

**Discourse
and Reference
in the Nuclear Age**

BY J. FISHER SOLOMON

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**DISCOURSE AND REFERENCE
IN THE NUCLEAR AGE**

OKLAHOMA PROJECT FOR DISCOURSE AND THEORY

**OKLAHOMA PROJECT FOR DISCOURSE
AND THEORY**

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Series Editors' Foreword

FRENCH CLASSICIST LOUIS GERNET once remarked that there are some human activities and investments it is entirely possible for a culture to forget. Citing examples from classical Athenian culture, he mentioned the impact of a political or monetary system and the foundation of cultural values as things that could be forgotten. Gernet was referring both to the temporary loss of values or memories of events that later reemerge and prove to be crucial as well as to cultural forgetting, or loss, of a reference. This latter kind of forgetting has a structural and social intention and constitutes a necessary cloak of obscurity thrown over functions or practices that, if contextualized and scrutinized, would be altered—as if too much had been revealed. The retrieval, or “remembering,” of lost cultural connections, therefore, can entail the rediscovery of a cultural impact already made but somehow obscured, the delayed recognition of a reference that has been camouflaged, as if to protect against articulations that are too harsh or too far-reaching in their implications.

The force of J. Fisher Solomon's *Discourse and Reference in the Nuclear Age* is that it creates precisely this sense of a once “forgotten” and now regained connection in modern culture. Solomon's dramatic reframing of culture within the possibility of nuclear war is the “remembering” of a recognition that has been made only peripherally in the past three decades. By focusing on language and the study of language in contemporary culture and on the possibility of nuclear annihilation, Solomon “remembers” nuclear death, a subject that, since World War II, has been discussed only at the

margins and in the gaps of academic and institutional discourse. Solomon marks and helps to effect this remembering by "thinking crudely," as Bertolt Brecht urged, and making the seemingly all too evident but previously deferred connection (as if, like Edgar Allen Poe's purloined letter, it had been too obvious to be seen) between the semiotic ultimacy of a nuclear referent and the local practices of textuality—the possibility of significance against the absolute cancellation of reference.

We believe that *Discourse and Reference in the Nuclear Age* is an important contribution to the contemporary debate about discourse theory and that it will help define the place of discourse, in an urgent way, in our social and individual lives. This book also fulfills our own best vision for the Oklahoma Project for Discourse and Theory in that it combines literary theory, philosophy, politics, and discourse theory in the exploration of a subject that is timely and of the utmost importance. We can think of no more important issue that contemporary intellectual life should address, and we can think of no issue that contemporary intellectual life has avoided more assiduously in the confines of the various disciplines of the academy.

This combination of urgency and avoidance in facing the issues of war and peace—in facing, that is, the "life" of the human sciences in a absolute way—is the subject of Solomon's study. Solomon first examines the status of discourse concerning nuclear war. What is the nature of language and discourse that "speaks" about nuclear war? Is discourse that "refers" to nuclear war of the same status as fictional discourse that refers to Captain Ahab or Moby Dick, for instance? Or does the social and political nature of nuclear war require that, although it is "contrary to fact," discourse treating nuclear war nevertheless must rethink the referential function of language, something contemporary philosophy of language has failed to do? In pursuing his topic, Solomon ranges through the major tenets of current language philosophy, but he turns to Aristotle for the intellectual

framework of his discussion of Saussure, Peirce, Popper, Derrida, and others, always returning to the pressing question, the defining question, of discourse theory—namely, the referential status of “potential” political events which discourse articulates.

Solomon's discussion is not simply of the effect of the possibility of nuclear war on intellectual endeavor, although this is a crucial sub-theme of the book. More generally, Solomon deals with what he calls the “concrete historical and political experience” in all the discursive formations that constitute our social life. In this way Solomon addresses the question of the “enunciation” of discourse, the difficult relationship between the general structures and forms of language—what Paul de Man calls the “grammatical” aspect of language and what Kierkegaard calls its “universalizing” tendency—and the particular enunciations of concrete situations. This, as Solomon suggests, is a pressing area of discourse theory, and *Discourse and Reference in the Nuclear Age* offers an important contribution to this debate.

But the more particular focus of this book—its own concrete historical and political situation—attempts to situate discourse theory within the experience of our times. That is, Solomon attempts to describe a discourse theory that “would be by nature both pluralistic and interdisciplinary, attempting to constitute . . . a ‘thick description’ of the structure of that complex system of interrelated national and international effects that we include under the umbrella of the ‘nuclear referent.’”

We do not need to point out the details of this discussion—Solomon's text is both impassioned and clear in its “rememberings” of these issues—but we do want to situate this study in the context of the Oklahoma Project's aims and ambitions. To begin with, Solomon's book places discourse theory within the social and political experience of our time by its very topic, especially in that such a discussion requires the kind of interdisciplinary focus that Solomon brings to the task. The book, like the Oklahoma Proj-

ect as a whole, is based upon the assumption that the study of discourse and discursive formations—in this case the language that refers to and defines the strategic nature of nuclear conflicts—demands an interdisciplinary approach. Solomon, thus, forges connections between the philosophy of language, the post-structuralist critique of structuralism and of continental and Anglo-American language philosophy, and political discourse. More important, Solomon suggests ways in which these divergent “disciplines” serve particular historical and political ends.

Solomon uses this analysis to conceive of nuclear war as a referent of discourse by “remembering” another model—an Aristotelian model—that attempts to account for the referential problem that nuclear war suggests, a model somewhat different from the contemporary structural models of discourse. The importance of this book, finally, is that it defines the problem of discourse in our time in ways that cannot and should not again be forgotten or deferred. This is an immensely important book that will help describe the engagement that “discourse theory” should provide to our intellectual and social lives. It opens a consideration that brings together, in the most pressing of contemporary concerns, divergent areas of intellectual pursuit. There are no more important concerns than those “remembered” in *Discourse and Reference in the Nuclear Age*, and we are pleased that this significant study has found a home in the Oklahoma Project.

ROBERT CON DAVIS

RONALD SCHLEIFER

Norman, Oklahoma

Acknowledgments

IT IS WITH SOME SADNESS that I complete these notes of acknowledgment and thanks, for only in the midst of their revision did I learn of the passing of the man who perhaps more than anyone else has made this book possible. I will not be alone in mourning the departure of Professor Morton Bloomfield, but among all those who have owed so much to him I feel that mine is a special debt, the debt not of a medievalist but of a student of critical theory to whom he offered support and guidance above and beyond an already full load of academic responsibilities. Long before this book had even been dreamed of, Professor Bloomfield allowed me the precious freedom to explore my own theoretical speculations and conjectures, the critical explorations that led to the writing of this book. Whatever mistakes I may have made along the way are my own, but I shall always owe to Morton Bloomfield's memory the opportunities I was granted to take the risks I believed necessary to take.

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J. FISHER SOLOMON

Los Angeles, California

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