

Creating Semiotic Agencies of Intelligibility - How and Why Fiction Matters

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Abstract

The paper attempts to view the genre of fiction, especially contemporary fiction, from a perspective which is semiotic-centred rather than theory-based. Although the novel has been variously interpreted in the light of structuralism/ post-structuralism, very few among them have touched upon the aspect of semiotics, which also deserves to be researched upon and studied in the present-day context. Fiction has, many a time, been subject to certain 'typified' and rigorous readings, leaving the reader baffled about the aesthetics of its sub texts. Although there are a number of theories that help to enrich the aesthetic content of fiction, a semiotic dimension seems to be the need of the hour.

More than any other literary form, the novel serves as a model by which society conceives of itself, perhaps the most important reason why structuralists concentrate on the novel. They study the creation and organization of signs not simply to generate meanings, but to produce a human world charged with meanings. Our expectation is that from the activity of reading the novel will be able to produce models of individual personality, relationships between society and the individual and the kind of significance these aspects can bear. The novel thus becomes the primary semiotic agent of intelligibility.

Precisely because the reader expects to be able to recognize a world, the novel he reads becomes a place in which models of intelligibility can be deconstructed, exposed and challenged. In poetry, deviations from the *vraisemblable* are easily recuperated as metaphor which should be translated from a visionary/prophetic stance; but in the novel conventional expectations make such deviations more troubling, and therefore potentially more powerful.

The distinction between the readable and the unreadable, between the Balzacian and the nouveau roman, is central to structuralism. Roland Barthes says that these are functional concepts rather than classes of texts. The traditional novel should challenge the reader in

some way, and the meanings experienced when reading such a novel would have a bearing on the reader's own life and would enable him to look upon it and the world in new ways. For all its opposition to models of intelligibility and coherence, the radical novel relies on the link between text and ordinary experience, just as the traditional novel did. The difference, therefore, is only in degree—the former is only a freer version of the latter. The general structuralist theory considers the novel as a hierarchy of systems. Barthes says that to read a text 'is not just to follow the unwinding of the story, it is also to identify the various levels, to project the horizontal links of the narrative sequence onto an implicitly vertical axis; to read a narrative is not only to pass from one word to another, it is also to pass from one level to another.'

If the basic convention governing the novel is the expectation that readers will be able to recognize a world which it produces, or to which it refers, it ought to be possible to identify at least some elements of the text whose function it is to confirm this expectation and to assert the representational or mimetic orientation of fiction. At this most elementary level, this function is fulfilled by a descriptive residue: items whose only role in the text is of denoting a concrete reality. This becomes, in Barthes' words, 'the reality effect', signifying that 'we are the real'—that the meaning of the sign is nothing other than its referent.

This process can be blocked by preventing one from moving through the text to the world and making one read the text as an autonomous verbal object—ie., making the reader aware of the process of writing itself. If the process of recognition is not blocked at this level, then the reader will, after assimilating this world, move back to the text so as to give meaning to what has been identified. This second move in the cycle of reading can be troubled if the text undertakes a proliferation of elements whose function is purely referential—in other words, enumerations or descriptions of objects may then serve no thematic purpose.

The referential function may be affirmed by descriptive details but it also depends on the narrative stance implied by the text. In most cases we can order the text as a discourse of an explicit or implicit narrator, who tells us about the events that occur in the fictional world. This is perhaps the simplest case, where the narrator identifies himself and the audience which joins him in looking at the events of the past. The narrative indicates what the reader needs to be told, how he might have reacted and what deductions or connections he is presumed to expect. Sometimes such texts make an internal distinction between story and presentation, from referential object and the rhetoric of the narrator. This may be true from the linguistic point of view, but if we were to separate the story from all marks of a personal narrator, we would have to exclude even the slightest general observation or evaluative adjective, the most discrete comparison, the most modest 'perhaps', the most inoffensive logical connection, all of which partake of discourse rather than *histoire*.

Barthes identifies, in addition to narration, two other levels of the novel that of character and that of lexics. A lexic is a minimal unit of reading, a stretch of text which is isolated as having a specific function different from that of neighbouring stretches of text. It could thus be anything from a single word to a brief series of sentences. Barthes distinguishes five major 'codes' which are applied to the reading of a text, each of which is a general semantic model that enables one to pick out items as belonging to a functional space which the code designates. Codes are determined by their homogeneity—they group together items of a single kind—and by their explanatory function.

1. Proaeretic code, that governs the reader's construction of plot
2. Hermeneutic code, which involves the logic of question and answer, enigma and solution, suspense and peripeteia.
3. Semic code, that provides models which enable the reader to collect semantic features that relate to persons and develop characters.
4. Symbolic code, that guides extrapolations from textual to symbolic readings, assigned to the realm of theme.
5. Referential code, the cultural background to which the text refers.

The absence of any code relating to narration, ie., the reader's ability to collect items which help to characterize a narrator and place the text in a kind of communicative circuit, can be considered a major flaw in Barthian analysis. He seems to draw upon Benveniste's distinction between distributional and integrative relations. A distributional relation is that which is defined by its relationship to other items of the same kind which appear earlier or later in the text. An integrative relation, on the other hand, is one whose importance derives not from a place in the sequence but from the fact that they are taken up by the reader and grouped with analogous items in paradigm classes which receive meaning at a much higher level of integration. Such a distinction can even correspond to Greimas' separation of static and dynamic predicates, having considerable intuitive validity as a representation of the different roles we can ascribe to the texts of a novel. However, very little attention has been brought to bear upon the basic problem of how we decide, even retrospectively, whether a particular element is to be treated as function or qualification.

Plot: Sequences of actions constitute the armature of an intelligible novel. A reader's ability to identify and summarize plots, as well as to group together similar plots, are all a part of his intuitive knowledge. In the analysis of plot structure, one of the best ways of discovering what norms are at work is to alter the text and consider how its effect is changed. The analyst of the narrative must of course be able to imagine 'counter texts'—ie, possible aberrations of the text, whatever be the scandalous elements in the narration.

Theme and symbol: Structuralists have not made theme a separate object of investigation because it is not the result of a specific set of elements but rather the name given to the unity we discern in the text. The ultimate structures of the proairetic code are thematic. Plot is but a temporal projection of thematic structures.

The conventions of novel-reading provide two basic operations—empirical and symbolic recuperations. The former is based on causal extrapolation, by establishing a sign relation between the description and meaning while in the latter, causal connections are absent. The symbolic code permits connections between accepted and unaccepted symbols/symbolic structures or readings.

Such formal devices are based on the concept of antithesis. If a text presents two items—characters, situations, objects, actions—in a way which suggests oppositions, then a whole space of substitution and variation is opened up to the reader. The presentation of two heroines, one dark and the other fair, sets in motion an experiment in extrapolation in which the reader correlates this opposition with thematic oppositions that it might manifest—evil/good, forbidden/permitted, or passive/active. The reader can pass from one opposition to another, trying them out, even inverting them and then determine which of them are pertinent to larger thematic structures which encompass other antitheses presented in the text. For instance, roasting and boiling are both forms of cooking and hence culture-based, but the opposition between them (direct exposure to the fire versus exposure mediated by a cultural object—the pot) can be used to manifest, within the cultural system itself, the contrast between culture and nature.

In the symbolic text the process of interpolation is made to appear natural. The symbol is supposed to contain in itself all the meaning we produce in our semantic transformations. It is a natural sign in which the signifier and signified are indissolubly fused, not an arbitrary or conventional sign in which they are linked by human authority or habit. Allegory on the other hand, stresses the difference between texts, flaunts the gap we must leap to produce meaning, and thus displays the activity of interpretation in all its conventionality.

Character: It is with regard to the cardinal aspect of character—one of the most integral aspects of the novel—that structuralism seems to have paid least attention. This is an ideological prejudice because the ethos of structuralism runs counter to the notions of individuality and rich psychological coherence which are often applied to the novel. Stress on the interpersonal and conventional systems which traverse the individual, which make him *a space* in which forces and events meet rather than an individualized essence, leads to a rejection of a prevalent conception of character in the novel—that the most successful and

‘living’ characters are richly delineated autonomous wholes, clearly distinguished from others by physical and psychological characteristics. This notion of character, the structuralists would say, is a total myth. In fact they have been more concerned with developing and refining Propp’s theory of roles/ functions that characters may assume and thus define a character as a ‘participant’ rather than as a ‘being’. But this role is so reductive and so directly dependent on plot that it leaves us with an immense residue.

In attempting to specify the thematic forces which govern the organization of plots at their most abstract levels, one would be able to draw upon a theory of archetypal or canonical plots such as those introduced by Northrop Frye. His *four mythoi of spring, summer, autumn and winter* are in a sense, stereotyped plots and thematic structures of the world. To *the mythos of spring* corresponds the comic plot of love triumphant, where a restrictive society poses obstacles which are eventually overcome. The *mythos of summer* has as its favoured plot the romance of the quest with its perilous journey, the crucial struggle and the exaltation of the hero. The *tragic plots of autumn* involve a negative alteration of contract, where the opponents gain their revenge.

The *mythos of winter* reverses, in an ironic manner, the romance of the plot, where quests prove unsuccessful, society is not transformed and the hero must learn that there is no escape from the world except through death. Forms of this kind serve as models which help readers to identify and organize plots, so as to enable them to name kernels -- like tragedy, comedy or tragic comedy—and make them thematically relevant.

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