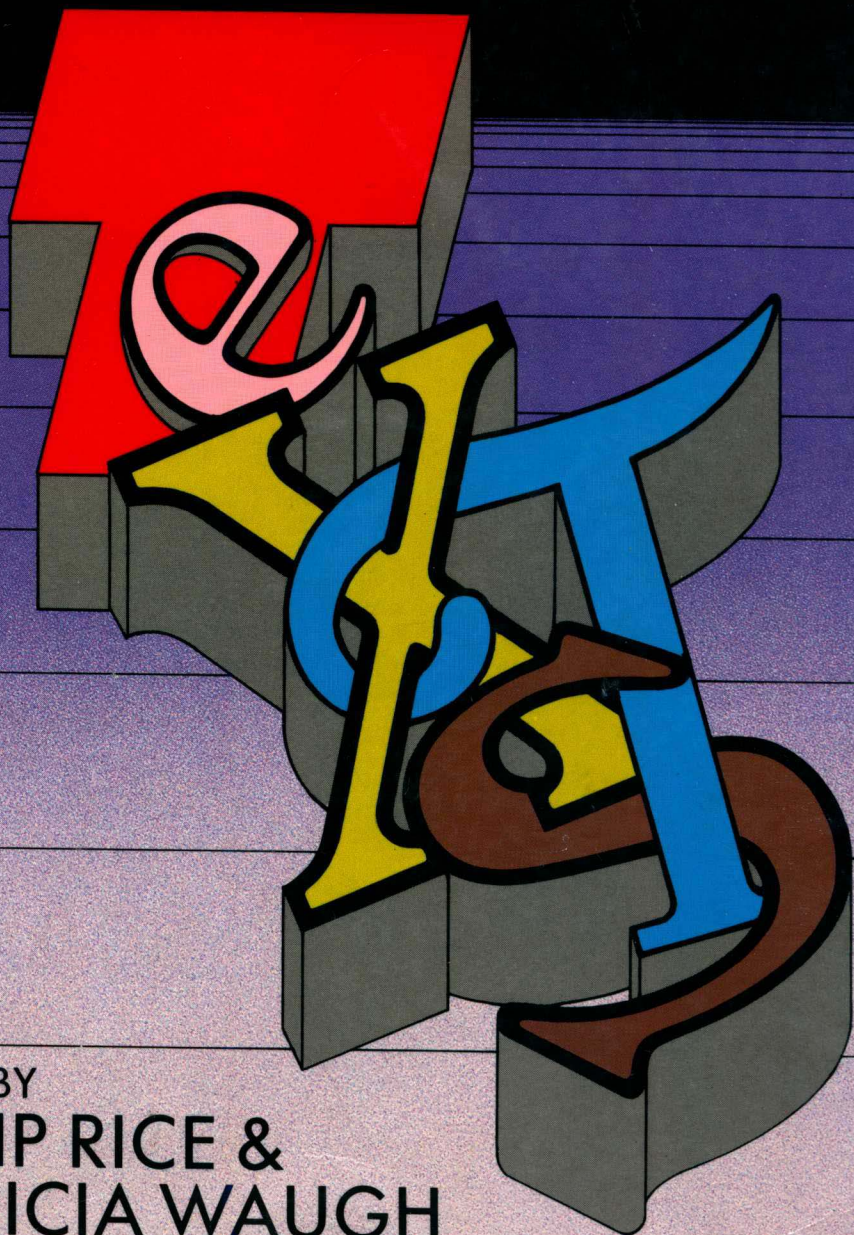


MODERN LITERARY THEORY

A READER

2ND EDITION



EDITED BY
PHILIP RICE &
PATRICIA WAUGH

MODERN LITERARY THEORY

A READER

Second Edition

Philip Rice

Lecturer in Communication Studies, Coventry University
and

Patricia Waugh

Lecturer in English, University of Durham



A member of the Hodder Headline Group
LONDON • NEW YORK • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND

© 1989, 1992 Selection and editorial matter Philip Rice and
Patricia Waugh

First published in Great Britain 1989 by Edward Arnold
Second edition 1992
Reprinted 1996 by Arnold, a member of the Hodder Headline Group
338 Euston Road, London NW1 3BH
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010

Distributed exclusively in the USA by
St Martin's Press Inc.
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Rice, Philip

Modern Literary Theory: Reader. 2 Rev. ed
I. Title II. Waugh, Patricia
801

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Modern literary theory: a reader/[edited by] Philip Rice and
Patricia Waugh. – 2nd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0-340-57599-9: \$17.95

1. Literature—History and criticism—Theory, etc. I. Rice,
Philip. II. Waugh, Patricia.

PN81.M54 1992

801'.95'09045—dc20

91-19707
CIP

ISBN 0 340 57599 9

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or
transmitted in any form or by any means, electronically or mechanically,
including photocopying, recording or any information storage or retrieval
system, without either prior permission in writing from the publisher or a
licence permitting restricted copying. In the United Kingdom such licences
are issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency: 90 Tottenham Court Road,
London W1P 9HE.

Typeset by Saxon Printing Ltd, Derby.
Printed and bound in Great Britain by J W Arrowsmith Ltd, Bristol.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Barbara Rasmussen, Barry Jordan and Jenny Rice for reading and commenting on various versions of the manuscript; and our editor at Edward Arnold, who has obviously realized that patience is a virtue.

The Publisher would like to thank the following for their permission to use copyright material:

Associated Book Publishers (UK) for the extract from *The Subject of Tragedy* by Catherine Belsey published by Methuen & Co. Associated Book Publishers (UK) and W W Norton & Company Inc for the extract from *Ecrits* by Jacques Lacan translated by Alan Sheridan, published by Tavistock Publications and W W Norton & Company, © 1977 by Tavistock Publications Ltd. Associated Book Publishers (UK) and the University of Chicago Press for the extract from *Writing and Difference* by Jacques Derrida, translated by Alan Bass, published by Routledge & Kegan Paul and the University of Chicago Press. Associated Book Publishers (UK) for 'Literature as an ideological form' by Pierre Macherey and Etienne Balibar in *Untying the Text* by Robert Young, published by Routledge & Kegan Paul. Associated Book Publishers (UK) for 'Analysis & Interpretation of the Realist Text' by David Lodge from *Working with Structuralism*, published by Routledge & Kegan Paul. Jonathan Cape Ltd and Macmillan Publishing Company and the Executor of the Estate of Ernest Hemingway for 'Cat in the Rain' by Ernest Hemingway. Croom Helm Ltd for 'Towards a Feminist Poetics' by Elaine Showalter published in *Women Writing about Women* by Mary Jacobus. Drake Marketing Services and Bay Press for 'Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies and Community' by Edward Said for *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-Modern Culture* ed by Hal Foster. Dr Ian Hunter for 'Reading Character'. The Johns Hopkins University Press for 'To Write: An Intransitive Verb?' by Roland Barthes published in *The Structuralist Controversy* by Macksey and Donato. The Johns Hopkins University Press for 'Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory' by Hans Robert Jauss, reprinted from *New Literary History* Vol 2, 1970, 7-37. The Johns Hopkins University Press for an extract from *The Implied Reader* by Wolfgang

viii *Acknowledgements*

lser. The MIT Press for 'Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse' Homi Bhabha, *October* 28 (1984), 125–133. The University of Nebraska Press for 'Art as Technique' by Victor Shklovsky reprinted from *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* translated and with an introduction by Lee T Lemon and Marion Reiss, by permission of the University of Nebraska Press, © 1965. Peter Owen Ltd for the extract from *Course in General Linguistics* by Ferdinand de Saussure edited by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, translated by Wade Baskin. Editions Du Seuil and Collins for the extract from *Image-Music-Text* by Roland Barthes. 'The Text, the Poem and the Problem of Historical Method', © Jerome J. McGann 1985. Reprinted from *The Beauty of Inflections* by Jerome J. McGann (1985) by permission of Oxford University Press. The Society for Education in Film & Television Ltd and Colin, MacCabe for 'Realism and the Cinema. Notes on some Brechtian Theses' *Screen* (1974) Vol 15, no 2. The University of Minnesota Press for Fredric Jameson, 'Periodizing The Sixties', from *The Sixties Without Apology*, eds. S Saynes et al. (1984). The University of Texas Press for 'Discourse in the Novel' by Mikhail Bakhtin, reprinted from *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* by M M Bakhtin, ed by Michael Holquist, translated by Carl Emerson and Michael Holquist, by permission of the University of Texas Press, Austin, © 1981. Verso Press for 'Criticism and Ideology' by Terry Eagleton and 'Lenin and Philosophy' by L Althusser, published in *New Left Books* translated by Ben Brewster. The University Press of Virginia for 'Past Significance and Present Meaning in Literary History', from *Structure and Society in Literary History*, by Robert Weimann (1976).

Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders of material produced in this book. Any rights not acknowledged here will be acknowledged in subsequent printings if notice is given to the publisher.

PREFACE

The success of the first edition 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 twenty-five 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 preface to the first edition (in 1988), it was evident that the rapid growth of literary theory since the mid-sixties and the mass of work devoted to theoretical discussion of literature had produced a radical transformation in literary studies. Critics and philosophers have always theorised 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 and for that reason we have included a revised and expanded section on Postmodernism to reflect this most recent development. Along with this change has occurred the rise of another critical practice referring to itself as the 'New Historicism' and, like Postmodernists, its practitioners tend to work with an eclectic mix of theories and to eschew the allure of holistic or 'totalising' theoretical models which claim to account for all aspects of human experience. We have included a new section, therefore, on the New Historicism. Anyone reading the essays reprinted here in the context of the material gathered in the reader as a whole will recognise that New Historicism is more a practice of reading than a theory of literature, but one which draws loosely and extensively on shifting combinations of many of the theoretical positions represented in earlier parts of the book. Any reflection upon Postmodernism or New Historicism inevitably raises questions about the compatibility or otherwise of different theoretical models and about their philosophical presuppositions. It seems likely that these are issues which will continue to be central to literary theoretical debates in the future.

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 offered 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 1983; Jefferson and Robey 1982; Selden 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.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vii
Preface	ix
PART ONE	1
Introduction	1
Section One: Saussure	
1 Ferdinand De Saussure, From <i>Course in General Linguistics</i> (1915)	8
Section Two: Russian Formalism	
2 Victor Shklovsky, From 'Art as Technique' (1917)	17
Section Three: Structuralism	
3 David Lodge, 'Analysis and Interpretation of the Realist Text' (1980)	24
4 Roland Barthes, 'To Write: An Intransitive Verb?' (1966)	42
Section Four: Marxism	
5 Louis Althusser, From 'Ideology and the State' (1969)	54
6 E. Balibar & P. Macherey, From 'Literature as an Ideological Form' (1978)	62
7 Terry Eagleton, From <i>Criticism and Ideology</i> (1976)	71
Section Five: Reader Theory	
8 Wolfgang Iser, From 'The Reading Process' (1974)	77
9 H.R. Jauss, From 'Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory' (1967)	83
Section Six: Feminism	
10 Elaine Showalter, 'Towards a Feminist Poetics' (1979)	92
11 The Marxist-Feminist Collective, From 'Women Writing: Jane Eyre, Shirley, Villette, Aurora Leigh' (1978)	102
PART TWO	109
Introduction	109
12 Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' (1968)	114

Section One: The Subject

- | | | |
|-----------|---|-----|
| 13 | Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience' (1949) | 122 |
| 14 | Julia Kristeva, 'A Question of Subjectivity – an Interview' (1986) | 128 |
| 15 | Colin MacCabe, From 'Realism and the Cinema; Notes on Some Brechtian Theses' (1974) | 134 |
| 16 | Catherine Belsey, From <i>The Subject of Tragedy</i> (1985) | 142 |

Section Two: Language and Textuality

- | | | |
|-----------|---|-----|
| 17 | Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' (1966) | 149 |
| 18 | Roland Barthes, 'From Work to Text' (1971) | 166 |
| 19 | J. Hillis Miller, 'The Figure in the Carpet' (1980) | 172 |
| 20 | Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, 'Deconstructive Reflections on Deconstruction; In Reply to Hillis Miller' (1980) | 185 |
| 21 | J. Hillis Miller, 'A Guest in the House; Reply to Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's Reply' (1980) | 189 |

Section Three: Discourse and the Social

- | | | |
|-----------|---|-----|
| 22 | M.M. Bakhtin, From 'Discourse in the Novel' (1934) | 197 |
| 23 | Tony Bennett, 'Texts, Readers, Reading Formations' (1983) | 206 |
| 24 | Michel Foucault, From 'The Order of Discourse' (1971) | 221 |
| 25 | Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse' (1983) | 234 |
| 26 | Ian Hunter, From 'Reading Character' (1979) | 242 |
| 27 | Edward Said, From 'Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies and Community' (1983) | 248 |

Section Four: New Historicism

- | | | |
|-----------|---|-----|
| 28 | Robert Weimann, 'Past Significance and Present Meaning in Literary History' (1976) | 261 |
| 29 | Jerome J. McGann, 'The Text, the Poem, and the Problem of Historical Method' (1985) | 289 |

Section Five: Postmodernism

- | | | |
|-----------|--|-----|
| 30 | Fredric Jameson, 'Periodizing the 60s' (1984) | 309 |
| 31 | Patricia Waugh, 'Stalemates?: Feminists, Postmodernists and Unfinished Issues in Modern Aesthetics' (1991) | 341 |

Bibliography 361

Index 367

PART ONE

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

2 Introduction

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' (1980, p7).

... 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*).

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 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

4 *Introduction*

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 second edition of the Reader has a new section on New Historicism and a revised section on Postmodernism. It is interesting that in both these most recent critical developments, theory as coherent 'grand narrative', begins to break down. In its place, a hybrid and shifting mix of aspects of and insights from earlier, 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 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. Within the terms of both of them, there can be no transcendent theoretical 'view from nowhere', for in each case the object of theoretical enquiry is seen inevitably to be a construction of theoretical discourses arising out of specific cultural situations.

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.

SECTION ONE

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 they have 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

6 Modern Literary Theory

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* (example used by Hawkes 1977). 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' (1974, p116). 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.

1 Ferdinand de Saussure, From *Course in General Linguistics*

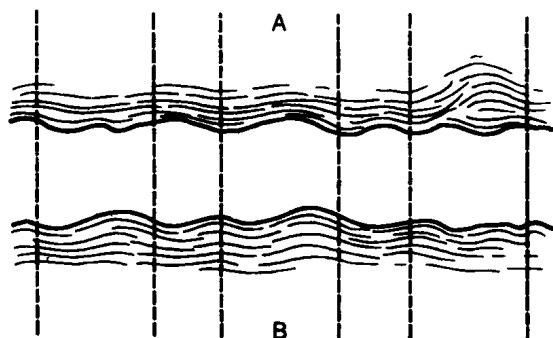
p111-119, 120-121

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 only a shapeless and indistinct mass. Philosophers and linguists have always agreed in recognizing that without the help of signs we would be unable to make a clear-cut, consistent distinction between two ideas. Without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. There are no pre-existing ideas and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language.

Against the floating realm of thought, would sounds by themselves yield predelimited entities? No more so than ideas. Phonic substance is neither more fixed nor more rigid than thought; it is not a mold into which thought must of necessity fit but a plastic substance divided in turn into distinct parts to furnish the signifiers needed by thought. The linguistic fact can therefore be pictured in its totality – i.e. language – as a series of contiguous subdivisions marked off on both the indefinite plane of jumbled ideas (*A*) and the equally vague plane of sounds (*B*). The following diagram gives a rough idea of it:



The characteristic role of language with respect to thought is not to create a material phonic means for expressing ideas but to serve as a link between thought and sound, under conditions that of necessity bring about the reciprocal delimitations of units. Thought, chaotic by nature,