My Narratology

An Interview with Brian McHale

DIEGESIS: What is your all-time favorite narratological study?

McHale: I once published an article on realism titled with an acronym, "WWJD?", a slightly disrespectful joke at the expense of American Evangelical Christians, who used the acronym to ask themselves, "What Would Jesus Do?" However, the "J" in my title wasn't for "Jesus" but "Jakobson." What would Roman Jakobson do? – a question I often, and profitably, ask myself – or rather, in its more general form, "What would the Russian Formalists do?"

I suppose every narratologist would acknowledge that modern narratology is rooted in the work of the Russian Formalists from the first decade or so of the Soviet regime. They are my favorites. Because we have settled on them the honorific of Founding Fathers, it is easy to forget how radical, strange and iconoclastic they were – and still are, if reread in a properly unreverential spirit. I reread them regularly for refreshment and reorientation: Viktor Shklovsky, of course, on "Art as Device" and *Tristram Shandy,* but also his essays on Dickens, *Don Quixote* and Sherlock Holmes; Roman Jakobson on realism and on the dominant; Yury Tynjanov on genre; Boris Eikhenbaum on "How Gogol's *Overcoat* Was Made"; and last but not least, Vladimir Propp on morphology – these are their narratological Greatest Hits, as far as I'm concerned.

It heartens me to imagine that the great Lubomír Doležel, intellectual heir of the Formalists – who had agreed to submit his own answers to these interview questions, but who left us before he could do so, and for whom I am subbing – would have approved of my choice.

DIEGESIS: Which narrative would you like to take with you on a lonely island?

McHale: Anyone who has read even a few words of what I've written over the years about postmodernist literature will assume that my answer would be *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973)*,* and why should I disappoint them? Yes, I would choose Thomas Pynchon's inexhaustible novel as my desert-island book, and I would lose myself in its proliferating plots, its fractal complexities, and its "mindless pleasures" (Pynchon's preferred title, before his editor talked him out of it). I recently listened to the audio-book version of it during a few (very long) drives, and I was reminded of the many passages and whole episodes that I really didn't know very well and hadn't looked into closely enough. Lots to do!

However, since there are other pleasures beyond the pleasures of prose, even Pynchon's prose, and since I value and relish the special complexities that arise

when narrative is crossed with poetry, I would also want to bring a narrative poem along with me to the island. Why not Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590, 1596), the longest *readable* poem in English? After I had reread Books 3, 4 and 6 (the best ones) a few times, I might even give the rather unpleasant Book 5 another try, and see whether I could stomach it any better now than when I tackled it the first (and so far only) time.

(If you think there's not much that *Gravity's Rainbow* and *The Faerie Queene* have in common, apart from inordinate length... think again.)

DIEGESIS: Why narratology?

McHale: There are two ways to construe this question, and some of those who have preceded me in answering it have construed it one way, some the other. It could mean, "Why narratology *in the world at large*?" Alternatively, it could mean, "Why narratology *in your career*?"

The latter question – why narratology in my career? – can be answered succinctly, "Because of the company I've kept." In Oxford in the '70s, when I was a doctoral student there, narratology was in the air, particularly in the vicinity of my dissertation supervisor, Jonathan Culler – not exactly a narratologist himself, or only occasionally one, but a major conduit for francophone narrative theory. The first fifteen or so years of my academic career I spent at Tel Aviv University, where I was mentored by the poeticians and literary theorists of the Tel Aviv School – especially Benjamin Hrushovski (who later renamed himself "Harshav"), Itamar Even-Zohar, Meir Sternberg, and Tamar Yacobi – and where I was present at the founding of *Poetics Today* and helped shepherd some of its most influential special issues on narrative theory into print. Fast-forward to the twenty-first century, when I found myself recruited to Ohio State by Jim Phelan, soon to be joined by David Herman, then Frederick Luis Aldama, then Robyn Warhol... I had spent the previous decade retooling myself as a scholar of poetry, but manifestly narrative was where the action was at Ohio State, and I didn't want to be left out of the fun. I wanted to play with the big boys and girls. So I rediscovered my inner narratologist.

As for the other way of construing the question – why narratology in the world at large? – others who came before me in this interview feature have already answered this question as cogently as I could ever hope to: because narrative is everywhere, because it pervades all the spheres of our lives, and because something so pervasive and so basic piques our curiosity and warrants our careful attention. All true; I would only add, because it is so pervasive *and also so often toxic* it deserves our *critical* attention. Narrative is not always (maybe not *often*) benign; it is potentially a powerful means of conning or bullying us into adopting the "natural" attitude toward the world – of accepting, without examining it too closely, the taken-for-granted. It is hard to remember at this distance in time that the Parisian narratologists whom I learned about in Oxford in the '70s were (many of them) darkly suspicious of the powers of narrative, and that in those days narratology was conceived of as a *demystificatory* practice. You can consume

narratives with pleasure, and even study them with devotion, but don't kid yourself that they *don't* have designs on you, or that they necessarily have your best interests at heart.

DIEGESIS: Which recent narratological trends are of particular interest to you?

McHale: "Interest" is a two-edged sword. Some of the recent narratological trends that most interest me are also the ones that I'm most deeply skeptical about; I'm interested precisely *because* I'm skeptical. Into this category fall both cognitive narratology and unnatural narratology, each of which has been amply represented in the pages of *Poetics Today,* the journal I edit (and where they will both be featured again in future). In both cases, my skepticism has a similar basis: they each, in their different ways, attribute *naturalness* to (some) narrative. For cognitive narratologists, or at least for some of them, narrative is a *built-in* feature of the human cognitive apparatus, perhaps even hardwired in the brain, and presumably universal across the species – in other words, *natural* to us. Where they see nature, I can only see culture, and it would take a lot of persuading, and a lot more evidence, to induce me to see things otherwise. In the case of unnatural narratology, the very concept of the *unnatural* presupposes a *natural* narrative somewhere that the unnatural kind can be distinguished from and profiled against. Once again, I'm skeptical: where the unnatural narratologists see nature, all I can see is more culture – culture all the way down, as it were.

Other recent developments seem to me more promising, and I am hopeful about the findings that they might yield in coming years. One of these is the renewed attention to *fictionality* inaugurated by Richard Walsh a few years ago, and recently taken up in an energetic way by the Danish circle around Henrik Skov Nielsen, aided and abetted by my colleague Jim Phelan. I also have hopes for further developments in the narratological approach to poetry for which I began lobbying a few years back. Narratological interest in narrative poetry seems lately to have cooled somewhat, but perhaps Jonathan Culler's forcefully *anti*-narrative stance in *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA 2015) will help, in a backhanded way, to reinvigorate the project.

DIEGESIS: What is the future of narratology?

McHale: I assume that this question is *not* an invitation to reflect on the fate of universities, humanities research and all the other institutional arrangements that make narratology possible. Assuming that these arrangements persist more or less intact – *not* a safe assumption, but let's entertain it anyway – then what might the future hold in store for narratology?

For one thing, the current expansion of the *scope* of narratology to include a wider range of media and forms of expression – serial television, computer games, social-media narratives, multi-modal narratives, transmedial and cross-medial narratives, etc. – means that the narratology of the future is likely to look markedly unlike the kind we have now, based as it is on literary prose narratives

(mainly novels) and feature films, and not much else. It would be naïve to imagine that expanding the field of narrative studies to include such a variety of new objects of attention will only yield more things to which to apply the same old theories. Rather, it will certainly call forth new theories, better suited to elucidate objects that don't look or behave much like novels or movies.

Not only is narratology bound to become more capacious, it is also likely to continue expanding along the historical axis, diving deeper into the past. I assume that the current impetus toward historical narratology will continue in future, further shifting the center of gravity in narrative studies away from latecomer genres like the novel, with (again) more or less profound knock-on consequences for narrative theory. I also hope and expect that narratology will grow more cosmopolitan in future, not only in the sense of including more examples from outside the North Atlantic sphere, but also in the sense of entering into dialogue with *other* traditions of narrative theorizing. Chinese narratologists, for instance, though eager enough to talk with us "Westerners" about "Western" narratology, also bring to the table a homegrown tradition of narratological reflection, Confucian in spirit rather than Aristotelian. The future of narratology may lie in the dialogue between those traditions, and in other such dialogues worldwide.

DIEGESIS: What other question would you like to answer?

McHale: I wish somebody would ask me, "What is science fiction good for?" This is not a self-evidently pertinent question unless, like me, you happen to have been writing and teaching about that genre recently, or reading a lot of it, or even just watching it on television or at the movies, or playing SF-themed video games – in other words, if you happen to be *just about anyone,* so ubiquitous is SF in contemporary popular culture. Obviously, SF is a major narrative genre, looming large over the contemporary cultural landscape, and so in that sense worth asking about. Equally obviously, it is manifestly good for quite a number of things, apart from spectacle and entertainment: for conducting thought experiments ("what if?"), imagining alternatives, thinking about the future (even if, as Fredric Jameson says, its main function is to demonstrate to us that we really *can't* imagine the future). But I also want to make a case for the use of SF as a tool of *narratological* reflection. It routinely *literalizes* and *enacts* at the level of storyworld the essentially metaphorical categories of narrative theory: analepsis and prolepsis, focalization, omniscience, world-building, etc. SF is the most narratologically self-conscious genre in world literature, and as such it deserves to be included in the central corpus of narratological test-cases.

Brian McHale is Arts and Humanities Distinguished Professor of English at the Ohio State University. A co-founder of Ohio State's Project Narrative, which he directed in 2012-14, he is also a founding member and former president of the Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present (ASAP). He was a vice-president of the International Society for the Study of Narrative (ISSN) in 2014-15, and president in 2016. He is the author of four books on postmodern literature and culture, including *Postmodernist Fiction* (London et al. 1987) and *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism* (New York et al. 2015). He has co-edited five volumes on twentieth-century literature, experimentalism, and narrative theory. Since July 2015 he has edited the international journal *Poetics Today*.

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