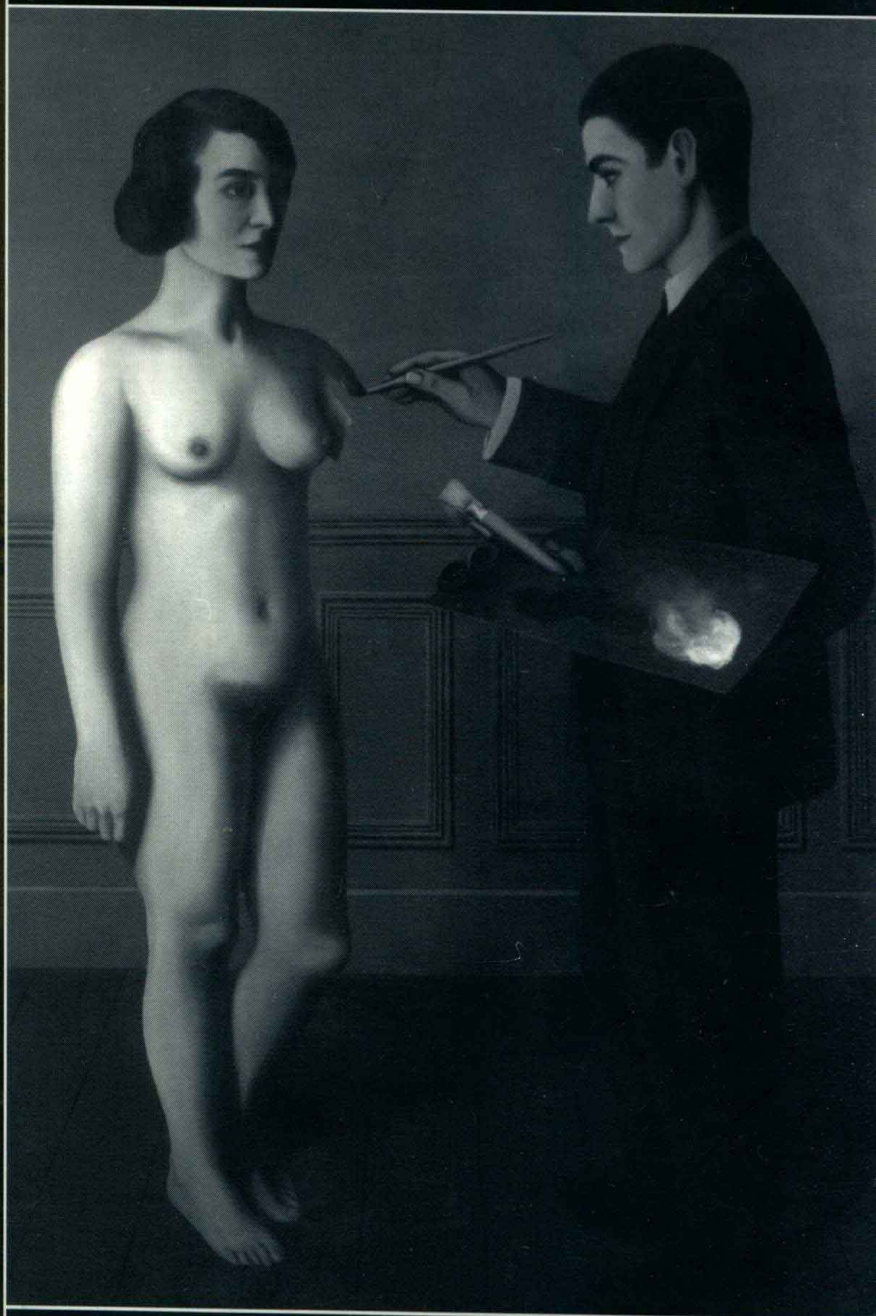
LITERARY DISCOURSE

A SEMIOTIC-PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO LITERATURE



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UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS
Toronto Buffalo London

Toronto Buffalo London
Printed in Canada

ISBN 0-8020-3577-9

Printed on acid-free paper

Toronto Studies in Semiotics and Communication
Editors: Marcel Danesi, Umberto Eco, Paul Perron, Thomas Sebeok, and Peter Schulz

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National Library of Canada Cataloguing in Publication Data

Johansen, Jørgen Dines
Literary discourse : a semiotic-pragmatic approach to literature

(Toronto studies in semiotics and communication)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-8020-3577-9

1. Semiotics and literature. 2. Literature – Philosophy.
I. Title. II. Series.

P302.5.J64 2002 801'.95 C2001-903577-9

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the University of Southern Denmark.

University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial assistance to its publishing program of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council.

University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial support for its publishing activities of the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP).

LITERARY DISCOURSE:
A SEMIOTIC-PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO LITERATURE

Preface

This book is an attempt to approach the study of literature from a semiotic-pragmatic point of view; more specifically, the semiotics and pragmatics of C.S. Peirce and the universal pragmatics of Jürgen Habermas. Thus it owes its framework, its architecture, to speak with Peirce, to his conception of the sign as I understand it and to my understanding and use of Habermas's concept of discourse.

In the introduction some problems concerning the categorization of literature are discussed, those dealing with the distinction between literature and non-literature and those dealing with distinctions between the different literary genres. An attempt is made to explain the fuzzy boundaries and the internal heterogeneity of literature by pointing out (with Gallie) that literature is inherently unruly and agonistic. Consequently, it seems impossible to give a universally valid definition of it. Instead, it should be studied and described in relation to its functions within a historical and communicative context.

The first part, 'Sign, Dialogue, Discourse' (chapters 1–2), expounds the general theoretical framework of this approach. The first chapter is on Peircean semiotics: on his concepts of sign and semiosis, and on communication from a semiotic perspective. In the second chapter, the point of departure is the two different concepts of discourse of Foucault and Habermas. This discussion, following Habermas, leads to the hypothesis that four basic discourses are needed for a community, and a culture, to survive. I further argue that a fifth should be added, that of literary discourse. This chapter ends with a brief sketch of the status of fictional literature at different times in European literary history. I further attempt a heterogeneous definition of literature using a cluster of often encountered features that are related to different dimensions of communicative semiosis (the semiotic pyramid).

This introductory section on semiotics in general and the concept of discourse is necessitated by my conviction that literature is firmly entrenched in communication within the lifeworld of communities, where it fulfils a number of important functions. Thus, to approach what is specific to literature as a mode of communication, and as an institution, presupposes an awareness of what different kinds of human sign production and interpretation have in common.

The second and central part of the book, 'The Four Dimensions of the Literary Text' (chapters 3–6) treats the mimetic, formal, subjective, and communicative dimensions of literature, respectively. The design of this part follows from the ideas of a communicative semiotics presented in chapters 1 and 2. However, even if the perspective is most certainly semiotic, I hope that it also will become evident that the person writing is a literary scholar who likes his trade. Theory should further, not hinder, the dialogue with, and interpretation of, literary texts. And it seems to me that literary theory is important because literature matters very much. Although interpretation is by necessity both reductive and amplificatory – it always says less and more than the text it interprets – I firmly believe that theoretical approaches to any field should, as far as possible, respect the heterogeneity of their object. And literature both is structurally complex and fulfils several functions at the same time.

Semiotics, in my understanding, offers a valuable perspective applicable to many fields, namely, that of seeing them as sign processes, as the production and interpretation of meanings. Indeed, I suppose that the study of meaning is ultimately what semiotics is all about. From such a perspective excellent work has been done in fields ranging from biosemiotics to the semiotics of literature. However, in order to be a biosemiotician one must have studied biology, and to be a literary semiotician one must know about the history and the theories of literature other than those called semiotic. Semiotics offers a indispensable perspective and a method of investigation. Nevertheless, as regards literature, semioticians must also respect the fact that they deal with a highly structured artefact, the product of a craft with a long tradition, and that much valuable knowledge about it is produced by scholars who do not consider themselves semioticians.

As regards literature, its heterogeneity stems from the fact that literary texts are linguistic utterances communicated from an author to a readership at a given time under specific social and cultural conditions and within, or in relation to, the literary institution. Thus, literary texts should be studied as texts that are rule-governed at different levels –

but that are also rule-breaking and rule-creating. Further, as utterances they are intentional and motivated; the author wants to represent and insist on something in addressing his or her listeners or readers, although what is said transcends what has been intended. Literary texts, even more than texts related to everyday business, seem to contain a surplus of meaning. The matter of literature is, broadly speaking, the human condition as it is seen – or in the case of literature, just as much imagined – by the uttering subject. Since such a perspective is grounded in time and space, the historical context of uttering is important to the understanding of the texts. Not taking this fact into account makes eminent the danger of reducing texts from different times and places to saying more or less the same things.

Literature, as one discourse among others, has somehow always been institutionalized, at least in a minimal way, but the literary institution has grown and changed over time, and the texts that have been categorized as literary has also changed. The offices and functions that literature has been thought to fulfil – by the poets, by authorities, and by readerships – have changed as well. And these, perhaps conflicting, self-understandings (e.g., the prescriptive and descriptive poetics – always a part of the literary institution) are not external to its texts.

Obviously, the individual literary scholar must have his or her own field of interest and study. Without such division of labour, the establishment of scholarship would be impossible. However, as regards literary theory, semiotic or non-semiotic, it seems important that it not be narrowly conceived according to special interests and fashionable points of view – *vestigia terrent*. This argument I have attempted to make in the third part of the book, 'On Interpretation,' where chapter 7 deals with the problems of hermeneutics from a semiotic perspective. Finally, in the Conclusion, I attempt to point to certain paradoxes that characterize literature as institutionalized communication.

I have tried to write a non-polemic book. Consequently, since this book is written from a semiotic-pragmatic perspective, I have refrained from taking up, and objecting to, points of view argued by other schools or movements, even when they question the point of view put forward here. The decisive reason for abstaining from such confrontation is that it would have made a much longer book. Instead, I have tried to argue my own points of view as best I could.

However, one's own ideas are the result of an ongoing dialogue with those of others, and of reflecting on and taking a stand on issues viewed differently by different scholars. Thus, Peirce more than Saussure,

Jakobson more than Hjelmslev, and Habermas more than Foucault have been the main sources of inspiration for the semiotic-pragmatic approach to literature contained in this book. And, going back to the first fully developed philosophical debate on literature, Aristotle, more than Plato, has influenced my views. The reason for pointing this out is not to inform the reader of something difficult to detect, because I trust that even the most cursory reading of the book will make these influences very clear. There is often, however, a complementarity between differing views. In spite of the fact that they cannot, at the same time, both be used as points of departure and as general frameworks for approaching literary texts, the one not chosen may supplement the chosen one.

For instance, in my opinion, the dynamism, generality, dialogic nature, and inclusiveness of Peirce's view makes it better suited to function as the general framework for the semiotic-pragmatic approach to literature. Within this framework questions may be asked that are not easily raised (or whose answer is deferred by referring to the fact that this part of the theory is not yet established) within the Continental tradition (mainly those concerning reference, communication and use – i.e., fields later taken up by linguistic pragmatics). However, even if the dethronement of structuralism in the 1970s was necessary, this does not mean that it did not possess (and does not still) real merit because of its valid and valuable insight into the ways in which significations are connected within what Greimas called semantic micro-universes. After all, structuralism was a linguistic semiotics, and thus close to spoken and written texts. Parts of chapter 4 draw on this tradition.

The other viewpoints that are contrasted here, the other 'less thans,' also make important points. Constructions of fields of inquiry that one may find unsuitable as general frameworks of research may prove useful for investigating phenomena of a more local nature. This is especially valid as regards literature, because literary texts are the products of complex human action and are thus overdetermined. The theoretical perspective through which they are seen should allow for supplementary points of view, not preclude them. And I have attempted to allow for such supplementarity in this book.

What follows is an attempt to apply the general semiotic viewpoints of my book *Dialogic Semiosis: An Essay on Signs and Meaning* (1993) to literature. In that book I studied semiosis, sign action, and sign interpretation in general, and I attempted to establish a comprehensive and coherent approach to the study of meaning. However, I have been trained as a literary scholar, and it has always been my goal to make

semiotics fruitful for the study of literature. The present book is an attempt to fulfil this ambition.

The work on this book was begun by my teaching a seminar on the subject while I was a Fulbright professor in the Scandinavian department at University of California, Berkeley, 1994/95. The department generously gave me time for research, and the discussions with graduate students and my colleagues proved inspiring. That year was a very good start. In the spring of 1997 I was a fellow at the Northrop Frye Centre in Victoria College of the University of Toronto. During those months I was able to create the general outline of the book, and I profited much from discussions with literary scholars Eva Kushner, Roseann Runte, and Mario Valdés and with semioticians Paul Buissac and Marcel Danesi. In 1998/99 I had a sabbatical year from the University of Southern Denmark, and spent October 1998 as a guest professor in the General and Comparative Literature Section at the University of Oslo, lecturing on the subject of this book and giving final form to chapters 6 and 7. However, I owe an equal debt to students and colleagues at my own university for inspiration and to other of its divisions for other kinds of support.

I am happy that University of Toronto Press was able to get the permission to reproduce the painting of Magritte, *La tentative de l'impossible* (1928, Attempting the Impossible) on the cover of this book. Although a painting, it is also a commentary on literature. First, it shows that what is represented is created by the artist. Second, it intimates that such creation is also an act of desire. Third, although it can be known only through contextualization, the female figure is, in fact, a representation of Georgette Magritte, the artist's wife, and the painter on the canvas is a self-portrait. Thus, the painting has its models, and model and artist are themselves present in the artwork. Fourth, nobody would, in spite of its close relation to the couple's lifeworld, take the painting for an accurate representation of reality. I think that these four points characterize literature as well as painting.

Flemming G. Andersen, dean of the humanities at the University of Southern Denmark, graciously relieved me from serving on the executive board of the faculty during 1998/99. I don't think that I could have completed the book while being involved in administration and university politics. Second, in the critical period when I was constantly carrying discs back and forth between my home and the university, the head of the IT division at our faculty, Jørn Erik Wennerstrøm, generously provided me with a home computer that matched the powerful

text program of the one in my office. Everybody knows that matching computers are bliss. My colleague Professor Morten Nøjgaard of the Institute of Literature, Culture, and Media in my own university has taken the trouble of reading the entire manuscript of the book, and I have profited much from his comments and suggestions. I also thank Professor Marianne Innis at University of Massachusetts, Lowell, for revising and correcting my English.

Last but not least, I thank my wife – for being my wife, and for her support and encouragement; for putting up with the long hours and for urging me to get the job done. This is why I dedicate this book to her – and to my children, who have given me peace of mind and made me happy by turning into affectionate, responsible, and independent grown-ups while this book was being written.

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Introduction

Introduction: Literature?

Owing to the necessity of making theories far more simple than the real facts, we are obliged to be cautious in accepting any extreme consequences of them, and to be also upon our guard against apparent refutations of them based upon such extreme consequences.

(*C.S. Peirce, CP 7.96*)[1]

What follows is an inquiry into what, to use a somewhat old-fashioned expression, is called the nature of literature, but which I prefer to see as something less pretentious, namely, as an investigation of the dimensions and features that are – rightfully, I think – thought to be general characteristics of the literary texts. Such a generality, however, should not be understood as a claim that every individual text deemed to be literature must possess all of them, because clearly each does not. It is, rather, the thesis of this book that it would be a sound analytic strategy to scan, as it were, literary texts to see whether they possess the features and dimensions mentioned below.

As a point of departure, transhistorical and static – that is, exclusively structural – definitions may be valuable, since they underscore structures and features that are often pertinent to literature. They are insufficient, however, because they neglect literature as discourse, that is, as one kind of cognition and communication among others, and the fact that literature fulfils multiple functions within a community. In this introductory chapter some of the difficulties in categorizing literature as specific kind of texts with stable properties will be confronted.

Thus, I share most literary scholars' belief in the historical reality of literature. Texts certainly exist that, at a given point in time and at a