



John Pier, ed.

**RECENT TRENDS IN NARRATOLOGICAL RESEARCH:
PAPERS FROM THE NARRATOLOGY ROUND TABLE/
ESSE4- SEPTEMBER 1997- DEBRECEN, HUNGARY/
AND OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS.**

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The contributions to this volume by Dieter Meindl, Gordon Collier, Elizabeth Deed Ermath, Jon-K Adams and John Pier originated as papers presented to the ESSE narratology panel (Debrecen, 1997) convened by Monika Fludernik, whose paper is also included. There are additional contributions by Martin Löschnigg, Ansgar F. Nünning, Pierre Gault (a good paper), Manfred Jahn (one of the best) and Uri Margolin (the best). All the articles are readable and interesting enough in the questions they address, although was often the case that the answers which suggested themselves to me as I read differed from the answers proposed by the authors. As the editor John Pier makes clear in the introduction, narratological theories are by nature given to model-building, and model-builders will certainly find much to engage their attention in this volume. The models proposed here tend to be local ones, addressing a given problem of literary expression or a particular genre. Indeed, several papers suffer in my opinion from the lack of a comprehensive theoretical framework for the pragmatics of narrative, of the overall phenomenological structure of narrative and of the general discursive processes involved in narrative. Such is the case with John Pier's paper on the dimensions of space in the narrative text: the term "space" is used in various senses (some of them literal and some metaphorical) which do not exhaust the possible dimensions of the analysis of space that might emerge from a more fully worked-out semiotic model of narrative. The models most authors in this volume propose remain likewise too narrowly conceptualized.

Take, for instance, the discussion in Dieter Meindl, "A Model of Narrative Discourse along Pronominal Lines", abounding in unwarranted generalisations. For example, "In structural terms, every character speech in third-person narrative is a first-person narrative *in nuce*, provided the characters make statements about their reality (identical realms of existence of

the enunciator and the enunciated) rather than narrating a fiction" (1999: 21). There is, obviously enough, a partial truth contained in this sentence, but the *caput mortuum* dwindles the closer we look into it. What if the character speaks "in the third-person" about another character, not h(er/im)self? What if the speech is an order, or a description, or any type of non-narrative speech act? Doesn't this happen in first-person narrative as well?— etc. This kind of imprecision plagues the writing of several contributors. That is, the individual sentences work reasonably well in the context of the argument, but quite often they cannot be relied on for overall conceptual accuracy. Meindl's paper draws on Benveniste's and Hamburger's theories, which emphasize the contrast between first person and third person narrative modes. One of the main points of the paper is that "first-person narrative invites us to entertain the notion of the (un-)reliability of the enunciating subject, a fictional character". Meindl uses two pairs of oppositions (particularization/generalization and concretization/ abstraction) to define four narrative movements: comment, scene, report and metaphor. These modes figure "as theoretical reference points that narrative discourse can in practice only approach, but never reach" (18). Meindl then defines the concept of "transposition" of pronominal reference (narratorial "T", narrateerial [my coinage, please do not blame Meindl for this!] "you") to another frame of reference, or another level, understood in Genette or Bal's terms. That there are many useful elements in the model proposed can easily be granted. But the notion of level is too mechanically conceived, since for instance the fictional editors in *Gulliver's Travels* or *Lolita* are considered to introduce additional frames of reference; the specific discourse acts "editing" or "writing a preface", not to speak of their fictional modalities, are shoehorned into the categories provided by a theory based on verbal enunciation. The analysis of free indirect discourse often rests here exclusively on the pronominal frame of reference, obscuring other important issues which transcend the model being proposed, such as the narrator's evaluation and attitude. An excessive aprioristic reliance on the (supposed) potentialities of the pronouns informs much of Meindl's approach, often resulting in sweeping generalisations. Thus, on the matter of second-person narration, Meindl holds that "the reader, confronted with one character addressing another or the self as "you" and thereby providing a story, finds it easier to conceive of the addressor as thinking than as speaking". But the addresser may well be writing, and the issue may well be clear to the reader beforehand by the use of a letter as a motivating device. Genette's classification of narrators and his differentiation between voice and perspective also come in for some criticism, which for the most part I think unjustified.

Martin Löschnigg ("Narratological Categories and the [Non-]distinction between Factual and Fictional Narratives") draws special attention to the applicability of discourse-level narratological categories (time, mode, and voice) to the analysis of historical texts. Formalism here surfaces in the question "whether we can identify discursive criteria to distinguish between fictional and factual narratives" (35). Surely those criteria should be established not at the intratextual level, but in the discourse protocols which regulate the production and use of fiction and of non-fiction—if our theory of discourse is aware of the actual circumstances and uses of speech events and of the disciplinary constraints on discourse, the distinction between factual and fictional is a given, not a problem to be solved by stylistic analysis. It may become a pseudo-problem if we try to solve it on purely formalist or structural terms. (Structural in the narrow sense, that is—personally I am in favour of a wider interpretation of "structuralism", one which does not favour structure at the cost of neglecting context and process, and which takes into account the social system of communication as well as of interpretation, not merely what we usually understand as the "structural" characteristics of texts, defined within a formalist paradigm).¹ Löschnigg explores some differences in the application of time, mode and voice. In time, "different patterns are very likely to emerge" in fiction and nonfiction, although any given temporal structure may appear in fiction as well as in historiography. His analysis of mode abounds in too sweeping generalizations, following Hamburger's dichotomy of an ontological difference between first-person and third-person narratives, and ascribing to linguistic structures (and necessity) what is a matter of traditions or conventions (and convenience). A quotation he draws from *Northanger Abbey* is self-defeating: "... a great deal of [history] must be invention. The speeches that are put into the heroes' mouths, their thoughts and designs—the chief of this must be invention" (quoted in Löschnigg, 39). For Löschnigg, this shows that Jane Austen already knew "that the presentation of a character's thoughts and feelings can serve as a criterion to distinguish between factual and fictional discourse". But surely it shows, too, that so-called "fictional" discourse and its modes pervade the supposedly "factual" genre of history so that quite often we will be hard put to tell between fact and fiction in history (as Ricœur has shown, factual/ fictional does not equal truthful/ untruthful). Then Löschnigg abandons description and becomes prescriptive when he argues that "a historian's account of-a person's inner life should either be accompanied by a 'perhaps' or a 'maybe' or, when there is reason for more conclusive conjectures, a 'he/she must have thought'", and should reserve free indirect discourse for the "sole grammatical locus" reserved to it by Hamburger, namely "narrative literature"—which

leaves one wondering whether Lytton Strachey's biographies, which are being chided here as insufficiently scrupulous in their use of f.i.d., are not "narrative literature". In sum, Löschnigg's claim that focalization presents "a decisive criterion in such a distinction" (i.e. fiction vs. nonfiction) seems unwarranted. As to the analysis of "voice", Löschnigg joins Genette (and Nünning, see below) as one of those who think one can do away with "that eminently superfluous category, the 'implied author'" —as if one did not need this concept and all of the refinements and sub-divisions one can think of in order to account for actual narrative communication. A review is not the appropriate context for the refutation of such notions.² Any informed reader will immediately grasp that authors do manipulate their self-image, and that any belief that a textual image of the author is "the author" *tout court* is naive. In order to theorise criticism which addresses these problems in illuminating ways, such as Maurice Couturier's *La Figure de l'auteur* or Michael Wood's *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction*, we need authors, implied authors, unreliable authors, implied narrators and more things than are dreamt of in many a narratological model. The conclusion that "voice (...) does not necessarily become distinctive on the level of discourse" is unsatisfactory, since it leaves out of the level of "discourse" the very heart of the matter, the author's use of literary discourse. One cannot but agree with Löschnigg that narratology should address the question of the difference between fiction and nonfiction, and contribute to its theorisation; but in order to do that we need a more comprehensive narratology than the Genette/Hamburger models favoured by Löschnigg.

In "Story Modalised, or the Grammar of Virtuality", Uri Margolin contributes much of the material also published as "Of What Is Past, Is Passing, or to Come: Temporality, Aspectuality, Modality, and the Nature of Literary Narrative" in David Herman's volume on *Narratologies* (a highly recommendable book for narratologists, incidentally). Basically, Margolin deals with areas of "non-factivity" in literary narrative (the disnarrated, counterfactuals, hypothetical inferences, possibilities not actualised, etc.), as they occur in present-tense, past-tense or future-tense narratives, as well as some speculations on the possible reasons for the growth of non-factual narrative in contemporary fiction. He leaves largely out of consideration, though, the major non-factual phenomenon, namely fictionality itself, as he brackets the problem of truth within the narrated world —what is factual or nonfactual for the narrating voice. Margolin might also want to consider a more complex classification of narrating time, one which took into account the author's time, and not just the narrator's. Nonetheless, the analysis is often illuminating and especially fruitful in approaching contemporary

metafictions and experimental novels. Students in a postgraduate seminar where I used both papers by Margolin as set texts thought them useful, suggestive and readily applicable for analytical purposes. We also discussed in the seminar Jon-K Adams's paper, "Order and Narrative", and found there both interesting observations and muddled general notions. Adams addresses the cognitive structure of anachronies, and points out that narrative does not aim to establish an absolute chronology of all events, since many temporal relations between the anachronical segments will be left indeterminate as they are not cognitively relevant. Some good points in Adams's paper are marred by a confusing discussion of the way plot is "destroyed" if we restore chronological order (which any reading must do, we might argue, and that in order to *construct* plot).

Ansgar Nünning's paper suggests "Reconceptualizing the Theory and Generic Scope of Unreliable Narration". We should avoid postulating "anthropomorphized" entities such as the implied author or the unreliable narrator, and reinterpret unreliable narration in the context of frame theory, as an interpretive strategy used by the reader (a definition which does not account for the use of unreliable narrators as a deliberate strategy on the part of the author). One wonders how the process of constructing textual characters could avoid a measure of "anthropomorphization", since it is human communication we are dealing with here, and any narrator, whether he is an "anthropomorphic" character or not, derives in the last analysis from the model of a human speaker. Nünning suggests, furthermore, that "the implied author's norms are impossible to establish and that the concept of the implied author is dispensable". Here I can only refer the reader to Wayne Booth's works on the subject, and recall that reading narrative fiction consists to a large extent in establishing those norms; any given construction will be open to critical debate, but reading without establishing them amounts to reading only superficial linguistic aspects of the text, not the coherent narrative discourse of literature. Of course Nünning's critique is based on a basic misunderstanding of the notion of the implied author. The implied author is supposedly "voiceless"! One wonders to whom we should attribute then the overall act of discourse of "writing a novel" or "a play". "To the real author", Nünning would no doubt answer, but "implied author" is a way of saying "real author as inferred from the work". The ghostly and voiceless implied author attacked by Nünning is a man of straw, a figment of the mind of critics who like him oppose the notion of implied author "which is ill-defined" —as is the case here— "and potentially misleading" —but then anything is potentially misleading if you are easily misled. As to the unreliable narrator, a careful reading of Nünning's third paragraph on page 69

shows that he does not understand this notion. A discrepancy between a narrator's view and the reader's grasping of the state of affairs seems to him a sufficient definition of unreliability —this would make Homeric or Miltonic narration unreliable to me, for instance, since my values are at odds with the narrator's. In this paragraph Nünning is unable to differentiate unreliability from mere ideological discrepancy, and no wonder, as he has jettisoned the overall values of the work, as distinct from the narrator's, as a relevant third set of values. Note however that the overall set of values of the work resurfaces in the following paragraph (p. 69, par. 4) —a muddle, once again. As Nünning says, the limitations of his question "Unreliable, compared to what?" "can be summed up in one brief sentence": "unreliable, not compared to the implied author's norms and values, but to the reader's or critic's preexisting conceptual knowledge of the world and to his or her (usually unacknowledged) frames of reference" (p. 81; sic). For Nünning, the term "unreliable narrator" is not "structural", but "pragmatic" (p. 74), a definition which shows that Nünning does not contemplate the structure of a work as incorporating pragmatic elements —*represented* pragmatic protocols which are therefore structural. The application of interpretive frame theory can indeed result in a more adequate definition of the notions of "implied author" or "unreliable narrator", but that will hardly be the case if the analysis proceeds from a basic misunderstanding of both concepts.

Manfred Jahn's "More Aspects of Focalisation: Refinements and Applications" uses concepts drawn from cognitive science which provide many interesting perspectives on concepts which have already been studied; still, not much is added to the initial formulations by Genette and Bal, apart from some theoretical corollaries and the streamlining of the most useful central notions which results from their being reformulated from an alternative perspective. Bal's conception was already "cognitivist" enough, even though it lacked the terminology of modern cognitive science. But there is still much work to be done in the interface of narratology and cognitive science, and this paper is recommended reading to any narratologist.

Gordon Collier's analysis of "Apparent Feature-Anomalies in Subjectivized Third-Person Narration" is also inspired by frame analysis; it deals with subtle effects of voice and perspective in the work of Patrick White, with characters absorbing elements of third-person narration; it is a very interesting paper on the analysis of the modalities of reference in represented speech and thought. As is the case of other papers in the collection, this one deals with exceptions, interstices and modulations of the more ordinary or central narratological structures. Experimental or style-conscious fiction figures prominently in most papers of this volume as an

object of analysis, as in most works on narratology. Thus, Elizabeth Deeds Ermath (in a paper reprinted from *EJES*) analyzes some narratological consequences of postmodern parody as it relates to the workings of the different levels of the narrative text: style plays against plot; the voice- or perspective-building categories modulate a story which is deliberately plotted along time-honoured lines.

Monika Fludernik's "The Genderization of Narrative" deals with problematic or ambiguous cases of sexual or generic identity in narrative voice, analyzing the textual clues we use to determine gender identity, including a survey of readers' responses and cross-linguistic grammatical observations. This is an extremely interesting paper in many respects, although the analysis is weakened by a partial neglect of the very point of the experimental texts playing on generic ambiguity. Fludernik argues that the refractoriness of novelists like Winterson in *Written on the Body*, "refusing a very determinate gender allocation, ultimately destroys the interpretative accessibility of the text, since any evaluation of the novel needs to first establish the 'facts' of the plot, and these, in our cultural understanding, crucially relate to the over-all schemata that we project on the text" (171-172). But surely the point of these texts is to play with interpretive accessibility —that is, they place the reader in a position in which s/he is required to deconstruct preconceptions about gender, and it is that frame of reference, one requiring a more complex reading and not a reading for the plot, that makes the text accessible, even though some aspects of plot or character will remain strategically inaccessible. What I miss most from the discussion is, once again, the higher-level discursive parameters: what is the point of sexual or generic ambiguity in narrative? The answer would have to consider the authors' sexual politics as well as the contemporary feminist debates and the issue of gay and lesbian rights; these texts seem to be much more ideologically driven than Fludernik's analysis suggests. Such a reading, however, would work on the interface of narratology and ideological critique, while Fludernik's interest is more strictly narratological.

Although strictures or disagreements are prominent in this review, many of the articles are interesting, carefully written and rewarding; the volume is well worth buying for any researcher interested in narratology, and deserves a wider print run than the "250 exemplaires" of the copyright page. The efforts of the editor and the convenor of the Debrecen narratology panel to make these papers available deserve recognition. There are, I insist, many untenable or mistaken notions in some papers, of the kind which should not be allowed to survive a more "intrusive" editing. Still, I am aware that the fact that I find in many papers so many things which I consider to be downright mistaken

does not reflect so much on the quality of the volume as on the still undertheorized status of narratology, a field of study with promising foundations in poetics, semiotics, pragmatics, linguistics and cognitive science which, however, do not yet amount to a disciplinary consensus on many seemingly basic issues.

JOSÉ ÁNGEL GARCÍA LANDA
UNIVERSIDAD DE ZARAGOZA

1. That Löschnigg is working within a formalist paradigm seems especially clear when he opposes the "discourse" of the work to the "work itself" (41) —a distinction which is surely artificial and formalist.
2. See my *Acción, Relato, Discurso: Estructura de la ficción narrativa* (Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 1998).

