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Why Narratology?

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Why narratology? What has narratology brought to the study of narrative, of literature, of discourse generally? What is the status of narratology among other disciplines? What difference does narratology make?

These are some of the speculative questions I will attempt to answer in this paper. I say "attempt to answer," because various answers are possible and because few if any of them can fail to be challenged. The questions are further complicated in that the issues involved can be addressed from various alternative perspectives. And indeed, there are those who will simply shrug and retort: "Why bother with narratology? Why take the trouble?"

Now, it is not by coincidence that the title of my talk, "Why Narratology?", resonates with the question "What is narratology?" *What is Narratology* is in fact the title of a collection of essays, subtitled *Questions and Answers Regarding the Status of a Theory*, that was published in 2003 under the editorship of Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller, the first volume of the book series "Narratologia" at Walter de Gruyter Press. Nor is it by coincidence that the question "What is narratology?" – itself open to widely divergent answers – leads us to considerations bearing on the history of narratology. The term, originally proposed by Tzvetan Todorov in his *Grammaire du* Décaméron in 1969, designates a "science of narrative" – not a science in the sense of the exact or natural sciences, as people have often assumed, but in the sense of *poetics*, a discipline with antecedents going back as far as Plato and Aristotle. Narratology properly speaking can be traced to these authors, although its most immediate sources are found in Russian formalism and in the structuralist movement. According to the editors of the volume *What is Narratology?*, the history of the discipline, unwritten in 2003 – still to be written today and for which we have no widely-agreed methodology or standards for selecting and ordering criteria – can nonetheless be divided without serious controversy into three phases:

> The first phase, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century in Europe and the USA and characterized by the accumulation of professionalized knowledge about narrative, took its material from three main sources: the remnants of normative rhetoric and poetics, the practical knowledge of novelists and the observations of literary critics. Until the mid-twentieth century, scholars collected the professionalized knowledge from these three areas and organized it under a wide variety of headings and titles […] (p. v)

Now in the Anglo-American domain, a clear example of the convergence of these three sources can be found in the codification of Henry James's famous prefaces to his novels by Percy Lubbock in his book *The Craft of Fiction*, published in 1921. Similar developments can be found from the end of the nineteenth century up to the middle of the twentieth century in Germany with what was called "the theory of the novel," and in French-speaking countries with the controversies over generic distinctions between *récit* (a short narrative of personal experience) and *roman* or novel (a realist genre reflecting a social or historical reality) as well as with some of the earliest work in linguistic stylistics, notably the *style indirect libre* or "free indirect discourse," by Charles Bally in Geneva.

The second phase in the history of narratology corresponds to what is commonly called today "classical" narratology, which flourished during the 1960s and 70s in the work of Todorov, Barthes, Bremond, Greimas, Genette and others within the context of the structuralist movement. What distinguished the original narratologists from earlier students of narrative was their allegiance, loosely shared with anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, psychoanalysts such as Jacques Lacan and specialists in other fields, to a principle that seriously questioned the long-established articles of faith of the traditional historical approach to the study of the various national literatures: the *pilot science* for the social sciences, including poetics, is structural linguistics. Thus, according to Todorov, narratives are structured according to a "universal grammar": the claim was that there is a profound unity between language and narrative such that a character, he says, must be understood as a noun in the grammatical sense and narrative action as a verb. Todorov's proposal to study narrative in terms of a universal grammar – in effect, to develop a so-called narrative grammar – encountered many critiques: for some, such a "narrative grammar" was a mere metaphor; for others, it was contestable on the grounds of linguistic concepts and methodologies; and for still others, it was an unacceptable violation of the boundaries between the disciplines, a useless and vain attempt to transform the study of literature into a rigid and sterile "science" incompatible with literature as an art, as a production of the imagination. Whatever the arguments for or against Todorov's model – the aim of which was to create a "grammar" of Boccaccio's *Decameron* that would apply not only to this particular work but to narratives in general – its impact, along with that of the models and theories developed by other structuralist narratologists, was real and had consequences that continue to be felt today even beyond the circles of specialists of narratology.

One of the most striking and important consequences of the early narratologists' innovations was to have profoundly transformed the study of narrative, and of literary studies generally, as an academic discipline in relation to other disciplines. By advocating linguistics as a "pilot science" for the social sciences, to which poetics was added – however contested this proposal may have been at the time and however disputable its initial results – the basis for looking at literature in a significantly new light was now laid out in strong terms. In the French sphere, for example, this meant that narrative was no longer regarded as one of the fine arts – the so-called *belles lettres* – or studied within the framework of traditional philology with its heavy emphasis on source and influence in the chronological succession of works, authors and movements; drawing on the distinction in Saussurean linguistics between diachronic (or historical) evolution and the synchronic structure and functioning of language at a given moment in time, the narratologists sought to develop a method for the systematic description and analysis of narratives based on principles, concepts and procedures that would be applicable to broad ranges of narratives and, ideally, to all narratives. This orientation is clearly affirmed in the famous 1966 issue of the French review *Communications* entitled "Recherches sémiologiques. L'analyse structurale du récit," a publication widely regarded as the founding act of narratology, even though the name of the new discipline, narratology, was not to come until 1969. Roland Barthes, in the famous opening essay, "Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits," begins with a statement that clearly sets the tone for narratology and its objectives, a statement that remains current even today as a sort of manifesto often quoted by narratologists. Barthes affirms, first, that the narratives of the world are countless, universal, transhistorical and transcultural; second, that they can be conveyed by various media (language, image, gesture); third, that they exist in nearly infinite generic forms; fourth, that they are open to examination from different perspectives (historical, psychological, sociological, ethnological, esthetic, etc.); and fifth, that, due to their universality, they are open to description by reference to a "common model" for which Saussure's notion of *langue* serves as a model. By laying out the domain and goals of

narratology in this way, and in particular by asserting the existence of a "common model" by which all narratives can be described, Barthes, together with his fellow narratologists, made a radical break with literary studies as they existed in the academy up to the 1960s, contributing to the so-called "structuralist revolution" that has had an enduring impact, even on non-narratological approaches to the study of narrative.

Now, it is not my purpose either to sketch a panorama or history of narratology or to outline one of the many narratological theories that have been developed over the past fifty years, but rather to gain some insight into the question "Why narratology?" and to identify some of the consequences of this approach for our understanding of narrative today. To illustrate the latter point, I refer to two of the most controversial positions staked out by the early narratologists which, once again, were expressed by Roland Barthes: the "death of the author" (also proclaimed by philosopher Michel Foucault) and the assertion that fictional characters are "paper beings." Although such claims were denounced by traditionalists for outrageously "dehumanizing" literature, they were fully compatible with the premises and goals adopted by the structural method, as illustrated by the narratological analyses carried out on actual texts; moreover, the death of the author and the reduction of characters to nothing more substantial than the paper on which stories are written was illustrated by French literary production of the 1960s and 70s in the form of the *nouveau roman*, represented by such authors as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor, Claude Simon, Jean Ricardou and others, in an assault on realist literature. This suggests that the theoretical work conducted by the narratologists was not mere speculative abstraction with little connection to literature, but that it was somehow corroborated by literary practice itself. Since the death of the author, for example, we have seen the rise of a new narrative genre: "autofiction." The example also confirms the links of narratology with Russian formalism, described by Wolf Schmid as "proto-narratology." At issue with Barthes' disconcerting proposals is one of the key notions of the formalists known as *ostranenija*, or "making it strange." Among the purposes of art, maintained Victor Shklovsky, is the attempt to make things that are familiar in everyday life seem strange. "Our perception of the world," observed Shklovsky, "has withered away, what has remained is mere recognition." For him, art forces us to see the world anew, to put things in a strange light by making the familiar seem unfamiliar. By severing the conventional ties between flesh-and-blood authors and their works or between living people and fictional characters and thus questioning or even violating the unspoken assumptions and established rules of the literary art, the early narratologists, similarly to the *nouveaux romanciers*, sought to draw a critical eye to the familiar, to unmask it in order to sharpen our perceptions and seek out novel and perhaps unconventional connections and underlying patterns in place of blindly taking for granted the familiar and the commonplace. Thus in one sense, the early narratologists sought to do in theory what the *nouveaux romanciers* were doing in practice.

Here, then, is one answer to the question "Why narratology?" This is an approach to the study of narrative that provides us with concepts and analytical procedures making it possible to apprehend, describe and explain the workings of narratives in ways and with degrees of system and rigor seldom achieved by previous approaches. One of the principal accomplishments of this orientation is to have revealed dimensions of narrative that were previously unexplored, thus expanding and deepening our knowledge of literature generally. Although the "common model" called for by Barthes in this undertaking – Saussure's *langue* – has never been universally established, or even widely acknowledged as a suitable and adequate model for narrative theory, there are many excellent narratological analyses that have durably affected the way narratives are studied. The most influential and durable of these studies coming out of the initial phase of narratology is, of course, Gérard Genette's "Discours du récit: essai de méthode," published in 1972 and since then translated into many languages. Here, only a few general points bearing on Genette's study can be mentioned.

Unlike the so-called "high structuralists" such as A. J. Greimas or Claude Bremond, whose contributions are highly formalized and abstract, laying particular emphasis on the logical and grammatical modeling of story content into a narrative deep structure, Genette, a "low-structuralist," developed his method with reference to a specific work which is extremely rich in the narrative techniques employed: Marcel Proust's *Á la recherche du temps perdu*. At the same time, Genette integrated into his system the findings of a number of narrative theories whose origins were neither structuralist nor formalist but that were well-known by traditional literary scholars. This is the case, notably, of point of view criticism which Genette reformulated as *focalization*. To resolve the conceptual confusions inherited from point of view criticism, he proposed to distinguish "Who sees?" from "Who speaks?", thus opening a new chapter in this particular branch of narrative theory. Another example is the notion of *narrative level*. Among other things, narrative level has proved useful for the integration of existing approaches to the so-called frame story into other aspects of narrative structure, and it has also contributed significantly to work done on narrative communication models and to the roles of the so-called *mise en abyme* as well as of *metalepsis* in the general economy of the narrative text. What I would like to emphasize, without going into further detail, is that Genette's contribution set a standard for system in narrative theory and analysis that remains exemplary even today: by combining theoretical principals into a synthetic model for the analysis of narrative as discourse as a signifying structure in its many interdependent aspects, Genette set out a method accounting in a comprehensive way for what Gerald Prince calls the "form and function" of narrative itself. This is true even though various particulars of the model have been revised and questioned and despite certain shortcomings or oversights that have been criticized. And it is true even though alternative narrative models have been elaborated since the appearance of Genette's book.

As is generally known, however, the structural method in narratology fell out of use for a variety of reasons: the crisis in structuralism, the sterile academic codification of narratological analysis, the rise of poststructuralism and deconstructionism and then, starting in the early1980s, the emergence of new scientific paradigms for narrative theory such as the analysis of storytelling in everyday conversation, discourse analysis, possible worlds theory, artificial intelligence and the cognitive sciences, among others. Another important development at about this time was the rise of feminist narratology in the United States: Susan Lanser, for one, began drawing attention to the place of socially-constructed gender roles in the constitution of narrative categories such as point of view, plot structure and character; Robyn Warhol, for her part, defined feminist narratology as an umbrella term for "the study of narrative structures and strategies in the context of cultural constructions of gender." Such considerations opened the way to the broader historical, social, cultural and political factors that influence narrative form and structure, so that by the early 1990s the contextual aspects of narrative, largely left out of the picture by the early narratologists, since their interest lay mainly with the textual properties of narrative, began to make themselves felt in narrative theory. Out of these developments was born a "contextual narratology." At about the same time, the scope of narratological concerns expanded yet again with the so-called narrative turn: where narratology had traditionally been focused on the literary disciplines, it became increasingly evident that disciplines such as the law, history, psychotherapy, ethnography and the other social sciences as well as managerial studies and the media and communication sciences, to name only a few, frequently contain elements of narrative. It thus came to be realized that narratological concepts and methods had something to contribute to research in these areas. This realization was favored by the fact that one of the original aims of narratology, as stated by Roland Barthes in 1966, was to identify narrative as an autonomous object of inquiry, independent of its manifestation in any specific genre or medium. It thus became possible to overcome the traditional tendency of literary criticism to define the study

of narrative according to its generic manifestations: the fable, the fairytale, the short story, the novel broken down into its various subgenres, etc. Without these generic restrictions, narratologists were tempted to explore the narrative elements found in lyric poetry and theater. The result was the emergence of a *transgeneric narratology*, calling into question the traditional division of literature into epic, lyric and dramatic. At the same time, it was also recognized that narratives exist not only in linguistic forms, but also in the various media – visual, gestural, cinematic and musical – and this led to the development of *transmedial narratology*, one of the most innovative branches in current narrative theory and analysis.

Needless to say, the many new avenues of narratological inquiry that sought to integrate contextual factors, transdisciplinary research and intermediality could not fail to expand and transform the original narratology, thus marking the third phase spoken of by the editors of *What is Narratology?* These developments culminated in what David Herman, in his introduction to a landmark anthology entitled *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*, published in 1999, called "postclassical narratology" or "narratologies," as opposed to the more text-centered structuralist "classical narratology." Herman characterizes this new orientation by pointing out that he "us[es] the term *narratology* quite broadly, in a way that makes it interchangeable with *narrative studies*. Arguably, this broad usage reflects the evolution of narratology itself […] No longer designating just a subfield of structuralist literary theory, *narratology* can now be used to refer to any principled approach to the study of narratively organized discourse, literary, historiographical, conversational, filmic, or other." (1999: 27 n.1)

So now, again, why narratology? At this point in time, two points seem beyond dispute: first, that narratology has a history with an ongoing evolution and can no longer be qualified as a mere technique or mechanical procedure for the description and labeling of narrative devices and structures; and second, that narratology is gaining a status among the disciplines. Given the sheer magnitude of these developments over several decades, they are clearly something not to be ignored and that must be reckoned with and evaluated.

Regarding the history of narratology, what characterizes this history is, first, that its sources are not restricted to the literary history of any particular national literature, but that they come from several different national traditions in literary research. The Russian formalists drew on German philosophy while French narratology in the 1960s was heavily indebted to translations of the formalists' essays and books into French; the Austrian narrative theorist Franz Stanzel has been credited with being the first German-language narratologist, even though his basic theory was formulated in the 1950s, more than ten years prior to the "official" birth of narratology in France; in Germany, some of the principal narratologists are professors of English, well-versed in English-language narratology, who challenge traditional German theories of narrative; Wayne C. Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), the most important single book in narrative theory in the United States during the latter half of the twentieth century, is based on criteria that have little to do with the European formalist and structuralist schools, and yet some of Booth's notions, notably the "implied author," are now fully integrated into mainstream narratology. Developments such as these and many more are clear evidence that narratology has become truly international in scope and that, indeed, it would never have come into existence without extensive international scholarly exchange. Any history of narratology must therefore be *comparative*, taking account of the various national traditions that have contributed to the formulation of narratological theses and methods of analysis, partly as a result of the importing and exporting of research results thanks to translations, international conferences and now, increasingly, the Internet. Another characteristic of the history of narratology is that it is not a linear or chronological history. Research carried out in this area in one country does not advance at the same pace or along the same lines as in other countries, and it often occurs, for example, that researchers in

Germany will take up in a new light a specific research topic abandoned in France several years earlier. For this reason, the history of narratology cannot be approached as a chronological succession of schools and theories but rather as a *genealogy* in which related developments are grouped together into what the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein called "family resemblances."

If the historical and national diversity of theoretical approaches to the study of narrative and the high level of international scholarly exchange in this area are reasons in themselves to acknowledge the influence of narratology, the expanding and sometimes innovative transdisciplinary dimension of narratological research constitutes perhaps even more compelling grounds for exploring the implications of these developments. Initiatives in this area are too numerous and complex to discuss here, so I will mention only one of the central issues in transdisciplinary narratological research. Briefly stated, what is involved is that the conceptual, terminological and methodological exchanges between narratology and other disciplines, already present during the 1960s and 70s, have taken on a particular intensity over the past twenty-five years. Needless to say, such transdisciplinary dialogue presupposes multiple skills on the part of researchers, and thus a degree of competence in several fields of research which is rarely achieved. As one can easily imagine, the results of these endeavors are in many cases tentative or even unsatisfactory. This is not to say, however, that significant breakthroughs have not been made in a number of areas. Among the most notable examples of these important developments is cognitive narratology, one of the dominant trends in the field over the past fifteen years.

In a monograph entitled *Storyworlds and the Sciences of Mind* (2013), David Herman, a topmost cognitive narratologist, makes what I think are some valuable observations about transdisciplinary research in general and narrative theory in particular. The risk of such research is that when, for example, a narrative theorist adopts a given branch of psychology in order to elucidate certain aspects of narrative, he may overlook significant developments and fundamental disagreements among psychologists specializing in this field. This lack of mastery of the acquired expertise may seriously compromise the value of the contribution and cast doubt on its pertinence to narrative theory. Herman's other observation, closely related to the first, is that transdisciplinary research should avoid the temptation to subordinate one discipline to another. This in fact is what was advocated by structuralist narratology when it adopted structural linguistics as a paradigm. Rather than such a "top-down" approach in which, for example, narratology would be regarded as a "subdomain within the cognitive sciences," Herman argues in favor of a "multidimensional approach." Thus in place of unilaterally transferring terms and concepts from one discipline to another and attempting to adapt them to the target discipline or to reconfigure that target discipline following the criteria of the source discipline, it is preferable to put the two disciplines on an equal footing in such a way that the results and insights gained in one field are pertinent to the other field. Advances in one discipline might then contribute to the resolution of a research problem in other disciplines or even serve to bring to light new topics for further investigation. One example of such an exchange, is the profound transformation of models of narrative grammars such as the one of Todorov I spoke of earlier as a result of developments in cognitive schema theory, a theory which, in turn, is partly indebted to frame theory in the field of artificial intelligence.

All in all, then, the evidence seems to lend little support to those who would dismissively ask "Why bother with narratology?" Beginning in the 1960s as an innovative synthesis of already existent concepts, theories and methods, research in this field has since gone on to explore its historical connections with literary scholarship in various national traditions. More recently, with full acknowledgment of the presence of narrative in areas other than literature, scholars have gone on to investigate narrative in its transdisciplinary dimension, thus positioning narratology in relation to research in non-literary disciplines. This process is

currently underway, even though the status of narratology as a discipline among other disciplines remains open for debate. Even so, it is clear that this particular approach to narrative theory has gained sufficient autonomy that we can indeed speak of a "science of narrative" in its own right, a science which is not dissolved into other academic disciplines. I will conclude, then, by asking "Why not narratology?"