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Tel Quel: écriture as political practice¹

Annamaria Carusi

Summary

This article is an overview of the notion of écriture as it emerged and developed in the journal *Tel Quel* and in the works of those affiliated with it. *Tel Quel* has now been discontinued, and has been replaced by *Infini*; in recent years – in fact, almost immediately after the break with Maosim in 1972/3 – the journal had already changed drastically. During the 25 years in which it was published, the journal covered a very wide range of concerns, and was instrumental in launching a large variety of experimental writings. This article is limited to the period 1960-71, and specifically to the emergence of écriture in the first issues of *Tel Quel*, to the Marx-Freud articulation elaborated from 1968 onwards, and to the type of problematic which besets the notion of écriture arising from this articulation. Although the number of writers and theorists who were at various times associated with the journal is extensive, I have referred particularly to the writings of Sollers and of Foucault.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel is 'n oorsig van die begrip écriture soos dit ontstaan en ontwikkel het in die tydskrif *Tel Quel* en die werk van skrywers wat daarby geaffilieer was. Die publikasie van *Tel Quel* is nou beëindig en dit is deur *Infini* vervang. In die afgelope tyd – trouens, feitlik direk na die breuk met Maoïsme in 1972/3 – het die tydskrif baie verander. Gedurende die 25 jaar waarin dit gepubliseer is, het dit 'n wye veld gedek, en was dit ook instrumenteel in die ontstaan van verskillende tipes eksperimentele tekste. Die tydperk 1960-71 word gedek; in besonder die verskyning van écriture in die eerste uitgawes van *Tel Quel*, die Marx-Freud-artikulasie wat sedert 1968 uitgewerk is, en die tipe problematiek wat deur hierdie artikulasie veroorsaak word. Alhoewel 'n groot aantal skrywers en teoretici op verskillende tye aan die tydskrif verbonde was, word in die besonder na geskrifte van Sollers en Foucault verwys.

1 Introduction

The journal *Tel Quel* represents one of the most ambitious projects of the 60's and 70's. Its problematisation of the Literary Institution has not yet been fully absorbed: one may indeed shelve or recuperate its problematic, yet it still stands as a question to any knowledge we may hope to gain not only in the field of literary studies proper, but also much further afield. *Tel Quel* and those connected with it, have not only made it impossible to return to hackneyed presuppositions about literature, but also forced us to proceed with much greater care and a feeling of unease when approaching any form of discourse. Emerging in the context of the radical and all-pervasive interrogation of the Sixties, it is a forum which brings together and at the same time puts on trial some of the most important proposals of the time. This is possible because of the double-edgedness of the journal: the notion of écriture² implicates both theory and practice; the relation between these is one of mutual problematisation.

It is the aim of this article to outline the problematic which underlies the

theory and practice of *écriture* in the journal *Tel Quel*, by analysing what may loosely be called “editorials”, “declarations” and programmes for future projects. It will appear from the outset that one is faced with a document on the question of commitment: the origins of *écriture* in the journal are unquestionably ethical. However, *écriture* as an ethic is beset with internal contradictions. I wish to propose that the aporia with which we are faced results from the fact that *écriture* as ethic and as graphism are necessarily set on opposing and contradicting trajectories.

2 *Tel Quel*: Opposing previous discourses

The “déclaration” which heads the first issue of *Tel Quel* is the first of a number of manifesto like documents, which abound in the journal, particularly in the period 1966–1972. As all manifestos, it is both a negation of previous discourses, and a thrust into a new one, which however, remains vague and indefinite in its outline. Here, it is the gesture of breaking away or of clearing a space which is more definitive. Far from defining an object to fill this space in advance, the object is left to define itself and its directions:

Absolutely nothing will please us more than to be accused of eclecticism. And is there a better ambition than that which makes us hope to unite here the best of what is being written – or has been written – in all the directions in which we should wish to advance? (no. 1: 4)³

The charge of eclecticism would not however be regarded so favourably by them later on, when their choice of discourse becomes more definitively outlined and purposeful. Within this initial “space” there is the intrusion of two discourses, which are extremely significant in view of the later theoretisation of the journal: one initiated by formalism and the other by Nietzsche, which in no way delimitate the project, but function rather as its vectors.

3 *Écriture*, formalism and Nietzsche

Parts of the “déclaration” are strong echoes of the theories of the Russian Formalists, and it was in fact the *Tel Quel* group which, both in the journal and in the publications published by the Éditions du Seuil in the “collection *Tel Quel*”, was instrumental in making the writings of the Russian Formalists accessible in France. This formalist moment is manifested in the “déclaration” firstly by the desire to return to the text itself – without submitting it to “moral and political imperatives”: “The ideologues have reigned over expression for a sufficiently long time for it to permit itself at last to give them the slip, and to occupy itself entirely with itself, its fatality and its particular rules” (no 1: 3). This may seem a surprising stand to take for a journal noted primarily for its fiercely political stance, and becomes comprehensible within the general project of *Tel Quel* only when Nietzsche is taken into consideration. The formalism of *Tel Quel* never functions in precisely the same way as that of the Russian Formalists. For, from the outset, it does not function on

the level of theory only but also on that of practice. While this opposition later becomes problematised by the Tel Quel group, the “déclaration” was primarily a call for a new type of writing:

What must be said today is that writing is no longer conceivable without a clear forecast of its powers, a sang-froid with regards to the chaos from which it rises, a determination which will place poetry at the highest intellectual level. All the rest will not be literature. (no. 1: 3)

The type of writing called for here – écriture at the first moment of its development – is at once an apparent retreat back into the specifically literary, an attempt to determine what the literary is once all that is extraneous to it has been removed, and what the powers peculiar to it are. Firstly, it underscores the pre-occupation with the project of the Nouveau Roman and its meta-lingual⁴ interrogation of the possibilities and limitations of écriture – Sollers’ “Sept propositions sur Alain Robbe-Grillet” in the second issue is almost a second “déclaration” as Foucault points out (1968: 11). Secondly it brings us to the preoccupation with Nietzsche, which informs the journal throughout its development. The quotation which functions as an epigraph to the first issue is significantly drawn from Nietzsche:

I want the world and I want it AS SUCH, and want it again, eternally, and I cry insatiably: encore! and not only for me alone, but for the whole play and for the whole spectacle; and not for the spectacle alone, but ultimately for me, because the spectacle is necessary to me – because it makes me necessary – because I am necessary to it – and because I make it necessary. (quoted in no. 1: epigraph)

The significance of Nietzsche to the Tel Quel project cannot be overestimated, and in fact determines and defines the formalism inherent to the journal. It is precisely because the “powers” of écriture are determined formally, that is, by the functioning of the signifier, that it ultimately has to do with what the world can be for us. The retreat into the specifically literary would appear to be a supremely a-political gesture. The interrogation of the literary word as a “pathological” or hypostatic sign in which the signifier is overdetermined and conditions the signified and the referent is however eminently political, since it provides a knowledge of the operations of the language which we use to communicate. This language would appear to be ideologically neutral, providing direct access to truth. When, however, a poetics based on the possible *disfunction* (most importantly, the rhetorical tropes of metaphor and metonymy) of the sign is embarked upon, it can be shown that the conditions for referentiality or truth are laid down precisely by a rhetoric, and that similarly truth and true knowledge depend upon an overdetermination of the signifier.⁵ In his work on aphasia and on the equivalence thesis, Jakobson shows that it is poetics which underlies language, as a coherent, non-contradictory system of representation.⁶ Nietzsche on the other hand, shows that truth and knowledge itself operate on the basis of force relations which over-determine the “spectacle” or the system of rep-

resentation.⁷ An interrogation of the “spectacle”, as a formal category, is therefore immediately political: hence the politicisation of rhetorics.

Through the text and respecting its specificity *Tel Quel* is thus a commitment to and desire of the world “as such” or “as it is”. With the re-consideration of Nietzsche, this “commitment of the world” does not take the form of a crude collapse of the text onto reality. It is the appropriation of the world not as being, but as “spectacle”, determined by relations of domination and force, and hence as a formal entity, which allows for this type of commitment. What is indicated here is the desire to see the spectacle as spectacle, stripped of the occlusions of the ideologues. To cite another passage taken from Nietzsche and used by Jean-Louis Baudry in his article *Écriture, Fiction, Idéologie* (1968: 134):

What is appearance for me! Certainly not the opposite of a being; . . . What could I know of any being whatsoever, if not the attributes of its appearance! Certainly not an inanimate mask that one can put on or remove from an unknown X! Appearance is for me life and action itself, life which is enough of a mockery to let me feel that there is nothing but appearance.

The “spectacle” is a representation and is visible as such only by an interrogation of its formal structure. But it is a representation only of itself: the representation-being dichotomy functions only to occlude the relations of force which over-determine the “spectacle”, and must be undermined through form. It is not surprising then that literature has a privileged relation to the “spectacle”. Precisely because it is made of language, the primary mediator of our intelligibility, it has the ability to either reinforce the force relations, or in the text of *écriture*, to subvert them by a display of the formal nature of the “spectacle”. Formal concepts developed by the Russian Formalists return but with an added dimension occluded by the insistence in Russian Formalism to divorce the text from anything considered as extrinsic to it – that of its relation to the “spectacle” by a *formal* cohesion, where the formal is an implicit upheaval of the ideological: by the very fact that what can be called “literary beauty” is disengaged from reality “it will touch those qualities which instantaneously establish the relations between ourselves, our immediate and most pure justification” (no. 1: 4). Functioning both as an epistemological project and as a form of commitment in the strongest sense of the word, this is what defines the neo-formalism of *Tel Quel*.

This is of course an anticipation of the project. The “déclaration” is merely an initial glimmering of the later development of the journal – but the later project does not deviate from this in any significant way. The reason for this relative consistency is its formalism, but perhaps more so its relation to Nietzsche, who together with Marx and Freud, is used to delineate the area of a new knowledge. *Tel Quel* is embedded in the Nietzschean discourse from its inception – the Marx-Freud articulation is defined in 1966-7, and has a bearing beyond the parameters of the purely literary. While studying the specificity of the literary text, other modes of signification, other modes of intelligibility are put into question:

Writing, which is in some respects our function towards the exterior world, our way of greeting it, of creating between it and us a complicity, an intimacy, a friendship ever greater, is definitely just an introduction. (no. 1: 4)

The question which remains to be answered is: what are the forms of commitment which can be considered as valid and open to the literary text? It is here precisely that the notion of *écriture* can be deployed in the most critical and productive way.

4 *Écriture* and its theory

While until 1966-78 the contributions to the journal are taken mostly from experimental writings by such writers as Marcelin Pleynet, Jean Thibaudeau, Jean Cayrol, Jean-Louis Baudry, Francis Ponge to name but a few, theoretical works later come to have a major impact. The period from 1960-66 is in fact characterised as a period of experimentation and formalism in the chronology of the journal published in the 1971 issue of *Tel Quel* (no. 47: 143-4), politically it has leftist tendencies, and has links with the French Communist Party. The massive theoretisation of the journal after 1966 is far from being gratuitous, but is instead part of the process through which previous assumptions are radicalised – the questions inherent to experimental writing as well as to formalism are now explicitly posed. This is the point at which the notion of *écriture* comes to take on its specificity in the journal. It is also in 1967 that the subtitle “Science/Littérature” (no. 29) appears for the first time. This is an important shift in the development of the journal: just three issues later Sollers’ “Programme” appears. This is the preface to his work “of *écriture*” *Logiques*, and in it the notion of *écriture* and the possibilities particular to it are specified. Sollers is one of the predominant personalities of the *Tel Quel* group, often acting as a spokesman. One can in fact say that “Programme” defines not only the project of *Logiques* but also that of *Tel Quel* itself. Whereas the word “*écriture*” is used in a vague sense in the 1960 declaration, marking an unspecified collusion with the world, in “Programme” it becomes evident that the notion of *écriture*, as it is used by the *Tel Quel* group from then on, cannot be thought outside of a scientific/theoretical perspective or outside of political commitment. What must be specified is the relation between these two discourses, theory and practice. When asked to explain the subtitle “Science/Littérature” in an interview with Jacques Henric, entitled “*Écriture et Revolution*” (1968: 67–79), Sollers answers that it is not a matter of reducing practice to theory, or of illustrating a preceding theory by a narrative or poetic practice. Theory, he points out, must be understood in the Althusserian sense of “a specific form of practice” (1968: 79). He goes on to quote this passage from Althusser’s *Pour Marx*:

The only Theory capable [...] of criticising ideology in all of its disguises, including the disguises of technical practices in the sciences, is the Theory of theoretical practice (as distinct from ideological practice): a materialist dialectic, or dialectical materialism in its specificity.

Écriture, as a specific mode of production, is itself a science or theoretical practice which coexists with scriptural practice. In order for it not to be subsumed under ideology, écriture must be maintained strictly within the borders of its own scriptural/theoretical practice, that is, it must elaborate itself as the “science” of its own system of functioning. Écriture is conceived of as a practice which is not assimilable to the concept of literature: it implies the complete overturning and undermining of this concept, and of its very status as an *object* which may be grasped by another discourse. Écriture can be studied only through its own process, implying a “massive disengagement from myth and from representation” (no. 32: 30). However, at the same time, the need for the elaboration of a theoretical practice which takes as its object the practice of écriture – a Theory of écriture as theoretical practice, is put forward in “Programme”. One may wonder at the necessity of such a theory. If écriture, as a practice, is capable of acting as a critique both of myth and of representation, the Theory of this practice can only be redundant to the already massive work done by it. Écriture in fact brings to the surface and functions as the underside of both myth and representation, and all those concepts subsumed by them; it functions as the inscription of their hitherto occluded conditions of possibility. Theory is necessary to écriture precisely because it is a process and not an object: it can be defined only in terms of a negativity. That is, écriture does not offer any positive knowledge. While its practice must be defined on the level of the *text* as a function of which écriture disposes, it does not and cannot express this function, if it is to remain écriture: “Dramatic economy of which the ‘geometrical space’ is not representable: it is played” (no. 31: 3). Expressivity, representation: these are the concepts immediately and directly subverted by écriture. Working within the logic of language, écriture cannot even be said to be language, according to Sollers; its process is one of negativity, it is a destruction of language. A destruction and negativity which can be spoken only by theory. This is then the function of theory, which is placed on the fine dividing line between speaking the “text” of écriture and reifying it, whereby it would regain its status as an object. This is precisely the problematic of the theory of écriture.

If the theory of écriture is to follow Althusserian lines it must provide for both a critical and an architectonic function, the former being:

the principle of all the “breaks” which provide a guarantee for the autonomy of theoretical reflection: the structural break that separates it from all other types of production and the epistemological breaks that distinguish between science and ideology within theoretical activity itself

and the latter:

the principle of all the “joints” of the “historical materialism” that attempts to reassemble the different real practices with the same mode of *production* as well as of the “dialectical materialism” that promises a general theory, “the theory of practice” in general, itself elaborated on the basis of the theory of existing theoretical practices. (Glucksmann, 1977: 285)

The theory of *écriture* would thus take as its object on the one hand the specificity of *écriture* – the operation of the “text” of which it disposes, and on the other a recognition of that which unites it with other modes of production through the category of production itself, which as Glucksmann (1977) points out is the unifying principle of Althusser’s theory.

5 The “text” of *écriture*

What then is this “text” located in and by the process of *écriture*? Turning to Foucault’s articles “Le langage à l’infini” (1963: no 15: 43-61) and “Distance, aspect, origin (which heads the anthology of theoretical works published collectively by the Tel Quel group – *Théorie d’ensemble* (1968: 11-24), it is evident that what for Sollers is the function within the process of *écriture* which brings with it the destruction of expressivity and thus ultimately of language, is for Foucault the very condition of possibility of language itself. Language is an expressivity,⁸ or a positivity, only when this condition is occluded beneath the constant movement towards the urgency of a Presence – Truth, Law – which however, remain inaccessible to it by an infinitesimal shift, necessary to it for its very existence. For it is this shift away from “being” that allows for any system of representation. More precisely, if we are to search for an origin of language at all, we are likely to find it only in the most definitive of absences: death.

It could well be that the approach of death, its sovereign gesture, its projection into the memory of man, hollow out in being and in the present the emptiness from which and towards which one speaks. (1963: 45)

In “Le langage à l’infini” Foucault provocatively postulates that language emerges in order to approach and at the same time to resist death. The limit of death is rendered intelligible only if it can be represented; by the same token representation itself is founded on an absence, which functions therefore as its necessary condition of possibility. In approaching this sovereign absence, representation must necessarily recoil from it, if it is not to be this absence, and no longer to merely represent it. Any system of representation is constituted only by its relation to absence. By definition, representation cannot entail identity with being.⁹ The resistance to death which is the function of language can only take the form of engendering within itself images of itself, thereby constantly renewing its relation to absence – hence language to infinity.

Language, on the line of death, reflects itself: it encounters something like a mirror there; and in order to stop this death which is going to halt it, it has only one power that of giving birth to its own image within itself in a play of mirrors, which has no limits. (1963: 45)

Death is to language the condition for a reflection of itself: its limit opens up to language a virtual space where “the word finds the indefinite source of its own image where it can represent itself to infinity, already behind itself, and

yet beyond itself" (1963: 45). Language is thus constituted as a series of duplicating folds: the originary fold¹⁰ being that which enables it to recoil from the ultimate absence of death to reflect instead only on itself as a system of representation. Language is an infinitisation of absence in order to avoid the definitive absence of death. Writing itself is made possible by this originary fold, specifically in Western culture since alphabetic writing does not represent the signified but the phonetic elements which signify it:

To write, for Western culture, would be to place oneself from the outset in the virtual space of self-representation and of reduplication, writing signifying not the thing, but the word, the work of language would do nothing but advance more profoundly in this impalpable thickness of the mirror, arouse the double of this double which *écriture* already is, discover thus a possible and impossible infinity, maintain it beyond death which condemns it and free the rustling of a murmur. (1963: 45)

In "Distance, aspect, origine", Foucault specifies the *text* which functions within *écriture*, by specifying the relation between the Tel Quel writers (Sollers, Thibaudeau, Baudry) and Robbe-Grillet. This relation is not merely an influence or a borrowing, but takes the form of a discursive articulation, functioning within each work as well as from one to the other, and is a relation of isomorphism. Isomorphism in the space of literary language does not imply a vision of the world, as Foucault points out, but rather is the form of a "fold interior to language".

The articulations within and between these works form a network or web ("réseau") in which figures function not as the evocation of the presence or absence of an object, but of its distance. Through this play on distance, a fictive or specular space is constructed as a series of reflections or simulacra, which is identical only to itself. The "réseau" which is thus formed functions both in and across discourses, such that a similar "réseau" exists both in the language deployed by the text, and from text to text. The possibility of a discursive articulation or isomorphism between texts is constituted by the power of language to function as a mirror of itself, and therefore by its relation to itself and to absence, creating "a relation such that words can define themselves opposite, beside and at a distance from each other, supporting themselves on their difference and on their simultaneity at the same time, defining, without privilege nor culmination, the extent of a network" (1968: 17). The "réseau" is formed by the act of writing: it is a fiction specific to the activity of writing, and which while not being reducible to language, has a relation of support and contestation to language. If language is a system of representation founded on a constitutive absence, fiction is the "verbal vein of that which does not exist, such as it is" (1968: 19). If the only power of language is to point to the distance of objects, the language which maintains itself within this distance is the language of fiction. The language of fiction is the distancing inherent to all language where the myths of origin and of presence are collapsed: "The language of fiction inserts itself in already spoken language, in the murmur which has never ended" (1968: 20). There is

no presence which acts as a source for fiction – the “source” of language is absence and the language of fiction plays out this absence, “speaks” only an absence. Fiction has only one moment of pure origin: the activity of writing itself, that is to say the instant when the pen begins to inscribe a word on paper; it has only one moment of actuality or of presence: the termination of writing once language is no longer possible. Between these extremities, language is determined by the *aspect* visible only in the movement of arriving or departing; thus it is a spatial rather than a temporal network which establishes the order of the aspect.¹¹ Just as the simulacrum gives way to fiction, fiction gives way to the aspect:

And if I willingly stop at the word aspect [perspective], after fiction and simulacrum it is at once for its grammatical precision and for the semantic knot which turns around it (the species of the mirror and that of analogy: the diffraction of the spectre and the division of spectres; the exterior aspect, which is not the thing itself and neither its certain surround; the aspect which modifies itself with distance; the aspect which often tricks but which is never effaced, etc. . .) (1968: 21)

Literature of the aspect and of distance pertain thus to the irremediable dispersion of language within language, which cannot be seen as a closed system, but as the system within which this dispersion is the essential function. Writing is the *blind* recognition of the emptiness in which the space of language is inscribed. “Language is this emptiness, this exterior within which it never ceases to speak: ‘the eternal rustling of the outside’” (1968: 23).

The “textes du réseau” are thus empty, specular and infinite language spread out before us. They are the only texts able to function within the conditions of possibility of language, precisely because their only *a priori* is language. If a critique of literature is possible today, it is only because these texts offer their own critique, but in a mute form. For that which makes them possible – the “réseau” – is at the same time that which they make apparent but which they cannot speak. It is at this point that a critical theory is simultaneously possible and necessary:

... and if criticism has a role, I mean if the necessarily second language of the critic can cease to be a derived, aleatory language, if it can be at the same time secondary and fundamental, it is to the extent to which it puts in words for the first time this network of works which is for each of them, their silence (1968: 17).

The significance of this article to the Tel Quel project is evident. Firstly, it makes it clear that what would appear to be the destruction of language as a system of representation is precisely that which makes language possible. The “text” within *écriture* is not an annihilation; it is the stripping away of any illusion of presence¹² by the functioning inherent to language itself, showing once again, that it is a negativity which makes the positivity of language possible at all. Secondly, it articulates the relation of theory to *écriture* on the basis of the conditions of possibility of both: the existence of a theory of *écriture* can be constituted only by the folds internal to language, which allow

one language to “speak” the silences of another, while at the same time remaining isomorphic to it. It is Barthes who exemplifies this type of criticism at its most effective. This is at the same time the reason why there exists both a (silent) theoretical practice within *écriture*, and a Theory of *écriture*. Thirdly, it allows us to re-read the first declaration in the light of the 1966-67 project of *Tel Quel*. For how can the “powers” of *écriture* be clearly forecast without a critical interrogation of its conditions of possibility? Fourthly, it takes us back to the Nietzschean enterprise at the inception of the journal, by specifying why and how literature and language, are a *spectacle* (in all senses of the word), and why the real is the “impossible” to both – to use Lacan’s terms.¹³ However, the insertion of Foucault into the *Tel Quel* project at this point is also ironical, since it hints, already at the moment when a collective “manifesto” is published by the group, which coincides with and is a response to the events of May ’68, at the shortcomings of the proposed definitions of *écriture* (based on a freudo-marxist synthesis), while never actually touching on this subject. In retrospect, Foucault’s article adds a rather bizarre note to the collection, encapsulating perhaps all that is crucial to the notion of *écriture*, and with the same stroke all that is possibly misguided in its theory.

6 ‘Textes de la rupture’

At this point, let us return to “Programme” in which Sollers specifies what the texts of *écriture* are (should be). His proposal is that the texts which inscribe the process of *écriture* as well as the theory which speaks this process have their source in the texts of rupture, defined as such only in terms of their “coefficient of formal-theoretical contestation (no. 32: 4). Texts of rupture are exemplified especially by the texts of Mallarmé and of Lautréamont, but also by Dante/Sade and Artaud/Bataille at different socio-historical junctures. What must be disclosed is the logic of these ruptures. It is precisely at the site of these ruptures that the Theory of *écriture* as theoretical practice and *écriture* as theoretical-scriptural practice must situate themselves in order to maintain their critical and architectonic functions.¹⁴ This permits a knowledge of *écriture* in its specificity as well as in the ways in which it interarticulates with other practices, most importantly, the economic. Just as realism may be said to share the status of the capitalist mode of production, the critique of representation found in the texts of Mallarmé and of Lautréamont has the same implications as Marx’s critique of capitalist political economy. Furthermore they are the symptom of a crisis of language homologous to that of this mode of production. *Écriture* is the “crisis, and the violent revolution, the leap of readability” (no. 32: 4). This crisis of readability is brought on by the critique of the forms of exchange underlying representation.¹⁵ The word as a communicational entity is structured along the same lines as the commodity as an exchangeable one. It is then a critique of exchange in representational discourse which underlies the political commitment of *Tel Quel*, a critique operated by the “text” of *écriture*, where the critical and architectonic functions of theory are fused, and where the category of production prevails.

For Sollers, the texts of rupture and their theory constitute a discontinuous

notion of history, aimed primarily at the destruction of the pseudo-continuity of literary history, itself founded on a speculative thought which “misrecognises the fact that the economic is the a priori determination of all thought” (no. 32: 4). This speculative thought can be maintained only by a series of exclusions, repressions and negations. Once again, the functioning of *écriture* and its theory as a critique is underscored, for these exclusions, etc., are the indication that it is textual *écriture*, that is discontinuity, which underlies a “cursive”, “figurative” and “teleological” history: textual *écriture* is to history what the “textes du réseau” are to language. A history of *écriture* is in a position to think the completion of a phase of history and its passage to another level of history as well as the entrance into history of other dominant cultures. A history of this type is made possible by an awareness of the inter-articulation of the literary as an ideological form and the economic.¹⁶ Dialectical and historical materialism are thus the two forms of knowledge with a claim to validity in the theoretical practice of *écriture*, the theory of this practice and its history. These fields of knowledge are at the same time that which define the contestatory power of these practices (including theoretical practice) beginning with the definitive break with and complete undermining of the concept of ideology. What is at stake here is the overturning of capitalist bourgeois ideology:

Theory considers “literature” (and the culture in which it is situated) as closed. From now on it will expose the exterior covering of that which has been thought by this name. It elaborates the real (economic) conditions of a priori systematic structures and the conditions under which textual *écriture* is effaced, by suppressing every fixation at the notion of work or of author (at the cultural fetishisation and the corollary fiction of a creative subjectivity). As “historical consciousness”, it is necessarily on the side of the revolutionary action in progress (31/2:7).

7 Critical/transformative practice

The theory and practice of *écriture*: this is the Tel Quelian form of commitment, for which it is attacked from every possible platform both on the Right and the Left, attacks to which it responds with a vigorous polemic, in almost every issue following the Autumn 1966 issue. The most important document to be produced during this period of intensive theoretisation is the collection of theoretical articles written by members of the group to which we have already referred, viz. *Theorie d'ensemble* (1968), which apart from Foucault's article, contains many seminal contributions by Barthes, Derrida and Kristeva. In this collection the Tel Quel project is further specified: the notion of *écriture* is seen as functioning within a constellation, the other terms of which are “text”, “unconscious”, “history”, “work”, “trace”, “production”, “science” (1968: 7). Indeed, there can be no clearer outline of the space in which this project is inscribed than the simple enumeration of these terms. The constellation which they form has traversed the terms “formalism”, “structuralism”, which were the indications of a break in the approach to the “literary” text, placing itself at a point preceding these latter three terms in

order to locate itself instead around the Lautréamont, Mallarmé, Marx, Freud articulation. It is precisely around this articulation that the theory of écriture develops. The reformulations of Marx and Freud by Althusser and Lacan respectively, together with that of language by semiotics, and the elaboration of grammatology by Derrida: such are the co-ordinates of the theory of écriture. The choice of heroes is of course by no means random: it enables the theory to cover a significant area, as well as indicating the inter-articulations of the economic, the constitution of the subject, and the “literary” and thus to gain access to the “textes de rupture”. The ambition of the project is to carry through a systematic critique of the closure bearing within it not only a mode of production, but more significantly, a system of intelligibility. Critique may be seen as the first moment of the project, the second being the desire to carry through this critique as political practice. This is the point at which theory becomes practice in the political sense: to reveal the functioning of a particular system of intelligibility is inevitably to enter into a contestatory political practice. Political practice itself does not stop here: what is affirmed is the ability of écriture, and its theory together with it, to transform symbolic structures: “What is at stake, is to widen the tearing of the symbolic system in which the modern West has lived and continues to live” (Barthes 1968: 9). Thus a theory of écriture, such as that postulated by Kristeva for example, is committed to a revelation not only of its functioning, but also of its “transformative lining” (1968: 10). The final point of the delineation of the project in the preface to this anthology reads as follows:

to articulate a politics logically linked to a non-representational dynamic of écriture, that is: the analysis of the misunderstandings provoked by this position, the explanation of their social and economic character, the construction of the relations between this écriture with historical and dialectical materialism. (1968:10)

The project is thus immediately and ultimately political, both as an articulation of a critical practice and of transformative practice. The basis for this period (1966-71) is marxism-leninism, a union which is necessary to the elaboration of a materialist political philosophy capable of sustaining the rigour of what is seen as a transformative practice as well as a critical practice, without allowing it to become an idealist-utopia. The success or failure of this project is rooted in the possibility of maintaining écriture, both as theory and as practice, in a strictly materialist line. In 1970 (no. 43) the “Science/Littérature” subtitle is significantly changed to “Littérature/Philosophie/Science/Politique”, signifying “in order – the reflection – the calculated inversion – of a real social and historical process, that is, the analytical exposition of its determination towards its cause” (no. 43:1). A materialist analysis provides a knowledge of social and historical processes; the materialist base is at the same time that which is occluded by them, their inverse, and their underlying cause:

The completed form which economic relations take on such as they are manifested superficially, in their concrete existence, thus also such as the agents of

these relations and those which incarnate them represent them when they try to understand them, is very different from their essential internal but hidden structure, and from the concept which corresponds to it. In fact, it is even the inverse, the opposite. (Marx – quoted in no 43:2)

It is therefore the irreversible ascent of the materialist base which must not be obscured; critique and transformative practice must both move along the lines or, be “faithful” to this ascent. Literature, philosophy, science and politics must converge in order to push through this symbolic transformation.

8 Interarticulations

Écriture and its theory (both as scriptural theory and as Theory of theoretical practice) unfold simultaneously in two directions. The first may be said to be “synchronic”, and consists in a stripping away of imaginary¹⁷ or ideological structures to determine instead what the underlying symbolic¹⁸ structure of these imaginary structures may be. The second may be said to be diachronic, consisting in the establishment of a discontinuous history, the location of a rupture in historical and symbolic structures (the Lautréamont, Mallarmé, Marx, Freud articulation). This movement may be better described as temporal or transformative since its ultimate goal is not only to analyse but also to effect a transformation of history by anticipating and projecting inevitable and radical changes in symbolic structures.

Critique and transformation do not exist separately in the project – one is always the underside of the other. A critique of existing structures is always contestatory and thus is always already political. The participation in the transformation of those structures would be an idealism if it did not arise out of critique, since it is the latter which provides a knowledge of the structure as it is, as well as of its conditions of possibility, which in Tel Quelian theory can never be other than materialist. If the anticipation and projection spoken of earlier are to avoid idealism, the only method they can adopt is that of a formalism articulated with logic, with materialism and with psychoanalysis, and whose object is the determination of the Symbolic through a critique of the Imaginary.

The first upshot of this is that both écriture and its theory are seen as political practices, at first in a Leninist and then in a Maoist sense. Secondly, these practices are radically interdependent – theory and its object are so closely intertwined that one is in fact impossible without the other. Theory and practice already coexist in the texts of Lautréamont and especially of Mallarmé, and in fact this coexistence would seem to prove that theory is always already praxis. A theory of these strata must be articulated with materialism and psychoanalysis in order to establish itself as a critique of the Symbolic. At the same time, écriture is a concept which arises out of the interarticulation of materialism and psychoanalysis. As Sollers points out in “Thèses générales” (1971: no. 44) a crisis in the capitalist mode of production may be grasped ideologically within modes of signification. The theoretical bases for such an analysis are firstly historical and dialectical materialism on

the one hand and the unconscious on the other. The tools of knowledge for this analysis are firstly an experimental practice (the literary avant-garde) and then the sciences of language (linguistics and semiotics).

At the juncture of this practice and of this science – and with regard to psychoanalysis and marxism-leninism – new operative concepts arise: those of *écriture*, of text. (Sollers, no. 44:99)

Returning to the four terms of the subtitle “Littérature/Philosophie/Science/Politique”: *écriture* being that mode of writing, which works within the literary, and yet at the same time causes it to collapse precisely because object language and metalanguage coexist in this practice, is also the process which can demonstrate the conditions under which literature is a philosophical “laboratory” in a process of transformation within historical materialism (no. 44:97). That is, if it knows its materialist basis, it will work within materialist philosophy (Lenin) dramatising this process of transformation. In this sense, *écriture* is not a philosophical derivation, but is instead the “productive reduplication” of philosophy. At the same time it is a science, constituting a scientific knowledge of language and of the activity of writing. While its participation is limited to the ideological struggle, its function is to cause literature as an imaginary structure and an ideological effect to collapse. Its only means of avoiding the Imaginary is to establish itself as a theoretical science on the basis of materialist philosophy. The ideological struggle can never however be directly political: its political duty, which is more a taking of sides, can be carried out only if the above conditions pertain, only if, that is, it is founded simultaneously on the sciences of language, of history, and of the unconscious. What must be determined is whether or not – and thus far in the Tel Quel project, the reply would be affirmative – a revolutionary theory of the economic will find its counter-part in the revolutionary theory of the text, and whether or not this will be tenable:

It is a question of knowing if the revolutionary theory of the proletariat, marxism-leninism, will or will not be diffused in the superstructures (be it, amongst other, in our specific field of work, the concept of signifying practice which marks the point of no-return in relation to ideologies of creation and of expressivity). (Sollers no. 44:99)

Écriture, which directly implicates its subject, and is embedded in the socio-economic, is thus indissociable from the Marx-Freud articulation, for the Tel Quel group at this time. This is evident in the studies of Barthes, for example, who in *Writing Degree Zero* as well as in *Critical Essays*, sees *écriture* as a synthesis of the personal (style) and the social (through language). Similarly for Kristeva; (in *La Révolution du langage poétique*), the text is the socialization of the negativity of death drive operated by, but which also traverses and transforms, language, and thereby the relation of the subject to the signifying system. This articulation is subversive insofar as it replaces the positions of history and culture on the one hand and personalism or subjectivism on the other with systematisations able to reveal the underside of both. What is at

stake here is the complete subversion of the ideological force of the myths of history/culture and personalism/subjectivism, through a critique which can reveal the disguises and lacunae which enable them to function as ideologies and which would seemingly appear to be separate, but are radically interdependent. When language is included in this articulatory system, an entire system of intelligibility will be put into question. If this interrogation is necessary as a critique, its effectiveness as a political practice hinges around the possibility of transforming that system of intelligibility. Therefore the projects of critique and of transformation are in turn dependent on a knowledge of *écriture* as a synthesis in which production, desire, history and language inter-articulate. Semiotics is the theory which can provide such a knowledge, since apart from being in a position to apprehend all structures as signifying systems, and thus to tackle head on the problematic of the signifier and of *écriture* itself, semiotics is able to account for the inter-articulation of language, materialism and psychoanalysis: for this reason, some of the most important studies undertaken during this period are based on a semiotic, or a derivation/transformation thereof, such as Kristeva's *semanalysis*. Semiotics is in the unique position of offering an analysis which may in fact function as a critique of intelligibility in general in its fundamental dependence on signification while taking into account historical and social determination on the one hand, and the constitution of the subject on the other. That is, it is able to hold within its range the interrelationships and interdeterminations of language, production and desire, insofar as they are signifying instances. Semiotics could ultimately be deployed as the critique of exchange necessary to the theory of *écriture*, on all the inter-articulating levels of language, production and desire¹⁹ as well as those concepts or processes capable of subverting exchange. Exchange as the instance which governs and maintains the capitalist mode of production, as well as the acceptance of the subject as transcendental and unified, and the realist system of signification (or all communicative discourse) operates the occlusion of the constitutive lack of which death is the metaphor: one "fullness" is exchanged for another. If it can be shown that all of these systems interarticulate and are dependent on a constitutive emptiness, the ideological system on which they are based may be undermined.

While semiotics as the Theory of theoretical practice may provide knowledge of the underlying structure, *écriture* as a signifying practice is the setting in motion and functioning of those concepts which semiotics/grammatology, interarticulated with materialism and psychoanalysis, as well as with the rediscovery of the "textes de rupture" reveal as being the conditions of possibility of representation itself, and all that is concomitant with it: process, productivity, desire, *jouissance*, trace, *différance*. What is postulated then is that *écriture* is in a position to transform the system of intelligibility. As Sollers states in an interview (no. 43: 76): "Écriture is not the servant of the real, or of the economic, it is the force of their symbolic transformation." He goes on to say (echoing Kristeva) that *écriture* is one specific level in a multilinear and discontinuous history caught in the general course of history, that is, in the transformation of modes of production. It is not a matter of a

linguistic functioning which accounts for a so-called revolutionary reality, but of a revolutionary practice, acting in correlation with other specific practices. A social and economic revolution cannot take place in a significant manner without a concomitant ideological revolution. The need for an ideological revolution accounts for the massive impact which Maoist thought and the Chinese cultural revolution had on *Tel Quel* manifested especially in the “mouvement de juin 1971”, but which had already had an influence on the members of the group from as early as 1966, most notably on Sollers himself. The ideological revolution would imply a “liberation” from the constraints and impositions of a bourgeois ideological-imaginary structure which maintains its dominance by virtue of a certain number of occlusions, directed specifically at an underlying lack. The text of écriture would then be that text which never loses sight of the constitutive lack, constantly pointing to it but never speaking it, never filling this empty space, for to fill it is necessarily to occlude it, and therefore to precipitate further ideological-imaginary impositions.

This is the danger which constantly threatens écriture conceived of as a political practice. To be effective as a critique of its own system of intelligibility, the text cannot flow over the borders of its negativity: for to do so would entail its falling back into the mode of “full” signification – representation, communication, expressivity, exchange. Neither can it function in terms of any positive political agenda. This indicates a contradiction in the theory which has produced the notion of écriture as a scriptural-theoretical configuration: if the various levels of theory and practice are at once a critique and a transformation of existing ideological-imaginary structures they are simultaneously operating what may be called, in their own terms, a “scientific” revelation of occluded conditions of possibility (the lack in one form or another) and an ideological “filling in” of that lack by the very fact that theirs is a gesture of political commitment. For the *Tel Quelian* notion of theory as scientific practice evidently bears the same limitations as the Althusserian notion from which it is derived: the question of the ideological basis for the label “science” always arises.

The problem of sustaining a critical practice – which always does have a political underpinning – without collapsing it into further ideological manipulations is linked to the insistence of maintaining the materialist base, and thus to the system of interarticulations which is seen to operate in écriture. This is overly reductive, since although the mode of signification on which representation and realism are based may be that of exchange, it may be said to be analogous to the exchange on which capitalism is based, but not necessarily dependent on it. If on the other hand we take materialism to mean simply the contrary of idealism, the resistance to idealism will itself be tainted by the same contradictions as the science/ideology distinction, where in fact the materialist base, as well as the category of production are transcendentalised in their turn, and therefore operate as constraining and regulating concepts, within the very infinity and dispersion which they promise. Desire, hinged onto production and language in the synthesis in which they are placed by écriture, would suffer the same containment. Consequently, it would appear

that the notion of *écriture* as scriptural-theoretical practice, functioning as a “pure praxis, purely produced from a pure theory” may be questioned precisely on the basis of its “colonisation” by dialectical materialism, which is not necessarily specific to the process of *écriture*.²⁰

The Tel Quel project finally fails on the very basis of that which it set out to oppose: a set of constraints in the name of an ideology, which are very quickly reified into perhaps an alternative, but a nonetheless *imposing* system. A restatement of the theory/praxis relation is required, one which would perhaps permit *écriture* to enter into a dialectical relation with the dialectical-materialist notion of revolution itself, in order to in turn transform and revolutionise its own necessarily ideological and representational underpinnings.

Notes

1. This article is drawn from Chapter 1 of my M.A. dissertation entitled *Écriture as political practice: An analysis of the journal Tel Quel with particular reference to the work of Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva*, and submitted to the University of the Witwatersrand in February, 1987.
2. The term “*écriture*” will remain untranslated throughout this article in order to avoid confusion and to retain its specificity.
3. All translations are my own. A brief note explaining references is necessary. In cases where a quotation with, for example, (no. 1:3), the first number refers to the issue of Tel Quel in which the quotation appears. One cannot ascribe these “editorials” or “declarations” to a particular author.
4. By the term “metalingual” is implied the self-reflective nature of *écriture*, within which there is a coexistence of the meta- and object-language. This self-reflectivity is one of the marks of *écriture*. As such the Nouveau Roman is a form of *écriture*. See Stephen Heath (1972).
5. Derek Spitz: unpublished paper.
6. Jakobson (1971).
7. Deleuze (1983).
8. That is, evokes a “being” foreign to the process specific to it.
9. Thus representation depends, for an ontology, on those techniques and functions which constitute it *as representation*.
10. The word “originary” is used here only in a loose sense. The object is not to discover the origins of language, but that which makes it possible.
11. This is congruent with Kristeva’s understanding of the intertext as a necessarily spatial category.
12. That is, of an identity between language and an ontology extraneous to it.
13. Lacan (1977).
14. See p. 71 above.
15. See also Baudrillard (1981).
16. See Balibar & Macherey (1981). Barthes’ *Writing Degree Zero* is a first attempt at a history of this type.
17. By the term “imaginary” is meant the structure through which a relation to the real is established and maintained.

18. "Symbolic" is used here in the sense of a structure which underlies and constitutes the possibility of Real and Imaginary structures. See Deleuze (1975) and Lacan (1977).
19. See Delaporte, J.P. and S. van Zyl (1984).
20. At this point I would like to thank Marianne de Jong, whose comments in a reading of this article were invaluable.

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