Editorial

ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT contributions of structuralism and post-structuralism has been a rethinking of critical presuppositions about language. If language had been for earlier theories a malleable tool to express human desires, ideas, capacities, it became for structuralist and post-structuralist thinkers an alien system weighing upon human consciousness. Jacques Derrida reminds us that the very term "language" itself is based on a binary opposition — speech/writing — which valorizes certain uses of language by marginalizing the excluded other. The psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan argues that the child perceives language as a hostile and arbitrary system. And, the new feminist theories of Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous turn away from the authoritarian hierarchies of a masculine use of language in order to construct an emancipatory, genuinely feminine linguistic practice. No longer seen as the servant of human desires, language imposes its own signifying practices, deflecting meaning and altering human expression. The comfortable "dwelling-house of language" now becomes Nietzsche's "prison-house of language."

What all of this implies is a return to an awareness of language as power. This is, in effect, a retrieval of themes and motifs from the classical theorists. For whether language was feared because of its potential intrusion into the rational sphere (as in Plato) or celebrated because of its cathartic energy (as in Aristotle), classical theory oriented its analysis towards the affective qualities of language, towards language's ability to transform, to alter, to change human consciousness and human society.

Nowhere is the issue of language as power more significant today than in multi-language cultures. There the relationships of

the individual to language are complicated by a layering of language upon language; and such sedimentation of languages exists uneasily within the inherited hierarchies of domination, subordination, and colonialism. The problem of finding a voice for the writer (or the critic, for that matter) is a problem of discovering a site from which to speak within the competing alternatives of linguistic expression. And there can be no doubt that whatever voice a writer speaks in inevitably situates his or her work within competing discourses of power. If a writer chooses to speak the colonial language his work takes on the *authority* of the colonial voice, but remains alien to the writer and carries the weight of a foreign tradition. If, on the other hand, the writer chooses the languages of subordination, the languages of the periphery — the indigenous voices, the "fallen" linguistic forms of dialect and pidgin — his work may subvert the dominant language but perhaps only at the cost of positioning his voice outside the voice of power. Nor are these choices limited to the colonial and neo-colonial situations of the third world: how is the excluded other — the woman, the immigrant, the working class — to find a voice in which to speak? How do the fragments and traces of such conflicts inscribe themselves in the literary text?

How, indeed, is the writer to negotiate language, a structuring and distorting system, but a system within which he or she must speak or not speak at all? This special number on "Issues of Language" is not intended to provide a final answer to such questions; still less to define language once and for all. Rather its purpose is to explore some of the ways in which writers have approached these problems, to re-examine the questions which might be posed, and, most of all, to raise new questions, new possibilities, new areas of inquiry.

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