

Book Reviews

Patrick O'Neill

Fictions of Discourse: Reading Narrative Theory

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994. Pp. 188. \$35.00 \$16.95

Reviewed by Barbara Rose

Fictions of Discourse is a highly readable examination of what Patrick O'Neill styles the Zeno Principle: "the principle that narrative as a discursive system is always potentially subversive both of the story it ostensibly reconstructs and of its own telling of that story" (3). Narrative, while it usually presents itself as the transparent vehicle of the story—the "real stuff"—always contains a counter-tendency *not* to tell its story.

One of the attractive features of O'Neill's discussion is his own awareness that he, too, is telling a narrative, and thus he, too, following the Zeno Principle, is implicitly challenging the value of his own claims to truth: with a nod to Heisenberg's paradox, he acknowledges that theorists are able to produce attractive theoretical models because, of necessity, they stack the epistemological deck by devising questions to the potential answers their research initially "naively" proposed. Thus O'Neill does not aim to provide definitive answers but, rather, to open narratology to its own discursive play in order to generate questions about narrative and narratology in particular, and cultural and critical theory in general.

The importance of *Fictions of Discourse* is its aim to rejuvenate narratology by amending its structuralist methodology to include important poststructuralist concepts of the text as complex process. Where previous theorists have offered a two-level model of narrative structure (Shklovsky; Todorov; Chatman), and others have argued for a three-level model (Genette; Rimmon-Kenan; M. Bal), O'Neill offers a four-level model: story, text, narration, textuality.

O'Neill is not trying to score intellectual points with this model and its implicit critique of previous narratological models. Far from it. He acknowledges throughout when a two- or three-level model works. His argument is that such models are often woefully insufficient. He persuasively reveals how the assumption that story—the "what" of a story—is a readerly construct, rather than a basic (and often unexamined) component of narrative, as traditional narratology assumes. In a series of sophisticated chapters, O'Neill demonstrates

that the boundary between the traditional binary model of story/discourse (the what and the how of a story) is more permeable than generally acknowledged.

O'Neill explores most deeply the implications of his model of narrative structure in his final two chapters, where he elaborates the necessarily *embedded* status of narrative levels. Incorporating poststructuralist concepts of the text as process allows him to present his four-level model as extending beyond the strictly intratextual boundaries of the text to the extratextual elements of "that textuality in which the entire narrative structure is always already embedded" (107). Corresponding to each of the four levels of his model are, on the one hand, character, narrator, implied author, and author, and, on the other, character, narratee, implied reader, and real reader. Most importantly, O'Neill argues that each of these embedded narrative realms necessarily undermines its "inferior" narrative level by relativizing that realm's claims to textual stability.

Thus story is not the stable narrative realm traditional narratology generally assumes it to be. Like discourse, it is shaped not only by intratextual elements, but also by extratextual discursive structures: specifically, those ever-changing contextualizing forces (history, culture, ideology, etc.) that always prewrite and rewrite the text *and*, as O'Neill argues, preread and reread it—even by the "same" reader of the "same" text. "His" *Odyssey*, for example, is not a single and self-contained text. It is the result of several readings of various translations at various times in various settings: a combination of popular treatments of the epic read in childhood abridgments and comic books and seen (and often later re-seen) in film and television versions as well as later canonical readings in canonical settings—school and university.

One area where the text is always and most emphatically prewritten and preread, not to mention always rewritten and reread, is that of literary translation. For it is translation that foregrounds the assumptions surrounding our often unexamined concepts of textual authority. As made clear by O'Neill's example of Luchino Visconti's *Death in Venice* (an intersemiotic translation from print to film of an interlingual translation from Thomas Mann's German to the film's English), in which the German protagonist, reading German books and newspapers, "naturally" speaks English to the Polish boy, to Italian hoteliers and waiters, and to his German compatriots, the *extratextual* element of receptive context dictates meaning in any translation. None of this confuses the audience, of course, because few viewers are bothered when, in a film by an Italian director of an adaptation of a German novel into English set in Italy and Germany, the primary characters speak English to each other but the secondary characters speak Italian, German, Polish, or French to each other. The viewer does not need to know exactly what the latter are saying because the viewer understands that they are not "characters" but part of the narrative setting (and therefore of an "inferior" narrative realm).

Classical narratology has often been criticized, even dismissed, as reductive, presenting narratives as two-dimensional models that overlook the roles of both the real overdetermined author and the real overdetermined reader. The importance of O'Neill's four-level model is his incorporation of post-structuralist notions of textuality—the ever-changing process of intersecting currents of intratextual and extratextual elements—which accommodates not only the text and its implied and real authors, but also (and more importantly) the culturally and historically constituted reader. As *Fictions of Discourse* makes clear, narratives are never stable and unchanging entities.

M.D. Fletcher, ed.

Reading Rushdie: Perspectives on the Fiction of Salman Rushdie

Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994. Pp. 400. US \$33.00

Reviewed by Axel Knoenagel

Salman Rushdie is today possibly the best-known English-speaking author in the world, perhaps even the most famous and most talked-about novelist in any language. Much of this fame is undoubtedly due to the death sentence pronounced after the publication of *The Satanic Verses* (1988). As a consequence of "the Rushdie affair," the figure of the literary artist frequently recedes behind the figure of the political victim.

Reading Rushdie is an attempt to remind us that Rushdie's oeuvre is larger and includes other important novels as well. M.D. Fletcher has collected a total of twenty-two essays on Rushdie, four of them published here for the first time. He proposes in his introductory essay, "The Politics of Salman Rushdie's Fiction," that "analyses of Rushdie's fiction can be divided roughly into two categories, one which emphasizes its metafictional nature and its experimental attempts to 'de-colonize' English, while the other stresses its more narrowly 'political' purposes of commenting on Islam and on Indian, Pakistani, and British society and politics" (3).

The range of the essays demonstrates the scope Fletcher claims for Rushdie criticism. The book contains three essays each on *Grimus* (1982) and *Midnight's Children* (1981), four on *Shame* (1983), two on both *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*, eight on *The Satanic Verses*, and two on *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990). *Reading Rushdie* thus presents a representative survey of Rushdie criticism since 1984.

The strength of *Reading Rushdie* lies in its making accessible a number of highly interesting texts that had previously been quite difficult to obtain. Especially noteworthy in this category is "The Importance of Being Earnest About Salman Rushdie," in which Sadik Jalal al-'Azm discusses Rushdie's