

Part IV

The Errors of Post-Saussurean Thought

The domination of the unconscious over consciousness, of the system of signs over the sign-using individual ('language speaks us', 'the signifier dominates over the signified'), and the decentring of the self have been most widely associated with the so-called post-Saussurean thinkers. These thinkers purported to base their ideas on Saussure's linguistics. The argument Tallis has had with them, extending over several books, takes issue, first, with their ideas, second, with their claim that these ideas are founded on Saussure's linguistics, and, beyond that, with their mode of argument.

First, Tallis has argued that the post-Saussureans (and subsequent exponents of what Richard Rorty has called 'Theory') are wrong about the nature of language. In particular, they confuse the signifier and the sign, the signifier with the sign in use, and the language system with speech. The confusion between the system of language and the use of that system on particular occasions results in post-Saussureans overlooking the fundamental characteristic of human discourse – the deliberate formulation and expression of meaning by a situated individual. Post-Saussureans are forced by their errors to absurd conclusions; for example, that texts do not refer to anything outside of themselves and, indeed, that language is non-referential. They are also wrong about the self, the human subject. This includes the developed self (a function of language, according to Benveniste, Barthes and many others); the developing self (the emergence of a fiction, according to Lacan, whose factually baseless and explanatorily inadequate genetic epistemology is an elaboration of an equally baseless Freudian metapsychology); the intending self (a myth, according to Derrida); the reading self and the writing self (more myths, according to the *maîtres à penser*); and so on. They are in addition wrong about literature and, in particular, wrong in the reasons they adduce for despising realism and about the respective functions of literature and literary criticism.

A second part of the argument Tallis has with the post-Saussureans concerns their claim to be grounding their ideas in Saussurean linguistics. Here again, he insists, they are wrong. Furthermore, their misreading of Saussure is only the most spectacular of their misreadings of writers – such as Peirce and Austin – whose work has some bearing on theoretical linguistics. Beyond the particular errors of the post-Saussureans, Tallis takes further issue with their style of argument, which he finds intellectually derelict. He considers their writings to exhibit: (i) an utterly opaque, sometimes near-delirious mode of argument; (ii) a propensity to draw huge conclusions from one or two bits of data, or, worse, a habit of dogmatic, unsupported assertion of massive ‘truths’; (iii) inconsistency; (iv) a fondness for argument from authority (‘X said this’ – as if citation were evidence); (v) as a correlative of this, a dishonest use of sources (strategic misquotation); and, finally, (vi) constant reference to ‘results established elsewhere’.