

## II. RECENZJE

Robert Scholes, *SEMIOTICS AND INTERPRETATION*. Yale University Press, New Haven—London, 1982, pp. 161.

The interest in deconstructive and post-structuralist criticism now in vogue in the major American universities seems to have eclipsed structuralist and semiotic theories of literature. Therefore Robert Scholes's *Semiotics and Interpretation* can be given a hearty welcome by all those who still try to make practical use of the semiotic approach to literary studies.

The author, who teaches English and comparative literature at Brown University, has won general renown as both a modern critic and an interpreter of literary theory. His contributions include *Fabulation and Metafiction*, a study of the postmodernist novel, *Science Fiction: History, Science, Vision* (written together with E. S. Rabkin), and a number of literary handbooks such as *Elements of Poetry*, *Elements of Fiction* or *The Nature of Narrative* (with R. Kellogg).

*Semiotics and Interpretation* was conceived as a sequel to Scholes's earlier *Structuralism in Literature* (1974) which offered a comprehensive survey and discussion of the most representative structuralist theories. The volume differs, however, from its companion piece in being practical rather than metacritical in intention. The educator in Scholes, concerned with direct implications of critical thinking for pedagogical process, has gained the upper hand over the pure theorist. He begins with a question addressed to academic teachers: "What specific interpretive

attitudes and strategies that are currently active offer us the best models for the interpretation of literary texts?", and demonstrates further on in what way semiotics can provide one of the possible answers.

The first two chapters define the methodological standpoint adopted by Scholes. He refers to Jakobson's original model of an act of communication, and situates semiotics in relation to other schools of critical theory and interpretation, taking into account the emphasis each of them puts on particular parts of the diagram. His procedure reminds one of a translation into the semiotic language of a similar classification of critical theories attempted by M. H. Abrams in his introduction to *The Mirror and the Lamp*. After a brief examination of interpretive strategies characteristic of the Neo-Aristotelians, of hermeneutics, reader-response criticism, New Criticism, Russian formalism, structuralism, deconstruction, and Marxist criticism, Scholes identifies a semiotic approach as stemming from the formalist and structuralist insistence on codes. Worth noticing here is his distinction between a semiotic analysis and its most influential predecessor in American critical thought, namely the New Criticism. He elaborates the difference between the notions of "text" and "work", which allows him to recapitulate the main premises of semiotics.

While Scholes finds it easy to point out the weaknesses and limitations of other methods, he seems not so rigorous in his understanding of semiotics.

In fact, as he himself admits, he has a tendency "at certain crucial points (to) bend the formalist, structuralist, and semiotic tradition in what (he takes) to be a necessary direction" (p. 17). Thus staying within the frames of terminology and remaining faithful to the basic concepts of semiotics, he tries to avoid the extremes of strictly formalized systems: "Many semioticians would argue that the meaning of any sign or word is purely a function of its place in a paradigmatic system and its use in a syntagmatic situation. But I wish to suggest that meaning is also a function of human experience" (p. 35). To approach full understanding of the text the student and the teacher "will have to be something of a historian and something of a philosopher and even something of a person" (p. 35).

Concentrating on semiotics as a tool of textural analysis rather than an academic discipline, he proceeds to define literature from a semiotic perspective as "a certain body of repeatable or recoverable acts of communication" (p. 18). He dwells for a while on the problem of literariness recognized as the imposition of additional forms of coding which produce the effect of "duplicity" in a communicative act. These preliminary theoretical considerations are concluded with the reservation that a formal codification of discourse is but a strategy which should lead us to a discovery of meanings pertaining to our experience as living human beings.

The following chapters constitute a series of essays exemplifying how the semiotic methods, not too rigidly treated, can be applied to the analysis of different types of texts such as poems, stories, films, a scene from a play, even bumper stickers or, humorously, a "portion of human anatomy".

In the essay on the semiotic study of poetry Scholes engages in the dialogue with Riffaterre, Ricoeur, and Lotman, and explores some of the prin-

ciples of poetic discourse formulated by them. He exercises his interpretive skills on the examples taken from the poetry of W. S. Merwin, W. C. Williams, and Gary Snyder, paying attention to the elliptical nature of poetic utterance and to the importance of the generic code. He disagrees with Riffaterre and Ricoeur on the issue of reference and refutes the view that poetry is essentially antimimetic and antireferential. The question of relationship between the poetic text and the world seems to him more satisfactorily answered by Lotman who not only enhances the view that the poetic text challenges our habitual modes of speech, perception, and thought, but he also stresses the fact that the text brings us dialectically to a greater understanding of the world.

Scholes takes sides with a methodology which can make the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic structures of meaning the most explicit, and can thus prove itself "pedagogically useful as a way of developing interpretive flexibility and sensitivity in students of literature" (p. 56).

The next essay breaks into a relatively new territory, devoting some consideration to the problem of the reader's narrativity understood as "the process by which a perceiver actively constructs a story from the fictional data provided by any narrative medium" (p. 60). The author looks more closely at the general aspects of behaviour, making a clear distinction between narration, narrative, and narrativity. He focuses on the differences between narrativity in film and literature, the former oriented toward conceptualization of cinematic images and scenes, and the latter toward visualization of verbal signs. He supports his argument with a brief analysis of some aspects of narrativity in a few American films.

In a separate study he approaches irony as an interesting problem to a semiotician. Unlike metaphor and metonymy which can be grasped on the



semantic level, irony to a great degree depends on the pragmatics of situation and is based on the communicative function of language. Scholes opposes his view of irony to the formalist or New Critical closure of the text: "Irony must always take us out of the text and into codes, contexts, and situations" (p. 76). He demonstrates different types of ironic discourse, drawing illustration from Sheridan's 18th-century comedy of manners, Balzac's *Eugenie Grandet*, and Donald Barthelme's contemporary parody of Balzac.

In the chapter devoted to a model analysis of Joyce's short story *Eveline*, Scholes attempts to create the optimum method combining three approaches to fictional texts. He chooses Todorov's "grammar", Genette's "rhetoric", and Barthes's "semiotic" of fiction, which are complementary but incomplete in themselves. To facilitate the practical criticism of fiction Scholes proposes to treat them as consecutive segments in a sequence of reasoning. He then brilliantly demonstrates how they can supplement one another in his analysis. However, one might recall Seymour Chatman's objection to Scholes's method (*Story and Discourse*), and note that its success depends largely on the critic's knowledge of the overriding thematic framework of *Dubliners*.

The next essay considers some of the features of text/diegesis relationship, taking Hemingway's *A Very Short Story* as an example of the prose which apparently eliminates discourse and offers us a pure diegesis. Scholes performs an interesting analysis which leads to the "decoding" of Papa Hemingway's misogyny veiled in a seemingly reticent text. Scholes makes a comparison between his semiotic reading and the New Critical exegesis of the same text, which brings him once again to the conclusion that we should approach fictions "as texts traversed by codes rather than as formal artifacts" (p. 126).

The final somewhat playful essay, subtitled *The Adventures of an Organ*

in *Language and Literature*, concentrates on three texts that deal with female sexuality (John Cleland's *Fanny Hill*, the first pornographic novel in English, Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, and D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*). Scholes tries to expose as culturally coded some of the conventions that we take to be natural.

Though the essays included in *Semiotics and Interpretation* deal with a versatile range of problems, they are all subordinated to the author's main objective: to acquaint the reader with the possibilities of a specifically semiotic approach to the practice of textual interpretation. The author has a unique gift for making complicated things simple without oversimplifying. Apart from learning the basic principles of semiotics, the reader will profit by gaining a new insight into some well-known texts.

Throughout the book Scholes renders a semiotic analysis in a flexible way, striving to maintain a balanced position between a highly formalized and individual human response. The result is that the semiotic perspective he adopts is sometimes given a more impressionistic and personal touch. Scholes tries to work out a compromise for which he often risks inconsistency.

*Semiotics and Interpretation* will fall short of the expectations of those who hope to find there a scholarly discourse on the problems of literary theory. However those to whom the book makes its appeal, the university teachers and students, will surely be helped by a lucid presentation of the semiotic methods of reading the text. It should be remembered that Scholes addresses himself especially to the American academic practice and tries to offer an alternative approach to the most commonly used "close reading".

On the whole, the book can be sincerely recommended as an accessible introduction to semiotic studies. It is supplemented by a useful glossary of semiotic terminology and a descriptive



bibliography of the most important contributions to semiotics and related fields.

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F. M. DOSTOJEWSKIJ. MATERIAŁY  
I ISSLEDOWANIJA, OTDIELNYJ  
OTTISK, Leningrad 1980, s. 96—106.

Literackie techniki obrazowania, budowania przestrzeni przedstawionej w prozie Fiodora Dostojewskiego stanowią przedmiot badań teoretycznych od kilkudziesięciu już lat.

Zdawać by się więc mogło, że wszelkie możliwości interpretacyjne zostały już wyczerpane. Jednak obecnie problematyka ta zyskuje nowy wymiar dzięki inspiracji płynącej z osiągnięć tzw. syntetycznego kierunku w literaturoznawstwie radzieckim, reprezentowanego przez Lichaczowa, Pigariowa, Konrada, a podejmującego sformułowany najpełniej przez Bachtina postulat syntetycznego badania różnopochodnych zjawisk artystycznych.

Nowe możliwości badawcze przedstawionej metody zainspirowały A. Czudakowa do podjęcia analizy świata przedmiotów przedstawionych w twórczości Fiodora Dostojewskiego. Zgodnie z owym sposobem myślenia wykorzystuje on w swoim studium tradycyjną dla malarstwa typologię możliwości odzworowywania świata, analizując literackie techniki kreowania portretu, wnętrza i pejzażu w twórczości omawianego pisarza.

Na tym jednak kończą się metodologiczne związki pracy Czudakowa z przywołanym tu kierunkiem badawczym, bowiem autor ten rezygnuje z poszukiwania typologicznie tożsamyh wyróżników ideowo-formalnych prozy Dostojewskiego i dzieł malarskich jego epoki. Postulowanych przez Lichaczowa „odpowiedniości stylowych” poszukuje

on w obrębie wyłącznie tradycji literackiej.

Ponieważ we wczesnych swych utworach autor *Idioty* wzorował się na Gogolu, krytyk rozpoczyna swe rozważania porównaniem metod obrazowania obu pisarzy stwierdzając, że obaj zgodnie rezygnują z topograficznej dokładności konstruowania przestrzeni przedstawionej na rzecz opisu w jednolitej tonacji emocjonalnej. Jednak Gogol uzyskuje wspomniany efekt dzięki nagromadzeniu przedmiotów o podobnych cechach, natomiast Dostojewski przedstawia świat rzeczy różnorodnych w swym materialnym kształcie, zyskujących jednolite „oblicze emocjonalne” w wyniku zderzenia niematerialnej „natury” przedmiotów i świadomości obcującego z nimi człowieka, w którym ujawnia się niepoznawalna „istota” rzeczywistości materialnej.

Jak dowodzi autor, tezę tę potwierdza fakt, że w kolejnych opisach te same wnętrza przybierają różne kształty w zależności od emocjonalnego nastroju przebywającego w nich człowieka. Jako przykład przytacza kolejne opisy pokoju Raskolnikowa w *Zbrodni i karze*.

Tak rozumiana wybiórczość, eksponowanie najbardziej znaczących elementów obrazu znajduje swe uzasadnienie w regule artystycznej, która ujmuje świat nie w jego przedmiotowości, lecz w podmiotowości, w skomplikowaniu emocji, spięć ideowych i psychologicznych.

Owej nadrzędnej regule podporządkowany jest również opis przyrody. Jak twierdzi Czudakow pejzaż w tradycyjnym rozumieniu w prozie Dostojewskiego w ogóle nie istnieje. Opis przyrody uzasadnia tu czy podkreśla emocjonalny nastrój bohatera lub pojawia się subiektywnie przezeń postrzegany, włączony w medytację często metaforyczną.

Z empirycznego obiektywizmu rezygnuje Dostojewski również w kreowaniu portretów bohaterów. Nieustanne poszukiwanie sposobów pokazania natury człowieka i świata sprawiają,