TEXT BOOK

AN INTRODUCTION TO LITERARY LANGUAGE

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A Letter to the Instructor

The title of this textbook is not a joke. It is meant to signify our intention to offer an alternative approach to the traditional course called "Writing About Literature" or "Introduction to Literature." By substituting the concept of *text* for the traditional concept of *literature*, we accomplish a number of things. We allow for the presentation of a wider range of material and a broader spectrum of approaches to literary study. And we close or reduce the gaps that have separated reading from writing, creative from critical work, and literature from ordinary language.

In this book the traditional literary genres have their places. We attend to narrative, dramatic, and poetic texts—but not in isolation from explanatory, meditative, and persuasive texts. We discuss reading and interpretation, but we do not restrict ourselves to those modes of study. Our aim is to help students to feel at home in the universe of textuality: to understand the workings of power and pleasure in all kinds of texts.

We begin with the simplest and most accessible materials and concepts, working from story and scene through metaphor, intertextuality, and experiment. We introduce concepts from linguistics and literary theory at appropriate points. But this is not a book *about* literature; it is a text for working *with* literature. Textual interaction is the guiding principle throughout. At any point, including, of course, the end, you may profitably bring in supplementary material. This is an inclusive, not an exclusive, approach. It is, however, presented in a highly developmental manner. Later sections assume the mastery of concepts and techniques stressed in the earlier sections. We guarantee that students using this book will have interesting discussions and will produce interesting texts themselves. And that is what it is all about.

Sincerely,

Robert Scholes
Nancy R. Comley
Gregory L. Ulmer

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First of all, we would like to thank Nancy Perry, whose patience, in the face of an unprecedented degree of loopiness, never flagged. Then Tom Broadbent, who, in Paleolithic times, it seems, made us an offer we couldn't refuse. And Lori Lefkovitz, who kept the faith and told us firmly what worked and what didn't. Others who assisted in various ways were David Bleich, Indiana University; Kitty Chen Dean, Nassau Community College; Sandra K. Fisher, SUNY Albany; Richard Gebhardt, Findlay College; Michael Holzman, University of Southern California; Joseph Kruppa, University of Texas at Austin, Deborah Linderman, Smith College; Frank O'Hare, Ohio State University; Marie Secor, Pennsylvania State University; Elisa Kay Sparks, Clemson University; and William Sheidley, University of Connecticut.

A Letter to the Student

You may, of course, have read our letter to your instructor—just as your instructor has undoubtedly read this letter to you. Other people's mail has a special fascination. Nevertheless, in these few paragraphs we will assume that you have just opened this book for the first time and want to know why: why you are using this book of all books, and what you may get out of using it. We consider these fair questions and will try to answer them fairly, but first we must warn you that verbal education is a lot like physical education. You build your mind in the same way you build your body: through your own efforts. We can provide the most interesting and useful material for you to work on, based on the most recent information about language and literature, but the benefits to you will depend on your own efforts. "No pain, no gain," as the iron-pumpers say.

Our goal is to help you to a better mastery of your verbal environment. We all live in a world that constantly bombards us with texts. To survive—and above all to do more than just survive: to flourish—we need to deal with all kinds of texts surely and confidently. This book is called *Text Book* because it offers an entrance into the world of textuality: to the higher and more developed forms of reading and writing.

As you enter this book you will find all kinds of texts: some are usually called "literary" and some are not. This mixture is essential to our method. We do *not* want to offer you a collection of "master" works that ask for your passive submission, but a set of texts that you can work and play with, increasing your own understanding of fundamental textual processes and your own ability to use the written word. We hope to help you feel more at home in the house of language, and we are confident that a better command of written language will contribute to a better life. That is saying a lot, we realize, but we want you to know that, though this book is often playful, we are serious about its purpose. It is different from other books, and that has made it harder to write—and more fun. We have worked on it for years, trying to make it as effective and attractive as we could.

Come on in and see for yourself.

Sincerely,

Robert Scholes
Nancy R. Comley
Gregory L. Ulmer

Contents

Chapter 1

Texts and People

In this chapter we will explore the ways in which people and their actions get into texts. Human events can be recounted (narrative) or enacted (drama), but either way they become *textualized*, taking on a certain formal structure that is found in much the same form in every culture: the structure of stories, which extends from personal anecdotes to literary novels and plays. That this should be the case is interesting in itself, but even more interesting is the way this formal structure returns into our lives, shaping our thoughts and actions. If you have ever found yourself wondering how something that was happening to you would sound in the telling, you know what we mean. If you have ever wondered how some experience in your life would "come out," you were applying a concept from storytelling to the interpretation of your own experience, even as it was happening: because experience does not "come out"—it just goes on and on.

The point of all this is that texts and life exist in a very complex relationship. Our thinking and even our feeling are shaped by texts in ways that we are dimly aware of in our normal day-to-day existence. We all use narrative structures and dramatic devices every day in our thoughts and in our actions—living out stories, playing roles, recounting events, enacting gestures and deeds. To learn more about how narrative and dramatic texts work, then, is to be a little more conscious of our own situations, a little more in control of our own lives.

The reading, discussion, and writing opportunities presented in this chapter are designed to help you strengthen your command of narrative and dramatic processes, building on the awareness you already have—having come this far in life—of narrative and dramatic forms. We will present you with some texts designed to reveal connections between these "literary" forms and ordinary life, and with some opportunities to move back and forth between the forms, developing your awareness and mastery of textual processes.

Story and Storyteller

Natural Narrative

Mary Louise Pratt

We think of literature as something special, as something above or beyond the way we use language in our daily lives—and so, in certain respects, it is. Literature is language used with special care and precision, or special energy and imagination. But the forms taken by literary works, and even the language used by poets and playwrights, are based on forms and ways of speaking that we all use, all the time. Literature is different from other uses of language, but it is also the same; it overlaps ordinary speech. Most approaches to the study of literature emphasize the differences, concentrating on the unique powers of literature. Without denying that these powers exist, we are taking the opposite tack in this book. We are going to emphasize the continuities, showing how literary forms and uses of language are connected to the ways that we use language on ordinary occasions. The point of doing it this way is to show that the passage from ordinary language to literature can be negotiated by any of us. It is not some impassable abyss that only a genius can leap. It is a craft, a skill, that will yield to study, effort, and practice. Our presentation begins with the anecdote, a basic form of storytelling that links the personal narratives we tell one another with the literary narratives produced by professional writers.

A few years ago Mary Louise Pratt, a literary critic, discovered that the great novels of world literature were similar in their structure to the personal narratives exchanged among people with very little formal education. She based her discovery on studies of inner-city speech by the sociolinguist William Labov. In the following selection we have reprinted a section of the second chapter of her book, A Speech-Act Theory of Literary Discourse, *in which she presents Labov's work and discusses its significance.*

For our purposes, the most important thing to learn from Pratt is the six-part structure of the ordinary personal narrative. You will find versions of this structure—or interesting deviations from it—in every kind of text that presents a story.

Much of Labov's research over the past ten years has been devoted to 1
documenting dialect variations in American English and above all to exploring the ways in which those divisions reflect and reinforce a

speaker's place in the class hierarchy of the larger speech community. He has concentrated especially on those dialects of American English considered by most Americans to be not only nonstandard but also substandard. In his first book, *The Social Stratification of English in New York City* (1966), Labov showed that phonological variation in the speech of New Yorkers could not be systematically specified independently of the social pressures acting on the speakers in the given speech situation. This was an important realization for linguistics since it provided support for building information about social context into the grammar.

Labov's interest in oral narrative stems mainly from a study of Black 2
English Vernacular (BEV), "that relatively uniform dialect spoken by the majority of black youth in most parts of the United States today, especially in the inner city areas" (Labov, 1972:xiii). The project, which resulted in the volume of essays titled *Language in the Inner City* (1972), was originally undertaken to find out whether dialect differences had anything to do with the consistent reading problems of inner city black children. It was conducted in Harlem. As he analyzed the phonological and grammatical differences between BEV and Standard English, Labov made an important observation:

> The major reading problems did not stem from structural interference in any simple sense. . . . The major causes of reading failure are political and cultural conflicts in the classroom, and dialect differences are important because they are symbols of this conflict. We must then understand the way in which the vernacular culture uses language and how verbal skills develop in this culture. (Labov, 1972:xiv)

BEV speakers had trouble reading not because they lacked verbal skills (the contrary proved to be the case) but because the verbal skills they had were of no use in school. All this seems a far cry from aesthetics, and it is true that Labov's interest in "verbal art" rose from his research quite indirectly. I quote here Labov's own description of this development. The passage is long but worthwhile as an introduction to my own discussion to follow:

> In the course of our studies of vernacular language, we have developed a number of devices to overcome the constraints of the face-to-face interview and obtain large bodies of tape-recorded casual speech. The most effective of these techniques produce *narratives of personal experience*, in which the speaker becomes deeply involved in rehearsing or even reliving events of his past. The "Danger of Death" question is the prototype and still the most generally used: at a certain point in the conversation, the inter-

> viewer asks, "Were you ever in a situation where you were in serious danger of being killed, where you said to yourself—*'This is it'?*" In the section of our interview schedule that deals with fights, we ask "Were you ever in a fight with a guy bigger than you?" When the subject says "Yes" we pause and then ask simply, "What happened?" The narratives that we have obtained by such methods form a large body of data on comparative verbal skills, ranging across age levels, classes and ethnic groups. Because they occur in response to a specific stimulus in the interview situation, they are not free of the interactive effect of the outside observer. The form they take is in fact typical of discourse directed to someone outside of the immediate peer group of the speaker. But because the experience and emotions involved here form an important part of the speaker's biography, he seems to undergo a partial reliving of that experience, and he is no longer free to monitor his own speech as he normally does in face-to-face interviews. (1972:354–55)

Labov was fascinated by the high degree of verbal virtuosity dis- 3
played by many of his informants in these narratives and by the high value placed on that virtuosity by the vernacular speech communities. This interest and the fact that, despite cultural differences, the narratives had great structural similarities led him to attempt a structural description of the oral narrative of personal experience as a speech act. The results of his study are found in two papers, "Narrative Analysis: Oral Versions of Personal Experience" (1967), written in collaboration with Joshua Waletzky, and "The Transformation of Experience in Narrative Syntax," in *Language in the Inner City*. (Unless otherwise specified, all subsequent references are to the latter article.) Before presenting Labov's analysis of these narratives, let me offer two contrasting examples, both taken from Labov's data. The first is a story told by a middle-aged white male speaker from Martha's Vineyard:

(1)

I never believed a whole lot in licking. I was never—
with my children, and I never—when it was with my animals,
dogs; I never licked a dog, I never had to. A dog knew
what I meant; when I hollered at a dog, he knew the—what
I meant. I could—I had dogs that could do everything 5
but talk. And by gorry, sir, I never licked 'em.

I never come nearer bootin' a dog in my life. I
had a dog—he was a wonderful retriever, but as I say he
could do everything but talk. I could waif him that way,

I could waif him on, I could waif him anywhere. If I shot a crippled duck he went after it; he didn't see it in the water, he'd always turn around look at me, and I'd waif him over there, if the duck was there, or if it was on the other side of where we're on, I could waif him straight ahead, and he'd turn and he'd go. If he didn't see me, he'd turn around, he'd look at me, and I'd keep a-waifin' him on. And he'd finally catch sight of him, and the minute he did, you know, he would beelinc and get that duck.

I was gunnin' one night with that dog—we had to use live decoys in those days—a fellow named Jack Bumpus was with me; I was over at a place called Deep Bottom, darker than pitch. And—uh—heard a quackin' off shore. And I said to Jack, "keep quiet. There's one comin' in." And uh—finally Jack said to me, "I think I see 'im." I said, "Give 'im a gun. Give 'im a gun. Try it."

So he shot, and this duck went for the shore with his wings a-goin' like that for the shore. Went up on the shore. Well this dog never lost a crippled duck on shore, he'd take a track just the same as a hound would take a rabbit track. And I sent him over. I said, "Go ahead."

So he went over there. And—gone a while and come back and he didn't have the duck. And that was unusual—I said, "You git back there and get that duck!" And he went back there; and he stayed a little while longer, longer than he did the first time, and he come back and he didn't have the duck.

And I never come nearer shootin' a dog. By gorry, I come pretty near. "*You git back there and get that duck!*" And that dog went back there, and he didn't come back. And he didn't come back. By gorry, we went over there—I walked over there, and here he was; one of my tame ducks that I had tethered out there had got the strap off her leg, and had gone out there, and when this fellah shot he hadn't hit the duck. The duck came to the shore, he hadn't hit the duck; but the duck was scared and come for the shore. My dog was over there, and he had his paw right on top of that duck, holdin' him down just as tight as could be, and—by gorry, boy, I patted that dog, I'll tell you if I had ever walloped that dog I'd have felt some bad. He knew more'n I did; the dog knew more than I did. He

knew that was that tame duck; he wasn't gonna pick him
up in his mouth and bring him, you know. He was just
holdin' him right down on the ground.

(Labov, 1967:14–15)

The second is a fight story told by a black adolescent male from Harlem referred to as Larry:

(2)

An' then, three weeks ago I had a fight with this other dude
outside. He got mad 'cause I wouldn't give him a cigarette
Ain't that a bitch? (Oh yeah?)
Yeah, you know, I was sittin' on the corner an' shit, smokin'
my cigarette, you know. I was high, an' shit. He walked over
to me:
"Can I have a cigarette?"
He was a little taller than me, but not that much. I said:
"I ain't got no more, man."
'Cause, you know, all I had was one left. An' I ain't gon'
give up my last cigarette unless I got some more. So I said:
"I don't have no more, man."
So he, you know, dug on the pack, 'cause the pack was in my
pocket. So he said:
"Eh, man, I can't get a cigarette, man? I mean—I mean
we supposed to be brothers, an' shit."
So I say:
"Yeah, well, you know, man, all I got is one, you dig it?"
An' I won't give up my las' one to nobody. So you know, the
dude, he looks at me, an' he—I 'on' know—he jus' thought
he gon' rough that motherfucker up. He said:
"I can't get a cigarette."
I said:
"Tha's what I said, my man."
You know, so he said:
"What you supposed to be *bad* an' shit?"
So I said:
"Look here, my man, I don't think I'm bad, you understand?
But I mean, you know, if I had it, you could git it. I like
to see you with it, you dig it? But the sad part about it,
you got to do without it. That's all, my man."
So the dude, he 'on' to pushin' me, man.
(Oh, he pushed you?)

An' why he do that? *Everytime somebody fuck with me*, why they do it? I put that cigarette down, an' boy let me tell you. I beat the shit outa that motherfucker. I tried to ***kill*** 'im—over one cigarette! I tried to ***kill*** 'im. Square business! After I got through stompin' him in the face, man, you know, all of a sudden I went crazy! I jus' went crazy. An' I jus' wouldn't stop hittin' the motherfucker. Dig, it, I couldn't stop hittin' 'im, man, till the teacher pulled me off o' him. An' guess what? After all that I gave the dude the cigarette, after all that. Ain't that a bitch?
(How come you gave 'im the cigarette?)
I 'on' know. I jus' gave it to him. An' he smoked it, too!

(Labov, 1972:356–58)

Labov's (1972) analysis of these "natural narratives," as they are commonly called, will seem self-evident to literary critics, and it is for precisely this reason that I want to outline it here. Labov defines narrative as: 4

> one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred. . . . Within this conception of narrative, we can define a *minimal narrative*, as a sequence of two clauses which are *temporally ordered*: that is, a change in their order will result in a change in the temporal sequence of the original semantic interpretation. (p. 360)

Narrative clauses are clauses with a simple preterite verb or, in some styles, a verb in the simple present. Here is an adult "danger of death" narrative which consists of four such ordered clauses: (This and all further examples in this chapter are taken from Labov's data.) 5

(3) Well, this person had a little too much to drink and he attacked me and the friend came in and she stopped it.

Narratives like (3), which consist only of narrative clauses, are not very interesting, nor are they very common. A fully developed natural narrative, according to Labov, is made up of the following sections:

1. abstract
2. orientation
3. complicating action
4. evaluation