



Project  
**MUSE**®

*Scholarly journals online*

# Classical and/or Postclassical Narratology

Gerald Prince

THE 'POSTCLASSICAL NARRATOLOGY' category, if not the label, and the distinction classical/postclassical were explicitly discussed for the first time in a 1997 article by David Herman entitled "Scripts, Sequences, and Stories: Elements of a Postclassical Narratology." Two years later, in the introduction to *Narratologies: New Perspectives in Narrative Analysis*, a collection of articles edited by Herman, the narratologist underlined the distinction he had outlined, and he emphasized the postclassical nature of the texts he had gathered. In 2005 Monika Fludernik took up this distinction, while modulating it, in her "Histories of Narrative Theory (II): From Structuralism to the Present." There she sketched one or two histories of the evolution of narratological studies and briefly characterized some recent tendencies of narratology. Thus, it seems that the distinction proposed by Herman was compelling enough to acquire mainstream ("historical") status in less than ten years.<sup>1</sup>

In what is called its classical phase, narratology may be viewed as a scientifically motivated, structuralist inspired theory of narrative which examines what narratives have in common as well as what enables them to differ narratively from one another. It refers back to Saussurean linguistics through its interest in narrative *langue* rather than narrative *paroles*, what allows a narrative to mean rather than what that narrative means. Particularly successful in the 1960s and 1970s, it includes among its most famous representatives the French or Francophonous founding fathers (Roland Barthes and the veritable manifesto constituted by his "Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits"), Tzvetan Todorov (who coined the very term "narratologie" and defined it in his *Grammaire du Décaméron* as the "science du récit"<sup>2</sup>), Gérard Genette (probably the most influential of all narratologists), A. J. Greimas (and the Semiotic School of Paris), Claude Bremond (and his *Logique du récit*), important continuators like Mieke Bal or Seymour Chatman, distant cousins like Wayne Booth or Franz Stanzel, and (Russian as well as Jamesian-American) formalist or quasi-formalist ancestors. Indeed, classical narratology can itself be characterized as formalist. It distinguishes conceptually between *Gehalt* and *Gestalt*, matter and manner, or—to use Hjelmslevian terminology—substance and form. It locates the specificity of narrative as opposed to non-narrative in the form (not the substance) of narrated content and narrating expres-

sion. It argues that differences in form account for distinctly narrative differences between narrative texts. It takes as its domain all and only possible narratives, considers them synchronically instead of diachronically, and concentrates primarily, not to say exclusively, on questions of technique and poesis rather than authorial intentions, receiver reactions or contextual situations and functions. Besides, it is also formalist in its view that the infinite variety of narrative forms results from different combinations of a finite set of invariant elements as well as in its commitment to the elaboration of a formal system describing these combinations of elements.

Postclassical narratology, which does not have much of a French accent<sup>3</sup> and which, according to Herman, begins to make a mark as early as the 1980s, presents a relatively different profile. As suggested by its name and as underlined by Herman himself, it does not represent a negation or rejection of classical narratology but an extension, an expansion, a broadening, a refinement. Postclassical narratology includes classical narratology as one of its decisive stages or components, rethinks and recontextualizes it, exposes its limits but exploits its possibilities, retains its bases, reevaluates its scope, and constitutes a new version of an enterprise that, once upon a time, was new too. Postclassical narratology asks the questions that classical narratology asked: what is (a) narrative as opposed to (a) non-narrative? what are the possible kinds of narrative? what increases or decreases narrativity? what influences its nature and degree or, even, what makes a narrative narratable? But postclassical narratology also asks other questions: about the relation between narrative structure and semiotic form, about their interaction with knowledge of the real world, about the function and not only the functioning of narrative, about what this or that particular narrative means and not only about how all and only narratives mean, about narrative as process or production and not simply as product, about the influence of context and means of expression on the responses of the receiver, about the history of narratives as opposed to the system underlying them, and so on and so forth. It even seems that, for some of its most fervent champions, no question—nothing in narrative texts or in their many contexts—is alien to postclassical narratology. As a matter of fact, in the introduction to *Narratologies*, Herman writes:

Note that I am using the term *narratology* quite broadly, in a way that makes it more or less interchangeable with *narrative studies*. Arguably, this broad usage reflects the evolution of narratology itself—an evolution that the present volume aims to document. No longer designating just a subfield of structuralist literary theory, *narratology* can now be used to refer to any principled approach to the study of narratively organized discourse, literary, historiographical, conversational, filmic, or other. (27)

To answer all the questions it asks, postclassical narratology uses very diverse and frequently new instruments: not structural linguistics anymore but computational linguistics, conversational analysis, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and not only linguistics but all the resources provided by the textual and cognitive sciences. As indicated above, it refers to an abundant and varied corpus: the traditional 'great works', of course, but also less canonical or more subversive texts, non-fictional and non-literary stories, 'natural' or spontaneous oral narratives, filmic accounts but also theatrical, pictorial, musical ones, as well as any number of seemingly less narrative material like economics, medicine or physics. It is itself plural, as shown by the title of Herman's aforementioned collection and by the frequent use of compound or hyphenated expressions to characterize its various manifestations (feminist narratology, post-modern narratology, postcolonial narratology, ethnonarratology, socionarratology, psychonarratology). It follows all sorts of orientation and features all kinds of inflection. There are now dialogical modulations of narratology but also phenomenological ones; there are Aristotelian approaches to it as well as tropological or deconstructive ones; there are cognitivist and constructivist variations on it, historical and anthropological views, feminist takes, queer speculations, post-colonial interrogations, and corporeal explorations.<sup>4</sup>

Nor is postclassical narratology anti-formalist. Indeed, it is very much interested in form, its definitional powers, its systematic investigation, and—more than its classical counterpart, which concentrates on narrative as opposed to narratives—it aims at ever more accurate descriptions of the formal aspects of specific texts and insists on the (potential) hermeneutic value of such descriptions. But it readily admits that a work's form does not provide everything necessary for the work's interpretation and evaluation. It grants that at least some non-formal aspects of a narrative text may contribute to that text's narrative specificity. It recognizes that formalist achievements often depend to some extent on familiarity with historical context. It is not exclusivist, imperialist, autonomist. Besides, though it aspires to characterize narrativity, narratives, and their diversity as precisely as possible, it does not dream of giving grammatical shape to its accounts.

In other words postclassical narratology is or prefers to be less formalist and more open than its classical predecessor, more exploratory and interdisciplinary, more hospitable to the critico-theoretical currents surrounding it, more expansive (bringing together poetics and interpretation, narrative theory and narratological criticism, which classical narratology tries to keep separate, and considering all kinds of subjects that classical narratology endeavors

not to consider), more 'modest' at the same time (less sure of its self-sufficiency), more utilitarian too, more empirical and even experimental, more hybrid, and, given that the bracketing of context and history still seems reactionary to many, certainly more politically correct.

The gradual replacement of a classical stance by postclassical attitudes, the progressive ascendancy of the latter, can be explained in various ways. The enthusiasm generated by "formalo-structuralism" was difficult to maintain. After drunkenness comes sobering up; after dreams, awakenings; after Barthes's "Introduction," Greimas's *Sémantique structurale*, Todorov's grammar and Bremond's logic, Genette's masterful "Discours du récit," fatigue and doubt. If in the domain of narrative discourse—in a narratology that can almost be called Genettean given the extent of Genette's influence—success was truly dazzling, in the domain of story, of the narrated, results were not as decisive. There was a realization that the distance between story structure and textual form is not easy to bridge and that narrative syntax may well be less important than narrative semantics or pragmatics. "Discours du récit" constituted an exemplary paradigm (in Thomas Kuhn's original acceptance of the term). It even seemed that the Genettean model required no more than a little refining, a little polishing, and, particularly in France, it quickly became the stuff of textbooks. On the other hand, in spite of the undeniable contributions made by Todorov, Greimas, and Bremond, works on the narrated did not quite constitute paradigms. They provoked much skepticism, much resistance, and it even seemed that narrative grammars (of the kind I devised, for instance<sup>5</sup>) made mountains out of molehills. Besides, the human sciences (insofar as they are 'human'), the humanities in the triumphant context of science proper, show as much if not more interest for 'undiscipline' as for discipline. They prove romantic and impatient, suspicious of grand narratives and other essential truths, fascinated with the local, the particular, the singular, with style more than grammar and difference more than sameness. Paradoxically, the narrative turn, which accompanied the linguistic turn as early as the 1960s or 1970s, was not only a symptom of the growing influence of narratology and of the analytical tools and reference points it provided for the characterization of all sorts of text, object, event, intellectual enterprise or scientific domain; the narrative turn was also a symptom of the decline threatening the discipline. As it fostered the use of the very term 'story' in lieu of many other terms (one said 'story' to mean 'argumentation' or 'explanation'; one preferred 'story' to 'hypothesis' or 'theory'; one spoke of 'story' instead of 'ideology'; one substituted 'story' for 'message'), it spurred the questioning or rejection of narratological 'scientism': after all, perhaps 'the science of narrative' itself

was just another story. If you can't beat them, join them. Forced to leave its ambitions and pretensions behind on pain of being condemned for naiveté and shunned for scientism, put in its place by the critique of structuralism—which, at least in the United States, was quickly baptized post-structuralism—and by a resilient devotion to history, context, and criticism, fearful of being discarded or ignored by disciplines and sub-disciplines increasingly sensitive to the inflections and influences of race, class, gender, sexuality, narratology tried to assimilate and to prove more adventurous or less jejune without abandoning most of its questions and its assets. It became postclassical.

But these explanations may be overly crude, this story overly dramatic. Perhaps, as suggested above, the change from classical to postclassical narratology was not that radical. Perhaps, instead of revolution, it was a matter of normal, expectable evolution. Perhaps classical narratology was always already postclassical, in the same way as structuralism is always already post-structuralist and the modern always already post-modern. Perhaps even the most austere and intransigent formalism is not without some openness and flexibility.<sup>6</sup> One should remember that, from the beginning, the history of narratology (like its prehistory) has been marked not only by a variety of inspirations—linguistic, anthropological, rhetorical, philosophical—but also by controversies, disputes, and transformations, with Lévi-Strauss scolding Propp, Greimas and Bremond revising him thoroughly, van Dijk reconfiguring Todorov, and many practitioners disagreeing about the very nature of the discipline and its object.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, many areas of study go through often unpredictable and powerful interactions with various new technologies or various new domains with which they come in contact. In the case of narratology one could mention, for example, work in Artificial Intelligence on schemas, scripts, plans, and a resultant interest in context and the 'encyclopedia'. One could also mention work in speech act theory and a consequent attention paid to pragmatics.

Perhaps, too, the modifications effected by postclassical narratology are ultimately not as significant as one might think. After all, William O. Hendricks stressed forty years ago the difficulty of relating algorithmically narrative deep structure to surface manifestation and the importance of solving that problem. James Bond, the detective story, the comic strip were not forgotten by classical narratologists, and neither was the figure of the reader. Bremond discussed virtuality before the decisive work of Marie-Laure Ryan and Uri Margolin on the subject. By the end of the 1970s, the sociolinguistic analyses of "natural narratives" proposed by William Labov had proved narratologically influential, and the pragmatic dimension of different degrees of narra-

tivity had been explicitly broached.<sup>8</sup> Quoting Barbara Herrnstein-Smith and Arkady Plotnitsky approvingly, David Herman (*Narratologies* 28-29) reinforces this point:

[T]he postclassical logic of undecidability may be applied to the very opposition between classical and postclassical. For this opposition, too, cannot be established once and for all, either theoretically or historically. . . . [T]here is an immensely complex and sometimes undecidable interplay between that which is classical and that which is postclassical.<sup>9</sup>

Still, it is difficult to ignore the contributions of so-called postclassical inquiries to narratological knowledge. More fundamentally, it is difficult to deny the fact that narratology is now often viewed as equivalent to narrative studies, that it is more methodologically varied, contextually engaged, hermeneutically oriented than it was, and that it devotes much of its energy to interpretation. One may regret the latter while recognizing that the examination of specific texts in specific contexts can test the validity and rigor of narratological categories, distinctions, and reasonings, identify (more or less important) elements that narratologists (may) have overlooked, underestimated or misunderstood, and lead to basic reformulations of models of narrative. If classical narratology, even when it acknowledges its significance, neglects the context by (temporarily) bracketing it, (artificially) restricting it or making it part of the text and (unintentionally) drowning it, postclassical narratology, even as it recognizes the importance of the text, can drown it by making it part of the context. Similarly, one may regret the heterogeneity of the methods used to study narrative since it is sometimes difficult to synthesize results linked to different horizons. Besides, discriminating between various tasks and between the questions they imply allows for a better circumscription of the object to be studied and for a more considered and systematic progress toward its clarification. Given a text like “John became European champion and world champion,” one can ask how many events it represents (a classical question), and one can also ask why it refers to John instead of Jacques, Mary or Jane (a postclassical question). Classical narratology tried to set certain questions aside. Postclassical narratology yields perhaps too easily to the temptation of asking them all. But if it may thus lose sight of its object sometimes, it often succeeds in increasing the dynamism and vigor of narrative exploration (see Fludernik, “Histories”). By addressing many kinds of questions, orienting its investigations in diverse (feminist, cognitive, post-colonial) ways, supplying a multiplicity of different optics to consider narratives, it discovers and/or invents a variety of narrative elements, procedures, techniques, and forms. Think, for instance, of Robyn Warhol’s work on

engaging and distancing narrators, Susan Lanser's consideration of narrative voice and person, David Herman's remarks on polychronic narrations (which involve and exploit a multi-valued system of temporal ordering, including such values or concepts as "indeterminately-situated-vis-à-vis time *t*"), cognitively oriented inquiries into narrative representations of consciousness, and post-colonially inflected views of free direct discourse (which might possibly issue from a group or collectivity rather than a single individual, from a more or less homogeneous "we" instead of an "I").<sup>10</sup> Or, within the francophone production, think of Raphaël Baroni on narrative tension, Françoise Lavocat on possible fictional worlds, Alain Rabatel on point of view, Françoise Revaz on narrativity, John Pier and Jean-Marie Schaeffer on metalepsis<sup>11</sup> or Jean-Marie Schaeffer again on the nature of fiction.

If, by means of new instruments, expanded corpora, and original inflections, postclassical narratology identifies or (re)examines various aspects of narrative and (re)defines or (re)configures them, it also suggests several important tasks to pursue or undertake. For example, the insistence on studying narratives as contextually situated practices points to the importance of incorporating the "voice" of the receiver (or other contextual elements) in narratological accounts of textual functioning. One might, for instance, devise models indicating how certain (portions of) texts can function as iterative or singulative narrative, as free indirect or narratized discourse, as representations of synchronous or asynchronous events, and therefore can yield different meanings depending on the receiver's interpretive decisions. Of course, making room for a receiver's voice will not put an end to a vast set of questions concerning the role and significance of any number of narrative features. Why receivers weight the latter differently, whether they are sensitive to switches in distance or point of view, how they construct different kinds of implied author, when they opt for one interpretation as opposed to another, or what leads them to distinguish different degrees of narrativity are empirical problems requiring empirically based solutions. Yet narratologists—classical or postclassical, formalist or not—have done little extensive empirical or experimental (cross-cultural and cross-media) exploration and have too often been inclined to take locally suggestive and persuasive arguments about understandings and responses for generally true statements. No doubt that type of exploration itself, even when focusing on strictly formal features, presents a number of difficulties. It is not easy to find or devise (laboratory) specimens free of the crippling disease of clumsiness, nor is it easy to design protocols for a sound assessment of processing strategies and interpretive responses. Nevertheless, following the example of Maria Bortolussi and Peter



Dixon, Willie van Peer and Henk Pander Maat, Els Andringa, or Richard Gerrig,<sup>12</sup> narratologists should attempt to ground their discipline experimentally in order to account for what actually is the case.

Theory should agree with reality; the description should correspond to the phenomena; and an adequate model of narrative should be realistic, that is, empirically grounded and validated. It should also be explicit as well as complete (accounting for all and only narratives), and it should characterize narrative competence (the ability to produce narrative texts and to construe texts as narrative). After a number of (early) intoxicating proposals—from Todorov, Greimas, van Dijk, and others—the modeling impulse seems to have abated.<sup>13</sup> Yet, as David Herman says, though narratology has changed, it has not renounced “its original commitment to developing the best possible descriptive and explanatory models” (*Narratologies* 3). Whether narratologists adopt classical or postclassical positions, whether they focus on specifying the nature of narrative grids or on exploring the ways various factors can inflect these grids, whether they give all or only some of their attention to form, the elaboration of such models is crucial to the coherence of the discipline and to the systematic study of its object. In other words and at least in this sense, whatever direction it follows, narratology should continue to be formalist.

*University of Pennsylvania*

### Notes

1. See David Herman, “Scripts, Sequences, and Stories: Elements of a Postclassical Narratology,” *PMLA*, 112 (1997): 1046-59; David Herman, ed., *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis* (Columbus: Ohio State U P, 1999); Monika Fludernik, “Histories of Narrative Theory (II): From Structuralism to the Present,” in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 36-59. See also Monika Fludernik, “Beyond Structuralism in Narratology: Recent Developments and New Horizons in Narrative Theory,” *Anglistik*, 11 (2000): 83-96; Ansgar Nünning and Vera Nünning, “Von der strukturalistischen Narratologie zur ‘postklassischen’ Erzähltheorie: Ein Überblick über Ansätze und Entwicklungstendenzen,” in *Neue Ansätze in der Erzähltheorie*, Ansgar Nünning and Vera Nünning, eds. (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2002), 1-33.
2. Tzvetan Todorov, *Grammaire du Décaméron* (The Hague: Mouton, 1969), 10.
3. See, however, Raphaël Baroni, *La Tension narrative: suspense, curiosité et surprise* (Paris: Seuil, 2007); Vincent Jouve, *L'Effet-personnage dans le roman* (Paris: PUF, 1992); Françoise Lavocat, ed., *Usages et théories de la fiction: le débat contemporain à l'épreuve des textes anciens (XVIe-XVIIIe siècles)* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2004); Alain Rabatel, *La Construction textuelle du point de vue* (Lausanne et Paris: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1998); Françoise Revaz, *Les Textes d'action* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1997); Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Pourquoi la fiction?* (Paris: Seuil, 1999).
4. See, for example, David Herman, *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2002); Kathy Mezei, ed., *Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology and British Women Writers* (Chapel Hill: U of Carolina P, 1995); Tom Kindt and Hans-

- Harald Müller, eds., *What Is Narratology? Questions and Answers Regarding the Status of a Theory* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2003); Phelan and Rabinowitz, *Companion*.
5. Gerald Prince, *A Grammar of Stories: An Introduction* (The Hague: Mouton, 1973), "Aspects of a Grammar of Narrative," *Poetics Today*, 1:3 (1980): 49-63, and *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative* (Berlin: Mouton, 1982), 79-102.
6. On this subject, see Marjorie Levinson, "What Is New Formalism?" *PMLA*, 122 (2007): 558-69.
7. See Gerald Prince, "Surveying Narratology," in Kindt and Müller, *What Is Narratology?*, 1-16.
8. See Claude Bremond, "La Logique des possibles narratifs," *Communications*, 8 (1966): 60-76; Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell U P, 1978), 36-41; Umberto Eco, "James Bond: une combinatoire narrative," *Communications*, 8 (1966): 77-93 and *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1978); William O. Hendricks, *Essays on Semiolinguistics and Verbal Art* (The Hague: Mouton, 1973); William Labov, "The Transformation of Experience in Narrative Syntax," in *Language in the Inner City* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1972), 354-96; Uri Margolin, "Of What Is Past, Is Passing, or to Come: Temporality, Aspectuality, Modality, and the Nature of Literary Narrative," in Herman, *Narratologies*, 142-66; Gerald Prince, "Introduction à l'étude du narrataire," *Poétique*, 4 (1973): 178-96 and *Narratology*, 145-61; Marie-Laure Ryan, "Embedded Narratives and Tellability," *Style*, 20 (1986): 319-40 and *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 2001); Tzvetan Todorov, "Typologie du roman policier," in *Poétique de la prose* (Paris: Seuil, 1971), 55-65.
9. Barbara Herrnstein-Smith and Arkady Plotnitsky, "Introduction: Networks and Symmetries, Decidable and Undecidable," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 94 (1995): 386.
10. See David Herman, "Limits of Order: Toward a Theory of Polychronic Narration," *Narrative*, 6 (1998): 72-95; Susan Lanser, "Toward a Feminist Narratology," *Style*, 20 (1986): 341-63 and "Queering Narratology," in Mezei, *Ambiguous Discourse*, 85-94; Gerald Prince, "On a Postcolonial Narratology," in Phelan and Rabinowitz, *Companion*, 377-78; Robyn Warhol, *Gendered Interventions: Narrative Discourse in the Victorian Novel* (New Brunswick: Rutgers U P, 1989); Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State U P, 2006).
11. John Pier and Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Métalepses: entorses au pacte de la représentation* (Paris: Editions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2005).
12. Els Andringa, "Effects of 'Narrative Distance' on Readers' Emotional Involvement and Response," *Poetics*, 23 (1996): 431-52; Marisa Bortolussi and Peter Dixon, *Psychonarratology: Foundations for the Empirical Study of Literary Response* (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 2003); Richard Gerrig, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading* (New Haven: Yale U P, 1993); Willie van Peer and Henk Pander Maat, "Perspectivation and Sympathy: Effects of Narrative Point of View," in *Empirical Approaches to the Arts and Literature*, Roger J. Kreuz et Mary Sue McNeally, eds. (New York: Ablex, 1996), 143-56.
13. See, for example, Teun A. van Dijk, *Some Aspects of Text Grammars: A Study in Theoretical Linguistics and Poetics* (The Hague: Mouton, 1972); Gérard Genot, *Problèmes de calcul du récit*, CRLLI 10 (Paris: Université Paris X-Nanterre, 1976); Algirdas Julien Greimas, "Narrative Grammar: Units and Levels," *MLN*, 86 (1971): 793-806; Thomas Pavel, *La Syntaxe narrative des tragédies de Corneille* (Paris: Klincksieck); Tzvetan Todorov, "La Grammaire du récit," *Langages*, 12 (1968): 94-102.