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2 Reading texts after the linguistic turn

Approaches from literary studies and their implications

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'Who's afraid of the "linguistic turn"?' the German historian Peter Schöttler asked in 1997, some eight years after his excellent survey of what he perceived to be historians' new interest in the analysis of language and discourse in the 1980s.¹ His answer was that, plainly, many historians still were. Apparently, the discipline's misgivings about the implications of addressing the linguistic and discursive parameters of both history and historiography were not easily dispelled. To this day, the uncertainty and instability going along with a focus on language and discourse is perceived as a threat to the institutional standards and foundations of historiography. History, conceived in this way, seems to lose its factuality and to evaporate into fiction, irrationality or merely discourse itself; any 'grand' or 'master narratives' of modernity are scattered into 'little narratives', and the unity of history itself appears to have been abandoned.² Accordingly, beyond the programmatic but strangely half-hearted 'Defense of History' by writers such as, most prominently, Richard J. Evans,³ constructive engagements with the challenge are few and far between and do not always come from the heart of the profession.⁴

What strikes the outsider such as the present writer with a background in literary studies, literary theory and sociological systems theory as slightly odd, however, is the persistence of the catchphrase 'the linguistic turn' in the context of this particular debate. To be sure, the 'turn' taken by philosophy and other disciplines at the beginning of the twentieth century – identified retrospectively as 'the linguistic turn' by the philosopher Richard Rorty only in 1967 – is of fundamental importance.⁵ But then there has been so much going on since then that the – from the historian's point of view – apparently widely accepted equation linguistic turn = literary theory = postmodernism surely merits closer scrutiny.⁶ This seems particularly necessary in view of the fact that in the fields of literary and cultural studies there has been a proliferation of subsequent 'turns' of all kinds since the 1980s, and this development makes the epithet 'linguistic' surely look old-fashioned and not 'postmodern' at all.⁷

So how does it all hang together? In the present chapter, the broader context of theoretical positions in literary studies will be outlined with an eye to their viability in realms beyond literature, and particularly history. Theory itself will be conceived of as springing from the renegotiations of objectivity that are characteristic

of modernity. From the eighteenth century onwards at the latest, traditional notions of objective truth had to face the emergence of subjectivity as a core ingredient of modern culture. Once truth became potentially subjective and thus relative, all truth claims had to be justified in new ways, and this function was taken over by theory in a specifically modern sense. Ultimately, however, the emergence of modern theory inaugurated an increasing awareness of the pervasiveness of reflexivity in modern culture at large. This fundamental importance of reflexivity was finally acknowledged with the linguistic turn in the early twentieth century, which later fed into the apotheosis of literary theory in the 1980s⁸ marked by its 'postmodern' ambition of taking the decisive step from being a theory of something towards being just 'plain "theory"' – with seemingly unlimited reach in explaining the world in terms of textuality and representation.⁹

The first section will address theories of textual meaning before the linguistic turn. In contrast to the assertion occasionally put forward in primers of literary theory in the English-speaking world that before literary theory there was only the ideology of liberal humanism,¹⁰ earlier theories about 'textual meaning and how to get at it in the case of literature' will be traced. From the eighteenth century onwards, the theory of interpretation called hermeneutics has tried to preserve the ideal of stable and unequivocal ('objective') textual meaning in spite of its increasing awareness of the fact that meaning can only be realized in subjective acts of interpretation. In the nineteenth century, on the other hand, the competitive projects of positivism and Marxism tried to establish extra-textual (i.e. social and historical) frames of objectivity from which textual meaning was to be derived. It is against theoretical orientations such as these that the early twentieth century emancipation of literary theory proper positioned itself by taking its inspiration from linguistics.

Accordingly, the second section will begin with a discussion of the internal ideological contradictions of the Anglo-American varieties of formalism ('Practical Criticism', 'New Criticism'), which are, in spite of their a- and transhistorical aspirations and their longevity, seen as transitional movements caught between the old paradigm of liberal humanism on the one hand and the emerging new paradigm of critical theory on the other.¹¹ This emergence of critical theory is then traced from Russian Formalism through Structuralism into Poststructuralism and Deconstruction, with the last two dominating the emerging self-descriptions of late twentieth-century Western culture as 'postmodern' between, say, 1968 and the early 1980s for better or worse. It is the stringency of this twentieth-century success story with its focus on language and textuality that makes the equation linguistic turn = postmodernism so attractive a target for its opponents. However, as the third section will then show, there has been a re-orientation towards history after the heyday of 'theory' in the 1980s, and fruitful ideas for the interpretation of texts from modern history can be drawn from this context. The chapter will accordingly end with an attempt to map the various components of the checklist outlined in the introduction to this volume onto recent theoretical and methodological positions in the fields of literary, cultural and media studies.¹²

Theory before theory

In an influential survey of the history of Western aesthetics, the literary critic M.H. Abrams suggests that approaches to reading texts can be grouped according to how they understand the relation of a text to the world.¹³ Since antiquity, the most widely held assumption is that a work of art imitates reality. Theories with this focus can be classified as 'mimetic theories' (from Greek *mimesis*, meaning 'imitation'), and they are often combined with 'pragmatic theories' focusing on the question as to why and how this imitation of reality should be accomplished and what effects it has (or should have) on an audience. While these theoretical orientations are still very much with us, a radically new orientation emerged at the end of the eighteenth century when 'expressive theories' focused on the mind and genius of the writer as the origin and sole frame of reference for the work. This Romantic emancipation of the work from the constraints of imitation and moral edification led in turn to a new type of 'objective theories' largely concerned with the work as an object in itself which was fully realized in the modernist movement at the beginning of the twentieth century and in formalist schools of literary criticism emerging at that time.

Broadly, then, one can distinguish between traditional, 'old-European' positions predicated on notions of objective truth on the one hand and specifically modern positions predicated on subjectivity and reflexivity on the other. While mimetic and pragmatic theories rest on the assumption that meaning and truth are basically residing in the world and function as eternal and objective norms of beauty and moral behaviour, this frame of reference no longer holds for expressive and subjective theories. As specifically modern theories they acknowledge the loss of ontological certainty characteristic of the modern age and try to compensate for this loss through an insistence on the autonomy of art as prefigured in notions of the artist as genius.

For the present purposes of reading texts from modern history the latter positions are obviously crucial, but it is important to note that the outline presented above does not indicate a linear sequence with each new position replacing the preceding one. Instead it is based on a cumulative principle: to this day, the ideal of objective truth has not vanished, although ever since the eighteenth century all truth claims have had to come to terms with the fundamental instability introduced by subjectivity and reflexivity. Accordingly, textual meaning under modern conditions unfolds in a three-dimensional sphere in which objective, subjective and reflexive orientations of meaning are simultaneously present. However, the bias of the rules of reading shifted only slowly from a nostalgic longing for objectivity to an acknowledgement of culturally domesticated forms of subjectivity and finally to a full-blown engagement with the cultural reflexivity induced by – well, not language as the phrase 'the linguistic turn' suggests, but rather, as will be seen later in this chapter, writing, printing and, of late, the electronic media. And the beginning of this trajectory is marked by the emergence of a theory of interpretation which tries to balance the ideal of stable, unified meanings as part of objective truth with the subjective implications of all acts of reading (and writing, for that matter).

The beginnings of hermeneutics (from Greek *hermeneutikos* 'an expert in interpretation') can be traced to the aftermath of the Reformation, which, in its rejection of the monopolizing of the interpretation of scripture by Catholic dogma, posed the problem of how to legitimize the newly democratized readings of the Bible.¹⁴ The basic principle established here was that of the hermeneutic circle, i.e. the assumption that the understanding of parts of the Bible as read by the individual reader is framed by the meaning of the whole and vice versa, while the meaningfulness of the whole can be taken for granted because of its status as 'God's word'. As soon as this idea is applied to texts beyond the realm of Holy Scripture, however, the problem of whether the meaningfulness of the whole (what whole?) can be presupposed surfaces, and it is exacerbated by the problem of historical distance. Generally, this problem is solved in hermeneutics by assuming a continuity of cultural expression since antiquity which creates a link between all texts. As late as 1960 Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) suggested in his seminal *Wahrheit und Methode* (Truth and Method) that the problem of subjectivity can be overcome by accepting tradition as a normative element which helps to avoid arbitrary subjective readings.¹⁵ Still, the problem of the potential subjectivism of all reading (and writing) acts resurfaced again and again in the hermeneutic tradition, and it found its seminal expression in Wilhelm Dilthey's (1833–1911) project of establishing the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) as an alternative to the increasingly successful objectivist paradigm of the natural sciences. In this context, Johann Gustav Droysen (1808–1884) insisted that when writing history the distinction between (objective) 'source criticism' on the one hand and (inevitably subjective) 'interpretation' on the other must be maintained, while the subjective implications of the latter should be reined in by the overarching continuity of Western civilization.

As opposed to this direct engagement with the cultural dimension of subjectivity, the nineteenth century also saw a redoubled attempt at preserving the unity of an objective world view. In France, the mathematician and philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857) laid out the programme for what he called positivism and which ultimately evolved into the discipline of sociology.¹⁶ In keeping with the French connotations of the word positive, this scientific programme for dealing with social problems strictly focused on what is real (as opposed to imagined), useful (as opposed to meaningless), certain (as opposed to uncertain) and constructive (as opposed to destructive). Following the anti-metaphysical tradition of the European enlightenment, positivism restricts itself to the observation and examination of given facts which are then classified in order to find out and establish the unchangeable laws of the world. On these premises, Comte develops his 'Encyclopaedic Law of the Classification of the Sciences' culminating in the historical method of sociology and integrates this into a larger world-historical scheme with clear political implications: Comte envisages a hierarchical model of society in which spiritual authority resides with an elite of sociologists while secular authority resides with bankers and businessmen.

At this point the ideological framing of scientific objectivity under modern conditions becomes obvious: while the observation and examination of facts may be undertaken for its own sake, there is, behind its back, as it were, a larger agenda

resting on a firm belief in the interconnectedness of scientific, economic, and social progress, i.e. the master narrative of modernity. From here it is only a small step to an outright materialistic philosophy of history as introduced by Karl Marx (1818–1883). While in many respects related to positivism, Marxism replaces the emphasis on knowledge as something arrived at through science with a radically new emphasis on a theoretical model of the material basis of a society as manifested in stages and states of its economy.¹⁷ This move provided the basis for the most powerful counter-narrative of modernity. It also made it clear once and for all that under modern conditions everything can be viewed from (at least) two angles, thus preparing the ground for all kinds of fundamentally critical projects in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, such as, for example, some of the positions subsumed under the heading of 'postmodernism'.

With regard to the reading of texts from modern history, however, this implies that since Comte and Marx there have been two objectivities, as it were. Both positivistic and Marxist approaches to literature, taking a decidedly anti-hermeneutical stance, regard literary texts as social and historical facts which should be explained without drawing upon fuzzy Romantic concepts like 'genius' or 'creative freedom', but nevertheless they part company with regard to their respective evaluations of texts. In the case of positivism, the basic assumption is that society determines the life of the author who in turn determines the shape of the work. This leads to an author-centred approach which searches for traces of biographical facts in the works.¹⁸ In spite of its anti-hermeneutical origins this mode of inquiry is not completely incompatible with the hermeneutical project of finding out what the author really meant, and to this day the combined power of these two positions, plus experiences drawn from everyday life as well as the conventions of school teaching and encyclopaedias, governs the attitude of many a normal reader or novice student of literature in spite of the fact that all kinds of epistemological problems could be identified (What are biographical 'facts'? How do we get at them? What happens to them in the poet's mind?). Similarly, the time-honoured, 'old-European' notion that literature mirrors reality (cf. Abrams's 'mimetic theories') is perpetuated in a fairly naïve way, notwithstanding the Marxist insight that literary texts do not necessarily mirror reality, because they might as well distort it. And finally, the seemingly straightforward analysis of 'objective' textual features turns out to be heavily influenced by subjective interpretive strategies.

Marxist thinkers, on the other hand, address some of these problems by somewhat paradoxically placing literature on the fairly inaccessible level of 'superstructure' (i.e. as part of the ideas and institutions which mediate between material existence of human beings and their consciousness) whilst acknowledging that the material basis of society is laid by its economic structure. According to these thinkers, literature in a class society is an ideological phenomenon caught up in the necessarily wrong or limited consciousness brought forth and controlled by the power structures of capitalism, though it does have, to a certain extent, the potential for transcending these conditions through its limited independence from the restraints of material production. Obviously, this framework offers a more sophisticated account of the social determination of textual meaning than positivism by

acknowledging that there need not be a one-to-one mirroring of reality. At the same time, however, this step opens up texts for alternative readings in the light of the version of modern progress that Marxism envisages. And with the benefit of hindsight one can see from today's vantage point that objectivity under modern conditions seems to be an ideological construct anyway, be it of bourgeois-capitalist persuasion as in positivism or opposed to this as in Marxism.

Theories of textual meaning before the emergence of literary theory, then, were very much preoccupied with staking claims for objectivity by linking textual meaning to something 'objectively' given outside of the text. Within the frameworks of positivism and Marxism, meaning is determined and unequivocally unified by society and history, while their wholesale and largely uncritical adoption of mimetic and pragmatic theories of art and literature manifests the ongoing longing for objectivity which is characteristic of modern culture to this day. The problem is, alas, that the alternative master narratives of modern progress projected by positivism and Marxism themselves undermine their aspiration to perpetuate objectivity, and one can assume that this fundamental relativity contributed massively to the explicitly reflexive turn modern culture took finally at the beginning of the twentieth century.

There was, however, another sphere increasingly claiming its own objectivity, as it were, in the course of the nineteenth century. In the Romantic period, a modern understanding of art and literature as imaginative and autonomous fields of cultural practice established itself. Just like the tradition of hermeneutics, this new aesthetic and literary paradigm tried to acknowledge the fundamental importance of subjectivity in all acts of reading and writing on the one hand and to salvage the possibility of unified meaning as guaranteed by the ideal of objectivity on the other. For all practical artistic purposes, the hermeneutic projection of objectivity into an idealized realm of 'culture' was translated into an emphatic insistence on the unity and totality of works of art (cf. Abrams's 'objective theories'), and at this point hermeneutics feeds into the momentous formation of what has come to be known as the Romantic ideology.¹⁹ As will be seen in the next section, reading practices in the fields of literature and education were heavily influenced by this ideological formation.²⁰ Before the linguistic turn, then, there were at least three objectivities available in modern culture: the master narrative of progress as envisaged in positivism on the one hand, and the two counter-narratives of Marxism and aesthetic autonomy on the other.²¹

The linguistic turn and beyond: modernity coming into its own

Objectivity, this brief survey suggests, became a highly problematic and contested category towards the end of the nineteenth century. Just like many other dimensions of modern culture, it was subject to differentiation, and an important effect of this development can be found in the proliferation of academic disciplines, each successfully negotiating its own highly specialized truth claims and objectivities but finding only limited acceptance beyond its own sphere. Obviously, this fragmentation contributed massively to the overall emergence of reflexivity as a

signature of modern culture in the early twentieth century. Against this background, the emergence of professional standards for the discipline of history in the course of the nineteenth century can be described in terms of the combination of hermeneutical and positivistic procedures outlined above, albeit with a strong bias towards objectivity as the ultimate yardstick of professionalism and defining quality of good practice. To this day, the conviction that 'things really did happen in the past and that historians can often find out what they were' is at the heart of the historical profession, and justly so as long as it goes hand in hand with the new sense of 'acute methodological self-consciousness' recently described by Keith Thomas.²² Or, as another observer puts it:

We did not need postmodernism to tell us that objectivity was always a chimera, that individual historians, their lives, loves and beliefs, are always there, in choice of subject and argument and in the very words they write. History never was just facts; it was always the interpretation of them. Before the historian, the first person who told stories about the past, history didn't exist. Facts existed, and the past, but not history.²³

Here, however, we are obviously back to square one in terms of the nineteenth-century schism between 'source criticism' and interpretation, and the question is: on what grounds can an *objectivity* not only of *evidence and induction*, but ultimately of *interpretation* be established as the defining quality of good practice within the discipline, and how can it accommodate the standards of postmodern epistemology without undermining the foundations of historians' professionalism?

One possible answer may lie in acknowledging the fundamental twentieth century shift from objectivity to reflexivity as a regulative idea of academic practice.²⁴ Interestingly, this shift was addressed earlier in literary studies than in history, presumably because of literature's lack of 'objective' and factual credentials. As the new discipline of literary studies emerged it had to come up with notions of 'literariness' in order to justify its existence, and a turn to language as literature's core ingredient seemed the logical next step, especially as linguistics was also emerging as a new discipline at the same time – and one with strong 'scientific' leanings and aspirations. This step was, however, taken only half-heartedly in the English-speaking world. Beginning with I.A. Richards's (1893–1979) and C.K. Ogden's (1889–1957) attempt at transferring methods of linguistic analysis to the reading of literary texts in *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923), the emergent approach of 'Practical Criticism' rejected subjectivist and impressionist modes of literary criticism as well as positivistic approaches.²⁵ All non-literary factors (author, context, reality) were relegated to their new status as 'background knowledge', and the literary text was emphatically conceived of as an organic unity in the face of an increasingly fragmented modern reality. Here it becomes obvious that the new objectivity of the approach oscillated precariously between scientific aspirations on the one hand and the ideological underpinnings of the object of study on the other, i.e. an a priori understanding of the literary text as a 'great', 'timeless' and unified work of art.²⁶ Nevertheless, the codification of this new 'intrinsic approach'

with its exclusive emphasis on 'close reading' under the banner of the 'New Criticism' in the United States of the 1940s established a new focus on the literary text itself as the sole origin of its meaning. And what is more, the truth-value of poetic language with its connotative and metaphorical levels of meaning and its toleration of ambiguity was for the first time explicitly emancipated from the understanding of truth in 'normal' (and scientific) language with its one-to-one denotations of the most literal and limited meaning of a word and its seemingly clear-cut reference to the world.²⁷ Accordingly, time-honoured notions of linguistic truth as rooted in language's correspondence to reality were supplemented by the notion that truth might equally reside in the coherence and acceptability of works of art or, by extension, language, texts or discourses in general. While this idea was at first exclusively limited to literature, the twentieth century saw its gradual expansion and, inversely, an erosion of referential, ontological notions of truth.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, an emerging group of Russian formalists was less encumbered by ideological burdens.²⁸ In Moscow and St Petersburg, a number of scholars tried to get rid of the unsystematic, subjective and impressionistic ways of dealing with literature inherited from the nineteenth century by focusing on 'how' instead of 'what' a text means. Just like the New Criticism, the first steps in this direction were heavily influenced by the aestheticist and avantgardistic poetic movements of the day with their programmatic insistence on aesthetic autonomy. Focusing on the distinction between 'normal' language based on habitual, automatic responses, mechanical recognition and reference to reality on the one hand, and self-referential poetic language which provokes a new awareness and intensity of perception in the reader on the other, the Russian formalists envisaged a dialectics of automatization and defamiliarization based on concrete acts of reception.²⁹ As opposed to the New Critics' insistence on 'timelessness', this dynamic model introduced the possibility of describing literary history in terms of an evolution of literary forms. Later stages of Russian formalism then moved beyond notions of form by introducing the concept of structure in which textual unity is not achieved by a combination and merging of elements, but rather by their dynamic interaction.³⁰ And finally, this development culminated in the so-called 'Structuralist Manifesto' (1928), which marked the final transformation of Russian formalism into structuralism.³¹ The shift from 'form' (with its firm link to the individual text at hand) to 'structure' (with its greater appreciation of the internal dynamics of texts) marked a decisive step in spelling out the implications of the linguistic turn. While for all practical purposes, structuralist readings of literary texts in the English-speaking world frequently remained strictly within the confines of terminologically upgraded close readings modelled on work by Roman Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss,³² the term structure continuously implied larger contexts in that the meaning of textual elements such as binary oppositions was conceived of as being embedded within larger structures, such as society understood as a structure of structures conditioning each other in no particular hierarchical order.³³

According to such approaches, meaning, then, takes its origin in structures, and the basic patterns of structures are prefigured in language itself. The modern

linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) was hugely influential, in particular his examination of binary oppositions. De Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* as transcribed by one of his students and published posthumously in 1916 describes language as a system or structure of elements whose relation to each other is governed by codes. Its most revolutionary and ground-breaking idea is that meaning emerges from these relations and oppositions rather than from a sign's reference to the world.³⁴ In other words: the relationship between the materially graspable side of a linguistic sign, the 'signifier', and its meaning, the 'signified', is governed by conventional aspects internal to the language system and thus arbitrary. Accordingly, meaning is a purely linguistic phenomenon basically independent from reference, though for all practical purposes the assumption of a reference implied by the apparent unity of the sign is of course helpful.

At any rate, this emancipation of meaning from reference and the idea that the principle of codes as binary oppositions could be transferred from the realm of language to the realm of culture at large were put to good use in structuralism's wide coverage of cultural phenomena. This coverage ranged from the analysis of poems to the question of how the aesthetic can be described as a social phenomenon, from investigations of the anthropological significance of distinguishing raw food from cooked food to the workings of narrative and the mythologies of everyday life in popular culture.³⁵ This in turn inaugurated the fully fledged cultural dispersion of the linguistic turn's implications, which were now refashioned in terms of semiotics, i.e. in terms of the systematic study of all factors involved in the production and interpretation of signs or in processes of signification. And it was in this realm that the final steps from structuralism into the much more radical claims of post-structuralism evolved.

Roland Barthes (1915–1980) suggested as early as 1964 that meaning is not dependent on the structure of the language system alone, but also on socially and culturally embedded secondary systems of signification such as politics, science, literature or whatever.³⁶ In the contexts of these secondary systems, every linguistic sign in de Saussure's sense, with its arbitrary but fairly stable denotative relation between signifier and signified, functions in its entirety as a new signifier. The signifieds of this new signifier unfold in a field of connotations particular to a given secondary system, and it surely does make a difference whether you talk about a tree in a linguistics class, in a nature poem, in the contexts of 'green' or conservative politics, or in terms of its economic potential. What is more, the plurality of secondary systems in modern culture suggests that their interaction might actually even create tertiary systems of signification in which signs taken in their entirety from one secondary system may stimulate ever-new connotations in another system which thus shifts into a tertiary position. Accordingly, the process of meaning production (semiosis) cannot be delimited, and the potential signifieds of a given signifier proliferate. It is this basic instability of meaning that is finally and notoriously addressed by the 'postmodern' theories of poststructuralism and deconstruction, and it should by now be clear in the light of the preceding survey that this position is the outcome of the linguistic turn at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is, in other words, not just the spleen of some particularly inventive French

theorists in the 1970s, but rather the eventual surfacing of a broader reflexive turn taken by modern culture at large, marked by a shift from 'old-European' ontology with its concomitant essentialism predicated on identity to an all-pervasive constructivism predicated on difference.³⁷

While structuralism and poststructuralism share the assumption that language is constitutive of human dealings with reality and that the world is a world of arbitrary signs, their understanding of the sign differs significantly. Where structuralism insists on the unity of the sign – *within* which meaning resides with its implied reference to the world – poststructuralism acknowledges that only the material dimension of the sign (the signifier) is accessible while its possible signifieds evolve unfixably from never-ending processes of semiosis. Accordingly, there is, in principle, a gap rather than a link between signifier and signified, the sign is not a unit, but rather an access point to a cultural practice which does not point towards anything beyond itself. As the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) argued, there is no 'transcendental signified' which is somehow present without any discursive mediation and can thus stop the endless play of signifiers.³⁸

In the light of these ideas, the structuralist project of providing a scientific basis for the human sciences by describing the laws and constants of the symbolic activity of the human mind finally had to be abandoned as the poststructuralist insistence on the fundamental openness and instability of meaning undermined the belief in the possibility of final explanations of all kind. Accordingly, Derrida suggested that the Western belief in final explanations is a 'logocentric' illusion brought about by the ontological self-deceptions of a culture grounding its world view on a 'metaphysics of presence', i.e. the idea, based on the primacy of spoken language in Western thought, that reality is represented in language through a direct correspondence between word and referent within an essentially whole thinking subject. Instead, reality is, in the context of Western culture, rather represented in language through writing (*écriture*) and the accumulation of information and ideas enabled by the storage function of written texts. Under these conditions, meaning is subject to what Derrida calls *différance*: it is never given and stable, but rather the effect of a never-ending dynamics of signifiers pointing at each other ('to defer') and mutually defining each other in a structure without a centre ('to differ'). Thus, signs neither mean anything 'in themselves' nor do they refer to anything beyond the ongoing process of *dissémination*.³⁹ Every decoding is also another encoding,⁴⁰ or, as Derrida notoriously put it: 'There is nothing outside of the text.'⁴¹ From a deconstructionist point of view, all readings predicated on 'transcendental signifieds' such as truth or reality are 'weak readings' while only readings which are deconstructing these truths by laying open their linguistic foundations can be considered 'strong'.

Clearly, in the light of these ideas, meaning can no longer be determined, criticized or evaluated by reference to facts or objects in reality, and accordingly the question of what historians are supposed to do indeed becomes pressing. But then, even if we accept that we cannot get at reality as such in its totality and ultimate meaningfulness (and the present writer for one does), this does not necessarily imply that reality does not exist, and even historians' belief in historical truth can

survive the onslaught of deconstruction if one acknowledges that interpretations are all we have. For most if not all practical purposes, however, we will have to distinguish between acceptable ('true') and unacceptable ('false') interpretations, especially in view of the power texts can wield in the world, and here the problem of referentiality cannot be evaded. Historians, for example, will insist that it all depends on evidence: if you get your evidence (sources, facts, events) wrong, your interpretation will turn out to be unacceptable, and this insistence on evidence is indispensable in view of the reality-constituting effects of historical interpretations and, most notoriously, in view of the disturbing implications of relativist positions with regard to the holocaust.⁴² However, a deconstructionist would say, the *meaning* of evidence accrues *exclusively* in the realm of (inter-)textuality made up of source texts with their *implied* reference to things, facts and events; it does not originate in things, facts and events themselves. And to this, a constructivist would add: even if we accept that things, facts and events have no historical meaning in their mere existence, it is nevertheless quite clear that they acquire their status as historical facts if a majority of sources *and* interpretations concurs in positing their existence.

It is this concurrence of sources and interpretations which provides an opening for a puncturing, as it were, of the theoretically impenetrable realm of textuality by referentiality. This opening transforms the implicit but ultimately untenable referentiality of statements about the world into a textually and discursively *constructed* explicit reference. Similarly, deconstruction's revolutionary gesture of demonstrating that all aspirations for reference, origins, totality, identity and truth are ultimately untenable because of the fundamentally unstable and non-referential character of language has to be countered with further questions: How can it be that genuinely unstable systems of signification acquire the power of reality principles nevertheless? Or, to put it differently: How do stable patterns of communication emerge? And why (and how) does culture work? These questions have been addressed by many recent approaches in literary, cultural and media studies in a shift from formalism through the heyday of pure theory towards a new, fully reflexive functionalism on a deconstructive basis, which is perhaps the most obvious sign of modernity having finally come into its own, albeit paradoxically under the label of 'postmodernity'.⁴³

Reading texts after the linguistic turn

The trajectory of approaches to reading in the main strand of literary studies in the twentieth century can be described as a sequence of decentring moves from work to text and beyond into realms of (inter-)textuality and, ultimately, towards an inquiry into the media conditions that restrict and empower cultural practices around texts of all kinds.⁴⁴ Starting with a focus on the literary text as a unified work of art, formalist and structuralist approaches soon shifted their attention to the more general linguistic underpinnings of texts, which in turn fed into notions of an overarching textuality of culture.⁴⁵ The cultural continuity of (inter-)textuality, however, cannot be adequately understood without addressing its indispensable prerequisite in

terms of media conditions, i.e. the dissemination of texts. It is Jacques Derrida's lasting achievement to have put this dimension with all its implications on the theoretical agenda. Under the auspices of writing, language can no longer be seen in terms of the difference between world and representation. Instead, it introduces a new difference between writing and voice which reproduces the difference between reference and sign (which 'transcends' the boundaries of language) within the confines of (written) language. In written language, this difference turns up ('immanently', as it were) as the difference between signifier and signified, from then on constituting its own reality in the realm of (inter-)textuality as described above.⁴⁶ At the same time, it is also clear that writing alone cannot account for the proliferation of this second-order 'reality', and here the specifically modern convergence of cultural differentiation and printing comes into play: the distributional power of printing supplements the storage and accumulation potential provided by writing and inaugurates a cultural dynamics unheard of before and eventually boosted by the even stronger distributional prowess of electronic media and digitalization.⁴⁷

What does this historical sketch entail for the practice of reading texts from modern history in order to write (about) modern history? It suggests, for example, that the mandate of reflexivity first articulated in the linguistic turn and then generalized in 'postmodern' theory and philosophy can be answered by paying attention to shifts in the history of different media with their implications for literacy (with all its ideological ramifications)⁴⁸ and historical semantics.⁴⁹ What affects the practice of reading texts from modern history most crucially, however, is the consequences of media-historical conditions for the availability of the historical record in terms of sources.⁵⁰ In this respect, the deconstructive slant on evidence introduced above can be put to good use. While there is, in principle, an ongoing process of semiosis and dissemination which amounts, ultimately, to a circulation of social energy (as Stephen Greenblatt put it memorably and metaphorically⁵¹), the material access point to these processes is provided by texts, and texts are always produced, circulated and received under social and media-specific conditions of accessibility and availability which in turn govern their availability as historical sources. It should be profitable, therefore, to supplement the venerable and highly successful tradition of historical 'source criticism' with deconstructive and media-historical ideas in order to bridge the unproductive schism between historical criticism on the one hand and literary criticism on the other.⁵² There can be no doubt that there are pragmatic differences between 'speakers' and 'voices' in literary/poetic/fictional texts on the one hand – which are, under modern conditions, often predicated on staging or framing subjectivity and, in the course of modern literary history, increasingly aware of their own textuality and mediality – and non-literary/historical/non-fictional texts on the other, which frequently insist on straightforward, transparent and seemingly objective referentiality. But it is also clear in the light of the preceding theoretical reflections that there is, even for the historian, nothing outside of the text at hand in terms of evidence, as the 'outside' can only be constructed and verified through a concurrence and convergence of sources *and* interpretations. Accordingly, and this is the link between source criticism and deconstructive

approaches, the apparent unity of a text or source can only be taken as a merely superficial and pragmatic one which has to be decentred in critical readings. It is the task of the historian as critic to analyse how a text creates its apparent unity and what historical tensions, rifts and aporias are elided in the process of this particular construction with its media- and genre-related as well as institutional and social constraints and opportunities.⁵³

Basically, then, texts are not so much 'carrying' meaning from a source to a recipient but rather bearing traces of meanings intentionally 'inscribed' as well as medially, socially and institutionally 'framed'. These meanings are then supplemented by all the meanings which are constructed in interpretations by various recipients under similarly complex conditions – and the latter are not at all limited to 'intended' meanings. The interpretation of texts from modern history should therefore be concerned with how the text functions rather than its origins. These functions can be mapped onto the three dimensions of meaning simultaneously present in modern culture, i.e. objectivity, subjectivity and reflexivity.⁵⁴ With regard to objective dimensions of meaning, the transformation of implied referentiality into constructed reference as introduced above has to be read against the background of Western traditions of mimesis on the one hand and in terms of the 'reality effect' created by intertextual as well as intermedial relations to existing discourses on the other.⁵⁵ Only in such a concurrence and convergence of discourses and texts can key concepts and binary distinctions, metaphors and modes of emplotment be 'naturalized' as objective representations of the world, and this effect is strongly supported by the implementation of neutral and impersonal modes of presentation. Nevertheless, given Western culture's strong bias towards spoken language with its concomitant tendency to think of writing in terms of transcribing a 'voice', subjective dimensions of meaning can frequently be found in texts, either implicitly in oblique allusions to subjective experience or explicitly through references to the 'speaker', 'narrator', writer or author of a text as well as by hints at its assumed or implied addressee or reader. And finally, reflexive dimensions of meaning can be analysed in terms of a text's acknowledgement, implicit or explicit, of its situational and institutional contexts, of its medial set-up including questions of genre and structure, and of its self-conscious and/or self-confident positioning in a wider historical context.⁵⁶

Reading texts in an academic context after the linguistic turn should critically question both the text under scrutiny and the act of reading itself as instalments in an ongoing process of acting in and making sense of the world. Against the background of the historical overview provided in this chapter, current readings should acknowledge the fact that the materiality of the world can be approached from various angles (such as language, semiosis, textuality, discourse, media conditions or communication) but never reached or, in its meaning(s), fully controlled.⁵⁷ In the end, then, it is important to realize that the theoretical turn taken by the humanities following on from the linguistic turn does not imply allegiance to a fixed body of work or to this or that school or approach. Instead, it requires an awareness of the contingency of one's own and other people's practice of ascribing meaning to texts. Theory in this sense is, first and foremost, a mode of persistent questioning always

in danger of 'tipping over' into a self-confirmatory practice by letting its *provisional* answers 'harden' into dogma. However, oversimplifications of abstract theoretical thought will always find their limits in the resistance of texts with their precarious, complex and contingent relation to material history in its inaccessible totality. And it is this complex interrelation between the human and material dimensions of history in an increasingly mediatized and globalized world that can be addressed through reflexive strategies of reading texts after the linguistic turn.⁵⁸

Notes

- 1 Cf. P. Schöttler, 'Wer hat Angst vor dem "Linguistic Turn"?', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft: Zeitschrift für historische Sozialwissenschaft* 23, 1997, 134–151; idem, 'Historians and Discourse Analysis', *History Workshop Journal* 27, 1989, 37–65. For a more recent overview cf. J.E. Toews, 'Linguistic Turn and Discourse Analysis in History', in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2001, vol. 13, pp. 8916–8922.
- 2 Cf. K. Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*, London: Routledge, 1991 and B. Skordili, 'Little Narratives', in V.E. Taylor and C.E. Winqvist (eds), *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, London: Routledge, 2001, pp. 230–232.
- 3 Cf. R.J. Evans, *In Defense of History* [1997], New York/London: Norton, 2000, p. 7f. The debate, of course, is not confined to questions of history, but implicates the foundations of scientific and philosophical truth in general. See, for example, from a philosophical perspective P. Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism*, Oxford: Clarendon, 2006, and, from a journalistic perspective, O. Benson and J. Stangroom, *Why Truth Matters*, New York/London: Continuum, 2006.
- 4 Cf., for example, G.M. Spiegel (ed.), *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn*, New York/London: Routledge, 2005, in which only five out of 13 contributors hold positions in history while the remaining eight have backgrounds in political science, sociology, anthropology, psychoanalysis, philosophy and English studies.
- 5 Cf. R. Rorty (ed.), *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967.
- 6 For a programmatic textbook cf. C.G. Brown, *Postmodernism for Historians*. Harlow: Pearson, 2005, and with regard to the tacit linguistic turn=postmodernism equation esp. pp. 33–48.
- 7 A recent survey study in German (D. Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns: Neuorientierung in den Kulturwissenschaften*, Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2006) identifies no less than seven turns under the general heading of 'Cultural Turns': the interpretive turn, the performative turn, the reflexive or literary turn, the postcolonial turn, the translational turn, the spatial turn, and the iconic turn.
- 8 Cf. J. Hillis Miller, 'Presidential Address 1986: The Triumph of Theory, the Resistance to Reading, and the Question of the Material Base', *PMLA – Publications of the Modern Language Association* 102.3, 1987, 281–291.
- 9 Cf. J. Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 1.
- 10 Cf. P. Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 11–32.
- 11 Barry, *Beginning Theory*, pp. 32–36.
- 12 Needless to say, the condensation of this huge field of theorizing about reading and meaning within the confines of just one chapter will necessarily be reductive, but it is to be hoped that these very restrictions will facilitate the emergence of a map, the functional point of which, if it is to serve its purpose of orientation, is its reductiveness.
- 13 Cf. M.H. Abrams, 'Types and Orientations of Critical Theories', in: idem, *Doing Things With Texts*, New York: Norton, 1989, pp. 3–30.
- 14 On the seminal importance of the Reformation for the emergence of modernity cf. Alan Sinfield, 'Protestantism: Questions of Subjectivity and Control', in idem, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1992, pp. 143–180.
- 15 Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, New York: Seabury, 1975.
- 16 For an extensive overview in English cf. *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte, Freely Translated and Condensed by Harriet Martineau* [1896], Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2000. Available from the McMaster Archive for the History of Economic Thought: <<http://socserv2.mcmaster.ca/~econ/ugcm/3ll3/index.html>> (accessed 10 January, 2008).
- 17 For a concise introduction to Marxist thought cf. Peter Singer, *Marx: A Very Short Introduction* [1980], Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- 18 Ordered, for example, according to Hippolyte Taine's (1828–93) famous triad *race/milieu/moment* or Wilhelm Scherer's (1841–1886) version *das Erlernte/Ererbte/Erlebte* ('education'/'inheritance'/'experience').
- 19 Cf. J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, who explicitly draws upon Marx's and Engels's *The German Ideology* (1845).
- 20 Cf. A. Richardson, *Literature, Education and Romanticism: Reading as a Social Practice, 1780–1832*, Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- 21 It is this affinity between two critical counter-narratives that might explain why (neo-) Marxists succumbed so easily to the charms of aesthetic autonomy, as in Adorno's clinging to the notion of true and authentic art which somehow resists commodification or in Althusser's conviction that art is not among the ideologies (cf. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology*, p. 66).
- 22 K. Thomas, 'New Ways Revisited: How History's Border's Have Expanded in the Past Forty Years', *Times Literary Supplement* October 13, 2006, 3f., 4.
- 23 S. Tillyard, 'All Our Pasts: The Rise of Popular History', *Times Literary Supplement* October 13, 2006, 7–9, 9.
- 24 On a larger scale this development can be described in terms of a shift from ontological and essentialist conceptions of scientific truth to constructivist conceptions of scientific truth. See, for example, N. Luhmann, 'The Modernity of Science', *New German Critique* 61, 1994, 9–23. Again, it is important to point out that both dimensions were present in modern culture from fairly early on. Cf., for example, Kant's concept of an all-pervasive critique as indicated in the 1781 preface to his *Critique of Pure Reason* ('Our age is, in especial degree, the age of criticism, and to criticism everything must submit.' Quoted from <<http://www.hkbu.edu.hk/~ppp/cpr/prefs.html>> P 009n, accessed on Jan. 14, 2008) as opposed to the longing for objectivity underlying his work at large.
- 25 Cf. I.A. Richards, *Practical Criticism* [1929], London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964.
- 26 Cf. Abrams's 'objective theories' and the hermeneutic and Romantic heritage in notions of aesthetic autonomy as well as the larger frame of liberal humanism as indicated in the preceding sections of this chapter.
- 27 Cf. J.C. Ransom, *The New Criticism* [1941], Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1979.
- 28 Cf. E.M. Thompson, *Russian Formalism and Anglo-American New Criticism*, The Hague: Mouton, 1971.
- 29 V. Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', in D. Lodge (ed.) *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, Harlow: Longman, 1988, pp. 15–30.
- 30 I. Tynianov, *The Problem of Verse Language* [1924], Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1981.
- 31 I. Tynianov and R. Jakobson, 'Problems in the Study of Literature and Language' [1928], in Matejka and Pomorska, *Readings in Russian Poetics*, pp. 79–81.
- 32 R. Jakobson and C. Levi-Strauss, 'Les Chats of Charles Baudelaire' [1962], in R. Jakobson, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 3, The Hague: Mouton, 1981, pp. 447–464.

- 33 For a brief and accessible introduction to Structuralism cf. Barry, *Beginning Theory*, pp. 39–60.
- 34 Cf. F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, London: Duckworth, 1983.
- 35 Cf., for example, J. Mukařovský, *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts* [1936], Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1970; C. Levi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* [1964], New York: Harper and Row, 1969; R. Barthes, 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative' [1966], *New Literary History* 6, 1975, 237–262 and *Mythologies* [1957], New York: Hill and Wang, 1972.
- 36 R. Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* [1964], New York: Hill and Wang, 1968.
- 37 For the philosophy-linguistics-interface in this process and its recent shift towards history and culture cf. M. Currie, *Difference, The New Critical Idiom*, London: Routledge, 2004.
- 38 For an accessible and concise introduction to Poststructuralism and Deconstruction cf. Barry, *Beginning Theory*, pp. 61–80. The by now classic introduction in English is J. Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982.
- 39 Cf. J. Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' [1966], in D. Lodge (ed.) *Modern Criticism and Theory*, pp. 107–123 and *Of Grammatology* [1967], Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- 40 The most instructive illustration of this principle is probably the analogy to second language learners who are only allowed a monolingual dictionary for a written exam: every word that they look up is encoded in new words, a certain percentage of which would have to be looked up again etc. ad infinitum.
- 41 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 158.
- 42 See, for example, the assessment in Evans, *In Defense of History*, pp. 106–108, 206–210 and the broad overview in R. Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- 43 Cf. N. Luhmann, 'Why Does Society Describe Itself as Postmodern?', *Cultural Critique* 30, 1995, 171–186.
- 44 For some basic contours see also R. Barthes's influential essay 'From Work to Text' [1971], in J.V. Harari (ed.), *Textual Strategies*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979, pp. 73–81 (also in R. Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1989, pp. 56–64). For a concise overview of the implications of this development in terms of a widened scope beyond literary texts cf. P. Childs, *Texts: Contemporary Cultural Texts and Critical Approaches*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006, pp. 1–10 and passim.
- 45 Cf. S. Greenblatt's notion of a 'poetics of culture' at the heart of the New Historicism as introduced in S. Greenblatt, 'Towards a Poetics of Culture', in H. Aram Veveser (ed.), *The New Historicism*, New York: Routledge, 1989, pp. 1–14. Interestingly, the earlier Positivism/Marxism-divide resurfaced in the new, textual dispensation of the 1980s in the form of a political alternative between the largely U.S.-based New Historicism and an explicitly left-wing Cultural Materialism in the U.K. as well as in discussions about the relation between postmodernism and postcolonialism.
- 46 Typical literary examples of this transformation are the invention of the individualized, subjective 'speaker' in lyrical poetry in early modern times (in the English context particularly in sonnets by Wyatt, Surrey, Spenser, Sidney and then, of course, Shakespeare) as well as the invention of an omniscient authorial voice for the emergent genre of the modern novel by Henry Fielding in the 1740s.
- 47 It is probably the shift towards a fully fledged digital society which enables us to see the mediality of the age of print more clearly than ever while we are already on our way into the 'next society' (Peter Drucker) under the auspices of the computer. On the theoretical implications of this shift cf. C. Huck and C. Schinko, 'The Medial Limits of Culture: Culture as Text vs. Text as Culture', in G. Sebald and J. Weyand (eds), *Grenzgänge – BorderCrossings: Kulturtheoretische Perspektiven*, Münster: LIT, 2006, pp. 57–71.
- 48 Cf., for example, B.V. Street, *Literacy in Theory and Practice* [1984], Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999 and 'What's New in New Literacy Studies? Critical Approaches to Literacy in Theory and Practice', *Current Issues in Comparative Education* 5.2, 2003, 77–91 as well as, with a stronger historical focus, Gerd Baumann (ed.), *The Written Word: Literacy in Transition*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1986.
- 49 Cf. R. Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- 50 The profession's awareness of this crucial factor is marked by the inclusion of an article addressing this dimension in the *TLS New Ways of History Revisited* issue. Cf. Alex Burghart, 'Web Works', *Times Literary Supplement* October 13, 2006, 16–17.
- 51 S. Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.
- 52 Cf. D.B. Mathewson, 'A Critical Binarism: Source Criticism and Deconstructive Criticism', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 98, 2002, 3–28 who argues that the approaches are not antagonistic in a theological context but can rather be taken to mark various stages in a continuing modern/postmodern engagement with the problem of truth under modern conditions.
- 53 Cf. Stephen Greenblatt's influential analysis of the doubling of enabling and restricting functions in culture as summed up in S. Greenblatt, 'Culture', in Lentricchia and McLaughlin (eds), *Critical Terms*, pp. 225–223.
- 54 On the narratological implications of this threefold frame cf. C. Reinfandt, 'Dimensions of Meaning in Modern Narrative: A Systems-Theoretical Approach to Narratology', in S. Tötösy de Zepetnek and I. Sywenky (eds), *The Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture as Theory and Application*, Edmonton/Siegen: LUMIS publications, 1997, pp. 83–90 and 'A Matter of Perspective: The Social Framing of Narrative Meaning', in B. Reitz and S. Rieuwerts (eds), *Anglistentag 1999 Mainz: Proceedings*, Trier: WVT, 2000, pp. 389–402.
- 55 Cf. R. Barthes, 'The Discourse of History' and 'The Reality Effect' in *The Rustle of Language*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1989, pp. 127–140, 141–148 and F.R. Ankersmit, *The Reality Effect in the Writing of History: The Dynamics of Historiographical Topology*, Amsterdam: Noord-Hollandsche, 1989.
- 56 See also the 'Basic Checklist' of 'How to Interpret Primary Sources' in the introduction to the present volume, pp. 5–14.
- 57 On the implications of a shift from the language/text/discourse-paradigm of the main strand of 'postmodern' theory to an alternative paradigm focused on non-foundationalist notions of observation, mediality, and communication cf. N. Luhmann, 'Deconstruction as Second-Order Observing', *New Literary History* 24, 1993, 763–782.
- 58 Cf. a recent German introduction to historiography 'in global perspective' (Markus Völkel, *Geschichtsschreibung: Eine Einführung in globaler Perspektive*, Wien: Böhlau, 2006) as reviewed by Simon Ditchfield, 'Noted Down', *Times Literary Supplement* November 9, 2007, p. 7.

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Part II

Varieties of primary sources and their interpretation