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On the Possibilities—and Limits—of Narrative Analysis

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Volume 4, numéro 1, 2014

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nw4_1cmi02

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Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1925-0622 (numérique)

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Citer ce document

Freeman, M. (2014). Who is Amos? On the Possibilities—and Limits—of Narrative Analysis. *Narrative Works*, 4(1), 137–144.

SPECIAL ISSUE: MULTIPLICITY AND COMMONALITY IN NARRATIVE INTERPRETATION

Who is Amos? On the Possibilities—and Limits—of Narrative Analysis

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I am grateful for the opportunity to comment on the pieces gathered together by Gabriela Spector-Mersel for this special issue. It is a quite remarkable project, one that succeeds well in its principal aims. Indeed, at times I found myself truly dazzled by what could be extracted from the text at hand by the various authors whose charge it was to analyze it. And yet, I sometimes found myself uncomfortable as well, and for one very basic reason: it is unclear to me how much can—or should—be said about Amos on the basis of what has been said in this text. It is but a text fragment, and although it is certainly possible and justifiable to raise some conjectures about what this text means and who this man is, it needs to be done cautiously and provisionally, with full recognition of what *cannot* be said.

I am reminded in this context of the basic stance Freud (1900/1953) takes (or at least professes to take) in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, when he insists that he can only interpret those dreams that are dreamt by his patients—that is, by those he knows well. With some understanding of their life histories, their internal dynamics, and their symbolic vocabulary, some gains can be made—with the help, of course, of the patients themselves. Without this hermeneutical backdrop, however, there is little to do but play out one's own interpretive strategies and modes of analysis. I want to be fair to the writers who were given the task of interpreting Amos's text. The fact is, they *had* no such

hermeneutical backdrop, and consequently, the only thing they could *possibly* do was play out their own interpretive strategies and modes of analysis. Generally speaking, I should also add, they have undertaken the task with a good measure of caution and interpretative humility—far more, surely, than Freud, who even with much fuller and more comprehensive texts in hand, too often reverted to his own preferred hermeneutical schemes. The writers whose works we have encountered here have largely avoided such “bad” hermeneutical prejudice. Indeed, they have largely avoided hermeneutical prejudice altogether—given the paucity of context, they really had no choice in the matter—and have done their best to stay with the text itself, its own internal intentionalities. And I reiterate: within the limits of this assignment, they have engaged in some truly amazing interpretive feats and have displayed clearly and well what can be done, analytically, in the hands of deft and able interpreters like themselves.

I nevertheless want to ask: Who *is* Amos? We cannot possibly know based on the information given—non-random though it may be (see especially Perez and Tobin’s (2014) article, which suggests otherwise; see also Spector-Mersel’s (2014b) focus on “selection”). Were this a “small story,” of the sort Michael Bamberg (e.g., 2006), Alexandra Georgakopoulou (e.g., 2006), and others have written about—a small slice of life, drawn from conversation, taking place *in situ*—the task would have been easier, for there is much that goes on in such exchanges that lends itself well enough to the kinds of analytic tools several of the writers represented here are employing. Were this a highly detailed “big story,” of the sort that I (e.g., Freeman, 2006) and other life-story analysts tend to explore, the task would have been easier too, for the more textual content we have, the more likely it is that we will be able to arrive at some sound and substantial interpretations and, in turn, be that much better poised to know what has been selected and why.

Not unlike Amia Lieblich (2014), I was inclined to read with my heart. But as she also acknowledged, the text was a “meager” and “thin” one. “In the present text,” she writes, “there are almost no stories, no life that has been lived, just a list.” She therefore has “a sense of the anxiety of failing memory, underlying this attempt to list all the important stations along the way” (p. 101). This is possible. But the fact is, we don’t know why this story is as thin as it is. It could be that Amos simply assumed this list-like account was all he was supposed to provide. It could be that he felt reduced by enormity of the challenge of telling his story, given especially the way it turned out. It could be that the caregiving context

with which the interview was introduced delimited the scope of his response (see especially Kupferberg's [2014] article for comments on positioning and related issues; see also Tuval-Mashiach's [2014] comments on the significance of context). Like Lieblich, I want to go beyond the text to the person; I want to gather some sense of what his story is really all about and why he tells it the way he does. But I don't know that I can in this particular case.

What we actually have here is what might be termed a "thin big story"—that is, a skeletal, highly truncated rendition of a much larger story, one that goes well beyond the demands of the moment, all the way into the innermost recesses of one's being. I find this text to be a vexing narrative animal—small in size, big in scope, telling in some ways, obscure in others. As noted earlier, this led to my being uncomfortable, at times, with some of the interpretative flights being made—not because they were poorly executed (they were not), not because they were spurious or "wild" (they were not), and not because they bespoke the kind of bad hermeneutical prejudice I mentioned when discussing Freud (they didn't), but because they couldn't help but be "underdetermined" by the data at hand. To a greater or lesser extent, this is always the case: interpretation is a going-beyond, an imaginative crafting of a context within which the data might make sense. And indeed, the interpretations offered do allow just this sort of sense to be made. Whether or not these interpretations are valid, however, is a different matter altogether. They may be. And they may not be. We just don't know.

Let me try to be a bit more explicit about the kind of text the present one is and why I found it as vexing as I did. "What seems to stand at the heart of the narrative interpretative lens, making it a distinctive way of examining storied data," Spector-Mersel (2014a) writes in her Introduction, "is *holism*," a principle "that derives from the epistemological conception of narratives as multi-origin and multilayered products, in which various dimensions converge" (p. 3; see also Spector-Mersel, 2011). This principle is an important one. But it is only part of the story. For, at the heart of the narrative interpretative lens is a specifically *narrative* holism, by which I mean one that recognizes and works with the dialectic of episodes and plot as it emerges in a given story. This involves a quite specific mode of temporality—*narrative* temporality (e.g., Ricoeur, 1981), one in which there is a hermeneutical tacking back and forth between the events in question and the evolving whole to which they contribute. The result is that even as it can plausibly be said that event A leads to event B, event B can and frequently does transfigure,

retroactively, the meaning and significance of event A. Both events have become episodes, and the nexus of their evolving interrelationship is the plot. In reading a narrative, therefore, we frequently find ourselves moving both forward, following the future-oriented direction of chronological time, and backward, discerning new meaning and significance in what has come before (e.g., Freeman, 2010).

We really don't see this process in action in Amos's text. The list-like nature of the text renders it more akin to a chronicle than a narrative: this happened, then this, then that, and so forth and so on. There are of course intimations of Amos's story within this text; it's not an *empty* chronology of events, but a quite full one, replete with narrative possibilities. On my reading, in fact, there are aspects of the text that cry out for narrative, that resonate and reverberate in such a way that we *know* there is more, much more, to the story. But it remains difficult to say what.

As Spector-Mersel (2014a) goes on to note in her Introduction, it is frequently helpful to differentiate two different levels of narrative analysis, the first dealing precisely with this *what* of the text and the second dealing with the *why*. Once we get hold of the former, we can (if we are so inclined) move on to the latter. As is clear from the articles in this issue, interpreters vary considerably in which of these is the primary focus, with some (for instance, discourse analysts) remaining largely within the confines of the text and others (for instance, life story analysts) moving freely beyond it, whether into the interior of the informant or out into the world. Does one of these basic orientations have an advantage when it comes to this particular text? On the face of it, it might seem that those more oriented toward the internal workings of the text would have the upper hand: given the scarcity of contextual information, one is left only with what is said, with what is *there*, immanent within the text. In keeping with what was said earlier, however, about this being, in essence, a thin big story, these close-to-the-text interpreters, highly attuned to the ins and outs of language itself, have before them a quite difficult challenge: they have to treat this big story as if it were a small one. Do those oriented toward addressing the question of *why* have it any easier? Perhaps—if not about Amos's deeper recesses (which must remain obscure) then about those broad structures of the social and cultural world that become inscribed in narratives, whatever their "size" might be. But these interpreters have a difficult challenge as well: they have to treat a thin big story as if it were a "thick" one.

These metaphors are getting out of hand. My apologies! Let me therefore try to offer a few additional comments that move beyond these metaphors, into broader narrative territory. Here, I want to avow not only my own preference for more extended life stories, of the sort we find in memoirs, autobiographies, and other such texts, but my reticence in trying to make sense of briefer ones, of the sort we find in interviews, even those that are lengthy and fairly comprehensive. I think back to interviews I did some time ago with aspiring artists (see Freeman, 1994) that would last three, four, even, in one case, seven hours. I had an enormous amount of information. But it was still a one-shot deal and thus limited, very limited, in what it could tell me about the people I was speaking to. I think about this process in relation to journalists, who do multiple interviews over lengthy periods of time, or biographers, who do extensive interviews and gather archival information and much, much more. We are not journalists. Nor are we biographers. The truth is, whatever “breed” of narrative analysts we are, we tend to go for the in-and-out-the-door approach, gathering what we can and making sense of it in whatever way we know how.

The possibilities are endless, indeed. Some of them have been pursued here with extraordinary skill and care. But alongside these possibilities are some significant limits—limits that become that much more visible, that much more acute, when the texts before us are meager and thin. That we can coax meaning from them is surely true. It’s been done here by every writer whose challenge it was to carry out the assignment at hand. I commend them for their efforts. But the assignment was a tough one. Many of our assignments are like this: we have a question, a purpose, and we go and speak to people or observe them or listen to their conversations, whatever. We carry out careful and caring work, hoping that we have done the texts—and the people whose texts they are—justice. These are tough assignments too—tougher, perhaps, than we sometimes care to admit.

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Appendix: Amos's Story*

1 I was born in Poland. I came at the age of two. I came -- (they)¹
 2 **brought** me. We at the first stage, because my **mother's** family
 3 mainly, were in *Balfur*,² so we came to *Balfur* for a few years. After
 4 that we moved to *Tel Aviv*. In *Tel Aviv* I was... I studied at the *Beit*
 5 *Chinuch*, the A. D. Gordon *Beit Chinuch*, and after that at *Chadash*³
 6 High School – continuation. And...secondary school. And I was a
 7 member of the *Machanot Olim*.⁴ For a long time. Within **this**
 8 framework I was sent to the *Palmach*.⁵ Because then we had reached
 9 the point that all *Hachshara*⁶ provided a quota for the *Palmach*. It
 10 was still before (they) had recruited all the *Hachsharas*. And I was in
 11 the *Palmach*, from the year... '42...no...don't remember, '42. I was
 12 in...2nd Company. After that we moved over to the 4th Battalion
 13 [suppressed weeping]. After that in the Negev Brigade. I was...in the
 14 beginning a squad commander, after that a platoon commander, and
 15 after that...an officer in the Brigade, and... That's how I drifted
 16 through the army and I finished as a Lieutenant-Colonel. And...that
 17 was already within the territorial defense. And in the territorial
 18 defense I met her. [His wife: *Not like that, you met me in a radio*
 19 *course. You were an instructor and I was a trainee.*] Okay. And
 20 when I was released from the army I came to *Gev*. Since then I have
 21 been at *Gev*. In various roles. Community coordinator, treasurer,
 22 and...after that I went...to work in the movement. In the UKM.⁷ I
 23 was...in the UKM for six years. Coordinator of the Health
 24 Committee. I was...and after that back to *Gev*, I worked for a few
 25 years in agriculture. After that, (they) assigned me -- (they) assigned,
 26 I took on the task of establishing a factory, and I established the
 27 factory called "*Gevit*." A paper products factory. And I managed it
 28 up until I retired, actually. **Half**-retired. I had already wanted to be
 29 replaced. And it so happened that **today** the factory... When I
 30 established the factory it was...a bit of a problem in *Gev*. It was a big
 31 investment, and (they) weren't used to that. And...in the beginning it
 32 limped along a bit. And then (they) actually began...to run after me.
 33 Why did you create this white elephant and why that... In the end
 34 that factory **today**, is the only thing that supports *Gev*. A lot for
 35 production, a lot... That's it, until...I got a **zberg**.⁸ A stroke. Since
 36 then I'm bound to the chair and... **The lucky thing** is that...as
 37 opposed to others, and I say as opposed, because I came out with an
 38 **intact** mind. It bothers me quite a bit these days. Meaning...the shift
 39 between **disability** and activity, it creates a problem for me,
 40 sometimes I...I think that I [suppressed weeping] am healthy today,
 41 in (my) thinking. (I) read books, read the newspaper, read...
 42 television. So when I think that I'm **healthy**, and I try...to **do**
 43 accordingly, **physically** – doesn't work. For instance getting out of
 44 bed, beforehand I got up by myself. Now I don't get up by myself. In

* Transcription and notes: Spector-Mersel (2014a).

45 walking I'm completely limited. And...and...these days I go back
 46 and forth between thinking that I'm healthy and **the future**, that I'm
 47 limited. And that's it, it's already...15 years. Essentially sitting in the
 48 chair. And that's a **long** time. Very long. And along with that I
 49 have...a Filipino aide. He really does help me a lot. And this is how I
 50 go through my life. I don't have much more than that now. I
 51 was...when I was active, I was a member of the political party
 52 center, the council. I was...pretty active in the UKM, I was in a
 53 position, I was a **working** man – in agriculture, I was in the
 54 community, community coordinator, I was treasurer. That's my life.
 55 Always in public affairs. Until I got sick. I got sick, so it took me out
 56 of the...frame. I stopped going to the (kibbutz communal) dining
 57 room – now there isn't a dining room anymore. (I) don't listen to the
 58 (kibbutz assembly) meetings, no activity. I was limited, mostly the
 59 walking limited me. And...that's that. About myself. What else do
 60 you want to hear? Interesting?

TRANSCRIPTION NOTES:

“--” signifies a break in the discourse and shift in tone, as if the teller is correcting himself

“–” signifies a break in the discourse, generally continuing in the same tone but without a pause that would warrant a comma

Boldface signifies stronger emphasis in pitch

¹ In colloquial Hebrew, the third-person masculine plural verb form (“they sent me”) is commonly used to send a passive message that defocuses the agent; either because it is unknown or irrelevant, or contrarily, obvious and primary. When “they” (or any other pronoun) is in parentheses, it signifies that the pronoun itself is not used with the related verb.

² A cooperative Zionist settlement established in the 1920s.

³ Both are well-known schools identified with the Zionist settlement.

⁴ A Zionist youth movement.

⁵ Literally, the acronym for “strike force,” the *Palmach* was the elite fighting force of the *Haganah*, the underground army of the pre-state Jewish settlement under the British Mandate in Palestine.

⁶ Under the British Mandate in Palestine, youth group movements that were mobilized toward agricultural settlement would go out to kibbutzim for a training period.

⁷ Abbreviation for *United Kibbutzim Movement*, the umbrella organization of all the kibbutzim.

⁸ Yiddish for “a bang.”