Modern Criticism and Theory

A READER

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Foreword

This book is a companion volume, and in some sense a sequel, to my *20th Century Literary Criticism: A Reader*, which was published by Longman in 1972. As such books go, *20th Century Literary Criticism* has been very successful. It has sold some 35,000 copies to date, and is used as a textbook in universities and colleges all around the world. Fifteen years later, however, it seems, not surprisingly, a little dated, and in need of supplementation. The most recent essay included in it (Frank Kermode's 'Objects, Jokes and Art') was first published in 1966. An enormous amount of important criticism and literary theory has been published since then, and entire new schools or movements have arisen (for example, deconstruction, reader-response criticism, feminist criticism). Moreover, much of this work has built upon or reacted against an intellectual tradition that goes back well before 1966, but was barely reflected in *20th Century Literary Criticism*—the tradition, loosely speaking, of 'structuralism'.

What is structuralism—or perhaps one should ask, what was structuralism? In the opinion of many qualified judges, structuralism is a thing of the past—was already in terminal decline by the time the English-speaking world became aware of its existence in the late 1960s. We live in the age of post-structuralism—but to understand *that* we must know what came before. Structuralism is, or was, a movement in what Continental Europeans call 'the human sciences', which sought to explain and understand cultural phenomena (from poems to menus, from primitive myths to modern advertisements) as manifestations of underlying systems of signification, of which the exemplary model is verbal language itself, especially as elucidated by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. One can trace a line from Saussure to the Russian Formalists, from the Russian Formalists (via Roman Jakobson) to the Prague Linguistic Circle, and from there to the structuralist anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss and the eruption of *la nouvelle critique* in Paris in the 1960s. This tradition was very inadequately represented in *20th Century Literary Criticism* (represented, in fact, by two short pieces by Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes, respectively) for the simple reason that it had only just begun to impinge on my consciousness at the time when I was compiling that Reader. In this respect I do not think that I lagged conspicuously behind my peer group in the British academic world. *20th Century Literary Criticism* was intended primarily for readers in Britain and America, and was heavily biassed towards Anglo–American criticism, as I admitted in the Foreword. That bias, however, seemed increasingly obvious as Anglo–American criticism itself became increasingly oriented to European criticism and theory.

'Theory' has more than one meaning in this context. Structuralism has generated in literary critics a much greater interest in, and anxiety about, the theory

of their own subject (what is sometimes called, after Aristotle, poetics) than was formerly the case, at least in Britain and America. But the recent theorization of literary studies has borrowed its terms and concepts very largely from other disciplines—linguistics, psychoanalysis, philosophy, marxism. In the process, literary criticism has been drawn into the vortex of a powerful new field of study in which all these disciplines are merged and interfused, and which goes under the general name of 'theory'. The aim of this collective enterprise would appear to be nothing less than a totalizing account of human consciousness and human culture (or else a tireless demonstration of the impossibility of such a project). A good deal of what goes on in university departments of language and literature nowadays, and is written in journals ostensibly dedicated to literary criticism, is contributing to Theory in this wide sense. The title and the contents of this Reader recognize the importance of theory in contemporary criticism, and its ambiguous status—both part of and larger than literary studies. Every item has an explicit theoretical dimension. What I wrote in the Foreword to *20th Century Literary Criticism*—'in our era, criticism is not merely a library of secondary aids to the understanding and appreciation of literary texts, but also a rapidly increasing body of knowledge in its own right'—has been emphatically confirmed in the last fifteen years by the explosion of theory.

This development, predictably, has created strains and stresses within the institutional structures that contain and maintain the academic study of literature. In the Foreword to *20th Century Literary Criticism* I felt obliged to rebut the view that students should be discouraged from reading criticism because, by supplying them with ready-made interpretations and judgments, it was likely to blunt their capacity for independent response to primary texts. The complaint more commonly heard today is that modern criticism's obsession with theory undermines the study of literature in a more fundamental way, by questioning its very foundations, such as the idea of the author as origin of a text's meaning, the possibility of objective interpretation, the validity of empirical historical scholarship and the authority of the literary canon.

By no means all of modern critical theory is hostile to these traditional humanist principles, but much of it certainly is, and it is easy to understand the anxiety that provokes this complaint. A premature and dogmatically enforced exposure to post-structuralist theory can be confusing and disabling to the student. I am sure, however, that the answer is not to try and ignore or suppress the existence of theory. We have eaten the apple of knowledge and must live with the consequences. Literary criticism can no longer be taught and practised as if its methods, aims and institutional forms were innocent of theoretical assumptions and ideological implications. What is essential, however, is that the new theoretical self-consciousness should be earned, not borrowed, that it should be based on a study of the seminal texts that gave rise to it. These are, for the most part, difficult texts, and coming to grips with them, seeking to understand them, is an educative process in itself, whether or not one accepts their conclusions.

There are numerous guides to structuralism and post-structuralism now available, and introductions to the work of individual critics and theorists. These publications are often extremely useful, but they are no substitute for the texts

upon which they comment, though paradoxically they are often cheaper and easier to obtain. There are also several critical anthologies which represent particular types of criticism, such as deconstruction, or reader-response criticism. *Modern Criticism and Theory* aims to provide within the covers of a single book a selection of important and representative work from all the major theoretical schools or tendencies in contemporary criticism, and to provide materials for tracing their historical evolution.

I have confined my selection to authors who have an established reputation, usually based on a substantial body of work, and who are firmly associated with particular theories or methods of criticism. Even with that limitation, the anthology could easily have been twice as long with no loss of quality. To keep it to a manageable length I excluded writers already represented in *20th Century Literary Criticism*. I made two exceptions to this rule: Roland Barthes, perhaps the most brilliant and original of all the critics in the structuralist–post-structuralist tradition, whose work was quite inadequately represented in the earlier Reader; and M. H. Abrams, whose 'The Deconstructive Angel' I found, as an editor, an irresistible short account and critique of Derridean deconstruction. As in *20th Century Literary Criticism*, I have tried to select items that naturally invite comparison in pairs or larger groups, and Abrams's essay is very much a case in point. As far as possible (there are very few exceptions) I have preferred complete, self-contained essays to extracts from longer works.

The format of this Reader is essentially the same as that of the earlier one. The items are arranged, generally speaking, in chronological order of first publication (in the case of translated texts I have used my discretion in choosing between the date of original publication and the date of the translation; and where two items are included by the same author the chronological sequence is inevitably disturbed). This order is presented in the first list of Contents (A), and should enable a reader to follow the historical development of modern criticism and theory, especially the transition from structuralism to post-structuralism. A second list of Contents (B) categorises items thematically, according to the school or approach which they exemplify. Each author's work is preceded by a brief note giving basic biographical and bibliographical information, and placing him or her in the general context of modern criticism and theory. After each headnote there are, where appropriate, suggestions for comparison with other items in the Reader ('Cross Reference') and for further reading about the writer's work ('Commentary'). Finally, by means of the index, the Reader can be used as a reference guide to modern criticism and theory.

Author's notes, and the notes of editors and translators of the original texts, are keyed by numbers and gathered at the end of each item. Explanatory notes by the present editor are keyed by letters of the alphabet, and printed at the foot of the page. In writing these notes I have borne in mind that this book, like its predecessor, is likely to be used by students from many different cultures and educational backgrounds, and that what may be self-evident to an English reader could be puzzling or obscure to a reader in another country or continent. When practicable, translations of foreign words and phrases into English are interpo-

lated in the main texts inside square brackets. Foreign words inside square brackets are interpolations by the translators of non-English texts.

20th Century Literary Criticism was based on an undergraduate course called 'Comparative Critical Approaches' which I taught for many years at Birmingham University. The materials for this Reader have, to a large extent, been gathered and sifted in connection with a weekly postgraduate seminar on post-Renaissance literature and modern critical theory for which I have been responsible for an even longer period at Birmingham. I would like to thank the many postgraduate students and occasional visitors who attended this seminar over the years for their contributions to my own education, and to thank the colleagues who regularly shared the strain of grappling with difficult and demanding texts—especially Deirdre Burton and Tom Davis. I also gratefully acknowledge the research assistance of Adrian Stokes and the help of Jackie Evans in compiling the index. Finally I should like to thank the colleagues in the Arts Faculty at the University of Birmingham—especially Anthony Bryer, Michael Butler, Ceri Crossley and Bob Smith—who generously assisted me in identifying quotations and allusions, and translating foreign words.

Birmingham, January 1987

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We have, unfortunately, been unable to trace the Foucault family as original copyright holders of Michel Foucault's 'What is an Author?', and we would appreciate any information which would enable us to do so.

Contents

A = Contents arranged historically

B = Contents arranged thematically

B. CONTENTS ARRANGED THEMATICALLY

[Items marked with an asterisk appear in more than one category]

I Formalist, structuralist and post-structuralist poetics, linguistics and narratology

II Deconstruction

III Psychoanalysis

IV Politics, ideology, cultural history

1 *Ferdinand de Saussure*

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) was a Swiss linguist who studied in Germany and France before taking up a university chair in his native city of Geneva, which he occupied for the rest of his life. Saussure is widely regarded as the father of modern linguistics. He is included in this reader because his theory of language and how it should be studied played a seminal part in the development of 'structuralism' as a method in the human sciences, and thus significantly affected the course of literary studies in this century. The theory was never published by Saussure himself in a complete and authoritative form. The *Course in General Linguistics* (first published in Paris in 1915) which goes under his name was compiled by colleagues after his death, based on lecture notes taken down by Saussure's students in his lifetime. Its most recent translator and editor, Roy Harris, has described it as 'without doubt one of the most far-reaching works concerning the study of human cultural activities to have been published at any time since the Renaissance.'

Before Saussure, the study of language, or philology as it was usually called, had been essentially historical, tracing change and development in phonology and semantics within and between languages or groups of languages. Saussure argued that a scientific linguistics could never be based on such a 'diachronic' study but only by approaching language as a 'synchronic' *system*, i.e., a system of which all the elements and rules are in theory simultaneously available to the user of the language. Saussure's discussion of 'the object of study' in linguistics, reprinted below, depends crucially on a distinction between *langage, langue* and *parole*, translated here as 'language' (i.e., the universal human phenomenon of language), 'a language' (i.e., a particular language system, for example English) and 'speech' (i.e., language in use, specific speech acts).

Language is made up of words, and another seminal contribution of Saussure's was his analysis of the word as a verbal sign having two sides, an acoustic image or sound pattern and a concept. The former he called *signifiant*, translated by Harris as 'signal', and the other *signifié*, translated as 'significance'. (The more usual translations are 'signifier' and 'signified'.) Saussure's crucial point was that the connection between the two is arbitrary—that is to say, a convention accepted by all users of a given language, not the result of some existential link between word and thing. It is the arbitrariness of the verbal sign that necessitates a systematic structure for language.

Some implications for literary studies which may be glimpsed in the brief extracts from the *Course* reprinted below (from Roy Harris's translation of 1983),

are : (1) the idea that literary texts could be seen as manifestations of a literary system (such as narrative) the underlying rules of which might be understood, thus making literary criticism a more 'scientific' discipline; (2) scepticism about historical explanations of literary phenomena, especially research into the 'origins' of meaning; (3) a corresponding emphasis on the collective or social construction of meaning in the production and reception of literary texts; (4) a critique of naive theories of literary 'realism'. Many of the essays included in this book are directly or indirectly indebted to Saussure's theory of language.

CROSS REFERENCES: 3. Jakobson
5. Lacan
6. Derrida
7. Bakhtin
27. MacCabe

COMMENTARY: Jonathan Culler, *Saussure* (1976)

The object of study

1. On defining a language

What is it that linguistics sets out to analyse? What is that actual object of study in its entirety? The question is a particularly difficult one. We shall see why later. First, let us simply try to grasp the nature of the difficulty.

Other sciences are provided with objects of study given in advance, which are then examined from different points of view. Nothing like that is the case in linguistics. Suppose someone pronounces the French word *nu* ('naked'). At first sight, one might think this would be an example of an independently given linguistic object. But more careful consideration reveals a series of three or four quite different things, depending on the viewpoint adopted. There is a sound, there is the expression of an idea, there is a derivative of Latin *nūdum*, and so on. The object is not given in advance of the viewpoint: far from it. Rather, one might say that it is the viewpoint adopted which creates the object. Furthermore, there is nothing to tell us in advance whether one of these ways of looking at it is prior to or superior to any of the others.

Whichever viewpoint is adopted, moreover, linguistic phenomena always present two complementary facets, each depending on the other. For example:

(1) The ear perceives articulated syllables as auditory impressions. But the sounds in question would not exist without the vocal organs. There would be no *n*, for instance, without these two complementary aspects to it. So one cannot equate the language simply with what the ear hears. One cannot divorce what is heard from oral articulation. Nor, on the other hand, can one specify the

relevant movements of the vocal organs without reference to the corresponding auditory impression.

(2) But even if we ignored this phonetic duality, would language then be reducible to phonetic facts? No. Speech sounds are only the instrument of thought, and have no independent existence. Here another complementarity emerges, and one of great importance. A sound, itself a complex auditory–articulatory unit, in turn combines with an idea to form another complex unit, both physiologically and psychologically. Nor is this all.

(3) Language has an individual aspect and a social aspect. One is not conceivable without the other. Furthermore:

(4) Language at any given time involves an established system and an evolution. At any given time, it is an institution in the present and a product of the past. At first sight, it looks very easy to distinguish between the system and its history, between what it is and what it was. In reality, the connexion between the two is so close that it is hard to separate them. Would matters be simplified if one considered the ontogenesis of linguistic phenomena, beginning with a study of children's language, for example? No. It is quite illusory to believe that where language is concerned the problem of origins is any different from the problem of permanent conditions. There is no way out of the circle.

So however we approach the question, no one object of linguistic study emerges of its own accord. Whichever way we turn, the same dilemma confronts us. Either we tackle each problem on one front only, and risk failing to take into account the dualities mentioned above: or else we seem committed to trying to study language in several ways simultaneously, in which case the object of study becomes a muddle of disparate, unconnected things. By proceeding thus one opens the door to various sciences—psychology, anthropology, prescriptive grammar, philology, and so on—which are to be distinguished from linguistics. These sciences could lay claim to language as falling in their domain: but their methods are not the ones that are needed.

One solution only, in our view, resolves all these difficulties. *The linguist must take the study of linguistic structure as his primary concern, and relate all other manifestations of language to it.* Indeed, amid so many dualities, linguistic structure seems to be the one thing that is independently definable and provides something our minds can satisfactorily grasp.

What, then, is linguistic structure? It is not, in our opinion, simply the same thing as language. Linguistic structure is only one part of language, even though it is an essential part. The structure of a language is a social product of our language faculty. At the same time, it is also a body of necessary conventions adopted by society to enable members of society to use their language faculty. Language in its entirety has many different and disparate aspects. It lies astride the boundaries separating various domains. It is at the same time physical, physiological and psychological. It belongs both to the individual and to society. No classification of human phenomena provides any single place for it, because language as such has no discernible unity.

A language as a structured system, on the contrary, is both a self-contained

whole and a principle of classification. As soon as we give linguistic structure pride of place among the facts of language, we introduce a natural order into an aggregate which lends itself to no other classification.

It might be objected to this principle of classification that our use of language depends on a faculty endowed by nature: whereas language systems are acquired and conventional, and so ought to be subordinated to—instead of being given priority over—our natural ability.

To this objection one might reply as follows.

First, it has not been established that the function of language, as manifested in speech, is entirely natural: that is to say, it is not clear that our vocal apparatus is made for speaking as our legs for walking. Linguists are by no means in agreement on this issue. Whitney, for instance, who regards languages as social institutions on exactly the same footing as all other social institutions, holds it to be a matter of chance or mere convenience that it is our vocal apparatus we use for linguistic purposes. Man, in his view, might well have chosen to use gestures, thus substituting visual images for sound patterns. Whitney's is doubtless too extreme a position. For languages are not in all respects similar to other social institutions. Moreover, Whitney goes too far when he says that the selection of the vocal apparatus for language was accidental. For it was in some measure imposed upon us by Nature. But the American linguist is right about the essential point: the language we use is a convention, and it makes no difference what exactly the nature of the agreed sign is. The question of the vocal apparatus is thus a secondary one as far as the problem of language is concerned.

This idea gains support from the notion of *language articulation*. In Latin, the word *articulus* means 'member, part, subdivision in a sequence of things'. As regards language, articulation may refer to the division of the chain of speech into syllables, or to the division of the chain of meanings into meaningful units. It is in this sense that one speaks in German of *gegliederte Sprache* [articulate speech]. On the basis of this second interpretation, one may say that it is not spoken language which is natural to man, but the faculty of constructing a language, i.e. a system of distinct signs corresponding to distinct ideas.

Broca discovered that the faculty of speech is localised in the third frontal convolution of the left hemisphere of the brain. This fact has been seized upon to justify regarding language as a natural endowment. But the same localisation is known to hold for *everything* connected with language, including writing. Thus what seems to be indicated, when we take into consideration also the evidence from various forms of aphasia due to lesions in the centres of localisation is: (1) that the various disorders which affect spoken language are interconnected in many ways with disorders affecting written language, and (2) that in all cases of aphasia or agraphia what is affected is not so much the ability to utter or inscribe this or that, but the ability to produce in any given mode signs corresponding to normal language. All this leads us to believe that, over and above the functioning of the various organs, there exists a more general faculty governing signs, which may be regarded as the linguistic faculty *par excellence*. So by a different route we are once again led to the same conclusion.

Finally, in support of giving linguistic structure pride of place in our study