

Modern criticism and theory
a reader
2nd ed.

edited by David Lodge ;
revised and expnded by Nigel Wood.

Modern Criticism and Theory

A Reader

Edited by
David Lodge

Revised and expanded by
Nigel Wood



LONGMAN

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

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

'Theory' has more than one meaning in this context. Structuralism has generated in literary critics a much greater interest in, and anxiety about, the theory of their own subject (what is sometimes called, after Aristotle, poetics) than was formerly the case, at least in Britain and America. But the recent theorization of literary studies has borrowed its terms and concepts very largely from other

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

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

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

There are numerous guides to structuralism and post-structuralism now available, and introductions to the work of individual critics and theorists. These publications are often extremely useful, but they are no substitute for the texts upon which they comment, though paradoxically they are often cheaper and easier to obtain. There are also several critical anthologies which represent particular types of criticism, such as deconstruction, or reader-response criticism. *Modern Criticism and Theory* aims to provide within the covers of a single book

a selection of important and representative work from all the major theoretical schools or tendencies in contemporary criticism, and to provide materials for tracing their historical evolution.

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

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

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

20th Century Literary Criticism was based on an undergraduate course called ‘Comparative Critical Approaches’ which I taught for many years at Birmingham University. The materials for this Reader have, to a large extent, been gathered and sifted in connection with a weekly postgraduate seminar on post-Renaissance

literature and modern critical theory for which I have been responsible for an even longer period at Birmingham. I would like to thank the many postgraduate students and occasional visitors who attended this seminar over the years for their contributions to my own education, and to thank the colleagues who regularly shared the strain of grappling with difficult and demanding texts – especially Deirdre Burton and Tom Davis. I also gratefully acknowledge the research assistance of Adrian Stokes and the help of Jackie Evans in compiling the index. Finally I should like to thank the colleagues in the Arts Faculty at the University of Birmingham – especially Anthony Bryer, Michael Butler, Ceri Crossley and Bob Smith – who generously assisted me in identifying quotations and allusions, and translating foreign words.

Birmingham, January 1987

Although just over a decade may seem a long time when assessing the vitality and continued relevance of theory, the project of revising David Lodge's first edition confirmed the soundness of its original guiding principles. Almost every university or college syllabus now introduces students to theoretical debates or approaches and there has been a parallel rise in the number of theory primers to aid this task. With such enforced familiarity, however, there have emerged at least two main potential dangers: that the individual accents of the theorists may become obscured by their incorporation into schools of critical thought, and that the excitement of coming to terms with original insights may be tempered by the premature need to develop clear positions for or against. The hope is, therefore, that this collection of seminal critical writing will be rather more provocative than definitive.

The essays I have added – indicated by my initials at the side of the head-notes – not only extend the range of the debates represented in 'the first' edition but also suggest where contemporary emphases lie. As with the earlier volume, I have attempted wherever possible to include contributions that demonstrate how theory might suggest critical practice. They are also texts that I have enjoyed discussing with postgraduates and, as one of the staff members who inherited the entirely pleasurable task of leading David Lodge's Theory Seminar at Birmingham and, latterly, starting one of my own at De Montfort University, I owe him and several generations of students an obvious debt.

Nigel Wood
Leicester, November 1998

We are grateful to the following for permission to reproduce copyright material:

Basil Blackwell Ltd/Cornell University Press for 'The Typology of Detective Fiction' by Tzvetan Todorov from *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. from French by Richard Howard, originally published in French under the title *La Poétique de la Prose*, © 1971 by Editions du Seuil. Copyright © 1977 by Cornell University; Columbia University Press for extracts from 'The Interpreter's Freud' by Geoffrey Hartman from *Easy Pieces*, 1985. 'The Bodily Encounter with the Mother' by Luce Irigaray in *Sexes et Parentes*, 'The Ethics of Linguistics' by Julia Kristeva from *Desire in Language* ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine & Leon S. Roudiez, all © Columbia University Press; Cornell University Press for 'What is an Author?' by Michel Foucault, trans. from the French by Joseph V. Harari in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Joseph V. Harari, Copyright © 1977 by Cornell University Press, published in UK by Methuen & Co.; Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd/Open Court Publishing Company, a division of Carus Publishing Company, Peru, IL. for 'The Object of Study' by Ferdinand de Saussure from *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris, © 1983; Editions du Seuil for 'The Death of the Author' by Roland Barthes from *Image Music Text*, ed. & trans. Stephen Heath, publ. Fontana 1979; Faber & Faber Ltd/Alfred Knopf Inc for the poem 'Blanche McCarthy' Wallace Stevens from *Opus: Posthumous: Poems, Plays, Prose* by Wallace Stevens, edit. Samuel French Morse – Copyright © 1957 by Elsie Stevens and Holly Stevens; The Regents of the University of California/University of California Press/Oxford University Press and the author for 'The Circulation of Social Energy' by Stephen Greenblatt in *Shakespearean Negotiations*, (1988), pp. 1–20; Harcourt Brace & Company for 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov' in *Illuminations* by Walter Benjamin, copyright © 1955 by Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt a. M., English translation by Harry Zohn copyright © 1968 and renewed 1996 by Harcourt Brace & Company; The Roman Jakobson Trust n/w/o Krystyna Pomorska Jakobson for 'Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Linguistic Disturbances' by Roman Jakobson from *Selected Writings II* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971) pp. 254–9, © The Roman Jakobson Trust; Johns Hopkins University Press for 'Reading Ourselves' by Elizabeth Flynn and Patrocini P. Schweickart (eds), *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts and Contexts*, pp. 35–62. © 1986 Johns Hopkins University Press and 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach' by Wolfgang Iser from *New Literary History*, Vol. 3 (Winter 1972) pp. 279–99 © 1972 University of Virginia; MIT Press Inc./The Jakobson Trust for 'Linguistics and Poetics' by Roman Jakobson, originally 'Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics' from *Style In Language*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1960; The Orion Publishing Group/the author's agents, Peters Fraser & Dunlop Ltd for extracts from *The Waterfall* by Margaret Drabble publ. Weidenfeld & Nicholson (1971); Oxford University

Press Inc. for 'Poetic Origins and Final Phases' by Harold Bloom from *A Map of Misreading*, Copyright © 1979 by Oxford University Press Inc.; Pantheon Books, a Division of Random House Inc. for an extract from 'Crisis (In Orientalism)' in *Orientalism* by Edward W. Said, Copyright © 1978, by Edward W. Said; Princeton University Press for 'The Textual Condition' by Jerome McGann in *Text 4* (1988), Copyright © 1991 by Princeton University Press; Random House UK Ltd/Gruppo Editoriale Fabbri – Bompiani-Sonzogno-Etas SPA for 'Casa-blanca: Cultural Movies and Intertextual Collage' by Umberto Eco from *Faith in Fakes* pubd. Martin Secker & Warburg Ltd; Harper & Row, Publishers Inc./Random House UK Ltd for Jonathan Cape Ltd for extracts from *The Raw and the Cooked* by Claude Lévi-Strauss, trans. John & Doreen Wightman. English translation Copyright © 1969 by Harper & Row Publishers Inc. and Jonathan Cape Ltd; Routledge for 'Textual Analysis: Poe's "Valdemar"' by Robert Young from *Untying the Text*, pubd. Routledge & Kegan Paul plc; Routledge/University of Chicago Press/George Borchardt Inc. on behalf of Editions du Seuil for 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' by Jacques Derrida from *Writing and Difference*, trans. Bass 1978, pp. 278–93 & notes p. 339, pubd. Routledge & Kegan Paul plc/Univ. Chicago Press; Semiotext(e) Inc. New York/Mark Poster as Editor, for extracts from 'Simulacra and Simulations' by Jean Baudrillard in *Simulations* (1983), reproduced from *Selected Writing*, ed. Mark Poster, Polity Press, 1988, originally from *Semiotext(e)*, Foreign Agents Series 1983; Taylor & Francis/W. W. Norton Co. Inc. for extracts from the translation originally published in *Yale French Studies* 36–7 (1966) of 'L'Instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient ou la raison de Freud' from *Ecrits: A Selection* by Jacques Lacan, translated by Alan Sheridan, Copyright © 1966 by Editions du Seuil, English translation Copyright © 1977 by Tavistock Publications, Reprinted by permission of W. W. Norton & Company Inc.; University of Chicago Press and the authors for articles 'The Deconstructive Angel' by M. H. Abrams *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 3, 1977, pp. 425–32, 'Interpreting the Variorum' by Stanley E. Fish *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 2, No. 3, pp. 465–86, 'The Critic a Host' by J. H. Miller *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 3, 1977, pp. 439–47, 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness' by Prof. Elaine Showalter *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 8, Winter 1981, pp. 179–205 and 'Faulty Perspectives' by E. D. Hirsch Jr from *The Aims Of Interpretation* 1976, pp. 36–49; Telos Press Ltd and the author for 'The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Postmodernist Debate' by Fredric Jameson, *New German Critique* No. 33, Fall 1984, pubd. Dept. German at Univ. Wisconsin-Milwaukee; University of California Press and the author for 'The Beast in the Closet' from *Epistemology Of The Closet* by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Copyright © 1990 University of California Press; University of Illinois Press and the author for 'Feminism and Critical Theory' by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in *Alma Mater: Theory and Practice in Feminist Scholarship*, edited by Paula A. Treichler, Cheris Kramarae & Beth Stafford, Copyright 1985 by the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois; University of Massachusetts Press for extracts from 'Sorties' by Hélène Cixous in *New French Feminisms*, ed. Marks and de Courtrivron (1980); University of Texas Press for 'From Prehistory of Novelist discourse' by M. M. Bakhtin from *The Dialogue Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist, pp. 41–83, Copyright 1981

University of Texas Press; Verso Ltd for part 'Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism' by Terry Eagleton from *Against the Grain*, Verso 1986, originally pubd. in *New Left Review* 152, July/Aug. 1985; Virago Press Ltd/author's agents, Rogers Coleridge & White on behalf of Juliet Mitchell for 'Femininity, Narrative & Psychoanalysis' by Juliet Mitchell from *Women: The Longest Evolution* © Juliet Mitchell 1984; Yale French Studies for 'The Resistance to Theory' by Paul de Man from *Yale French Studies* 63, 1982.

A = Contents arranged historically	
B = Contents arranged thematically	
Foreword	xi
Preface to the second edition	xv
Acknowledgements	xvi

A CONTENTS ARRANGED HISTORICALLY

1 Ferdinand de Saussure	1
The object of study	2
2 Walter Benjamin	10
The Storyteller	11
✓ 3 Roman Jakobson	30
Linguistics and poetics	31
The metaphoric and metonymic poles	56
4 Jacques Lacan	61
The insistence of the letter in the unconscious	62
✓ 5 Jacques Derrida	88
Structure, sign and play in the discourse of the human sciences	89
✓ 6 Mikhail Bakhtin	104
From the prehistory of novelistic discourse	105
7 Tzvetan Todorov	137
The typology of detective fiction	137
8 Roland Barthes	145
The death of the author	146
Textual analysis: Poe's 'Valdemar'	151
9 Michel Foucault	173
What is an author?	174
10 Wolfgang Iser	188
The reading process: a phenomenological approach	189
11 Julia Kristeva	206
The ethics of linguistics	207
✓ 12 Harold Bloom	217
Poetic origins and final phases	218
13 E. D. Hirsch Jr.	230
Faulty perspectives	231

14 M. H. Abrams	241
The deconstructive angel	242
15 J. Hillis Miller	254
The critic as host	255
16 Hélène Cixous	263
Sorties	264
17 Edward Said	271
Crisis [in orientalism]	272
18 Stanley Fish	287
Interpreting the <i>Variorum</i>	288
19 Elaine Showalter	307
Feminist criticism in the wilderness	308
20 Paul de Man	331
The resistance to theory	332
21 Fredric Jameson	348
The politics of theory: Ideological positions in the postmodernism debate	349
22 Terry Eagleton	360
Capitalism, modernism and postmodernism	361
23 Geoffrey Hartman	374
The interpreter's Freud	375
24 Juliet Mitchell	387
Femininity, narrative and psychoanalysis	388
25 Umberto Eco	393
<i>Casablanca</i> : Cult movies and intertextual collage	394
26 Jean Baudrillard	403
Simulacra and Simulations	404
27 Luce Irigaray	413
The bodily encounter with the mother	414
28 Patrocínio P. Schweickart	424
Reading ourselves: Toward a feminist theory of reading	425
29 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick	448
The Beast in the Closet	449
30 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak	475
Feminism and Critical Theory	476
31 Stephen Greenblatt	494
The circulation of social energy	495
32 Jerome McGann	512
The textual condition	513
Index	521

B CONTENTS ARRANGED THEMATICALLY

(Items marked with an asterisk appear in more than one category)

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

1 Ferdinand de Saussure	1
The object of study	2
3 Roman Jakobson	30
Linguistics and poetics	31
The metaphoric and metonymic poles	56
6 Mikhail Bakhtin	104
From the prehistory of novelistic discourse*	105
7 Tzvetan Todorov	137
The typology of detective fiction	137
8 Roland Barthes	145
The death of the author	146
Textual analysis: Poe's 'Valdemar'	151
11 Julia Kristeva	206
The ethics of linguistics*	207
20 Paul de Man	331
The resistance to theory*	332
25 Umberto Eco	393
<i>Casablanca</i> : Cult movies and intertextual collage	394

II Deconstruction

5 Jacques Derrida	88
Structure, sign and play in the discourse of the human sciences	89
14 M. H. Abrams	241
The deconstructive angel*	242
15 J. Hillis Miller	254
The critic as host	255
20 Paul de Man	331
The resistance to theory*	332
23 Geoffrey Hartman	374
The interpreter's Freud*	375
26 Jean Baudrillard	403
Simulacra and Simulations*	404
30 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak	475
Feminism and Critical Theory*	476

III *Psychoanalysis*

4 Jacques Lacan	61
The insistence of the letter in the unconscious	62
12 Harold Bloom	217
Poetic origins and final phases	218
16 Hélène Cixous	263
Sorties*	264
23 Geoffrey Hartman	374
The interpreter's Freud*	375
24 Juliet Mitchell	387
Femininity, narrative and psychoanalysis*	388
27 Luce Irigaray	413
The bodily encounter with the mother*	414

IV *Politics, ideology, cultural history*

2 Walter Benjamin	10
The Storyteller	11
6 Mikhail Bakhtin	104
From the prehistory of novelistic discourse*	105
9 Michel Foucault	173
What is an author?	174
11 Julia Kristeva	206
The ethics of linguistics*	207
17 Edward Said	271
Crisis [in orientalism]	272
21 Fredric Jameson	348
The politics of theory: Ideological positions in the postmodernism debate	349
22 Terry Eagleton	360
Capitalism, modernism and postmodernism	361
24 Juliet Mitchell	387
Femininity, narrative and psychoanalysis*	388
26 Jean Baudrillard	403
Simulacra and Simulations*	404
29 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick	448
The Beast in the Closet*	449
30 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak	475
Feminism and Critical Theory*	476
31 Stephen Greenblatt	494
The circulation of social energy	495

V *Feminism*

16	Hélène Cixous	263
	Sorties*	264
19	Elaine Showalter	307
	Feminist criticism in the wilderness	308
24	Juliet Mitchell	387
	Femininity, narrative and psychoanalysis*	388
27	Luce Irigaray	413
	The bodily encounter with the mother*	414
28	Patrocínio P. Schweickart	424
	Reading ourselves: towards a feminist theory of reading	425
29	Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick	448
	The Beast in the Closet*	449
30	Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak	475
	Feminism and Critical Theory*	476

VI *Hermeneutics, reception theory, reader-response*

10	Wolfgang Iser	188
	The reading process: a phenomenological approach	189
13	E. D. Hirsch Jr.	230
	Faulty perspectives*	231
18	Stanley Fish	287
	Interpreting the <i>Variorum</i>	288
28	Patrocínio P. Schweickart	424
	Reading ourselves: towards a feminist theory of reading*	425

VII *Cognitive literary scholarship*

13	E. D. Hirsch Jr.	230
	Faulty perspectives*	231
14	M. H. Abrams	241
	The deconstructive angel*	242
32	Jerome McGann	512
	The textual condition*	513

Ferdinand de Saussure

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

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

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

continued

Some implications for literary studies which may be glimpsed in the brief extract from the *Course* reprinted below (from Roy Harris's translation of 1983), are: (1) the idea that literary texts could be seen as manifestations of a literary system (such as narrative) the underlying rules of which might be understood, thus making literary criticism a more 'scientific' discipline; (2) scepticism about historical explanations of literary phenomena, especially research into the 'origins' of meaning; (3) a corresponding emphasis on the collective or social construction of meaning in the production and reception of literary texts; (4) a critique of naïve theories of literary 'realism'. Many of the essays included in this book are directly or indirectly indebted to Saussure's theory of language.

CROSS REFERENCES: 3. Jakobson

4. Lacan

5. Derrida

6. Bakhtin

COMMENTARY: JONATHAN CULLER, *Saussure* (1976)

ROY HARRIS, *Reading Saussure* (1987)

The object of study

1. On defining a language

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

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

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

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