

# MODERN LITERARY THEORY

**A Reader**  
**Third Edition**

*Edited by*

**PHILIP RICE AND  
PATRICIA WAUGH**



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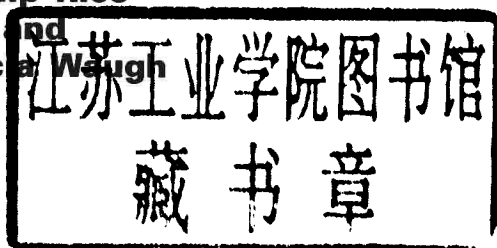
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Philip Rice

Patricia Waugh



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## PREFACE

The success of the first two editions of this anthology has fulfilled original hopes that it would form the basis for a pedagogic introduction to and clarification of the immense volume and diversity of theoretical writing that, over the past 25 years, has so radically questioned our understanding and construction of literature as an object of critical study and the methods and presuppositions of criticism itself. When we wrote the first preface (in 1988), it was evident that the rapid growth of literary theory since the mid-1960s and the mass of work devoted to the theoretical discussion of literature had transformed literary study by the 1980s. Critics and philosophers have always theorized about literature and literary criticism, but the recent erosion of boundaries between philosophy, political theory, psychoanalysis, social theory and literary criticism would seem to represent something of a 'paradigm shift' in literary studies. The very foundations of the Anglo-American literary tradition have been challenged. Since then, all foundations of Western thought and representation have increasingly been held up to critical gaze: the concept of criticism born with modern scepticism was always poised to turn introspective. Sceptical doubt was bound eventually to turn on the instruments of its own articulation and analysis, so that objects of knowledge may come to seem not so much entities on which language reflects than artefacts actually constructed through and within language. In literary criticism the notion of the text as an 'object' to be analysed methodically by the empiricist critic has given way to a situation where distinctions between truth and rhetoric, literature and philosophy, history and text, have become increasingly obscure. As Jacques Derrida has written in the essay which concludes this anthology, English literature has become the site of a new multidisciplinary which has challenged the methods and assumptions not only of literary critics, but of philosophers and scientists too.

The crisis in epistemology has brought with it a crisis in value: for there can hardly be agreement about the value of literary works when there cannot be agreement about the constitution of literature itself. The postmodern critique of 'grand narratives' has spread its nets over the controversial issue of the canon and the idea that aesthetic value is essential and universal and self-evidentially reflected in a broadly stable tradition of great works of art. Recent developments in feminist criticism, in Cultural Materialism, New Historicism and Postcolonialism, have further 'exploded' English and challenged earlier assumptions about aesthetic value and meaning. There has been a visible retreat from totalities: in the postmodern resistance to universalization; in New Historical method – an eclectic mix of theories which avoids

any single paradigm; in the postcolonialist resistance to the universalizing thrust of colonialist discourses. There is a new emphasis on reading, on the dialectics of interpretation, as opposed to the search for a systematic model which might 'explain' the text. Many of the newest schools of criticism, such as the New Historicism, are more practices of reading than 'theories of literature', but they draw extensively, if loosely, on shifting combinations of many of the theoretical models represented throughout this anthology.

In compiling this third edition the aim has been to retain those essays and documents which now seem to have a canonical place in the history of modern literary theory and to include more recent material which reflects some of the critical issues emerging from the retreat from theoretical holism. Earlier sections have been expanded, revised and updated and new essays selected which represent the current debate in Postmodernism, Postcolonialism, New Historicism and Cultural Materialism. Derrida's retrospective essay on the state of theory has been included to indicate how any reflection upon Postmodernism or New Historicism inevitably raises questions about the compatibility or otherwise of different theoretical models and about their epistemological presuppositions. It seems likely that these are issues which will continue to be central to literary theoretical debates in the future, a tendency reflected in the growing interest of literary theorists in philosophies of science.

The task of selection for this anthology has not been an easy one, for the field which has to be mapped continuously changes its boundaries as new relations and combinations move in and out of the foreground. A book which attempted to be totally inclusive would be well beyond the means of the readers we hope to reach. Our aims, therefore, have been modest rather than ambitious: to introduce a broad and diverse selection of works which might be seen as conceptual 'keys' to the theoretical revolution; to draw out some of the implications of the theoretical positions represented and, in particular, to offer an anthology through which the reader can get a foothold on the map of contemporary theory and become acquainted with some of the principal theories and theorists involved.

The book is organized into two parts which are subdivided into sections, each one representing a major area in contemporary literary theory. In most sections we have tried to include an extract which gives an account of the theory and, where appropriate, a contribution which uses that theoretical paradigm as a critical approach to literary texts. Editorial commentary has been kept to a minimum in order to devote as much space as possible to the source material, but commentary is nevertheless required for the field only partially organizes itself, and then more on the basis of history than of nature. If contemporary theory teaches us anything it is that the orders of the world are not 'natural' but constructed. Our commentary is thus offered more as an attempt to rationalize the organization of the material rather than to provide an exhaustive critical explanation of it. Indeed the anthology might usefully be seen as a supplement to the various critical accounts of literary theory that have appeared in the last few years (Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983), Jefferson and Robey's *Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction* (1982) and Selden's *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (1985)). Again, to save space, the bibliography is selective and indicative only, though it should prove an adequate starting point for further research.

We hope that the experience of reading the book will stimulate further interest and help to clarify the major theoretical positions and their relations to each other. But beyond that (and in the spirit of contemporary theory) we hope that it will encourage readers to contest and challenge the very structures of knowledge and understanding we have used in compiling this book.



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# CONTENTS

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>Preface</b>	<b>ix</b>
 <b>PART ONE</b>	 <b>1</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Section One: Saussure</b>	<b>6</b>
1 Ferdinand de Saussure, From <i>Course in General Linguistics</i> (1915)	8
<b>Section Two: Russian Formalism</b>	<b>16</b>
2 Victor Shklovsky, From 'Art as Technique' (1917)	17
<b>Section Three: Structuralism</b>	<b>22</b>
3 David Lodge, 'Analysis and Interpretation of the Realist Text' (1980)	24
4 Roland Barthes, 'To Write: An Intransitive Verb?' (1966)	41
<b>Section Four: Marxism</b>	<b>51</b>
5 Louis Althusser, From 'Ideology and the State' (1969)	53
6 E. Balibar and P. Macherey, From 'Literature as an Ideological Form' (1978)	61
7 Terry Eagleton, From <i>Criticism and Ideology</i> (1976)	69
<b>Section Five: Reader Theory</b>	<b>73</b>
8 Wolfgang Iser, From 'The Reading Process' (1974)	76
9 H.R. Jauss, From 'Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory' (1967)	82
10 Paul Ricoeur, 'Phenomenology and Theory of Literature: An Interview with Paul Ricoeur' (1981)	89
11 Harold Bloom, From <i>The Anxiety of Influence</i> (1973)	95
<b>Section Six: Feminism</b>	<b>98</b>
12 Elaine Showalter, 'Towards a Feminist Poetics' (1979)	99
13 The Marxist-Feminist Collective, From 'Women Writing: Jane Eyre, Shirley, Villette, Aurora Leigh' (1978)	109



<b>PART TWO</b>	<b>114</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>114</b>
<b>14</b> Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' (1968)	118
<b>Section One: The Subject</b>	<b>123</b>
<b>15</b> Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience' (1949)	126
<b>16</b> Julia Kristeva, 'A Question of Subjectivity – an Interview' (1986)	131
<b>17</b> Hélène Cixous, 'Sorties' (1975)	137
<b>18</b> Judith Butler, 'Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig and Foucault' (1987)	145
<b>19</b> Jonathan Dollimore, <i>From Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries</i> (1984)	159
<b>Section Two: Language and Textuality</b>	<b>173</b>
<b>20</b> Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' (1966)	176
<b>21</b> Roland Barthes, 'From Work to Text' (1971)	191
<b>22</b> Paul de Man, 'The Resistance to Theory' (1982)	198
<b>23</b> Barbara Johnson, 'Gender Theory and the Yale School' (1985)	215
<b>Section Three: History and Discourse</b>	<b>226</b>
<b>24</b> M.M. Bakhtin, 'From 'Discourse in the Novel' (1934)	230
<b>25</b> Michel Foucault, 'From 'The Order of Discourse' (1971)	239
<b>26</b> Jerome J. McGann, 'The Text, the Poem, and the Problem of Historical Method' (1985)	251
<b>27</b> Stephen Greenblatt, 'Resonance and Wonder' (1990)	268
<b>Section Four: Postmodernism and Postcolonialism</b>	<b>289</b>
<b>28</b> Fredric Jameson, 'Periodizing the 60s' (1984)	292
<b>29</b> Patricia Waugh, 'Stalemates?: Feminists, Postmodernists and Unfinished Issues in Modern Aesthetics' (1991)	322
<b>30</b> bell hooks, 'Postmodern Blackness' (1991)	341
<b>31</b> Edward Said, <i>From Culture and Imperialism</i> (1993)	348
<b>32</b> Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse' (1983)	360
<b>Section Five: Looking Back on the States of Theory</b>	<b>368</b>
<b>33</b> Jacques Derrida, 'Some Statements and Truisms about Neo-Logisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and other Small Seismisms' (1990)	368
<b>Select Bibliography</b>	<b>379</b>
<b>Index</b>	<b>384</b>

# PART ONE

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## INTRODUCTION

Though literary theory is not a recent phenomenon it often appears that way. Its rapid growth since the mid-1960s, and the mass of work devoted to theoretical discourse about and around literature has produced what can only be described as a radical transformation. If literary theory seems new it is not because theorizing about literature is new, but because of the quantitative and qualitative difference of contemporary work. What characterizes contemporary theory is, on the one hand, its heterogeneity and on the other, its unprecedented attack on the grounding assumptions of the Anglo-American critical tradition.

Literary studies has always been a pluralistic discipline. The various practices that constituted the Anglo-American tradition, such as literary history, literary biography, moral-aesthetic criticism and even the New Criticism had, until recently, managed to coexist in a state of fairly 'stable disequilibrium' based on a broad consensus about the author, the nature of the literary work, and the purpose of criticism. Critics might have argued about the inclusion of this or that piece of writing in the canon of literature, but the notion that something called 'literature' existed was never in doubt nor was the sense that the author was the originator of the work, or that the act of criticism was subordinate to the literature it studied. All of this and more has come in for rigorous interrogation and re-evaluation from a theoretical discourse no longer consigned to the margins.

Contemporary critical theory has asserted itself in the everyday life of literary studies, refusing to accept its marginalization as a peripheral concern more akin to philosophy. It sees itself as existing at the heart of the critical enterprise, insisting that there is no critical act that can transcend theory. As numerous theorists have pointed out, the traditional forms of criticism through which literature is and has been studied are not 'theory free' responses to great literary works, nor are they pure scholastic endeavours. All forms of criticism are founded upon a theory, or an admix of theories, whether they consciously acknowledge that or not. Theoretical writings have recognized that what are often taken to be 'natural' and 'commonsensical' ways of studying literature actually rest upon a set of theoretical injunctions which have been

## 2 Modern Literary Theory

naturalized to the point at which they no longer have to justify their own practices.

The way that theory has been inflected into the everyday workings of the literary discipline has often proved a source of passionate debate. Responses have taken many different forms, from irate dismissal to enthusiastic development. If theory seems to some critics to be deeply implicated in the everyday pursuits and routines of the discipline, to others it seems not to be addressing the object of study directly and to be operating in the realms of the abstract and the abstruse, divorced from that close reading and intimate study of literary works that has so characterized the discipline. Much of the theory *is* abstract, and does not offer a method for approaching literary texts directly, however, it has important implications for the way we study literature, implications that cannot be dismissed simply because the theory is of no immediate pragmatic value. The discipline of literary criticism is largely founded on the basis of an immediate relation with its objects of study, but this is historically determined, not inevitable or natural. Part of the attack on the critical orthodoxy has been concerned with the undermining of that sense of a 'natural' way to study literature. And if literary theory sometimes appears to caricature the tradition it attacks, and to make it seem more singular than it actually is, that is because its attack has often been targeted not at the manifest plurality of critical practices that constitute the tradition but at its roots, at that set of founding assumptions which traditional criticism often obdurately refuses to acknowledge as anything other than the 'natural' and 'sensible' way of criticism.

The critical orthodoxy is undoubtedly a plurality of practices; from literary history and literary biography, to myth criticism and psychoanalytic/criticism, to the New Criticism and moral-aesthetic criticism. But this plurality is grounded in a broad consensus focused on an epistemological and ontological certainty regarding the nature of the relation between the author, the text and the reader, and upon the definition of the text itself. Each form of criticism leans in a different direction: psychoanalytic/biographical emphasizes the author; historical/sociological emphasizes the context; New Criticism emphasizes the text-in-itself; moral-aesthetic criticism the relation between the text and the reality it portrays. However, they all accept a broadly mimetic view of literature where literature in some way or other, reflects and delivers up 'truths' about life and the human condition (even if, as in the case of New Criticism, the mimetic view is not foregrounded). The task of literature is to render life, experience and emotion in a potent way; the job of criticism is to reveal the true value and meaning of the rendition – a rendition at once contained within the literary work and yet, paradoxically, needing the critical act to reveal it.

The mimetic perspective depends upon a view of language as a transparent medium, a medium through which reality can be transcribed

and re-presented in aesthetic form, and reality, self-contained and coherent, transcends its formulation in words. This view of language is, in turn, related to a general conception of the world which is 'man-centred', and to an epistemology that Catherine Belsey has characterized as 'empiricist-idealist'.

common sense urges that 'man' is the origin and source of meaning, of action and of history (*humanism*). Our concepts and our knowledge are held to be the product of experience (*empiricism*), and this experience is preceded and interpreted by the mind, reason or thought, the property of a transcendent human nature whose essence is the attribute of each individual (*idealism*).<sup>1</sup>

The grounding assumptions of humanism presuppose that experience is prior to its expression in language and conceive of language as a mere tool used to express the way that experience is felt and interpreted by the unique individual. The existence of the unique individual is the cornerstone of the humanist ideology and provides the grid on which traditional literary criticism enacts its particular studies of the literary text. Inscribed in this ideology is the notion that literature is the collective product of especially gifted individuals who are able to capture the elusive universal and timeless truths of the human condition through the sensuous and sensitive use of the tool of language. Contemporary literary theory addresses and interrogates this set of founding assumptions in various ways and from a number of different perspectives. Through its interrogation the consensus around literary studies, and the ideological grid which underwrites it, has fragmented.

One of the principal focuses for the attack on Anglo-American critical practices has centred on language and derives largely from the linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure. Language, according to Saussure, is not a mere tool devised for the re-presentation of a pre-existent reality. It is rather, a constitutive part of reality, deeply implicated in the way the world is constructed as meaningful. According to this view language cannot be regarded as transparent, as it has to be if the mimetic tradition is to sustain its validity. Saussure's theory offers the possibility of a different perspective and gives rise to a wholly different epistemology. This perspective has been referred to as 'post-Saussurean'; it generally includes Structuralist and/or Post-Structuralist theories.

However, initial challenges to the orthodoxy did not come only from Structuralism. Other perspectives had an important influence – Feminism brought a cultural politics to literary studies, as did the particular mode of Marxism dominant in the 1960s/70s (though this mode of Marxism is closely related to Structuralism). Reader theory also disturbed the orthodoxy by shifting the object of study from the author/text to the text/reader nexus (again some of this work was closely allied to Structuralist thought). In general the critical perspectives that emerged strongly in the post-1960s period exhibited a much more self-conscious and reflexive

#### 4 Modern Literary Theory

tendency, and a more rigorous and coherent attitude to the study and analysis of literature. However, the more radical versions of theory, usually Post-Structuralist, took the issue further. They posed not just a new set of approaches and/or a revised understanding of literature and the world, but also a profoundly different mode of existence for the text, for discourse, for the individual and for the discipline of literary studies and literary criticism itself.

Part One of this book deals with the initial break with the orthodoxies of literary studies. The material for this part has been selected to exemplify its less radical questioning and undermining of the literary studies enterprise. But while it is less radical it does prepare the ground for the work represented in Part Two which generally adopts a more interrogative and disrupting perspective. It is in this sense that the book has been divided into two parts – but this division is not meant to imply an historical progression from, for instance, the inadequacies of Structuralism to a more satisfactory Post-Structuralism. This is not a matter of simple causal development or progression through the gradual accretion of knowledge. It is, rather, a matter of different trajectories and different directions that have been taken or refused.

This third edition of the Reader includes new material on Reader Theory, on 'The Subject' and on 'Language and Textuality', and two new sections entitled 'History and Discourse' and 'Postmodernism and Postcolonialism'. It is interesting that in the most recent critical developments, theory as coherent 'grand narrative' begins to break down. In its place, a hybrid and shifting mix of models and insights from earlier, often more 'totalizing' theoretical systems are brought together in a new practice of textual criticism or analysis of cultural meaning. In New Historicism and Postmodernism, there is a shift away from the pleasures of pure and coherent theory to an engagement with contingency, plurality, the fragment, and a loss of clear distinction between text and context, depth and surface. Postcolonialism draws on the Post-Structuralist critique of the centred Subject, on the Gramscian understanding of the concept of hegemony, on Lacanian psychoanalysis, narrative theory, Foucauldian analyses of power and knowledge, feminist critiques of difference and Postmodernist challenges to the discourses of Enlightenment. In all of these critical movements, there is a new emphasis on situatedness, on the provisional and perspectival nature of knowledge, on Constructivism: the transcendental theoretical 'view from nowhere' has largely disappeared as the object of theoretical enquiry is seen increasingly to be a discursive construction arising out of specific cultural and institutional practices.

The field of literary studies is currently a heterogeneous configuration of competing practices and epistemologies ranging from the traditional forms of literary criticism such as New Criticism and moral-aesthetic criticism, to the more recent Structuralism, Reader Theory, Feminism, and various Post-

Structuralisms. Within this configuration individuals do not always align themselves with one or other of the theoretical positions, rather, they often debate, support, argue against, believe in, deny and utilize a number of them; readers and critics, in other words, occupy multiple, and sometimes contradictory positions in relation to the theories. It is up to the reader of this book to evaluate the various positions represented here and though we have our own preferences our job is not to foist these on others. We would urge, though, a critical assessment of the various theories on the basis of the arguments they offer and an openness to the more radical positions offered in Part Two.

### Note

- 1 C. Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London, Methuen, 1980), p. 7.

# SECTION ONE

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## SAUSSURE

The work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure has played a crucial and formative role in the recent transformation in literary theory. Saussure's influence rests on a single book which records his seminal theory of language, the *Course in General Linguistics*. This was compiled by students and colleagues, after his death in 1913, from notes taken at lectures he delivered between 1907 and 1911 when he taught at the University of Geneva.

Though not as well known as Marx or Freud, Saussure has been ranked with them in terms of the influence he has had on systems of thought developed in the twentieth century. Like Freud and Marx, Saussure considered the manifest appearance of phenomena to be underpinned and made possible by underlying systems and structures; for Marx, it was the system of economic and social relations; for Freud, the unconscious; for Saussure, the system of language. The most radical implications of their work profoundly disrupt the dominant, humanist conception of the world for they undermine the notion that 'man' is the centre, source and origin of meaning. Saussure's influence on literary theory came to the fore in Structuralism and Post-Structuralism, though his work had had significant influence prior to that, notably on the structural linguistics of the Prague Circle and on the structural anthropology of Lévi-Strauss.

It is worth reviewing the main tenets of Saussurean theory since they form the necessary grounding for much of the theory represented in this book. Saussure argued that the object of study for linguistics is the underlying system of conventions (words and grammar) by virtue of which a sign (word) can 'mean'. Language is a system of signs, the sign being the basic unit of meaning. The sign comprises a signifier and signified, the signifier is the 'word image' (visual or acoustic) and the signified the 'mental concept'. Thus the signifier *tree* has the signified *mental concept of a tree*. It is important to note that Saussure is not referring here to the distinction between a name and a thing but to a distinction between the *word image* and the *concept*. The signifier and signified, however, are only separable on the analytic level, they are not separable at the level of thought – the word image cannot be divorced from the mental concept and vice versa.

The first principle of Saussure's theory is that the sign is arbitrary. It is



useful to consider this at two levels: firstly at the level of the signifier, secondly at the level of the signified. At the level of the signifier, the sign is arbitrary because there is no *necessary* connection between the signifier *tree* and the signified *concept of tree*; any configuration of sounds or written shapes could be used to signify *tree* – for instance, *arbre*, *baum*, *arbor* or even *fnurd*.<sup>1</sup> The relation between the signifier and the signified is a matter of convention; in the English language we conventionally associate the word 'tree' with the concept 'tree'. The arbitrary nature of the sign at this level is fairly easily grasped, but it is the arbitrary nature of the sign at the level of the signified that is more difficult to see and that presents us with the more radical implications of Saussure's theory.

Not only do different languages use different signifiers, they also 'cut up' the phenomenal world differently, articulating it through language-specific concepts – that is, they use different signifieds. The important point to grasp here is that language is not a simple naming process, language does not operate by naming things and concepts that have an independently meaningful existence. Saussure points out that 'if words stood for pre-existing entities they would all have exact equivalents in meaning from one language to the next, but this is not true'.<sup>2</sup> One of the most commonly referred to illustrations of this is the colour spectrum. The colours of the spectrum actually form a continuum; so, for instance, that part of the spectrum which runs from blue through to red does not consist of a series of different colours – blue, green, yellow, orange, red – existing independently of each other. The spectrum is, rather, a continuum which our language divides up in a particular way.

Just as there is nothing 'natural' about the way we divide up the colour continuum (indeed, other languages divide it up differently), so there is nothing natural or inevitable about the way we divide up and articulate our world in other ways. Each language cuts up the world differently, constructing different meaningful categories and concepts. It is sometimes difficult to see that our everyday concepts are arbitrary and that language does not simply name pre-existing things. We tend to be so accustomed to the world our language system has produced that it comes to seem natural – the correct and inevitable way to view the world. Yet the logic of Saussure's theory suggests that our world is constructed for us by our language and that 'things' do not have fixed essences or cores of meaning which pre-exist linguistic representation.

Returning to the colour spectrum, we can see that orange is not an independently existing colour, not a point on the spectrum but a range on the continuum: we can also see how the colour orange depends, for its existence, on the other colours around it. We can define 'orange' only by what it is not. There is no essence to the colour, only a differentiation. We know that it is orange because it is not yellow and not red. Orange depends for its meaning on what it is not, i.e. orange is produced by the system of difference we employ in dividing up the spectrum.

For Saussure the whole of our language works in this way. It is a system of difference where any one term has meaning only by virtue of its differential place within that system. If we consider the sign 'food', it could not mean anything without the concept of *not* food. In order to 'cut up' the world, even at this crude level, we need a system of difference, i.e. a basic binary system – food/not food. Language is a far more complex version of this simple binary system. This led Saussure to emphasize the *system* of language, for without the system the individual elements (the signs) could not be made to mean.

An important distinction follows from this: that between *langue* and *parole*. *Langue* is the system of language, the system of forms (the rules, codes, conventions), and *parole* refers to the actual speech acts made possible by the *langue*. Utterances (*paroles*) are many and varied and no linguist could hope to grasp them all. What linguists could do was to study what made them all possible – the latent, underlying system or set of conventions. Saussure then adds a further distinction, that between synchronic and diachronic aspects. The synchronic is the structural aspect of language, the system at a particular moment; the diachronic relates to the history of the language – the changes in its forms and conventions over time. Because signs do not have any essential core of meaning they are open to change, however, in order to 'mean' the sign must exist within a system that is complete at any one moment. This led Saussure to assert that the proper object of study for linguistics was *langue* (the system which made any one act of speech possible), in its synchronic aspect.

The extract we have chosen to represent the work of Saussure deals, for the most part, with the arbitrary nature of the signified and with that aspect of a sign's meaning which is given by virtue of its place in the system.

### Notes

- 1 T. Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (London, Methuen, 1977).
- 2 F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* tr. W. Baskin (London, Fontana/Collins), p. 116.

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## 1 Ferdinand de Saussure,

From *Course in General Linguistics* (1915), pp. 111–19, 120–1

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### 1 Language as Organized Thought Coupled with Sound

To prove that language is only a system of pure values, it is enough to consider the two elements involved in its functioning: ideas and sounds.

Psychologically our thought – apart from its expression in words – is