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Author

UCLA French and Francophone Studies Graduate Student Association

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REVIEWS

Hierarchy and Manipulation, Faculty Critical Theory Group Colloquium in honor of A.-J. Greimas, UCLA, April 24-26, 1986.

The recent UCLA Faculty Critical Theory Group conference on Semiotics, entitled *Hierarchy and Manipulation*, opened with a keynote address by A.-J. Greimas, the leading figure in Structural Semantics. In that address, "On Meaning," Greimas characterized his own work as an attempt to posit as the object of critical investigation not words as signs but rather discourse. The way in which texts produce meaning, he suggested, is by semantic components. Such an investigation requires a well-constructed meta-language in order to talk about those components, and Greimas' own *Attempt at a Method* is therefore an attempt at a "simple descriptive language." The fact that many of the auditors of the conference (judging from an informal survey on my part) found the language of the presentations neither simple nor descriptive testifies to the formidable nature of the jargon used but does not alter the validity of the attempt, which is to perfect an analytic tool.

As Greimas reminds us, Hjelmslev had earlier noted that "hierarchy" is a central concept in the definition of language itself. Greimas' method posits a hierarchy in which the semantic level (accessible to "actantial analysis") is a "deep structure," more fundamental than the linguistic level, also known as the level of manifestation; hence an analysis of discourse at the level of the syntagm is hierarchically more fundamental than an analysis of semiosis at the level of manifestation.

Greimas' own discourse invokes the notion of hierarchy as the linguists have developed it and applies it to discourse rather than to

words (adapting a Bakhtinian strategy) in order to claim that structural analysis (itself developed from earlier Formalist models such as that of Propp) penetrates more "deeply" and is thus a more parsimonious model than linguistic models. In this way Greimas' structural analysis "subsumes" the study of semiosis at the level of manifestation under the study of semantics at the structural level.

The theme of "hierarchy and manipulation" as a critical *modus operandi* was also brought out in those individual sessions which I attended. Among these was Alain Cohen's presentation, "Semiotics and Psychoanalysis," which concerned among other issues the extent to which narrations produced in psychoanalytic sessions could be analyzed using semiotic theory; that is to say, analyzed *as* narratives (or *as* conversation or *as* discourse; this is itself an issue). Paolo Fabri (a panel discussant along with Hermann Parret) noted the methodological problem posed by a semiotic analysis, which unlike a psychoanalytic study, makes no distinction, much less a hierarchical one, between subconscious and conscious. This and other questions of hierarchical order often resemble the formula for a joke to which we don't yet have the punchline: for example, what is the difference between a semiotic analysis of psychoanalytic theory and a psychoanalytic analysis of semiotic theory?

The dispute about hierarchy (ontological, logical, phenomenological) is fundamental to the activity of critical theory. It is a serious intellectual endeavor (essential, as Greimas noted, to the notion of science itself) to distinguish between the accidental and the essential characteristics of the object in question, and to argue whether and to what extent we "distinguish" or "invent" such distinctions. It is also a sophisticated rhetorical tactic to claim, not that other theories are wrong, but that their results, whatever they may be, are subsumed and thus either co-opted or rendered trivial by one's own more fundamental analysis.

The moral of the story is: Hierarchy is Manipulation.

Amy S. Morris
Program in Comparative Literature, UCLA

1. A.-J. Greimas, *Sémantique structurale: recherche de méthode* (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1966). English translation published as *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*, trans. Daniel McDowell, Ronald Schleifer and Alan Velie (Lincoln: UP of Nebraska, 1983).

La Détresse et l'enchantement by Gabrielle Roy. Montréal: Boréal Express, 1984, 505 pp.

Gabrielle Roy (1909–1983) is one of the most widely read French-Canadian novelists of this century. She was a three-time winner of the Governor General's Award in Canada, and her most acclaimed novel, *Bonheur d'occasion*, won France's Prix Fémina in 1947. Roy's final work was the autobiographical *La Détresse et l'enchantement*. The book was uncompleted at the time of the author's death and covers only the first thirty or so years of her life, from her youth in Manitoba to her early years as a writer in Montréal.

Using a language rich in sentiment, Roy recounts her childhood in a small French-speaking settlement where the lack of material wealth was offset both by a strong sense of pride and defiance toward poverty and a strong-willed resistance to assimilation into the English-speaking world surrounding her. Her mother, the guiding force of the family, is largely responsible for providing courage and humour in the face of misfortune, and she somewhat overshadows Roy's father, whose death nevertheless represents the first tragedy of the author's life.

Roy's frail health steers her toward sedentary pursuits. She excels in school and chooses a career in education, while at the same time joining a small travelling theatre company and dabbling in her favorite pastime, writing. After eight years of teaching, she departs for Europe, first to Paris in search of cultural identity, and then by chance to London where she studies drama. In London she discovers love with a young Ukrainian militant and makes lifelong friendships until the imminent threat of war calls her back to Canada.

It is in the chapters devoted to her European experience that one sees Roy's sense of identity begin to emerge and solidify as she is tested in new situations, bringing a new consciousness of purpose. In Paris, Roy learns that sharing the same language does not mean sharing the same culture; twice removed geographically from her French ancestors (Québec being her closest motherland), she experiences an intense feeling of *dépaysement*. In her attempt to adapt to Parisian life, she is able to ascertain her cultural difference and the manner in which it enriches and forms her own particular vision of life. The process of self-discovery continues in London as she comes to terms with her "self" and simultaneously confronts her vocation as a writer. Upon her return to Canada, she settles in Montréal to begin her new career.

In much of the work Roy analyzes her life with traditionally feminine psychological descriptions, focusing on her relationships with family and people she encounters. Her keen perception and adventuresome spirit create the "enchantment" which time and again relieves her of the anguish arising from the difficulties of her life. In the following passage, describing the outset of a walking tour of southern France just before she returns to Canada, Roy records a privileged moment in her development:

Tôt le lendemain nous sommes allées nous équiper à bon compte au marché de la vieille ville... Nous avons acheté de solides souliers de marche et à chacune, pour faire plus vite, une jupe pareille et des blousons identiques en plus d'un havresac à porter sur le dos à l'aide de bretelles passées autour des épaules... Nous sommes parties... enchantées de tout ce que nous voyions, sans doute parce que nous allions au pas et avions le coeur à tout embrasser...

Je ne le savais pas encore, mais ce matin-là commençait ma vraie jeunesse que je n'avais pas encore eue aussi totale, trop accaparée avant par tous les soucis et l'inquiétude, et que je n'aurais plus jamais aussi grisante. Pour la première fois de ma vie, j'étais loin de tout le mal qui m'avait atteinte ou atteignait les autres. Si j'ai tellement aimé ce cher pays de Provence, c'est peut-être avant tout parce que là seulement j'ai vraiment été libérée d'angoisse, libérée d'ambition et peut-être même de souvenirs—l'être bienheureux qui vit au jour le jour.


Readers and students of Gabrielle Roy may find in this self-portrait valuable insights into her fiction and her development as a writer. *La Détresse et l'enchantement* should also have a particular appeal for those interested in Canadian studies since it concerns the problems of bilingual and bicultural experience as seen from a personal perspective.

Maryse C. Tardif
Department of French, UCLA

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Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouverait
ici l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

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Paroles Gel ees
Department of French
160 Haines Hall
UCLA
405 Hilgard Avenue
Los Angeles, CA 90024
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