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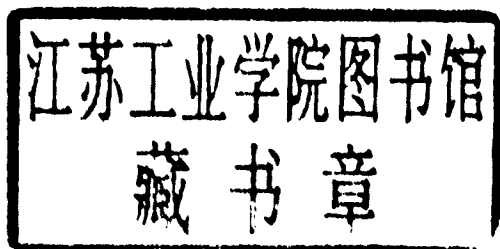# Discourse

Robert Hodge

Literature as Discourse

Textual Strategies in English and History

Robert Hodge

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Preface

In the past thirty years the academic study of the subject 'English' has been transformed in Britain and the USA and the English-speaking world. These far-reaching changes have been part of a groundswell of changes that have profoundly affected all disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. The 'traditional' form of these disciplines emphasized the autonomy of each discipline, the purity of its object, the self-evidence of its founding premises and its independence from contemporary social issues and concerns. In discipline after discipline these assumptions have been challenged, under the banners of interdisciplinarity and critical theory.

Thirty years on, the situation in a subject like English presents a complex picture. On the one hand a wide-ranging series of critiques of the practices of the older forms of the subject has challenged their very legitimacy, and the potential scope of the subject has been transformed. But the new has not simply replaced the old. The two forms sit alongside each other in the education system as a whole in an uneasy coexistence. This is a political problem, not just an academic one. If the field of English is partitioned between traditionalists and progressives, each trying to overcome or marginalize the other, then the resulting polarization and division will weaken the field, at a time when there are many attacks on the continuing existence of critical research in the humanities.

This book was written as an intervention in just such a situation. It aims to construct alliances, not to further the existing divisions: to point out routes that link the old and the new, so that practitioners of each do not feel they must define themselves in opposition to those of the other in ways that would constrain and weaken both. I should stress that I do not wish to be seen as even-handed in this enterprise. I do not aspire to turn the clock back half-way, so that the subject can exist in a twilight world between the old and the new. The genuine advances of the new are too important to be compromised with in any way. But those advances are not

themselves beyond critique, especially where they have adopted a polemical one-sidedness which was necessary in a time of struggle but which will become increasingly inconvenient if it hardens into a new orthodoxy.

In the new construction of 'English', a decisive move has been the decentring of the category of 'literature' and the challenge to the primacy of the text as the organizing principle of the English curriculum. Instead, literature is seen as a social construct, sustained at particular times by particular groups to serve particular interests: an ideological machine concerned with legitimation and control, working through a system that excludes or privileges certain kinds of text (literary texts and the 'canon') and specific readings and modes of reading (literary criticism and its exemplary works). When literature is seen as a contingent phenomenon produced in and by discourse, then a whole set of new objects and connections becomes immediately and directly available for study: social processes that flow through and irresistibly connect 'literary' texts with many other kinds of texts, and social meanings that are produced in different ways from many social sites. The single term that best encapsulates this sense of the object of study is 'discourse'. This concept, following Foucault's influential usage, emphasizes literature as a process rather than simply a set of products; a process which is intrinsically social, connected at every point with mechanisms and institutions that mediate and control the flow of knowledge and power in a community.

But the notion of literature as discourse does not dispense with the category of the literary nor with the importance of text. On the contrary, what is involved is a new theorization of the literary, and a new strategy for dealing with text. Text and discourse in practice form an inseparable pair, because discourse is only available for study in so far as it leaves traces in text. The theorization of text and the development of textual strategies for the study of literature as discourse is therefore one of the main aims of this book: not only because it is important, but also because I see this as the one area which practitioners of the new have culpably neglected, in the heady fascination with contextualism and the open fields of the extra-textual.

The new forms of 'English' need to go beyond their critique of existing methods and strategies of textual analysis. Otherwise there will be nothing to prevent the old methods from continuing to determine critical practice for want of a clear and viable alternative. But the problem is made more confusing because there is not just an absence here. Interdisciplinarity has made available an open-ended set of possible methods, complete with their own difficult terminologies and agendas. This openness can be liberating for readers constrained by the tyranny of a single method, but beyond a certain point it can become another form of oppression, if it becomes a requirement that all these methods and concepts be fully assimilated by anyone who presumes to speak with authority about texts of any kind.

To meet this problem I have adopted the strategy of drawing primarily on

the terms and methods of social semiotics, as described in *Social Semiotics* (Hodge and Kress 1988). *Social Semiotics* provides a coherent and useable framework that is relevant to the present task. It is a synthesis of methods and concepts from a range of disciplines (semiotics, linguistics, psychology, sociology and others), each of which is or ought to be concerned with some aspect of the social production of meaning. *Social Semiotics* attempted to bring these into a single coherent scheme and set of terms. The present book aims to make this body of ideas more accessible, especially for readers whose background is in 'English'. It concentrates on a small core of terms and concepts, explaining and illustrating each of them, and positioning them explicitly against familiar ideas from literary criticism. I have introduced a small number of specialist terms, but I have kept these to a minimum: nine only, not (I hope) an insuperable burden for the reader.

It might be appropriate here to summarize what a 'social semiotic' approach entails, before it is expounded at greater length in the book that follows. At the centre is the search for a textual strategy that goes beyond assumptions of an isolated text and a self-contained language system. The social study of text cannot stay within the category of text as it is normally understood, because social forces and agents and processes all exist outside specific texts and yet are decisive components of their social meaning. But texts are the material carriers of meaning and thus are indispensable objects for the study of social meaning. To neglect or disvalue the search for more powerful analysis of text in the name of a concern for the social, as some have done, is perverse. Instead, social semiotics expands the scope of what it treats as text, including contexts, purposes, agents and their activities as socially organized structures of meaning, text-like objects which are themselves mediated by other texts if they are to be available for any kind of study. Instead of an opposition between a close but asocial reading of a specific class of texts ('literature') and a socially oriented refusal to be entrapped by specific reading strategies, social semiotics looks for strategies of reading that are more intensive, more flexible, more comprehensive and more committed to the study of the social.

One class of meanings involved in the production and reception of text is especially likely to be misunderstood in this context. This is the meaning inscribed in the rule systems that govern literary production itself (reading and writing), the forms and conventions so beloved by formalist writers. From the perspective that sees literature as discourse, these rules are quintessentially social, since the systems of control are implicated in broader mechanisms which provide the context and resources for their operation. This quality of rules affects important categories like 'genre', which are crucial, in addition, to the study of individual texts. Literary conventions and genres are often treated as abstract and formal but not especially social categories. Yet they always operate as part of a social

process, and it is these processes and their agents, as material social beings and events, that are the primary objects for social analysis, not rule systems or structures of meaning in isolation. Social semiotics distinguishes sharply between the rule systems or regimes and what these project on the one hand, and the complex and contradictory structures of meaning produced by actual readers and writers, who are no less social for having a material existence, on the other.

There are three crucial aspects of textual processes that are so important that this book devotes a chapter to each. One is the social meanings and functions of style. Style is a distinguishing mark of aesthetic forms of discourse and a decisive component in the construction of literariness, but the aesthetic is commonly used to neutralize connections with social meanings and purposes. This is itself a potent social fact: but social semiotics seeks to go beyond deconstructing it to a thoroughgoing and precise strategy for reading the social meanings of style.

Another important concept is transformation. A theory of transformation is ultimately a theory of how and why change occurs or is resisted. Such a theory is essential in the study of social forces and processes in literature, the key to methods of interpretation that try to track meanings as they pass from text to text or disappear from the surviving record. At the same time a transformational theory brings out the basic truth that all textual production is implicated in a series of histories, so that all reading is a form of historical inquiry, on whatever scale.

A final integrating concern is with the category of modality, i.e. the set of ways that the meanings of texts are keyed in to structures of meanings outside them in such a way as to command or disclaim belief. In this way 'reality' itself is constructed as an effect of texts. This problematic relationship of texts to reality and truth has been at the core of debates about the nature and functions of literature for millennia. It is a problem that is by no means confined to literature, but is a crucial issue with every major form of text, from propaganda and advertising to the cooler descriptions of science and history.

So far I have mostly enclosed 'English' in warning apostrophes. As a term it is no longer appropriate to any of the forms of pedagogic practice that currently go under that name, and it is especially misleading for the enterprise that I describe in this book. It is a pun that is constantly shifting its ground, but always exerting a reactionary semantic–ideological pull. There are real disadvantages with the word and I wish I could use another, but at the moment it has overwhelming currency as a hegemonic term. I make no attempt to use it consistently because I have no wish to pretend or construct a consistency which it lacks in general use. I use it rather to invoke a recognizable but confused and unstable area of the curriculum, not a single, unitary and eternal object. In this area, at present, 'literature' looms large as a defining object, so I follow this assumption too, trusting

that this usage will enable me to be understood but not defined.

So the content of 'English', for the purposes of this book, opens out in two directions. One can be described under the rubric of 'culture'; the other under that of 'communication'. Traditionally English stayed within the boundaries of high culture, focusing specifically on literary texts. The complex cultural forms of contemporary stratified societies include 'popular culture' as well as prestige forms. They span different media (written, spoken, print, film, art, TV) across time. This book assumes a scope for English that incorporates new objects without jettisoning the objects which constituted the old territory. I have sometimes aspired to be conservative in the choice of texts and issues to study, including the old-fashioned as well as the familiar, but always dealing with them in relation to strategically selected themes or texts or issues that in different ways point to new possibilities and new uses for English.

English is also traditionally concerned with language: with the systems producing social meaning in all genres, for all purposes, for all groups in English-speaking societies. But the specificity of English language and culture can only be properly understood through a comparative approach. So this book includes examples in a range of other languages: European, both ancient (Greek and Latin) and contemporary (French and German), and non-European (Japanese and Aboriginal Australian). Since the book is intended for students of English, the discussions assume no prior knowledge of these particular languages, but at the same time this approach clearly announces the premise that exclusive attention to English texts and the English language is not enough.

Though the book is primarily addressed to students of 'English' at tertiary level, across the spectrum of the varieties of that discipline, I also have two other kinds of reader in mind. One is the classroom teacher of 'English', trained in one set of knowledges and required to be proficient in another; at the leading edge of change in the subject but disvalued and ignored by those who assert leadership in the field. This book does not try to describe the practices of English at primary or secondary school levels, but it does attempt to establish a form of the subject that would help to restore the unity of the subject at all levels, and be of interest and use to all its practitioners.

Another kind of reader I address more tentatively is the historian. In the interdisciplinary movement of the 1960s, the link that seemed most obvious for English was with History. My own early efforts to forge this link from a base in English proved a salutary experience for me, because it looked so promising yet was so difficult to achieve in practice. Part of my problem was that I had misconstrued the relationship between the two disciplines. Initially I supposed that because English was a different and generally bigger subject in the curriculum, then these were different disciplines on the same level, with English perhaps the more comprehensive. I

came to see that English should be regarded as part of History (though the kinds of history taught in Britain and American universities were themselves only different fragments of this single overarching discipline). So the concept of interdisciplinarity in fact serves to reify an existing arbitrary organization of knowledges within academic institutions. But that organization is sustained by economic and political forces that make it extremely difficult to redraw the academic map. So there is a subtext to this book: the conviction that the relation between English and History is not an optional extra but involves the reconstitution of a single enterprise. However, I also recognize the power of the institutional forces that work in the other direction. So this book is not exactly addressed to historians, so much as written to be overheard by them, in hopes that some will be persuaded to allow their own disciplinary projects to be illuminated by a social semiotic approach. And perhaps some day they will welcome their by then eager English colleagues into the capacious arms of a reconstituted practice of history.

A final comment is in order about the strategy and organization of the book. The overall principle of organization is an exposition of the concepts and methods of social semiotics. But even though a concern with method was the motivating principle for the book, I would also stress that method should be seen as immanent in the practice of criticism. So each chapter is concerned with specific points of method, but devotes more space to particular analysis than to formal exposition. The chapters explore issues and texts that were of interest and importance to me. They develop specific arguments, less conclusively than if that were their only aim, but in greater depth than a mere illustration of method would have required: because any method will only seem worthwhile if it can produce original, convincing, important and useable readings.

This book, like every other, owes a great deal to many people. Although I have not done full justice in the text to all those whose writings have stimulated and influenced me, I will not try to correct specific omissions here. More important is to acknowledge individuals who in various informal discursive modes have given me invaluable criticism and support. First of these and on a special level is Gunther Kress, with whom I have worked so closely over the last fifteen years, developing different aspects of a common project. Bill Green's comments and perspective proved a decisive influence at a crucial stage. David Birch, Michael O'Toole, John Frow, Vijay Mishra, Horst Ruthrof and Geoffrey Bolton provided helpful comments on various chapters. John Thompson's comments on the final draft were acute and encouraging, and Julia Swindells and Stephen Cox also provided salutary critiques, just in time for me to benefit from them. Pam Cox's influence is pervasive. She has provided provocation and criticism, materials and orientations on a scale that is beyond mere acknowledgement.

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Social Semiotics and the Crisis in Literary Studies

The terms 'crisis' and 'revolution' are liable to rhetorical overkill, but there is a precise sense of these terms that provides an illuminating description of the current situation in the subject/discipline of English. In his theory of revolutions in science, T. S. Kuhn (1962) describes a typical pattern of periods of 'normal' scientific practices broken up by periods of 'crisis' and 'revolution'. In the crisis stage, the taken for granted authority of the single presiding scheme, which he calls a paradigm, is weakened, and the field is left open for competing protoparadigms to assert their supremacy, engaging in radical critique and the generation of genuinely new theories and practices. In a revolution, in this account, one paradigm achieves dominance, and then proceeds to establish its adequacy over the whole range of the previous paradigm, incorporating most of its objects plus the new ones that signal its own explanatory power.

In these terms, 'English' is still at the crisis stage. 'Traditional' literary criticism, the centrepiece of the subject, is in disarray, following a powerful and convincing assault on its assumptions from a variety of perspectives, which can be labelled Marxist, structuralist and post-structuralist. Even so, departments with the name English or English Literature still dominate the academic landscape at all levels of the curriculum, and will do so for many years to come. And the central reading practice of 'traditional' literary criticism, often called simply 'practical criticism', has only been discredited by these assaults, not replaced. There is as yet no widely recognized alternative form of practical criticism which will allow a new paradigm to carry out the range of explanatory tasks that is implicit in its critique of the old and its hopes for the new. This requires strategies of 'close reading' even more powerful than those on which the previous paradigm prided itself, without the narrowness and limitations that provoked objection, along with equally powerful strategies of 'distant reading', able to make sense of objects as large as genres, periods and disciplines. In this book I hope to contribute to this particular paradigm-forming enterprise.

Traditional criticism revisited

In addressing this urgent task of critique and incorporation of the previous paradigm, it is important to deconstruct the unity of 'traditional'. Not only were there regional differences between the two dominant national systems, British and American; even more significant were differences between levels of each system. When undergraduate English was dominated by the New Criticism in USA and Leavisite practical criticism in Britain, doctorates were still a passport to positions of authority in the academic hierarchy, and doctoral theses assumed competence in a particular reading regime, that of 'literary scholarship'. Lower down in the education system, the rigours of 'practical criticism' had to be considerably adapted to the different conditions of the secondary level classroom.

So 'practical criticism' in its two closely related regional forms was always in some degree oppositional and marginalized within the full set of reading practices of the 'traditional' paradigm, whose repertoire was therefore never either a single monolithic practice or a happy pluralism. Rather, it was constituted by a single functional set of different reading regimes, held together by a set of discursive rules that controlled all contradictions so tightly that they were invisible to practitioners. But the contradictions remained, ready to be mobilized once the dominance of the 'traditional' paradigm was shaken. The new paradigm should not ignore the possibilities thrown up by these contradictions. Nor can it expect to be without a similar structure of contradictions of its own.

In the USA the paradigm options for undergraduate reading practices developed a dual form, deriving from the 'New Critics' and from Northrop Frye, whose *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) offered complementary strategies of 'distant reading'. In Britain there was not this choice, so dominant was the model built around the practical criticism of F.R. Leavis and his followers. The case of Leavis repays closer scrutiny, as a particularly clear and influential instance of the contradictions to be found in paradigm-creators. Between 1930 and 1960, Leavisites filled chairs and lectureships throughout Britain and the Empire and Commonwealth, and generations of English teachers in schools were profoundly influenced by his work. Leavis himself was regarded as a master of practical criticism, unerring in his grasp of the language of literary texts, and indomitable in his defence of high literary standards against the threats of mass culture. And last but not least, his form of criticism was highly compatible with the needs and values of classroom teachers of English of the time, who found the Leavis approach eminently usable. Yet in spite of such success and influence, he was personally excluded by the literary establishment of his day. At Cambridge, where he taught for most of his academic life, he never got a chair, and he saw opponents appointed to chairs partly in order

to oppose him. On the other hand leading critics in British versions of the new paradigm, such as Raymond Williams, acknowledge the role of Leavis in their own intellectual formation. It is clear that in announcing the triumph of the new paradigm we need to recognize the continuities with the old, built out of contradictions in it which proved points of transition and growth, in spite of their declared hostilities and oppositions.

As an example of Leavis's actual practice as a critic, consider the following discussion of the poet William Blake:

> The measure of social collaboration and support represented by the English language didn't make Blake prosperously self-sufficient. He needed more – something that he didn't get. This is apparent in a peculiar kind of difficulty that his work offers to the critic. I am thinking of the difficulty one so often has in deciding what kind of thing it is one has before one.
>
> > A petty sneaking knave I knew –
> > O! Mr Cromek, how do ye do?
>
> – that is clearly a private blow-off. *The Tyger* is clearly a poem (in spite of the bluffed-out defeat in the third stanza). But again and again one comes on the thing that seems to be neither wholly private nor wholly a poem. It seems not to know what it is or where it belongs and one suspects that Blake didn't know. What he did know – and know deep down in himself – was that he had no public: he very early gave up publishing in any serious sense. (Leavis 1952: 187)

This piece of criticism takes for granted aestheticism (in its confident distinction between a poem and a non-poem) and elitism (Blake is being weighed carefully and found somewhat wanting). Language is deferred to, as the primary object of literary judgement, but interestingly the language is not itself analysed or treated as needing analysis. The qualities are so 'clearly' present that no further discussion is required. What he is diagnosing here, in Blake's case, is what would later be labelled cultural deficit theory in sociolinguistics, where it is used to explain the supposed intellectual and scholastic inadequacies of working-class and black students (cf. Bernstein 1971, Labov 1969). Although texts are quoted or alluded to, the focus is not on the texts as such, but on the processes of their production and reception. These processes are represented as intrinsically social, determining the forms of the text and their 'literary' values. And his own text draws attention to its discursive nature, as the dynamic product of a discursive subject whose discursive processes (e.g. 'I am thinking of the difficulty') are themselves part of his meaning.

In this performance it is significant that Leavis is not doing everything he claims to be (e.g. he takes for granted a precise but controversial sociolinguistic history of English and implies methods of linguistic analysis that he never demonstrates). It is equally significant that he carries out

an analysis of the conditions of production of literary meaning that he doesn't see fit to theorize or substantiate, coexisting with the critical programme that he does exemplify: that is to say, there is one programme (a sociolinguistics of literary language) that he privileges but cannot engage in, and another (a discourse analysis of conditions of literary production) that he deploys but cannot theorize or justify. Yet these are two decisive developments that are foregrounded in what I have called the new paradigm and which I try to address in this book.

In the same period in the USA, the New Criticism shared a similar set of strategies and assumptions – unsurprisingly, given many common intellectual roots and a common set of pedagogic needs. As an instance, here is a comment by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, discussing a similar kind of text by Blake in their influential undergraduate textbook *Understanding Poetry*. They quote the whole of a twelve-line poem by Blake, 'The Scoffers' ('Mock on, mock on, Voltaire, Rousseau') and then offer this analysis:

> The speaker begins abruptly by addressing two of the Scoffers, Voltaire and Rousseau. (It does not matter, insofar as the merit of the poem is concerned, whether or not we regard the historical Voltaire and Rousseau . . . as really scoffers against the things of the spirit. The important matter is that Blake should have felt them to be so and should have been able to make poetry out of his indignation against them.) (Brooks and Warren 1976: 329)

This comment takes for granted the self-evidence of the category of 'poetry,' and the centrality of the function of evaluating a poem's 'merit'. We can also see very clearly the pedagogic concern that students should get the correct meaning, and the confidence that ultimately there is a single correct meaning. But we also note the equivocal role of history in establishing the credentials of a reading. It doesn't matter, it seems, what the historical Voltaire and Rousseau 'really' thought, though we are also given to understand that Brooks and Warren do know. It does matter, however, what Blake really thought and that he was sincere in thinking it. Yet there are no markers of sincerity pointed to in the text, and no strategies for an undergraduate reader of the poem to draw on to test this sincerity. Instead, literary scholarship, available to pedagogues but not to students, serves as the basis for an absolute ruling on the truth of history.

We can see here, crossing all that is common to Leavis and the New Criticism, traces of the different orientations of these two forms of the traditional paradigm. The New Criticism shows a greater concern with intellectual history than with social history and the social context of literature. It also shows a keener sense of the gap between the writer (Blake) as constructed in and by the text (the 'speaker') and his material social

existence. A form of the same difference still distinguishes the dominant American and British forms of the new paradigm, in spite of all they have in common. This small instance shows what is also true on a broader scale. The new paradigm is not simply a repudiation of the former paradigm. Its break from the past follows lines of cleavage in that past, and is created out of the contradictions within its practices. So we can see a kind of continuity between the new and the old paradigms, so close that in a sense the new paradigm can be seen as a necessary development of the old. But that is not to say that the break was not real, and difficult, and important.

Key concepts in social semiotics

This book uses social semiotics as a framework for studying literature as discourse, and literary criticism itself as constituted through discursive processes. Here I will use Blake and his critics as a source of examples to illustrate some of the key concepts and terms of social semiotics. One of the most basic concepts is structure. Many forms of structuralism have been formalist and indifferent to social context and process, but this need not be the case, and the sheer obviousness of the basic kinds of semiotic structure is what makes them such powerful categories for the study of social meanings.

A semiotic structure is a significant relationship between two or more elements. There are two basic kinds of semiotic structure: *syntagmatic* (syntactic) structures, and *paradigmatic* structures. A syntagmatic structure is a structure consisting of two or more elements in space or time. 'I knew', for instance, combines a subject 'I' and a verb 'knew' to produce its meaning. Paradigmatic structures are organized sets of alternatives. Such structures determine the meaning of the choice of any element. For instance, Leavis uses both 'I' and 'one' to describe himself in the text I have quoted: these two terms form a paradigmatic set, either member of which Leavis could choose. The meaning of the choice of either is to be found in the terms of the choice itself. In the case of 'I' or 'one', one criterion is clearly the difference between personal ('I') and impersonal ('one'). In this instance, Leavis chooses both, at different times, but this does not cancel the significance of the choice. On the contrary, it signifies an important confusion in his construction of his role as a critic, as paradigm shaper and marginalized voice.

Choice, of itself, does not confer a social meaning. It is only when the terms of the choice are understood by reference to social structures that the resulting meaning is social. In this case, the opposition between 'I' and 'one' is structured by the status of the user or the situation. 'One' is a formal use, marking the speaker as of high status (members of the British royal family, for instance, are fond of 'one') or the context as formal. 'I' is