



Beginning theory

An introduction to literary and cultural theory

Second edition Peter Barry

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Acknowledgements

You'd better not look down, If you want to keep flying

So says the great B. B. King. It is excellent advice, and trying to stick to it helped me to complete this book. I was also greatly helped by the advice and expertise of Anita Roy, Humanities Editor at Manchester University Press. Annie Eagleton was a meticulous and helpful copy-editor, and Alison Abel provided valuable help at the proof-reading stage.

Many of the chapters are based on material I used on the 'Introduction to Literature' and 'Concepts of Criticism' courses at LSU. The former is taught by a 'team-ministry' of various colleagues, whose comments and advice I have been most grateful for over the past few years. In particular, I must thank Gillian Skinner for reading sections of the manuscript and making a number of extremely useful suggestions, all of which I have acted upon. Nicola King supplied the 'What feminist critics do' checklist, and I have adopted this idea for all the chapters. Of course, all the faults which remain in the book are entirely my own responsibility.

Steve Dorney rescued me when my technical expertise proved unequal to the task of producing hard copy from my (as I thought) cunningly adapted disks. Marian and Tom enabled me to write the book by giving me frequent periods of study leave from Sainsbury's and 'Playdays'. The book is for my mother and in memory of my father, Francis Barry.

I will be most interested to hear from any users of this book who might wish to write to me (either via Manchester

University Press, or directly to English Department, UCW, Aberystwyth, Dyfed SY23 3DY, Wales, UK (ptb@aber.ac.uk). If anything in the book seems unclear, or unnecessary, or misrepresented, or wrongly omitted, or fails to acknowledge a source, I will endeavour to improve or rectify matters in any subsequent edition.

Sections of Chapter 3 have previously appeared (in a slightly different form) in *The Use of English* and *The English Review*.

Peter Barry

LSU

April 1995

Preface to the second edition

Since the first edition of this book (which was written in the earlier part of the 1990s) literary theory has continued to change and develop. To reflect these developments, I have added a new chapter on ecocriticism, making this the first book of its kind to register the increasing interest

in 'Green' approaches to literature.

Of course, my own feelings about the various kinds of theory have changed a bit too. In particular, I now find structuralism rather more interesting than poststructuralism, and to reflect this I have added a new chapter on narratology, a branch of structuralist theory which lends itself very readily to enjoyable and thought-provoking practical applications. Apart from these new chapters, the second edition is the same book as the first, but with up-dated bibliographies.

With my colleagues at Aberystwyth I teach on a range of theory courses, notably the 'RTRT' modules ('Reading Theory/Reading Text'), whose original twenty-seven mini-topics I helped reduce to four somewhat larger ones. This is more or less what the structuralists Levi-Strauss and Todorov wanted to do to the thirty-one narrative functions posited by Vladimir Propp (see Chapter 12), which shows how keen we are at Aber to apply the lessons of literary theory to our everyday teaching lives. I am very grateful to my colleagues and students for all the discussions we have had about 'RTRT', and to students on the 'Short Story' option over the past few years with whom the various theoretical approaches to narrative have been tried out.

The cartoon narrative on page 225 is supplied courtesy of Gray Dudek, Marketing Division of Pedigree Masterfoods, a division

of Mars UK 2001. I am very grateful to Matthew Frost at MUP for his tireless promotion of this book (which is now part of the 'Beginnings' series), and, for nearly everything else, to Marianne and Tom (who has graduated since the first edition from 'Play-days' to 'Gameboy Advance').

English Department, Aberystwyth

Introduction

About this book

The 1980s probably saw the high-water mark of literary theory. That decade was the 'moment' of theory, when the topic was fashionable and controversial. In the 1990s there was a steady flow of books and articles with titles like *After Theory* (Thomas Docherty, 1990) or 'Post-Theory' (Nicolas Tredell, in *The Critical Decade*, 1993). As such titles suggest, the 'moment of theory' has probably passed. So why another 'primer' of theory so late in the day?

The simple answer is that after the moment of theory there comes, inevitably, the 'hour' of theory, when it ceases to be the exclusive concern of a dedicated minority and enters the intellectual bloodstream as a taken-for-granted aspect of the curriculum. At this stage the glamour fades, the charisma is 'routinised', and it becomes the day-to-day business of quite a large number of people to learn or teach (or both) this material. There are evident dangers of over-simplifying things and so offering a false reassurance to students facing the difficulties of this topic for the first time. All the same, the main responsibility of anyone attempting a book

like this one is to meet the demand for clear explanation and demonstration. If the task were impossible, and the mountain of theory could be climbed only by experts, then the whole enterprise of establishing it on undergraduate courses would have been a mistake.

The emphasis on practice means that this is a 'work-book', not

just a 'text-book'. As you read you will find suggested activities, headed 'STOP and THINK', which are designed to give you some 'hands-on' experience of literary theory and its problems. You will not just be reading about it, reducing theory to a kind of spectator sport played only by superstars, but starting to do it for yourself. Becoming a participant in this way will help you to make *some* personal sense of theory, and will, I hope, increase your confidence, even if you suspect that your practical efforts remain fairly rudimentary. It is also hoped that the 'STOP and think' activities will provide the basis for initiating seminar discussion if this book is being used in connection with a taught course on critical theory.

All the critical approaches described in this book are a reaction against something which went before, and a prior knowledge of these things cannot be assumed. Hence, I start with an account of the 'liberal humanism' against which all these newer critical approaches, broadly speaking, define themselves. Likewise, the currently successful versions of Marxist, feminist, psychoanalytic, and linguistic criticism all define themselves against earlier versions of each of these, and therefore I try in each case to explain the earlier versions first. I think that many of the current difficulties students have with theory arise from trying to miss out this stage. My approach amounts to throwing you in at the shallow end. Potentially this is more painful than being thrown in at the deep end - the technique used in most other student introductions to literary theory - but it does reduce the risk of drowning.

It should, perhaps, be stressed that the other general introductions to theory that are now available represent a stage on from this one. They offer an even and comprehensive coverage of the entire field, but with relatively little in the way of practical discussion of applications. I find them very useful, but they seem to me to be recapitulations of literary theory, often from a viewpoint more philosophical than literary, rather than introductions to it. The evenness of the coverage means that the pace never varies, so that there is no opportunity to stop and dwell upon an example in a reflective way. By contrast, I haven't tried to be comprehensive, and I do try to provide variation in pace by selecting questions, or examples, or key essays for closer treatment. Gen-

erally, the available introductions don't grapple with the problems of teaching or learning theory: until recently, the only two that tried to do so were Durant and Fabb's *Literary Studies in Action* and Lynn's *Texts and Contexts* (see Further reading section). Both these are interesting but eccentric books whose rather fragmented format prevents any real flow of discussion or explanation.

At undergraduate level the main problem is to decide how much theory can reasonably be handled by beginners. Time is not unlimited, and there is a need to think about a realistic syllabus rather than an ideal one. Theorists, like novelists, are dauntingly plentiful, and the

subject of theory cannot succeed in lecture rooms and seminars unless we fashion it into a student-centred syllabus. We are rightly dismissive these days of the notion of leaching a 'Great Tradition' of key novelists, as advocated by the critic F. R. Leavis. But Leavis's Great Tradition was essentially a syllabus, manageable within a year-long undergraduate course on the novel. It is possible to read and adequately discuss a novel or two by Austen, Eliot, James, Conrad, and Lawrence within that time. We need to make sure that what is presented as theory today likewise makes teaching sense.

When we are about to move into something new it is sensible to first take stock of what we already have, if only so that the distance travelled can later be measured. So in the first chapter of this book I invite you to look back critically and reflectively on your previous training in literary studies. We then go on to look at the assumptions behind traditional literary criticism, or 'liberal humanism' as theorists usually call it.

The term 'liberal humanism' became current in the 1970s, as a shorthand (and mainly hostile) way of referring to the kind of criticism which held sway before theory. The word 'liberal' in this formulation roughly means not politically radical, and hence generally evasive and non-committal on political issues. 'Humanism' implies something similar; it suggests a range of negative attributes, such as 'non-Marxist' and 'non-feminist', and 'non-theoretical'. There is also the implication that liberal humanists believe in 'human nature' as something fixed and constant which great literature expresses. Liberal humanists did not (and do not, as a rule) use this name of themselves, but, says an influential school

of thought, if you practise literary criticism and do not call yourself a Marxist critic, or a structuralist, or a stylistician, or some such, then you are probably a liberal humanist, whether or not you admit or recognise this.

In the course of explaining some of the major critical ideas now current, this book provides summaries or descriptions of a number of important theoretical essays. But I want to stress at the outset that it is important, too, that you read some of the major theorists at first hand. Yet as soon as you begin to turn the pages of Barthes, Lacan, Foucault, or Derrida you will encounter writing which looks dauntingly difficult and off-putting. How, then, to cope?

I suggest that it is much better to read *intensely* in theory than to read *widely*. By this I mean that you will gain little from reading chapter after chapter of a book that is making little sense to you. You will gain much more by using the same amount of reading time to read one crucial and frequently mentioned chapter or article several times for yourself. Having a detailed knowledge of what is actually said in the pages of a well-known argument, being aware of how the argument unfolds and how it is qualified or con-textualised, will be far more useful to you than a superficial overall impression gained from commentaries or from desperate skim-reading. However daunting the material, you have to make your reading meditative, reflective, and personal. Try to become a slow reader. Further, some intensive reading of this kind will enable you to quote lines other than the handful that are cited in all the commentaries. And most importantly, your view of things will be your own, perhaps quirky and incomplete, but at least not just the echo and residue of some published commentator's prepacked version. In a nut-

shell, intensive reading is often more useful than extensive reading. 'English studies' is founded on the notion of close reading, and while there was a period in the late 1970s and early 1980s when this idea was frequently disparaged, it is undoubtedly true that nothing of any interest can happen in this subject without close reading.

I suggest, therefore, that you try out for yourself a useful form of intensive reading, the technique known as 'SQ3R'. This breaks down the reading of a difficult chapter or article into five stages,

as designated by the letters 'SQRRR', or 'SQ3R', as is it usually given. The five stages are:

S - That is, *Survey* the whole chapter or section fairly rapidly, skimming through it to get a rough sense of the scope and nature of the argument. Remember that information is not evenly spread throughout a text. It tends to be concentrated in the opening and closing paragraphs (where you often get useful summaries of the whole), and the 'hinge points' of the argument are often indicated in the opening and closing sentences of paragraphs.

Q - Having skimmed the whole, set yourself some *Questions*, some things you hope to find out from what you are reading. This makes you an 'active' reader rather than a passive one, and gives your reading a purpose.

R1 - Now *Read* the whole piece. Use a pencil if the copy is your own to underline key points, query difficulties, circle phrases worth remembering, and so on. Don't just sit in front of the pages. If the book is not your own jot *something* down on paper as you read, however minimal.

R2 - Now, close the book and *Recall* what you have read. Jot down some summary points. Ask whether your starting questions have been answered, or at least clarified. Spell out some of the difficulties that remain. In this way, you record some concrete outcomes to your reading, so that your time doesn't simply evaporate uselessly once the book is closed.

R3 - This final stage is the *Review*. It happens after an interval has elapsed since the reading. You can experiment, but initially try doing it the following day. Without opening the book again, or referring back to your notes, review what you have gained from the reading; remind yourself of the question you set yourself, the points you jotted down at the *Recall* stage, and any important phrases from the essay. If this produces very little, then refer back to your notes. If they make little sense, then repeat the *Survey* stage, and do an accelerated *Read*, by reading the first and last paragraphs

of the essay, and skim-reading the main body assisted by your pencilled markings.

You may well have evolved a study technique something like this already. It is really just common sense. But it will help to ensure that you gain *something* from a theoretical text, no matter how initially forbidding it might be.

Finally, it will, I hope, go without saying that no comprehensiveness is possible in a format such as this. Clearly, also, this book does not contain all you need to know about theory, and it does not in itself (without the reading it refers you to) constitute a 'course' in literary theory. It leaves out a good deal, and it deals fairly briskly with many topics. It is a starter-pack, intended to give you a sense of what theory is all about, and suggest how it might affect your literary studies. Above all, it aims to *interest* you in theory.

Approaching theory

If you are coming to literary theory soon after taking courses in such subjects as media studies, communications studies, or socio-linguistics, then the general 'feel' of the new theoretical approaches to literature may well seem familiar. You will already be 'tuned in' to the emphasis on ideas which is one of their characteristics; you will be undaunted by their use of technical terminology, and unsurprised by their strong social and political interests. If, on the other hand, you took a 'straight' 'A' Level literature or 'Access' course with the major emphasis on set books, then much of what is contained in this book will probably be new to you. Initially, you will have the problem of getting on the wave-length of these different ways of looking at literature. As you would expect in studying at degree level, you will encounter problems which do not have generally agreed solutions, and it is inevitable that your understanding of the matters discussed here will remain partial, in both senses of that word, as everybody's does.

But whichever of these two categories you fall into, I want to assure you at the outset that the doubts and uncertainties you will

have about this material are probably *not* due to:

1. any supposed mental incapacity of your own, for example, to your not having 'a philosophical mind', or not possessing the kind of X-ray intellect which can penetrate jargon and see the sense beneath, or
2. the fact that your schooling did not include intensive tuition in, say, linguistics or philosophy, or
3. the innate and irreducible difficulty of the material itself (a point we will come back to).

Rather, nearly all the difficulties you will have will be the direct result of the way theory is written, and the way it is written about. For literary theory, it must be emphasised, is not innately difficult. There are very few inherently complex ideas in existence in literary theory. On the contrary, the whole body of work known collectively as 'theory' is based upon some dozen or so ideas, none of which are in themselves difficult. (Some of them are listed on pp. 34—6). What *is* difficult, however, is the language of theory. Many of the major writers on theory are French, so that much of what we read is in translation, sometimes of a rather clumsy kind. Being a Romance language, French takes most of its words directly from Latin, and it lacks the reassuring Anglo-Saxon layer of vocabulary which provides us with so many of our brief, familiar, everyday terms. Hence, a close English translation of a French academic text will contain a large number of longer Latinate words, always perceived as a source of difficulty by English-speaking readers. Writing with a high proportion of these characteristics can be off-putting and wearying, and it *is* easy to lose patience.

But the frame of mind I would recommend at the outset is threefold. *Firstly*, we must have some *initial* patience with the difficult surface of the writing. We must avoid the too-ready conclusion that literary theory is just meaningless, pretentious jargon (that is, that the theory is at fault). *Secondly*, on the other hand, we must, for obvious reasons, resist the view that we ourselves are intellectually incapable of coping with it (that is, that we are at fault). *Thirdly*, and crucially, we must not assume that the difficulty of theoretical writing is *always* the dress of profound

ideas - only that it *might* sometimes be, which leaves the onus of discrimination on us. To sum up this attitude: we are looking, in literary theory, for something we can use, not something which will use us. We ought not to issue theory with a blank cheque to spend our time for us. (If we do, it will certainly spend more than we can afford.) Do not, then, be *endlessly* patient with theory. Require it to be clear, and expect it, in the longer term, to deliver something solid. Don't be content, as many seem to be, just to see it as 'challenging' conventional practice or 'putting it in question' in some never quite specified way. Challenges are fine, but they have to amount to something in the end.

STOP and THINK: reviewing your study of literature to date

Before we go on, into what may well be a new stage in your involvement with literature, it would be sensible to 'take stock' and reflect a little on the nature of our literary education to date. The purpose of doing this is to begin the process of making visible, and hence open to scrutiny, the methods and procedures which have become so familiar to you (probably going back to the time when you began secondary school) that they are no longer visible at all as a distinct intellectual practice. But stock-taking is not part of our normal intellectual routine, unfortunately, and it is a difficult and demanding thing to do. Yet please do not skip this section, since theory will never make any sense to you until you feel the need for it yourself. What I would like you to do is to try to become conscious of the nature of your own previous work in English, by recalling:

1. what first made you decide to study English, what you hoped to gain from doing so, and whether that hope was realised;
2. which books and authors were chosen for study and what they had in common;
3. which books and authors now seem conspicuously absent;
4. what, in general terms, your previous study taught you

(about 'life', say, or conduct, or about literature itself).

Doing this will help you to begin to obtain a perspective on your experience of literature to date. Spend an hour or so doing it. I carried out a similar exercise myself as part of the process of working on this book, and some of the result is given below. It is intended more as a prompt than a model, and I have not responded in any systematic way to the four questions above. Reproducing it will perhaps help to 'personalise' the voice behind this book, but I leave you to decide whether you want to look at this before or after doing your own.

My own 'stock-taking'

Since literary theory is the topic of this book I will concentrate on detailing the course of my acquaintanceship with it. In fact, I heard nothing at all about literary theory as an undergraduate at London University in the late 1960s. I took a straightforward 'Wulf-to-Woolf' English course (*Beowulf to Virginia Woolf*) with compulsory Old and Middle English papers. Essentially, I now realise, the English course I followed in the late 1960s retained the shape and the outlook of the pioneer English degree courses established at London University more than a century before.

The one innovation in English teaching at London was to recognise the existence of something called American literature and to appoint a lecturer* to teach it. As a result of taking this American course I became an enthusiast for a range of American poets who were part of the 'alternative culture' of the time. At the same time, and for several years afterwards, I was also trying to write poetry of more or less this kind. It quickly became apparent that conventional criticism could make very little of poetry like this. So by the early 1970s I was beginning to look at newer critical approaches than those I had encountered at university. But I wasn't at that time an advocate of literary theory, since 'theory' as such was then a non-existent category in literary studies.

* The lecturer was Eric Mottram, who died in January 1995.

The change of emphasis seems to have happened in my own case around 1973, when the words 'structuralism' and 'semiotics' begin to feature in notes about what I was reading and in the titles of the books and articles I was interested in. Structuralism, we were then learning, was a new kind of literary theory which had recently become prominent in France, and semiotics ('the science of signs') was one of its sub-branches. I was loosely connected with the London Graduate Seminar started by Frank Kermode after he became Professor of English at University College, London. The group debated the work of the structuralist Roland Barthes and caught Kermode's enthusiasm for it. I bought and read everything by Barthes then in print in England, no great undertaking since all that was available was *Writing Degree Zero* and *Elements of Semiology*, probably his least interesting and least accessible books. His much more engaging collection *Mythologies* appeared in English in 1973 in the Paladin imprint. 1973 was also the year when *The Times Literary Supplement* devoted the major part of two issues (5 and 12 October) to a 'Survey of Semiotics', with articles by Umberto Eco, Tzvetan Todorov, and Julia Kristeva, major names in these new kinds of critical theory and encountered then (in my case) for the first time. This interest in theory was consolidated in 1981 when I was asked to devise a course on literary theory as part of the BA programme at my previous college, and, in turn, a decade or so of teaching that course has led to this book.

1

Theory before 'theory' -liberal humanism

The history of English studies

It is difficult to understand liberal humanism (that is, the traditional approach to English studies, see the Introduction, pp. 3-4) without knowing something about how English developed as an

academic subject. So this is the topic of the next few pages.

STOP and THINK

The multiple choice questions below indicate the scope of what is touched upon in this section. Underline what you think are the right answers before reading further, and then correct your answers, if necessary, as you read on:

1. When do you think English was first taught as a degree subject in England?: was it 1428, 1528, 1628, 1728, 1828, or 1928?
2. At which institution was English first taught as a degree subject in England?: was it Oxford University, Cambridge University, London University, Southampton University, or none of these?
3. Until the nineteenth century you had to be a member of the Anglican (Episcopalian) Church and male to take a degree in England. True or false?
4. Until the nineteenth century lectures degree courses in England had to be unmarried Church of England clergy. True or false?
5. Until the nineteenth century women were not allowed to take degrees in England. True or false?
6. In the early twentieth century women could take degree courses in England, but were not allowed to receive degrees. True or false?

To explain the rise of English studies we need to indicate briefly what higher education was like in England until the first quarter of the nineteenth century. The short answer is that it was a Church of England monopoly. There were only two universities, Oxford and Cambridge. These were divided into small individual colleges which were run like monastic institutions. Only men could attend them, of course, and students had to be Anglican communicants and attend the college chapel. The teachers were ordained ministers, who had to be unmarried, so that they could live in the college. The subjects available were the classics (ancient Greek and Latin literature), divinity (which was taken by those seeking ordination) and mathematics. Anyone who was Catholic, Jewish, or Methodist, or atheist was barred from entry, and hence, in effect, barred from the professions and the Civil Service. As far as higher education was concerned, then, you could say that right up to the 1820s, the organisation of higher education had not changed since the Middle Ages.

Many attempts were made to reform the situation, expand higher education, and introduce practical subjects into the curriculum, but they all came up against entrenched conservative forces. The breakthrough came in 1826 when a University College was founded in London with a charter to award degrees to men and women of all religions or none. From 1828 English was offered as a subject for study, and they appointed the first English Professor of English in 1829. However, it was not really English as we know it. It was mainly the study of English language, merely using literature as a source of linguistic examples. English literature as such was first

taught at King's College, London

(another college of what later became London University) beginning in 1831.

In 1840 F. D. Maurice was appointed Professor at King's. He introduced the study of set books, and his inaugural lecture lays down some of the principles of liberal humanism; the study of English literature would serve 'to emancipate us ... from the notions and habits which are peculiar to our own age', connecting us instead with 'what is fixed and enduring'. Maurice regarded literature as the peculiar property of the middle class and the expression of their values. For him the middle class represents the essence of Englishness (the aristocracy are part of an international elite, and the poor need to give all their attention to ensuring mere survival) so middle-class education should be peculiarly English, and therefore should centre on English literature. Maurice was well aware of the political dimension of all this. People so educated would feel that they belonged to England, that they had a country. 'Political agitators' may ask what this can mean 'when his neighbour rides in a carriage and he walks on loot', but 'he will feel his nationality to be a reality, in spite of what they say'. In short, learning English will give people a stake in maintaining the political *status quo* without any redistribution of wealth.

You can see from this that the study of English literature is being seen as a kind of substitute for religion. It was well known that attendance at church below middle-class level was very patchy. The worry was that the lower classes would feel that they had no stake in the country and, having no religion to teach them morality and restraint, they would rebel and something like the French Revolution would take place. The Chartist agitation of the 1830s was thought to be the start of this, and the first English courses are put in place at exactly the same time.

The conventional reading of the origins of the subject of English is that this kind of thinking begins with Matthew Arnold in the 1850s and reaches its height with the publication of the Newbolt Report on the Teaching of English in England in 1921. It is evident from material like Maurice's inaugural lecture that this was happening much earlier. However, I do not accept the simplistic view that the founders of English were motivated merely

by a desire for ideological control. This was undoubtedly one of their motives, but the reality was much more complicated. There was, behind the teaching of early English, a distinctly Victorian mixture of class guilt about social inequalities, a genuine desire to improve things for everybody, a kind of missionary zeal to spread culture and enlightenment, and a self-interested desire to maintain social stability.

London University degrees were taught by external licence at university colleges in major industrial cities - Liverpool, Birmingham, Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds, and so on, all these places eventually becoming major universities in their own right. Hence the spread of the subject at degree level throughout the country. However, Oxford and Cambridge were suspicious of the new subject of English and held out against it, Oxford until 1894 and Cambridge until 1911.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century there was vigorous discussion and campaigning to establish a Chair in English at Oxford. In 1887 the first attempt was defeated largely because of a speech in the Convocation by the Professor of History, Edward Freeman. Freeman's speech is another key document: it touches upon several problems in English which are still unresolved. He said:

We are told that the study of literature 'cultivates the taste, educates the sympathies and enlarges the mind'. These are all excellent things, only we cannot examine tastes and sympathies. Examiners must have technical and positive information to examine.

This is a problem which has never been entirely solved in English. What, exactly, is its knowledge component? As a way of attaching specific and technical information to the study of English, early supporters had advocated the systematic study of language, but early advocates of English wanted to separate literature and language study, so that the one could be done without the other. Freeman's famous response was: 'what is meant by distinguishing literature from language if by literature is meant the study of great books, and not mere chatter about Shelley?' Freeman won the argument. Literature had to be studied along

with language, otherwise it would not be an academic subject at all. So when the English course was finally set up at Oxford in 1894 it contained a very heavy element of historical language study - Anglo-Saxon, Gothic, Letto-Slavonic, Middle English, etc., from which it has still not managed to free itself.

A greater sense of direction was given to English in the Cambridge English school in the 1920s. Because Cambridge English was the most recently founded, dating only from 1911, it had the least weight of tradition to fight against, so change was relatively easy. The engineers of this change were a group of people who began teaching at Cambridge in the 1920s. They were: I. A. Richards, William Empson, and F. R. Leavis.

I. A. Richards was the founder of a method of studying English which is still the norm today. Firstly, it made a decisive break between language and literature. Richards pioneered the technique called Practical Criticism (the title of his book in 1929). This made a close study of literature possible by isolating the text from history and context. Instead of having to study, say, the Renaissance period as a distinct historical moment, with its characteristic outlook, social formations, and so on, students could learn the techniques of practical criticism and simply analyse 'the words on the page'. The gain from this was that it was no longer possible to offer a vague, flowery, metaphorical effusion and call it criticism. Richards argued that there should be much more close attention to the precise details of the text.

A second Cambridge pioneer was a pupil of Richards, William Empson, who presented his tutor with the manuscript of the book which was published in 1930 with the title *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. This book took the Richards method of close verbal analysis to what many felt to be an extreme. Empson identified seven different types of verbal difficulty in poetry (which is what he meant by ambiguity) and gave examples of them, with worked analyses. Another Cambridge critic, F. R. Leavis, said in a review that it is a highly disturbing book because it uses intelligence on poetry as seriously as if it were mathematics. Not everybody liked this ultra-close form of reading. T. S. Eliot called it the lemon-squeezer school of criticism, and his own critical writing is always on a much more generalised level.

The last of these Cambridge pioneers was F. R. Leavis, probably the most influential figure in twentieth-century British criticism. In 1929 he met and married Q. D. Roth, subsequently

known as Q. D. Leavis. He had written his doctoral thesis on the relationship between journalism and literature. She had written hers on popular fiction. These were revolutionary topics, and a certain excitement and glamour attached to this couple in the 1930s. In 1932 they founded an important journal called *Scrutiny* and produced it together for twenty-one years. As the title implies, it extended the 'close-reading' method beyond poetry to novels and other material.

Leavis's faults as a critic are that his close readings often turn out to contain lengthy quotations on which there is surprisingly little comment. The assumption is that the competent reader will see there what Leavis sees. As has been said of him, he often gives the impression that he is analysing the text when he is really just paraphrasing it. Secondly, his approach to literature is overwhelmingly moral; its purpose is to teach us about life, to transmit humane values. His critical terms are never properly defined. He famously refused the invitation offered by the critic Rene Wellek in the 1930s that he should 'spell out the principles on which he operated in a more explicit way than hitherto'. The result was one more degree of isolation for literary studies. In the period of its growth just surveyed, it claimed independence from language studies, from historical considerations, and from philosophical questions. The consensus which held the subject together from the 1930s to the 1960s rested upon the acceptance of these demarcations. The 'project' of 'theory' from the 1960s onwards is in essence to re-establish connections between literary study and these three academic fields from which it had so resolutely separated itself.

Ten tenets of liberal humanism

The personal account on pp. 9-10 mainly responds to the second and third of the four questions given earlier. I'm now going to

expand on the implications of the fourth question, which asked what it is, exactly, that we learn when we 'do' English in the traditional way. Of course, we learn things about specific books and authors, but I mean here the more general values and attitudes which we absorb from English, and which remain as a kind of distilled essence of the subject when all these specific details have been forgotten. These are not usually formulated and stated, but they are, in a sense, all the more real for that, being simultaneously both pervasive and invisible. They can only be brought to the surface by a conscious effort of will, of the kind we are now trying to make. So what follows is a list of some of the elements which seem to constitute this 'distilled essence' of the subject, that is, the corpus of attitudes, assumptions, and ideas which we pick up, probably unawares, as we do it. These seem to have been what we were learning when we studied English - these are the values and beliefs which formed the subject's half-hidden curriculum:

1. The first thing, naturally, is an attitude to literature itself; good literature is of timeless significance; it somehow transcends the limitations and peculiarities of the age it was written in, and thereby speaks to what is constant in human nature. Such writing is 'not for an age, but for all time' (as Ben Jonson said of Shakespeare): it is 'news which stays news' (Ezra Pound's definition of literature).

2. The second point is the logical consequence of the first. The literary text contains its own meaning within itself. It doesn't require any elaborate process of placing it within a context, whether this be:

- (a) *Socio-political* - the context of a particular social 'background' or political situation, or

(b) *Literary-historical* - whereby the work could be seen as the product of the literary influences of other writers, or as shaped by the conventions of particular genres, or

(c) *Autobiographical* - that is, as determined by the personal details of the author's life and thought.

Of course, as scholars, most academics would assert the value

of studying these contexts, but as critics their adherence to the approach which insists upon the primacy and self-sufficiency of the 'words on the page' commits them to the process which has been called 'on-sight close reading'. Essentially, this removes the text from all these contexts and presents it 'unseen' for unaided explication by the trained mind.

3. To understand the text well it must be detached from these contexts and studied in isolation. What is needed is the close verbal analysis of the text without prior ideological assumptions, or political pre-conditions, or, indeed, specific expectations of any kind, since all these are likely to interfere fatally with what the nineteenth-century critic Matthew Arnold said was the true business of criticism, 'to see the object as in itself it really is'.

4. Human nature is essentially unchanging. The same passions, emotions, and even situations are seen again and again throughout human history. It follows that continuity in literature is more important and significant than innovation. Thus, a well-known eighteenth-century definition of poetry maintains that it is 'what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed'. Likewise, Samuel Johnson famously denigrated Sterne's novel *Tristram Shandy* on the grounds of its novelty, that is, its originality.

5. Individuality is something securely possessed within each of us as our unique 'essence'. This transcends our environmental influences, and though individuality can change and develop (as do characters in novels), it can't be transformed -hence our uneasiness with those scenes (quite common, for instance, in Dickens) which involve a 'change of heart' in a character, so that the whole personality is shifted into a new dimension by force of circumstance - the miser is transformed and changes his ways, or the good man or woman becomes corrupted by wealth. Such scenes imply a malleability in the essence of character which is at odds with this underlying assumption of English studies. The discipline as a whole believed in what is now called the 'transcendent subject', which is the belief that the individual ('the subject') is antecedent to, or transcends, the forces of society, experience,

and language.

6. The purpose of literature is essentially the enhancement of life and the propagation of humane values; but not in a programmatic way: if literature, and criticism, become overtly and directly political they necessarily tend towards propaganda. And as Keats said, 'we distrust literature which has a palpable design upon us', that is, literature which too obviously wants to convert us or influence our views.

7. Form and content in literature must be fused in an organic way, so that the one grows inevitably from the other. Literary form should not be like a decoration which is applied externally to a completed structure. Imagery, for instance, or any other poetic form which is detachable from the substance of the work in this way, rather than being integrated with it, is merely 'fanciful' and not truly 'imaginative' (the distinction made by Coleridge in the *Biographia Literaria*).

8. This point about organic form applies above all to 'sincerity'. Sincerity (comprising truth-to-experience, honesty towards the self, and the capacity for human empathy and compassion) is a quality which resides *within* the language of literature. It isn't a fact or an intention *behind* the work, which could be gleaned by comparing, say, a poet's view of an event with other more 'factual' versions, or from discovering independent, external information about an author's history or conduct. Rather, sincerity is to be discovered within the text in such matters as the avoidance of cliché, or of over-inflated forms of expression; it shows in the use of first hand, individualistic description, in the understated expression of feeling, whereby (preferably) the emotion is allowed to emerge implicitly from the presentation of an event. Moreover, when the language achieves these qualities, then the truly sincere poet can transcend the sense of distance between language and material, and can make the language seem to 'enact' what it depicts, thus apparently abolishing the necessary distance between words and things.

9. Again, the next idea follows from the previous one. What is valued in literature is the 'silent' showing and demonstrating of something, rather than the explaining, or saying, of it.

Hence, ideas as such are worthless in literature until given the concrete embodiment of 'enactment'. Thus, several of the explicit comments and formulations often cited in literary history contain specific denigrations of ideas as such and have a distinct anti-intellectual flavour to them. Here we see the elevation of the characteristic 'Eng Lit' idea of *tactile enactment*, of sensuous immediacy, of the concrete representation of thought, and so on. According to this idea (which is, of course, itself an idea, in spite of the fact that the idea in question is a professed distrust of ideas) words should mime, or demonstrate, or act out, or sound out what they signify, rather than just representing it in an abstract way. This idea is stated with special fervency in the work of F. R. Leavis. (For a critique of the 'enactment' idea see 'The Enactment Fallacy', by the present author, in *Essays in Criticism*, July 1980. For a general discussion see James Gribble's *Literary Education: a Re-evaluation*, Cambridge University Press, 1983, chapter 2).

10. The job of criticism is to interpret the text, to mediate between it and the reader. A theoretical account of the nature of reading, or of literature in general, isn't useful in criticism, and will simply, if attempted, encumber critics with 'preconceived ideas' which will get between them and the text. Perhaps in this phrase 'preconceived ideas' we get another glimpse into the nature of this pervasive distrust of ideas within liberal humanism, for there seems to be the notion that somehow *all* ideas are 'preconceived', in the sense that they will come between the reader and text if given half a chance. There is, in fact, the clear mark here of what is called 'English empiricism', which can be defined as a determination to trust only what is made evident to the senses or experienced directly. Ultimately this attitude goes back at least to the philosophy of John Locke (1632-1704), which gives a philosophical expression to it. His book *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) puts forward the view that ideas are formed when direct sense impressions from the world are imprinted on the mind. The mind then

assembles these, so giving rise to the process of thinking. Locke rejected introspective speculation as a source of valid knowledge and

insisted on the need for direct experience and evidence of things. Traditional English studies, we might say, has always been Lockean in this sense.

The above list contains a series of propositions which I think many traditional critics would, on the whole, subscribe to, if they were in the habit of making their assumptions explicit. Together, ideas like these, and the literary practice which went with them, are now often referred to as 'liberal humanism'.

Literary theorising from Aristotle to Leavis -some key moments

So far I have perhaps given the impression that theoretical positions about literature were never explicitly formulated by liberal humanists, at least in Britain, and that everything remained implicit. Yet a widely current body of theoretical work existed from the start within English studies, and references were often made to it in books and essays. The average student or teacher of 'Eng Lit' up to the 1970s would probably have had a fairly limited direct contact with this body of work, since the whole thrust of the subject was away from this kind of generalised position-taking.

What, then, constituted the body of theory about literature that has existed for many centuries as an available under-pinning for the study of literature, even if literary students seldom had any extensive first hand acquaintance with it? Well, the material goes back to Greek and Latin originals. Critical theory, in fact, long pre-dates the literary criticism of individual works. The earliest work of theory was Aristotle's *Poetics*, which, in spite of its title, is about the nature of literature itself: Aristotle offers famous definitions of tragedy, insists that literature is about character, and that character is revealed through action, and he tries to identify the required stages in the progress of a plot. Aristotle was also the first critic to develop a 'reader-centred' approach to literature, since his consideration of drama tried to describe how it affected the audience. Tragedy, he said, should stimulate the emotions of pity and fear, these being, roughly, sympathy for and empathy

with the plight of the protagonist. By the combination of these emotions came about the effect Aristotle called 'catharsis', whereby these emotions are exercised, rather than exorcised, as the audience identifies with the plight of the central character.

The first prestigious name in English writing about literature is that of Sir Philip Sidney, who wrote his 'Apology for Poetry' in about 1580. Sidney was intent on expanding the implications of the ancient definition of literature first formulated by the Latin poet Ovid, who had said that its mission is '*docere delictendo*'- to teach by delighting (meaning, approximately, by entertaining). Sidney also quotes Horace, to the effect that a poem is 'a speaking picture, with this end, to teach and delight'. Thus, the giving of pleasure is here allowed a central position in the reading of literature, unlike, say, philosophy, which is implicitly stigmatised as worthy and uplifting, but not much fun. The notion of literature giving pleasure will now seem an unremarkable sentiment, but Sidney's aim was the revolutionary one of distinguishing literature from other forms of writing, on the grounds that, uniquely, literature has as its primary aim the giving of pleasure to the reader, and any moral or didactic element is necessarily either subordinate to that, or at least, unlikely to succeed without it. In a religious age, deeply suspicious of all forms of fiction, poetry, and representation, and always likely to denounce

them as the work of the devil, this was a very great step to take. In English too, then, critical theory came before practical criticism, as Sidney is writing about literature in general, not about individual works or writers.

Literary theory after Sidney was significantly advanced by Samuel Johnson in the eighteenth century. Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* and *Prefaces to Shakespeare* can be seen both as another major step forward in critical theory, and as the start of the English tradition of practical criticism, since he is the first to offer detailed commentary on the work of a single author. Prior to Johnson, the only text which had ever been subjected to this intensive scrutiny was the Bible, and the equivalent sacred books of other religions. The extension of this practice to works other than those thought to be the direct product of divine inspiration marks a significant moment of progress in the development of

secular humanism.

After Johnson came a major burgeoning of critical theory in the work of the Romantic poets: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley. One of the main texts is Wordsworth's *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*. What Wordsworth wrote in this preface was the product of collaborative discussions between himself and Coleridge. The introduction was added to the second edition of the ballads, published in 1800, after the first, of 1798, had been met with puzzlement. The book blends high literature and popular literature, since it contains literary ballads constructed on the model of the popular oral ballads of ordinary country people. The original readers of *Lyrical Ballads* also disliked the abandonment of the conventions of verbal decorum. These conventions had imposed a high degree of artificiality on poetic language, making it as different as possible from the language of ordinary everyday speech. Thus, a specialised poetic vocabulary had tended to enjoin the avoidance of simple everyday terms for things, and an elaborate system of rhyme and a highly compressed form of grammar had produced a verbal texture of much greater density than that of ordinary language. Suddenly, two ambitious young poets were trying to make their poetic language as much like prose as possible, avoiding the conventions of diction and verbal structure which had held sway for so long. Thus, this book is one of a number of significant critical works in literary theory whose immediate aim is to provide a rationale for the critic's own poetic work, and to educate the audience for it. It also anticipates issues of great interest to contemporary critical theory, such as the relationship between poetic language and 'ordinary' language, and that between 'literature' and other kinds of writing.

A second significant work from the Romantic era was Coleridge's misleadingly titled *Biographia Literaria*. The title might lead us to expect a work like Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, but in fact much of it directly addresses the ideas contained in Wordsworth's *Preface*, showing by a close consideration of aspects of his work that Wordsworth writes his best poetry when he is furthest away from adherence to his own theories of what poetry should be. Indeed, in the years during which he and Coleridge had drifted apart as friends, they had also taken radically differ-

ent views about the nature of poetry. Coleridge came to disagree completely with the view that the language of poetry must strive to become more like the language of prose. He saw this as an

impoverishment of the poetic effect which must ultimately prove suicidal. The argument dovetails neatly with the works already cited: if literature and other works differ in their aims and effects, as Aristotle and Sidney had maintained, and if poetry, unlike other kinds of writing, aims to teach by entertaining, then the major way in which the entertaining is done must be through the language in which it is written. The language entertains by its 'Active' qualities - this is the source of the aesthetic effect. Something like this is also connoted in Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* (1821) which sees poetry as essentially engaged in what a group of twentieth-century Russian critics later called 'defamiliarisation'. Shelley anticipates this term, since for him poetry 'strips the veil of familiarity from the world ... it purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity ... It compels us to feel that which we perceive, and to imagine that which we know'. This remarkable critical document also anticipates T. S. Eliot's notion of impersonality (put forward in his 1919 essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent') whereby there is a distinction between (as we might call it) the author (who is the person behind the work) and the writer (who is, so to speak, the 'person' *in* the work). In Eliot's view, the greater the separation between the two the better, since 'the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates', so that poetry is not simply the conscious rendering of personal experience into words. Shelley registers all this a hundred years earlier in his characteristically magisterial prose:

the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness; this power arises from within, like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, *and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or of its departure.*

(*A Defence*, lines 999-1003, my italics)

There is also an anticipation here of the Freudian notion of the mind as made up of conscious and unconscious elements. Indeed,

the idea of the unconscious is an essential one in Romanticism, and implicit in everything written about poetry by another major Romanticist, John Keats. Keats did not write formal literary theory in the way Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley did, but he did reflect on poetry in a sustained way in his letters. He too formulates a notion of the workings of the unconscious, for instance in a letter to Bailey of 22 November 1817 when he speaks of how 'the simple imaginative Mind may have its rewards in the repetition of its own silent Working coming continually on the Spirit with a fine suddenness'. The 'silent working' of the mind is the unconscious and the 'spirit' into which it erupts is the conscious. Keats's idea of 'negative capability' also amounts to this same privileging of the unconscious, this same desire to allow it scope to work, negative capability being 'when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' (letter to his brothers, 21 December 1817). In the critical writings of the Romantics, then, there are many anticipations of the concerns of critical theory today.

After the Romantics the main developments in critical theory were the work of mid and late Victorians, George Eliot, Matthew Arnold, and Henry James. George Eliot's critical work ranges widely over classical and continental writers, and philosophical issues, as did Coleridge's. It is worth emphasising this, since there are two distinct 'tracks' in the development of English criticism. One track leads through Samuel Johnson and Matthew Arnold to T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis. This might be called the 'practical criticism' track. It tends to centre upon the close analysis of the work of particular writers, and gives us our familiar tradition of 'close reading'. The other track lies through Sidney, Wordsworth, Coleridge, George Eliot, and Henry James. This track is very much 'ideas-led' rather than 'text-led': it tends to tackle big general issues concerned with literature - How are literary works structured? How do they affect readers or audiences? What is the nature of literary language? How does literature relate to the contemporary and to matters of politics and gender? What can be said about literature from a philosophical point of view? What is the

nature of the act of literary composition? These 'track two' preoccupations are very similar to the concerns of the critical theo-

rists who became prominent from the 1960s onwards, and it is important to realise that these concerns are not an exotic imposition upon 'native' Anglo-American approaches to literature but, rather, have been part of it from the beginning.

The insistence upon 'close reading' in the 1920s sprang partly from the work of Matthew Arnold in the previous century. Arnold has remained a key canonical figure in the history of English criticism, partly because F. R. Leavis adopted and adapted several of his ideas and attitudes and gave them twentieth-century currency. Arnold feared that the decline of religion would leave an increasingly divided society with no common system of beliefs, values, and images, with potentially disastrous consequences. He saw literature as a possible replacement for religion in this regard, but believed that the middle classes, on whom the burden and responsibility of democracy largely fell, had been progressively debased by materialism and philistinism. The critic would help such people to recognise 'the best that has been known and thought in the world' and thus enable them to give individual assent to the canon of great works which had emerged through the collective wisdom of the ages.

Arnold's most significant thinking is contained in the essays 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time' and 'The Study of Poetry'. He stresses the importance for literature of remaining 'disinterested', by which he means politically detached and uncommitted to any specific programme of action. The goal of literary criticism is that of attaining pure, disinterested knowledge, that is, to use another of his favourite phrases, of simply appreciating 'the object as in itself it really is' without wanting to press the insight gained into the service of a specific line of action. Arnold's key literary-critical device is the notion of the Touchstone, which avoids any definitions of desirable literary qualities, and merely suggests using aspects of the literature of the past as a means of measuring and assessing the literature of today. The way the Touchstone works is concisely explained in J. A. Cuddon's *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (3rd edition, Blackwell, 1991):

A touchstone is ... so-called because gold is tried by it. Matthew

, Arnold used the word in his essay *The Study of Poetry* (1880) in connection with literary criteria and standards:

Arnold advises that we should 'have always in mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and apply them as a Touchstone to other poetry'. He suggests that his Touchstone method should provide the basis for a 'real' rather than an 'historic' or 'personal' estimate of poetry. (See Cuddon, p. 980.)

In the first half of the twentieth century, the key critical names in Britain were F. R. Leavis, T. S. Eliot, William Empson, and I. A. Richards. All except Eliot were at Cambridge in the 1920s and 1930s, involved in the pioneering English School there which had a powerful influence on the teaching of English worldwide up to the 1970s. Eliot's contribution to the canon of received critical ideas was the greatest, his major critical ideas being:

- the notion of the 'dissociation of sensibility', developed in the course of his review article on Herbert Grierson's edition of *The Metaphysical Poets*,
- the notion of poetic 'impersonality', developed in the course of his two-part essay 'Tradition and the

Individual Talent', and

- the notion of the 'objective correlative', developed in his essay on *Hamlet*.

All these ideas have become controversial: the idea that a 'dissociation of sensibility' occurred in the seventeenth century, radically separating thought from feeling, is one for which historical evidence has never been found. Later in his career Eliot denied that he thought the dissociation had been caused by the English Civil War, though he added rather cryptically that he thought it might have been caused by the same factors as those which brought about the Civil War - a nice distinction. The best use of the idea is simply as a way of describing the special qualities of mind and sensibility which we detect in the Metaphysical poets: as a historical generalisation it seems quite without support. The best critique of the idea can be found in Frank Kermode's book *Romantic Image*.

The idea of impersonality was partly Eliot's way of deflecting

current thinking about poetry away from ideas of originality and self-expression which derived from Romanticism. Eliot's own personality, and the education he had received at Harvard, made this emphasis on the individual highly distasteful. It was much more congenial to him to see poetry not as a pouring out of personal emotion and personal experience, but as a transcending of the individual by a sense of tradition which spoke through, and is transmitted by, the individual poet. The best parts of a poet's work, he says, are not those which are most original, but those in which the voice of his predecessors can be most clearly heard speaking through him. Hence, there is a large distinction to be drawn between the mind of the individual, experiencing human being, and the voice which speaks in the poetry. This was not an original thought - Shelley, as we saw, had something very like it in his *Defence of Poetry* - but Eliot was the first to make it the cornerstone of a whole poetic aesthetic.

The objective correlative, finally, is really another encapsulation of English empiricist attitudes: it holds that the best way of expressing an emotion in art is to find some vehicle for it in gesture, action, or concrete symbolism, rather than approaching it directly or descriptively. This is undoubtedly true: little is gained in fiction or poetry by having characters (or narrators) say what they feel: it has to be *shown* in some way in words or actions. This is perhaps little more than the ancient distinction (first made by Plato) between *mimesis* and *diegesis*. The former is a *showing* of something, in the character's own words, or in actions which we actually see on the stage, if it is a play, while the latter is *telling* the audience or reader about things they don't see for themselves or experience in the direct speech of the characters. All Eliot's major critical ideas are thus flawed and unsatisfactory, and perhaps their long-standing currency is indicative of the theoretical vacuum into which they were launched.

The most influential British critic prior to the theory movement was F. R. Leavis. Leavis, like Arnold in the previous century, assumed that the study and appreciation of literature is a pre-condition to the health of society. He too distrusted abstract thought and looked for a system of literary appreciation (like Arnold's Touchstones) which by-passed fixed criteria, arguing

instead for an openness to the qualities of the text. Like Arnold, finally, he rejected any attempt to politicise either literature or criticism directly.

The two differ, however, in a few notable regards: Arnold, for example, takes the pantheon of past great writers more or less for granted: he does not question the excellence of Dante, for instance, which is why Dante can become a Touchstone. By contrast, Leavis sometimes wrote essays attacking the reputations of major established figures, and, indeed, it was the essence of his method to argue that some reputations

would *not* stand up to the kind of close textual scrutiny he constantly recommended. Arnold, in his critical ideas, seems essentially to license and encourage the amateur. You may not have read *everything*, he implies (how could you, since you don't have the unlimited time of the professional critic?), but if you have read the best, and can identify its qualities, then you can be confident in looking at new writing and reaching a true judgement on it. This 'protestant' aesthetic encourages a direct relationship between the individual reader and the literary greats.

F. R. Leavis began as an admirer of Eliot's critical work as well as of his poetry, but later greatly modified his views. He avoided the coining of critical vocabulary, and instead used as critical terms words and phrases which already had established lay senses: 'life', for instance, is used by Leavis almost as a critical term, as is the notion of 'felt experience'. For Leavis the crucial test is whether the work is conducive to 'life' and vitality. Leavis's extreme popularity was partly due to the fact that he was essentially a kind of combined avatar of Johnson and Arnold, offering again the former's moralism and the latter's social vision and anti-theoretical critical practice. Leavis is still so pervasive an influence that little more need be said about him here.

William Empson and I. A. Richards can perhaps be taken as a pair, though the latter was the tutor of the former in the late 1920s. Empson's book *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) was itself somewhat ambiguous in its effects. On the one hand, its ultra-close readings of texts demonstrated the kind of text-led extreme which might be seen as the logical development of the 'track one' tradition of British criticism described above. The word 'ambi-

guity' in the book's title can be translated as 'verbal difficulty', and Empson unravels his examples by meticulous textual surgery, rather than references out to a wider context. On the other hand, though, Empson's basic attitude towards language is that it is really a very slippery medium indeed: when we handle language we need to be aware that the whole thing is likely to explode into meanings we hadn't suspected of being there at all. As we go from ambiguity type one to type seven we seem to be approaching the frontiers of language, where the territory eventually becomes un-mappable, and we seem to end up looking into a void of linguistic indeterminacy. This can be seen as an anticipation from within the British tradition of post-structuralist views about the unreliability of language as a medium (see p. 64). But the placing of language within *any* context naturally tends to reduce or eliminate ambiguity. (For instance, the word 'pain', when you hear it spoken in isolation, is ambiguous, since it sounds the same as 'pane', but encounter it in the context of any actual situation of usage and the ambiguity disappears). Hence the later Empson drew back from the linguistic void by stressing, in particular, the autobiographical context in which literary works, in his view, are grounded.

I. A. Richards, finally, is the pioneer of the decontextualised approach to literature which became the norm in Britain from the 1930s to the 1970s as 'practical criticism' and in America during roughly the same period as the 'New Criticism'. Richards's experiments in the 1920s of presenting students and tutors with unannotated, anonymous poems for commentary and analysis gave rise to the ideal of removing the props of received opinion and knowledge and fostering a 'true judgement' based on first hand opinion. It is easy to see the connection between this and Arnold's 'Touchstones'. What is certain is that this decisive 'Ricardian' moment established the 'track one' 'practical' tradition of criticism so completely for so long that a selective amnesia descended on the discipline and it came to be widely regarded as the *only* tradition that had ever existed.

The subsequent conflict between liberal humanism and 'theory' is a pretty fundamental one, but it is worth reminding ourselves that it is actually much older than the 1970s when it

broke out with such force in Britain, America, and elsewhere. Similar debates and arguments took place in the 1930s, for instance between F. R. Leavis, whom we might regard as the archetypal British liberal humanist, and the critical theorist Rene Wellek. Leavis and Wellek debated the relationship between literary criticism and philosophy in the pages of Leavis's journal *Scrutiny*. Wellek's point against Leavis was simply that practical criticism was *not* enough - he ought to spell out the theoretical assumptions on which his readings, and his procedures generally, were based. In Wellek's view a series of 'close readings' of Romantic poets in Leavis's book *Revaluations* is offered to the reader in a theoretical vacuum. As he politely put it, 'I could wish that you had stated your assumptions more explicitly and defended them systematically' (*Scrutiny*, March 1937, p. 376). This refusal to accept the liberal humanist method as simply the 'natural' and taken-for-granted way of 'doing' literature is the crux of theory's general response to it. Though less politely than Wellek, theorists make the same demand as he did - spell out what you do, and why, when you read and criticise literature, so that your methods can be evaluated along with others. Implicit in this demand is the view that if these things are made explicit (as we tried to do in the previous section) then the weaknesses of liberal humanist assumptions and procedures will become apparent, and other approaches will have a chance of replacing them.

The work of all the figures discussed in this section can be found in the collection *English Critical Texts*, ed. D. J. Enright and Ernst de Chickera (Oxford University Press, 1962).

Liberal humanism in practice

It is perhaps unnecessary to supply a full-scale example of liberal humanist practice, since that practice will surely be familiar to anyone reading this book. However, I will sketch out, mainly for comparative purposes, what I would consider to be a characteristic liberal humanist reading of Edgar Allan Poe's tale 'The oval portrait' (see Appendix 1) since the tale will be used later to illustrate structuralism in practice, and narratology.

A liberal humanist approach to this tale (or, to be more specific,

a Leavisite approach) might focus on the evident conflict of values in the story between 'art' and 'life'. The central point of commentary and interpretation might be the moralist argument that true value lies in the 'lived life' of the unique individual, and that it is disastrous for the artist to fail to recognise a necessary subservience of art to a communal reality. Further, when artists begin to see themselves as Faustian super-heroes, able to cross all boundaries of taste, taboo, and conduct, and even to assume the god-like role of creating and sacrificing life itself, then a hubris-tic act is committed which ultimately dries up the sources of the life of art itself. Hence, the artist in this tale in his isolated turret, feeding vampire-like on the vital energies of his sitter, is an emblem of a debased and degenerate form of art whose values are of the purely aesthetic 'art for art's sake' kind and have no reference to any wider notion of personal and psychic health.

Two things stand out in this approach: firstly, this kind of reading is driven (ultimately) by its moral convictions (laudable in themselves, of course) rather than by any model of what constitutes a systematic approach to literary criticism. The robust championing of 'life' in the above sketch makes the term 'Leavisite' seem an appropriate one to apply to it. The second notable aspect of it is that it seems to by-pass matters of form, structure, genre, and so on, and launches straight into the discussion of matters of content. If the sketch were filled out, there would doubtless be comments on such characteristics as structure, symbol, and design, but they would probably be *secondary* in nature, intended as concrete support for the *primary* focus of the reading, which is the moral position taken. I am not, of course, dismissing such an approach as worthless: my intention is simply to characterise it and distinguish it from other approaches.

The transition to 'theory'

The growth of critical theory in the post-war period seems to comprise a series of 'waves', each associated with a specific decade, and all aimed against the liberal humanist consensus just illustrated, which had been established between the 1930s and the 1950s. In the 1960s, firstly, there were two older, but still unas-

simulated, rival new approaches, these being *Marxist criticism*, which had been pioneered in the 1930s and then reborn in the 1960s, and *psychoanalytic criticism*, which was of the same vintage and was similarly renewing itself in the 1960s. At the same time two new approaches were mounting vigorous direct assaults on liberal humanist orthodoxies, namely *linguistic criticism*, which came into being in the early 1960s, and early forms of *feminist criticism*, which started to become a significant factor at the end of the decade.

Then, in the 1970s news spread in literary-critical circles in Britain and the United States of controversial new critical approaches, in particular *structuralism* and *post-structuralism*, both of which originated in France. The effect of these two was so powerful as to produce, by the late 1970s and early 1980s, a situation which was frequently referred to as a 'crisis' or 'civil war' in the discipline of English. The questions these two approaches centred upon concerned matters of language and philosophy, rather than history or context. In the 1980s a shift occurred which is sometimes called the 'turn to history', whereby history, politics, and context were reinstated at the centre of the literary-critical agenda. Thus, in the early 1980s two new forms of political/historical criticism emerged, *new historicism* from the United States and *cultural materialism* from Britain. Both these take what might be called a 'holistic' approach to literature, aiming to integrate literary and historical study while at the same time maintaining some of the insights of the structuralists and post-structuralists of the previous decade.

Finally, in the 1990s a general flight from overarching grand explanations seemed to be taking place, and there was what seemed a decisive drift towards dispersal, eclecticism, and 'special-interest' forms of criticism and theory. Thus, the approach known as *postcolonialism* rejects the idea of a universally applicable Marxist explanation of things and emphasises the separateness or otherness of post-imperial nations and peoples. Likewise, *postmodernism* stresses the uniquely fragmented nature of much contemporary experience. Feminism, too, shows signs of dissolving into a loose federation known as gender studies, with gay and lesbian texts emerging

as distinct fields of literature, and hence

implying and generating appropriate and distinct critical approaches: also part of this 1990s federation is black feminist (or 'womanist') criticism. The necessary limits on a book like the present one make it impossible to include everything, and for the time being it does not venture beyond postcolonialism and postmodernism.

Some recurrent ideas in critical theory

These different approaches each have their separate traditions and histories, but several ideas are recurrent in critical theory and seem to form what might be regarded as its common bedrock. Hence, it makes some sense to speak of 'theory' as if it were a single entity with a set of underlying beliefs, as long as we are aware that doing so is a simplification. Some of these recurrent underlying ideas of theory are listed below.

1. Many of the notions which we would usually regard as the basic 'givens' of our existence (including our gender identity, our individual selfhood, and the notion of literature itself) are actually fluid and unstable things, rather than fixed and reliable essences. Instead of being solidly 'there' in the real world of fact and experience, they are 'socially constructed', that is, dependent on social and political forces and on shifting ways of seeing and thinking. In philosophical terms, all these are *contingent* categories (denoting a status which is temporary, provisional, 'circumstance-dependent') rather than *absolute* ones (that is, fixed, immutable, etc.). Hence, no overarching

fixed 'truths' can ever be established. The results of all forms of intellectual enquiry are provisional only. There is no such thing as a fixed and reliable truth (except for the statement that this is so, presumably). The position on these matters which theory attacks is often referred to, in a kind of shorthand, as *essentialism*, while many of the theories discussed in this book would describe themselves as *anti-essentialist*.

2. Theorists generally believe that all thinking and investigation is necessarily affected and largely determined by prior ideological commitment. The notion of disinterested enquiry is

therefore untenable: none of us, they would argue, is capable of standing back from the scales and weighing things up dis-

passionately: rather, all investigators have a thumb on one side or other of the scales. Every practical procedure (for instance, in literary criticism) presupposes a theoretical perspective of some kind. To deny this is simply to try to place our own theoretical position beyond scrutiny as something which is 'commonsense' or 'simply given'. This contention is problematical, of course, and is usually only made explicit as a counter to specific arguments put forward by opponents. The problem with this view is that it tends to discredit one's own project along with all the rest, introducing a *relativism* which disables argument and cuts the ground from under any kind of commitment.

3. Language itself conditions, limits, and predetermines what we see. Thus, all reality is constructed

through language, so that nothing is simply 'there' in an unproblematical way - everything is a linguistic/textual construct. Language doesn't *record* reality, it shapes and creates it, so that the whole of our universe is textual. Further, for the theorist, meaning is jointly constructed by reader and writer. It isn't just 'there' and waiting before we get to the text but requires the reader's contribution to bring it into being.

4. Hence, any claim to offer a definitive reading would be futile. The meanings within a literary work are never fixed and reliable, but always shifting, multi-faceted and ambiguous. In literature, as in all writing, there is never the possibility of establishing fixed and definite meanings: rather, it is characteristic of language to generate infinite webs of meaning, so that all texts are necessarily self-contradictory, as the process of deconstruction will reveal. There is no final court of appeal in these matters, since literary texts, once they exist, are viewed by the theorist as independent linguistic structures whose authors are always 'dead' or 'absent'.

5. Theorists distrust all 'totalising' notions. For instance, the notion of 'great' books as an absolute and self-sustaining category is to be distrusted, as books always arise out of a particular socio-political situation, and this situation should not

be suppressed, as tends to happen when they are promoted to 'greatness'. Likewise, the concept of a 'human nature', as a generalised norm which transcends the idea of a particular race, gender, or class, is to be distrusted too, since it is usually in practice *Eurocentric* (that is, based on white European norms) and *androcentric* (that is, based on masculine norms and attitudes). Thus, the appeal to the idea of a generalised, supposedly inclusive, human nature is likely in practice to marginalise, or denigrate, or even deny the humanity of women, or disadvantaged groups.

To sum up these five points: for theory:

Politics is pervasive,

Language is constitutive,

Truth is provisional,

Meaning is contingent,

Human nature is a myth.

If, at later points in this book, or later in your study of theory, you begin to find that your grasp of things is slipping it would be worthwhile coming back to this list to remind yourself of the basic frame of mind which theory embodies. It is very likely that a concept with which you are having difficulty will turn out to be a version of one of these positions.

Selected reading

Books representing the liberal humanist position

Alter, Robert, *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age* (Simon and Schuster, 1989; rpt. W. W. Norton, 1997, with a new preface). Polemical anti-theoretical introduction, 'The disappearance of reading',

and final chapter, 'Multiple readings and the bog of indeterminacy'; the chapters in between are on traditional literary critical concepts such as 'Character', 'Style' and 'Perspective'.

Gardner, Helen, *In Defence of the Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 1984).

Based on a course of lectures responding to a book by Frank Kermode (then a champion of theory). A vigorous defence of traditional human-

ist scholarship and criticism against what she saw as the malign influence of theory.

Gribble, James, *Literary Education: A Re-evaluation* (Cambridge University Press, 1983).

One of several books from the early 1980s which mounted a defence of traditional literary scholarship against theory. See chapter one, 'Literature and truth': chapter four, 'The subjection of criticism to theory': chapter five 'Literature and the education of the emotions'.

Steiner, George, *Real Presences: Is There Anything in What We Say?* (Faber, 1989; rpt. University of Chicago Press, 1991). Steiner is a polyglot, polymath humanist whose work has never been anti-theoretical. In the three long essays in this book he grapples with the problem of relating theoretical accounts to the actual experience of responding to literature and the other arts.

Watson, George, *The Certainty of Literature: Essays in Polemic* (Harvester, 1989).

Watson's opposition to contemporary theory is absolute and unqualified, as the title of this book implies.

Books about the rise of English as an academic subject

Baldick, Chris, *The Social Mission of English Studies 1848-1932* (Oxford University Press, 1983).

A clearly argued history of literary criticism in England from Matthew Arnold. Detailed, and with a clear introduction.

Doyle, Brian, 'The hidden history of English Studies' in *Re-Reading English*, ed. Peter Widdowson (Methuen, 1982), pp. 17-31. Asks 'why and how did English become a major subject in higher education?' An influential account, though the emphasis is slightly different from the one I have offered here.

Eagleton, Terry, 'The rise of English', chapter one in his *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Blackwell, 1983; 2nd edn. University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

A polemical and very readable account of the growth of 'English', broadly in line with Doyle's.

Graff, Gerald, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (University of Chicago Press, 1987).

A detailed account of the growth of English studies in the United States.

Kearney, Anthony, *The Louse on the Locks of Literature: John Churton Collins* (Scottish Academic Press, 1986).

Collins was a nineteenth-century pioneer of English studies. This enjoyable book includes an account (on which I have drawn in the relevant part of this chapter) of debates in the press and Parliament on the proposed new academic subject of 'English'.

Mulhern, Francis, *The Moment of Scrutiny* (New Left Books, 1979). *Scrutiny* was the journal founded by F. R. Leavis in 1932, so this widely respected book continues the story of 'English' from where Baldick (above) leaves off.

Palmer, D. J., *The Rise of English Studies* (Oxford University Press, 1965). A readable account.

Potter, Stephen, *The Muse in Chains: A Study in Education* (Cape, 1937, rpt. Folcroft, 1973).

An early account of early English. The specimen examination papers from the nineteenth century (included in the appendices) are very revealing.

Tillyard, E. M. W., *The Muse Unchained: An Intimate Account of the Revolution in English Studies at Cambridge* (London, Bowes & Bowes, 1958).

Continues the story of English from where Potter (above) leaves off, describing Cambridge in the 1920s and 1930s and the early careers of Richards, Empson, and Leavis. Palmer, Potter, and Tillyard together provide what might be called liberal humanism's own account of its development, distinctly different from that offered by Baldick, Doyle, Eagleton, and Mulhern.

2

Structuralism

Structuralist chickens and liberal humanist eggs

Structuralism is an intellectual movement which began in France in the 1950s and is first seen in the work of the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (1908—) and the literary critic Roland Barthes (1915-1980). It is difficult to boil structuralism down to a single 'bottom-line' proposition, but if forced to do so I would say that its essence is the belief that things cannot be understood in isolation - they have to be seen in the context of the larger structures they are part of (hence the term 'structuralism'). Structuralism was imported into Britain mainly in the 1970s and attained widespread influence, and even notoriety, throughout the 1980s.

The structures in question here are those imposed by our way of perceiving the world and organising experience, rather than objective entities already existing in the external world. It follows from this that meaning or significance isn't a kind of core or essence *inside* things: rather, meaning is always *outside*. Meaning is always an attribute of things, in the literal sense that meanings are *attributed* to the things by the human mind, not contained within them. But let's try to be specific about what it might mean to think primarily in terms of structures when considering literature. Imagine that we are confronted with a poem, Donne's 'Good Morrow',

let's say. Our immediate reaction as structuralists would probably be to insist that it can only be understood if we first have a clear notion of the genre which it parodies and

subverts. Any single poem is an example of a particular genre, and the genre and the example relate to each other rather as a phrase spoken in English relates to the English language as a structure with all its rules, its conventions, and so on. In the case of Donne's poem the relevant genre is the *alba* or 'dawn song', a poetic form dating from the twelfth century in which lovers lament the approach of daybreak because it means that they must part.

But the *alba*, in turn, can hardly be understood without some notion of the concept of courtly love, and, further, the *alba*, being a poem, presupposes a knowledge of what is entailed in the conventionalised form as utterance known as poetry. These are just some of the cultural structures which Donne's poem is part of. You will see that your structuralist 'approach' to it is actually taking you further and further away from the text, and into large and comparatively abstract questions of genre, history, and philosophy, rather than closer and closer to it, as the Anglo-American tradition demands. Now if we use the crude analogy of chickens and eggs, we can regard the containing structures (the *alba*, courtly love, poetry itself as a cultural practice) as the chicken, and the individual example (Donne's poem in this case) as the egg. For structuralists, determining the precise nature of the chicken is the most important activity, while for the liberal humanists the close analysis of the egg is paramount.

Thus, in the structuralist approach to literature there is a constant movement away from the interpretation of the individual literary work and a parallel drive towards understanding the larger, abstract structures which contain them. These structures, as I suggested at the start of this section, are usually abstract such as the notion of the literary or the poetic, or the nature of narrative itself, rather than 'mere' concrete specifics like the history of the *alba* or of courtly love, both of which, after all, we could quite easily find out about from conventional literary history. The arrival of structuralism in Britain and the USA in the 1970s caused a great deal of controversy, precisely because literary studies in these countries had traditionally had very little interest in large abstract issues of the kind structuralists wanted to raise. The so-called 'Cambridge revolution' in English studies in the 1920s

had promulgated *the opposite* to all this: it enjoined close study of the text in isolation from all wider structures and contexts: it was relentlessly 'text-based' and tended to exclude wider questions, abstract issues, and ideas. Structuralism in that sense turned English studies on its head, and devalued all that it had held dear for around half a century, asking long-repressed questions such as: 'What do we mean by "literary"?' 'How do narratives work?' 'What *is* a poetic structure?' Traditional critics, in a word, did not welcome the suggestion that they ought to switch their attention from eggs to chickens.

Signs of the fathers - Saussure

Though structuralism proper began, as we said, in the 1950s and 1960s, it has its roots in the thinking of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). Saussure was a key figure in the development of modern approaches to language study. In the nineteenth century linguistic

scholars had mainly been interested in historical aspects of language (such as working out the historical development of languages and the connections between them, and speculating about the origins of language itself). Saussure concentrated instead on the patterns and functions of language in use today, with the emphasis on how meanings are maintained and established and on the functions of grammatical structures.

But what exactly did Saussure say about linguistic structures which the structuralists later found so interesting? This can be summarised as three pronouncements in particular. Firstly, he emphasised that the meanings we give to words are purely *arbitrary*, and that these meanings are maintained by convention only. Words, that is to say, are 'unmotivated signs', meaning that there is no inherent connection between a word and what it designates. The word 'hut', for instance, is not in any way 'appropriate' to its meaning, and all linguistic signs are arbitrary like this. (There is the minor exception of a small number of onomatopoeic words like 'cuckoo' and 'hiss', but even these vary between languages.) Insisting that linguistic signs are arbitrary is a fairly obvious point to make, perhaps, and it is not a new thing to say (Plato said it in Ancient Greek times), but it is a new concept to *emphasise*

(which is always much more important), and the structuralists were interested in the implication that if language as a sign system is based on arbitrariness of this kind then it follows that language isn't a reflection of the world and of experience, but a system which stands quite separate from it. This point will be further developed later.

Secondly, Saussure emphasised that the meanings of words are (what we might call) *relational*. That is to say, no word can be defined in isolation from other words. The definition of any given word depends upon its relation with other 'adjoining' words. For example, that word 'hut' depends for its precise meaning on its position in a 'paradigmatic chain', that is, a chain of words related in function and meaning each of which could be substituted for any of the others in a given sentence. The paradigmatic chain in this case might include the following:

hovel shed hut house mansion palace

The meaning of any one of these words would be altered if any one of the others were removed from the chain. Thus, 'hut' and 'shed' are both small and basic structures, but they are not quite the same thing: one is primarily for shelter (a night-watchman's hut, for instance), while the other is primarily for storage: without the other, each would have to encompass *both* these meanings, and hence would be a different word. Likewise, a mansion can be defined as a dwelling which is bigger and grander than a mere house, but not as big and grand as a palace. Thus, we define 'mansion' by explaining how its meaning relates to that of the two words on either side of it. If we have paired opposites then this mutually defining aspect of words is even more apparent: the terms 'male' and 'female', for example, mainly have meaning in relation to each other: each designates the absence of the characteristics included in the other, so that 'male' can be seen as mainly meaning 'not female', and vice versa. Similarly, we could have no concept of 'day' without the linked concept of 'night', no notion of 'good' without a 'bad' to define it against. This 'relational' aspect of language gave rise to a famous remark of Saussure's: 'In a language there are only differences, without fixed terms'. All words, then, exist in

'differencing networks', like these 'dyads', or

paired opposites, and like the paradigmatic chain of 'dwelling place' words given earlier.

Saussure used a famous example to explain what he meant by saying that there are no intrinsic fixed meanings in language - the example of the 8.25 Geneva to Paris express train (see the *Course*, pp. 108-9, and Jonathan Culler's discussion of this example in *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 11). What is it that gives this train its identity? It isn't anything material, since each day it will have a different engine and carriages, different drivers and passengers, and so on. If it is late, it won't even leave at 8.25. Does it even have to be a train? I once asked at Southampton station for the Brighton train, and the ticket collector pointed to a bus standing outside the station and said, 'That's it'. It was a Sunday, and because of engineering works on the line a bus service was being used to ferry passengers beyond the sections being worked upon. Sometimes, then, a 'train' *doesn't* have to be a train. Saussure's conclusion is that the only thing which gives this train its identity is its position in a structure of differences: it comes *between* the 7.25 and the 9.25, that is, its identity is purely relational.

Thirdly, for Saussure, language *constitutes* our world, it doesn't just record it or label it. Meaning is always *attributed* to the object or idea by the human mind, and constructed by and expressed through language: it is not already contained within the thing. Well-known examples of this process would be the choice between paired alternatives like 'terrorist' or 'freedom fighter'. There is no neutral or objective way of designating such a person, merely a choice of two terms which 'construct' that person in certain ways. Another example of the same concept is seen in the two ways of referring to the domestic tax imposed in Britain by the Thatcher government: opponents of this tax called it the poll tax, evoking images of the Middle Ages and the Peasants' Revolt. The government itself called the tax the community charge, avoiding the negative word 'tax' and making use of the favoured term 'community'. The term for this tax used by a given individual immediately indicated a political position, and, again, no neutral or 'objective' alternative was available. It has been said that there are three versions of every story, your version, my version, and the truth, but the case here is more complicated than that, since

all the available terms are purely linguistic - there is no truth about these matters which exists securely outside language.

Wherever we look, we see language constituting the world in this way, not just reflecting it. For instance, the words for colours *make* a reality, they don't just name things which are 'there': the spectrum isn't divided into seven primary colours; all the colours merge into one another. So we might have had fourteen names rather than seven. Another example is the terms we give to the seasons of the year. We have four distinct names ('spring', 'summer', etc.), but actually the year runs continuously without any breaks or decisive changes. It isn't, in reality, divided into four. Why not have six seasons, or eight? Since change is continuous throughout the year the divisions could be made anywhere at all. The seasons, then, are a *way of seeing* the year, not an objective fact of nature. So Saussure's thinking stressed the way language is arbitrary, relational, and constitutive, and this way of thinking about language greatly influenced the structuralists, because it gave them a model of a system which is self-contained, in which

individual items relate to other items and thus create larger structures.

One other distinction made by Saussure gave structuralists a way of thinking about the larger structures which were relevant to literature. He used the terms *langue* and *parole* to signify, respectively, language as a system or structure on the one hand, and any given utterance in that language on the other. A particular remark in French (a sample of *parole*) only makes sense to you if you are already in possession of the whole body of rules and conventions governing verbal behaviour which we call 'French' (that is, the *langue*). The individual remark, then, is a discrete item which only makes sense when seen in relation to a wider containing structure, in the classic structuralist manner. Now, structuralists make use of the *langue/parole* distinction by seeing the individual literary work (the novel *Middlemarch*, let's say) as an example of a literary *parole*. It too only makes sense in the context of some wider containing structure. So the *langue* which relates to the *parole Middlemarch* is the notion of the novel as a genre, as a body of literary practice.

STOP and THINK

Consider some of the points made so far in this section about language.

Firstly, can you think of other examples of language constituting reality, rather than merely naming something which is already there? Your examples may be of a similar type to those mentioned above ('freedom fighter', 'poll tax', the seasons). You may also like to consider the significance in this context of those 'speech acts' which are known as 'performatives', that is, the kind of utterance which *is* the reality it designates, such as making a promise ('I promise to tell him') or formally opening some new facility ('I now declare this bridge opened').

Secondly, can you see any flaws in the line of argument about language and reality put forward by Saussure? For instance, does it make sense to posit a category of pure difference? Do you see any force in the counter-view once put forward by the critic Christopher Ricks, that you can't just have difference, you have to have difference *between* things? (See his article 'In Theory' in *London Review of Books*, April 1981, pp. 3-6.) If you accepted Ricks's argument, and agreed that you can only have difference between things, what implications would this have for the Saussurean argument that languages have only differences, without fixed terms?

Thirdly, are you convinced by that train? Is its position in the timetable really the *only* thing which gives it its identity? Saussure supplements the example with another one:

Why can a street be completely rebuilt and still be the same? Because it does not constitute a purely material entity; it is based on certain conditions that are distinct from the materials that fit the conditions, e.g. its location with respect to other streets

(*Course*, pp. 108-9)

A counter-argument might be that the 8.25 has to be train-like before it can be the 8.25: nobody will remark, 'There goes the

8.25 to Paris' if a flock of pigeons emerges from under the station canopy: likewise, it is true to say that a given street has a largely relational identity - you define 'X' Street by saying that it's the one that runs at right angles between 'Y' Street and 'Z' Street. All the same, a piece of string stretched between the two will not be mistaken for the street.

The scope of structuralism

But structuralism is not just about language and literature. When Saussure's work was 'co-opted' in the 1950s by the people we now call structuralists, their feeling was that Saussure's model of how language works was 'transferable', and would also explain how all signifying systems work. The anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss applied the structuralist outlook to the interpretation of myth. He suggested that the individual tale (the *parole*) from a cycle of myths did not have a separate and inherent meaning but could only be understood by considering its position in the whole cycle (the *langue*) and the similarities and difference between that tale and others in the sequence.

So in interpreting the Oedipus myth, he placed the individual story of Oedipus within the context of the whole cycle of tales connected with the city of Thebes. He then began to see repeated motifs and contrasts, and he used these as the basis of his interpretation. On this method the story and the cycle it is part of are reconstituted in terms of basic oppositions: animal/human, relation/stranger, husband/son and so on. Concrete details from the story are seen in the context of a larger structure, and the larger structure is then seen as an overall network of basic 'dyadic pairs' which have obvious symbolic, thematic, and archetypal resonance (like the contrast between art and life, male and female, town and country, telling and showing, etc., as in the 'worked example' later).

This is the typical structuralist process of moving from the particular to the general, placing the individual work within a wider structural context. The wider structure might also be found in, for instance, the whole corpus of an author's work; or in the genre

conventions of writing about that particular topic (for instance, discussing Dickens's novel *Hard Times* in terms of its deviations from novelistic conventions and into those of other more popular genres, like melodrama or the ballad); or in the identification of sets of underlying fundamental 'dyads'. A signifying system in this sense is a very wide concept: it means any organised and structured set of signs which carries cultural meanings. Included in this category would be such diverse phenomena as: works of literature, tribal rituals (a degree ceremony, say, or a rain dance), fashions (in clothing, food, 'life-style', etc.), the styling of cars, or the contents of advertisements. For the structuralist, the culture we are part of can be 'read' like a language, using these principles, since culture is made up of many structural networks which carry significance and can be shown to operate in a systematic way. These networks operate through 'codes' as a system of signs; they can make statements, just as language does, and they can be read or decoded by the structuralist or semiotician.

Fashion, for instance, can be 'read' like a language. Separate items or features are added up into a complete 'outfit' or 'look' with complex grammatical rules of combination: we don't wear an evening dress and carpet slippers; we don't come to lectures in military uniform, etc. Likewise, each component sign derives its meaning from a structural context. Of course, many fashions in clothing depend on breaking such rules in a 'knowing' way, but the 'statement' made by such rule-breaks (for instance, making outer garments which look like undergarments, or cutting expensive fabrics in an apparently rough way) depends upon the prior existence of the 'rule' or convention which is being conspicuously flouted. In the fashion world recently, for instance, (late 1994) the combination of such features as exposed seams, crumpled-looking fabrics, and garments which are too big or too small for the wearer signified the fashion known (confusingly, in this context) as deconstruction. Take any one of these features out of the context of all the

rest, however, and they will merely signify that you have your jacket on inside out or don't believe in ironing. Again, these individual items have their place in an overall structure, and the structure is of greater significance than the individual item.

The other major figure in the early phase of structuralism was

Roland Barthes, who applied the structuralist method to the general field of modern culture. He examined modern France (of the 1950s) from the standpoint of a cultural anthropologist in a little book called *Mythologies* which he published in France in 1957. This looked at a host of items which had never before been subjected to intellectual analysis, such as: the difference between boxing and wrestling; the significance of eating steak and chips; the styling of the Citroen car; the cinema image of Greta Garbo's face; a magazine photograph of an Algerian soldier saluting the French flag. Each of these items he placed within a wider structure of values, beliefs, and symbols as the key to understanding it. Thus, boxing is seen as a sport concerned with repression and endurance, as distinct from wrestling, where pain is flamboyantly displayed. Boxers do not cry out in pain when hit, the rules cannot be disregarded at any point during the bout, and the boxer fights as himself, not in the elaborate guise of a make-believe villain or hero. By contrast, wrestlers grunt and snarl with aggression, stage elaborate displays of agony or triumph, and fight as exaggerated, larger than life villains or super-heroes. Clearly, these two sports have quite different functions within society: boxing enacts the stoical endurance which is sometimes necessary in life, while wrestling dramatises ultimate struggles and conflicts between good and evil. Barthes's approach here, then, is that of the classic structuralist: the individual item is 'structuralised', or 'contextualised by structure', and in the process of doing this layers of significance are revealed.

Roland Barthes in these early years also made specific examinations of aspects of literature, and by the 1970s, structuralism was attracting widespread attention in Paris and world wide. A number of English and American academics spent time in Paris in the 1970s taking courses under the leading structuralist figures (and these included Colin MacCabe) and came back to Britain and the USA fired up to teach similar ideas and approaches here. The key works on structuralism were in French, and these began to be translated in the 1970s and published in English. A number of Anglo-American figures undertook to read material not yet translated and to interpret structuralism for English-speaking readers; these important mediators included: the American,

Jonathan Culler, whose book *Structuralist Poetics* appeared in 1975: the English critic Terence Hawkes whose book *Structuralism and Semiotics* came out in 1977 as the first book in a new series published by Methuen called 'New Accents'. Hawkes was the general editor of the series, and its mission was 'to encourage rather than resist the process of change' in literary studies. Another influential figure was the British critic Frank Kermode, then professor at University College, London, who wrote with enthusiasm about Roland Barthes, and set up graduate seminars to discuss his work (though he later in the 1990s became identified, in retirement, with much more traditional approaches). Finally, there was David Lodge, Professor of English at Birmingham, who tried to combine the ideas of structuralism with more traditional approaches. This attempt is typified by his book *Working with Structuralism* (1980).

What structuralist critics do

1. They analyse (mainly) prose narratives, relating the text to some larger containing structure, such as:
 - (a) the conventions of a particular literary genre, or
 - (b) a network of intertextual connections, or
 - (c) a projected model of an underlying universal narrative structure, or
 - (d) a notion of narrative as a complex of recurrent patterns or motifs.
2. They interpret literature in terms of a range of underlying parallels with the structures of language, as described by modern linguistics. For instance, the notion of the 'mytheme', posited by Levi-Strauss, denoting the minimal units of narrative 'sense', is formed on the analogy of the morpheme, which, in linguistics, is the smallest unit of grammatical sense. An example of a morpheme is the 'ed' added to a verb to denote the past tense.
3. They apply the concept of systematic patterning and structuring to the whole field of Western culture, and across cultures, treating as 'systems of signs' anything from Ancient Greek myths to brands of soap powder.

Structuralist criticism: examples

I will base these examples on the methods of literary analysis described and demonstrated in Barthes's book *S/Z*, published in 1970. This book, of some two hundred pages, is about Balzac's thirty-page story 'Sarrasine'. Barthes's method of analysis is to divide the story into 561 lexies', or units of meaning, which he then classifies using five 'codes', seeing these as the basic underlying structures of all narratives. So in terms of our opening statement about structuralism (that it aims to understand the individual item by placing it in the context of the larger structure to which it belongs) the individual item here is this particular story, and the larger structure is the system of codes, which Barthes sees as generating all possible actual narratives, just as the grammatical structures of a language can be seen as generating all possible sentences which can be written or spoken in it. I should add that there is a difficulty in taking as an example of structuralism material from a text by Barthes published in 1970, since 1970 comes within what is usually considered to be Barthes's post-structuralist phase, always said to begin (as in this book) with his 1968 essay 'The Death of the Author'. My reasons for nevertheless regarding *S/Z* as primarily a structuralist text are, firstly, to do with precedent and established custom: it is treated as such, for instance, in many of the best known books on structuralism (such as Terence Hawkes's *Structuralism and Semiotics*, Robert Scholes's *Structuralism in Literature*, and Jonathan Culler's *Structuralist Poetics*). A second reason is that while *S/Z* clearly contains many elements which subvert the confident positivism of structuralism, it is nevertheless essentially structuralist in its attempt to reduce the immense complexity and diversity possible in fiction to the operation of five codes, however tongue-in-cheek the exercise may be taken to be. The truth, really, is that the book sits on the fence between structuralism and post-structuralism: the 561 lexies and the five codes are linked in spirit to the 'high' structuralism of Barthes's 1968 essay 'Analysing Narrative Structures', while the ninety-three interspersed digressions, with their much more free-wheeling comments on narrative, anticipate the 'full' post-structuralism of

his 1973 book *The Pleasure of the*

Text. The five codes identified by Barthes in *S/Z* are:

1. *The proairetic code* This code provides indications of actions. ('The ship sailed at midnight' 'They began again', etc.)
2. *The hermeneutic code* This code poses questions or enigmas which provide narrative suspense. (For instance, the sentence 'He knocked on a certain door in the neighbourhood of Pell Street' makes the reader wonder who lived there, what kind of neighbourhood it was, and so on).
3. *The cultural code* This code contains references out beyond the text to what is regarded as common knowledge. (For example, the sentence 'Agent Angelis was the kind of man who sometimes arrives at work in odd socks' evokes a preexisting image in the reader's mind of the kind of man this is - a stereotype of bungling incompetence, perhaps, contrasting that with the image of brisk efficiency contained in the notion of an 'agent').
4. *The semic code* This is also called the connotative code. It is linked to theme, and this code (says Scholes in the book mentioned above) when organised around a particular proper name constitutes a 'character'. Its operation is demonstrated in the second example, below.
5. *The symbolic code* This code is also linked to theme, but on a larger scale, so to speak. It consists of contrasts and pairings related to the most basic binary polarities - male and female, night and day, good and evil, life and art, and so on. These are the structures of contrasted elements which structuralists see as fundamental to the human way of perceiving and organising reality.

As the last two codes have generated the greatest difficulty (especially in distinguishing one from the other) I will use each in turn as the basis of an example, beginning with the symbolic code, which I will illustrate in use as the organising principle for the interpretation of an entire tale, the story being 'The oval por-trait' (reproduced in Appendix 1), by the early nineteenth-cen-tury American writer Edgar Allan Poe, an author who has received considerable attention from both structuralists and post-

structuralists. In terms of the 'What structuralists do' list of activities above, this is an example of category I.(d), treating narrative structure as a complex of recurrent patterns and motifs.

In discussing it I will enlist your help as a co-writer of this structuralist critique. The points at which your help is requested are indicated by the 'stop and THINK' heading.

A brief working summary of the plot may be useful. During what appears to be a civil war in an unnamed European country a wounded officer (as we may assume him to be) takes refuge in a recently abandoned chateau. The room he sleeps in contains an extremely lifelike portrait of a young woman, and a written account of this portrait, which he finds in the room, tells how the artist was her husband, who had become so carried away with the creation of the portrait that he failed to notice that as 'life' was kindled in the painting it simultaneously drained away from the sitter. At the end of the tale the placing of the final touch of colour which renders the portrait perfect coincides with the death of the sitter.

The most basic difference between liberal humanist and structuralist reading is that the structuralist's comments on structure, symbol, and design, become paramount, and are the main focus of the commentary, while the emphasis on any wider moral significance, and indeed on interpretation itself in the broad sense, is very much reduced. So instead of going straight into the content, in the liberal humanist manner, the structuralist presents a series of parallels, echoes, reflections, patterns, and contrasts, so that the narrative becomes highly schematised, is translated, in fact, into what we might call a verbal diagram. What we are looking for, as we attempt a structuralist critique, and where we expect to find it, can be indicated as in the diagram below. We are looking for the factors listed on the left, and we expect to find them in the parts of the tale listed on the right:

Parallels	Plot
Echoes	Structure
Reflections/Repetitions in Character/Motive	
Contrasts	Situation/Circumstance
Patterns	Language/Imagery

Listing some of the parallels, etc., which might be picked out in Poe's tale is perhaps the best way of illustrating all this. Firstly, then, the tale itself has a binary structure (a structure of paired opposites) made up of two contrasting halves: the first part is a 'framing' narrative, containing the first-person account of the wounded officer, while the second is the story-within-the-story which he reads in the commentary on the painting. There is a very marked difference in narrative pace between these two halves, the first being leisurely, ponderous even, reflecting the down-to-earth, rationalistic mind of the officer, while the second moves with increasingly disjointed rapidity, reflecting the frenzy of artistic creation, and the rapid downward spiral of the victim/sitter's health.

A second contrast within the tale is that the chateau itself performs very different functions in the two halves. In the first half it is a place of refuge and recuperation for the officer, where he finds safety from his enemies and, we may assume, recovers his health. In the second half, by contrast, it is a place of danger and ultimately destruction for the sitter, where she is delivered to the whims of her artist-husband and her life is drained away.

STOP and THINK

Now, look for other contrasts between the two halves. For instance, each half features a relationship between two people (the officer and the valet in the first part and the artist and his

wife in the second): how do these two relationships differ? There is an unequal distribution of power within each relationship, but the effects are different. How, exactly? Is there a similarity in what the members of each couple do to and for each other?

The main 'actors' in the two halves are (respectively) the wounded officer and the artist. What contrasts are observable in the mental state of these two?

Both the officer in the first part and the artist in the second

are, in a sense, engrossed in a painting, but the role of art in the two halves is very different. What exactly is the contrast?

All these are contrasts, parallels, etc., between the two halves. There are also many more *within* the two halves. Firstly, there is a strongly implied contrast between the husband's self-absorbed artistic frenzy on the one hand, and a more conventional outwardly directed sexual passion of the kind which might be expected in a husband for a new bride. Instead of being fascinated by her, this husband is 'entranced before his work' in auto-erotic contemplation. Indeed, the marriage is in a sense bigamous, since the husband is described as 'having already a bride in his art'. The several weeks he spends alone with his new bride executing the painting are a kind of sustained negative parody of a honeymoon. Locked up together for several weeks, the husband painter 'took a fervid and burning pleasure in his task and wrought day and night', and towards the end 'the painter had grown wild with the ardour of his work'. In fact, he has spent this 'honeymoon' in passionate involvement with the first bride rather than the second.

A third level of contrasts and parallels are those which concern narrative mechanisms such as presentation and language, as well as content. One such, for instance, is the parallel between the narrators of the two halves. Both have a degree of anonymity, and in the second case the anonymity is complete, since we are given no information at all about the identity of the author of the 'vague and quaint words' of the story-within-the-story. (The only named character is Pedro the valet, the least important figure in the tale.) But structuralists are encouraged by Roland Barthes to ask of a text the question '*qui parle?*' - 'Who is speaking?' and if we ask that question of the second part of the tale, then the answer will involve dislodging the narrator from the position of a neutral spectatorial recorder, for this account must have been written by someone who witnessed these events without attempting any intervention. At the very least, this witness is someone without insight, indistinguishable from those who, having seen the portrait, 'spoke of its resemblance in low words, as of a mighty

marvel, and a proof not less of the power of the painter than of his deep love for her whom he depicted so surpassingly well'.

STOP and THINK

The first narrator, too, can be seen as to some degree culpable, and as wilfully blind to the events witnessed. Could we go further? Is there a parallel between the two narrators, such that the first is aligned, through the language used, with the attitudes of the artist-husband?

For instance, what do you make of his prolonged contemplation of the painting? Are there elements in that part of the text which parallel the displaced eroticism of the artist's protracted gazing on his wife as he makes the painting? There are two examples, not just one, of an intense masculine gaze in the story. Look at the distribution of the words 'gaze' and 'glory' (or 'gloriously') in the text. Look at the way the passing of time is depicted in each of these cases. In both cases there is a moment when the gaze is averted: what is the significance of this parallelism?

All these contrasts are of a very particular kind, proper to just this one tale. We may then perform a simplifying move which is rather like finding the lowest common denominator of a set of numbers, for these items might be reduced to a set of more generalised ones: the contrast and conflict between *life* and *art*, *male* and *female*, *light* and *dark* (in the sense of enlightenment and moral benightedness, as well as in purely physical terms), *looking* and *doing*, *reality* and *representation*. The thesis of the structuralist is that narrative structures are founded upon such underlying paired opposites, or dyads, so that contrasts such as these are the skeletal structure on which all narratives are fleshed out. If we had to reduce even this list of dyads, to achieve a single pair, then it would have to be the art/life contrast, since the tale seems most to be about life and art viewed as factors in an overall psychic economy.

The obvious final question is to ask which side of this dichotomy the tale is on. There can surely be little doubt that it is on the side of art, for it is the act of artistic creation, and, to a lesser extent, that of contemplating a work of art, which is most vividly and passionately described in the tale, rather than any sense of the waste of a young life. The frenzy of this 'passionate, wild, and moody man' produces a work of art so lifelike that it seems the product of a divine being. This is no way to champion 'life'. 'Officially' the story is a pious protest at the sacrifice of a young life, but in practice the making of the sacrifice is presented with a kind of loving envy. As D. H. Lawrence didn't quite say, never trust the moral, trust the tale.

So much, then, for the symbolic code. The second example centres on the operation within a text of the *semic code*. This code, as we have said, is linked with the process of characterisation and thematicisation but operates on a smaller scale than the symbolic code. For Hawkes, in the book mentioned earlier, it 'utilises hints or "flickers of meaning"', and given that it operates through the nuances of individual words and phrases, the best way to appreciate it in action is to use a variation of what educationalists call 'cloze procedure', which involves deleting words from a text and having readers fill these gaps by drawing inferences from context and overall structure.

The passage below is the opening of a novel by Mervyn Jones. The central character, Mr Armitage, is presented in the opening scene and his character immediately established. I have left gaps in the text and have listed at the end of the relevant sentences several words which might fill that gap (one of which, in each case, is the word actually used by the author). You will see that the character is decisively altered, according to the word you choose to fill the gap, enabling us to feel the *semic code* actually at work. The paragraphs have been numbered for ease of reference. In terms of the 'What structuralists do' list, this is an example of I.(c), that is, of relating the text to a projected model of an underlying universal narrative structure, since the critic would assume that the five Barthesian codes are fundamental to the workings of all narratives. Spend time now selecting a word for each gap before going on to my commentary.

STOP and THINK

1. John Edward Scott Armitage: fifty-five years old, five feet

eleven inches tall, weight thirteen stone three_____

[pounds, ounces]

2. June the eighth: a fine morning, nine-fifteen by the programme change on the car radio, also nine-fifteen

exactly as he checked the time on his_____ watch.

[multi-function, Swiss, Swatch, Timex, Pocket, Mickey Mouse]

3. Hendon Way, north-bound. Armitage was driving a

Jaguar, just run in. Its newness pleased him - the _____

smell of the leather, the neat zeros on the mileage dial. He was among those men whose car is never more than a year old.

[rich, sweet, heady, sexy, opulent] There is further description, then Armitage slows the car to look at two hitch-hikers. They meet his standards of acceptability, and he offers them a lift, but the response to his offer is a momentary hesitation. The text resumes:

4. The boy still presented his pleasant smile, but did not get into the car. Now he seemed to be considering, not only the directions, but also the car, and even Armitage himself. The hitch-hiker, in fact, was deciding whether to accept the driver instead of the other way round. Armitage

was_____ In a few seconds more he might have been

indignant. But the girl said: 'This is fine - yes it is - super, really'.

[baffled, stumped, gob-smacked]

5. She spoke eagerly, indeed with some impatience at the boy's hesitation. And she too smiled at Armitage, but more

than pleasantly, _____, he thought. Of course, they were

lucky to get a long ride in a new Jaguar. The girl clearly realised this; she seemed, moreover, to be happy to travel with Armitage. As soon as this notion occurred to him Armitage saw that it was absurd. Yet it was an attractive thing for her to give such an impression.

[happily, cheerfully, invitingly, gleefully]

6. She ____ into the front seat, and the boy got into the back.

Armitage pulled away quickly to get ahead of a removal van. He drove in a thrusting style, seizing every opportunity, overtaking in roaring third gear. He met, and then dismissed, the thought that the girl's presence beside him had made him show off his skill.

[jumped quickly, plumped heavily, slid seductively, slid easily, squeezed awkwardly, slipped quietly]

I'll comment briefly on the gaps in each of these paragraphs.

In the first, the word in the published text is 'ounces', the precision of which immediately suggests a man with a very precise and ordered attitude to life. (How many people know their weight to the nearest ounce?)

In the second paragraph the character of Armitage is completely changed if we change his watch. In the text his 'Swiss' watch reinforces the image of the well-ordered, well-to-do life already established in the first few lines of the book. But the semic code's 'flicker of meaning' can instantly change him into an ageing gadget-faddist with a multi-function digital timepiece, or a dedicated follower of fashion with a trendy Swatch Watch, or an old fogey with a pocket watch, or a hearty life-and-soul-of-the-party type with a jokey Mickey Mouse watch.

In the third paragraph the words 'sweet', 'heady', and 'sexy' all come close to turning Armitage into a leather fetishist, while 'rich' has a certain directness and vulgarity which implies that his pleasure in things is in direct proportion to their cost. The text's 'opulent' retains an element of this but seems to imply an appreciation of quality and craftsmanship for its own sake.

In the fourth paragraph (as often in fiction) the kind of word used by the narrating voice reflects the character being described. 'Stumped' suggests an undignified cluelessness, as, even more so, does 'gob-smacked', whereas the text's 'baffled' implies the offended dignity of a man of some standing accustomed to a degree of respect.

In the fifth paragraph Armitage's perception of the nature of

the girl's smile is a crucial element in his characterisation. The text has him seeing her as smiling 'cheerfully', indicating that he is pleased to perceive a positive reaction towards him. If she were smiling, in his view, 'invitingly', then the implication would be that his motives were entirely sexual. 'Gleefully', on the other hand, would make her into a child rather than an adult.

In the final paragraph the missing phrase indicates that, all the same, Armitage finds the girl attractive and is physically aware of her. The text tells us that she 'slid easily' into the front seat, implying a certain slender gracefulness. Armitage's attention is less directed towards the boy, so he simply 'got into' the back. If we reverse these two phrases the implication is that Armitage is more interested in the boy than the girl, thus: 'She got into the front seat, and the boy slid easily into the back'. This has the effect of tending to construct Armitage as homosexual, even though no such explicit statement is made.

This simple 'cloze' exercise, then, indicates something of the small-scale, but none the less crucial,

workings of the semic code in the construction of character, while also showing how, in sequence, this code can begin to activate thematic motifs, such as the notion of orderliness and control associated with Armitage.

The operation of two other codes could easily be illustrated from the same passage. The *hermeneutic code*, for instance, is obviously important in it. Right at the beginning of a novel the reader has to be drawn into the process of speculating about possible outcomes, working out enigmas, and predicting the possible patterns of events and motives. Thus, with this example we are immediately involved in answering questions like 'What is going to happen as a result of this meeting?' 'Are the hitch-hikers as innocent as they seem?' 'Will Armitage's confidence be shaken in some way as the novel progresses?' Finally, an example of the *cultural code* is seen in the third paragraph when we are told that Armitage 'was among those men whose car is never more than a year old', where the text appeals to our prior knowledge of this kind of man as a distinct type with a whole range of related characteristics and habits. The last code, the symbolic, would be difficult to detect in such a brief and early extract from a novel, and has already been demonstrated at length on the Poe example.

Selected reading

Barthes, Roland, *The Semiotic Challenge*, translated by Richard Howard (Blackwell, 1988).

Essays by the best-known structuralist critic; see chapter in section three 'Textual analysis of a tale by Edgar Allan Poe', on 'The facts in the case of M. Valdemar'.

Barthes, Roland, *A Roland Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (Vintage, 1993).

Culler, Jonathan, *Structuralist Poetics* (Routledge, 1975).

A book which immediately established the author's reputation as a 'mediator' of difficult theories. Thorough, but seldom succinct.

Culler, Jonathan, *Barthes* (Fontana, 1983).

Culler, Jonathan, *Barthes: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford Paperbacks, 2002).

Hawkes, Terence, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (Methuen, 1977).

A pioneering book in a key series. Equivalent to Culler, but does it better, in my view, because the series format makes for brevity and tightness.

Scholes, Robert, *Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction* (Yale University Press, 1974).

An admirable book. Don't be put off by its age. You won't find anything to match it.

Sturrock, John, *Structuralism* (Paladin, 1986).

Covers structuralism in a variety of fields (language, social sciences, etc.). Chapter four is a good, succinct

account of literary structuralism and its antecedents.

3

Post-structuralism and deconstruction

Some theoretical differences between structuralism and post-structuralism

Is post-structuralism a continuation and development of structuralism or a form of rebellion against it? In one important sense it is the latter, since a very effective way of rebelling is to accuse your predecessors of not having the courage of their convictions. Thus post-structuralists accuse structuralists of not following through the implications of the views about language on which their intellectual system is based. As we saw, one of structuralism's characteristic views is the notion that language doesn't just reflect or record the world: rather, it shapes it, so that *how* we see is *what* we see. The post-structuralist maintains that the consequences of this belief are that we enter a universe of radical uncertainty, since we can have no access to any fixed landmark which is beyond linguistic processing, and hence we have no certain standard by which to measure anything. Without a fixed point of reference against which to measure movement you cannot tell whether or not you are moving at all. You have probably at some time had the experience of sitting in a stationary train with another train between yourself and the far platform. When that train begins to move you may have the sensation that it is *your* train which is moving and only realise this isn't so when the other train has gone and you again see the fixed point of the platform. Post-structuralism says, in effect, that fixed intellectual reference points are permanently removed by properly taking on board

what structuralists said about language. Or, to change the analogy, in space, where there is no gravity, there is no up and down, and these pronouncements about language send us into a gravity-free universe, without upside down or right way up. This situation, of being without intellectual reference points, is one way of describing what post-structuralists call the *decentred universe*, one in which, by definition, we cannot know where we are, since all the concepts which previously defined the centre, and hence also the margins, have been 'deconstructed', or undermined, in the manner described later.

The characteristic concerns of post-structuralism, as hinted at here, may at first seem pretty remote. Why this constant high anxiety about language, we might ask, when it seems to work perfectly well most of the time for day-to-day purposes? But on reflection we may find that it is precisely on this matter of anxiety about language that we can most easily identify with post-structuralist concerns, for these anxious feelings seem remarkably pervasive whenever we have to use language at any level beyond that of casual daily exchange with people we know very well and whose status is the same as our own. For instance, think of any slightly less straightforward language situation, like writing to your bank, writing an essay, striking up a friendship with a stranger at a party, or sending a letter of condolence. In these cases, and many more, there is an almost universally felt anxiety that the language will express things we hadn't intended, or convey the wrong impression, or betray our ignorance, callousness, or confusion. Even when we use a phrase like 'If you see what I mean' or 'In a manner of speaking' there is the same underlying sense that we are not really in control of the linguistic system. These feelings, writ large, are really the same, or, at least, surely have the same source, as the radical linguistic scepticism which is so typical of deconstruction. Here, then, is a way into the post-structuralist

frame of mind which lies very much within attitudes and anxieties which most of us experience.

However, perhaps it will be helpful simply to list some differences and distinctions between structuralism and post-structuralism, under the four headings below.

1. *Origins* Structuralism derives ultimately from linguistics. Linguistics is a discipline which has always been inherently confident about the possibility of establishing objective knowledge. It believes that if we observe accurately, collect data systematically, and make logical deductions then we can reach reliable conclusions about language and the world. Structuralism inherits this confidently scientific outlook: it too believes in method, system, and reason as being able to establish reliable truths.

By contrast, post-structuralism derives ultimately from philosophy. Philosophy is a discipline which has always tended to emphasise the difficulty of achieving secure knowledge about things. This point of view is encapsulated in Nietzsche's famous remark 'There are no facts, only interpretations'. Philosophy is, so to speak, sceptical by nature and usually undercuts and questions commonsensical notions and assumptions. Its procedures often begin by calling into question what is usually taken for granted as simply the way things are. Post-structuralism inherits this habit of scepticism, and intensifies it. It regards any confidence in the scientific method as naive, and even derives a certain masochistic intellectual pleasure from knowing for certain that we *can't* know anything for certain, fully conscious of the irony and paradox which doing this entails.

2. *Tone and style* Structuralist writing tends towards abstraction and generalisation: it aims for a detached, 'scientific coolness' of tone. Given its derivation from linguistic science, this is what we would expect. An essay like Roland Barthes's 1966 piece 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative' (reprinted in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. Stephen Heath, 1977) is typical of this tone and treatment, with its discrete steps in an orderly exposition, complete with diagrams. The style is neutral and anonymous, as is typical of scientific writing.

Post-structuralist writing, by contrast, tends to be much more emotive. Often the tone is urgent and euphoric, and the style flamboyant and self-consciously showy. Titles may well contain puns and allusions, and often the central line of the argument is based on a pun or a word-play of some kind.

Often deconstructive writing fixes on some 'material' aspect of language, such as a metaphor used by a writer, or the etymology of a word. Overall it seems to aim for an engaged warmth rather than detached coolness. 3. *Attitude to language* Structuralists accept that the world is constructed through language, in the sense that we do not have access to reality other than through the linguistic medium. All the same, it decides to live with that fact and continue to use language to think and perceive with. After all, language is an orderly system, not a chaotic one, so realising our dependence upon it need not induce intellectual despair.

By contrast, post-structuralism is much more fundamentalist in insisting upon the consequences of the view that, in effect, reality itself is textual. Post-structuralism develops what threaten to become terminal anxieties about the possibility of achieving *any* knowledge through language. The verbal sign, in its view, is constantly floating free of the concept it is supposed to designate. Thus, the post-structuralist's way of speaking about language involves a rather obsessive imagery based on liquids - signs float free of what they designate, meanings are fluid, and subject to constant 'slippage' or 'spillage'. This linguistic liquid, slopping about and swilling over unpredictably, defies our attempts to carry signification carefully from 'giver' to 'receiver' in the containers we call words. We are not fully in control of the medium of language, so meanings cannot be planted in set places, like somebody planting a row of potato seeds; they can only

be randomly scattered or 'disseminated', like the planter walking along and scattering seed with broad sweeps of the arm, so that much of it lands unpredictably or drifts in the wind.

Likewise, the meanings words have can never be guaranteed one hundred per cent pure. Thus, words are always 'contaminated' by their opposites - you can't define *night* without reference to *day*, or *good* without reference to *evil*. Or else they are interfered with by their own history, so that obsolete senses retain a troublesome and ghostly presence within present-day usage, and are likely to materialise just when we thought it was safe to use them. Thus, a seemingly innocent

word like 'guest', is etymologically cognate with 'hostis', which means an enemy or a stranger, thereby inadvertently manifesting the always potentially unwelcome status of the guest (see below, p. 71). Likewise, the long-dormant metaphorical bases of words are often reactivated by their use in philosophy or literature and then interfere with literal sense, or with the stating of single meanings. Linguistic anxiety, then, is a keynote of the post-structuralist outlook. 4. *Project* By 'project' here I mean the fundamental aims of each movement, what it is they want to persuade us of. Structuralism, firstly, questions our way of structuring and categorising reality, and prompts us to break free of habitual modes of perception or categorisation, but it believes that we can thereby attain a more reliable view of things.

Post-structuralism is much more fundamental: it distrusts the very notion of reason, and the idea of the human being as an independent entity, preferring the notion of the 'dissolved' or 'constructed' subject, whereby what we may think of as the individual is really a product of social and linguistic forces -that is, not an essence at all, merely a 'tissue of textualities'. Thus, its torch of scepticism burns away the intellectual ground on which the Western civilisation is built.

Post-structuralism - life on a decentred planet

Post-structuralism emerged in France in the late 1960s. The two figures most closely associated with this emergence are Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida (1930-). Barthes's work around this time began to shift in character and move from a structuralist phase to a post-structuralist phase. The difference can be seen by comparing two different accounts by Barthes of the nature of the narrative, one from each phase, namely the essay 'The Structural Analysis of Narrative' (first published in 1966 and reprinted in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. Stephen Heath, 1977) and *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973). The former is detailed, methodological and forbiddingly technical, while the latter is really just a series of random comments on narrative, arranged alphabetically, thereby,

of course, emphasising the randomness of the material. Between these two works came the crucial essay 'The Death of the Author' (1968) which is the 'hinge' round which Barthes turns from structuralism to post-structuralism. In that essay he announces the death of the author, which is a rhetorical way of asserting the independence of the literary text and its immunity to the possibility of being unified or limited by any notion of what the author might have intended, or 'crafted' into the work. Instead, the essay makes a declaration of radical textual independence: the work is not determined by intention, or context. Rather, the text is free by its very nature of all such restraints. Hence, as Barthes says in the essay, the corollary of the death of the author is the birth of the reader. So the difference between the 1966 essay and the 1973 book is a shift of attention from the text seen as something produced by the author to the text seen as something produced by the reader, and, as it were, by language itself, for as Barthes also says, in the absence of an author, the claim to decipher a text becomes futile. Hence, this early phase of post-structuralism seems to license and revel in the endless free play of meanings and the escape from all forms of textual authority. Later there is an inevitable shift from this textual permissiveness to the more disciplined and austere textual republicanism suggested in the quotation (p. 71) from Barbara Johnson. For

her, deconstruction is not a hedonistic abandonment of all restraint, but a disciplined identification and dismantling of the sources of textual power.

The second key figure in the development of post-structuralism in the late 1960s is the philosopher Jacques Derrida. Indeed, the starting point of post-structuralism may be taken as his 1966 lecture 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' (variously reprinted, most recently in abbreviated form in K. M. Newton's *Twentieth Century Literary Theory: A Reader*, Macmillan, 1988). In this paper Derrida sees in modern times a particular intellectual 'event' which constitutes a radical break from past ways of thought, loosely associating this break with the philosophy of Nietzsche and Heidegger and the psychoanalysis of Freud. The event concerns the 'decentring' of our intellectual universe. Prior to this event the existence of a norm or centre in all things was taken for granted: thus 'man', as the Renaissance

slogan had it, was the measure of all other things in the universe: white Western norms of dress, behaviour, architecture, intellectual outlook, and so on, provided a firm centre against which deviations, aberrations, variations could be detected and identified as 'Other' and marginal. In the twentieth century, however, these centres were destroyed or eroded; sometimes this was caused by historical events - such as the way the First World War destroyed the illusion of steady material progress, or the way the Holocaust destroyed the notion of Europe as the source and centre of human civilisation; sometimes it happened because of scientific discoveries - such as the way the notion of relativity destroyed the ideas of time and space as fixed and central absolutes; and sometimes, finally, it was caused by intellectual or artistic revolutions - such as the way modernism in the arts in the first thirty years of the century rejected such central absolutes as harmony in music, chronological sequence in narrative, and the representation of the visual world in art.

In the resulting universe there are no absolutes or fixed points, so that the universe we live in is 'decentred' or inherently rela-tivistic. Instead of movement or deviation from a known centre, all we have is 'free play' (or 'play' as the title of the essay has it). In the lecture Derrida embraces this decentred universe of free play as liberating, just as Barthes in 'The Death of the Author' celebrates the demise of the author as ushering in an era of joyous freedom. The consequences of this new decentred universe are impossible to predict, but we must endeavour not to be among 'those who ... turn their eyes away in the face of the as yet unnameable which is proclaiming itself (Newton, p. 154). This powerful, quasi-religious appeal to us not to turn our eyes away from the light is typical of the often apocalyptic tone of post-structuralist writing. If we have the courage, the implication is, we will enter this new Nietzschean universe, where there are no guaranteed facts, only interpretations, none of which has the stamp of authority upon it, since there is no longer any authora-tive centre to which to appeal for validation of our intepretations.

Derrida's rise to prominence was confirmed by the publication of three books by him in the following year (translated as *Speech and Phenomena*, *Of Grammatology*, and *Writing and Difference*). All

of these books are on philosophical rather than literary topics, but Derrida's method always involves the highly detailed 'decon-structive' reading of selected aspects of other philosophers' works, and these deconstructive methods have been borrowed by literary critics and used in the reading of literary works. Essentially, the deconstructive reading of literary texts tends to make them emblems of the decentred universe we have been discusssing. Texts previously regarded as unified artistic artefacts are shown to be fragmented, self-divided, and centreless. They always turn out to be representative of the 'monstrous births' predicted at the end of 'Structure, Sign, and Play'.

STOP and THINK

A key text in post-structuralism is Derrida's book *Of Grammatology*. The slogan 'There is nothing outside the text' is the most frequently quoted line from this book, but it is usually quoted out of context to justify a kind of extreme textualism, whereby it is held that all reality is linguistic, so that there can be no meaningful talk of a 'real' world which exists without question outside language.

It is becoming common today to deny that such a view is the one actually put forward by Derrida, and while I do not recommend that you attempt to tackle the whole book at this stage, you could put yourself considerably ahead of many commentators and critics by acquiring a detailed knowledge of the section of the book in which this remark occurs, using the intensive reading technique I describe in the Introduction. The section is subheaded 'The exorbitant, questions of method' (pp. 157-64).

Derrida is writing in this section about Rousseau's 'Essay on the origin of languages', but he stops to question his own method of interpreting this text, and hence the nature of all interpretation. He debates the concept of the 'supplement', a word which in French can also mean a replacement, in the sense that language replaces or stands in for reality. (This idea is outlined in the immediately preceding pages of *Of*

***Grammatology*, pp. 141-57.) But what exactly is the nature of this 'standing in', since 'the person writing is inscribed in a determined textual system' (p. 160), which is to say that we all inherit language as a ready-made system, with its own history, philosophy, and so on already 'built in'? In this sense one might argue that we don't express ourselves in words, merely some aspect of language:**

The writer writes *in* a language and *in* a logic whose proper systems, laws, and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely. He uses them by only letting himself, after a fashion and up to a point, be governed by the system. And the reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses. This relationship is not a certain quantitative distribution of shadow and light, of weakness or of force but a signifying structure that critical reading should *produce*.

(Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 158)

Reading and interpretation, then, are not just *reproducing* what the writer thought and expressed in the text. This inadequate notion of interpretation Derrida calls a 'doubling commentary', since it tries to reconstruct a pre-existing, nontextual reality (of what the writer did or thought) to lay alongside the text. Instead, critical reading must *produce* the text, since there is nothing behind it for us to reconstruct. Thus, the reading has to be *cl* econstructive rather than reconstructive in this sense. This is the point where Derrida makes the remark which he later calls 'the axial proposition of this essay, that there is nothing outside the text' (*Of Grammatology*, p. 163):

Reading ... cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it... or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place, outside of language, that is to say, in the sense that we give here to that word, outside of writing in general. That is why the

methodological considerations that we risk applying here to an example are closely dependent on general propositions that we have elaborated above; as regards the absence of the referent or the transcendental signified. There is nothing outside of the text.

(*Of Grammatology*, p. 158)

He expands this further and reiterates that 'beyond and behind what one believes can be circumscribed as Rousseau's text, there has never been anything but writing ... what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence' (p. 159).

You will not find these pages of Derrida by any means easy, but they will repay some intensive work, ideally in group discussion. Do they enable you to pin down precisely what Derrida is saying about the relationship between word and world, and are his views as stark and uncompromising as they are often accused of being?

Structuralism and post-structuralism - some practical differences

An initial problem here is that post-structuralism often claims that it is more an attitude of mind than a practical method of criticism. This is, in a sense, quite true, but perhaps no more true of post-structuralism than of any other critical orientation. After all, in what sense could, say, Marxist or feminist - or even liberal humanist - criticism be called a method? Only in the loosest way, surely, since none of these provide anything like a step by step procedure for analysing literary works. All they offer is an orientation towards a characteristic central issue (that is, towards issues of class, gender, and personal morality, respectively) and a body of work which constitutes a repertoire of examples.

What, then, seem to be the characteristics of post-structuralism as a critical method? The post-structuralist literary critic is engaged in the task of 'deconstructing' the text. This process is given the name 'deconstruction', which can roughly be defined as applied post-structuralism. It is often referred to as 'reading

against the grain' or 'reading the text against itself, with the purpose of 'knowing the text as it cannot know itself. (These are Terry Eagleton's definitions.) A way of describing this would be to say that deconstructive reading uncovers the unconscious rather than the conscious dimension of the text, all the things which its overt textuality glosses over or fails to recognise. This repressed unconscious within language might be sensed, for instance, in the example used earlier when we said that the word 'guest' is cognate with (that is, has the same original root as) the word 'host', which in turn comes from the Latin word *hostis*, meaning an enemy. This hints at the potential double aspect of a guest, as either welcome or unwelcome, or as changing from one to the other. This notion of 'hostility', then, is like the repressed unconscious of the word, and the process of deconstruction, in revealing the unconscious of the text, might draw upon such disciplines as etymology in this way.

Another well-known definition of deconstructive reading is Barbara Johnson's in *The Critical Difference* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980):

Deconstruction is not synonymous with 'destruction'. It is in fact much closer to the original meaning of the word 'analysis', which etymologically means 'to undo' ... The deconstruction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or arbitrary subversion, but by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text.

(Johnson, *The Critical Difference*, p. 5)

Derrida's own description of deconstructive reading has the same purport. A deconstructive reading:

must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of language that he uses ... [It] attempts to make the not-seen accessible to sight.

(*Of Grammatology*, pp. 158 and 163)

J. A. Cuddon, in his *Dictionary of Literary Terms* asserts that in deconstruction:

a text can be read as saying something quite different from what it appears to be saying ... it may be read as carrying a plurality of significance or as saying many different things which are fundamentally at variance with, contradictory to and subversive of what may be seen by criticism as a single 'stable' meaning. Thus a text may 'betray' itself.

(from the entry on Deconstruction)

So the deconstructionist practises what has been called textual harassment or oppositional reading, reading with the aim of unmasking internal contradictions or inconsistencies in the text, aiming to show the disunity which underlies its apparent unity. The aim of the 'New Critics' of the previous generation, by contrast, had been precisely the opposite of this, to show the unity beneath apparent disunity. In pursuance of its aims, the decon-structive process will often fix on a detail of the text which looks incidental - the presence of a particular metaphor, for instance -and then use it as the key to the whole text, so that everything is read through it.

In talking about structuralism we discussed how structuralists look for such features in the text as parallels, echoes, reflections, and so on (p. 52). The effect of doing this is often to show a unity of purpose within the text, as if the text knows what it wants to do and has directed all its means towards this end. By contrast, the deconstructionist aims to show that the text is at war with itself: it is a house divided, and disunified. The deconstructionist looks for evidence of gaps, breaks, fissures and discontinuities of all kinds. So a diagram showing the differences between structuralism and post-structuralism at the practical level might look like this:

The structuralist seeks:

The post-structuralist seeks:

Parallels/Echoes

Contradictions/Paradoxes

Balances

Shifts/Breaks in: Tone

Viewpoint

Tense

Time

Person

Attitude

Reflections/Repetitions

Conflicts

Symmetry

Absences/Omissions

Contrasts

Linguistic quirks

Patterns

Aporia

Effect: To show textual

Effect: To show textual

unity and coherence

disunity

In presenting the example, I will refer back to this list, and will also suggest a simple three-stage model of the deconstructive process. I will end with some questions to help you to try your own 'worked example'.

What post-structuralist critics do

1. They 'read the text against itself so as to expose what might be thought of as the 'textual subconscious', where meanings are expressed which may be directly contrary to the surface meaning.
2. They fix upon the surface features of the words - similarities in sound, the root meanings of words, a 'dead' (or dying) metaphor and bring these to the foreground, so that they become crucial to the overall meaning.
3. They seek to show that the text is characterised by disunity rather than unity.
4. They concentrate on a single passage and analyse it so intensively that it becomes impossible to sustain a 'univocal' reading and the language explodes into 'multiplicities of meaning'.
5. They look for shifts and breaks of various kinds in the text and see these as evidence of what is repressed or glossed over or passed over in silence by the text. These discontinuities are sometimes called 'fault-lines', a geological metaphor referring to the breaks in rock formations which give evidence of previous activity and movement.

Deconstruction: an example

I try here to give a clear example of deconstructive practice,

showing what is distinctive about it while at the same time suggesting it may not constitute a *complete* break with more familiar forms of criticism.

The three stages of the deconstructive process described here I have called the *verbal*, the *textual*, and the *linguistic*. They are illustrated using Dylan Thomas's poem 'A refusal to mourn the death, by fire, of a child in London' (Appendix 2).

The verbal stage is very similar to that of more conventional forms of close reading, as pioneered in the 1920s and 1930s in Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, and elsewhere. It involves looking in the text for paradoxes and contradictions, at what might be called the purely verbal level. For instance, the final line of Thomas's poem reads 'After the first death there is no other'. This statement contradicts and refutes itself: if something is called the first then a sequence is implied of second, third, fourth, and so on. So, the phrase 'the first death' clearly implies, at the literal level, that there *will* be others. Internal contradictions of this kind are indicative, for the deconstructionist, of language's endemic unreliability and slipperiness, of which more will be said later. There are other examples of this kind in the poem. Please look again at the poem and see if you can identify others. You might begin by considering the use of the word 'until' in combination with 'never'.

One other facet of post-structuralism relevant here is its tendency to reverse the polarity of common binary oppositions like *male* and *female*, *day* and *night*, *light* and *dark*, and so on, so that the second term, rather than the first, is 'privileged' and regarded as the more desirable. Thus, in the poem it seems to be darkness, rather than light, which is seen as engendering life, as the poet talks of 'the mankind making / Bird beast and flower / Fathering and all humbling darkness'. This paradox reflects the way the world of this poem is simultaneously a recognisable version of the world we live in, and an inversion of that world. For the deconstructionist, again, such moments are symptomatic of the way language doesn't reflect or convey our world but constitutes a world of its own, a kind of parallel universe or virtual reality. Identifying contradictory or paradoxical phrases like these, then, is the first step in going against the grain of the poem, reading it 'against

itself, showing the 'signifiers' at war with the 'signified', and revealing its repressed unconscious. This first stage will always turn up useful material for use in the later stages.

The 'textual' stage of the method moves beyond individual phrases and takes a more overall view of the poem. At this second stage the critic is looking for shifts or breaks in the continuity of the poem: these shifts reveal instabilities of attitude, and hence the lack of a fixed and unified position. They can be of various kinds (as listed in the diagram given earlier); they may be shifts in focus, shifts in time, or tone, or point of view, or attitude, or pace, or vocabulary. They may well be indicated in the grammar, for instance, in a shift from first person to third, or past tense to present. Thus, they show paradox and contradiction on a larger scale than is the case with the first stage, taking a broad view of the text as a whole. In the case of the 'A refusal to mourn', for instance, there are major time shifts and changes in viewpoint, not a smooth chronological progression. Thus, the first two stanzas imagine the passing of geological aeons and the coming of the 'end of the world' - the last light breaks, the sea finally becomes still, the cycle which produces 'Bird beast and flower' comes to an end as 'all humbling darkness' descends. But the third stanza is centred on the present - the actual death of the child, 'The majesty and burning of the child's death'. The final stanza takes a broad vista like the first two, but it seems to centre on the historical progression of the recorded history of London, as witnessed by 'the unmourning water / Of the riding Thames'. Hence, no single wider context is

provided to 'frame' and con-textualise the death of the child in a defined perspective, and the shifts in Thomas's poem make it very difficult to ground his meaning at all.

Look again at the poem to see if you can detect other examples of this larger scale 'textual' level of breaks and discontinuities. Note that *omissions* are important here, that is, when a text doesn't tell us things we would expect to be told. You might begin by asking whether the poet tells us why he refuses to mourn, or rather, why the expressed intention of not doing so is not carried out.

The 'linguistic' stage, finally, involves looking for moments in

the poem when the adequacy of language itself as a medium of communication is called into question. Such moments occur when, for example, there is implicit or explicit reference to the unreliability or untrustworthiness of language. It may involve, for instance, *saying* that something is unsayable; or saying that it is impossible to utter or describe something and then doing so; or saying that language inflates, or deflates, or misrepresents its object, and then continuing to use it anyway. In 'A refusal to mourn', for instance, the whole poem does what it says it *won't* do: the speaker professes his refusal to mourn, but the poem itself constitutes an act of mourning. Then in the third stanza the speaker says that he will not 'murder / The mankind of her going with a grave truth'. This condemns all the accepted ways of speaking about this event, and the poet professes to stand outside the available range of clichéd, elegiac stances or 'discursive practices', as if some 'pure' stance beyond these necessarily compromised forms of utterance were possible. Yet this is followed, not by silence, but by the solemn, quasi-liturgical pronouncements of the final stanza: 'Deep with the first dead lies London's daughter', the speaker proclaims, which sounds very like traditional panegyric oratory, with the dead person transformed into some larger than life heroic figure, becoming 'London's daughter' (an impossible designation for her in life), 'robed' as for some great procession of the dead of all the ages, and now reunited with Mother Earth in the form of the London clay in which she is now buried.

In this poem, we might say, Thomas identifies the language trap, and then falls into it. Look again at the poem with this 'textual' level in mind. Are there other examples of Thomas's being forced to use the rhetorical strategies he has just exposed? You might start by looking at his use of the words 'mother' and 'daughter' and thinking about the nature of the metaphorical 'family' implied by these words. Other metaphorical constructs to look at are those entailed in the word 'murder' and in the notion of the 'unmourning' Thames.

Once the grain of the poem is opened up, then, it cannot long survive the deconstructive pressures brought to bear upon it, and reveals itself as fractured, contradictory, and symptomatic of a

cultural and linguistic malaise. A three-step model like this will lend itself to applications to other material; it gives this approach something distinctive as a critical practice, and lays the strengths and weaknesses of deconstruction open to scrutiny, just as other methods are open. The deconstructive reading, then, aims to produce *disunity*, to show that what had looked like unity and coherence actually contains contradictions and conflicts which the text cannot stabilise and contain. We might characterise it as waking up the sleeping dogs of signification and setting them on each other. In contrast, more conventional styles of close reading had the opposite aim: they would take a text which appeared fragmented and disunified and demonstrate an underlying unity, aiming to separate the warring dogs and soothe them back to sleep with suitable blandishments. Yet the two methods, far apart though they would see themselves as being, suffer from exactly the same drawback, which is that both tend to make all poems seem similar. The close reader detects miracles of poised ambiguity alike in Donne's complex

metaphysical lyrics, and simple poems like Robert Frost's 'Stopping by woods on a snowy evening', which receive the full-scale explicatory treatment of the ten- or twenty-page article, so that the experience of reading them loses all its particularity. Similarly, after the deconstructionist treatment all poems tend to emerge as angst-ridden, fissured enactments of linguistic and other forms of indeterminacy.

I'll comment further on some of the characteristics listed on the post-structuralist side of the diagram on page 72, using as an example 'The castaway' (Appendix 3), a well-known poem by the eighteenth-century poet William Cowper. As all critics recognise, this poem works at two levels: on the 'surface' it is an account of the death of a man washed overboard from a ship, who speaks in the poem in his own voice and laments his fate. At a 'deeper' level the poem is about Cowper's own fear of and isolation within his incipient mental breakdown.

For the deconstructionist, firstly, exposing contradictions or paradoxes might involve showing that the feelings *professed* in a poem can be at odds with those *expressed*. For instance, in 'The castaway' (p. 224) the speaker *says* that he does not blame his shipmates for his plight, but even saying this raises the possibility that

he does. Thus, at one point he says that his friends did all they could to save him, but elsewhere he implies that they desert him and hurry off to save themselves. Look again at the poem to identify the points where these inferences might be drawn.

Secondly, pointing to breaks, gaps, fissures, discontinuities is a way of implying that the text lacks unity and consistency of purpose. There may, for instance, be changes in tone, or perspective, or point of view. In 'The castaway', for instance, the text sometimes uses *T* and sometimes *he* for the man lost overboard: ('such a destin'd wretch as I' but '*His* floating home for ever left' - my italics). Look again at the poem and see if you can identify other examples of this. As I have already indicated, at one level it is an imaginative retelling of the death of a sailor lost overboard during one of the expeditions of the explorer George Anson, based on the account of the incident in Anson's published journals. At another level this is merely a metaphor for the isolation and depression felt by Cowper himself. But the relationship between these two levels is very 'unsettled': for instance, all the specific details about Anson and his expedition distract from the generalised notion of loss, abandonment, and isolation, and we shift erratically from one to the other.

Thirdly, the 'linguistic quirks' which seem relevant include several kinds of linguistic oddity or *non sequitur* of the kind which undermine secure meanings. There are many of these in 'The castaway'. In the final stanza the poet says that no divine assistance came when '*We* perished, each alone' - my italics - but the poem has shown the death of only one person. On the other hand, if the statement is a general one about how we all have to face death alone, then we would expect the present tense rather than the past ('We perish' rather than 'We perish'd').

The term 'aporia', finally, is a popular one in deconstructive criticism. It literally means an *impasse*, and designates a kind of knot in the text which cannot be unravelled or solved because what is said is self-contradictory. It perhaps corresponds, therefore, to what the British critic William Empson, in his book *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) designated as the seventh type of verbal difficulty in literature, namely that which occurs when 'there is an irreconcilable conflict of meaning within the text'. For

instance, at the start of the third stanza we are told of the drowned man that 'No poet wept him', but the existence of the poem we are reading contradicts this. There seems to be no way out of this 'bind'. It is often said that Roland Barthes's 1968 essay 'The Death of the Author' marks the transition from structuralism to post-structuralism, and in that essay Barthes says that in the text 'everything must be

disentangled, nothing deciphered'. The aporia, though, is a textual knot which resists disentanglement, and several of the elements discussed above as contradictions, paradoxes, or shifts might equally be classified under the more general heading of aporia.

While it is easy to see why this process might be called reading against the grain, it is misleading to suggest that the poem has an obvious 'grain' or overt meaning which the critic has merely to routinely counteract. Reading this poem will also have shown, I hope, that structuralist and post-structuralist reading practices are much at odds with each other: identifying patterns and symmetries in the structuralist manner discovers a unified text which is, so to speak, happy with itself, whereas 'reading the text against itself' produces a sense of disunity, of a text engaged in a civil war with itself.

Selected reading

Barthes, Roland, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. R. Miller (Hill & Wang, 1975).

This book represents the 'playful' side of Barthes: it is brief, enigmatic, and entertaining.

Derrida, Jacques, 'The exorbitant question of method', pp. 157-64 in *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

Derrida, Jacques, 'Structure, sign and play in the discourse of the human sciences', reprinted in abbreviated form in K. M. Newton's *Twentieth Century Literary Theory: A Reader* (Macmillan, 1988).

Derrida, Jacques, 'The purveyor of truth', pp. 173-212 in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988). This essay is Derrida's response, fully introduced within the volume,

to Lacan's reading of Poe's story 'The Purloined Letter'. This and the two previous items constitute suggested initial reading of Derrida.

Derrida, Jacques, *A Derrida Reader*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (Columbia University Press, 1998).

An 'assisted introduction' - a substantial selection of Derrida's essays, each with its individual introduction. A very useful book for sustained engagement with Derrida.

Jefferson, Ann and Robey, David, eds, *Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction* (Batsford, 2nd edn, 1986). See chapter four, 'Structuralism and post-structuralism'.

Norris, Christopher, *Derrida* (Fontana, 1987). A brief and helpful guide.

Norris, Christopher, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2nd edn, 1991). A standard introductory account.

Royle, Nicholas, ed. *Deconstructions: A User's Guide* (Palgrave, 2000). A series of well-focused essays by a range of important commentators.

Sarup, Madan, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism* (Longman, 2nd edn, 1993).

Expanded and updated in 1993. See the chapter 'Derrida and Decon-struction'.

4

Postmodernism

What is postmodernism? What was modernism?

As with structuralism and post-structuralism, there is a great deal of debate about how exactly modernism and postmodernism differ. The two concepts are of different vintage, 'Modernism' being a long-standing category which is of crucial importance in the understanding of twentieth-century culture, whereas the term 'postmodernism', as is well known, has only become current since the 1980s. 'Modernism' is the name given to the movement which dominated the arts and culture of the first half of the twentieth century. Modernism was that earthquake in the arts which brought down much of the structure of pre-twentieth-century practice in music, painting, literature, and architecture. One of the major epicentres of this earthquake seems to have been Vienna, during the period of 1890-1910, but the effects were felt in France, Germany, Italy and eventually even in Britain, in art movements like Cubism, Dadaism, Surrealism, and Futurism. Its after-shocks are still being felt today, and many of the structures it toppled have never been rebuilt. Without an understanding of modernism, then, it is impossible to understand twentieth-century culture.

In all the arts touched by modernism what had been the most fundamental elements of practice were challenged and rejected: thus, melody and harmony were put aside in music; perspective and direct pictorial representation were abandoned in painting, in favour of degrees of abstraction; in architecture traditional forms

and materials (pitched roofs, domes and columns, wood, stone, and bricks) were rejected in favour of plain geometrical forms, often executed in new materials like plate glass and concrete. In literature, finally, there was a rejection of traditional realism (chronological plots, continuous narratives relayed by omniscient narrators, 'closed endings', etc.) in favour of experimental forms of various kinds.

The period of high modernism was the twenty years from 1910 to 1930 and some of the literary 'high priests' of the movement (writing in English) were T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, Virginia Woolf, Wallace Stevens, and Gertrude Stein, and (writing in French or German) Marcel Proust, Stephane Mallarme, Andre Gide, Franz Kafka, and Rainer Maria Rilke. Some of the important characteristics of the literary modernism practised by these writers include the following:

1. A new emphasis on impressionism and subjectivity, that is, on *how* we see rather than *what* we see (a preoccupation evident in the use of the stream-of-consciousness technique).
2. A movement (in novels) away from the apparent objectivity provided by such features as: omniscient external narration, fixed narrative points of view and clear-cut moral positions.

3. A blurring of the distinctions between genres, so that novels tend to become more lyrical and poetic, for instance, and poems more documentary and prose-like.
4. A new liking for fragmented forms, discontinuous narrative, and random-seeming collages of disparate materials.
5. A tendency towards 'reflexivity', so that poems, plays and novels raise issues concerning their own nature, status, and role.

The overall result of these shifts is to produce a literature which seems dedicated to experimentation and innovation. After its high point, modernism seemed to retreat considerably in the 1930s, partly, no doubt, because of the tensions generated in a decade of political and economic crisis, but a resurgence took place in the 1960s (a decade which has interesting points of similarity with the 1920s, when modernism was at its height). However, modernism never regained the pre-eminence it had enjoyed

in the earlier period.

This gives us a rough indication of what and when modernism was. Does postmodernism, then, continue it or oppose it? To decide this we need to attempt a working definition of this second term. As a starting-point, we can take a selection of the most readily available descriptions of postmodernism. J. A. Cuddon's entry in his *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* describes postmodernism as characterised by 'an eclectic approach, [by a liking for] aleatory writing, [and for] parody and pastiche'. So far, this doesn't really put much daylight between modernism and postmodernism, since the word 'eclectic' suggests the use of the fragmented forms which, as we have just said, are characteristic of modernism. (Eliot's *The Waste Land*, for instance, is a collage of juxtaposed, incomplete stories, or fragments of stories.) Also 'aleatory forms', meaning those which incorporate an element of randomness or chance, were important to the Dadaists of 1917, who, for instance, made poems from sentences plucked randomly from newspapers. The use of parody and pastiche, finally, is clearly related to the abandonment of the divine pretensions of authorship implicit in the omniscient narratorial stance, and this too was a vital element in modernism. It could be said, then, that one way of establishing the distinction between modernism and postmodernism is to dissolve the sequential link between them, by retrospectively redefining certain aspects of modernism as postmodernist. According to this view, they are not two successive stages in the history of the arts, but two opposed moods or attitudes, differing, as suggested in the next paragraph.

The nature of the distinction between modernism and postmodernism is summarised in the excellent joint entry on the two terms in Jeremy Hawthorn's *Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory* (Edward Arnold, 1992). Both, he says, give great prominence to fragmentation as a feature of twentieth-century art and culture, but they do so in very different moods. The modernist features it in such a way as to register a deep nostalgia for an earlier age when faith was full and authority intact. Ezra Pound, for instance, calls his major work, *The Cantos*, a 'rag-bag', implying that this is all that is possible in the modern age, but also implying regret about that fact. In his poem 'Hugh Selwyn

Mauberley' he speaks of the First World War being fought 'For two gross of broken statues, For a few thousand battered books', and is evidently pained, in lines from the same poem like 'a tawdry cheapness / Shall outlast our days' and 'We see *to kalon* [beauty] / Decried in the market place' by the rise of commercialism at the expense of 'eternal verities'. In *The Waste Land*, too, the persona says, as if despairingly of the poem, 'These fragments I have shored against my ruins'. In instances like this there is a tone of lament, pessimism, and despair about the world which finds its appropriate representation in these 'fractured' art forms (the collages of Kurt Schwitters, for example, which mix painted areas of canvas with

random clippings from newspapers, timetables, and advertisements). For the postmodernist, by contrast, fragmentation is an exhilarating, liberating phenomenon, symptomatic of our escape from the claustrophobic embrace of fixed systems of belief. In a word, the modernist laments fragmentation while the postmodernist celebrates it.

A second, and related, difference between the two is also a matter of tone or attitude. An important aspect of modernism was a fierce asceticism which found the over-elaborate art forms of the nineteenth century deeply offensive and repulsive. This asceticism has one of its most characteristic and striking manifestations in the pronouncements of modernist architects, such as Adolf Loos's proclamation that 'decoration is a crime', or Mies van der Rohe's that 'less is more', or Le Corbusier's that 'a house is a machine for living in'. These pronouncements resulted in the 'shoe box' and 'carbuncle' buildings which have generated such hatred and opposition, particularly through the 1980s, but the high idealism they represent retains its power to move. The same refined asceticism is seen in literature in the minimalism which (for instance) shrinks poems to narrow columns of two-word lines registering rigorously sparse, pared-down observations, or in the drama of Samuel Beckett, in which a play may be reduced to a running time of thirteen minutes, with a single speaker, no set, and language which is sparse in the extreme. By contrast, again, postmodernism rejects the distinction between 'high' and 'popular' art which was important in modernism, and believes in excess, in gaudiness, and in 'bad taste' mixtures of qualities. It

disdains the modernist asceticism as elitist and cheerfully mixes, in the same building, bits and pieces from different architectural periods - a mock-Georgian pediment here, a tongue-in-cheek classical portico there. A similar postmodernist 'edifice' in literature would be the 'Martian' poetry of writers like Craig Raine or Christopher Reid, where bizarrely colourful mixtures of imagery, viewpoint, and vocabulary jostle on a surface which seems happy to be nothing *but* surface, without the depths of significance which a literary education trains us to seek out. Nothing could be further in spirit from that austere modernist asceticism.

'Landmarks' in postmodernism - Habermas, Lyotard and Baudrillard

A major 'moment' in the history of postmodernism is the influential paper 'Modernity - an Incomplete Project' delivered by the contemporary German theorist Jürgen Habermas in 1980. For Habermas the modern period begins with the Enlightenment, that period of about one hundred years, from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century, when a new faith arose in the power of reason to improve human society. Such ideas are expressed or embodied in the philosophy of Kant in Germany, Voltaire and Diderot in France, and Locke and Hume in Britain. In Britain the term 'The Age of Reason' was used (till recently) to designate the same period. The so-called Enlightenment 'project' is the fostering of this belief that a break with tradition, blind habit, and slavish obedience to religious precepts and prohibitions, coupled with the application of reason and logic by the disinterested individual, can bring about a solution to the problems of society. This outlook is what Habermas means by 'modernity'. The French Revolution can be seen as a first attempt to test this theory in practice. For Habermas this faith in reason and the possibility of progress survived into the twentieth century, and even survives the catalogue of disasters which makes up this century's history. The cultural movement known as modernism subscribed to this 'project', in the sense that it constituted a lament for a lost sense of purpose, a lost coherence, a lost system of values. For Habermas, the French post-structuralist thinkers of the 1970s, such as

Derrida and Foucault, represented a specific repudiation of this kind of Enlightenment 'modernity'. They attacked, in his view, the ideals of reason, clarity, truth, and progress, and as they were thereby detached from the quest for justice, he identified them as 'young conservatives'.

The term 'postmodernism' was used in the 1930s, but its current sense and vogue can be said to have begun

with Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester University Press, 1979). Lyotard's essay 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?', first published in 1982, added in 1984 as an appendix to *The Postmodern Condition* and included in Brooker's *Modernism/Postmodernism*, 1992, takes up this debate about the Enlightenment, mainly targeting Habermas, in a slightly oblique manner. Lyotard opens with a move which effectively turns the debate into a struggle to demonstrate that one's opponents are the real conservatives (a familiar 'bottom line' of polemical writing on culture). From every direction', he says, 'we are being urged to put an end to experimentation', and after citing several other instances he writes (obviously of Habermas):

I have read a thinker of repute who defends modernity against those he calls the neo-conservatives. Under the banner of postmodernism, the latter would like, he believes, to get rid of the uncompleted project of modernism, that of the Enlightenment.

(Brooker, p. 141)

Habermas's is simply one voice in a chorus which is calling for an end to 'artistic experimentation' and for 'order ... unity, for identity, for security' (Brooker, p. 142). In a word, these voices want 'to liquidate the heritage of the avant-gardes'. For Lyotard the Enlightenment whose project Habermas wishes to continue is simply one of the would-be authoritative 'overarching', 'totalising' explanations of things - like Christianity, Marxism, or the myth of scientific progress. These 'metanarratives' ['super-narratives'], which purport to explain and reassure, are really illusions, fostered in order to smother difference, opposition, and plurality. Hence Lyotard's famous definition of postmodernism, that it is, simply, 'incredulity towards metanarratives'. 'Grand Narratives'

of progress and human perfectability, then, are no longer tenable, and the best we can hope for is a series of 'mininarratives', which are provisional, contingent, temporary, and relative and which provide a basis for the actions of specific groups in particular local circumstances. Postmodernity thus 'deconstructs' the basic aim of the Enlightenment, that is 'the idea of a unitary end of history and of a subject'.

Another major theorist of postmodernism is the contemporary French writer Jean Baudrillard, whose book *Simulations* (1981, translated 1983) marks his entry into this field. Baudrillard is associated with what is usually known as 'the loss of the real', which is the view that in contemporary life the pervasive influence of images from film, TV, and advertising has led to a loss of the distinction between real and imagined, reality and illusion, surface and depth. The result is a culture of 'hyperreality', in which distinctions between these are eroded. His propositions are worked out in his essay 'Simulacra and Simulations' reprinted in abridged form in Brooker, 1992. He begins by evoking a past era of 'fullness', when a sign was a surface indication of an underlying depth or reality ('an outward sign of inward grace', to cite the words of the Roman Catholic Catechism). But what, he asks, if a sign is not an index of an underlying reality, but merely of other signs? Then the whole system becomes what he calls a *simulacrum*. He then substitutes for *representation* the notion of *simulation*. The sign reaches its present stage of emptiness in a series of steps, which I will try to illustrate by comparing them to different kinds of paintings.

Firstly, then, the sign represents a basic reality: let's take as an example of this the representations of the industrial city of Sal-ford in the work of the twentieth-century British artist L. S. Lowry. Mid-century life for working people in such a place was hard, and the paintings have an air of monotony and repetitive-ness - cowed, stick-like figures fill the streets, colours are muted, and the horizon filled with grim factory-like buildings. As signs, then, Lowry's paintings seem to represent the basic reality of the place they depict.

The *second* stage for the sign is that it misrepresents or distorts the reality behind it. As an example of this

let's take the glam-

ourised representations of cities like Liverpool and Hull in the paintings of the Victorian artist Atkinson Grimshaw. These paintings show the cities at night, wet pavements reflecting the bright lights of dockside shops, the moon emerging from behind clouds, and a forest of ships' masts silhouetted against the sky. Life in these places at that time was presumably grim, too, but the paintings offer a romantic and glamourised image, so the sign can be said to misrepresent what it shows.

The *third* stage for the sign is when the sign disguises the fact that there is no corresponding reality underneath. To illustrate this, take a device used in the work of the surrealist artist Rene Magritte, where, in the painting, an easel with a painter's canvas on it is shown standing alongside a window: on the canvas in the painting is painted the exterior scene which we can see through the window. But what is shown beyond the window is not reality, against which the painting within the painting can be judged, but simply another sign, another depiction, which has no more authority or reality than the painting within the painting (which is actually a representation of a representation).

The *fourth* and last stage for the sign is that it bears no relation to any reality at all. As an illustration of this stage we have simply to imagine a completely abstract painting, which is not representational at all, like one of the great purple mood canvases of Mark Rothko, for instance. I should emphasise that I'm not suggesting that these four paintings are examples of the four stages of the sign, merely that the four stages can be thought of as analogous to the four different ways in which these paintings signify or represent things.

The first two of these stages are fairly clear, the second two perhaps less so. Baudrillard's own example of the third stage (when the sign hides an absence) is Disneyland. In one way, of course, it is a sign of the second type, a mythologised misrepresentation of the United States:

All its [the USA's] values are exalted here, in miniature and comic-strip form. Embalmed and pacified ... digest of the American way of life, panegyric to American values, idealised transposition of a contradictory reality.

(Brooker, *Modernism/Postmodernism*, p. 154)

But Disneyland is actually a 'third-order simulation' (a sign which conceals an absence):

Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the 'real' country, all of 'real' America, which *is* Disneyland (just as prisons are there to conceal the fact that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, which is carceral. Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real.

In a word, Disneyland has the effect of 'concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle'. Within postmodernism, the distinction between what is real and what is simulated collapses: *everything* is a model or an image, all is surface without depth; this is the *hyperreal*, as Baudrillard calls it.

The grand sweep of this kind of rhetoric has a strong appeal. One might see it as a kind of latter-day Platonism, its devotees enjoying the mystical insight that what is normally taken as a solid and real world is actually just a tissue of dreamlike images. If this second aspect of the postmodern condition, this loss of the real, is accepted as a fact, then it is hard to see a ground for literary theory to occupy, since all methods

of literary interpretation -Marxist, feminist, structuralist, and so on - depend upon the making of a distinction between surface and depth, between what is *seen* in the text and some *underlying* meaning. Once we accept that what we see is all we get, then there is, clearly, very little which a literary critic or theorist can claim to be doing.

More generally, for postmodernism there are certain ever-present questions and provisos. In this extreme Baudrillardian form, the 'loss of the real' may seem to legitimise a callous indifference to suffering. In a now notorious pronouncement Baudrillard maintained that the Gulf War never happened, that what 'really' took place was a kind of televisual virtual reality. (See the book by Christopher Norris in the Selected reading section.) Likewise, if we accept the 'loss of the real' and the collapsing of reality and simulation into a kind of virtual reality, then what of the Holocaust? Could this, too, be part of the reality 'lost' in the image networks? In other words, without a belief in some of the con-

cepts which postmodernism undercuts - history, reality, and truth, for instance - we may well find ourselves in some pretty repulsive company.

STOP and THINK

The crucial category in Baudrillard's four-stage model is the third one, the sign which conceals an absence, which conceals the fact that the supposedly 'real' which it represents is no longer there, that beyond the play of surfaces there is nothing else.

It is not easy to achieve a precise understanding of this concept. It may help in doing so if you try to think of examples other than Disneyland. The idealised images of masculinity or femininity presented in advertisements, for instance, may be helpful: these also are copies or representations for which no original exists - no actual people are quite like these, though people might strive to become like them. In this way the image tends to become the reality, and the two tend to become indistinguishable.

Further, if we agree that the real has indeed been lost then we need to decide how we react to this fact. If we are to revel in the boundary-free zone which results, we will need to be sure that the 'real' is a concept we can do without. Perhaps recent events suggest otherwise. In the television coverage of the Gulf War we saw computer-image film of high-tech 'smart' weapons homing in on Iraqi targets, while the commentary spoke of 'surgical strikes' which could 'take out' key enemy installations. News bulletins also included footage of pilots who spoke of what they were doing in the same 'unreal' terms, using the terminology of video combat games, for instance. Perhaps these things are symptomatic of what can happen when the category of the real is eroded. Likewise, could we condemn the Holocaust without the category of the real, or

campaign against (say) racial discrimination or environmental pollution?

What postmodernist critics do

1. They discover postmodernist themes, tendencies, and attitudes within literary works of the twentieth century and explore their implications.
2. They foreground fiction which might be said to exemplify the notion of the 'disappearance of the real', in which shifting postmodern identities are seen, for example, in the mixing of literary genres (the thriller,

the detective story, the myth saga, and the realist psychological novel, etc.).

3. They foreground what might be called 'intertextual elements' in literature, such as parody, pastiche, and allusion, in all of which there is a major degree of reference between one text and another, rather than between the text and a safely external reality.
4. They foreground irony, in the sense described by Umberto Eco, that whereas the modernist tries to destroy the past, the postmodernist realises that the past must be revisited, but 'with irony' (*Modernism/Postmodernism*, ed. Peter Brooker, p. 227).
5. They foreground the element of 'narcissism' in narrative technique, that is, where novels focus on and debate their own ends and processes, and thereby 'de-naturalise' their content.
6. They challenge the distinction between high and low culture, and highlight texts which work as hybrid blends of the two.

Postmodernist criticism: an example

A useful example of postmodernist criticism, which makes a straightforward application of ideas derived from Lyotard, is Jeffrey Nealon's 'Samuel Beckett and the Postmodern: Language games, Play, and *Waiting for Godot*' (reprinted in the Macmillan 'New Casebook' on *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, ed. Steven

Connor, 1992). This mainly shows the first of the six postmodernist critical activities listed above, but also has elements of the second, in the sense that the notion of language as a self-contained system relates closely to Lyotard's idea of the 'disappearance of the real'. Nealon first explains the notion of 'language games', derived from Wittgenstein, whereby when we claim that something is true we are not measuring it against some external absolute standard, but by internal rules and criteria which operate only within that designated sphere and have no 'transcendent' status beyond that. These have a restricted applicability, just like the rules which govern moves in a game. Thus, *Knight to King's Rook Four* might be a winning move in a chess game, but would carry no weight at all in a game of football, say, or an argument about who should do the washing-up. Likewise, the 'move' in a philosophical discussion which establishes a proposition as true or valid has its validity only within the 'language game' of philosophy. For Nealon, Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*, engage in 'language games' of this type, but without realising their full significance. Actually, such language games, the postmodernists agree, are all we have; there is no transcendent reality behind them and they are actually self-validating, and provide us with the social identity we seek. But Vladimir and Estragon hanker for some deeper or 'transcendent' reality over and above this. Thus, says Nealon, 'it is the play of Vladimir and Estragon's words, not any agreed-upon meaning for them, which constitutes their social bond. Waiting for legitimation of their society in Godot is, from the beginning, unnecessary'.

Vladimir and Estragon, then, have difficulty in accepting this postmodern view that 'gaming' is enough (*Just Gaming* is the title of one of Lyotard's books): they wish to have the security provided by some 'Grand Narrative' of guarantee and absolute validation. This desired comprehensive reassurance is linked in the play with Christian notions of redemption, which 'recuperate' (meaning, roughly, explain and give significance to) the apparently meaningless details and trials of daily life. ('Offer it up', my Catholic teachers would say in response to any minor complaint about unfairness or injustice.) Vladimir and Estragon, then, are trapped at the 'modernist' stage, and hence riven with nostalgia

for the lost wholeness of the past. For Nealon, the kind of legitimating discourse which Vladimir and Estragon seek is parodied in Lucky's 'think' near the end of the first act. This is a parody of the 'totalising' 'metadiscourse' of philosophy and religion, a practical demonstration of the 'language game of truth' which is all that is available to us. It is, says Nealon, a narrative that disrupts and deconstructs all notions of universal, ahistorical, consistent metanarrative - *all* Godots. Had Godot turned up, the implication is, what could he have offered but pious and pedantic gibberish of this kind?

Lucky has perceived this, hence his exuberant and joyous parody, but the others resist it, so his speech is met with violence. The modernist, that is, wishes to go on believing in the toppled gods and Godots. Vladimir and Estragon, for Nealon, are, throughout the play, on the verge of a 'deconstructive breakthrough'. When they forget about Godot they are happy and inventive in their language games, revelling, we might say, in the openness and uncertainties of 'the postmodernist condition'. But repeatedly they come back to Godot, and the supposed restraints and imperatives he places upon them. 'Let's go far away from here', Vladimir proposes at one point, to which the response is 'We can't ... We have to come back tomorrow ... To wait for Godot'. We might characterise this view by saying that Vladimir and Estragon prove themselves in the end to have a modernist attitude to the fragmentation of truths and values which we have seen in the twentieth century. They long for a return to the lost fullness of purpose of the past, so their experience of fragmentation is nostalgic and angst-ridden. At times they seem on the verge of making a transition (or 'breakthrough', as Nealon calls it) to a postmodern attitude, in which fragmentation becomes a condition welcomed and enjoyed, but in the end they fail to do this.

The modernist/postmodernist dichotomy that underpins this reading could be applied to many other works. Are there any which stand out in your mind? Waiting, for instance, seems to be an important activity in twentieth-century drama, notably in the plays of Harold Pinter - *The Dumb Waiter* would be a very obvious example. You might like to consider the value or otherwise of using the ideas of postmodernism in the explication of any of

his plays with which you are familiar. Another 'waiting' play on which a very similar reading might be attempted is Anton Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* (1901), in which the sisters of the title, Olga, Masha, and Irina, are stranded in lives of bourgeois respectability in northern Russia, twenty-three hours by train from the next town of any size (see Michael Frayn's introduction to the Methuen edition of Chekhov's plays). The sisters wait in vain - like Vladimir and Estragon - for some external force to enter their provincial lives and transform them, and the ideals for which each pines can be seen as personal 'metanarratives', such as an ideal of social progress, or the notion that their sufferings will in some way contribute to a better human life in the future. Irina, for instance, says near the end of the play that 'A time will come when people will understand what it was all for, what the purpose was of all this suffering, and what was hidden from us will be hidden no more'. For the sisters, too, the actually self-sufficient reality of their condition is provided by the language games they play endlessly, and the image of the capital city of Moscow, a glittering amalgam of memory and desire, which constitutes for them a kind of hyperreality or simulacrum.

Selected reading

Benjamin, Andrew, ed. *The Lyotard Reader* (Blackwell, 1989). A very useful source.

Brooker, Peter, ed. *Modernism/Postmodernism* (Longman, 1992).

A general reader on the topic to examine alongside Docherty's and Waugh's. I find the introduction makes

heavy going of the modernism/postmodernism distinction, but this is a compact collection of the key items by Habermas, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Jameson, Eco, Hutcheon, etc., as well as earlier material.

Connor, Steven, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Blackwell, 2nd edn, 1996).

Connor's has been an important voice in this field, stating issues and dilemmas with clarity and force.

Docherty, Thomas, ed. *Postmodernism: A Reader* (Columbia University Press, 1993). Monumental. The rival reader to Waugh's. A very useful collection of

material, with sub-sections, each with its own introduction, but I prefer Waugh for its overall clarity and convenience.

Norris, Christopher, *Uncritical Theory: Postmodernism, Intellectuals and the Gulf War* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1992). A difficult but timely 'expose of some postmodernist excesses.

Sarup, Madan, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism* (Longman, 2nd edn, 1993).

A helpful section on postmodernism, including Lyotard and Baudrillard, and considerations of selected postmodernist 'cultural practices' such as video and architecture.

Waugh, Patricia, ed. *Postmodernism: A Reader* (Arnold, 1992).

A valuable collection of material, which includes relevant American essays (such as Susan Sontag's seminal 'Against Interpretation') which pre-date the general use of the term 'postmodern' - as well as key pieces by Lyotard, Baudrillard, and Habermas: also essays from the Marxist debate on postmodernism between Jameson and Eagleton, where postmodernism is reluctantly accepted as the inevitable 'cultural logic of late capitalism'. Essays too from prominent theorists of postmodernism like Linda Hutcheon and Brian McHale.

Woods, Tim, *Beginning Postmodernism* (Manchester University Press, 1999).

A comprehensive account of postmodernism presented in a lively and readable way. This is one of the titles in the 'Beginnings' series.

5

Psychoanalytic criticism

Introduction

Psychoanalytic criticism is a form of literary criticism which uses some of the techniques of

psychoanalysis in the interpretation of literature. Psychoanalysis itself is a form of therapy which aims to cure mental disorders 'by investigating the interaction of conscious and unconscious elements in the mind' (as the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* puts it). The classic method of doing this is to get the patient to talk freely, in such a way that the repressed fears and conflicts which are causing the problems are brought into the conscious mind and openly faced, rather than remaining 'buried' in the unconscious. This practice is based upon specific theories of how the mind, the instincts, and sexuality work. These theories were developed by the Austrian, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). There is a growing consensus today that the therapeutic value of the method is limited, and that Freud's life-work is seriously flawed by methodological irregularities. All the same, Freud remains a major cultural force, and his impact on how we think about ourselves has been incalculable.

Freud's major ideas include those italicised in the next three paragraphs. All of Freud's work depends upon the notion of the *unconscious*, which is the part of the mind beyond consciousness which nevertheless has a strong influence upon our actions. Freud was not the discoverer of the unconscious: his uniqueness lies in his attributing to it such a decisive role in our lives. Linked with this is the idea of *repression*, which is the 'forgetting' or ignoring

of unresolved conflicts, unadmitted desires, or traumatic past events, so that they are forced out of conscious awareness and into the realm of the unconscious. A similar process is that of *sublimation*, whereby the repressed material is 'promoted' into something grander or is disguised as something 'noble'. For instance, sexual urges may be given sublimated expression in the form of intense religious experiences or longings. Later in his career Freud suggested a three-part, rather than a two-part, model of the psyche, dividing it into the *ego*, the *super-ego*, and the *id*, these three 'levels' of the personality roughly corresponding to, respectively, the consciousness, the conscience, and the unconscious.

Many of Freud's ideas concern aspects of sexuality. *Infantile sexuality*, for instance, is the notion that sexuality begins not at puberty, with physical maturing, but in infancy, especially through the infant's relationship with the mother. Connected with this is the *Oedipus complex*, whereby, says Freud, the male infant conceives the desire to eliminate the father and become the sexual partner of the mother. Many forms of inter-generational conflict are seen by Freudians as having Oedipal overtones, such as professional rivalries, often viewed in Freudian terms as reproducing the competition between siblings for parental favour. (As the very idea of the Oedipal complex would suggest, Freudian theory is often deeply masculinist in bias.) Another key idea is that of the *libido*, which is the energy drive associated with sexual desire. In classic Freudian theory it has three stages of focus, the *oral*, the *anal*, and the *phallic*. The libido in the individual is part of a more generalised drive which the later Freud called *Eros* (the Greek word for 'love') which roughly means the life instinct, the opposite of which is *Thanatos* (the Greek word for 'death') which roughly means the death instinct, a controversial notion, of course.

Several key terms concern what might be called psychic processes, such as *transference*, the phenomenon whereby the patient under analysis redirects the emotions recalled in analysis towards the psychoanalyst: thus, the antagonism or resentment felt towards a parental figure in the past might be reactivated, but directed against the analyst. Another such mechanism is *projection*, when aspects of ourselves (usually negative ones) are not

recognised as part of ourselves but are perceived in or attributed to another; our own desires or antagonisms, for instance, may be 'disowned' in this way. Both these might be seen as *defence mechanisms*, that is, as psychic procedures for avoiding painful admissions or recognitions. Another such is the *screen memory*, which is a trivial or inconsequential memory whose function is to obliterate a more significant one. A well-known example of these mechanisms is the *Freudian slip*, which Freud himself called the 'parapraxis', whereby repressed material in the unconscious finds an outlet through such

everyday phenomena as slips of the tongue, slips of the pen, or unintended actions.

A final example of important Freudian terminology is the *dream work*, the process by which real events or desires are transformed into dream images. These include: *displacement*, whereby one person or event is represented by another which is in some way linked or associated with it, perhaps because of a similar-sounding word, or by some form of symbolic substitution; and *condensation*, whereby a number of people, events, or meanings are combined and represented by a single image in the dream. Thus, characters, motivation, and events are represented in dreams in a very 'literary' way, involving the translation, by the dream work, of abstract ideas or feelings into concrete images. Dreams, just like literature, do not usually make explicit statements. Both tend to communicate obliquely or indirectly, avoiding direct or open statement, and representing meanings through concrete embodiments of time, place, or person.

How Freudian interpretation works

Freudian interpretation is popularly thought to be a matter of attributing sexual connotations to objects, so that towers and ladders, for instance, are seen as phallic symbols. This kind of thing had become a joke even in Freud's own lifetime, and we should remember that he once said, 'Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar'. (Freud was a heavy cigar smoker, mind you, so he had a vested interest in saying that.) In reality, Freudian interpretation is often highly ingenious, rather than highly simplistic. For example, let's

imagine how a dream featuring a Roman soldier might be interpreted. Freud believes that a dream is an escape-hatch or safety-valve through which repressed desires, fears, or memories seek an outlet into the conscious mind. The emotion in question is censored by the conscious mind and so has to enter the dream in disguise, like a person barred from a club who gets in by dressing up as somebody else. The Roman soldier might be connected with the real subject of the dream by a chain of associations. Let's say that the dreamer is a young adult still under the thumb of an authoritarian father but wanting to break away from his influence, and experience adult life to the full. The Roman soldier might represent the father by a process of *association*: the father is associated with ideas of strictness, authority, and power in the domestic sphere; the Roman soldier is linked to the same things in the political sphere; so the one is substituted for the other. So the soldier in the dream is a symbolic representation of the father.

But several meanings might be condensed into this symbol. Suppose the dreamer is tempted to rebel against the father by entering into a sexual liaison of which the father would certainly disapprove. The Roman soldier might also represent this person, the envisaged lover; perhaps the clichéd phrase 'Latin lover' might have prompted this. Thus, both the feared father and the desired lover are *condensed* into the single dream figure of the Roman soldier.

The purpose of devices like displacement and condensation is two-fold. Firstly, as we said, they disguise the repressed fears and wishes contained in the dream so that they can get past the censor which normally prevents their surfacing into the conscious mind. Secondly, they fashion this material into something which can be represented in a dream, that is, into images, symbols, and metaphors. Material has to be turned into this form for dreams, since dreams don't *say* things, they *show* things. In this sense especially, as we have indicated, they are very like literature. Hence the interest of literary critics in Freudian methods of interpretation.

This should raise questions in your mind about how we decide when a Freudian interpretation is plausible and when not. I want to take one more example, this time from a book by Freud called

The Psychopathology of Everyday Life. In spite of its title, this is one of Freud's most enjoyable and

accessible publications. Its subtitle explains what it's about: 'Forgetting, slips of the tongue, bungled actions, superstitions and errors'. (Bungled actions are when you do things like unwrapping a sweet, putting the paper in your mouth, and throwing away the sweet.) The underlying assumption is that when some wish, fear, memory, or desire is difficult to face we may try to cope with it by repressing it, that is, eliminating it from the conscious mind. But this doesn't make it go away: it remains alive in the unconscious, like radioactive matter buried beneath the ocean, and constantly seeks a way back into the conscious mind, always succeeding eventually. As Freud famously said, 'There is always a return of the repressed'. Slips of the tongue or pen, the forgetting of names, and similar 'accidents' show this repressed material in the act of seeking a way back.

The example is from Freud's own experience and it attributes significance to the forgetting of a word from a quotation. It is worth spending a little time on, since it typifies the quality of complexity and ingenuity which I have suggested is common in Freudian interpretation. Freud explains that while on holiday with his family he met an academic young man who, like Freud, was Jewish and they discussed the anti-semitism which might hinder their careers. The young man voiced strong feelings on this matter, expressing the wish that such wrongs might be put right by a future generation. He made this point with a quotation from the Latin poet Virgil, using words spoken by Dido, Queen of Carthage, when she is abandoned by Aeneas. Her words are '*Exoriare aliquis nostris ex ossibus ultor*', meaning 'May someone arise from our bones as an avenger', but in quoting the line in Latin the young man accidentally leaves out the word 'aliquis' (which means 'somebody'). Freud corrects the quotation, and the young man (who has read Freud's books) challenges him to explain the significance of this simple act of forgetting. Freud accepts the challenge, and asks the young man to say 'candidly and uncritically whatever comes into your mind if you direct your attention to the forgotten word without any definite aim'. This produces the following sequence of associations:

Firstly, similar-sounding words like *relics*, *liquefying*, *fluidity*, and *fluid*.

Secondly, St Simon of Trent, whose relics he saw some years ago.

Thirdly, an article in an Italian newspaper called 'What St Augustine says about women'.

Fourthly, St Januarius, whose blood is kept in a phial in a church at Naples and on a particular holy day it miraculously liquefies. He says 'the people get very agitated if it is delayed'. Freud points out that two of these saints (*Januarius* and *Augustine*) have names which link them closely with the calendar, and he has already worked out why the young man forgot the word 'aliquis'. The young man has been uneasy about a certain event, and if he had said the word 'aliquis' that would have reminded him again of this anxiety: so the unconscious protects him by deleting the word from his conscious memory. Perhaps you can already work out what the event is which the young man is worried about. He breaks off and says in some embarrassment 'I've suddenly thought of a young lady from whom I might easily hear a piece of news that would be very awkward for both of us'. He hesitates, and Freud asks 'That her periods have stopped?' The young man is astonished, and Freud explains how he knew: 'Think of the calendar saints, the blood that starts to flow on a particular day, the disturbance when the event fails to take place.'

STOP and THINK

In its elaborateness, and its use of what literary critics would call 'symbolism', this example is fairly typical of aspects of psychoanalytic interpretation. How convincing do you find it? Try to pinpoint your own reaction in a specific way. What is your judgement based upon? Do you distrust the example because of its elaborateness? (I am assuming some degree of distrust, since that is

what I have encountered whenever I have used it.) Should there be a limit to the number of associative steps allowable between the slip and its interpretation? Without some such limit, could not the chain

of associations be made to stretch to almost any interpretative destination? Or is it the nature of the steps, rather than their number, which makes the example finally unconvincing? If so, what is it about them which has this effect?

Note that the example seems to require the unconscious to anticipate the flow of conscious thought, to see that any word suggesting liquid will act as a reminder of the feared pregnancy, and then to eliminate the Latin word 'aliquis', preemptively, from the conscious mind.

My own feeling about it is that there is an attractive complexity about this example, far removed from the banalities of interpretations which are popularly called 'Freudian'. The anxiety felt by the young man is shown to suffuse the mind, in what seems to me a very plausible way, rather than being locked away in some specific compartment; hence, it is likely to surface anywhere at all. But perhaps this is simply to say that the elaborateness is what I like about this example.

Freudian interpretation, then, has always been of considerable interest to literary critics. The basic reason, again, is that the unconscious, like the poem, or novel, or play, cannot speak directly and explicitly but does so through images, symbols, emblems, and metaphors. Literature, too, is not involved with making direct explicit statements about life, but with showing and expressing experience through imagery, symbolism, metaphor and so on. However, because the 'statements' made are not explicit there is an inevitable 'judgemental' element involved, and in consequence psychoanalytic interpretations of literature are often controversial.

Freud and evidence

Distrust of Freud has been growing in recent years, partly as a result of his mainly negative views on women, as seen in the

notion that women's sexuality is based upon feelings of narcissism, masochism, and passivity, and the idea that they suffer from an innate form of inferiority complex known as 'penis envy'. Recent work seems to show that these views were maintained by misreading, or even misrepresenting, the evidence presented to him by his patients; for instance by taking accounts of sexual abuse in childhood as fantasies rather than reality. Freud's wilful misreading is seen in the case study usually known simply as 'Dora', but officially entitled 'Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria' (volume 8 in the Pelican Freud Library). Feminist critics, and others, have read this case study as a means of psychoanalysing Freud. For instance, a collection of essays on the case appeared in 1985 under the title *In Dora's Case: Freud, Hysteria, and Feminism* (ed. Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane, Virago, 1985). 'Dora' was brought to Freud for treatment in the autumn of the year 1900, by her father, as an eighteen-year-old. Her parents had found a note threatening suicide, which was the culmination of a period of withdrawal and difficulty. Dora broke off the treatment before it reached any conclusion, so Freud calls the case '*Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*'. The bulk of the material is Freud's analysis and interpretation of two dreams which she related to him in the course of the treatment, and we'll concentrate on one of these.

The family situation at the time the analysis took place is that Dora's wealthy parents were unhappy in their marriage, but they had formed a close friendship with another couple, Mr and Mrs K. A sexual relationship developed between Dora's father and Mrs K, which went on for several years. Mr K knew of

this, and all three adults seemed to have an unspoken agreement that in exchange, as it were, Dora should be made available to Mr K. Mr K made approaches to her on two occasions, the first in his office, when she was fourteen; in a state of obvious excitement he suddenly took hold of her and began to kiss her. She reacted with a violent feeling of disgust and ran out. Freud considered this reaction neurotic: in his view 'this was surely just the situation to call up a distinct feeling of sexual excitement in a girl of fourteen', since Mr K, as he explains in a footnote, was 'still quite young and of prepossessing appearance' (p. 60).

The second occasion happened when Dora was sixteen. She and Mr K were walking together beside a lake, and he 'had the audacity to make a suggestion to her'. She slapped his face and hurried away. Freud is puzzled by the 'brutal form' of her refusal, and again sees her reaction as neurotic. When Dora told her father about what had happened he asked Mr K for an explanation, but Mr K denied that the incident had ever taken place. Her father believed him rather than Dora. Given these circumstances, Freud's view of the situation seems remarkably perverse. The first of the two dreams on which much of the analysis centres was a recurrent one, which first happened when they were staying in a house by the lake where Mr K made his indecent proposal:

A house was on fire. My father was standing beside my bed and woke me up. I dressed quickly. Mother wanted to stop and save her jewel-case, but father said 'I refuse to let myself and my two children be burnt for the sake of your jewel-case'. We hurried downstairs, and as soon as I was outside I woke up.

(The Pelican Freud Library, vol. 8, p. 99)

Freud comments, *firstly*, that the immediate trigger of the dream is that when they arrived at this small wooden house her father said he was afraid of what would happen if there was a fire there. *Secondly*, in the afternoon Dora had woken up from an afternoon nap on the sofa to find Mr K standing over her. In the dream the father and Mr K are transposed. *Thirdly*, some years before she had heard her mother and father having a serious argument about jewels. *Fourthly*, Freud points out that the German word 'jewel-case' is a slang term for the female genitals. According to Freud, therefore, the dream expresses Dora's repressed wish to give Mr K what he wants (that is, her jewel-case): the fire represents her own repressed passion. The figure of Mr K is transposed with that of the father to express the wish that her former Oedipal love for her father will protect her from the temptation to yield to Mr K's advances. Freud sees in Dora's resentment of the relationship between her father and Mrs K a residual trace of this Oedipus complex, a feeling that Mrs K is her successful rival for her father's love. Against the combined male forces of her father, Mr K, and Freud it would seem that Dora has little chance, and the

whole case study certainly shows Freud and psychoanalysis at their weakest. (Psychoanalysis in relation to feminism is further discussed in Chapter 6 on feminism.)

What Freudian psychoanalytic critics do

1. They give central importance, in literary interpretation, to the distinction between the conscious and the unconscious mind. They associate the literary work's 'overt' content with the former, and the 'covert' content with the latter, privileging the latter as being what the work is 'really' about, and aiming to disentangle the two.
2. Hence, they pay close attention to unconscious motives and feelings, whether these be (a) those of the author, or (b) those of the characters depicted in the work.

3. They demonstrate the presence in the literary work of classic psychoanalytic symptoms, conditions, or phases, such as the oral, anal, and phallic stages of emotional and sexual development in infants.
4. They make large-scale applications of psychoanalytic concepts to literary history in general, for example, Harold Bloom's book *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) sees the struggle for identity by each generation of poets, under the 'threat' of the greatness of its predecessors, as an enactment of the Oedipus complex.
5. They identify a 'psychic' context for the literary work, at the expense of social or historical context, privileging the individual 'psycho-drama' above the 'social drama' of class conflict. The conflict between generations or siblings, or between competing desires within the same individual looms much larger than conflict between social classes, for instance.

Freudian psychoanalytic criticism: examples

What kind of literary problem can Freudian psychoanalytic theories help with? Let's start with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, an example which is so well-known that it has become a cliché. The relevant items in the above list of what Freudian critics do are:

1. the distinction between conscious and unconscious, 2. uncovering the unconscious motives of characters, and 3. seeing in the literary work an embodiment of classic psychoanalytic conditions. In the play Hamlet's father is murdered by his own brother, Hamlet's uncle, who then marries Hamlet's mother. The ghost of Hamlet's father appears to Hamlet and tells him to avenge the murder by killing his uncle. There is no obvious difficulty about doing this, but Hamlet spends most of the play delaying and making excuses. Why? He is not particularly squeamish, as he kills other people in the course of the play. Also, what the ghost reveals merely confirms suspicions Hamlet had independently formed himself, and he gathers other external evidence that the ghost is telling him the truth. So why the delay? Critics have long debated the question without coming to any generally accepted conclusions. Psychoanalytic criticism offers a neat and simple solution: Hamlet cannot avenge this crime because he is guilty of wanting to commit the same crime himself. He has an Oedipus complex, that is, a repressed sexual desire for his own mother, and a consequent wish to do away with his father. Thus, the uncle has merely done what Hamlet himself secretly *wished* to do: hence the difficulty for him of being the avenger. This view of the play was first sketched out by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). As Freud summarises the matter, Hamlet is unable to

take vengeance on the man who did away with his father and took that father's place with his mother, the man who shows him the repressed wishes of his own childhood realized. Thus the loathing which should drive him on to revenge is replaced in him by self-reproaches, by scruples of conscience, which remind him that he himself is literally no better than the sinner he is to punish.

(Penguin Freud Library, vol. 4, p. 367)

As evidence for this view of the play, the psychoanalytic critic points to the bedroom scene in which Hamlet shows an intense and unusual awareness of his mother's sexuality. Freud links the situation of Hamlet in the play to that of Shakespeare himself ('It can, of course, only be the poet's own mind which confronts us in *Hamlet*') He cites the view that it was written immediately

after the death of Shakespeare's own father in 1601 ('while his childhood feelings about his father had been

freshly revived') and he adds, 'It is known, too, that Shakespeare's own son who died at an early age bore the name of "Hamnet", which is identical with "Hamlet"' (p. 368). All the same, it is Hamlet the character in whom the Oedipal conflict is detected, not Shakespeare the author. Here, then, is a famous problem in literature, to which psychoanalysis can offer the basis of a solution. The sketch for an interpretation of the play put forward by Freud was later developed by his British colleague Ernest Jones in *Hamlet and Oedipus* (1949). There is a famous sustained literary pastiche of this psychoanalytical-autobiographical view of *Hamlet* in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922).

Another example of a puzzling play with which the psychoanalytic critic can offer help is Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*. This example illustrates the third item in the list of what psychoanalytic critics do, the classic Freudian condition embodied in the play being that of the mother fixation. *The Homecoming* centres on an East End of London all-male household consisting of an autocratic father and two grown-up sons. The mother has been dead for some years but her memory is worshipped by the widower and her sons. There is a third son who has emigrated to America where he is a college professor. He comes back on a visit to his family, bringing his wife (this being the literal homecoming of the title). During the visit the sons and the father have the idea of setting their brother's wife up as a prostitute in a Soho flat, and living off the proceeds. Their brother agrees to this, and the wife accepts it calmly when it is put to her, having first extracted the best possible financial terms, and made it clear that she will be in many ways the boss of this new household. Her husband goes back to America without her, and to their three children (all boys). These events seem so bizarre that the play is often performed as a kind of surreal farce.

But, again, the psychoanalytic critic is able to offer an explanation which makes some sense of them. In her article 'Pinter's Freudian Homecoming' (*Essays in Criticism*, July 1991, pp. 189-207) M. W. Rowe suggests that the underlying explanation is to be found in Freud's essay, 'The most prevalent form of

degradation in erotic life'. The all-male family shown in the play suffers from a classic condition known as a mother fixation, in which there is an exaggerated reverence for the mother. Such people are attracted only to women who resemble the mother, but because of this the shadow of the incest taboo makes the expression of sexual feelings towards them difficult or impossible. Hence, their only way out is to seek sexual relationships with women who do not resemble the mother, and whom they therefore despise. So in order to generate sexual excitement such men have to degrade the love object, since if they are not so degraded they will resemble the mother, and hence, in the man's mind, not be available as a sexual partner. Thus, women are polarised into idealised maternal figures on the one hand and prostitute figures on the other. The exaggerated reverence for the mother is usually much diluted by adolescence, but if the mother has died before the child reached adolescence, as in the household shown in the play, then a damaging, idealised image of her can live on, and eclipse that of all possible sexual partners. Hence, when the brothers propose the prostitute plan the husband accepts this because that is how he himself has thought about or fantasised about his wife in order to make a sexual relationship with her possible. Again, then, the action which we see presented in the play turns out to be an enacting of the suppressed desires of one of the central characters.

Lacan

Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) was a French psychoanalyst whose work has had an extraordinary influence upon many aspects of recent literary theory. Lacan began his career by taking a medical degree and then training in psychiatry in the 1920s. In the 1930s he worked on paranoia, publishing his thesis on his patient Aimee. His famous theory of the 'mirror stage' (explained later) was first presented at a conference in 1936. Subsequently his ideas were influenced by figures who successively dominated Parisian intellectual life, such as the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (1908-), and the linguists Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), and Roman Jakobson (1896-1982). Only in the 1950s did Lacan

begin to challenge the orthodoxies of his subject field. In 1955 at a conference in Vienna he called for a new 'back-to-basics' Freudianism. But he meant, not a new attempt to understand the 'conscious personality' (the 'ego') and interpret its behaviour in the light of an understanding of the workings of the unconscious (which many would take to be the whole point of Freudianism), but rather a new emphasis on the the unconscious itself, as 'the nucleus of our being'. In 1959 these unorthodox views resulted in his expulsion from the International Psychoanalytic Association (a kind of World Congress of Freudian analysts) and in 1964 in Paris he set up his own breakaway Ecole Freudienne and published a section of his training sessions under the title *Ecrits*. By this time he himself was one of the most prominent Parisian intellectuals. Lacan's reputation, then, rests on the published 'seminars', the *Ecrits*. A French seminar is not a group discussion but a kind of extended lecture for graduate-level students. The intense atmosphere of these occasions is suggested in an eyewitness account of Lacan's seminars in the 1950s:

He speaks in a wavering, syncopated or thundering voice, spiced with sighs and hesitations. He notes down in advance what he is going to say, then, before the public, he improvises like an actor from the Royal Shakespeare Company ... he fascinates his audience with his impressive language ... Lacan does not analyse, he associates. Lacan does not lecture, he produces resonances. At each session of this collective treatment, the pupils have the impression that the master speaks about them and for them in a coded message secretly destined for each one.

(Quoted by John Lechte in *Julia Kristeva* Routledge, 1990,

pp. 36-7)

Note here the emphasis on showmanship, on improvisation, on by-passing the formally structured presentation of ideas usual in lectures, and on the transmission of information in a coded form as part of an initiation process. Lacan says, in the piece discussed below, that the only teaching worthy of the name is teaching you can only come to terms with in its own terms. I emphasise all this to prepare you for the initial strangeness of Lacan's writing, all of which was based on the semi-improvised meditations which occu-

pired the two to three hours of these weekly occasions.

The vast output of Lacan has not all been of equal interest to literary critics. The major interest has been in the following:

1. The essay 'The insistence of the letter in the unconscious', reprinted in David Lodge, ed. *Modern Criticism and Theory* (Longman, 1988), pp. 79-106.
2. The seminar on Edgar Allan Poe's story 'The Purloined Letter', reprinted in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), pp. 28-54, with extensive editorial commentary and annotations.
3. The seminar on *Hamlet*, 'Desire and the Interpretation of desire in *Hamlet*', reprinted in *Literature and Psychoanalysis: the Question of Reading: Otherwise* Shoshana Felman, ed. (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), pp. 11-52.

Lacan's own explication of his ideas is often intimidatingly obscure. I would suggest that in reading him

you should devote some study time to reading the same piece several times, rather than reading through a great deal of his work once only. In grappling with Lacan I have found the following particularly helpful:

1. David Lodge's pre-summary of the argument of Lacan's 'The insistence of the letter in the unconscious', pp. 79-80 in *Modern Criticism and Theory*.
2. John Lechte's account of Lacan's thinking, chapter two 'The effect of the unconscious' in his book *Julia Kristeva*, pp. 13-64. I have also drawn upon this for the biographical details given above.
3. A summary by Toril Moi, pp. 99-101 in *Sexual/ Textual Politics* (Methuen, 1985).
4. The critique of Lacan, chapter five 'The mirror stage - a critical reflection', pp. 131-63 in Raymond Tallis's *Not Saussure: A Critique of Post-Saussurean Literary Theory* (Macmillan, 1988).

The most important Lacanian text for literary students is 'The insistence of the letter', first delivered in 1957 to a 'lay' audience of philosophy students, rather than to trainee psychiatrists, but

using material from the professional seminars. In what follows I attempt a summary of the argument, trying to show why these ideas have been used so intensively by literary critics.

Lacan begins the piece by paying allegiance to the intellectual dominance of language studies: he asks (rhetorically) 'how could a psychoanalyst of today not realise that his realm of truth is in fact the word?' Language, then, is central, and this is so because in investigating the unconscious the analyst is always both using and examining language - in effect, Freudian psychiatry is entirely a verbal science. And the unconscious is not a chaotic mass of disparate material, as might formerly have been thought, but an orderly network, as complex as the structure of a language: 'what the psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious is the whole structure of language'.

So the unconscious, in Lacan's famous slogan, is structured like a language. But how is a language structured? Modern language studies, he goes on, begin with Saussure, who shows that meaning in language is a matter of contrasts between words and other words, not between words and things. Meaning, that is to say, is a network of differences. There is a perpetual barrier between signifier (the word) and signified (the referent). He demonstrates this built-in separation with a diagram showing two identical lavatory doors, one headed 'Ladies' the other 'Gentlemen'. This purports to show that the same signifier may have different signifieds, so that (Lodge, p. 86) 'only the correlations between signifier and signifier supply the standard for all research into meaning'. Hence, 'we are forced to accept the notion of an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier' (Lodge, p. 87). That is, words and meanings have a life of their own and constantly override and obscure the supposed simplicities and clarity of external reality. If signifiers relate only to one another, then language is detached from external reality, and becomes an independent realm, a crucial notion in post-structuralist thinking (see Chapter 3, pp. 64—5).

But what evidence is there that the unconscious is 'linguistic' in structure as Lacan alleges? He argues that the two 'dream work' mechanisms identified by Freud, *condensation* and *displacement* (Chapter 5, pp. 98-9) correspond to the basic poles of lan-

guage identified by the linguist Roman Jakobson, that is, to *metaphor* and *metonymy*, respectively. The correspondence is that:

1. In metonymy one thing represents another by means of the part standing for the whole. So twenty sail would mean twenty ships. In Freudian dream interpretation an element in a dream might stand for something else by *displacement*: so, a person might be represented by one of their attributes; for instance, a lover who is Italian might be represented in a dream by, let's say, an Alfa Romeo car. Lacan says this is the same as *metonymy*, the part standing for the whole.
2. In *condensation* several things might be compressed into one symbol, just as a *metaphor* like 'the ship ploughed the waves' condenses into a single item two different images, the ship cutting through the sea and the plough cutting through the soil.

The use by the unconscious of these linguistic means of self-expression is part of Lacan's evidence for the claim that the unconscious is structured like a language. He goes on to emphasise the linguistic aspect of Freud's work: whenever the unconscious is being discussed the amount of linguistic analysis increases, since puns, allusions, and other kinds of word play are often the mechanisms which make manifest the content of the unconscious - think back to the 'aliquis' example, for instance.

The transition section of the essay moves attention again from the conscious self, which has always been regarded as the primary self, to the unconscious as 'the kernel of our being'. In Western philosophy the conscious mind has long been regarded as the essence of selfhood. This view is encapsulated in the proclamation by the philosopher Descartes, 'I think, therefore I am'. Lacan lays down a dramatic challenge to this philosophical consensus (remember that he is addressing an audience of philosophy students) when he reverses this into 'I am where I think not' (Lodge, p. 97), that is, in the unconscious, where my true selfhood lies. Lacan insists, then, that the Freudian discovery of the unconscious be followed through to its logical conclusion, which is 'the self's radical ex-centricity to itself (Lodge, p. 101). And he asks 'who is this other to whom I am more attached than to myself,

since at the heart of my assent to my own identity it is still he who wags me?' (Lodge, p. 102). Hence, the self is 'deconstructed', shown to be merely a linguistic effect, not an essential entity. The unconscious, then, is the 'kernel of our being', but the unconscious is like a language, and language exists as a structure before the individual enters into it. Hence, the liberal humanist notion of unique, individual selfhood is deconstructed. The argument, then, is extremely ambitious and wide-ranging in its effects. In a few pages Lacan seeks to alter nothing less than our deepest notions of what we are.

But why, in particular, is it of such interest to literary critics? I think the answer to this question is a consequence of the relentless logic of the views put forward in the essay. Thus, Lacan says that the unconscious is the 'kernel of our being', but since the unconscious is linguistic, and language is a system already complete and in existence before we enter into it, then it follows that the notion of a unique, separate self is deconstructed. If this is so, the idea of 'character', which rests in turn on the notion of a unique separate self, becomes untenable. So a major consequence of accepting the Lacanian position would be to reject the conventional view of characterisation in literature. Since Lacan deconstructs the idea of the subject as a stable amalgam of consciousness, we can hardly accept novelistic characters as people but must hold them in abeyance, as it were, and see them as assemblages of signifiers clustering round a proper name. Hence, a wholly different reading strategy is demanded.

Further, the view of language offered by Lacan sees it as fundamentally detached from any referent in the world. Accepting this view leads to a rejection of literary realism, since in realist novels the underlying assumption is that the text figures forth the real world for us. Hence, adopting the Lacanian outlook would involve valuing instead the modernist or postmodernist experimental, fragmented, allusive text, where, for instance, a novel plays with the devices of the novel, alludes to other novels, and so on, just as, for

Saussure, the signifiers which make up a language refer only to one another, and interact with one another, but do not figure forth a world. Hence, a wholly different set of literary preferences is also demanded.

Lacan's foregrounding of the unconscious leads him to speculate about the mechanism whereby we emerge into consciousness. Before the sense of self emerges the young child exists in a realm which Lacan calls the Imaginary, in which there is no distinction between self and Other and there is a kind of idealised identification with the mother. Then, between six months and eighteen months comes what he calls the 'mirror-stage', when the child sees its own reflection in the mirror and begins to conceive of itself as a unified being, separate from the rest of the world. At this stage the child enters into the language system, essentially a system which is concerned with lack and separation - crucial Lacanian concepts - since language names what is not present and substitutes a linguistic sign for it. This stage also marks the beginning of socialisation, with its prohibitions and restraints, associated with the figure of the father. The new order which the child now enters is called by Lacan the Symbolic. This distinction between the Imaginary and the Symbolic has been used extensively in literary studies, for instance, by French feminist critics (see Chapter 6, pp. 129-30). In terms of the literary polarisation between the realist and the anti-realist text, the Symbolic realm would have to be seen as the one found in realist literature, a world of patriarchal order and logic. By contrast, the anti-realist text represents the realm of the Imaginary, a world in which language gestures beyond itself, beyond logic and grammar, rather in the way that poetic language often does. Indeed, the contrast between the Imaginary and the Symbolic might be seen as analogous to that between poetry and prose. In practice the two realms, and the two kinds of language, must always co-exist, and the critical stance which follows from an acceptance of the Lacanian outlook will involve a preference for the kind of literary text in which there are constant irruptions of the Imaginary into the Symbolic, as in the kind of 'metafiction' or 'magic realism' in which the novel undercuts and queries its own realism. A fine example of this kind of work would be that of the British novelist B. S. Johnson whose constant textual inventiveness takes the form, for instance, of moments when the characters cross-question the author, taking issue with his version of their motives, or his handling of the plots in which they figure. Hence, apparently

abstract Lacanian notions, such as the constructedness and instability of the subject (the self), or the subject as a linguistic construct, or language as a self-contained universe of discourse can be seen in action in the texture of the work of fiction.

What Lacanian critics do

1. Like Freudian critics they pay close attention to unconscious motives and feelings, but instead of excavating for those of the author or characters, they search out those of the text itself, uncovering contradictory undercurrents of meaning, which lie like a subconscious beneath the 'conscious' of the text. This is another way of defining the process of 'deconstruction'.
2. They demonstrate the presence in the literary work of Lacanian psychoanalytic symptoms or phases, such as the mirror-stage or the sovereignty of the unconscious.
3. They treat the literary text in terms of a series of broader Lacanian orientations, towards such concepts as lack or desire, for instance.
4. They see the literary text as an enactment or demonstration of Lacanian views about language and the unconscious, particularly the endemic elusiveness of the signified, and the centrality of the unconscious. In practice, this results in favouring the anti-realist text which challenges the conventions of literary representation.

Lacanian criticism: an example

To illustrate some of the concerns of a Lacanian approach to literature we can now look briefly at Lacan's well-known interpretation of Edgar Allan Poe's pioneering detective story 'The Purloined Letter'. (The tale is included in the Penguin *Edgar Allan Poe: Selected Writings*, ed. David Galloway, and also reprinted in *The Purloined Poe*.) Lacan analysed this story in a series of 'seminars', as part of the induction process for trainee analysts. In the 1980s several post-structuralist essays were written in response to the publication of these seminars, and much of the material has usefully been collected and republished in *The*

Purloined Poe. Also, Newton's *Theory into Practice* contains an essay on the topic by the Lacanian psychoanalytic critic Shoshana Felman. Since it is by Lacan himself, this example demonstrates the fourth of the Lacanian critical activities listed above, Lacan finding in it evidence of his own views on language, and on the process of psychoanalysis.

Poe's story has about it an archetypal air which lends itself well to psychoanalytic interpretation. There is no in-depth characterisation, the characters being suggestive of chess pieces which are moved about by the author in a ritualistic combat of bluff, counter-bluff, and subterfuge. They are named the Queen, the King, the Minister, the Chief of Police and Dupin, the detective. What happens can be divided into four phases:

1. The Minister is in discussion with the Queen in her apartments when the King enters unexpectedly. He notices that she is anxious the King should not see a letter which is on the desk, but she can't conceal it as this would draw his attention to it. When the attention of both is distracted the Minister removes it, substituting a letter from his own pocket which has a similar appearance.
2. When she discovers the theft the Queen realises who is responsible, and when the Minister is away she gets the Chief of Police and his men to search his apartments. In spite of employing the most thorough and scientific methods he finds nothing.
3. In desperation she asks for Dupin's help. He visits the Minister and reasons that carrying the letter on his person would be too great a risk, but its usefulness lies in his being able to produce it at any time, so it can't be hidden outside the house. But if it had been *hidden* inside the house the search would have discovered it, so it must be in the house but not hidden. Sure enough, he sees the letter above the mantelpiece, carelessly pushed in amongst other items of correspondence.
4. He visits again, and having arranged a distraction in the street, substitutes a fake letter for it. The letter is returned to the Queen, and the Minister, unaware that he no longer pos-

sesses it, brings about his own downfall. A note inside the fake reveals that this is Dupin's revenge for being duped by the Minister in a love affair in earlier life.

Lacan's account of the tale is lengthy, but of markedly different character from the conventional Freudian criticism of Poe, which is best represented by the work of Freud's 1930s disciple Marie Bonaparte (also extracted in *The Purloined Poe*). In Bonaparte the tale is read, as are all Poe's works, as a symptom of the author's neurotic inner life. Thus, she reads beyond the text to the author, identifying in him a mother fixation and necrophilia on the basis of the content of the tales. Lacan, by contrast, does not talk about the psychology of the individual author, but sees the text as a metaphor which throws light upon aspects of the unconscious, on the nature of psychoanalysis, and on aspects of language. We can summarise these as

follows:

1. *The stolen letter is an emblem of the unconscious itself.* In the story we find out nothing about the *content* of the letter: we merely see it affecting the actions of every person in the tale. Likewise, the content of the unconscious is, by definition, unknowable, but everything we do is affected by it: we can guess at the nature of this content by observing its effects, just as we can deduce the general nature of the letter's contents from the anxiety it generates. Freud's investigations resulted in confident assertions about the precise nature of the content of the unconscious, but Lacan is much more sceptical about the possibility of such certainties. Like the letter, the pieces which might make sense of our inner mental universe have been purloined, and we have to learn to operate without them. We have, that is, to use the code without having the key.

2. *Dupin's investigation of the crime of the stolen letter enacts the process of psychoanalysis.* The analyst in psychoanalysis uses repetition and substitution: in getting the patient to verbalise painful repressed memories, the original event is repeated in verbal form, but the verbal account is then substituted in the conscious mind for the repressed memory in the unconscious. Once it is conscious and verbalised, the memory is disempowered and mental well-being is restored. Likewise, Dupin's

investigative process in the story centres on repetition and substitution: his theft of the letter from the Minister is a repetition of the Minister's theft of it from the Queen, and the theft is achieved by substitution, a false letter being used as a replacement for the real one. 3. *The letter with the unknown content is an embodiment of aspects of the nature of language.* In language there is an endless play of signifiers, but no simple connection with any signified content beyond language. The signified is always lost or purloined. In the same way, we see the significance of the letter throughout the story, but we never find out precisely what is signified within it. It is an example of signification itself, not a sign of some specific thing. Likewise, all words are purloined letters: we can never open them and view their content unambiguously; we have the signifiers, which are the verbal envelopes of concepts, so to speak, but these envelopes cannot be unsealed, so that the signifieds will always remain hidden, just like the content of the purloined letter in Poe's tale.

Comparing the Freudian and Lacanian examples discussed in this chapter will make it immediately apparent that there is an immense gulf between these two approaches, even though - paradoxically - they both stem from the same original body of Freudian theory.

Selected reading

General

Ellmann, Maud, ed. *Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism* (Longman, 1994). A useful collection, showing the influence of Freud and Lacan on criticism.

Felman, Shoshana, ed. *Literature and Psychoanalysis - The Question of Reading: Otherwise* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982). An important collection of essays. Felman's own 'Turning the screw of interpretation' is about Henry James's story 'The Turn of the Screw', one of the earliest texts to be subjected to psychoanalytic criticism (by the critic Edmund Wilson in 1934).

Jefferson, Ann and Robey, David, eds, *Modern Literary Theory: A Com-*

parative Introduction (Batsford, 2nd edn, 1986). Chapter five 'Modern psychoanalytic criticism'.

A useful general account, not restricted to Freud.

Kurzweil, Edith, ed. *Literature and Psychoanalysis* (Columbia University Press, 1983).

A very useful collection with good editorial commentary. The first section is on early psychoanalytic theory, the third on literary applications, including essays on Keats, on Henry James's disturbing ghost story 'The Jolly Corner', on Kafka, and on Lewis Carroll. The final section is on French psychoanalytic theory.

Wright, Elizabeth, *Psychoanalytic Criticism: Theory in Practice* (Revised edn, Polity Press, 1998).

Short and wide-ranging, dealing with Freudian and Lacanian approaches, as well as others not discussed here, but not an easy read.

Freud

Bernheimer, Charles and Kahane, Claire, *In Dora's Case: Freud, Hysteria, and Feminism* (Columbia University press, 2nd edn, 1990). A critique of Freud's handling of this case, by various commentators, including Jacques Lacan (briefly and incisively), Jacqueline Rose, Toril Moi, and Jane Gallop. This book works beyond the traditional (but now outmoded) antagonism between feminism and psychoanalysis by moving towards Lacanian and post-structuralist re-readings of Freud.

Freud, Sigmund, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (first published in 1900. Volume four in the Penguin Freud).

A key work in the creation of twentieth-century sensibility. Explains the basic dream mechanisms, 'Condensation', VIa; 'Displacement', VIb; also the Oedipus complex and *Hamlet* 363-8.

Freud, Sigmund, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (first published in 1901. Volume five in the Penguin Freud).

Very readable and interesting, in spite of the title. Either this book or the case histories would be the best place to begin with Freud.

Freud, Sigmund, *Case Histories I: 'Dora' and 'Little Hans'* (Volume eight in the Penguin Freud).

Detailed records of Freudian interpretation. The element of ingenuity and complexity emphasised above is very evident in these accounts.

Thurschwell, Pamela, *Sigmund Freud* (Routledge, 2000).

A useful title in the 'Critical Thinkers' series, which is similar in introductory scope to the old 'Fontana Modern Masters'

series.

Timpanaro, Sebastiano, *The Freudian Slip: Psychoanalysis and textual Criticism* (Verso Paperback, 1985).

I list this fascinating and readable book by a noted Italian Marxist partly because it is illustrative of the traditional antagonism between Marxism and psychoanalysis. Timpanaro 'deconstructs' many of the slips in Freud's *Psychopathology* on the grounds that they are explicable in terms of incidental verbal similarities. See, for instance, his discussion of the 'aliquis' example, pp. 19-28.

Wolheim, Richard, *Freud* (Fontana Press, 2nd edn, 1991).

Still the best introduction. But read some of Freud himself first.

Lacan

Lacan, Jacques, 'Desire and the interpretation of desire in *Hamlet*', reprinted in *Literature and Psychoanalysis - The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, ed. Shoshana Felman (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), pp. 11-52.

Lacan, Jacques, 'The insistence of the letter in the unconscious', reprinted in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. David Lodge (Longman, 1988), pp. 79-106.

Lacan, Jacques, Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter', reprinted in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), pp. 28-54, with extensive editorial commentary and annotations.

Lacan, Jacques, *Ecrits* (Routledge, 2001).

A very welcome publication in Routledge's excellent 'Classics' series which reprints key critical texts of the twentieth century.

Mitchell, Juliet and Rose, Jacqueline, eds, *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne* (Macmillan, 1982). Key Lacanian texts translated and discussed.

Sarup, Madan, *Jacques Lacan* (Harvester, 1992).

A volume in the Modern Cultural Theorists series by an able explainer of difficult material. Begins with an account of Freudian ideas and ends with a discussion of Lacan and feminism.

6

Feminist criticism

Feminism and feminist criticism

The 'women's movement' of the 1960s was not, of course, the start of feminism. Rather, it was a renewal of an old tradition of thought and action already possessing its classic books which had diagnosed the

problem of women's inequality in society, and (in some cases) proposed solutions. These books include Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), which discusses male writers like Milton, Pope, and Rousseau; Olive Schreiner's *Women and Labour* (1911); Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), which vividly portrays the unequal treatment given to women seeking education and alternatives to marriage and motherhood; and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), which has an important section on the portrayal of women in the novels of D. H. Lawrence. Male contributions to this tradition of feminist writing include John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Woman* (1869) and *The Origin of the Family* (1884) by Friedrich Engels.

The feminist literary criticism of today is the direct product of the 'women's movement' of the 1960s. This movement was, in important ways, literary from the start, in the sense that it realised the significance of the images of women promulgated by literature, and saw it as vital to combat them and question their authority and their coherence. In this sense the women's movement has always been crucially concerned with books and literature, so that feminist criticism should not be seen as an off-shoot or a spin-off

from feminism which is remote from the ultimate aims of the movement, but as one of its most practical ways of influencing everyday conduct and attitudes.

The concern with 'conditioning' and 'socialisation' underpins a crucial set of distinctions, that between the terms 'feminist', 'female', and 'feminine'. As Toril Moi explains, the first is 'a political position', the second 'a matter of biology', and the third 'a set of culturally defined characteristics'. Particularly in the distinction between the second and third of these lies much of the force of feminism (see Moi's essay in *The Feminist Reader*, ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore). Other important ideas are explained in the appropriate part of the remainder of this section.

The representation of women in literature, then, was felt to be one of the most important forms of 'socialisation', since it provided the role models which indicated to women, and men, what constituted acceptable versions of the 'feminine' and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations. Feminists pointed out, for example, that in nineteenth-century fiction very few women work for a living, unless they are driven to it by dire necessity. Instead, the focus of interest is on the heroine's choice of marriage partner, which will decide her ultimate social position and exclusively determine her happiness and fulfilment in life, or her lack of these.

Thus, in feminist criticism in the 1970s the major effort went into exposing what might be called the mechanisms of patriarchy, that is, the cultural 'mind-set' in men and women which perpetuated sexual inequality. Critical attention was given to books by male writers in which influential or typical images of women were constructed. Necessarily, the criticism which undertook this work was combative and polemical. Then, in the 1980s, in feminism as in other critical approaches, the mood changed. *Firstly*, feminist criticism became much more *eclectic*, meaning that it began to draw upon the findings and approaches of other kinds of criticism - Marxism, structuralism, linguistics, and so on. *Secondly*, it switched its focus from attacking male versions of the world to exploring the nature of the female world and outlook, and reconstructing the lost or suppressed records of female experience. *Thirdly*, attention was switched to the need to construct a new

canon of women's writing by rewriting the history of the novel and of poetry in such a way that neglected women writers were given new prominence.

Such distinct phases of interest and activity seem characteristic of feminist criticism. Elaine Showalter, for instance, described the change in the late 1970s as a shift of attention from 'andro-texts' (books by men) to

'gynotexts' (books by women). She coined the term 'gynocritics', meaning the study of gynotexts, but gynocriticism is a broad and varied field, and any generalisations about it should be treated with caution. The subjects of gynocriticism are, she says, 'the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women; the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution or laws of a female literary tradition'.

Showalter also detects in the history of women's writing a *feminine phase* (1840-80), in which women writers imitated dominant male artistic norms and aesthetic standards; then a *feminist phase* (1880-1920), in which radical and often separatist positions are maintained; and finally a *female phase* (1920 onwards) which looked particularly at female writing and female experience. The reasons for this liking for 'phasing' are complex: partly, it is the result of the view that feminist criticism required a terminology if it was to attain theoretical respectability. More importantly, there is a great need, in all intellectual disciplines, to establish a sense of progress, enabling early and cruder examples of (in this case) feminist criticism to be given their rightful credit and acknowledgement while at the same time making it clear that the approach they represent is no longer generally regarded as a model for practice.

But feminist criticism since the 1970s has been remarkable for the wide range of positions that exist within it. Debates and disagreements have centred on three particular areas, these being: 1. the role of theory; 2. the nature of language, and 3. the value or otherwise of psychoanalysis. The next three sections will look at each of these in turn.

Feminist criticism and the role of theory

A major division within feminist criticism has concerned disagreements about the amount and type of theory that should feature in it. What is usually called the 'Anglo-American' version of feminism has tended to be more sceptical about recent critical theory, and more cautious in using it, than have the 'French' feminists, who have adopted and adapted a great deal of (mainly) post-structuralist and psychoanalytic criticism as the basis of much of their work. The 'Anglo-Americans' (not all are English or American) maintain a major interest in traditional critical concepts like theme, motif, and characterisation. They seem to accept the conventions of literary realism, and treat literature as a series of representations of women's lives and experience which can be measured and evaluated against reality. They see the close reading and explication of individual literary texts as the major business of feminist criticism. Generally, this kind of feminist criticism has a good deal in common with the procedures and assumptions of the liberal humanist approach to literature, although feminists also place considerable emphasis on the use of historical data and non-literary material (such as diaries, memoirs, social and medical history) in understanding the literary text. The American critic Elaine Showalter is usually taken as the major representative of this approach, but other exemplars would be Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Patricia Stubbs, and Rachel Brownstein.

However, most of these are in fact American rather than 'Anglo', and this should make us question the usefulness of this widely accepted category. English feminist criticism is, after all, often distinctly different from American: it tends to be 'socialist feminist' in orientation, aligned with cultural materialism or Marxism, so that it is obviously unsatisfactory to try to assimilate it into a 'non-theoretical' category. The existence of this kind of feminism has been rather obscured by the fact that certain popular books summarising feminist criticism (like K. K. Ruthven's *Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction* and Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics*) do not discuss it as a distinct category. Examples of this kind of work are: Terry Lovell's *Consuming*

Fiction (1987), Julia Swindells's *Victorian Writing and Working Women* (1985), and *Sea Changes*:

Culture and Feminism (1986) by Cora Kaplan, an American who worked in Britain for many years. Kaplan was a member of the Marxist Feminist Literature Collective, an important group whose very existence indicates the strong political and theoretical interests of this kind of feminist criticism. A similarly important group was the Literature Teaching Politics Collective, which was also a series of conferences and an associated journal. An important figure associated with this group is Catherine Belsey, whose books, (such as *The Subject of Tragedy* (1985), and *John Milton: Language, Gender, Power* (1988)), are part of this same socialist feminist British tradition. While the definitive works in the so-called 'Anglo-American' tradition appeared in the late 1970s, the British 'socialist feminist' tradition produced its key works in the mid-1980s and remains active and influential.

In contrast to the Americans (if not, as we have just argued, to the British) the work of 'French' feminism is more overtly theoretical, taking as its starting-point the insights of major post-structuralists, especially Lacan, Foucault and Derrida. For these feminist critics, the literary text is never primarily a representation of reality, or a reproduction of a personal voice expressing the minutiae of personal experience. Indeed, the French theorists often deal with concerns other than literature: they write about language, representation, and psychology as such and often travel through detailed treatments of major philosophical issues of this kind before coming to the literary text itself. The major figures on this 'French' side of the divide are Julia Kristeva (actually Bulgarian, though regarded abroad - as she has ruefully said - as a kind of embodiment of French intellectualism), Helene Cixous (Algerian-born), and Luce Irigaray.

All three are best encountered initially in the various feminist readers now available. For instance, Kristeva's 1974 interview 'Woman can never be defined' is in *New French Feminisms* (Marks and De Courtivron), as are sections from 'Sorties' and 'The Laugh of the Medusa' by Cixous, and sections from Irigaray's *The Sex Which is not One*. Extracts from the same Cixous and Irigaray pieces are also in *Feminisms: A Reader* (Maggie Humm).

A sustained discussion of the differences between 'Anglo-American' and 'French' feminisms (though one which is much on the side of the latter) is Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics*. For a more recent account see the chapter 'Imaginary Gardens with Real Frogs in them: feminist euphoria and the Franco-American divide, 1976-1988' by Ann Rosalind Jones in *Changing Subjects: The Making of Feminist Literary Criticism* (Greene and Kahn). These French feminists are particularly concerned with language and psychology, which are considered in the two following sections.

Feminist criticism and language

Another fundamental issue, on which opinion is just as polarised, is the question of whether or not there exists a form of language which is inherently feminine. There is a long-standing tradition of debate on this issue within feminism. For instance, Virginia Woolf, (in sections four and five of her extended polemical essay *A Room Of One's Own*) suggests that language use is gendered, so that when a woman turns to novel writing she finds that there is 'no common sentence ready for her use'. The great male novelists have written 'a natural prose, swift but not slovenly, expressive but not precious, taking their own tint without ceasing to be common property'. She quotes an example and says 'That is a man's sentence'. She doesn't make its qualities explicit, but the example seems to be characterised by carefully balanced and patterned rhetorical sequences. But 'it was a sentence unsuited for a woman's use', and women writers trying to use it (Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot) fared badly. Jane Austen rejected it and instead 'devised a perfectly natural, shapely sentence proper for her own use', but this is not described or exemplified. Presumably, though, the characteristics of a 'woman's sentence' are that the clauses are linked in looser sequences, rather than carefully balanced and patterned as in male prose.

Generally, then, the female writer is seen as suffering the handicap of having to use a medium (prose writing) which is essentially a male instrument fashioned for male purposes. This thesis that the language is 'masculine' in this sense is developed by Dale

Spender in the early 1980s in her book *Man Made Language* (1981) which also argues that language is not a neutral medium but one which contains many features which reflect its role as the instrument through which patriarchy finds expression. (This view that the language is man-made is challenged from within feminism by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in the essay 'Sexual Linguistics: Gender, Language, Sexuality', reprinted in *The Feminist Reader* ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (Macmillan, 1989). If normative language can be seen as in some way male-oriented, the question arises of whether there might be a form of language which is free from this bias, or even in some way oriented towards the female. French theorists, therefore, have posited the existence of an *écriture féminine*, (the term is that of the French theorist Helene Cixous, from her essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa'), associated with the feminine, and facilitating the free play of meanings within the framework of loosened grammatical structures. The heightened prose of the Cixous essay both demonstrates and explains it:

It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility which will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded ... it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric [male-dominated] system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philo-sophico-theoretical domination. It will be conceived of by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate. (Marks & de Courtivron, *New French Feminisms* Harvester, 1981)

Here the user of *écriture féminine* seems to exist in a realm beyond logic ('this practice can never be theorized ... and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination'.) The user of such language is seen as a kind of perennial freedom-fighter in an anarchic realm of perpetual opposition ('peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate') sniping at the centres of power. For Cixous (though not for other theorists) this kind of writing is somehow uniquely the product of female physiology, which women must celebrate in their writing:

Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word 'silence' ... Such is the strength of women that, sweeping away syntax, breaking that famous thread (just a tiny little thread, they say) which acts for men as a surrogate umbilical cord.

(Marks & Courtivron, p. 256)

Écriture féminine, then, is by its nature transgressive, rule-transcending, intoxicated, but it is clear that the notion as put forward by Cixous raises many problems. The realm of the body, for instance, is seen as somehow immune ('impregnable') to social and gender conditioning ('rhetorics, regulations, codes') and able to issue forth a pure essence of the feminine. Such 'essentialism' is difficult to square with a feminism which emphasises femininity as a social construct, not a given entity which is somehow just mysteriously 'there'. And if femininity is socially constructed then it must follow that it differs from one culture to another, so that such overarching generalisations about it are impossible. Who, we might ask, are these women who 'must' write through their bodies? Who imposes this coercive 'must' upon them, and (above all) why?

Further expression of the notion of the *écriture féminine* is found in the writing of Julia Kristeva. Kristeva

uses the terms the *symbolic* and the *semiotic* to designate two different aspects of language. In her essay 'The System and the Speaking Subject' the symbolic aspect is associated with authority, order, fathers, repression and control ('the family, normalcy, normative classico-psychological-tending discourse, all of which are just so many characteristics of fascist ideology'). This symbolic facet of language maintains the fiction that the self is fixed and unified (what she describes as 'a language with a foreclosed subject or with a transcendental subject-ego'). By contrast, the semiotic aspect of discourse is characterised not by logic and order, but by 'displacement, slippage, condensation', which suggests, again, a much looser, more randomised way of making connections, one which

increases the available range of possibilities. She quotes Plato in the *Timaeus* invoking 'a state of language anterior to the Word ... Plato calls this the *chora*', and, again, it is linked with the maternal rather than the paternal. All this is presented at a fairly generalised level, but Kristeva sees the semiotic as the language of poetry as opposed to prose, and examines its operation in the work of specific poets. Though it is linked conceptually with the feminine, the poets who use it are not all female, and in fact Kristeva's major exemplars are male writers.

It should be stressed, though, that the symbolic and the semi-otic are not two different *kinds* of language, but two different *aspects* of language, both of which are always present in any given sample. The model, again, is that of the unconscious and the conscious, and the Lacanian re-use of these notions. The symbolic is the orderly surface realm of strict distinctions and laid-down structures through which language works: this aspect of language is the side stressed by the structuralists, the Saussurean 'network of differences'. But ever-present is the linguistic 'unconscious', a realm of floating signifiers, random connections, improvisations, approximations, accidents, and 'slippage' - everything, that is, entailed in the post-structuralist view of language. Indeed, one way of characterising the process of deconstruction (whereby contradictory cross-currents of meaning are discovered in texts) is to see it as the 'unconscious' of the text emerging into and disrupting the 'conscious' or 'surface' meaning. These disruptive incursions into rational, previously stable structures are seen, for instance, in dreams, in poetry, and in modernist, experimental writing which distorts the surface of language (for example, the poetry of e. e. cummings). This 'random' element can never be escaped by even the most meticulous and painfully deliberate composer of prose. Clearly, since language is by definition an inventive and improvisatory practice, if cut off from Kristeva's realm of the semiotic it would instantly perish.

For her notion of the basic opposition between the semiotic and the symbolic Kristeva is indebted to Jacques Lacan and his distinction between two realms, the *Imaginary* and the *Symbolic*. The Imaginary realm is that of the young child at the pre-linguistic, pre-Oedipal stage. The self is not yet distinguished from

what is other than the self, and the body's sense of being separate from the rest of the world is not yet established. The child lives in an Eden-like realm, free of both desire and deprivation. The semiotic is seen as inherently subversive politically, and always threatens the closed symbolic order embodied in such conventions as governments, received cultural values, and the grammar of standard language.

For some feminists this visionary 'semiotic' female world and language evoked by Cixous and Kristeva is a vital theatre of possibilities, the value of which is to entertain the imagining of alternatives to the world which we now have, and which women in particular now have. For others, it fatally hands over the world of the rational to men and reserves for women a traditionally emotive, intuitive, trans-rational and 'privatised' arena. Not surprisingly, therefore, the language question is one of the most contentious areas of feminist criticism.

Feminist criticism and psychoanalysis

The story so far of feminism's relationship with psychoanalysis is simple in outline but complex in nuance. The story can be said to begin, like so much else, with Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* in 1969 which condemns Freud as a prime source of the patriarchal attitudes against which feminists must fight. The influence of this view within feminism is still very strong, but Freud was defended in a series of important books in subsequent years, notably Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* in 1974. This book defends Freud against Millett by, in effect, using Millett's own terms and concepts, especially the distinction, so crucial to feminism, between sex and gender, the former being a matter of biology, the latter a construct, something learned or acquired, rather than 'natural'. This distinction is what Simone de Beauvoir invokes in the famous first sentence in Part Two of *The Second Sex* (1949) when she writes 'One is not born a woman; rather, one *becomes* a woman'. The project of de Beauvoir's book is one which *Sexual Politics* sees itself as continuing. Mitchell's defence of Freud, then, is to argue that Freud doesn't present the feminine as something simply 'given and natural'. Female sexuality

(indeed, heterosexuality in general) isn't just there 'naturally' from the start, but is formed by early experiences and adjustments, and Freud shows the process of its being produced and constructed, particularly in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (in volume seven of the Penguin Freud, entitled *On Sexuality*). It follows that gender roles must be malleable and changeable, not inevitable and unchangeable givens.

Thus, the argument runs, the notion of penis envy need not be taken as simply concerning the male physical organ itself (whatever might have been Freud's intentions), but as concerning that organ as an emblem of social power and the advantages which go with it. (I am reminded of an advertisement - which was banned - showing a photograph of a nude woman with the caption 'What women need to succeed in a man's world'. The woman shown had male sexual organs crudely drawn in over her own.) In the reading discussed in the next section, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar use the idea of 'social castration', which amounts to the same thing, for this term signifies women's lack of social power, this lack being represented, by means of the word 'castration', as a male possession, though not as in any sense a male attribute.

Jane Gallop's 1982 book *Feminism and Psychoanalysis* continues the rehabilitation of psychoanalysis, but by switching from the Freudian to the Lacanian variety, partly on the grounds that what is often implicit in Freud is explicit in Lacan's system, namely that the phallus is not the physical biological object but a symbol of the power which goes with it. While men, of course, come out of Lacan's writings better advantaged than women, none the less Lacan shows men too as powerless, since the fullness of signification, which the phallus also represents in Lacan's work, is not attainable by either men or women. Also, Lacan's way of writing - notoriously abstruse, playful, punning, and 'paralogical' (meaning beyond or above logic) seems to embody the 'feminine' or 'semiotic' aspect of language, rather than the 'masculine' or 'symbolic' aspect.

Another significant name in the rehabilitation of Freud is the British critic Jacqueline Rose whose book *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* is an example of an applied feminist-psychoanalytic approach. Rose's project is to combine the insights of feminism,

psychoanalysis and politics. She is joint editor, with Juliet Mitchell, of *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freu-dienne* (1982). The argument in favour of Lacan, and of Freud, is, again, that it shows sexual identity to be a 'cultural construct', gives a detailed series of 'insider' accounts of how the construction takes place, and shows examples of this conditioning being resisted.

The resulting position is (as Isobel Armstrong remarks in a article about Rose in *The Times Higher Education Supplement* 16 July 1993, p. 15) a very complicated one. In general the defence of Freud and Lacan has been more favourably received by French and British feminists than by Americans (another interesting transgression of the usual Anglo-American versus French dichotomy). Elaine Showalter, for instance, in her essay about Ophelia (reprinted in Newton's *Theory into Practice* - see under General Readers in the Further reading section) is dismissive of Lacan's evident disregard of Ophelia - he promises to discuss her in his seminar on *Hamlet*, but somehow never gets round to it. Likewise, Jerry Aline Flieger, an American contributor to *Changing Subjects: The Making of Feminist Literary Criticism* (Greene and Kahn), sounds a note of scepticism when she writes:

I was fascinated and troubled by Lacan's characterisation of the phallus as the Signifier of Signifiers, as well as by his infamous statements 'There is no sexual relation', and 'Woman does not exist'. Thus I was relieved and grateful when feminists such as Jacqueline Rose and Jane Gallop, in the late seventies and early eighties, performed ingenious and persuasive readings of Lacan as critic of phallogocry, rather than advocate.

(p. 267)

The effect of this comment is partly to draw attention to the ingenuity *needed* to mount such a defence.

Stephen Heath, in an essay in *Feminist Literary Criticism* (ed. Mary Eagleton) quotes Roland Barthes to the effect that 'The monument of psychoanalysis must be traversed - not bypassed' (p. 214). We might say that feminism began by trying to do the latter, then changed course and did the former. The tendency of American feminists to be unconvinced by the rehabilitation of

psychoanalysis can perhaps be explained by the fact that psychoanalysis has been more an accepted part of middle-class life in the USA than it ever became in Europe. Hence, it is more difficult for Americans to see it as still possessed of radical potential, least of all for women. Further, there was a new emphasis in the 1990s on the culturally-specific nature of psychoanalysis, and hence a reluctance to claim any kind of universal validity for it. In Rose's own work, as elsewhere, there is a strong and growing interest in listening to the voices of the hitherto excluded 'Other', particularly those of the cultures and races which had no place in the work of Freud or Lacan.

STOP and THINK

General: Within feminism there is a strong emphasis on the 'constructedness' of femininity, that is, on such matters as conditioning and socialisation, and the influence of images and representations of femininity in literature and culture. All these formulations are ways of avoiding 'essentialism', which is the contrary view that there is some natural, given essence of the feminine, that is universal and unchangeable.

Anti-essentialism has for some years now been a dominant concept in critical theory, but there is some awareness, too, that it is a notion which leaves us with certain difficulties. For instance, does anti-essentialism, by making it hard to make *any* generalisations about women, also make it difficult to politicise women as a group? Does it tend to reduce identity to the sum of circumstances, perhaps in spite of our 'instinctive' feelings that identity may be deeper than that? Is the fact that we have such feelings admissible as evidence - on either side? And in any case, what would constitute evidence on *either* side of this question?

Specific: In the example discussed below, what are some of the ways in which the critical assumptions and procedures differ from those made in non-feminist approaches to the same work? Compare it with the two essays mentioned at the start

of the example, or with the pieces in the Macmillan *Casebook on Wuthering Heights* (ed. Miriam Allott, 1970).

What feminist critics do

1. Rethink the canon, aiming at the rediscovery of texts written by women.
2. Revalue women's experience.
3. Examine representations of women in literature by men and women.
4. Challenge representations of women as 'Other', as 'lack', as part of 'nature'.
5. Examine power relations which obtain in texts and in life, with a view to breaking them down, seeing reading as a political act, and showing the extent of patriarchy.
6. Recognise the role of language in making what is social and constructed seem transparent and 'natural'.
7. Raise the question of whether men and women are 'essentially' different because of biology, or are socially constructed as different.
8. Explore the question of whether there is a female language, an *écriture féminine*, and whether this is also available to men.
9. 'Re-read' psychoanalysis to further explore the issue of female and male identity.
10. Question the popular notion of the death of the author, asking whether there are only 'subject positions ... constructed in discourse', or whether, on the contrary, the experience (e.g. of a black or lesbian writer) is central.
11. Make clear the ideological base of supposedly 'neutral' or 'mainstream' literary interpretations.

Feminist criticism: an example

As an example of feminist criticism I will take the account of *Wuthering Heights* by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, from their book *The Madwoman in the Attic*. The piece is reprinted in

the widely-used *Debating Texts* (ed. Rick Rylance). Rylance reprints two other accounts of the same novel, one by Q. D. Leavis, which might be considered as liberal humanist, and one by Frank Kermode which might be seen as post-structuralist. Comparisons can also be made with Eagleton's Marxist account