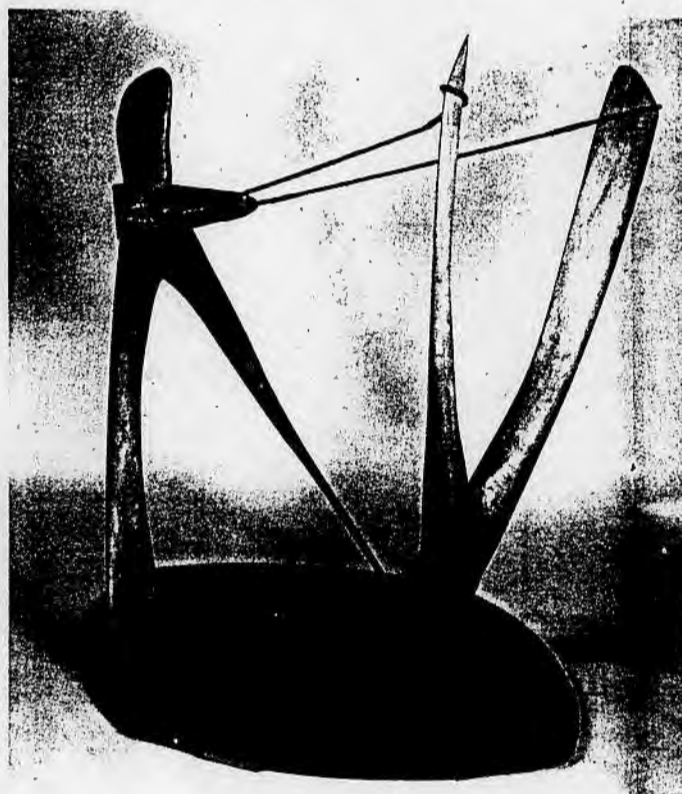


Narratology

INTRODUCTION TO THE THEORY OF NARRATIVE

SECOND EDITION



MIEKE BAL

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Cover illustration: Mary Longman, *Co-Dependents*, 1966 (cottonwood, leather, copper, rope, paint, wood). Photography by Sharon. From Gerald McMaster, *Mary Longman: Traces* (Kamloops Art Gallery, 1996)

ISBN 0-8020-7806-0



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ing it was precisely what I proceeded to do. I read the text even though my reading was constantly interrupted by the painting that was looking back at me, nagging that I ought to look at it first.

The single narrator (CN) tells the story of himself in the voice of a six-year-old boy: the homey, familial situation, the loving mother who taught her children to make decorations and yet worried when the boy caught on too eagerly and too well. The hand of the allegorical figure in the embedded painting, also quite motherly, also teaching art to the putti/children she is portraying, casts a shadow – just as Boucher's painting casts a shadow on Aptekar's painting, and the letters of the glass plate cast theirs, the shadow of the autobiography that talks about another painter's hands, behind which the boy is hiding.

In this painting (figure 2), the masterpiece from the past is quoted and thus appropriated in a work that affirms its place in the present; the image is overlaid by words; and the words enhance a story of subjectivity, the torment of a subject in relation to the objects he saw and craved to make.

This work emblemizes the importance of narrative structure in many ways: it posits a child narrator in the linguistic text, an allegorical figure as a CN narrator in the quoted Boucher copy, an embedded narrator who appears as a postmodern adult narrator who knows 'his' Boucher but who stands outside it, in the painted work that 'quotes' the Boucher, and a mixed-media EN narrator in the embedding text of the work as a whole. The question of embedding is complicated by the obvious heterogeneity of the discourses deployed, including the different media. The question of the relation between levels of narration can help us to understand this painting. Is there a degree of mirroring going on between the linguistic and the painted narrative, and between the overall work and the quoted Boucher?

The text sandblasted on the glass plates reads as follows:

I'm six years old and hiding behind my hands. 'The Evil Eye's gonna get you!' my big sister shrieks. 'It can see-e-e you!' Of course I have to look.

After supper I watch snowflakes fall and make the street slippery. It's Saturday. I'm waiting at the kitchen table while Mom helps Dad get dressed for a Bar Mitzvah he's got tonight. He plays cornet in a band. After he drives off, she teaches us to make hanukkah decorations with glitter and glue and colored cellophane. She used to be an Art Teacher. We tape them to the window like Jewish stained glass. I have a knack for it, but my mother seems worried. I see it in her eye.

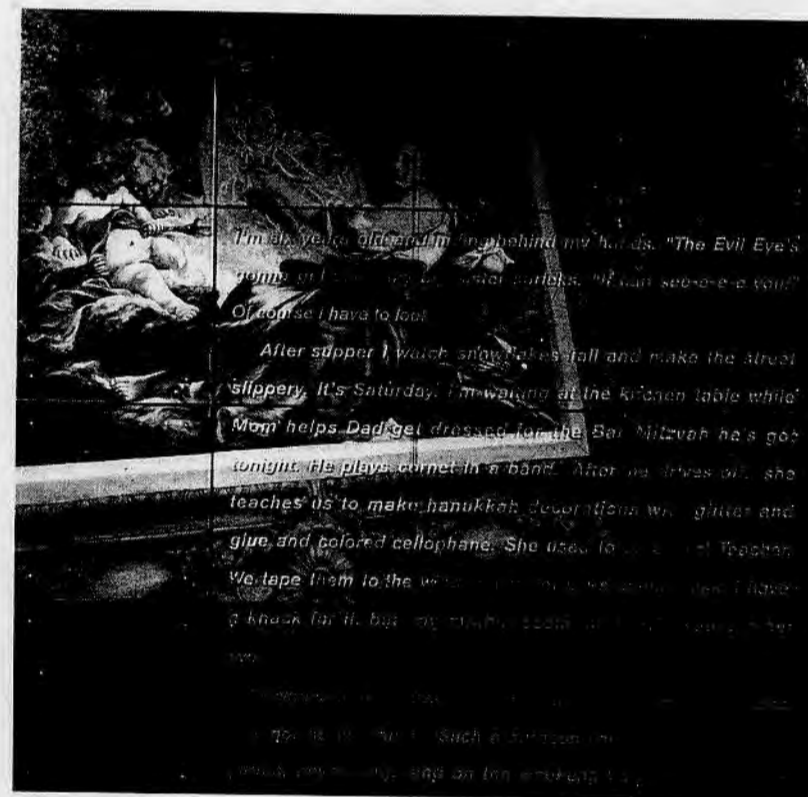


Figure 2

'Keynahora,' she says in Yiddish, meaning the Evil Eye should only not be watching. 'Such a surgeon you'll make with those hands, keynahora, and on the weekend you can be artistic.'

This story, and the painting of which it is a part, will travel along in the next chapters, too, whose contents are hinted at by some of the concepts I use here. This story is a short study in hands, and a text 'about' (fabula) seeing and not seeing, and seeing differently and historically. Written in the present tense, the text vividly pictures the little boy who still believes one can hide behind one's hands. The homey scene is depicted

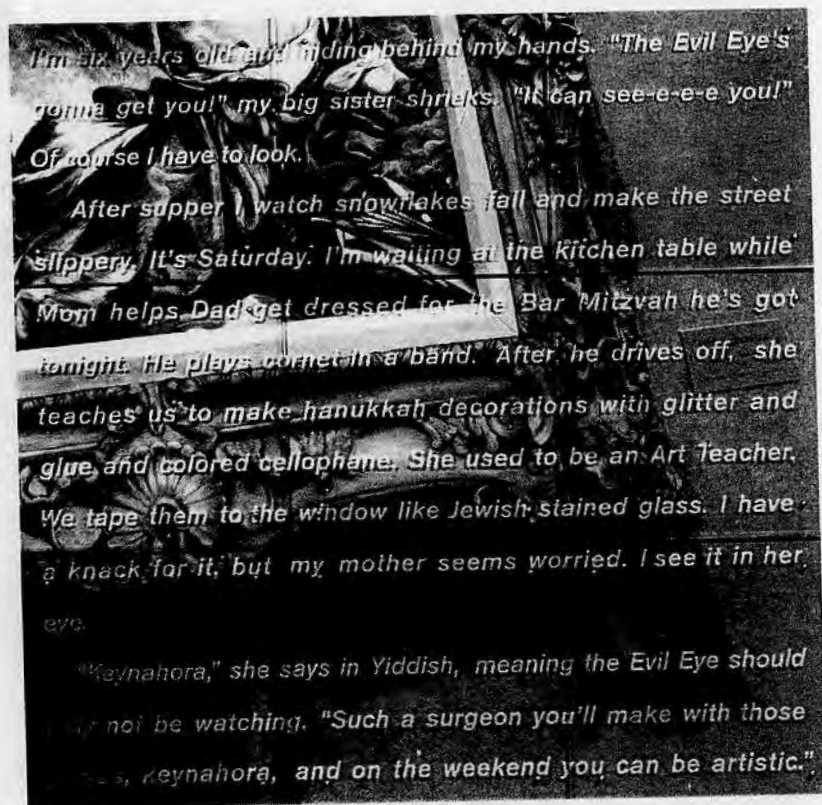


Figure 3

with an admirable scarcity of words that remain close to the vocabulary and style of the child protagonist who believes in the power of the Evil Eye, so that the narrator can be identified with this boy. Yet the unease when he 'sees' (in the past) worry in his mother's eye is clearly interpreted (also) in the present of the adult man who became a professional painter in opposition to his mother.

'I see' is an act of vision that is not predicated upon distance and mastery but on contact and mutuality. In the present tense, the phrase evokes an act of seeing (fabula) situated in the past, and burdened with a past. The child has removed his hands from before his eyes, he hides no more. But his hands remain a bone of contention. The shadow (figure

3) cast by the allegorical painter in the Boucher is reflected in the child's mother, whose ambitions for her son do not match his desire. Here, the embedded painting begins to show its hand as a mirror-text.

Nor is this visual confrontation simply autobiographical, an anecdote from the domain of pure subjectivity, irrelevant for the public. The primary narrator has made sure his readers can share parts of his ideological space and know others. The absent father whose departure – to go and earn the family's bread – made possible the idyllic togetherness of mother and children in which the son's gift stands out: most of the readers of this work know that situation, its seductions and its drawbacks, by experience or lack of it, in the past or in the present. The ironic capitalizing of 'She used to be an Art Teacher,' which involves the reflection of the adult writer, fills the mother's worried eye with a double past. The confrontation that is so subtly building up is not just one between dominating parent and powerless child, but feeds on the mother's own sacrifice of a career similar to and continuous with what she rejects for her child. And that career is precisely mirrored in the quoted Boucher. Again, this exceeds the pure subjectivity of individual experience.

The reference to Yiddish in the embedded text spoken by the mother, as an index of European Jewry, more culturally specific than the predicaments of the nuclear family, turns this autobiography into an auto-history that explains and justifies, while making it the more painful, the mother's wish that her son make a career that will make him less vulnerable in the world.

The hand, so central in this very short story, the hand that hides and points, becomes a sign for what the son can do, won't do, and desires to do. It points to the future already prefigured by the other version of the mother, the Art Teacher in Boucher's painting, who points to the child she is depicting. Thus the child, in spite of his mother's worried resistance, is an artist-to-be, and as such also his mother's creation, and both the story and the painting pay homage to that continuity.

Although Boucher's painting is usually not considered as a narrative, I would like to make the case that, by Aptekar's intervention, it gains narrative momentum. This analysis is not a literary appropriation of visual art but a truly pictorial narratology, which does full justice to the visual aspects of the work. Starting from the back, it is noticeable that the painter-narrator has enhanced, just like Borges, the fact that even totally faithful copies must differ from their original. The painting's multi-layered structure begins with nuances. The panels covered by the copy of Boucher's *Allegory*, including its elaborate frame, each have a slightly different tone. This variation in tone is not continued on the

parts beyond the frame. It suggests, then, that the meticulous copy of the older painting, done in an illusionistically faithful mode, nevertheless is 'just' a fiction. This self-reflexive disillusioning – a visual meta-narrative comment from the primary narrator – in the layer that *supports* the painting is also present in the reversal of the model. The Boucher has been copied in mirroring symmetry. This not only exposes the copy as 'just' a copy but also suggests a reading of the embedded narrative as a mirror-text. By these two gestures of self-exposure, the narrator can be said to 'appropriate' the older work, in the mode of many postmodernist artists, but to do so with self-irony and subtle emphasis on that gesture. This alone sketches him in as much older than the boy narrator of the text panel.

There is yet another indication that this text is best read as a mirror-text. The predominant colour of the painting is blue: the blue of Boucher's clouds, and the different tone of blue of the historicizing wallpaper on which, supposedly, in a realistic illusion, the Boucher is hung. The constructedness of the narrative is also emphasized by the fact that only a portion of the Boucher is copied. The slight cropping of the upper left edges – due to the perspectival adaptations of the reversal – just like the reversal and the variation in background tone, all point to the same problematic.

But then, the blue wallpaper with whitish flowers on it presents an artificial version of the 'natural' clouds in the Boucher. It is as if the primary narrator, the later artist who can only 'reflect' – mirror – older art, is at least not fooling himself about the natural quality of his clouds. Doubly historicizing, by the style of the wallpaper and the reference to art-historical clouds, the postmodern anti-illusionism of the painting is self-conscious and, in its self-awareness, also emulating the Boucher, of which it is a 'wilful misreading.'

There is also a lot of blue in the baroque draperies, like clouds made of fabric, in particular the woman figure's dress. Blue, then, is the link between the elements that can only be separated through time, history, geography, and space. The woman who – in art history's past of Boucher – allegorized the Art of Painting, alias the – past – Art Teacher, is pointing, and thus, narratively incorporated. Her hand points to the children yearning to learn to paint – or is it the brush, that sixth finger? But then, the finger points at the re-presentation of the child in the painting in the painting. Definitely, 'pointing' is the crucial object being mirrored. And this pointing hand casts a shadow – on the re-presented child.

The frame, itself a narrativizing element that both signifies and under-

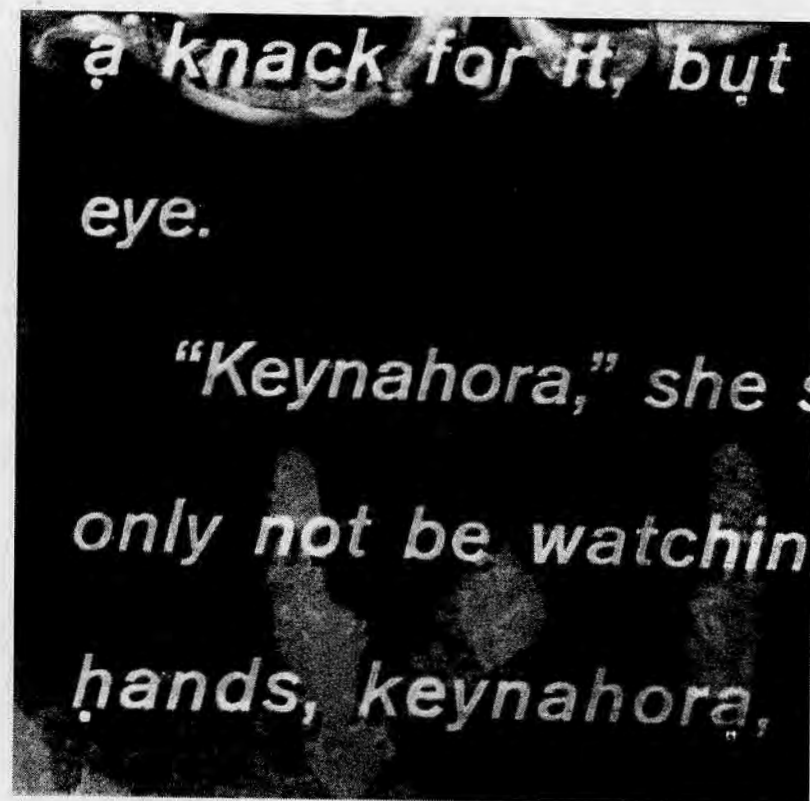


Figure 4

mines the boundary it is supposed to *be*, due to its historicizing exuberance drips off the wallpaper up to and beyond the edge of the entire painting. There is no escape from that shadow (figure 4). The shadow takes strange, uncanny shapes: of bats, hanging upside down as bats are wont to do, and scaring little children; spooky shapes, and then lighter spots looking like footsteps – another pointer.

There is another pointing, narrativizing thing in this work. Inside the Boucher but in the lower-left corner (right in the copy, left in the original) where painting and writing overlap most densely, behind the Art Teacher's back, rests a bunch of paint brushes. These brushes point outward, into the wallpaper where the painter-narrator stands alone, with-

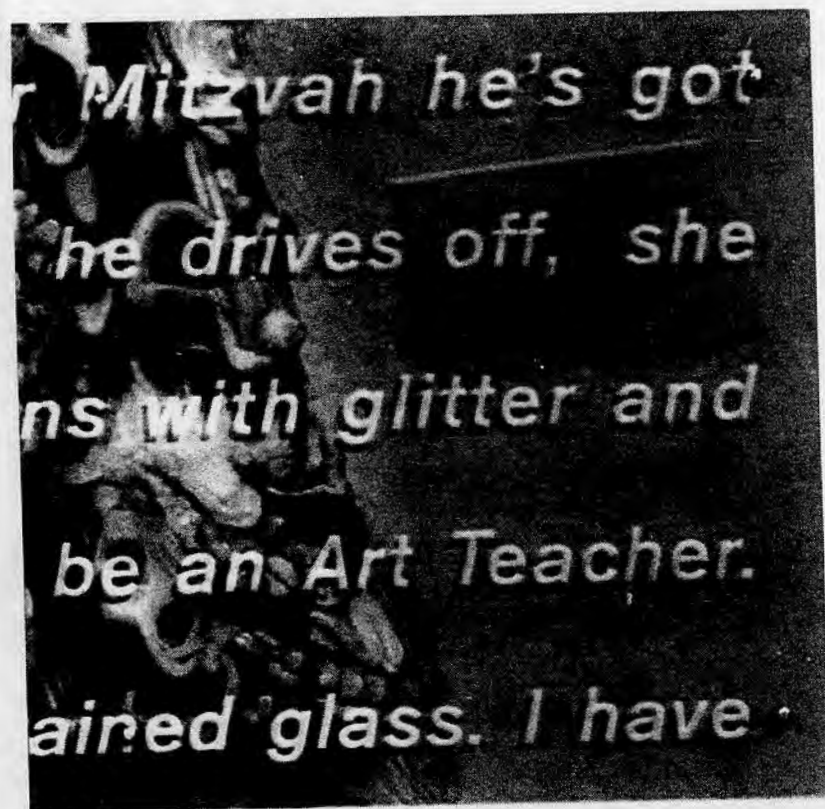


Figure 5

out Boucher, but framed by his bourgeois upbringing. On that blue wallpaper is painted one little object that seems out of place, different, as if it alone can escape the past as the delightful burden it appears to be. The object, painted in the same colour as the rest of the wallpaper, looks like a museum label or an envelope with an address on it (figure 5).

On that label is writing. Painted, not sandblasted, like the other writing, the writing on the glass. This writing in is Hebrew. Or is it? In fact, it is gibberish, illegible, but yes, it *means*, unmistakably 'Hebrew.' Is this little detail pointed out by the paint brushes behind the Teacher's back, the signature of an artist whose difference as a Jew almost made him a surgeon instead of what he most wanted to be? In other words, is this

the one moment where the primary narrator refers to himself? But then, is that small but nagging political message addressed to him (by whom?) or to us, viewers who crave to read it but cannot? The one thing this label/envelope's illegible 'Hebrew' does is the most important narrativizing and mirroring act. Hebrew reads from right to left, not from left to right. Between the historical, gentile Boucher representation and the image of Hebrew writing, two cultures are brought to bear on each other. But it is up to the reader where to start the pointing: with the signature of the 1996 work pointing back to Boucher, or the other way around.

* * *

This short analysis not only demonstrates that an analysis of narrative levels helps to gain access to a complex narrative text. It also helps to historicize narratological analysis. The meta-narrative and ironic commentaries implied by the relation between embedded Boucher and overall text underscore the idea that postmodernism has a special preference for the use of mirror-text. Thus, another preconception can be eliminated: that structural analysis is ahistorical.

6: Remarks and Sources

I have limited myself in the choice of topics for this chapter. Only the status of the narrative agent and its relationship to what is narrated have been discussed. This restriction is the effect of the decision, already put forth in the introduction, to limit our subject matter. Narratology studies narrative texts only in so far as they are narrative; in other words, in their narrativity. In particular, the topic of this chapter, the text, is also studied elsewhere in several other aspects. Linguistically oriented disciplines such as stylistics, but also grammar, syntax, and semantics, are important for different kinds of investigations of the text, but have been left out deliberately here. Side trips to other disciplines would inevitably have interfered with the systematic organization of this study.

Nevertheless, the connections with related disciplines have made themselves felt at several points. The distinction between direct, indirect, and free indirect discourse, which I have discussed here because it concerns the status of the narrative agent with regard to the object of narration, is one of the classic topics of linguistics. The delimitation of the subject of discussion, however, cannot be more than preliminary.