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CHAPTER 2

No-Narrator Theories/ Optional-Narrator Theories

Recent Proposals and Continuing Problems

SYLVIE PATRON

The narrator is the fundamental concept of classical narratology and has carried on into most postclassical forms of narratology (*pan-narrator theories*). For these theories, the presence of a fictional narrator, whether overt or covert, is constitutive of the definition of fictional narrative. I propose to survey the recent scholarship challenging pan-narrator theories and favoring optionalism: the argument for the optional nature of the narrator in the theory and analysis of fictional narrative. By “recent” I mean articles or book chapters belonging to the period of new or postclassical narratology (Walsh 1997, 2007a; Gaut 2003; Kania 2005; Thomson-Jones 2007, 2009; Currie 2010; Köppe and Stühling 2011; Margolin 2011a), as distinct from those written in opposition to classical narratology (Kuroda 2014a [1973]; 2014b [1974]; 2014c [1976]; Banfield 1973, 1978a, 1978b, 1982) or even prior to the date generally thought to mark its coming into being (Hamburger 2003 [1957, 1968]).

After a few preliminary remarks concerning terminology, I will briefly present the various proposals mentioned above and the relations that exist (or not) between them as well as the proposals of the first generation (those of Kuroda and Banfield in particular). I will offer a synthesis of the main arguments put forward in favor of the optional-narrator theory. The first argument concerns the inadequacy of the arguments of the opposing theory,

Two prior versions of this article, in French and English, have been published in Patron (2015: 165–86, 2019: 153–68).

although optional-narrator theorists also base their views on other theoretical or critical-interpretive data. In the second section of my essay, I will emphasize the absence of historical perspective in most of the proposals in question and identify a few errors or approximations in certain presentations of the history of the concept of the narrator. In the third and final section, I will outline a contribution that could be made to the debate between pan-narrator theories and optional-narrator theories by a history of literary theories based on the model of the history of linguistic theories, as understood by the so-called French school, which is closely linked to epistemology rather than to historiography alone.

1. A SURVEY OF RECENT PROPOSALS

1.1. Terminology

A few terminological clarifications need to be established before starting in order to make the proposal clear and avoid certain epistemological ambiguities. The expression “non-narrator theory” was first used, to my knowledge, in an article by Marie-Laure Ryan (1981) to describe the positions of Émile Benveniste (1971 [1959, 1966]), Käte Hamburger (2003 [1957, 1968]), Ann Banfield (1973, 1978a, 1978b), and S.-Y. Kuroda (2014c [1976]): “This position . . . is known to specialists as the non-narrator theory of narrative fiction” (Ryan 1981: 519). The expression is used again in Ryan (1991: 67) in the form of “The No-Narrator Theory of Fiction” as well as in Ryan (1993: 601, 2001: 146, 150) and in other subsequent works and articles. This is an inadequate expression and leads to confusion; it was never used, moreover, by the theorists in question. It is inadequate because none of the theorists in question deny the fact that there is a fictional narrator in some fictional narratives. What they dispute is the assumption that there is always a fictional narrator in all fictional narratives. The prefix “no” in “no-narrator theory” can only be understood as a “passage to the limit,” leading the negative part of the theory to completely absorb the positive part. The expression was never used by either Kuroda or Banfield (the other theorists being outside of the confrontation proper, both for reasons of date and reasons connected to their epistemological project). We do find an article called “No-Narrator Theory” signed by Banfield in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (2005), but this is a commissioned article whose title was given by the editors of the volume. Among the theoretical opponents of Kuroda and Banfield, the use of the expression “no-narrator theory” is often accompanied by the idea that this theory, or different versions

of it, lacks a unified model to account for fictional narratives as a whole, or even the category of fictional and nonfictional narrative together. We find one formulation of this idea in Ryan (1981: 519–20, 1991: 69). A closer examination reveals that this idea is simply a consequence of the way Ryan presents this theory, or certain versions of it, which could very easily be presented differently. Henrik Skov Nielsen (2004: 135) takes up this idea, but without offering any justifications or critical examination. Nielsen also provides us with the most clear-cut formulation of the idea, already put forward by Ryan (1991: 69), according to which this theory and its different versions cannot account for cases of fictional narrative that do have a narrator: “It has seemed impossible to make room for fictional first-person narrative in a theory that does not have room for the narrator” (Nielsen 2004: 135). This opinion is a revealing discursive fact (“no” in “no-narrator theory” is not understood as a passage to the limit over a two-sided theory, but confused with an absolute negation). However, it cannot be considered as a serious proposition concerning the structure of Hamburger’s, Kuroda’s, and Banfield’s theories. The second-generation theorists, who will receive more attention in the rest of this essay, do not use the expression “no-narrator theory.” The expression that Tilmann Köppe and Jan Stühling adopt to refer to their version or other versions of the theory is “optional-narrator theory,” which is more adequate on a descriptive level (regarding this adequacy, see Kania 2005: 47; Köppe and Stühling 2011: 59 *passim*; Margolin 2011a: 43–44). The optional-narrator theory is opposed to the pan-narrator theory, which is also itself an adequate description of the theory referred to above, according to which there is a fictional narrator in all fictional narratives.

1.2. Second Generation Optional-Narrator Theorists

Among second-generation theorists, the challenge to the theory that all fictional narratives have a fictional narrator (henceforth pan-narrator theory) takes various forms:

1. an interrogation into the identity of the narrator—in other words, and in particular, an interrogation into the endo-consistency of the concept of the narrator in narratology (see Walsh 1997, 2007a);
2. a demonstration of the argumentative weaknesses of pan-narrator theory (see Gaut 2003; Kania 2005; Thomson-Jones 2007, 2009; Köppe and Stühling 2011); and

3. a rethinking of the relationships between the author and narrator, leading to a challenge of the idea of the omnipresence of a certain type of narrator in fictional narratives (see Currie 2010).

Uri Margolin's article (2011a) needs to be presented in a little more detail. Its title, "Necessarily a Narrator or Narrator if Necessary," represents a paraphrase of the opposition between pan-narrator theory and optional-narrator theory. The article, however, does not challenge the pan-narrator theory (for Margolin is the only one of the theorists in question to consider the arguments put forward by pan-narrator theory and optional-narrator theory as having equal weight). Instead, he sets himself the goal of describing the considerations (linguistic, philosophical, literary-theoretical, etc.) "which can motivate a narratologist to judge the narrator category/instance as an indispensable or as a merely optional element of his general model of literary narrative." He concludes by invoking "two recent theoretical moves which tend to circumvent the need for such a choice" (Margolin 2011a: 43): the redefinition of narratology's field of objects and reconsideration of the criteria for evaluating concepts and models. It is reasonable to suppose, however, that the refusal to choose between pan-narrator theory and optional-narrator theory and the appeal to a new transgeneric and "cognitive-instrumentalist" narratology, which would make this choice easy to circumvent, conceals an inclination toward the dominant theory, namely pan-narrator theory (see also Margolin 2009, 2011b¹).

Among all the theorists in question, with the exception of Margolin, the challenge to pan-narrator theory is based on a certain conception of fictionality (see Walsh 1997 and especially 2007a, 2007b; Köppe and Stühling 2011; Currie 2010) or on a certain conception of art or artisticity, though in a more implicit way (this appears in particular in the comparison between literary narrative and film: see Gaut 2003; Kania 2005; Thomson-Jones 2007, 2009; see also Currie 2010). Richard Walsh is the only one of the theorists in question to explicitly take up the relationship he has with the first-generation theorists, characterized by their linguistic orientation: "Notable dissenters, on linguistic grounds, have been Käte Hamburger (2003), Ann Banfield (1982), and S.-Y. Kuroda (2014). My own objections to the narrator are based upon representational rather than linguistic criteria; hence, I shall be arguing that certain 'narrators' are outside representation, not that certain narratives function outside communication" (Walsh 2007a: 174, n. 1). In the conclusion to

1. The revision of Margolin 2009 (see 2014), which differs from the previous version only in section 3.6, does not offer any significant change from this point of view.

their article, Köppe and Stühling invoke the argument of the lack of theoretical unity advanced by the pan-narrator theorists against the first-generation optional-narrator theorists (see Köppe and Stühling 2011: 74 and 78, n. 43). However, it is difficult to know whether this invocation should be interpreted as an expression of solidarity with the first-generation theorists or, on the contrary, as in the case of Walsh, a desire to differentiate or highlight what is singular about their own contribution to the debate.

1.3. Arguments in Favor of Optional-Narrator Theory

In synthesizing the main arguments advanced in favor of optional-narrator theory, it is useful to make a distinction between a first part, which focuses on the scientific weakness of the arguments for pan-narrator theory, and a second part, which comprises positive arguments in favor of optional-narrator theory. We can note that most of the time, the arguments for pan-narrator theory have been advanced in response to the so-called no-narrator theory, Kuroda's and Banfield's versions of the optional-narrator theory in particular (this is a point that does not appear frequently enough in the work of the second-generation optionalists; see Köppe and Stühling 2011: 78, n. 41). The names of the arguments, on the other hand, are due to the second-generation optionalists. The fact that these arguments are reproduced from one theorist to another can be considered as a form of legitimation via consensus.

The Analytic Argument. This is presented in Gaut (2003: 235–37) and in Thomson-Jones (2007: 83) as the “a priori argument,” and in Kania (2005: 47–48), Thomson-Jones (2009: 301), and Köppe and Stühling (2011: 63) as the “analytic argument.” It aims to prove the existence of a fictional narrator in all fictional narratives. It is called “analytic” because its proof is based on expressing what is implicitly contained in the concept of narrative (or narration). Even though it is formulated in different ways by different theorists, the structure of the analytic argument remains globally the same:

1. Narration is an activity (an “activity of telling or showing a story,” according to Thomson-Jones [2007], or “speech acts,” according to Köppe and Stühling).
2. Every activity implies an agent (“someone who utters them,” according to Köppe and Stühling).
3. Therefore, narration implies an agent (“the utterer,” according to Köppe and Stühling). It is this agent that is called the narrator in pan-narrator theory.

For Gaut, Kania, Thomson-Jones, and Köppe and Stühling, the analytic argument does not prove what it is supposed to prove, namely the existence of a fictional narrator in all fictional narratives. What it establishes is the existence of a narrative agent, which may be called a narrator, for all narratives (see also Currie 2010: 65–67). It says nothing, however, as to the ontological status of the narrator or, shall we say, of the second narrator in the case of fictional narratives. The conclusion that all narration implies a narrator does not necessarily mean that all fictional narration implies a fictional narrator. On the other hand, if pan-narrator theorists tend to use the term “narrator” when talking about a fictional narrator, this does not mean that every instance of this term must be understood as referring to a fictional narrator. Use of the term “narrator” to refer to the author, the person in the real world who utters the story (orally or in writing), can be found among such eminent scholars as Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg or Roland Barthes (see Spearing 2005: 17–18; Patron 2016 [2009]: 24–25).

The Ontological Gap Argument. This argument is presented under this name, but with slightly different content, in Kania (2005: 48–50) and in Köppe and Stühling (2011: 64–65). Thomson-Jones (2007: 83–84, 2009: 300–301), for her part, uses the expression “argument from means of access,” which must be considered as synonymous with Kania’s ontological gap argument. The ontological gap argument also aims to prove the existence of a fictional narrator in all fictional narratives. It rests on two premises:

1. We can reasonably expect an answer to how films or literary narratives are able to give us access, perceptually in the case of film, linguistically in the case of literary narrative, to information concerning fictional worlds—for brevity’s sake, to fictional worlds. The obvious answer is that somebody gives us access to these fictional worlds (see Kania 2005: 48).
2. Only fictional individuals can have access to fictional worlds and thus give this access to other individuals (see Kania 2005: 48; Köppe and Stühling 2011: 64, 65).

The conclusion is that only a fictional person, who may be called a narrator and who, this time, is clearly characterized as fictional, can give us access to the fictional world of the film or of the literary narrative.

The ontological gap argument is subject to several criticisms. In Kania, in Thomson-Jones, and in Köppe and Stühling, we can identify two main ones. The first concerns the arguable nature of the first premise. Is it really reasonable to ask ourselves how films or literary narratives are able to give us

access to fictional worlds? Kania draws first on George Wilson (1997: 309), a pan-narrator theorist, to remind us of the fact that there may be paradoxes or incoherencies at the very base of fictional works (we can think of narratives where the narrator is a dead character). He adds that, more commonly, whether the narrator is thinking the words we are reading, speaking them aloud, or has written them down remains indeterminate, as does the question of how we might have obtained a transcription or a copy of these words (see Kania 2005: 49; see also Thomson-Jones 2007: 84, 2009: 300–301). Similarly, Currie (2010: 77) invokes Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, where it is indeterminate how we have obtained a collection of narratives from various sources presented as forming a unity.

The other main criticism that can be made of the ontological gap argument is that postulating a fictional narrator does not resolve the problem of our access to the fictional world. The second premise suggests that a real person (the filmmaker, the actual author of the text) cannot have access to a fictional world, because he or she is situated on a different ontological level from that of the characters and events of this world. At the same time, the fictional narrator is located on an ontologically different level from the one we occupy as readers, who are real people. We are thus still faced with the same problem: that of understanding how the narrator is supposed to bridge the gap between the real world and the fictional world of the film or the literary narrative in order to provide us access to the fictional world (see Kania 2005: 51; Thomson-Jones 2007: 84; see also, formulated somewhat differently, Köppe and Stühling 2011: 65).

The Blocked Inference Argument. This argument is found under this name only in Köppe and Stühling (2011: 65–67). Actually, it represents a reformulation and further specification of the second stage of Kania's ontological gap argument (2005: 50–51) used in Thomson-Jones (2009: 299–300). It is also found in Walsh (2007a: 74) and in Margolin (2011a: 49) in an incidental manner. Its aim is to prove the necessity of attributing the illocutions (assertions, condemnations, etc.) of a fictional narrative to a fictional narrator on the basis of the fact that it would be false or absurd to attribute them to the author.

The structure of the blocked inference argument can be presented in the following way:

1. All fictional illocutions have to be attributed to someone.
2. Fictional illocutions cannot be attributed to the author.
3. Therefore, fictional illocutions have to be attributed to someone else who can be called a narrator and who must be fictional.

In the case of Köppe and Stühling, the blocked inference argument is logically fallacious due to an ambiguity in its terms. The confusion in question occurs between two interpretations of the expression “fictional illocutions,” in particular in the proposition “Fictional illocutions cannot be attributed to the author.” In the first interpretation, “fictional illocutions” refers to illocutions that a fictional character makes fictionally (which we can represent as “Fictionally, S utters p”). An example is “I came to Comala because I had been told that my father, a man named Pedro Páramo, lived here” in the first sentence of Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo* (1994 [1955]: 3). In the second interpretation, the expression refers to illocutions concerning fictional states of affairs (represented as “S utters that, fictionally, p”). An example is “The first time Aurélien saw Bérénice, he found her frankly ugly” in the first sentence of Louis Aragon’s *Aurélien* (2003 [1944]: 17; my translation). For Köppe and Stühling, while the proposition “Fictional illocutions cannot be attributed to the author” can be considered to be true according to the first interpretation, the same cannot be said in relation to the second. The theory of fiction they rely on specifically establishes that fictional illocutions in the sense of the second interpretation are precisely what the author of fictional narrative does: “A utters that, fictionally, p.” For example, Aragon, in the opening sentence of *Aurélien*, generates the fictional truth that the first time Aurélien saw Bérénice, and so on. The case where fictional illocutions generate the fictional truth that a fictional narrator fictionally makes illocutions is considered as a special case. Comparable theoretical propositions can be found in Walsh (2007a: 78, 80) and in Currie (2010: 66, 70–71). On the other hand, if the proposition “Fictional illocutions cannot be attributed to the author” can be considered to be true according to the first interpretation, which concerns a special type of fictional illocutions, the two premises are not enough to establish the truth of the conclusion, which is supposed to concern all illocutions of a fictional narrative.

The Distinction of Fiction Argument. This argument bases the necessity of the author/narrator distinction on the necessity of accounting for the “distinction of fiction” (according to the expression of Cohn 1999), that is to say, what differentiates fictional discourse from nonfictional discourse. For Köppe and Stühling (2011: 67), this argument is invalid to the extent that the concept of the fictional narrator must itself be explained, and this can only be achieved on the basis of a theory of fiction. The distinction of fiction argument effects a simple reversal of the order of explanations. This idea is also at the heart of Walsh’s challenge to pan-narrator theory (2007a: 72, 80). Another criticism concerns the function of the narrator in the distinction of fiction argument. Walsh puts it very clearly:

The function of the narrator is to allow the narrative to be read as something known rather than something imagined, something reported as fact rather than something told as fiction. . . . But such a view of the matter suffers the embarrassment that some of the things such an extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrator is required to “know” are clear indices of the narrative’s fictional status, and so they contradict this rationale for positing such an agent. The most obvious of these occurs with internal and free focalization—that is, the narrative’s access to the mind of another. (2007a: 73)

The passage goes on to reject the explanatory pertinence of the concept of the omniscient narrator, a criticism also found in Currie (2010: 68–69).

The Argument from Mediation. This argument is presented in Köppe and Stühling (2011: 68–72). It is also found in Currie (2010: 83–84) and in Thomson-Jones (2007: 78, 2009: 301) in an incidental manner. It can be presented as follows:

1. All fictional narratives display some sort of mediation.
2. There is no mediation without a mediator.
3. All fictional narratives have a mediator who can be called a narrator.

The first criticism that can be made of this argument is that “mediation” is an umbrella term that covers a variety of quite different phenomena that call for different explanations. Köppe and Stühling select three types of phenomena: the particular description of fictional events in the narrative (they speak of the “coloring” of fictional events), explicit commentaries, and evaluations. For them, to attribute mediation, in the sense of the particular description of fictional events, to a mediator or narrator should not be considered as an argument in favor of the pan-narrator theory, but rather as a consequence of the prior adoption of this theory. They go on to show that the framework of the optional-narrator theory can very well account for mediation: “The difference between the narratorless account of coloring and the narrator-based account can be said to be this: while the narrator-based account involves imagining of a narrator that he describes certain events under a particular description, the narratorless account involves imagining certain events under a particular description” (Köppe and Stühling 2011: 70). This position can be illustrated by the first sentence of Flaubert’s *A Sentimental Education*: “On the morning of 15 September 1840 the Ville-de-Montereau was lying alongside the Quai Saint-Bernard, belching clouds of smoke, all ready to sail” (Flau-

bert 2008 [1869]: 3). I will return to Köppe and Stühling's analyses of explicit commentaries and evaluations in relation to the relationships between theory, analysis, and interpretation.

1.4. Other (Positive) Arguments

The positive arguments in favor of optional narrator-theory can in turn be divided into two categories: those that establish the superiority of the optional narrator-theory over the pan-narrator theory from the point of view of the rational criteria concerning the theory as such, and those that establish the superiority of the optional narrator-theory from the point of view of its practical utility, that is, for the practice of literary interpretation.

Kania insists on the simplicity of his theory, which he calls "a minimal theory":

As Wilson points out, if there is a fictional narrator it is usually pretty obvious from the work. If the story is told in the first person, ostensibly by someone with a different name from the author's, and it is sold as a novel, we have many good reasons to suppose that within this fiction being told there is also a fictional telling by a fictional agent. Sometimes the signs are much more subtle, as in the popular example of Henry James's "The Liar." But sometimes we have simply no reason to suppose there is a fictional telling of the story we read or see. In *The Heart of the Matter*, Graham Greene spins a good yarn, but there is no reason to posit an overarching fictional telling within it or coextensive with it. (Kania 2005: 51–52)

We find this simplicity again in Köppe and Stühling's formulation of the basic tenet of the optional-narrator theory: "The basic tenet of ON [optional narrator] is that there is a narrator if we have good reasons to postulate a narrator. According to ON we have good reason to do this if a text explicitly or implicitly authorizes us to imagine that the story is told by a narrator" (Köppe and Stühling 2011: 73). I will not return to the criterion of theoretical unity, which is as present in Walsh (2007a: 78), as it is in Köppe and Stühling (2001: 74). To these criteria, Köppe and Stühling add that of falsifiability when they present the idea that in order to disprove the optional-narrator theory on the basis of a counterexample, it would be necessary, first, to demonstrate that the example can be analyzed adequately only with recourse to a fictional narrator, and second, that the example is characterized as narratorless by the optional-narrator theory—in other words, that the example chosen is indeed

an authentic counterexample. On the other hand, Köppe and Stühling are much weaker on an epistemological level when they stress that the fact that a fictional narrative can be analyzed adequately only with recourse to a fictional narrator is precisely a good reason to postulate a fictional narrator. What they establish in this way is that the demonstration of falsity is impossible and thus that the theory is unfalsifiable. The revisions in the theory also need to be assessed in the light of what the new model represents better than the former one: This is the meaning of Kania's claim that "one advantage of [his] theory is that it can deal with all literary fictions," including those that have "storytelling narrators," that is to say fictional narrators who clearly signal the fictionality of the stories they tell (see Kania 2005: 52; for the notion of "storytelling" vs. "reporting narrators," Walton 1990: 368–72). Köppe and Stühling also raise the case of "storytelling narrators," presented as a possible instance of heterodiegetic narrators, that is to say narrators who are not present as characters in the story they tell (see Köppe and Stühling 2011: 62).

From the point of view of its practical, critical-interpretative applications, the first advantage of the optional narrator-theory is that it allows us to eliminate "silly questions" (in the words of Walton 1990: 174–83, also used by Gaut 2003: 244, 246–47; Currie 2010: 58–60, 77) or "non-questions" (expression used by Chatman 1990: 130, quoted in Kania 2005: 49). Whether they are considered to be "silly" questions" or "non-questions," it is clear that they are illegitimate to pose and to attempt to answer (the pan-narrator theorists admit this as much as the optionalists). For example, how can the narrator have direct access to the mental states of other characters? How can the narrator recount fictional events that are supposed to have occurred in the absence of any witnesses? Why, in some cases, does the narrator withhold information about the mental states of characters or other facts of the story? And so on (see Walsh 2007a: 74; Gaut 2003: 244, 247). These are logical and fully justified questions once we affirm the existence of a fictional narrator in all fictional narratives. But they no longer arise once one considers that fictional events, including events that take place inside the mind of the characters, can be given to us to imagine directly. In Kania, the antithesis of "non-questions" is "interesting critical questions":

Whether we posit a fictional narrator in *The Heart of the Matter* or "The Liar" is a question of what it would buy us in terms of understanding these works. If I understand these works correctly, the supposition of a fictional narrator in *The Heart of the Matter* would get us no further than the intuitive understanding that Greene himself is telling the tale. On the other hand, the supposition of a fictional narrator in "The Liar" makes sense of its boss-eyed

view of the action, and gives rise to further interesting critical questions.
(2005: 52)

We find the same kind of comment in Kania (2005: 52) and in Walsh (2007a: 78–79) regarding the advantage that may be gained by positing an unreliable narrator in order to account for certain inconsistencies in a narrative. As for Köppe and Stühling, they return to their analysis of explicit commentaries and evaluations in fictional narratives in order to establish the superiority of the optional-narrator theory over the pan-narrator theory:

We argued that it is a matter of interpretation whether the evaluation is done by a narrator, or by some other fictional agent, or whether the passage in question is to be understood as an invitation to the reader to imaginatively evaluate a fictional state of affairs in a particular way. Now, by assuming right away that there is a narrator, could not interpreters run the risk of forgetting about some of these possibilities, and especially the possibility of there not being any fictional agent who does the evaluating? In this sense, might ON [Theory] not be pragmatically superior to PN [Theory]? (Köppe and Stühling 2011: 73)

We can mention finally that Margolin, in the first part of his article devoted to the narrator “as cognitive instrument,” poses more or less the same questions but from the opposite perspective from that of the other theorists (Margolin aims rather to show the advantage that may be gained from positing a narrator, even in problematic cases; see 2011a: 55). He admits, however, that very little is to be gained by employing this concept in the case of third-person past-tense heterodiegetic narratives, in which respect he is closer to the optional-narrator theorists, although without actually adopting this position (see Margolin 2011a: 56, 2011b).

The proposals of Walsh, Kania, and Köppe and Stühling, like Margolin’s, remain very general. These theorists content themselves with talking about interpretation in general, at most the interpretation of such-or-such a fictional narrative, but without ever going into details. What we need now are detailed analyses of the greatest possible number and variety of fictional narratives. Only then can we understand what the relationships between theory, analysis, and interpretation in pan-narrator theory and optional-narrator theory really are and appreciate the heuristic superiority of optional-narrator theory over pan-narrator theory (see Patron 2010a, 2010b, 2013). I started doing this work in Patron (2010a), where I sought to identify the problems encountered by analysis and interpretation raised by pan-narrator theory in the case of Juan

Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*. This montage novel is composed of two distinct parts (even though they interpenetrate in places), the first involving a fictional narrator and the second not having this narrator and being best understood as having no fictional narrator at all. In Patron (2013), which forms a pair with the first article, I tried to show the interest of the optional-narrator theory not only in negative terms but also in positive terms. The example in the 2013 article is Mario Benedetti's "Cinco años de vida" ("Five Years of Life"), a "fantastic short story" in the words of the author, or an "unnatural" narrative in the terminology of contemporary unnatural narratology.

2. A GENERAL LACK OF HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

A common feature of the work of the second-generation optional-narrator theorists, which they also share with most of the work of the pan-narrator theorists of the same generation, is their lack of historical and meta-historical perspective (a perspective that would include reflections on the models that represent the evolution of narrative theories). I will address this question in three points, devoted, respectively, to the structure of the optional-narrator theorists' horizon of retrospection, to certain errors or approximations in references to the history of the concept of the narrator and, finally, to the absence of what could be called the *historical argument* among the optional-narrator theorists.

2.1. The Horizon of Retrospection

I borrow the notion of horizon of retrospection (*horizon de rétrospection*) from the history of linguistic theories. It refers to previous knowledge that a scientific work draws on, whether the knowledge in question is commonly shared but not referenced or comes from identifiable sources (see Auroux 1987; Puech 2006). In the case of the optional-narrator theorists, the horizon of retrospection is not empty (there are more or less numerous names or references: not very many in Kania 2005, lots in Köppe and Stühling 2011). But it is fragmentary, arbitrary (why one reference rather than another?) and lacks historical depth (the oldest references are Hamburger 2003 [1957, 1968] and Kayser [2000] 1957). Above all, it seems to reflect the interests and chance readings of the individual theorist. In some cases the referencing process is absent, which does not mean a total absence in the horizon of retrospection, but rather that elements of knowledge are present in a vague way as shared

knowledge. As we have seen, Walsh (2007a: 73) raises the question of the indices of fictionality, but he does not refer there or elsewhere to the work of Hamburger, who was nevertheless the first to address this question. Other elements of knowledge are referred to the most recent contributor to the debate, which signifies both a presence and an absence in the horizon of retrospection. Thus Currie (2010: 76) attributes the use or even the invention of the term “effaced narrators” to Wilson (2007). In the case of Köppe and Stühling (2011) and in that of Margolin (2011a), it is clear that the multiplication of references, including references that are not strictly contemporary, still do not take us outside a profoundly ahistorical presentism. Everything is placed on the same level: the arguments of the pan-narrator theorists in Köppe and Stühling (2011), the (linguistic, philosophical, literary-theoretical, etc.) considerations these arguments are attached to, and those of the optional-narrator theorists in Margolin (2011a).

We can also observe that references to the theories of Hamburger, Kuroda, and Banfield do not have the same status as references that are co-present with the activity of the optional-narrator theorists (e.g., Genette 1980 [1972] for Walsh; Searle 1975 or Cohn 1990 for Walsh and Köppe and Stühling; Walton 1990 for Kania, Currie, Köppe and Stühling; the works of the film theorists for Gaut, Kania, and Thomson-Jones). We have seen this in Walsh (2007a: 174, n. 1), who refers to the theories of Hamburger, Kuroda, and Banfield and simultaneously excludes them from the field of co-presence, that is to say from being used or refuted in the discussion—in short, from the dialogue with previous theories. Köppe and Stühling dilute them in a mass of uncategorized and unranked references, none of which belong to the field of co-presence: “We are by no means the first to criticize PN. Previous discussions include Banfield 1982, Morreall 1994, Weismar 1994, Walsh 1997, Ryan 2001, Gaut 2003, Kania 2005, Banfield 2005, Patron 2006, Walsh 2007, chapter 4” (Köppe and Stühling 2011: 75, n. 3). As for Margolin, he also excludes them almost immediately from his field of attention: “The arguments against the universal narrator position cited so far are familiar to us from the work of Banfield, Kuroda, and Hamburger, and have been reiterated by Patron. But this is only one part of the story, since several additional kinds of consideration are as relevant in this context. And this is where our attention turns next” (Margolin 2011a: 47). Under these conditions, there is nothing surprising in the fact that certain proposals of the optional-narrator theorists

unknowingly repeat some of Banfield’s proposals in particular: for example, the criticism of the inverted hierarchy between the fictional narrator and the language of fiction: “to treat a represented instance of narration as onto-

logically prior to the language doing the representing is to press the logic of representation beyond representation itself and to make the subordinate term superordinate—that is, to assert a paradox in the name of logic” (Walsh 2007a: 80);

appear as a regression in relation to some of Hamburger’s, Kuroda’s, and Banfield’s strong proposals: such is the case of the proposals that quite simply assimilate the role of the author of the fictional narrative with that of the narrator, either factual or fictional: “The answer I am proposing to my original question, ‘Who is the narrator?’ is this: the narrator is always either a character who narrates, or the author” (Walsh 2007a: 78); “unless there is some particular reason for thinking otherwise, I see no problem with the intuitive view that the person telling the story is the one who made it up—the author” (Kania 2005: 53); “we can say that Watson is the *internal* author/narrator and Doyle the *external* author/narrator”; “In the simplest cases, we have just an author/narrator, who tells a story, and in the story itself there is no narrator” (Currie 2010: 67, 74).

2.2. History of the Concept of the Narrator

Some works of the optional-narrator theorists contain errors, overt or covert, due to insufficient knowledge of the history of the concept of the narrator.

Overt: Walsh writes that “the narrator’s promotion, as a concept, from a representational effect to a structural principle has occurred specifically in response to the qualities of fiction, not narrative *per se*” (Walsh 2007a: 69). Walsh is alluding here to the promotion of the narrator, as a concept, in classical narratology, inspired by structuralism. In this sense, his claim is false: In Barthes (1966), a major reference for Genette (1980 [1972]), the promotion of narrator is a response to the need to guarantee an “immanent” approach to fictional narrative (understood as an approach to the fictional narrative itself, removed from all external considerations; see Patron 2016 [2009]: 25–26, 32). If we go much further back in time, however, we can say that the birth of the concept of the narrator did in fact occur specifically in response to the qualities of fiction, notably with the memoir novel or first-person novel in the original sense of the term. The need for the concept of narrator, as distinct from both the author and the other fictional characters, appeared with the genre of the memoir novel, a form of autonomous first-person fictional narrative that is not embedded within a third-person fictional narrative. The issues it encapsulates are as follow:

- an “I” that is not that of the author but that of a fictional character (see above for the distinction of fiction argument and the argument from mediation);
- a “truth pact” within the fiction, it being supposed that the narrator is telling a factual story—in this case his or her life story (see above for the ontological gap argument);
- a restriction of the narrative information to what the narrator can know (see the function of the narrator in the distinction of fiction argument), but also to what the narrator can plausibly remember; and
- a more or less marked opposition between the experiencing “I” and the narrating “I.”

These points can be illustrated by Marivaux’s *La Vie de Marianne*, Smollett’s *Adventures of Roderick Random*, and Goldsmith’s *Vicar of Wakefield*—all examples taken from Anna Laetitia Barbauld in what is probably the first theoretical account of the narrator according to the traditional conception (see Barbauld 1977 [1804, 1959]; Patron 2016 [2009]: 15–17 *passim*, 2011 *passim*, 2012b: 164, 166).

Covert: Walsh takes Genette (1980 [1972]) as his point of departure and devotes a number of pages to demonstrating the incoherence of his typology of narrators, based on the double opposition “homo-/heterodiegetic” (i.e., present or absent as characters in the story they are narrating) and “extra-/intradiegetic” (i.e., present as narrators in first- or second-level narratives). Walsh is right to point out that in three out of four cases, the narrator is a character in the fiction: “There is nothing about the internal logic of fictional representation that demands a qualitative distinction between narrators and characters. Such narrators [i.e., homodiegetic extradiegetic narrators], because they are represented, *are* characters, exactly as intradiegetic narrators are” (Walsh 2007a: 72). But he should have known and made clear on this occasion that the concept of narrator was introduced into the theory precisely in order to account for the case of narratives that are homodiegetic and extradiegetic in one of the senses Genette gives to this term (it actually concerns single-level narratives, for which the distinction between intra- and extradiegetic is irrelevant). A case in point is Marivaux’s *La Vie de Marianne*. The work of Kania, Currie, and Köppe and Stühling shows the same kind of errors or omissions. I will just quote Kania on the fictional character of the narrator: “The claim is *not* that the narrator is a character in the traditional sense (though this may be the case—for example, in most novels narrated in the first person), merely that it is not to be posited at the level of actuality, but rather at the fictional level” (Kania 2005: 47; see also Currie 2010: 74 and Köppe and Stühling 2011: 63–64, 67).

As for Margolin's definition of the narrator (2009: 351), taken up again in later works (2011a: 43, 44 and 2014), I refer the reader to the discussion published in the *Living Handbook of Narratology* (see Patron 2011; Margolin 2011b).

2.3. The Historical Argument

Nowhere do the optional-narrator theorists appeal to what could be called the historical argument when taking on their opponents. I understand by this not the argument according to which the first concept of the narrator would be the best one (it is the best-founded empirically, but limited from the point of view of its extension) but the more general argument according to which things have not always been as they are now. The lines of history could have resulted in a different state of affairs: Nothing says that pan-narrator theory is not destined to disappear for a period of time and then possibly reappear at a later time in the same or in another form. In short, it is a relativistic argument coming within a scientific perspective that integrates history as the primordial given in narrative theory.

3. TOWARD A HISTORY OF CONCEPTS IN NARRATIVE THEORY

In the field of narrative theory, it is important to encourage historical research that combines questions concerning the structure of theories with an examination of the genesis of concepts. We can clearly see the interest of such an approach in the discipline's current state of development: It creates the conditions for this development to be effectively cumulative and not cyclical, and it means that, for example, a question such as that of the narrator, whether universal or optional, is not periodically posed and resolved in the same terms.

3.1. Principles

This type of research is based on a number of principles that have been established for some time by historians of linguistics for their discipline (see the work of Auroux and of the *Histoire des théories linguistiques* Laboratory; see also Colombat, Fournier, and Puech 2010 for a general survey).

The first principle is that of the *commensurability* of theories: However diverse the approaches and periods may be, it must always be possible to compare theoretical texts and evaluate them in terms of their aims, methods, and priorities with regard to the production of knowledge. In the case we are concerned with, we need in particular to examine the weight and validity of traditions in poetics, render these traditions commensurable with the modern theorization of the narrator, and show the continuity of sets of problems that often have the interest of being seen as radically distinct.

The second principle is *anti-teleology*. Generally speaking, the historian should refrain from appealing to teleology, in other words, explaining the past by the future. An opposition such as that between pan-narrator theories and optional-narrator theories can be a way of organizing the debate so that it harmonizes what appears as disjointed in a chronology that is neither linear nor directed by a program or end. But there are also other oppositions that partly, but only partly, overlap with the previous one (on the opposition between communicational theories of narrative and noncommunicational or poetic theories of fictional narrative, see Patron 2016 [2009], 2010a, 2012a, 2012b).

Another principle consists in accepting that every discipline has a *sanc-tioned* history and a *forgotten* one. A discipline does not destroy its past but integrates, assesses, and rewrites it (Auroux 1980: 8). Auroux uses the term “rate of reinscription” (*taux de réinscription*) to measure the capacity of a discipline to integrate its acquired knowledge. He opposes disciplines with a high rate of reinscription (such as mathematics) to those with a low rate of reinscription (such as linguistics, to which we could add literary theory or poetics). Where there are many theoretical ruptures in a discipline and a low rate of reinscription, the previous states of the discipline maintain a direct theoretical interest.

3.2. The Narrative Model in Historiography

Historians of linguistic theories challenge the idea that the narrative model (linear, unified, teleological) is adequate for representing the evolution of theories in the domain of the humanities. They suggest replacing this traditional model with that of series or “lines of history,” which are numerous and able to intersect, become entangled, remain more or less independent, and may be longer or shorter in duration and even disappear (see Auroux 1989: 33ff., 1994: 20, 2012). It seems to me that this model can be profitably applied to the history of narrative theories. I give a few examples below, borrowing most of my characterizations of historical lines from Auroux (2012) while remaining

aware that my examples are less varied and are less empirically grounded than those of Auroux.

A short line, with an outcome that is not universally recognized (at least among literary theorists) and that has few current extensions, is the challenge on linguistic grounds to the pan-narrator theory by Kuroda and Banfield.

A long line, whose origins go back to Plato, with oscillations (and no limit moving along the timeline to the right), is the classification of modes of narration according to which either the author (more precisely the “poet”) narrates or else tries to give the illusion that it is not he who is narrating but a fictional character. Walsh (1997, 2007a), Kania (2005), and Currie (2010) are clearly situated on this line. Genette (1988 [1983]: 101–2), cited in this regard by Köppe and Stühling (2011: 75, n. 2), occupies it on certain points.

There is, however, an element here that might appear problematic. Kania writes in a note that “the actual author *constitutes* the fictional world by his narration; the fictional world of *Vanity Fair* had no existence prior to Thackeray’s telling, against which his reliability could be judged” (2005: 54, n. 36). In the same way, Köppe and Stühling stress the difference between David Hume telling *The History of Great Britain* and Charles Dickens telling the story of *David Copperfield*: “The latter *invites us to imagine* the story of David Copperfield without being in any way accountable for the truth of the tale. David Hume, in contrast, is committed to the truth of what he says about the history of Great Britain” (2011: 64; see also 68). Comparable claims can be found in Currie (2010: 69). They can be interpreted as the intuition of a problem concerning the use of the verb “narrate” (or “tell”), which does not mean the same thing when it refers to the author of the fictional narrative who constitutes the fictional world as it does when it refers to the narrator, real or fictional (at least in the case of reporting narrators), for whom the real or fictional world exists prior to the act of narration. In this sense, the line on which Kania, Köppe and Stühling, and Currie are situated intersects with another line of history, also long, characterized by sporadic reappearances, with one theoretical reappearance in particular provoking a rupture to the left (called an “epistemological rupture”): theorization of the role of the author of fictional narrative in opposition to that of the author of historical narrative; theorization of the role of the epic author in Hamburger.

Another line of history intersects with the preceding ones: the apprehension of the first-person fictional narrative as a particular or *marked* case of fictional narrative. This concept dates from the first theorizations of the first-person novel. It is found both in Hamburger (2003 [1957, 1968]) and in Searle (1975), although Hamburger and Searle are usually opposed to each other in other respects. Köppe and Stühling take it up, but apply the marked feature

to the whole category of fictional narratives with a narrator, based on, but according to them not reducible to, the category of first-person fictional narratives: “In general, . . . it is not true that every work of fiction necessarily has a fictional narrator. The prescription to imagine being told something by a narrator is part of particular works of narrative fiction only” (2011: 62). Kania, on the other hand, shows that he is not situated on the same line of history when he writes: “Let us make clear that I do not deny the existence of fictional narrators. They most obviously exist in first-person narrated novels. Indeed, it may be that *most* novels have fictional narrators” (2005: 47).

We can furthermore note that Genette (1980 [1972]: 243–45, 1988 [1983]: 97) introduces something that was not in any of the series concerning the narrator or narration up to that point: the idea that all narratives, fictional or nonfictional, are in the first person, in other words are enunciated by an “I,” whether explicit or implicit, apparent or effaced, but which, if effaced, can always be reinstated. This is the basis of the refutation undertaken by Kuroda and Banfield regarding a certain type of sentence found in fictional narratives, Japanese in the case of Kuroda, English and French in Banfield.

We can see that lines of history allow us to make the opposition between optional-narrator theorists and pan-narrator theorists more complex, since opposed theorists do not always occupy opposite lines and since some theorists are not always found on the lines where they would be expected to be. We may also find in the plurality of historical lines an explanation of the fact that “the general class of literary narrations for which any of these theorists deny a narrator is significantly unclear,” according to the estimation of Wilson (2007: 77, n. 7). This effectively represents a problem for optional-narrator theory as a whole, considered in particular from the perspective of its falsifiability.



Unsurprisingly, the existence of a narrator in first-person fictional narratives (in a slightly broader sense than the original meaning of fictional narratives, the sense in which a character tells his or her story *or* that of another character that he or she has witnessed) is uncontroversial for optional-narrator theorists as well as for pan-narrator theorists. This narrator, in effect, is not a theoretical fiction or entity, but rather an immediate empirical object. The whole question is to know how far we can extend the application of this concept of the narrator to other sorts of fictional narratives without stripping it of its empirical determinations. This question underlies the challenge made by certain second-generation optional-narrator theorists. But these theorists

themselves are not clear as to the status and place of the traditional concept of the narrator in their model.

Since reconstituting the history of a discipline is a good indicator for assessing the particular epistemological situation in which this discipline finds itself, it seems to me that the introduction of a historical perspective into the reflections of the optional-narrator theorists would mark an important step in the evolution of narrative theory.

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