

## Review of *Narrative* by Paul Cobley

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Review of *Narrative* by Paul Cobley. London, New York: Routledge, 2014.

Paul Cobley has published a new edition of his *Narrative* in the Routledge New Critical Idiom series. Like the first edition, the new book offers an interesting and highly readable introduction to the topic, presenting both historically oriented chapters on the evolution of narrative from a broad phylogenetic point of view or in the Hebraic and Hellenic traditions as well as a very well argued synoptic chapter on the current state of the art in narrative studies, just to mention a few approaches among many interesting ones. The short case studies and examples analysed represent different kinds of texts ranging from canonical literary works to film and visual arts. The book also includes a very useful glossary. This undoubtedly enhances the book's use-value among students and helps specialists to glimpse interesting vistas beyond the narrow disciplinary boundaries, even though the selection of examples is very much centred on the English-speaking world.

Narrative is easily associated with narratology, this term in turn bringing into mind illustrious names such as Gérard Genette, Mieke Bal, Shlomit Rimmon-Kenan, Algirdas Julien Greimas and Vladimir Propp. Their books were familiar reading for those who entered the humanities or the social studies in the 1980s or 1990s. Cobley, however, distances himself from this tradition. It is difficult to find similarities between his book and, let's say, Rimmon-Kenan's *Narrative Fiction* from 1983 or even the 1997 second edition of Bal's *Narratology*. Obviously, the books share some basic notions and distinctions (story, plot, narrator, different levels, etc.), but the basic approach and the intentions are different. If the classic textbooks seek to define and explain technical terminology, Cobley is more interested in knowing what narratives do. The structural framework and focus are replaced by dynamical and dialogical ones. "The most 'simple' of stories", the author writes, "is embedded in a network of relations" (2), and in this network, it represents "the world for a purpose" (204), such as the affirmation and re-affirmation of identity. From this perspective, technical questions are less pressing than more holistic considerations.

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Cobley discusses the evolution and the uses of narrative in a rough chronological order that begins with the oral traditions and moves via Plato and Aristotle, and through the Middle Ages towards the present, dedicating specific chapters to realism, "Beyond realism", modernism and postmodernism. This corresponds to the increasing complexity in the narratives analysed, postmodernism answering to a developing technological environment, and to an increased awareness of the problematic aspects of conventions of representation. Here, Cobley makes reference to Eco's famous example of how to say "I love you" by citing Barbara Cartland. This could be discussed with the notion of 'exaptation' that Cobley uses to defend his view of narrative against vulgarizing Darwinian interpretations. Narratives may be used to enhance fitness in specific situations, although they were not built for that purpose by natural selection. This process of co-opting or upgrading is exaptation. Likewise, Cartland's prose may help a desperate postmodern lover to express his emotions, even though it was not written with that possibility in mind. In defending narrative as exaptation, Cobley is cleverly criticizing the reductionist (and normative) socio-biological claims on narratives, while at the same time defending the social utility of the latter.

The discussion is interesting and convincing for the most part, although it could be denser in some occasions; for example, the introduction to radio as media seems too long. For the readers of this journal, Cobley's use of semiotic theories is of primary interest. Such references can be divided into three categories: Uexküll; Bakhtin and Peirce; Saussure. Cobley discusses Uexküll shortly at the end of his book in a sub-chapter dedicated to "Narrative modelling". This does not provide new information, but the link he makes between Uexküll's notion of *umwelt* and research on proto-narrative and proto-artistic structuring in neonate-adult communication is very interesting, pointing to the importance of the socio-cultural fabric of semiosis in the emergence of narrative.

The references to Bakhtin and Peirce share the purpose of providing a dynamical and dialogic frame for Cobley's discussion. The former serve the purpose well, although more could perhaps have been said about Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and his fundamental works on the history of the novel. Concerning Peirce, I must say that, although I am profoundly in favour of works of this type (and glad that Cobley mentions Sheriff's *The Fate of Meaning*, yet wondering why Dines Johansen's *Literary Discourse* is absent), I find here the problem that burdens quite many other efforts to make Peirce's work meaningful beyond its original field, philosophy. Peirce's theory and notions are situated at such a general level that it is difficult to see how *exactly* they inform the analysis of specific narratives. Characteristically, Cobley changes level when he switches from narrative to Peirce's semiotics and back, leaving the transitions sometimes unexplained. I am not convinced by Cobley's characterization

of “the connection of a hero and ‘goodness’” in a film as “general law” (208) of the kind Peirce called with the notion of ‘legisign’. A hero can certainly symbolize ‘goodness’, but calling this connection a general law is either too short or misleading. A more careful discussion on what Peirce meant by ‘law’ and what is commonly understood by symbolization would have been necessary here.

Also, I am not totally satisfied with some of Copley’s formulations. This concerns the treatment of Saussurean semiotics as well. For example, the author argues that “the Peircean sign consists of an inbuilt property for causality” (207), exemplified by a pointing finger, whereas “there is no sense of causality” (206) in the Saussurean sign. I think the question is much more complicated: the finger has to be used to point, otherwise the “inbuilt property” (if it exists) is ineffective; on the other hand, signs conceptualized with Saussure’s theory can also be used to point and give orders and thus to suggest causality at least. Copley is keen to make the distinction between his approach and the structural tradition on several occasions, and in doing this, he tends to give a simplified picture of structuralism. This is a pity, since the differential dimension of the sign system is perfectly compatible with Peircean semiotics, if one accepts bracketing Saussure’s ideas on arbitrariness. Signs make distinctions, and these distinctions may have a systematic character. This is a vital dimension of semi-osis, and the structural tradition still offers useful notions for analysing it, provided that they are translated into the pragmatic frame theory. There’s room for exaptation here also.

In general, Copley’s take on the history of semiotics and the study of narrative is synoptic, neglecting the diachronic dimension. Claude Lévi-Strauss’s work on the structural analysis of myths curiously appears as contemporary or even posterior to Claude Bremond and A. J. Greimas (32). The question here is not only one of the chronology of events, but of the way we construct the history of the discipline. In my opinion, it would be more interesting to try to understand in what sense the Structural endeavour has made current research possible, be it through exaggeration or dead-ends (that we could explain with Popper). But this would necessitate a more developed historical consciousness than one can probably demand from a textbook. Copley argues convincingly why narrative is important, how we should understand it, how it has evolved, and what the most promising approaches in the field are right now. This is an important achievement. The book will undoubtedly serve many students and researchers interested in these topics.