

My Narratology

An Interview with Sylvie Patron

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

Patron: Before anything else, I would like to thank the editors of *DIEGESIS* for inviting me to participate in this series of interviews, following so many distinguished researchers whose names are much more obvious choices than mine. I note moreover that five of them – Susan S. Lanser, Ansgar Nünning, James Phelan, Brian Richardson, and Marie-Laure Ryan – appear in the table of contents of *Introduction à la narratologie postclassique* (2018), a volume I edited last year with the aim of introducing the new directions in international narratological research to a French audience. Some of them have honored me with their friendship and goodwill, and I acknowledge them here with gratitude.

Concerning the first question, I share the view of Ansgar Nünning (2015) when he writes that “the trouble with the first two questions [...] is that they encourage you to adopt the kind of ranking-top-five-list-winner-takes-all-perspective that seems to have become the dominant way of worldmaking in today’s media, to the detriment of all those who don’t happen to be in the limelight or at the top of those lists.” I would add that this perspective has the additional drawback of minimizing, or purely and simply erasing, the important differences between the sociological impact of a study or research program and its theoretical and empirical value. It is clear, for example, that few narratological studies have had as much sociological importance as Gérard Genette’s “Discours du récit. Essai de méthode” (1972) (*Narrative Discourse. An Essay in Method* [1980]), which is cited, moreover, in almost all of the interviews published in *DIEGESIS*. On the other hand, I maintain that this study and the research program it determined pose numerous conceptual and empirical problems. I am neither the first nor the only one to say this: these problems were raised in studies that were contemporaneous or near-contemporaneous with Genette’s own, and some have been revived today in the work of young researchers (I am thinking, for example, of Roger Edholm, who has recently received the 2019 James Phelan Award for the Best Essay in *Narrative*). For my own part, I have been working for many years to increase awareness of these critical works, which are often much more rigorous and reliable on a scientific level than Genette’s study, but which can’t be integrated into the mainstream.

At the risk of sounding scandalous, I would say that what interests me in Genette’s work are the elements that are false, arbitrary, or poorly conceived. It is important to recognize that a great deal of what he presents in “Discours du

récit” had been ‘in the air’ for a long time and had already been introduced here and there in a fragmentary and non-systematic way. His specific contribution was its systematization. But what has never been studied in detail is the way that systematization profoundly changed the elements it started from. There are countless examples. Take the “extradiegetic-heterodiegetic” narrator. It can be considered as an effect of binarism (the double-entry table where you put pluses or minuses in the boxes, which Genette borrowed from linguistic structuralism). Here, the binarism generates a non-empirical fact, which is to say a fact that isn’t ‘in the world.’ It has not been said enough, moreover, that the resources from linguistics that Genette uses amount to a very limited stock, combined with a certain number of preconceptions. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (1989, 158) highlighted this in “How the Model Neglects the Medium. Linguistics, Language, and the Crisis of Narratology,” referring to the “exclusion of language”: “It is perhaps paradoxical but – I claim – nevertheless true that the same school [literary structuralism] that put such an emphasis on language in the analysis of poetry almost completely ignored it in the study of narrative.” (Ibid.) This remark is entirely correct, but it has barely been picked up on. And “classical,” “structuralist” narratology is still commonly opposed to contemporary, “postclassical” narratologies, which have chosen different theoretical scaffoldings. The history of science, in the field of the social sciences in any case, is full of these kinds of misunderstandings.

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

Patron: Allow me not to answer this question or to answer in a playful way: let’s leave “lonely islands” alone! Let’s also try to stop them from being submerged by rising sea levels or swamped by waste from our industrialized countries. I find it surprising for that matter that we still today describe islands which aren’t inhabited by human animals as “lonely,” when their biodiversity is generally in a better state than in spaces where human activities are concentrated... I am happy that the International Society for the Study of Narrative, at the initiative of its current president, Maria Mäkelä, has started to reflect on the question of the ecological footprint.

I will come back to narratology, the scientific study of narratives (without hystericizing the term “scientific,” or aligning it with the epistemological ideal of the exact sciences). The issue of the constitution of corpora and the artifacts they can induce, and, reciprocally, the issue of the critical decentering that can result from enlarging the corpus, are serious ones which, in my view, have not yet received sufficient attention (except within the framework of feminist narratology, which Susan S. Lanser alludes to in her interview). Ansgar Nünning and Brian McHale also raise these issues in their answers to the fifth question, “What is the future of narratology?,” along with Brian Richardson in his answer to the added question, “What areas are still in need of narratological investigation?”

DIEGESIS: Why narratology?

Patron: Brian McHale (2017, 199; italics in the original) is right to say that there are two ways of understanding this question: “Why narratology *in the world at large?*” and “Why narratology *in your career?*” or simply “Why narratology for you?” I only feel qualified to answer the second reformulations of the question.

The genesis of my interest in narratology, or more precisely the history and epistemology of narratology, lies at the intersection of two types of concern:

— On the one hand, the fact that narratology, or in the beginning the scientific study of literary narratives, has attained a significant level of development, with foundational texts and research programs, modes of transmission and teaching, a whole body of knowledge whose “handbookization,” for example, is a sign of relative stabilization. In this sense, and based on these criteria, we can say that it lies at the leading edge of literary theory in general. But what narratologists lack (as do literary theorists in general) is first of all a memory: a memory of the results, problems and concepts developed before them – what French historians of linguistics have called a “horizon of retrospection” (*horizon de rétrospection*). This is also more profoundly a relationship to the historicity of scientific development: the fact that there are mediations and prisms of reception (we can think, for example, of what is translated and not translated from one language to another, and the sometimes distorting prisms translations can represent). The conception of the history of the discipline is still largely teleological and ignores the phenomena of recurrence and reversibility that affect and characterize the field.

— On the other hand, in a situation marked by the explosion of research in the field of general (not exclusively literary) narratology, combined with a critique of previous models and an appeal to interdisciplinarity, these historical and epistemological reflections can appear to be a “cold” theoretical exercise (without any pejorative connotation): a more distanced and self-reflexive one. It allows us to question things that are too quickly accepted as self-evident and provides some perspective on positions that can sometimes tend to become fixed. I will also say that the special character of the French context (the fact for example that researchers in the field of literary studies still read very little in English) necessitates both the presentation of international narratological research in a way that is as neutral and objective as possible, and the historical and epistemological investigation that allow connections and continuities to be established over long periods of time.

I borrow a certain number of concepts and ways of conceptualizing the history of narratology from French historians of linguistics. Firstly, the horizon of retrospection and its symmetrical pair, the horizon of projection (represented, for example, in Saussure in the form of the project of a general semiology and perhaps in narratology the project of transmedial narratology, which I will come back to). Secondly, the idea that knowledge grows by a process of *accretion*, which is to say by the addition of new conceptual productions to clusters in which the older knowledges are always already contained. Thirdly, the re-

fusal of the linear narrative model that presents a succession of theories corresponding to separate research programs (comparative grammar – structuralism – generative grammar – pragmatics, and, in the same way, “proto-narratology” – classical narratology – postclassical narratology), and the corollary affirmation of the coexistence of several research programs. Also, the necessity of selecting “finer” objects of research (concepts, names of concepts, examples, etc.), which can shift the terms of the debate and lead to the emergence of new representations.

In my work on the concept of the narrator, I have, for example, shown that the history of narratology contains not one but *two* concepts of the narrator, which are different in nature and origin: the first one, which I call the original narrator, comes from the first theorized descriptions of the memoir-novel or first-person novel in the strict sense of the term; the second one comes from the German controversy on authorial intrusions (or more generally from the German theorization of the enunciator of the narrative, which at a given point in time took the form of this controversy). In order to say that there are two different concepts involved here, I draw on Jean-Claude Milner’s (1995 [1989], 17f.) well-formulated observation that “concepts with the same name may in fact be totally different, because they encapsulate different groups of issues,” just as “concepts with different names may be strictly equivalent,” if they encapsulate issues that appear to be the same. This duality is irreducible. The narrator in the traditional conception refers to a concrete empirical object, which distinguishes the genre of the first-person novel from other fictional narrative genres available in a given period. The second concept of the narrator refers to a theoretical object, an abstraction or construction, and not an empirical given. In particular, it allows the narrative or “epic” work, including the epic poem and the novel, to be opposed to the dramatic work (it also has an aesthetic value in discourses that are not solely descriptive, in Käte Friedemann’s work, for example). The later extrapolations, for example the affirmation of the fictionality of the narrator in fictional third-person narratives (Franz K. Stanzel) or the opposition between “homodiegetic” and “heterodiegetic” narrators (Genette), represent important stages in what could be called the stratification of the concept of the narrator. But they have never managed to mask the problems engendered by this historical duality, which are highlighted in the critical works I mentioned earlier but can also be found, if we are willing to pay a little attention, in the narratologically-inspired presentations of the concept of the narrator.

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

Patron: I think there are clear connections between what I have just described and the “historical narratology” mentioned all at once by Susan S. Lanser (“We need *histories* of narrative voice, temporality, focalization, character, plot [...]” [2016, 82]), Ansgar Nünning (“[...] a genuinely cultural and historical narra-

tology, i.e. a self-reflexive narratology that not only looks at the cultural variability and historical development of narrative forms and genres, but also considers the historicity, and cultural specificities, of its own approaches, concepts and methods” [2015, 107]), and Brian McHale (“I assume that the current impetus toward historical narratology will continue in future [...]” [2017, 201]). I also mentioned feminist narratology earlier for its epistemological vigilance. I am more familiar with some trends than others, especially from translating substantial overview articles by Susan S. Lanser, David Herman, Ansgar Nünning, and Brian Richardson into French. I have become particularly invested, for reasons to do with chance encounters and friendships, as so often happens in academic life, in unnatural narratology. In his interview, Brian Richardson (2013, 98) describes unnatural narratology as “incorporating vast new areas of world narrative into a theoretical framework, and rethinking that framework to include these strange, new texts.” I have noticed that this perspective, as well as these strange, new texts, are particularly attractive to students. Brian Richardson visited the seminar I led in 2018 at the Université Paris Diderot and I’m very grateful to him for doing so, it was an excellent experience. I have also taken part in some of the work of the “fictionality group” that James Phelan (2015) referred to in his interview, in which he is a leading figure. I wouldn’t go so far as to say that nothing narratological is alien to me, that would be excessive (especially since it is not easy, in France, to keep up with everything that comes out and even less to find these works in the libraries; I often talk about it with Jonathan Culler, another great researcher interviewed in *DIEGESIS* and a wonderful interlocutor for me), but I am very interested in what is happening in the field in general.

DIEGESIS: What is the future of narratology?

Patron: I like Ansgar Nünning’s (2015, 107) answer: “Since I am an academic and not a prophet, I would be loath to make any sweeping predictions about the future of a field that has been, and is, undergoing quite rapid changes.” Allow me to shift the question a little. Along with the horizon of retrospection, it is also appropriate to consider the horizon of projection of a discipline or field of study. That of contemporary narratologists manifestly contains a project of general or transmedial narratology (it is mentioned by Marie-Laure Ryan [2014], who is its most prominent representative, but also by Ansgar Nünning [2015], Brian McHale [2017], and James Phelan [2015]), and a project of interdisciplinarity. It is clear that in order to understand not only what narrative is, but also fiction or fictionality, or even experience, we have to adopt an interdisciplinary approach. But we have to be careful not to confuse this transversality and true interdisciplinarity with conceptual transfers that operate through analogy, homology, and metaphorisation, as has too often been the practice in literary studies in the past. The future of narratology should also, it seems to me, reexamine its past and ask itself, for example, why it started out as a literary narratology (and I am not only thinking of Barthes, Genette, etc., nor even

of Shklovsky and the Russian formalists, but much older clusters of theorization, which appeared in the theory of the novel and in texts that are often as prescriptive as descriptive).

I am very interested from this point of view in Brian Richardson's (2013, 99) answer: "Speculating on the future of literary studies in the USA, I am guessing that the swerve away from deconstruction, poststructuralism, and cultural studies will continue. The resulting vacuum should be filled by the study of literature as literature, rather than as history, psychology, or sociology. These developments would lead presumably to greater interest in the text itself, in narratology, and in aesthetics." I am not actually sure whether we can say the same thing about the situation in France, where deconstruction and poststructuralism ("French Theory," as we also say in French!) have not had the same influence on literary studies. I note as well that "the study of literature as literature, rather than as history, psychology, or sociology" is a near-paraphrase of a remark of Roman Jakobson's in 1921. As I was saying about phenomena of recurrence...

DIEGESIS: What other question would you like to answer?

Patron: I feel like I have already stretched the patience of the readers of *DIEGESIS*. But if for example you were to ask me, "How would you like to conclude this interview?" I would answer: with a quote. It comes from Gaston Bachelard (1938 [2002], 25) and concerns "the sense of the problem." As it is quite long, I will only give the ending: "Nothing is self-evident. Nothing is given. Everything is constructed." (Ibid.)

This interview was translated by Melissa McMahon
with the collaboration of Sylvie Patron.

Sylvie Patron is *maître de conférences habilitée à diriger des recherches* in French Language and Literature at the Université Paris Diderot / Université de Paris, France. A specialist in the history and epistemology of literary theory, she has published, among other books, *Le Narrateur: Introduction à la théorie narrative* (2009), reprinted as *Le Narrateur: Un problème de théorie narrative* (2016), and *La Mort du narrateur et autres essais* (2015), translated as *The Death of the Narrator and Other Essays* (2019). She is currently finishing an anthology on *Optional-Narrator Theories* (to be published at the University of Nebraska Press). She is First Vice-President of the International Society for the Study of Narrative.

Bibliography

- Bachelard, Gaston (2002): *The Formation of the Scientific Mind. A Contribution to a Psychoanalysis of Objective Knowledge*. Manchester. [English translation of *La Formation de l'esprit scientifique. Contribution à une psychanalyse de la connaissance objective*, Paris 1938, by Mary McAllester Jones].
- Edholm, Roger (2018): "The Narrator Who Wasn't There. Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* and the Discontinuity of Narrating Characters". In: *Narrative* 26 (No. 1), pp. 17-38.
- Genette, Gérard (1980): *Narrative Discourse. An Essay in Method*. Ithaca. [English translation of "Discours du récit. Essai de method," in *Figures III*, Paris 1972, by Jane E. Levin].
- Lanser, Susan S. (2016): "My Narratology: An Interview with Susan S. Lanser." In: *DIEGESIS. Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research* 5 (No. 1), pp. 81-84.
- McHale, Brian (2017): "My Narratology: An Interview with Brian McHale." In: *DIEGESIS. Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research* 6 (No. 2), pp. 198-202.
- Milner, Jean-Claude (1995 [1989]): *Introduction à une science du langage*. Paris.
- Nünning, Ansgar (2015): "My Narratology: An Interview with Ansgar Nünning." In: *DIEGESIS. Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research* 4 (No. 1), pp. 104-109.
- Patron, Sylvie (2018) (Ed.): *Introduction à la narratologie postclassique. Les nouvelles directions de la recherche sur le récit*. Paris.
- Phelan, James (2015): "My Narratology: An Interview with James Phelan." In: *DIEGESIS. Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research* 4 (No. 2), pp. 81-87.
- Richardson, Brian (2013): "My Narratology: An Interview with Brian Richardson." In: *DIEGESIS. Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research* 2 (No. 2), pp. 98-100.
- Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith (1989): "How the Model Neglects the Message. Linguistics, Language, and the Crisis of Narratology". In: *Journal of Narrative Theory* 19 (No. 1), pp. 157-166.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure (2014): "My Narratology: An Interview with Marie-Laure Ryan." In: *DIEGESIS. Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research* 3 (No. 1), pp. 78-81.

Sylvie Patron

Université Paris Diderot / Université de Paris

UFR Lettres, arts, cinéma

Les Grands Moulins

5 rue Thomas Mann

75013 Paris, FRANCE

E-mail: sylvie.patron@orange.fr

How to cite this article:

Patron, Sylvie: "My Narratology. An Interview with Sylvie Patron". In: *DIEGESIS. Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research / Interdisziplinäres E-Journal für Erzählforschung* 8.2 (2019). 91-97.

URN: [urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20191204-142602-5](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20191204-142602-5)

URL: <https://www.diegesis.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/diegesis/article/download/353/561>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).