

*Hegel, Language, and Literary Theory**Saussure, Barthes, Derrida, Deleuze***8.1 Saussure, Barthes, and the Structure of the Sign**

While we can't say that Hegel's views of language directly influenced all literary theorists, it's clear that those views anticipate some of the fundamental concepts of language on which much literary theory is founded. For example, Saussure's very definition of the sign is dialectical. In his lectures published as *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure states: "I propose to retain the word *sign* [*signe*] to designate the whole and to replace *concept* and *sound-image* respectively by *signified* [*signifié*] and [*signifiant*]: the last two terms have the advantage of indicating the opposition that separates them from each other and from the whole of which they are parts."¹ The sign is the synthesis of signifier and signified, and it is this synthesis that "refers" to the object. The indifferent externality or "thing" is constituted as an object not by the fact of reference but by the *relation* of this reference to the reference of other signs, a relation that structures other "objects" as part of an overall network. In other words, the system of objects is actually *internal* to the network of signs, each sign shaping or prefiguring its object.

Hence, in this system there is no object beyond the sign; this is not to say that the sign somehow *creates* its object (whether this be physical, like a "table," or psychological like "love"). Rather, the object has significance in the light of the sign. But it is the same process which creates subjectivity – not any individual subjectivity but a cumulative, historical, communal, subjectivity. Hence language is the *form* of both subjectivity and objectivity, which are created at the same time and are effectively coterminous, the difference between them being one of viewpoint or emphasis. Language is the medium of their creation. In this sense, subjectivity becomes linguistic. Whatever categories we hold subjectivity to

¹ Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 67. Hereafter cited as *CGL*.

comprise – as in Kant’s case, substance, causality, relation, etc. – are not just categories but concepts in language. Kant saw the “external” world as actually shaped by our subjective apparatus: by our intuitions of sensibility, whereby we see everything in space and time; and by the twelve categories of our Understanding, whereby we see everything in terms of quantity, quality, relation, causality, etc. But whereas Kant saw subjectivity as fixed, we can, if we view these categories as merely concepts related to other concepts in language, withdraw from them their privileged or universal status and see them as interacting with, or even replaceable by, other concepts.

When we say that the concepts are necessarily in interaction with other concepts, we have moved to a Hegelian standpoint; when we recognize, with Saussure, that these concepts are part of the system of language, we have effectively reformulated the insights of Kant in terms of language. Whereas he addressed the connection between thought and reality, we, like Hegel, are interposing language into that connection – not as a mere relation but as an *internal* relation that contributes to the constitution of both terms. In other words, language internally structures both thought and reality.

The French structuralist (and poststructuralist) Roland Barthes was effectively expressing this “linguistic turn” embodied in Hegel when he remarked that “it is human history which converts reality into speech.”² Hegel, we recall, held that the world comes to us as sensation and is transformed into a world of language. According to Barthes, what mythical speech presupposes is a “signifying consciousness” and every object in the world can “become speech” (*Myth*, 111). Myth belongs to semiology, the general science of signs initially postulated by Saussure. Like Derrida, Barthes sees an entire province of contemporary research – including psychoanalysis, structuralism, and some kinds of literary criticism – as concerned not with facts but with signs. And, reminiscent of Hegel’s definition of his *Logic*, Barthes sees semiology as “a science of forms” (*Myth*, 111). Indeed, the explanation of mythology, for Barthes, entails what Engels called a “dialectical coordination” of particular sciences: mythology is a part of both semiology and ideology, and cannot be explained by a one-sided omission of either of these domains (*Myth*, 112).

What’s fascinating here is that Barthes’s definition of the sign, like Saussure’s, brings out its dialectical structure. He begins by

² Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Collins, 1973), p. 110. Hereafter cited as *Myth*.

acknowledging that “semiology postulates a relation between two terms, a signifier and a signified.” However, “we are dealing, in any semiological system, not with two, but with three different terms. For what we grasp is not at all one term after the other but the correlation which unites them ... the signifier, the signified, and the sign, which is the associative total of the first two terms.” Barthes offers an example: if I use roses to signify my passion, we do not (except for analytical purposes) have merely a signifier (roses) and a signified (my passion); we have only “passionified roses” (*Myth*, 113). The point is that neither signifier nor signified have any meaning independently of the totality, the unity, the synthesis, that they mutually comprise.

What Barthes calls this “tri-dimensional pattern” is operative, as he observes, in many other thinkers besides Saussure. For example, in Freud’s analysis of dreams, there are actually three terms: manifest content, latent content, *and* a “correlation of the first two: it is the dream itself in its totality.” For Freud, a dream is “the functional union of these two terms.” For Sartre, the signified is comprised by “the original crisis in the subject ... Literature as discourse forms the signifier; and the relation between crisis and discourse defines the work, which is the signification” or sign (*Myth*, 113–14). In all these cases we are dealing with a dialectical structure whereby the initial positing of any term already presupposes not only another term whose relation to “it” defines it (or, in Hegelian terms, brings it into being) but a totality which must be understood as a concrete unity of the terms. The identity of each exists only in relation to the totality which itself presupposes the openness of its parts toward mutuality of completion.

Interestingly, the notion of discourse as the “signifier” brings to mind Kojève’s influential reading of Hegel’s Absolute Idea as “discourse.” And in subsequent passages, Barthes effectively reiterates this idea, not as specifically applied to Hegel, but in more general terms. In myth, he says, the tri-dimensional pattern forms a second-order semiological system, a meta-language. In mythical language, what was the totality of the sign in the first-order language becomes merely one component – merely the signifier – in the second-order system. So what was a totality in the first system becomes merely a part in the second. This is effectively the dialectical process reconceived in terms of language, with one totality being superseded within a larger framework, and with the process of sublation embodying a move to a higher level, a more comprehensive perspective. In this sense, also, the function of Absolute Spirit is usurped by language – which does not necessarily rob the movement of its unifying

tendencies but denies any absolute authority to those tendencies, relocating them – within language – as immanent, as ideologically motivated, and as sustained only by their connections within the larger (human) network of signs. We can use the example that Barthes himself gives: a Negro soldier saluting the French flag on one level has an obvious significance, one of Frenchness and militarism, and a particular person's nationalistic orientation. But, at a higher "mythical" level, this entire sign of the first system (the entire combination of signifier and signified as denoting Frenchness) itself becomes the first term, the signifier of the second, mythical, order of signification: it portrays and posits "Frenchness" as a universal concept, one that commands the willing allegiance of even former colonials or their descendants. And in this broader mythical signification, the personal traits and history of the Negro are entirely suppressed, a strategy that makes the order of myth ideological (*Myth*, 122). This is a revealing example of how the dialectical process is never arrested; for its third term, the synthesis or mediated unity it posits can always be regarded as the first term, the given or immediate unity, of a further development.

In fact, for Barthes, the function of Absolute Spirit is effectively supplanted by myth. For it is myth that gives "historical intention a natural justification" (*Myth*, 142). It is myth that has the "bourgeois" ideological function of erasing "the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they once were made." In other words, myth suppresses any historical dialectic, substituting this with an idealized dialectical process. "The world enters language as a dialectical relation between activities, between human actions; it comes out of myth as a harmonious display of essences" (*Myth*, 142). This, as we will see later, was almost exactly Marx's critique of the Hegelian dialectic: that it substituted for the real world a panorama of essences, of ideas. And Barthes himself sees this process of myth as "exactly that of bourgeois ideology." Myth is "*depoliticized speech*" (*Myth*, 142).

For Barthes, the term "political" signifies "the whole of human relations in their real, social structure, in their power of making the world" (again, Marx's account of "labor" in Hegel comes to mind). But what myth does is to abolish the "complexity" of human acts; it "gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics ... it organizes a world which is without contradictions ... it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves" (*Myth*, 143). Again, this is strikingly similar to Marx's critique of Hegel's dialectic as first acknowledging the contradictions of the bourgeois world but then resolving

these in a synthesis engineered by Absolute Spirit, in a reaffirmation of the alienated vision of religious thinking which retracts the reality of the world into the sphere of pure essences. Barthes in fact cites Marx's view that "the most natural object contains a political trace," a trace that has been suppressed or superseded. Barthes effectively identifies the dialectic as a kind of culmination of bourgeois ideology, with its characteristic instrument being myth as that which reconciles, naturalizes, and brings all into a harmonious totality.

Where I would differ with Barthes is in this: it is not bourgeois ideology as such which does the work of harmonizing and naturalizing; this, rather, is the function of liberal humanism. It is liberal humanism that writes the narrative of bourgeois ideology. Bourgeois ideology is the "patient," reeling off the details of her own economy, her own immediate material needs and requirements, as yielded by her short-term calculations for the future. "I desire this and this and this; I would sell this, and exchange that. I want to work in this way, and would be compensated. But I am not happy. In fact, I am not just alienated but utterly confused and conflicted. And I have a history of abuse, at the hands of my father." Liberal humanism is the psychoanalyst, piecing together these fragments, shored against its own ruins, into a narrative, restoring history, bringing back into visibility originating circumstances as well as a reminder of other aspects of the patient's life, ethical, moral, aesthetic – into what can be only a labored coherence, a provisional totality. Bourgeois ideology represses the dialectic of its own making; liberal humanism attempts to restore, to bring back, this dialectic – however imperfectly configured – and as such, must begin with a critique of Hegelian restoration. And of course, many modes of literary theory, including deconstruction (as we have seen) and Deleuzian "Schizoanalysis" (as we shall see) comprise a critique of this liberal humanist critique, citing psychoanalysis as part of the problem – and, more fundamentally, the ego and the very concept of "man."

The work of Saussure and Barthes exhibits how Hegel's views of language anticipate some of the founding notions of literary theory. We can now examine in detail specific readings of Hegel on language by two profoundly influential theorists, Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva.

8.2 Jacques Derrida: Language and Difference

Derrida's reading of Hegel on language might be seen as one aspect of his general critique of the dialectic as logocentric, as presupposing the authority of a Logos which enables a closed, totalizing, and unified

metaphysical system. Essentially, Derrida sees the sign as central to Hegel's dialectical process, whereby (a) mind or the self is posited as an immediate unity, (b) it engages with the otherness of the external world or nature, and (c) it negates this otherness and returns to itself as a mediated unity. We saw in the previous chapter that Hegel sees the mind as receiving the external world in the form of sensations and reconfiguring it as language. Derrida's reading of Hegel can be summarized as follows. The sign for Hegel is the vehicle of mind's engagement with, and negation of, the world. The sign thus mediates between two "presences," two states of the self, hence the sign is viewed as essentially "psychological," as a part of our mental experience. So Derrida sees the sign in Hegel as the contradictory site of oppositions embedded in the mind's interaction with the world – between sense and intellect, same and other, internal and external. The sign is sustained in this function by the privilege Hegel grants (as do most philosophers, according to Derrida) to speech over writing, where the sign as *sound* is central to the mind's *Aufhebung* or sublation of nature and the external world. The mind converts its sensuous intuitions of the world into its own internal images or representations. It is the sign, as sound, which gives "external" form to these representations, thereby giving mind or intelligence an objective existence. According to Derrida, Hegel's phonocentrism here rests upon the privilege Hegel accords to the "name" in his account of language. In the following section, we can pursue the details of Derrida's argument.

Like Saussure and Barthes, Derrida sees the sign itself as dialectical in its very structure. In a renowned essay on Hegel, he makes the general observation that metaphysics has treated the sign only as a "transition" between "two moments of full presence," acting as provisional reference of one presence to another. "The process of the sign has a history ... between an original presence and its circular reappropriation in a final presence ... Always, from the outset, the movement of lost presence already will have set in motion the process of its reappropriation."³ Derrida is referring here to the Hegelian dialectic, which moves from an initial identity or presence to "lose" itself in external relations, and is finally "reappropriated" into a higher identity or presence. So metaphysics in general, and Hegelian metaphysics most powerfully, has been based on "presence," and has given the sign a merely transitional status in the

³ Jacques Derrida, "The Pit and the Pyramid: Introduction to Hegel's Semiology," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (1972; rpt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 71–2. Hereafter cited as *PP*.

potential opening up or “losing” of that presence or identity in difference, in a network of relations. This status is transitional because the function of opening up is abrogated by a larger presence which incorporates and negates both difference and relation – at least, this is Derrida’s understanding. Hegel himself might argue that the third stage does not merely negate difference but integrates it into a more comprehensive conception of identity, namely “identity-in-difference.”

What is the place of semiology in Hegel’s system? According to Derrida, Western metaphysics has always located semiology within psychology – the “non-natural science of the soul.” Derrida notes that in general Hegel’s philosophy is divided into three parts: Logic, which deals with the Idea “in and for itself”; the philosophy of Nature, which treats the Idea “in its otherness”; and the philosophy of Spirit, which is “the science of the Idea come back to itself out of that otherness” (*PP*, 73). What is significant here for Derrida is that Hegel’s theory of the sign belongs to the third of these moments: The sign is “the agency or essential structure of the Idea’s return to self-presence.” It is part of the movement of the Idea’s relation to itself (*PP*, 74). To locate the place of semiology still more narrowly, Derrida observes that, for Hegel, semiology is “a chapter” in psychology (*PP*, 75).⁴ In Hegel’s speculative semiology, Derrida explains, the sign is understood according to the structure and movement of the *Aufhebung*. By means of sublation, Spirit elevates itself above nature in which it was submerged, and it both suppresses and retains nature, sublimating nature into itself, and presents itself to itself (*PP*, 76). In other words, the sign is instrumental in the mind’s process of reducing the other, the world of nature, to itself.

8.3 Pit to Pyramid: A Circular Journey

Derrida elaborates the mechanism of this reduction. For Hegel, he notes, semiology is a part of the theory of imagination. Mind or intelligence sublates the content of an intuition and creates an *image* which, in being freed from its original immediacy, is effectively mind’s way of creating “an externality of its own.” The image enables the passage from the intuition originally given to conceptuality. The image, as seen earlier, is internalized

⁴ As Catherine Kellogg notes, such a placing of the discussion of the sign under psychology “mobilizes an entire metaphysical tradition that privileges speech over writing,” “The Three Hegels: Kojève, Hyppolite, and Derrida on Hegel’s Philosophy of Language,” in *Hegel and Language*, ed. Surber, p. 209. Hereafter cited as *HL*.

in memory and preserved in an “unconscious dwelling” or “pit.” Derrida proposes to follow the path leading from this “pit” to the “pyramid” or sign. This path, he claims, “remains circular,” and “the pyramid becomes once again the pit that it always will have been” (*PP*, 77). Intelligence (as Derrida reads Hegel) can draw from this pit or reservoir, synthesizing the internal image with recollected existence to create representations. But this first process is merely the province of “reproductive” imagination which is still constrained, passively, by what is given to us in intuition (*PP*, 78).

Derrida notes that in the next stage, that of “productive” imagination, this limit is passed, since imagination now creates without recourse to external intuitions. Intelligence is externalized and “produced in the world as a thing. This singular thing is the *sign*” (*PP*, 78). Derrida sees this process, which externalizes an internal content and produces intuitions from itself, as “scandalous,” implying that the observer spontaneously produces what she observes. The “scandal,” apparently, is not just that the mind manufactures the world from within itself, but that it appears to produce *intuitions* from within itself. We recall Hegel’s view that sensations, even when transformed and idealized by the mind, could nonetheless be *intuited* – as signs. Derrida likens the status of Hegel’s productive imagination to Kant’s transcendental imagination: They are both intermediaries between sensibility and Understanding, and so the sign in its very nature is an inherent contradiction. It is “*both* interior and exterior, spontaneous and receptive, intelligible and sensible, the same and the other, etc., the sign is none of these” (*PP*, 79). It is none of these because it is caught between each of these oppositions.

8.4 The Sign as Dialectic

Here, Derrida raises a more fundamental question concerning the very nature of the dialectic: “Is this contradiction dialecticity itself?” The question of the sign, notes Derrida, would soon become confused with the question of dialectics (*PP*, 80). What Derrida appears to mean here is that, if the sign is an element in psychology, it serves as the vehicle whereby the mind achieves self-relation; or, to put it crudely, whereby the human self-achieves realization, progressing from immediate self-identity to mediated identity. The sign, being “double” in its nature, being both material (as a sound or inscription, a signifier) and ideal (a meaning, a signified), is the site where the sensible and intelligible intersect. And this is also the site of the dialectical process: the sensible is first transformed

into the intelligible (as the content of sensuous intuition is idealized by the mind); then, this idealized content, the mental image, is again given a sensuous form in the sign, which is the mind's way of representing itself, of giving itself an "external" existence. The sign is therefore integral to the dialectic whereby we create ourselves and the world (as structured by ideality or our mental operations). We saw earlier that, for Derrida, the Hegelian sign is dialectical in its very structure; it now emerges that the dialectic in its very nature is semiotic.

The "scandal" here concerns the relation of the sign to reality, and to truth. Hegel's productive imagination which produces the sign and presides autonomously over its own creations is indifferent to truth as such. We must ask, says Derrida, "why truth ... is announced as absence in the sign" (*PP*, 80). In other words, the sign as produced by the productive imagination is by definition distanced from reality since it is "freely" created, independently of any actual intuition, of any actual engagement with the world.

In his somewhat indirect attempt to answer this, Derrida notes that for Hegel the sign is created by a process of kenosis, of emptying, of the significance of an original intuition, and replacing it with another significance. So, says, Derrida, "we have ... a kind of intuition of absence, or more precisely the sighting of an absence through a full intuition." He quotes Hegel's statement that the "sign is some immediate intuition, representing a totally different import from what naturally belongs to it ... it is the *pyramid* into which a foreign soul (*eine fremde Seele*) has been conveyed" (*PP*, 83). Derrida claims that this conception of the "pyramid" fixes a number of essential characteristics of the sign. The first of these is arbitrariness, the "absence of any natural relation" between the signified (the representation, *Bedeutung*) and the signifier (the intuition). He sees this arbitrariness in the fact that the "soul" (meaning) conveyed into the "pyramid" (the material signifier) is foreign. It's not hard to agree with Derrida up to this point. But he then goes on to state that the "irreducibility" between a sound or signifier and what it means (the signified) "amounts to the irreducibility of the soul and body, of the intelligible and the sensory, of the concept or signified ideality on the one hand, and of the signifying body on the other, that is, in different senses, the irreducibility of two *representations*" (*PP*, 84). So Derrida sees an "irreducibility" or disjunction between all the registers in which a signifier exists – body, sense, matter – and the registers in which the meaning or signified exists – soul, intellect, ideas.

8.5 Some Problems with Derrida's Reading

On the foregoing points we could perhaps take issue with Derrida. The arbitrariness here is for Hegel not a function of irreducibility (of whatever type) but of the *suspension* or *abrogation* of the natural import of an intuition. It surely does not concern any kind of distance or incommensurability ("irreducibility") between intellect and sense or body and soul or signifier and signified. The arbitrariness lies simply in the fact that the intellect is free to assign any meaning it likes to the intuition. Derrida further claims that this "irreducibility" is the reason that the signifier "*represents an entirely other content*" (than what is given in intuition); but again, the reason is not irreducibility but rather – as seen in the previous chapter – the raising of the content of the given intuition to generality. The "meaning" of arbitrariness, asserts Derrida, is freedom: "the production of arbitrary signs manifests the freedom of the spirit ... In the sign spirit is more independent and closer to itself." This is why the sign has "an essential place" in the development of psychology and logic (*PP*, 86). Derrida notes that Saussure will later make a similar observation, saying that signs are wholly arbitrary, and that Saussure will "realize better than the others the ideal of the semiological process" (*PP*, 86, n). But as we have already seen, this is not quite what Hegel says. What he argues is that signs have a necessary place in "the economy of intelligence." in other words, in the process of understanding the world, from the initial encounter with sensation in experience to conceptualization of that experience.

Derrida is essentially arguing that for Hegel the sign suppresses "truth" or external reality – whereas Hegel himself argues that the sign expresses that reality *as mediated by the mind*. Is there a difference? Unlike Hegel, Derrida does not differentiate between immediate and mediated absence. For Hegel, the sign is a means of suppressing immediate presence and of awakening-mediated presence – which fulfills the true identity of the original presence, and proclaims its affiliation with other signs in a relational system of presence. Derrida's larger point concerning the semiotic nature of the dialectic is perhaps that the mind or the self effectively reproduces the world in its own image; that the very process of negation, the very process of thought as enlisting the sign is imperialistic, conquering all the rich variety of sensuous otherness in the world and reducing it to sameness within a predetermined ideal framework. The rich "presence" of reality is always converted into, always reconfigured as, *re*-presentation – of the mind to itself. Mind effectively substitutes

language – the outer form of its own existence – for reality. It substitutes the world of signs for the external, sensuous world.

8.6 Language and Machines

Hegel's views of language have profound implications for human subjectivity and its interaction with the world, its production of the world through signs. An important element in the way that humans connect to the world in most of the phases of capitalism is their reliance on machines and the precise function that machines are made to bear. What exactly is a machine? This has been the focus of theorists such as Deleuze and Guattari. Anticipating their work, Derrida uses the notion of a machine to draw out certain implications of Hegel's linguistics. He points out that when Hegel criticizes attempts by Leibniz and others to create a universal language on mathematical models, he is stipulating the limits of a "machine." Derrida defines a machine here as embodying a "mute writing, released from the voice and from every natural language," as well as of the mathematical symbolism which proceeds according to the operations of the abstract or formal understanding. The silence of this writing, says Derrida (i.e., its disembodiment, its dislocation from the human body and from speech) would "interrupt the movement of the *Aufhebung*, or in any case would resist the interiorization of the past (*Erinnerung*), the *relevant* idealization, the history of the spirit, the reappropriation of the logos in self-presence and infinite parousia" (*PP*, 105). In other words, the machine disrupts the movement of Hegel's dialectic at all levels.

Calculation, the machine, and mute writing, says Derrida, all fall outside of any possible redintegration into an Hegelian identity. This prompts him to ask: "What might be a 'negative' that could not be relèvé?" In other words, what might be a negative content that cannot be sublated or appropriated into service of the overall system? His answer is: "Quite simply, a machine ... A machine defined in its pure functioning, and not in its final utility, its meaning, its result, its work." What Hegel could never conceive is a machine that would work without being "governed by an order of reappropriation." It could not serve as the Other, the opposite, the non-thought, for any thought. The machine, working by itself, would constitute pure externality, an outside that could not be internalized. Derrida sees in the Hegelian system a "structural incapacity to think without relèvé." Yet the sign "cannot completely do without the machine" (*PP*, 107).

So, for Derrida (as I understand him here), the “external” mode of thought implicit in calculation and in the machine – which is an embodiment of externality – is somehow unable to be seen by Hegel as a true “other” of thought proper, and therefore unable to be integrated into any teleological or purposive scheme. But again there is a problem here. Derrida’s understanding of “externality” is spatial and does not answer to Hegel’s own view of it. What Hegel means by saying that arithmetical calculation – as conducted by a machine – is “external” is simply that its elements are externally, additively, cumulatively, related; there is no internal unity or coherence or purpose shaping them from within. The machine performs this, if you like, in a purely mechanical way. However, for Hegel, this kind of externality – whether performed mechanically by a human being or an actual machine – cannot somehow be placed “outside” of thought; it is simply another, inferior, level of thought. To say that the machine somehow represents an absolute externality is to take literally its ability to think “outside” the living thought of a human being. The “external” thinking employed by the abstract understanding, according to Hegel, is used in many fields and characterizes certain historical periods; it represents a lower stage of thought which is nonetheless internal to, and integral to, the overall progress of thought, whether considered as the thought of an individual, an entire culture, or an epoch.

8.7 Epilogue: Deleuze, Guattari, and the Language of Capitalist Machines

The issues raised here are significant, for machines play an increasingly vast role in our world, specifically as harnessed by the productive forces of capitalism in its most technocratic and digital phases. What if we interpreted “machine” in the sense attributed to it by Deleuze and Guattari? In their major work *Anti-Oedipus*, these thinkers offer a vision explicitly directed against the Hegelian dialectic of integration and totality. They regard the world as composed not of subjects and objects, but of “machines” in interaction with “partial objects.”⁵ In this anti-humanist

⁵ This was a concept originated by Melanie Klein, who saw the infant’s undeveloped subjectivity as relating not to a composite person but merely to one part, initially the mother’s breast. Lacan extended the implications of the concept to suggest that partial objects in general are incapable of being represented completely and cannot be integrated into the subject’s self-image as complete. Deleuze and Guattari interpret the concept even more generally to indicate the necessary incompleteness of all “objects” since these are immersed in a network of “flows” and “breaks” where all identity is shifting.

vision, human beings are not composite entities but are, like everything else, machines – eating machines, loving machines, and most fundamentally, desiring machines. There is no distinction between man and nature. The human body is reconceived as the “body without organs,” which is no longer a composite and hierarchical organism, with the brain directing the remaining parts. Rather, it is undifferentiated, unhierarchical, unorganized, and indifferent. All the flows of desire pass through it freely.⁶

Deleuze and Guattari define the machine as “a *system of interruptions* or breaks (*coupures*).” Every machine is part of a continual material flow that it cuts into. The anus is a machine that cuts off the flow of feces; the mouth cuts off the flow of milk or air. These are “desiring machines.” Each machine that interrupts this flow is connected to another machine that produces it; and this second machine, in turn, is an interruption or break only in relation a third machine that “produces a continuous, infinite flux” (*AO*, 36). This is almost an inverted dialectical process. It is a vision of the world where the human body does not compose any kind of unity but is a site of several, mutually interacting machines, whose functions are sometimes specific and sometimes transferable. The “self” here is but a residue, an appendage, within this “grid of disjunctions” (*AO*, 38). The subject, existing as merely a residual break alongside a machine, has no specific or personal identity. It is born anew with each of the states through which it passes (*AO*, 40–1). There is no whole or totality or purpose within which these machines operate, except the totality of “matter” – air, sound, space, parts of bodies, parts of objects – which represents an unbroken flow always interrupted by machines. And these desiring machines, as we shall see later, are invested in the larger social machine which regulates desire and indeed, in our present era, in the all-consuming capitalist machine.

The question here is how these machines relate to language. Each machine, say Deleuze and Guattari, has a code built into it. They see machines as interacting according to these codes. But these codes are not linear. Using Lacan’s model of the code of the unconscious as comprised of several chains of meaning, they see the machinic codes as open-ended and polyvocal, resembling “not so much a language as a jargon” (*AO*, 38). No chain is homogeneous and the chains resemble a series of characters

⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (1972; rpt. London: Athlone Press, 1984), pp. 2–5, 9–11, 15. Hereafter cited as *AO*.

from different alphabets, with each chain capturing fragments of other chains. This system of writing “is a great disjunctive synthesis” where the “one vocation of the sign is to produce desire, engineering it in every direction” (*AO*, 39). So, as I understand this, the language of machines is, like the language of the unconscious, open, polyvocal, and related to desire on a preconscious level – before desire itself becomes regulated by social codes “where a despotic Signifier destroys all the chains, linearizes them” (*AO*, 40). It is the task of the rebel or “schizo” – who could, one imagines, be a socialist, a gender rights activist, an artist, or simply some weed-smoking Beckett-reading nihilist – to detach words and concepts from their stability of meaning and to recapture the polyvocality that is the code of desire (*AO*, 40).

“Writing has never been capitalism’s thing. Capitalism is profoundly illiterate.” The death of writing, Deleuze and Guattari tell us, is like the death of God or the death of the father: the news is slow to reach us (*AO*, 240). Writing is really an archaism in capitalism and, inasmuch as it is still used, is “adapted to money.” What the capitalist machine employs is a “language of decoded flows” as opposed to “a signifier that strangles and overcodes the flows.” In this “nonsignifying language,” no type of sign is privileged, whether it be phonic, graphic, or gestural. Electronic language and data processing do without voice or writing, and the computer “is a machine for instantaneous and generalized decoding” (*AO*, 240–1). The “productive essence of capitalism” speaks “only in the language of signs imposed on it by merchant capital or the axiomatics of the market” (*AO*, 241). In other words, the authors seem to be suggesting that “despotic” language, or language where signs are despotically reduced to fixed meanings, belong to overtly repressive regimes of the past, where a given language – embodying a given view of the world and certain definite values – was stabilized by recourse to some ultimately authoritative and despotic Signifier, whether this be God, the divine right of kings, or the cosmological hierarchy.

However, according to Deleuze and Guattari, capitalism also *recodes* these flows, investing its own codes and regulations into desire, in a system where, as Marx observed, money becomes the measure of “meaning” in every sense. The value, function, and purpose of any entity must accrue from its place in the market. As I understand their thesis, even language or writing here becomes a commodity, directly saleable or, for students, a means to a monetary end. Its “meaning” – whatever other value is accorded to it by specific professions such as academia – cannot escape ultimate determination by the larger forces and codifications of the market.

Even the styles of writing predominantly encouraged within pedagogy under capitalism – concise, containing an unambiguous thesis, discernible progression through paragraphs, and a summarizing conclusion – are geared to the demands of the corporate world. We don't generally encourage our students to use metaphor, repetition, symbols, and allusions – there are separate creative writing programs within which the nurturing of such skills is “contained” and directed toward further modes of entry into the market such as publishing. In this overall scenario, language as such has ceased to function as a relation with the world, a means of self-expression or self-exploration or seeking knowledge. The meanings of its signifiers are “recoded” according to the demands of the market economy. As Deleuze and Guattari see it, art becomes subversive in its use of language when it disrupts this system of recodification, and, in a sense, returns to modes of exploration of desire.

Indeed, according to Deleuze and Guattari, language as used in capitalism – as a disjunctive linguistics of decoded and recoded flows of desire – is not expressed by Saussurian linguistics, which is a “linguistics of the signifier,” in which signifiers retain a “minimal identity” throughout their variations in the overall system. The capitalist “linguistics of flows” is embodied more nearly, they suggest, in the work of the Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev, who engaged in a “destruction of the signifier” (*AO*, 243). Hjelmslev's linguistics, being a more open-ended system than what Saussure offered, is “the only linguistics adapted to the nature of *both* the capitalist *and* the schizophrenic flows” (*AO*, 243).

What is interesting here is that both Derrida, on the one hand, and Deleuze/Guattari on the other, view Saussurian linguistics as ultimately a linguistics of “closure.” But whereas Derrida correlates Saussure's linguistic with Hegel's views of language in a metaphysics of presence which represents the culminating expression in Western thought of the movement and contradictions of capitalism, Deleuze and Guattari see capitalism as having superseded the historical era of the “despotic Signifier” and its expression in Saussure, and needing the more open linguistics of Hjelmslev. So all these thinkers would agree on the correlation of Hegelian metaphysical “closure” with Saussure's closed linguistic system. But Deleuze and Guattari presumably – for they don't appear to address this issue directly – see capitalism as having superseded its expression in Hegel. Or do they? It is also clear that they see capitalism as riven by a broad contradictory movement, between the releasing of schizophrenic energies and an apparatus of repression. This insistence on the constituting nature of this contradiction may well comprise a rejection of any

dialectical synthesis. But it is above all in their notion of the machine that they posit a world that is inexplicable in the terms of Hegelian or Saussurian linguistics. Again, this is a thesis that will be disputed later in this book, for it assumes that Hegel's system, as well as Saussure's, must be read as enforcing closure.

Equally, Derrida imputes to Hegel – to the dialectic, to the *Aufhebung*, to his concept of the sign – a greater absoluteness than his system needs to bear. We may recall, for example, that in *First Philosophy of Spirit*, Hegel saw the meaning of sounds as emerging only in relation to other sounds, and the “name” not as something absolute but as a “self-suspending” particular, whose ideality or fullness of identity was realized only in a relational system of speech. I would argue that it is not the sign, nor language in general, that is the vehicle of closure in Hegel's system. These are an integral part of the dialectical process; the often-cited instruments of closure – teleology, the state, freedom, Absolute Spirit – arise from within the dialectic, and they themselves cannot be extricated from the weight of their own immersion in semiosis, from their own internal structuring by the operations of the sign.