes it on us in the most insidiously illegitimate way imaginable. We are in full cogito interruptus, which would not be interruptus if, in consequence, it were no longer presented as cogito. But McLuhan's whole book rests on the equivocation of a cogito that is denied, arguing in the modes of denied rationality.

If we are witnessing the advent of a new dimension of thought and of physical life, either this is total, radical—and has already conquered—and then books can no longer be written to demonstrate the advent of something that has made all books purposeless; or else the problem of our time is that of integrating the new dimensions of intellect and sensibility with those on which all our means of communication are still based (including television communication, which, at the outset, is still organized, studied, and programmed in Gutenbergian dimensions) and then the critic's job (as he writes books) is to act as mediator, and therefore to translate the situation of enveloping globality into terms of a Gutenbergian rationality, specialized and linear.

McLuhan has recently realized that perhaps books must no longer be written; and with *The Medium Is the Message*, his latest "nonbook," he suggests a discourse in which word is fused with image and the chains of logic are destroyed in favor of a synchronic, visual-verbal proposition, of unreasoned data set spinning before the reader's intelligence. The trouble is that *The Medium Is the Message*, to be completely understood, needs *Understanding Media* as a code. McLuhan cannot elude the requirement of rational clarification of the process we are witnessing; but when he surrenders to that demand for cogito he is bound not to interrupt it.

The first victim of this ambiguous situation is McLuhan himself:

He doesn't just line up disconnected data and make us swallow them as if they were connected. He also makes an effort to present us with data that seem disconnected and contradictory while he believes them to be connected by logical operations, but he is ashamed of showing these operations in action. Read, for example, this excerpt, which we have complemented with numbered parentheses, in order to separate the various propositions:

"It seems contradictory that the fragmenting and divisive power of our analytic Western world should derive from an accentuation of the visual faculty.

(1) This same visual sense is, also, responsible for the habit of seeing all things as continuous and connected.

(2) Fragmentation by means of visual stress occurs in that isolation of moment in time, or of aspect of space, that is beyond the power of touch, or hearing, or smell, or movement.

(3) By imposing unvisualizable relationships that are the result of instant speed, electric technology dethrones the visual sense and restores us to the dominion of synesthesia and the close interinvolvement of the other senses."

Now, try rereading this incomprehensible excerpt, inserting at the indicated places these links: (1) In fact; (2) Nevertheless; (3) On the other hand. And you will see that the reasoning flows, at least formally.

But these observations still concern only the expositional technique. More serious are the instances where the author sets actual traps of argumentation that can be summed up in a general category definable in terms dear to those schoolmen that McLuhan, an old commentator of Thomas Aquinas, should know and imitate: the equivocation on the suppositio of the terms: or, equivocal definition, in short.

Gutenberg man and, before him, alphabet man had at least taught us to define precisely the terms of our speech. To avoid defining them in order to "involve" the reader further could be a technique (what else is the deliberate ambiguity of poetic discourse?), but in other cases it is a trick to throw sand in our eyes.

We won't go into the carefree change of a term's usual connotations: Thus hot means "capable of allowing critical detachment" and cool means "involving"; visual, "alphabetic"; tactile, "visual"; detachment, "critical involvement"; participation, "hallucinatory uninvovement"; and so on. Here we are still at the level of a deliberate regeneration of terminology for provocatory purposes.

Let us look, instead, as examples, at some more criticizable games of definition. It is not true that—as McLuhan says—all the media are active metaphors because they have the power to translate experience into new forms. In fact, a medium—the spoken language, for example—translates experience into another form because it represents a code. A metaphor, on the contrary, is the replacement, within a code, of one term with another, a simile established and then covered. But the definition of medium as metaphor also covers a confusion in the definition of the medium. To say that it represents an extension of our bodies still means little.

The wheel extends the capacity of the foot and the lever that of the arm, but the alphabet reduces, according to criteria of a particular economy, the possibilities of the sound-making organs in order to allow a certain codification of experience. The sense in which the press is a medium is not the same as that in which language is a medium. The press does not change the coding of experience, with respect to the written language, but fosters its diffusion and increments certain developments in the direction of precision, standardization, and so on. To say, as McLuhan says, that language does for intelligence what the wheel does for the feet (in so far as it allows us to move from one thing to another with ease and nonchalance) is little more than a boutade.

In effect, all of McLuhan's reasoning is dominated by a series of equivocations very troubling to a theoretician of communication, because the differences between the channel of communication, the code, and the message are not established. To say that roads and the written language are media is making a channel the same as a code. To say that Euclidean geometry and a suit of clothing are media means pairing a code (a way of formalizing experience) with a message (a way of signifying, through conventions of dress, something I want to say, a content). To say that light is a medium means not realizing that at least three definitions of "light" come into play here:

(1) light as signal (I transmit impulses which, in Morse code, then mean certain messages);

(2) light as message (the light burning in the girlfriend's window that means "come"); and

(3) light as channel of other communication (if, in the street, there is a light burning, I can read the poster on the wall).

In these three cases light performs different functions, and it would be very interesting to study the constants of the phenomenon under such diverse aspects, or to examine the birth, thanks to the three different uses, of three phenomena—light. In conclusion, the happy and now famous formula, "The medium is the message," proves ambiguous and pregnant with a series of contradictory formulas. It can, in fact, mean:

(1) The form of the message is the real content of the message (which is the thesis of avant-garde literature and criticism);

(2) The code, that is to say, the structure of a language—or of another system of communication—is the message (which is the famous anthropological thesis of Benjamin Lee Whorf, for whom the view of the world is determined by the structure of the language);

(3) The channel is the message (that is, the physical means chosen to convey the information determines either the form of the message, or its contents, or the very structure of the codes—which is a familiar idea in aesthetics, where the choice of artistic material notoriously determines the cadences of the spirit and the argument itself).

All these formulas show that it is not true, as McLuhan states, that scholars of information have considered only the content of information without bothering about formal problems. Apart from the fact that here, too, McLuhan plays on terms and uses the word "content" in two different definitions (for him it means "what is said" while for the theory of information it means "the number of binary choices necessary to say something"), we discover that the theory of communication, formalizing the various phases of the passage of information, has offered instruments useful in differentiating phenomena that are different and must be considered as different.

Unifying these various phenomena in his formula, McLuhan no longer tells us anything useful. In fact, to discover that the advent of the typewriter, bringing women into business firms as secretaries, created a crisis for the manufacturers of spittoons, simply means repeating the obvious principle that every new technology imposes changes in the social body. But in the face of these changes it is highly useful to understand whether they occur because of a new channel, a new code, a new way of articulating the code, the things the message says in articulating the code, or the way a certain group is disposed to receive the message.

Here, then, is another proposition: The medium is not the message; the message becomes what the receiver makes of it, applying to it his own codes of reception, which are neither those of the sender nor those of the scholar of communications. The medium is not the message because, for the cannibal chief, the clock is not the determination to spatialize time, but a kinetic ornament to hang around the neck. If the medium is the message there is nothing to be done (the Apocalyptics know this): We are directed by the instruments we have built.

But the message depends on the reading given to it; in the universe of electricity there is still room for guerrilla warfare: The perspectives of reception are differentiated, the TV station is not attacked, the attack is against the first chair in front of every TV set. It may be that what McLuhan says (and the Apocalyptics with him) is true, but in this case it is a very harmful truth; and since culture has the possibility of shamelessly constructing other truths, it is worth proposing a more productive one. In conclusion, three questions about the appropriateness of reading McLuhan.

Is it possible to understand Understanding Media? Yes, because even though the author seems to assail us with an enormous welter of data (Alberto Arbasino has splendidly suggested that this book was written by Bouvard and Pécuchet), the central information it gives us is still one and indivisible: The medium is the message.

The book repeats this with exemplary stubbornness and with an absolute fidelity to the ideal of speech in the oral and tribal societies to which it invites us: As McLuhan says, the entire message is repeated frequently on the circles of a concentric spiral and with seeming redundancy. Just one carp: The redundancy is real, not apparent. As with the best products of mass entertainment, the confusion of collateral information serves only to make appetizing a central structure that is unrelentingly redundant, so that the reader will receive always and only what he has already known (or understood).

The signs that McLuhan reads all refer to something that is given us from the start. Having read authors like Sedlmayr, is it worth reading authors like McLuhan? Yes, actually. True, if you reverse the signs, both say the same thing (namely, the media do not transmit ideologies; they are themselves ideologies), but McLuhan's visionary rhetoric is not lachrymose, it is stimulating, high-spirited, and crazy. There is some good in McLuhan, as there is in banana smokers and hippies. We must wait and see what they'll be up to next.

Is it scientifically productive to read McLuhan? An embarrassing problem, because you have to take care not to liquidate in the name of academic common sense someone who writes the Canticle of Sister Electricity. How much fertility is concealed behind this perpetual intellectual erection?

McLuhan does not confine himself to saying to us "Ace of Spades equals death," but he makes further affirmations that, though still kabbalistic, are of the type of "legs: eleven": in which case we do not have a totally unmotivated relationship, as in the former statement, but a certain structural homology. And the search for homological structures frightens only narrow minds and alphabets incapable of seeing beyond their own primers. When Panofsky discovered a structural homology between the plan of Gothic cathedrals and the form of medieval theological treatises, he tried to compare two *modus operandi* that give life to relational systems that can be described by a single diagram, a single formal model.

And when McLuhan sees a relationship between the disappearance of the Gutenbergian mentality and certain ways of conceiving organizational structures in a linear and hierarchical way, he is undoubtedly working on the same plane of heuristic happiness. But when he adds that the same process had led to the disappearance of the lines of porters waiting the arrival of guests in a hotel then he begins to enter the realm of the unverifiable, and when he comes to the disappearance of the vertical lines in nylon stockings he is in the realm of the imponderable. When he then cynically plays with current opinions, knowing they are false, he

arouses our suspicions. McLuhan knows that a computer performs many operations at instantaneous speed, in a single second, but he also knows that this fact does not authorize him to declare that the instantaneous synchronization of numerous operations had put an end to the old syntax of linear sequences.

In fact the programming of a computer consists precisely in the arranging of linear sequences of logical operations broken down into binary signals; if there is something not very tribal, enveloping, polycentric, hallucinatory, and nonGutenbergian, it is precisely the programmer's job. It's wrong to take advantage of the ingenuousness of the average humanist, who has learned all he knows about electronic brains from science fiction. Precisely because his discussion offers some valid intuitions, we ask McLuhan not to play the shell game with us.

But and this is a fairly melancholy conclusion the popular success of his thought is due, on the contrary, to this very technique of nondefinition of terms and to that cogitointerruptus logic that has given such cheap celebrity also to the Apocalyptic, popularized in one-size-fits-all dimensions in well-intentioned newspapers. In this sense McLuhan is right: Gutenbergian man is dead, and the reader seeks in the book a message at low definition, in which to find hallucinatory immersion. At this point isn't it better to watch television?

That television is better than Sedlmayr is beyond any doubt. With McLuhan, things are different. Even when they are merchandised in a jumble, good and bad together, ideas summon other ideas, if only to be refuted. Read McLuhan; but then try to tell your friends what he says. Then you will be forced to choose a sequence, and you will emerge from the hallucination.

1967

Language, Power, Force

On January 17, 1977, Roland Barthes, before the kind of capacity audience attracted by great social and cultural occasions, delivered his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, where he had just been invited to occupy the chair of literary semiology. This lecture, which the newspapers reported at the time (Le Monde devoted an entire page to it), has now been published by the Editions du Seuil, under the humble and very proud title *Leçon** Just over forty pages, it is divided into three parts. The first deals with language, the second with the function of literature with regard to the power of language, the third with semiology and, in particular, literary semiology. I must immediately say that here I will not go into the third part (which, brief as it is, nevertheless would demand an extended discussion of method), and I will mention the second part only in passing. It is the first part that, I feel, raises a problem of far broader scope, going beyond both literature and the techniques of enquiry into literature, to arrive at the question of Power—a question that informs also the other books referred to briefly in this article.

Barthes's inaugural lecture is constructed with splendid rhetoric and begins with praise of the position he is about to occupy. As many perhaps know, the professors of the Collège de France confine themselves to speaking: They give no examinations and have no power to promote or fail the students, who listen to them solely out of love for what they say. Hence Barthes's contentment (once both humble and very proud): I am

entering a place beyond power. Hypocrisy, to be sure, because nothing confers more cultural power in France than teaching at the Collège de France, producing knowledge. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. In this lecture (which, as we shall see, focuses on play with language), Barthes, however innocently, is playing: He offers one definition of power and presupposes another.

In fact, Barthes is too subtle to ignore Foucault, whom he actually thanks for having been his patron at the Collège; therefore he knows that power is not "one" and that, as it infiltrates a place where it is not felt at first, it is "plural," legion, like demons. ". . . Power is present in the most delicate mechanisms of social exchange: not only in the State, in classes, groups, but even in fashion, public opinion, entertainment, sports, news, information, family and private relations, and even in the liberating impulses which attempt to counteract it."

Whence: "I call the discourse of power any discourse which engenders blame, hence guilt, in its recipient." You carry out a revolution to destroy power, and it will be reborn, within the new state of affairs. ". . . Power is the parasite of a trans-social organism, linked to the whole of man's history and not only to his political, historical history. This object in which power is inscribed, for all its human eternity, is language, or, to be more precise, its necessary expression: the language we speak and write," the given language.

It is not the ability to speak that establishes power, it is the ability to speak to the extent that this ability becomes rigid in an order, a system of rules, the given language. The given language, Barthes says (in an argument that repeats broadly, I don't know how consciously, the positions of Benjamin Lee Whorf), obliges me to enunciate an action, placing myself as subject, so from that moment on what I do will be the consequence of what I am. The given language obliges me to choose between masculine and feminine, and forbids me to conceive a neuter category; it obliges me to engage the other by either "thou" or "you"; I have no right to leave my affective and social relationship unspecified.

Naturally Barthes is speaking of French; English would restore to him at least the last two grammatical freedoms mentioned but (as he would rightly say) it would take others from him. Conclusion: "Thus by its very structure, my language implies an inevitable relation of alienation." To speak is to subject oneself; the given language is a generalized reaction. Moreover—"it is neither reactionary nor progressive, it is quite simply fascist; because fascism does not prevent speech, it compels speech."

From the polemical point of view, this is the affirmation that, since January of 1977, has provoked the most reaction. All the other affirmations which follow are its consequences; we must not be amazed then to hear people say that the given language is power because it compels me to use already formulated stereotypes, including words themselves, and that it is structured so fatally that, slaves inside it, we cannot free ourselves outside it, because outside the given language there is nothing.

How can we escape what Barthes calls, Sartre-like, this huis clos? By cheating. You can cheat with the given language. This dishonest and healthy and liberating trick is called literature. Hence the outline of a theory of literature as writing, a game of and with words. A category involving not only so-called literary practices but also ones operative in the text of a scientist or historian. The model of this liberating

activity, however, is for Barthes always that of the "creative" or "creating" activities.

Literature puts language on stage, exploits its interstices, is not measured by the statements already made, but through the very game of the subject it states, it reveals the flavor of words. Literature says something and, at the same time, it denies what it has said; it doesn't destroy signs, it makes them play and it plays them. If and whether literature is liberation from the power of the given language depends on the nature of this power.

And here Barthes seems to us very evasive. For that matter he mentioned Foucault not only as a friend, and directly, but also indirectly in a sort of paraphrase, when he spoke a few sentences on the "plurality" of power. And the notion that Foucault developed of power is perhaps the most convincing in circulation today, and certainly the most provocative. We find it, constructed step by step, in all his work.

Through the differentiation, from one work to the next, of the relations between power and learning, between practices of discourse and practices of nondiscourse, in Foucault a notion of power is clearly outlined that has at least two characteristics of interest to us here: First of all, power is not only repression and prohibition, it is also incitement to discourse and production of knowledge; in the second place, as Barthes also indicates, power is not single, but is massive; it is not a oneway process between an entity that commands and its subjects.

In short this power is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the "privilege," acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions—an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated. Furthermore, this power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who "do not have it"; it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them; it exerts pressure upon them, just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them.*

Further still:

By power, I do not mean "Power" as a group of institutions and mechanisms that ensure the subservience of the citizens of a given state. . . . It seems to me that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies.

Power must be looked for not in one sovereign center but in the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the latter are always local and unstable. . . . Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything but because it comes from everywhere. . . . Power comes from below. . . . There is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations, and serving as a general matrix. .

. . One must suppose rather that the manifold relations of force that take shape and come into play in the machinery of production, in families, in limited groups and institutions, are the basis for wide-ranging effects of cleavage that run through the social body as a whole.*

Now this image of power closely recalls the idea of the system that linguists call the given language. The given language is, true, coercive (it forbids me to say "I are him," under pain of being incomprehensible), but its coercion doesn't derive from an individual decision, or from some center that sends out rules in all directions: It is a social product, it originates as a constrictive apparatus precisely through general assent. Each individual is reluctant to have to observe the rules of grammar but consents and demands that others observe them because he finds his own advantage in such observance.

I'm not sure we can say that a given language is a device of power (even if, because of its systematic nature, it is a constituent of knowledge), but it is surely a model of power. We could also say that, being the semiotic apparatus par excellence or (as the Russian semioticians express it) the primary modelizing system, it is the model of those other semiotic systems that in the various cultures are established as devices of power, and of knowledge (secondary modelizing systems).

In this sense, therefore, Barthes is right in defining the given language as something connected with power, but he is wrong in then drawing two conclusions: that the given language is therefore fascist, and that it is the object in which power is inscribed, its threatening epiphany, in other words.

We can immediately liquidate the first, very clear error: If power is as Foucault defined it, and if the characteristics of power are found in the given language, to say that the given language is therefore fascist is more than a wisecrack, it is an invitation to confusion. Because fascism then, being everywhere, in every power situation, and in every given language, since the beginning of time, would no longer be anywhere. If the human condition is placed under the sign of fascism, all are fascists and no one is a fascist any longer. Whence we see how dangerous demagogical arguments are, which we find used abundantly in everyday journalism, and without Barthes's refinement, for he at least knows he is speaking in paradoxes and using them for rhetorical ends.

The second misunderstanding seems to me more subtle: The given language is not that in which power is inscribed. Frankly, I have never understood the French or frenchified affectation of inscribing everything and seeing everything as if inscribed: To put it simply, I'm not quite clear as to what inscribing means.

It seems to me one of those expressions that resolve in an authoritative manner problems that nobody knows how to define otherwise. But even if we accept this expression as valid, I would say that the given language is the device through which power is inscribed where it establishes itself. I would like to make myself clearer, and for this reason I refer to the recent study of Georges Duby on the theory of the three orders.* Duby starts out with the Estates General, at the dawn of the French Revolution: Clergy, Nobility, and Third Estate. And he asks where this theory (and ideology) of the three estates came from.

And he finds it in very ancient Carolingian ecclesiastical texts, where the people of God is referred to as being divided into three orders, or parties, or levels: those who pray, those who fight, and those who work.

Another metaphor in circulation during the Middle Ages was that of the flock: There are the shepherds, the sheepdogs, and the sheep. In other words, according to the traditional interpretation of this triple division, there is the clergy, which directs society spiritually, there are the soldiers who protect it, and there are the people, who support both. It is fairly simple, and you have only to think of the investiture conflict and the struggle between papacy and empire that we studied in school, to understand what is being discussed.

But Duby goes beyond the banal interpretation. In more than four hundred exceptionally closely argued pages, tracing the vicissitudes of this idea of the Carolingian period at the end of the twelfth century (and only in France), he discovers that this model of the ordering of society is never repeated exactly. It reappears often, but with the terms arranged differently; sometimes, instead of a triangular form, it takes on a four-point shape; the words chosen to designate this party or that are changed, sometimes milites are spoken of, sometimes they are called pugnatores, sometimes cavaliers; sometimes, instead of clergy, the word is monks; sometimes they speak of farmers, sometimes simply of workers, sometimes of merchants.

The fact is that over a period of three centuries numerous evolutions of European society took place, and different alliances came into play: between the urban clergy and the feudal lords, to oppress the populace; between clergy and populace to escape the pressure of the knights; between monks and feudal lords against the urban clergy; between urban clergy and national monarchies; between national monarchies and great monastic orders. . . .

The list could continue to infinity. To us Duby's book is like what a study of the relations between the Christian Democrats, the United States, the Italian Communist Party, and the Italian Manufacturers' Association in our century might seem to a reader in the year 3000. So you quickly realize that things are not always as clear as they look, that categorical expressions such as "opening to the left" or "economic development" take on different meanings not only as they pass from Andreotti to Craxi, but also within the confines of a Christian Democrat Party conference and in the space of two elections. Those medieval polemics which seemed so clear to us, with such well-defined party ploys, are actually very subtle. And the fact that Duby's book is so dense, so fascinating and boring at the same time, so difficult to unravel, lacking immediately comprehensible summarizations, is almost justified, because it puts before us a flux of sticky maneuvers.

At a given moment, the Cluniac monk speaks of division among clerics, cavaliers, and peasants, but seems to stir up the specter of a four-part division, adding to the tripartite axis (which is concerned with earthly life) a binary axis that involves the supernatural life, and where the previous trio is set against the monks, who are mediators with the next world. The game is then ever so slightly altered and there is the hint of the domination that the monastic orders want to assume over the other three orders, in which the urban clergy would perform a purely vicarious function, and direct relations would be established between monasteries and feudal structure.

It happens that each of these formulas, so similar and yet so different, is structured on a network of relationships of strength: The knights sack the countryside, the populace seeks support and tries to defend the produce of the land, but among the populace are already emerging those

who own their own property and tend to redirect the situation to their own advantage, and so on.

These relationships of strength, however, would remain purely aleatory if they were not disciplined by a power structure in which everyone is consentient and prepared to recognize himself as part of that structure. To this end, there intervenes rhetoric, the ordering and modelizing function of language, which with infinitesimal shifts of accent legitimizes certain relationships of strength and criminalizes others. Ideology takes shape: The power born from it becomes truly a network of consensus, beginning from below, because the relationships of strength have been transformed into symbolic relationships.

At this point in my reading of texts so different, an opposition between power and strength is outlined, an opposition that seems to me totally erased in the talk we hear every day now, in the school, the factory, the ghetto, about power. As we know, since '68 criticism of power and protest against it have greatly deteriorated, because they have become mass-produced. An inevitable process and we will not repeat (with a fine reactionary stance) that when a concept arrives within everyone's grasp it crumbles, and so it should have remained the property of a few. On the contrary, it is precisely because it had to be within everyone's grasp, though in the process it would risk crumbling, that the criticism of its degenerations becomes important.

So then, in mass political discussion of power there have been two ambiguous phases: the first, ingenuous, in which power had a center (the System, like an evil boss with a moustache who, at the keyboard of a maleficent computer, taps out the perdition of the working class). This idea has been sufficiently criticized, and Foucault's notion of power intervenes, in fact, to show its anthropomorphic naïveté. A trace of this revision of the concept can be found even in the internal contradictions of various terrorist groups: from those who want to strike at the "heart" of the state to those who, on the contrary, unravel the strands of power at its edge, in the points I would call "Foucaultian," where the prison guard, the petty merchant, the foreman are engaged.

But the second phase remains more equivocal; here strength and power are all too easily confused. I speak of "strength" instead of causality, which would come to me more spontaneously, for reasons that we will see; but we can begin at once with a fairly ingenuous notion of causality. There are things that cause other things: The stroke of lightning burns the tree; the male member inseminates the female uterus.

These relationships are not reversible: The tree does not burn the stroke of lightning, and woman does not inseminate man. There are, on the other hand, relationships where somebody makes somebody else do things because of a symbolic relationship: The man decides that in the home the woman washes the dishes; the Inquisition decides that heretics will be burned at the stake and assumes the right to define heresy. These relationships are based on a strategy of language that, once labile relationships of strength are recognized, institutionalizes them symbolically, achieving consensus from the dominated. Symbolic relationships are reversible. In principle the woman has only to say no to the man and he will have to wash the dishes, the heretics reject the authority of the Inquisition and they will not be burned.

Naturally, things are not that simple, precisely because the discourse that symbolically represents power must deal not with simple causal relations but with complex interaction of forces. Still this seems to me

the difference between power, as symbolic fact, and pure causality: The former is reversible, the latter is only capable of being contained or bridled, it allows reforms (I invent the lightning rod; the woman decides to go on the pill, to renounce sexual relations, to have only homosexual relations). The inability to distinguish between power and causality leads to much childish political behavior. As we have seen, things are not all that simple. Let's replace the notion of causality (onedirectional) with that of force.

A force is applied to another force: They form a parallelogram of forces. They do not cancel one another; they are composed, according to a law. The play among forces is reformist: It produces compromises. But the game is never between two forces, it is among countless forces; the parallelogram gives rise to far more complex multidimensional figures. To decide which forces must be set against which other forces, decisions are made which are dependent not on the play of forces but on the play of power. A knowledge is produced, of the composition of forces.

To return to Duby: When knights exist, when the merchants appear on the scene with their wealth, when the peasants start migrating towards the city under the scourge of famine, you are dealing with forces: The symbolic strategy, the formulation of convincing theories of the three orders or the four, and thence the configuration of power relationships come into play in defining which forces must restrain which others, and in what direction the consequent parallelograms must march. But in Duby's book, at least for the idle reader, the play of forces risks disappearing in the face of the dominant argument, which is made up by the constant rearrangement of the symbolic figures.

We come to the last book in the pile, *War in European History** Michael Howard's study of weapons in the development of European history. We will speak of it only obliquely, inviting the reader to enjoy for himself this fascinating book that starts with the wars of the feudal period and arrives at those of the nuclear age, with a wealth of anecdote and unpredictable discoveries. In 1346, at Crecy, Edward III introduces, against the enemy cavalry, his longbow archers. These longbows, which shoot five or six arrows in the same time that a crossbow could fire only one of its large darts, engage a new force against the cavalry. They defeat it. From that moment on, cavalry is convinced that its armor must be heavier; the cavalry becomes less easily maneuvered and is totally useless when dismounted. The force of the armed cavalier is annulled.

These are relationships of force. The reaction to them is an attempt to check the new force. In other words, the entire structure of the army is reformed. Through adjustments of this sort, the history of Europe proceeds, and armies become something different. Remember the lament of Ariosto's paladins, complaining of the blindness of the harquebus? But now the new relationships of force, in reciprocally checking one another and in adjusting, create a new ideology of armed forces and produce new symbolic arrangements. Here Howard's book seems to proceed inversely from Duby's: from force, indirectly, to the new structures of power, whereas the other went from formulation of the images of power to the relations of new forces and old that underlay the images.

But if we don't reflect enough on this opposition, we fall into forms of political childishness. We do not say to a force: "No, I won't obey you"; we develop techniques of checking it. But we don't react to a relationship of power with a mere and immediate act of force. Power is far more subtle and exploits a far more widespread consensus, and heals the wound received at that point, always and necessarily marginal.

This is why we are usually fascinated by the great revolutions; to posterity they seem a sole act of force, which, applied at an apparently insignificant point, turns the whole axis of a power situation: the taking of the Bastille, the attack on the Winter Palace, the coup at the Moncada barracks. . . . And this is why the aspiring revolutionary is eager to repeat exemplary acts of this kind, and is amazed when they don't succeed. The fact is that the "historical" act of force was never an act of force, but a symbolic gesture, a theatrical finale that sanctioned, in a fashion also scenically pregnant, a crisis in power relationships that had been spreading, in a grass-roots way, for a long time. And without which the pseudo-act of force would again be a mere act of force, without symbolic power, destined to become adjusted in a little local parallelogram.

But how can a power, composed of a consensus network, disintegrate? This is the question Foucault asks, also in *The History of Sexuality*. "Should it be said that one is always 'inside' power, that there is no 'escaping' it, that there is no absolute outside where it is concerned, because one is subject to the law in any case?" If you think about it, this is Barthes's assertion when he says that we can never escape from language. Foucault's answer is:

This would be to misunderstand the strictly relational character of power relationships. Their existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: These play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle. . . . Hence there is no single locus of all rebellions, no pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial. . . .

The points, knots, or focuses of resistance are spread over time and space at varying densities, at times mobilizing groups or individuals in a definitive way, inflaming certain points of the body, certain moments in life, certain types of behavior. . . . But more often one is dealing with mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them. . . .*

In this sense power, in which we are, sees the crumbling of its fundamental consensus rise from its own inner being. What I want to point out most, within the limitations of this essay, is the homology between these continuous processes of breakdown described (in a fairly allusive form) by Foucault and the function Barthes assigns to literature inside the system of linguistic power. Which would lead us perhaps also to make some reflections on a certain aestheticism in Foucault's view, just as he (compare the 1977 interview in the appendix of the volume just mentioned) declares himself opposed to the end of the writer's activity and to the theorization of writing as eversive activity. Or to wonder if Barthes (when he says that it is a possibility open also to the scientist or to the historian) is not making literature an allegory of the relationships of resistance and criticism of power in the wider context of social life.

What seems clear is that this technique of opposition to power, always from within and widespread, has nothing to do with the techniques of opposition to force, which are always external, and specific. Oppositions to force always obtain an immediate reply, like the clash of two billiard

balls; those against power always obtain indirect replies. We will venture an allegory, something like a good old American film of the '30's. In Chinatown a gang sets up a laundry racket. Acts of force. They come in, ask for money, and if the laundry doesn't fork over, they smash the place up. The proprietor of the laundry can oppose force with force: He punches a gangster in the face. The result is immediate. The gangster has to exercise greater force the next day. This game of forces can lead to some changes in the restriction of the neighborhood life: iron bars on the laundry doors, alarm systems.

But gradually the inhabitants of Chinatown adjust to the atmosphere: The restaurants close earlier, the inhabitants stay home after dark, other storeowners agree that it's more reasonable to pay up than be harassed. . . . A relationship of legitimization of the gangsters' power has been established, and everyone collaborates, including those who would prefer a different system. Now the gangsters' power is beginning to be based on symbolic relationships of obedience, in which the obedient are as responsible as the obeyed. In a way, each finds something in it to his own advantage.

The first breakdown of the consensus could come from a group of young people who decide to organize a celebration every evening with firecrackers and paper dragons. As an act of force it could perhaps hinder the passage or the flight of the gangsters, but as far as that goes the action is minimal. As an aspect of resistance to power, the celebration introduces an element of self-confidence, which acts to disrupt the consensus dictated by fear. Its results cannot be immediate; and, furthermore, there can be no result unless other marginal attitudes correspond to the celebration, other ways of declaring, "Count me out." In our film it could be the courageous act of a local reporter. But the disrupting process could also abort. The tactics would have to be immediately denied, if the racket system were capable of absorbing them into the local folklore. . . . We will stop the allegory here before, being a movie, it obliges us to find a happy ending.

I don't know whether this festivity with the paper dragon is an allegory of literature according to Barthes or whether Barthes's literature and this festivity are allegories of the Foucaultian crises of the systems of power. Also because at this point a new suspicion arises: To what degree does Barthes's given language obey mechanisms homologous to the systems of power described by Foucault?

Let us posit then a given language as a system of rules: not only grammatical ones, but also those that today are called pragmatic. For example, the conversational rule that a question must be answered in a pertinent way, and whoever breaks this rule is judged, depending on the situation, rude, silly, provoking; or else it is assumed he is hinting at something else he doesn't want to say. Literature that cheats with the given language is presented as an activity that breaks down the rules and imposes others: temporary, valid in just one instance and for one current; and especially, valid in the context of the literary laboratory.

This means that Ionesco cheats with the given language, making his characters speak the way they do in *The Bald Soprano*, for example. But if in a social relationship everyone spoke like the bald prima donna, society would break down. Mind you, there would not be a linguistic revolution, because revolution involves an upset of power relationships; a universe that talks like Ionesco wouldn't upset anything, it would establish a kind of nth degree (the opposite of zero, an indefinite

number) of behavior. It would no longer be possible even to buy bread from the baker.

How does the given language defend itself against this risk?

Barthes tells us, reconstructing a power situation faced by its own violation, absorbing it (the anacoluthon of the artist becomes common norm). As for society, it defends the given language by reciting the literature, which questions the given language's position, in certain set places. Thus it happens that there is never any revolution in a language: Either it is a pretense of revolution, on the stage, where all is licit, and then you go home speaking in a normal way; or else it is an infinitesimal movement of continuous reform. Aestheticism consists of believing that life is art and art, life, confusing the areas. Deceiving oneself.

The given language, therefore, is not a scenario of power, in Foucault's sense. Very well. But why do we seem to have found such strong homologues between linguistic devices and devices of power—and to have noted that the knowledge on which power is nourished is produced through linguistic means?

Here another suspicion arises. Perhaps it isn't that the given language is different from power because power is a place of revolution, something denied to language. It is that power is homologous to the given language because, as the former is described to us by Foucault, it can never be a place of revolution. That is, in power there is never any distance between reform and revolution, since revolution is the moment when a slow process of gradual adjustments suddenly undergoes what René Thom would call a catastrophe, a sudden turn; but in the sense in which a collecting of seismic movements suddenly produces an upheaval of the earth. A final breaking point of something already formed in advance, step by step. Revolutions then would be the catastrophes of the slow movements of reform, quite independent of the will of the subjects, casual effect of a final compounding of forces that obeys a strategy of symbolic adjustments ripening over a long time.

Which is tantamount to saying that it isn't clear if Foucault's view of power (which Barthes, with genius, exemplifies in the given language) is a neorevolutionary view or a neoreformist one. Except that Foucault's merit would lie in having abolished the difference between the two concepts, forcing us to rethink, along with the notion of power, also that of political initiative. I can already see the hunters of fashions charging me with having categorized Foucault as a typical reactionary thinker. Nonsense. The fact is that in this knot of problems new notions of power take shape, and of force, of violent upheaval and of progressive adjustment through slow, marginal shifts, in a centerless universe where all is margin and there is no longer any "heart" of anything. A fine plexus of ideas for a reflection that arises under the sign of a "leçon." We'll leave it suspended. These are problems, as Foucault would say, that the single subject does not resolve. Unless he confines himself to literary fiction.

In Praise of St. Thomas

The worst thing that happened to Thomas Aquinas in the course of his career was not his death, on March 7, 1274, in Fossanova, when he was barely forty-nine, and, fat as he was, the monks were unable to carry his body down the stairs. Nor was it what happened three years after his death, when the Archbishop of Paris, Etienne Tempier, published a list of

heretical propositions (two hundred and nineteen of them) that included the majority of the theses of the followers of Averroes, some observations on terrestrial love advanced a hundred years earlier by André le Chapelain, and twenty propositions clearly attributable to him, Thomas, the angelic doctor himself, son of the lordly family of Aquino.

For history soon dealt with this repressive act and in Thomas's favor, he received justice, even after his death, winning his battle while Etienne Tempier ended up, with Guillaume de Saint-Amour, Tommaso's other enemy, in the unfortunately eternal ranks of the great reactionaries. No, the disaster that ruined the life of Tommaso d'Aquino befell him in 1323, two years after the death of Dante and was perhaps also, to some degree, attributable to the poet: in other words, when John XXII decided to turn Tommaso into Saint Thomas Aquinas. These are nasty mishaps, like receiving the Nobel Prize, being admitted to the Académie de France, winning an Oscar. You become like the Mona Lisa: a cliché. It's the moment when the big arsonist is appointed Fire Chief.

This year marks the seventh centenary of the death of Thomas. Thomas is back in fashion, as saint and philosopher. We try to understand what Thomas would do today, with the faith, culture, and intellectual energy he had in his own day. But love sometimes clouds the spirit: To say that Thomas was great, that he was a revolutionary, it is necessary to understand in what sense he was one. For, though no one can say he was a reactionary, he is still a man who raised a construction so solid that no subsequent revolutionary has been able to shake it from within—and the most that could be done to it, from Descartes to Hegel to Marx and to Teilhard de Chardin, was to speak of it "from outside."

Especially since it is hard to understand how scandal could come from this person, so unromantic, fat, and slow, who at school took notes in silence, looked as if he weren't understanding anything, and was teased by his companions. And, in the monastery, as he sat at the table on his double stool (they had to saw off the central arm to make enough room for him) the playful monks shouted to him that outside there was an ass flying and he ran to see, while the others split their sides (mendicant friars, as is well known, have simple tastes); and then Thomas (who was no fool) said that to him a flying ass had seemed more likely than a monk who would tell a falsehood, and the other friars were insulted.

But then this student that his companions called the dumb ox became a professor, worshiped by his students, and one day he went out walking on the hills with his disciples and looked at Paris from above, and they asked him if he would like to be the master of such a beautiful city, and he said that he would much prefer to have the text of the Homilies of Saint John Chrysostom; but then when an ideological enemy stepped on his foot he became furious and in that Latin of his that seems laconic because you can understand it all and the verbs are exactly where an Italian expects them, he exploded in insults and sarcasm that sound like Marx when he is lashing out at Mr. Szeliga.

Was he good-natured, was he an angel? Was he sexless? When his brothers wanted to prevent him from becoming a Dominican (because in those days the cadet son of a good family became a Benedictine, which was something proper, and not a mendicant, which would be like entering a serve-the-people commune or going to work with Danilo Dolci), they captured him as he was on his way to Paris and shut him up in the family castle; then, to get the crazy notions out of his head and turn him into a respectable abbé, they sent a naked girl, ready and willing, into his room. And Thomas grabbed a firebrand and started

running after her, clearly meaning to burn her buttocks. No sex, then? Who can say? Because the thing upset him so much that afterwards, as we are told by Bernard Gui, "Women, unless it were absolutely necessary, he avoided as if they were serpents."

In any case this man was a fighter. Sturdy, lucid, he conceived an ambitious plan, carried it out, and won. What then was the field of battle, what was at stake, what were the advantages he achieved? When Thomas was born, the Italian communes had won the battle of Legnano against the empire fifty years earlier. Ten years before his birth England received the Magna Charta.

In France the reign of Philippe Auguste had just ended. The empire was dying. Within five years the seafaring and trading cities of the north would join to form the Hanseatic League. The Florentine economy was expanding, about to issue the gold florin; Fibonacci had already invented double-entry bookkeeping; the flourishing medical school of Salerno and the law school of Bologna were a century old.

The Crusades were in an advanced state; in other words, contacts with the East were in full development. Further, the Arabs in Spain were fascinating the Western world with their scientific and philosophical discoveries. Technology was making great strides: There were new ways of shoeing horses, driving mills, steering ships, yoking oxen for bearing burdens and plowing. National monarchies in the north, and free communes in the south. In short, this was not the Middle Ages, at least not in the popular sense of the term. Polemically, we might say that if it weren't for what Thomas was about to do, it would already be the Renaissance. But Thomas actually had to do what he was going to do if things were then to proceed as they did.

Europe was trying to create for itself a culture that would reflect a political and economic plurality, dominated, true, by the paternal control of the church, which nobody called into question, but also open to a new sense of nature, of concrete reality, of human individuality. Organizational and productive processes were being rationalized: It was necessary to find the techniques of reason.

When Thomas was born, the techniques of reason had been operative for a century. In Paris, at the Faculty of Arts, they still taught music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy, but also dialectic, logic, and rhetoric, and in a new way. Abelard, a century before, had been there; for private reasons he was deprived of reproductive organs, but his head lost none of its vigor. The new method was to compare the opinions of the various traditional authorities, and decide, according to logical procedures based on a secular grammar of ideas. Linguistics, semantics were being employed; scholars asked themselves what a given word meant and in what sense it was used.

Aristotle's writings on logic were the study manuals, but not all of them had been translated and interpreted; few knew Greek, except for the Arabs, who were far ahead of the Europeans both in philosophy and in science. But already a century before, the school of Chartres, rediscovering the mathematical texts of Plato, had constructed an image of the natural world based on geometrical laws, on measurable processes. This was not yet the experimental method of Roger Bacon, but it was theoretic construction, an attempt to explain the universe through natural bases, even if Nature was seen as a divine agent. Robert Grosseteste developed a metaphysics of luminous energy that suggests partly Bergson and partly Einstein: The study of optics was born. In

short, the problem of the perception of physical objects was broached, a line was drawn between hallucination and sight.

This is no small matter. The universe of the early Middle Ages was a universe of hallucination, the world was a symbolic forest peopled with mysterious presences; things were seen as if in the continuous story of a divinity who spent his time reading and devising the Weekly Puzzle Magazine. This universe of hallucination, by Thomas's time, had not disappeared under the blows of the universe of reason: On the contrary, the latter was still the product of intellectual élites and was frowned upon. Because, to tell the truth, the universe of terrestrial things was frowned upon. Saint Francis talked to the birds, but the philosophical foundation of theology was neo-Platonic.

Which means: Far, far away there is God, in whose unattainable totality the principles of things, ideas, stir; the universe is the effect of a benevolent distraction of this very distant. One, who seems to trickle slowly downward, abandoning traces of his perfection in the sticky clumps of matter that he defecates, like traces of sugar in the urine. In this muck that represents the more negligible margin of the One, we can find, almost always through a brilliant puzzle-solution, the imprint of germs of comprehensibility, but comprehensibility lies elsewhere, and if all goes well, along comes the mystic, with his nervous, stripped-down intuition, who penetrates with an almost drugged eye into the garçonnière of the One, where the sole and true party is going on.

Plato and Aristotle had said all that was needed to understand the problems of the soul, but the nature of a flower or of the maze of guts the Salerno doctors were exploring in the belly of a sick man, and the reason why the fresh air of a spring evening was good for you: Here things became obscure. So it was better to know the flowers in the illuminated texts of the visionaries, ignore the fact that guts exist, and consider spring evenings a dangerous temptation. Thus European culture was divided: If they understood the heavens, they didn't understand the earth. If somebody then wanted to understand the earth and not take an interest in heaven, he was in big trouble. The Red Brigades of the period were roaming around: heretical sects that, on the one hand, wanted to renew the world, set up impossible republics, and on the other hand, practiced sodomy, pillage, and other horrors. Reports might or might not be true, but in any case it was best to kill the lot of them.

At this point the men of reason learned from the Arabs that there was an ancient master (a Greek) who could supply a key to join these scattered limbs of culture: Aristotle. Aristotle knew how to talk about God, but he also classified animals and stones, and concerned himself with the movement of the stars. Aristotle knew logic, studied psychology, talked about physics, classified political systems. But above all Aristotle offered the keys (and in this sense Thomas was to make the fullest use of him) to overturning the relationship between the essence of things (that is, to the extent that things can be understood and said, even when those things are not here, before our eyes) and the matter of which things are made. We can leave God out of it: He is living happily on his own and has provided the world with excellent physical laws so that it can go ahead by itself.

And we needn't waste time trying to recover the trace of essences in that sort of mystic cascade of theirs whereby, losing the best along the way, they come and get all muddled up in matter. The mechanism of things is here, before our eyes; things are the principle of their movement. A man, a flower, a stone are organisms that have grown up obeying an internal

law that moved them: The essence is the principle of their growth and their organization. It is a something already there, ready to explode, that moves matter from inside, and makes it grow and reveal itself: This is why we can understand it. A stone is a portion of matter that has assumed form: Together, from this marriage, an individual substance has been born. The secret of being, as Thomas was to gloss with a bold intellectual leap, is the concrete act of existing. Existing, happening are not accidents that occur to ideas, which for themselves would be better off in the warm uterus of the distant divinity. First, thank heaven, things exist concretely, and then we understand them.

Naturally two points have to be clarified. First of all, according to the Aristotelian tradition, understanding things does not mean studying them experimentally: You had only to understand that things count, theory took care of the rest. Not much, if you like, but still a huge step forward from the hallucinated world of the previous centuries. In the second place, if Aristotle had to be Christianized, more space had to be given to God, who was a bit too much off to one side. Things grow thanks to the inner force of the life principle that moves them, but it must also be admitted that if God takes all this great movement to heart, he is capable of thinking the stone as it becomes stone by itself, and if he were to decide to cut off the electricity (which Thomas calls "participation") there would be a cosmic blackout.

So the essence of the stone is in the stone, and it is grasped by our mind, which is capable of thinking it; but it existed already in the mind of God, which is full of love and spends its days not doing its fingernails but supplying energy to the universe. This was the game to be played; otherwise Aristotle wouldn't enter Christian culture, and if Aristotle remained outside, nature and reason remained outside, too.

It was a difficult game because the Aristotelians that Thomas found had preceded him, when he began to work, had taken another path, which might even be more pleasing to us, and which an interpreter fond of historical short-circuits might even define as materialistic: But it was a very slightly dialectical materialism; indeed, it was an astrological materialism, and it rather upset everybody, from the keepers of the Koran to those of the Gospel. The man responsible, a century earlier, had been Averroes, Moslem by culture, Berber by race, Spanish by nationality, and Arab by language.

Averroes knew Aristotle better than anybody and had understood what Aristotelian science led to: God is not a manipulator who sticks his nose into everything at random; he established nature in its mechanical order and in its mathematical laws, regulated by the iron determination of the stars. And since God is eternal, the world in its order is eternal also. Philosophy studies this order: nature, in other words. Men are able to understand it because in all men one principle of intelligence acts; otherwise each would see things in his own way and there would be no reciprocal understanding.

At this point the materialistic conclusion was inevitable: The world is eternal, regulated by a predictable determinism, and if a sole intellect lives in all men, the individual immortal soul does not exist. If the Koran says something different, the philosopher must philosophically believe what his science shows him and then, without creating too many problems for himself, believe the opposite, which is the command of faith. There are two truths and the one must not disturb the other.

Averroes carried to lucid conclusions what was implicit in rigorous Aristotelianism, and this was the reason for his success in Paris among the masters at the Faculty of Arts, in particular with Sigier of Brabant, whom Dante puts in Paradise with Saint Thomas, even if it is Thomas's fault that Sigier's scholarly career collapsed and he was relegated to the footnotes in popular handbooks of philosophy.

The game of cultural politics that Thomas tried to play was a double game: on the one hand, to make Aristotle accepted by the theological learning of the time; and on the other, to detach him from the use the followers of Averroes were putting him to. But in doing this, Thomas encountered a handicap: He belonged to the mendicant orders, who had the misfortune of having put Joachim of Fiore in circulation along with another band of apocalyptic heretics who represented a grave danger for the established order, for the Church and for the State. So the reactionary masters of the Faculty of Theology, with the fearsome Guillaume de Saint-Amour at their head, could easily say that mendicant friars were all Joachimite heretics, and wanted to teach Aristotle, the master of the Averroes-inspired atheistic materialists.

But Thomas, on the contrary, was neither a heretic nor a revolutionary. He has been called a "concordian." For him it was a matter of reconciling the new science with the science of revelation, changing everything so that nothing would change.

In this plan he showed an extraordinary amount of good sense and (master of theological refinements) a great adherence to natural reality and earthly equilibrium. Mind you, Thomas did not aristotelianize Christianity; he christianized Aristotle. He never thought that with reason everything could be understood, but that everything is understood through faith; he wanted to say only that faith was not in conflict with reason, and that therefore it was possible to enjoy the luxury of reason, emerging from the universe of hallucination. And so it is clear why in the architecture of his works the main chapters speak only of God, angels, the soul, virtues, eternal life; but, within these chapters, everything finds a place that is, more than rational, "reasonable."

Within the theological architecture you understand why man knows things, why his body is made in a certain way, why he has to examine facts and opinions to make a decision, and resolve contradictions without concealing them, trying to reconcile them openly. With this Thomas gave the church once more a doctrine that, without taking away a fraction of its power, left the communities free to decide whether to be monarchist or republican, and it distinguishes for example among the various types and rights in property, going so far as to say that the right to property does exist, but for possession, not use.

Or, in other words, I have the right to possess a building, but if there are people living in hovels, reason demands that I grant the use to those who do not possess the equivalent (I remain owner of the building, but the others must live there even if this offends my egoism). And so on. These are all solutions based on equilibrium and on that virtue that he called "prudence," whose job was to "retain the memory of gained experience, to have an exact sense of ends, prompt attention to situations, rational and progressive investigation, circumspection of opportunities, precaution in complexities, and discernment of exceptional conditions."

It works, because this mystic who was so eager to lose himself in the beatific contemplation of God to whom the human soul aspires "by nature"

was also alert, in a human way, to natural values and respected rational discourse.

It must be remembered that, before him, when the text of an ancient author was studied, the commentator or the copyist, when he came upon something that clashed with revealed religion, either scratched out the "erroneous" sentences or marked them with a question mark, to alert the reader, or else they shifted the words to the margin. But what did Thomas do, instead? He aligned the divergent opinions, clarified the meaning of each, questioned everything, even the revealed datum, enumerated the possible objections, and essayed the final mediation. Everything had to be done in public, just as, in his day, the disputatio was public: The tribunal of reason was in operation.

Then, if you read closely, in every case the datum of faith came to prevail over everything else and led to the untangling of the question; in other words, God and revealed truth preceded and guided the movement of secular reason. This has been made clear by the most acute and affectionate Thomas scholars, like Etienne Gilson.

Nobody has ever said that Thomas was Galileo. Thomas simply gave the church a doctrinal system that put her in agreement with the natural world. And he won, at lightning speed.

The dates are explicit. Before him it was asserted that "the spirit of Christ does not reign where the spirit of Aristotle lives"; in 1210 the Greek philosopher's books of natural history were still forbidden, and the ban continued through the following decades, as Thomas had these texts translated by his collaborators and commented on them. But in 1255 all of Aristotle was allowed. After the death of Thomas, as we mentioned, there was an attempt at reaction, but finally Catholic doctrine was aligned along Aristotelian positions. The dominion and spiritual authority of Bene-detto Croce over fifty years of Italian culture was as nothing compared to the authority Thomas displayed by changing in forty years the whole cultural policy of the Christian world. Hence Thomism.

That is to say, Thomas gave Catholic thought such a complete frame that, since then, Catholic thought can no longer shift anything. At most, with the scholastic Counter-Reformation, it developed Thomas, gave us a Jesuit Thomism, a Dominican Thomism, even a Franciscan Thomism, where the shades of Bonaventure, Duns Scotus, and Ockham stir. But Thomas cannot be touched. Thomas's constructive eagerness for a new system becomes, in the Thomistic tradition, the conservative vigilance of an untouchable system. Where Thomas swept away everything in order to build anew, scholastic Thomism tries to touch nothing and performs wonders of pseudo-Thomistic tightrope walking to make the new fit into the frame of Thomas's system. The tension and eagerness for knowledge that the fat Thomas possessed to the maximum degree shift then into heretical movements and into the Protestant Reformation. Thomas's frame is left, but not the intellectual effort it cost to make a frame that, then, was truly "different."

Naturally it was his fault: He is the one who offered the church a method of conciliation of the tensions and a nonconflictual absorption of everything that could not be avoided. He is the one who taught how to distinguish contradictions in order to mediate them harmoniously. Once the trick was clear, they thought that Thomas's lesson was this: Where yes and no are opposed, create a "nes." But Thomas did this at a time when saying "nes" signified not stopping, but taking a step forward, and exposing the cards on the table.

So it is surely licit to ask what Thomas Aquinas would do if he were alive today; but we have to answer that, in any case, he would not write another Summa Theologica. He would come to terms with Marxism, with the physics of relativity, with formal logic, with existentialism and phenomenology. He would comment not on Aristotle, but on Marx and Freud. Then he would change his method of argumentation, which would become a bit less harmonious and conciliatory. And finally he would realize that one cannot and must not work out a definitive, concluded system, like a piece of architecture, but a sort of mobile system, a loose-leaf Summa, because in his encyclopedia of the sciences the notion of historical temporariness would have entered.

I can't say whether he would still be a Christian. But let's say he would be. I know for sure that he would take part in the celebrations of his anniversary only to remind us that it is not a question of deciding how still to use what he thought, but to think new things. Or at least to learn from him how you can think cleanly, like a man of your own time. After which I wouldn't want to be in his shoes.

1974

The Comic and the Rule

Of the many questions that make up the panorama of problems connected with the comic, I will confine myself to just one, for reasons of space, and will take the others for granted. The question may be badly formulated; it may even be contested as a question. Nevertheless, it is, in itself, an endoxon that has to be borne in mind. Crude as it may be, it contains some germ of problematic truth.

The tragic (and the dramatic)—it is said—are universal. At a distance of centuries we still grieve at the tribulations of Oedipus and Orestes, and even without sharing the ideology of Homais we are distressed by the tragedy of Emma Bovary. The comic, on the other hand, seems bound to its time, society, cultural anthropology. We understand the drama of the protagonist of Rashomon, but we don't understand when and why the Japanese laugh. It is an effort to find Aristophanes comic, and it takes more culture to laugh at Rabelais than it does to weep at the death of the paladin Orlando.

It is true, one may object, that a "universal" comic does exist: custard-pie-in-the-face, for example, or the braggart soldier falling into the mud, the white nights of the husbands frustrated by Lysistrata. But at this point it could be said that the tragic that survives is not only the equally universally tragic (the mother who loses her child, the death of the beloved), but also the more individual tragic. Even without knowing the accusation against him, we suffer as Socrates dies slowly from the feet toward the heart, whereas without a degree in classics we don't know exactly why the Socrates of Aristophanes should make us laugh.

The difference exists even when contemporary works are considered: Anyone is distressed in seeing Apocalypse Now, whatever his nationality, whereas for Woody Allen you have to be fairly cultivated. Danny Kaye did not always make people laugh; and Cantinflas, the idol of Mexican audiences in the '50's, left us non-Mexicans cold; the comedians of American TV are not for export (no one in Italy has ever heard the name of Sid Caesar; Lenny Bruce is equally unknown), just as our Italians Alberto Sordi and Toto cannot be exported to a number of countries.

So, in reconstructing a part of the lost Aristotle, it is not enough to say that in tragedy we have the downfall of a person of noble condition, neither too wicked nor too good, for whom we can in any case feel sympathy, and at his violation of the moral or religious code we feel pity for his fate and terror at the suffering that will strike him but could also strike us, and so finally his punishment is the purification of his sin and of our temptations; and, conversely, in the comic we have the violation of a rule committed by a person of lower degree, of bestial character, toward whom we feel a sense of superiority, so that we do not identify ourselves with his downfall, which in any case does not move us because the outcome will not be bloody.

Nor can we be satisfied with the reflection that in the violation of the rule on the part of a character so different from us we not only feel the security of our own impunity but also enjoy the savor of transgression by an intermediary. Since he is paying for us, we can allow ourselves the vicarious pleasure of a transgression that offends a rule we have secretly wanted to violate, but without risk. All these aspects are unquestionably at work in the comic, but if these were all then we would be unable to explain why this difference in universality exists between the two rival genres.

So the point does not (not only) lie in the transgression of the rule and in the inferior character of the comic hero. The point that interests me is, on the contrary, this: What is our awareness of the violated rule?

We can eliminate the first misunderstanding: that in the tragic the rule is universal, hence its violation involves us, while in the comic the rule is particular, local (limited to a given period, a specific culture). To be sure this would explain the loss of universality: An act of cannibalism would be tragic, a comic act would be a Chinese cannibal's eating one of his fellows with chopsticks instead of knife and fork (and naturally it would be comic for us, but not for the Chinese, who would still find the act fairly tragic).

Actually, the violated rules of the tragic are not necessarily universal. Universal, they say, is the horror of incest; but Orestes' obligation to kill his own mother would not be universal. And we may ask ourselves why today, in a period of great moral permissiveness, we should find the situation of a Madame Bovary tragic.

It would not be so in a polyandrous society, or even in New York; let the good lady indulge her extramarital whims without making such a fuss about it. This excessively repentant provincial woman should make us laugh today as much as the main character in Chekhov's "The Death of a Civil Servant," who, having sneezed on an important person sitting in front of him at the theater, then goes on repeating his apologies beyond all reasonable limits.

What is typical of the tragic, before, during, and after the enactment of the violation of the rule, is a long examination of the nature of the rule. In tragedy it is the chorus itself that offers us the depiction of the social "frames" in whose violation the tragic consists. The function of the chorus is precisely that of explaining to us at every step what the Law is: This is the only way we can understand its violation and its fatal consequences. And Madame Bovary is a work that, first of all, explains how adultery is to be condemned, or at least how severely the contemporaries of the protagonist condemned it. And The Blue Angel tells us, first and foremost, how a middle-aged professor should not run amok

with a chorus girl; and Death in Venice tells us chiefly how a middle-aged professor should not fall in love with an adolescent boy.

The second step (not chronological, but logical) is then to tell how they couldn't avoid doing wrong, and couldn't help but be swept away. And precisely because the rule is reiterated (either as assertion in terms of ethical value, or as recognition of a social constriction).

The tragic justifies the violation (in terms of fate, passion, or whatever) but doesn't eliminate the rule. This is why it is universal: It explains always why the tragic act must inspire pity and fear. Which amounts to saying that every tragic work is also a lesson in cultural anthropology, and allows us to identify with a rule that perhaps is not ours.

The tragic can describe the situation of a member of an anthropophagous community who rejects the cannibalistic ritual, but it will be tragic to the degree that the story convinces us of the majesty and weight of the duty of anthropophagy. A story that narrates the sufferings of a dyspeptic and vegetarian anthropophagist who doesn't like human flesh, but fails to explain to us at length and convincingly how noble and proper anthropophagy is, will be only a comic story.

The confirmation of these theoretical proposals would lie in showing that comic works take the rule for granted, and don't bother to restate it. And this, in fact, is what I believe and what I suggest investigating. Translated into terms of textual semiotics, the hypothesis could be formulated in this way: There exists a rhetorical device, which concerns the figures of thought, in which, given a social or intertextual "frame" or scenario already known to the audience, you display the variation without, however, making it explicit in discourse.

The fact that suppressing the violated norm is typical of figures of thought seems evident in irony. Which, as it consists of asserting the opposite (of what? of what is or what is believed socially), dies when the opposite of the opposite is made explicit. At most, the fact that the opposite is being asserted may be suggested by the inflection, but irony must not be commented on, there must be no assertion of "not-A," bearing in mind that "instead-of-A" is the case. For the fact that instead-of-A is the case is something everyone must know, but no one must say.

What are the scenarios that the comic violates without having to repeat them? First of all, the common scenarios, the pragmatic rules of symbolic interaction that society takes for granted. The pie in the face makes us laugh because we normally assume that, at a party, pies are eaten and not thrown at other people.

Because we know that kissing a lady's hand means lightly grazing it with the lips, a comic situation arises when someone seizes the hand and covers it greedily with wet, smacking kisses. (Or he may proceed from the hand to the wrist and then to the arm—a situation no longer comic and perhaps even tragic in an erotic relationship, an act of carnal violence.) Look at the conversational maxims of H. P. Grice. It is pointless to say that in everyday interaction we violate them constantly. Not so. We observe them, or else we accept them to give flavor, against the background of their unheeded existence, to conversational implicature, rhetorical figure, artistic license. Precisely because rules, even unconsciously, are accepted, their unmotivated violation becomes comic.

(1) Maxim of quantity: Make your contribution as informative as is required. Comic situation: "Excuse me, do you know what time it is?" "Yes."

(2) Maxim of quality: (a) Do not say what you believe to be false. Comic situation: "My God, I beseech thee, give me some proof of thy nonexistence!" (b) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. Comic situation: "I find Maritain's thought unacceptable and irritating. Thank God I've never read any of his books!" (declaration by a university professor of mine, personal communication, February 1953).

(3) Maxim of relation: Be relevant. Comic situation: "Can you drive a motorboat?" "Why, you bet your life! I did my military service in Death Valley!"

(4) Maxim of manner. Avoid obscurity of expression and ambiguity. Be brief and avoid unnecessary prolixity. Be orderly. I don't believe it necessary to suggest comic results of this violation. Often they are involuntary.

Naturally, I insist, this requisite is not sufficient. Conversational maxims can be violated with normal results (implicature), with tragic results (depiction of social maladjustment), with poetic results. Other requisites are necessary, and I refer the reader to other typologies of the comic effect. What I want to insist on here is that in the abovementioned instances comic effect is achieved (*ceteris paribus*) if the rule is not cited but assumed as implicit.

The same thing happens with the violation of intertextual scenarios. Years ago *Mad* magazine specialized in little cartoon scenes from "the movies we would like to see." For example, outlaw bands in the West tying a girl to the train tracks in the prairie. Successive frames, in a Griffith-like sequence, the train approaching, girl weeping, the good guys riding to the rescue, progressive acceleration of the cross-cutting, and, at the end, the train crushing the girl. Variations: the sheriff who prepares for the final duel obeying all the rules of the Western, and in the end is shot by the villain; the swordsman who gains admittance to the castle where the bad guy is keeping the beauty prisoner, he swings across the splendid great hall on the chandelier and the drapery, engages in a fantastic duel with the villain, and at the end is run through. In all these cases, to enjoy the violation, the rule of the genre must be presupposed, and considered inviolable.

If this is true, and I believe it would be difficult to declare the hypothesis false, then the metaphysics of the comic should also change, including the Bakhtinian metaphysic or metaanthropology of carnivalization. The comic seems to belong to the people, liberating, subversive, because it gives license to violate the rule. But it gives such license precisely to those who have so absorbed the rule that they also presume it is inviolable. The rule violated by the comic is so acknowledged that there is no need to reaffirm it. That is why carnival can take place only once a year. It takes a year of ritual observance for the violation of the ritual precepts to be enjoyed (*semel-in fact-in anno*).

In a world of absolute permissiveness and complete anomie no carnival is possible, because nobody would remember what is being called (parenthetically) into question. Carnival comic, the moment of transgression, can exist only if a background of unquestioned observance exists. Otherwise the comic would not be liberating at all. Because, in

order to display itself as liberation, it would require (before and after its appearance) the triumph of observance.

And this would explain why the massmedia universe is, in fact, at once a universe of control and regulation of the consensus and a universe based on the commerce and consumption of comic patterns. Laughing is allowed precisely because before and after the laughing, weeping is inevitable. The comedian doesn't need to reiterate the rule because he is sure it is known, accepted without discussion, and it will remain all the more so after the comic license has allowed—within a given space and through an intermediary mask—violating it in jest.

"Comic" is, in any case, an umbrella term, like "play." We must still ask ourselves if, in the various subspecies of this highly ambiguous genre, there isn't room for a kind of activity that plays differently with the rules, to allow exercises also in the interstices of the tragic and, eluding by surprise, this murky commerce with the code, which would condemn the comic in general to act as the best safeguard and celebration of the code.

I believe we can identify this category with the one Pirandello opposed to the comic, or articulated with respect to it, calling it humor.

The comic is the perception of the opposite; humor is the feeling of it. We need not discuss this still-Crocian terminology. An example of the comic might be a decrepit old woman who makes herself up like a young girl; humor would insist on asking also why the old woman acts like that.

In this development I no longer feel superior and detached toward the bestial character who acts against the proper rules; I begin to identify with him, I suffer his drama, and my laugh is transformed into a smile. Another example that Pirandello offers is that of Don Quixote as opposed to the Astolfo of Ariosto.

Astolfo arriving on the moon riding a fabled hippogriff and, at nightfall, seeking a hotel as if he were a commercial traveler, is comic. But not Don Quixote, because we realize that his battle with the windmills reproduces the illusion of Cervantes, who fought and lost a limb and suffered imprisonment for his illusions of glory.

I would say, furthermore, that the illusion of Don Quixote is humorous, when he knows or should know, as the reader knows, that the dreams he is pursuing are by now confined in the possible worlds of an outmoded chivalrous literature. But then, at this point, Pirandello's hypothesis meets ours. It is not by chance that Don Quixote begins with a library. Cervantes' work does not assume knowledge of the intertextual scenarios on which the adventures of the madman of La Mancha are modeled, reversing their outcomes. It explains them, repeats them, discusses them again, just as a tragic work recalls the rules that will be violated.

Humor thus acts like the tragic, with perhaps this difference: In the tragic the reiterated rule is part of the narrative universe (Bovary), or, when it is reiterated at the level of the structure of discourse (the tragic chorus) it still is uttered by the characters; in humor, on the other hand, the description of the rule should appear as an intrusion, though concealed, of the author, who reflects on the social scenarios in which the enunciated character should believe. Humor then would be excessive in metalinguistic detachment.

Even when a single character speaks of himself and upon himself, he is split into judge and judged. I am thinking of the humor of Woody Allen, where the threshold between the "voices" is hard to distinguish, but, so to speak, makes itself heard. This threshold is more evident in the humor of Manzoni, marking the detachment between the author, who judges the moral and cultural world of Don Abbondio, and the actions (interior and exterior) of Don Abbondio himself.

In this way humor would not be, like the comic, victim of the rule it presupposes, but would represent the criticism of it, conscious and explicit. Humor would always be metasemiotic and metatextual. The comic of language would belong to the same breed, from Aristotelian witticisms to the puns of Joyce. To say, "Green ideas without color sleep furiously" could be (if it didn't resemble poetry) a case of verbal comic, because the grammatical norm is presupposed, and it is only by presupposing it that its violation appears evident (hence this sentence makes grammarians laugh, but not literary critics, who are thinking of other rules, already of a rhetorical nature, and hence of second degree, that would make the sentence normal).

But to say that *Finnegans Wake* is a "Scherzarade" reconfirms, as it conceals, the presence of Scheherazade, of the charade and the scherzo in the very body of the transgressive expression. And it shows the kinship, the basic ambiguity of the three repeated and denied lexemes, and the paranomastic possibility that made them fragile. For this reason anacoluthon can be comic and the lapsus for which we are not asked the reasons (buried in the very structure of what others call the signifying chain, but which is actually the ambiguous and contradictory structure of the encyclopedia).

Wit, on the other hand, and the pun are already kin to humor: They do not arouse pity for human beings, but distrust (which involves them) of language, in its fragility. But perhaps I am confusing categories that must be further distinguished. In reflecting on this fact, and on the relationship between reflection and its times (chronological times, that is), I am perhaps opening the door, just a crack, onto a new genre, the humorous reflection on the mechanism of symposia, where one is asked to reveal in thirty minutes what is *le propre de l'homme*.

1980

The end