What Is Structural Exegesis?

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Editor's Foreword

The first three volumes in this series dealt respectively with form criticism, redaction criticism, and literary criticism. And now we come to structural exegesis (or interpretation or criticism), which has been intensively used in France for some years and is being employed increasingly in other countries, including the United States. It might be helpful at the outset to relate structural exegesis to the other three disciplines in a very sketchy way.

Form criticism has been to some extent a literary discipline because it has concerned itself with the formal patterns in the pericopes of the Gospels (or other New Testament literature). But I would judge that it has been more strongly historical than literary because of its interest in the *development* of a given unit or form, and in the influence of the setting in life on both the origin and the development of both the form and content of the units of the Gospel tradition. Redaction criticism has likewise been both literary and historical, but again I would deem the historical concern to be the dominant one, although some recent redaction-critical studies have manifested a more genuinely literary-critical approach. Redaction criticism is literary in its intention to observe and analyze how the final author of a Gospel (or other document) shaped and modified his source materials (tradition) and put them together. How does the author give expression to his theological interpretation of Jesus through his stylistic and compositional techniques? But redaction criticism is also fundamentally historical in nature because it wants to separate tradition from redaction (the author's contribution)—rather than looking at the text as a unified whole—and to assess the connections and tensions between the two as well as to investigate the historical relationship between the author and his community and the history-of-thought relationships among the Gospels. I believe that most form and redaction critics have operated, implicitly or explicitly, with the assumption that the language of their texts was exercising primarily the referential function. The texts refer beyond themselves to events, situations, conflicts, ideas—and meaning is not really available apart from this reference.

The volume on literary criticism gave some attention to the kind of inquiry that biblical scholars have traditionally called literary criticism—such as the search for sources behind the Gospels. This is, however, really a kind of historical criticism because it is concerned with the temporal process through which the Gospels came into existence. Nevertheless, this volume was devoted principally to what we might call aesthetic literary criticism (although I do not want to impose that term or exactly this understanding of literary criticism on Professor Beardslee).

Aesthetic literary criticism sees its texts as exercising primarily the poetic linguistic function, or at least it is able to throw this function into relief. Language exercising the poetic function attracts attention intransitively to itself and does not refer it to some object beyond the text. Poetic language (using the term *poetic* broadly to include narrative and various kinds of imagistic language) is able to grasp the attention in this way because the various linguistic elements are locked into each other centripetally so that attention does not escape easily to the outside. This internal organization makes the text an organic unity and gives it a semi-autonomy. The text is grasped as a whole or totality, as people read it, rather than as something to be analyzed (into tradition and redaction), and meaning is seen to be a function not of the relationship between text and historical setting, but primarily of the union of form and content in the text itself. Form is not a separable container for the content but is itself the shaping or patterning of the content. All of this is to say that aesthetic literary criticism is concerned with the surface structure of the text, the manifest union of form and content.

Structural criticism I take to be a mode of literary criticism, but its object is not primarily the surface structure of the text. It focuses rather on the relationship between the surface structure and the "deep" structures which lie implicitly or unconsciously beneath, around, or alongside of the text. Structural criticism wants to articulate the larger implicit structure which in some way generates the text under consideration. How and to what extent does the given text manifest the reservoir of formal possibilities that belong to literature as such? There is a sense in which structural criticism is referential, but it does not derive the meaning of a text from its reference to something nonliterary, that is, something historical, sociological, or ideational. It discloses rather how the text "refers" to the reservoir of formal literary possibilities. I should like to add that all "structuralists" cannot be pressed into the same mold, and surely not all of them would agree with my brief formulation here.

It should not be thought, in my judgment, that historical and literary disciplines mutually exclude each other. But one thing that structuralism has taught us is that the two must be kept distinct, separate, and unconfounded. This is because the meaning which an item has in its own meaning system (its synchronic connections) is not the same as the meaning which it has as part of a historical process (its diachronic connections). For example, the prologue of the Gospel of John, which foregrounds the divine pre-existence of Jesus, receives a part of its meaning from its *relationship* to the story of the foot washing which belongs to the same larger narrative. But in the history of christological thought, which we may see developing from one Gospel to another, the pre-existence of Jesus is a *substitute* for the virgin birth and/or baptism of Jesus. The picture is further complicated by the fact that items which do or might belong to the same diachronic process may be *treated* synchronically, as related to each other in the same meaning system. But that carries us beyond the purposes of this brief foreword.

DAN O. VIA, JR.

Preface

Structuralism is necessarily an interdisciplinary endeavor. Structural methods can only be developed by a team of specialists in several fields. The interdisciplinary project "Semiology and Exegesis" at Vanderbilt University, a project supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, provided this necessary interdisciplinary context. The preparation of this book has benefited from the collective methodological research of two interdisciplinary seminars and a colloquium, at Vanderbilt University, and of a three week international colloquium on Biblical Semiotics (Annecy, France, July 1974).

The following colleagues at Vanderbilt University have participated in the seminars: W. von Raffler Engel (professor of Linguistics), J. Kaplan and D. Thomas (both professors of Anthropology), L. Crist and R. Poggenburg (both professors of French Literature), J. Engel (professor of German Literature), J. Post (professor of Philosophy), P. Krolack (professor of Systems and Information Sciences), C. McCorkel (professor of Fine Arts), J. Crenshaw (professor of Old Testament), C. Hambrick (professor of Religious Studies), and L. H. Silberman (Hillel professor of Jewish Studies). The colloquium at Vanderbilt University featured two speakers: S. Wittig (professor of English Literature, University of Texas at Austin), and D. Via, Jr. (professor of Religious Studies, University of Virginia). The international colloquium on Biblical Semiotics included twenty-eight scholars, the majority of whom belonged to the Association for the Structural Study of the Bible (a group of French scholars also known as ASTRUC), a group from Vanderbilt University, and scholars from various European Universities. J. Delorme and J. Calloud (both professors of Biblical Exegesis, Catholic University, Lyon, France) were the conveners; J. Geninasca (professor of French Literature, University of Zurich, Switzerland) was a guest speaker; and M. Rengstorf (assistant of Professor A. J. Greimas, University of Paris) was a consultant.

Each page of this work reflects this collective research. It is with

gratitude that I acknowledge that this book owes much to the insights of each of them. Special thanks are due to Dan Via who offered a detailed criticism of a first draft of this book which led to many improvements, and to J. Delorme, J. Calloud, and M. Rengstorf who taught me so much. I have nevertheless to assume the responsibility for the content of this book.

Last, but not least, five persons who collaborated closely with me in my research: my wife Aline, and four Ph.D. candidates, John Jones, Ed McMahon, Judd Parker, and Gary Phillips. The "form of the expression" of this book owes much to them: my wife typed it and re-typed it; the others helped me with the English style and language. The "form of its content" also owes much to the constant encouragement and critical insights that each of the five gave me.

I

The Place of Structural Methods in the Exegetical Task

We designate as "structural exegesis" that which employs those exegetical methods which are deliberately derived from the methodologies of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, and of the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss.

In biblical exegesis we are accustomed to making use of a series of methods: for instance, text criticism, literary criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism. When confronted with various types of structural analysis our spontaneous tendency is to classify these new methods alongside the others. Thus we are attempting to evaluate the validity and usefulness of structural methods in terms of their ability to answer questions raised by the traditional methods—and we become perplexed. At the outcome of a very involved structural analysis we find that very few (if any!) such questions have been answered. Consequently we are tempted to dismiss structural methods as useless. Yet, if we resist this temptation and examine more closely the structuralist methods we discover that our initial assumption was misguided. Structural methods do not fit into the series of traditional exegetical methods. Text criticism, literary criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism belong together because they all assume a historical paradigm with a specific preunderstanding of the biblical text. That is, they presuppose that biblical texts are to be seen primarily as sources for reconstructing some kind of historical process. By contrast the structural methods assume a linguistic paradigm, that is, that expression in language is to be taken as a fundamental category and not as an access to something else, e.g., history. Thus the very introduction of structural methods in exegesis implies a shift in the exegete's preunderstanding of the biblical text. This shift needs to be elucidated and evaluated in order to determine if it is legitimate and potentially fruitful for the exegete to involve himself in these methods which are still in

process of formulation. Such an evaluation will entail defining the nature of the exegetical task and setting forth some criteria for evaluating the methods. On this ground we intend to show that in the present cultural situation neither traditional nor structural exegesis alone can successfully carry out the exegetical task to its end. By contrast it will appear that the combination of traditional and structural methods is neither a luxury nor a fad but a "must" if one wants to carry out the exegetical task in the contemporary culture. We shall also suggest that the exegetical methods (primarily reformulations of traditional methods) which resulted from the research of the New Hermeneutic themselves witness to this methodological shift.

IN A NEW CULTURE, A NEW EXEGESIS

Contemporary Culture

The goal of the present chapter is to *interpret* the significance of the present diversification in exegetical methods. As in any interpretation, the present one will be involved in a hermeneutical circle; my evaluation is necessarily based upon preunderstandings which I need to elucidate at the outset by stating them briefly.

Our culture is man-centered rather than cosmos-centered. Our preunderstandings are therefore man-centered: they depend upon our "view of man" (rather than upon our "world view").[1] Modern convictions about man can be characterized as dialectical. Man is perceived at once as a creator of "significations" (that is, of meaningful entities, cultural values, symbols, etc.) and as a conditioned being upon which significations are imposed.[2] We are not concerned here to justify philosophically such a dialectical view of man. We simply suggest that it is prevalent in our culture. The recent debate over the work of B. F. Skinner can serve as an illustration. Many of Skinner's behaviorist theories are used for educational and advertising purposes. We assume with Skinner that man is conditioned; however, this assumption is taken seriously only insofar as it does not threaten to destroy our dialectical view of man. There is no objection to saying "significations are imposed upon man" as long as one can also imply "and man is a creator of significations." But as

1. Our view of man (as a whole or in one of its specific aspects) is a conviction: although it can be conscious—it can be an understanding or a philosophy—most of the time it is simply self-evident.

2. Although one cannot date cultural changes precisely, it is significant to note that this view of man imposed itself relatively recently upon our society. In this paragraph we use the term "signification" without its technical connotation discussed in Chapter II.

soon as Skinner argues (as in *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*)[3] that man is totally conditioned, objections are raised from all sides.

Our other presuppositions are simply corollaries of this dialectical view of man. For instance, let us consider the nature of language. Without denying that man is an author (he uses language to express what he means), we need also to affirm with Heidegger and his disciples the ontological nature of language (meaning is not poured into language by the author but belongs intrinsically to it).

When applied more directly to the object of our investigation, the dialectical view of man demands that we consider exegetical methods as a specific type of language. The exegete (as subject) chooses and creates his methods, although concurrently these methods impose themselves on the exegete: each specific set of methods symbolizes a specific preunderstanding of the text. Changes in methods entail changes in preunderstanding (or, at least, changes in that part of the preunderstanding which is involved in exegetical methods). This is why we stated above that introducing new exegetical methods implies a shift in preunderstanding of the biblical text, and that it is illegitimate to test the validity and usefulness of a specific exegesis in terms of its ability to answer the questions raised by another exegetical method. What is still needed are criteria which will allow us to evaluate the legitimacy of various exegeses. In order to establish them we shall discuss first the nature of the exegetical task (and specifically its relationship to the hermeneutical task), and second, the relationship between exegetical methods and the exegete's culture.

Exegesis and Hermeneutic

The process of interpreting a text—a single phenomenon—can be viewed as including two approaches: exegesis and hermeneutic. Exegesis aims at understanding the text in itself, while hermeneutic attempts to elucidate what the text means for the modern interpreter and the people of his culture. Exegesis and hermeneutic must be distinguished from each other despite the fact that the very function of exegesis is to lead to hermeneutic. This is not to say that our distinction between two modes of interpretation should be identified with that proposed by nineteenth-century scholarship. The difference lies in the presuppositions which lead to such a distinction.

A characteristic formulation of nineteenth–century position can be found in W. Dilthey's work.[4] Hermeneutic and exegesis were seen

3. B. F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971).

4. Cf. Wilhelm Dilthey's 1900 essay entitled "Origin and Development of Hermeneutics," German original in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. V.

in a subject-object schema. Dilthey proposed to distinguish between a) an interpretation as *explanation* of the text; and b) an interpretation as *appropriation* of the text. His concern was to distinguish as clearly as possible the former (which he associated with the scientific explanation of natural phenomena) from the latter (which he called a "science of the mind": *Geisteswissenschaft*), in order to establish the scientific character of the appropriation of the text despite the fact that it is not readily comparable to the natural sciences. Consequently these two types of interpretation were primarily seen in contrast and opposition to each other.

The sharpness of Dilthey's distinction was rapidly eroded when the discussion focused on the problem of the hermeneutical circle. Thus for Bultmann exegesis and hermeneutic are closely related, although the distinction between them is still necessary. As the New Hermeneutic has shown, Bultmann was ultimately able to maintain such a distinction because of his understanding of language as an objectification of the existential self-understanding; language conceals the latter. The obstacle posed by this objectification has to be overcome by exegesis in order to uncover the existential self-understanding hidden in the text. In such a case, exegesis (which is no longer understood in terms of the subject-object schema) leads directly to hermeneutic. As a result of exegesis the existential self-understanding of the text confronts the interpreter's existential self-understanding.

With the New Hermeneutic one needs to challenge Bultmann's understanding of language and consequently his understanding of the relationship of exegesis to hermeneutic. Following Heidegger and Gadamer the New Hermeneutic acknowledged the *ontological nature* of language. In theological terms one can then speak of the incarnation of the Word of God in language. The Word is not to be found beyond the human language but in it—in the "language event" as Fuchs puts it. In other words, the meaning of the language that the hermeneut wants to appropriate belongs to the language itself and not to a pristine realm beyond language. In such a perspective, exegesis—understood as explanation and clarification which allow the overcoming of the objectification of language—is not the necessary prelude to hermeneutic. The transmission of the meaning of the text (hermeneutic) does not depend upon its objective analysis (traditional understanding of exegesis). On this we agree with the New Hermeneutic school. Nevertheless the hermeneutic of a text is not directly possible: it needs to be preceded by an exegesis, although the exegetical task is no longer that envisioned by Dilthey and Bultmann.