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Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Critical Review: A Journal of Politics and Society

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcrj20>

That strange realm called theory

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Published online: 01 Sep 2008.

To cite this article: Geoffrey Sampson (1989) That strange realm called theory, *Critical Review: A Journal of Politics and Society*, 3:1, 93-104, DOI: [10.1080/08913818908459554](https://doi.org/10.1080/08913818908459554)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08913818908459554>

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THAT STRANGE REALM CALLED
THEORY

FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE, rev. ed.

by Jonathan Culler

Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986. 157pp., \$22.50 (\$5.95 paper)

IN SEARCH OF SEMIOTICS

by David Sless

Totawa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble, 1986. 170pp., \$28.50

David Lodge's 1984 novel *Small World* portrays an academic profession in near-perpetual motion between international conferences. "Half the passengers on transatlantic flights these days are university teachers. Their luggage is heavier than average, weighed down with books and papers—and bulkier, because their wardrobes must embrace both formal wear and leisurewear. . . . For that's the attraction of the conference circuit: it's a way of converting work into play, combining professionalism with tourism, and all at someone else's expense. Write a paper and see the world!"

To many academic readers, myself included, this passage touches a raw nerve. If we are working at the frontiers of science, there is no doubt that we push those frontiers outwards more quickly if we periodically exchange experiences and ideas with like-minded colleagues elsewhere; and, even in the 1980s, it is fairly easy for us to get access to public funds

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for the purpose. Yet however useful these meetings may be, they are undoubtedly at the same time thoroughly enjoyable holidays from the tedium of our normal routine, commonly held in attractive locations: many of the taxpayers who send us on these trips could not afford equally satisfying vacations for themselves. Can we be sure that the level of expenditure involved is fully justified by the resulting scientific gains?

For Lodge's academic nomads this question, if they let it worry them, would be specially acute. His characters are no inorganic chemists or cardiologists; the comic force of his novel stems largely from the fact that its subjects are literature specialists, who go through all the outward motions by which scientific disciplines expand the total of human knowledge while actually being engaged in an enterprise in which the concepts of knowledge and discovery seem scarcely to apply. Literary criticism is a domain of subjective judgments rather than empirical findings. How can a serious research discipline be founded on matters of personal taste?

One may well ask. Academics of earlier centuries would have been puzzled at the idea of "English" as a discipline which can be studied for bachelors' and higher degrees. Here and there the concept is still resisted. The Oxford college of which I am a member declines to accept undergraduates to read for degrees in English, on the ground that "they're supposed to know English before they come." Indeed I believe that in Britain it was not until fairly late in the nineteenth century that modern foreign languages such as German and French came to be seen as subjects for university-level study, though these do at least involve solid facts about grammar and idiom to be learned alongside the discussion of literature.

Nowadays, though, English Literature not merely is accepted as an academic discipline but has attained a central place in the map of learning. As the expansion of higher education in the 1960s changed university degrees from luxuries for the few to routine requirements for the many, English as a safe and easy option was a subject that attracted particularly large influxes of new students. The fact that it involved consideration of human emotions and relationships made it particularly appealing to the women students who were for the first time entering higher education in large numbers. Increased student numbers meant more staff posts, and the many people taken on to teach in university English departments had perforce to develop the research dimension of "lit. crit." in order to establish their standing among their academic peers.

Nowadays, university staff numbers in Britain and perhaps elsewhere are beginning to shrink; but it is noticeable that the reductions are affecting chiefly the “hard sciences” such as chemistry and physics, while English and modern languages remain relatively unaffected—which has nothing to do with anyone’s judgment of the relative value of subjects, and everything to do with patterns of student choice. Evaluating the relative worth of different subjects is not an activity that normally happens in the academic world, imbued as it is with the professional ethos that rejects the right of any but practitioners of a discipline to set that discipline’s standards. If literature specialists did not engage in any activity which they called research, other academics would not take them seriously; but, provided they agree among themselves to count some activity as valid research, then so far as practitioners of older-established subjects are concerned it *is* research. That is how the university world works.

Plenty of activities done by literature specialists in the name of research are clearly solid and respectable: establishing the correct texts of early classics, tracing authors’ intellectual biographies, and so forth. But in the world of *Small World* this sort of research does not rate. In literary studies as in science, star status is reserved for those involved in theory. The chief question agitating Lodge’s characters is who will get a lavishly-funded new post, the UNESCO Chair of Literary Criticism, and what theoretical tendency will be favored through the choice—“formalist, structuralist, Marxist or deconstructionist?” The non-theoreticians are *Small World’s* hewers of wood and drawers of water, patronized and laughed at by the serious contenders.

It is not easy, however, to say what the theories in question are theories of. The phrase “literary theory” is too narrow, because the kinds of discourse that the real-life counterparts to Lodge’s characters engage in do not limit their purview to literature but extend to other arts and to “culture” in a very general sense. Sometimes the phrase “critical theory” is used; but even this is evidently perceived as unduly specific, and quite frequently people eschew any qualifying adjective and talk of “theory” *tout court*—as does Jonathan Culler in the Preface to one of the books under review, who suggests that reading Saussure is “an excellent way of sorting out what is going on today in that strange realm called ‘theory.’” The center of gravity of the community contributing to the strange realm lies in university English departments, but members crop up under plenty of other headings also. David Sless, author of the other book reviewed, is Director of the “Communication Advisory and Research Enterprise” at one Australian institution of tertiary education

and Senior Lecturer in Communication at another, and the genesis of his book occurred during a sabbatical spent at a British “Centre for Cultural Studies”—such titles would be familiar to Lodge’s *Small Worlders*.

Saussure as Linguist

Among the gurus of “theory,” few names are as numinous as that of Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of structuralism—probably the most successful of the many isms that have competed for *Small Worlders*’ attention. Cognoscenti will tell you that structuralism has had its day; but then, in the forefront of the trends that have supplanted it is “deconstructionism,” which as its name suggests is consciously defined in reaction to structuralism and thus owes perhaps as much to Saussure in a negative fashion as structuralism does positively. If there is any substance in “theory,” a goodly portion of it must surely be found in Saussure.

Yet Saussure, so far as I know, had no professional interest in literature at all (if one discounts an engagingly dotty unpublished investigation of the idea that Roman poets hid anagrams of people’s names in their poems). Indeed, to describe Saussure as a guru is quite unfair if one considers that the central use of that word at present seems to be as a self-description by various South Asian operators who manipulate the religious yearnings of naive young people in order to enrich themselves in what looks like a purely cynical fashion. Saussure had no notion of what his name would come to stand for in the late twentieth century; if anyone had told him, I guess he would have been flabbergasted. He died in 1913 (aged 56), having spent his career teaching linguistics in Paris and Geneva. All his publications were about the history and prehistory of the Indo-European language family: he was famous for making a major advance at the early age of 21 in the task of reconstructing the sound-system of the Proto-Indo-European language from which most European languages ultimately descend (the theory which he put forward then was later corroborated by tangible evidence discovered after his death). All this work is highly technical, and scarcely anyone reads it today. But, towards the end of his life, Saussure several times gave a course of lectures on the general nature of language considered from an abstract, philosophical point of view; and although he himself deliberately refrained from publishing this material, some of his colleagues collated his students’ lecture notes and turned them into a book after

Saussure's death. It is that book—*A Course in General Linguistics*—that all the fuss has been about.

The central idea of the *Course* is that a language is a system of units which cannot be considered in isolation from one another because they mutually determine each other's values: the *Course* frequently draws an analogy with a game of chess, where the potentiality of a given piece at any moment depends not merely on what piece it is but where it is relative to the positions of the other pieces, so that moving one piece changes the values of all the others. As a linguist myself I recognize a measure of truth in this. For instance, the range of shades we call *red* in English is limited by the existence of various other words naming adjacent colors—*orange, pink, purple, brown*; in a language which possesses markedly fewer color words, the translation of *red* will typically cover a larger share of the spectrum. At the same time, the validity of the point has its limits. The translation of *four* surely means precisely the number four even in a language lacking names for large numbers. Saussure's *Course* discusses a number of general ideas about languages as abstract systems of relationships, and in my judgment most of his ideas are broadly acceptable but by no means absolute truths.

Saussure as Theorist

What is not clear is how these ideas, whether right or wrong, tell us anything new and important—anything at all, indeed—about literary or cultural considerations. All the detailed discussion and examples in the *Course* relate to technical linguistic structure. Yet the book has been taken as a key document in the development of critical theory, by people who have no knowledge of or interest in the technicalities of linguistics. In particular, the concept of a structure as a set of units defined by their mutual relationships is claimed to be seminal for modern thought. According to Culler's Conclusion, Saussure offers “an exceptionally clear expression” of “a major shift in our conception of the world”: “for the thought of our century the world is no longer essentially a collection of independent entities, of autonomous objects, but a series of relational systems”—a claim which Culler supports by alluding to Modernist literature, Cubist painting, and relativistic physics. Culler sees Saussure's achievement in articulating this novel outlook as sufficiently significant to make Saussure possibly (Culler cautiously hedges his bet at this point) the “twentieth-century Galileo.”

It may be symptomatic that, of the three examples of twentieth-century relativism quoted by Culler, he spends only a few rather waffly lines on the two belonging to domains likely to be familiar to his audience, namely literature and art (he leaves me unsure which writers his phrase "Modernist literature" is meant to refer to), while taking much more space to argue that Saussure's outlook matches distinctive modern trends in physics. If there is a correspondence in this case it can hardly be more than coincidental: physicists adopted relativity theory because it accounted well for their observations, and certainly not because it suited a *Zeitgeist* manifested in literature and linguistics. Culler does not pretend that more than coincidence is at work; yet he feels it worth discussing physics at length. By doing so, he associates his topic with the prestige that belongs to theoretical science; and this, it seems to me, is a regular part of the strategy of those who seek to turn talking about literature into a serious research discipline. The public has come to understand over three centuries that when natural scientists develop and debate alternative abstract theories they are entitled to respect, since this behavior leads to a cumulative increase in empirical knowledge, often very useful or power-conferring knowledge. Literary theorizing surely cannot hope to engender a comparable product, but it can try to commandeer a share of the respect by sounding similar.

Repeatedly, Culler uses turns of phrase that pastiche science. "[Saussure's] work contains different lines of argument, whose angles and force must be calculated"; "To . . . stimulate thought about fundamentals, to insist on the relational nature of linguistic phenomena: these are the vectors of Saussure's theory." Metaphors are harmless, but what is the metaphorical force of "vector" here? I know three senses the word has in various sciences, but none of them appear even figuratively appropriate in this context. Near the end of his book Culler quotes the impenetrable French thinker Jacques Lacan, "who calls the Saussurian model of the sign an indispensable algorithm: 'S/s, which is read as the signifier over the signified . . .'" "Algorithm" is an unambiguous word, which is entirely incompatible with this context: neither a "model" nor an algebraic formula such as S/s can be an algorithm. But, though strictly meaningless, such remarks induce in the naive reader an agreeable frisson of contact with intellectual domains known to be both highly difficult and highly valuable. Saussure may have been no guru in the modern sense, but his name is invoked in connection with behavior that often seems quite guru-like.

Culler, like many proponents of structuralism, lays stress on the fact that linguistics since Saussure has been genuinely scientific in its intel-

lectual texture. The suggestion here seems to be that Saussure showed the way in which a subject previously characterized by the non-cumulative methods of the humanities could convert itself into a discipline ranking alongside physics or chemistry. But, if this is what is intended it is doubly misleading. In the first place, linguistics was scientific before Saussure too. Although his *Course* was associated with an important shift of emphasis within the subject, that shift had nothing to do with the arts/science contrast. More important, the texture of day-to-day activity in modern scientific linguistic research really owes rather little to Saussure. Whether one thinks of pure theoretical linguists, who refine theories about structural constraints on the diversity of human languages with a view to the light they shed on genetically-inherited human cognitive mechanisms, or of computational linguists who develop software capable of dealing with the complexities of natural-language structure in order to permit the automation of practical language-processing tasks, in either case the advance of knowledge consists in developing and testing masses of abstract but extremely specific hypotheses which are accepted or rejected in terms of their compatibility with particular observed facts, which are often trivial in themselves but happen to be crucial for a particular hypothesis. Philosophical generalities about the relational nature of linguistic units and the like don't come into it: that sort of thing is good for inspiring enthusiasm in first-year undergraduates or for Sunday-paper think-pieces, but it is scarcely relevant to serious research (just as, I imagine, a chemist pursuing some special problem in the domain of aromatic compounds does not waste much time thinking about what we mean by "chemical reaction").

With critical theory, on the other hand, one does not seem to encounter work that moves beyond the philosophical generalities and gets down to the hard slog of promulgating detailed hypotheses and bringing them to bear on trivial but empirical observations. The crucial interplay between theory and observation, in Karl Popper's terms between "conjectures and refutations," scarcely gets off the ground in this domain. New isms supplant old isms, but not, so far as an outsider can judge, because the old isms unexpectedly fall foul of recalcitrant observations—has there ever been a literary Michelson-Morley experiment? How could there be? Yet, if there couldn't, how can the language of "research" and "findings" be appropriate in the world of literary and cultural discourse?

There is no need of empirical research to fuel the turnover of theories, when literary reviews are constantly avid for novel ideas to titillate their readers, and young academics need to move their careers along by

making their mark as original thinkers. But, if this is all that theory-change in the literary domain amounts to—and Culler says nothing to dispel our suspicion that that is so—then does it not demean Galileo's name to suggest that his modern equivalent might be a man associated with this sort of intellectual modishness? Galileo faced the Inquisition because observation led him to dissent from received views. The only risk facing denizens of the Small World is the drying up of conference invitations, and they avoid that risk not by staying with traditional wisdom but by thinking up new ideas—any new ideas, provided they can persuade their peers to find them interesting.

The A Priori Science

For those who seek to turn Saussure into the forerunner of an all-embracing revolution in human thought, it is desirable to be able to show that Saussure himself saw his ideas as having implications beyond the limited domain of technical linguistics. For this reason, much attention has been paid to the brief passages in the *Course* where Saussure proposes "a science which would study the life of signs within society," which he called "semiology." "Since [this science] does not yet exist," Saussure said, "we cannot say what it will be; but it has a right to existence; its place is assured in advance." For Saussure it was self-evident that linguistics, which did already exist, was just a special case: "the laws which semiology discovers will be applicable to linguistics." Linguistics deals with those signs belonging to the systems we call languages; semiology was to deal with all conventional signs, including those constituting language but also many others, for instance the acts prescribed by codes of etiquette and ritual.

The name which has nowadays become attached to this alleged general science of signs is for some reason not Saussure's coinage "semiology" but rather a word created by the American philosopher C. S. Peirce, "semiotics." Under this name, the subject conceived by Saussure has been brought to birth and equipped with a flourishing apparatus of university courses, books, and academic journals devoted to it. For Culler, the question whether Saussure is truly the modern Galileo depends centrally on whether or not the new discipline of semiotics is destined to "become a dominant intellectual movement of our time" (an issue which Culler says is not yet clear).

For anyone interested in the history of science, though, Saussure's conception of a science which has not yet been invented but whose place

is waiting for it must surely be suspect. It is characteristic of real sciences to link phenomena not previously seen to be related. Before Newton, would it have seemed self-evident that there was a science waiting to be created that would describe the tides, the motions of the planets, the movement of an apple falling from a tree and the flight of an arrow as diverse aspects of a unified phenomenon? I think not. Conversely, many people expected there to be a science which linked the motions of the planets with human birth-times and personalities, but it turned out there wasn't one. Why should we expect a priori that there are any interesting, non-trivial laws to be discovered that apply to all kinds of conventional sign?

The evolution of linguistic science since Saussure's day, as it happens, has made it increasingly implausible that linguistics is a special case of a general science of signs. The most fertile area where deep and apparently true new laws of language have emerged relates to the "recursive" nature of grammar—the fact that sentences contain constituents such as phrases and clauses of various categories nested one within another in a hierarchical fashion. Let me give an example (oversimplified, but it will serve to illustrate the point). It seems to be a universal law obeyed by all human languages that whenever a grammatical rule moves a constituent of a particular category from one place in a sentence to another, if an example of the relevant category contains a smaller example nested inside itself the rule may only apply to the larger constituent and not to the smaller. For instance, in the English sentence *She called on the man who wrote those songs*, the words *the man who wrote those songs* form a noun phrase containing within itself the smaller noun phrase *those songs*. Accordingly, we can question the larger phrase and ask *Which man did she call on?*, but (despite the fact that it would be a perfectly sensible question to ask) we may not question the included noun phrase and ask *Which songs did she call on the man who wrote?*

Now recursivity is a property possessed by few sign-systems other than language. Ritual activities, or the "languages" of national flags or flowers (to quote two further instances of the domain of semiotics as portrayed in David Sless's book) seem not to have recursive grammars, so that laws comparable to the one just sketched cannot meaningfully be extended to such topics. In general, as modern scientific linguistics has succeeded in uncovering an increasingly rich and deep structure of universal laws of human language, so it has made language seem less and less like a special, unusually complex case of some more general phenomenon—instead language now seems *sui generis*, scarcely compa-

rable with other sign systems. If that is right, the enterprise of semiotics is presumably on a hiding to nothing.

Hence, perhaps, Sless's title. Sless writes as someone convinced that a substantial, valuable discipline called semiotics exists, but who finds that no one can tell him what it consists of. The writings of the discipline's practitioners are little help: "obfuscation and esoteric jargon have rendered much of it unintelligible"—the newcomer is "confused by strange terminology, made uneasy by loose reasoning, concerned over an absence of method and alarmed by sweeping generalisations."

Yet an academic discipline is the writings and discourses of its practitioners. Ideas, beliefs, and theories are human creations; a discipline which is riddled with non sequiturs, undefined terms, and the like is what it is, it is not an imperfect reflection of some Platonic ideal discipline that no mortal has succeeded in articulating. Initially, one might suppose that Sless is depicting a situation in which the ideas of a few serious thinkers have been confused and overlaid by the exegeses of a host of third-raters, so that Sless's task would be to disentangle the meaningful, valuable material from the rubbish for the benefit of newcomers unsure which is which. But as the book proceeds it becomes clear that this is not so: there are no semioticians who think and write clearly and convincingly, or if there are Sless does not pay special attention to them.

Like other inhabitants of the Small World, Sless seems unaware of the very possibility that an academic discipline may be vacuous. Just because a word ending in -ology or -ics has been coined and used as the title of university departments (though, parenthetically, I am not sure that any university does have a whole department of semiotics), one is not entitled to assume that what lies behind that title is more than empty words. If the beliefs of the fifteenth century coexisted with the twentieth-century structure of higher education, diligent youngsters would be notching up credits towards degrees in astrology—which would make it politically quite awkward to assert that astrology is bunk: but bunk it is. If Sless once entertained the possibility of vacuity, the evidence he accumulates would make it difficult for him to avoid the conclusion that semiotics is twentieth-century astrology. Nowhere does his "search for semiotics" reach firm ground, a fact which he admits quite frankly. "There are many different accounts of what semiotics should be and this has precipitated a far-reaching and sometimes extravagant debate about this *possible* subject; so that when someone tells us that they are an expert in semiotics, we should understand this to mean that they are knowl-

edgeable about the debate, for there is no real subject of semiotics, . . . only a tantalising possibility.”

Perhaps Sless hopes that he himself has succeeded in writing clearly and cogently, avoiding the obfuscations of all his semiotician predecessors. But he makes no such claim—in this respect he is becomingly modest; and if he nevertheless privately cherishes the hope, I fear it is ill-founded. Try the following passage, for instance:

The landscape of communication is more like the surface of a giant trampoline than terra firma. When a trampoline yields as we walk across it the feeling may be one of uncontrollable and hence chaotic movement but we know that the trampoline is obeying strict physical laws of elasticity. . . . Some rather wild and woolly thinkers following in the footsteps of the post-structuralist Parisian Jacques Derrida have discovered that they can lurch uncontrollably across the surface of the trampoline, limbs flying in stylistic spasms. . . .

It makes no better sense in context, I promise.

But Sless closes his mind to the possibility that his search might have no object. While modest about the extent to which he or others have succeeded in articulating semiotics, he is the reverse of modest about the significance of what it is they find it so hard to articulate. “The scope of the semiotic vision is breathtaking in its scale, and the first lesson of the semiotic method should be humility in the face of something much greater and more complex than oneself.” Harnessing such overblown rhetoric to such poverty of substance, how can Sless avoid being laughed to scorn? Like Culler, he wraps himself in the language of science as a protective coloration. But Sless, who makes even larger claims than Culler for the significance of his subject, takes the strategy of validation by reference to science much further.

It is not just that Sless uses more in the way of quasi-algebraic notations than Culler, and supports his claims about semiotics by appealing more frequently and in greater detail to allegedly comparable principles in the hard sciences—though both these things are true. Thus, in order to clarify the problem that meaning is simultaneously the semiotician’s object of study and an aspect of his subjective intellectual life, Sless resorts to a couple of pages on the quantum theory of particle physics, illustrated by two “Feynman diagrams” together with one of the most complex equations I have ever seen used in any context. (Its terms are left entirely unexplained, so its only function in Sless’s book is to put the reader in the right mood.) But furthermore, where Culler treats natural science as a paradigm of intellectual achievement, with which he is

anxious to associate his own field, for Sless the scientists frequently seem to be a bunch of stumblebums, who will be far outpaced by semiotics just as soon as the latter becomes comprehensible. “[I]t is clear from Feynman diagrams that there has been a failure within physics to articulate a logic of positions. . . . There is no set of diagrams, notation or calculus in physics which is equivalent to the notation developed in [my] text. . . . [U]ntil physics . . . begins with due humility to articulate its own logic of positions, semiotics is on its own; it may be that the decisive advance in understanding in physics will come from developments and discoveries in semiotics.” Later, Sless discusses Gödel’s theorem, one of the principal achievements of twentieth-century mathematical logic: “Gödel tells us only what happens, without explaining why. . . . It is the [semiotic] *stand-for* relation, which mathematics cannot explain, which enables us to understand why any system will always be incomplete.” (But Gödel’s theorem does not say that any logical system must be incomplete, which is untrue—only that any system fulfilling certain specific conditions must be incomplete.)

Pretensions as large as Sless’s make it difficult to find a moderate stance in response. Either this admittedly turgid, obscure and jargon-ridden academic trend really is about to knock the intellectual giants of the twentieth century into a cocked hat, or it is empty. Since the book has found a publisher, presumably some readers are expected to accept the former alternative—perhaps they will.

David Lodge evidently has no illusions about the status of the activity he participates in. (Lodge is himself a university teacher of English, whose most recent academic book was *Working with Structuralism*.) The climax of Lodge’s novel arrives when Persse McGarrigle, the Candide figure whose quest gives the book its structure, stands up at the conclusion of a forum on critical theory at the Modern Language Association of America and puts to each rival theorist the question “What follows if everybody agrees with you?” The question is devastatingly unanswerable.

Culler and Sless, on the other hand, take the *Small World* entirely seriously, and thereby expose its hollowness. Reading Lodge, I wondered whether the items he had picked out to satirize for his readers’ delectation might not be concealing some nuggets of serious thought. The books under review make the truth all too clear. Literature is there to be read and enjoyed; not theorized about.