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STUDIES IN TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE

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SPECIAL ISSUE
GETTING THE MESSAGE: ON
THE SEMIOTICS OF LITERARY
SIGNIFICATION

GUEST EDITOR
Nomi Tamir-Ghez

CONTENTS — FALL 1981, SPRING 1982

Semiotic Consequences.

Jonathan Culler5

Abstract. This paper outlines the semiotic perspectives of Saussure and Peirce and the points at which these quite different theories intersect. It considers the implications of these points of intersection for literary studies and uses the example of *Oedipus Rex* to illustrate the semiotic character of acts and facts. (JC)

The Question of Readability in Avant-Garde Fiction.

Susan Rubin Suleiman17

Abstract. All avant-garde literature is in some sense «unreadable»—that is, unintelligible in terms of prevailing norms of intelligibility. Avant-garde fiction aggressively proclaims its transgressions of traditional narrative «logic,» and thus challenges at the same time the reader's belief in his or her sense-making ability; the reader may react to this threat by counter-attacking, dismissing the text as «unreadable.»

Paradoxically, the term «readable» has a negative value in Roland Barthes's terminology, where the «readable text» is opposed to Barthes's idealized notion of the truly modern «writable text.» According to Barthes, the «writable text» refuses commentary, defies all attempt at a logical, systematic reading. This view is a romantic one. Barthes suggests that the only ap-

proprate way to read modern texts is by adopting their fragmentariness, yielding to them in a kind of ecstasy (*jouissance*). I suggest, however, that at least two other ways of reading such texts are possible, and desirable: one way consists in the discovery of *new* rules of readability, which admittedly tend to lead to new codifications and a new canon (this, I argue, is what has occurred in the case of Robbe-Grillet's «transgressive» fictions); the other way consists in seeing how modern texts inscribe the question of their «unreadability» within themselves—in other words, how they thematize the opposition between readable and unreadable, unity and fragmentation, order and transgression. Maurice Roche's *Compact* serves as the text of reference in this latter discussion. (SRS)

Understanding Narrative.

Gerald Prince 37

Abstract. Our ability to understand narratives—that is, our capacity for retelling them, paraphrasing them, summarizing them, expanding them, and specifying (at least some of) their points—is a function of our narrative competence. The latter is shown to include the following set of knowledges and abilities: (1) the knowledge that narrative consists of narrating (signs representing the narrating activity, its origin, and its destination) and narrated (signs representing real or fictive situations and events in a time sequence) and the ability to distinguish between the two; (2) the knowledge that the narrated describes changes of situations in time and that the preservation of its main chronological features is important for the preservation of its meaning; (3) the ability to focus on the narrating and, more particularly, on those evaluative statements pointing to a narrative lesson; (4) the ability to process the narrated in terms of a contrastive analysis; and (5) the ability to generalize the particulars depicted in the world of the narrated. (GP)

The Nature of Meaning of Stories in Conversation.

Livia Polanyi 51

Abstract. Although everyday stories told in the course of ongoing conversations are as open to multiple readings as many literary texts, the participants in the conversational storytelling situation must assign a meaning to a given telling of a story in order to facilitate the absorption of the story into the state of general talk which normally obtains. In the present paper, work done by the American linguistic school of narrative analysis (as begun by Labov and Waletzky and further developed by the author of this paper) is brought together with insights into conversational storytelling from ethno-

methodological conversation analysts (Sacks, Jefferson, etc.) The meaning of a given telling of a story is shown to derive from both the structure of the story as told and the process of interpretation which goes on in the conversation after the telling. Special attention is paid to the «next story» which can follow the telling of a «first story» in a conversation. It is argued that the next story is crucially constrained by the first story, while the first story is assigned its meaning partially from the topic of the following one. (LP)

On Reading Poems: Visual & Verbal Icons in William Carlos Williams' «Landscape With The Fall Of Icarus».

Irene R. Fairley67

Abstract. Williams' admiration for Brueghel's landscape is coded in structural and stylistic correspondences between the poem and the painting. Structures in the poem have effects analogous to the use of devices of color, line, foregrounding in the painting. The poem, like the painting, presents a «neutral» scene but subtly insures the reader's involvement. Further, Williams draws a visual statement so that graphic features suggest a global image isomorphic with the motif of descent. Features of the poem, such as line and clause length, syntactic construction, semantic coherence, are discussed as factors that contribute to rapid glancing and increase readability. A study of readers shows their sensitivity to graphic features including the poem's shape, and corroborates the importance of stylistic features. (IRF)

On Meanings and Descriptions.

Mieke Bal100

Abstract. Although descriptive passages would appear to be of marginal importance in narrative texts, they are, in fact, of both logical and semantic necessity. Narratology, therefore, must take these segments into account. In this article, I shall survey the present situation in this field and compare rival points of view. I shall also offer several suggestions for analyzing descriptions. The following topics will be discussed: the nature of description as a specific type of discourse which makes it recognizable as such; the internal structure of description; the place and function of descriptions in the text as a whole. In the latter section, the semantic impact of descriptions in the overall meaning of narrative texts will be accounted for.

This article is intended as a contribution to the theory of description as a part of narratology. It also has a didactic purpose, since it proposes a model for the analysis of texts which can be used for systematic text-study, both in a historical and a comparative perspective. (MB)

Fiction and the Ontological Landscape.

Thomas G. Pavel 149

Abstract. The paper examines fictional ontologies in relation to the distinction between sacred and profane ontologies. This distinction suggests that most cultures organize their worldview into various ontological landscapes. Several types of such landscapes are examined and fiction is characterized as a peripheral ontology used for ludic and instructional purposes. (TGP)