

JOHN PIER AND JOSÉ ÁNGEL GARCÍA LANDA, eds. *Theorizing Narrativity*. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008. 464 pp. ISBN 978-3-11-020244-1.

Everyone can name a compilation of essays that has inaugurated a new discipline or changed the tack of an existing one significantly. In the field of stylistics, for instance, one can readily invoke the collective work *Style in Language* edited by Thomas Sebeok in 1960. As is widely known, it contains the papers and subsequent discussions generated by the 1958 Bloomington conference on style, and in particular Roman Jakobson's concluding statement "Linguistics and Poetics," which contributed to the consolidation of a persistent craze about the poetic sequence being the site of phenomena usually restricted to the paradigmatic organization of verbal resources. It is hard to say whether *Theorizing Narrativity*—partly the outcome of a seminar meeting on narratology held in Zaragoza in 200—will achieve a similar status within the canon of narrative theory. This depends on many factors, most of them only explainable by the postulates of chaos theory, but, *prima facie*, this volume seems to satisfy all the requisites to become a landmark of contemporary narratology. In this respect, and apart from the uncontested academic stature of its contributors, the main asset of *Theorizing Narrativity* is the wise combination of classical notions sensibly updated and of highly original topics that threaten to dissolve the once well-set contours of the narrative genre. So Gerald Prince's basically immanent notion of narrativity is complemented from outside the text by the pragmatic constraints of what he calls *narratability*, and, thus enriched, the resulting concept engages in a breath-taking dialogue with purely pragmatic and performative ideations of narrativity as put forward, say, by Beatriz Penas and David Rudrum, as well as with the dazzling discussion of the disputed narrative properties of virtual reality and computer games that Marie-Laure Ryan offers in her paper on transfictionality. Taken as a whole, this collection of essays can be viewed as a successful blend of classical and postclassical narratological notions coupled with cultural and contextual issues, evincing that narrative theory has followed a course quite akin to that of twentieth-century linguistics, i.e. from a blind word-centredness to the rigorous consideration of the roles played by producers and consumers of texts in a specific socio-cultural setting.

Pinpointing the exact nature of narrativity has truly become an overriding obsession with latter-day narratology. Somehow it is felt that this notion constitutes the main crux of narrative studies, for its precise delineation would eventually disclose the *differentia specifica* of narrative discourse and thus chart at a stroke a fundamental territory of literary theory. But such precise delineation does not seem to be forthcoming. Narrativity could be minimally defined as that which turns a semiotic artifact—whether verbal or not—into a narrative or into

something perceptible as one. Of course, this definition is deceptively simple and, apart from making everything contingent on what one understands as a narrative, throws into relief the massive conceptual change implied in choosing between two wordings that, at a cursory glance, may look almost equivalent, i.e. “into a narrative” and “into something perceptible as [a narrative].” In the first case, narrativity counts as an inherent property of the object and does not depend on contextual issues; in the second case, it is a kind of projection onto the semiotic medium of conventions, expectations, and perceptions of context-bound nature. *Theorizing Narrativity* veers between both poles, though it certainly gravitates towards the pragmatic one on account of its innovative thrust.

Thirteen papers plus an editorial introduction, a final bibliography, and an onomastic index make up this volume. The papers are not expressly classified into thematic sections, but, for the sake of presentation and discussion, the editors form six groups—not five, as they wrongly state in the introduction (9)—with explicit headings that describe the angle from which the capital notion of narrativity has been approached. Only one paper evades this grouping and acts as a preliminary frame of reference for readers to take their bearings amidst the intricate theoretical opulence of *Theorizing Narrativity*. In this paper, Gerald Prince distinguishes between narrativity, narrativehood, narrativeness, and narratability, the first one designating the general concept while the other three diverse aspects thereof. Narrativehood characterizes an object extensionally as a narrative; narrativeness refers to the possession by an object of a set of traits that may turn it into a narrative; and narratability is what other theorists call tellability or point, i.e. the capacity of an object to be perceived as a more or less successful narrative by its receivers. It should be noted that Prince positively adheres to a transitional or gradational view of narrativity and associate notions (21–22), whereby the narrative profile of an object can be higher or lower depending on the number of conditions it fulfils, a methodological outlook explicitly shared by most contributors to this collection.

Two papers are gathered by the editors under the heading of dynamism and anti-immanentism. Contrary to received accounts that tend to locate narrativity in the concrete judicial case but not in the law-code, Meir Sternberg argues that the modalized discourse of possibility, uncertainty, or non-factuality typical of legal statutes qualifies as narrative, and illustrates his inference by what he calls “if-plots,” i.e. casuistic precepts of a fact-contingent nature that point to the future and can be reduced to minimal narrative sequences. John Pier, for his part, pursues narrativity against the background of the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy and concomitant notions, in combination with the strategies of heuristic reading—casual, naive, prospective—and semiotic reading—deliberate, critical, retrospective. Eventfulness and chance are the key words of the next heading, which brings together Peter Hühn’s essay on the narrative relevance of eventfulness—a gradational concept based on the perception of events as more or

less radical departures from expected norms—and Werner Wolf’s proposal of a set of parameters and steps to assess the role of chance in fiction as a clue to implied worldviews. The following section on pragmatic and performative perspectives on narrative comprises two papers, one by Beatriz Penas and another by David Rudrum. Penas’ work transfers to the narrative text the pragmatic principle that the propositional meaning of a sentence need not coincide with its intended meaning as a real, context-bound utterance. She proposes to read stories as pragmatic acts, and the development of this proposal forms the theoretical basis for the analysis of deviant, non-standard narratives by Hemingway and Nabokov. Fairly compatible with this view is Rudrum’s contention that narrativity should be interpreted in performative terms, and thus assimilate contextual aspects such as tellability and point often dealt with separately. Two other papers by Jukka Tyrkkö and Michael Toolan are brought together because both address the obstacles faced by readers when processing narrative texts. Tyrkkö analyzes the structural pitfalls of fragmented, multilinear, or kaleidoscopic narratives—whether hypertextual or encyclopedic—whereas Toolan uses corpus linguistics techniques to determine how the early lexical choices made in a (short) story are indicative—or not—of later thematic developments. Coming now to the issue of transmediality, three papers deal with narrativity across different media. Ansgar Nünning and Roy Sommer argue for the inclusion of drama in the narrative genre, especially on account of its elements of diegetic narrativity, while Monika Fludernik follows suit from the specific angle of her experiential narratology, and Marie-Laure Ryan sets rigorous limits to the concept of transfictionality and tends to accord computer games a narrative status of sorts as against the proposals of the Scandinavian school of ludologists. Finally, under the heading of retelling, José Ángel García Landa spells out his conviction that all stories are reconfigurations of previous ones in such a way that narrativity always entails some form of repetition.

At the outset, I praised the comprehensiveness of this compilation. But there is more to it than a satisfying blend of more or less complementary theoretical positions—it is also a surprisingly rich collection of critical analyses of narrative works that range from brief discussions to full-blown critiques. No doubt these analyses are employed to bring home a number of theoretical points, but at times they are so extensive and insightful that they threaten to encroach upon theory and lead a textual life of their own. This is particularly the case with Penas’ discussion of Hemingway’s “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” (1936) and Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory* (1966) as anti-narrative texts, or Toolan’s lexical analysis of the language of guidance in Alice Munro’s “The Love of a Good Woman” (1996); but one can also find substantial pieces on Joyce’s “Grace” (1914) and *Portrait* (1916), Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740), Greene’s *Pandosto* (1588), Hardy’s *Tess* (1891), etc.

Few objections can be raised about *Theorizing Narrativity*, and all of them are essentially formal. Each chapter concludes with a list of cited references, but, given the thematic cohesiveness of this volume, many entries occur time and again—Genette’s *Narrative Discourse*, for instance, is cited in six different lists.

This, however, can be easily solved in future reprints by conflating all the lists in one. More disturbing is to notice that misprints and factual errors are by no means rare. One can find, for instance, enigmatic strings such as “over arious stthe image” (402), references to the “American Civil War” (373) when the American War of Independence is clearly intended, the partial repetition of a line at the top of page 275, and an allusion to “six important issues” when *seven* are actually listed (346–49). There are also a number of minor misspellings and grammatical glitches that should be corrected (“court *if* law” 95; “draw attention [to] a curious...” 121; “your” instead of *you* 151; “nothing really take[s] place” 159; “On [the] one hand” 200; “the features . . . has led” 293; “theroretical” 419; etc.—my italics in all cases).

Yet it may seem ungracious to point out the existence of these formal oversights when the intellectual achievement of *Theorizing Narrativity* is both impressive and far-reaching. To my mind, the key feature of this collection lies in its daring wealth and irreducible scope, in its thought-provoking potential, and, above all, in its capacity to render problematic an aspect of narrative theory that had reached a kind of self-complacent stability and needed new dynamism.

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