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**Perron, Paul. *Narratology and Text: Subjectivity and Identity in New France and Québécois Literature*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003. Pp. xvii + 338. CND\$60.00 (cloth). ISBN: 0-8020-3688-0.**

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Perron's brilliant and important *Narratology and Text* is well-summarized on the dust jacket. In essence: using an approach "[f]using semiotics, narratology, stylistics, and literary and cultural theory with one of the only English-language studies on Greimas," *Narratology and Text* studies diverse literary texts from the place and periods its title indicates in order to show the action of literature in the process of constructing a French-Canadian/Québécois identity in terms of a "utopian *here*" "opposed to a dystopian *there*" or "*elsewhere*." The "New France" literature foregrounded in the subtitle consists of Cartier's *Voyages* and the Jesuit *Relations*; other chapters are devoted to the Québécois/French-Canadian corpus: Aubert de Gaspé's *Anciens Canadiens*, Lacombe's *Terre paternelle*, Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine*, Laberge's *La Scouine*, Roy's *Bonheur d'occasion*, and Thériault's *Agaguk*. Both the theory and literary corpus that the book studies are (to borrow from the very useful semiotic actantial concepts for analysis of roles and agents) important objects of value of the book's quest, sought after by the author's action as agent of research and writing.

This co-existence, within one volume, one scholarly quest, of two objects of value and desire raises the question as to their relative importance in terms of authorial intent (which object is more important to individual readers will vary). While answers to that question will also vary as a function of the individual reader's subjective perceptions, no answer could be valid which erroneously deemed the literary corpus to be the more important because only Part I, "Narratology" (3-38) (and, to a lesser extent, the Preface, vii-xvii) make theory and methodology their main focus; whereas Parts II and III ("Discovery, Conversion and Colonization"; "Historiography and the Novel: Nation and Identity") and the Conclusion (which together occupy pages 39-258) focus on the literary corpus (Cartier's *Voyages* and the Jesuit *Relations* being, assuredly, literary texts, as Perron deftly demonstrates).

As the publisher's term "[f]using" suggests, Perron transforms his vast knowledge and profound understanding of literary theory, as partially exposed in the beginning portion of the book, into methodological instruments for effective reading of his literary corpus. The

theoretico-methodological component of the book is thus intensely present throughout, including in the endnotes, glossary, bibliography, and index. His overall view of the corpus – its “defining the *self* both as part of a closed community founded in race, language, and religion, and as radically opposed to the *other*, an omnipresent heterogeneous threat to the homogeneous group” (as quoted on the dust jacket) is far from original; it constitutes the hypothesis (usually deemed acceptable as fact without further examination after numerous studies had led to its edification) whose value Perron tests by submitting it to a rigorous reading complying with the theoretico-methodological instruments whose existence and value are the topic of Part I. In short, the book is a re-examination (and confirmation) of the accuracy of an often taken-for-granted view not only of French-Canadian/Québécois identity, but also of its construction by means of literary texts.

Perron makes rare but significant use of his literary corpus as material in the development of semio-narratological theory: the book makes few claims to furthering the latter’s development – but those claims are justified, and the contributions appreciable. Perron spells out his view of those contributions: “reconceptualize the theory and methodology that have informed much of European narratological analysis,” “rethink . . . major contributions from the Paris School and rework them in terms of a more global theory of production and reception by taking into account the pragmatic dimension of discourse . . . introducing an ontological dimension to the analysis of narrative,” concentrating on “the enunciative strategies and mechanisms . . . that position, cognitively manipulate and move the enunciatee-reader . . . [;] integrate in the global model of narrative analysis . . . the perceived, thought, and felt semantic universe, by and through the body” (17).

As do most authors, Perron occasionally forces the literary text studied to conform with his preconceived notion about what it should say rather than what it actually says. A striking example of this is when he writes that *La Terre paternelle* presents *here* as a locus of “duty, resignation and patience,” thereby contradicting, in a miserabilist critical warp, the textual reality constituted by the novel’s reference to “l’enfant du sol” as “enjoying well-being and fortune” (Perron’s accurate translation of “jouissant de l’aisance et de la fortune” [155]). Even more unfortunate is Perron’s mistranslation of “enfant du sol” as “child of nature” a few lines after having offered the better translation “child of the soil”: “enfant du sol” might more usefully still have been translated as “child of the farm,” for the “child” in question is, in Lacombe’s novel, the product of (agri)culture, not “nature.” Perron’s mistranslation is in strange contrast with his distinction elsewhere between “nature” as the dysphoric *beyond* land of the Amerindians.

But . . . the book is undoubtedly intended also to demonstrate the usefulness of semio-narratological analysis for the accurate perception of meaning in literature – or, as Perron put it in an earlier and similar book, *Semiotics and the Modern Quebec Novel: A Greimassian Analysis of Thériault’s Agaguk* (1996), “to demonstrate the heuristic value of [Greimas’] rather complex theory and methodology” (Perron, 1996, 3). Perron offers us here – as he often has elsewhere – a “defence and illustration” of the semio-narratological approach to the study of narrative literature; implicitly, this book is an illustration and promotion of that approach as the best approach extant to such study. The approach is deliberately scientific in ambition. Perron writes that semiotics was considered as a “stage towards . . . giving a more ‘scientific’ account of

meaning" (20): it still is.

While it is good that other sorts of literary studies exist, Perron certainly provides a convincing defence and illustration, a promotion-by-demonstration of his diverse objectives, including the position that Greimassian semiotics-based study of literature is of great value to the cognitive understanding – and, I feel, the aesthetic appreciation – one can experience from reading them. The result is that the theory-methodology component and the literary corpus component of this book are *both* focalized and focalizer relative to each other, switching functions frequently, in a felicitous meta-text, both mimetic and narrative, which shows and tells readers about those components, those two objects of value and of authorial desire.

Despite Perron's "fusing" of the two components, he opens the door to their separation – and thereby their distinct analysis and appreciation – by attributing to the former a distinct portion of the book. The literary corpus component is the better-treated. It consists of well-known texts, with which even unilingual Anglophone specialists in Canadian literature (by far the largest potential readership) will be familiar, as they will with the basic hypothesis regarding French-Canadian identity and the role of these literary texts in its formation. Secondly, Perron's analysis of these texts and of their role in identity formation is thorough and, despite the introduction of terms and notions not explained in Parts I and II nor in the chapters devoted to analyzing meaning and its production in the literary corpus, nor in the glossary, convincingly demonstrates the accuracy of that basic hypothesis.

The immense importance of Greimas' work justifies every effort to further awareness of it among scholars who do not read French. While introductory, Part I – like the book as a whole – will be found challenging by many members of its main target public. True, few literary scholars are unaware of the pre-Greimas developments Perron summarizes (too often by name only – a rich bibliography does not adequately compensate for the frequent non-mention of titles in Part I); but even parts of those developments are too elliptically presented; other sections are turgid due to unnecessarily complex sentences and terminology whose effect is not to illuminate but to obfuscate. *Narratology and Text* blithely offers terms such as "praxic-pathic" (27) and "proprioceptivity" (38) and many others with no or scant definition (neither those two terms nor many others are even listed in the useful yet inadequate glossary, 313-315).

Perron is scarcely to be faulted for this: while he seems over-eager to convince readers that some previously-published portions of this book appear here in significantly revised forms, he modestly omits mentioning that readers will find in much of his earlier work useful preparatory reading relevant to tackling this book. While the analysis of *Agaguk* in Perron's *Semiotics and the Modern Quebec Novel* (1996) may seem to some a fine example of critical "overanalysis" relative to the chapter on that novel in *Narratology and Text*, the earlier book clearly paves the way to a useful reading of *Narratology and Text* by offering an introduction consisting in sections entitled "Historiography and the Novel," "The Historical Novel: *Les anciens Canadiens*," "The Agrarian Novel: *Maria Chapdeleine*," "The Urban Novel: *Bonheur d'occasion*," and "The Wilderness Novel: *Agaguk*" (section titles practically identical to several chapter titles in *Narratology and Text*); and a Chapter 2, "The Semiotics of the Novel," covering largely the same ground as that of the preface and introduction of *Narratology and Text*. The latter book is, to a significant extent, a laudable expansion of portions of its 1996 predecessor, and a condensation of its chapters on *Agaguk*. Readers will benefit from having at hand Gerald

Prince's *Dictionary of Narratology* (1987, 2003) which explains the semiotic square more clearly than does *Narratology and Text* or any other explanation of it I have read; and also Greimas and Courtès' indispensable dictionary of semiotics *Sémiotique*.

*Narratology and Text* is also a massive exercise in translation. Translation is directly involved when Perron himself has translated passages, be they quotations from literary texts or works of literary theory or criticism (we are deeply indebted to Perron for the majority of Greimas' work already available in English). Translation decisions are involved when deciding whether to accept existing translations. Simply writing and thinking narratology and semiotics, especially Greimassian, involves massive translation, because so much of the seminal work in the fields was originally written in French, and because Greimas published his works on semiotics almost exclusively in that language.

The obscurity of many sentences might be partially due to the difficulty of translation – perhaps much writing on Greimas, narratology, and semiotics would gain, in the minds of English-speaking readers, by register shifts (“showing” and “telling” compared to the signifiers normally used in literary criticism in other European languages to designate the relevant signifieds). Perron's translation work is extremely meritorious, here as elsewhere, notwithstanding the occasional mishap (“pour avoir fait exprimer le signe de notre créance à quelques petits enfants Iroquois” most likely should be translated as “for having led some little Iroquois children to make our sign of the cross” rather than “for having expressed the sign of our creed to some little Iroquois children” (111) (but Perron and his publisher deserve applause for including, here and throughout the book, the French originals along with translations by Perron or others). “[T]he text unravels” (183) is a mistranslation of “le texte se déroule,” and given the negative connotations of “to unravel,” “unfolds” would have been preferable (compare the equally unfortunate “unravelling of the tale,” 159).

Doubly misleading is the translation (127) of Pascal's famous phrase – which Perron misquotes – “Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ignore,” (“ignore” should read “ne connaît point”). The logic and structure of Perron's paragraph leaves the reader thinking that the phrase was Racine's. Moreover, the last word in “la raison ignore” has been seriously mistranslated as “ignores,” since the phrase (both in Perron's misquote and in Pascal's original “ne connaît point”) means “of which reason is unaware” or “which reason cannot understand.” Finally, the publisher has allowed more misprints than might have been expected from a major university press: the absence of “the” before “actant” on page 31, line 8, “mandate, sequence” (45), “appropriating” (133), “temnps” (138), “governs” (181), “temps” (instead of “tempes,” 189), “Ayallik” in the English translation where the French reads “Agaguk” (236), “jeunes” (246), absence of “littéraires” (*Dictionnaire des oeuvres du Québec*, 288, note 4), absence of “à” between “ressemblait” and “une” (304), and “Paneton” (308). Let not the proof-reader(s) be too harshly judged, however: the challenging content of *Narratology and Text* makes its typological accuracy an impressive achievement – as is, on the levels of theory, scholarship and criticism, this outstanding book itself.

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