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Paris 1976

When Sartre died, the French mourned the loss of a genius. When Malraux died, he was proclaimed a hero of French culture and those who had villified him during his lifetime remained silent. But when Barthes, Lacan, and Foucault died, they were buried uneasily, though they had influenced the sixties and seventies more directly than had either Sartre or Malraux. This ungracious reaction on the part of the critics towards their *maîtres à penser* was particularly ironical, for their style of writing bore witness to the fact that structuralism, in its many forms, had been fully integrated into the French intellectual's vocabulary.

The demise of structuralism was celebrated in a book by Jean-Paul Aron, *Les Modernes*. Aron summarizes the main "intellectual events" from 1945 to 1984, and highlights the sterility and dishonesty of the modernist philosophers. The book was published in 1984, by which time these philosophers were dead and unable to reply to Aron's criticisms. Barthes had died on the 26th of March 1980 at the age of sixty-four. He was knocked down by a laundry van as he was leaving a luncheon with François Mitterrand, Jack Lang, the Minister of Culture, and some other notable Parisians. He had stated, in interviews and to friends, that he was beginning to doubt his system of thought. He wanted to write less analytical, more lyrical books. He wanted to take time off from Parisian literary life and spend more time wasting time. He was obviously in need of lying fallow and would, no doubt, have come up with a new kind of book. Already, in *Fragments d'un Discours Amoureux* (1977) and *La Chambre Claire* (1980) he had begun to infuse his work with lyrical, unexplained material. He would take the reader swiftly from an idea to a personal experience and back again to a theory. His life was just part of the puzzle, and his attitude towards his own life was playful and witty. He made his name in 1953 with *Le Degré Zéro de l'Écriture*, in which he celebrates

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Camus's simple, clear writing style, and points to the terrible problems that rhetoric poses for a French writer.

There followed a number of semiological texts, *Eléments de Sémiologie*, *Système de la Mode*, and *L'Empire des Signes*. Then in 1975 he accepted an offer to write a book about himself called *Barthes par lui-même*. So, by the mid-seventies Barthes had experience writing autobiography and criticism. He was now faced with the challenge of synthesizing his differing talents, and he succeeded, in a highly original way, with *Fragments d'un Discours Amoureux*. But he was looking for a more novelistic form of expression, where his life and ideas would be transformed. It was at this point that he died.

When the critics say that Barthes was disillusioned with structuralism, they are quite accurate. But when they assert that he had become a prisoner of his own system of thought, they overlook the fact that Barthes was going beyond pure structuralism even before it had become internationally fashionable.

But Barthes is no longer fashionable, and Jean-Paul Aron's *Les Modernes* happened to coincide with the Parisians' desire to disown their structuralist past. During our conversation, at the Brasserie Lipp on the Boulevard St. Germain, Aron went so far as to suggest that Barthes' sterile philosophy had contributed to his death. "I have to be careful when I say this, but nevertheless, I have the feeling that Barthes was very ill at ease with himself towards the end of his life, and that he had enclosed himself in a dead-end system. He was perhaps trying to come up with new solutions, but as I say in my book, *Les Modernes*, it's hard to change your identity when you've made your name doing one thing. And Barthes had made his name with structuralism. O.K. you will say to me. But what does that have to do with Barthes' death? Well, I don't want to attempt mediocre psychoanalyzing in a brasserie, but I would hazard to say that Barthes was lacking in creative energy, and that he was in a kind of despair. And that was what prevented him from recovering from the accident. Often, you need a certain kind of energy to fight back and live after an accident. And Barthes did not have it. It's obviously only a hypothesis but it is not that far-fetched."

Aron feels that structuralism is antithetical to creativity. And

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he bemoans the effect that it had on writers and poets during the last twenty years. For it was not only psychoanalysts like Lacan and philosophers like Foucault who integrated it into their work, but also poets and novelists who wrote with the intention of remaining faithful to the theories of the structuralist gurus. "I believe that the cultural models that have become fashionable in France have asphyxiated the production of works of art and literature, and I denounce it in my book. But I think it's ridiculous to affirm that a painting is merely a 'language.' And that a novel should be an arrangement of objects that professors can then criticize and dissect, as in the novels of Alain Robbe-Grillet . . . these artistic productions have nothing to do with real art."

Aron feels that his compatriots have always been fashion-conscious and fickle, particularly in Parisian circles, but more recently their search for novelty has invaded art and literature. "I am not against modernity, and I know that each epoch produces its own new truth. But I am against these impostures of modernity, that's to say, these 'new' systems of thought, which become like commodities. People think that America suffers from this search for novelty, but it's becoming a real problem in France. And people say that America produces literary works like commodities. But it's true of France. At the moment we have new products, or books, that glut the market, each one destroying the validity of the previous 'new' book. This vertiginous production of books has nothing to do with modernity.

"It's certain that it's no coincidence that American universities in particular have been fascinated by these French models of thought, and particularly structuralism and semiotics. Nowadays, thank goodness, the French have no time for all that, and the only place where structuralism is taken seriously is in American universities, and a little in English universities."

Aron has travelled a great deal in the United States, and he continues to give lecture tours. He is not referring to Americans in general, but to the academics, when he says, "When the Americans stumbled on semiology, and structuralism, they were delighted, for it offered them a method of thinking which dispensed with the need to live or feel. They were reassured to find a discipline that affirmed that language had an existence

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of its own, independent from life. I also think that Americans are wary of delving into their feelings, and structuralism gave them the opportunity to opt out.”

Aron defines structuralism as a technique for avoiding feeling: “People take to these systems of thought when they want to avoid living, meaning, and feelings. There’s this curious taste for objectivity. I’m not sure if that’s the right word to express it, but what I mean is that people are under the illusion that you can transcribe a so-called objective view of the world . . . so you don’t have to actually experience life. English in any case would be a better language to express my thoughts in this area, for you have a much richer vocabulary than the French for expressing words like ‘ressentir’ and ‘le vécu.’ People like Robbe-Grillet, too, are radical enemies of feeling, and his books did well because he reflected the fashions of the epoch.”

But Robbe-Grillet cannot be categorized alongside Barthes, nor can the followers and imitators and dissectors of structuralism be confused with the founding fathers. For Robbe-Grillet did hold the view that meaning was extraneous to literature. But Barthes never shared these views. In 1984, Robbe-Grillet published an autobiography, *Le Miroir qui revient*, which had the critics up in arms. How could a writer who had banished characters from the novel write about himself? How could he write a readable, perfectly accessible book when he believed that meaning was a peculiarity of old-fashioned novels? *Le Monde* lamented: “How can the champion of a literature without conscience or meaning begin to write about his own life and his ancestors after thirty years of asceticism? One has to admit that his followers have been wasting their time.”

At first it seems strange that Robbe-Grillet’s followers would be dismayed to learn that he had written a book contradicting his past theories. But when one learns that Robbe-Grillet is an established editor at Les Editions de Minuit, as well as a writer, one can see that his changing tastes are decisive for certain authors. One of the problems inherent in Parisian literary life is that many writers are also editors and critics. The fact that writers like Robbe-Grillet and Bernard-Henri Lévy (who runs a collection at Grasset) have the opportunity to publish their friends and review their enemies’ books, gives Parisian literary

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life its passionate intensity. And the action still takes place in cafés. Places like the bar at the Hôtel du Pont Royal and Lipp (where Aron and I decided to meet) have their regular clientele of editors and writers, some of whom are known to appear at precise hours.

Aron had suggested we meet at Lipp, on the Boulevard St. Germain, which is one of his favorite meeting places. He described himself, over the telephone, so I would recognize him: “I always wear a scarf. I’m a little balding. And if you ask the maître d’hôtel, he knows me. They all know me at Lipp.” Not only did the waiters know Aron, but a young man caught his attention and asked if he would sign a copy of *Les Modernes*, which he happened to be reading. The young man congratulated Aron on his book. Aron gave him the dates of his next lecture and proceeded to tell me that this kind of chance meeting was the way things happened in Paris. The young man had probably been awaiting his arrival.

“It’s so hard to explain to American students, in fact to people who haven’t lived in Paris,” said Aron, “but places like Lipp are cultural institutions. It’s a specifically Parisian phenomenon. You see these places have such a historical weight. There are cafés that have been here since the seventeenth century. The proof is that there we are in Lipp. And the reason these places are so important is that the French don’t socialize that much. And when they do, they prefer to see their friends outside their homes. There are numerous kinds of spaces where people meet . . . in the corridors of publishing houses, and magazines and reviews. People bump into each other by chance and they exchange information.

“There are several privileged places, like the Closerie des Lilas, and the Bar du Pont Royal, and to a lesser extent, La Coupole. The Coupole is much less important than it was before the war, when the painters like Modigliani and Soutine and Giacometti met there. Sometimes even Jean Genet would come along with Giacometti, although Genet did not like socializing in public. Oh, for certain, La Coupole is of less importance now. But you mustn’t eliminate it. Then there’s Balzar. In the evening it tends to be the place for painters and writers. And, of course, Lipp. There are also restaurants . . . under the Second Empire

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and during the beginning of the First Republic there were so many restaurants. And there were the famous dinners Flaubert and the Goncourt Brothers and Saint-Beuve and Zola attended. And Edmond de Goncourt would write down everything they said during dinner.

“So you can see that these actual meetings in restaurants created a kind of literature—as with the Goncourts. The magnetism of these cafés is quite incredible. Even the American exiled writers, who were much less equipped to deal with Parisian literary debate, would meet up regularly at cafés. As you know, the American writers are not used to this kind of life, and they would never have met up in cafés if they had been living in the States. I’m thinking of 1925, when Hemingway, Scott Fitzgerald, and Miller would meet up at the Closerie des Lilas and Harry’s Bar. They would actually play the Parisian game among themselves. You have to admit that it’s extraordinary, the power of these places.”

Before the publication of *Les Modernes*, Aron would also participate in the literary lunches given regularly by the *Nouvel Observateur*. The majority of newspaper and magazines, including *Le Monde*, also gave regular lunch parties. “I wrote for *Le Nouvel Observateur* for a long time. But when *Les Modernes* was published they sacked me, out of fury. I remained courteous towards them, even though the editor, Jean-Daniel, wrote me an insulting letter about my book. You see, each week they write a piece praising Lévi-Strauss and Barthes.”

As Aron talked about his book, which took him ten years to write, one had the impression that he was writing from his own convictions. Though the publication of *Les Modernes* coincided with a general weariness with the modernist philosophers, he had not written it to please. On the contrary, his book had resulted in the loss of his job at *Le Nouvel Observateur*. I asked him how he had maintained a distance from the literary fashions over the years:

“Oh, that’s very kind of you to ask me this question, because it gives me a chance to talk about my own intellectual itinerary and my personality. And since you are asking me to talk about myself, I am forced to return to my bibliography. Thirty years ago, in 1955, I was young, but I was old enough to think for

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myself. I was a young teacher at a lycée. It was then that I first came into contact with these models of thought that I denounce in my book. At that time, Proust and Joyce were mainly used for structuralist criticism. My immediate reaction was to laugh, when I saw what the professors were doing with these authors. After all, there are extraordinary things in Proust and Joyce, and they were being forgotten. All that had feeling and humanity was eliminated as they analyzed it away. I think I had a sense of distance later on because I felt marginal. I felt that the culture was asphyxiating me and that it was not mine.”

While structuralist literary criticism is still taught in French universities, and certain newspapers like *Le Nouvel Observateur* continue to praise Barthes and his disciples, Aron feels that their work has passed into history, and has nothing to do with the actual preoccupations of writers and philosophers. But structuralism was a way of life. It was a private club, and a way of interpreting life. The absence of structuralism has left a void. I asked Aron whether he was heartened by this freedom from ideologies:

“Well, perhaps you are right in suggesting that it is a good thing. But this absence of ideologies in France at the moment is also a sign of a lack of values. Not that I wish to confuse a sense of values with ideologies. But I feel that there is an emptiness at the moment. And I don’t think it’s confined to France. People are obsessed by a need for security, in France and in the rest of Europe, and they don’t understand that a society has to take risks.

“But there are two levels to any culture: there’s the superficial, obvious level, and another level which is in the process of being created. The universities and critics write about the solidified culture, and they read Barthes and Lévi-Strauss. But there is also the underground culture.

“The French have this habit of praising the established culture. There’s an attitude of deference and admiration here which makes people completely lose their critical capacities. I think that the French certainly have a lot to learn from the British in this respect. For in England they do retain a sense of judgment. In France, this adulation that’s showered on the fashionable writers is an ancient tradition. As in the case of Foucault, they

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continued to praise him, even though his last books were the least original things he had ever written. But he was famous, and he was ill, and so they would say nothing against him.

“He did have a great talent as an historian, and he used structuralism as his tool. His books are perfectly made, but they are actually without originality. And I think that Foucault, like Barthes, was plagued by his own lack of creativity and vitality. And his loss of vitality might have been linked to his premature death. I realize that I am taking a risk by making statements like this. But one can take a look at the facts. Since his book, *Surveiller et Punir*, which he wrote ten years before his death, he had written hardly anything.

“Of course, there was that small tome on history called *La Volonté de Savoir*, but he actually spent seven or eight years preparing a book that was in no way an important book. *Surveiller et Punir* was a very important book, but after that he wrote conventional things and I don't think he had much conviction in what he was doing. And Althusser is in a mental home after killing his wife in a fit of madness. It might seem shocking to you that I would say this, but you yourself pointed out that Barthes, Foucault, and Lacan all died within a short space of time. Now that I come to think of it, I should have devoted more space to this coincidence in my book.”

Foucault died on the 25th of June, 1984, at the age of fifty-seven. And the critics did indeed treat him more graciously on his death than either Lacan or Barthes. Though Aron feels that he wrote very little after *Surveiller et Punir*, which was published in 1975, he did in fact write several books, including three volumes on the history of sexuality: *La Volonté de Savoir* (1976), *L'Usage des Plaisirs* (1984), and *Le Souci de Soi* (1984).

But it is true that Foucault had lost his enthusiasm for his work. In an interview which he gave just before his death, to *Le Monde*, he says that he “nearly died of boredom, writing these books; they resembled my previous work too closely.” Foucault had also withdrawn from his previous activism. His writings on prisons had been accompanied by practical action to improve prison conditions in France and to publicize abuses. In the mid-seventies, the group he had founded, the GIP, to deal with these issues in a practical way, was dissolved. During the last

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ten years of his life, he seemed to doubt the validity of his practical work and his writings.

In the eighties, the pernicious nature of structuralism became most apparent when it was applied to psychoanalysis. Though critics still dispute whether Lacan's system was bona fide structuralism, it is evident that he tried to apply structuralism to the study of the unconscious. On his death, on the 9th of September, 1981, many psychoanalysts and writers spoke out against Lacan's theories. In *Le Monde*, the psychoanalyst Colette Chiland stated that Lacan was merely playing with words. He had created a theory of psychoanalysis which omitted making any mention of the patient. Psychoanalysis was no longer a method of giving emotional support or understanding to a patient. It had become a self-sufficient study, whose subject matter was psychoanalysis. This same narcissistic and escapist mentality had also infiltrated the literary world: The subject matter of writing was writing itself. The attention and massive publicity that were given to these various dogmas created the illusion that France had nothing to offer except its *maîtres à penser*. When the masters died, and the ideologies were refuted, many critics, both abroad and in France, pointed to a creative decline in France. The structuralist coterie may have given the critics a great deal to write about, but one cannot confuse structuralism with a creative flowering.

It is a heartening sign that no new coterie dogmas have been fabricated in the eighties, for it paves the way for a more open-minded and less rigid approach to literature. Even Aron's pessimistic view of French culture has become attenuated: "For the last thirty years I had the feeling of living in a cultural desert in Paris. But now I think there's a murmuring, underground culture that is in the process of germinating in France . . . it's imperceptible at the moment . . . but I sense that something is being born."

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