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Despite the similarity in their titles these books are remarkably different. They belong to very different places on the spectrum of literary critical approaches. Christian Messenger's study presents what is essentially a narratology of sports fiction while Michael Oriard's study of the rhetoric of gaming draws upon what could be termed broadly new historicist assumptions. Each book is interesting not only for what it tells us about literary texts but also for the theoretical insights that accompany the textual analyses.

Christian Messenger generates his theoretical context from so-called “play theory” as it has been adapted to the needs of a literary object by Schiller, Greimas, Jameson, and Derrida. Messenger takes from the work of these luminaries elements that complement his own formalist project; for he is concerned to establish a typology of sports fiction that can be expressed as a set of “object relations”. Individual texts are then mapped on to this diagrammatic set of relationships to reveal the dynamic operations of such features as form and content, spirit and matter, aesthetics and consumption. Basically, he seeks a universal grammar by which to describe the operations of sports fiction. His is, then, an exercise in generic classification, though the problematical term “genre” does not appear anywhere in the book.

Genre, or the “structural semantic” system of Messenger's study, mediates between the individual text and some larger category (such as “Literature”), a function that has particular implications for sports fiction because the sports novel is characteristically concerned with the relationship between the individual sports-person and the community (whether that be the team or society at large). This analogy does not escape the notice of Messenger, who uses this common pattern by focusing his typology on the role of the sports hero. In the first two sections of the book the hero is viewed both in relation to such concepts as “the body, to a single opponent, to nature, to schooling, and to witness-spectators” and in relation to such crises as “gender-definition, self-definition, and courage” (p. 251); in the final section of the book the individual hero is described in relation to popular American team sports: basketball, baseball, and football. In Messenger's “structural semantics” of sports fiction, play mediates between the poles of individual sports heroism, collective heroism, and anti-heroism, and the dynamics of these relationships determine the structure of his study as he discusses a vast array of sports novelists, from the famous to the virtually unknown.

Where Messenger deals with sports fiction, Michael Oriard studies the role of sporting metaphors in American culture since the early nineteenth century. Where Messenger draws upon a range of modern literary theorists, Oriard assumes a reader familiar with Johan Huizinga's classic Homo Ludens (English translation, 1955) and defines by contrast with this text his own project. Most simply, he is concerned with the metaphor of life as a game and he investigates the ways in which this metaphor both reveals and creates cultural values. The history of this rhetorical structure is charted through the development of America from a work-centred culture in the early nineteenth century to a leisure culture in the 1980s. Also under investigation is the role of sport and play within a network of culturally powerful concepts, among which Oriard counts “heroism, success, gender, race, class, the law, religion, salvation; the relations of Humankind, God, and Nature” (p. ix). He is concerned with the discourses related to play rather than sport or gaming itself: his study is that of a rhetorician, not a social historian. While he is well aware of the ideological function of rhetoric, this
is not counted among his primary interests. He maintains that political, economic, and social significances are constantly shifting within a given historical period and even when expressed by a single style of rhetoric. This can be seen clearly in the rhetorical figure of play which is traditionally associated with spontaneity and freedom but also with anarchy and chaos, unlike game and sport which, during the course of the nineteenth century, gradually overcame their negative associations with gambling and mockery though they never lost them completely. Oriard looks at how American writers have confronted the conflict of values expressed by these concepts as a means of registering their responses to cultural change. The book comprises four parts but really the argument divides between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as changes in rhetorical figures are related symptomatically to the processes of secularization and modernization.

In the introduction the Progressive Era is taken as the model for the argument of the entire book. Owen Wister and, later, Theodore Roosevelt's Western writings together with contemporary social developments provide an exemplifying context for the work of Dreiser, Crane, Norris, London, and Wharton, in which modern life is seen as a game with both winners and losers. The book then goes on to discuss the evolution of an American mythology of play and its relationship with the dialectics of worldly/spiritual success. Popularization of this mythology in the twentieth century is related in the final section to a countercultural tradition of play that has always opposed the conventional mythology of sport and gaming. I found most interesting the chapter on the period from the Beats to the New Age, where countercultural rebellion is seen as more the expression of conflicts within the social mainstream, where the ascendancy of play has created a crisis within the ethic of work, than as a genuinely revolutionary movement.

The theoretical contribution of Michael Oriard's book lies in its representation of middle-class culture as a site where a variety of white male voices engage in conflict rather than consensus. Representative of that conflict, in his view, are the canonical writers of American literature. Christian Messenger also broadens our sense of the American canon by demonstrating the ways in which all sports fiction (serious and popular) behaves as a “Literature” and so makes a claim upon the label of “literary.”

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