Emergent Narrativity

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Abstract

This paper deals with those dimensions of narrative which define it as such (i.e. narrativity). It examines some current conceptions of narrativity, and puts forward an emergentist theory of narrativity, one which takes into account the narrative structuring effected by narratological analysis itself as a distinct cognitive activity.

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Why is a narrative a narrative? What makes a narrative more or less narrative? Which properly narrative elements can be discerned in narrative architecture? Which are the formal and communicative resources a narrative can exploit or develop in specifically narrative ways? Which elements or resources can legitimately be labeled "narrative" in a text which is, nevertheless, not "a narrative"? These questions stake out, at least in part, the issue of narrative specificity, or narrativity.

These initial questions have some common ground, but they also point out different dimensions of the problem and directions for discussion. We

might therefore distinguish (following Gerald Prince) "narrativehood" (a matter of whether something is or is not "a narrative") from "narrativeness" (the determination of *how* narrative it is, and in which ways) —as different dimensions of narrativity. Or we might differentiate diegetic narrativity from mimetic narrativity (with Ansgar Nünning and Roy Sommer). We may address the narrativity of the lyric, or the element of diegetic narrativity in drama; or analyze the narrative specificity of interactive online games.

Two main approaches to the issue of narrativity might be labeled the "structuralist" and the "post-structuralist" one. Structuralist approaches tended to focus on formal approaches to narrativity and on the narrativity of "narratives"; post-structuralism has favoured the fuzziness of reader-response, and has explored the fringes of narrativity, or the narrative components of non-narrative phenomena.

A typical structuralist approach to narrativity might start from a structural analysis of the narrative text into levels of analysis (for instance, story and discourse, or *fabula* and *siuzhet,* or the three-level set, action, story and discourse). From thence, we might analyze the narrative specificity of each of those levels: e.g. which kind of actions will yield higher narrativity, or which discursive strategies are specific to narratives, or favoured by narrative representation. One might focus, for instance, on the varying modes and aspects of diegetic narrativity or those of mimetic narrativity; on the narrative logic of event sequences, or the different meanings and modes of closure at the level of the action, of the story structure, and of the rhetoric of narrating. Many of the constitutive phenomena of narrativity are still insufficiently explored within the tradition of mainstream or classical narratology, which therefore remains a fruitful line of inquiry.

Following a post-structuralist tack, on the other hand, one would stress the fact that "some narratives are born narratives, some become narratives, and some have narrativity thrown upon them". The (inter)active role of the receiver and the multiple contexts and uses of narrative would be emphasized. One remembers that in the heyday of formalism, literary theorists tried to provide formal or structural definitions of literature. These have been by and large discredited and now functional definitions are preferred: few theorists would now question that "some literary works are born as literature, some become literature and some have literariness thrown upon them". Certainly, making a similar claim about narrative is a much bolder and (arguably) questionable move. After all, isn't narrative by definition a structure (e.g. "a structure of events")?

However questionable when pushed to an extreme, this relativization of narrativity is a fruitful line of inquiry for poststructuralist narratology. Far from being dependent on universal, context-free structures and traits, narrativity is largely tied to pragmatic, functional, contextual, generic and cultural circumstances. Classical narratology provided "grammatical" or structural definitions of narrativity; but this phase of narratology has been succeeded by poststructuralist or postclassical narratology. A useful contrastive characterization of both phases can be found in Gerald Prince's article "Narratologie classique et narratologie postclassique" in *Vox Poetica*. Postclassical narratology favours definitions which are more interdisciplinary and more tied to cultural contexts and debates. Definitions—or perhaps problematizations, as when, for instance, the very concept of narrativity is problematized, by being considered no longer a neutral concept but one defined in relation to issues of genre, of standard

and nonstandard language, and generally speaking as an issue of social semiotics (as in Beatriz Penas's chapter in *Theorizing Narrativity*).

According to the glossary of the recent *Blackwell Companion to Narrative* Theory (ed. James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz), narrativity is "the formal and contextual qualities distinguishing narrative from non-narrative, or marking the degree of 'narrativeness' in a discourse, the rhetorical principles underpinning the production or interpretation of narrative; the specific kinds of artifice inherent in the process of narrative representation." (P. 548). There is ample room in this definition to consider that the narrativity of a text (or of a "phenomenon") need not to be predetermined, but may rather be subject to reinterpretation, or be jointly constructed through the interaction of the narrator and the receiver or interpreter.

The issue of narrativization must therefore be considered together with narrativity. Narrativization involves a structuring, narrativizing activity exerted on non-narrative material, or the reorganization of previous narrative structures in order to produce a new narrative (cf. my paper on retelling in *Theorizing Narrativity*). In Hayden White's narratology of history, narrativization is a task effected by the historian in order to impose a plot-like order on prenarrative historical data; here it is the author who narrativizes. Monika Fludernik (*Towards a Natural Narratology*) has emphasized, instead, the reader's use of narrativizing strategies to naturalize difficult texts—e.g. by reading them as as a sequence of events, or as the focalization of an experiencing mind.

Gerald Prince, who has distinguished the dimensions of "narrativehood" and "narrativeness" within narrativity, has thereby drawn attention to the

narrativity of texts that we wouln't want to call narratives; these texts may show different kinds of narrativeness (e.g. the representation of experientiality, varying proportions between action and commentary, between virtuality and actuality of the represented events… etc.) without thereby qualifying for narrativehood. These degrees of narrativeness are perhaps best classified by Didier Coste's mapping of different traits which may be present in a greater or lesser degree (in *Narrative as Communication*). The main constitutive elements of narrativity according to Coste are: transactiveness/non-transactiveness, transitiveness / intransitiveness, causality / non-causality, specificity / generality, singularity / banality, and the presence / absence of alternative courses of action.

Apart from these scalar categories, Marie-Laure Ryan has noted the importance of the dimension of virtuality/actuality in plots (and the varieties of its unfolding in the contrast betweeen the "actual" narrative world and the private worlds of the characters; she has also emphasized the relevance of different modalities of narrativity: the simple narrativity of folk tales, the figurative narrativity of genres such as the lyric, philosophy, or history; the complex narrativity of canonical novels; the instrumental or subordinate narrativity of exempla, sermons… etc.

The recent *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* features articles on narrativity by Prince, and on narrativization by Jan Alber, which address these issues. But arguably other articles on narrative in this volume are just as relevant to a discussion of narrativity: those addressing issues of genres or text-types. Reflecting on narrativity along the lines of text-type takes us back inescapably to the definition of narrative, and (in Alexandra Georgakopoulou's article in the *Routledge Encylopedia of Narrative*

Theory) back to definitions such as Chatman's: narrative necessitates a double chronology, the chronology of representing discourse and the chronology of represented events in the story (—on which more shortly).

Text-type approaches to narrativity may address the specific differences in the narrativity of properly narrative genres (e.g. kinds of plot-structures in drama vs. those of novels; the Aristotelian contrast between the tragedy and the epic; the narrative specificity of the short story, etc.). That is, different kinds and modes of narrativeness. Issues of narrativehood have also been prominent: the frontiers of narrative vs. those of other major text types, such as exposition, explication, instruction, or non-narrative conversation. Linguistic theories of discourse modes, as well as speech-act theory are also highly relevant to this discussion (see on this point my discussion in *Acción, Relato, Discurso*).

As noted by Georgakopoulou, some theorists (Bruner, Swales, Virtanen; one might add Ricoeur, Dennett, Turner, etc.) have placed narrative at an even higher structural level, beyond these text types. Narrative would be a more encompassing cognitive operation or macro-text-type; such approaches tend to emphasize the presence of narrativity (the narrative ingredient) in each of these major text-types. Georgakopoulou finds that by focusing on narrative at such a level of generality, one tends to forget to keep a perspective on the specific differences between actual narratives. Contemporary tendencies in analysis tend to focus less on abstract formal elements, and emphasize instead the intricacies of specific and situated uses of forms in localized generic or social contexts. "One possibility would be to explore narrative as a dynamic conglomeration of more or less prototypical textual, functional, and contextual parameters" (Georgakopoulou 596). She emphasizes the varying uses of resources in

different contexts and the changing degrees of attention users pay to these resources, as well as the appearance of local hybrid modes in specific communicative contexts and communities.

Clearly, what is "a good story" in one community or under one set of conventions may be sorely lacking in narrativity from a different point of view (—both *Ulysses* and *Don Quixote* are notorious examples of unreadability for the popular mind). The eye of the beholder, and the sociolinguistics of genres and styles, therefore, must be taken into account in any discussion of narrativity. One might also look to deliberate parodies or anti-narratives, which deconstruct narrative conventions and show a kind of negative narrativity, a narrativity by contrast. (See for instance my case study of Beckett's novels in *Samuel Beckett y la narración reflexiva*).

A longer article on "Genre theory in narrative studies" by Michael Kearns in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* necessarily covers some of this ground as well. We find here again a conception of genre (narrative genre, in this case) as a set of conventions "activated" by the reader: "To approach a text as *narrative is to implement expectations about point, *narrative progression or transformation, *actants, and *narrator (see narrativity; tellability); in fact, any text containing a sequence of *events invites these expectations" (Kearns 201).

Kearns traces back to Aristotle the classical or taxonomic conceptions of genre, and notes that in the twentieth century these were displaced by functionalist concepts which integrate literary genres within a wider linguistic framework. Thus, Genette redefines narrative as a "linguistic mode" beyond the limits of specific literary genres—a mode which can be used by any genre. And Derrida's "law of genre" conceives of texts as

partaking of genres without belonging to them. This law is also relative to the act of reading: thus, the narratologist must examine the ways in which readers use narrative conventions together with those relative to other types of discourse in dealing with a given text.

The influence of hermeneutics, Kearns notes, has also put restraints on foundational and absolutist conceptions of genre, since the hermeneutic circle necessitates a two-way movement between text and reader and a negotiation between the various elements and component parts of a discourse. None of these strictures on "genre", however, limit the need to study narrative as a specific cognitive, linguistic and cultural phenomenon, with a distinctive status and requiring special study. But present-day theorists prefer to approach genres and discourse modalities with a multidimensional grid of scaled parameters, rather than with absolute and exclusive categories—a fuzzier approach to the issue of specificity both at the level of genre and at the level of the individual text.

Issues of genre bear on the production, the receiver's processing and the cultural reception of specific narratives. On the pole of production, generic narrative patterns act as guidelines, from the most general level of narrative configuration understood as a basic cognitive process, through overarching cultural master narratives, archetypal patterns, or myths—indeed all the dimensions of Genette's architextuality—up to the concrete ideologies located in a specific period or commmunity. The processing, reading or interpretation of narratives likewise necessitates such architextual and ideological patterns to allow communicative interaction. Cultural institutions and ideological processes then reuse specific acts of reception (and in turn condition them) so that certain narrative patterns, genres, or certain specific narratives, are awarded a privileged cultural status (e.g.

"literature", "history") or are otherwise associated to specific communities, communicative contexts, functions. The social uses of narrative patterns at the levels of production, of processing and of cultural reception feed back on each other, so that, for instance, producers of narrative do not work in a void but in a cultural context which receives certain kinds of narrative in ways which are to some extent pre-established (while potentially subject to change through individual action).

As we have noted, many recent theorists have emphasized the role of narrative as a natural linguistic mode and an ingredient present in many genres. This "wider" conception of narrative as an overarching mode dissociated form specifically narrative texts has recently come under attack by Shlomith Rimmon Kennan ("Concepts of Narrative", in *The Traveling Concept of Narrative*). Rimmon-Kenan takes issue with the generalized use of the term "narrative" in psychoanalysis, in critical discourse analysis, and in other humanistic disciplines. Although she recognizes the presence of narrative elements in many of the phenomena these disciplines label as 'narratives', Rimmon-Kenan insists on the need of a double time sequence (that of action and that of its representation) and of a mediating instance (a narrator, etc.) in order to label a phenomenon as 'narrative'.

(Although one wonders, alongside with proponents of three-tiered narrative models [García Landa 1998], whether the triple chronology of (1) action, (2) story and (3) narrative discourse may not be more adequate:
- The chronology of action, i.e. the narrated events not as they are narrated but as they are supposed to have happened.
- The chronology of story, i.e. the narrated events in the order, perspective, etc. articulated by the narration.

- The chronology of narrative discourse, i.e. the story plus the narrating of the story, or the narrating as speech event, including digressions, interactive moves towards the receiver, etc.)

While many (literary) narratologists may have found irritating the 'anything goes' use of the term 'narrative' by social analysts or psychologists, and to that extent agree with Rimmon-Kenan's strictures, one might also object the following. When a (social, psychological, political, etc.) analyst calls something a 'narrative' and then goes on to analyze it, s/he is not necessarily presupposing that the narrative has already been articulated by someone. Quite often, the analyst is doing double duty: at once constructing the narrative, articulating it out of disperse and partially related elements in the discursive space being analyzed, and immediately (or simultaneously) s/he articulates in addition a counternarrative which provides an alternative account or helps configure a more comprehensive argument (thereby showing that the narrative which has been identified or brought to light in the discursive space under consideration was one-sided or ideologically biassed).

It is understandable that, in the process, sometimes straw targets may be set in order to be demolished, or open doors may be closed so that the analyst may crash through them (no doubt depending on one's viewpoint vis à vis the door). Yet there is possibly no other way in which the analyst's work may be done. For instance, if we speak about "the Left's narrative of the Spanish War" we create to a large extent a fiction, which will have to be much more closely argued and articulated in detail if we want to avoid a simplistic perspective. Be as it may, we will be effecting a selection, structuring, interpretation, etc., both of a number of discourses on the Spanish War (extracting a narrative from them) and of the narrative subject

to whom we attribute that narrative ("the Spanish Left", for instance). And that work of narrative structuring will be done, quite possibly, with a view to effecting a critique of the narrative we have just articulated.

Therefore, from an interactional, postclassical, or socio-semiotic perspective on narrativity, the analyst is not a neutral analyst. It is not just that the process of analysis is ideologically articulated: the very object of such analysis is constituted in part by the analysts themselves. It is the analist who must bring to light the narrativity of the object under study, in order to deconstruct that narrativity.

To be sure, good analysts do not produce that narrativity out of a top hat; instead they offer a clear, well-structured, convincingly argued formulation of phenomena which are socially active and relevant, making us see clearly for the first time ("ne'er so well expressed") the relationships between phenomena whose mutual relation, we now sense, was on the tip of our tongue or of our minds. To go on with our example, the analyst will offer a perspective on "the Left's narrative of the Civil War" which is better argued than that of "the Left" itself (who is, to be sure, a fuzzy Narrator). Then the analyst will subject to a critical analysis or deconstruction this narrative which has been articulated in good measure thanks to his/her own analytic work.

The essential issue here is that both the narrative which is extracted and the critique to which it is subjected are narrativizing performances which must have a hermeneutic value, and help interpret the phenomenon under analysis, first in its existing social manifestations, then in the critique thereof. Both steps must manifest the emergent and interpretive value of narrative, constituting objects of knowledge where nothing but

unconnected phenomena existed before. The social analyst, therefore, does not face the situation Rimmon-Kenan's critique would lead us to surmise, with well-articulated narratives, with a narrator, and a double temporal sequence, ready for analysis. Before they deconstruct a "narrative", social analysts must construct it. Admittedly, such an activity may involve much self-serving and navel-gazing argumentation. Nonetheless, it cannot be done otherwise. Ideological debate is made of narratives and counternarratives.

There remains to mention yet another crucial issue in the analysis of "perceived" and emergent narrativity, one which opens a metatheoretical dimension in narrative analysis. Different theories of narrative (and different theories of narrativity), and the practice of different narrative analyses, may be considered to be different perceptual instruments which capture narrative "wavelengths" which escape other theories and approaches (or, as Kenneth Burke would put it, other "terministic screens"). Therefore, theoretical investigation and practical analysis of narrative alike help to develop, in an emergent way, new dimensions of narrativity—an interaction between narrative text and narratological metatext which in turn feeds back on the development of new modes of narrative exhibiting new dimensions of narrativity.

Thus, several chapters in *Theorizing Narrativity* thus bring into clearer focus the narrativity in phenomena which are not obviously narrative—an instance may be Meir Sternberg's chapter on the narrativity of legal statutes, or Marie-Laure Ryan's analysis of the peculiar narrativity of online videogames.

To take another instance, recent cognitivist analyses have emphasized the psychological narrativity of action sequences, plans, etc., in subjective experience. One might argue that, according to classical definitions, there is no narrativity here, since there is no communication from one subject to another, there is no identifiable text, there is no representation… although maybe we should draw the line here and concede that there is, of course, a process of representation involved here. And we might as well concede that there is, too, a process of self-communication. As a matter of fact, consciousness, in an emergentist conception such as George Herbert Mead's, is a process of self-communication. The notion of "self-indication" addressed by an organism to itself (see Blumer 1986) is crucial here. Theory-making is a process of bringing-to-consciousness and therefore of self-communication for the theorist, but (at least in principle) not just for the theorist; it is also the emergence of consciousness in the social sphere through a process of communication.

A narratology which is able to include this narrativity of consciousness among the phenomena analyzed is an instance of the kind of theory that contributes to the perception of narrativity where none was to be seen—which almost (though not quite) amounts to saying, where there was none before theory came along, to bring emergent narrativity to the surface.

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