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The Aesthetics of Ambiguity

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It is an unspectacular observation to say that modernist literature is difficult, that it is somehow more obscure, more complicated, hermetic, equivocal or ambiguous than the literature of former times. More than a hundred years after the first stirrings of literary modernism the **opinio communis** still seems to be that these texts are markedly «different», that it is unclear what they are all «about», or whether they make any sense at all.

I should like to take this common assessment, which only looks naive but contains more truth than meets the eye, as my point of departure and discuss how literary theory can help us understand the phenomenon in question. This means that my paper will not give you a whole range of examples of highly ambiguous modernist fiction or poetry, with which, I suppose, you are familiar anyhow; it is rather about **ways of theoretically dealing** with literary texts which demonstratively display **semiosis**, or the conspicuous proliferation of multiple meanings. It is, by the way, in this sense that I shall use the term **ambiguity**: as an umbrella term which covers all sorts of linguistic and literary phenomena having more than one possible interpretation or meaning.

How then can we theoretically account for a literature which displays this feature to a hitherto unknown degree? Basically, there are two different approaches. You can either bunch together modern avantgard poetry and fiction with similar manifestations in 20th century painting and musical composition and then explain their occurrence with reference to something that is outside literature, outside the arts; or you can go in the opposite direction and try to specify whether there is anything in the logic of literary texts and literature in general that can be held accountable for this new kind of writing. In other words, you go inside the aesthetic material and try to understand how its structures work and function, and where - and possibly why - the difference comes in.

At first sight, the first approach looks more promising: It could yield a very economical, simple explanation for a whole variety of interrelated phenomena and it would stress the fact that literature does not happen in the void but is essentially something cultural, social and historical. But when you survey the various studies committed to this approach, you begin to wonder. For one, their statements about some fundamental causal or dialectical relationship between modernist literature on the one hand and «the modernist situation» on the other hand remain, on the whole, suspiciously **general**; that is, a general interrelatedness is insinuated, but this approach tells you very little about concrete, individual works of modernism. Secondly, this approach invariably tends to be reductive, that is, something literary is reduced to something extra-literary and non-literary, an aesthetic phenomenon is treated as if it were non-aesthetic etc.. No talk of dialectics can dispel this atmosphere of simplistic positivism, can counter the feeling that something essential has been lost on the way.

My third objection is not systematical, but «merely» empirical: The majority of studies which

opt for the «external» explanation of modernist literature treat their object in a barely hidden derogative, or even downright hostile way. Whether conservative idealists deplore the «loss of the centre» and identify modernist art and literature as a symptom of a fast spreading cultural disease, or whether self-appointed Marxists - quite undialectically - denounce modernism as downright «bourgeois decadence», as an unmistakable sign of the inveterate corruption and imminent downfall of capitalist society, in both cases it is only too obvious that they do not like what they see. In a quite demagogical way, they make use of the undeniable gap between artist and public and censure modern art and literature for not toeing the line, for not meeting certain pre-established norms. Regrettably, most of their efforts must be filed under «How to explain modernism without really trying».

What we need instead is an aesthetics of modernist literature which does not reduce its object, but opens it up, which makes it accessible and understandable, an aesthetics which does not denounce the new as a deficient version of the old, which can rather enlighten us about the working of this new kind of writing as well as about its historical **locus**. The question is not how can we reduce, belittle or truncate a phenomenon so that it fits our theories and preconceptions, but how can we widen our concepts and ideas so that they embrace what we cannot yet understand. What we need, in a word, is an aesthetics at the height of its material. For this purpose, it seems on second thoughts, an approach which is after the evolutionary **logic** of its object and the concrete workings of this kind of language is much more adequate than a global «external» explanation.

What then does poetical or literary language do? How does it differ from other kinds of language? Once you pose these questions, you have already - wittingly or not - subscribed to **deviational aesthetics**, i.e. an aesthetics which presupposes that poetical language deviates in certain respects from the norm of everyday language and that one can name its essence - **literariness** - by laying one's finger upon that specific difference. It is true that deviational aesthetics, convincing as it is at first sight, is subject to fairly serious criticism - but this need not concern us here, only later. The astounding thing about 20th century models of poetical or literary language based on deviational aesthetics is that practically all of them, however different they may be, attach highest importance to the phenomenon of **ambiguity**, although - and that is truly remarkable - none of them was originally designed to highlight or bring out the decisive role of ambiguity. But whether you follow the structuralist model of Roman Jakobson or the ideas of the Soviet semiotician Jurij Lotman or the aesthetics of the post-structuralist Roland Barthes - and I could name a few others -, they all acknowledge that ambiguity is not peripheral but central to poetry and literature, that ambiguity could even be called the hallmark of poetical and literary language, because it is an **unavoidable and necessary effect** of the special kind of structuring that language undergoes once it is used in this particular way.

How is that? I hope I do not injustice to the notable differences between the above-mentioned thinkers when I say that the fundamental idea of all deviational aesthetics is this: in poetical and literary language, linguistic elements are taken out of their «normal» context and reassembled in a new and unexpected way. The rules and patterns of everyday language are not binding for literary texts, which constitute their own codes. These idiosyncratic codes are, of course, not ready at hand for the reader - he has to find them or even constitute them by actively engaging in this secondary structuring of a given text in the act of reading. This activity can be arduous and frustrating or delightful and rewarding - it all depends. But in any case it follows that one

can only speak of an adequate **aesthetic** reading if the reader is tackling the text on this secondary plane and trying to decipher what these once familiar but now strangely recontextualized elements mean **here**, what their secondary or literary meaning is, **beyond** their everyday referential use. This is exactly where ambiguity comes in: As no secondary structuring of language can totally obliterate the customary and deeply ingrained referential meanings of these elements but can only, by various devices, loosen their formal ties, these elements now characteristically oscillate between what they usually mean and the new meaning they are striving to constitute. Therefore, **all** poetical language is **inevitably ambiguous** - I should like to call this «Ambiguity Mark I» -; this is just another way of saying that literary or poetical texts are written in such a way that we are led to surmise there is a secondary plane to them, an «extra» meaning. All this is not new, yet it will, in the long run, help us to understand the conspicuously high degree of ambiguity in modernism, help us to understand why this «Ambiguity Mark II» is so predominant in avantgarde literature.

Before I go on with this, however, I have to stop and discuss a concept which figures largely in these very same models: it is the notion of **auto-referentiality**, which is a bit problematical but which, by its being problematical, wonderfully points the way toward an explanation of «Ambiguity Mark II».

«Auto-referentiality» could be called the sister term of «ambiguity», as both describe two sides of the same coin. What it basically means is that when you reassemble linguistic elements in a strange and unusual way you force the reader to slow down his reading, you render his acts of recognition more difficult, while at the same time you appeal to this flexibility, imagination and re-create freedom. Such texts are demanding - but can be very rewarding, too. In any case, by this special kind of structuring the reader's attention is shifted from the usual and habitual referential use of these linguistic signs - for example that «swan» refers to a large white water bird (the example is James Anderson Winn's and it refers, of course, to Baudelaire's *Le Cygne*) - to what they might mean **here**, in this particular context. One might say that all poetical and literary texts - which are, remember, **by definition** ambiguous - demand the reader's **special** attention and refer him to their very own composition when he asks for their meaning. Literary texts are therefore auto-referential in the sense that you cannot answer what they «mean» until you have looked closely at **how** they are done, and this of course means - these are the two sides of the coin - that they are **auto-referential** in the sense that they direct the reader towards their essential and fundamental **ambiguity**.

Were it only this that is implied by the talk of auto-referentiality, we could rest the matter at that. But unfortunately the term as it stands suggests a bit more and is somewhat misleading. To say that a sign - and certainly a literary text is a super-sign - is auto-referential is a contradiction in terms. If a sign is something that refers to something else, then certainly something that refers only to itself cannot be a sign. To this deviationists would answer that they do not claim **absolute** auto-referentiality for literary structures but only a tendency **towards** auto-referentiality, or they will say, like Roman Jakobson, that auto-referentiality is a **function** which combines with various other functions, such as, for example, the emotive and referential functions, which, however, it can never totally obliterate. And, they could add with some justification, any misunderstanding of their use of the term was impossible, for did they not speak of the literary text's characteristic **oscillation** between its «aesthetic» meaning and the original referential meaning of its elements, which could never be totally left behind? Isn't that, they

would argue, another way of saying that auto-referentiality in literary texts is always limited and never pure and absolute? It certainly is, but the consequence should be spelt out as radically as possible: In literature, total auto-referentiality is unattainable because its material - language - makes it impossible. No matter what you do to a linguistic element such as «swan», no matter how astoundingly you re-contextualize it, its occurrence will always, however faintly and modified, conjure up the image of a large white water bird. Not even the most extreme secondary structuring of language can kill the primary meanings. Even the breaking up of language into purportedly meaningless syllables or even rudimentary sounds still leaves you with a trace of meaning, which opens up a space for association. There is no escape from the prison-house of language. The medium prohibits it. The writer's material is «always already» used and no word chemistry enables him to neutralize it, to melt these oft-used coins into meaningless primal matter before he begins his proper work (the metaphor is Sigurd Burckhardt's). Language displays a characteristic obstinacy - the literary text is therefore always a palimpsest, it cannot help it: it is always written over or against the primary meaning of its elements.

So let us accept this explanation that when deviationists speak of auto-referential texts they do not «really» mean auto-referential but only «sort of» auto-referential, as this inhibited kind of auto-referentiality is, «of course», the only kind attainable in the medium of language.

But what about the media of the other arts, music and painting? Do they too, by the nature of their material, prohibit pure auto-referentiality? Obviously they do not. A musical note is a musical note, by itself it means nothing. What it means in a musical context is dependent on its place and function in that musical structure. The same holds true for abstract form and colour (although some cognitive physiologists may have reservations). By themselves, forms and colours do not mean a thing - and what they mean in assembly is the product of their composition. Does that mean that after all there is such a thing as unqualified auto-referentiality, only not in the field of language? Does that mean that the original concept makes sense, only not in literary theory? The answer is no, for the fundamental objection has not been refuted at all: an auto-referential sign is a contradiction in terms. We are in a pretty awkward situation: on the one hand it seems to make sense to characterize musical compositions and modernist non-objective paintings as «auto-referential»; we know what we mean by that and think it designates an important feature of these aesthetic constructs - but on the other hand we have to admit that the term, on closer inspection, is most unfortunate.

What sort of thing is a sign which refers to itself? I propose to solve this riddle in the following way: A sign which leaves behind referentiality ceases to be a sign - it no longer means but just is. It has transcended its former being-a-sign, it has undergone a category transformation. It is because of this that so many people are puzzled, irritated or even infuriated when they are confronted with these still provocative aesthetic phenomena, such as non-representational paintings or musical compositions which do not aim at depicting or evoking anything definite. People will ask the artist, «What does it mean?», and the artist's answer, «You look at it», is, of course, the only possible and the only correct answer.

But what shall we call a sign which is no longer a sign, which stands for itself only? We shall call it, I think, quite simply what it is: a **thing** or an **event** - and as it is usually presented to us in an institutionalized context which society has especially set apart from «practical» goings-on, we might as well call it a unique **offer**, an offer to **experience** something unusual. I find

something very reconciliatory and uplifting in the idea that at the end of modernism's long march towards auto-referentiality we are, in the most advanced manifestations of 20th century art, referred back to one of the most basic and ancient concepts of aesthetics, the, as I would say, pragma-aesthetic category **kat exochen**, viz. **experience**. This idea will in the end help us to situate an aesthetics which strives to be at the height of its material.

The foregoing discussion of auto-referentiality in literature and the arts will pretty soon put us in a position to satisfactorily account for the conspicuously high degree of ambiguity in modernist literature, or, «Ambiguity Mark II». In fact, the explanation is already beginning to shine through...

As I said before, the literary text - or more precisely: the reader's understanding of a literary text - characteristically oscillates between the primary referential meaning of its elements and the new literary (or symbolical or aesthetic) meaning they constitute. This oscillation is an inevitable effect of the properties of the material literature works with, viz. language. One could say that the massive system of everyday language exerts a kind of gravitational pull which ensures that none of its elements, however accelerated, can leave its space of meaning and lead a life all of its own. The primary referential meaning of linguistic elements makes itself felt as a force of inertia, always slowing down dynamic semiotic processes, inhibiting new configurations of sense, finally ruling out absolute meaning and autonomy. The prison-house of language needs no gaolers, because there is no outside, no beyond. All you can do as a liberty-loving inmate is to work inside and transform its rigidity from within, by letting loose new, unheard-of messages (or vice versa, because new **kinds** of messages produce, of course, their own codes) - messages which, simply because they could not be uttered in the ruling code, radically undermine its claim to absolute rule.

What then can a writer do who aims at making the most of his material, who wants to bring out the literary in literature, the poetical in poetry? What can he do to counter the gravitational pull of conventional, everyday meaning, to loosen the elements from their settings and set them loose? Under which circumstances can he most easily set semiosis going, prepare the way for the dynamical production of new meanings, and, against all odds, at least **reach out** for auto-referentiality, the promising yet unattainable ideal, denied to word-smiths? And what will be the effect, the result of all his exertion?

Well, to begin with, the breaking of all primary codes is essential. And that includes not only basic codes like the semantic, syntactic and sometimes even the phonological codes, but also sets of rules of understanding which apply to larger units of a text and produce, when working, conceptions of «character», «time», «place», «plot», «causality», «coherence» etc.. All these conventions are in fact semiosis-restricting devices which play a vital role in all kinds of literature which are in the widest sense **mimetic**, most notably, of course, in realistic and naturalistic writing. As I have amply illustrated elsewhere the prehistory of modernism is basically little more than the gradual erosion of textual codes which make the reader believe the text but mirrors life - sometimes distortingly; always from a certain angle or perspective and always giving a certain section only - but nonetheless mirrors it. To the same degree that these codes or conventions are eroded and undermined, the linguistic elements from top to bottom, according to the specific point of attack, will gain a relative freedom. The reader of such an unconventional text will soon find out that he will not get very far when he tries to process these signs in the habitual way and,

if he does not give up prematurely, he will make new «informed guesses» and try out new codes and sense configurations.

Now the interesting thing is **not** (although it is true) that the more you take back all sorts of semiosis-restricting devices and conventions, the more the text will be read **as a text** and the emphasis will fall increasingly on the way it is done and on its **inherent** processes of meaning - that is already the basic law for «Ambiguity Mark I» (which we find in all literature). No, after a certain point, something entirely new happens: the liberated signifiers become **multiply interpretable**. Their free play does not allow just **one** reading, it cries out for **multiple decoding**. This is the point of semiotic take-off. The accumulation of subversive-creative energy has so heated up the linguistic atoms that a new **quality** is achieved. Not more of the same, but a **new kind** of game. As the text leaves behind the shackles of mimesis, it becomes possible to lay **various** interpretive grids over the loosened elements, and if a text is aesthetically good, i.e. meaning-productive, it will produce whole strings of differing meaningful configurations which do not rule each other out but which complement each other and all together constitute the richness of that literary text. The text has thus turned into a meaning-generator, which feeds on the energy you as a reader are willing to invest.

To answer my last question: What you get as the effect of the author's efforts to achieve auto-referentiality in the medium of language is an augmented, an enhanced kind of ambiguity which clearly differs from and surpasses that ambiguity which is common to all literary texts: what you get is, in fact, irreducible «Ambiguity Mark II», **the hallmark of modernist literature**.

I think it has now become obvious that modernism's radical departure from conventionality, its marked tendency towards auto-referentiality and its conspicuously high degree of irreducible ambiguity are only three different aspects of the very same process. No one of these could be without the other two, because they are genetically inseparable.

But isn't all this merely a theoretical construct, which has no counterpart in historical reality? I do not think it is and the simple proof lies in the differences between poetry and prose, which up till now I have neglected in favour of their common features. Poetry characteristically lacked some of the semiosis-restricting conventions of narrative prose and where it shared them their application had always been more liberal, less binding. On the other hand, poetry has traditionally highlighted its «otherness» by the massive employment of devices like rhyme, rhythm, metaphor, metonymy etc.. As a result, people have always recognized its artificiality more easily than that of prose and they have more willingly conceded that it contains more than meets the eye, that it is somehow more difficult than prose etc.. If the two - poetry and prose - had to run a race towards auto-referentiality, which of the two do you think would get to «Ambiguity Mark II» first? Literary history gives us the answer and it quite pleasingly is the same one would predict theoretically: poetry, of course. The advent of modernism is heralded in Mallarmé and Rimbaud, not in Zola! In poetry there were fewer semiosis-restricting conventions to overcome than in prose, or to put it the other way round: the resistance to the liberation of the signifier was much stronger in prose, as there the parameters orientating the reader towards mimesis and «reality» were traditionally much deeper anchored. It took a comparatively long time until the solvent had trickled down, or, if I may mix my metaphors, until the bars to semiosis had been removed. Historically, prose entered the race with a handicap; poetry, it is a fact, arrived there earlier, for the conventions of its genre offered less resistance to the tendency towards auto-referentiality.

It is time, I think, to draw the first conclusions: As I have elaborated in a voluminous study published earlier this year [1988], it is indeed possible to describe the Euro-American history of painting and musical composition in the last one hundred and fifty years as a process of continuous and accelerating self-focalization of aesthetic structures. Both in painting and music, mimetic aesthetics and mimetic practice were systematically supplanted by their post-mimetic counterparts. Colours, forms and musical notes are materials with which auto-referentiality, if the term be used at all, can be attained - language is not. If the material of literature - words - is exposed to the same overall tendency towards auto-referentiality, if writers partake in the same revolution against mimesis - because its once liberating conventions have meanwhile become constricting and confining -, all you get and all you **can** get in this medium is a markedly higher degree of **ambiguity**, the kind of **irreducible ambiguity** we have come to associate with modernism.

*The central thesis of this paper and of the study of the same title therefore is:
The conspicuous high degree of ambiguity in modernist literature can be identified as an unavoidable spin-off effect of a superordinate tendency or evolution towards higher auto-referentiality discernible in all arts - an effect that is, however, characteristic of literature, due to the specific properties of its «always already» meaningful material, language.*

It follows from this that modernist ambiguity is fundamentally different from the ambiguity in the literature of former times, different both in **genesis** and **function**, and, above all, in **significance**. This theoretical assessment is borne out by a diachronical survey and reconstruction of the literary practice and aesthetic theories predominant in bygone epochs of European writing. Ambiguity has always played its part in the aesthetic activation of the reader, but it is only in our age that it has moved right to the core and become, in its increased form, a principal, irreducible feature of literature.

The above thesis presupposes, of course, that it makes sense to speak of literary history or the histories of music and art as evolutionary processes. This is indeed an idea that I should like to subscribe to. It is the only alternative to believing that what we are dealing with - the succession of literary texts our cultural hemisphere has produced in the last 2800 years or so - is a meaningless jumble, a kaleidoscopic chaos without rhyme or reason. Any attempt at writing literary history, any sketch of how forms, structures and contents have followed each other imposes a certain order and logic upon its material, or if you think the wording is too strong, it **tells you a story**. And that is a good thing. After all, it is our job - is it not? - to make understandable what before could not be understood, to create order and simplicity where at first we saw only a heterogeneous mass of disconnected phenomena. Surely, something must have gone wrong if, when our work is done, incomprehension and confusion have increased (although there are times, I must admit, when I think it is necessary to plead for the opposite ...).

When I speak of literature as an evolutionary process, I do not imply the teleological unfolding of a preconceived Platonic idea of literature writ large, not even that such an evolution **is the case**. All I am saying is that it **makes sense** to look at literary history **as if it were** an evolution. My approach is pragmatic and nominalist, not essentialist. And the reason why I claim that it makes good sense to operate with the notion of an evolutionary process is that only then are we in a position to answer the most important question that can be asked about **change** and **innovation**: Why is the new there? What is the gain, the evolutionary advantage of a

manifestation which is not only different in degree, but different **in kind**? This is why we cannot do with evolutionary models of the merely **reproductive** kind of the Russians Formalists, Tynjanov for example. They explain new variations of the same game, but not the introduction of an entirely new game. What we need is a real evolutionary model which pays tribute to the essential aspect of **self-transcendence**, i.e. the ability of a given structure to evolve all on its own or in co-evolution with other open systems into something quite different and original. I have suggested such a model in accordance with the ideas of Nobel prize winner Ilya Prigogine and Erich Jantsch. Time forbids me to go into details here, but the gist of the matter is this: Suppose literature is an evolutionary process with the fundamental rule to assemble linguistic elements in such a way that they can be understood as carriers of or triggers for aesthetic ideas (an aesthetic idea, so the classical definition of Kant, is an idea which gives you a lot to think, without, however, any **definite** thought, i.e. concept or **Begriff**, that could be adequate to it). Suppose further it is the dynamical principle of that process to take - as any self-transcending evolutionary process will do - any existing aesthetic configuration as the point of departure for a search after new, yet unknown and unexploited possibilities of structuring, then it is possible to deduce the traditional literary epochs as evolutionary plateaus at the ends of which, each time, the fundamental rule of the game is transcended and a new space for a «freer» play is opened up, because, although the old rule is not aesthetically exhausted, it has already used up all its **innovative** drive and possibilities. (This, by the way, explains both why older literary texts are still pleasing to us - a fact which cannot be explained by a strictly Formalist model - and why the speed of this evolutionary process is so much higher than could be expected if it were only dependent on the feedback of the public.) So the symbolical writing of the Middle Ages gives way to all kind of mimetic writing (which brings greater freedom in subject matter and form), which in turn gives way to post-mimetic writing, a kind of writing that is as revolutionary and incomprehensible to the mimetically orientated reader as purely realistic and secular writing must have appeared to somebody reared on the traditional Christian fourfold interpretation of the meaning of the Scripture.

Modernist writing constitutes a new paradigm, it is set on the catalysis or proliferation of **possibilities of meaning**. We impoverish its message when we decline to meet it on its own ground. Nothing is more ridiculous than summaries of the contents of say, Samuel Beckett's novels or **Finnegans Wake**. It is almost like an art criticism which describes the objects purportedly hidden in an abstract painting - painfully inadequate. It misses what this kind of literature is all about. It is not **paraphrasable**, no more so than any good old poem. But it can be experienced, and its logic can be explained, if understood.

Leaving behind mimesis, **literary language comes into its own**. In a newly won freedom it thematizes its own relational and symbolical condition. Literary language in its most advanced form is a discourse about the processes and possibilities of meaning inherent in all language. Literary language in this form is therefore a rehabilitation of **semiosis**, the dynamic principle of **all language**, too easily forgotten in the gravitational field of the hardened signifiers of everyday usage. The literature of modernism foregrounds what is basic to all language, viz. **to signify through dynamic relations**. **Modernist literature is language in the making**.

What then are the practical consequences of an aesthetics of ambiguity which claims to be at the height of its material, which claims to have discovered the historical **locus** of modernist ambiguity through the logic of its coming-to-be and which pleads for a change of paradigm in

literary criticism in order to do justice to the change of paradigm which has occurred in literary practice? Paradigmatic changes seldom present new data or exciting new findings. They add little new to what is already there, but rather suggest looking at it in a different way. Paradigmatic changes suggest a different **Gestalt** for groupings of phenomena which have become problematical, and they rely on the experience of spontaneous cognitive re-grouping which, indeed, constitutes its own evidence.

A major consequence of a theoretical breakthrough for the aesthetics of ambiguity would be, I think, that it could put an end to the futile and fruitless reiteration that there is ambiguity in modernist literature. That is trite and has not led us anywhere. The aesthetics of ambiguity instead sets out to analyze meticulously the specific **HOW** of «Ambiguity Mark II», and it does so against the backdrop of a notion of its aesthetic and historical **place**. Offering a model of the inner workings of these texts as well as of their historical logic, it conforms ideally with Ockham's razor («entities must not be unnecessarily multiplied»): With a very small set of concepts it can account satisfactorily for a wide range of interrelated and even divergent phenomena, such as the seemingly entirely disparate writings of Joyce on the one hand and Beckett on the other. It does so not only with a high degree of simplicity and economy and - if I may say so - some elegance, but also with terms that do not carry with them the stigma of **lack**, the stigma of **incompleteness**. Why speak of «indeterminacy» when the elements of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* are clearly overdetermined? Why speak of **gaps** when what we read are clearly positive signs, only signs that behave in a very special way? Terminology can be revealing and what it reveals here in morphemes like «un-» and «leer», is that unwittingly Iser's point of reference is still an aesthetics of representation, of mimesis.

But the foremost consequence would be, I think, in the way we relate to this kind of literature and in the way we communicate about it. Let me explain by going back and picking up two remarks I made earlier on. The first is that fairly serious criticism can be levelled against deviational aesthetics. Upon closer scrutiny it becomes evident that deviation is neither a sufficient nor even a necessary condition of literariness. There are literary texts which do not deviate at all and others which deviate a lot but are a far cry from being regarded as literary. But if the reasons for a text's being counted as literary do not lie within that text, they must lie without it. Obviously, literariness is a **pragmatic** category, it refers to a specific cultural **practice**, to the special way in which we process certain texts, which, prior to being processed in that way, did not share a common feature. Literariness in a text is, in a word, the **product** of our reading it in such a way, it is not, contrary to appearances and common belief, our point of departure.

Now, doesn't that finish off the aesthetics of ambiguity, based as it is on a deviational concept of literary and poetic language? It might look as if I were committing an act of critical harakiri - but I am not. I am only positioning my theory. For it is perfectly possible to overcome the aporias of deviational aesthetics and yet retain its formidable explanatory power. This can be done by a kind of **focus aesthetics**, which combines (and finally replaces) both aesthetic attitude aesthetics and institutional aesthetics in so far as it acknowledges that our focussing on an object or text as aesthetic or literary **constitutes** the aesthetic object or literary text, as distinct from the material artefact (Mukařovský). Such an act of focussing or **ascription** of literariness needs no justification, our attitude and assessment alone are sufficient. But in reality people do not run

amuck aesthetically and declare their preferences in a totally subjective, idiosyncratic and haphazard way. Rather, they conform to and are themselves part of an established social practice. That is why the more individually orientated aesthetic attitudes and the more socially orientated institutional aesthetics are far from being at odds with each other. They rather complement each other in a way which is only hidden to the more fanatical proponents and partisans of both philosophies. What is more, there is no inherent necessity why such a unified focus theory of aesthetics should not include the vast range of aesthetic phenomena which are (at a given time, in a given society) regarded as deviating from some norm or other (such as practically all texts of high modernism) - **as long as we keep in mind that such a deviation is only relative and relational and by no means constitutive** of art and literature as such. As long as we steer clear of **substantialism**, there is no harm in making use of deviational aesthetics in this qualified sense and therefore the aesthetics of ambiguity outlined above can stand as it is. It is even confirmed and reinvigorated by this little detour: For if you cannot **prove** that a given text is literary, but can only point to common practice (which may be accepted or not), it follows that it is all the more so impossible to **prove** ambiguity or enumerate **conclusively** the meanings of a modernist text. All one can do - and that is a lot - is to invite readers to enter into a special relation with the text, to persuade them to process it in a special way and then see what happens. In other words: A unified focus aesthetics, which incorporates the aesthetics of ambiguity as the special literary case of the aesthetics of the auto-referentiality predominant in modernism, leads directly to a practice of mild **persuasion**, of opening up of **possibilities of experience**. Not pretending to know what is the case and forgoing the privilege of instructing others what to think, the aesthetics of ambiguity rather offers access to «meaning as an event» (Stanley Fish), to the **experience of experience**. Not claiming to be able to prove that aesthetic features are **objectively** there, the aesthetics of ambiguity, in a wise agnosticism, can calmly rely on the self-evidential and persuasive power of **experience**, of that which constitutes its own (if not logical) proof.

This is, I think, the major consequence of my theory. And it coincides miraculously with that other point I made earlier on, about auto-referential signs: An «auto-referential sign», I said, to the same degree that it can attain that status at all, ceases to be a sign: it no longer **means**, but is. It has transcended its being-a-sign and is «only» a thing or an event. Singled out by social and cultural practice, it might as well be called a unique offer, an **offer to experience** something new and unusual. At the beginning of this paper I called for an aesthetics at the height of its material and I suggested to widen our concepts and ideas so that they embrace and do justice to what we cannot yet understand. I cannot hope to have achieved this in so short a paper, and even my major study of the same title leaves some questions open. But if there is one point which makes me believe that the project is on the right track, it is this unexpected coincidence, which bears, I think, repetition: An art and a literature which, by striving after auto-referentiality, transcend their former semiotic status and present themselves as free offers of experience meet with an aesthetics which, knowing it can never prove conclusively the objectivity of what it talks about, can only submit the same offer: to enter, to expose oneself to an experience and to see what happens. Both modernist practice and this theory naturally coincide in the ultimate pragmatic-aesthetic category: **experience**.

This, then, is what modernism is all about: This kind of art and literature does not prescribe - it leaves its meaning to us. As language comes into its own, it celebrates a playful freedom. To enjoy it, we must bring with us open-mindedness and tolerance, flexibility and keen observation, intelligence and an alert curiosity, plus the ability to think on several levels at the same time or

to pursue several traces simultaneously. These are abilities which, in everyday life, are of no mean value. But here, we are invited to practice them free from any situational constraints, and the more we do so, the higher will be the yield. The more we bring with us and the more we are willing to put at risk, the more we shall be given in return. It is a costly gift, demanding an exertion, designed as it is - to quote Samuel Taylor Coleridge out of context - to «mould our spirit, and by giving make it ask.» («Frost at Midnight»).

It was your countryman, José Ortega y Gasset, who propounded in his writings the idea that human consciousness is like a net in whose meshes the elements of reality are caught. And he further suggested it was our task to braid the meshes of this net tighter in order to gain a richer catch. Varying his simile he said that many things escape our notice simply because there are not enough layers or levels in our minds for them to settle on and therefore it is necessary to multiply these levels in our consciousness so that a greater number of elements (and configurations!) could find room in it simultaneously. I think that is what modernist literature is after: **the full orchestration of human consciousness.**

And it contains, as exaction and promise, the permanent and reverberating question of the conditions of its **social realization.** Modernist literature not only thematizes semiosis and the proliferation of meanings, but also, conversely, their suppression and the power to define a uniform hegemonic discourse. In *Through the Looking-Glass* Alice asks, «The question is (...) whether you can make words mean so many things», to which Humpty Dumpty replies, «The question is (...) which is to be master - that's all.»

It is a credit to modernism that by celebrating ambiguity, creativity, and the multiple decodability of texts, it is never silent about its opposite: the deadening **containment** of language and meaning, which is a powerful tool of oppression. For, are not the limits of my language the limits of my world (Wittgenstein)?