

INTRODUCTION



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The history of thematic criticism appears to fall into three distinct phases. In its early, free-flowing and relatively positivistic form, it held a prominent place in literary analysis for quite some time, before being swept away by the various formalisms of the sixties and seventies; now it is making a cautious return to a position of importance. Form, after all, is itself saturated with thematic implications; structures (one might think, with Françoise Escal, of certain *nouveaux romans*) can function as themes: behind an apparently exclusive devotion to design may lie an implicitly thematic reading, even if the theme concerned is merely that of themelessness. Contemporary critics have therefore felt justified in responding as Peter Cryle does to proponents of these methods: “you never stopped using themes, you just did so without knowing it.”

Literary study cannot afford to ignore the theme. It is that through which we read and it is that around which one writes, the locus of artistic creation in its effort to balance tradition against originality, the point of intersection between fictional and nonfictional worlds. Nevertheless, thematics is a rather undisciplined discipline, beset with subjectivist strategies and terminological disputes; what is needed—given, as Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan points out, that traditional linguistics cannot be brought to bear here—is a methodological framework, a theory or set of theories to set against those which supplanted it. To this end, three symposia were held on the subject in France, in 1984, 1986 and 1988, with speakers at the first conference being given the following (non-exhaustive) pointers:

Thematic “relief”: this term designates the procedures by which some of the statements and concepts in a work are made into themes, while others serve as background to these themes. This is a familiar problem in linguistics and in discourse studies where it is known as the articulation of *theme* and *rheme*,

or topic and comment. Thematic designation (the individualization of a theme), focalization (the emphasis on a specific theme) and resonance (the procedures by which rhemes or commentaries are articulated), as well as the relationships of theme to variation and theme to *topos*, all fall within the scope of this particular problematics. The historical dynamics and mutual demarcation of themes and rhemes would also be worth investigating.

The internal structure of thematics includes the constitutive elements of thematics and their syntax. Is a theme a concept (like love, death, the city or the double), a set of concepts (the prodigal son, death and the maiden), or a judgement ("life is a dream," "the course of true love never did run smooth")? What restrictions and what laws of attraction govern the combination of themes? What can be learned from the thematic syntaxes of music and the visual arts? How may manifest and implicit themes be told apart? Could there be a pathology of the theme, a study of thematic obsessions and of the connections between theme and fantasy? What about meta-themes, which thematize literary technique itself?

Textual organization and thematic groundwork. Do certain types of narrative structure impose specific restrictions on the distribution of themes? Or perhaps the other way around? What is the status of the motif, that provisional synthesis between narrative oversimplicity and thematic investment? May affinities be detected between thematic choices and the semantics of fictional worlds, between discursive categories (such as tense, mood, voice, person and perspective) and families of themes, between thematics and genre theory?

Thematics and the act of reading. In the light of recent studies on reading and reception, is there such a thing as thematic attention, or for that matter thematic readers, conditioned by the ambient culture and using, to find their way in the text, decoding strategies which remain to be codified?

Thematics and cultural history. Over and above thematic conventions, can relationships be drawn between themes and specific historical periods—given the fact that the former often seem to recur in more than one culture or period? How is one to describe the rise, expansion and fall of themes—whether they be prophetic, present or vestigial—or thematic cycles, or again the periodic return of manifest and implicit themes? Is there room for a sociology of themes, which would define their role in the social circulation of texts? How may the relationship between literary thematics and, say, moral, religious or scientific thought be articulated?

Empirical research. How do the recognition, retention and integration of themes operate? What is the role of these operations in the understanding of literary texts? Can we establish links with the technology of thematics, the analysis of content and documentary languages?

This manifesto, together with papers from the first symposium, was originally published in *Poétique* 64 (1985); some of these pieces, and others

from the second and third symposia—printed, respectively, in *Communications* 47 (1988) and *Strumenti Critici* 60 (1989)—are reproduced here. All were delivered in French; those which were initially written in English we present in their original form, the rest in translation. Other English-language versions, including Claude Bremond's "Concept and Theme," may be found in Werner Sollors' 1993 collection, *The Return of Thematic Criticism*. We are happy to present an article by Sollors written especially for this volume.

The publication of Sollors' anthology attests to the resurgence of the theme, to its growing prestige as a critical concept; but its definition still remains elusive, its anarchic proliferation difficult to limit. While conceding the subjective nature of thematization, Menachem Brinker manages at least to determine its source: the theme we isolate depends on our particular aims and needs, whether we are in search of authorial intentions, readerly responses or our own pet subjects. Brinker defines theme as the principle of a possible grouping of texts, literary or non-literary, various such groupings being possible in each case. There are also limits to the arbitrariness involved, as to some extent reception is conditioned by a system of shared beliefs; Brinker appends the recommendation—although this carries its own share of subjectivity—that each theme should unify a substantial or significant set of components.

As if to illustrate this approach, Werner Sollors' analysis focuses upon a specific motif which allows several mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century texts to be gathered together. Sollors' diachronic examination of these texts, tracing the history of their common motif from emergence to disappearance, appears to confirm Brinker's suspicion that thematic material tends to come from without: the "bluish tinge in the half-moons" derives from non-literary texts and enters literature as the result of a shift in ideology. And his synchronic study, producing various families among the works according to which features they hold or lack, points toward Jean-Marie Schaeffer's claim (shared, incidentally, by Georges Roque) that no single variation can ever exhaust a theme.

In a formulation akin to that of Brinker, Schaeffer defines theme as a construct enabling links to be drawn between textual segments (though not whole texts) which exemplify a given theme in a similar (if not equivalent) way. Locating two major themes exemplified by the Faust subject—the damnation of an arrogant man and the salvation of a penitent—and focusing on the former, Schaeffer goes on to demonstrate the extent to which generic factors are involved in shaping textual segments, leading to disparities between two exemplifications of one and the same theme, and thus to difficulties in its isolation.

In a similar vein, Thomas Pavel describes how such generic considerations inflect the "thematic universe" of Racinian tragedy. Here, the progressive endeavor to separate the tragic mode from the epic leads to a certain

quality of stasis, an emphasis on speech over movement. This also explains Racine's thematic focus: action having effectively been outlawed from the stage, his field of inquiry finds itself considerably constricted, and he innovates in narrating the birth of language.

If Pavel uses the term "thematic universe" it is because, as he and Claude Bremond argue in their concluding article, theme is extremely hard to pin down. Theme may be defined as the axis on which a *referential attention* meets the "aboutness" of a text; but how is one, from the meagre and misleading clues one is given, to determine this aboutness every time? And at what level does the referential attention operate? Does it focus upon material or design, on an age-old (possibly pre-literary) theme or on its treatment by a specific variant? Bremond and Pavel concede, with Brinker, that much depends on the goals and systems of the individual interpreter.

Refusing to be vanquished by the protean theme, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan and Lubomír Doležel attempt to contain its endless multiplication, to diminish still further the element of subjectivity. For Doležel, each thematization may well be a construct, but each is also regulated by functional pragmatics; for both, there is a primary subject—though there may be minor themes as well (Rimmon-Kenan), and although different themes may present themselves at varying levels of a text (Doležel)—akin to the Jakobsonian *dominant*. Thematization, in this sense, means the selection of a single component around which to structure the work, or indeed the world: theme, for Doležel, is something that applies to all of human activity, a kind of experiential constant; and just as each action has its "mode," determined by the predominant type of motivation (instinct, passion, reason), so each text must have its theme. The theme is thus the top term in a hierarchy of thematic groupings, a "high-order label"—to use Rimmon-Kenan's terminology—possibly homologous to the principal formal aspect of the text. In Doležel's "structural thematics" (where thematics is defined as the extensional semantics of literary texts), themes—semantically invariant components of the structure as a whole—are formed from clusters of recurring motifs and, in turn, collect into *thematic fields*.

Not all thematicians seek such unity amid diversity, however: some prefer to valorize *discontinuities*. When Georges Roque and Cesare Segre do so, it is by affirming the primacy of *motif* over theme. For Segre, the motif (which, like the musical theme, is the smallest possible thematic unit) provides a royal road to the collective unconscious, indicating ways in which experience is conceptualized and subsequently verbalized. The most revealing analyses, then, rather than merely linking texts with features in common, are those which focus on *differences* in the way these features are arranged—the *plot*, as opposed to the *fabula*—privileging the syntagmatic over the paradigmatic.

matic. The exhaustiveness of a Thompson, argues Segre, is preferable to the universality of a Propp.

Roque's investigation centers on attempts by various modern movements, in part via a revalorization of the motif, to free the visual arts from their subservience to written forms. Avant-garde artists refuse to start from a theme or to let one dominate their work; theme becomes as much of a construct for the creator as it is for the viewer. The locus of aboutness—now frequently a self-referential aboutness, raising questions about the artistic process in its entirety—is henceforth the motif.

While visual art may seek to divest itself of meaning, however, music is often engaged in the quest for one. Typically, explains Françoise Escal, the theme of a musical piece has less in common with that of a literary text than with that of a linguistic utterance: explicit and immanent, it needs no interpretation, let alone construction. And quite unlike the literary theme, it is specific to a single work (or series); indeed, this fact is partly responsible for an event in music that might be termed the birth of the author. The language of music is not reducible to words, but the temptation remains, a temptation "to rival natural language," to describe, to tell, to endow the musical signifier with signifieds and even referents. This desire reaches its peak in the nineteenth century, as composers seek the status of apostles and music is thus *required* to communicate; the leitmotiv and musical anagram may be seen as symptoms of this general trend.

To a certain extent, this trend carries through to recent developments in composition, in particular to the "centripetal" attitude Jean-Yves Bosseur describes. Certain composers, like Kagel, Schnebel and Stockhausen, attempt to extend thematics beyond the relationships between sounds, so as to involve the musical operation in its entirety. Like the melodic theme, this new theme (or rather *thematics*, as what we have here is more of an inquiry than a concept) is a unifying and generative principle, ensuring coherence and engendering a specific process of play, a process with its own inner logic. Unlike the melodic theme, however, this "thematics of the acoustic act" changes in essence from one piece to the next. The "centrifugal" tendency, as instanced by the Fluxus group and John Cage, rejects even such a transitory form of control: all that remains is a "thematics of ambiguity and of paradox." Radically indeterminate and resiliently open-ended, this origin with no telos—not even the process is set up as a goal any more—takes music beyond aesthetics and turns it into an art of life.

This compositional style bears a close resemblance to Gaston Bachelard's phenomenological method-without-a-method, his structure which varies from one moment to the next, constantly requiring reinvention around particular images. Seeking a path beyond such nebulous individualism—one shared by

Georges Poulet, and denounced by Claude Bremond in “Concept and Theme”—and a way to introduce some continuity into the discontinuity, Peter Cryle proposes to set a Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics against the theories of the semioticians and formalists who, when they displaced the phenomenologists, were able to do so without a fight. Gadamer replaces free play with a relatively controlled game, turning an indeterminate *I* into a somewhat stable *we*; there is no longer a message for my reception, but now the object of our understanding.

Whether this can provide the method thematics so badly needs, one which acknowledges all the complexities of thematization without letting them tear it asunder, remains as yet to be seen. Meanwhile, such variations have at least had the merit of turning thematics back into a theme.



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