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Dos Passos instead of Goethe!

Some observations on how the history of narratology is and ought to be conceptualized

Taking as starting point some collective volumes since the year 2000 which aspire to provide new views on narratology, this essay discusses the problem of how to conceive the history of narratology in a way that is more enlightening than the linear narrative used so far to tell this story. It lists some aspects which are neglected by the usual narrative and favors a decentered conception of narratology's development.

The study of collective volumes since 2000 which belong to the field of literary studies and aspire to provide new views on narratology produces an ambivalent impression. On the one hand, many articles base their findings on a corpus of a few narratological classics that are selected again and again. On the other hand, some authors refer to approaches of quite heterogeneous sources which do not form part of the mainstream of narratology at all. I shall take these volumes and the double impression they make on the reader as a starting point for some considerations on the question of how we should conceive, in a fruitful but also fitting way, the history of modern narratology as an interdisciplinary and international field of research. The essayistic manner of my text is due to the fact that, as it seems, not much research has been done on the history of narratology. What I have to say about our limited knowledge of this history will also exhibit, of course, some limitations.

Ironically, decades after the advent of 'postclassical' narratology, the discipline so far has conceptualized its own history mostly in a non-contextual manner, namely as a pure transfer of ideas. Such an approach corresponds to the spirit of 'classical' rather than 'postclassical' narratology. It is time to apply a postclassical approach. The usual master narrative – let us call it this way – tells the story of modern narratology in three steps (e.g. Nünning 2002, 5): First there were the protonarratological beginnings of Russian Formalism in the 1910s and 1920s. Then French Structuralism produced in the 1960s to 1970s systematic accounts of narrative structures, either in form of universal generative narrative grammars or as 'low structuralism' providing equally universal tools for textual analysis. Finally, this classical phase of narratology has been expanded or modified towards postclassical narratologies[1] which take the specificities of cultural, political and cognitive contexts into account.

This narrative is not wrong but misleading. Quite rightly it asserts the existence of a research tradition, namely a continuity between concepts advanced by Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Tomashevsky, Yury Tynyanov et al., the generative

systems of Roland Barthes, Algirdas J. Greimas, Tzvetan Todorov et al., the terminologies of french and anglosaxon 'low structuralism' (Gérard Genette, Seymour Chatman, Dorrit Cohn et al.) and, finally, derivations and applications with respect to specific contexts and corpora by Monika Fludernik ('natural narratology'), David Herman ('cognitive narratology'), Brian Richardson ('unnatural narratology') and many others. Also, the master narrative should not be deemed wrong because it constructs and simplifies. Every meaningful historical account, to be sure, must adopt certain assumptions that determine why it highlights certain things as important and omits others. Overviews presuppose a structured reduction of information. A city map that renders the chartered territory in a ratio of 1:1 wouldn't be helpful.

The master narrative is misleading, however, insofar as it coerces narratological research into a shape that doesn't quite fit. In its linear structure it tells the story of an identifiable singular subject of theory that undergoes some changes and migrates from Russia via France to the USA. The history of narratology thus assumes the form of a biographical novel or even of a teleological *Bildungsroman*: After tentative juvenile beginnings the mature hero finds his calling and in his old age-wisdom he expands and enriches his knowledge. In similar (and similarly playful) fashion Monika Fludernik, for instance, takes Russian Formalism to be the childhood, French Structuralism the youth and postclassical narratology the mature age of modern narratology.[2]

In order to vindicate actual trends and to back up prospective developments, such a description is helpful and legitimate. It is, however, too simple to allow a differentiated retrospective grasp of the complexities and discontinuities of narratology's history. Which narrative form would be more suitable to this enterprise? Brian Richardson proposes the form of a chronicle: "I suggest [...] that for both literary and critical history we use the model of the chronicle, with its minimal causality, openness to multiple stories, and abandonment of teleological trajectories, in order to represent more accurately the purposive clutter and unpredictable successions of the polymorphous past" (Richardson 2000, 172f.). But chronicles provide their material only with a temporal order and don't achieve what we should expect from an interesting narrative in the history of science, namely a relevant structuring of the field in question.

Instead of a *Bildungsroman* or a chronicle I propose the spatial and decentered model of the *Großstadtroman* with its many protagonists and its widely ramified routes through the city including connecting main roads and intersections but also discontinuous elements like dead-end streets and occasional subway stations. For the story to be told is anything but a teleological organic process. Rather, it is driven by many agents and multiple causes. Let us consider some factors that cause discontinuities in the field of narrative research:

To begin with, there are language barriers. An international scientific community of narratologists does certainly exist. But there are also numerous national communities which are separated and sometimes isolated from each other by language borders. The French, German and English translations of Mikhail Bakhtin's writings since the late 1960s, for example, were crucial for

their worldwide success – half a century after the texts's genesis. The fate of Bakthin's writings demonstrates the power of language barriers as well as the necessity of translations. Or take the reception of French narratology in Germany. Gérard Genette's *Discours du récit* has been translated into German only decades after its first publication 1972 (in his *Figures III*) and after having been presented to the Anglophone public through successful introductions to narratology such as Chatman (1978) and Rimmon-Kenan (1983). A German translation appeared only in 1998 (titled *Die Erzählung*), and it was only in these years that Genette's terminology began to be incorporated into German narratological introductions (for the first time, as it seems, in Vogt [1998] and Martínez / Scheffel [1999]). Other important French narratologists like Claude Bremond, Algirdas J. Greimas or Jean-Marie Schaeffer, whose writings for the most part have not been translated into German, did not achieve much attention. One might tend to think that nowadays language barriers have decreased. But is that really true? English, as in other fields of international scientific research, provides narratologists with a *lingua franca* indispensable for international exchange and collaboration. But the dominance of English brings about extremely asymmetric streams of communication. International processes of reception and canonization take place only in English. Therefore, native speakers or near native speakers of English are privileged. This holds true not only for oral communication but also for the international impact of publications in journals, collective volumes and monographs. Untranslated research written in other languages remains enclosed within its native community – as it is obviously the case, for instance, for the articles written in Danish included in Krogh Hansen (2009) (the volume also includes English texts).[3] Or take the case of Slavic narratology done in Estnic Tartu, in Hungarian Szeged and in other places (documented in Kerekes [2004] und Schmid [2009b]). All the more helpful, therefore, are translations of important contributions which have not entered the mainstream such as the texts of Russian and Czech origins collected in Schmid (2009a).

Secondly, there are barriers due to the variety of disciplines: Even within the linguistic confines of a national community major differences exist between the academic disciplines with their peculiar traditions and corpora of narrative theory. Since 2000 there has been a substantial amount of publications devoted to inter- and transdisciplinary aspects of narratology (Aumüller 2012; Heinen / Sommer 2009; Kindt / Müller 2003; Klein / Martínez 2010; Martínez 2011; Meister 2005; Nünning / Sommer 2004; Olson 2012). These volumes inform us about findings in areas usually not frequented by scholars of literature. But such efforts need to be pursued much further. Narratological research being done in various disciplines remains more often than not isolated from each other. Most of the volumes just mentioned are rather multidisciplinary than interdisciplinary. How many literary scholars utilize the extraordinary rich narratological reservoir of ethnology's majestic multivolume *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*? Who among modern literary scholars knows about the findings on narrative performance, time, focalization etc. in recent classical Greek philol-

ogy (Grethlein / Rengakos 2009)? Where, in literary studies, are imprints of the flourishing empirical research on narrative being done in social sciences and in conversational linguistics (Straub 1998)? Even within one academic discipline there are noticeable gaps and incongruities of reception alongside institutional divisions, e.g. between 'Neuere deutsche Literatur' (modern German literature) and 'Mediävistik' (medievalist studies) (not to mention the even broader gaps between Germanic languages and literatures). Some of the studies on medieval literature edited by Harald Haferland and Matthias Meyer in the volume *Historische Narratologie. Mediävistische Perspektiven* (2010) exhibit excellent knowledge of narratology's international state of the art. Important monographs on medieval forms of narration by Gert Hübner (2003), Armin Schulz (2012) oder Uta Störmer-Caysa (2007), on the other hand, have been largely unnoticed by scholars of modern literature. Speaking in terms of the structure of *Großstadtroman*, the narratological efforts in various disciplines seem to build up not to one Paris-like capital city with its center and periphery but rather to a multicentered urban region like the Ruhrgebiet where the outskirts of one municipal area merge into the next. The walks of its inhabitants, however, tend to revolve around their particular centers.

Thirdly, barriers due to corpora: Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* influenced narratology well beyond the confines of its corpus of one hundred magical fairytales collected by Alexander Afanasyev. But many other narratologically valuable studies do not enter the mainstream because they refer to peculiar corpora of texts and receive attention only by colleagues working on the same subject. This happens with corpora that are defined by themes (as in postcolonial, gender or queer narratologies) or literary genres (studies on the ancient epic, legend, *Bildungsroman* etc.) as well as by periods (ancient, medieval, postmodern narratives). To this type of research related to specific corpora also belong narratologies dealing with narration in drama, film, comic, music, dance etc. In this last field of research, however, in recent years a considerable amount of studies has been published devoted to media-specific as well as transmedial aspects of narration (e.g. Alber / Fludernik 2010; Heinen / Sommer 2009; Martínez 2011, 17-58; Olson 2011; Pier / García Landa 2008).

Fourthly, barriers due to different generations: Younger narratologists not only take over and expand the mass of older findings, they also ignore substantial parts of them. As it seems, this practice has increased rather than diminished in recent years. In German literary studies, for instance, the morphological approaches developed in the 1920s by André Jolles or Clemens Lugowski have not been taken over (contrary to their ongoing reception in ethnology). Rather surprisingly, also many French studies of the more recent classical period of narratology have disappeared from the horizon of actual research – think of Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (1957), Algirdas J. Greimas' *Du sens* (1970) or Claude Lévi-Strauss' *Anthropologie structurale* (1958), all of them providing valuable insights and conceptual tools for any research interested in cultural contexts and functions of narration.

Finally, there are multiple barriers due to academic practices: Whether narratological innovations become successful; whether monographs and articles gain prestige; whether handbooks and introductions achieve authority or not – all of this is not only influenced by barriers of language, academic disciplines, corpora, and generations, but also by the many contingencies of academic practice. The success of academic studies obviously depends on how many colleagues connect with them, which conferences they are presented at, in which volumes, journals, series and publishers they get printed. Dietrich Weber's excellent study on the varieties of analeptic narration (Weber 1975), for instance, has not really been taken up by subsequent research on this topic even among German scholars. This is probably influenced by the fact that he simply does not care much to connect his own terminology with corresponding current concepts by other authors. Such influences range well beyond the narrower confines of academia. The persistent (and by no means unmerited) presence of Franz K. Stanzel's theory in German literary studies is partly due to the fact that it is still very common in the teaching of literature in secondary schools. As the main body of students of German literature at the universities become school teachers, there seems to be a continuous reciprocal reaffirmation of Stanzel's work. His success in the secondary schools, in turn, owes a lot to its readily accessible terminology. (Who ever tried to make students familiar not with authorial, personal and I-narrators but with hetero-, homo-, auto- and metadiegetic narration knows what I am speaking about.)

These remarks are not meant as a lament but as a description. Of course these barriers are anything but insurmountable. Some theories don't migrate to other academic milieus and communities, but others do. In recent years there has been a growing number of internationally assembled volumes on inter- and transdisciplinary aspects of narratology. Narrative research takes place in a field of practice that is dynamically entangled between barriers and the surpassing of barriers. Such barriers, moreover, are not just impediments to a supposedly perfect science. In a sense, they are indeed helpful because they enable new research. To neglect large quantities of the ever growing amount of former research is convenient for one's own productivity. You don't have to have read Clemens Lugowski's masterful study *Die Form der Individualität im Roman* (1932) on premodern novels to write something relevant about causality in narratives – as can be proofed by the contributions in Brian Richardson's excellent volume *Narrative Dynamics. Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames* (Richardson 2002). The filtering of research tradition becomes obstructive, though, when it keeps letting through only ever the same substances. A frequent change of membranes would be suitable in order to produce a continuously renewed set of insights. Some of the recent medievalist studies mentioned above, for example, do return to Lugowski's long forgotten insights. Moreover, Lugowski's observations on premodern forms of causality and narrative motivation would enrich and modify the seemingly universal terminology applied to modern narratives in Richardson's anthology. The history of narratology contains more than the history of its momentary winners, more than the lines of tradition of

transitorily dominant theories selectively projected into the past. To be sure: Much of former research has been rightly forgotten. But the recollection of neglected approaches and insights is not only of archival interest but can be helpful for new findings. The Russian Formalists knew that sons (and daughters) turn themselves to their literary grandparents in order to surmount the automatized standards of their fathers. The same could be the case with the tradition of narrative research.

What conclusions can be drawn from these observations? How are we to understand the history of narratology? It seems that many colleagues would favor a concept that represents narratology as an unfolding but unified research program. Whether such a program is a reasonable ideal for the future development of narratology or not is not my topic here. In any case it does not facilitate a correct description of the factual narratological research throughout the past decades. Up to now narratology has not developed as a theory in, for instance, Thomas Kuhn's sense, namely as an axiomatic and internally consistent body of theory within which a homogeneous scientific community produces normal science.[4] Whether narratology's history can be told in the form of a *Großstadtroman* remains to be seen. Till now, research on this topic covers only fragments. There are, however, some deserving studies dealing with neglected aspects of narratology's history (Cornils 2004; Darby 2001; Schernus 2012). Lately Monika Fludernik and Greta Olson have called for a "comparative narratology" which would transcend the canon established by the Anglophone community. In recent narratological research they recognize a growing interest in local traditions hitherto marginalized: "This new direction assesses the local and national contributions to narratology diachronically and offers these perspectives as a basis for innovations in what may be considered 'mainstream' Anglophone narratology" (Fludernik / Olson 2012, 4).

Interesting histories of narratology which would retain its complexities along with providing it with a meaningful structure could be inspired by several models, for instance by Edward W. Said's approach, along the lines of Foucauldian discourse analysis, in *Orientalism* (Said 1978) or by Mieke Bal's concept of *travelling concepts* (Bal 2002). Another promising route through the asphalt jungle of this history off the beaten paths was provided twenty years ago by Lubomír Doležel in his *Occidental Poetics: Tradition and Progress* (1990). Doležel tells the history of narratology as a history of concepts. 'Concept' has a different meaning here than in Bal's book. Doležel is interested in the history of those concepts that refer to particular aspects of narrative texts such as the distinction between *fabula* and *syuzhet*, the narrator, or the narrated world. His approach avoids some disadvantages of the master narrative:

- Concept histories (as conceived by Doležel) are *partial*: They don't claim to encompass the whole history nor just its kernel but only the parts pertinent to the concept in question. They relate not *the* but *a* history of narratology.

- Concept histories are *discontinuous*: Its subjects may disappear underground like metros to resurface at another place after decades or centuries – such as the development of the possible worlds theory. Doležel makes it start at the beginnings of 18th century with Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Johann Jakob Bodmer, and Johann Jakob Breitinger and resumes it in the later 20th century with Saul Kripke and David Lewis.
- Multiple concept histories are *not synchronous*: Different concepts develop neither similarly nor simultaneously and therefore cannot be condensed into an encompassing master narrative. Doležel, for instance, draws the path of structuralist poetics not from Moscow and St. Petersburg / Leningrad via Paris to Boston and California but from French linguistics around 1900 via German morphology (1910s and 1920s) and its reception in Russia up to the Prague school of Semiotics in the 1940s to 1960s.
- Finally, concept histories allow for a *historical* understanding of narratological concepts themselves rather than presupposing the existence of a never changing universal tool box of narrative forms.[5]

In this vein various histories of narratology could be told – not in the mode of an encompassing *Bildungsroman* but as *Großstadtroman* with its different paths and discontinuities, including potential new stories which still wait to be envisaged.

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[1] To use David Herman's well known term from his introduction to the collective volume *Narratologies* (Herman 1999).
[2] Cf. Fludernik 2005, 37; again in Alber / Fludernik 2010, 4f.
[3] Similarly complex interactions and structures of dominance and the problems of their comprehension in the research on global history are discussed by Sachsenmaier (2011) and Herren et al. (2012).
[4] In his well known *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962).
[5] This, however, is not an option pursued by Doležel.