

1 FICTIONALITY AND FIELDS OF REFERENCE

A Theoretical Framework

PREFACE

1. Works of literature convey meanings and meaning complexes as well as rhetorical and aesthetic import; they require of the reader some kind of “experience” or “concretization” and call for interpretations and elucidations. However, the experience and interpretation of literary texts are not a matter of language alone: language in literature can be understood only as embedded in fictional or projected constructs—situations, characters, ideas—no matter how partial or unstable these may be. On the other hand, the fictional constructs in literary texts—the situations, characters and ideas—are mediated through language alone. This is one basic inherent circularity of works of literary art.

It is not necessarily a logical “vicious circle,” but can be understood as a detailed interdependence between the two domains: language and fictional constructs. We cannot simply build up or deduce the one from the other “objectively,” as it were. An interpretation involves making certain hypotheses on aspects of this interdependence.

2. Let us take a simple example. The sentence “Everything changes” appears on the first page of Joyce’s short story “Eveline.” What does it mean? Can we understand it from the language itself, from the two simple English

For a different description of the theory, with additional sections on the reader, the concept of junction, and the hierarchy of patterns, see Chapter 8.

words? Does it convey the same thing as a similar idea uttered by an ancient Greek philosopher? What is the scope of the word “everything” and how serious is the commitment behind this assertion?

Indeed, this sentence may refer to permanent changes in nature, the destruction and recomposition of matter; or changes in society; or to biological changes in the lives of people.

The immediate context is:

That was a long time ago; she [Eveline] and her brothers and sisters were all grown up; her mother was dead. Tizzie Dunn was dead, too, and the Waters had gone back to England. Everything changes. Now she was going to go away like the others, to leave her home.

Here, the sentence “Everything changes” can be taken as a generalization of the facts stated in the neighboring sentences. It may then either apply in a general way, as a characteristic of life: people move, grow up, die, leave home; or, in a more limited scope, as a summary of the destinies of the people around our character, Eveline. If we enlarge the context somewhat to other things described in the opening of the story, we may assume that “everything changes” applies to Dublin and its traditional world: a man from Belfast “came” and built new houses, foreign workers appeared, red brick houses were built, etc. Furthermore, Eveline’s own leaving home is seen as a deduction from a general principle, and the story itself becomes an example of it. (The cover of the Penguin Modern Classics edition of *Dubliners* says: “The incidents he [Joyce] relates are small in themselves but of universal interest.”)

In any case, to understand what the sentence conveys, we must consider the fictional “reality” to which it is applied, and the scope of things it may cover. Indeed, as we saw above, we may apply it in turn to several frames of reference, in the fictional as well as in the real world, as part of interpretation hypotheses.

When we read the whole story, however, it turns out that Eveline does not leave. She, who tried to escape the destiny of her mother, “becomes” her mother. In her life, at least, *nothing changes*. To the extent that Eveline can be seen as representative, as some readers would see her, the story epitomizes in Joyce’s words, the “paralysis” of Ireland. Indeed, we may assign the interpretive construct “nothing changes” to the position of the narrator (or above him, to the implied author). This conclusion—nothing changes—is not stated in explicit language but results from a summary of the plot. Such a summary,

however, contradicts the statement “everything changes” as understood before. To resolve the contradiction, the assertion “Everything changes” must be limited to Eveline’s own point of view and to the circumstances, the time and place when it was uttered (or experienced), i.e., when Eveline thought that she, too, was leaving. This statement underlines the discrepancy between Eveline’s understanding of her situation and the real state of affairs; or between her youthful “revolt” and its defeat. It represents the ironic distance between the constant *present* time of the character’s experience—moving with the story and ignorant of the future—into which the reader is temporarily drawn, and the *past* of the narrator’s perspective, which the reader grasps fully only at the end.

This dependence of language on “reality constructs” (which, in turn, are built from elements of language), as seen in such a simple utterance, is even more crucial in the “difficult” and figurative language of poetry, where words may be wide open for ambiguities and must be limited by fictional constructs (see Chapter 2 on metaphor).

3. This is not the only basic circularity, or interdependence, inherent in literary texts. Circularity in a logical argument is considered a negative feature. But in real life and in literary texts it is essential to human existence and to our understanding. Every person depends on his/her circumstances and shapes them at the same time. Ideas and characters, psychology and history are interdependent. Interaction theory of metaphor is based on this principle.

A similar circularity can be found between any part of the text and its *Regulating Principles*, such as irony, point of view, genre, etc.: we construct such attitudes from the text and then read the text as directed by them. Thus, a satirical text constructs the satirical tone and then reads the text in a satirical light.

Similar, though more diffuse, is the very difficult relation of “representation” between literary fictions and the external “world” upon which they are modeled on the one hand, and which they represent as typical, deviating, critical, etc., on the other.

Such interdependencies may occur in every aspect of literary works. A meter is constructed from certain distributions of syllables and stresses in verse and, in turn, imposes a certain reading on the verse lines. A plot is constructed from several events presented in the text and then, in turn, imposes certain readings, selections and interpolations of other events, often not explicitly stated in the text. Hypotheses of interpretation involve hypotheses on such interdependencies and may be refuted when one of the terms is exposed as wrong.

I shall not deal with the other kinds in this paper, but merely point out that ours is not an isolated case. Indeed, interdependence between constructs is at the very heart of representations of reality and of works of literature.

To return to our starting point: the problem of fiction and “fictional worlds” cannot be isolated from the problem of language in literature.

WHAT IS FICTIONALITY?

4. On the face of it, fiction can be described as language offering propositions which make no claim for truth values in the real world. Thus, the philosopher John Searle explains “fictional” utterances as opposed to “serious” utterances in the same way as he analyzes the opposition “metaphorical” versus “literal.” According to him, “fictional utterances are ‘nonserious.’” “For example, if the author of a novel tells us that it is raining outside he isn’t seriously committed to the view that it is at the time of writing actually raining outside. It is in this sense that fiction is nonserious” (Searle, p. 60).

Searle’s analysis makes the important link between fictionality and commitment to the truth of a proposition. Fictional worlds are presented to us in language, often in the form of propositions. Yet somehow those propositions are not really “true.” In this respect, he joins a venerable tradition, including such concepts as I. A. Richards’s “pseudo-statements” and Roman Ingarden’s “Quasi-Urteile.”¹

In the sense of his analysis, Searle is right: the novelist, indeed, makes no commitment that it is actually raining “outside” (wherever he is) “*at the time of writing*” (my emphasis—B.H.). But neither do we if we talk about an *absent frame of reference* in real life. The problem is that the truth value of propositions can be judged only within specific *frames of reference* to which they are—or may be—related. A person using the expression “it is raining outside”—in a novel or in a letter—may refer to his immediate surroundings, to the fictional situation in the novel, or to any other frame or reference that he recalls or tells about (such as India or the town where his mother lives).

5. In the case of a work of literature, we are not dealing with isolated sentences or propositions, but with an *Internal Field of Reference* (IFR)—a whole

1 The standard English translation of this term, “quasi-judgments,” should be taken not in an evaluative sense but as equivalent to “quasi-propositions.” Urteil, in German logic of the early 20th century means “proposition” or “assertion.”

network of interrelated referents of various kinds: characters, events, situations, ideas, dialogues, etc.² The language of the text contributes to the establishment of this Internal Field and refers to it at the same time. For example, in the passage from Joyce's "Eveline" quoted above, an assertion is made: "Tizzie Dunn was dead." The text *projects* a new referent, not mentioned before, the person "Tizzie Dunn," and, at the same time, refers to it, asserting her/his death.³

Within this Internal Field of Reference, we judge the truth values of propositions using whatever other information for the same Field that we may have. This holds both for assertions made in the language of the text itself and for descriptions emerging from readings and interpretations of the text as in the case of "nothing changes" in the example above, which is not a statement in the text but a necessary construct in its interpretation.

There is no interpretation of the "meaning" of a text without such constructs, just from the language of the sentences, as it were.

6. Let us define our terms.

A *referent* (*r*) here is anything we can refer to or talk about, may it be a real object, an event, an idea, or a fictional, non-existent object.

A *frame of reference* (*fr*) is any semantic continuum of two or more referents that we may speak about: it may be a scene in time and space, a character, an ideology, a mood, a state of affairs, a plot, a policy, a theory, psychoanalysis, the wind in the autumn trees, the mountains of Corsica, etc. We know things in the world through such frames rather than through logical arguments. This mode of knowledge may be called *situational cognition*, which is the mode of operation of literature.

Any referent named in one word can be opened up into a frame of reference, if further details are given.

We may distinguish *frs* of various kinds. An *fr* may be *present* to the interlocutors or *absent*; if absent, it may be *known* or *unknown* to one or both of them. It can be *real*, a concrete scene in time and space, or *ideal*, a theory or

2 The argument here is based on my theory of "Integrational Semantics" (see Chapter 3 below).

3 A few lines earlier in the story, the name Dunn is mentioned for the first time: "the Dunns" are listed among "the children of the avenue" who "used to play together in that field." The reader may conjecture that Tizzie Dunn is one of those children or their mother (which would parallel her own mother's death mentioned in the same sentence). No decisive evidence for or against such an assumption can be made from the text.

an abstract concept (e.g., “existence” or “triangle”). An *fr* can have a unique description in time or be iterative (“they used to play”), or have any other undefined or unusual reality-relations; it may be a typical situation (“autumn”) or highly individualized (“the crazy party in my garden on the 6th of October last year”). It may be existing in reality, hypothetical or fictional; its ontological status is unimportant for semantics—it is anything that we can speak *about* or project in our imagination (an “intentional” object in Husserl’s sense).

The various kinds of *frs* pose different problems for the theory of understanding. Thus, in a *present fr* (sitting in a room), some details of information will be supplied by the non-verbal situation and need not be spelled out in words, while in an *absent fr* many details are left out. In a *known fr* we may appeal to the hearer’s knowledge or memory (“it is like in the picture on the left wall in my study,” or: “it’s Vietnam all over again”), whereas in a story we have to construct the missing parts or leave them indeterminate.⁴ The problem of projecting a fictional world in literature depends on this contradiction. The story “Eveline” is largely presented from her point of view, but she sits inside the *fr* and doesn’t need to explain what she observes, whereas the reader is outside that *fr* and somehow needs to know various facts: how old is she, what is her last name, her profession, etc. The writer has to find special ways to fill in such information. In other words, in the techniques of showing, the character is in a *present fr* while the reader observes an *absent fr*.

7. A *Field of Reference* (FR) is a large, multidimensional, hypothetical universe, containing a multitude of cotextual, crisscrossing and interrelated *frs* of various kinds. We may isolate such Fields as the USA, the Napoleonic Wars, Philosophy, the “world” of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, the world today, cultural memory, etc. I use the term “isolate” advisedly, since a Field or a frame in this conception are not fixed ontological entities; their delimitation depends on strategies of reference, understanding and explanation. Any *fr*, e.g. “a party” in *War and Peace* (see my analysis in Chapter 8) can be composed of many smaller *frs* (characters, groups, dancing, drinks, etc.).

There is no essential difference between a large *fr* and an FR. Both project a hypothetical continuum, only parts of which are given in the text. There can

4 For some further descriptions of *frs*, see Chapter 2 below on poetic “Metaphor and Frames of Reference,” especially sections 4 and 5.

be a whole hierarchy of frames within frames. An *fr* evoked in an utterance or a text is represented by several *rs* and never in full, while an FR is represented by several *frs* and never in full. Thus, in a novel, the hero may appear at age two and then at age nineteen—we fill in the rest, if needed. The only difference lies in the convenience of understanding things within scenes or problems or continuities, that are all included in a larger, hypothetical whole.

When reading a newspaper, we get information about a large number of heterogeneous, disconnected *frs*: segments in the economy, politics, trade unions, a literary prize, gossip, a description of an accident, predictions about the next day's weather, etc.—all in one page. We do not perceive them as isolated, disconnected objects, floating in a void, but rather as spots on a vast map, a Field of Reference, which has a hypothetical (though fuzzy) scope and coherence: “the World,” “the USA,” “Modernity,” etc.

We know we shall never be able to connect all these *frs* in their full continuity, fill up the full map of, say, “the USA today,” but we do know some *frs* on that map and have notions about some relations between them, and we know, in principle, how to go about finding out about other facts and connections or filling in missing information: by reading *The New York Times* or Norman Mailer, studying economics or geography, referring to an encyclopedia, talking to experts, etc. There is a network of relations there, the precise nature of which is not fully and explicitly known to anyone, but various approximations, generalizations, theories, combinations of those, as well as contours and concrete examples make the nature of the network clear to an extent that we think we know what it is and how to find out more about it.

A Field of a different kind is a science, such as Physics or Sociology. Here, too, we have to confront huge conglomerates of a great variety of theories, concrete studies, experiments—spots and approximations on a large map which is neither fully presented nor evenly filled in.

8. The unique feature of a work of literature is that it projects its own *Internal Field of Reference* (IFR) while referring to it at the same time; to use a well-known simile: a literary text builds the boat under its own feet while rowing in the sea. The “outside” in Searle's example is not an actual place but a frame of reference projected in the novel (the outside in relation to a house) at the same time as something is being predicated about it (that it rains there).

In other words, a work of literature projects its own “reality” while simultaneously describing it. The problematic nature of various “existents” in

that “reality” (characters, objects, events) is closely related to the contradictory sources of our informants and information about it, the indeterminacies and gaps in the presentation, and the changing faces of language in shifting contexts.

Hence, when the author of a novel tells us that it is raining outside, we must assume that he or his character *is*, indeed, “seriously committed to the view that it is [. . .] actually raining outside” (Searle), though not, as Searle suggested, “at the time of writing,” but *in the frame of reference he is speaking about*. On the other hand, he is not committed to the view that this *fr* itself exists in the real world. Thus, in a novel, as in the real world, if during that rain a visitor arrives, he or she must either be wet or was not really outside, or we must assume that the narrator or his character was either mistaken in his assertion, or is lying on purpose, or is altogether an “unreliable narrator.”

Needless to say, an author rarely tells us anything directly, he does it through various speakers and narrators, who are committed to the same truth within the Internal Field of Reference or are exposed as being ironical, ignorant, lying, or unreliable.

9. In this respect, the use of language in a literary text is basically similar to that in real life situations which are outside our direct experience at the time of communication (*absent frs*): we cannot judge the truth value of utterances about them by means of direct observation; we can only confront them with other utterances—or images and other non-verbal evidence—relating to the same frames of reference. We can combine them, oppose them or subsume them under other *frs* that we do know. We have at our disposal not an “objective” world but only some information about it, mediated through different sources, speakers, texts, ideologies and points of view as well as views acquired or formed in our own life experience. Furthermore, this information is partial and spotty, just a projection of a world rather than a real object. The conclusion, therefore, may be true within our set of beliefs or it may be contradictory, unresolved, changing, biased and so on.

In a real-life situation, one assumes that, ideally, there are ways of finding evidence and ascertaining what the real state of affairs was (by means of travel, police investigation, newspaper reports, science, etc.), since the referents supposedly do exist “out there.” In a literary text, for referents which are unique to its Internal FR (specific fictional characters, meetings, dialogues, lunches, etc.), there are no such ways outside of the given text because those

referents did not exist outside of it. We learn about them, however, in much the same way as we learn about any *absent frs* in the real world: by means of further verbal and non-verbal evidence about them, subsuming them under known categories and models and judging the reliability of the informants. Thus, in Gore Vidal's historical novel *Lincoln*, Lincoln and many characters were historical figures, they existed in External Fields of Reference, in the real world, but their food at breakfast and their dialogues as presented in the novel are fictional. Still, we can try to compare those internal *frs* to what we know about the mores of breakfast of that time.

It is often impossible to resolve the various partial and contradictory pieces of evidence and decide what "really" happened in a novel, what "really" the character's motivations were; or figure out the details of an interpersonal situation in a poem, even though the poem may carry an experience of, or a response to, that situation. The author's ideology, his views on any specific issue or the "meaning" of the whole work can often not be reduced to one sentence but must be constructed as a cluster of different, shifting, even contradictory, positions, opinions, observations, possibilities.

10. In the understanding of language in the world, the senses of the words and meanings of sentences are related to specific referents within specific frames of reference and, in turn, are influenced by them. The frame of reference, to which a text or its understander relates the words, provides information both for judging the truth value of any utterance and for specifying, qualifying, metaphorizing or otherwise modifying their meanings.

If I am mistaken or lie or exaggerate, other observations of the *fr* may expose it. If I shout: "close that gate," and the referent in the *present fr*, to which I point, is not a gate but a door, the hearer will reunderstand the word "gate" to mean "door" and then will have to interpret my words to mean: "for me, at this moment, under these circumstances, that door is like a gate"; which may mean: "this door is as wide open as a gate," or: "too many people are flooding in," or "shut the door because of the noise." In the case of the rain outside, if the frame of reference is in the tropics, we may assume that the rain is strong; if it is during a drought, the utterance will convey relief and hope; if we know that there is no rain, we may understand it as a metaphorical expression, etc. When the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai starts a poem with the words: "Do not accept these rains that come too late," we have a background of a dry country, unanswered prayers for rain, etc. Indeed, the poem enlarges this *fr* into a desert ("Make your pain an image of the desert"), i.e., the poet is fully

committed to the rain and its importance in his constructed *fr*. And then he turns the whole *fr* “desert” into a metaphor for another *fr*: the pain or human suffering or resistance to the evils of history. A person cannot really accept or not accept the rain—which forces the reader to see it as a metaphor for human defiance. Thus, the precise meaning of the words is dependent on the *frs* to which they refer.

Yehuda Amichai

Do Not Accept

Do not accept these rains that come too late.
Better to linger. Make your pain
An image of the desert. Say it's said
And do not look to the west.⁵ Refuse

To surrender. Try this year too
To live alone in the long summer,
Eat your drying bread, refrain
From tears. And do not learn from

Experience. Take as an example my youth,
My return late at night, what has been written
In the rain of yesteryear. It makes no difference
Now. See your events as my events.
Everything will be as before: Abraham will again
Be Abram. Sarah will be Sarai.

(Amichai, p. 59)

11. From the opposite direction, the meaning of utterances is influenced by the *Regulating Principles* that dominate a text or parts of it. The meanings of words and sentences are influenced by the tone of voice, point of view, genre, political propaganda, circumstances of utterance, stance toward an audience, etc. The authority behind the text—i.e., the speaker or position from which the text is presented, the attitude and kind of text chosen—guides our understanding, tells us “in what sense” (serious, ironic, etc.) to take the senses of the words.

5 In Israel, the rain comes from the West, the Mediterranean.