

## Book Reviews

John K. Sheriff. *The Fate of Meaning: Charles Peirce, Structuralism, and Literature*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989. pp.xviii, 149. \$13.15 pb.

By critically exposing foundational assumptions about such binaries as writing/speech, male/female, culture/nature poststructuralism has successfully relativized our thinking in the humanities and social sciences. Perhaps the success has been too thoroughgoing: we have been thrust less into a postlapsarian world than into the chaos that preceded creation—an exhilarating experience, to be sure, but one which leaves no stable ground on which to base the actions that the fact of our living, and living as social beings, entails. This short, lucid, and coherent study provides some important clues about ways in which the absolutism of poststructuralist scepticism may be tempered and even radically replaced without any falling back onto mere logocentric assumptions.

It does this by examining the foundational assumptions of poststructuralism itself in Saussurean concepts of language, and particularly the concepts of the sign as arbitrary and meaning as differential. It takes as its model the sign theory of American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), which differs in several striking respects from that of his contemporary, Saussure. One of these lies in Peirce's recognition of a far greater number of motivated and "natural" signs than Saussure, and this leads to a more stable ontology than the Saussurean. If only some signs are arbitrary, we are directed to consider the possibility that concepts may not be merely cultural constructions, but may also be products reciprocally negotiated between subject and object.

Sheriff bases much of his book on this ontological issue ("[t]he core of Peirce's pragmatism is a refutation of absolute idealism *and* realism and an insistence of the interdependence of reality *and* thought" [141]), but his preoccupation is particularly with the epistemological implications of Peirce's sign theory and its critical bearing on post-Saussurean thought and implications for art, criticism, and theory.

Both Saussure and Peirce see meaning as a product of sign systems but for Saussure meaning is a product of differential relations—paradigmatic, syntagmatic—in language itself. Derrida has wonderfully demonstrated how Saussure's definition of language as a "system of differences without positive terms" leads to the undermining of the

referential status (a covert "positive term") in Saussure's signified: it too is already a signifier. In this, however, as he acknowledges (Sheriff 127-30), he was anticipated by Peirce nearly one hundred years before. Where Peirce significantly departs from consistency with Derrida and further from consistency with Saussure is in his introduction of a third term into sign theory/theory of meaning. His terms "sign" and "object" correspond quite closely to Saussure's "signifier" and "signified," but there is no equivalent to Peirce's "interpretant."

For Saussure/Derrida meaning is a product of the difference between the signifier and signified, and since difference implies overlap rather than coincidence of identity, meaning is also non-meaning, nothing, that which is occluded or deferred to provide some illusion of finality. It is not difficult to see the implications of this theory as a largely, perhaps even purely, formal system, in which the users of language play a passive role. It is language which dupes us into a belief in meaning; and even when we poststructurally realize the trick it plays we continue to be under its determination and control. We move from the position of Shakespeare's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to Tom Stoppard's, in the prison-house still, but now knowing it.

It is the triadic system of Peirce that Sheriff presents as an alternative to the dyadic of Saussure/Derrida/poststructuralism. It should be underlined that he does not present it as a *refutation*—he suggests a refutation might be impossible—but as an alternative, coherent, consistent, and plausible, which is in important respects superior to the equally coherent, consistent, and plausible dyadic system. Meaning is less a product of differential relations within language than of the creative refashioning of these by those who interpret signs (the signs themselves of course being interpretations of prior signs). Language does not make the difference; we do. Without the interpretant there can be no satisfactory account of meaning: without an auditor there can be no sound in a thunderstorm, no clap or bang, no Thor, no Thunderbird flapping its wings, no demonstration of the laws of physics, no inspiration for Ian Fleming's *Thunderball* (a possible plus). Meaning cannot come out of system, which is inert; meaning is created, again and again, by resignifying agents in all uses of language to a lesser or greater degree.

This view of meaning as a creation of agents has major bearings for postcolonial thought. Agency is frequently discussed these days, but nearly always as an escape from "false consciousness" with all the elitist (Calvinist?) assumptions this entails. There is also a contradictory entailment, for "it is not possible for us to describe our own archive, for it is within these rules that we speak" (Foucault). Peirce implicitly suggests a way out of both linguistic elitism and linguistic determinism that is consistent with the postcolonial experience of disidentificatory creation both against and through an archive and by a culture rather than by great leaders directing the masses. While it would be anachronistic to speak of Peirce as writing against the determinism of contemporary European philosophy the applicability of his thought to this function is

consistent with his concept of an American philosophical alternative to the scepticism of European thought, particularly in its Cartesian legacy.

I have dwelt on Sheriff's epistemological exploration, but in conclusion should briefly indicate a second major contribution of this book in its significance for theorists of discourse. Neither Peirce nor Sheriff use that term, but in chapters five, six, and seven, Sheriff demonstrates how Peirce's thought deals with distinct (though never "pure") discursive categories for possibility, fact and reason into which fall art, criticism, and theory. Poststructuralists do not make these distinctions because, as Sheriff points out, their view of language is monofunctional:

Derrida's definition of language as 'writing' is an assertion that all language is of the nature of a class-10 sign/symbols representing symbols as symbols. Therefore, much of structural and Derridean theory of language is consistent with Peirce's theory of class-10 signs. It should be clear now why deconstructive theorists cannot distinguish between literature and history or philosophy. (127)

Peirce provides a theoretical base for the ludic and empirical as well as the conceptual functions of language, and Sheriff draws out its implications.

Charles Peirce's work has attracted steady attention from philosophers and semioticians over the years, but for the past two decades in literary studies European thought drawing on Saussurean insights has been dominant. This book shows, with considerable originality, the significant poverty of that tradition.

IAN ADAM

Sue-Ellen Case. *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990. pp. 327. \$39.95; \$14.95 pb.

The carefully worded, multivalent title of this collection of essays is a clue to the variety, complexity, problematics, and sometimes intramural tension of the twenty pieces assembled by the person who is arguably the *grand-dame* of feminism and theatre within American academe. "Performing" is intended as both gerund and participle; the plural it precedes is an acknowledgement of the variety of endeavours that share the same rubric. The theory offered does not always have traditional theatre as its target; many kinds of performances—including critical writing and self-presentation—are considered. Some of the discussions of theatre betray social feminist assumptions so tame as to appear virtually mainstream.

The essays, with two exceptions, were selected from issues of *Theatre Journal* published between 1984 and 1989. During that period, Case and Timothy Murray were the journal's editors and, as Case states in her introduction, the two were criticized by the publication's parent organization (American Theatre in Higher Education) for publishing femi-