

Monstrosities in Criticism

Translated by Robert J Matthews

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There is criticism to which one responds, other criticism to which one replies. Wrongly perhaps. Why not lend an equally attentive ear to incomprehension, triviality, ignorance, or bad faith? Why reject these as so many incidents, regrettable for family honour? Is one correct in believing them inessential to the activity of criticism? I wonder if there is not an unfortunate defence reaction involved here: one is afraid, of course, of acknowledging that the book has, in a certain manner, formed and nourished them; but above all else, one is afraid of recognising that they are nothing else, perhaps, than a certain critical grid, a certain manner of coding and transcribing a book, a singularly systematic transformation. The impostures within the critical space are like monsters within the realm of living: nevertheless coherent possibilities.

But they are still waiting for their St. George. I hope that one day the old divisions will be abolished. The vague moral criterion will no longer be used which opposes the "honest" and "dishonest" criticism — the "good" criticism which respects the texts of which it speaks, and the "bad" criticism which deforms them. All criticism will appear as transformations, proximate or far-ranging transformations, but which all have their principles and their laws. And these *petits textes* with the sloping brow, the crooked legs, and the veering eye, that one commonly despises, will enter in the dance where they will execute movements neither more nor less honourable than the others. One will no longer seek to reply to them nor to silence their din, but rather to find the reason for their misshapeness, their lameness, their sightless eyes, their long ears.

Mr. Grossvogel has just drawn my attention to two of these *petits textes*. One appeared during the summer of 1970 in a small conservative French review, *La Pensée*; it comes, I believe, from a university professor. It seems that the other is supposed to have been written by a journalist, this one appeared in the widely circulated weekly *New York Times Book Review* (February 28, 1971). The interests in these texts lies in the fact that both utilise the four traditional means of transformation (alteration of the text, *découpage* or quotation out of context, interpolation, and omission); that both obey the same three laws (ignorance of the book, ignorance of what they are speaking about, ignorance of the facts and texts to which they object); and that nevertheless they achieve exactly opposing results: in one case, it is a question of a transformation achieved by means of increasing the book's entropy; in the other, by means of decreasing its entropy.

INCREASING ENTROPY

Under the title 'Foucault et l'Espagne' there appeared in *La Pensée* an article which one would wrongly consider unimportant. For it is not a small thing when in criticising a book the author is reproached — and this is only an example — for not having "breathed a word" of Racine's Orestes although several pages are devoted to him right in the middle of the work. It is no small thing to reproach an author for the absence of the proofs and justifications which are given in full in the notes at the bottom of the pages. One needs, in order to do this, during the lifetime of the author, inspiration, a spirit of sacrifice, or at least the ascetic abnegation which makes one write with the certitude of never being read by anyone.

Mr. Pelorson must be admired for the enormous risks he has taken. But it must be recognised that his boldness is not capricious. It has ordered itself efficaciously to the requirements of a unique operation; substituting for the book, such as it exists, his method, his object, his limits, his truths, and his errors — in a word, with his own bizarre form, an amorphous fog of contingent events. This operation, which is not simple, supposes a certain number of local transformations.

RELATING THE BOOK TO A GENERAL THEORY TO WHICH IT IS UNRELATED/ In five or six instances Mr. Pelorson labels my work 'structuralist.' Now, I have never at any moment pretended to be a structuralist, on the contrary. This I explained several years ago. When Mr. Pelorson speaks of a 'succession of structures within the *episteme* of European Man,' there is a perfectly absurd clash of incompatible words.

EFFACING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE SUBJECT TREATED/ *History of Madness*¹, says Mr. Pelorson, is 'in fact the description of the attitudes of the *episteme* with regards to insanity.' Now further on, this *History of Madness* is supposed to be 'in fact the inventory of rites of exclusion.' If the first delimitation was exact, it is clear that the greatest part of the book would be off the subject; but, according to the second, the book could be said to be only an arbitrary carving within a vast subject, which is never treated in its totality. All of the limits are effaced, thanks to the remarkable usage that Mr. Pelorson makes of the expression 'in fact': everything the book says is in excess; everything it does not say is a lacuna. No longer has anything the right to be said, nor to be left unsaid.

CONFUSING THE INDICES OF VERIFICATION/ Regarding ancient leprosariums which were transformed into houses of detention, I am supposed, according to Mr. Pelorson, to have cited 'several examples' of which only two are supposed to be truly convincing. Now, I indeed cited some examples, with indication of the sources: among others, Chateau-Thierry, Voley, Charenton, Saint-Germain, the general hospital of Claremont, etc. And Saint-Lazare. Can Mr. Pelorson explain why Saint-Lazare is an example which he finds rather unconvincing? Unless by this he seeks, in effacing each single certitude, to render everything equally uncertain.

EFFACING THE LEVELS OF ANALYSIS/ I spoke of the vagabondage of the insane during the Renaissance. But according to Mr. Pelorson I am not supposed to have indicated whether the question relates to an imaginary figure (present in the texts and iconography) or an historic reality. I thus pose the question:

- the documents on the insane chased from Frankfort, transported to Mainz by ship, or sent back to Kreuznach, are they myths?
- the pilgrimage of the insane to Larchant, Gournay, Besançon, Geehl, are they myths?
- the document which indicates the price of a replacement for a pilgrimage of the insane, is it a myth?
- the equal numbers of foreigners among the insane of Nuremberg, are they a myth?
- the practice of flogging the insane in public and of hunting them, a myth?

In order to be able to criticise it, Mr. Pelorson invents a book in which imaginary themes and real practices are supposedly not distinguished, this at a price of reading neither text nor references; thus presenting the book as a variation without rules upon an imaginary world *sans réalité*.

PRACTICING RANDOM DÉCOUPAGE/ Here are two phrases: 'the asylum took precisely the place of the leprosarium in geography'; and 'the asylum took precisely the place of the leprosarium in the geography of haunted locales and in the landscapes of the moral universe.' The second is what I wrote; the first is what Mr. Pelorson has transcribed. Likewise, I am supposed to have not breathed a word about love-madness ('*le délire amoureux*') within Renaissance literature. I did. I am not supposed to have cited Cardénio; I did. I am not supposed to have spoken of *Andromaque*; I did.

Likewise, I am not supposed to have spoken of the internment of the insane in Spain during the Renaissance; I did, citing the cases of Valencia, Saragossa, Seville, Toledo.

Likewise, I am supposed to have hardly spoken of the rites of detention in the sixteenth century. I did with regard to the institutions in Nuremberg, Paris, Melun, Hamburg, Caen. I did with regard to the restraining bunks (*couchettes de force*) in the Hôtel-Dieu and in Bethlehem. I did with regard to the insane enchained and displayed before the public in the Narrtürmer. I did with regard to the houses of correction constructed in England in accordance with the Act of 1575. I did with regard to the vagabonds, enchained and constrained to work in the streets of Paris in accordance with the Act of 1532.

I am supposed to have cited only a single document concerning the spiritual reintegration of the Lepers. If Mr. Pelorson had read my book, he would have found in the footnotes references to the rituals of Rouen, Mons, Chartres, and Lille, and to the custom in Hainault.

INTRODUCING HIS OWN INCOMPETENCE/ As it is good strategy not to bore the reader and as much as possible to make him laugh, I am going to cite a text from Mr. Pelorson. 'Insanity and silliness' are supposedly 'synonyms within the terminology of Foucault [...]. Now the author is not aware that Don Quixote is the clearest illustration of a distinction made at the time, and no doubt forever, between insanity and

¹ The original in *Diacritics* referred to *Madness and Civilization*; I have replaced this with *History of Madness* as the former is an abridged version of the text of which the latter is a complete translation, and *History of Madness* had not been released when this article was published. — Ed.

foolishness. Certainly in the insults between sensible men the two words are often equivalent. But when a truly insane man appears on the scene, then foolishness is revealed as different.'

One ought not be deceived: it is not at all to ridicule Mr. Pelorson that I have cited this text. But in order to show to just what end he knows how to utilise an incompetence, which guarantees for him an uncommon position.

I will only recall the existence in the eighteenth century of a total semantic field which encompasses words such as *fou*, *sot*, *fat*, *imbécile*, *stupide*, *nigaud*, *niais*, *simple*. That this semantic field is regularly exploited in the medical treatises (cf. for example the analysis of the *Stupiditas* by Willis; or later, the definition in the *Encyclopédie* of insanity as a 'great foolishness'). That the resort to the real practice of internment is often justified by the 'weakness of spirit.' Finally, that the word *niais* designates something completely different from our present word *sot* in that phrase where La Boétie says of Claudius that he was not simply *simple* but *niais*, and that it is closely associated with mental illness in the text of Dufour: 'insanity has received different names: in infancy, one ordinarily calls it *bêtise* or *niaiserie*.'

Mr. Pelorson thinks that, confronted with an insane man, one knows at once that this man is not a fool, but insane. For once I am not far from thinking like Mr. Pelorson: there are some fools, face-to-face with whom, one knows that they are not insane, but very simply fools.

It is clear: all of the small operations of Mr. Pelorson have a precise purpose — to efface whatever can distinguish the book about which he is speaking from any other; to render uncertain the most justified assertions of the book; to mix the levels of analysis; to contrive that what was said was not said. So that the book loses all specificity, everything that it says is at once in excess or wrong, everything that it did not say is at once attributed to and reproached as a lacuna. Briefly, the book is no longer anything; it tends in every aspect towards amorphism. And to hasten this transformation, Mr. Pelorson finally introduces his own incompetence. The maximum of entropy is thus attained: the energy of the system cannot help under these conditions but approach zero.

DECREASING ENTROPY

This operation, recently effected by George Steiner in the *New York Times Book Review*, is greatly more seducing, more difficult, and more creative; it is a question, in parting from the actual book, with all that he can muster of the familiar, the already-known, and the probable, of fabricating the most improbable phantasm imaginable of the book. For this operation a certain number of local operations must be effected, often very close to those which lead to the inverse result. Certain operations are nevertheless quite unique.

REVERSING THE PROS AND CONS/ I said, for example, in *The Order of Things* that the works of Nietzsche and Mallarmé had introduced important modifications within the philosophical and literary discussion of the nineteenth century; I even rendered this more precise, subsequently noting the beginning with Nietzsche of the 'uprooting' of anthropology. Assertions which are hardly perplexing; but Mr. Steiner substitutes for them the much more improbable assertion that Mallarmé and Nietzsche are the 'principal witnesses' of the *episteme* formed at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Likewise, with respect to Lamarck, I indicated how limited his role has been in the constitution of biology in the nineteenth century, even if his ideas had been passionately discussed. In this, I say nothing which would very much surprise the historians of biology. F. Jacob, the most recent of these and one of the great contemporary biologists, has just shown this very strikingly. Mr. Steiner pretends (and the fine man wants to praise me for it) that I have shown the 'fascinating part' that Lamarck plays within modern thinking in biology.

I wanted to indicate that the appearance of the word "literature" was without a doubt tied to a new form and a new function of a literary language which had existed, under quite different aspects, since Greek antiquity. An assertion for which Mr. Steiner substitutes the obviously much more improbable and risky one that there was no literary usage of the language in Cicero, Plato, and Thucydides.

THE INTRODUCTION OF FOREIGN ELEMENTS/ In *The Order of Things* I have attempted to mark the play of the correlations, analogies, and differences within several domains of knowledge in a given epoch (theory of language, natural history, political economy, theory of representation); I have attempted the analysis without recourse to such notions as the "spirit" or the "sensibility" of an epoch; I have furthermore attempted to grasp according to those rules and schemes, the objects, the concepts, and the theories which were formed in these different domains. In introducing such terms as "spirit," "consciousness," and "sensibility" of an epoch, and in making it seem as if these terms are central in my work, Mr. Steiner

transforms the book into a sort of monster of incoherence that only a furious mind, and by only the most improbable of chances, could have imagined.

THE INVOCATION OF PHANTOMS/ In the history of grammar, natural classifications, and economic analysis in the eighteenth century, there was hardly any reason to speak of Voltaire. I did not do so. Mr. Steiner cannot remember whether I did speak of him or not: he should read my book. He states then that what I say of him is 'slapdash.' In case I did speak at length about him, Mr. Steiner's criticism will have an appearance of censure, in the name of the profound knowledge which he withholds; if I have spoken briefly of Voltaire, his complaint will have the appearance of exactitude; and if I have not spoken of Voltaire at all, the criticism will have the appearance of a clipped comment of politeness or irony. In any event, the noise from these present-absent characters which come to the doors of the book to demand redress for the injustice of which they have been the victims lends to my work the fantastic atmosphere of murder, of the oubliette.

THE SUBSTITUTION OF NAMES/ I have evoked, for the beginning of the nineteenth century, the conception of language as the expression of a profound life and will. "Will," this is a word which says something to the erudition of Mr. Steiner. His mind makes only one turn: "will, will, but that's Nietzsche." Bad luck: if Mr. Steiner had read a little above and a little below, he would have seen that it was a reference to Humboldt and several others. But of course, the appearance of Nietzsche in the first half of the nineteenth century is after all considerably more unusual.

Same thing for the word "archaeology." That word ought to locate itself somewhere, thinks Mr. Steiner. Let's give it to Freud. Mr. Steiner does not know that Kant used this word in order to designate the history of that which renders necessary a certain form of thought. I have pointed to this use, however, in another text. Certainly I would not presume that Mr. Steiner should read me. But he should leaf through Kant. I well know, however, that Kant is not as fashionable as Freud.

Still another example. On natural history, the classification and continuities of the living, there are two important and classic works. One, by Lovejoy, treats the transformation of this theme since Antiquity; he analyses the variations of the philosophical, cosmological, and scientific idea of a chain of being through Western thought. The other work, a little earlier, is by Daudin; he analyses the transformation of biological knowledge from the taxonomies of the seventeenth century until evolutionism. Of these two books, it is the second which has aided me, not the first. That is why I cited it, and indicated how much I owed to it. Mr. Steiner claims that my debt is to Lovejoy, which proves that he has not read Daudin; and that I do not cite my sources, proving further that he has not read my book.

THE REFERENCE TO FICTIVE WORKS/ In my offhandedness, I am supposed, according to Mr. Steiner, to have omitted citing another of my sources: Lévi-Strauss. Is he not in effect at the origin of my work, he who has shown, as everyone knows, the relations between 'economic exchange' and 'linguistic communication'? With this assertion by Mr. Steiner, one is in the domain of pure invention. Of course, Lévi-Strauss has never established the relations between economics and linguistics, but has used linguistic methods in order to analyse the structures of matrimonial exchange. In any case, for my part, I have not studied the relations between economics and linguistics, but have sought the elements common to the theories of money and general grammar in the eighteenth century. As for this idea, it has not come to me unassisted, but from reading an author whom I cited: Turgot. But one would have to be aware of that in order not to have to invent the fictive work of an author obviously much more *à la mode*.

But I would be very wrong to grumble. Mr. Steiner invents, for my greater profit, works that I have never written. He is willing even to manifest a certain indulgence for the 'monographs' that I have devoted to the history of mental illness. Which ones, for God's sake? I have written only one. Yet it was not at all a history of mental illness, still less as Mr. Steiner claims, a study of 'the mythologies and the practices of mental therapies,' but of the economic, political, ideological, and institutional conditions according to which the segregation of the insane was effected during the Classical period. And in relation to these processes, I attempted to show that these myths and therapeutics were only secondary or derivative.

Patently: it is necessary to oppose vigorously the notion that Mr. Steiner could be devoid of talent. Not only does he reinvent what he reads in the book, not only does he invent that which was not there, but he invents that to which he objects, he invents the works to which he compares the book, he even invents the author's own books.

It is a shame for Mr. Steiner that Borges, who has genius, has already invented criticism-fiction.