



[Interview with] Sylvie Patron

Sylvie Patron

► To cite this version:

Sylvie Patron. [Interview with] Sylvie Patron. Peer F. Bundgaard, Henrik Skov Nielsen et Frederik Stjernfelt. Narrative Theories and Poetics: 5 Questions, Copenhagen, Automatic Press / VIP, pp. 159-169, 2012. hal-00698708v2

HAL Id: hal-00698708

<https://hal.science/hal-00698708v2>

Submitted on 27 Apr 2013

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

21

Sylvie Patron

Professor of French Language and Literature
University of Paris Didotot-Paris

1. Why were you initially drawn to narratology or narrative theory?

Without wishing to play on words, I would say that I became involved in narrative theory and criticism (more precisely, in the history and epistemology of narrative theory) through the critique of narratology. It is important to know what I mean when I speak of *narrative theory* and *narratology*, or even *critique of narratology*. I will therefore begin by offering some precisions on these points.

1.1. By *narratology*, I understand a school of literary theory or, more precisely, of the theory of literary narrative, which was first formed in the mid 1960s and based at the École Pratique de Hautes Études (EPHE), then at the École des Hautes Études en Science Sociales (EHESS) in Paris. Gérard Genette swiftly became its leading figure. For historical reasons which deserve closer examination, his prominence began to extend outside France in the late 1970s, particularly in the Netherlands, the United States and Israel; it later reached other countries in Europe, often by an indirect route, particularly in German-speaking countries, which were subject to other influences. (This overall picture naturally needs to be drawn with greater nuance and emphasis on the fact that within narratology considered as a whole, Genette's dominance was never total, but rather tended to combine with national traditions, often with the result of revitalizing them.) As to the program put forward by narratology, it was expressed as follows in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*: "Analysis of narrative discourse will thus be for me, essentially, a study of the relationships between narrative and story, between narrative and narrating, and (to the extent that they are inscribed in the narrative discourse) between story and narrating" (Genette 1980 [1972], p. 29). It was reformulated in the preface to the French transla-

tion of Käte Hamburger's *Die Logik der Dichtung* (*The Logic of Literature*), where the accents falls more strongly on the issue of fiction: "[...] the work of fictional narratology, always more or less focused on the comparison of discourse and story, assumes (by virtue of a provisional methodological decision) that the nonserious pretense of fiction — to tell a story that has actually happened — is taken seriously" (Genette 1993: 113). *Story*, *narrative* (or *narrative discourse*, or simply *discourse*), *narrating* (or *narrator*): narratology cannot do without the propositions these words encapsulate. They designate issues so essential that it cannot call them into question without undermining its own legitimacy.

(I) There is a story, which must be clearly distinguished from the narrative in which it is expressed.

(II) The narrative is always uttered by somebody addressing somebody else (even in the case of written narrative: "uttered", here, means "produced in verbal form, whether oral or written": this is what Genette terms the *narrating* (*narration* in French)).

(III) In the case of narrative fiction, the story and the narrating (and thus the narrator and the narratee) are fictional. More exactly, a fictional act of narrating duplicates the author's real act, which narratology passes over, although in its absence there would simply be no narrative. The fictional narrator tells the narratee a series of events which he or she knows before recounting it. He or she is the one who makes use of the categories of *time* (*order*, *duration*, *frequency*), *mode* and *voice* in Genettian narratology. He or she is behind the selection and presentation (sometimes termed *focalization*) of narrative information in other schools of narratology.

This obviously does not mean that such propositions cannot be called into question (on the basis of conceptual redefinitions: "story/narrative" in the case of fictional narrative, "narrator", "fictional", etc., or refutation, in other words a demonstration of their falseness in some specific cases). However, it is clear that calling these concepts into question is admissible only in theories other than narratology.

Contemporary debates accord great importance to the difference between so-called *classical* and *postclassical* narratologies (this terminology was put forward not by historians, but rather by the protagonists of the second movement themselves). Postclassical narratology, they claim, is distinguished by a profusion of new methods and research hypotheses. They add that it draws on a range of sciences and that its corpus is much larger and more

varied than that of classical narratology. Nevertheless, it seems to me that retaining the term *narratology* is at least as important as the distinction between classical and postclassical, as long as it is understood what using this term means: it designates this very set of propositions even if they survive in different, but still translatable, forms.

1.2. I have already situated *narrative theory* on a different level from narratology. I understand narrative theory in its largest extension: all forms of knowledge based on narrative or the faculty of narration, apprehended through the whole range of narrative discourses or texts. Narrative theory includes both classical and postclassical narratology, but also theories other than narratology, theories older than narratology, theories belonging to different cultural areas from narratology, etc.. Some authors use the term *narratology* (or even *postclassical narratology*) to designate the domain I am calling *narrative theory*, however such terminology has its drawbacks.

1.3. By *critique of narratology*, I understand a study of the conceptual and empirical basis of narratology. This study is grounded notably in the existence and the theoretical and empirical value of theories other than narratology.

2. What do you consider your most important contribution(s) to the field?

My major contribution to the history and epistemology of narrative theory is my 2009 volume entitled *Le Narrateur* (The Narrator), initially subtitled *Un problème de théorie narrative* (A Problem in Narrative Theory) and renamed *Introduction à la théorie narrative* (Introduction to Narrative Theory) at the publisher's request. It differs from narratological studies, whether classical or postclassical, in its *object*, the narrator (narratology cannot study the narrator to the extent that it takes it as axiomatic), its *method*, a historical and critical approach to different theories focused on the opposition between *communicational* theories of narrative and *non-communicational* theories, which can also be termed *poetic* theories of narrative fiction, and finally, its *conclusions*, which call into question the dominance of the communicational paradigm in the theory and analysis of narrative fiction.

2.1. The question is as follows: is there a narrator for all narrative fiction, or only in certain cases (which would imply that narratives can be "narratorless")? This question separates communicational

theories of narrative, according to which communication between a narrator and a narratee constitutes the definition of narrative, including narrative fiction, and non-communicational or poetic theories of narrative fiction, which consider that narrative fiction, or a certain type of narrative fiction, and communication are mutually exclusive categories. According to these theories, narrative fiction is not, or is not always, the product of an act of communication. These theories also aim to rehabilitate the function of the author as the creator of the narrative fiction.

Now let me cite the three basic propositions of narratology once more: (I) there is a story, which must be clearly distinguished from the narrative in which it is expressed; (II) the narrative is always uttered by somebody addressing somebody else; (III) in the case of narrative fiction, the story and the narrating (and thus the narrator and the narratee) are fictional. In other words, for narratology, all narrative has a narrator, whether real or fictional, who communicates narrative content to a narratee, whether real or fictional. More exactly:

- in the case of non-fictional narrative, a real narrator (the author) communicates narrative content, which is given as authentic, to a real narratee (the reader);
- in the case of narrative fiction, the author communicates narrative content which both of them know has no claim to authenticity, via the mediation of communication by a fictional narrator to a fictional narratee, of narrative content which is given as authentic.

Narratology is only interested in the second situation of communication, which can be summarized by the questions “who is speaking?” and “to whom?” (implying: fictionally). It frequently does without the operator “It is fictional that...” and considers narrative fiction as an *analogon* or an imitation of non-fictional narrative.

For non-communicational or poetic theories of narrative fiction, on the contrary:

- it is not at all obvious that the relation between the author and the reader is one of communication, in an essential and interesting sense of the term *communication* (based on a linguistic and potentially pragmatic interpretation of what communication is, as opposed to what it can be considered not to be);
- it is not at all obvious either that there is always a fictional situation of communication implying a fictional narrator and narratee. The presence of a fictional situation of communication must

be established on the grounds of a logico-linguistic analysis rather than presupposition. Its absence enables the appearance of other forms that are always more or less closely linked to the representation of the “third-person subjectivity” (or to that of “subjectless subjectivity”) and which have become indissociable from third-person narrative fiction.

In fact, for non-communicational or poetic theories of narrative fiction, the most interesting question in the case of narrative fiction is not “who is speaking?” (implying: fictionally), but the question “how is it written?” (implying: given the possibilities offered by the structure of language).

2.2. Communicational theories of narrative are theories implying the absence of linguistic differences between non-fictional narrative, fictional narrative and communicational discourse. The problem is that they are also non-linguistic theories of narrative fiction (with the exception of part of Lubomír Doležel’s theory in *Narrative Modes in Czech Literature*, 1973). I disagree with certain representations of classical narratology, generally those prompted by a concern to define postclassical narratology, which see the former as a linguistic theory of narrative inspired by structural linguistics. Such representations do not withstand rigorous scrutiny. On the other hand, non-communicational or poetic theories of narrative fiction are linguistic theories of narrative fiction (except Hamburger’s, which is more akin to logic and the philosophy of language; some of her propositions are nevertheless translatable into linguistic discourse). For the representatives of these theories, the narrating of fiction is distinct in some respects from non-fictional narrating, and similar to the latter in others; it can only be theorized within the framework of a linguistics of written language and a historical stylistics of discourses and genres.

2.3. Communicational theories of narrative fiction are theories of omni-fictionality in fictional narrative. They are not interested in the distinction, which stems from the study of the reception of works of literature, between those elements that relate to the content of the fictional representation (the characters, events, the narrator if there is one) and those relating to the means employed in the construction of the representation (the language, style and composition of the text on different levels). On the other hand, non-communicational or poetic theories of narrative fiction make this distinction more or less explicitly. Ann Banfield writes, for example, on the subject of the author’s style: “[...] style approached

in this way is not on a par with those aspects of style which create the intentional construct which is fictional subjectivity. A writer may leave his signature in his writing — it may even contribute a major proportion of what is valued in it — but this is not what his writing creates [...]” (1982: 253). Mary Galbraith uses more explicit formulations: “In a fictional narrative without a narrator, the language of narration is not itself part of the fiction, except where it represents the verbal expressions of characters [...]. Rather, the language of narration is the mode of being of the fiction. Fictional people, events, experiences and verbal expressions are all represented and come to life through the language of the text, and the style of the language makes each fiction a different kind of experience, a different texture, a different self-world relation” (1995: 49). In my own article entitled “La mort du narrateur et l’interprétation du roman. L’exemple de *Pedro Páramo* de Juan Rulfo” (Patron 2010a), I have aimed to show the benefits to be gained from this distinction for the analysis and the interpretation of a particular work of narrative fiction.

2.4. Beyond the preceding formulation of oppositions, I consider as my own contribution:

(I) Identifying the point at which the concept of the narrator took on a stabilized form (coinciding with the first descriptions of the first-person novel as opposed to the third-person novel) and observing the persistence of the traditional conception of the narrator in communicational theories of narrative (where it is never integrated without the introduction of an imbalance or disparity between criteria) and in non-communicational or poetic theories of narrative fiction (where it is integrated but reinterpreted).

(II) Compiling a corpus and studying the succession of theories in the case of communicational theories of narrative fiction (in the case of non-communicational or poetic theories of narrative, I was able to adopt an existing corpus and examine relationships of succession which had already been established).

(III) Offering a renewed account of non-communicational or poetic theories of fiction (which had been the object of a number of erroneous readings and representations). As in the case of communicational theories, I endeavored to evaluate the common characteristics and differences between these theories on the level of the issues raised, the concepts and the terminology used and the literary examples cited.

(IV) Establishing the genealogy of certain concepts or ideas, and exposing several errors linked to conceptual transfers between nar-

ratology and enunciative linguistics, or between narratology and speech act theory, for example.

2.5. My book calls into question the dominance of the communicational paradigm in the theory and analysis of narrative fiction. Despite some obscurity or approximate reasoning and the different extension given at times to *narratorless narrative*, I consider that non-communicational or poetic theories of narrative are sounder on the theoretical level, more precise and adequate on the descriptive level and more fertile on the interpretative level than communicational theories of fiction.

3. What is the proper role of a narratology and narrative theory in relation to other academic disciplines?

As far as I am concerned, the pertinent question is the following: what is the role of the history and epistemology of narrative theory in relation to narrative theory and potentially to other academic disciplines? The answer to this question would require more space than I have available here, however I will try to give a few indications along with some examples.

3.1. Historicizing narrative theory consists in making information available to researchers which may broaden their *retrospective horizon* (*horizon de rétrospection* in French): the memory of results, problems and concepts developed before their time (I am taking the term and its definition from French historians of linguistics). To cite a simple example, Genette's discussion of *person* based on the expressions "first-person narrative" and "third-person narrative" contains very limited retrospection. When he writes that "these common locutions seem to [him] inadequate, in that they stress variation in the element of the narrative situation that is in fact invariant — to wit, the presence (explicit or implicit) of the 'person' of the narrator" (1980: 243-244), Genette shows that he is not familiar with the traditional definition of these expressions, which focuses on the "person" of the protagonist, rather than that of the narrator (even if the first-person novel is characterized by the protagonist *also* being the narrator of the novel). Clearly, had he been aware of this definition, Genette would not have formulated the issue in the same way and the discussion would no doubt have continued on different grounds. The importance of historicizing contemporary narrative theory is readily seen: dissipating the illusion of natural concepts (the theories and concepts they employ, the terms used, etc. are not natural entities, but historical realities; in other words, nothing is obvious,

nothing is given, everything is constructed); fighting “presentism”, showing the continuity of sets of problems which often prefer to be seen as radically distinct; showing oversights, too, the gaps in the memory of the discipline; potentially re-opening debates which were thought to be closed; conversely, helping history become truly cumulative, rather than cyclical, by avoiding questions being asked repeatedly in the same, or synonymous, terms.

3.2. The history of narrative theory therefore provides the conditions for informed study of the epistemology of narrative theory. Historical inquiry reveals, for example, that the modern, narratological concept of the narrator is the fruit of syncretism between:

- the traditional concept of the narrator (referring to the character who has the status of narrator, in the ordinary sense of the term, in the first-person novel);
- the personification of a generic opposition, the opposition between narrative and dramatic genres (the narrator referring here to the mediating agent of the narrative, in particular the dialogs contained in the narrative, of whatever type);
- the personification of a methodological principle, the principle of immanence, according to which the coherency of an analysis implies that an object only be grasped through the interplay of its internal relations (the narrator referring, here, to the speaker within the narrative, of whatever type);
- the personification of a methodological decision, the decision to treat narrative fiction as an *analogon* or imitation of non-fictional narrative (the narrator referring, here, to the fictional producer of the narrative fiction, of whatever type);
- lastly, the personification of John Searle’s theory of illocutionary pretense (the narrator referring here to the speaker who conforms to the characteristic, constitutive rules of the assertions contained in any narrative fiction, which is a mistake from Searle’s point of view).

In some narratologies (I am thinking in particular of those tackling literary narrative and cinema, and even theater all at once), the concept of the narrator is so thoroughly stripped of all empirical determinations that one wonders how it can still be applied in its original domain, to wit, the first-person novel.

Postclassical narratology has not eliminated such contradictions; far from it. It could even be said that it has made them a core element of its theoretical programs.

3.3. Thus we come to the idea of *evaluative* epistemology. Evalu-

ating theories is a necessity within any discipline. The relativism of historical description must therefore be moderated by taking into account the theoretical and empirical value of theories, in the case of narrative theory as with other academic disciplines.

4. What do you consider the most important topics and/or contributions in narratology?

The formulation of this question worries me for two reasons: first, it appears to be looking for a list of winning contributions, which I do not feel entitled to put forward; second, it abandons the distinction between narratology and narrative theory, which I believe to be important, in the sense that I have made clear.

4.1. One way for me to reply to this question without replying as such is to outline the principles on which I based the compilation of my corpus: distance with regard to pure erudition; choice of representativity over exhaustiveness. I favored Gérard Genette's and Seymour Chatman's theories over Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's for example, which does not offer an original understanding of the narrator or narration (the same goes for Mieke Bal, who has an original understanding of narrative focalizations, while her understanding of the narrator is strictly equivalent to Genette's). I gave Franz Stanzel's theory a prime position because of its originality, as well as its reception and the influence it has borne (which is shown in the book with the examples of Gottfried Gabriel and Monika Fludernik). In the case of Lubomír Doležel's narrative theory, the criterion of influence was not the most important, since this theory is not well known outside the circle of specialists in Czech literature. It was rather the criteria of originality, interest and difference from Genette's narratology in its relation to linguistics, and also the fact that it is necessary to be familiar with this theory in order to understand the theory of authentication, a branch of Doležel's theory of fiction. In the case of non-communicational or poetic theories of narrative fiction, which are less numerous and more concerned to publicize the cumulative grounds of their knowledge, as I mentioned already, I only had to adopt a corpus and examine relationships of succession which had already been compiled, from Käte Hamburger to S.-Y. Kuroda and Ann Banfield, and from the latter to the representatives of deictic shift theory (Buffalo school). I did not devote a chapter to Dorrit Cohn, whose eclecticism (Hamburger's understanding of fiction, Genette's view of the narrator, her rejection of Banfield's theory without further argument) appear to me as a theoretical

compromise, or rather, fundamentally, a non-theory. (I am only referring, of course, to the part of her theory which concerns the narrator without calling into question Cohn's considerable contribution to the theory of narrative fiction in general.)

4.2. As for the topics, which I have not yet mentioned, it seems to me that narratology has placed too much value on the question of the narrator ("who is speaking?") and in a different way, of its corollary, the narratee ("to whom?"), and focused attention on a few macrostructural devices seen as relating to the communication between the two, to the detriment of other major questions and phenomena. I have already noted the question of the language of fiction and that of the biplanar reception of narrative fiction. I will mention, here, the issue of plot production (*narrative tension* in Raphaël Baroni's terminology), which has long been neglected for reasons to do with the history of narratology and its trends. As Baroni puts it, "[...] one can [...] criticize the relegation of "narrative sequence" to the register of a narrative theme, function or motif, in other words its assimilation with the logical form of the story, to the detriment of the study of the complex relations formed between what is told, the manner in which it is told, and the aesthetic aim of the arrangement of the events to form a plot"; "[t]o remain within a structuralist framework, the plot would fall into the domain [...] as much of Genette's modal narratology as of thematic narratology, even if, at the time, questions pertaining to narrative sequentiality were monopolized by the latter trend to the detriment of the former" (2010:190, 192) (It could also be said that these questions were overlooked by the former trend, since they were considered to be the prerogative of the latter — chronologically the former.)

5. What are the most important open problems in this field and what are the prospects for progress?

I have no foresight as to the fate of narratology (even if I have suggested that part of its program of study, developed forty-odd years ago, can no longer be considered valid). I will therefore limit myself to briefly concluding this article by insisting on two points which I believe to be important. First point: the relation between history and epistemology. In the humanities, historical inquiry must palliate the near impossibility of experimentation (I am more skeptical than many contemporary narratologists about the contribution of the cognitive sciences in this domain). There are a certain number of problems in narrative theory which would clearly benefit from

solid historical input. Second point: interdisciplinarity and its limits. The theory of narrative fiction certainly has a lot to learn from other disciplines which are interested, however closely, in narrative in general and in narrative discourses or texts in particular. However, it should not forget the theoretical method of discriminating tasks and specifying objects which has been employed by literary theory since it was formed as a discipline.

Translated by Susan Nicholls