

Retracing the Meeting of Structural Linguistics and French Symbolist Poetry: The Debate of *The Cats* by Charles Baudelaire

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In 1962, the Russian linguist Romain Jakobson and the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss co-conducted a study on the poem *The Cats* (*Les Chats*) by Charles Baudelaire. Based on linguistic and ethnological references, their study focuses on a structural analysis of the famous Baudelairean sonnet at several levels such as phonological, phonetic, syntactic, prosodic, and semantic. Many critical papers were published as soon as this work appeared. Faced with the crowd of dispute and opposition, Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss wrote a series of journalistic or monographic articles to explain and defend themselves. Our study aims to be a systematic summary of the dispute, proposing to analyze the criticisms of Riffatere, Mounin, and Frandon, and giving a reading of Jakobson's reply. In conclusion, we will try to relate this debate to the French New Criticism (la Nouvelle Critique) to understand its historical and theoretical importance.

Keywords: poetry, structuralism, linguistics, Baudelaire, French New Criticism

I. The Debate of The Cats: Its Context

In 1941, the Russian linguist Romain Jakobson met the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss at the Ecole Libre des Hautes Etudes in New York. It is a historic encounter in the development of structuralism, bringing decisive benefits to both. Jakobson's structural linguistics introduced Lévi-Strauss to theoretical elements which he lacked to carry out his work as an anthropologist on the kinship system, while his structural analysis of the greek myths gave profound inspiration to structural research of the linguist.

In 1962, they co-signed a study on the poem *The Cats* (*Les Chats*) by Charles Baudelaire in the Journal of *L'Homme*¹. Based on linguistic and ethnological references, this research focuses on a "structural analysis" (Jakobson & Lévi-Strauss, 1962, p. 5) of this famous Baudelairean sonnet² at several levels such as phonological, phonetic, syntactic, prosodic, and semantic.

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¹ Founded in 1961 by Lévi-Strauss, Emile Benveniste, and Pierre Gourou in the sixth section of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, *L'Homme* is a scientific journal that opens up to the multiple currents of ethnology and anthropology, and which seeks to promote an interdisciplinary approach.

² The poem *Les Chats* was published for the first time in the review *Le Corsaire-Satan* in November 1847, then inserted in *Le Chat Trot*, a short story by Jules François Félix Husson, dit Chamfleury, friend and fervent admirer of Baudelaire, and in 1853 reappeared in *The Adventures of Mademoiselle Mariette*, a novel by the same Champfleury. Then, this irregular sonnet is put in 1857 in the first edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal* and 1861 in the second edition of the collection, which makes this piece one of the best known and most read of Baudelaire's life.

Many critical works were published as soon as this structuralist and literary research appeared: some researchers such as Pierre Deilbouille (1968), Lucien Goldman (1969) and Norbert Peters, and Léon Cellier (1971), side with Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss and sometimes advocated extending their structuralist research. On the other hand, some researchers including the linguists Georges Mounin (1968) and Michael Riffaterre (1970), and Claude Pichois, the exegete of Charles Baudelaire, opposed more or less violently the two structuralist researchers. Even ten years after the publication of this research, Gérard Antoine, in an article published in *Le Français moderne*, still accused Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss of having “risked their scientific reputation” in this undertaking and therefore suffered “the greatest fiasco on the testing grounds of criticism” (Antoine, 1973, p. 387).

Faced with this crowd of disputes and opposition, the two authors of this research wrote a series of journalistic or monographic articles to explain and defend themselves. Lévi-Strauss’ reply in 1970 is equivocal (Frandon, 1972, p. 103). While insisting on the “currentness” of this “attempt” and of “its conclusions”, it nevertheless opens up to “a new structuralism” which “proposes more liberal methods, less automatic approaches”. Unlike Lévi-Strauss’ eclecticism, Jakobson’s defense (Jakobson, 1980, pp. 21-35), in the form of a post-script published in 1980, is more straightforward and more acerbic, where he seeks to give the text dated 1962 as much historical and theoretical precision as possible to defend against the attacks of Mounin and Riffaterre. All of these defenses and attacks ultimately take the form of an intellectual quarrel, which soon came to be called the “Debate of *The Cats*”.

Given the complexity of the problems involved and the wealth of sources, our study aims to be a systematic summary of the dispute, proposing to analyze the criticisms of the three “adversaries” who are Riffaterre, Mounin, and Frandon, before giving a reading of Jakobson’s answer. In conclusion, we will try to relate this debate to the French New Criticism (*la Nouvelle Critique*) to understand its historical and theoretical importance.

II. Three Opponents: Riffaterre, Mounin, Frandon

In his article *Two approaches to Baudelaire’s Les Chats* published in 1966, Michael Riffaterre analyzed the entire article by Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss. We find this essay very provocative, especially insofar as this famous specialist on structural stylistics offers a structural analysis different from that of Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss “who made Baudelaire’s sonnet a super poem inaccessible to the normal reader”. According to Irrelevance of grammar, a section in this essay, “Jakobson chose grammatical units to do this exegesis and many others because the grammar will provide the analyst with structural units already made”. However, “any grammatical analysis of a poem will only give the grammar of this poem”. With Riffaterre, such a study of the grammatical level of the poem makes no sense. On the contrary, it would be necessary to work on “a structure which will explain how the contact between the poem and the reader is established” (Riffaterre, 1966, p. 201).

In a thesis delivered at a Baudelaire symposium in 1967 (Mounin, 1968, pp. 155-160), Georges Mounin also gave a furious criticism of the grammatical analysis of Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss. His criticism is “in the fashion of polemic-polemics loyally conducted” (Patty, 1970, p. 328). Like Riffaterre’s text, Mounin provides some meaningful details on the method used by Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss and marks its limits. He judges this work as “disappointing”. According to him, it proves nothing against structural linguistics, because it is not strictly speaking linguistically. “It only appears as such because it operates on grammatical units and seeks to group them

into structures or symmetries” (Mounin, 1968, p.160). In conclusion, Mounin wonders if these “structures” are “responsible and solely responsible for the beauty of the text” and if they give the sonnet “the character of an absolute object” (Jakobson & Lévi-Strauss, 1962, p. 17).

The controversy against Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss never aims at this grammatical dimension alone. For Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss as for other researchers of the sonnet, the explanation of the 7th and 8th lines constitutes the challenge of their studies. While acknowledging the incomparable importance of the two verses, Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss try to analyze “the animate and the inanimate” (Jakobson & Lévi-Strauss, 1962, p. 15), the sounds, and the syntactic construction. Referred to the mythology of “Erebus”, the two signatories affirm that by a couplet of verses n°7 and n°8, the sonnet achieves an evolution “from the exterior towards the interior”, “of the empirical world and the mythological world” and “of the real and towards the surreal” (Jakobson & Lévi-Strauss, 1962, p. 19). On the contrary, in the eyes of Mr. Riffaterre and Gilbert Durand, the mythological value of the piece is of little importance. The latter focus on a “demystification” of the two verses. In the text mentioned, Mr. Riffaterre neglects the cultural contents of “Erebus” and therefore “discharges these verses of their evocative power” and “defuses their poetic charge” (Riffaterre, 1966, pp. 224-225). Similarly, G. Durand judges these verses “completely outside the poetic field of this poem and has the least welcome of the poem”. He sees in it “a syntactic incorrectness”, even the last line of the second quatrain seems “marked with a certain neo-classical preciousness which is not very Baudelairian” (Durand, 1969, pp. 17-18).

Instead of breaking with Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss, as Riffaterre and Mounin did, Ida-Marie Frandon took a relatively balanced and objective position in a commentary published ten years after the article in question. Given “the impact of this article, which has been, in France and abroad, too great”, “the structural method” which, according to him, “renews the study of literary texts, makes it safer, almost mechanical, independent of the motivations of the writer and the individual critics”, I.-M. Frandon first considers this “explanation of Baudelaire’s sonnet” as “a lesson, a model lesson which the two learned masters of structuralism have given to literary critics” and which “seems to demand study and attention” (Frandon, 1972, p. 101).

Frandon attributes this “attention”, especially to lines 7 and 8. According to her, “these two verses constitute the decisive moment of the sonnet”, “since through them, through them, the metamorphosis of the familiar cats, somewhat disturbing, of our homes, into cats, mysterious intermediaries between the visible ... and the invisible, and the realm of the alchemist and the mystic”. It is therefore essential “to extract the meaning of these two verses, as they complete the descriptive part and prepare the final movement, the lifting of the veil. From Frandon’s point of view, “R. Jakobson and Cl. Lévi-Strauss perceived it well” “because they return to these verses several times, and with explanations of different types” (Frandon, 1972, p. 106); on the contrary, the “demystification” of G. Durand and Riffaterre “does not, therefore, seem convincing”, given that it is Baudelaire himself who plays on mythology, and that “these subtle games of Baudelaire with the imaginary and mythology” are “meaning-making games” (Frandon, 1972, p. 109).

But the scope of the article by I.-M. Frandon does not stop there. According to Frandon, Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss have noted the “ambiguity” of verses 7 and 8, but they do not seek to “propose an explanation, which will be, in this precise case, syntactical”. And yet, it is “the insufficiency of these means of explanation and their lack of adequacy” that “have led and will lead to contradictions”. He pointed out that “the conditional mood and the past tense express a possibility that we reject the very moment we formulate it”; and the construction of

“to take for”, which assembles various values and creates a syntactic difficulty for the reading of Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss, must have only one value, it is “the idea of possession”, if we refer “to the word serfdom which accentuates, “in the post-posed premise”, the antithesis with the rhyming word “pride” and the unreality of domesticating cats (Frandon, 1972, p. 109).

As we have noted, from the perspective of Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss, the set of verses n°7 and 8 form a particular “couplet” which prepares a “modulation...in the phonic, semantic and grammatical texture of the sonnet” (Jakobson & Lévi-Strauss, 1962, p. 13). However, with Frandon, it is an “arbitrary dissection”, “poorly done”, “in a whole where everything holds together, where each element reacts on the other”. By asking “will we say couplet following R. Jakobson and C. Lévi-Strauss?”, Frandon evokes the fact that “the couplet is a metric unit foreign to the sonnet”, and accuses them of “misunderstanding the nature of the sonnet, a structure which enjoys a kind of status, which constitutes a whole, and which is strongly ... structured” (Frandon, 1972, p. 112).

In his conclusion, Frandon returns to his starting point, that is to say, “the recipes that structuralism recommends”. A sonnet by Baudelaire, “put through a mill” and “passed through such a mechanism”, will no doubt lose its “uniqueness”. Such structuralism, like all others, “reducing the text to categorical arrangements which are valid for any text and do not account for what ensures a work of its originality”, “cannot appear reassuring as a ... panacea”, unless “researchers go further, and beyond” (Frandon, 1972, pp. 115-116).

III. Jakobson’s Defense

The target of this huge wave of criticism, Jakobson cannot keep silent. He “systematically investigates” (Jakobson, 1980, p. 34) the discussion regarding his article and finally publishes in 1980 a Postscript to the discussion on the grammar of poetry. As the title has already shown, this text mainly reacts to the controversies around the grammatical aspect of the poem, in other words, the criticisms of Riffaterre and Mounin. In the eyes of Jakobson, neither Riffaterre, who makes himself “one of the most bellicose participants in this discussion”, nor Mounin, “can manage to grasp the truth of Baudelairean poetry. On the idea of Riffaterre’s “irrelevance of grammar”, he cites the poet’s passion for “the irrefutable value of the order between words” and explains himself thus: “the grammatical texture of poetic language takes a large part of its intrinsic value” because of the role of an “evocative wizard” of grammar (Jakobson, 1980, p. 25).

Mounin, who questioned “the introduction of the symmetrical arrangement of grammatical oppositions”, is considered by Jakobson as “one of the most inveterate skeptics” (Jakobson, 1980, p. 26), because for Baudelaire and Jakobson himself, “regularity and symmetry rank among the primordial requirements of the human spirit”. Mounin’s question is probably superficial. About his discovery of “a clean cut every time Jakobson gives his pen to Lévi-Strauss”, Jakobson strongly defends “the inseparable undertakings of the two, at the same time, on the same desk”. The response to Riffaterre and Mounin is also addressed to other “inveterate skeptics” since they are only “a surprising example of a critic who lacks the sense of verbal art and ‘poetic importance of its linguistic intermediary” (Jakobson, 1980, p. 34).

IV. Conclusion: *The Cats* and the French New Criticism

In his postscript, Jakobson defined the 1962 article with these terms: “This study is the first of my printed attempts in a Western language to examine the grammar of poetry in a concrete example, and the first printed

attempt to apply this task to Western poetry. And it was the first case of a joint and simultaneous collaboration to study such a subject by two explorers, of different language and training". With his proud conviction of "novelties", the linguist was quick to qualify his "adversaries" (Mounin and Riffaterre) as levity, stubbornness, and flatness.

For us, this quarrel constitutes a high point in the life of structuralism and the establishment of the "New Criticism" in France. Jakobson, with the connivance of Lévi-Strauss, introduced to France certain critical practices of poetry adopted by the Anglo-American "New Criticism", and joined innovative French scholars, such as Roland Barthes and Jean-Pierre Richard.

Let us not forget another significant contemporary event of this debate. It is about the debate Barthes versus Picard, about Sur Racine (1963) of the first, between the French New Criticism and the university and Lansonist criticism. Roland Barthes' approach joins Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss in chasing authorial intention and historical circumstances and presenting the literary text as a self-sufficient universe. In a way, the two debates are one, to form what is taking shape in their time, structuralism and the French New Criticism.

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