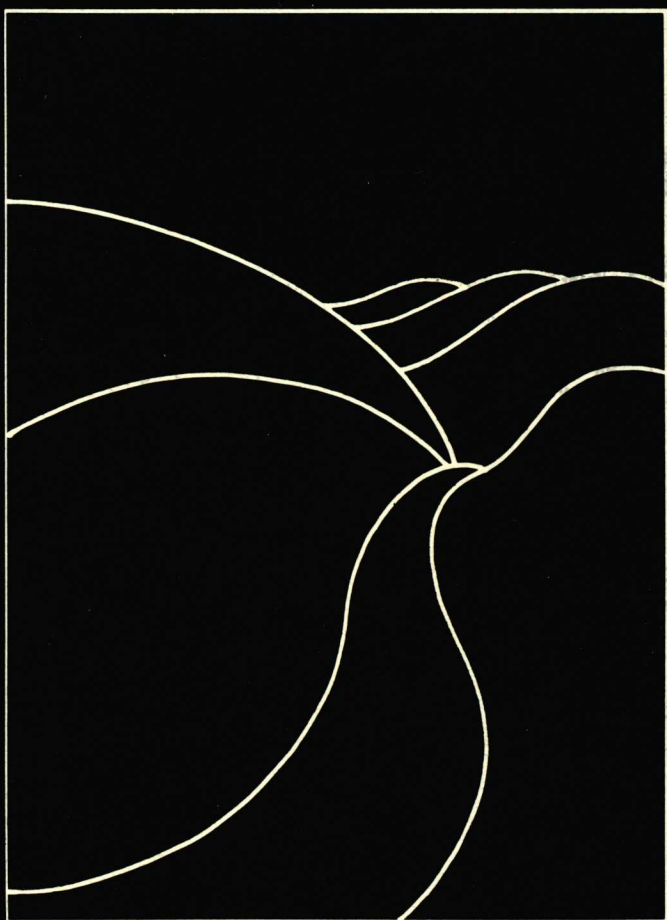


Fictional Worlds



Thomas G. Pavel

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For Mihai

Preface

THE LAST few decades have witnessed a considerable variety of research on narrative and dramatic fiction focused on the formal properties of literary texts. The semantics of fiction has remained, however, at the periphery of critical attention. Yet a comprehensive theory of literature needs a viable account of literary content that would complement formal and rhetorical studies. In contrast to the reluctance of formalist poetics to address the semantic aspects of fiction, recent analytical philosophy and aesthetics have been devoting an ever-increasing energy to their exploration. The temptation to cross boundaries soon became irresistible, and indeed most literary scholars who offer semantic contributions have borrowed their notions from modal logic and speech-act theory.

By proposing a survey of the semantics of fiction, I am attempting to pave the way for a theory sensitive to the nature and function of imaginary worlds, the representational force of fiction, and the links between literature and other cultural systems. After an introduction that criticizes classical structuralism, Chapters 2 and 3 evaluate the literary relevance of various philosophical stands on fictional beings and worlds. An exploration, in the fourth chapter, of several features of fictional worlds leads, in Chapter 5, to a discussion of literary conventions. The links between fiction and the broader economy of culture constitute my last chapter.

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the Causal Theory of Names" (1979) and "Tragedy and the Sacred" (1982); *Studies in 20th Century Literature* for "Fictional Landscapes" (1982); *Philosophy and Literature* for "Incomplete Worlds, Ritual Emotions" (1982); and *Poetics Today* for "Borders of Fiction" (1983).

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1 ≈ Beyond Structuralism

My purpose in this book is to discuss some of the main issues raised by the theory of fiction, a field emerging at the crossroads of literary criticism and philosophy. On the philosophers' side, the interest in fiction fits naturally into the development of modern philosophies of language and logic. Starting with Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein, the program of analytical philosophy had as its central task the clarification of philosophical language through careful scrutiny of concepts and the construction of powerful logical models. During the early stages of the inquiry, philosophers focused their attention on freeing rational discourse from the trappings of ordinary, prelogical language, wherein vague, ambiguous expressions often display a linguistic form quite at variance with their logical structure, sometimes misleadingly referring to nonexistent entities. Regimentation of language involved the elimination of ambiguities and of misguided reference; it therefore had to devote considerable energy to forging a secure link between linguistic expressions and the states of affairs talked about, between language and reality. But since, within the language of unmistakable truth, expressions such as "the flying bird" and "the flying horse" receive a different treatment (the first expression readily accepted, the second failing referential tests), philosophers were inevitably led to favor literal varieties of language over fictional and metaphoric uses. The logical formalisms proposed during this period expressly eliminated fictional language as a deviant phenomenon that hinders the course of representational language.

More recently, however, as the earlier self-righteousness and reformatory intentions of analytical philosophy gradually gave way to an outlook more tolerant of the variety of linguistic uses, philosophers of logic and language started to question the soundness of limiting

the inquiry to plain referential discourse. The reorientation brought about by research in modal logic and possible-world semantics has drawn the attention of logicians toward the close kinship between possibility and fiction: formerly underrated, fiction begins to serve as a means of checking the explanatory power of logical hypotheses and models. Since fictional discourse allows for any imaginable kind of confabulation without constraint, and since the rebellious properties of literary and mythological fiction challenge most models and appear to defy easy regimentation, literary phenomena may be understood to provide a severe testing ground for formal semantics.¹

Outside logic proper, the more relaxed standards of analytical philosophy have led to a revival of concern for the properties of fiction: aiming at prospecting the entire spectrum of linguistic activities, speech-act philosophers cannot neglect fictional discourse, while tolerant epistemologists, replacing the classical idea of a reality unique and undivided with a multiplicity of equally valid world versions, have come to look at fiction as just another of these numerous versions, by no means less worthy than its competitors.²

Structuralism and Literary Semantics

In literary criticism and theory, the growing interest in the properties of fictional discourse grew during a period when structuralist methods and ideas increasingly met with challenge. Not unlike the early opponents of structuralism, who disliked the invasion of a scientific ideology into the private grounds of the humanities, poststructuralist and deconstructionist critics reacted against structuralism's taste for sciencelike certitudes. To the quest for a unique, well-defined structure of the literary text, the poststructuralists contrasted the search for multiple readings, destined to show that there is no such thing as *the* meaning or *the* structure of a work.³ In a similar vein, although from a different angle, various trends in reader-oriented criticism denounced the structuralist obsession with objective properties of the literary text, showing that it inevitably led to the neglect of reception processes (Suleiman, 1980; Tompkins, 1980).

But impatience with structuralist scientific pretensions, or with the unrelenting search for objective and universal literary properties, is not the only conceivable reaction to this trend. Opposition to structuralism just may as well originate in the feeling that while its strongly advertised call for a rational, scientific study of literature was indeed

worth pursuing, the structuralist way of implementing its own program most often failed to do justice to the expectations raised.

In a series of influential papers that laid the foundation of French structuralism, Claude Lévi-Strauss summoned anthropology and more generally the humanities to reach for a new scientific status by emulating the advances of structural linguistics and more specifically by applying phonological models, which in his view represented the paradigm of scientific success in a social field. Claiming that earlier mythological research failed to understand the arbitrariness of linguistic signs, he submitted that since myths behave like a language, to miss this essential truth amounted to being blocked at a prescientific stage. For him, arbitrariness freed mythological meaning from its dependence on the superficial features of given stories or story schemata. Carl Jung's assumption that a given mythological pattern always has the same meaning "is comparable," Lévi-Strauss wrote, "to the long supported error that a sound may possess a certain affinity with a meaning: for instance the 'liquid' semivowels with water . . . Whatever emendation the original formulation may now call for, everybody will agree that the Saussurean principle of the *arbitrary character of the linguistic sign* was a prerequisite for the accession of linguistics to the scientific level."⁴ The search for the meaning of a myth involves going beyond the familiar pattern of events; just as the succession of phonemes /t/ plus /r/ plus /i:/ is associated with a meaning "tree" impossible to derive from phonetic elements, in Oedipus' story the narration of monster slaying, parricide, and incest is but an arbitrary sequence behind which lurks the unexpected meaning: the hesitation between the biological and chthonian origin of man. The analogy is striking; nonetheless the attack on prestructuralist anthropology misfires, since the principle of arbitrariness maintains only that there is no motivated link between the conceptual side and the phonetic side of a linguistic sign; it does not deny the stability of linguistic meaning, once the semiotic system has been established. The objection to Jungian methodology fails, since not only is there nothing "un-Saussurean" about granting a set of elements a constant meaning but, on the contrary, within the Saussurean framework semantic stability constitutes a universal trait of semiotic systems.

If, in order to upgrade its scientific status, mythological analysis needs linguistic models, it still has to decide which aspect of language would provide the most appropriate term of comparison. If mythological patterns were modeled after phonemes, they would lack independent meaning, and, just as phonemes constitute and distinguish

morphemes, mythological patterns would play an important role in structuring the units of higher meaningful levels. But of course mythological patterns are not meaningless in themselves. Moreover, while in linguistic systems the morphological level enjoys more visibility than does phonology—in order to grasp the meaning of an utterance we naturally tend to pass through sound without noticing it—where would one find a credible candidate for a higher mythological level, both heterogeneous and arbitrarily linked to mythological patterns? If the linguistic analogy is to be pursued, mythological patterns would better be compared to words, which possess meaning and contribute to the global meaning of the next level, the sentential level, which in turn may be used to describe states of affairs and events. Or perhaps it would be even more fruitful to assume that, in spite of superficial resemblances with word and sentence structure, myths, stories, and more generally discourse phenomena observe much more complex regularities; so their analysis needs a conceptual apparatus considerably richer than sentence linguistics can provide. By basing their inquiry strictly on phonological models, structuralists may have stopped short of exploring genuinely interesting paths for the study of myths and other discursive phenomena. Therefore, rather than accusing them of having extended scientific methods too far into the realm of the humanities, one may feel that they have failed to develop a sufficient methodological momentum and have prematurely arrested their inquiry.⁵

From anthropology, the structuralist quest for linguistic models, mediated by narrative analysis, spread into poetics, with phonologism providing a comfortable methodological solution, as can be seen in Roland Barthes's early work on narrative structures and in early literary semiotics. In literary structuralism, however, methodology was not destined to be a major concern; rather than scrutinizing the methodological adequacy of their model, most proponents of this trend preferred to theorize about general properties of literature, with the nontrivial consequence that the structuralist heritage consists more in theoretical theses than, as many believe, in a set of scientific methods. Among these theses, the most widespread have been mythocentrism, semantic fundamentalism, and the doctrine of the centrality of text, with its corollaries, an antiexpressive stand and an immanentist approach to culture. Although each was at the origin of illuminating proposals concerning myth and literature, they entailed nonetheless a limitation of research horizons.

According to mythocentrism, narrative form constitutes a privi-

leged manifestation of literary meaning; narrative structures are set in the center of literary studies, and stylistic and rhetorical features, referential force, and social relevance are deemed to be more or less accidental. I would, moreover, distinguish between a weak, or literary, form of mythocentrism and a stronger, generalized form. Weak or literary mythocentrism may be characterized as the strategy of focusing the literary inquiry on narrative phenomena, so as to marginalize other aspects of the text and to make them appear dependent on plot. Barthes's contention that mimesis is a contingent aspect of stories, entirely subordinated to the narrative logic, provides a good example of this strategy:

The function of narrative is not to "represent"; it is to constitute a spectacle still very enigmatic for us, but in any case not of a mimetic order. The "reality" of a sequence lies not in the "natural" succession of the actions composing it, but in the logic there exposed, risked and satisfied. (1966, pp. 123-124)

In a similar vein, literary characters have been treated as mere agents, structurally defined in relation to the units of plot.

Taking a further step in this direction, stronger or generalized mythocentrism postulates the existence of a narrative level in every meaningful event, be it a story, a nonliterary text, or even a nonlinguistic semiotic object: a painting, a musical work, a social system. It argues that textual meaning does not originate in the production of utterances and their combination into discourse; rather it is relayed on its way by narrative structures that in turn produce the meaningful discourse articulated in utterances (Greimas, 1970, p. 159). As a consequence of so powerful a hypothesis about the inner organization of semiotic systems, the proponents of strong mythocentrism relax the notion of narrative structure and allow for the identification of a narrative level in nonnarrative texts.⁶ The obvious predicament of such theoretical maneuvers lies in the choice between loss of specificity and instant refutation; for, if all texts must contain narrative configurations, then either the definition of these will become general to the point of being trivial, or else the empirical existence of texts without narrative properties will disprove the hypothesis.

It was literary mythocentrism that, perhaps because of its weaker form, more extensively affected classical structuralist poetics. By overemphasizing the logic of plot, mythocentrism helped to create the impression that problems of reference, mimesis, and more generally of relations between literary texts and reality were merely af-

tereffects of a referential illusion, spontaneously projected by narrative syntax. This belief effectively prevented the structuralists from devoting attention to the referential properties of literary texts. Since, moreover, structuralist poetics had adopted the distinction between *story* and *discourse*, the story being most often identified with narrative structures, it was quite natural that the only alternative to plot studies were the examination of discursive techniques, an examination that, while producing remarkable accomplishments,⁷ helped nevertheless to implement the moratorium on representational topics.

This moratorium was encouraged by a doctrine that I will call semantic fundamentalism and that closely relates to phonologism in mythological studies and narrative theory. During the mid- and late nineteen-fifties, when anthropological and literary structuralism came into the open, the only available framework in narratology was Vladimir Propp's study of Russian fairytales. Propp had noticed that fairytales displaying a different inventory of motifs may be described as possessing a similar sequence of abstract narrative functions. There are four sequences of events at the beginning of different tales:

- (1) The king gives the hero an eagle—the eagle carries the hero to another country.
- (2) Grandfather gives Suchenko a horse—the horse carries Suchenko to another country.
- (3) A magician gives Ivan a boat—the boat carries Ivan to another kingdom.
- (4) The queen gives Ivan a ring—strong men coming out of the ring carry Ivan to another kingdom.

These can be reduced to two abstract functions: *gift* and *departure*. The examination of a corpus of fairytales led Propp to establish a sequence of thirty-one functions shared by the members of his corpus. But, since these abstract functions were designed to capture the syntactic, combinatorial properties of the stories in question, by virtue of their very construction they fostered neglect of the specific meaning of each story.⁸

Quite early, structuralists realized that narrative and mythological semantics falls outside the scope of Proppian narratology;⁹ the semantic models they proposed for myths and literary texts nonetheless share the Proppian orientation toward abstract, general schemata.

One of the most typical structuralist approaches to textual meaning is, again, Lévi-Strauss's analysis of the Oedipus myth. Inspired by the idea of the phonological oppositions that distinguish lexical units, the analysis assumes that every myth or story is underlain by a pair of achronic semantic oppositions, which constitute the semantic core of the story or myth and do not depend on the chronological unfolding of the story. Accordingly, Oedipus' myth is reduced to the linkage of two semantic oppositions: the overrating of kinship relations versus its underrating and the chthonian versus the biological origin of man. A few events of the myth are selected and distributed among these four categories: Oedipus' and Jocasta's marriage as well as Antigone's love for her brother Polynice manifest the overrating of family relations, while the killings of Laios by his son Oedipus and of Polynice by his brother Eteocles reveal the underrating of kinship links. In a less apparent way, Oedipus' victory over the Sphinx, who is a chthonian monster, and the meaning of Oedipus' name ("swollen foot") are assumed to signal respectively the negation and the affirmation of the chthonian origin of man. The global meaning of Oedipus' myth would consist in just this proportion: overrating kinship is to its underrating as affirmation of the chthonian origin of man is to its negation. Myth does not solve the tensions; rather it helps cultures to live with them, by linking oppositions to one another and relativizing them. A similar semantic account of literary texts has been developed by structuralist semioticians who, at the deepest core of all texts and semiotic objects, postulate a four-term, semantic structure. Labeled the "semiotic square," the four-term structure is supposed to inform the meaning of the entire text through a complex generational process.¹⁰ But neither proposal offers an explicit procedure for discovering the fundamental structure of a text, or at least for validating the proposed semantic core by confronting it with the narrative text; both inductive and deductive constraints on the analysis are disturbingly absent. The four semantic terms of the myth are obtained only through the exclusion of several events of considerable intuitive importance: the plague in Thebes, Oedipus' quest for truth, its revelation, and the hero's self-punishment. But since there is no explicit reason for the exclusion, this particular choice appears arbitrary.

More seriously, it is difficult to believe that all myths, stories, or texts can be reduced to single elementary semantic structures consisting of four terms in a proportional relationship.¹¹ Semiotic objects

are complex constructions, overloaded with meaning; to postulate so rudimentary a sense involves a considerable loss of information; since, too, semantic fundamentalism brings no independent evidence that would confirm the existence of a core semantic structure, there are no compelling reasons to accept its oversimplifying account of the meaning of myths and stories. The absence of independent evidence is a symptom of immanentism: under the influence of early structural linguistics, in particular of Louis Hjelmslev's views, semantic fundamentalists tend to believe in the autonomy of semiotic objects to the extent that they willfully limit the inquiry to the examination of these objects, claiming that evidence about the structure of a myth should be found in the family of myths it belongs to; or that the meaning of a literary text should be discovered through the interrogation of that text only.

The belief in the autonomy of semiotic objects goes beyond the goals and practices of semantic fundamentalism; it constitutes a general feature of many recent trends in literary criticism that share a propensity to grant literary texts the central place in literary studies. The centrality of the text, as opposed to the romantic centrality of the artist, has indeed been the most widespread doctrine in literary criticism until recently. Aestheticism's and formalism's disdain for non-aesthetic values and objects, phenomenology's avoidance of history and its practice of describing isolated objects of consciousness, as well as the cult of tangible facts embraced by empiricism, have all encouraged this doctrine. In its extreme form, emphasis on single texts gives rise to the principle of "text closure," which asserts that all the elements necessary for the understanding of a text are contained therein. When practice led researchers to look for information outside the text itself, as is indispensable for the study of genres, influence, imitation, and parody, the recourse to external sources was restricted to other texts: hence the idea of intertextuality.¹²

As a consequence, the venerable notion of literary work (*oeuvre*) fell into dispute for a while. But while works are produced by craftsmen, texts can be conceived of as the result of linguistic games more or less independent of individual will and purpose: the notion of author, Barthes claimed, must give way to that of scriptor, the faceless agent through whom language deploys its textual virtualities (1968a, pp. 147–148). A strongly antiexpressive aesthetics accompanied classical structuralist poetics, discouraging reflection on those literary and artistic features that transcend purely structural properties: style, reference, representation, global meaning, expressiveness.¹³