Narratives and Worlds

The "Narratives and Worlds" project is a research initiative of the Fictionality Group within the Department of English and Related Literature. It is a comparative project, both historically (medieval and modern periods) and culturally (English, American, Israeli, Palestinian, Arabic and South African literatures), and its focus upon fictionality also intrinsically demands that fictional narratives are situated in relation to non-fictional discourses (historiographic, biographical, testimonial), as well as problematic cases that resist categorization. The project as currently conceived is a collaboration with Monika Fludernik's narratology group at the university of Freiburg, as the basis for an AHRC/DFG joint research funding bid; this relationship brings with it the strongly diachronic and comparative methodology of the European narratological tradition, and a cognitive model of narrative sense-making, to complement the York group's cross-period and cross-cultural strengths and rhetorical, communicative model of fiction.

The relation between fictional and non-fictional narratives is commonly understood in terms of fictional worlds, which fictions both refer to and produce—as if non-fictional narratives produced the actual world to which they refer. There is a conceptual confusion here: a "world" in the sense that may be produced is not a referential object but itself a cognitive representation, in a mode quite different from narrative. A narrative is linear, temporal, sequential, and perspectival, whereas a world is systemic, spatial, massively parallel—global. Neither can be subsumed by the other; they exist in a relation of mutual dependence. If, as Roger Schank has it, "Storytelling and understanding are functionally the same thing" (*Tell Me a Story: Narrative and Intelligence*, 1990: 24), then understanding is not so much a grasp of reality itself as the symbiotic relationship between a narrative and a world. In fact, we are not quite the hostages of narrative that Schank's formulation implies: one of the things we understand about stories themselves is that they are always partial and contingent, artificial impositions of sense. To conceive the world of a story is not merely to enact a closed loop of narrative sense-making; it is also to conceive something other than a story, and irreducible to it. This tight bond between the power and the limitations of narrative is the conceptual focus of our project.

The "Narratives and Worlds" project aims to enlarge our understanding of how these two ways of conceptualizing reality—narrative and world—interact and

conflict. It proposes that narrative sense-making takes place not in relation to the world as referential object, nor to a neat binary of real and fictional worlds, but to a multiplicity of worlds that serve neither as the ground of narrative nor as its product, but in dialectical tension, as irreducibly distinct yet co-dependent conceptual frames. The project instantiates this multiplicity of worlds in four ways: period, culture, genre and discipline. It will use the problematic reciprocity of narrative and world as an analytical tool to deepen our insight into the rhetorical and cognitive function of particular narratives and conceptual worlds, in case studies within the medieval and modern periods, and across different modern literary cultures; it will do so in relation to both fictional and non-fictional narrative genres, re-examining and relativizing that uneasy distinction in the process; and it will examine the interplay between these narratives and conceptual worlds in political/ideological terms, in terms of formations of sensibility/affect, and as cognitive negotiations with empirical reality.

Fictions are central to the project because they foreground the respect in which narrative's grasp on reality is less a matter of its particulars than of the general paradigm—the weltanschauung—that those particulars articulate, and which itself makes them comprehensible. The double logic here depends heavily upon the interpretative function of the implicit, so that to understand a fiction at all is to be drawn into a kind of complicity with its rhetoric. But this is also true of non-fictional narrative, and the problematization of the borderline between the two narrative modes (a recurrent historical and cross-cultural phenomenon, not just a postmodern western tic) can be seen as a correlative of instability in the available world paradigms. The issues here situate literary analysis in relation to historiographical and philosophical perspectives upon narrative, and are not just a matter of genre, but also of disciplinary paradigms as themselves distinct conceptual worlds in relation to which specific disciplinary understanding takes place. The interdisciplinary dimension of the project, therefore, does not assume the commensurability of these worlds, and our interdisciplinary dialogues about the mutual implication of narratives and worlds within different fields of study will be equally alert to the ways in which disciplinary paradigms are themselves instances of the topic under scrutiny.