TWELFTH NIGHT AND THE TYRANNY OF INTERPRETATION

BY ELIZABETH FREUND

Whoever knows the reader will henceforth do nothing for the reader. Another century of readers—and the spirit will stink.

—Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra

“There are many tasks that confront criticism,” says a prominent American spokesman for semiotics, “many things we need to advance our understanding of literature, but one thing we do not need is more interpretations of literary works.”¹ I shall not pause here to rehearse the full list of worthwhile projects Jonathan Culler has urged us to undertake in lieu of or “beyond interpretation” since I have nothing but applause for their promise of fresh intellectual yield. It is the startling dispossession of the interpreter in Culler’s trenchant and negative fiat that I wish to engage. The sharpness of his ban against interpretation should no doubt be attributed to the semiotic zeal that energizes the rhetoric of the recent collection of essays from which I quote. Certainly Culler is a master-mediator of complex theory, for which the Anglo-American reader should be thankful; and if semiotics be the food of understanding, by all means let us have excess of it. Perhaps it is no more than a sign of the times that our academic sensibilities are more attuned to feuding than feeding. Culler’s frankly polemical stance vis-a-vis the current reassessment of the tasks of reading is incisively but perhaps too hastily articulated in the following sentences:

[The] insidious legacy of the New Criticism is the widespread and unquestioning acceptance of the notion that the critic’s job is to interpret literary works. . . . In this critical climate it is therefore important, if only as a means of loosening the grip which interpretation has on critical consciousness, to take up a tendentious position and to maintain that, while the experience of literature may be an experience of interpreting works, in fact the interpretation of individual works is only tangentially re-
lated to the understanding of literature. To engage in the study of literature is not to produce yet another interpretation of King Lear but to advance one’s understanding of the conventions and operations of an institution, a mode of discourse.²

If we follow Culler here, we’re in danger of throwing out the baby with the bath-water. Culler’s opposition of “interpretation” to “understanding” puzzles partly because what seems to lurk behind it is a restatement of the old subjective/objective dichotomy (supposedly invalidated by the thrust of semiotics, deconstruction and related theories of literary studies), in which “interpretation”—Culler links it with “experience”—connotes what W. B. Michælss calls a traditional American “mistrust of the self,”³ while “understanding” aspires to inhabit a more neutral or impartial semiotic space. Be that as it may, there is a provocative irony in dismissing the interpretation of literary texts only to fill the vacuum with the close readings of critical and philosophical texts. The inclusion of these alternative texts, I hasten to emphasize, constitutes a welcome and valuable contribution to our literary horizons. My resistance is not to these guests but to a slurring of the reciprocity that knits theory and interpretation. And so it is over the question of our hermeneutic hunger that I wish to linger in this essay.

It is not difficult to endorse some of the reasons behind Culler’s impatience with interpretation as an exclusive activity. Basically his argument is that the endless atomistic “readings” which comprise our New Critical legacy have become a narrow and purposeless reiteration. The enterprise of close reading without any larger theoretical self-consciousness is demonstrably exhausted. Culler has argued repeatedly that its underlying presupposition, that “there is a poem being read by a human being,”⁴ is just too naive. No work of art and no interpretation is free of history, society or whatever other systems of signification or interpretive communities we occupy. And even though this circumstance of the literary experience has acquired a certain degree of recognition, Culler holds that we still continue to perpetuate naive interpretation masquerading as criticism both in our classrooms and in many of our professional journals. The result of this uncritical stance has been to defeat and trivialize valuable projects by translating them into a practice that produces yet more interpretation. (Here Culler cites the cases of archetypal criticism, psychological criticism and Stanley Fish’s affective poetics.) His own remedy for inflationary criticism has been consistent and forceful: instead of attempting to

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elucidate the meaning of individual literary texts, we should explore their structural and semiotic behavior, study their underlying conventions, presuppositions and systems of signification. To approach a text semiotically would be, briefly, to describe the conditions of its intelligibility. "If we are to understand our social and cultural world we must think not of independent objects but of symbolic structures, systems of relations which, by enabling objects and actions to have meaning, create a human universe."5

The study of semiotics has to a large extent overturned our traditional order of hierarchies and priorities: in an antirepresentational theory of literature art is no longer an imitation of nature or life—life itself is a symbolization. Although literary meaning is not entirely banished from the semiotic arena of discussion, its origins are redefined and relocated. Meaning is discovered neither in an autonomous artefact (the thing itself) nor in an autonomous mind (the interpreter’s self), and certainly not in an authorial or transcendental Will (intentionality, human or divine), but in the system itself. Of the manifold implications for our human universe, the most controversial has been the displacement or decentering of the human subject as the creative source of meaning. Who or what makes sense?

The question bears directly on the issue of understanding. The “I” or self in this view no longer is conceived as something given, an independent and steady core of introspection and awareness; instead, like everything else in our social and cultural world, it is a construct, a sign constituted by the symbolic systems to which it relates. Since it has no privileged position, the reader’s self, Culler concludes (following Barthes), “becomes the name of the place where the various codes can be located, a virtual site.”6 In this map of reading, site displaces insight, and the concomitant inference that has troubled empirical readers and humanists is that our cherished notion of a singular and unique perceiving consciousness turns out to be more of a common place than we had reckoned. For if consciousness is to disappear into semiotic space, interpretation as we now know it must inevitably dissolve into the impersonal, derivative, interminable and supposedly neutral play of textuality. Now it is precisely at this juncture—the moment of the disappearance of consciousness—that the question of a witnessing awareness arises: what is the status and provenance of an event without a witness? In other words, can the conditions of understanding in a project such as Culler’s overlap hermeneutic

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circularity and its imaginative/intuitive burden? What does it mean to exist in the order of language? In what sense, if any, can we stipulate that language itself has a consciousness, an "inwit"?

Investigations of rhetoricity such as Paul de Man's indicate that these questions must be explored not beyond but only within interpretation, and that reading—as Geoffrey Hartman has put it—"tests the claim that there is a language of knowledge which is more rigorous than literary language—more aware, at least of rhetorical figures in their duplicity, their intertwined cognitive and persuasive aspects." The following pages will therefore reflect on the hypothesis that readers are neither the source nor the masters of a language of knowledge or consciousness for which and to which they are accountable, but are themselves subject to the duplicity of language, to its meshing and intertwining of cognitive and persuasive aspects, and that the act of witnessing is represented through them by the wit of language itself. In order to enable this reflective process, we must reimagine or recenter ourselves within a constituted mirror. We must become a fictive other reflecting on a fictive self. In these specular conditions the interpreter as mirrored self is inaugurated by an act whose nature is necessarily double, an uncanny semiotic event that, like Pygmalion's statue, takes on a life and imaginative consciousness of its own. But it is precisely the doubleness of this reflective semiotic origin that creates a labyrinth whose involutions compel a reengagement with the questions of mimesis and of representation. To be a reader is to concede the text's solicitation to understand; it is to undertake the task of contextualizing and responding; and this assumption of responsibility for understanding is—like poetry itself—mimetic of the mind. It is our dubious, foundational performative acts of interpretation and misinterpretation that create our human universe. So far, Culler and I would not, I believe, see any cause to disagree. But if the semiotic project wishes to found itself on the expulsion of interpretation it will nevertheless have to contend with the mimetic residue it harbors within itself. I venture the hypothesis, therefore, that semiosis and mimesis may yet turn out to be the Tweedledum and Tweedledee of criticism, contentious identical twins who propel the plot of poiesis. And if wit and twinhood are my burden, I shall without further ado let Twelfth Night speak for me in a heuristic interpretive exercise that will explore this view.

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Since painting is already the flower of every art, the story of Narcissus is most to the point. What else can you call painting but a similar embracing with art of all that is presented on the surface of the water in the fountain?

—Alberti, *On Painting*

The powerful waywardness of interpretive operations certainly propels the plot of *Twelfth Night.* I single out one of its less conspicuous hermeneutic bouts for the construction of an allegory of reading. In act 1 scene 3, the scene in which the plot to gull Malvolio with a foolish-making text is hatched, Andrew and Toby are carousing late into the night when the Clown enters.

Andrew: Here comes the fool, i' faith.
Clown: How now my hearts? Did you never see the picture of we three?
Toby: Welcome, ass. Now let's have a catch.

(2.3.15–18)

Feste's allusion to a familiar piece of Renaissance visual wit is not a particularly subtle witticism but it serves as an instructive paradigm. "We Three" is a picture of two asses in which the beholder of the picture makes up the third. Presumably taking his cue from Andrew ("here comes the fool"), Feste's jest identifies the company as consisting of two more fools who, as in the picture of "We Three," are conned into reading the representation ("fool" or "ass") as a reflection of themselves. Toby catches and responds to the allusion by genially embracing the fraternity of foolery or ass-hood.

The joke provides its own built-in model of interpretation, a model in which the hermeneutics of the visual representation together with its title, "We Three," are totally contingent on a subject-object circuit. In this situation, the unwitnessed picture must remain witless, an empty signifier in a symbolic order in which absence is a constitutive component of the composition, marking a place to be occupied by the contingent presence of an interpreting beholder. Furthermore, the beholder is situated, framed or reflected, by the work of art in a relationship that is doubly reflexive because the response itself is an object of interpretation. The artefact requires an independent witnessing imagination that is distinct from its own framed self, and that must invest a certain

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amount of wit in realizing the aesthetics of this representation. If
the beholder is insufficiently witty—if he fails to read the com-
position—the effect short-circuits. Meaning hinges very directly—
and I speak literally—on the presence of mind. But the very act of
mind, the witnessing recognition, has the effect of framing the be-
holder and coercing him into asshood because the picture is inter-
preted only when the beholder concedes himself to be an ass. It is
a no-win situation in which the interpreter’s freedom to be witty
traps him in a symbolic order that declares his witlessness—a
plight from which there is no escape other than an unconditional
and genial surrender, such as Toby’s, to the playfulness.

In this model of the hermeneutic process, then, the interpreter
is obliged to take a position both inside the frame and outside it, to
adopt two mutually exclusive centers of reference that exist in
oscillating and recursive interchange. Without conceding asshood,
the reader cannot unriddle the picture; but if he fails to read the
picture, he is palpably an ass. To read the picture is to distance
oneself from the picture; to read the picture is also to become the
picture. This supersession of perspectives triggers a reflective pro-
cess that unseats and reinstates consciousness in a continuing dia-
lectic: there will always be a sense in which to be outside is to be
inside, but to be inside is to be outside.

Now if we think of the two distinct orders or perspectives on
which this model depends as the semiotic or symbolic on the one
hand, and the mimetic or referential on the other, we may begin to
perceive how precarious are the conditions they define for the in-
terpretive consciousness or activity. These conditions are uncann-
ily like the predicament of twinhood upon which the play invites
us to speculate—an experience of the copresence of identity and
difference. If the twins are identical they are not identifiable. Viola
can never become Viola without her double, Sebastian, and
without the mimetic dis-illusionment of the illusionistic semiotic
puzzle to which Orsino refers toward the end of the play:

One face, one voice, one habit, and two persons—
A natural perspective, that is and is not.

(5.1.214–15)

This counter-icon of “We Two” is an indispensable configuration
for the mimetic viewer; it forestalls the imminent collapse of
meaning. For Orsino, the dangers of differance are deflected by
the emergence of a benign difference. As he complacently remarks,

If this be so, as yet the glass seems true,
I shall have share in this most happy wreck.

(5.1.263–64)

One might say that the tangle of "mistaken identities" that the play exhibits is the product of a kind of jamming in the mimetic system. For semiosis alone invalidates the notion of mistaken identity altogether; its system of undifferentiated signifiers—"one face, one voice, one habit"—resists all possibility of interpretation. Semiosis would thus seem to point to a meaningless, unreadable singleness from which only mimesis saves it by restoring the doubleness and equivocation, the binary relation of difference—"two persons, a natural perspective, that is and is not"—which engenders the possibility of making sense, to say nothing of matches or happy endings and comic closures.

That is why the unequivocal masculinity of Viola's double, Sebastian, is crucial to the play's resolution. He embodies the possibility for a stabilizing mimetic anchorage. Indeed, his own consciousness of selfhood depends on it. In act 4, scene 4, when—within the space of sixty-odd lines—he is mistaken for Cesario, accosted verbally by Feste, assaulted physically by the braggart knights Toby and Andrew, and solicited by the desiring and desirable Olivia, he concludes with sturdy common sense that either the Illyrians are all mad or he must be dreaming. Either event posits a context of interpretation in which he can situate his consciousness of bewilderment, and thereby recuperate meaning. For Sebastian, making sense is a mixed Saussurean and Aristotelian strategy of discrimination and differentiation between possible representations of reality; his assumption is that he moves in a world of signs which enable the semblance of sanity and self-identity that characterize "Sebastian" (and the mimetic text), and in which the fixed difference between sanity and madness, waking and dream, generates meaning. He could of course have hypothesized a more radical interpretation, for example the possibility that he is a dramatic persona, a fiction, a semiotic cipher, a text. But to imagine some such Borgesian or Pirandellian eventuality would be a manifest act of mimetic suicide, to perform which Sebastian would have
to be, in a manner of speaking, *beside himself*. To be or not to be? Sebastian is no melancholy fool.

But Feste, who delivers a message to somebody he assumes is “Cesario” only to be met with angry incomprehension, deals with this exasperating predicament otherwise; he cheerfully undertakes a mock denial of difference, indeed an out-and-out flouting of the constraints of co-referentiality, self-identity, and *deixis* that are some of the prominent markers of mimetic representation:

No, I do not know you, nor am I not sent to you by my lady, to bid you come speak with her; nor your name is not Master Cesario; nor this is not my nose neither. Nothing that is so is so.

(4.1.5–9)

To be is not to be! If Sebastian’s discourse implies that reality is prior to language, Feste’s implies that discourse creates or annihilates reality at will. His rhetoric constitutes an undifferentiated semiotic world in which not only is that which meets the eye (that which apparently is) no longer self-evident, but discourse itself creates a new kind of reality in which the laws of noncontradiction that order our mimetic universe no longer operate, and their absence reduces significance to a kind of ineffable meaning degree-zero.

If the symbolic order points to an undifferentiated, unstable and unidentifiable universe of meanings, its apparent opposite, mimetic language, bound to a determinate referent, nevertheless generates “misprision in the highest degree” (1.5.53). The self-identity of semiosis alone is a plenitude of possible signification that yields an interpretive nothing—a dearth or death of meaning; but the self-division of mimesis also generates a superfluity or surfeit of meanings that, in the manner of Orsino’s opal imagination, refuses to stand still and dies in its own too much. The semantic and mimetic perspectives, it transpires, are not mutually exclusive, nor is their opposition entirely symmetrical; rather, a Derridean logic of deconstruction haunts the distinction between them, and you can’t have one without the other any more than you can have “letter” or literal without “figure” or figural.

The rhetorical cousin of the counter-icon of “We Two” is the tautological figure of Pleonasmus (Self-Saying in Puttenham’s nomenclature). It is a favourite with Feste:
Bonos dies, Sir Toby; for as the old hermit of Prague, that never saw pen and ink, very wittily said to a niece of King Gorboduc, "That that is is," so I being Master Parson, am Master Parson; for what is "that" but that, and "is" but is?

(4.2.13–17)

What indeed, when Feste "is" Sir Topas—there is no other—but he "isn't" Sir Topas because there is no Sir Topas besides Feste. There is nothing as unrevealing as tautology—discourse in the mirror of discourse—and yet the emptiness of tautology is the completest, most accurate form of identification. Its mode indicates the extent to which identity and self are verbal constructs deriving from a kind of unindividuated id of discourse (the semiotic pleasure principle?). To be in the symbolic order of language as Feste is, is to lead a tricky existence where identity is generated or denied by the whims of a copulative. The freedom to be verges on the anarchic when it collapses into the freedom not to be. Consider the dilemma of Andrew Aguecheek, who probably thinks he never spoke truer word than when he declares his conviction that "to be up late is to be up late." "A false conclusion," Toby declares, "I hate it as an unfilled can. To be up after midnight, and to go to bed then, is early: so that to go to bed after midnight, is to go to bed betimes" (2.3.6–9). In the tricky mirror of discourse the reflection of "to be up late" is not necessarily self-identical; it may be, by a manipulation of the rules governing the system, "to be up early." Nothing that is so is so. Discourse that corresponds to itself rather than to a stable context or referent can be bent to almost any use. Caught between the absurdity of self-saying on the one hand and the danger of violating language by forcing it into meaning, the conditions of intelligibility become intensely precarious and speculative.

Feste’s verbal conduct in particular exhibits an exuberant awareness of the topsy-turvy ness of language. More than any other figure, the Lady Olivia’s fool may be seen to embody a self-obliterating, self-authoring linguistic “inwit” in defiance of a treacherous Logos.

To see this age! A sentence is but a chev’ril glove to a good wit—how quickly the wrong side may be turned outward... indeed words are very rascals since bonds disgraced them... Troth, sir, I can yield you [no reasons] without words, and words are grown so false I am loath to prove reason with them.

(3.1.11–25)

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There is no metalanguage for this arch-deconstructor whose carnivalesque cogito is founded on the pun, the double-entendre, the equivocation, the false attribution, the tautological impasse; consequently, he can claim total release not only from the tyranny of meaning, but also from the perplexity of specifying the impossible conditions of meaning governing the prison-house of language.

The inverse of this condition is embodied in Andrew Aguecheek who, despite his yearning to be admitted into a stable symbolic order, is also free of the tyranny of meaning by virtue of his absolute witlessness.

Andrew: Methinks sometimes I have no more wit than a Christian or an ordinary man has.

Toby: Pourquoi, my dear knight?

Andrew: What is pourquoi? Do or not do? I would I had bestowed that time in the tongues that I have in fencing, dancing and bear-baiting. O, had I but followed the arts!

(1.3.81–92)

Andrew’s linguistic impotence comically glosses the power of the tongue to make or unmake both man and woman. In the grammar of courtship, as in valor, distinctions between proper and common elude him:

Toby: Accost, Sir Andrew, accost.
Andrew: What’s that?
Toby: My niece’s chambermaid.
Andrew: Good Mistress Accost, I desire better acquaintance.
Maria: My name is Mary, sir.
Andrew: Good Mistress Mary Accost.
Toby: You mistake, knight. “Accost” is front her, board her, woo her, assail her.
Andrew: By my troth, I would not undertake her in this company. Is that the meaning of “accost”? (1.3.48–58)

He has yet to learn—at the cost of a broken head—the consequences of accosting the semblance of a “coward,” a signifier whose astonishing signified turns out to be “the very devil incarnate” (5.1.79–80). Although he can cut a caper and has the
backtrick as strong as any man in Illyria, in a verbally constituted
and language-governed environment Andrew does not shine. In-
deed, his incurable logo-deficiency and his repeated victimization
by lexis makes him the ultimate underachiever.
But perhaps the whirligig of interpretation and understanding
"brings in his revenges" nowhere with more pericision of comic
justice than in the case of Malvolio. His disingenuous blindness to
the semiotic powerhouse takes the form of a deliberate coercion of
the enigmatic letter into determinate mimetic meanings calculated
to flatter the interpreter and coincide with his narcissistic fan-
tasies.

By my life, this is my lady's hand: these be her very C's, her
U's, and her T's, and thus makes she her great P's. It is, in
contempt of question her hand.

(2.5.87–90)

Having identified the author, he moves quickly to disclose the in-
tended reader:

... what should that alphabetical position portend? If I could
make that resemble something in me! Softly! "M.O.A.I."

.......................... ........................................
"M."—Malvolio! "M!" Why, that begins my name!

.......................... ........................................
"M.O.A.I." This simulation is not as the former: and yet, to
 crush this a little, it would bow to me, for every one of these
letters are in my name.

(2.5.119–41)

Malvolio's despotic way with a text digs his own hermeneutic
grave and should stand as a warning to all interpreters who prac-
tice the self-deception of believing in the text's penetrability, and
who would force the letter to yield its occult secrets by manipula-
tion and cunning. The wonderful irony of the entire episode lies in
the booby trap of the text and the symmetry of its revenge. The
letter that Malvolio would crush and subdue to his will is designed
by Maria—as witty a piece of Eve's flesh as any in Illyria—to
avenge the curtailment of freedom that this puritanical interpreter
of norms would enforce. This stratagem will succeed only if its
apparently cryptic inscription is transformed by the addressee into
a reflection of his own vanity. The fraud of the text can succeed
only if it reflects the truth of Malvolio, namely his fraudulent
piety. The seemingly meaningless MOAI is then truthful or mean-

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ingful of Malvolio, the tyrannical interpreter who persuades himself that he reads the text and finds himself tyrannized by the text’s reading of him.

It is evident that a narcissistic passion for rhetoricity constitutes the ur-plot of the play subtitled “What You Will.” References to languages and metalanguages, texts and discourses, histories, songs, alphabets and epistles, speech and writing, voices and tongues, hands and penmanship, messages both written and oral, translation, wordplay and so forth permeate a text positively obsessed with its own textuality. Persona and script, role and parole intertwine in the fashioning of “character” and letters dominate the action. Viola, purveyor of texts, is a superb semiotic instrument; Malvolio is a casualty of the carnival of letters; Feste, agile “corrupter of words,” dismantles every discourse. The text’s self-regarding posture is reenforced by other representational and performing arts to amplify the play’s signifying systems; the spectacle is interspersed with song and music; and throughout it continually draws attention to its own theatricality, its playfulness. “Are you a comedian?” Olivia inquires of Cesario (1.5.183). Toby, Fabian and Andrew hide in the “box tree” to view the antics of Malvolio “practising behaviour to his own shadow” (2.5.17). The spectacle of Malvolio, strapped in his ludicrous costume of cross-gartered yellow stockings and grinning mask, moves Fabian to remark that “if this were played upon a stage now, I could condemn it as an improbable fiction” (3.4.128–29). And when Feste impersonates Sir Topas he goes to the trouble of donning a beard and gown—in addition to his vocal disguise—even though Malvolio, for whose benefit he impersonates, cannot see him. But even more than the theatricality of spectacle, it is the masquerade of language, its creations and decreations of fictions imitating fictions, that predominates. The system of signification itself commands attention to an extraordinary degree, suggesting that the pleasures of semiosis have preempted the purposefulness of mimesis.

III

What syllable are you seeking
Vocalissimus
In the distances of sleep?
Speak it.

—Wallace Stevens,
To the Roaring Wind
Perhaps the most foregrounded instance of a radically uncertain signifier is the pronominal marker of identity in the direct speech of drama: "I." Its indeterminate gender generates the effects that traditional interpretation has identified as the central thematic motif of *Twelfth Night*, namely, mistaken or misplaced sexual identity. Consider the diversity of ways by which the speaking "I" in Viola's first embassy to Olivia constitutes an illusory self that ostensibly fails to keep faith with its origins or referent.

*Viola:* The honourable lady of the house, which is she?

*Olivia:* Speak to me, I shall answer for her. Your will?

*Viola:* Most radiant, exquisite, and unmatchable beauty—I pray you tell me if this be the lady of the house, for I never saw her. I would be loath to cast away my speech: for besides that it is excellently well penned, I have taken great pains to con it. Good beauties, let me sustain no scorn; I am very comptible, even to the least sinister usage.

*Olivia:* Whence came you, sir?

*Viola:* I can say little more than I have studied, and that question's out of my part. Good gentle one, give me modest assurance if you be the lady of the house, that I may proceed in my speech.

*Olivia:* Are you a comedian?

*Viola:* No, my profound heart; and yet, by the very fangs of malice I swear, I am not that I play. Are you the lady of the house?

*Olivia:* If I do not usurp myself, I am.

(1.5.169–87)

The witty playfulness of the encounter proceeds, among other things, from the oddity of the "I" 's behavior. The dialogue charts a speech site where "misprision in the highest degree" governs the play of the empty signifier, and releases a plethora of unauthenticated signifieds which generate considerable confusion of gender and purpose. We expect the speech of self-presentation to situate or contextualize an identity, but if we seek modest assurance of the identity of the speaking "I" we are compelled to unravel a labyrinthine specularity, a tissue of subversive textuality. Who speaks?

Semiotically speaking, the arbitrary phoneme in itself (its mate-

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riality) remains an indeterminate blank; mimetically speaking, its speech releases a redundance of imitations, simulations and dissimulations whose tautological absurdities defeat the attempt to fill the blank of “I” yet performatively conjure it into being. Olivia’s “I,” for instance, in speaking for the lady of the house, presents itself in the third person (“I shall speak for her”), and then proceeds to make the “I” conditional on “I” (“If I do not usurp myself, I am”)—a patently redundant and tautological statement. Viola’s “I” is stranger still: “I am not that I play” is both positive and negative self-definition in which “I am I” and “I am not not I” are equally present. Her account to Orsino of her hypothetical sister, in a later scene (2.4), sharpens this process of self-definition by self-estrangement:

Viola: My father had a daughter lov’d a man,
     As it might be perhaps, were I a woman,
     I should your lordship.
Duke: And what’s her history?
Viola: A blank, my lord. . . .

(2.4.108–11)

Cesario’s subjunctive mode describes a hypothetical or counterfactual condition (“were I a woman”), but if Cesario is Viola the condition becomes counter-counterfactual, that is to say tautological: Viola is a woman. Semiosis blanks out the deixis, but mimesis recuperas it, for the obverse side of tautology, of the counter-counterfactual condition is not a “possible” world, but history, or at any event the fictions that we call “story.”

Viola’s history in Illyria begins with an unexplained duplicity in her stratagem to present herself to Orsino as a “eunuch”—“For I can sing, / And speak to him in many sorts of music” (1.2.57–58). The association of uncertain gender with the asemantic attributes of music (and the risks of cacophony) flickers throughout the play in plural and elusive guises. In the embassy scene, the “I” of Viola constitutes a transgression of gender on a first level of semantic signification. The “I” impersonates a man (Cesario) who is the impersonation of another man, Sebastian (“for him I imitate” [3.4.393]), who is impersonated by a woman named Viola, whose love for the Duke Orsino places her in the quandary of serving as his ambassador of love to another woman. The signifier “woman,” however, does not point to a single or stable signified since the
sign situation is structured in four binarily constituted ways, which could yield the following incompatible senses: "I" is either a heterosexual Viola, faithful to her task, braving an impossible situation with all the witty and resourceful skills at her disposal; or a heterosexual Viola, slyly unfaithful to her task, exposing the hollowness of Orsino’s proxy lovemaking and thereby ensuring that her rival Olivia will find him utterly ridiculous and so will continue to reject him; or a homosexual Viola, sympathetic to Olivia’s rejection of Orsino, and exploiting the situation to charm her rival into a flirtatious liaison; or a homosexual Viola, sympathetic to Olivia’s rejection of Orsino, but suppressing this sympathy in order to remain faithful to her mission. These complications are restated on a second level of semiotic signalling—the level of theatrical performance—by the conventions of the stage. The "I" is an actor representing a persona; on the Elizabethan stage, the actor is a boy playing a girl playing a boy. Only a mimetic view of drama will naturalize the scandal of undecideable and reversible gender inscribed in the semiotics of Shakespeare’s theater.

There is, however, a further level of semiotic unravelling that throws the mimetic into disarray. This is the textual level on which the “I” breaks free of the previous naturalizing mimetic contexts, for it is nothing but a verbal construct constituted by previous texts. From a strictly semiotic point of view language “itself” is not inherently masculine or feminine but neuter, sexless until harnessed to an ideology. To perceive a textualized Viola is to desexualize her; it is to recognize that her “persona” or “role” or “character” is parasitically sustained by the institution of romantic love and its codes. The “character” Viola/Cesario is no more than a text echoing Orsino’s (and Shakespeare’s) intertextual relations with the literary genre of courtly poetry. As a matter of fact Orsino himself is a walking anthology that Viola is taught to read and mediate. “I have unclasp’d / To thee the book even of my secret soul” (1.4.13–14), he tells her, and tutors her in the strategies of how to interpret his text. “Be clamorous, and leap all civil bounds . . . unfold the passion of my love, / Surprise her with discourse of my dear faith; / It shall become thee well to act my woes . . .” (21–26).

Indeed the textual metaphor is a central vehicle for the display of wit in the dramatized encounter between the two women. Viola insists that she may speak only within her textual constraints—she
has no other identity—and is eager to get on with her text “for it is poetical.” Olivia observes shrewdly that “it is more like to be feigned” but promises to make an excellent interpreter for she is curious, alert and engaged:

Viola: Most sweet lady—
Olivia: A comfortable doctrine, and much may be said of it. Where lies your text?
Viola: In Orsino’s bosom.
Olivia: In his bosom? In what chapter of his bosom?
Viola: To answer by the method, in the first of his heart.
Olivia: O, I have read it: it is heresy.

(1.5.224–31)

The intratextual situation defies all attempts to disentangle the semiotic from the mimetic perspective. Olivia’s strategy is to assume that there are two distinguishable and decipherable texts. One is Orsino’s, delivered by his messenger, and this text she rejects as heresy; the other is that of the messenger and this she reads as true doctrine. Her fallacy corresponds to Malvolio’s: the move to interpret the encrypted text with unseemly haste causes her to fall in love with a secondary and apocryphal textual commentary—her own. To be sure, the error is understandable, even necessary and therefore exemplary, for the texts are so derivative, so inextricably knit into each other that to descry an authentic or original inscription in this palimpsest is to violate its “character.” “What I am, and what I would, are as secret as maidenhead” (1.5.218–19), says the cryptic, genderless text. All this and more is brought sharply into view by the semiotic spotlight. But lest it be thought that my purpose is to crush the play’s semiotic plenitude into totalizing closure, I conclude with a brief reflection on this issue.

The indeterminate character of texts as well as characters reflects and conditions the plight of the interpreter. For the semiotic critic, the character Viola belongs to language—it is a cipher enmeshed in textuality. The mimetic critic assumes the contrary, that language belongs to the character Viola, who is a psychologically self-identical and genuine person—witty, vivacious, playful, feminine, boyish, utterly charming and above all authentic. Harold Jenkins speaks for a long tradition of Shakespearean readings when he says: “In the emotional pattern of the play Viola represents a genuineness of feeling against which the illusory can be mea-
In this mimetic view the textual densities, contradictions, indeterminacies and discontinuities are gaps to be filled by the critic's psychological subtlety; and for this purpose the layerings of simulation and dissimulation are the perfect representation. To detextualize Viola is to interpret the character, to provide her with a gender, a persona, a coherent set of motives, etc. What happens to interpretation when Viola is retextualized?

If for the mimetic critic indeterminacy is a challenge to determine meaning, whereas for the semiotic critic indeterminacy is a criterion for discovering not meaning but the conditions of meaningfulness, let me, in conclusion, ponder this distinction by a consideration of the complex tonality of the celebrated willow cabin fantasy.

Viola: If I did love you in my master's flame
     With such a suffering, such a deadly life,
     In your denial I would find no sense,
     I would not understand it.

Olivia: Why, what would you?

Viola: Make me a willow cabin at your gate,
     And call upon my soul within the house;
     Write loyal cantons of dejected love
     And sing them loud even in the dead of night;
     Halloo your name to the reverberate hills
     And make the babbling gossip of the air
     Cry out "Olivia!" O, you should not rest
     Between the elements of air and earth
     But you should pity me.

Olivia: You might do much.

(1.5.268–80)

The question is, who speaks, or sings, in this hypothetical condition of Viola imagining herself in Orsino's doublet and hose? Mimetic criticism encounters a difficulty here for if language expresses Viola, then whose representative is she? Whose side is she on? She certainly represents both the spirit and the letter of Orsino's embassy with remarkable fidelity; she will not be denied access; she will plant herself at Olivia's door until audience is granted; in unfolding the passion of his courtly ardors she will be clamorous and leap all civil bounds. This is fidelity to the point of self-obliteration. Is her text an improvement on Orsino's original, or a parody of his "adorations," "fertile tears" and "groans that

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thunder love, with sighs of fire” (1.5.256–57)? Does she represent another or herself?

At its finest mimetic criticism has found in this song “the touch of reckless forthrightness, the spirit, the candor, the imaginative panache . . . the self-assertive, masculine qualities which have been lacking in Orsino and which promptly bring out the womanly Olivia,”13 and from this interpretation has projected all the moving qualities the speech is felt to have, namely the genuine ardor that Viola contrives both to express and conceal by means of her boy-mask as she rises to the challenge of Olivia’s double-barrelled question: “What would you?” But where exactly is the authenticity of feeling located? Is there a qualitative difference between Viola’s discourse of love and Orsino’s? For mimetic criticism, the authenticity is a function, hermeneutically educed, of a mimetic construct named “Viola,” imbued with all its weight of hypostatized emotions and frustrated longings. For subjectless semiotic criticism to engage with these questions is to unveil its residue of hermeneutic hunger. It might venture the following interpretation:

The tonalities of the speech incorporate voices and echoes to the point where language overextends the confines of personal identity. In the absence of an authoring voice or a determinate addressee, the name “Olivia,” addressed to “the soul within” and hallooed to the reverberate hills is no longer character-specific but a musical response to the babbling gossip of the air: an echoing, disembodied wail of desire issuing from language and returning to language, a song whose meaningless or unmotivated status has a performative, self-inaugurating function: it brings into being that which is not. In these counterfactual circumstances we are compelled to recognize that there is no song, only absence synesthetically mirrored in the figure of Echo—the voiceless, speechless nymph unable to declare her love. The song that is not there is an echo that has no origin; it sing[s] the pathos of the absence that all language is. The blank in language that semiotic criticism uncovers is the very thing that imbues the text with meaningfulness. But the pathos of a verbal “inwit” discovering its own lack of voice in the traces left by echo must be heard to be recognized. Interpretation, despite its fragility and uncertainty, confers that mediating recognition. For its catch, like Feste’s, is sung against the silencing tyranny of semiosis:
Andrew: Begin, fool: it begins, 'Hold thy peace.'
Clown: I shall never begin if I hold my peace.

(2.3.69–71)

For all its ululating and elliptic coyness, the song begins; and it arrives at a destination. "You might do much," says the reader, smitten with the sound of the song which is not.

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NOTES


2 Culler, 5 (my emphases).


4 Culler, 4; see also 124.

5 Culler, 25.

6 Culler, 38 (my emphases).


9 Ernest B. Gilman, in The Curious Perspective: Literary and Pictorial Wit in the Seventeenth Century (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1978), has shown brilliantly how the displays of metaphysical wit in seventeenth century poetry—just like the displays of visual wit enabled by devices such as the curious perspective—direct and control the reading experience. Gilman’s consistently mimetic interpretation of Twelfth Night foregrounds many of the same features that I have singled out in order to argue, however, that the play “offers a salutary exercise in perception for both the characters and the audience” (149) and thereby initiates us into the clear-sightedness that accepts the “juncture of artifice and truth—in love, and in drama” (150).

10 Cf. Gilman, 148–49.

11 For a semiotic view of the character of “character,” see Joel Weinsheimer, "Theory of Character: Emma" in Poetics Today 1 (1979): 185–211. (Cf. Shakespeare’s pun on the word “character” in Sonnet 59: “Show me your image in some antique book / Since mind at first in character was done.”)


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