

# Review. The First Narratology Quartet Is an Upbeat Composition

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*Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2012). Theory and Interpretation of Narrative Series; xiv + 280 pp.

In the past few decades, narratology has been booming. It has developed in various so-called postclassical directions, transcending the self-imposed limits of the classical, structuralist approaches (Barthes, Greimas, Genette) that founded the discipline in the 1960s and 1970s. Narratology has also absorbed a vast amount of non-literary research (in empirical psychology, evolutionary science, linguistics, and cognitive studies, to name only the most prominent external sources), and it has been paying ever more attention to ‘unnatural’ narratives, that is, unusual narratives that run counter to everyday stories and that flout the mimetic conventions narratologists have supposedly tended to focus on. Though these developments have led to an enormous advance in the analysis of (literary) narratives, they have also resulted in a rather bewildering array of methodologies. This diversity makes it difficult to see what exactly lies at the heart of the narratological investigation these days. *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates* addresses these two problems. It installs a dialogue between dominant approaches (rhetorical, feminist, cognitive, and unnatural narratology) by investigating core concepts from all four angles. As such, the book is extremely timely. It is also highly original. There have been many excellent introductions to narratology, but none has taken the form of a discussion between a handful of major experts. As Gerald Prince states on the back cover: “I know of no book like this one.”

Maybe the comparison with introductory handbooks is not entirely apt. Indeed, *Narrative Theory* is not aimed at readers who are completely new to the discipline. Readers of this book better be fully acquainted with classical narratology, and it may even help if they have at least a passing knowledge of postclassical theories and methods. Perhaps a fifth voice, working from the classical structuralist angle, could have broadened the audience. It would have been interesting to see just where and how the new approaches divert from the classical ones. That might indeed have shown even more clearly how favorably state-of-the-art work on core concepts, such as character and the reader, compares to the alleged structuralist concentration on the text. Needless to say, hardcore structuralists are not easy to come by these days, and the comparison we suggest might in fact have complicated the whole set-up. Using one of the terms coined by the practitioners of rhetorical narratology, we might say that the addition of a structuralist voice could have made the authorial audience far too heterogeneous. Parts of the audience would be bored with yet another exposition of the basics (which many narratologists still offer to undergraduates as their starting point in the field, and rightly so), while newcomers attracted by this introductory dimension would have been slightly mystified by all the postclassical fervor. So as *Narrative Theory* stands, there is no real reason to complain about the level and organization of the dialogue it so skillfully presents.

### **Structure and principles**

The book consists of two parts. In the first part, the contributors set out their basic ideas, and then they tackle six core concepts, each time illustrating their theoretical points with pertinent interpretations of one well-selected novel. In the second part they react to each other, sometimes vigorously challenging their partners in the conversation. The rhetorical approach is introduced, used and defended by James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz. Robyn Warhol is in charge of feminist narratology, whose ideological inspiration she does not seek to hide. David Herman presents an approach that connects narrative and mind—he dislikes the term “cognitive narratology” (221-2). Brian Richardson, finally, offers an emphasis on unnatural narrative so as to correct the mimetic slant he detects in the work of many colleagues. All of them point out that they are not trying to cover the complete field, that they are not iconic or exemplary, and that their approach may not even be appreciated by all the narratologists working in their subfield. The novels for illustration add up

to a diverse and politically correct reading list: Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (Phelan/Rabinowitz), Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (Warhol), Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* (Herman), and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (Richardson).

Fortunately, the two-part structure of *Narrative Theory* does not mean that explicit comparisons, agreements and rejections can only be found in the second half. From the very first chapter, in which the narratologists sum up the basics of their approach, there are cross-references and comments on their colleagues. Often these early rejoinders amount to highly enlightening passages. Warhol explains why her methodology is far removed from cognitive narratology (10). Herman tries to show that the rhetorical view on mimetic, thematic, and synthetic aspects of the story precludes questions that need to be asked, for instance about the narrative communication diagram, which in his view has led to concepts overly shaped by "the anti-intentionalist arguments of the Anglo-American New Critics" (16). In the six subsequent chapters dealing with narratological core concepts, the reader can also find direct comparisons that are very informative. Examples include Richardson's comment upon the rhetorical view on progression and dynamics (78-9), and Herman's treatment of "authorial audience" in a useful section on reader constructs (151-2). Debate, in other words, is at the heart of the book.

The six core concepts discussed from chapter two onwards often come down to a set of related terms. Chapter two deals with authors, narrators, and narration; three is concerned with time, plot, and progression. Next the spatial component (space, setting, perspective) is up for discussion, followed by a four-fold view on characterization. Chapter six is devoted to reception and the reader, and the final chapter of the first part discusses values and norms involved in storytelling. Obviously, one might have selected different or additional concepts, such as speech representation, focalization, medium and genre, but these concepts do get a mention in the analyses, for instance in Warhol's reading of Austen's free indirect discourse (40-1), or in Herman's comparison between McEwan's *The Cement Garden* and the film version of this novel (48-9). Also, the selection is adequate enough to reach the aim of the book; namely, to clarify different approaches to narrative theory by "promoting dialogue among practitioners in the field" (ix).

Our only substantial complaint in connection to this has to do with the relegation of fictionality to the sidelines of the conversation. David Herman offers a theory of narrative at large, while the other contributors concentrate

on literary narrative. Herman is clearly mindful of this difference, but neither he nor his colleagues consider it with an eye for the impact of fictionality on the reception process. For a theory of fictionality that affects many of the core concepts discussed in *Narrative Theory*, and indeed complicates its presentation of rhetorical narratology, we advise readers to turn to *The Rhetoric of Fictionality* (2007) by Richard Walsh. Arguing for a direct link between the reader's awareness of fictionality (induced by markers in the text or by the paratext) and the effects of representation in the act of reading, Walsh has interesting, outside-of-the-box proposals about such varied issues as extradiegetic heterodiegetic narration and emotional involvement on the part of the audience. Fictionality is also a central focus in *Disputable Core Concepts of Narrative Theory* (2012), a recent effort by members of the Nordic Network of Narrative Studies. While that collection of essays lacks the tight organization of the book under review here, it does present a challenging view on a wide array of narratological topics such as telling and showing, character, and unreliable narration.

The five contributors to *Narrative Theory* present their cases eloquently, clearly and convincingly. There is no weak link in the chain and no wayward theorizing. One might, of course, ask whether it would not have been a good idea to have all contributors work on the same short story or novel. This tactic might have clarified the overlaps, agreements, and disagreements in the practice of interpretation. Up to a point, this sort of clarification can be found in the second part, when the contributors discuss each other's interpretations; there are some very interesting cases of alternative readings of the same text. For instance, Phelan and Rabinowitz produce a challenging alternative to Warhol's reading of the ending of *Persuasion* (190-1); Warhol adds to Herman's interpretation of McEwan (207-8), and Richardson points to the anti-mimetic dimensions of the novels analyzed by his colleagues (245 ff.). The fact that these alternative readings are so interesting, enhances the relevance of our suggestion that it might have been worthwhile to have all contributors interpret the same text. George Eliot's *Middlemarch* would perhaps have been a great choice given the four approaches on offer—it thrives on a rhetorical framework, dominated by an intrusive narrator who combines a degree of condescension with an almost tawdry effort to elicit sympathy from the readers; it thematizes gender in unexpected ways, eventually even seeming to fall back on the marriage plot it so vehemently questions early on; it is geared to the panoramic evocation of a typical story world (the provincial town), but regularly opts out of the description of locations in

favor of dialogue or consciousness evocation; and it undermines the realist illusion so regularly that one wonders how it has been able to become one of *the* realist novels in English. (For a recent postclassical treatment of *Middlemarch*, see chapter three of Alan Palmer's *Social Minds in the Novel* [2010].)

The use of one and the same text would have implied that texts are indifferent to methods, that they do not dictate a certain way of reading, or at the very least, that they can be approached with any methodology. This idea could seem to run counter to one of the principles put forward by Phelan and Rabinowitz, namely the a posteriori-principle: "Theory should not precede narrative, stipulating what it must be and do, but should rather follow from the myriad practices of actual storytellers" (185). A rule like this sits uneasily with the illustrative function of the texts that are actually analyzed in *Narrative Theory*. As the contributors make clear in their initial statements in the first chapter, the novels have been selected because they are considered especially suitable for illuminating certain aspects of the theory. At the end of the book, Brian Richardson explicitly points out that his colleagues use their novels of choice for their own purposes. For instance:

Nor should one chide Herman for passing on the most complex, innovative, and acclaimed work of McEwan: his goal is not to explicate the work of McEwan, but to illustrate his own theory. But these choices do suggest how the theoretical parameters we select go on to influence the narratives we gravitate toward and decide to foreground. They also reveal how much one's theoretical perspective leaves out, whether in the analysis of a text or in our understanding of an author's corpus. (248)

Richardson claims that the theories of Phelan, Rabinowitz, and Herman "do not provide much help for dealing with many of the most distinctive and innovative aspects of a work like *Midnight's Children*" (237). That would have been proved or disproved if the contributors had all been working on the same text. Now it remains a suggestive, but inconclusive statement. Perhaps our wish for a more objective comparison shows just how strongly we crave for an ideal theory—a coherent, encompassing treatment of (literary) narrative that can be tested on any text so as to prove its strength.

Richardson's remark also highlights the corrective function of his own approach. He is keen to list literary texts that make things tough on supposedly neutral theories of narrative such as Herman's and

Rabinowitz/Phelan's, but he does not offer a full paradigm of his own. Warhol takes this bull of incompleteness by the horns at the outset of her own presentation: "Nothing in any of the other contemporary versions of narrative theory prohibits attention to gender, sexuality, class, or other politically significant and historically grounded differences. What chiefly sets feminist narrative theory apart is its insistence on placing those issues at the center of the inquiry" (11). It is not clear to us how Warhol develops this insistence into a complete theory of narrative—in fact, just like Richardson, she seems to be weary of totalizing efforts to describe the function and processing of narrative. In our view, Phelan/Rabinowitz and especially Herman mount excellent defenses against this reproach. Their responses in Part Two also show how their approaches are capable of addressing Warhol's and Richardson's legitimate concerns.

### **Each to his own**

As in any dialogue that wants to be successful, there is a need to be concise. *Narrative Theory* is no exception to that rule. Every chapter presents a very succinct view of the topic at hand, which leads to a clear and very successful form of interaction. It also means, inevitably, that some nuances are lost, and that some positions and views may be stated more bluntly than they would have been had there been more room to expand. If readers feel the need for such expansion, they can contribute to the blog the publisher has created for further discussion.<sup>1</sup> As it happens, this forum has failed to take off. So far (until the middle of September 2012, that is), only one of the authors himself has added extra points to his contribution. There is no shortage of discussion at narrative theory conferences

worldwide, but the digital possibility to extend a book by some of the major researchers in the field does not seem to catch on.

The condensation and compression of theories works better for some than for others. It seems to do little harm to rhetorical narratology, perhaps because this approach is based on the common sense view of stories as intentional forms of communication—everyone can relate to that. In addition, the terms Phelan and Rabinowitz have introduced to narratology (such as the six forms of unreliability, or the thematic, mimetic and synthetic aspects of characters) are extremely handy to use. Herman's narrative and mind theory, a more abstract approach that looks less pragmatic at first sight, presupposes an acquaintance with some lesser known theories and concepts, and therefore may look less directly applicable. To be sure, David Herman does a terrific job clarifying the intricacies of story world construction. His is a very refined, nuanced and highly systematic view that does become clear in the actual analysis of the six core concepts, but it is less suited to a short point-by-point presentation than its rhetorical counterpart. For a more extensive description of his approach we highly recommend Herman's *Basic Elements of Narrative* (2009). In that book he briefly proposes his CAPA-model, which "consists of *Contexts* for acting, *Actions*, *Persons* who perform the actions, and *Ascriptions* of reasons for acting" (203).

Warhol's summary of feminist principles might look reductionist, polemical or dualistic to some readers. At the outset she states: "'Feminism' denotes the conviction that dominant culture and society are organized to the disadvantage of everyone who does not fit a white, masculine, middle- or upper-class, Euro-American, not-yet-disabled, heterosexual norm" (9). And in the discussion of literary values, she declares: "A feminist narrative critic will implicitly or explicitly evaluate a text according to its relation to patriarchy: the important question about a text's value is whether on the whole it operates to support patriarchal social and cultural arrangements or to subvert them" (165). These outspoken views do have the advantage of clarity and can be adapted to the format of the short dialogue much more easily than the cognitive way of looking at things. In addition, Warhol finds room to put these statements in perspective, for instance when she admits that aesthetic values are not completely covered by the anti-patriarchal stance (166-168).

Brian Richardson's unnatural or antimimetic stance is well suited to the discussion format, first of all because it starts from very clear (and again: binary) principles, namely that narratology is based too much on mimetic

and natural narratives, and that something else is needed for ‘unnatural’ narratives without characters or a clear setting in space and time. Secondly, Richardson has an almost encyclopedic knowledge of literary works that illustrate his point, so his exposé is always larded with convincing and noteworthy examples. His general point is so clear that it can easily be made in a few sentences, which means there is plenty of room for further nuance and for a trenchant discussion of the other approaches.

## Each and all

If one compares the various approaches, some recurring elements stand out. First of all, there is what could be called the rebirth of intention. In the wake of the New Critics, the structuralists and their decontextualized close readings, motives, purposes and intentions were banned from the practice of narrative analysis. They seem to be back with a vengeance. To rhetorical narratologists, all stories are purposeful forms of communication. For instance: “To the extent that you are considering narrative *as a communicative process*, then authors, and their communicative purposes, matter” (30). Time and again, Phelan and Rabinowitz claim that Finn’s story goes this or that way because that is the way that Mark Twain intended it to go. The difference between intentions and purposes is not discussed, perhaps because of lack of space. At any rate, both terms are used as if they are interchangeable. Sometimes, the analysis covers “Twain’s purpose” (64), sometimes “Twain’s intention” (65).

Phelan and Rabinowitz seem in no doubt whatsoever that they can make definite and reliable statements about authorial intentions—an attitude that perhaps marks the strongest departure from structuralism in the whole of *Narrative Theory*. Or, indeed, from poststructuralism, as Warhol points out in her discussion of rhetorical narratology. She aligns herself with “the poststructuralist characterization of ‘the author’ as a product of discourse” (209). But discourse does not preclude intentions in her view. She herself often talks about Austen’s intention, for instance when discussing her strategies to undermine male and female stereotypes. More generally, she says that rhetorical and feminist narratology share at least one basic assumption: “Both take into account the motives of implied authors” (210).

David Herman’s theory, too, is resolutely intentionalist. He even claims that the use Phelan and Rabinowitz make of the implied author is too friendly for anti-intentionalists, as the concept springs from a reluctance to turn directly to the real author as the source of the text (226-7). Herman

states more radically “that anti-intentionalist claims should instead be attacked at their root” (226). Valorizing research in disciplines such as ethology and the study of language acquisition, he suggests a cognitive solution to the problem by defining authorial intention as a reason for storytelling ascribed by the audience to the author. As we understand it, the notion of ascription highlights the role of the reader and seems to allow for a variety of outcomes to the reader’s efforts in combining textual markers and authorial image when developing the author’s motives.

Intention is not a big issue for Richardson. He recognizes that the concept of the implied author may be useful for some texts (51), but in his analyses, authorial intention is usually transformed into textual strategies aimed at undermining conventional, mimetic forms of storytelling. Richardson’s intentionalist formulae most often focus on texts and their seeming desire to go against established norms. He focuses on “antimimetic strategies in texts” and adds: “antimimetic narratives refuse to obey or openly flout mimetic conventions” (21). It sometimes even seems as if some literary works of art were designed to fight against the natural narratology Richardson finds so defective: “Rather than trying to force antimimetic practices into a mimetic theory they were designed to subvert, we need instead to produce a more dialectical theory that can encompass both traditions” (237; see also 241).

A second common ground, next to intentionalism, is the subjective and evaluative involvement on the part of all narratologists who contribute to the volume. Gone are the days of pretended objectivity and neutrality, both terms so dear to structuralists. David Herman is the most cautious here: he rarely makes claims about the greatness of the narrative he is studying. Phelan and Rabinowitz on the other hand regularly applaud Twain’s narrative strategies and prowess, for instance:

As our tone suggests, we greatly admire Twain’s handling of the relationships among author, narrator, and audience in this passage, and we extend our admiration for his craft to the whole first two-thirds of the narrative. In chapter 7, which explicitly takes up the question of evaluation, we will discuss what we regard as Twain’s far less successful narration in the last third of the novel, the infamous Evasion section. (37)

Warhol too states her preferences, calling *Persuasion* “a favorite text of mine” (10) and Austen “my favorite author” (11). At one point, even a religious metaphor comes to the surface: “The way characters like Austen’s

can leave the impression of being real people is one of the miracles of literary writing, and it produces one of novel-reading's greatest pleasures" (119). Brian Richardson does not try to hide his admiration for antimimetic writers such as James Joyce, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and especially Samuel Beckett. They are central to literary history and to literary value:

It is also the case that among the authors regularly considered the most prominent in Western literature, a large number often use antimimetic strategies; this suggests that there is some correlation between the kind of self-consciousness that produces literary value and that which exposes outmoded literary conventions. (179)

A narratology that hardly ever mentions Beckett is not worth its salt:

Beckett is one of the most important and influential figures in both Anglophone and Francophone literature; from the late 1960s to the early 1980s he was widely regarded as the greatest living author writing in English, and he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. What must one make of a narrative theory that has little or nothing to say about such an eminent, important, and influential author? (237-8)

The acceptance of subjective preferences into theoretical frames does not mean that narrative theory in this book is giving up its claims or that it has turned into a free-for-all. As Phelan and Rabinowitz put it in their review of the other approaches, they hold on to "the some-answers-are-better-than-others principle" (186). Even though they are self-proclaimed pluralists, they try to show that their way of reading is superior to the one practiced by their colleagues, who in turn try to convince the reader of the opposite. This is clearly as it should be in any discussion that does not want to be gratuitous. All contributors propose compelling arguments to bolster their case, and the reader may very well swing from one approach to the other. This effect is a credit to the excellence of the contributors.

In their preface the authors state that "the 'navigational aid' [they] offer here aims not to steer [their] readers in particular directions but rather to give them the means to pick their own routes through major debates within the field—routes that may well differ from any of [theirs]" (x). *Narrative Theory* effortlessly succeeds in doing just that. It presents the reader with a vast amount of concepts, arguments, debates, and insights, but it never forces the reader to follow the proposed path as the only way

to narratological bliss. There is no hint of dogmatism in this dialogue between five experts, neither is there any feeling of gratuity. The debate finds an ideal balance between defending one's own views and leaving the others to make up their own minds. This kind of poise offers clear proof of narratology's excellent health. As David Herman puts it:

I view it as a sign of the vitality of narrative theory that we have now reached a stage where open, vigorous debate about the methods and aims of scholarship on stories has become not only possible but necessary—that is, a basic or constitutive part of research activity in the field. (218-9)

Narratology is not a monolithic discipline that offers one central approach, as used to be the case in the structuralist era. It has become a forum for discussion, and *Narrative Theory* provides a perfect model for this kind of interaction.

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