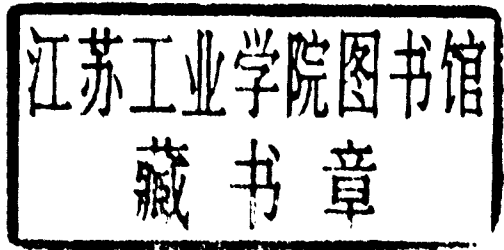

Literary Theory Today

Edited by
PETER COLLIER
and
HELGA
GEYER-RYAN

Literary Theory Today

Edited by PETER COLLIER
and HELGA GEYER-RYAN



Polity Press

Copyright © in this collection, introduction,
chapters 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 11 and 12, and this
translation of chapters 2, 3, 4, 9 and 10
Polity Press, 1990. Chapter 1 copyright
© The Johns Hopkins University Press; chapter 2
copyright © Peter Bürger; chapter 5 copyright
© Stephen Greenblatt; chapter 9 copyright © Sarah
Kofman; chapter 10 copyright © Editions Denoël;
chapter 13 copyright © Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

First published 1990 by Polity Press
in association with Basil Blackwell

Editorial office:
Policy Press, 65 Bridge Street,
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Marketing and production:
Basil Blackwell Ltd
108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF, UK

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation
of short passages for the purposes of criticism
and review, no part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or
transmitted, in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or
otherwise, without the prior permission of the
publisher.

Except in the United States of America, this book
is sold subject to the condition that it shall
not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent,
resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without
the publisher's prior consent in any form of
binding or cover other than that in which it is
published and without a similar condition
including this condition being imposed on the
subsequent purchaser.

ISBN 0 7456 0477 3

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

Typeset in 10/12 pt Baskerville by Photo-graphics, Honiton, Devon
Printed in Great Britain by T.J. Press (Padstow) Ltd.

Notes on Contributors

HOMI K. BHABHA Lecturer at the School of African and Asian Studies, University of Sussex. Author of *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, forthcoming).

PETER BÜRGER Professor of French and Comparative Literature at the University of Bremen. Author of *Theory of the Avant-garde* (Manchester: Manchester University Press and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) and *The Decline of Modernism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, forthcoming).

PETER COLLIER Lecturer in French at the University of Cambridge and Fellow of Sidney Sussex College. Author of *Proust and Venice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Co-editor of *Visions and Blueprints. Avant-garde Culture and Radical Politics in Early Twentieth-century Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988) and *Modernism and the European Unconscious* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

HELGA GEYER-RYAN Associate Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Amsterdam. Author of *Der andere Roman. Versuch über die verdrängte Ästhetik des Populären* (Amsterdam and New York: Heinrichshofen, 1983) and *Fables of Desire* (Cambridge: Polity Press, forthcoming).

STEPHEN GREENBLATT Professor of English, University of California, Berkeley. Author of *Renaissance Self-fashioning. From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980), and *Shakespearean Negotiations. The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). Editor of *Allegory and Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

HANS ROBERT JAUSS Professor of Literary Criticism and Romance Philology, University of Konstanz. Author of *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*

(Brighton: Harvester and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), and *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

ANN JEFFERSON Lecturer in French at the University of Oxford and Fellow of New College. Author of *The Nouveau Roman and the Poetics of Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), and *Reading Realism in Stendhal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Co-editor of *Modern Literary Theory. A Comparative Introduction* (London: Batsford, 2nd edition, 1986).

BARBARA JOHNSON Professor of French and Comparative Literature, Harvard University. Author of *Défigurations du langage poétique. La seconde révolution baudelairienne* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979), *The Critical Difference. Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), and *A World of Difference* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2nd edition, 1989).

SARAH KOFMAN Philosopher, University of Paris I (Sorbonne). Author of *Nietzsche et la métaphore* (Paris: Galilée, 1983), *The Enigma of Woman. Woman in Freud's Writings* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), *Nietzsche et la scène philosophique* (Paris: Galilée, 1986), *The Childhood of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), and *Freud and Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

JULIA KRISTEVA Professor in the Department of Textual and Documentary Sciences, University of Paris VII. Practising psychoanalyst. Author of *About Chinese Women* (London: Boyars, 1977), *Desire in Language. A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), *Tales of Love* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), and *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

MICHAEL RIFFATERRE Professor of French, Columbia University. Author of *Essais de stylistique structurale* (Paris: Flammarion, 1971), *Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978 and London: Methuen, 1980), and *Text Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK Professor of English, University of Pittsburgh. Author of *In Other Worlds. Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York and London: Routledge Methuen, 1988). Co-editor of *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

ELAINE SHOWALTER Professor of English, Princeton University. Author of *A Literature of Their Own. British Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977 and London: Virago, 1978), *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1987). Editor of *The New Feminist Criticism. Essays on Women, Literature and Theory* (New York: Random House, 1985 and London: Virago, 1986).

ROBERT WEIMANN Member of the Academy of Arts, German Democratic Republic. Author of *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater. Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), and *Structure and Society in Literary History* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2nd edition, 1984).

ALBRECHT WELLMER Professor of Philosophy, University of Konstanz. Author of *Critical Theory of Society* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), *Ethik und Dialog. Elemente des moralischen Urteils bei Kant und in der Diskursethik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1986), and *In Defence of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press and Boston: MIT Press, forthcoming).

Contents

Notes on Contributors	vii
Acknowledgements	
Introduction: Beyond Postmodernism PETER COLLIER and HELGA GEYER-RYAN	1
Part I	11
The Surprise of Otherness: A Note on the Wartime Writings of Paul de Man BARBARA JOHNSON	13
The Problem of Aesthetic Value PETER BÜRGER	23
Metaphysics at the Moment of its Fall ALBRECHT WELLMER	35
Part II	51
The Theory of Reception: A Retrospective of its Unrecognized Prehistory HANS ROBERT JAUSS	53
Resonance and Wonder STEPHEN GREENBLATT	74
Text, Author-Function and Society: Towards a Sociology of Representation and Appropriation in Modern Narrative ROBERT WEIMANN	91

Part III	107
Undecidability as Hermeneutic Constraint MICHAEL RIFFATERRE	109
Literariness, Dominance and Violence in Formalist Aesthetics ANN JEFFERSON	125
Conversions: <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> under the Sign of Saturn SARAH KOFMAN	142
Identification and the Real JULIA KRISTEVA	167
Part IV	177
Feminism and Literature ELAINE SHOWALTER	179
Articulating the Archaic: Notes on Colonial Nonsense HOMI K. BHABHA	203
Poststructuralism, Marginality, Post-coloniality and Value GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK	219
Index	245

Introduction: Beyond Postmodernism

I

Literary and cultural theory are in ferment today because literature and culture themselves appear threatened in our 'postmodern' age, a post-industrial age of instantaneous electronic communications, where the privileged status of the text and the coherence of cultural activity are increasingly destabilized. Jean-François Lyotard has described this world (too indulgently, perhaps) in *The Postmodern Condition*. But although it could be argued that this 'postmodern' ideology is itself a product of the anarchic liberalism of the new right, disguising prescription as description when it declares modernism to be played out and artistic experimentation and ideological critique outdated, one has to admit that there is little virtue in trying to revive an idealized past. Moreover, the crisis of culture and its theory indicate above all the precarious state of what Habermas has called 'the project of modernity', thus threatening the most vital discourses of legitimization and critique which we have inherited from the European Enlightenment. Even in the recent past, cultural discourse seemed regulated by what Lyotard calls 'grand narratives', which included the reassuringly subversive discourses of twentieth-century modernism – formalism, marxism, psychoanalysis. The arguments of Saussure, Marx and Freud initially inspired the most acute languages of modern literary criticism, seemingly able to make the poem or the novel totally explicable by an all-powerful theory. But our late twentieth-century world has seen these originary, totalizing theories called into question and their unquestioning exponents lose their authority. Perhaps the very sophistication of their later practitioners, cutting the theories loose from their original, specific militancy, has weakened their claim to reveal hidden meaning. Roland Barthes moved from complex systems of coded semiotic meaning to a position of apparently capricious textual enjoyment; Pierre Macherey and Louis Althusser argued that the ideology expressed by a text was a practice largely independent of the socio-

economic infrastructure; Lacan, moving beyond Freud's study of the process whereby the artist unwittingly impressed his own symbolic meaning into the work of art, found that there was no essential self behind the shifting mental hall of mirrors which constituted the 'subject' of thought and discourse.

The claims of criticism based on such universal and holistic premises, then, have come to seem increasingly 'perverse', and have been radically challenged by less totalizing movements like 'deconstruction', 'new historicism', or 'feminism', which are as partisan in their way as the 'grand narratives', but which acknowledge and assume their own partial character. There is none the less much continuity – deconstruction, for instance, derives its model of close reading from formalism, its ideological demystification from marxism, and its hermeneutic reversal from psychoanalysis. So it seems to be possible to acknowledge the strength of Lyotard's postmodern analysis, agreeing that there are no transcendental foundations of knowledge, no privileged viewpoints – and yet not feel bound passively to lament the loss of 'the project of modernity' and the lack of any effective modern critique, or actively to connive at the creation of a world where all cultural activity might be judged equally meaningful or meaningless. Thus the authors of the essays in this volume all acknowledge the crisis in literary and cultural theory, but they all suggest ways of working through and beyond it.

Even a postmodern critic like Lyotard does in fact assume the powers of critical discourse, while refusing to elaborate any 'narrative' of its legitimation. And although the dominant current of poststructuralist criticism today, deconstruction, eschews legitimation, since it pursues a negative hermeneutics, showing in every author studied a self-contradictory discourse, and since it follows no principle other than the quest for 'difference/deferment' (rejecting, as metaphysical illusion, any originary discursive meaning inscribed within writing, or any founding humanist significance), its representatives have none the less in practice directed their theories towards the dissection and subversion of the powerful symbolic institutions which support the status quo. However, what these dismantlers of ideology and symbolic domination still tend to avoid is a theoretical rationale, for fear of complicity with the very metaphysics and essences which they have attacked not only for being false but also for supporting an oppressive social hegemony. In his post-Marxian *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno already tries to banish transcendental aesthetics from his appreciation of the fragmented, negative artifacts of his archetypal modernist artists, Beckett, Kafka and Celan. Beckett's work, for instance, is designated as a tendentially silent artistic act of resistance to the meliorative project of bourgeois aesthetics. And Derrida, the philosopher who haunts all poststructuralist criticism, has found a blind spot vitiating the conscious project of every philosopher and writer he has discussed, from Plato to Nietzsche and Heidegger, from Rousseau to Freud.

Yet a series of recent articles and books has revealed the cruel paradox which lies at the heart of this deconstructive purism. The pro-Nazi stances

of Heidegger and Paul de Man, both writers who had seemed dauntingly, quintessentially independent, have been experienced retrospectively as catastrophic. Whereas the right-wing politics of Yeats, Pound, Eliot and Lewis, not to mention Marinetti, Céline or Gottfried Benn, have long been the subject of critical discrimination between degrees and kinds of commitment in expression and action, Heidegger and de Man were somehow assumed to have deactivated the crude relation of philosophy and literature to personality and society, making their play of argument sublimely inclusive of, yet untouched by, contingency. So that the shock was the greater when, at the height of the sway of American deconstruction (when it appeared to have subsumed the other languages of criticism into its negative hermeneutics), there was a return of the repressed voice of its political and philosophical 'other'. Indeed, in the crisis unleashed by the revelation of Paul de Man's wartime collaboration, the political repressed resurfaced in its most grotesquely 'uncanny' form, as fascism. For the languages of modern criticism, even in their poststructuralist forms, supposed at least a negative principle behind their critical practice: rejecting the dangerously simplistic languages of fascism – racism and imperialism, patriarchy and coercive identity, strictly monological or binary thinking, utilitarian rationality. Yet one advantage of the crisis is that now, the history of modern literary theory has to be scrutinized and its unresolved questions used to rethink the future.

For these reasons Barbara Johnson's critical review of Paul de Man and the politics of deconstruction, which urges a reinterpretation of the political mistakes and misconstruals of the founder of American deconstruction, opens this book's reassessment of modern literary theory. It exemplifies a crucial conjuncture in the postwar history of literary theory. Johnson rejects the charge that deconstruction must lead to a total uncertainty of language and ideology, and shows how an analysis of de Man's wartime collaborationist writings, and of their suppression, just like Schiller's denial of violence in Kant's aesthetics, can teach us the need to admit the political parameter into literary theory.

The separation of the literary text from society and with it the repression of the problems of interpretation and literary value are discussed by Peter Bürger in a critique of Pierre Bourdieu, whose authoritative *Distinction* shows up the social strategies and identifications disguised behind positions of aesthetic taste and judgement. Bürger admits that all criteria of evaluation are historically limited, although he is suspicious of Adorno's tendency to interpret the innovations of the artistic avant-garde as manifestations of an objective development of the artistic material. For Bürger it is vital to assert the continuing possibility of differentiating aesthetic values against what he sees as a pessimistic reduction by Bourdieu of cultural consumption to social determinism, where literature and culture are considered primarily as an apparatus for the distribution of cultural 'capital' and social distinction.

The philosophical implications of both Barbara Johnson's revision of deconstruction, and Bürger's challenge to Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, are explored in Albrecht Wellmer's analysis of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* as a

concept of reason conscious of the seductive alliance between the power of critique and the temptation of metaphysics. Despite Adorno's attempt to replace Kant's faculty of reason, judged metaphysical, with concrete artistic practice, Wellmer argues that the theories of Derrida show that Adorno himself was tempted to invest aesthetics with metaphysical presence.

In fact, the essays by Johnson, Bürger and Wellmer, which constitute Part I of this book, form the cornerstones of our field of investigation: the repositioning of critical practice after the misadventures of theory, once its lingering metaphysical assumptions (as to truth, value, use) and its discursive integrity (seeking a pure position from which to approach other positions) had been called into question. Their essays tackle the extremes of political collusion, the collapse of aesthetic values, and philosophical nihilism, which seem to threaten the deconstructive position. All three argue that critique is still possible despite the crisis but that it can only advance by taking its very difficulties as the starting point of its analyses.

II

The paramount importance of history in shaping, determining and legitimizing our perception and interpretation of works of art, and creating an archeology of texts from the past, is the theme of the second part of our book. Both Hans Robert Jauss and Stephen Greenblatt are concerned with the dialectical process which establishes relations of continuity and/or difference between past and present. Jauss's 'reception theory' takes as its starting point the context within which commentators on the Bible established different interpretative strategies, according to whether they saw themselves retrieving original meaning, recording accreted significance, or reinterpreting in the light of new situations. Jauss moves in the last analysis to emphasize the historical continuity of the activity of interpretation, despite the shifts of content and context emphasized by reception theory, where the parameters of meaning are displaced by the creative input of the reader.

Greenblatt, like Jauss, insists on 'the historicity of texts' and the 'textuality of history', and he too rejects universal criteria of value and meaning. Yet he goes further than Jauss in foregrounding discontinuities in the encounter between past and present. His 'new historicism' questions the acts of cultural interpretation and selection which assign value to some artifacts rather than to others. He considers the fate of the divergent objects which are invested with value by museums, and which are caught in the dialectic of the respectful 'resonance' which the work's rooting in a cultural context tends to inspire, and the shock of 'wonder' which original (and hence alien) creativity may provoke. Greenblatt gives preference to the specificity of the historical moment and its alienating, disruptive effect on the normalizing assumption of continuity, accepting the fact that the historical perspective of his *own* theory is thereby called into question. And, in formulating the

challenge that his 'new historicism' offers to teleological aesthetics, Greenblatt traces the contingent historical accidents of his personal trajectory and research.

But the problems of founding such an interpretative strategy may well seem to threaten to render all cultural production entirely arbitrary. And it is against the danger of turning the precariousness of representation itself into an ontological absolute that Robert Weimann, adapting the Marxian concept of appropriation, shows how different literary forms represent different stages of the crisis of representation. He rejects the two extreme poles of the relation of language to reality, the structuralist position that sign-systems are autonomous, and the vulgar Marxist view that they directly reflect reality. In constructing a history and sociology of modern forms of self-reflexive literary representation, he shows how certain key works by Flaubert, James and Hemingway signal self-consciously and self-critically the reference of their own texts to the world they attempt to appropriate.

III

The violence and constraints affecting the relation of the historical to the textual had traditionally been ignored by advocates of a strictly structuralist semiotics, from the Russian Formalists in the 1920s, who defined literature by its 'literariness', excluding all other criteria, to the French critics of the 1960s, whose semiotics were inspired less by linguistic theory itself than by its conjunction with the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss. But since then there has been a revolution within linguistics itself. The whole development of pragmatics has challenged not only the self-contained systems of structuralism, but also, it would seem, the generally self-consuming theories of the lack of overarching meaning which Derrida's philosophy has inspired.

Thus the third part of our book opens with chapters by Michael Riffaterre and Ann Jefferson, who acknowledge the need to redefine the aims of a poststructuralist formalism. Their 'targets' are the 'undecidability' which for Jacques Derrida, and critics like Geoffrey Hartmann, removes key literary texts from monologic significance, and the 'literariness' which for Roman Jakobson cuts off the text from the world. Michael Riffaterre shows how an ambiguous poetic discourse can yield effective meanings without the principle of 'undecidability' paralysing hermeneutic activity; using texts by Blake and Wordsworth which are notoriously difficult to interpret, he shows how the reader calls on a wider cultural judgement to override the primary 'undecidability' of the text as provisionally segmented, and thus deploys a heightened hermeneutic awareness, leading to a reprocessing of the work in terms of a revised principle of segmentation. This second stage of interpretation then frees the meaning which was blocked within the text, but also opens it up to wider areas of public interpretation, through intertextual activity. Ann Jefferson re-evaluates the two key figures of the tradition of

Russian Formalism and suggests that Roman Jakobson's quest for stylistic universals has oversimplified the operation of language by ignoring its socio-political dimension, which is better formulated by the aesthetic theory of Mikhail Bakhtin, whose notion of fiction as a polyphonic and carnivalesque activity is grounded in a theory of socio-linguistic agonistics.

As critics working from a linguistic basis have needed to refocus structuralism and contextualize its interpretative activities, so psychoanalytic critics have seen the power and principles of their founding exegetical system simultaneously exploited and challenged. Sarah Kofman, who has published elsewhere her theoretical studies of Freud's aesthetics, here conducts a detailed reading of one of Freud's own exemplary readings, that of *The Merchant of Venice*, in order to deconstruct an over-simplified psychoanalytic symbolism. It transpires that, even though Freud avoided being entirely constrained by the transformational structures suggested by his own model of the dream work, he still did not bring out the social dimension of meaning which Shakespeare's language and structure convey in the case of his female and his Jewish subjects, whose discourse is laden with subversive symbolic connotations and values which challenge simplistic readings.

The critique of a given and stable psychoanalytic symbolism continues in the next chapter, where all of Julia Kristeva's experiences as a pioneer of semiotics, a supporter of feminism, and a practising psychoanalyst feed in to her theoretical and discursive strategies. She demonstrates how Lacan's notion of 'identification' illuminates both a case history and a reading of Joyce. But Kristeva's essay moves beyond a position of simple Freudian or feminist ideology, for, if a notion of identity is necessary to render the psyche operational, the semiotic pleasure of readerly projection implies a concomitant strategy of reversal of identification. She finds the figure of the wandering Ulysses as significant a psychological position as that of Freud's classic Oedipus complex; her model highlights the powerful circulation of desire not only in the modernist text, but also in the controversial transference postures she explores in her therapeutic work.

IV

The need to revise modes of analysing the expression and representation of women is implicit in Kristeva's essay, as it is in Kofman's. But the relation of the underlying ideology to the mode of reading practised, and the social position it implies, is explicitly brought into focus by Elaine Showalter's survey of the developments and prospects of feminist criticism. She shows how interpretations of the feminine are inescapably related to questions of race and class, how psychoanalytic or other theories must be contextualized in relation to their different frames of institutionalized literary and cultural activity. Showalter refuses the comforts of an essential feminine nature. But she also rejects naive double-binds like those allegedly opposing 'equality' to 'difference', or 'Anglo-Saxon pragmatists' (compiling a female literary

history) to 'French theoreticians', (conceptualizing a quintessentially female language). As she unfolds the different diachronic stages and synchronic strategies of a feminist literary enterprise she comes to the conclusion that the most urgent issue of today's theoretical debate, beyond the relationship between the concepts of difference and identity in the discourse of gender, is the power of a radically new discourse, questioning all given institutions, to displace not only literary canons and gender stereotypes, but all the parameters of critical discourse in other fields.

The consequent project, to re-situate oneself as critical subject while maintaining a position of effective agency and rejecting the temptations of (patriarchal) essentialism or (institutionalized) pragmatism, has implications beyond feminism and opens a debate on the place of the critical subject in terms of race and class, as well as in terms of the role of the teacher and critic, and the importance of non-literary cultural activity. And as Showalter unwrites patriarchal discourse, so Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak challenge the identities imposed by Western discourse in general on the third world, thus calling into question the limited horizons within which many critics tend to operate. Homi Bhabha points out the ambiguity of the most critically aware literary visions of Empire, those of Forster and Conrad, even or particularly when they claim to speak on behalf of the non-European, and he reads their limitations in the light of the contradictory ideology of non-literary administrative documents, whose repressed sub-text he elucidates using the models of Derrida's 'in-between' and Freud's uncanny. Gayatri Spivak argues that the role of the teacher should be scrutinized, in order to focus on, for example, women's expression in a Bengali film, rather than on a traditional (white, patriarchal) literary text. She engages Foucault as well as Marx in her self-critical exposure of the difficulties of the commentator wishing to assume her marginal position without rendering it unproblematically dominant. Both Bhabha and Spivak, then, elaborate the difficulties of articulating a notion of cultural identity. They reject that identity whenever it is defined merely as the 'other' (the negative image) of a position of coercive power, and their models take on a resonance which disturbs our own readings and positions, whatever our progressive intentions.

Indeed, it is precisely this spirit of critical and self-critical enquiry which has inspired this volume of original essays, precluding any monolithic conclusion as to the current state of literary and cultural theory and its future prospects. None the less the very variety and energy of the authors' different responses is already a kind of answer. We find that the sophisticated voices of the new feminist consciousness and the post-colonial third-world intelligentsia are not to be contained by traditional ideologies, even those speaking in their favour. They will use the terminology of Marx and Freud, but they will constantly question the ideological schemata which these systems also presuppose. However, they do not contradict the new political conscience of deconstruction or the heightened social awareness of post-Freudian psychoanalysis. And formalism is able to criticize its linguistic

foundations, while still providing a model of critical reading, compatible, moreover, with the aims of critical hermeneutics and reception theory. Marxism and the Frankfurt School have distanced themselves from any simple theory of the relation between culture and society, but the models of appropriation and negative dialectics which they inspired still furnish important theoretical instruments. New developments in historical and social theory reopen the whole question of cultural and aesthetic value, ebulliently in the new historicism, more problematically, perhaps, in the case of modernist fiction and ethnic cinema. The destabilization of the critical metalanguages of modernism has, clearly, not been fatal.

In her opening chapter, Barbara Johnson quotes Paul de Man on the uncertain relations of language and art to the world:

it is not a priori certain that language functions according to principles which are those or which are *like* those, of the phenomenal world. It is by no means an established fact that aesthetic values are *incompatible*. What is established is that their compatibility, or lack of it, has to remain an open question.

The contributors to this book show how important, and exhilarating, it is for them to call into question the bases of their own interpretative activity. Certainly, no one critical language can now claim hegemony. Metaphysics and politics will not disappear. The lesson for the critic is to remain vigilant, and *foreground* their interference with interpretation, instead of wishing it away. Formalism must compose with reader-response strategies, psychoanalysis must open up its symbolic systems to feminist models. Marxism must come to terms with a dissolution of nineteenth-century genres as well as class-models. Each position is insecure: the place of the sacred Jewish texts in Greenblatt's museum is no less fragile than the authority of Spivak's Bengali film critic. Bürger cannot prevent life overrunning art in Beuys' piles of felt and traces of fat, nor can Kristeva isolate the polymorphous liberation of the Joycean text from the surrogate maternal identity which she offers to disturbed female desire. But their openness is not to be confused with total relativity. The circulation of textual, social and mental energies driving contemporary criticism to transgress boundaries is objectively unsettling; it is still emotionally and intellectually allied to the vast enterprise of demystification and liberation that mark our modern age.

It has been suggested by Gianni Vattimo, in a synthesis of earlier reactions by Benjamin, Adorno, and Heidegger, that we are now faced with 'the death or decline of art', where avant-garde critics as well as avant-garde artists are forced to enact the options of 'utopia' (a naive belief in the suffusion of the whole of life with aesthetic power), 'silence' (using a vestigial, self-destructive art negatively, to resist any social recuperation of culture), or 'kitsch' (a manipulative mass culture). We believe that the present volume shows that avant-garde criticism is able to resist these extremities, and that,

without succumbing to an unjustified 'pathos of the future', it shows its ability to maintain a vigorous critical and self-critical project, precisely by taking these apparent limitations as its thematic challenge.

Peter Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan
Cambridge 1990