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THE COMMONSENSE VIEW THAT LITERATURE SIMPLY REFLECTS REALITY AND THAT LANGUAGE IS MERELY A PASSIVE MEDIUM OR TOOL FOR EXPRESSION ====>

2 CRITICISM AND MEANING

2.1 Post-Saussurean linguistics

THE failure of each of these theoretical assaults on expressive realism to break with the commonsense view of language has meant that while each in turn has had a fashionable following, and while New Criticism even came to prevail as an orthodoxy, particularly in the United States, common sense has continued to flourish and expressive realism, with only minor concessions to its opponents, has survived largely unscathed. The New Critics, Northrop Frye and the reader-theorists stay within the empiricist-idealist problematic, and in doing so they permit an easy eclecticism, a critical practice which appropriates and reconciles elements from some or all of them, without being compelled to confront the implications of its own assumptions and presuppositions.

The logical possibility of expressive realism, however, is put in question by post-Saussurean linguistics, which challenges empiricist-idealist ways of understanding the relationship between language and the world. I use the term 'post-Saussurean' not simply in a chronological sense, but to identify work which traces a direct descent from the radical elements in Saussure's theory of the sign, so that Chomsky's transformational generative grammar, for instance, is not

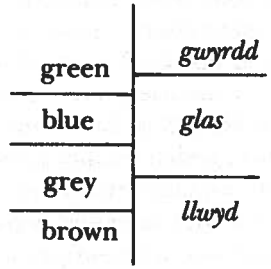
post-Saussurean in this sense, whatever Chomsky's importance for work in linguistics as a whole. Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, published in 1916, has exerted a profound influence not only on linguistics itself but on the rise of semiology (or semiotics),[7] the science of signs which Saussure postulated in a tantalizing passage of the *Course* (Saussure 1974, p. 16). The full implications of Saussure's work, both for language and for the other signifying systems of society, are still in the process of being recognized. The study of literature as a signifying practice is currently being transformed by an increasing realization of Saussure's importance.

The most revolutionary element in Saussure's position was his insistence that language is not a nomenclature, a way of naming things which already exist, but a system of differences with no positive terms. He argued that far from providing a set of labels for entities which exist independently in the world, language precedes the existence of independent entities, making the world intelligible by differentiating between concepts. This hypothesis requires amplification and justification.

In Saussure's theory, language is a system of signs. A sign consists of a signifier (the sound-image or the written shape) and a signified (a concept). The sound-image *dog* is inseparably linked in English with the concept *dog*, and the two can be isolated from each other only analytically. 'Language can . . . be compared with a sheet of paper: thought is the front and the sound the back; one cannot cut the front without cutting the back at the same time; likewise in language, one can neither divide sounds from thought nor thought from sound' (*ibid*, p. 113).

The inseparability of the signifier and the signified, the fact that for a speaker of English the sound-image *dog* belongs with the concept *dog* and not, say, with the concept *cow*, creates the illusion of the transparency of language. 'It is in the nature of language to be overlooked' (Hjelmslev 1969, p. 5). We feel as if *dog* is a label for something which exists unproblematically, in some ultimate and incontestable way, and it is only by an effort of thought that it is possible to challenge this feeling. Saussure challenged it. He was not the first to do so — the problem is the central (and unresolved) issue in Plato's *Cratylus* — but his work exerted a powerful influence on subsequent linguistic theory.

Saussure's argument depends on the different division of the chain of meaning in different languages. 'If words stood for pre-existing concepts, they would all have exact equivalents in meaning from one language to the next; but this is not true' (Saussure 1974, p. 116). The truth is that different languages divide or articulate the world in different ways. Saussure gives a number of examples. For instance, where French has the single word *mouton*, English differentiates between *mutton*, which we eat, and *sheep*, which roams the hills. Jonathan Culler cites the distinction between *river* and *stream* in English in contrast to *fleuve* and *rivière* in French. In English what distinguishes a river from a stream is size; in French a *fleuve* flows into the sea, a *rivière* into another *rivière* or a *fleuve* (Culler 1976, p. 24). Some languages divide the spectrum differently from others. In Welsh the colour *glas* (blue), like the Latin *glaucus*, includes elements which English would identify as green or grey. The boundaries are placed differently in the two languages and the Welsh equivalent of English *grey* might be *glas* or *llwyd* (brown):



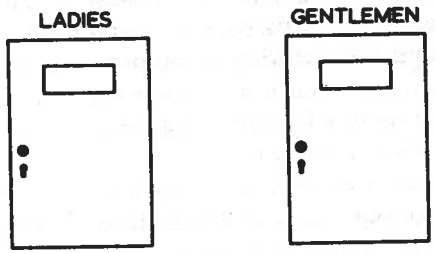
(Hjelmslev 1969, p. 53)

In other words, colour terms, like language itself, form a system of differences, readily experienced as natural, given,

but in reality constructed by the language itself.

Nor is this process of differentiation confined to objects of the senses. The distinction in French between *science* and *connaissance* does not correspond to the English *science* and *knowledge*: indeed each term can be translated from one language to the other only approximately and by what seems a very circumlocutory process, because the words have the effect of limiting each other's range of meaning within the interdependent whole which constitutes each language. Signs are defined by their difference from each other in the network of signs which is the signifying system. Languages which have a past historic tense have a corresponding restriction on the use of the simple past. In proto-Germanic there is no future tense, and in consequence the value of the present tense is different from its value in languages which have both tenses (Saussure 1974, p. 117). These non-correspondences, often experienced as difficult to grasp in the process of learning a new language, have far-reaching theoretical implications. We are compelled to argue either that our own language has got its concepts 'right' in some absolute way, and that all the others are to varying degrees out of step, or that concepts are purely differential, and that they are determined not by their positive content but by their relations with the other terms of the system. 'Signs function, then, not through their intrinsic value but through their relative position' (*ibid*, p. 118).

We use signifiers to mark off areas of a continuum. The spectrum again illustrates the point. It is not that I cannot distinguish between shades of blue but that the language insists on a difference, which readily comes to seem fundamental, *natural*, between blue and green. The world, which without signification would be experienced as a continuum, is divided up by language into entities which then readily come to be experienced as essentially distinct. The way in which we use signifiers to create differences appears in the labelling of otherwise identical toothmugs, 'his' and 'hers'. Jacques Lacan illustrates the point with the following diagram:



Here the signifiers, *Ladies* and *Gentlemen*, are used to create a distinction. The image of the twin doors symbolises 'through the solitary confinement offered Western Man for the satisfaction of his natural needs away from home, the imperative that he seems to share with the great majority of primitive communities by which his public life is subjected to the laws of urinary segregation' (Lacan 1977a, p. 151).

The quotation from Lacan draws attention to another important element of Saussure's general thesis: language is a social fact. Only a social group can generate signs. Noises which have no meaning may be purely individual, but meaning, intelligibility, cannot by definition be produced in isolation. The sign is in an important sense arbitrary — the sound *dog* has no more necessary or natural connection with the concept *dog* than has *chien* or *Hund*. Even onomatopeic words, which seem to imitate the sounds they signify, are by no means international: French dogs say *ouaoua*; *to splash* in French is *éclabousser*. And it is the arbitrariness of the sign which points to the fact that language is a matter of convention. The linguistic community 'agrees' to attach a specific signified to a specific signifier, though in reality, of course, its agreement is not explicitly sought but merely manifested in the fact that certain linguistic units are used and understood. 'The arbitrary nature of the sign explains in turn why the social fact alone can create a linguistic system. The community is necessary if values that owe their existence solely to usage and general acceptance are to be set up'

(Saussure 1974, p. 113). And conversely, of course, a community needs a signifying system: social organization and social exchange, the ordering of the processes of producing the means of subsistence, is impossible without the existence of a signifying system. Language therefore comes into being at the same time as society.

This suggests that while the individual sign is arbitrary there is an important sense in which the signifying system as a whole is not. Meaning is public and conventional, the result not of individual intention but of inter-individual intelligibility. In other words, meaning is socially constructed, and the social construction of the signifying system is intimately related, therefore, to the social formation itself. On the basis of Saussure's work it is possible to argue that in so far as language is a way of articulating experience, it necessarily participates in *ideology*, the sum of the ways in which people both live and represent to themselves their relationship to the conditions of their existence. Ideology is *inscribed in signifying practices* — in discourses, myths, presentations and re-presentations of the way 'things' 'are' — and to this extent it is inscribed in the language. I shall discuss ideology in more detail in Chapter 3. For the moment let me suggest that while ideology cannot be reduced to language and, more important, language certainly cannot be reduced to ideology, the signifying system can have an important role in naturalizing the way things are. Because it is characteristic of language to be overlooked, the differences it constructs may seem to be natural, universal and unalterable when in reality they may be produced by a specific form of social organization.

The women's movement, to take a commonplace instance, has drawn attention to the inscription in signifying practice of the patriarchal organization of society. One example is the use of *man, men* to mean *people* in expressions like 'Western Man', 'men produce their means of subsistence'. The words for male persons are also used as the common gender nouns in these instances and this has the effect of constituting an implicit equation between *people* and *male people*, so that women come to be represented in discourse as a secondary sex, differentiated from an implied male norm. That *he* subsumes *she* in legal documents and in generalizations ('if an employee has a grievance, he will report it . . .'; 'the reader will make up his mind') has similar implications, and it is no accident that in a period when women are becoming increasingly conscious of the effects of patriarchy, they are challenging these linguistic usages, insisting on *people, he or she, his or her*. The way in which ideology is inscribed in ordinary language is also apparent in the differentiation between women who are available for marriage and those who are not (*Miss, Mrs*). The marking of this difference implies a distinction which is in some way essential between married and unmarried women, while men remain *Mr* whether they are married or not. The usefulness of making and publicly labelling the distinction between married and unmarried women in a society in which men have been conventionally responsible for taking the initiative in selecting a marriage partner is easily overlooked in favour of its naturalness. The introduction of *Ms* has ideological implications, as well as the advantage of saving time or embarrassment in addressing women whose marital status is not known.

We are aware of the connection between language and ideology in these instances because the position of women in the social structure and in ideology is currently in transition, and here the changes which are taking place are predominantly radical changes. In a quite different area, however, it may be that the recent and increasingly common blurring of the distinction between *uninterested* and *disinterested* is also ideologically significant. It could be argued that as capitalism increasingly equates wealth with happiness (while also contradictorily asserting, of course, that the best things in life are free), *interest* as intellectual curiosity or concern is gradually ceasing to seem distinct from *interest* as material or economic concern, so that *disinterested* (detached, having nothing to gain) is becoming synonymous with *uninterested* (bored).

A historical instance of the relationship between social formation, ideology and language may make the point more persuasively. The medieval usage *gentil* has no precise modern equivalent. The concept inscribed in the word (aristocratic, courteous, virtuous) is not fully signified by its descendants, *gentle* and *genteel*, and the use of these words with the full meaning of *gentil* becomes increasingly rare from the Renaissance onwards. Meanwhile, *nice*, which during the course of its history has meant a number of things including *lazy, foolish* and *lascivious*, took on its predominant modern meaning of *agreeable* in the late eighteenth century (O.E.D., 15), the period of the rise of industrial capitalism, when the bourgeoisie became firmly installed as the ruling class. A *nice* person is a 'democratic' concept in a way that a *gentil* person is not. *Nice* has no aristocratic connotations, but it makes concessions to the middle-class proprieties in certain contexts ('nice manners', 'nicely brought up'). Clearly here the decline of *gentil* and the rise of *nice* are not arbitrary but are related to changes in the social formation: broadly, *gentil* is feudal, *nice* bourgeois-democratic.

If signifieds are not pre-existing, given concepts, but changeable and contingent concepts, and if changes in signifying practice are related to changes in the social formation, the notion of language as a neutral nomenclature functioning as an instrument of communication of meanings which exist independently of it is clearly untenable. Language is a system which pre-exists the individual and in which the individual produces meaning. In learning its native language the child learns a set of differentiating concepts which identify not *given entities* but *socially constructed signifieds*. Language in an important sense speaks us. This does not mean that all discourse is trapped in linguistic determinism. Language is infinitely productive (Hjelmslev 1969, pp 109-10) and it is in language that the ideology inscribed in the language can be challenged. But it does mean that an organization of the world which seems natural is not necessarily so. Differences and distinctions which seem obvious, a matter of common sense, cannot be taken

for granted, since common sense itself is to a large degree a linguistic construct. Roland Barthes's *Mythologies*, originally published in 1957, has come to be regarded as the classic exposition of the ways in which ideological myths are naturalized to form common sense in our society.

The difficulty of challenging common sense, however, becomes apparent in the context of the close relationship between language and thinking. Language is not, of course, the only signifying system. Images, gestures, social behaviour, clothes are all socially invested with meaning, are all elements of the symbolic order: language is simply the most flexible and perhaps the most complex of the signifying systems. Thought, if not exclusively dependent on language, is inconceivable without the symbolic order in general. 'Thought is nothing other than the power to construct representations of things and to operate on these representations. It is in essence symbolic' (Benveniste 1971, p. 25). As a result, mental categories and the laws of thought tend to reflect the system of differences inscribed in the symbolic order. 'The varieties of philosophical or spiritual experience depend unconsciously on a classification which language brings about only for the reason that it is language and that it is symbolic' (*ibid*, p. 6). There is no unmediated experience of the world; knowledge is possible only through the categories and the laws of the symbolic order. Far from expressing a unique perception of the world, authors produce meaning out of the available system of differences, and texts are intelligible in so far as they participate in it.

Again it is important to stress that this is not an argument for determinism. We are not enslaved by the conventions which prevail in our own time. Authors do not inevitably simply reiterate the timeworn patterns of signification. Analysis reveals that at any given moment the categories and laws of the symbolic order are full of contradictions, ambiguities and inconsistencies which function as a source of possible change. The role of ideology is to suppress these contradictions in the interests of the preservation of the existing social formation, but their presence ensures that it

is always possible, with whatever difficulty, to identify them, to recognize ideology for what it is, and to take an active part in transforming it by producing new meanings. The relationship between language and thought explains, however, the tenacity of the empiricist-idealist theory of language. Language is *experienced* as a nomenclature because its existence precedes our 'understanding' of the world. Words seem to be symbols for things because things are inconceivable outside the system of differences which constitutes the language. Similarly, these very things seem to be represented in the mind, in an autonomous realm of thought, because thought is in essence symbolic, dependent on the differences brought about by the symbolic order. And so language is 'overlooked', suppressed in favour of a quest for meaning in experience and/or in the mind. The world of things and subjectivity then become the twin guarantors of truth.

The relationship between language and thought also explains the intensity of the resistance to new meanings and new ways of analysing the world, just as it explains the difficulty of unfamiliar concepts (signifieds) which cannot come into existence without new and unfamiliar discourses — new signifiers and relations between signifiers. To challenge common sense is to challenge the discourse of common sense.

From this post-Saussurean perspective it is clear that the theory of literature as expressive realism is no longer tenable. The claim that a literary form reflects the world is simply tautological. If by 'the world' we understand the world we experience, the world differentiated by language, then the claim that realism reflects the world means that realism reflects the world constructed in language. This is a tautology. If discourses articulate concepts through a system of signs which signify by means of their relationship to each other rather than to entities in the world, and if literature is a signifying practice, all it can reflect is the order inscribed in particular discourses, not the nature of the world. Thus, what is intelligible as realism is the conventional and therefore familiar, 'recognizable' articulation and distribution of concepts. It is intelligible as 'realistic' precisely because it reproduces what we already seem to know.

Equally, the subjectivity of a specially perceptive author is no guarantee of the authority of a specific perception of the world. If thought is not independent of the differences inscribed in language, then subjectivity itself is inconceivable outside language. I shall discuss this more fully in Chapter 3.

2.2 The construction of meaning

Realism is plausible not because it reflects the world, but because it is constructed out of what is (discursively) familiar. The process of constructing meaning by reproducing what is familiar can be illustrated briefly and clearly by reference to a non-literary signifying system, advertising. (In what follows I owe a good deal to the very interesting analysis provided in Judith Williamson's book, *Decoding Avertisements*.) If, for example, we consider half a dozen advertisements for different perfumes, we see the Saussurean system of differences literally in the process of construction. Perfumes differ chemically from each other, of course: they *smell* different. But their promotion depends on the association of a smell with a social 'meaning'. Through the juxtaposition of 'semes' (signifieds of connotation) the product comes to be intelligible as the signifier of a cultural and ideological signified,[8] and to the extent that the construction of the process of signification is overlooked and the naming, packaging and advertising are seen as transparent, the product becomes the signifier of specific cultural and ideological values. It is the role of publicity to *characterize* perfumes, to differentiate them from each other in ideological (as opposed to merely physical) terms, to create distinct social signifieds for them, to give them meaning.

The six advertisements I have chosen more or less at

random from current issues of women's magazines demonstrate how the process of characterization is achieved. Each advertisement shows a 'realistic' photograph of a different type of woman. To enable us to identify each type certain familiar cultural codes are invoked, and we are invited to make an association between their meanings and the product. What is important is that the codes are already part of our knowledge. The *Chique* advertisement shows a woman in a large hat, a silk shirt and the jacket of a suit. The top half of her face is invisible, shaded by the brim of her hat. We 'read' this as sophisticated, mysterious, classically elegant, and to do so we draw on the current photographic codes, in which the fact that the woman's eyes are hidden connotes mystery, and on the code of dress which is not, of course, confined to pictorial modes of representation, but which is commonly invoked as a means of characterization in fiction of all kinds. A different kind of sophistication is signified in the advertisement for Yves Saint Laurent's *Rive Gauche*. Here the French name is supported by a caption in (not very difficult) French, which enables the reader to *experience* a feeling of sophistication in being able to understand it. The model is wearing brightly coloured, highly fashionable clothes, and stares coolly and provocatively back at the spectator. The *Estivalia* advertisement shows a woman in a long white dress gazing off to the left. Soft focus photography and the absence of bright lighting connote twilight and romance. The setting is organic, perhaps a walled garden. Behind the model and to the right is a barely identified figure, quite out of focus. The caption reads, 'for daydream believers'. Here we are invited to construct a miniature narrative, a 'daydream' story which takes account of the mysterious figure, the woman and the setting, to perform the daydreaming endorsed by the advertisement. It would be easy to do so on the basis of countless romantic films, stories and novels, and by doing so we should be participating actively in the process of constructing the 'meaning' of Estivalia. The impression is that we create an individual daydream out of our own subjectivity: in practice the range

of probable narratives is constrained by the particular semes juxtaposed in the photograph. The components of the image — shadowy figure, white dress, evening, tree — tend to propel us in a very specific direction. The picture is not particularly rich in plurality, at least for members of our society.

These three advertisements draw on the cultural stereotypes of femininity, and in decoding them with such ease we demonstrate the familiarity of these stereotypes. The remaining three advertisements present 'liberated' women, now also rapidly becoming recuperated for ideology as a new set of stereotypes. These figures are in reality no less 'feminine', no less offered as objects for the male gaze. *Blasé* shows a woman in a shirt and trousers, a sweater tied round her neck, walking towards the camera with windswept hair. *Charlie* is a girl in trousers with a document case, striding purposefully across the tarmac of an international airport. *Charivari* shows a girl in trousers and a flat cap balancing exuberantly on a bicycle in a cobbled street. Again we construct connections between their clothes, their settings and their actions, unconsciously — or at least without conscious effort — producing a signified which is in reality predetermined by the familiarity of the signifiers.

These advertisements are a source of information about ideology, about semiotics, about the cultural and photographic codes of our society, and to that extent — and only to that extent — they tell us about the world. And yet they possess all the technical properties of realism. Literary realism works in very much the same kind of way. Like the advertisements, it constructs its signifieds out of juxtapositions of signifiers which are intelligible not as direct reflections of an unmediated reality but because we are familiar with the signifying systems from which they are drawn, linguistic, literary, semiotic. This process is apparent in, for instance, the construction of character in the novel.

Here a brief demonstration of the process is less easy than it is in the case of advertisements, since the character-signifiers of, say, the central figure are usually distributed

throughout the text. None the less fictional characterization, though often more complex than the characterization of the perfumes, is a process of construction from an assembly of semes in exactly the same way. George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, for example, presents a subtle and detailed analysis of Dorothea Brooke in a way that has encouraged generations of readers to feel that she has a life beyond the pages of the novel. Criticism has conventionally recognized in Dorothea a 'rounded character' whose vitality is palpable and whose inner nature accounts for her actions. But of course Dorothea is as patently constructed out of the signifying systems as the photographs which characterize Chique or Estivalia. The juxtaposition of the signifiers is more complex, more inclined to be contradictory; the signifiers themselves are in some cases more esoteric; but the fundamental process of construction is very similar. Consider, for instance, the opening sentences of *Middlemarch*. They constitute only the beginning of the construction process, but they will be linked to a network of semes distributed throughout the novel, with the effect of creating an impression of a character of complexity and depth.

> Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress. Her hand and wrist were so finely formed that she could wear sleeves not less bare of style than those in which the Blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters; and her profile as well as her stature and bearing seemed to gain the more dignity from her plain garments, which by the side of provincial fashion gave her the impressiveness of a fine quotation from the Bible,— or from one of our elder poets,— in a paragraph of today's newspaper.

Here the opening sentence employs what Barthes (1975, p. 18) identifies as the 'code of reference', an allusion to a shared body of knowledge, 'that kind of beauty which [as we all recognize] seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress'. The phrase lends the authority of an apparent familiarity to the image constructed from the genuinely familiar semes

which follow and which attribute to Dorothea (with whatever trace of irony) qualities of fineness, austerity, purity, otherworldliness, timeless worth, rarity. Subsequent passages deepen the image, constructing less favourably received but equally readily intelligible meanings: fervour, impetuousness, pride. In consequence Dorothea lives.

This necessary familiarity does not mean that realism can never surprise us. Of course it can do so through unexpected juxtapositions and complexities. But it assembles these juxtapositions and complexities out of what we already know, and it is for this reason that we experience it as realistic. To this extent it is a predominantly conservative form. The experience of reading a realist text is ultimately reassuring, however harrowing the events of the story, because the world evoked in the fiction, its patterns of cause and effect, of social relationships and moral values, largely confirm the patterns of the world we seem to know.

Realism is a culturally relative concept, of course, and many avant-garde movements have successively introduced formal changes in the name of increased verisimilitude. But the term is useful in distinguishing between those forms which tend to efface their own textuality, their existence as discourse, and those which explicitly draw attention to it. Realism offers itself as transparent. The rejection of the concept of a literary form which reflects the world, however, has led some post-Saussurean critical theorists to use the phrase 'classic realism' to designate literature which creates an effect or illusion of reality. This is not just another gratuitous piece of jargon. 'Classic realism' makes it possible to unite categories which have been divided by the empiricist assumption that the text reflects the world. By implying Saussurean quotation marks round 'realism', the phrase permits the inclusion of all those fictional forms which create the illusion while we read that what is narrated is 'really' and intelligibly happening: *The Hobbit* and *The Rainbow, The War of the Worlds* and *Middlemarch*. Speaking animals, elves, or Martians are no impediment to intelligibility and credibility if they conform to patterns of speech and behaviour

consistent with a 'recognizable' system. Even in fantasy events, however improbable in themselves, are *related* to each other in familiar ways. The plausibility of the individual signifieds is far less important to the reading process than the familiarity of the connections between the signifiers. It is the set of relationships between characters or events, or between characters *and* events, which makes fantasy plausible.

2.3 The plurality of meaning

If post-Saussurean linguistics undermines the possibility of expressive realism (see pp. 46-7), it is equally apparent that it puts in question the theoretical positions from which I have argued that expressive realism has been attacked. Any attempt to locate a guarantee of meaning in concepts of human experience or human hopes and fears which are outside history and outside discourse is as inadequate as the formalist belief that the guarantee of meaning is eternally inscribed in the discourse of the text itself. The critical assaults on expressive realism sketched in Chapter I all constitute, whether consciously or unconciously, quests for a theory of meaning. The object in each case is to locate a guarantee of the meaning of the text. Expressive realism finds this guarantee in the author's mind, or in the world we all know, or in the conjunction of the two — the author's perception of the world we know. New Critism is uncertain whether to locate it in language or in human experience. Frye finds it in human anxieties and aspirations. The reader-theorists finally invoke a reader, variously defined, whose responses are largely determined either by the author or by the text, and this reader constitutes the authority for the meaning of the text. In the German versions this meaning is to a limited extent plural.

The problem confronted (or evaded) by all these theories can be fairly simply demonstrated. To take an extreme and fairly obvious example, if I encounter the sentence, 'democracy will ensure that we extend the boundaries of civilization', it is apparent that there are several ways in which I might understand it. Possibly 'democracy' would evoke free speech, consumer choice and parliamentary elections; 'civilization' would suggest the antithesis of barbarism; and its extension would seem a product of the preservation of democratic values in a world where totalitarianism constantly threatens. Alternatively, however, I might understand 'democracy' to be a more radical seizure of power by the people, so that 'civilization', a way of life hitherto the prerogative of a privileged few, would become accessible to everyone. Or I might read the sentence entirely differently to mean that the introduction of consumer choice ('a hollow sham') into the third world will ensure that by developing capitalism there we impose our own ('decadent') cultural and political values. Other readings could almost certainly be produced, and these various readings have nothing to do with whether I agree with the statement or not (except in so far as my agreement would probably be conditional on my interpretation). On the contrary, they depend on the connotative meanings of the words themselves.

But what does the sentence 'really' mean? If I invoke a specific *speaker* — a Conservative M.P., a committed socialist or the Vice President of Pepsi Cola — I can readily attribute to the sentence a single meaning guaranteed by what I take to be the intentions of the speaker. Alternatively, if I posit a specific *hearer*, reader of the *Daily Telegraph*, social democrat or South American guerrilla, I can locate a single interpretation. Neither is very satisfactory: both speaker and hearer are to some degree conjectural, the product of speculation and generalization. But these practices constitute the respective bases of the expressive theory and reader-theory. The alternative has been to find an authority for meaning in the world we experience (New Criticism) or the world we aspire to (Northrop Frye).

What is apparent from the example of the sentence about democracy and civilization is the extent to which language is a social fact. The meanings of the sentence vary from one political discourse to another (conservative, socialist,

liberationist, etc.), and to the extent that the hearer participates in these political discourses, he or she finds in the sentence one or more of the possible readings. In other words, the meaning of this sentence is *plural*. But this is emphatically not to say that it is subjective. In reality we all participate in a range of discourses — political, literary, scientific and so on — and these are 'subjective' only to the extent that they — and the contradictions and collisions between them — construct our world of meaning and experience. A word or a sentence is intelligible only within a specific discourse, and discourse is in turn constitutive of subjectivity, as I shall argue in Chapter 3. To posit an individual subject as an authority for a single meaning is to ignore the degree to which subjectivity itself is a discursive construct. To find a guarantee of meaning in the world or in experience is to ignore the fact that our experience of the world is itself articulated in language.

Of course, the example I have given is an artificial one. 'Democracy' notoriously means all things to all speakers, and in any case we do not normally come across such sentences in isolation. The context of such a sentence might be expected to narrow the range of possible readings. On the other hand, the possibility of finding plurality in a succession of sentences might well be greater still. Its context in the work as a whole may seem to indicate that certain readings are not appropriate to an individual sentence, but this context, itself made up of sentences (or elements from other semiotic systems), is also subject to interpretation, and in narrowing some kinds of plurality, context may open others. And in any case, literature, dealing in the great (discursive) ambiguities of love and death, sacrifice and revenge, and traditionally believed to be rich in connotation and elusive in its nuances, is surely all the more susceptible of a plurality of interpretations than a crude and commonplace political slogan.

2.4 A new critical practice

It is the recurrent suppression of the role of language which has limited this plurality, and this suppression is in turn ideological. The task of a new critical practice is first to identify the effects of the limitation which confines 'correct' reading to an acceptance of the position from which the text is most 'obviously' intelligible, the position of a transcendent subject addressed by an autonomous and authoritative author. Thereafter it becomes possible to refuse this limitation, to liberate the plurality of the text, to reject the 'obvious' and to produce meaning.

The theory which defines and delimits the new critical practice brings together specific elements of separate theoretical discourses, even though these discourses, produced to serve distinct theoretical and practical ends, are not in their entirety compatible with each other. It is my hypothesis, for instance, that both Althusserian Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis may contribute to an understanding of the role of literature and the possibilities for literary criticism, although, as they stand, they are far from fully consistent with each other. Neither of these theories in isolation seems to me to be able to offer an adequate account of the work of literature. Very briefly, Lacan apparently leaves little room for history, while Althusser's theory of subjectivity leaves little room for change. I have therefore drawn on each position without dwelling on the incompatibilities between them. To justify this procedure in theoretical terms would necessitate a very different kind of book, using the work of Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, perhaps, in *Language and Materialism*, and invoking in addition a theory of discourse which would permit us to identify the historical specificity of modes of subjectivity. In the mean time my present procedure seems to me to be admissible if it generates a productive critical practice.