

MEDIATING BETWEEN GOD AND MAN: Towards a Poetics of Sacred Discourse

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The Bible has, over the years, been read from a vast array of different perspectives, and has proved a happy hunting ground for people of many disciplines. In the light of postmodern decentring, it is natural that the focus of attention should have shifted to the text in itself, and consequently, there has been a plethora of studies aimed at investigating the Bible as Literature, a discourse-oriented approach that sets out to understand the text 'as a pattern of meaning and effect'. It asks questions such as: 'what does this piece of language signify in context? What are the rules governing the transaction between storyteller or poet and reader? Are the operative rules, for instance, those of prose or verse, parable or chronicle, omniscience or realistic limitation, historical or fictional writing? What image of the world does the narrative project?' – all very valid questions in a world in which we no longer have any guarantees of an objective reality behind the linguistic sign.

Meir Sternberg's work *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* is one such attempt to read the Bible as literature, and indeed, the questions given above are his formulations (1987: 15). We expect therefore to encounter a reading of biblical discourse that takes the socio-cultural context of production into account; for it is only in context that these questions become meaningful. We can only pronounce upon the meaning of textual language if we understand something about the projected function of the work as a whole; and the rules governing the transaction between storyteller and reader have obviously shifted many times throughout the history of narrative production.

It comes as a surprise, therefore, to find that, of all the possible literary models available throughout world history, Meir Sternberg has chosen to assume that the 'operative rules' at work on the Bible are similar to those operating on a 19th century or modernist novel. All his narratological conclusions are subordinated to this model, and, as a result, he builds up a reading of Biblical discourse that, whilst being internally coherent in itself, clashes with our intuitions. Surely the

Biblical narrator could not have been as self-consciously artful and manipulative as Sternberg makes out? Could the projected narratee really have been as eminently reasonable and democratically-minded as he assumes? After all, several thousand years separate the context of production from this particular context of reception, and there have been many dramatic paradigm shifts in the meantime, not least of which is the Enlightenment and the 'scientific' view of reality that followed in its wake.

Meir Sternberg's own discourse is also ridden with value judgements that he takes no pains to justify or conceal. It is clear that, to him, what is 'artful' or 'crafty' or 'devious' is good, whilst 'naïvety' is abhorrent, symptomatic of lack of mental sophistication. In short, he is clearly privileging the rational, analytical, *logos*-oriented mode of thought at the expense of a more imaginative, synthetic, *mythos*-based model. Consequently, his interpretation of Biblical narrative reads rather as if he is desperately trying to save the Biblical narrative from charges of primitivism and prove that the narrator is a 'modern', an approach which clearly lays itself open to allegations of anachronism, among other things.

The problem, it seems to me, is essentially a question of genre. Our interpretation of any work is largely conditioned by the category in which we choose to insert it, for this presupposes a certain function of the text, a certain relationship between narrator, narratee and text, and a certain use of language. Sternberg's assertion, in his opening chapter, that the work, functionally-speaking 'is regulated by three principles: ideological, historiographic, and aesthetic' has implications for all narratological dimensions. Particularly, the assumption that the text aims to persuade and inform presumes a gap in status and/or knowledge between narrator and narratee, and a connative or referential use of language (to use Roman Jakobson's classification), that may not originally have been present.

To my mind, something important is missing from this analysis, namely the notion of the *sacred*. Whilst this term is not usually present in the narratologist's lexicon, it seems indispensable when dealing with a work like the Bible. As Mircea Eliade asserts, 'The completely de-sacralised Cosmos is a recent discovery in the history of the human mind. Although it is not our role here to show the historical processes or alterations to spiritual behaviour that led to this situation, modern man has de-sacralised his world and has assumed a profane existence. For our purpose it is enough to assert that de-sacralisation is characteristic of the total experience of non-religious

man in modern societies, and, as a consequence, he finds it increasingly difficult to understand the existential dimensions of the religious man in archaic societies'¹.

If the Bible is considered to have been produced within the sacred mindset, then all presuppositions about narrator/narratee and discourse take on an altogether different aspect. It is my objective in this paper, therefore, to explore the possibilities of a distinct mode of discourse based upon the notion of the sacred, and to suggest directions in which an eventual poetics of sacred discourse might lead. I do not consider myself competent to offer any hard and fast interpretations of Biblical passages under this rubric, since, as I explain below, this ultimately requires a profound knowledge not only of the entire text but also of the Hebrew language which I unfortunately do not have. Instead, I will limit myself to asking questions and suggesting directions in which future study might proceed. But for this we must begin by defining what exactly we mean by 'sacred'.

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As Mircea Eliade suggested in the quotation given above, it is not easy for modern man, brought up on a diet of rationalistic scientific enquiry, to understand what is meant by 'sacred'. Religious writings themselves are very little help, since they presume an inside view. Perhaps the first thinker to attempt to define the sacred experience in anything like a 'scientific' way was Rudolf Otto, who focused upon the sentiment of awe and mystery provoked in the individual when confronted with the 'numinous'. He also emphasised the essentially non-rational nature of the experience: 'The sacred is, first and foremost, a category of interpretation and evaluation which only exists as such in the religious domain..... it contains an element which escapes all rationality, constituting as such an *arrêton*, something ineffable'²

More helpful still is Mircea Eliade, who defines the Sacred in respect to its opposite, the Profane: '...for the 'primitive' as for the man of all pre-modern societies, the *sacred* equalled *power*, and, ultimately, *reality* itself. Sacred potency means at the same time reality, eternity and efficiency. The opposition sacred/profane is often equivalent to an opposition between *real* and *unreal* or pseudo-

¹ From *O Sagrado e o Profano* (p.27), translated from the Portuguese by the author.

² From the Portuguese edition of *O Sagrado* (p.13), translated by the author.

real...Thus, it is easy to understand that the religious man deeply desires *to be*, participate in *reality*, become saturated with power³. This notion is extended in his other work, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, in the following fashion: 'If we observe the general behaviour of archaic man, we are struck by the following fact: neither the objects of the external world nor human acts, properly speaking, have any autonomous intrinsic value. Objects or acts acquire a value, and in so doing become real, because they participate, after one fashion or another, in a reality that transcends them. Among countless stones, one stone becomes sacred – and hence instantly becomes saturated with being – because it constitutes a hierophany, or possesses mana, or again because it commemorates a mythical act, and so on...' (1954:3-4).

Expressed in this way, the experience immediately becomes intelligible as a kind of *semiosis*, the attribution of meaning to the chaos of primary perceptual experience. Suddenly we find that the chasm separating us from archaic man shrinks to a mere fissure; for, in constituting his hierophanies, he is essentially engaged in the same task as we are when we select facts to be included in our personal autobiographies and national history curricula, or as we delimit and organise our personal space. In short, he is engaged in the construction of an Identity, a vision of the world with himself at the centre, separated from the Other by boundary protected by taboo.

This becomes clearer when we note the similarities between this discourse of the Sacred and post-colonial discourse of the Nation. Eliade (1954:6-17) describes how, to the archaic mindset, the wild uncultivated regions of the world are assimilated to chaos, and how, consequently, settlement in a new, unknown country is equivalent to an act of Creation, accompanied by rituals of consecration, aimed at constituting a sacred centre that becomes the *axis mundi*. Similarly, Renis Debray, quoted by Timothy Brennan in a post-colonial work entitled 'The National Longing for Form' (1990:51) states: 'we should not become obsessed by the determinate historical form of the nation-state but try to see what that form is made out of. It is created from a natural organization proper to *homo sapiens*, one *through which life itself is rendered untouchable or sacred. This sacred character constitutes the real national question*'. The quotation continues: 'The second founding gesture of any human society is its delimitation within an enclosed space. Here also there takes place an encounter

³ From *O Sagrado e O Profano* (p.27), translated from the Portuguese by the author.

with the sacred, in the sense of the Temple. What is the Temple, etymologically? It was what the ancient priest or diviner traced out, raising his wand heavenwards, the outline of a sacred space within which divination could be undertaken. This fundamental gesture is found at the birth of all societies, in their mythology at least. But the myth presence is an indication of something real⁷.

The same kind of organisational principle applies to Time as well as to Space. Debray says that the first step toward the creation of a sense of national identity is ‘a delimitation in time, or the assignment of origins, in the sense of an Ark. This means that society does not derive from an infinite regression of cause and effect. A point of origin is fixed, the mythic birth of the Polis, the birth of Civilization or of the Christian era, the Muslim Hegira, and so on. The zero point or starting point is what allows ritual repetition, the ritualization of memory, celebration, commemoration – in short, all those forms of magical behaviour signifying defeat of the irreversibility of time⁴.

This unexpected point of contact between ancient and modern civilisations may be extended if we consider the process by means of which an object or event becomes endowed with sacred status. Take, for example, the stone in Eliade’s quotation that becomes ‘saturated with being’: it could have been the stone that Jacob erected at Bethel. It could just as easily be a stone that some geologist or archaeologist or sculptor finds in a field, which for some reason, exhibits some potential for becoming a Sign in their particular universe of meanings. Obviously the meanings attributed are different in each case. But the processes by means of which the stone becomes consecrated as a Sign are remarkably similar. In each case, the object is firstly cordoned off (symbolic marking of boundary) and protected from contamination⁵; then, its status as Sign is proclaimed (at conferences, in the case of the scientists) and consecrated textually. If this is accepted by the community at large, then it will enter the Canon, and thereafter, will be housed in the rarefied atmosphere of the museum or gallery, and spoken about in hushed tones of awe. Indeed, the very name of the Prophet who first proclaimed the Sign gains a sacred glow through association, and will be treated with the utmost respect, at least until some upstart comes along and institutes a process of demythification

⁴ Thus, modern national celebrations such as American Independence Day and Portuguese 25th April may be considered sacred to the national sense of identity just as the foundation days for the primitives.

⁵ The anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) describes at length the way in which notions of hygiene and pollution reflect Identity, and as such may be assimilated to our notion of the Sacred.

aimed at overthrowing the old god and setting up a new idol in its place.

Thus, it is clear that our stone, in phenomenological terms, was effectively brought into being by our archaeologist or geologist, and from then on, gained a numinous quality through participating in a network of meanings centred around the identity of the discipline in question. We could at this point ask if the stone has any objective meaning at all independent of the beholder? C.S. Pierce would answer in the negative, that the sign does not even exist until perceived as such. Consequently, the whole notion of 'objectivity' may disappear altogether, or be revealed as merely the dominant meaning, enforced through structures of power and without any independent validity. This concept will be important for our discussion of the Bible.

To recapitulate, then, it seems that Eliade's notion of the Sacred may be equated with a process of semiosis, by means of which the Chaos of sensory perception is endowed with significance. This may operate at the level of the Individual or the Group. In the case of the former, a car gains a sacred dimension when the owner sees it, not as mere means of getting about, but as a symbol of his status/virility etc. For a People (tribe, nation, or community of archaeologists), places, objects, people may be endowed with sacred status in the same way. The same applies to Discourse. The young man with the sacred car makes a selective rendering of past events to his bolster his constructed Identity (he may emphasise or even invent sexual conquests, for example), just as a Nation tells and teaches its history in a selective way. In both cases, those events which are felt to be significant are illuminated at the expense of those which are not; that is to say, they become *real* to the organising mind, and if the degree of passionate engagement with the sign is sufficiently intense, then, even in the modern world, it gains the glow of the numinous that Otto describes.

As we have seen, the consecration of meaning is part of the construction of Identity, and this is instituted and maintained through Ritual. It is in this sense, then, that the Bible becomes unequivocally a Sacred Text. It is a type of discourse sustained with a view to defining the identity of the people that gave rise to it, and every stage of its production and reproduction (including oral repetition, writing, editing, interpreting and translation) constitute a kind of consecration ritual. Consequently, it may no longer be considered as descriptive or representational writing, or rhetoric, but something rather more akin to

the Performative Speech Act (like ‘I hereby name you man and wife’, or ‘I baptise this child...’) which alters one’s state in the world.

The repercussions of this shift upon the poetics of bible discourse are immense. First and foremost, there is a collapse of the distinction between Narrator and Narratee into a collective ‘us’ that stretches from the present back into the mythical origins of the people. There is no longer any Subject trying to persuade the Other of the rightness of his viewpoint, because the Narratee is not the Other; the Other is the profane creature outside the boundaries of the sacred precinct who cannot participate in communal rites. Hence, there is no rhetoric, for there is no need for it. Even Auerbach’s claim that the Bible ‘insists that it is the only real world’ (1953:15) falls short, since his sentence predicates a subject and an object, and even this gap has disappeared.

Secondly, there is a collapse of the distinction between the Creator and the Created, or between Author and Text. Eliade says: ‘an object or act becomes real only insofar as it imitates or repeats an archetype. Thus, reality is acquired solely through repetition or participation; everything which lacks an exemplary model is “meaningless”, i.e it lacks reality. Men would thus have a tendency to become archetypal and paradigmatic...he sees himself as real, i.e. as “truly himself” only, and precisely, insofar as he ceases to be so’ (1954:34). Thus, in the act of writing or repeating the Bible stories, the teller/writer leaves his separate profane existence behind and, at least for the duration of the ritual, finds his true identity in this communal activity. In merging with the archetype, the spirit of the tribe, or God, comes into being

It is interesting at this point to make an analogy with a more modern piece of discourse, uttered in a quite different context, which seems to make a similar point about the need for archetypes. ‘A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form. Man, Gentlemen, does not improvise. The nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice and devotion. Of all cults, that of the ancestors is the most legitimate, for the ancestors have made us what we are’.⁶

The phrase ‘Let there be light’ now takes on a whole new dimension. The metaphor of lighting up a darkness seems to come to

⁶ Renan, E. (1882:21)

hand quite readily to describe the process of semiosis, and indeed, we have already in this essay, quite naturally, used the words ‘highlight’ and ‘illuminate’ in this sense. Uttered as it is in the ritualistic subjunctive, it is now clear that this phrase is some kind of magic spell or incantation by means of which the collective identity/Spirit of Tribe/God (which are ultimately the same) is summoned into being. Thus, the group creates and is created by its God in an endless circular process of semiosis based upon ritual. It is in this sense that Eliade argues that the imitation of archetypes and the repetition of paradigmatic gestures abolishes time: ‘through such imitation, man is projected into the mythical epoch in which the archetypes were first revealed’ (1954:35).

It should now be clear that, in sacred discourse, language functions in a completely different way to what we are used to. While characteristics of Jakobson’s poetic function may be retained (see below), it no longer seems to be operating referentially or connotatively, but closer to Northrop Frye’s *kerygmatic* mode, as a ‘vehicle of revelation’ (1983:29) ‘on the other side of the poetic’ in relation to rhetoric (1990:101), or Halliday’s ritual function, serving to ‘define and delimit a social group’ (1973:63). It is above all opaque, a kind of magic spell or incantation, whose purpose is to change reality, rather than convey information. Consequently, sounds (and possibly even the visual shapes) become important in a way that they are not usually in referential language⁷. Similarly, the denotative or referential meaning gives way to the connotative or symbolic meaning, and the total significance of the text is constructed analogically, through echoes and associations and thematic links. Nothing is redundant. A synonym is never a simple synonym, introduced for cohesive purposes, but a nucleus of meaning in its own right, with echoes and connections elsewhere. Etymology gains a vital importance, as being evidence of the word’s link to the archetypal past. Syntactical patterns are significant, and not susceptible to surface transformation without loss of meaning. Even those words usually considered to be semantically

⁷ Northrop Frye (1990:64) says of this technique in poetry: ‘The effect of exploiting the sound resemblances within a language is to minimize the sense of arbitrariness. Originally this procedure may often have been close to magic: in magic a causal connection between a word and a thing, a name and a spirit, is often assumed, and in magic the poetic effort to get the right words in the right order may help to affect something in the external world’.

empty, such as those we know of as ‘grammatical words’, are likely to be resonant in a way that they rarely are in other forms of discourse⁸.

The structure of sacred discourse is also considerably different from rational forms of discourse dominant in modern society. Above all, it is not linear; there is no sense of cause and effect, or of logic; rather it is dominated by circular, chiasmic⁹ and symmetrical patterns based upon Repetition, for it is in this way that the group partakes of the archetype. Therefore, all instances of repetition (on the level of sound, word, phrase, sentence, metaphor or chunk of discourse) deserve a great deal of attention. Unlike realist fiction, in which an earlier instance is usually taken as a foreshadowing of what is to come, in sacred discourse, truth value is determined by faithfulness to the archetype. Indeed, Eliade (1954:75) even suggests that in the simplest human societies, sin is defined as an act that does not derive from an archetype (making an interesting correspondence with the notion of norms in modern cultural studies), which would indicate that acts that are variations on an archetype are stages in man’s gradual fall from the state of grace. As an example of this we could look at the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob essentially as repetitions of Adam (who was made in the image of God), and examine in what ways their stories are repeated and in what ways they differ. Amongst the many analogies that we could list, the fact that Abraham and Isaac build wells while Jacob raises stones has already been pointed out. The Well is, in itself, a very rich symbol with multiple connotations, amongst which we could at random select the theme of water. This is even more primary and resonant, taking us back to the Garden, which was of course watered by four rivers and therefore needed no artificial irrigation. But Adam transgressed and was banished, and thereafter his descendants had to work and irrigate the land, because it no longer yielded spontaneously. Water is now revealed to be not only a symbol of fertility (connecting to all the other fertile/barren oppositions, including the question of wives and offspring), but also of divine grace. Adam failed to repeat the archetypal pattern perfectly, and water was withdrawn; Jacob moves one more step away from the

⁸ Hugh White (1991:74) discusses the role of personal pronouns in ‘symbolic narrative’, suggesting that they ‘enable the subject to identify her/himself with a form in an expressive act. In this act, the subject enters language and experiences consciousness across the mediation of the sign which unites her/him with the other. S/he experiences her/himself thus precisely in this encounter with another consciousness in an event of mutual recognition’.

⁹ Many scholars have pointed the use of the chiasmic or envelope structure in Biblical narrative, most notably Joel Rosenberg (1984:52).

archetype by heaving stones instead of digging wells, and grace is withdrawn, for his wife Rachel is initially barren. Thus we can see how failure to repeat the archetype perfectly (due in each case to a kind of individualistic hubris that would have been anathema to the collective spirit), results in a successive move away from the archetypal centre. Consequently it becomes clear how a good god could have in fact given rise to a bad world, one of the most thorny questions that theology has had to grapple with for centuries.

Character in sacred discourse is also very different from character in a realist novel. Rather, the personages are all instances of archetypes, to one extent or another, and the more complex characters are likely to be based on different archetypes, without any internal coherence. For example, David the young boy who defeats Goliath may be linked analogically to the other instances of a weaker prevailing over a stronger, rather than to David the King, who certainly belongs to a different pattern. Similarly, we should be attentive to uses of the proper name (names, as we already know, are highly significant) as opposed to apparently neutral substitutes such as 'the man' or 'the king', which may well point in quite a different thematic direction. As an example, we could quote the use in the Garden Story of both *adam* (with its etymological connection to the ground) and *ish* (gender specific, and used to etymologise the word for 'woman', *ishhah*), which are clearly more than simple cohesive devices as they would be in rational discourse.

This kind of poetics privileges the earliest Hebrew versions of the texts because all rewritings, adaptations and translations are imperfect repetitions moving further and further away from the archetype. As such, it has much in common with the interpretations that Kabbalists and other mystics have been doing for centuries on the assumption that Biblical Hebrew somehow corresponded more perfectly to reality than other languages¹⁰. However, it is important here to highlight that it is not Hebrew itself that is inherently superior, rather it is ritualistic usage that generates allegorical meaning and gives rise to a vast body of spiritual wisdom that we could perhaps equate with the Soul of the Tribe.

¹⁰ Umberto Eco explores this notion at length in his book *The Search for the Perfect Language*, arriving of course at the conclusion that there is no perfect language, and that Hebrew is an arbitrary system of signs like all others.

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In the final part of this work, I would like to look at two of the passages analysed by Meir Sternberg, and suggest how a consideration of the Bible as Sacred Discourse might lead to different conclusions. As mentioned above, it is not my aim to offer a foolproof interpretation of the passages in question, since that is clearly beyond my competence; rather I would like to indicate some directions that enquiry could take.

The first passage I would like to consider is I. Sam. 9:6-10, concerning the role of the prophet. Meir Sternberg (1987:94-6), predictably, given his propensity to overvalue rationalism, constructs a complex argument to show that the Biblical narrator here is engaged in 'image-shattering', offering 'a thrust against the inflated figure cut by the prophet in the popular imagination'. However, if the text is analysed in accordance with the poetics of sacred discourse, then it yields a completely different result. The three 'synonyms' used for the prophet ('man of god', 'seer' and 'prophet'), each belonging to a different era, are also in a sense imperfect rewritings of an archetype, and thus progressively deteriorating in truth-value. Given that authority lies in tradition, then, to my mind, Sternberg is wrong in seeing the deliberate highlighting of the etymological connection between *nabi* ('prophet') and *nabi* ('bring') as indicating criticism on the part of the narrator of the practice of bringing gifts to the prophet (this indignation is Sternberg's own, I think, given his viewpoint from modern capitalist culture in which the concept of 'alms' is redundant). Rather, I would suggest that Saul's question 'what shall we bring the man?' is merely bowing to the precedent of custom in an obedient fashion. If there is any suggestion of a pejorative meaning here, it is likely to lie in relation to the more archaic word 'seer' (pointed out in 9:9 in the sentence beginning 'Formerly in Israel....', which explicitly makes the connection between the two). If the shaman was considered in the past to have been gifted with special insight (and the connections here with the theme of 'seeing' need to be explored), then clearly some kind of distancing has taken place if the more modern word now means 'bring'. Could the notion of 'bringing' relate not to the custom of bestowing gifts but to the idea of 'bringing out' hidden truths? If so, then the truth is no longer as visible as it was in the past, even to the prophet, but has to be coaxed out into view. In addition, the fact of Saul wanting to 'bring' a gift to the prophet so that the prophet can 'bring' something to them has a symmetry about it that

need not be interpreted cynically in terms of a trading transaction. Like the hospitality that is offered to the guest, this type of giving perhaps has the practical and spiritual function of maintaining group cohesion, of validating the role of the shaman rather than destroying it.

The second passage I would like to consider is I Kings 21:13-6, in which Naboth is stoned to death outside the city and the event is variously reported, leading to Ahab's seizing of his vineyard. Meir Sternberg (1987:408-9) here has rightly taken notice of the most salient feature of this passage, namely the insistent repetitions not only of words, but also of phrase-length structures and overall sentence organisation; however, he predictably focuses his analysis on the information gaps in the various transmissions which he interprets as a key to character. I would suggest that, once again, his conclusions represent an imposition of a rational structure upon a text which is determinedly non-rational. In this case, even in English, it is clear that the repetitions have some kind of rhythmic logic and incantatory effect that must surely be greatly accentuated in the Hebrew. There is something in this formal repetition of information with a slight addition each time, resulting in a longer and longer sentence, that is reminiscent of the 'There was an old lady who swallowed a fly' - style of nursery rhyme, even down to the deliberately abrupt and unexpectedly down-to-earth ending. In this kind of doggerel, the pattern is so overwhelmingly pleasing to our most primitive senses, that we fail to notice the incongruous or outrageous meaning of the words. We are led further and further away from semantics into the realm of pure rhythm, the words gradually ceasing to operate as independent signs, but instead becoming part and parcel of a harmonious whole in which the repetition is all¹¹. Then suddenly we are brought back down to earth with a bump when confronted with a new element that refuses to repeat the pattern but instead acts in a new, original and rational way. The brief experience of solidarity comes to an end and, to hide our disappointment, we (moderns, that is) laugh at our own foolishness for having allowed ourselves to be hypnotised in this way.

¹¹ It strikes me that gossip must function in a similar way, with the group-consolidation function taking over from referential accuracy as repetitions become gradually more and more outrageous. Indeed, this Biblical passage could clearly be interpreted as a kind of rumour that grows and grows until it all explodes under its own weight.

This kind of passage, therefore, is like an experience of pure ritual, which ends when Ahab breaks the pattern by interpreting the words literally and using them as a basis for a new act. (It is clearly he, not Jezebel, who breaks the chain, because, while her turn adds a considerable amount of new information, she links it to the previous one through repetition of the word 'dead', which presumably in Hebrew contains a sound echo with the previously-used Preterite form). The message of this passage lies, therefore, not in its semantic content so much as in its structure, which, I imagine, could be actively experienced if the Hebrew were chanted aloud. It is the same message that we have encountered before, that repetitions conjure the spirit, and that we must not break the chain, for to do so destroys the spell and we return to the world of the profane.

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As I hope I have shown in these brief analyses, there is much to be gained by introducing the concept of 'sacred' into the poetics of biblical narrative. Not only does it narrow the field of interpretative possibilities, apparently infinite as far as this text is concerned, but it also provides a safeguard against the projection of anachronistic values that inevitably occurs when the field of 'literature' is left wide open. For this, to my mind, is what Meir Sternberg has done. So utterly convinced is he of the superiority of *logos* over *mythos*, and so determined to save the text from charges of primitivism, that he systematically projects the most tortuous logic onto his hapless narrator, apparently unaware that man only began to think in a linear logical way a relatively short time ago¹².

In addition, he is apparently unaware that the most recent tendencies in psychology, sociology and linguistics are pointing to the possibility that modern man is not as rational as he likes to think he is, and that there are all sorts of ritualistic tendencies underlying his social behaviour. In particular, Discourse Analysis has shown that much of our everyday conversation is regulated by conventional patterns that operate on a level normally far below our conscious control, and which can be analysed into predictable sequences of Speech Acts, repeated time and time again in the endless process of

¹² There was of course a Classical Enlightenment two thousand years before the European Enlightenment. However, to my knowledge, nothing of the sort took place in antiquity within the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

group consolidation¹³. Consequently, an analysis of the Bible as a communal Speech Event, rather than as the ‘artful’ work of one individual mind, would seem to be more in keeping with modern linguistic trends.

I would like to finish by, rather roguishly, pointing out an irony that may not have escaped the reader. It has already been demonstrated that the Sacred mindset is totalitarian, in the sense that it does not permit the existence of any alternative reality; all meanings are its meanings. The world experienced in this way, while one-sided to modern eyes, is nevertheless imbued with the most intense vitality, since it is lived with passionate engagement, and felt with every fibre of the body and soul. This is why primitive and not-so-primitive peoples have always felt the urge to desecrate the shrines of rival tribes and set up their own gods; they are, by imposing their own meanings, protecting their own identity, since compromise effectively means annihilation.

It therefore takes a very rational mind to respect what is sacred to the Other. The temptation is always to get in there and impose your own meanings on what went before, demoting what does not seem significant and appropriating and redefining everything that appears to have signic potential in your universe of representations. This works on all levels - as regards other people’s property, another culture’s relics, icons from the past. It also works with texts, for, as we have seen, the endless process of rewriting and translation and updating is nothing more than the desecration of the shrine of the tribe that went before.

Seen in this light, Meir Sternberg’s insistence of the rightness of his reading does not seem quite so rational. Nor does the concept of ‘sacred’ seem quite so primitive. Or perhaps, deep down, we are all really ‘primitives’, and have a lot more in common with the Biblical mindset than we realised. This, of course, was what Meir Sternberg was trying to prove, just that, in my opinion, he got it the wrong way round. In trying to show that the Biblical narrator was an artful rational modern like himself, all he succeeded in proving was that, beneath his own rational veneer, lurked a primitive urge to impose his own kind of Sacred Order on the world.

¹³ See, for example, Coulthard, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis*, pp.59-95.

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