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Excerpt
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PART I

Theories as stories

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Stories, theories and things

The topic of an essay or novel, while I work on it, becomes the most important topic in the world for me, otherwise I couldn't work on it. To write, therefore, about myself as writer, as I have increasingly been asked to do, is very difficult without sounding self-important. Any famous name I may mention by way of illustration will make me seem to be putting myself on the same level, and any statement I may make about anything being unnoticed, on which I spent much thought and time, will sound like petulant complaint, instead of a point about the greatest gap of all, that between intention and effect. Moreover, I have also at times been asked to write about my relationship, as author, to literary theory, which act threatens to quarter or sexter me among all the frailties and fallacies variously attributed to the different functions of Jakobson's diagram.

Nevertheless those two things (myself as novelist and my relation to theory) are what I am going to write about in this opening chapter, not just to get rid of it, but to give a certain personal, author's perspective on the critical, that is, supposedly more 'objective' (but see Ch. 2) chapters that mostly make up this book.

This preamble is an attempt at a distancing disclaimer. I think I can honestly say that my attitude to my own creative work has become (or has been made to become) quite wise. On the sweet success side, I have long thought that to promote or protest, to scramble and scheme, is a waste of my precious energy because, either my work is of value and will therefore be more widely appreciated one day even if I am dead, or it is not, in which case, *pourquoi me fatiguer?* I have had little enough time to write what I wanted as it is. My only concern has been to be at least available in print, a bottle in the sea, and it is quite troublesome enough to have to protest behind the scenes to the bottle-throwers about their occasional malpractices.

The canon

Similarly, on the question of my relationship to theory, I know that nothing I may say about it will be of the slightest interest or value unless my work should enter into what Frank Kermode, in his admirable book *The Genesis of Secrecy* (1979), calls the canon, reviving the term from religious exegesis and showing how it functions the same way in literature. Only works that are considered, on whatever criteria and at whatever time, part of a canon, receive the (to an author ambiguous) blessing of interpretation. The term caught on, and the concept of canon was further finicked since Kermode's book (for example, the curious division between 'canon' and 'classic', see Gumbrecht 1988), but I am using it here in its generally accepted sense. And although Kermode would perhaps not go as far as Stanley Fish (1980), the implication is clear: outside the canon no interpretation, rather as one (now abandoned) dogma had it: outside the Church no Salvation. Fish would add: therefore no existence.

In other words, I am one of the many authors who have a brief existence at what Hirsch (1967), as opposed to Fish, calls the interpretation level (the 'meaning' or simple reading of the text as syntax, for instance by reviewers), but who have little or no existence at what Hirsch calls the critical level (the 'significance' or what others call interpretation, that links the text to other things/realms of thought: the world, that is, other stories, other texts). This can only begin to happen, for better or for worse, when an author enters a canon, however shifting, and I have a knack of somehow escaping most would-be canonic networks and labels: I have been called 'nouveau roman in English' and *nouveau nouveau*, I have been called Postmodern, I have been called Experimental, I have been included in the SF Encyclopaedia, I automatically come under Women Writers (British, Contemporary), I sometimes interest the Feminists, but I am fairly regularly omitted from the 'canonic' surveys (chapters, articles, books) that come under those or indeed other labels. On the whole I regard this as a good sign.

To talk about one's own work is therefore peculiarly hazardous, since to talk about is already to interpret, and therefore to bring my work into an existence, for me as interpreter, which it does not apparently have much for me as writer, except in so far as the act of writing is also already an act of reading and therefore of interpretation. Perhaps I should emborgesize my work and talk about it as if it did not exist save as a fiction (Tlön?) merely alluded to,

which everyone knows they can't go and look up, let alone look up to, look down on, look through and into or look wise by, in other words interpret. But then, Borges is himself an author, not a theorist.

Stories as theories

Yet is he not? There are more stars in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy . . . There are more stories in heaven and earth, Horatio . . . For 'story' has now become a star word in critical theory for theory, for the representation of 'things': history, criticism, chemistry, physics, sociology, psychoanalysis or philosophy, all are stories we tell ourselves to understand the world, all quite meta (-phorical, -linguistic, -historical, if there is a meta-), the Matter of Britain, of France, of the World, of Me. Not only institutional agreements, or languages, or language-games, but also the Fact of the Matter, which the realist philosopher insists on, has itself become meta, that is, 'story' for the Pragmatist: 'His own technique in philosophy is that same Homeric, narrative style which he recommends to the literary critic [. . .] a narrative whose details he hopes the literary critic will help him fill in' (Rorty 1985, 5, see also 1979; 1982).¹

George Steiner once told me that my books weren't novels but language-games: the context was so friendly I still don't know whether this was simple categorizing, or praise, or dismissal, but on present terminology it would mean 'story'. Could literature, so long outcast to the backyard of philosophy, be making a comeback through the front-door?

Novelists are usually indifferent theorists, I said at the beginning, or regarded as such. For example Brian McHale, in examining John Barth's 'story' of late modernism as a 'literature of exhaustion' (1967) and postmodernism as a 'literature of replenishment' (1984a), finds that it doesn't fit the facts, and prefers the 'story' of Dick Higgins (1984) whereby, before 1958, 'innovative artists and thinkers had typically been preoccupied with the process of cognition', characterized by the questions 'How can I interpret this world of which I am part? And what am I in it?' whereas 'postcognitive' artists and thinkers ask 'Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which

¹ See Brian McHale 1988 for a similar constatation and use of the fact that 'theory' is more and more recognized as 'story'. The original essay on which this chapter is based was written in 1985, but not published until after McHale's. It is always pleasing to see that one's ideas are independently confirmed by others.

of my selves is to do it?' (1978, 10, quoted McHale 1988, 560). This distinction is the basis for his own impressive study of postmodernism as concerned with 'ontological' rather than with 'epistemological' questions and effects (see Ch. 14). Whatever the case, he considers Barth's theory as a less good 'story'. But novelists are usually good story-tellers, and their stories sometimes survive theories. But that, too, depends on the canon-makers.

So 'story' has replaced 'philosophy', 'model', 'paradigm', 'theory', and may even swallow up the supposedly non-paradigmatic Fact of the Matter: It is the case, say the philosophers, it is a case-history, say the psychoanalysts, it is a model, say the scientists, it is a story say the poets and some philosophers, it is the repetition of an absent story, say the post-Lacanian deconstructionists. Let us play: There are more theories in heaven and earth, Horatio. There are more models in heaven and earth, Horatio. There are more paradigms in heaven and earth, Horatio. There are more absences in heaven and earth, Horatio. But no, it won't do, since it is all our philosophies that dream up the paradigms, models, interpretations, stories, scenarios, matters, things, absences, and there cannot, on much present theory, be more than are dreamt up, only more to be still dreamt up. Let's try another way in, *medias res*.

A metastory, with metacharacters

Chapter 1 (draft). Once upon a time, in 1968, there appeared a novel called *Between*, by Christine Brooke-Rose, hereafter in this metastory or story-matter referred to as the author, author of *Out, Such*, and earlier novels. *Between* deals with (?), explores (?), represents (?), plays around with (?), makes variations on (?), expresses (?), communicates (?), is about (?), generates (?), has great fun with the theme / complex experience / story / of bilingualism. The I / central consciousness / non-narrating narrative voice / is a simultaneous interpreter who travels constantly from congress to conference and whose mind is a whirl of topics and jargons and foreign languages / whose mind is a whirl of worldviews, interpretations, stories, models, paradigms, theories, languages. Note that in this metastory the simultaneous interpreter has no sex.

But [analepsis to explain origin of facts presented *in medias res*] during the writing of the first draft in 1964 the author became totally blocked until, some three years and another novel later, this simultaneous interpreter became a woman. Why? Obviously not because the

author had ever been a simultaneous interpreter, but presumably [author-comment] because other themes / experiences (worldviews, interpretations, stories) became entangled with the notion / imagined experience / theory / story that simultaneous interpretation is a passive activity, that of translating the ideas of others but giving voice to none of one's own, and therefore a feminine experience. Yet, apart from the initial idea of bilingualism, none of this had been the author's personal experience either as woman or as author, at least, not consciously. It was a cliché, which was nevertheless true enough generally (like all clichés) for the purpose of creating the language of the novel and getting, as I. A. Richards used to say, the 'tone' right. Thus two non-experiences of the author (simultaneous interpretation, woman as passive transmitter) fused with genuine experiences of worldviews (stories, etc.) to produce an imaginative experience that rang true, at least to the author. Clearly these two non-experiences must have repeated an absent story. [This is where the analepsis catches up on the *in medias res* presentation. Yet it is *hors-texte*. Yet there is no *hors-texte* that is not really in.]

The novel is written in what Bakhtin (1929a) calls 'free direct' discourse, that is, there is no separate narrative voice from that of the character, yet the character is not narrating, the distinction between hetero- and homodiegetic is collapsed, as in most Beckett. The syntax of *Between* is free-ranging in that a sentence can start in one place or time, continue correctly, yet by the end of the sentence one is elsewhere. The novel is also written entirely without the verb *to be*. [I'll skip the writing difficulties of this and the *hors-texte* proleptic analepsis in which after such practice the author went on doing without the verb *to be* for months, out of habit, even anonymously in the *Times Literary Supplement*.] There were reasons, for all this, which fall into two groups: (i) at the source of writing, the self-imposition of constraints; (ii) for the intended effect of the writing, mimetic 'realism' (yes! see Chapter 14 on anti-realism) – in brief, perpetual motion in my central consciousness, and loss of identity due to her activity. The point, however, is that (i) was more important in that these constraints produced a specific style; and that, although the novel received much praise at the time, no one ever noticed either: the novel was by no means received as 'realistic' but as 'experimental' (*nouveau roman*, 'no story', etc.). But more on realism vs. experimentation elsewhere (Chs. 14, 17).

As to the verb *to be*, there is no reason why anyone except a deconstructionist should notice the lack of something, unless it is

announced in the blurb, all the less so because the novel is not part of a canon and thus doesn't exist. Another author might come along, and maybe has, announcing that he has written a whole novel without the verb *to be*, and it would surely be either acclaimed as a *tour de force* or dismissed as a mere *tour de force*. But it would at any rate exist in a minor canon of books written without this or that verb. Others would then start writing without auxiliaries or modals – and indeed a French author did shortly after but without having heard of me write a whole novel without the letter *e*, and later another with only the letter *e*, but said so, and was much written about, and interpreted, and thus existent (Georges Perec, *La Disparition*, 1969, *Les Revenentes*, 1972, see Ch. 14).

Chapter 2 (introducing a new character), Thru. *Thru* was conceived in 1970 but for obstetrico-typographical reasons did not appear until 1975. This was the only novel in which two selves, actual author and theoretical critic, came together. It was [author-comment] a novel about the theory of the novel, that is, a narrative about narrativity, a fiction about fictionality, a text about intertextuality and [hors-texte analepsis] it took four summers to get 'right'. The author had enormous fun with it and was duly rapped on the typographic knuckles for it – typographic because by the time it came out it all seemed pretty external to him. She had stuck her neck out and his neck knew what it would get. [Conclusion in proleptic analepsis: the external harm this book did to her reputation as incomprehensible and pretentious was lasting and profound. He was dismissed and had a long *traversée du désert*.] It was, at that point [author-comment], her best and most daring book in the self-reflexive genre. Concluding moral: this chapter is a metaphoric metaparadigmatic model meta-story of my relationship to theory.

Chapter 3. A new character called *Amalgamemnon*, by the same author, was started in 1978 and appeared, after trials and tribs, in 1984. It is written in the future and conditional tenses, the subjunctive or imperative moods. [Hors-texte analepsis of origin: there were also reasons, partly technical (see Genette) and partly sociopsychopolitophilosophical, that is, 'realist' (skip); and many difficulties and rewritings to avoid the oracular tone of the future, as well as a real (fictional) ontological problem of how the characters should speak, since they are made to speak there and then on the page; this was eventually resolved by various suggestions that they do not do so,

and the necessary ‘naturalness’ was obtained by a compromise (cheating, as indeed does Perec in his hypogrammic novels): present and past allowed in dialogue, but as interrogative and negative only, thus preserving the notion that nothing can be said to have happened or be happening. End of analepsis, now *en-texte* but metatextual.]

Despite strong hints in the blurb this time, the author was praised or blamed or commented for things undreamt of in her philosophy, and his text, after briefly becoming quite other, ceased, like the previous ones, to exist for a while, though now it is actually being ‘taught’ in some American universities, but that’s another story.

This neglect can be received as all to the bad: the act of reading (Hirsch’s ‘interpreting’) has been lost, except for the canon, those boom-books of any one historical literary moment, where reading gets so ‘close’ it becomes interpretation (Hirsch’s criticism) and self-perpetuates itself to exhaustion. Or it can be received as all to the good: at least the author’s gigantic tussles with language, or their results, do not stick out like a sore thumb [Metalinguistic/Poetic/Phatic/Subjective play: medium has become a sore thumb, as for a sculptor. Thor sum? Fore sum? Or sum? Awesome foursome].

Chapter 4. While *Amalgamemnon* was doing the rounds (my previous publisher having sacked me on economico-typographic grounds), the author cheered herself up by writing a science fiction story. He wrote it in as mainstream a way as possible, with every narrative cliché in use (hetero- and extradiegetic narrative voice, change of focalization in each chapter – to each focused character his psychological problems – a classic title *The Alphaguys*, etc.). She had decided to show he could do ‘story’ [plot], which she was said to be weak on, and who knows, perhaps to write a best-seller? It was read by a publisher who had just turned down *Amalgamemnon*. He said ‘it’s very mainstream, isn’t it? Why didn’t you write it in your own way?’ The author said (with a smile/an ironic laugh/her heart sinking a little, etc.) ‘But you’ve just turned down my own way.’ At least the publisher didn’t say ‘style’. She meant, the author supposed, why couldn’t I mingle this nice clear plot with ‘my own way’?

And that is what the author did, once *Amalgamemnon* had been accepted, she turned back to the science fiction, jettisoned the mainstream technique and rewrote it entirely, to produce *Xorandor* (the title change came from the rewriting, which had meant working much harder inside computer-languages). In fact it was still remarkably straightforward but without the earlier attempts at familiar

modes. The only experiment he allowed himself was the narration wholly in dialogue, by two kids dictating into their computer, i.e. learning how to tell their own story as they go, and with the concomitant invention of a children's slang out of electronic and physics jargon, for the simple reason that he had no idea (generation gap + living abroad) how kids talk. The reason was practical, the result, again, a particular style. (Though as to inventing a slang Burgess had already done much the same and no doubt better with Russian words in *A Clockwork Orange*, 1962.) *Xorandor* was indeed more successful than the author's previous 'experimental' novels. And yet it was a distinct compromise: more plot, less play. I then went on to write *Verbivore*, a 'sequel' or rather a playing both with the realistic technique of sequels and with shifting narrative levels which demolish that technique. Then *Textermination*, the whole four from *Amalgamemnon* forming one 'Intercom' Quartet.

Chapter 5 (author reflections). If a text (centre of Jakobson diagram) does not exist until attended to and interpreted, according to one story (East of the diagram), then according to another the *hors-texte* West of the diagram does not exist either, the myth of origin, the *always already there* which makes nonsense of the preceding ('Chapters' 1–4). And since the preceding is a form of interpretation, and since interpretation is metalanguage (South), and since, according to yet another story (Lacan's) there is no metalanguage, the interpretation that brings a text into existence doesn't exist either. What is left? The Phatic function (South but less far down), largely ignored by criticism, presumably because it's merely taken to mean the more perishable aspect of contact, such as paper, or even reading aloud, although clearly there are many texts which exploit this Phatic function more fully and textually. Oh, and the Referential (North), the world.

Chapter 6. Scrap the six chapters, try another way in, not as meta-author. End of meta-story.

Story (of theory), theory (of story), story of story

In my parallel professions, I have often been asked the same question in two different versions. It is a naive question, but each generation of students from seventeen to seventy-seven years old seems to have to ask it.

The question is (a) addressed to me as a teacher, for example, in a class: but does the author think of, intend, is he aware of all these structures (of significance, etc.) that you read into the text? and (b) addressed to me as author, for instance, after a reading: when you write, do you think of, intend, are you aware of, all the theory you write and teach?

Now (b), my relationship to theory as author, is the topic I am trying somewhat digressively to tackle in this opening chapter, so as maybe to find some answer to it, but clearly it's the same question as (a). Or, to quote Hillis Miller (1982) on repetition in *Lord Jim*: 'The question the novel asks and cannot unequivocally answer is "Why is this?" To say it is because Conrad designed his novel in recurring patterns is to trivialize the question and to give a misplaced answer to it' (36).

But I should here (at last) distinguish between two current notions of 'literary theory'. As these questions show, most students, at least to begin with, think of 'theory' as a set of magic techniques that will give them access to the arcanum of the text, that is, enable them to do their assignments in the way the teacher expects. Over and over again, in a freshman class, I have been discouraged by the silence, or at very best the vaguest one-word paraphrase, that greets my request for reactions to a text, until I give them some clue as to how it is possible to read it. Then they busily take notes (but maybe this is a comment on French secondary school teaching, which the university has to spend much time in unteaching). And a technique for reading implies a reading of the technique for writing: theory as *technique*. Represented, at its best and worst, by rhetoric and poetics, the study of literary devices and conventions.

The other notion of theory, which deals with ultimate aims and the very status and conditions of meaning (to put it at its simplest) is represented, also at its worst and best, by philosophy in all its many aspects from hermeneutics to logical analysis, from aesthetics to epistemology, from the philosophy of science or history to the history of philosophy, from traditional metaphysics to the deconstruction of same and the beyonding of that. This much wider and more far-reaching notion of theory seems at the moment to be replacing or to have replaced the other, but both are at the root of the 'naive' question in both its aspects, and both exist and function within my consciousness, no, more, as part of my passionate interests and curiosity without which I cannot write, and both make the split into author and theorist particularly painful and exhilarating.