2. The structure of the fabula (II):

Boris Tomashevski, "Thematics"; Mieke Bal, *Narratology*

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2.1. Fabula and Siuzhet in Formalist Narratology

Boris Tomashevski gave in the last section of his *Theory of literature* what is perhaps the clearest and most systematic contribution to narrative theory made by the Russian formalists.\[1\] The central concepts used by the formalists in narrative analysis, fabula and siuzhet, were developed by other theorists prior to Tomashevski. Viktor Shklovski drew an opposition between fabula and siuzhet that is less dynamic than Tomashevski's:

The idea of plot [siuzhet ] is too often confused with the description of events--with what I propose provisionally to call the story [fabula ]. The story is, in fact, only material for plot formulation. The plot of Evgeny Onegin is, therefore, not the romance of the hero with Tatyana, but the fashioning of the subject of this story as produced by the introduction of interrupting digressions.\[2\]

The distinction is close enough to the one drawn by formalists in the English-speaking world. A. C. Bradley draws a difference between the subject matter and the form of a work.\[3\] For Bradley, as for
Shklovski, the finished work is nothing but form: subject matter exists not as such, but as a series of formal relationships. And Henry James is careful to distinguish the subject he deals with (shapeless in itself) from the finished product, the novel, which is a subject matter told in a special way, seen from a special point of view.[4] Shklovski's conception, however, seems to be moving beyond those of James or Bradley because it is more specifically narratological and, as such, more analytical. This first definition opposes fabula and siuzhet as a series of events to a finished form. The finished narrative is not only a sum of events: there are narrative techniques, the use of point of view and of the narrator, which change those events into something different. And the verbal element of the work, the narrative surface, becomes one with the events. In a work by Shakespeare the doings of the characters and the language they speak are one: as a late follower of the Romantic tradition, Shklovski believes that all the elements of the literary work form an organic whole. So, in this first definition, fabula is an abstract (or actual?) series of events, while siuzhet is the work itself considered as form: a complex verbal structure in which the fabula has experienced a sea change. We could argue that Shklovski distinguishes only two of our levels of analysis, fabula and text. Siuzhet seems to be inescapably concrete here, inseparable from the verbal texture of the work, and in no way an abstract structure. However, in a later work Shklovkski seems to conceive of both fabula and siuzhet as abstract series of events, and to distinguish a) the fabula, b) the siuzhet, c) the work as a whole. He draws

a distinction between the "events in the work" and "the siuzhet" in the work. Siuzhet is not the event that takes place in the short story or novel. Siuzhet is a construction which, having resource to events, characters, and settings, compressing time or transposing it, creates as a result a certain perceptible phenomenon, which is experienced the way the author wishes us to experience it.[5]

We may observe here that none of the elements Shklovski mentions as setting apart fabula and siuzhet is
of a verbal nature: they all involve a reorganization of elements which is conceivable in words or in images. In fact, the Russian formalists applied this analytical opposition to the criticism of cinema as well as of fiction. Iuri Tynianov praised films with an involved siuzhet structure as opposed to the primitive, fabulaic narrative of popular action films. Complication, he argued, should lie not in the events of the fabula line, but in the artistic construction of the film, in the montage Soviet avant-garde filmmakers like Eisenstein and Pudovkin were giving so much importance to. A film, just like a literary work of art, needs more than a story: it needs "special conditions of style, language, junctions and movements of the material."[6]

Shklovki's accounts of the opposition fabula / siuzhet are often impressionistic and not very clear. Apart from the question of the verbal or nonverbal nature of the siuzhet, there is a more important one, having to do with the exact status of these terms as a whole. Do they refer to a theory of composition, or to a theory of reception? Shklovski is ambiguous here; in any case, his definitions seem to point to the former. "Fabula" is something which should concern the author, since it is his material, or at most the critic who uses it as a regulative concept the better to define the deviant construction of the siuzhet. Like Bradley or James, Shklovksi seems to conceive of form as wholly intrinsic to the work. Fabula is completely extraliterary: the work itself is all siuzhet, all form and organization. Once the work is finished, the concept of fabula is unimportant, and fulfils no role in the theory, since all the art lies in the siuzhet.

Later conceptions of the opposition fabula / siuzhet are more dynamic and relational. Tomashevski's definition, at first sight, looks much like Shklovksi's. However, from his definition we can see that in his conception the fabula is present in the work in an implicit way: it is "the aggregate of mutually related events reported in the work" (Tomashevski, "Thematics" 66). It is not merely a phase in composition, a material previous to and external to the work. The differential definition of plot (fabula is,
as always, the more basic concept) also seems to stress the temporal distortion of the order of events as the most immediate difference between the fabula and the siuzhet:

Plot is distinct from story. Both include the same events, but in the plot the events are arranged and connected according to the orderly sequence in which they were presented in the work. (Tomashevski, "Thematics" 67)

But here too we can see the difference when Tomashevski adds in a footnote that "the story is 'the action itself', the plot 'how the reader learns of the action'." That is, the action is present in the work for everyone, not merely for the critic. Its presence is first abstract and then concrete because it is reconstructed by the reader, it is concretized during the reading process. Fabula in Tomashevski or Tynianov is an element of the reader's experience of the work, not merely a material used by the author. That is, for the first time these critics define the structure of a narrative work of art as a tension between fabula and siuzhet. For Shklovski, structure meant siuzhet, the existing arrangement between the elements of the work. For Tomashevski and Tynianov, the structure of the work is more complex than that: it involves both the existing arrangement (siuzhet) and its absent counterpart, fabula, which is used by the reader as a regulative principle in interpreting siuzhet. For Tomashevski, the reader receives the siuzhet and then reconstructs the fabula: that is, he de-constructs the construction of the work as a necessary step in the understanding. There are in Tomashevski lingering traits of a vaguer conception of the relationship of fabula and siuzhet, for instance when he argues that "real incidents ... may make a story. A plot is wholly an artistic creation" ("Thematics" 68). Here the two concepts seem to be relatively independent from each other, rather like E. M. Forster's own "story" and "plot."
Tynianov's use of the concepts of fabula and siuzhet is yet more complex and dynamic. For him, both fabula and siuzhet are constructed by the reader as the reading process goes along, in perpetual reference to each other. None can exist without the other; both can progress only through their interaction in the reader's mind.[7] It is significant that at the same time Tynianov proposes to define the fabula as the fully concretized fictional action and world, and not merely as an action scheme. It is clear that if fabula is to be the product of the reader's normative construction, it is not enough to define it as the bare schematic skeleton of action. It is indeed the main defect of Mieke Bal's theory of narrative that she only defines fabula taking into account its condensed version. Both versions of fabula are necessary to account for the reader's activity: the expanded one (action) as the dialectical foil of the siuzhet during the reading process; the schematic one (action-scheme) as an instrument used in varying degrees of explicit formulation by the reader (as a psychological macrostructure) and by the critic (as a heuristic, metalingual construct).

Let us look closer now at the concepts used by Tomashevski in his analysis of the fabula, although we should not forget that his work is also important in the systematization of analytical concepts at siuzhet level.
2.2. Motifs and Macrostructures

The chapter devoted to the study of narrative and drama is called "Thematics." Tomashevkski apparently means that poetry is more intrinsically formal than these genres where the importance of theme is prominent. Still, his analysis does not deal in the main with the themes of literature themselves, but with their formal structuration in the work. Tomashevnski begins section two, "Story and Plot," with a definition of the theme (siuzhet, or unified semantic content) of a work as a unity composed of small thematic elements standing in one of two specific relations to each other:

We may distinguish two major kinds of arrangements of these thematic elements; (1) that in which causal-temporal relationships exist between the thematic elements, and (2) that in which the thematic elements are contemporaneous, or in which there is some shift of theme without internal exposition of the causal connections. The former are stories (tales, novels, epics); the latter have no "story," they are "descriptive." ("Thematics" 66)

The difference established here is not really one between narrative and nonnarrative works, since the criterion of division is causality rather than temporality. The narrative of a travel book (for instance, Bruce Chatwin's The Songlines) is organized by purely temporal elements, with a minimum of causality, of plot development and resolution. This opposition, as indeed most of the narratological oppositions we
establish, is to be seen as an idealization of a continuum: the relative importance of causal relationships vis-a-vis temporal ones may be highly variable.

Tomashevski gives a description of thematic material as ideally unified, and describes what we might call the microstructure of the work as generated by an analysis or subdivision of complex into simple thematic units. Let us note that here we could easily inverse the perspective, and describe the reader's activity as one of integration of atomic thematic units into larger wholes: actions, scenes, episodes. But Tomashevski presents a somewhat more abstract, formalist perspective, and he often does not relate the structure of the work to the activity of the reader (though we have already noted an important exception, and there are others).

The simplest thematic unit, the motif, is defined by Tomashevski at sentence level. This is evidently a matter of choice from our point of view, though Tomashevski is more categorical. An ambiguity lies in the status of those sentences. Are they actual sentences of the text, or "constructed" sentences, which metalinguistically describe the basic core of events in a work? Tomashevski would seem to stand here close to the notion of motif developed by Veselovski.

Veselovski first related organically the notions of motif and theme (siuzhet), by defining theme as a complex unit of which motifs are the atomic elements:
"A theme is a series of motifs. A motif develops into a theme." "Themes vary: certain motifs make their way into themes, or else themes combine with one another." "By theme I mean a subject in which various situations, that is motifs, move in and out." "By the term 'motif' I mean the simplest narrative unit." "The feature of a motif is its figurative, monomial schematism; such are those elements incapable of further decomposition which belong to lower mythology and to the tale."[8]

Propp notes that in Veselovski's view the motif is the primary, given thing, while the siuzhet or theme comes afterwards, as "a creative, unifying act" (Propp 12). But Veselovski's primary concern was not structural. This definition of motif was a notion of a necessarily metalinguistic nature, since its aim in Veselovski's work was to allow the comparison of different versions of folktales. Propp's notion of function, developed from Veselovski, was also of a metalinguistic nature: the series of functions described by Propp are not actual sentences in the folktale, but structural units which underlie a sentence or group of sentences. However, we observe that in Tomashevski we also have "Raskolnikov kills the old woman", which though abstract enough with respect to Crime and Punishment is no longer devised for the purpose of comparison between different themes: it belongs to one specific work. A motif is related above all to other motifs in the same work, not to similar motifs in similar works. Tomashevski explicitly separates the formalist and the comparatist notion of motif: the latter are truly atomic units, while "in comparative studies one must speak of motifs that have remained intact historically, that have preserved their unity in passing from work to work, rather than of 'irreducible' motifs" ("Thematics" 68).

Let us go back to the definition of fabula and siuzhet seen on the basis of the concept of motif:

Mutually related motifs form the thematic bonds of the work. From this point of view, the story is the
aggregate of motifs in their logical, causal-chronological order; the plot is the aggregate of those same motifs but having the relevance and order which they had in the original work. (Tomashevski, "Thematics" 68)

So, it is not events but motifs which are the atomic units of both fabula and siuzhet, even if Tomashevski seems to be thinking of motifs mainly as events. A problem appears now, since there are things relevant in the siuzhet which are irrelevant in the fabula, but at the same time Tomashevski insists that the same motifs make up the two. Moreover, using Shklovski's example, we might argue that Pushkin's digressions in Onegin are made up of motifs all right, but that those motifs are not a part of the story or the fabula. They are not narrative, but commentative, phatic or reflexive in nature. It would seem that not all the motifs in a work are narrative in the sense of being a rearrangement of a fabula, as Tomashevski implies, but we shall leave this question aside for the moment.

2.3. The Two Logics of Narrative

When Tomashevski describes the differences between the motive structures of fabula and siuzhet he stresses the presentational function of the latter:

The place in the work in which the reader learns of an event, whether the information is given by the author, or by a character, or by a series of indirect hints--all this is irrelevant to the story. But the
The siuzhet becomes a structure of information, a cognitive perspective imposed on the fabula. The fabula is informationally homogeneous, while the information of the plot is perceptually colored. Fabula can be conceived "in se" apart from an observer, but siuzhet requires a specific point of view, temporal ordering and distribution of information. Once again, the figure of the reader is significantly related to the form of the work: a crucial step in formalist analysis. The siuzhet has a structure of its own, whose coherence is not guided by temporal and causal considerations, but by artistic needs: the presentation of the story in a successful way to cause a particular experience in the reader: suspense, curiosity, sympathy, etc. As we shall see later, the particular coherence of this informational structure is ensured through motivation.

2.4. Classification of Motifs

This difference in the logic of fabula and siuzhet brings along a difference in the motifs which make up the work: "By simply retelling the story we immediately discover what may be omitted without destroying the coherence of the narrative and what may not be omitted without disturbing the connections among events. The motifs which cannot be omitted are bound motifs; those which may be omitted without disturbing the whole causal-chronological course of events are free motifs" ("Thematics" 68). Bound motifs are in some way the core of the work, while free motifs belong to the stylistic periphery: according to Tomashevski, "Although only the bound motifs are required by the story, free motifs (digressions, for
example) sometimes dominate and determine the construction of the plot" ("Thematics" 68). So, once again we find the notion of the fabula as a basic framework and material, and siuzhet as a detailed artistic elaboration. Literary tradition is seen as more determinant on the use of free motifs, which give each kind of writing its determining quality. We see that bound motifs are bound by the laws of the fabula: time and causality. Free motifs, on the other hand, are bound by the laws of the siuzhet: artistic relevance. Tomashevski is ambiguous as to whether there is any sense in speaking of free motifs in the fabula. He seems to conceive of the fabula basically as a schematic series of bound motifs, somewhat like Propp's functional series in the folktale. This notion of fabula as an action scheme (and not a fully fleshed world) is useful in narratology, and versions of this concept can be found among more recent critics from Barthes and Bremond to Van Dijk or Bal.[9] But it is to some extent contradictory with one direction of Tomashevski's analysis, namely the conception of the fabula as the product of the reader's deconstruction of the siuzhet.

Bound motifs call for other motifs, and their development and connection calls for free motifs. Tomashevski's analysis is developed later by Roland Barthes's classification of narrative motifs into functions (either kernels or catalysers) and indexes.

Another principle of classification divides the motifs into static and dynamic. This division cuts across the first one: "Free motifs are usually static, but not all static motifs are free" ("Thematics" 70). This classification derives from a conception of the fabula as the transition from a static situation to a different static situation. From this very definition we see that the basic action scheme must include both static and dynamic motifs, although in Tomashevski's view the fabula consists most characteristically of bound motifs, while most motifs introduced at siuzhet level are static.
2.5. Horizontal Sections of the Fabula

Tomashevski's definition of narrative progress is interesting because it leads us to the interests and therefore to the characteristics of the actors. Tomashevski, however, restricts his account to the description of a conflict of wills:

The development of a story may generally be understood as a progress from one situation to another, so that each situation is characterized by a conflict of interest, by discord and struggle among the characters. ("Thematics" 71)

This description sounds as if the characters' wills were not artificial constructs, but the true engines of the fabula's progression. It would be more adequate to describe the early situation and its evolution with respect to more character traits. The characters have different intentions, but they also have different knowledge of the situation, different abilities and personal characteristics (name, age, social status, appearance, etc.). All these elements make up what a character is (a paper being), and should find a place in a narrative description of the fabula. In fact, if we define a situation as a particular structural relationship between character (setting, etc.) and other traits, an event could be described as the suppression or the
appearance of one trait, or the transference of one trait from one character to another. In this way, we could describe each character's narrative evolution concerning his aims, his status, or his point of view in the narrow sense--what he knows. It is important to note that there are as many potential points of view in the story as there are characters. Point of view is a story-level category, and we shall study it later on, but we should not forget that in this more restricted sense point of view already exists at fabula level. Later, in his analysis of the story ("Thematics" 73-74), Tomashevski introduces also the reader's point of view in the sense of what he knows about the fabula at any given point of the story. This allows on the one hand a classification of possible narrative situations according to the relative knowledge of character and readers, comparable to the ones developed later by Pouillon, Todorov and Genette. On the other hand, "the reader" is shown to be in a way one character among others; not a real person but a role defined by the text.

This classification of character traits (epistemic, essential, volitive, etc.) would also allow a closer analysis of the intrigue, a concept defined by Tomashevski as "the gathering of the characters into groups and . . . the agreement of each group upon the tactics to be used against the other" ("Thematics" 71).

The definition of narrative as "a journey from one situation to another" (70) is also a version of a triadic model which seems to be inevitable in narrative analysis, from Aristotle's beginning, middle and end to Lotman's definition of narrativity as the transgression of a semantic border. Hegel's dialectic structure of thesis-antithesis-synthesis which lies at the basis of his grand narrative of the spirit's development could be a useful middle between these extremes. In fact, Tomashevski explicitly posits a dialectical progress in the story:
In the simplest system of dialectics relevant to the construction of a story, the climax is like the antithesis (the thesis is the exciting force, the antithesis the climax, and the synthesis the ending). ("Thematics" 72)

The ending of the fabula (which, according to Aristotle, follows something of necessity but is not followed of necessity by anything) is defined by Tomashevski with respect to the expectations of the reader. During the development of the action, the reader is particularly active; he forms expectations as to the possible outcome of the present action, but "The later harmonious situation, which does not require further development, will neither evoke nor arouse the reader's anticipation" ("Thematics" 71). This definition of the unified fabula with respect to the reader's activity can already be found in the neo-Classical dramatic theories of Corneille or Dryden.[10]

Many of Tomashevski's concepts for plot analysis are immediately derived from Aristotle. So, Tomashevski relates the degree of tension in the plot to "the proximity of a great change of fortune" ("Thematics" 72), an Aristotelian expression. The concept of peripety reminds us of Aristotle's peripeteia, but in the Poetics this referred to a momentous "reversal of the situation" which was present only in complex plots; in Tomashevski a peripety is any alteration in the situation. Other terms for elements of the fabula (climax, exposition, etc.) are introduced or developed by Tomashevki following the tradition of the German poetics now unjustly underestimated (e.g. Freytag, Spielhagen, Friedemann).
2.6. Vertical Integration: Exposition and Motivation

Tomashevski has introduced a series of terms to describe the "horizontal" sections of a fabula: initial situation, exciting force, peripeties, climax, ending. Now he introduces a further term, the exposition, which is "a narrative introduction to the initial situation", or "the presentation of circumstances determining the initial cast of characters and their interrelationships." The exposition is not the beginning of the work. It is distinguished in a footnote from the parts of the siuzhet, the beginning and the end as they are actually found in the work:

From the point of view of the arrangement of the narrative material, the part beginning the narrative is called the prologue. The close is called the epilogue. ("Thematics" 72)

The exposition cannot be defined with respect to the siuzhet alone. But it is not simply a part of the fabula either. Otherwise, we would just call it "initial situation." The exposition is, therefore, the early part of the fabula insofar as it is presented in the siuzhet. It is a concept having to do not only with cause and effect (since it usually deals with static relationships or with the causes of a particular situation) but also with the
informative structure of the work: the exposition is there to serve the artistic interest and control the reader's knowledge, while allowing him to acquire the necessary causal and temporal orientation in the narrated world. Its definition must therefore be intrinsically relational, half-way between fabula and siuzhet. In this way, Tomashevski avoids the inadequacies which Freytag's definition of exposition as the initial part of the work presents for an extended narratology.[11]

Tomashevski divides exposition into immediate, delayed, and transposed. The latter involves a time shift for one whole section of the narrative, while delayed exposition is gradual and correlative with an ex abrupto beginning.

The concept of delayed exposition leads Tomashevski to deal with point of view and the use of focalizer characters: "Usually the author withholds information about the circumstances involving a group of major characters, telling the reader only what one or the other of the characters knows" ("Thematics" 73). Let us note here that the important thing is not what the "author" (in fact, the narrator) knows, but instead what he says to the reader.

Motivation is a concept which no longer has to do specifically with the analysis of the fabula structure. It refers to the organization of information, the presentation of fabula elements to the reader. But naturally enough the siuzhet often introduces those motifs following patterns which emerge spontaneously from the fabula. This is clear above all with respect to compositional and realistic kinds of motivation. Since the reader is in a way a character, the author can use the experience of other characters to guide and
give shape to the reader's experience. The concept of motivation could be expanded to include the restrictions of point of view and some narrative techniques (e.g. epistolary or memoir narration) which transpose fabulaic perceptual or narrative structures to the siuzhet as a compositional technique.

If Tomashevski does not expand the concept in this sense, he does use it to deal with literary evolution and literary tradition, studying the interplay of new and well-worn motivation techniques (also in section 5, "The Vitality of Plot Devices"). This is a peculiarly Formalist perspective on literary history, and it should concern us here to the extent that we can reverse our perspective and see fabulaic elements no longer as a possible source for elements, but as constructions which are introduced at that level of the textual structure in order to provide motivation of some kind or other. This is, essentially, the "scandalous" description of character given by Viktor Shklovski in his analysis of Don Quixote.

2.7. Time, Space, Character

Tomashevski defines other elements of the fabula apart from the structure of the events, such as the time,
space and characters. He divides in a neat way fabulaic time, "the amount of time required by the events that are said to occur" ("Thematics" 78) and reading time, which is related to the size of the work. We could argue that he also develops the notion of siuzhet time as different from both, even though he does not offer an intentional threefold division, when he defines the concepts of delayed exposition, *Vorgeschichte* and *Nachgeschichte*. As to the place of the action, he calls it static or dynamic ("Thematics" 78), and that is about everything. Place he completely subordinates to action. Tomashevski does not study place symbolism of any kind, or even the relationship between spatial representation and focalization. The emphasis, however, is formalist: place is not merely referential but a constructive device which allows the development of the action.

The same goes for the hero: a character who is "the living embodiment of a collection of motifs" ("Thematics" 88). As a rule, "The character is a guiding thread which makes it possible to untangle a conglomeration of motifs and permits them to be classified and arranged" ("Thematics" 88). Nothing furthest from A. C. Bradley's all too human Shakespearean characters.

Name, psychological characteristics, conduct, direct characterization by the author, are the building materials of a character. As a construction, the character performs an informational function, and must be recognized and remembered by the reader. Tomashevski links once more in this way the deeper level of the fabula with the reading process in a dialectical interplay. The character's psychological unity affects other elements of the work, constituting what Tomashevski calls the character's "mask." The division of characters into static and dynamic ("Thematics" 89) should be considered in conjunction with the definition of event we commented on before, since in dynamic characterization "the elements of characterization enter intimately into the story, and the crisis of the character . . . marks a change in the situation in the story"
"Thematics" 89). This remark could be extended in some degree or other to any event in a fabula.

In spite of his insistence on the constructedness of character and what Barthes would call its indexical nature relating different levels of the textual structure, Tomashevski tries to divide the constructive elements into those belonging to the fabula and those proper to the siuzhet:

The protagonist is by no means an essential part of the story. The story, as a system of motifs, may dispense entirely with him and his characteristics. The protagonist, rather, is the result of the formation of the story material into a plot. ("Thematics" 90)

Accordingly, he what gives us the sense of a character's being the hero are shown to be the constructive elements of the plot: point of view, narrative orientation by the author, etc. These observations are helpful, but they should not be pushed too far, because it is also a tenet of formalist doctrine that fabulas are composed with the sole view to make them perceptible as a siuzhet. The importance of Tomashevski's contribution lies as much in his analysis of the text into semiotic levels as in his awareness of how these levels are organically and dialectically related to each other.
Lemon and Reis, the earliest translators of Formalist texts into English, use (or misuse) the terms story and plot to translate fabula and siuzhet, respectively.

A. C. Bradley, "Poetry for Poetry's Sake" 739.

Henry James, "The Art of the Novel."

Viktor Shklovski, La cuerda del arco: sobre la disimilitud de lo simil 84.

Iuri Tynianov, "Plot and Story-Line in the Cinema" 20.

Cf. Emil Volek's account in Metaestructuralismo 152 ff.


See Meir Sternberg's critique of Freytag in *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (ch. 1).