

wire with armed guards in 12-foot high towers at each corner. No exercise facilities. Totally inadequate food which is brought in pig swill buckets. Gross overcrowding—sixty men in one hut for example with not enough room between the beds to stand to make them and two dry toilets per hut of sixty men. Seven wash-basins for 120 men. Constant noise all night from barking dogs and sentries hitting the iron huts with their batons. Inadequate heating and water running down the walls soaking bedding. No educational facilities. Visitors subjected to physical abuse from neighbouring ‘loyalist’ housing estate and then subjected to up to four hours’ wait after humiliating body searches—plus the financial problem of having to take taxis to get there costing £4.)

These men are held without charge or trial as political hostages for the Unionist party. As I write (29th September) the review board hasn’t met. But how can you prove your innocence to them when you are not told what allegations are made against you? Many of those now interned (and there are sixty men in Crumlin still ‘detained’), are old men arrested merely because they were interned in 1938. Liam Mulholland (77), was first interned in 1929. Many are in no illegal organizations, but how can you prove that you’re *not* in something? Faulkner says that these men cannot be charged in the courts because there are no witnesses against them or if there are they are too frightened to give evidence. This is like saying that in order to wipe out illiteracy we should close all the schools. You cannot preach ‘law and order’ and then introduce internment and expect anyone to have much confidence in your sincerity.

Internment caught no IRA leaders since they had been on the run for months. Merely a handful of rank and file members and a large number of old men and political opponents of the Unionist government. PD and Civil Rights members were picked up and held it is admitted because they would have spoken out at public meetings against internment. Who could blame them? This troubled country cannot hope to see any lasting peace until Internment is ended and all repressive legislation repealed. If the Unionists aren’t prepared to do this, then Westminster must. Or are they going to introduce internment in Upper Clyde Shipyards?

Structures in Space

—An Account of Tel Quel’s Attitude to Meaning

by Graham Dunstan Martin

At one point of Nathalie Sarraute’s novel *Les Fruits d’Or* two Parisian intellectuals are discussing the book:

‘To my mind, what causes the—“prodigious” is not too strong a

word—the prodigious beauty of this book—and this is why no one passage of it can be taken in isolation—is that it constitutes an experience to my knowledge unique. . . . This book, I believe, establishes in literature a privileged language which succeeds in outlining an analogy which is its very structure. It is an absolutely new and perfect appropriation of rhythmic signs which transcend by their tension what is inessential in every system of semantics. That inessential quality which you have been describing so accurately, dear friend.’ The other, facing him, suffers a brief contorsion, as if ruffled by a sudden gust of wind, then quickly grows calm again, and slowly nods his head: ‘Yes. Of course. It has an *élan* which abolishes the invisible by grounding it in the ambiguity of the signified.’¹

Nonsense is usually funny, I suppose, and not often dangerous. It only becomes so when it is erected into unassailable dogma by its adherents, and is then acclaimed by a public who think that what is mystifying must *ipso facto* be deserving of worship. The ideas of the *Tel Quel* group are, I am glad to see, being challenged in France itself.² I should like to add my voice to that of the challengers—and to Roger Poole’s perceptive remarks in *Twentieth Century Studies*, May, 1970—and try to explore (as coolly as possible) what seems to me to be the centre of the *Tel Quel* position, namely its views on the relation between literature and experience. Besides, the exercise may have its own value, in clarifying some of the issues concerned in this perennial problem—though I cannot of course hope to resolve any of them.

First, let me say a few words about *Tel Quel* itself. It is an avant-garde literary magazine published by Seuil and founded in 1960. To begin with, it was uncommitted, and welcomed a wide variety of contributions, ranging from posthumous letters of Paul Eluard and approving remarks on Valéry to translations of John Donne. A progressive narrowing of the review’s position set in, however, about the time that Marcelin Pleynet took over the editorship in 1963. The editorial board seem to have been increasingly interested in Roland Barthes’ particular variety of structuralism, based on Saussure. They also interested themselves in the Russian formalists, and indeed, performed a useful service to the French public by publishing an anthology of this critical school in 1965.³ Their main concerns increasingly became structural linguistics seen as throwing light on both life and literature, and a strong Communist commitment. They have been for some time now vociferously Maoist.

Philippe Sollers and the unreadable

I have mentioned Roland Barthes as being more or less their

¹*Op. cit.*, pp. 92–93.

²See for instance, *Change* 6, p. 10: ‘Literature speaks of language only when speaking of something else’ (Roubaud) and, *ibid*, the footnote on p. 89

³*Théorie de la littérature* chosen and translated by T. Todorov, Seuil 1965.

mentor. Other major influences upon the group are Michel Foucault and the philosopher Jacques Derrida, whose thinking, like Heidegger's, often seems to depend on puns and double meanings. Both Foucault and Derrida contributed to *Tel Quel's* collective manifesto published in 1968 (*Théorie d'ensemble*). The poetry, or rather anti-poetry, of Marcelin Pleynet and Denis Roche is also worthy of note. According to Denis Roche, 'poetry is inadmissible' and no doubt bourgeois too; and he seems to wish to destroy the possibility of poetry by emphasizing the arbitrary elements in poetic form. For instance, he will present us with a text arranged in lines, as verse would be. But the content will read like a random collection of disconnected phrases from a piece of prose; and the lines are broken in the middle of words, often without the word in question being continued on to the next line. Roche's poems in the issue of *Tel Quel* for Summer, 1971, include a page which is a Chinese 'inscription' in Mongolian characters.

Another typical, and indeed central, figure is Philippe Sollers, the only founder member still left on the editorial committee. Sollers' stance is already interestingly foreshadowed in the 2nd issue of *Tel Quel* (Summer, 1960), where he praises the novels of Robbe-Grillet for 'rejecting any personal interpretation of the world', and notes with approval the novelist's characteristic method of working and reworking a single episode again and again throughout the course of his novel. This is interesting because of Sollers' later insistence on the inner connexions and permutations of a text. By 1966, Sollers was using the verb 'to write' in the curious sense of the reader's re-creating the text for himself as he reads; and he is praising Pleynet, but also Dante and de Sade, for being 'unreadable'. His novel *Nombres* (1968) has no subject and no characters: it reads like a series of passages torn bodily out of context and redistributed in haphazard disorder among the pages of the 'novel'. The occasional isolated Chinese ideogram appears at the end of a section to further disconcert the reader.

By now there is little in an issue of *Tel Quel* that the average reader would recognize as literary. Not that this is by any means a criticism, of course, since anti-art (if it is not paradoxical to say so) is a legitimate form of art. But *Tel Quel* is also largely given up to long articles full of structuralist and Marxist terminology, and these are often of rebarbative complexity and difficulty. The review is naturally accused of jargon. And it evidently seeks to exercise a sort of intellectual Terror over the Parisian literary world. As the apparent avant-garde of structuralism, and certainly its most noisy adherent, *Tel Quel* is prominent. But how often is it understood? And what are the implications of its attitude to literature and meaning, attitudes which it seems to share with such influential figures as Barthes and Foucault, and which seem to be approved of by such writers as the novelist Claude Simon and the poet Francis Ponge? Let us investi-

gate some of the statements on literary meaning made by one of its most brilliantly intellectual theorists, Julia Kristeva.

Saussure: Disregarding the Referent

I shall start by giving a version of the classic diagram of the relationship between word and meaning, i.e. the semiotic triangle:¹

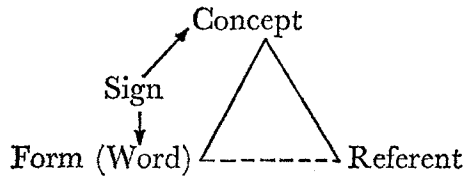


FIGURE 1

The exact scientific status of this schema need not concern us. Lyons (and many other linguists) prefer not to talk about the ‘concept’, since it cannot be ‘observed’—except of course by introspection. What seems clear, however, is that the elements of ‘Form’ and ‘Concept’ were accepted in some sense by Saussure, the great Swiss linguist upon whose ideas the views of *Tel Quel* are largely based. In Saussure, the diagram takes the following form:

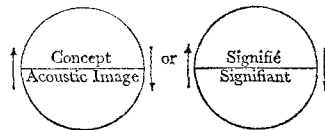


FIGURE 2

For his is a binary analysis of meaning: he appears to disregard the referent.² And indeed one can understand why: the relation between concept and referent is the knottiest of philosophical problems. That there must be *some* such relation, however, is self-evident, and Saussure himself can hardly have intended to ‘abolish’ the referent.

The other two ideas of Saussure relevant to *Tel Quel* are: (2) his observation that the relationship between word and concept is an arbitrary one.³ This is clearly, in very general terms, true. There is nothing to connect the animal or concept ‘horse’ with the form the word ‘horse’ takes.⁴ (3) Language is composed of nothing but

¹Cf. Ogden and Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*, and John Lyons *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics* (Cambridge), p. 404.

²‘Le signe linguistique est donc une entité psychique à deux faces . . .’, Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, p.99. Saussure’s analysis may be an inner analysis of what appears as ‘Concept’ in Figure 1, i.e. his ‘acoustic image’ is the mental image of the word and his ‘concept’ the idea for which this stands. However, this possibility does not affect the main issue here, which is the status of the referent.

³Saussure, *op. cit.*, pp. 100–102.

⁴Saussure himself however remarks on onomatopoeia as a clear *partial* case of such a connexion. And see for example J-M. Peterfalvi, *Introduction à la psycholinguistique*, PUF, Paris 1970, for some interesting further cases of apparently innate human associations of sound with sense.

differences.¹ It is the distinctions between words that count. If one of the three synonyms *redouter*, *craindre* and *avoir peur* were removed from the French language, its whole content, says Saussure, would be redistributed between the remaining two.² If a new word is introduced, the others in its immediate vicinity ‘move’ to make room for it. Thus, relationships inside the language system count more than reference outside it. And the term ‘structuralism’ is defined by Lyons in *New Horizons in Linguistics* as a conception of language as having ‘a certain structure . . . which can be considered and described independently of the *substance* in which it is realized.’³

Roland Barthes: Écrivain|Écrivain; Transitive|Intransitive

A further preliminary remark about the theoretical background: *Tel Quel* makes a basic distinction between two opposite types of discourse. Jean Ricardou in *Théorie d'ensemble* lists a number of such distinctions as made by previous theorists: *Poésie/Reportage* (Mallarmé), *Danse/Marche* (Valéry), *Poésie/Prose* (Sartre), *Écrivain|Écrivain* (Roland Barthes).⁴ The last is clearly the direct influence on *Tel Quel*, as Barthes is in some sense their mentor. Now, in Barthes' terms, the *écrivain's* language refers to and seeks to transform the world. This language he consequently calls ‘transitive’. The *écrivain's* language on the other hand is ‘intransitive’: it is continual interrogation, calling in question, ambiguity, and reflexiveness: i.e. it refers to *itself*.

The basic distinction between prose and poetry is of course an eminently respectable one. It is also extremely useful. It occurs in Philip Wheelwright's excellent *Semantics and Ontology* in the form of a distinction between block and fluid language.⁵ Wheelwright however suggests that these are extreme terms of the same scale, not absolutely separate forms of discourse. He also points out (and this will be important with regard to what follows) that the question of whether the object referred to by language actually exists or not, is an ontological question, *not* a semantic one.

Tel Quel's Julia Kristeva, makes a similar distinction. Poetic language she asserts to be a form of discourse in its own right.⁶ It is, however, usually considered by linguists as a ‘violation’ of the normal rules of language,⁷ and she protest that this attitude prevents linguists from studying a ‘distinctively poetic morphology’.⁸ Poetry

¹*Op. cit.*, p. 166: ‘. . . dans la langue il n'y a que des différences *sans termes positifs*. Qu'on prenne le signifié ou le signifiant, la langue ne comporte ni des idées ni des sons qui préexisteraient au système linguistique, mais seulement des différences conceptuelles et différences phoniques issues de ce système. Ce qu'il y a d'idée ou de matière plastique dans un signe importe moins que ce qu'il y a autour de lui dans les autres signes.’

²*Ibid.*, p. 160.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 240 ff.

⁵ Essay in *Metaphor and Symbol*, ed. L. C. Knights and Basil Cottle, London, 1960.

⁶ Kristeva, *Σημειωτική*, Recherches pour une sémanalyse, Seuil, Paris, 1969, p. 176.

⁷ See, for instance, *New Horizons in Linguistics*, ed. Lyons, Penguin, 1970, particularly the article by J. P. Thorne, pp. 185 ff.

⁸ *Recherches pour une sémanalyse*, p. 177.

is a case, less limited than normal, of the linguistic code; and in poetic language, 'the "totality" of the code which the subject has at his disposal, is more or less realized'.¹ Poetic language is thus a potential infinity for the writer, language is more like an organism than a mechanism ruled by 'laws'², and 'literary practice reveals itself as an exploration and discovery of the possibilities of language . . .'.³ One can only approve the privileged status here being offered to poetry and indeed to literary discourse in general—not to mention the encouragement to experiment and innovation.

At this point the key *Tel Quel* notion of *intertextualité* raises its head. The individual text belongs among all other texts.⁴ It is a system of multiple connexions both internal and external to itself.⁵ Poetic language cannot be properly understood except when all the relationships expressed in it are taken into account. 'The meaning of poetic language is formed in relationship: that is to say it is a function where one cannot speak of a "sense" of unity A outside those functions which link it to B, C, D and E.'⁶ This is of course quite accurate: the total sense of a work of literature is not reducible to simple statements, and is indeed inseparable from the work's detail.

It is true that this is all many degrees better than the Socialist Realism naïvely espoused by traditional Marxists. There is in fact no acceptance by the Maoist *Tel Quel* of any kind of realism. The avant-garde alone is revolutionary, not because of what they say, but because of the manner of their saying it.

The Discourse that Destroys itself

Not because of what they say . . . And here is the rub. According to Julia Kristeva, the practice of 'écriture' (the particular form of 'poetic language' recommended by *Tel Quel*) exists in a curious logical no-man's-land: 'Each sign has a denotatum; each sign has no denotatum; each sign has and has not a denotatum; it is not true that each sign has and has not a denotatum. Paragrammatical writing is continuous reflexion, written challenging of the code, the law and itself.'⁷ Poetic language questions itself, grammar, and the very nature of language. In the questioning, apparently, lies its revolutionary nature. And Sade, consequently, is taken seriously by Sollers because he *cannot* be taken seriously, because his is 'a discourse which destroys itself', leaving nothing in its place.⁸ It is, in short, not the *substance* of the activity that defines it as revolutionary: it is its *manner*.

¹*Ibid.*, p. 178.

²*Ibid.*, p. 179.

³*Ibid.*, p. 178.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 181 ff.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 184

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 188.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁸See Sollers, *Logiques*, Seuil, 1968, pp. 78 ff.

And there is truth there too, of course. But not the truth asserted by *Tel Quel*. At the bottom of these assertions lies the most radical assertion of all: that literary language is amputated from its referent. Julia Kristeva's proof of this has a certain logical elegance, no doubt: it amounts to a claim that in poetic language the sign *both means and does not mean*.

Quoting the Baudelaire poem *Une martyre*,
 'Au milieu des flacons, des étoffes lamées
 Et des meubles voluptueux,
 Des marbres, des tableaux, des robes parfumées
 Qui traînent à plis somptueux,
 Dans une chambre tiède où, comme en une serre,
 L'air est dangereux et fatal,
 Où des bouquets mourants dans leurs cercueils de verre
 Exhalent leur soupir final . . .'

she comments: 'It is a question neither of the concrete nor of the general, and the context itself blurs this distinction.'¹ The observation is common enough: poetry describes the particular so as to suggest the universal. 'The poetic *signifié*', she goes on, 'is, in this sense of the word, *ambiguous*.' We must be careful not to confuse the *Tel Quel* sense of the word 'ambiguous' with its Empsonian sense, however; in Empson's terms, it suggests not a logical uncertainty, but a mixture or multiplicity of meanings. In Kristeva's terms, 'ambiguous' means: having more than one sense, and therefore being illogical. She goes on: 'Speech does not tolerate this kind of concrete but non-individual *signifié*.'² This of course is simply not true of parables, for instance, or of funny stories. But let us allow Kristeva her point for the moment, for she is at any rate speaking here of a feature which does, in a very general way, *tend* to distinguish literary from normal discourse. Poetic language, she continues, *seems* to refer to objects or to happenings; but this is done in terms which logical speech rejects as inadmissible. 'Bouquets don't die, furniture isn't voluptuous, in non-poetic speech. They are so however in poetry, which, in this way, asserts the *existence of a non-existence* and effects the ambivalence of the poetic *signifié*.'³ Thus, because poetic language is not strictly 'logical', Kristeva asserts that it is self-contradictory.

Isn't furniture voluptuous?

Now many things could be said about this, including the very doubtful validity of an argument that involves apparent negative entities, like 'non-existence' and 'negativity'. But the following remarks will perhaps suffice: (1) We accepted Kristeva's point about bouquets not dying, and furniture not being voluptuous in non-poetic speech above, for the sake of following her argument. But it

¹ *Recherches pour une sémanalyse*, p. 252.

² *Ibid.*, p. 253.

³ My italics. *Ibid.*, p. 253.

really is not acceptable in her terms, that is in the terms of an *absolute* distinction. We saw earlier in this essay that Wheelwright attributes to language an ability to be 'fluid to various degrees', that is '*poetic* to various degrees'; and ordinary speech bears this out: we frequently employ metaphor there, and not merely dead metaphor, and we then understand this metaphor in the classic sense, as conveying *meaning*. Consequently, and despite Kristeva, it is *reasonable* to ask what it means to speak of 'dying bouquets' and 'voluptuous furniture'. And once we ask this question, it becomes clear why they are so spoken of: it is in a sense the basic metaphor of poetry that the world we live in has 'meaning' for us, and that we hence attribute 'meaning' to it when we speak of it; and the writer 'notices' details in an imaginary room because these details have a human sense, have 'something to say to us'. This 'something' indicates 'something more' than usual: 'voluptuous furniture', for instance, indicates a set of emotional associations more sensual than usual; it indicates a meaning 'in' the furniture beyond its normal everyday meanings. Or rather, it could indicate this, were it not such a cliché.

It sounds perhaps as if I am a sufferer from the pathetic fallacy. Not at all: it should be clear that to speak in these terms, attributing 'meaning' to the world, is a manner of speaking: it suggests that we find ourselves reflected in the world as in a mirror, that we interact with it, that it is our environment, which forms us as we help to form it. (Kristeva would perhaps not take this point, as she seems to have an irredeemably literal mind.)

(2) My second point is connected with my first. It is in fact highly questionable at what *point* one can distinguish between literal and metaphoric. The theory itself is inadequate to the observed facts. At what point, for example, in the following sequence, does 'voluptuous' cease to be literal and start to be metaphoric: 'Voluptuous feelings, a voluptuous woman, a voluptuous dance, a voluptuous bed, voluptuous furniture?' The doubtful and shifting nature of this boundary is also shown by the fact that we know that numerous words have been, in the course of time, employed as metaphor so regularly that they have ceased to be felt as metaphor. A commonly quoted instance is the Latin word *scrupulus* (a small, sharp stone), which has of course become our 'scruple'. Similarly, Latin *spiritus* (wind, breath) is now English 'spirit'. An even more interesting example for the present argument is a word such as 'outsider', where one may clearly feel the word's direct connexion with literal externality. The very primacy of the literal over the metaphoric is doubtful too, as one can see when one considers accounts of the mental processes involved in certain scientific discoveries, where it is the application of a new model to an old problem that produces the breakthrough. The most famous case is perhaps Kekulé's dream of intertwining serpents (he had fallen asleep on the top of a London

bus), which formed a 'model' which he applied to the problem of molecular patterns. From model to metaphor is not very far; and perhaps all new ideas are 'metaphoric'.¹

In short, to agree with Kristeva in asserting that it is not 'true' to say that furniture is voluptuous, and that this phrase is self-contradictory, would be to condemn oneself to the most flat-footed literalism of mind. One might even thus disqualify oneself from ever having any new ideas—were such literalism of mind in fact possible.

Must meaning disappear?

Kristeva is of course aware that in normal discourse we do not treat ambivalences, metaphors and multiple meanings in the fashion she described. 'In the universe of language [there is] the possibility of combining different interpretations given to a discourse or to a significant unity by independent readers or listeners. The total meaning of non-poetic discourse would result in fact from a combination of all the possible meanings of that discourse, that is to say from a reconstitution of the discursive polysemy produced by the totality of possible speakers. Clearly, such an attitude is possible *also* when faced with a poetic text, but it has nothing to do with its specific nature as discourse *other* than communicative speech.'² As can be vividly seen from this quotation, Kristeva's position rests ultimately upon mere dogmatic assertion: that in poetry we 'do not' or 'must not' accept that a complex of meanings of more than normal plenitude is being given us, but 'must' (apparently in the name of logic, of all things) feel these multiple meanings to cancel each other out. But this assertion (apart from its sheer dogmatism) depends also upon an absolute distinction between literal and metaphoric speech. For if the one blends insensibly into the other, no such assertion becomes possible. As we have seen, one can more reasonably assert that the prose/poetry distinction is a matter of degree. It is Kristeva's insistence on an *absolute* and doctrinaire distinction that has led her astray.

In terms of practical criticism, Kristeva's attitude gives rise to the following process: that when, as in Pleyne's lines

'Quel bonheur aux yeux du passant
L'absence de l'océan'

'the ocean, by reason of its indefinite identity, evokes absence; but it can equally be a question of a simple absence (or lack) of ocean',³ the two senses are held to *cancel* each other out. Thus,

1 meaning = 1 meaning,
but
2 (or more) meanings = 0 meaning.

¹ As Owen Barfield suggests in his interesting discussion 'The Meaning of the Word "Literal"' in *Symbol and Metaphor*, quoted above.

² *Recherches pour une sémanalyse*, pp. 263–264.

³ Sollers, *Logiques*, p. 209.

It is perhaps when this disappearance of meanings into the void cannot by any stretch of the imagination be achieved, that *Tel Quel* condemns a text or an author. Balzac's story *Sarrasine*, commented on at length by Barthes in his recent book *S/Z*, evokes an interesting complex of meanings, as Barthes himself convincingly, if Freudianly, demonstrates. But because it does so, it is merely 'classic'. On the other hand, what can even Barthes say about the ideal *Tel Quel* text, which would consist of so many interlocking and mutually destructive meanings that it would be equal to *total meaning*, and consequently to *no meaning*? Barthes himself proudly admits: 'Des textes scriptibles il n'y a peut-être rien à dire.'¹ (Of 'scriptible' texts nothing perhaps can be said.)

It will by now be clear how much *Tel Quel's* theories owe to the basic approach of Saussure: his apparent lack of interest in the referent, his statement that language is composed only of differences, the tendency of his (as of most) linguistic theories to concentrate on structure at the expense of content and meaning, all these are reflected in Julia Kristeva's exposé. There is, of course, nothing wrong in the *linguist's* treating language as if it were a system of abstract relationships and nothing more. And no doubt it is advisable for the linguist to deal as much as possible with the observable: indeed, great advances have been made by adopting this approach. However, we are here concerned with literary meanings; and *Tel Quel's* Saussurian stand is itself insufficiently scientific. For it tends to ignore and denigrate later advances in linguistics which do not suit it, attacking them as a 'technocratic current of English and American empiricist and positivist inspiration'.²

Certainly a partial truth does lurk in the attitude of *Tel Quel* towards the ideal text. It is a fact of experience that where the possible meanings of a series of images are *too* numerous, a kind of mental abolition of meanings occurs: one is left, as it were, with the meanings blank. Mallarmé perhaps approaches this point in some of his poems, and is indeed quoted approvingly by *Tel Quel* as an instance of their own theories. Sollers' 'novel' *Nombres* (1968) is a most suitable instance: it could be 'about' anything, and consequently (and intentionally) is 'about' nothing.

The insulation of poetic meaning

I have been speaking of a 'disappearance of meanings'. I must at

¹ 'scriptible' because the reader is supposed to engage in a creative process akin to writing, when reading them. Such texts consequently involve maximum suggestibility of a maximum of meanings. Texts which are 'lisibles' on the other hand contain only a modicum of meanings (like Balzac's *Sarrasine*). As so often with a *Tel Quel* notion, a thoroughly valid observation has been pushed to a dubiously valid extreme. For this distinction recalls C. S. Lewis's two-fold distinction (in *An Experiment in Criticism*, Cambridge, 1961) of ways of reading into (1) escapist, and (2) re-creative (and not, of course, recreative). It is clear that a higher level than normal of multiple meanings is a distinctively modern technique for compelling the reader to read in way 2.

² See, for this phrase, *Tel Quel* 43, p. 79. It is evidently Chomskyan linguistics that is being attacked.

this point be more precise, and repeat that what is really meant here is 'a disappearance of the referent'. It is in relation to the real world that poetic texts, according to Kristeva, have nothing to say, are self-contradictory. They are 'des textes clos'; they refer to *themselves* (and, by the principle of *intertextualité*, to other texts); they are closed systems of linguistic relationships, which, as they are held not to relate to any referents, are necessarily *abstract* relationships. The mode of being of these texts is thus *musical*:¹ the words are like notes, having meaning only in relation to one another; and, with *Tel Quel*, literature has become as abstract as fugue, or the paintings of Jackson Pollock.² Thus Kristeva asserts that poetic language is 'an operation of generalized negativity', and that its function is to 'annihilate', or to perform a function akin to Sūnyavāda.³

The structuralism of *Tel Quel* thus bears no resemblance to the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss or of the linguist; for these latter seek to deduce as scientifically verifiable a structure as possible in a text or

¹ In the normal sense in which we speak of a poem as being 'musical', of course, a Sollers or Denis Roche text is markedly *unmusical*; it also gives an unpoetic, prosy impression. Here, I suspect, is another consequence of Kristeva's view that a text either *is* or *is not* poetic. There can be no degrees in 'écriture': language is intended either to relate to the world or not to relate. Consequently, to seek a higher density of poetry in his language is no concern of the 'scripteur'; and I take it that, in *Tel Quel*'s view, Patience Strong would be as poetic as Hopkins *if only the words of both could be assumed to have no referents*.

² A tendency to concentrate above all on the abstract or musical relationships between the words of a poem is already evident in Mallarmé—and to some extent in his disciple Valéry. Cf. Michel Foucault in *Les mots et les choses* (Gallimard, 1966), p. 313: 'La littérature se distingue de plus en plus du discours d'idées . . . ; elle devient pure et simple manifestation d'un langage qui n'a pour loi que d'affirmer—contre tous les autres discours—son existence escarpée; elle n'a plus alors qu'à se recourber dans un perpétuel retour sur soi, comme si son discours ne pouvait avoir pour contenu que de dire sa propre forme: elle s'adresse à soi comme subjectivité écrivante, ou elle cherche à ressaisir, dans le mouvement qui la fait naître, l'essence de toute littérature; et ainsi tous ses fils convergent vers la pointe la plus fine—singulière, instantanée, et pourtant absolument universelle—, vers le simple acte d'écrire. Au moment où le langage, comme parole répandue, devient objet de connaissance, voilà qu'il réapparaît sous une modalité strictement opposée: silencieuse, précautionneuse déposition du mot sur la blancheur d'un papier, ou il ne peut avoir ni sonorité ni interlocuteur, ou il n'a rien d'autre à dire que soi, rien d'autre à faire que scintiller dans l'éclat de son être. 'This view is not noticeably different from the attitude of Sartre towards poetry, as expressed in *Situations II* (Gallimard, 1948), where it seems that poetry is 'l'échec de la communication (qui) devient suggestion de de l'incommunicable' (p. 86) and 'les poètes sont des hommes qui refusent d'utiliser le langage' (p. 63). The source of the disagreement between the Sartrean and *Tel Quel* schools of thought is that, for Sartre, poetry alone is 'intransitive', whereas the rest of literature is 'transitive' (to use Barthes' terms once again); whilst, for the *Tel Quel* group, everything that is properly literary is 'intransitive.' See the account of the discussion at La Mutualité, published in *Que peut la littérature*, Paris, 1965, and in particular Jean Ricardou's crystal-clear account of the *Tel Quel* position.

³ *Recherches pour une sémantologie*, p. 273. According to the Sūnyavāda, or doctrine of emptiness, all statements about the phenomenal world could be shown by dialectical argument to be self-contradictory. For instance, in an argument akin to Zeno's, motion was shown to be impossible—and, by taking the argument further than Zeno did, rest too was invalidated. Thus, reason was incompetent to apprehend reality. The solution lay only in transcending all contradictions in totality, the absolute. (See *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism, A Study of the Mādhyamika System*, T. R. V. Murti, London, 1955, and particularly Chapter VII.) This apparent appeal to Buddhist philosophy is curious, for Kristeva on the one hand deprecates 'mystical and esoteric' interpretations of poetry, and on the other shows no sign of regarding explanations based on reason as merely provisional and relative. In her belief, no doubt, to compare poetry with a Buddhist doctrine is merely to further suggest its irrelevance to experience. But it is ironic that she should herself come so close to presenting us with a 'mystical and esoteric' account of it—even though she presumably thinks this particular one meaningless.

object of study. *Tel Quel's* structuralism, both as regards its theory and its literary practice, is a building of impressive structures in a void of pure abstraction. And yet one of *Tel Quel's* contemporary classics is Francis Ponge, who once wrote, tongue in cheek, 'Sans doute ne suis-je pas très intelligent: en tout cas les idées ne sont pas mon fort.'¹

Now it is ironic that the extreme materialism of *Tel Quel* should produce not only a theoretical structure of such abstraction, but also 'works' of similar abstraction. The reason perhaps lies in their desire (a very laudable one in itself) to valorize poetry and literary language in general *in its own right*. Now a materialistic outlook necessarily attributes value only to what is materialistic. Kristeva herself says that her object is to 'couper court à des spéculations interprétatives du texte moderne qui ont pu, on le sait, donner lieu à des raisonnements mystiques et ésotériques'.² The ambition is admirable: by all means let us have as rational an account as possible of the functioning of poetry. But the direction in which such an account might take us would be that of the valorization of multiple meaning, and this the *Tel Quel* group refuse to do. They prefer to empty poetry of meaning, to refuse it relevance to experience.³

And I think one can see why. They are doctrinaire Marxists. By refusing relevance to literature and in particular to avant-garde and experimental literature, they have in fact discovered a means of saving it from the dead hand of Stalinist Social Realist criticism. For, if it does not relate to life, it cannot have anything to say about life, and cannot be attacked by Zhdanovites on political grounds. The function of experimental art then becomes simply that it experiments, that it is a kind of parable in the abstract world of words for revolution in the real world of politics.

But the trouble is that, by the same token, truths other than the didactic, the political and the Maoist are denied. Literature's ability to state complex truths about the world, feeling and human nature is simply negated. *Tel Quel* appear to assert the validity of multiple and complex meanings. But in fact they deny it, since they deny its applicability to experience, where (by implication) only the dogmatic, single-track 'truths' of historical materialism hold good. The theories of *Tel Quel* have, in short, dangerously totalitarian implications—were anyone to take them seriously.

¹Ponge, *Le grand recueil*, Vol. II, p. 9. One is, not amazed, but amused to read in *Twentieth Century Studies*, No 3, Jean-Marie Benoist complaining in traditional continental fashion of English empiricism (p. 54, note 10). It is admittedly naïve of the English to think that Dr Johnson's famous gesture of *kicking the stone* ('I refute him thus!') demonstrates anything; but the opposite Gallic extreme of erecting polysyllabic shrines in empty air to mere verbal ingenuity, is hardly more helpful.

²*Op. cit.*, p. 267.

³Let me emphasize: even an *indirect* relationship to life is denied. Barthes goes so far as to write (*Essais critiques*, Seuil, 1964, p. 164—this passage first appeared in *Tel Quel* in Autumn, 1961): 'far from being an analogical copy of reality, *literature is the awareness itself of the unreality of language* . . .' His italics.