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ULRICH BROICH, and
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*Science Fiction: Theorie und
Geschichte, Themen und Typen,
Form und Weltbild*

Stuttgart: Reclam, 1981. Pp. 215

The term "science fiction" encompasses in its general outlines and content a very protean literary genre. It is indeed a moot point whether it actually constitutes a genre at all. For unlike detective fiction, for example, which owes its definition to a variety of analytical narrative techniques revealing its primary theme, the detection of a crime, science fiction lacks any central or controlling theme, motif, or narrative approach. Despite a tendency among the uninitiated to associate science fiction solely with BEMS ("bug-eyed monsters"), or with other such fictional phenomena as "aliens," "visitors from space," "mind parasites," "space vampires," and "evil earths"—to choose a random sample of titles and subtitles from the current pulp rack—this class of fiction actually offers substantially more. Generally recognized canonical works include Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1895), C. S. Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* (1949), Asimov's *The Caves of Steel* (1954), and Frank's *Dune* (1965) which investigate real existential problems within the context of fictional "future worlds," "parallel worlds," and "alternate worlds." The key is an arresting mix of sociopolitical consciousness, with empiricism and imagination. Links with long-established traditions of adventure stories and travel literature are clear. In its beginnings, science fiction was predominantly utopian, but in time developed branches into political satire, social criticism, and pseudo-theological redemptive literature. But whether drawing upon the narrative possibilities inherent in balloon travel in the 17th and 18th centuries, upon exploration of the submarine world in the 19th, or space flights and microbiology in the 20th, authors inventively projected the scientific assumptions of their respective eras into speculative realms; sometimes, as in the case of H. G. Wells, with prophetic results.

Fascination with this type of fiction is widespread both in North America and abroad. Bookshops devote whole sections to the trade (novels, short stories, anthol-

ogies); science-fiction magazines find ready markets, and the topic attracts both popular writers and scholars alike. The sci-fi buff now has paperback histories (for example, Michael Ashley, *The History of the Science Fiction Magazine 1926-45*, 2 vols., 1974, and Brian Ash, ed., *The Visual Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, 1977) and even supposed tourist guides like Jeff Rovin [sic], *The Transgalactic Guide to the Solar System M-17* (1981).

The title of the German study under review invites the reader to expect that the three coauthors have analyzed and described the sci-fi literary phenomenon with comprehensive authority. The index reveals a division in which three distinct approaches and perspectives present the "theory and history" (Suerbaum), "themes and types" (Broich), and the "form and world view" (Borgmeier) of science fiction. This commendable achievement would have filled a significant gap in German secondary literature on the subject. In fact, however, they limit themselves to a narrow selection of British and American novels, whose features they then subject to minute and exacting analysis. Narrow selection is, of course, a sound principle where the texts are representative of a particular class or trend, or where they are intended to illustrate special literary problems. However, the criterion for the present selection is in this case both non-literary and non-historical: namely the general accessibility of the texts in German libraries. While this may be of some value to the impecunious non-specialist, it seems, in the light of the literary market in Germany, rather cramped. Science fiction is readily available in Germany at bookstores and newsstands alike. Heyne publishers, for example, offers a broad range of science fiction in paperbacks featuring standard and current texts in German translation from Britain, France, USA and the USSR. It also includes indigenous works from both West and East Germany. Heyne has also published a two-volume *Lexikon der Science Fiction Literatur* [sic], touted as the first comprehensive bio-bibliographical work on the subject in the German language. Thus the research team of Suerbaum-Broich-Borgmeier would seem to have neglected unnecessarily some choice works, among them those by Daniel Fon-danèche (France), Boris Strugazki (USSR), and Gert Prokop (GDR). The latter's *Der Tod der Unsterblichen* ("Death of the Immortals") offers a new and paradoxical twist in detective sci-fi by solving an uncommitted murder in 21st-century USA.

What the researchers have actually achieved with their topic is admittedly far more important than what they might have done if they had inclined to the reviewer's perspective, or had they at least chosen a precise title. Adopting the structure and style of German dissertations, the authors have examined their selected texts with positivistic thoroughness. Categories and subcategories of data, derived both from a close reading of the primary texts and from broad familiarity with secondary literature, offer the reader "empirical" evidence. Special chapters deal with such topics as "the communicative process in science fiction" (complete with flow charts), offer a "historical functional analysis instead of a genealogy," and provide a discourse on narrative perspective in terms of "fictionality and its claim to reality" (rather than the traditional distinction between reality and verisimilitude). To this has been appended a selective bibliography of 16 "important" anthologies, 38 "important novels" (only four of which are listed as having been translated into German), eleven bibliographies and reference works, and some three and one-half pages of secondary literature. Little is served in summarizing here what *Science Fiction* communicates. Indeed to attempt to do so would necessitate extrapolating information from a plethora of independent aperçus. The authors themselves provide no conclusions. Nor indeed do they provide new insights or syntheses in this piecemeal treatment of a topic which invited urbanity and imagination. Here jargon is rife. To speak with one of Prokop's characters in the above-noted novel: "Johnny hat wahrscheinlich eine gewaltige Entdeckung gemacht, die—nein, ich werde es dir nicht sagen. Es soll hier in meinem Kopf begraben bleiben. Niemand soll es erfahren. Niemand." The generalist to whom the book is directed will be dissuaded by ponderous academic jargon; the specialist will prefer the critical works which *Science Fiction* so richly cites.

Michael Hadley

D. A. MILLER

*Narrative and Its Discontents:
Problems of Closure in the
Traditional Novel*

Princeton: Princeton University
Press, 1981. Pp. 300. \$20.00

MARIANNA TORGOVNICK

Closure in the Novel

Princeton: Princeton University
Press, 1981. Pp. 238. \$16.50

George Eliot remarked in a letter to John Blackwood that "conclusions are the weak point of most authors, but some of the fault lies in the very nature of a conclusion, which is at best a negation." Today, of course, the fashionable word is *closure*, not *conclusion* or *ending*. Called by whatever specific name one wishes, this major problem, the subject of two memorable books in the late 1960's (Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* and Barbara Herrnstein Smith's *Poetic Closure*), now appears to be generating intense interest: in 1978 *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* entitled one of its issues Narrative Endings; and in 1981 a single university press, Princeton, has published two full-length studies of the problem.

D. A. Miller's *Narrative and Its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* began as a doctoral dissertation at Yale, makes use of fashionable terminology ("signifier," "signified," "binary opposition," etc.), and here and there refers to fashionable names (Roland Barthes seems to be a favorite). Miller devotes one chapter to Jane Austen's works, excluding *Northanger Abbey*; one to George Eliot's *Middlemarch*; and one to Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* and *Lucien Leuwen*, the latter labeled "a long, patchy novel that Stendhal never finished." Miller is concerned with "nonnarratable elements," those which are incapable of generating a story or which have "no narrative future," and, conversely, with the "narratable," "instances of disequilibrium, suspense, and general insufficiency from which a given narrative appears to arise." "The narratable inherently lacks finality," and traditional novels, though they "build toward closure . . . are never fully or finally governed by it"—in other words, there is a "tension" or "conflict" "within the novel, between the principles of production and