
Forum

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A Postclassical Narratology

To the Editor:

Drawing on contemporary cognitive science, David Herman makes an impressive effort to rethink the conclusions of a number of "classical" narratologists concerning text sequences and narrativity ("Scripts, Sequences, and Stories: Elements of a Postclassical Narratology," 112 [1997]: 1046–59). Two possible objections to Herman's larger project immediately suggest themselves, however. One is the unidirectionality of his account of the changing and cumulative movement of literary history ("The formal impetus, the constitutive gesture, of literary fiction has been the rejection or at least the backgrounding of scripts in which prior texts were anchored and the complementary foregrounding of new scripts matched to changing ideas about narrative" [1054]).

The problem with this kind of account is that it seems to have no place for the unexpected reappearances of lost genres and the general historical short-circuiting that the history of literature constantly produces. Thus, *Don Quixote* indeed opens "with a semicomical indictment of the delusive power of outmoded scripts, those of chivalric romance" (1054), but this model does not explain the continued power of Cervantes's example, which explicitly inspired subsequent writers to produce comparable indictments over several centuries, such as Lennox's *A Female Quixote*, Scott's *Waverly*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and Faulkner's *Old Man*. Despite the accumulation of centuries of literary history and despite changes in historical circumstances, this story still needs to be told and its lesson relearned.

Analogously, the fact that Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste et son maître*, which only intermittently inspired interest during the years after its publication, could be successfully (and faithfully) transformed into a postmodern play by Milan Kundera suggests that Diderot's text responds to much more (or less) than its immediate historical matrix. More relevant to its diachronic situating than the encyclopedists' debates on free will and determinism, which Herman invokes, is *Tristram Shandy*, an inspiration also of comparable responses from the untimely figures of Jean Paul, Machado de Assis, G. V. Desani, Cabrera Infante, and Salman Rushdie. I must conclude with the admittedly Shandean claim that the history of narrative does not proceed in anything like a simple diachronic trajectory; it folds back on itself unexpectedly and is constituted by chronological leaps, gaps, and repetitions at least as much as by a steady temporal progression. The appropriate metaphor for the history of literature is not the view from the bow of

a ship heading toward an ever-receding horizon but rather a long snake in an odd spot, whose shape displays irregular loops and unexpected points of contact.

The second, more general and more fundamental problem lies with Herman's attempt to produce a description of narrative practice that includes all narratives, whether fictional or nonfictional, classical or postmodern, hackneyed or hermetic. It is not clear that this is necessary or even possible. I was disappointed to find that the example Herman provides to illustrate avant-garde writing is a passage from *Nightwood* that seems tame by the standards of the avant-garde—or of *Nightwood* itself, for that matter. What is needed is an engagement with much more radical pieces that challenge the limits of narrative, a number of which can be found among the texts of Gertrude Stein, the *Tel quel* novelists, John Cage, and the later Beckett. Gerald Prince once described *La jalousie* as “a novel, of course, but a pseudo-narrative one” (*Narratology* 65). How would Herman view this claim?

I strongly suspect that such works do not possess a minimal “narrativity” but instead are designed to frustrate all standard conventions of narrativity. Or, to deploy Herman's terms, it may well be that the radical avant-garde narrative script is in fact predicated on the negation of the conventional narrative script—a script that Herman otherwise maps convincingly. A universal theory of narrative would then be a theoretical impossibility, since the more experimental writers do not merely attenuate but forcibly implode, subvert, or deconstruct the basic identifying features of conventional or nonfictional narrative.

What is needed then is both the kind of natural narratology that Herman advocates and an antinarratology that can describe innovative writers' violations of conventional and even logical orders. The rebirth of narrative poetics in the first part of this century was largely occasioned by a desire to comprehend the most innovative writing of the period; it would be disappointing and ironic if a postclassical narratology were to produce a theory that attempts to embrace every text but the most challenging ones—the ones that constitute perhaps the best reason for doing narrative theory.

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Reply:

I admire Brian Richardson's scholarship on narrative, and I am grateful for his letter and the opportunity it gives me to clarify my position. It may be that I miscon-

strue Richardson's two objections to my approach, but in my opinion both are misplaced. Furthermore, I believe that Richardson's second objection commits him to a view of narrative (and narrative theory) that is ultimately untenable.

In the first instance, I do not think that my account of literary history is unidirectional. Note that in the first of the two research hypotheses outlined on page 1054, I mention dominant, recessive, and emergent narrative techniques. This vocabulary, it seems to me, does not entail unidirectionality; in fact, I used these terms to avoid an overly linear account of literary history. The “new” (emergent) scripts and narrative techniques being foregrounded over “old” (recessive) ones at a given point might well have been dominant (or recessive, or emergent) in an earlier epoch. Thus the hypothesis is designed to allow for the “irregular loops and unexpected points of contact” that Richardson eloquently describes. A particular narrative strategy can reemerge—can again be used to contest a dominant strategy, though invariably with a difference—at different moments in literary history. My analysis does assume that the literary corpus gets progressively bigger, but it also implies that what made Cervantes write *Don Quixote* could make Flaubert, mutatis mutandis, write *Madame Bovary*. Hence, literary history is perhaps less a partially coiled snake than an ever-expanding field of forces, crisscrossed by multiple vectors of change.

Richardson's second objection concerns what he takes to be the “theoretical impossibility” of my (or any) “attempt to produce a description of narrative practice that includes all narratives.” Richardson mentions writers like Gertrude Stein, the *Tel quel* novelists, John Cage, and the later Beckett and remarks that texts by these writers “are designed to frustrate all standard conventions of narrativity.” The formulation just quoted suggests why this second objection is not only misplaced but also, as I see it, incoherent. To grasp what makes some novels pseudo- or antinarrative, readers also need to have a sense of what, generally speaking, a narrative is. Similarly, to study how and why avant-garde writers violate standard conventions for designing and interpreting stories, analysts should try to characterize narrative conventions as well as the ways in which they can be violated. The two tasks are complementary; it would be just as bad to neglect one as the other. My main purpose in this essay was to rethink classical accounts of general and basic narrative structures. For reasons of space and strategy, I was only secondarily concerned with the complex story designs for which the early narratologists would perhaps not even have had a name. But though my essay centers on the cognitive bases for narrative conventions, I refer the reader to the second research hypothesis sketched on