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I

A FUNCTIONAL THEORY
OF NARRATIVE

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Toward a functional theory of narrative

One of the most anomolous, puzzling, and even mysterious features of the book of Genesis is the repeated utterance of words which are pivotal for the plot by a character who has no spatial presence in the narrative world.

I speak, of course, of the words of God, Yahweh Elohim, which issue forth not from an awesomely represented heavenly world, nor from an incarnated divine being present in the time and space of the earthly world, nor even from the psychic world of dreams and visions (though all of these occasionally do occur), but – from nowhere! They simply spring from the written page, “In the beginning ... God said,” (Gen. 1:1, 3) or “And Yahweh said to Abram, “Go ...” (Gen. 12:1).

Since as readers we are very dependent upon contextual clues for understanding the meaning of utterances, the total absence of such clues from some of the most crucial utterances in the book of Genesis is no small obstacle to our understanding of this narrative. To be sure later religious tradition and theology have created contexts of their own which have so encased the Genesis narrative with theological hypostases and systems that the absence of a context for these utterances in the narrative now easily goes unnoticed, just as the absence of the mention of Satan from the narrative of the Fall of Genesis 3 is no longer perceived by many readers. But the lack of context for the divine Voice in the narrative itself must be taken very seriously by a reader who seeks (as I do) to study the style and structure of Biblical narrative writing. The work to follow is an attempt to develop a way of reading the Genesis text, drawing upon the varied resources of contemporary semiotics and literary criticism, that is responsive to the peculiarities of this mode of narrative discourse which is so restrained in its use of representative language.

Actually, the implication just conveyed that no clues were given as to the contexts of the two divine utterances is not altogether accurate. We can correct this by comparing the following utterances, which are subject to remarkably different interpretations:

- (1) Let there be light.
- (2) He said, “Let there be light.”

(3) God said, "Let there be light."

(4) He laughed and said, "Let there be light."

Statement (1) differs from (2) – (4) in that it lacks a narrative context. To interpret the statement as it stands in terms of its denotative or conceptual content and its grammatical form leaves much unclear. "Light" is apparently an object word with a precise ostensive definition: electromagnetic radiation to which the organs of sight react. The verb "be" could be grasped in terms of more abstract sense relations meaning to exist or live as opposed to not existing or dying. The word "let" in this sentence would be an auxiliary verb conveying the modality of command; and "there" would be a kind of deictic pronoun of place used here to refer to a state of existence.

Nothing, however, has been said about whether the reference of light is to sunlight, candlelight, or electric light. The precise state of existence of such light also is not conveyed in the sentence by the verb "be." Does this mean absolute existence as opposed to non-existence, or some lesser form of existence such as is achieved by striking a match or flipping a switch? The modal auxiliary "let" only makes the meaning more obscure, since to "let" "be" an object, which presumably did not exist before, puts unusual strains on the definition of "be." But more fundamentally, convention requires that a command always be uttered by someone, and this source is not given. Without knowledge of the speaker, the contextual conditions are not known which would eliminate some of the multiple possibilities given above.

Glimmers of a context begin to appear in sentences (2) – (4), provided by introductory phrases which place the command within a discursive context. Now it is clear that these words are not, for example, a poem, a riddle or an advertisement for a public utilities company. The utterance belongs within a discursive and possibly narrative context. It is a citation. The significance of sentence (2) can be seen by comparing it to (4). The latter places the citation within a parodic context so that the meaning is not to be "taken literally." The speaker has perhaps turned on the light in a room through some hidden technical device and uttered the words for the amusement of his audience, in parody of the words of the Genesis creation story which his audience knows. Utterance (2), by comparison, relates the citation in a straightforward fashion, implying that it is to be taken literally. Of course, not knowing the "he" leaves the reader still with many interpretive uncertainties.

Sentence (3) identifies the speaker as "God." This reveals another general semantic context. To the extent that the reference of the word "God" is known, the meaning of the statement becomes more stable. If, however, very little else is known of God than that he said these words, then the words themselves become the context in which their speaker is to be understood rather than the reverse. The obscurity of the sentence's meaning would then be compounded.

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Since the project before us is the meaning and analysis of the structure of the Genesis narrative from which sentence (3) was taken, it is obvious that the problem of the modal connection (that is, the predominant mood) of the narrative framework to the direct discourse of the characters is fundamental. There are numerous utterances of the divine which occur not “out of the blue” but literally out of the page. To the extent that the discursive structure is a factor in producing the meaning, the modality by which the two basic elements in that structure are related – the narrative framework and the character’s speech – would have to be the starting point for the analysis.

Contemporary narratologists often choose to treat such statements as this only in terms of their conceptual content, however. The distinction between the direct discourse and narrative framework is ignored when determining the fundamental structure of a narrative and its semantic content.

Good examples of this type of approach can be found in the work of Seymour Chatman and the early work of Mieke Bal. Chatman bases his narrative theory upon Aristotle and certain derivative formalist theories influenced by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. The distinction between direct discourse and the narrative framework is passed over at the outset when he defines narratives as a combination of “story” (*histoire*) – “the *what* in a narrative that is depicted” (the chain of events [actions, happenings] and the existents [characters, details of setting]) – and “discourse” (*discours*) – the *how*, “the means by which the content is communicated,” which may be either verbal or non-verbal.¹ Since the distinction between direct discourse and narrative framework exists only at the “discourse” level, and not at the level of “story,” and the bifurcation of narrative into story and discourse has the effect of confining semantics to the story level, this precludes the possibility that any fundamental semantic distinctions can be made at the discourse level.

This division reflects the Saussurian distinction between the signifier and signified, which Chatman, utilizing the categories of the Danish linguist Hjelmslev, formulates as a distinction between the plane of expression (the “how”) – the signifiers – and the plane of content (the “what”) – the signifieds. He further breaks down each of these planes into substance (the material medium of verbal discourse and the material, objective content to which the words refer) and form (the common narrative structures on the expression plane, and, on the content plane, the conceptual signifieds of the narrative structure such as events, character and setting and their connections).

Similarly Mieke Bal, adhering more closely to the language of the Russian formalists, presents a three-level structure: text, fabula, and story.² Most of what Bal places under the two categories, text and story, Chatman includes under the category of “discourse” (i.e., the “how”), whereas the category of story for Chatman (i.e., the “what”) is equivalent to what Bal means by fabula. In both the central characteristic of the narrative text is that it tells a story.³

It is clear that Chatman and Bal both locate the meaning of the narrative itself in the formal content, that is, the “what.” Chatman raises the question, “What does narrative (or narrativizing a text) mean?”, and answers that it is to be found in the formal content, the three signifieds that belong to narrative structure: “event, character, and detail of setting.”⁴ These three elements correspond exactly to two of the three categories which Aristotle describes as arising from “the objects of the dramatic imitation” (*Poetics*, 1450a, line 10); i.e., fable or plot (actions) and character (moral qualities). The third of Chatman’s categories, the representation of the setting, is also clearly a form of imitation determined by its objects.⁵ It is important to note that *these signifieds may be expressed in either the direct discourse or the narrative framework. The distinction between narration and direct discourse plays no role at the level of the “what,” that is, the semantic content.*

If this mimetic theory is applied to sentence (3) (God said, “Let there be light.”), and to its narrative context, a number of problems arise. While the preceding verses do provide a type of setting (i.e., time reference to the beginning, and reference to unformed chaos) and character reference (i.e., God as the subject who speaks), the signifiers of sentence (3) at the discourse level do not refer to an event, but rather constitute an event. The utterance does not refer to light, but has, as the consequence of its utterance (revealed in the succeeding phrase), the existence of light. Here the discourse does not recount a happening, but is itself a happening, and it is precisely in this happening that the meaning of the narrative is to be found, i.e., creation through speech. Such language does not fit easily into an understanding of narrative that blurs the distinction between narrative framework and direct discourse, since the words of discourse would be reduced to merely signifying instruments which refer to a signified content, and there would be no place for meaning which is inseparable from the speech act itself.

Gérard Genette illuminates this problem when he points out that the chief weakness of the mimetic theory of narrative is that there is an element in narrative that is clearly not mimetic, namely, the direct discourse passages. The problem is made clear by looking at Plato’s way of defining this category in relation to mimesis. Plato distinguishes between *lexis* (the manner of speaking) and *logos* (that which is said, the thought content). Under the category of *lexis* he locates *diegesis*, or simple narration by a poet in his own words, and *mimesis*, which is an imitation in direct discourse of another speaking. Plato opposes *mimesis* to *diegesis* as a perfect imitation to an imperfect. In *diegesis* the poet only gives the words of others in indirect speech.

In Genette’s view, however, direct discourse in a narrative is in fact the thing itself which supposedly is being imitated. It is thus a tautology to speak of a direct speech as a perfect imitation. A perfect imitation in the verbal medium is the thing itself. It is the imperfect which is, under the category of *lexis*, the

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actual imitation, thereby making diegesis, in fact, mimesis. As Genette says: “the very notion of imitation on the level of lexis is a pure mirage which vanishes as one approaches it; the only thing that language can imitate perfectly is language, or to be more precise, a discourse can imitate perfectly only a perfectly identical discourse; in short, a discourse can only imitate itself ... A perfect imitation is no longer an imitation; it is the thing itself, and in the end, the only imitation is an imperfect one, *mimesis* is *diegesis*.”⁶

In comparing narrative to a painting, Genette says that direct discourse would be equivalent to a Dutch master placing a real oyster shell into his picture. Direct discourse is heterogeneous to the representative, mimetic context in which it stands in the narrative.⁷ This suggests then that mimetic theories cannot fully account for the meaning of direct discourse in narratives. A semantic cleavage exists between these two forms of discourse.⁸ Thus Genette finds the two basic components of narrative to be direct discourse and presentational narration which provides the contextual framework. The discursive context of the entire narrative work creates a final important “frontier” which impinges upon the narrative form and meaning. To the extent then that direct discourse constitutes such a fundamental, semantic feature of narrative, one cannot define a narrative in terms of the relation between the narrating discourse and the narrated, mimetic (signified) content which suppresses this distinction. This is especially true of the Biblical narrative which presents many such centrally important acts of speech in direct discourse, such as Genesis 1:3.

Some literary theorists have recognized the need for an approach to narrative which finds a point of departure within discourse rather than building upon the distinction between verbal form and semantic content.

Mary Louise Pratt has been the first to move toward a comprehensive, systematically developed theory of literature which does not rely upon this formalist dichotomy.⁹ Her critique of formalist poetics, from which the narratology of Chatman and Bal stems, focuses upon its primary concern with defining the features which make literature “literary.” Applied to narrative, this results in an attempt to determine the formal characteristics of narrative discourse that are approximately parallel to the formal features of ordinary discourse. In Saussurian terms, the study of narrative poetics sets out to describe the system of features observable in narrative texts as Saussure set out to observe the systematic features (*la langue*) of ordinary oral discourse. Bal describes this as the development of descriptive “tools” which make possible insight in the “abstract narrative system.”¹⁰

This approach, Pratt argues, was slanted toward the study of certain written texts already recognized as literary. These strategies cannot work with oral narratives that are generally assumed to be non-literary because oral narrative

would have to be described in terms of a host of characteristics which stem from the context of utterance which is considered beyond the scope of formal analysis. Utilizing studies of oral narratives by William Labov she concludes: "His data make it impossible to attribute the aesthetic organization of prose fiction to 'literariness', but his methodology shows us what we can attribute it to: the nature of the speech situation in which the utterance occurs."¹¹ This similarity between natural narrative and literary narrative is due to the fact that "most of the features which poeticsians believed constituted the 'literariness' of novels are not 'literary' at all. They occur in novels not because they are novels (i.e., literature) but because they are members of some other more general category of speech acts."¹²

The pressing question to which this leads, of course, is what kind of global speech act is a likely candidate to fulfill this large role? To answer this question Pratt utilizes the work of speech-act philosopher J. L. Austin to provide a way of analyzing the context in which utterances are made, and the conventions which govern their form and reception. On this basis she is able to define the location of narrative in the context of the author/reader relationship and seeks to understand, in a broad sense, what occurs in an event of narration. In contrast to standard speech acts, such as asserting or representing, she characterizes an act of narration as "verbally displaying a state of affairs,"¹³ that is, transmitting a message which has a special relevance to the hearer that exceeds that of simple assertive or representative speech acts. This special relevance requires that the narratives "represent states of affairs that are held to be unusual, contrary to expectation, or otherwise problematic."¹⁴ This endows the narratives with the quality of "tellability" which "characterizes an important subclass of assertive or representative speech acts that includes natural narrative, an enormous proportion of conversation, and many if not all literary works." She terms this subclass of speech acts the "exclamatory assertion."¹⁵

Having defined the type of global speech act which gives rise to narrative, Pratt then proceeds to fill in the conventional literary context shared by authors and readers which make this type of speech act "felicitous" (i.e., effective). To do this she draws on a variety of sources. They extend from the conventional factors which shape the audience's willingness to enter into a one-way discourse with no opportunity to respond,¹⁶ to the assumption created in the reader by the "pre-selection and pre-paration" which the publication process engenders,¹⁷ to the "conversational maxims" of speech-act philosopher H. P. Grice which provide a means of analyzing the implications (or "implicatures" in Grice's terminology) of dialogue.¹⁸ With this array of conventions to define the external context of the narrative speech act, Pratt can then turn to the analysis of the speech acts internal to specific narratives.

Here we find a way of approaching narrative which finds significance not

merely in the referential content of the discourse, but in the speech act itself. J. L. Austin argued that utterances such as promises, vows, naming, etc., do not have meaning in the usual way; that is, they are not true or false in the referential sense. Yet they also cannot be viewed as nonsense. They are cases where “the issuing of an utterance is the performance of an action.”¹⁹ He wants to describe the significance of such speech acts in terms of their “force” rather than their meaning (understood as sense and reference). By force he means that, for example, a marriage vow, when uttered under the proper conventional circumstances (before an authorized person and in the authorized form, with the proper intentions by all parties) has the effect of marrying two persons. He terms the capacity of utterances to achieve an effect through conformity to conventions, “illocutionary force.”²⁰ The conventions or rules link the utterance to the situation of discourse and insure the “force” of the utterance.

Thus by determining the conventions which link narrative discourse to the situation of its origin, Pratt is able to determine the character of narrative in terms of its originating act rather than in terms of its referential content. In the case of Genesis 1:3 the force of this sentence (and the narrative of which it is a part) would arise from its “tellability.” A problem arises, however, with the application of this approach to such a passage as this.

A distinction has to be made at the outset between the act of narrating as evidenced in the narrative framework, and the utterance internal to the narrative. While few would dispute that Genesis 1:3 and the narrative of which it is a part could be considered an “exclamatory assertion” which is “tellable,” the specific sense in which it is tellable is difficult to determine because of the time gap between its original writing and the modern world. To attempt to determine this would lead away from the specific analysis of the narrative into a veritable abyss of uncertainties entailed with the reconstruction of the worldview of the original narrator (or narrators) and audience. Moreover, such a reconstruction would say very little about the modality of the relationship of the narrator’s discourse to the divine utterance – the critical question here.

In addition, the very concept of tellability is an objectification of an intersubjective process (to be explained in ch.2 below) which is far more fundamental to human life than a communicative convention.

If one applies speech-act theory to the specific utterance of the divine Voice within the “fictive” narrative world, numerous problems also arise. Pratt views the speech acts internal to works of imaginative literature as imitative speech acts; that is, they are speech acts in which their “real world” illocutionary force has been blocked by its fictionality. Aside from the question of the generic identity of Genesis 1, can the speech act in 1:3 be understood as an imitative command?

The core of the problem is seen by looking again at the sentence from Genesis 1: “And God said, ‘Let there be light’.”

Although in the few preceding verses information is provided to establish that the speaker, God, is also the creator of heaven and earth, and thus would presumably satisfy the “felicity” condition which requires that a performative sentence be uttered by a speaker in the proper, authoritative position to do so, the first and most important condition is not met:

There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances.²¹

But while the sentence might rely upon common knowledge among its readers of the procedure for issuing orders, the circumstances are beyond comprehension and the effect is anything but conventional. Under what circumstances governed by convention can one say these words were uttered by the divine Voice? And what convention can be said to govern the effect – “and there was light”?

To be sure, the recording of the immediate positive (obedient?) effect of the command shows a correspondence of the text with speech-act conventions, but the effect is itself highly unconventional. It is clear that the force of this utterance cannot be sufficiently grasped in terms of the correspondence of speech acts to conventional rules.

The central problem of speech-act theory which has carried over as well into the attempts to build a theory of literature upon it, is that there has not been an adequate theory of the “meaning” of illocutionary force. In Austin’s writing a distinction is repeatedly made *between* meaning and force. Meaning is understood primarily in terms of Fregeian sense relations and reference, that is, the meaning associated with what John Searle (Austin’s principle expositor) calls the propositional act.²² While Searle argues that no absolute distinction can be made in literal utterances between meaning and force, the way in which they remain in some kind of unity seems to be through “deep syntactic structure, stress, intonation-contour (and, in a written speech, punctuation).”²³

Jonathan Culler points out, however, that there are too many contextual factors which cannot be reduced to syntax and sign, and which even escape conscious intention: “Meaning is context bound, but context is boundless ... any attempt to codify context can always be grafted onto another context it sought to describe.”²⁴ This problem points to the dimensions of the subject – of the unconscious as an inescapable factor in the force of utterances. Since the problem of the subject is not opened by Austin and Searle, force still remains basically a heterogeneous factor which is somehow perceived in addition to the propositional content of sentences.²⁵ It is explicitly present as a verbal marker only in the case of first-person statements such as “I promise,” “I bet,” etc. Where such explicit markers are missing, and the theory is stretched to apply to language which is either not directly related to genuine

constitutive rules (such as is the case with “expositives” and “verdictives,” i.e., sentences with clearly propositional content),²⁶ or cases where the meaning may derive partly from an explicit grammatical elimination of reference to the speech event,²⁷ it has come under considerable criticism. So long as illocutionary force is presented as a quasi-objective entity produced by other objective factors such as conventional rules, then it will be difficult to prove its existence in the absence of established rules, or in the case of grammatical barriers which exclude speech acts from direct presence in the signifying relations of the sentence (the third-person form can itself be seen as such a barrier).²⁸

Although it is clear that Searle is attempting to overcome the radical bifurcation of language bequeathed by Saussure, the division of the speech act into force and meaning finally bears a close formal relation to Saussure’s division between synchrony and diachrony, and more particularly to his division of the synchronic realm into the quasi-diachronic syntagmatic and the associative dimensions. The propositional features of sentences consisting of sense and reference correspond to the associative (psychological) and referential relations of Saussure’s conceptual “signified.” The force factor, which is relative in some cases to the grammatical case of the verb (imperative, interrogative, etc.) and in all cases to the constitutive rules rooted in the collective consciousness of the society, corresponds to the syntagmatic, grammatical axis of Saussure (which he also recognized as an abstract form concretely rooted in the particularities of individual societies and their language). This explains why Searle said that the rules belonged to *langue* and not *parole*.²⁹

The reason thus becomes apparent as to why speech-act theory, as Austin and Searle have formulated it, can shed little light on a sentence such as (4) (He laughed and said, “Let there be light.”). Too many of the vital conditions of “felicity” are not present to account for the “force” factor. The illocutionary dimension of language can only be established on the basis of a theory which goes beyond the dichotomies of formal thought to unite the dimensions of force and meaning.

If Saussurian linguistics and its derivative narrative theories cannot adequately account for the significance of the act of speech in direct discourse, are there other language theories which might provide a better foundation?

As early as 1958, Continental linguist Eugenio Coseriu published a thoroughgoing refutation of the central concepts of Saussurian linguistics in his book *Synchronie, Diachronie und Geschichte*.³⁰ In this book Coseriu brilliantly shows the superficiality of Saussure’s distinction between diachronic events of speech production and the synchronic language system. In Coseriu’s view, language changes, whether at the level of sound, grammar, or concepts, present no problem at all for communication. “Certainly,” he writes,