



# Culler

The Pursuit of Signs

# The Pursuit of Signs

**'Twenty years ago, if you wanted to know where literary theory was at, I'd say "semiotics", and Culler's *Pursuit of Signs* was the best way to see the links. Today? Same answer. Overview, criticism, problems and solutions: Culler offers them all in each chapter, on key topics and questions of the humanities. The book has the same urgency and acuity that it had then. Except that, with the interdisciplinary turn taking hold, literary theory itself, through this book, becomes a much more widespread tool for cultural analysis.'**

*Mieke Bal, Professor of Theory of Literature,  
University of Amsterdam*

Jonathan  
**Culler**

## The Pursuit of Signs

Semiotics, literature, deconstruction

With a new preface by the author



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## PREFACE

One important feature of literary criticism in recent years has been the growth of interest in signs and their modes of signification. In the early 1960s Roland Barthes informed readers who were interested in the latest intellectual fashion that the way to recognize a structuralist was by a certain vocabulary of signification: look for *significant* and *signifié* or *syntagmatic* and *paradigmatic*; by these signs shall ye know them. This may or may not have been a sure test at the time, but today, doubtless because of the proselytizing activity of structuralists themselves, this vocabulary has grown common. *Signifier* and *signified* are no longer reliable signs of a particular theoretical commitment. They appear in a range of critical and interpretive writings and even in works of literary history. The activity of criticism has become bound up with the sign and the debates of literary theory bear upon the possibility of mastering it.

Criticism is the pursuit of signs, in that critics, whatever their persuasion, are incited by the prospect of grasping, comprehending, capturing in their prose, evasive signifying structures.

Criticism occurs because the signs of literature are never simply given as such but must be pursued, and different modes of criticism can be distinguished by the accounts they give of this pursuit. Semiotics, which defines itself as the science of signs, posits a zoological pursuit: the semiotician wants to discover what are the species of signs, how they differ from one another, how they function in their native habitat, how they interact with other species. Confronted with a plethora of texts that communicate various meanings to their readers, the analyst does not pursue a meaning; he seeks to identify signs and describe their functioning. For other critics, this general and classificatory project is of minor interest. Like hunters pursuing a particular beast that will make a splendid trophy, they have a more precise goal. A sign sequence is there to be interpreted; one pursues it to capture its meaning.

This book investigates the problems and projects of a semiotics of literature, particularly those that have figured in current theoretical debate. Semiotics has in general claimed that the study of literature ought to be above all an investigation of the ways and means of literary signification. Sometimes theorists argue that the possibility of interpreting individual works depends upon mastery of the systems and procedures that semiotics seeks to elucidate: critics cannot hope to work out compelling interpretations of a novel unless they have a thorough understanding of the nature and conventions of narrative, the relations between story and discourse, and possibilities of thematic structure. At other times semioticians emphasize that the interpretations of readers and critics are themselves part of the material they study: to investigate literary signification is to analyze how works communicate to readers. In both cases, however, the task of semiotics is to describe the system of literary signification that is drawn upon by readers and critics in their encounters with literary works. The goal is a complete description of this system, just as the goal of linguistics is a complete



description of the sets of rules and conventions that constitute a language and enable linguistic communication to take place.

Such general and ambitious projects provoke disputes: disagreements within semiotics about how to proceed; disagreements with other theorists about the possibility of such an enterprise. This book is concerned with both. Part I offers two overviews, of recent criticism and of semiotics, outlining two major questions treated in the following sections. The first is the role or status of interpretation. In reading reviews of critical and theoretical works one is struck by how frequently they are submitted to one and the same test: does this discussion enable us to produce new interpretations of literary works? If so, let us debate their validity. If not, consign it to the flames, for the proof of a theoretical discourse lies in the interpretations it yields when 'applied.' This notion that the production of new interpretations is the task of literary study, the *raison d'être* of all writing about literature, is now such a fundamental assumption of Anglo-American criticism that it has a decisive impact on all developments in contemporary criticism.

The second question is the relation of semiotics to deconstruction, which also arises from a reflection on signs but whose ambitions are different. Deconstruction is, as Barbara Johnson has put it, 'a careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text.'<sup>1</sup> Skeptical of the possibility of mastering meaning with a comprehensive system or discipline, it investigates what the most powerful and interesting texts have to tell us about signification and shows how they undo the logics of signification on which they rely.

After these overviews, Part II takes up the problems of literary semiotics in more detail, assessing various ways of approaching literary signification and the uses of certain concepts such as 'horizon of expectations' and 'intertextuality.' A major development in recent criticism has been the focus on the reader, both in theories of literary signification and in criticism that describes

the meaning of the work as the experience it provokes in the reader. As a method of interpretation reader-response criticism poses numerous questions but from my perspective the most important concerns its relation to poetics and semiotics, which can be conceived as theories of reading. Throughout this section I argue for a distinction between interpretive criticism and poetics which seems to me the only way of avoiding a confusion that has surrounded both structuralism and literary semiotics.

Part III could be placed under the aegis of deconstruction since its concern is the implications for semiotics of the aspects of literary meaning that deconstruction has brought to the fore. Elsewhere, in *On Deconstruction: Literary Theory in the 1970s*, I confront deconstruction directly, undertaking extended exposition of Derrida's arguments and a survey of deconstruction in literary criticism. Here I am concerned not with philosophical arguments, nor with the relation between speech and writing, but with how certain problematic moments in texts would fit into a semiotics and what effect they would have on a semiotics that tried to encompass them. For example, Chapter 7 'Apostrophe' began as a semiotic investigation of a striking but puzzling feature of the ode and of lyrics generally, the invocation of or address to absent beings and various non-human entities: souls, skylarks, sofas. Apostrophes have interesting linguistic properties; the question is, how do these linguistic signs function in the second-order system of the lyric? In principle one might hope to isolate a number of different signifying functions and the features by which they could be discriminated. The immediate effect or impact of apostrophes is embarrassment, and with this as a point of departure one can identify a series of poetic possibilities. The results indicate, however, a certain structural reversibility of figures which would make impossible a semiotics committed to a one-to-one mapping of signifiers to signifieds.

Deconstruction enters the later chapters somewhat more explicitly. 'The Mirror Stage' (Chapter 8) investigates how

deconstruction might lead one to reconsider certain classical positions, such as those enunciated in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, revealing a complexity hitherto masked. The next chapters illustrate the impact on traditional semiotic subjects—‘analyse du récit’ and the analysis of metaphor—of the self-deconstructive moments in literary works described by critics like Paul de Man; and the final chapter considers the relation of these theoretical debates and issues to university curricula. What these essays show, I believe, is that deconstruction has not ‘refuted’ structuralism and semiotics, as some ‘post-structuralists’ would have it. If deconstructive readings give us reasons to believe that a complete and non-contradictory science of signs is impossible, that does not mean that the enterprise should be abandoned, any more than Gödel’s proof of the incompleteness of metamathematics leads mathematicians to abandon their metamathematic investigations. One might even say that the paradoxes which deconstructive readings identify as important insights into the nature of literary language are for semiotics the result of basic methodological distinctions—between *langue* and *parole*, system and event, synchronic and diachronic, signifier and signified, metaphor and metonymy—which are still essential to the analytical project even though they break down at certain points or yield two perspectives that cannot be synthesized.

Semiotics is a metalinguistic enterprise. It attempts to describe the evasive, ambiguous, paradoxical language of literature in a sober, unambiguous metalanguage. But with the proliferation of critical metalanguages in recent years, it has become clear that critical and theoretical discourse shares many properties with the language it attempts to describe. The discourse which attempts to analyze metaphor does not itself escape metaphor. There is a metalinguistic function—language can discuss language—but there is no metalanguage, only more language piled upon language. Deconstruction has been particularly acute in showing the uncanny involvement of theories in the domains

they claim to describe, in showing how critics become engaged in a displaced reenactment of a text's scenario.

Criticism is thus a pursuit of signs in a second sense: a pastime or activity that is in and of the sign. The fact that signs are not just the objects of the critic's quest but also the agents and even grounds of that quest does not mean that the critic must deem himself a poet or seize every opportunity to pun. On the contrary, one can continue the pursuit of signs, the attempt to grasp, master, formulate, define, even though one knows that one is caught up in a signifying process that one cannot fully control—a process at work even at the moments when one produces one's best formulation, one's most productive insight.

Much of the material in this book has appeared elsewhere in a different form. I have revised extensively in order to eliminate what now seem to me mistakes and to give the book focus and continuity, but one result of this process of composition is the difficulty of thanking the people who have helped in its gestation: all those who asked questions or offered an objection after lectures or who commented, succinctly or extensively, on published papers. Since one of the subjects of this book is the dependency of any discourse on innumerable other discourses, most of them anonymous, I will simply thank the intertextuality of current critical debate for its essential assistance, singling out only Cynthia Chase, whose critical comments on all the essays provoked rewriting and rethinking. I am also grateful to the Guggenheim Foundation for a Fellowship during which the project was completed.

## **PREFACE TO THE ROUTLEDGE CLASSICS EDITION**

*The Pursuit of Signs* was written at the height of the fortunes of semiotics, the science of signs. Ferdinand de Saussure, the founder of modern linguistics, had argued that linguistics would one day be part of a comprehensive science of signs, which would study the production of meaning in culture and society. In the 1960s and 1970s it seemed as though this prediction would come true as French structuralism took linguistics as a model for reconfiguring anthropology, Marxism, psychoanalysis, and literary and cultural studies. This helped to provide the impetus for an international semiotic movement. The prospect of placing literary studies within a larger science of signs seemed not only possible but desirable—the key both to energizing literary studies and to solidifying their central place within the humanities and social sciences.

Reprinting this volume today, twenty years later, provides an occasion to reflect on what has happened in literary theory and literary and cultural studies generally. How have things changed? How would I put things differently today? How has

the evolution of literary and cultural studies altered the significance of the arguments and proposals that these essays make?

There are three main arguments that I conduct in the course of these essays. First, I champion the prospect of a semiotics, a systematic science of signs, as the best framework for literary studies. Second, I argue that a major obstacle to the semiotic project is the legacy of Anglo-American New Criticism, which generated the assumption that the interpretation of individual literary works is the goal of literary studies, so that any critical or theoretical writing should be judged by its ability to foster a new, improved interpretation. Third, I sought to contest the idea that semiotics and structuralism had been refuted by deconstruction, despite its critique of the possibility of a complete and systematic account of signs. I argued, in essence, that while deconstruction is thought to undermine the possibility of semiotics, in fact it offers powerful contributions to our understanding of the functioning of signs, and should not be an obstacle to the pursuit of a semiotics, broadly conceived.

Why did semiotics seem to offer the best future for literary studies and how have things changed since then? In the 1960s and 1970s French structuralism had energized the study of literature as a cultural practice and mode of signification and representation, stressing its self-reflexivity, granting a pivotal role to avant-garde literature. If the meaning of avant-garde literature lies in its challenge to our habitual ways of making sense (identifying narrative sequences, recognizable characters, and so on) then the project of interpreting these challenging works requires one to make explicit the conventions and the interpretive procedures on which literary intelligibility generally relies. Thus, it is precisely the works that brazenly flout codes and conventions that direct us to the importance of understanding those conventions.

It seemed possible that the idea of a general science of signs, a semiology or semiotics, might revitalize the humanities and

social sciences in general, not just literary and cultural studies. Above all, it seemed to me, as I undertook to advocate such a shift, that semiotics brought a methodological clarity to the study of literature and culture that had often been lacking.<sup>1</sup> In discussions between literary critics and linguists, for instance, which were quite common in those days, literary critics would ask linguists if their analytical tools could help us deal with literature. The linguists would reply, 'What are you trying to do? What is the question?'. And the critics would find themselves answering, vaguely, 'Well, we want to understand these texts better.' Criticism seemed unable to translate its goals into precise questions. From the semiotic point of view, however, it was clear that the task was not to produce new interpretations but to construct an account of the rules and conventions, the system of signification, if you will, that enabled cultural objects to function as they do—to have the meanings that they do for members of a culture. The task of linguistics is not to produce a new and subtler interpretation of 'The cat is on the mat,' showing that we have been wrong all along in our understanding of this sentence, but rather to offer an account of the rules of English that account for the meaning this sentence has for speakers of the language. Similarly, semiotics made it clear that the task of a science of signs was to understand the conventions and the functioning of the sign systems that make up the human world.

The ambitious program of a science of signs did not succeed, and it is appropriate to ask why it did not. The first reason for failure, I think, is the excessive ambitions of semiotics: the attempt to take all knowledge as its province may have been doomed from the start, but it certainly made it harder for semiotics to succeed in any particular area of endeavor. Wherever it ventured, it could not but seem an imperialistic interloper seeking to claim this area for its vast putative empire. The senior figure in semiotics in America, Thomas Sebeok, who also served as the editor of *Semiotica*, the journal of the International Semiotic

Association, insisted that semiotics needed to dissociate itself somewhat from literary and humanistic theorizing so as to ground itself squarely in the subject matter of the natural sciences, but was there ever much of a chance that biologists would declare themselves to be semioticians or that literary folks would happily ally themselves with a movement struggling to be recognized among the natural sciences? Another influential figure, Umberto Eco, wrote *A Theory of Semiotics* in which he offered a list of the concerns of the field that is almost comical in its range and disorder: 'Zoosemiotics, Olfactory signs, Tactile communication, Codes of taste, Paralinguistics, Medical semiotics, Kinesics and proxemics, Musical codes, Formalized languages, Written languages, Unknown alphabets and secret codes, Natural languages, Visual communication, Systems of objects, Plot structure, Text theory, Cultural codes, Aesthetic texts, Mass communication, Rhetoric.'<sup>2</sup> Since the training and knowledge necessary for studying these widely disparate sign systems are likely to be very different, it is hard to see how these variegated pursuits could come together into a science. People proclaiming an affiliation with semiotics wrote interesting articles on topics like these, but semiotics never became a sufficiently powerful presence in any one of these areas to make much headway.

But what happened within literary and cultural studies itself? Semiotics did not meet a lot of overt resistance—denunciations or battles about its legitimacy—but, as I anticipated, it ran up against a deep assumption about the goals of literary and cultural study. In general, when people study literary and cultural objects, they want to know what they mean and thus the test of any new approach becomes whether or not it helps one produce interpretations which are both plausible and new. Since semiotics explicitly claimed that it sought not to generate new interpretations but to understand what made previous interpretations possible, it could seem at best a rebarbative belaboring of the



obvious, an attempt to make explicit what we at some level already know, and at worst an irrelevance. If semiotics has not advanced much beyond the point to which it is taken by the essays in this book, it is because people have been more eager to use semiotic terms in formulating their interpretations of literary works than to pursue the understanding of the sign systems themselves. What is true of semiotics in general is also true for narratology, the systematic study of narrative, which was developed with much fanfare during the heyday of structuralism in the 1960s and 1970s but which has languished since then, even though we have not satisfactorily answered the basic questions about how we identify plots, how we recognize satisfactory endings and so on. Critics are more interested in interpreting novels than in trying to spell out how we go about understanding them as we read.

Where I went wrong was in thinking of this assumption about the primacy of interpretation as primarily the legacy of the New Criticism, so that one might combat it by arguing against the methodological framework of the New Criticism (the notion of the work of art as an organic whole, for instance). In fact, the assumption has proved to run deeper than that, and continues to govern literary studies, despite the successful questioning of many tenets of the New Criticism. Today the norm in literary studies is scarcely the appreciative interpretation of individual literary works that the New Criticism encouraged. Interpretation still reigns, but these days it is more likely to be symptomatic interpretation, which takes the work of art as the symptom of a condition or reality thought to lie outside it. Students learn to interpret literary works for what they show us about the condition of women, for instance, or about the dialectic of subversion and containment in which works of art participate. Interpretation is still the primary task, but the goal may be to identify what the work represses or illuminates by concealing, for example, how does this work portray society or what

does it reveal about social attitudes to the experience of the characters in question. Symptomatic interpretation, which takes the text as the symptom of a historical or social reality to be grasped elsewhere, does permit analysts to focus on literary devices or semiotic operations, even if these are seen as mechanisms of distortion, containment. This shift in the dominant mode of interpretation, which is likely to be temporary, leaves semiotics or, as I would now say, 'poetics,' with much the same task of shifting attention from the interpretation itself to the discursive conventions and mechanisms of the text, whether we see those mechanisms as the brilliant achievements of a great author or as defenses against realities that impose themselves on whoever writes.

No longer would I say that battling the legacy of the New Criticism was a major task for the theorist, but I still think that the distinction between poetics and hermeneutics, which I champion in these essays, is crucial to attaining methodological clarity. While interpretations of individual works can be especially rewarding for those who write them and for those who in reading them have their eyes opened to new dimensions of literary structure and signifying possibilities, it remains true for me that the goal of literary and cultural studies must be a poetics, an understanding of the operation of literary and cultural discourses. I am glad to report that progress has been made towards some of the goals outlined in these essays.

As for semiotics and deconstruction, while deconstruction scarcely became dominant in literary studies, as right-wing critics tended to complain in the culture wars of the 1980s and early 1990s, the visibility of deconstruction, as I feared, encouraged the idea that we had entered a post-structuralist age and that the systematic projects of structuralism and semiotics were passé, if not actually refuted. If we live in a post-structuralist age, we don't need to bother with structuralism. Talk of deconstruction had the effect of providing an excuse to neglect the systematic and supposedly scientific projects of structuralism

and semiotics, even though it ought not to have done.<sup>3</sup> The demonstration that the project of systematically accounting for meaning is subject to paradoxes and indeterminacy does not warrant the refusal to pursue this project, any more than similar paradoxes in the scientific realm—say, the impossibility of deciding whether to treat light as wave or particle—lead to the abandoning of systematic investigations.

Today, the relation between semiotics and deconstruction is no longer the theoretical question of the moment, but perhaps because deconstruction no longer provokes the passions it once did, it is easier now to conduct the sort of argument I was pursuing, about the ways in which deconstructive readings have illuminated the mechanisms of meaning. Certainly it seems the sort of claims I make here—about narrative structure (Chapter 9, ‘Story and Discourse’) about figurative language (Chapters 7 and 10, ‘Apostrophe’ and ‘The Turns of Metaphor’), and even about the governing metaphors of critical history (Chapter 8, ‘The Mirror Stage’)—are less controversial now than they were then and more likely to be assimilable into a general poetics of the sort that we still need.

What was at stake in the conflict between semiotics and deconstruction? It is usually said to be an argument about the possibility of science, of mastery of the mechanisms that produce meaning. Certainly deconstruction, in its devotion to a teasing out of the warring forces of signification within a text and to the impossibility of a secure and totalized understanding, resisted fiercely or sarcastically the imperialistic rhetoric of semiotics. But in fact the question of whether or not a science of signs and meaning is possible seems very much a side issue. The progress of linguistics has not been blocked by its failure to achieve anything like a complete understanding of the mechanisms of language. Thus the question of whether a completeness and systematicity is really attainable is not crucial. On the contrary, I would say that the insights deconstruction offers into the

functioning of language and texts constitute the most important modern contribution to our understanding of signification. The real issue, then, in the conflict between semiotics and deconstruction may not be the possibility of science so much as a quarrel about the role of interpretation (for deconstruction characteristically proceeds by intricate, complex readings of texts) and about what semiotics would see as deconstruction's neglect of general cultural mechanisms and concentration on a handful of texts by the most celebrated writers and thinkers. Where semiotics reads advertisements, comics, and television programs, deconstruction tackles Plato, Rousseau, Wordsworth, Hölderlin, and Hegel.

The same issues arise today in arguments about the relation between cultural studies and the close analysis of literary and philosophical texts. Cultural studies has its roots in the cultural analysis of British Marxism, but also in semiotics, particularly Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, with their pioneering interpretations of cultural objects of everyday life, from cars and detergents to wrestling and Einstein's brain. Often aggressively resistant to the privileging of high culture over mass culture or popular culture and to what it would see as excessively ingenious interpretations of individual texts, cultural studies can be seen as the heir to semiotics in its interest in understanding cultural practices. This affinity has been obscured by the fact that the announced goal of cultural studies is not scientific but political, not to create a science of signs but 'to make a difference.' But one can argue that, as in the case of semiotics, there is a gap between this overarching goal and the attempts to understand cultural practices, and that on the concrete level of analysis, there are important affinities between the two movements, both of which initially claimed all of culture as their province. Today, as cultural studies has become less aggressive in its claim to be the proper framework for the study of all cultural objects and in its denigration of close reading and attention to literary works, it should be

possible to focus on literature as a discursive system and to study systematically the relations between literary and non-literary discourses, as in the attempt to understand the workings of narrative. In sum, while today it would be pointless to champion poetics as a central enterprise of semiotics (since semiotics scarcely figures in the theoretical landscape any more), it may be opportune to promote poetics as a central enterprise of cultural studies in general.

One pertinent question for the enterprise of a poetics is the role of the concept of the reader. Several essays here, including 'Semiotics as a Theory of Reading,' focus on the operations performed by the reader in interpreting texts, making these operations a primary object of study. In recent years we have heard much less about 'the reader' than we did in those days. We have moved from the reader to readers, in the plural, and shown special interest in positing interpretive activities of readers defined by current identity categories: gender, ethnicity, sexuality. Focus has shifted from formal operations of interpretation—making connections, transforming literal nonsense into figural sense—to responses to particular contents and to possibilities of inclusion or exclusion. There are important issues here that have been explored—how texts exclude or include a woman reader, for example—but the rejection of 'the reader' as an illicit idealization or, worse, as a presumption of normativity by the cultured heterosexual white male reader, has obscured an important fact: that a text is addressed to and thus posits a reader, and that the elucidation of this role (what is this reader supposed to know or to accept?) is crucial to the understanding of the operations of the text. No one is *the reader*, certainly; texts have readers, who are as different as the people who read. But a text posits a reader. And we need to return to that important fact if we are to understand the operations of texts.

The most frequently cited essay of this collection has been 'Apostrophe,' no doubt because it takes up a puzzling literary

device that had previously been discounted (the direct address to objects, creatures, or even people who are not in fact addressees of the utterance). Its usefulness has no doubt been due to the fact that people writing interpretations of individual poems, as well as those thinking about the romantic or the modern lyric, have reason to cite it. Since this essay runs dialectically through a range of possible effects of this strange literary figure, without declaring for one or the other, I think that it can stand very well without revision. I would add only one thing. I take as my point of departure the claim that lyric is fundamentally discourse overheard: a poetic speaker produces utterance which readers overhear. Now it seems to me that for the better understanding of the lyric, one must combine this claim with the recognition that lyrics, unlike novels, are also spoken by the reader. When we read a lyric, aloud or silently, we utter the words, we temporarily occupy the position of the speaker, so that we too say 'I fall upon the thorns of life, I bleed,' or 'Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments.' We are not simply overhearing the speech of another, whom we strive to identify from this speech but are ourselves trying out, trying on this speech. And some of the embarrassment of apostrophe comes, I think, from the fact that we ourselves engage in this preposterous act of addressing clouds, birds, and the spirits of the dead.

The essays of the third part of this book explore, I say, the implications for semiotics of aspects of texts and meaning that deconstruction has brought to the fore. Though 'semiotics' no longer functions as the name of the perspective which will synthesize our understanding of meaning of all kinds, this sort of enterprise still seems to me essential to the future of literary and cultural studies. How can we progress without attempting to understand, as explicitly as possible, how cultural productions come to have the meaning they do? The essays of this final section seem to me to tackle problems—about narrative structure, about figurative language, about lyric, and that are still very

much of the moment. I hope that twenty years from now we will be closer to a comprehensive theory of discourse and discourses than we are today.

Jonathan Culler  
Ithaca, New York  
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# Part I

# 1

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## BEYOND INTERPRETATION

In the years since World War II, the New Criticism has been challenged, even vilified, but it has seldom been effectively ignored. The inability if not reluctance of its opponents simply to evade its legacy testifies to the dominant position it has come to occupy in American and British universities. Despite the many attacks on it, despite the lack of an organized and systematic defense, it seems not unfair to speak of the hegemony of New Criticism in this period and of the determining influence it has exercised on our ways of writing about and teaching literature. Whatever critical affiliations we may proclaim, we are all New Critics, in that it requires a strenuous effort to escape notions of the autonomy of the literary work, the importance of demonstrating its unity, and the requirement of 'close reading.'

In many ways the influence of the New Criticism has been beneficent, especially on the teaching of literature. Those old enough to have experienced the transition, its emergence from an earlier mode of literary study, speak of the sense of release, the new excitement breathed into literary education by the

assumption that even the meanest student who lacked the scholarly information of his betters could make valid comments on the language and structure of the text. No longer was discussion and evaluation of a work something which had to wait upon acquisition of a respectable store of literary, historical, and biographical information. No longer was the right to comment something earned by months in a library. Even the beginning student of literature was now confronted with poems, asked to read them closely, and required to discuss and evaluate their use of language and thematic organization. To make the experience of the text itself central to literary education and to relegate the accumulation of information about the text to an ancillary status was a move which gave the study of literature a new focus and justification, as well as promoting a more precise and relevant understanding of literary works.

But what is good for literary education is not necessarily good for the study of literature in general, and those very aspects of the New Criticism which ensured its success in schools and universities determined its eventual limitations as a program for literary criticism. Commitment to the autonomy of the literary text, a fundamental article of faith with positive consequences for the teaching of literature, led to a commitment to interpretation as the proper activity of criticism. If the work is an autonomous whole, then it can and should be studied in and for itself, without reference to possible external contexts, whether biographical, historical, psychoanalytic, or sociological. Distinguishing what was external from what was internal, rejecting historical and causal explanation in favor of internal analysis, the New Criticism left readers and critics with only one recourse. They must interpret the poem; they must show how its various parts contribute to a thematic unity, for this thematic unity justifies the work's status as autonomous artifact. When a poem is read in and for itself critics must fall back upon the one constant of their situation: there is a poem being read by a human being.

Whatever is external to the poem, the fact that it addresses a human being means that what it says about human life is internal to it. The critic's task is to show how the interaction of the poem's parts produces a complex and ontologically privileged statement about human experience.

Though they may occasionally attempt to disguise the fact, the basic concepts of the New Critics and their followers derive from this thematic and interpretive orientation. The poem is not simply a series of sentences; it is spoken by a *persona*, who expresses an attitude to be defined, speaking in a particular tone which puts the attitude in one of various possible modes or degrees of commitment. Since the poem is an autonomous whole its value must lie within it, in richness of attitude, in complexity of judgment, in delicate balance of values.

Hence one finds in poems *ambivalence*, *ambiguity*, *tension*, *irony*, *paradox*. These are all thematic operators which permit one to translate formal features of the language into meanings so that the poem may be unified as a complex thematic structure expressing an attitude towards the world. And in place of a theory of reading which would specify how order was to be achieved, the New Criticism deployed a common humanism or, as R. S. Crane calls it, a 'set of reduction terms' toward which analysis of ambivalence, tension, irony, and paradox was to move: 'life and death, good and evil, love and hate, harmony and strife, order and disorder, eternity and time, reality and appearance, truth and falsity . . . emotion and reason, simplicity and complexity, nature and art.'<sup>1</sup> A repertoire of contrasting attitudes and values relevant to the human situation served as a target language in the process of thematic translation. To analyze a poem was to show how all its parts contributed to a complex statement about human problems.

In short, it would be possible to demonstrate that, given its premises, the New Criticism was necessarily an interpretive criticism. But in fact this is scarcely necessary since the most

important and insidious legacy of the New Criticism is the widespread and unquestioning acceptance of the notion that the critic's job is to interpret literary works. Fulfillment of the interpretive task has come to be the touchstone by which other kinds of critical writing are judged, and reviewers inevitably ask of any work of literary theory, linguistic analysis, or historical scholarship, whether it actually assists us in our understanding of particular works. In this critical climate it is therefore important, if only as a means of loosening the grip which interpretation has on critical consciousness, to take up a tendentious position and to maintain that, while the experience of literature may be an experience of interpreting works, in fact the interpretation of individual works is only tangentially related to the understanding of literature. To engage in the study of literature is not to produce yet another interpretation of *King Lear* but to advance one's understanding of the conventions and operations of an institution, a mode of discourse.

There are many tasks that confront criticism, many things we need to advance our understanding of literature, but one thing we do not need is more interpretations of literary works. It is not at all difficult to list in a general way critical projects which would be of compelling interest if carried through to some measure of completion; and such a list is in itself the best illustration of the potential fecundity of other ways of writing about literature. We have no convincing account of the role or function of literature in society or social consciousness. We have only fragmentary or anecdotal histories of literature as an institution: we need a fuller exploration of its historical relation to the other forms of discourse through which the world is organized and human activities are given meaning. We need a more sophisticated and apposite account of the role of literature in the psychological economies of both writers and readers; and in particular we ought to understand much more than we do about the effects of fictional discourse. As Frank Kermode emphasized in his