

## Reconceptualizing narratology. Arguments for a Functionalist and Constructivist Approach to Narrative<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This long conversation with Meir Sternberg focuses on some crucial points in narrative theory. Special attention is given, in the first part, to the historical evolution of narrative studies, as well as to the theoretical differences between different paradigms, from Aristotle, through French structuralism, to the present days; in the second part he centers on the explanation of his constructivist and anti-mimetic model and on the difference with other approaches to narrative studies. Providing two fundamental arguments against what he calls «objectivist approaches», he demonstrates the validity and the theoretical value of some of his most thought-provoking proposals, such as the Proteus Principle and the universals of narrative. Thanks to its explanatory power the interview constitutes a simple introduction to Sternberg's functional-rhetorical approach and a glimpse at the editorial policy of the journal «Poetics Today».

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### Keywords

Narrative theory, functionalism, Narratology, Proteus principle, constructivism

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### 1. Narratology «classical» and «postclassical»: is there any difference between the two movements?

The difference is nonexistent. There is no such thing, because when you speak about «classical» and «post-classical» narratology you assume a few things that are simply false. First, you assume that there was at source just one narratology – the «classical» – and that there ensued some advance, some movement toward another narratology that was «post-classical». When people refer to classical narratology, what they in fact mean is French structuralism and its mostly American influence, its followers in America. But the point is that at the same time as when structuralism arose – in the late 1960s – there were other directions and other movements than this French-American narratology, in various parts of the world and in different disciplines. One direction, for example, was that – mentioned in this Fribourg conference – led by William Labov and Joshua Waletzky. They were sociolinguists and did very interesting work in Harlem, trying to investigate the language of the people and the storytelling there. Significantly, their first article was pub-

<sup>1</sup> The Author's considerations were prompted by Franco Passalacqua's and Federico Pianzola's questions, which are signalled by the [F.P.-F.P.] acronym.

lished in 1967,<sup>2</sup> which is almost at the same time as the famous issue of «Communications»<sup>3</sup> which announces the arrival of French structuralism.

At the time, there were also various other (linguistic, New Critical, Neo-Aristotelian, Jamesian) approaches to various discourse kinds, with narrative often at their head. And, perhaps most importantly, there was the Tel Aviv school, which arose in the 1960s. We established a department of Poetics and Comparative Literature in 1968, we launched a journal in Hebrew on poetics, the first in the world that was devoted to poetics, and we started publishing things on a wide front, largely related to narrative theory. In Biblical studies, for example, one of the most classical papers is one I published with a colleague in 1968 on the story of David and Bathsheba. That was the first time the ‘theory of gaps’ was formulated; in a very initial form, indeed, but at long last a theory on narrative ambiguity as such was formulated. Which were concepts virtually unknown at the time. And we have continued working. Today, decades later, we are still working in the field, and there is not only myself. There is, for instance, Tamar Yacobi, one of the best known experts, and perhaps *the* innovator, in the domain of ‘unreliable narration’.<sup>4</sup> After Wayne Booth, she started the movement, the second wave, which is constructivist: where unreliability is no longer seen as a feature of the narrator, but as an inference made by the reader about the narrator in order to deal with difficulties in the text. We have many ways of dealing with difficulties in the text. We may say, for example, that the text suffers from a mistake. In the Bible, for example, we find it written about King Saul, «he was one year old» when he came to power. Obviously, a mistake intervened: some number fell out, it was *forty*-one, *twenty*-one, etc. And so, of course, on a larger scale: for example, when we are dealing with Proust and we know that the manuscript of his great novel was very problematic, because he wrote it in installments, he did not finish it, he did not revise it. Faced with a difficulty in the text, we can then resort to what I call a «genetic solution» – relegate the problem to the genesis of the work. But another way is to say that this difficulty has arisen in the text (for example, the text contradicts itself) because the narrator is unreliable. And so he is trying to deceive, or he is trying to impress the readers. This is one of the directions of the Tel Aviv school which Tamar Yacobi initiated. And there are others, notably our students over the decades. Eyal Segal is in a way the third generation.

So, to come back to the labels, there is no such thing as a single narratology that was «classical», meaning French structuralism. That is the first lie. And then, the so-called post-classicism does not consist in a single thing. It is rather like a supermarket, a mixture of different things. Some of them are enemies to each other, some of them have no relation to structuralism – they do not know structuralism, or they are not interested in structuralism. But, suddenly, the mishmash receives a common umbrella term like that. I mean, if you talk about post-Impressionism, you know what you are talking about: a definite pictorial style, Cezanne for example; it evokes a real thing. Here it is a hodgepodge, and the single umbrella term was invented by interested parties. I don’t want to go into it, but it was invented in order to give an impression that the history of narratology started with classicism and then moved toward something that is the development of classi-

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<sup>2</sup> William Labov and Joshua Waletzky, *Narrative Analysis*, «Journal of Narrative and Life History», n. 7 (1967), pp. 1-38.

<sup>3</sup> Gérard Genette, *Frontières du récit*, «Communications», n. 8 (1966), pp. 152-163.

<sup>4</sup> Tamar Yacobi, *Fictional Reliability as a Communicative Problem*, «Poetics Today», n. 2:2 (1981), pp. 113-126.

cism. This tale is simply false. I would not care, if it did not deceive so many people who do not have the knowledge of the facts. They think: there is this term, it is used by known narratologists, so it must be true to the facts. As I mentioned yesterday, at the conference, the only one who spoke against it was Brian Richardson, who wrote a short article in «PMLA» a few years ago, but it has been forgotten.<sup>5</sup> Nobody has noticed it. I simply came to the conclusion that it is time to get the facts right. Whether I can eliminate the term I do not know, but at least I think that people, especially young people, who do not have the knowledge of the field's history, should know the truth. And again, in this context, I am not preaching any kind of narratology, I am simply saying: these are the facts.

## 2. The development of a new theoretical framework

### 2.1. Aristotle, French structuralism, and the rise of the functionalist approach to narrative

From the beginning, what I believed is that the way to do narratology is different from what was common at the time. I finished my doctorate on Exposition and Temporal Ordering in 1971, and what I did there is really the basis of my conception and of the tools I have been using, although they developed of course over the years. The main thing is this. The various approaches, whether those of the mentioned French structuralism or those inspired by linguistics, they were, and to a large extent still are, formalist in the sense that they believed that form is inherent in the text. In other words, that you can divide texts by certain given features, like such and such narrator, such and such time structure. Most of the scholarly work was done on typologies, classifications, the most famous of which is Gérard Genette's in *Narrative Discourse*. From the outset, I believed that this was wrong. I believed that we must start with the effect on the mind, and that is the key to all my work: we must start with the effect on the mind. As I mentioned yesterday very briefly, I started with this and then I proceeded to look for – if we are talking about narrative – what would be the effects that did not specify a certain kind of narrative, or a certain style, a certain period and so forth, but that define narrative in its 'narrativity'. I came to the conclusion that the three master effects – or universals – are 'curiosity', 'suspense' and 'surprise'.

Now, you have to understand, that when I was a doctoral student, I could not explain things as well as I do now; in my doctorate (1971), they are already explained, but I had to work my way toward this goal because it went against the mainstream.

### 2.2. [F.P.-F.P.] How did you come to develop your thought in the 1960s and 70s?

Officially, I studied in the English Department in Jerusalem and officially my doctorate is in English. But I had a supervisor who was a wonderful person, H. M. Daleski. He is a very well-known scholar of D. H. Lawrence – his is perhaps the best book on D. H. Lawrence – he has also written an important book on Charles Dickens, an important

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<sup>5</sup> Brian Richardson, *A Postclassical Narratology*, «PMLA», n. 113 (1998), pp. 288-289.

book on Conrad, then on Thomas Hardy, and so he is a distinguished scholar of the English novel. I knew him well and liked him. He was my tutor in the first year – tutor in English poetry – he was finishing his doctorate then. I took courses with him in «The novel of the twentieth century» and related topics. When I came to do my doctorate – I am not going to go into all the details – I asked him to be my supervisor. The doctorate was what later turned into my first book, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* — this is more or less also the title of the doctorate itself – and I outlined to him what I had in mind. He told me «Look, I don't know anything about this, but I'm willing to learn» — what a response — and I said «Ok, we'll learn together. I'll work out things and bring them to you for approval». And it was a wonderful experience.

There was no theory on the topic. It concerned the organization of information in the narrative text, especially the order — how order makes a difference, the different possibilities of order and so on — always effect-directed, that is, directed toward the three universals and various other effects attached to the universals. For example, the universals do not include our feelings toward characters. But our feelings toward characters can take part, in, for example, suspense. They can intensify suspense, and also the other way around, when suspense arises or is intensified, then our attachment to the character may grow with it. Perhaps I will go into further details later. What I wanted to say is that it was a wonderful experience. I kept groping my way, sometimes progressing more quickly, sometimes less quickly. But my supervisor was very helpful, I would give him a chapter or part of a chapter and he would read it very very carefully, sometimes more than once, and comment on it in great detail. Whatever he did not understand, I took to be my fault: I did not explain it properly, perhaps I did not understand it properly yet. I got from him the feedback of a very intelligent, a very scholarly, and a very empathetic person – he was all for this doctorate.

Finally, the doctorate was finished, and then, not without delay, I published it (1978). I owe much to Bill Daleski. He was so open-minded. It was not the kind of thing he did, but he was interested, and later he himself used some of the ideas or tools that we had discussed. I am not sure I could do this unorthodox research in another framework. As you probably know, academics tend to be conservative, and even when they are advanced, they want you to do things in a certain way, because otherwise you might endanger the work of the supervisor and those surrounding him. Anyway, this is the story.

### 2.3. [F.P.-F.P.] In the University of Jerusalem, was rhetoric the main approach in other disciplines as well?

No. My main field was English, but from my first year of University I wanted to do things that were not done anywhere. Not that I had a very clear idea, but, for example, I was always attracted to the question of time. I do not know why, but from childhood I was fascinated with it. I knew I wanted to do something with it, and the more I read, even as a boy ten years old, eleven years old, the more the questions began to define themselves. For example, I have always been fascinated with sequential order. And not just narrative order. For example, in the 1980s, I published an essay on deictic order. Deixis is the system by which we translate the outside world into the frame of communication. It includes three dimensions: one of them is the dimension of person, «I/you/he», another is the dimension of time, and still another involves space. When you say «now, here», «here» means the place where we speak or where we write, and «now» is the time. You thereby translate the outside world. In the outside world, there is no *here*.

There is, say, the dining room that you occupy. But when you translate this room into the speech situation, you have the *here*. So most of the research on record was about the use of alternative terms. What are the ways for pointing to the speaker? For example, you can say «I», or sometimes, like a football player, you can refer to yourself in the third person. You can hear Pelé say, «Pelé wants to do this». And that is ok. These are good questions. What interested me, beyond this, was a kind of contradiction that I detected between what we learn at school and what we are told at home. In school they teach you: first person «I», second person «you», third person «he». First, second, third. At home they teach you to say: «you», «he» and «I». So I wanted to understand why this clash between orders.

Now we are not talking about narrative orders, but about deictic orders. And this «why» likewise provoked me from childhood. I still remember I went to school and asked my teachers, and they said, «This is nonsense». So I kept the question in mind and decades later I wrote this article. I was fascinated with questions of order from an early stage and I knew I wanted to do something with them. And slowly, as I studied, I went to other fields, where I hoped to acquire the knowledge or the tools with which I could work. So I took courses in Linguistics, and I took courses in Philosophy and — the point which is most relevant to us — there was a department of Comparative Literature, but it was a very old-fashioned department. I am not saying that the teachers were not good. I remember, for example, that I took a course with a well-known woman poet, Leah Goldberg; she was a wonderful poet. I still remember how she loved Italian, which she knew very well. She drove us crazy, because all the material was in Italian, and she said «If you like, you can get the translations, but I am teaching it in Italian». There were passages from Dante and there were sonnets; what she liked especially was the literature from the fourteenth century, the fifteenth, the Renaissance. So it was an experience. But there was no theory, except for one teacher, Benjamin Hrushovski, who was different from the others. But when you really want something, you find the way to do it.

It was a kind of lucky coincidence that in those years they began translating, for example, the writings of the Russian formalists into English, or into French — which by then I read — or into German, which I could also read. Their work was really a new thing and it supplied some of the questions, some of the beginnings of the answers, although I was not quite satisfied. Those were also the years when I really discovered Aristotle, who is the only theorist in history whom I admire. I disagree with him about a lot of things, but without him there would be no poetics, no literary theory at all. If there were, it would be very different.

I might disagree with Aristotle on a lot of questions, some of them very important — by the way, I wrote about him more than once — but what I liked about him most was his functional approach. I remember how when I understood this, I said, «Yes, this is what I always wanted», that things are defined by their purpose or effect. Only, I disagreed with his effects. I found, for example, that he had no concept of the effect of narrative as such. Take the two main kinds on which he worked, drama and epic. To me, they are narrative in the large sense, because they produce certain distinctive effects. Now, Aristotle speaks about a lot of effects. He says that the «universal effect» of art is pleasure. In chapter four of the *Poetics*, he says that man is the most imitative creature, and so we take pleasure in imitation. He also speaks, of course, about the effect of tragedy, the famous catharsis, the interplay of pity and fear. But he never says what is the effect of narrative, not even of narrative in epic or drama. Never. And this to me was the key question. I groped toward the answer, which turned out to lie in those three univer-

sals, suspense, curiosity, and surprise. But studying and fighting with him was to me the greatest inspiration in those years, and has remained so ever since. I teach an advanced course on narrative and the students do not understand why we devote half the course to studying Aristotle's *Poetics*, but slowly they understand that this is the source of poetic reasoning. And in many ways he is better than modern theorists, including those who use his concepts in diverse forms. Anyway, there was no real help I could get from the institution, not because they objected, but simply because they were not asking these questions; nor were the questions I was interested in asked anywhere else.

### 3. Sternberg and Genette: different approaches to the same problems. Point of view, focalization, and reported discourse

If you speak about «classic» narratology, that is, French structuralism, they ask completely different questions, although there was a convergence of interests. For example, my greatest enemy — I speak not in personal, but in theoretical terms — Gérard Genette, has shared my interest in time and point of view, which were the main topics of my first book. But our approaches were poles apart. He is a typologist — he just wants to group things by and into form — while I am a functionalist: I start by asking, What is the effect, and then I try to see what form(s) can trigger this effect. At the start, I could not quite formulate this interplay between form and effect, or form and function — which is opposed to formalism, because formalism merely says «These are the forms», or as Genette calls them, «the figures»: «analepsis», «prolepsis» and so forth. Some years later, though, I generalized this form/function interplay into the most important principle of communication — communication at large, not only narrative — that I formulated. It is now fairly well known as what I called «the Proteus Principle». The Proteus Principle ensued naturally from my interest in first of all establishing the effects, and then finding the forms that generate them. I discovered that once you ask the question this way — given the effect, what could produce it? — you find that a lot of things could produce it. Then I said, «This looks like something systematic, it is not just a matter of chance». Indeed, the more I thought about it and the more I tested it, the firmer became the Proteus Principle: that any effect can be produced by an infinite number of forms, and any form can produce an infinite number of effects. It works both ways. In more technical language, I called it the many-to-many correspondence. Many forms relate to one effect, and one effect to many forms. So that is the Proteus Principle. Just to anticipate one of the next questions, Why is it that even some people who adopt, or claim to adopt, my approach do not really understand it?

In Genette's *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, there are two references to me that I appreciate. One is a very complimentary reference to my analysis of the *Odyssey*, but Genette did not draw the conclusions. He found the analysis superb, but then, the analysis did not come out of the blue, and did not just come out of my natural talent as an interpreter: it came out of the system, and was intended to demonstrate the system. For the whole analysis shows the interplay (especially) of curiosity and suspense, and how they take different forms, and how they change from one chapter to the other of the *Odyssey*. So yes, he was very complimentary about the approach, but missed or avoided the conclusions, and the same holds true for his reference to the very article where I first formulated the Proteus Principle. It is an article published in 1982, in «Poetics Today», entitled *Proteus in Quotation-Land* and become famous since. As Genette's book was published in '83 and this article appeared in '82, it was more or less an immediate response. That article con-

tains a sharp attack on Genette's concept of 'mimesis', already latent in the subtitle of that essay: *Proteus in Quotation-Land: Mimesis and the Forms of Reported Discourse*.<sup>6</sup> If you remember his *Narrative Discourse*, he talks a lot about «mimesis» as related to «diegesis» — these are Platonic terms, and they are taken from Plato's *Republic*, book three — and I showed that his use of the key term «mimesis» was not consistent and tried to explain why and then showed that the whole distinction between mimesis and diegesis is not really applicable. I mean it is not a theoretical distinction that we can apply to the variety of forms of reported discourse, that is, of quotation, direct, indirect, free indirect discourse, and so forth. Genette made the reference to that article and said, «Yes, there are various forms», but he never said (or perhaps saw) that he had gone wrong and, again, he never drew the conclusion.

One of the key distinctions in that book is between what he calls «representation of events» and «representation of speech». What he claims is that speech can be represented in reproductive form, that is, for example, if something is spoken, a quoter can quote it word for word, and does quote it so in direct discourse, whereas events cannot be quoted, let alone represented exactly, because they are non-verbal. So you have somehow to find words for them that did not exist, whereas in quotation the words existed from the beginning. What I showed in my article is that direct speech is not an exact reproduction of what was originally said, not only as an empirical fact, but even in theory. The whole article is devoted to this; and, by the way, the dogma is not just his. Genette echoed what linguists and other scholars had been claiming for two thousand years: that direct discourse is a replication of the original. And now, you know, one thing that gives me satisfaction is that this millennia-old dogma is dead. I killed it, presumably for good.

So one form (e.g., direct discourse) does not go, either in reason or in practice, with one function (e.g., reproductive), but the two exhibit a protean interplay. The immediate effect was on the theories of reported discourse, which in the 80s and the 90s were very widespread. For example, one of the works that took up the fight against the old formalist dogma — I called it «the direct-speech fallacy», that is, the mistake that direct speech is an exact reproduction of the original — was a comprehensive book by Monika Fludernik on the (especially free indirect) representation of discourse. She was one who took up the new idea with enthusiasm and made it even more popular. To return to Genette, he spoke as if he agreed with me and that is the end of the matter. So, if you ask me whether he was responsive, yes, but not in essentials; he did not change his ways. The key point — and this also explains why some people find it difficult really to understand what I have been arguing — is that there is no compromise between the positions. Because either forms exist in themselves or there are no forms except in terms of functions, that is, when you look at the text, what you understand the text to be doing determines the forms that you see. Forms do not exist anywhere, except in the mind that makes functional sense of discourse.

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<sup>6</sup> Meir Sternberg, *Proteus in Quotation-Land: Mimesis and the Forms of Reported Discourse*, «Poetics Today», n. 3:2 (Spring 1982), pp. 107-156.

#### 4. «There are no forms except in terms of functions». The story of David and Bathsheba and the spread of functionalist theories after the downfall of the structuralist program

You read a text and interpret it, for example, as a sequence of events proceeding from one point to the other. You read the same text and you find an ambiguity in the text, where it is not clear what is happening there: it may be this, it may be that. One of my earliest essays, the one I mentioned, written in 1968, is about the story of David and Bathsheba (II Samuel 11). — Do you remember the story? During the time of war, King David stayed in Jerusalem and he went to the roof of the building to enjoy the evening air and he saw a woman washing there, a beautiful woman. He tried to find out who she was, and was told she was the wife of one of his officers, Uriah, away fighting in the war. He summoned her and slept with her. After a time, she sent to tell him that she was pregnant, and so he had to cover up the pregnancy. He called the husband from the battlefield, under the pretext that he wanted to hear about the war, got a first-hand report from him, and then said «Now go home and see your wife», in the hope that he would go home, nature would take its course, and the pregnancy would be covered up. But what the analysis showed was that the story keeps it systematically ambiguous whether the husband, Uriah, knows that the king has slept with his wife — because (say) at court you cannot hide anything — or whether he did not know. Nor is this just a question of fact. To finish the story: Uriah refuses to go home, saying «While my people are fighting, I'm not going to go home and enjoy myself». Then the king tries again, and when he doesn't succeed, he sends him back to the battlefield with a sealed letter to the commander of the army that in effect orders, «See to it that he's killed». And the commander does it. He arranges some kind of mad attack. Uriah leads it and dies, taking his secret to the grave. To the end, then, the question remains whether Uriah knew about his wife's infidelity, about the king's affair with her.

With regard to this matter, the ambiguity leaves the reader not just with different, polar facts, but also with different figures. On the one hand, if Uriah did not know, you have the idealist, who refuses to go home and have a good time while his comrades are fighting in the field. On the other hand, if he did know, then you have the deceived and defiant husband, making an excuse not to go home through the idealistic argument «I can't go home while my friends are fighting». The ambiguity being permanent, irresolvable, these two opposed Uriah figures must co-occur in the reading along with the facts, against world logic. There is also the strategic ambiguity about what King David thinks about the excuses made by Uriah. Does he take the excuses at face value or does he think «The man is playing with me»? Again it makes a difference, not just to the events, to what happened, but also to the characters we build (including David as killer by remote control).

So, what I want to say is that most people — and this story has been around, for millennia — read it one way or the other. It is very interesting to look at interpretations over the centuries and discover how and why some readers are sure that Uriah is innocent, while others are sure that he knows. But the claim made in that analysis was that we encounter a deliberate ambiguity, that is, the narrative plays irreducibly with both possibilities, to multiple effect.

Therefore, moreover, if John reads that story as Uriah knowing, for example, and Liz reads it as Uriah both knowing and not knowing, then the forms are different to suit. That is, certain sentences suddenly become ambiguous, according to Liz, but not according to John. According to John, this all signifies one thing. So is the sentence to be



(re)constructed this way or that way? That is what I mean when I say that the ultimate effect determines the very forms of language. The forms do not have any independent existence, and that is why my narrative theory is irreconcilable, and cannot be mixed up, with an approach like Genette's and most of the other theories in narratology. In the heyday of structuralism, it was very hard for me to push forward my theory, because there was this wall of, I would not say hostility, but simply a deep otherness. Various people in narratology thought I had strange ideas. Funnily enough, the Proteus Principle – especially its narrative dynamics – was already gaining currency in other fields. For example, the three master effects were adopted by cognitive researchers in the early 80s. They were also adopted in film theory by a leading film theorist, David Bordwell — in his early book *Narration in the Fiction Film* — and he spread the reconception of narrative there.<sup>7</sup>

About the same time, there was still a resistance in narratology itself. In the 80s, structuralism broke down and people started looking for alternatives. One of the available alternatives they (re)discovered was my work. I had been pushing it forward, but it was, and remains, a fight to the death, conceptually speaking. I do not want to overdramatize matters, but it comes to an either/or choice. Indeed, the trouble with some people who have taken up my approach, to this day, is that they want to hold on somehow to the bad good old formalism, to the old French structuralism, and not only because they invested a lot of work and time and prestige in it. Whatever the motives, they find it difficult to leave Genette-style formalism behind and accept the Proteus Principle, with its radical implications. This is why, for example, the talk given at the conference yesterday by my ex-doctoral student Eyal Segal was so different from other, even related talks: because he was born into this way of thinking and to him it is natural. He does not have any commitment to any opposed program, he has not invested in other-minded work. Hence the difference from those who, even when they use the same terms — and put them to interesting use — do not go all the way with the functional reorientation, so that there arise various internal problems. The talk I gave yesterday about suspense indicated some of the problems, and many of them are leftovers of the old formalism.

But there have also been very fruitful adoptions. Let me give you one of the earliest and largest examples. David Bordwell came across my first book, on *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction*, and was inspired by it. The three narrative universals – suspense, curiosity, surprise – accordingly loom large in the argument and examples of *Narration in the Fiction Film*. But what he did went beyond applying them to film. Rather, he extended the theory, because he is a very intelligent man, with a fine theoretical mind. He asked himself, «If I adopt this theory, how will it be affected if it is brought into contact with film?», which is not a medium in which I myself was an expert. (By the way, I know more about film now than I did then, because my work had focused on verbal narrative.) He adapted, and so extended, the theory to film, and that is why, when I got his book, I learned from it. For example, I discovered how film can use devices — forms, if you like — that are not available to verbal narrative in order to produce the master effects. The Proteus Principle accordingly gains a massive novel confirmation. The more so since Bordwell also adopted another part of the same theory, regarding point of view. For example, are the important parameters of point of view in verbal and literary narrative extendible to the cinematic medium? How does what the narrator knows – or the

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<sup>7</sup> David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1985.

«narration» – relate to what the narrator tells? Why does this relation persist and/or vary, specifically between word and image?

## 5. So many papers and just four books. The editorial program of «Poetics Today» and its role in the contemporary debate about narrative

You wonder why I keep publishing articles, including extensive programmatic overviews in «Poetics Today», rather than writing or finishing more books. Well, my vision — it may be a big word — as an editor is that I do not want to be a post office box, where things arrive from assorted quarters. I want to look at the field and see what is necessary to be done, sometimes to do a new thing, sometimes to counter things that I regard as undesirable or unscholarly developments, and do something about them, like arranging a special issue. The same rationale applies to my personal work. I see some development — or fail to see one — and I think that it is really urgent to take action now. Not to wait to finish the book, because it may take two and a half years and then it is sometimes too late. Very often you have to seize the moment. And this has resulted in what you describe. But I have good news for you. I have decided to start consolidating now and, if God gives me health and life, I will devote the coming years more and more to bringing the pieces together. For example, the *Telling in Time* series is almost ready for publication and other things as well, including a set of articles on *Narrativity*.<sup>8</sup> They are part of a book manuscript that I need a few months to finish. I will mend my ways in this regard.

But you are perfectly right, maybe I lost something by not developing them straight into books, but we do what we have to do, and I do not believe in regrets. One of my favourite poets in Hebrew, Dan Pagis, has a wonderful line that says «I have never understood this hunger/ for the past». Now, in translation it loses all its poignancy, because in Hebrew *hunger* and *past* are anagrams [...raav... avar]. A kind of punning construction. (By the way, the speaker is a snake, because he sheds his skin, so he is free of the past.) I have always believed that instead of regretting things, it is better to go ahead and do them, or, if possible, correct them. On the whole, I am a very fortunate man, in that I have spent my life — and, God willing, I have not nearly finished it — doing what I love and working hard not because I had to, but because I chose to. Not all the time, because you are in a university and you have to contribute in various ways. But most of the time I have done the things I loved or believed in: my own work and editing «Poetics Today», which takes about forty percent of my time. Not a simple thing — and that is again because I do not want to be a post office box. I want to do things — or repair them — and some are difficult to do. Nothing like a mail order.

As in my own work, I am a great believer in building bridges between disciplines, or between directions, within or across them. If you look back at the issues and volumes of «Poetics Today» — I have now been editing it for twenty years — you will find that they are largely composed of such bridges. That is the best, sometimes the only way to progress. Instead of being closed within a certain paradigm, with vested interests to defend, you open up things and you see whether you can contribute and whether you can gain something by going to a neighbor. I have done it in my own work and I have done it in «Poetics Today», and it always takes time, just as it takes time for me personally to

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<sup>8</sup> Meir Sternberg, *Narrativity: from objectivist to functional paradigm*, «Poetics Today», 31:3 (Fall 2010), p. 507-659.

master a new field. In preparing a special issue, you sometimes have to work months in order to get together the people, to put together some operational as well as conceptual framework — who will write what, and so forth. So it takes a lot of my time, but I am not a martyr. I have a sense of mission, I feel that there were many years when «Poetics Today» was a kind of a lighthouse to various scholars who felt that they were flooded with things that were unscholarly developments, like some «cultural» varieties or more kinds of post-structuralism. It was really politics in literary critical form, and «Poetics Today» kept faith with the real scholarship. Especially since we publish things according to quality — even if I violently disagree with them — as long as they are on a sufficiently high level in their own scholarly terms. A lot of people who believe in scholarship, not just my kind, have accordingly turned to «Poetics Today». Even if they did not publish there, they read the journal and it gave them (as they gave us) strength to continue. So yes, I have a sense of mission, but I also take pleasure in helping to generate a special issue that has an impact on the field, or in helping to develop an article that may have been badly written but seemed to me promising. This is an immense satisfaction to me, and yes, it comes sometimes at the cost of my own work, but we are what we are.

## 6. Two arguments against mimetic approaches to narrative and for a shift to a functional narratology

In this overview of Narrativity that I have recently published,<sup>9</sup> you will find a lot of things that are related to the subjects we've discussed as basic issues. What makes a work 'narrative'? What constitutes narrative in its narrativity? (Of course, the latter being a new term, many have asked these questions without using it.) Since Aristotle, the common answer has been mimetic or representational or objectivist (interchangeable terms for the same thing). That is, the definition of narrative has generally been framed in terms of the represented world — of events, or of the relations between events and characters, or of agents with their intentions, and so forth. In this overview, I give a more detailed account of this long, strong, and diverse mimetic approach. For example, while some define narrative by one event, others say, «One event is not enough, it must be a certain kind of event». «Yesterday a plane fell down» is not a narrative according to them, because a narrative — they say — requires a human agent. So «The plane fell down» would not be a narrative, but «He lighted a cigarette» would be. It is ridiculous, but the threshold rises further among mimeticists. Still others thus say, «No, we need at least two events» — this is very popular — while others object in turn: «No, two events are not enough, we need events with a causal relation between them». And others say, «That's not enough, either. We need an agent with an intention. The cause will be what the agent intended, and the effect will be what he did with that intention». And others say, «Even this is not enough, because narrative demands» — for example, in many cognitivist theories — «some kind of problem solving», which runs from a dramatized problem to the agent's solution. In turn, a solution brings us to another demand: that the events must reach closure. And I have not yet exhausted the possibilities. But all these definitions are mimetic, objectivist, or representational in this sense: they all define narrative in terms of the represented world. More of this lifelike object, less of that, and so forth. As I said,

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<sup>9</sup> Meir Sternberg, *Narrativity: from objectivist to functional paradigm*, cit.

this definition has persisted from Aristotle to the present day, with almost no exceptions, least of all redeeming ones.

The overall majority of definitions have been mimetic. As I suggested before, I find them sadly inadequate because of a complex of reasons. But let me just mention the most basic ones. First of all, it is very strange that everyone concerned — at least nowadays — knows that narrative is composed of two sequences. There is the sequence of events in the world (the order of happening) and there is the sequence of events in the discourse about the world (the order of reading, or telling). Now, how can narrative be defined by two sequences as a necessary condition, and then get defined by one of these sequences — by the mimetic order of events? If the condition for narrative is two sequences, then it must be defined in terms of those two sequences, because this twinship is what distinguishes it from everything else. You can see already how this mimetic line of definition is strangely, fatally inconsistent. Moreover, all mimetic approaches — whatever form of events they stipulate — assume that their defining feature of narrative is given, and as I tried to explain before, there is no such thing as a textual given. Take a text: how can one tell what form of events there is, if the form of events depends on our interpretation of what it does, to what effect in the (con)text, and so forth? Yesterday, when I gave my talk, one of the things I wanted to bring in was a saying by Alfred Hitchcock. He said — and I quote literally — «I am a typed director. If I made a movie of Cinderella, people would be looking for a body in the coach». What sounds like a joke conceals a profound insight. It is exactly like that. I mean, you have the same events — the Cinderella events — but you come to them with the preconception that it is a Hitchcock movie and then you bring into them a «typed» form: the expectation of a body in the coach. It is not a form that you have been given on the surface, but one that you import or construct by reference to an operative framework. Or, as I showed many years ago, in one of my first articles, a sentence known to be taken from, say, a realistic novel, and the same sentence known to be taken from a detective novel, will mean different things to the reader.

So, it is again the functional frame that determines the form. Compare how one fine cognitive philosopher, Phillip Johnson-Laird, attacked story grammars (typically based on mimetic definitions). He said, «A grammar contains elements like setting, events, and so on. But how can you tell, in bringing the grammar to a text, what is setting, and what is event?» In other words, the mimetic definer presumes some interpretation of the discourse, but it never appears in the definitional formula — any more than the discourse sequence itself. The (silent) practice therefore belies the (official) theory. Whatever your mimetic definition, you cannot apply it without some reading of the text in its actual sequence. You may stipulate one/two/three events, causality and so forth, but the very question of whether there is any causality in the text or not remains a matter of interpretation.

Let me illustrate from E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*, where he brought two examples which have become notorious and have been repeated endlessly. As he put it, «The king died and then the queen died» is a story, «The king died and then the queen died of grief» is a plot. Accordingly, a story is one event plus another, later event; a plot is one event that causes another event. But, suppose we encounter the first two-event sequence, «The king died and then the queen died», in a text. Now, I do not know how many, but, say, twenty percent or fifty percent of the readers will read it as a causal sequence. They will mentally add, in other words, that the queen died of grief. This incurs the notorious *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy: when you read things that are given in a se-

quence of time, you tend to project a further, causal connection between them. Again, the form of words looks the same, but one will read it as «One event plus one later event», while another will read it as «One event leading to another event». No fixed form, then, because it depends on interpretation. So, if you define narrative as «One event plus one later event», how can you identify it in the text? You cannot identify it on this basis. The bankruptcy of the formalist approach is again evident and inherent.

Here I brought only two arguments against it. One is the fact that narrative consists of two sequences, so it makes sense that a definition of narrative must somehow involve both sequences, not one — the mimetic one; the second is that using the mimetic sequence by itself, you cannot apply it to any text, because then you inevitably have to mediate the definition by another sequence that is never given in the definition — the sequence of the text, which has a meaning, a purpose, a movement, and a logic of its own. I do not think that on every question, if you have a rivalry between approaches, one approach is necessarily right and the other wrong. Sometimes it is a question of what you are interested in. But here the mimetic approach is definitely and hopelessly wrong, because untenable on any ground. It is not acceptable either in reason — narrative entails two sequences, rather than just the mimetic one — or in practice — you cannot apply it without contradiction: without smuggling into the application the other, discursive sequence, which was never acknowledged in the formal definition.

## 7. «Narrative is not given, it is a construct». How is it possible for the same discourse to be both a description and a narration? Consequences of a constructivist approach to narrative

Narrative is not given, it is a construct, just like a form of events, or indeed like a form of narration. I mentioned the work of Tamar Yacobi on (un)reliable narration. If you think about it, the same principle operates there: it says that the features of the narrator are not given in the text, and so not necessarily attached to him. You read *Lolita*, for example, and the narrator, Humbert Humbert, is characterized as unreliable. Why? Rather than a given, he and his tale count as unreliable only because (or if) his norms clash with the norms that we readers take to be operative here. We do not think it right for a grownup man to rape a twelve year old girl every night. And then, in face of this outrage and its glorification by Humbert, we say: «The author invests this narrator with problematic values, so as to signal to us that we are to read that narrator as unreliable, rather than as one that represents the author's views». So, just as the form of events is not given, the figure of the narrator is not given, either. It is (re)constructed according to our understanding of the work as a whole. If you believe Nabokov to be in favour of Humbert Humbert's doings and judgments, then Humbert Humbert becomes a reliable narrator, in that he speaks for the author.

Or take another aspect of point of view as construct. You start reading a novel and suddenly you encounter privileged information — for example, an insight into the character's mind. What do you do with it? How to make sense of it? Obviously, it is strange, unnatural information, which we, in our daily human lives, can never reach. So, what you often do is to construct an omniscient, superhuman narrator. Not that the narrator is given as omniscient. And you can always construct an alternative, because if there is no alternative, then there is no construction. My dear beloved mother used to say that there is an alternative to every action, except for two: sneezing and making children. These you can do in only one way; for everything else, there is more than one way. She was a very

smart lady; alternatives are (nearly) always available. You could say here – in face of the inside view – that we have a normal narrator, «one of us», who merely invents what others think. Still when you put one hypothesis against the other, you find that the first («omniscient») hypothesis is more probable. It makes better sense of the text. But if someone says, «I think that this is a limited narrator who invents», you cannot prove him wrong. This goes to show that, on either hypothesis, we have to do with a construction.

More generally, I claim is that since a narrative is a construct of our minds, any sign or any collection of signs is a narrative if it produces in us suspense, curiosity or surprise. Think of yourselves. Sometimes you go for a walk in the desert, you see a rock, and suddenly you fashion a story about it. Why? Because somehow it has made you wonder about its past. Inversely, the very fact you made up a story shows the effect of curiosity on you, in response to which you have generated the story. A movement from a gap to a storied gap-filling, in brief. And the same holds true, for example, against the mimetic conception that narrative requires a certain number of events or even one event. In the *Telling in Time* article you translated,<sup>10</sup> I ask «What about the cry of ‘fire?’». When we hear that cry, what happens? It comes as a surprise. We then go back in time to (re)construct some past misadventure – as the cause of the fire – and also look forward: we must run away. A pregnant moment, as it were. So you do not need to have any specific form in order to create narrative. *We* create narrative, and the creation is reader-dependent or reading-dependent. You and I can be confronted with the same collection of signs and I will read it one way and you will read it another. Perhaps I can prove that my reading is better than yours, but this is not the business of narrative theory. The business of deciding what interpretation is better falls to interpretation theory. The theory of narrative must explain both the good readings and the bad readings, since the good and the bad readings are motivated by the same (re)constructive, teleological, protean force.

## 8. The Proteus principle: the many-to-many correspondence between forms and functions. Epistemological value and philosophical implications of a protean model of narrative

Mine is, then, a constructivist theory.

[F.P.-F.P.] Like Nelson Goodman’s theory?

No, he is not a constructivist. I mean, it depends on how you define constructivism, but it is not the same thing.

[F.P.-F.P.] There are different levels and different kinds of constructivism.

For example, Goodman has written about quotation, and he echoes again the old definition, which involves the «direct speech fallacy», with its form/function package deal. So, anything but a constructivist in my sense. Like other labels, ‘constructivism’ can be understood in different ways.

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<sup>10</sup>Meir Sternberg, *Raccontare nel tempo (II): Cronologia, teleologia, narratività*, traduzione di Franco Passalacqua, «Enthymema», I (2009), pp. 136-186.

[F.P.-F.P.] Do you have any idea why this functionalist approach of yours has met with resistance?

Yes, I have thought a good deal about this, and you must remember that I have been fighting against the current for so many years. I often ask myself where the resistance comes from, and there may be more than one reason. People's interests and investments doubtless affect their responses, but I do not want to go into this.

I think there is a basic psychological reason, namely, the human tendency to the opposite of the Proteus Principle, what I call the package-deal fallacy. It is simply convenient to say «X goes with Y», «form A goes with function A1», «form B goes with effect B1». The world then looks orderly, safe. The Proteus Principle is, by contrast, a subversive force; it says nothing is stable, except that we make everything *ad hoc*. This is psychologically very difficult for many people to accept, and some of them like to believe that this is not scholarly, because scholarship must establish order. Only, order means to them «A form goes with A1 function» and related package deals. I am also for order — all scholarship is for order — but of a very different kind. The Proteus Principle establishes an intricate and flexible order, which I believe reflects the dynamism of human communication. The other order looks very orderly, but it does not work. I can show in every case that form A can perform functions that are other than A1 and that function A1 can be performed by forms other than A. In many cases, this infinite dynamism even leaps to the eye. So I believe that the resistance is basically psychological. To most people the world feels safe when you can say «A goes with B», form and function come in a package. It makes the scholar's life easier too, compared with the difficult Protean alternative. Even among my students, I have found that it takes them time to free themselves from what was hammered into their heads in high-school. There, teachers like to be regarded as omniscient: they know, indeed foreknow all the answers, and teach accordingly. So you have to re-educate students – and not them alone – into taking a bolder yet humbler approach. Basically, this is the conclusion I have come to.

[F.P.-F.P.] Do you think that studying narrative theory with this approach and teaching the Proteus Principle could be important for a reconception of people's way of studying, even in primary and secondary school?

Yes, it changes everything. I think the Proteus Principle needs to be taught to every child at school. It is our protection against dogmatism, against a tyranny of thought. Nor is it to teach them something alien, but something that they practice, that we all practice. I mean, we all communicate in so many ways, sometimes to achieve the same result. With one person you know that the way to achieve it is this, but if you want to achieve the same result with another person, you choose another means. So, the Proteus Principle formulates what we actually do, to some extent at least. That is what I find so attractive about it. Whereas what is preached to us by teachers and by politicians and by ideologies is designed to channel us into a certain automatic mind-set, into seeing things as fixed and inevitable: «If this happens, we must go to war», «If that happens, we must impose new taxes on the public». No, there is always an alternative. So, as a man who deeply believes in freedom of thought, I think that Proteus is a vital democratic principle, apart from its scholarly advantages. As I said, it is a safeguard against tyranny.

[F.P.-F.P.] Do you think this principle could work in the scientific field as well?

Yes, I think so. Moreover, I think that good scientists or good scholars have always practised it under various names. Sometimes revolutions, in the humanities or in the sciences, can really be described in terms of the Proteus Principle. A very simple example: «In order to achieve this kind of effect, to obtain light, you don't have to use candles, you can use electricity». To me, it is the same thing. I do not consider the Principle area-specific or discipline-specific. For example, one of my objections to the way that various linguists operate is their drive toward package-deals, within grammar, say, or between verbal form and meaning. I can bring an example from a theory that was once enormously influential, not least among structuralists: I'm referring to the work of Roman Jakobson. Take the famous article «*Linguistics and Poetics*». Jakobson speaks there about the functions of language. He enumerates six functions, which correspond to six linguistic elements. But Jakobson is actually an anti-functionalist. I mean, he speaks of functions, but wants to tie those functions to certain forms. For example, «The poetic function expresses itself in the projection of the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection to that of combination». Now, in simple language, this means that the poetic function manifests itself in structures of equivalence. X is «equivalent to Y», because «similar to Y», or «opposed to Y»; one line of poetry is equivalent to another, one stanza is equivalent to another, one sentence structure is equivalent to another. But why restrict the poetic function to the form of equivalence? Why not say, as others do, that the poetic function expresses itself in, say, metaphoric language? That the poetic function expresses itself — as Aristotle would say — in the pleasure of imitation? That the poetic function expresses itself in ambiguity? There being infinite possibilities, why restrict the poetic set toward the message to one of them? Or another Jakobsonian function, say, that of self-expression, supposedly manifests itself in exclamations. But why tie it to exclamation? Cannot we express ourselves in an infinite number of ways? Jakobson is in this sense a false functionalist. He speaks of functions, but to him science or linguistic science consists in package-deals: for example, the poetic function manifests itself in equivalence, another function goes with a different but equally monopolistic (e.g., exclamatory) verbal form, and so on, down to the last of the six. Therefore, even the use of the word «function» does not guarantee a functionalist approach.