From Romanticism to Critical Theory

The philosophy of German literary theory

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Introduction

Renewing the theoretical canon

THE ROOTS OF LITERARY THEORY

The history of worries about the point of the study of literature, and about how to establish the meaning of literary texts, is a very long one indeed:

> PROTAGORAS: In my view, Socrates, the most important part of a man's education is to become an authority on poetry. This means being able to criticise the good and bad points of a poem with understanding, to know how to distinguish them, and give one's reasons when asked. (Plato, *Protagoras* 339)
>
> SOCRATES: Conversation about poetry reminds me too much of the wine parties of second-rate and commonplace people.... No one can interrogate poets about what they say, and most often when they are introduced into the discussion some say the poet's meaning is one thing and some another, for the topic is one on which nobody can produce a conclusive argument.
>
> (Plato, *Protagoras* 347)

Questions about 'poetry' and literature are in fact inseparably connected to the history of Western philosophy, including, as we shall see, aspects of that philosophy, like analytical philosophy, which generally have little direct concern with literature. The starting point of this book is the emergence at a decisive point in the intellectual development of the modern world of theoretical concern with the status of the notion of 'literature'. Indeed, I shall later argue that 'literature' itself comes into existence in the period in question, because, prior to the growing dominance of non-theological conceptions of language in the second half of the eighteenth century, what it is that makes a particular text a 'literary' text is not necessarily an issue of any wider significance. The rise of 'literature' and the rise of philosophical aesthetics—of a new philosophical concern with understanding the nature of art—are inseparable phenomena, which are vitally connected to changes in conceptions of truth in modern thought. It is this latter aspect of the question of 'literature', which has been too often neglected in literary theory based on the assumptions of French structuralism and post-structuralism, that will be central to this book: hence my desire to give an account of the philosophy of German literary theory rather than just of 'German literary theory'.

Why, though, should there have been such sustained world-wide attention to the theory of literature in recent years? No doubt the justified feeling that the academic study of literature can get rather too close to what goes on at the 'wine parties of second-rate and commonplace people' was a factor in the rise of literary theory at the end of the 1960s. However, the motivations behind the differing positions in literary theory have been so diverse that it is difficult to see any common denominator between them. Motivations have ranged from the scientistic desire to prove that one can make empirically testable truth claims about literary texts of the same kind as can be made about physical phenomena (in certain versions of structuralism), to the desire to unmask class or gender ideology in even the most admired products of Western literary culture (in the most varying versions of Marxist and Feminist theory). Despite this diversity of aims most such positions have at least shared the need to establish stronger legitimations for literary study, either by reflecting upon just what it is trying to achieve in its existing forms or by suggesting that it ought to concentrate on doing something else. Literary theory is, then, usually bound up with the perceived need to legitimate the study of literature, or, perhaps more significantly, with the suggestion that such legitimation is now lacking. One of my major concerns here is to show how the analysis of some of the attempts to legitimate literary study necessarily takes us into key areas of modern philosophy. The need to integrate the disciplines of literary study and philosophy in new ways is, I propose, vital to the longer-term health of both disciplines: there *is* for most of us in the developed Western world no *immediately* important social and political point to the revelation of the ideological aspects of major bourgeois literary works, and it is time that radical critics finally admitted this fact. Important work needs to be done, though, in showing how issues which emerge in relation to literature are, when connected to important developments in contemporary philosophy, germane to issues concerning our self-understanding which do potentially play an important role in engaging with virtually any area of modern society.

Despite the enormous success and influence of the literary theory which began in the late 1960s there is now a growing suspicion, even among some of its practitioners, that literary theory itself is in crisis. The signs of this suspicion have, of course, been eagerly seized upon by those who never engaged in literary theory in the first place. Despite the threadbare nature of the arguments of many traditionalist opponents of literary theory, it is becoming clear that some of the more ambitious claims for literary theory are in need of revision and that some of the more extreme versions of post-structuralist theory in particular cannot be defended. This book is intended, then, in the light of the decline of the euphoria that inevitably follows any fundamental reorientation in an academic discipline, to provide new impetus for theoretical work in all areas of the humanities by changing the focus of the theoretical debate in the direction of a more informed philosophical consideration of the issues. It is also intended to show that the extreme form of the opposition to literary theory is simply mistaken, because the essential bases for such reflection have been with us at least since the German Romantics and form part of mainstream philosophy. In this respect the very fact that literary theory has, because of its deeper historical roots, not been quite such a controversial issue in Germany as it has been in Britain, France, and the USA, should give pause for thought to those who are so implacably opposed to it. This difference in perception also has to do with the differing perceptions of the role and nature of philosophy in the intellectual culture of these countries.

Why, then, write a book which focuses on the German tradition of reflection upon literature?[1] The initial answer is that the German philosophical traditions I shall be exploring are the historical and theoretical 'condition of possibility' of the new wave of theory which developed from the 1960s onwards in the work of Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man and others. It will become apparent, though, that the German traditions in question have yet to be understood in sufficient depth, a fact which must affect our understanding of recent French theory.[2] A further obvious legitimation for such a book is the fact that many people in German studies, especially in Great Britain, have failed to engage with French and American literary theory, let alone with German theory. Many students in German studies will read some Immanuel Kant or some Friedrich Schlegel, or even some Walter Benjamin, but there is too little awareness that the theoretical issues with which these thinkers were engaged are very close to the issues that make certain eminent figures in German studies and other areas of the humanities so hot under the collar when they are attached to the name of Jacques Derrida. As we shall see, an apparently dead piece of the history of German ideas, like the 'Pantheism controversy' which began in 1783, involves many of the questions that eventually lead both to post-structuralism and to some of the dilemmas of contemporary analytical philosophy. Rather than these issues being the product of a new fashion, then, they actually involve a history which goes back at least as far as the beginnings of German Romanticism. The importance of this tradition will also be shown from a different direction: approaches in analytical philosophy to questions of meaning have, until very recently, seemed very distant from questions posed by the tradition of German hermeneutic philosophy whose origins play a major role in what I have to say here. The fact is, though, that some of the most interesting developments in contemporary American philosophy, in the work of Donald Davidson, Hilary Putnam, Richard Rorty and others, come remarkably close to aspects of a tradition which, with the exception of Kant, is never even mentioned by most analytical philosophers.

LITERATURE, AESTHETICS AND IDEOLOGY

What, then, do I actually mean by ‘literary theory’? Am I not failing to see that, if the fuss over theory is to be explained, something radically new must have emerged at the end of the 1960s which changed so many people’s approaches to literature? It all depends, though, upon what is understood as the real innovation in literary theory. In his invaluable *Literary Theory,* Terry Eagleton cites the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky’s 1917 essay ‘Art as Device’ as the decisive moment in the development of what would come to be known as literary theory (Eagleton 1983 p. vii). In that essay Shklovsky attempted to establish ways of analysing literary texts which freed the reading of the text from the attempt to interpret its meaning in terms of the biography of its author, the history of the time of the text’s production, or other factors beyond the text. For Shklovsky and the other Russian Formalists, the linguistic techniques in the literary text which ‘defamiliarised’ our habitual perceptions became the criterion of ‘literariness’. By concentrating upon verifiable features of the *language* of the text this approach moved the focus of interpretation away from the idea that one is reconstructing the author’s intended meaning to the idea that textual meaning is not primarily constituted at the level of the intentions of the author at all. What we understand are the words on the page, which do not require knowledge of what was intended by the person who wrote those words for them to be comprehensible: we understand via the rules and contexts of the language into which we are socialised, not by access to the inner mental acts of others. A related approach to meaning will, of course, come to be shared by the tradition of analytical philosophy which develops via Gottlob Frege, and others, parallel with the early manifestations of literary theory such as the work of Shklovsky.[3] The vital aspect of this shift in understanding for literary theory was, then, the change in the locus of meaning from author to text, a shift which also leads to attention to the role of the interpreter in the constitution of textual meaning.

In the light of the importance for the emergence of literary theory of this change of focus towards language and away from the author, it might seem to be rather stretching the point to suggest that the real founders of literary theory are the Romantic thinkers Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis (the pen-name of Friedrich von Hardenberg) and F.D.E.Schleiermacher, in their work from the 1790s onwards. This work was, of course, written before the development of the kind of linguistics supposedly capable of establishing binding norms of everyday language which Shklovsky thinks literary texts transgress. Indeed, many approaches to literary theory have seen the hermeneutic tradition which develops as part of German Romanticism as the source of precisely the kind of interpretation which locates meaning in the individual author qua creator of the text and therefore leads literary criticism to search for that meaning by attempting to reconstruct the contexts of the author’s internal and external world. If literary theory depends upon the move *away* from this hermeneutic paradigm, why claim it begins with the early German Romantics?

The reasons for my version of the story of literary theory become clearer if one considers Shklovsky's essay from another perspective. Rather than seeing the essay predominantly in terms of linguistics and textual theory, and therefore regarding it as a prototype for structuralist and post-structuralist theories of the text, one can see its argument as really an argument about aesthetics. The 'aesthetic' aspect of the literary text can here be understood simply as that which is not bound by existing linguistic and formal rules, which is significant precisely because it is not rule-bound. The vital point is that a proper understanding of the role of aesthetics in literary theory enables one to see many aspects of the work of Derrida and others as a continuation of a tradition in modern philosophy, not as a wholly novel (let alone disreputable) way of approaching philosophy. In Russian Formalism the text takes on aesthetic status if it reveals the already known world in a new light, thereby rendering the familiar unfamiliar. The analysis of such revelation is admittedly at the level of deviation from linguistic norms, and literary theory has generally tended to rely upon particular—sometimes questionable—conceptions of language, deriving in particular from Formalism and from Saussurian linguistics. What interests me here, though, is how this revelation itself is to be understood. This is a question about the relationship of the notion of literature to aesthetics, rather than to linguistics. Underlying many of my subsequent arguments will be the premise that without this change in orientation towards the aesthetic literary theory will end up without a valid way of talking about 'literature', with consequences I shall discuss below.

Eagleton justifiably maintains that defamiliarisation is a possibility inherent in any use of language at all. This can either mean that we give up the notion of defamiliarisation as a means of reliably identifying literature, or—a point which Eagleton largely ignores—that its becoming significant in the discussion of literature may turn out not to be primarily a linguistic issue at all. Much here will turn upon what one thinks language is, and I shall spend some considerable time on this issue in the following chapters. The fact that defamiliarisation need not be understood solely in linguistic terms is evident in all kinds of aesthetic experience: for example, a painting or a piece of music can also be understood as 'defamiliarising' habitual perceptions. Linguistic defamiliarisation can therefore be seen as only one form of what Martin Heidegger termed the 'world-disclosing' capacity of art, art itself being understood as that which 'discloses' the world in new ways: in this context Manfred Frank (1989b) cites Paul Klee's dictum that art 'renders reality visible', rather than copying or representing what is known to be already there.[4] The examples of wordless music and non-representational visual art can suggest why the capacity for world-disclosure has to be understood in more than the restricted sense involved in linguistic defamiliarisation. Although we may not always be able to say exactly what it is that is revealed or articulated to us by a piece of music, that does not mean that the piece is not meaningful in some important sense. The same, as we shall see later, also applies to new metaphors, which are not amenable to definitive paraphrase. The implications of this aspect of aesthetics have too often been obscured in many existing approaches to literary theory, because of the desire to unmask what are seen as the reactionary tendencies of the understanding of art and literature in the Western bourgeois tradition. I shall argue that this evaluation of the tradition of aesthetics in modern European thought is, both in terms of progressive politics and in terms of a workable account of interpretation, a serious mistake.

Thus far we have not got much closer to a satisfactory account of what is meant by 'literature' than the suggestion that it is linked to questions about what might be meant by art. This could look more like a regression to older problems than a potentially new approach, but I want to suggest that the issues of aesthetics are still very much with us. Eagleton claims that 'There is no "essence" of literature whatsoever' (Eagleton 1983 p. 9), precisely because any use of language which deviates from established linguistic practices can be said to involve defamiliarisation. It is, he maintains, a question of ideologically interested judgement as to what counts as 'literature', a fact which is reflected in the battles over the changing membership of the 'canon' of socially and academically accepted literary works. Literature is, as such, a functional term which is used in relation to certain texts deemed to be worthy of cultural approval within a particular society or class. The vital question here, though, is how the notion of judgement itself is to be understood. Eagleton's case depends upon making a clear distinction between kinds of judgement, in which aesthetic judgements are inherently linked to ideology. The fact that all judgements—be they cognitive, moral or aesthetic—necessarily involve evaluation rightly does not trouble Eagleton. What matter are the further consequences which are drawn from the functioning of evaluation in specific historical contexts. Eagleton sees 'literature' as inextricably implicated in the legitimation of forms of social power and control, most notably those of the modern European bourgeoisie. It has no 'essence' because the functioning of these forms of social power is so diverse that the very fact of regarding 'literature' as *au-dessus de la mêlée* would, by hiding their ideological roots, actually contribute to the ideological function of those texts that are valued at certain periods under the name of literature.

However, the failure to identify literature as being 'a distinct, bounded object of knowledge' (ibid. p. 205), in the same way as, say, the chemical elements are bounded objects of knowledge, is a less persuasive argument for subsuming literature into a theory of ideology than Eagleton tries to make it. It is evidently wrong to underestimate the ideological functions of what a society or class honorifically terms 'literature'. The danger, though, is that the notion of ideology can become hopelessly vague, because any cultural artefact can be seen as functioning ideologically if it has effects on the perceptions and understandings of the members of a society. Important discriminations must therefore be made here if the notion of ideology is not to become vacuous. Eagleton's claim is that literature ties in with the existing forms of domination in the society of its origin. However, even at this level the identification, for example, of the possible stabilising ideological function of Theodor Fontane's novels in relation to fears about social unrest in the Wilhelmine period may obscure other ways in which those texts could also have subverted the dominant ideological perspectives of their time.[5] This kind of interpretative ambiguity already poses the question as to whether differing possible readings are merely ideologically at odds, or whether one of the readings may invalidate the others, because it tells us more about the work's capacity to reveal the world. It also points to the fact that one of the most vital features of a text qua literature may be that it provokes certain significant kinds of interpretative ambiguity.[6] This alone does not give us a sufficient criterion for literature—and the very notion of criterion, as I show below, may be itself problematic with regard to literature—but it is arguable that texts which retain a productive ambiguity in thoroughly differing contexts over long periods seem to be those to which the name literature is now often attached. It may be that other texts would have been equally able to do this, had they not been excluded from attention by dominant cultural valuations, but the fact that the history of culture involves the distressing waste of works of great value does not mean that the works that have the luck to survive *only* do so because they fit into dominant ideological expectations. This would anyway be a circular argument which no one could validate unless they were beyond ideology, a location which Eagleton's theory itself cannot allow.[7]

A perhaps even more important danger of Eagleton's position for a radical approach to literature is that interpretation of a text in terms of its ideological functions within its own era may render the text inert for its readers today. This can then lead to a surrendering of the text to those who wish to mobilise it for their own ideological ends. If the Left (wrongly) insist that Shakespeare was ideologically a proto-Tory, the Right will thank them for handing him over to them as a part of their heritage which can make most of the Left's approved cultural icons look puny in comparison (on this see Ryan 1995). In that case, though, what on earth should the Left do with figures like Richard Wagner? The failure to engage with the most powerful works of bourgeois culture, like those of Wagner, beyond revealing their indisputable relations to barbarism, means we do not understand why such works are enduringly powerful in ways which cannot finally be grasped by the category of ideology and which cannot be merely a function of their roots in barbarism. Although great works of art almost invariably involve aspects which must repel critics concerned with human emancipation, it is fatal to reduce them to these aspects.

Underlying such questions is the very simple question of why one is bothering with these particular works in the first place, especially when one is primarily concerned with unmasking their ideological functions. If this really is one's primary concern, one must already have judged that the works exercise such an ideological influence via their aesthetic power that the unmasking is essential. This assumption itself already seems to concede a lot to the aesthetic, in so far as the attention of radical critics to works in the 'canon' of classics either rests on the blunt fact that they are rightly or wrongly what gets read and studied, which would seem to obviate the need to worry about them so much, or upon the fact that the classics *are* somehow different, despite the ideological shadow which they also cast. Often the fact of ideological misuse is so patent, as in the reception of the work of Goethe or Hölderlin by the Nazis, that it is hardly difficult to show that it *is* misuse.[8] The fact of ideological misuse does, though, raise the vital issue of whether the revelation of that misuse is achieved from a position which is not itself merely another ideological perspective—so that one person's misuse is merely another person's use. I shall be looking at these issues in more detail later, particularly in Chapter 5, but it is important already to see the inherent complexity they involve for a radical approach to literature. The fact that Goethe's works are still important could be and sometimes is the result of their bolstering reactionary and patriarchal ideologies—think of the sexism evident in the different fates of Gretchen and Faust at the end of *Faust* Part II—but to begin with this assumption is already to lose the battle, because trying to reveal what else they have meant and may yet come to mean can then only be a secondary concern. Without an orientation towards understanding the truth-potential in art that is more than ideology, many of the most essential issues concerning the significance of art cannot even be discussed. The vital task here is to develop an account of truth which enables such issues to appear at all: this will be a constant concern in what follows.

Eagleton tends to assume that because cultural evaluations are continually being transformed they are best dealt with via the category of ideology. Hidden behind this is the assumption that 'truth' would be that which is not thus subject to continual transformation and not linked to the exercise of power, and that truth's task would be to grasp the 'essence' of the object. Eagleton cites Marx's famous dilemma, given the assumption that the stage of social and economic development of a society must relate to its degree of cultural development, over the 'eternal charm' of Greek art, suggesting that it is mistaken to see this charm as eternal, because social and cultural conditions might change and our positive judgements of Greek art might be wholly revised at some point in the future. He thus implies that our present interest in Greek art is predominantly a product of our particular culture. In one sense this is a truism: if our culture were not at least minimally interested in it we would have no access to it anyway. It may indeed turn out to be the case that Greek tragedy will become wholly distant to some future society (as it no doubt already contingently is in many already existing societies), but we do not *know* if it will, which makes Eagleton's argument mere supposition. In contrast, if one considers the real historical change in the significance of Greek tragedy in Schelling's and Nietzsche's shocking reorientation of the interpretation of tragedy away from the ideas of the Good, the True and the Beautiful towards tragedy as the expression of an inherently riven 'Dionysian' cosmos, a much more substantial basis for argument than Eagleton's questionable counterfactual suggestion is revealed.[9] In this perspective the decisive question is how these texts can undergo such a radical shift in significance, while yet remaining alive for their differing recipients.[10]

Eagleton's position here is based on a false alternative. His concern is to get away from the idea of an entity called 'great literature', which is supposed to be an expression of eternal human values, in order not to ignore the evident historical relativity and ideological interestedness of such evaluations. Consequently he deconstructs the very notion of a unified 'thing called literature' by revealing the disparate genealogy of the notion. His suspicion is primarily of literature 'in the sense of a set of works of assured and unalterable value' (Eagleton 1983 p. 11). This, though, is by no means the only way the word 'literature', which Eagleton admits is the best available term we have at present for what he is talking about, has been used. The value attached to Greek tragedy qua 'literature' has been radically *different* for differing cultures throughout history. As such the real question is why radically differing—and even wholly opposed —interpretations continue to emerge in relation to these works rather than others. This, as T.W.Adorno, Heidegger, Gadamer and others have realised, necessarily connects questions of literature to central philosophical questions concerning art and truth.

Eagleton's assertion that there is no 'essence' of literature means that there is no criterion which can reliably be employed to identify whether a text is literature or not, as opposed, say, to the concept of oxygen, which can usually be employed to establish whether a gas is oxygen or not. He invokes the notion of the 'eternally given and immutable', which, he says, cannot apply to 'literature', thereby seeing literature in relation to more reliable concepts, such as those in the natural sciences. It is, though, arguable that *no* particular knowledge is 'eternally given and immutable', because all particular knowledge continually changes its status in relation to the world within which it is understood, and inherently requires interpretation for its validity. Though we *may,* for example, mean the same as Lavoisier when we talk of oxygen, it is another matter altogether to assert that what we think oxygen is is the same as what Lavoisier thought it was (it almost certainly is not). This topic is far too complex to be dealt with appropriately here, but it is worth noting how contentious it has been in recent analytical philosophy.[11] Furthermore, in another perspective, the very lack of a stable concept of the literary can actually be used to *defend* the notion of literature rather than eliminate it.

In this view the literary text is precisely that kind of text which resists being categorised in terms of the attributes which it shares with other texts. Schleiermacher claims ‘There can be no concept of a style’, in the same way as Eagleton claims there can be no stable concept of literature. Schleiermacher does so, though, as we shall see in Chapter 5, in order to defend the significance of the literary. This way of talking about the literary is in one sense necessarily indeterminate: the important attributes cannot be ‘identified’ in the strict sense of the word, which entails subsuming those attributes under an already existing concept, or attaching the appropriate predicate to them, because they must be unique to particular texts. The sense that Kafka’s style is ultimately inimitable, but yet exclusively and identifiably *his* style, is one factor in what makes his texts aesthetically significant. There are clearly problems with this position, but it does do justice to one of the most widely shared intuitions concerning literary works, namely that they are immune to paraphrase in ways that non-literary texts are not.[12] The conception suggested here does not entail establishing the ‘essence’ of literature, because what is a unique literary style when it emerges in the work of an author at one point in time might (and often does) subsequently become part of an established, identifiable repertoire of stylistic means. ‘Literature’ here becomes understood via transformations of language, not via the notion of a set of approved fixed cultural artefacts. The presence of the ‘literary’ is consequently not confined to certain kinds of text, but is, as Eagleton himself suggests, a possibility in any text when it reshapes linguistic and conceptual possibilities. Classification at differing historical periods of certain kinds of text as ‘literature’ is therefore to be understood as only one part of a wider process whose significance cannot be circumscribed by a theory of ideology. The decisive issue is *why* value comes to be attached to linguistic and formal innovation in this way, and the theories at issue here will be used to suggest answers to this question which affect much more than just the question of literature.

One alternative to this approach to the question of ‘what is literature?’ is to give up altogether on reflection about the nature of the literary, and simply to ‘get on with the job’ of literary criticism. This position, which is still the norm in many areas of literary study, seems to me to be intellectually dishonest, especially in the light of the cogent attacks, like those of Eagleton, on many of the dominant conceptions in literary study. Reflection on what literature is relates to the need constantly to show anew why literature matters: once one fails to do this and just carries on working in an established mode of literary criticism an essential dimension of the motivation for literary study can be lost. The decline of the study of literature in many modern languages subjects is not just to be explained by students’ burning, career-driven interest in ‘area studies’, or whatever marketable alternative modern linguists have thought up to keep Philistine governments at bay. English studies have few such problems and have been given a new lease of life by the controversies generated over literary and cultural theory, and European philosophy continues to grow in popularity despite the formidable intellectual difficulties it entails. Clearly it is undesirable to become involved in meta-reflections at every point of one's work in the study of literature; it is, though, even more undesirable to pretend that established approaches to literary scholarship are self-legitimating. That is the route to the final demise of the subject which one purports to love.

In a very important sense, though, most study of literature is pointless: there is no unanimous goal towards which it is oriented. Although the most obvious point of reading literary texts would seem to be the 'pleasure of the text', for example, it is worth noting how little academic work on literature has anything convincing to say about this pleasure and how little sense of that pleasure is really allowed to penetrate into academic discourse. Scholarly journals are full of new interpretations of the classics and of a range of other texts deemed worthy of academic attention. However, the biggest *mistake* of traditional literary criticism, I would suggest, is just to assume that its goal is to establish the meaning or meanings of literary texts. Regarding this as a mistake might sound rather odd. No doubt concern about the meaning of a literary text is vital to our engagement with it, but one of the main achievements of literary theory has been to force a reconsideration of what constitutes the meaning of a text. Consider the following: if the goal of reaching the meaning of the text were to be achieved, the discipline of literary criticism could presumably abolish itself, at least in relation to those texts where there was final consensus over their meaning.[13] The traditional interpretative attitude to the text feeds upon one way in which people respond to the challenge of texts whose meaning is not immediately apparent to them, by suggesting that research, especially into the life and times of the author, can reveal what that meaning really is, or add to and deepen the initial intuitions one has about that meaning. At the same time such criticism, whose partial validity is, as far as I am concerned, incontrovertible, fails to come to terms with crucial other aspects of literary experience, such as the sense of the text's *resistance* to being clearly understood, despite its apparent meaningfulness. The notion that the latter experience ought really to be converted into the former fits the classic model of Cartesian rationalism: the critical task is understood in the form of a move from indistinct personal impressions of the text, to clear and distinct ideas which can be shown to be publicly valid by use of evidence from the text and its contexts.

Varying versions of this model have tended to and largely still do form one important basis of literary studies as an academic discipline.[14] The easiest way to see what might be wrong with the model is to ponder what it is supposed to do with the recalcitrant elements of a modernist text, such as a Kafka short story (on this issue see Menke 1991, Bowie 1992b). If the recalcitrant elements can be definitively interpreted in discursive language, then the point of the critical task would seem to be a game of 'hide and seek the meaning', which comes to an end when the interpreter has found the real meaning cowering behind the cellar door of the text. At this point the literary text is safely rendered into discursivity, but, of course, thereby becomes thoroughly pointless, because we no longer need the literary text itself to communicate what it really means. Now, as we shall see in the following chapters, the notion of pointlessness is vital to aesthetics, but *this* kind of pointlessness would obviate art altogether.[15] The 'Cartesian' model is historically very recent and is in some measure the result of the perceived need for humanities subjects to reach the level of rigour that was assumed to be present in the natural sciences, an attitude which, as we shall see in Chapter 6, is associated with Wilhelm Dilthey. Furthermore, the obvious fact about the 'Cartesian' approach to texts is that it can be applied to any text of any kind, which actually leads it into a strange convergence with Eagleton's position.

The radical alternative to the complacency of the literary critical consensus is the complete renunciation, in the manner of Eagleton, of the notion of literature, based on the fact that most existing attempts to give an adequate account of what literature is end up in the kind of difficulties he so effectively reveals. Interestingly, the traditional critic tends to end up agreeing with Eagleton despite himself, because he does not in fact possess a defensible way of approaching the literary. The traditionalist claim that the interpretation of 'forms, structures, images, allusions, symbols, conventions and their transgression', which are the 'means that literature has developed to offset or bypass any limitations of the bare linguistic medium'[16] (Reed 1992 p. 209), is the object of literary study must first deal with the problem that the elements to be interpreted are not particular to literature. Indeed, ancient rhetoric requires attention to almost exactly the same elements—Eagleton suggests that a new version of rhetoric is one of the directions in which the study of literature should move once it has ceased to be solely about privileged texts. Reed insists that we do not need philosophy to carry on literary study, but he locates that study in relation to a range of topics which are the bread and butter of a whole series of philosophically oriented disciplines: the establishing of the conventions which literature transgresses was, as we have already seen, a product of the particular conception of linguistics which fed Russian Formalism, and helped form the basis of structuralist textual theory. Do we, then, give up the notion of literature after all, because it can either be subsumed into ideology or because there are no actual criteria on offer to show us what it is? It should already be plain that I think this renunciation of the term is a significant mistake, which derives from a characteristic misunderstanding of the role of aesthetics in modern philosophy. Both the dominant literary critical consensus and Eagleton's view can be most appropriately questioned by reinterpreting aspects of the German tradition in the light of issues which have become apparent in contemporary theory.

For many people, the worrying aspect of my position will lie in its reliance upon a notion of judgement which makes no claims to the kind of certainty that could be achieved either by arriving at more stable definitions, relying on well-established criteria of literary criticism, or by seeing literature as simply a subset of other ideological formations. In this context it is important to see, however, that much recent philosophy, both European and analytical, has increasingly moved away from the idea that there are fixed boundaries between areas of judgement, towards the idea that all claims to validity inherently involve interpretation. These strands of contemporary philosophy thereby echo issues from the origins of German literary theory. Kant already regarded the question of judgement as perhaps the most important issue in our very understanding of truth in any area, not just in relation to literature or other art. In his later work he did so particularly with regard to aesthetic judgements, thereby setting in motion one of the main traditions of German literary theory. Issues from this tradition, from Romanticism to Heidegger and the Frankfurt School, to the present, will form the object of the following chapters. The fact is that Romantic philosophy initiates a vital but often misunderstood transformation in modern philosophy, which is linked to the development of Romantic philosophy's particular notion of literature. Both Eagleton's theory and the literary critical approach cannot adequately articulate this notion of literature, which can be used to open up new perspectives on themes that have reemerged in recent literary theory.

THE ROMANTIC HERITAGE

What, then, does the Romantic approach offer which the other positions we have so far looked at do not? Eagleton regards Shklovsky's founding essay as particularly significant because it moved literary study away both from the categories of 'creativity' and 'imagination', and from the notion that literature 'represents' the social world, towards the study of linguistic techniques and to a conception which does not regard literature as the representation, the 'copying' or 'imitation' in language, of a world constituted in the mind of the individual author or reader. He thinks this move revokes the legitimacy of theories of literature that are attached to the ideas of representation and imagination, in favour of a theory of ideology and rhetoric. The theory of ideology links the production and reception of literature to wider collective political and social questions; the theory of rhetoric concerns itself with the pragmatic effects which texts, as 'discursive practices', can have in historical and social contexts. Such a move away from the 'imagination' might seem to make my projected story even less convincing, in so far as creativity and imagination are evidently central to Romantic thought. It is, though, a mistake to think that the everyday understanding of these terms exhausts what they meant in Romantic theory.

A central aim of early German Romantic thought was to bring together in a new synthesis the increasingly specialised knowledges that were developing in both the natural and the human sciences at the end of the eighteenth century. This synthesis would counter the increasing divergence of these particular knowledges by integrating them into a world-view in which the activities of free human beings and the law-bound nature investigated by the sciences were not rigidly opposed. The Romantic synthesis was to replace the discredited scholastic and early Enlightenment picture of a world whose unity was a priori divinely guaranteed. The work of art, understood as the manifestation of a unification of necessity and freedom not possible in any other realm of human activity, played a vital role in Romantic approaches to such a synthesis.[17] This, however, already points to one of Eagleton's major contentions against Romantic thought. The emergence in this period of the idea of a realm of human activity which unites necessity and freedom would seem inherently ideological, because that realm will fail to confront the real antagonisms in the society which gave rise to it, in which the most basic forms of freedom are denied to most of the members of that society—we are talking, after all, about the world which drove many of its most socially and politically aware members to despair, madness or suicide. In the Romantic conception art can be regarded as reconciling in the realm of appearance what is unreconciled in reality, and thus as a form of ideology.[18] Art does so, though, because it grants freedom to the imagination, allowing it to move beyond the world of what there is to a world of as yet unrealised possibility. There is therefore, in the strict sense of the word, a 'utopian' aspect involved in the understanding of art.[19]

Understanding this utopian aspect of art prevents a one-way interpretation of art as ideology. The initial question here is whether one regards the work of the imagination as merely a substitute for something more solid or 'real'. Clearly the imagination can produce omnipotence fantasies of the kind manifested in the worst of Hollywood: that the imagination is the prime object of ideological manipulation is beyond question. But consider the following: if there were no realm in which images of an as yet non-existent freedom became available to the oppressed in a society it would become hard to see how any hope for a better world could even be *understood.* The fact is that the argument that art merely reinforces the ideological superstructure is essentially the same as the 'Young Hegelian' argument, common to both Feuerbach and the early Marx, that religion is an obstacle to real social progress because it offers images of a non-existent after-life. Religion and art are in this view providers of only apparent solutions to real problems—which is, of course, also the function of mythology. In this respect the Romantic enthusiasm for art has generally —and in some senses rightly—been understood as part of the attempts to fill gaps left by the process of secularisation and rationalisation in Western societies.

It is crucial, though, to understand the complexity of the decline of theology, and the relationship to art of that decline. Even Marx did not see religion in a one-sided manner: the 'opium of the people' is a real and justifiable necessity when the pain of life is intolerable and cannot immediately be redeemed. Furthermore, the power of theology as a source of meaning is not obliterated when belief in God comes to be undermined.

Indeed, one can argue that much of the Marxist tradition, particularly that current which leads, via Romanticism, from the early Marx to the work of Adorno, Ernst Bloch and Benjamin, is actually concerned with trying to come to terms with the demise of theology while not surrendering the resources offered by the theological tradition for human emancipation. Jürgen Habermas, the most distinguished contemporary heir of this tradition, has recently insisted that

> As long as religious language brings with it inspiring, indeed indispensable semantic contents, which (for the time being?) withdraw themselves from the power of expression of philosophical language and still await translation into discourses of legitimation *(begründende Diskurse),* philosophy will, even in its post-metaphysical form, neither be able to replace or repress religion. (Habermas 1988 p. 60)

By connecting this conception of religious language to the question of aesthetics and literature we can better begin to understand what is at stake in Romantic philosophy. The semantic contents of those forms of language which are not reducible to any other type of discourse are precisely what is at issue in the Romantic conception of art. Stanley Cavell has suggested that ‘the activity of modern art, both in production and reception, is to be understood in categories which are, or were, religious’ (Cavell 1969 p. 175): the failure to understand how this is the case is one root of many of the invalid attempts to reduce literature to ideology.

Romantic thought, as we shall see, was driven by the insights of Kant’s philosophy and by an understanding of language which was linked to the emergence of interest in the integrity and diversity of other cultures characteristic of the second half of the eighteenth century in Europe. As well as expressing fears both about the dangers inherent in the rise of deterministic conceptions of the natural world, of the kind summarised in the title of La Mettrie’s book *Man the Machine,* and about the processes of rationalisation in society that form part of the rise of capitalism, this opening of perspectives on to the diversity of human languages also related to the increasingly rapid death of the rigid ideologies of feudalism, including the ideology of established religion. The resultant theory was often eclectic, refusing to accept definitive boundaries between apparently differing intellectual spheres. This was both its strength and its weakness: sometimes the imaginative creation of analogies between differing areas of knowledge took over completely from scientific or other kinds of validation.[20] At the same time the use of analogy and metaphor to connect apparently disparate phenomena did lead to real scientific advances and to ideas which still command our attention. Even at this level of generality the links of Romantic theory to aspects of literary theory should begin to be apparent. The combination of aesthetics and new approaches to language leads to a loosening of rigid demarcations between areas of knowledge. It is this reorientation of established approaches to knowledge which makes both literary theory and Romantic philosophy so controversial.[21]

Literary theory is itself a hybrid rather than a unified discipline, combining resources from philosophy, linguistics, psychoanalysis, feminism, social theory and other areas of the humanities, in order to question basic assumptions about the understanding of texts and other bearers of truth and meaning in both the human and the natural sciences. Like Romantic philosophy, literary theory can be understood as part of a growing reaction against the separation of the everyday 'life world' from the systemically determined spheres of science, technology and modern bureaucracy. By crossing boundaries between subjects it attempts to reveal the repressions involved in the specialisation of knowledge into discrete cultures of experts. The fact that objections of the kind made to Romantic thinking have resurfaced in recent objections to literary theory can further suggest ways in which they are closely related. The fundamental attribute which Romantic philosophy shares with literary theory is, then, a questioning of the borders between differing disciplines, including those between the humanities and the sciences.

By reducing the theory of literature to a theory of ideology Eagleton's version of the story of literary theory pays too little attention to questions of aesthetics which emerge in the Romantic re-examination of knowledge in all spheres that results from the decline of traditional theology. For Eagleton, 'literature' becomes, as we saw, one of the ways in which a particular social class attempts to make its own self-legitimation into the universal form of legitimation, a trait it shares with the dominant bourgeois conceptions of other forms of high art.[22] For the Romantics literature and art are actually linked to a much more complex sense of the nature and value of human knowledge than Eagleton's theory can countenance.

THE TRUTH OF LITERATURE

If the tension between the conception of the text as bearer of the ideology of its class and era, and the conception of the text as a work of art which, because of its claim to truth, cannot be reduced to its ideological functions is not sustained, a whole dimension of our understanding of the significance of modern art and literature in relation to other forms of knowledge and expression becomes obscured. Perhaps the most significant dimension of the theory we shall be considering, which plays virtually no role at all in Eagleton's account, is, therefore, the emergence via Romantic theory of the idea that works of art are bearers of truth. For this to *be* the case a change away from the notion of truth as 'representation', as the adequacy or correspondence of mental concept or proposition to its object, a notion which probably dates back at least as far as Aristotle, must take place. This change in the concept of truth is linked to the move away from a conception of art as mimesis towards the idea of art as a revelation or 'disclosure' of the world.

In a representational theory of truth a statement is true because it corresponds to the way the world already is 'out there', which means that what is true pre-exists its being able to be said that it is true. The difficulty of sustaining this conception lies in the fact that we have no obvious warrant for claiming that the truth of a proposition already exists in this way, without begging the question as to what makes the proposition true by presupposing the conception which is at issue in the first place. The move away from representational conceptions creates a tension in the modern notion of truth which underlies many of the debates over truth and ideology in Marxism and elsewhere, and which has become important in various areas of contemporary philosophy, both European and analytical. I want to argue that without a proper understanding of this tension literary theory is likely to continue pursuing some paths which are already proving to be dead ends. By attending to this tension in the history of Western philosophy literary theory can and should be led closer to the wider discussion which is developing between the analytical and European traditions of philosophy. The further benefit of this approach to these issues is that it gives one much stronger methodological legitimations for the study of literature, by suggesting that truth is not that which is confined to the verifiable and instrumentally applicable sciences. At the same time such an approach will acknowledge that the *academic* study of literature can only be more substantially legitimated by its being brought into new contact with other disciplines: although the aesthetic reasons for reading literature seem to me in many senses the vital reasons, it is questionable whether they alone prove the case for the necessity of an *academic* study of literature.

In order to elucidate what is at issue here let us, then, very briefly and schematically consider two paradigmatic modern notions of truth, one from analytical philosophy and the other from the hermeneutic tradition.[23] A central task in analytical philosophy has been the clarification of the status of propositions. This clarification has often been undertaken via the exploration of what is entailed by the convention of the logician Alfred Tarski that '"Snow is white" is true if and only if snow is white' (which is also often couched in the form *'"Schnee ist weiß"* is true if and only if snow is white', in order to suggest how truth is possible between differing natural languages). Removing the quotation marks from 'Snow is white' points to the relationship between a sentence (the words 'Snow is white' or *'Schnee ist weiß'*) and the conditions under which it is held to be true (its being the case that snow is white). This kind of analysis is, in some versions at least, concerned with how our everyday use of assertions functions via what Donald Davidson, the most significant contemporary theorist of truth in analytical philosophy, has called our 'general and pre-analytic notion of truth' (Davidson 1984 p. 223), the notion which we require both for everyday communication and for the most sophisticated scientific theories. For Davidson, understanding what it is that makes 'Snow is white' true is understanding its meaning, the two being basically identical.[24]

An important part of the hermeneutic tradition which derives from Romanticism, on the other hand, takes an apparently very different tack by linking truth to art, via the claim that art reveals the world in ways which would not be possible without the existence of art itself—a version of this view can be ascribed to Schlegel, Novalis, Schleiermacher, Heidegger, Benjamin, Adorno and Gadamer. This view is connected to a very different conception of language, which begins to develop with Rousseau and Herder. Truth is here seen in terms of the capacity of forms of articulation to 'disclose' the world. However, the conceptions of truth as warranted assertability and truth as revelation or 'disclosure' are, despite appearances, not wholly separable. Once this is established many of the major themes in recent theoretical discussion begin to look different. Heidegger suggested the link of the two conceptions of truth in his demonstration that the ability to make assertions must be preceded by the 'disclosure' of the state of affairs that is to be asserted. Wittgenstein's famous example of the 'duck-rabbit' drawing can, for example, be seen as lines on paper, or as a duck, or as a rabbit. There is no one answer to 'what it is', and one could easily see it as something other than these three obvious descriptions. The truth 'disclosed' in the proposition that 'This is x' does not consist for Heidegger in that proposition's correspondence to a direct apprehension of 'objective' reality—the apprehension of lines, or a rabbit, or a duck—but rather in its expressing a state of affairs in which something is understood *as* something. It is in this dimension of understanding, which is not a registering of pre-existing truth-determinate objects 'out there' in the world independent of what we say about them, that the potential aesthetic aspect of our relationship to language becomes apparent. The structure of 'seeing-as' is fundamental both to knowledge claims in the sciences, and to the experience of literary or other art works, because it is the basis of how the contents of our inner and outer world become articulated.[25] What something is 'seen as' is historically variable, in ways which cannot be circumscribed by a definitive scientific description of what the thing 'really is'. This approach begins to suggest good theoretical reasons why 'literature' might continue to be a major source of the ways in which we make sense of the world, a fact that has, for example, become increasingly important in recent work in the history of science. Once one moves away from the presupposition that there is a final fact of the matter 'out there', the question of interpretation, of how we understand the world through language, becomes the crucial issue.

The relationship between the propositional and the aesthetic conceptions of truth becomes particularly interesting when linked to the attempt to establish a workable notion of literature. A vital aspect of the history of modern art can most effectively suggest the dimension missing from Eagleton's analysis in *Literary Theory* (which is also largely absent from his subsequent book on aesthetics). Perhaps the most important artistic development linked to German Romantic theory was the change in the status of music, the least representational form of art, from being regarded as a subordinate form of art to being regarded as the highest form of art.[26] The rise of the idea of ‘absolute music’, music which does not accompany a text and does not require a text, and the emergence of a workable conception of literature are simultaneous phenomena in Germany at the end of the eighteenth century.[27] Questions concerning music’s relationship to ideology are therefore clearly linked to ambiguities concerning the aesthetic status of literature. In Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* Settembrini, the democratic rationalist and admirer of ‘literature’ as a vehicle of progressive ideology, is ironically presented as suggesting that music is ‘what is half-articulated, dubious, irresponsible, indifferent’. Even when music is ‘clear’ it is not, Settembrini claims,

> real clarity, it is a dreamy, insignificant clarity which does not commit one to anything.... I have a political aversion to music.... Music is invaluable as the last means of arousing enthusiasm, as a power which drags one upwards and forwards, if it finds the mind prepared for its effects. But literature must precede it. Music alone will not move the world forwards. Music alone is dangerous.... I am not exaggerating if I declare it to be politically suspect. (Mann 1972 pp. 120–1)

Settembrini’s suspicions are echoed in Eagleton’s desire to be rid of an aesthetic notion of literature in favour of a theory of discursive practices, and in Eagleton’s claim that the alternative to his approach leads to a reactionary mystification of our understanding of language in literary texts. Now music is clearly not inherently an ideology-free means of articulation, as Adorno, despite his belief in the centrality of great music for understanding the underlying truth of developments in modern society, will make very clear. There is already an ideological dimension, even to wordless music, when it repeats, rather than transforms, the patterns of music produced solely for commercial and functional ends, or when the manner of performance, including of great music, leads to the mere creation of effect, rather than to the illumination of the work. This suggests, though, how important it is to be able to judge the ideological as of a different order from what is aesthetically valid. Eagleton’s desire to abandon the notion of literature begins to look more problematic when, as it is in Romantic theory, literature is linked to music.

Music clearly shares certain attributes with verbal language, consisting in the articulation of sounds (or inscriptions) in patterns, according to underlying (but shifting) rules whose exact status seems elusive. Furthermore, music has a capacity to affect how we see something: the example of film music most obviously illustrates this. The music which accompanies a scene in a film can do more than transform the mood of what is shown: it can actually change what we see. The decisive difference between music and verbal language is usually established at the level of semantics: music lacks ‘meaning’. Meaning is, of course, a notoriously difficult term to define, but one recent (if questionable) definition of meaning can help make a basic point clear. Richard Rorty, claiming to follow aspects of Donald Davidson's theory seen above, usefully summarises some of the recent discussions in American philosophy by defining meaning as 'the property which one attributes to words by noting standard inferential connections between the sentences in which they are used and other sentences' (Rorty 1991a p. 13), so that 'Snow is white' will tend to occur when other sentences of a certain kind recur. The crucial aspect of this definition here is that 'meaning' is not constituted by standard relationships of words to objects—of the kind where the word 'table' 'represents' the object out there upon which my computer is sitting—because what an object is *said* to be depends upon discriminations within language itself, rather than upon already existing discriminations in an objective world.[28] The idea should also be familiar from recent literary theory, where it generally derives from Saussurian linguistics, which maintains that the relationship of word to object is not a relationship between pre-existing entity and signifier, because the *determinacy* of differentiations between entities (but, one should add, not necessarily the differentiations themselves) depends upon linguistic differentiations.[29]

Rorty uses his sense of 'meaning' to claim that the creativeness evident in literature is just a special case of the

> ability of the human organism to utter meaningless sentences—that is, sentences which do not fit into old language games, and serve as occasions for modifying those language-games and creating new ones. This ability is exercised constantly in every area of culture and daily life.
>
> (Rorty 1991b p. 125)

He does not, though, offer us any kind of explanation as to *how* it is that meaningless utterances can take on meaning. This problem relates in part to his exclusion of the subject from meaning-creation, an exclusion which I shall consider in other thinkers in the following chapters. It also relates to questions concerning the very ability of philosophy to give a definitive account of any aspect of language. Hilary Putnam has, for example, pointed out that Rorty's 'dichotomizing human thought into speech within "criterion governed language games" and speech "outside" language games' (Putnam 1995 p. 64) offends against Rorty's own claims to be a pragmatist by introducing an essentially metaphysical distinction between kinds of language: from what location is one to judge what is within and what is outside the language game? Davidson, whose conception Rorty claims to be developing, has himself suggested that all language (not just metaphors) can in fact 'make us notice' things in ways which are not analysable in terms of the conception of meaning seen in Tarski's convention. In the convention the meaning of the utterance is circumscribed in the act of understanding whether it is true, whereas what the statement 'Snow is white' can make us notice cannot be thus circumscribed. In the present context the statement may make us notice things about the functioning of statements in diverse contexts, for example, rather than telling us about the properties of snow.

The function of ‘making us notice’ can, of course, also be attributed to music, which is able to make us notice things in much the same ways as language, and whose ‘meaning’ cannot be semantically determined.[30] The interesting historical fact is that the relationship of language to music becomes particularly significant once the idea that language primarily represents objects in the world begins to be abandoned. This move—away from the notion of language as representation[31] —can be clearly located at the beginning of what is now usually termed ‘modernity’, around the middle of the eighteenth century.[32] The change in the understanding of language which takes place during this period is obviously linked to the decline of theological views of the world, in which language, to put it crudely, was regarded as God’s naming of the furniture of the universe. Michel Foucault argues in *The Order of Things,* for example, that a shift in the nature of language occurs in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century, such that ‘words cease to intersect with representations’ (Foucault 1970 p. 304. On this see also Bowie 1989, and 1990 Chapter 7). Significantly, although Foucault does not link this shift to music, he does link it to the rise both of ‘literature’ and of modern philology. Literature and philology are, for Foucault, the dialectical opposites of each other: for there to be literature there must, he claims, be that which attempts to explain language, a science of language. The perceived need for such a science clearly becomes more pressing when the theological understanding of language loses credibility. Literature therefore becomes the realm of language which ‘arises for its own sake’ and which is not bound to representation. The notion of language which ‘arises for its own sake’ already shows how this conception of language is connected to the wider issue of aesthetics, which from Kant onwards involves the idea of the object which is valuable for its own sake, as opposed to being valuable in terms of its abstract commodity value. Kant’s setting the agenda of modern aesthetics is, of course, contemporaneous with the rise of Foucault’s ‘literature’.

In this light the Russian Formalist criterion of the literary can be seen as the result of an attempt to marry a scientific analysis of language, which provides rules for discriminating between kinds of language—the realm of Rorty’s ‘meaning’ —with an aesthetic understanding of language, which points to usages that cannot be subsumed under existing rules. The proximity of Foucault’s description of literature to a description of music is fairly obvious. In this view literature also enacts the problem inherent in language’s attempt to circumscribe itself in a science. If literary language involves the creation of new, previously ‘unheard’ meanings, language cannot be finally describable. For it to be thus describable would require new meanings already to exist prior to their articulation, leaving the problem of how one could assert that they do so exist without just invalidly assuming that they do. It is this realisation which has led Davidson more recently to suggest that there is no such thing as a language ‘if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed’ (Lepore 1986 p. 446) —i.e.

an already existing entity which can be theoretically circumscribed, as opposed to being the endlessly changing praxes of real speakers. The consequences of the realisation that words cannot be said to intersect with things are, then, vital both to literary theory and to contemporary philosophy. Foucault's account offers one way of looking at a fundamental issue in modern thought, namely the tension between the attempt to explain the functioning of language in a science of language and the awareness that such an explanation involves the necessary circularity of using language to explain itself. This tension, I will contend, is at the heart of the development of the modern idea of literature.

The importance of the necessary circularity entailed in language's *self-explanation can* be suggested by a later example, which has undoubted links to Romantic philosophy. The 'linguistic turn', the turn towards language, rather than the mind, as the primary object of philosophical investigation, which is usually seen as the product of the twentieth century, is a consequence of central aspects of Romantic philosophy. Wittgenstein actually claimed in the *Tractatus* that language *is* able to represent reality (a view he was later to repudiate). He goes on to add, though: 'The proposition can represent the whole of reality [thus of the 'sayable'] but it cannot represent what it must have in common with reality in order to represent it' (Wittgenstein 1961 p. 50). To achieve this representation one would have to place oneself 'outside the world' (ibid.). If the world is mirrored by or in language, what guarantees *outside* of language that the reflection is really of the world? Nothing that can be said—*in* language—could *identify* what is *beyond* language as identically reflected in language. The conceptions of language as re-presentation of the world which preceded this realisation about (or change in?) the nature of language relied on an explicit or unconsciously theological link between word and object, in which the object is given a name by God or derives its name from a Platonic realm of essences, the *universalia ante res* ('universals which precede the things' — the Platonic table, for example, as opposed to the one in front of me). If this link is broken, radically new ways of understanding language become inevitable, which must take new account of the constitutive role of language in the worlds people make for themselves. One of the new ways of understanding language that emerged at the end of the eighteenth century linked attempts to grasp language to a form of language which was semantically indeterminate: to music. Semantic indeterminacy can be interpreted either as rendering a form of articulation inferior, as primitive cries or animal cries are usually taken to be, or as pointing to a higher form of expression *beyond* semantically determinate language. It was the latter conception which played the vital role in Romantic philosophy. If language cannot finally say how it relates to the world, a means of articulated expression such as music takes on a new significance, because it may tell us what verbal language cannot—either by complementing what verbal language can do or by enabling something to be understood in a non-verbal manner. It is at this point that probably the most defensible modern notion of literature, which regards it as that which tries to 'say the unsayable', becomes possible. The implications of this perhaps rather mystical sounding conception of 'literature' will be considered in the following chapters, where it will become evident that a series of major philosophical issues emerge from it.

The conception of language at issue here depends, then, on those aspects of verbal language which have no 'meaning'. If 'meaning' requires inference from standard contexts, those uses of language which do not allow such inference because they do not fit into standard contexts do not have 'meaning' in Rorty's particular sense. The most obvious examples of such lack of 'meaning' are new metaphors, which rely upon unfamiliar combinations of the familiar. We understand the individual words and the syntax in a metaphor like Schopenhauer's 'a geometrical proof is a mousetrap' (an example discussed by Max Black and Donald Davidson) but we cannot give a definitive analysis of what it means.[33]

The underlying question here—which has played a major role in the controversies over the work of Derrida—is whether determinacy of meaning is given priority over those aspects of language which are not determinable. The mistake of those who think concentration on indeterminacy—or, better, undecidability—is a move towards mere linguistic anarchy lies in their failure to see that the relationship is always being re-negotiated between the relatively stable elements of everyday language—'meanings' —which make possible the functioning of social life by solving problems and co-ordinating action, and the metaphorical, 'world-disclosing' aspect of language. One of the main loci of that process of negotiation is our modern understanding of 'literature' and its relationship to other kinds of articulation, such as music. The most significant aesthetic theorists in the German tradition attempt to find ways of understanding the relationships between those aspects of articulation which can be determined in a stable manner in terms of their truth-value, and those which cannot be thus determined, but which still play an essential role in the constitution of the worlds we inhabit. The shift in the understanding of language outlined above depends upon the awareness of the freedom that results when the notion of language as representation of a pre-existing fixed reality is rejected. It is this perceived freedom which gives rise to the modern conception of literature, of language which can rewrite rules and thereby open up new aspects of the world.

The capacity of literary discourse to rewrite the rules crucially also extends to the formal constitution of the work, whose very aesthetic status is often regarded as being dependent upon its ability to establish its own rules, upon its 'aesthetic autonomy' qua work of art.[34] Adorno suggests how this change in the status of language is essential to the question of literature:

> No word which becomes part of a literary work completely gets rid of the meanings which it has in communicative speech, but in no literary work, not even in the traditional novel, does this meaning remain untransformed and

> the same as the word had outside the work. Even the simple 'was' in a report of something that was not gains a new formal quality *(Gestaltqualität)* by the fact that it was not. (Adorno 1965 p. 111)

From what we saw earlier it can be argued, as does Eagleton, that any word in any text has its significance transformed by its context. Once again, though, merely registering this fact threatens to level the kinds of discrimination that a proper account of judgement should be most concerned to preserve. Eagleton pays too little attention to the extent to which great literary works involve much more diverse ways of transforming meaning than other texts. This is again a matter of degree, but differences of degree are the basis of forms of judgement in any realm, as I have already suggested. Giving a theoretical account of the difference between a literary text and a non-literary text is difficult, and depends upon interpretative evaluation which may not achieve consensus. A view which thinks consensus over such evaluation is inherently doomed to failure is, as I shall show in Chapter 5, the product of a creeping positivism that only wishes to allow cognitive validity to judgements that supposedly do not require interpretative consensus.

What we usually term literary form, which can, to take only a very few elements, be the rhythmic patterns of the sentences—rhythm in the sense of repetition of signifying elements of any kind, be they semantic or musical — the distribution of line or paragraph lengths, or a whole variety of larger-scale structural echoes, is no doubt made up of aspects inherent in all language, but the crucial factor is how the new forms of combination give rise to something which, although it may not be the integrated organic totality of some Romantic conceptions of the work of art, is more than the sum of the particular aspects of the text. Furthermore, it is at the level of the irreducible particularity of the organisation of great works that form is most significant, precisely because it cannot be reduced to general rules.

Discussion of literary form is notoriously contentious, because identification of formal constituents of a work depends upon the vagaries of interpretation: in this sense there are as many formal aspects of a work as there are different interpretations of that work. While such interpretations are always open to revision, this fact is only a problem for those who raise the mythical standard of hard data that are independent of interpretation, a standard whose validity is increasingly impossible to defend. The question is, then, not *whether* one can, but *how* one interprets the significance of formal aspects of a text, a question which relates to the status of the text qua work of art. Clearly mere formal coherence is not what is at issue: the most tedious form of regular verse will provide this. Adorno's point is that it is in relation to works where existing meanings are most decisively transformed, indeed to the point of the *destruction* of those meanings, that the significance of form really becomes apparent: clearly this is more the case in late Hölderlin than in a regular sonnet by a minor poet.

Underlying Adorno's argument is a vital aspect of Romantic aesthetics already encountered above: the essential model for his conception of aesthetic form is Viennese classical music, itself a product of the period in which the conception of literature at issue here was first articulated. Adorno's insistence on the notion of the autonomous work of art, an insistence that is—mainly because of the inherently non-representational aspect of music—easier to defend in the case of music than of literature, is the precondition of his notion of form. The point of aesthetic autonomy is that the configuration of the elements of the work brings about an irreducible transformation of those elements, which are therefore regarded as bound only by their own law. The literary text can in this respect also become the locus, not of the constitution of new meaning, but of the manifestation of language's capacity to resist conversion into 'meaning'. This fact is vital in understanding why questioning the nature of literature is important at more than a merely theoretical level. The history of modernist literature (and other arts) has often been seen as a continual negotiation with 'nonsense', because radical new articulation may be either revelatory of new sense or actually devoid of any explicable sense at all. The proximity to nonsense of modernist literature is, of course, a further way in which literature becomes connected to music.

At the most basic level music qua acoustic phenomenon consists, like language, of series of differentiated frequencies, of the kind which also occur in nature. Both musical and verbal forms are built up out of elements which have moved from being merely occurrent to being significant, and have been subsequently reshaped in traditions of musical praxis and verbal communication which necessarily involve sedimented elements of already existing significance. The use of received forms in new contexts is inherently an aspect of all forms of art from the very beginning of the history of art, as the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and others has demonstrated. The specifically modern awareness of language at issue here, in which meaning comes to be understood as transformable by re-contextualisation, rather than as ultimately residing in the divinity, or some other fixed order, allows one to construct a bridge between differing forms of modern art. Links between literature and music cease to be mere analogies if the borderline between language and music is made more permeable. When, for example, Brahms (in his First Symphony) and Bruckner (in his Fifth) suddenly interpolate a Lutheran chorale into the climax of the conclusion of the work, one kind of potential significance, the liturgical significance of the chorale, is transformed into something else, which has then to be understood via the context of its occurrence. When Alban Berg later uses a Bach chorale in his violin concerto the intervening changes in music make the interpolation signify differently again. Interpreting the significance of the musical element from the past necessarily leads into the realm of metaphor, because there cannot be a definitive account of what the mixture of existing, historically significant, material and a new context 'really means': the new context uses the old material as part of its novelty. It is at this level that the significance of aesthetic autonomy and its links to the question of literature become most obviously apparent.

The above example can itself be used as a metaphor for the functioning of language in literary texts: it involves a version of what has come to be referred to as ‘intertextuality’, the inherent dependence of texts upon preceding texts. The difference of literary intertextuality from the everyday repetition of historically sedimented linguistic praxes in differing contexts is never absolute, and the significance of what difference there is depends upon interpretative judgement. This dependence is, though, precisely the aspect of literary theory which has so far often been neglected, on the basis of some of the assumptions I wish to question in this book. The mistake of much literary theory which works with notions like intertextuality has been to stress the dependence of the text on the already existing resources of other texts while failing adequately to characterise the aesthetic transformations brought about by the new formal configuration of those resources. It is the reconfiguration of existing linguistic elements to release new semantic potential, or to destroy existing meanings, that makes literature a vital fact in the self-understanding of modernity, not the fact that all texts are parasitic upon other already existing texts. The condition of possibility of ‘literature’ is, then, connected to the fact that even the most sophisticated semantic theory is unable to account for the transformation of meanings brought about by the recontextualisation of words in a text.[35]

The fact that there is no stable boundary between transformed and untransformed meanings, thus between Adorno’s ‘communication’ or Rorty’s ‘meaning’, and those aspects of a text which refuse communication in terms of established meanings is only a problem for those who think that the only kind of judgement that is ‘real’ has to be fitted into a theory which can be validated empirically in terms of already established concepts. Novalis makes the striking statement, whose theoretical consequences will be examined in the following chapters, that ‘Criticism of literature *(Poesie)* is an absurdity. It is already difficult to decide, yet the only possible decision, whether something is literature or not’ (Novalis 1978 p. 840). There is no fixed concept for such a decision, and it may be that works cease to be literature if their semantic potential or their resistance to interpretation becomes exhausted—think, for example, of some of the now clearly dead nineteenth-century realist novels. However, if one accepts that the crucial aspect of the literary is its irreducibility to conceptuality, then Novalis’ insistence on such judgement—what he terms the ‘aesthetic imperative’ —makes the notion of literature as a source of truth a vital philosophical issue.

Before we embark on the account of some of the ways in which these issues have manifested themselves in modern German philosophy and literary theory, it is important to remind ourselves what is really at stake in the debates over the status of literature in modernity. The process of secularisation which gives rise to the new conceptions of language and art in question here is also, as Nietzsche, Max Weber and many others will suggest, a process of ‘disenchantment’ of reality, which can and does lead to the threat of complete meaninglessness or ‘nihilism’. The differing ways in which literature and other art in the modern period confront the dangers of meaninglessness which are an inherent part of the post-theological world are mirrored in the differing approaches to literary theory from the Romantics to post-structuralism. The particular political and historical involvement of the thinkers to be considered here, such as Heidegger’s membership of the NSDAP, and the links of other theorists such as Benjamin and Adorno to political opposition to Nazism and to the ravages of modern capitalism, can connect the theoretical issues to central questions about the direction of the modern world, thereby rendering consideration of ‘literary theory’ vital to a whole series of other interpretative and cognitive disciplines, from history to social theory. The crucial linking factor will be the understanding of the relationship between truth and art.

Even in a book as extensive as this one, there will necessarily be major omissions: I shall only mention one here. For a variety of reasons I have not included a chapter on Nietzsche. One reason is that the whole book is in a way directed against some of the more extreme Nietzschean conceptions of truth that have fed into certain areas of literary theory. I have already suggested in the Conclusion of Bowie (1993) that the Nietzschean critique of truth is only startling if one assumes that all previous versions of truth are correspondence theories: this book shows that suspicion of the notion of correspondence was already part of philosophy at the end of the eighteenth century. At his best Nietzsche does come close to some of the approaches I try to show here are the central aspects of Romantic thought. At his worst, though, he becomes a crass reductionist (see Bowie 1990 Chapter 8), and sometimes worse than that. My further major reason for not devoting a whole chapter to Nietzsche is personal: I actually think he is overrated. Nietzsche may indeed be the most influential thinker of modernity, but he is also one of the most hectoring, derivative, self-obsessed and generally reactionary modern theorists to put pen to paper. In short, this book simply wants to suggest that there are more interesting theorists out there, who may now have more to offer than Nietzsche.