Preface: A Model for the Reader

The writing of this book has been accomplished over a four-year period and not in strictly chronological order. The subjects of language and style first presented themselves to me and emerged as independent texts, but I found I could not long remain in the rarified air of pure theory. Parts 2 and 3, then, lay dormant while I rushed to test my original impulses against the recalcitrance of literature itself, and slowly Parts 1 and 4 arose, more or less simultaneously, to round off my essay. It was not until this latter stage of development that I discovered precisely (or at least vividly) what I was writing about, and this discovery convinced me, more terribly than could any abstract conjectures, of the impossibility of formulating a complete statement on the interpretation of literary works. I have awakened at times to the frantic urgency with which I was writing, to a feeling of frustration juxtaposed with exhilaration. Yet this intensity of feeling did not arise because I was on the brink of formulating truly new and original ideas; rather I found myself confronting a crisis of consciousness, a disruptive moment of revolutionary transition both professional and cultural.

The insignificance of this present work in the face of such grand feelings should be obvious to any reader; but if I have not been adequate to it, the following pages must reveal that I have been faithful. This short preface reflects both my unwillingness to stop writing, my fear that I have not finished, and my doubt about what I have done that must be explained at least another time. The occasion for my writing comes from what seems to me an instructive division in the world of literary criticism. This division is not the same as the often-noted fragmentation of modern theory in our post-romantic world, not the same as our comfortable play with multiple perspectives. Our century in
Western society has been dominated by a multitude of romanticisms, but romanticisms nonetheless. We have engaged in endless debates over the adequacy of various interpretive methodologies, battles between New Critical formalism and historicism, between symbolism and realism, between phenomenology and explication de texte, between existentialism and aestheticism. We have supported countless volumes of quibbles between subgroups of larger groups; we have spawned schools within schools, and countermovements to countermovements. Each fragmented system proclaims its newness, its achievement of greater insight, and its inviolable integrity. But all of this conflict has been no more than internecine war; the context has always been romanticism, and even the self-proclaimed classicists of the early twentieth-century Anglo-American literary world were, on some reflection, merely extensions of post-Kantian aesthetics.

I do not mean to say that this extended romantic period renders all of these schools identical; I do claim, however, that they have all been trapped within the fundamental problematics of romantic philosophy. It is perhaps not much more than the tyranny of a specific terminology, the ubiquity of a vocabulary sustained by words like "becoming," "organicism," "symbol," "metaphor," "experience," "humanism," "time," "pastness," "subject," and a host of others too numerous to list. Now in the nineteen sixties and seventies one must be blind indeed not to sense the presence of a truly "other" movement, what I here will call (for lack of a better term) a new classicism, which seems bent on the total destruction of romantic meanings and values. It is no wonder that we, who are so steeped in the agony of our post-Kantian universe that it has become familiar and safe, tend to lash out against this encroachment on our sacred territory. We reject, condemn, engage in ad hominem attacks, even try to ignore the penetrating questions leveled at our cherished beliefs, although we do so to little avail.

It is particularly the specter of a many-headed giant called "structuralism" that disturbs us; its several mouths shout antihumanism, antisubjectivism, antihistoricism with belligerent forcefulness, and we respond somewhat quixotically with cries of our own well-worn phrases. I have been throughout this book consistently reluctant to give up much of my romantic heritage,
but I discovered that some territory had to be yielded in order to reach firmer ground. Once having done this, I found that my world survived this strategic move, and at that point the encounter with the enemy became more familiar than I could have possibly imagined on our first meeting. What suddenly disclosed itself was that the enemy was a projection of myself, that classicism was no opposition at all but a companion to romanticism in a world greatly enriched and more expansive than that I had previously inhabited. My temptation was to give this new world a romantic twist, to describe structuralism (like all other twentieth-century movements) as an aberrant form of romantic aestheticism, to put a neat Hegelian schema on it so that the new classicism seemed to be an antithetical system generated in the belly of romanticism itself. Yet none of these solutions worked; structuralism, in terms of the practical effects of its explanatory models, was not simply a version of romanticism. Any historical schema of contrasting theoretical movements was distorting, for romantic and classical methods of interpretation both belong to a more encompassing, a more universal, problem of “knowing.” Interpretation is both an act of consciousness (a condition of consciousness and thereby subject to time) and a context for consciousness (a prior condition for thought itself, which provides the necessary basis for knowing and thereby transcends time).

Classicism and romanticism are different visions of human experience and knowledge that define the limits of man’s capacities to know. If this sounds like a surrender to structuralism, I hasten to add (still defensively) that this nontemporal, expanded point of view is neither included by nor excludes historicity, subjectivity, and humanism. A theory of man in in the cosmos (structuralism) does not cancel out a theory of man as the cosmos (romanticism). Thus if Kant succeeded in recentering man in his world through a counterrevolution of Copernicus’s earlier decentering, Lévi-Strauss has decentered man once more with a third revolution that brackets the transcendental subject of Kant’s philosophy. The extraordinary fact in these seemingly cataclysmic whirlings and turnings is that man remains firmly on his earth throughout. Although shifts of universal perspective betoken alterations of social structure and culture, no shift is possible without the two terms of difference.
Lévi-Strauss, of course, has not given us a mere reproduction of the pre-Copernican, Ptolemaic cosmology. The world is not merely repeating itself; but man finds from time to time that his world has grown inward or expanded outward too far, and he wants (both in the sense of needs and desires), at these extreme times, to reorder his perspective. All in all, man's finitude remains unchallenged; whether we see him as uniquely individual with the romantics or as a minute and anonymous fragment of the infinite cosmos with the new classicists, man's role in life's game remains pretty much the same: his identity and security are never assured, and his responsibility and moral accountability are ever present but never static.

So too must we view man's actions and creations as always a projection of his finitude, as struggles to join his dreadful sense of self and his sublime sense of grander systems in an identity-guaranteeing work. I will be accused here of having returned to romanticism, but I plead for tolerance since my struggle against romantic terminology remains deadlocked despite my best efforts. To make my point clear I am forced to resort to a device that I see as both classical and romantic: the telling of a story. As a classical device it is intended to function as a model for all I want to say in the pages that follow, as a text about a text that does not explain the latter text but at least recognizes it as text. As a romantic device it takes the form of a parable, or, perhaps better, a fragment of narrative that is partly true, partly imagined, and recounts a moment of insight.

In the south-central highlands of Mexico, in the state of Oaxaca, above the low coastal shelf on either side that separates this region of mixed heritages and topographical contrasts from the Gulf of Mexico on the north and the Pacific Ocean on the south, beyond the dry deserts and humid rain forests that must be torn through to open the valley, is the tiny village of San Bartolo de Coyotepec. Touched by the paved highway that man's insistent progress has poured in a thin, sterile ribbon over the fertile, living earth, the village holds its silent space, forgotten by travelers who rarely pause as they pass by. It rests anonymously on the floor of the valley, in full view of the dark green mountains that surround it—if its space were not so insignificant from a distance, and if its earth-formed brick buildings were not so
continuous in color with the ground out of which they arise. There is dignity in the stillness of the village, in the tinkling sounds of bells on red-brown goats moving slowly along the dusty streets, of a radio blaring somewhere, unlocatable but distinct, of an occasional human voice; there is a dignity unmindful of the fact that a neighboring village, less than a kilometer away, has stolen its name, Coyotepec, and of the more crushing nonexistence conferred on it by Mexican roadmaps. There is a highway marker, a wide gravel shoulder where some have turned because they missed their destination, and there is a sign that points laconically to the hacienda of Doña Rosa.

Oaxaca is famous for a most unusual black clay pottery made in the region. My wife and I had come there, at least in part, to buy some typical examples. We found it in the shops that came with the opening of the valley by the roads, in stalls at the Saturday Indian market, in every shape from simple mescal bottles to tiny toy whistles formed as birds or other animals for tourists. Barbara and I had traveled two thousand miles to find these treasures, but we were bewildered by their plentifullness. Can fame be valued by the commonplace? At the market pots lay in neat rows on the dusty streets like curious pebbles arranged by a playful child. In shops they were stacked row upon row in precarious mounds that seemed in constant danger of toppling over, shattering, and mingling once more with the indistinguishable earth from which they came. Indeed they did drop, from time to time, slipping from the seemingly careless fingers of the Indian women who sold them; they cracked, chipped, and caught dust from the heavy stale air that hung over the market. I turned hundreds of them over in my strange hands, examining them for indications of shoe polish that would mark them as inauthentic, as having been mass-produced instead of slowly molded, stroked swiftly with a rough stone in a process that turned the finished product to a glossy rather than a dull black, and lingeringly fired in an oxygen-poor kiln. We found some that interested us, bargained for pennies of value, and stuffed our purchases gingerly into our shopping baskets.

I wondered always if we had detected the polish; was the tell-tale soot of our possessions really soot or was it a lingering deposit of bootwax? Yet I was not sure why it mattered. Who, after all, would know? Was not the result of each process equally
glossy, equally unusual in its bright blackness? Among the plenitude of such pots, so casually regarded by the artisans who made them, why did we show this ostentatious concern for authenticity?

Monte Alban is located on a small outcropping of mountains just south of Oaxaca City, towering above the valley and holding view for miles in all directions. The top of the highest peak is leveled, and there, in extraordinary symmetry, are the magnificent ruins of civilizations that hide under curtains of vegetation and erosion. Oaxaca is a vast storehouse of such ruins, a preserving area where the ground one stands on breathes with the monumental traces of worlds removed from our view but that now and again thrust upward into the air. The main plaza on Monte Alban is composed of expansive, open terraces, marked at regular intervals by swiftly rising pyramids, layers upon layers, hand-hewn and arranged so that they give clear evidence of the two cultures once centered there and now scattered throughout the region. The ruins are partly excavated, but on this day they were utterly deserted to the winds that rush with soft, lonely sighs across the plaza. Monte Alban is marked with hundreds of burial tombs, now numbered in random sequence, but most still unexplored and veiled with rumors of riches a thousand times greater than the stunning gold and silver necklaces dotted with semiprecious stones already unearthed. Following a crude tour-guide map, we struggled down the steep mountainside, clutching roots and loose stones, in search of the famous burial chamber where archaeologists had worked for eight days without sleep to sift the dust for more and more of the delicate filigree that now glares from glass cases in the tiny Oaxaca museum. We did not find it, but every swelling of the earth seemed a mark inscribed outside of time, the absent footprints made by men from mysterious civilizations, rich cultures filled with immensities of lived experience, of religious rituals and bewildering, alluring myths. Excited far more from half-seen riches than from harsh, opened storehouses where jewels once lay, we returned to the plaza and stood holding hands for long moments listening to voices speaking in the ageless freedom of the wind.

The technique of making black pottery had been lost, had
faded back into the dust of crumbling ruins to be unearthed by curious scholars in shards that seemed insignificant when placed beside the exquisite jewelry. Thus entering the realm of time and history, it awaited the moment when, by “accident” the legend goes, it was rediscovered by Doña Rosa. She unknowingly scraped a pot before firing; it came out glossy instead of powdery black. The day after our visit to Monte Alban, Barbara and I decided to drive to Doña Rosa’s hacienda in San Bartolo de Coyotepec. She was famous now; her hacienda was the largest and the finest in the village; she displayed proudly the pictures of her visit from the president, and she gave regular demonstrations of her technique to tour groups. She also signed her work—or rather her son signed for her. She could not write.

I was troubled still by the dilemma of authenticity, but I was sure that on this day we would find the real thing. As we drove, the mountains around us hid behind a haze spawned from the marriage of warm summer sun and the humid air of the rainy season. Yet I could see the outlines of Monte Alban, and the vividness of the open terraces floated across my mind. Yesterday we had stood on the central pyramid, alone as rainclouds gathered over the mountains, looking down as the mountain looked down on tiny farms, narrow roads, on the city of Oaxaca with its cathedral of pale green stone—but unaware of San Bartolo de Coyotepec. Now, as we turned off the paved highway onto the rutted dirt street that led to Doña Rosa’s hacienda, I was aware of the imposing presence of Monte Alban as never before, towering over the anonymous village.

It was Sunday; no one was at Doña Rosa’s for a demonstration. We hesitated outside the plain brown walls that enclosed her gardens, walls precisely like those of other smaller houses where other village potters lived, continuous with their walls and with the dusty road. There was something of reverence in our motion, and in my voice as the tiny Indian woman with her brownish, furrowed skin came toward us. I asked if the shop was open, but it was no shop, only a corner of her home dedicated to the ageless pottery that had made her famous. She nodded to us and sat at a wide, crude table under the portico facing the garden, lush, green, filled with flowers blooming; she sat staring not at us, perhaps not at anything, while we browsed self-consciously through several simple shelves of glossy black pots. We held hands and
whispered, not because we were afraid she would hear, for she spoke no English, but because it was Sunday, and because this tiny woman with miniature hands of dark skin made richer by the earth she molded for eighty years, whose hands could not sign her name but whose name was famous because of her hands, guided by what deathless spirit no one knows, discovered a technique as old as Monte Alban itself, and older yet, because this was Doña Rosa, and this was Sunday, and this ground was sacred to strange gods that filled us with awe and peace.

I turned the pots in my hands as I had done a hundred times before in the Oaxaca market, with the same awkward carefulness of one who is afraid to break the silence with some clumsy accident, yet in the presence of their creator whose unconcern ridiculed my care. We selected a few, but almost in silence and completely free of that ostentatious show of testing their authenticity we had affected in the market shops. It was not the guarantee of the name crudely scratched in the clay, not the prideful claim of ownership that Doña Rosa would not and could not express, not the simple, graceful, yet wholly functional and only faintly decorated shapes of the pottery, but the slender, clay-colored hands of the silent woman, those hands that touched the same earth of other civilizations with the same magic as the other craftsmen who also made fragile, useful, glossy black shapes, those hands that accidentally worked the clay in the same way as the other craftsmen, yet whose discovery made her famous, named her Doña Rosa for a world of people she will never see.

My exaggerated care for our purchases was less important than before as we thanked Doña Rosa and turned to go, although our treasures were far greater than any others we were to find. The feeling that swirled around us with the wind on the mountainside at Monte Alban descended to the valley and raised the dust from the barren ground, and touched us lightly and settled on our clothes and our Doña Rosa pots. We talked excitedly, full of that energy released when one emerges from a cathedral, with a happiness of discovery like that of the archaeologists who did not sleep for eight days while they sifted the treasures of an ancient tomb. We, too, would take our finds from their native soil to rest awkwardly on our display shelves two thousand miles away. No one would know, of course, if they were authentic or shoe polish
imitations, yet the dust of Doña Rosa's porch would appear on our treasures no matter how often we wiped them—as if the clay, fired hard and glossy black, emitted some of its own substance to turn the little, encased world around them once more into the dry brown dirt of Oaxaca. As we bumped slowly back onto the paved highway and forced the car out of the dusty ruts that gathering rainclouds would turn into mud, and summer sun behind the rain would bake hard, and soft sobbing winds would brush once more into dust, a glimmer of sunlight pierced my eyes, a flash of green trees and bare stones that rose out of the valley floor toward the obscuring clouds. Looking down on San Bartolo de Coyotepec, and on the strangers bearing their treasures, was Monte Alban.

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Friday's Footprint