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Mikkonen, Kai

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Diachronic Narratology and Historical Inquiry: Strategies, Principles and Metaphors

KAI MIKKONEN

kai.mikkonen@helsinki.fi
University of Helsinki

The idea that *narratives* have a history and that narrative forms and practices, as defined in narratology, provide us with an important frame for literary history, is a recent invention. While there have been many attempts to unite narrative theory and historical inquiry since at least the 1980s,¹ the concept of diachronic narratology stems from Monika Fludernik's manifesto-like article, entitled "The Diachronization of Narratology" (2003), in which Fludernik envisions a new research field dedicated to the history of narrative forms, practices and their functions. However, despite recent advances in this field, behind the exciting rhetoric and bold promises of this trailblazing text loom questions of how narratological concepts and their system, involving decontextualized structural distinctions of narrative elements, can in fact be re-conceived as historical inquiry.

In its paradigm-shifting emphasis, Monika Fludernik's article is related to other contemporaneous calls for narrative theory to move towards cultural, historical and contextualist questions at the turn of the millennium (e.g., Herman; Nünning; Darby). Among these voices, the project of diachronic narratology is clearly closest to the ethos of a traditional literary historian. Fludernik argues, in fact, that the post-classical and contextualist trends of narratology of the time when she was writing, with the sole exception of feminist narratology, focusing on

¹ Or even much earlier if we wish to include Hayden White's *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe* (1973), Gérard Genette's essay "Poétique et histoire" (1969), Mikhail Bakhtin's historical poetics, and the Russian formalist notions of defamiliarization and motivation among such attempts.

forgotten and neglected women's texts, have lacked interest in the *history* of narrative (Fludernik "The Diachronisation" 331–32). She then calls for a major research breakthrough in diachronic inquiry, since it would also seem to offer endless research opportunities: "once one starts to cast around for historical questions touching on narrative, one soon finds that the sheer number of relevant topics and their significance are overwhelming" (332). Consequently, Fludernik sketches a research programme that would focus on narrative forms in their historical transmission, development and change, including issues such as the narrator-narratee communication, the author/narrator distinction, metafictional and metanarrative commentary and the function of descriptive passages. Basically, then, any narrative element formulated in narratological terms would be relevant as an object of study under the rubric of diachronic narratology.

The end of Fludernik's article reflects the writer's strong optimism and, seen from today's perspective, clear over-confidence in the heady vision of fusing narratology with history:

If such historical analysis is taken into account, the field of narratology could be on the brink of a major revolution. These questions will keep professors busy for at least a few decades and will provide ample opportunities for dissertations. The train has started in Europe. The motto is "Westward Ho!" (344)

In the last eighteen years, no such revolution has taken place, even though there has been a steady flow of significant studies under this rubric, especially within classical and medieval literary studies in Germany and The Netherlands. The wide and varied scope of the German-language research from the last decade has also been impressively introduced in the *Handbuch Historische Narratologie* (2019), which offers an overview of the theorization of narrative practices from antiquity to early modern times and seeks to bring these studies into dialogue.² However, in Anglo-American narratological research and elsewhere, diachronic narratology has made little progress during this period.

² See von Contzen and Tilg. Fifteen years after Fludernik's article, Paul Dawson echoed almost word for word the same concerns as his German colleague in 2003: "What narratology has tended to lack until recently is a historical dimension or, more precisely, a historiographic orientation to its method in which various formal features are understood as historically contingent practices rather than reified linguistic structures or universal cognitive processes and in which these features are studied through time" (Dawson "Introduction" 7).

In this essay, I will discuss the relationship between narratology and historical inquiry, a profound question that scholars working in this field have raised but that has not been systematically investigated. The persistence of this paradox may in fact provide an explanation for why this research field, with so much apparent potential, has been relatively slow to expand, spread and gain influence.

Historical or Diachronic, Typological or Specific

The problem of how narrative theory, and more precisely narratology, can be applied to and conceived in terms of historical inquiry can also be formulated as a question about the limits of the application of narrative theory. In other words: how can narratological concepts and their theoretical system be moved from one historical context, i.e. our own “narratological era” from after the late 1960s, and be applied to another period? The question becomes the more pressing the further back we are removed from the nineteenth century and the kinds of literary examples including mainly European novels ranging from Henry Fielding and Jane Austen to Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf that were used to formulate the basic categories in classical narratology.

The paradox concerning the relation between narrative forms and historical context has been recently discussed in terms of different research orientations and their various forms of reasoning. Thus, Eva von Contzen has cogently argued that the project of historicizing narratology is characterized by a tension between the need to focus, on the one hand, on “systematic approaches that rely on established parameters and theorems, and thus necessarily proceed deductively” and, on the other hand, inductive approaches to text analysis that try “not to impose categories that do not (yet) apply to the text in question” (von Contzen “Dido’s Words” 59). One option for diachronic narratological analysis, then, is to apply the narratological concepts deductively in text analysis, without paying attention to historic circumstances and to consider the relevance of this historical context only after the completion of the narratological analysis, while the other is to focus on the meanings and uses of narratives in a particular context; thus, in this inductive approach, one could consider whether the narratological concepts fit the texts and their context. In other words, one type of diachronic narratology relies on synchronic text analysis against some relevant historical backdrop; another is predicated

on some historical claim about changes in narrative practices, which is subsequently examined through the analysis of specific texts.

In fact, the opposition between deductive and inductive modes of diachronic research simplifies the situation in existing narratological practice. The options for diachronic narratology involve various alternatives along a broad spectrum situated between the use of additional theory- and concept- or corpus-driven as well as context-sensitive approaches. Furthermore, the choices faced not only concern whether one begins with the narratological concepts or with the historical context but also the very meaning of historical inquiry in such a diachronic study and the nature of the narratological categories themselves. Moreover, any scholar in this field is confronted with the question of the scope of narrative history, which can be conceived, for instance,

- as the history of some narrative form within some historical timeframe;
- as the study of literary history at some specific point or continuum in time, considering specific narrative forms and practices;
- as the history of narrative representation considering a particular literary form, device or practice and its functions within some historical trajectory and
- as the history of narrative in a broader sense, perceived across literary genres and other narrative arts and media, within some historical trajectory.

Furthermore, the delimitation of the historical timeframe and scope of research is also linked to the very notion of narrative. Indeed, the history of the concept of narrative remains to be written.

Some of these basic choices about the focus, method and object of diachronic narratological study are further reflected in von Contzen's attempt to differentiate between *historical* and *diachronic* narratology. Thus, she defines historical narratology as being "synchronic in that it considers narrative practices at a specific point in time, usually in a premodern context," while diachronic narratology "sets a historical narrative practice in relation to earlier and later developments" (von Contzen "Dido's Words" 57). Pointing out that these two notions "obviously overlap," since, for instance, it may be difficult to distinguish between "a point in time" and a historical period, she nevertheless argues that they

correspond to different views on narrative: in their most vehement applications, historical narratology is interested in its objects of study as an end in themselves, while a diachronic narratology considers narrative texts as building bricks, or steppingstones, in a larger trajectory of narrative developments.

(56; see also von Contzen and Tilg vii)

In other words, “historical narratology” is less interested in the transhistorical quality of the narratological notions than narrative parameters in their historical location and practice and in relating the given narrative forms to their historical-cultural conditions at a certain point in the past (von Contzen and Tilg vi). In existing research, however, the two perspectives usually overlap because the terms “historical” and “diachronic” narratology are often used interchangeably, and because there is much potential ambiguity between them, as becomes evident in perspective shifts between more theoretical and more historical moments within individual studies in the field.

Despite these shortcomings, von Contzen’s distinction between deductive and inductive reasoning on the one hand and historical and diachronic narratology on the other, brings to our attention important internal tensions within this research domain.³ What she calls “historical” and “diachronic” varieties or orientations could, in fact, be understood as an inner tension characterizing all narratological research. Perhaps the most burning issue here is that all research labelled diachronic or historical narratology must address the issue of how to relate theory (the narratological concepts and their system) to history. Subsequently, diachronic narratology must take issue with the question of whether to historicize the narratological concepts themselves and, if so, what that might mean in practical research.

Take Irene J.F. de Jong’s narratological analyses of classical literature as an example. Von Contzen classifies de Jong’s approach as an instance of diachronic orientation (von Contzen and Tilg vii), which is justified considering de Jong’s use of narratological notions as transhistorical

³ Contzen and Tilg suggest that, ultimately, it is necessary to combine the two approaches, as the specific and specifically historical, can only be recognized in the larger universal or transhistorical context (or what is assumed to be universal and transhistorical): “Letztlich ist es notwendig, beide Ansätze zu verschränken: Spezifisches – also auch spezifisch Historisches – wird erst vor dem größeren Kontext eines Universalen oder Transhistorischen (d.h. eines als universal oder transhistorisch *Angenommenen*) erkennbar” (viii).

universals, as well as her interest in the formal and structural features of classical narratives. Narratology first and foremost provides de Jong with a set of invaluable perspectives to better grasp the typical qualities of a classical text's narrative structure, including questions of narrative situation and level, focalization, temporal structure and the narrative representation of space and visual experience. De Jong's research pays only some attention to the genetic history of the narrative forms, their modification over time or their historical context. Nonetheless, at the same time, certain important aspects of her research represent what von Contzen would call historical narratology. For instance, despite the typological focus of de Jong's careful narratological readings of classical Greek and Latin texts, the unique qualities of individual literary narratives are always foregrounded. Beyond typology, another important feature in narratology for de Jong, as becomes evident in the Preface to her *Narratology & Classics*, is that narrative theory can help to "sharpen and enrich our interpretation" in the study of classical texts (de Jong *Narratology & Classics* v), by which she means, in particular, to provide readers with a keener perception of the texts' narrative complexity, that is, the specific ways in which they mediate narrative meanings in their period.

In her definition of diachronic narratology, de Jong's entry from *the living handbook of narratology* states "the description and analysis of the history of the forms and functions of narrative devices within a given (period of a) literature" (de Jong "Diachronic Narratology" n.p.). It further emphasizes the study of historical change. Apparently, then, diachronic narratology is framed in and subjected to the study of developments within a historical literary period.⁴ In fact, however, in much of de Jong's work, the relationship between the typological and the historical research interest remains deeply ambivalent. Her discussions of narrative structure in her narratological primer *Narratology & Classics* and many other works, seek to, first and foremost, confirm the supposed transhistorical applicability of narratological categories that can cross not only temporal and cultural but also generic boundaries. The main objective in the impressive monograph series that de Jong has co-edited under the title *Studies in Ancient Greek Narrative* (SAGN), including four

⁴ In her *Narratology & Classics*, in turn, de Jong considers an even broader historical frame for narratology by suggesting that her approach could potentially enable students of Classics to tease out "the literary DNA of the most popular literary form of our times, the novel" (*Narratology & Classics* 11).

volumes published and one in progress,⁵ focuses on the identification, classification and description of narrative devices or techniques, including their repertoire, variation and function or the implications of their use in ancient Greek narrative literature (de Jong “General Introduction” xii; De Temmerman and van Emde Boas 3). At the same time, the comparisons that de Jong and her colleagues make in this series between the uses of the same devices in different texts and often across different literary genres, enable them to suggest some tentative historical claims.⁶ Typically, however, these historical inferences and insights are presented in the conclusions of these studies, concerning only general tendencies, intertextual speculations or changes in the functions of the devices under investigation (de Jong and Nünlist “Epilogue: Narrators” 552–53) and intertextual relations (546).

Moreover, whenever de Jong compares narrative devices and techniques, she does so independently of genre and, in fact, one central finding in this vast body of research is that they are not bound by genre (545–46; de Jong and Nünlist “Epilogue: Time” 522).⁷ Even with regard to ancient historiography, there is in de Jong’s mind no need to develop a separate historiographic narratology (*Narratology and Classics* 172), as she realizes the ancient historians used the same narrative devices and means to create personae as the writers of modern fiction; thus, she posits the supposed relevance of the narrator notion across times and narrative genres.

All things considered, it is difficult to classify de Jong, who is thus far perhaps the most productive and accomplished scholar in the field of diachronic narratology, according to von Contzen’s definition of the

⁵ The areas that have been covered thus far include narrators, narratees and narratives (2004); time (2007); space (2012) and characterization (2017).

⁶ By contrast, the parallels that de Jong frequently draws between classical narratives and modern fiction serve her to highlight the transhistorical relevance of narratological notions and parameters. See, for instance, her discussion of metalepsis (“Metalepsis” 88–92) or the device of “the anonymous traveller” (“Anonymous Traveller” 314–20), in modern and postmodern novels.

⁷ Nonetheless, de Jong and Nünlist also endorse the view, which evidently contradicts their genre-independent premise that genres “are not homogeneous where the use of narrative devices is concerned” (“Epilogue: Time” 522). Furthermore, Temmerman and van Emde Boas emphasize in the introduction to the fourth study in the SAGN series that “character and characterization are, *prima facie*, topics where de Jong’s point about genre-independence may not be wholly applicable” (De Temmerman and van Emde Boas 4).

two main directions in this field. The narratological studies of de Jong are structurally oriented, often typology-driven and focused on the narrative universals, investigating the narrative composition of individual texts in their classical period. This deductive approach emphasizes a synchronic perspective. There are, however, frequent historical comparisons, moments, insights and suggestions. This results in a kind of alternation between narratological formal analysis and the typological research interest, on the one hand, and the historical and comparative research approach on the other.

Strategies in Diachronic Narratology

It seems necessary for any scholar engaged in diachronic narratology to address the question of the relation between narrative theory and history and to choose a strategy in this respect. At the same time, as existing research in this field also suggests, more than just two strategies may be adopted. The alternatives include, at least, the following basic options, which appear in different varieties.

1. The *transhistorical* definition and application of the narratological concepts that privileges the study of *narrative categories*. The justification for this strategy may arise from the claim that narratology can make most significant contributions if it has a “clear profile,” that is, when it is used as a steady set of key categories that can be applied to all kinds of narratives in different epochs (Grethlein and Rengakos 3). In other words, keeping the narratological categories as intact as possible may allow one to better identify similar narrative devices and phenomena across different timeframes, narrative practices and literary traditions. Therefore, in its purest typological version, when diachronic narratology is conceived as a means of identifying, classifying and comparing narrative universals in some historical period, this kind of research becomes analogous to the study of any literary patterns, such as *topoi*,⁸ motifs or *Stoffe* that can be catalogued across periods, genres, and literary traditions.

⁸ In her study on the literary device of the anonymous traveller, de Jong identifies the same (unresolved) dilemma of perceiving the device either in terms of a universal (like a cultural meme) or a historical form (a literary device invented in ancient Greek literature), thus reflecting the ambiguity between a typological and a historical orientation characteristic of her work (de Jong “The Anonymous Traveller” 329–33).

Another possible justification for the transhistorical strategy is an interest in narrative categories as universals that point to the supposed timeless aspects of storytelling. However, in existing research practice, it is not common to maintain a transhistorical conception of the narratological categories without any consideration for the way in which these concepts can be used in the given context. Thus, the transhistorical application is, in fact, usually accompanied by historical considerations pertaining to the functions of these categories in the given epoch. Period-specific literary and rhetorical concepts may also be added to the set of narratological categories. For instance, de Jong adopts this strategy in *A Narratological Commentary on the Odyssey*, where she includes in her glossary of narratological terms “whenever possible [...] the ancient equivalents of these terms, as found in the scholia” (de Jong *Narratological Commentary* xi). Thus, the glossary incorporates concepts specific to the study of the literature of antiquity, pertaining, in particular, to rhetoric and thematics, including examples such as epic regression, refrain composition or “Jørgensen’s law” that refers to characters who, “lacking the omniscience of the narrator” or the information that the narratees may have, “ascribe divine interventions to Zeus (in general), to an unspecified god [...], or to the wrong god” (xv).⁹

Still another possible justification used in support of the transhistorical strategy, is to argue that many earlier rhetorical concepts, from the literature of antiquity to the Renaissance, anticipate narratological categories. This “anticipation hypothesis” comes in at least two varieties. The weaker version suggests that premodern scholars, be they classical, medieval, or Renaissance scholars, showed interest in similar complex phenomena of narrative organization, perspective and strategy as today’s narratologists. It is therefore justified to compare these concepts with present-day narrative theory. René Nünlist has demonstrated that ancient

⁹ De Jong’s introduction to the SAGN volume on space also articulates the argument that the study of space in classical literature, “with its long history of ekphrasis, the ubiquity of topoi like the *locus amoenus*, or charged spatial oppositions, e.g. inside versus outside, to mention but a few of the more obvious examples,” can illustrate how narrative literature much before the nineteenth-century realist and naturalist novels, which have functioned as the standard for modern narrative theory on these issues (de Jong “Introduction” 17), explored the full range of possibilities of space and description.

scholars, in particular the writers of Greek scholia, observed complex phenomena of temporal organization, narrative perspective and voice closely related to what today's narratology might identify as analepsis and prolepsis or embedded focalization (see Nünlist). This shared interest across history, however, Nünlist suggests, does not necessarily entail that the Greek scholia "contain a narratological theory *avant la lettre*" (Nünlist 82) but rather that some of the reading strategies and questions in these scholia, show remarkable similarities with narratological notions. These resemblances (and differences) are worth noting and studying. By contrast, the stronger version of this hypothesis claims exactly the opposite, that is, that premodern scholars using the rhetorical notions of their time "can actually be seen as narratologists *avant la lettre*" (de Jong "Klassische Philologie" 275). It is then correct to say that narrative categories have remained the same and can be easily identified across different periods of time. Likewise, it is accurate to suggest the scholars' interest in such categories has not altered over time.

The transhistorical strategy can be further modified and rendered less fundamentalist by conceiving the narratological categories as universals only valid for certain periods (Fludernik *An Introduction* 115) or by regarding them as universals that have historically changing purposes and functions. In the latter case, diachronic research can distinguish between a universal narrative form and its use or function, which on the contrary is historically contingent and changing. For instance, in her discussion of the historical change of scene shifts¹⁰ from Middle English narratives through Renaissance to the nineteenth century and twentieth-century modernism, Monika Fludernik emphasizes that the scene change is "ideally suited to demonstrate that formal analysis needs to be complemented by a functional approach" (Fludernik "The Diachronisation" 344).¹¹ Thereby, the study of the functions of narrative devices and elements introduces a historical dimension into narratological research.

¹⁰ By a "scene shift" Fludernik means the way in which "narratives manage to get from one set of characters in one location to another set of characters in a different location" (Fludernik "The Diachronisation" 334).

¹¹ Similarly, in de Jong's large international research project *Studies in Ancient Greek Narrative*, the historical dimension of the research involves the way in which the narrative devices are *used* by individual authors (de Jong "After Auerbach" 121).

2. The *historicizing strategy*, by contrast, contends that the narratological concepts need to be modified, and possibly also redefined, according to the given historical context. This strategy presupposes that the applicability and efficacy of the narratological categories is never given but needs to be proven, with added modifications, in each case and relative to each context and body of work. Thus, for instance, it can be held that the poetic terms of the given era and genre, or native philological traditions, need to be taken into account, and that the qualities of the given corpus, and the historical conditions of its reception, can significantly modify the approach. Therefore, this strategy also holds that the various contexts of literary history or the history of narrative can function as a testing ground for narratological concepts and approaches. In this sense, then, we could consider all diachronic study on narratives in premodern contexts as a wonderfully huge laboratory for testing the scope, applicability and weight of these categories. Moreover, gaining sharper understanding of the historical limitations of notions such as the narrator, narratee or focalization could also benefit the analysis of modern narrative texts.¹²

The historicizing strategy can assume different shapes, based on the way in which the narratological categories can be historicized. More precisely, this refers to how these concepts and their categories themselves are subjected to the study of historical transmission, change, continuity, and rupture; furthermore, as Fludernik suggests, they may be redefined, readjusted and related to context- and period-specific narrative concepts and practices (Fludernik *An Introduction* 115).

One variety of this strategy corresponds to what von Contzen has identified as “historical narratology,” in particular when it entails the investigation of how the modern narratological categories must be contextualized and functionalized differently in premodern contexts, including the possibility of questioning and *redefining* these categories (von Contzen and Tilg viii). The point of applying narratology to ancient narratives could thus take as its starting point the limitations of narratology – due to its focus on modern narrative fiction –, which could bring into sharper view some historically specific features, functions and uses of narrative. Hence,

¹² See also, Patron Sylvie, where the historical argument for optional-narrator theory is developed by various writers.

Egbert J. Bakker argues that narratology fails to do justice to the complex issue of narrative performance in Homer, due to the theory's systematic insistence on clear distinctions between author, narrator, and character (Bakker). Similarly, Nicholas Paige points out that narratology fails to recognize the distinction between modern omniscient narrators, as we find them in the works of such writers as Émile Zola, and the poet-narrators of earlier periods such as Homer (Paige *Before Fiction* 201); thus, they are both regarded as kinds of "extradiegetic heterodiegetic" narrators. Such findings concerning problems in applying narratology provide these scholars with important historical insights; this is a seminal point to which I will return later in this article.

Still another variety, perhaps to some degree less radical in its historicizing mode, is the strategy focusing on the multiple and changing functions of the narrative practices and strategies, including historically shifting forms of reading, genres and the aesthetic assumptions that accompany them. In other words, the point of diachronic inquiry would then be to study the historically changing uses of certain practices with specific attention given to the protean nature, reception and generic frames of such practices. Further, in this kind of research, the narratological categories can help to identify particular narrative practices, although there is no presupposition about their universal applicability. These categories may be affected by the historical research perspective and interest but, most of all, their use is subjected to the historical research perspective. Thus, Paul Dawson concludes in his investigation of the broad terminological shift and change of function concerning authorial commentary (or "intrusion") from the eighteenth to the twentieth century English-language novel, that this technique "is neither a singular nor a static formal convention but a varied practice with an historically shifting relation to realism" (Dawson "From Digressions" 162).¹³

3. The *combination or complementary strategy* comprises approaches designed to bring narrative theory and history together while privileging the study of historical change. Thus, this strategy can

¹³ Diachronic narratology can also serve as a kind of research model for the study of a period-specific narrative device without any use of actual narratological categories. See, for instance, Maravela on the development of the narratorial *νήπιος*-comment in the Greek epic.

present the link between narratology and contextualist historical study in terms of a complementary relation. In research practice, it can involve alternation between a narratological text analysis and a study of historical change. For instance, diachronic narratology could thus proceed in a way enabling the narratological text analysis to function as a preliminary work for actual interpretation or as a contextualist, historicizing approach that supposedly “goes beyond the unhistorical frame of traditional narratology” (Grethlein and Rengakos 6). Following that principle, Jonas Grethlein and Antonios Rengakos, the editors of *Narratology and Interpretation. The Content of Narrative Form in Ancient Literature*, argue that combining narratology with historicizing approaches is “a crucial step” (3) allowing them to do better historical research with ancient Greek and Latin literatures. Narratology, thus understood as a heuristic device put to the service of the historical study of narrative, can bring to light new aspects of the studied works or new dimensions of their known features; furthermore, it may offer a sharper and more systematic analysis of narrative form, practice and representation in ancient literature.¹⁴ The conception of the narratological categories may be similarly universal and transhistorical as in the first strategy but in contradistinction to that approach, here the scope of narratological analysis is subjected to a historical inquiry, either as a preliminary text analysis or in an add-on and ad hoc fashion.

As a whole, these three strategies and their variations reflect a broad spectrum of possible approaches, from the one extreme of narratological analysis including some occasional or haphazard, literary historical remarks (as in Gérard Genette’s “*Discours du récit*”) to a full-scale historicist rejection of the applicability of these categories beyond modern and postmodern fiction.¹⁵ In actual research, furthermore, these strategies

¹⁴ Thus, according to Grethlein and Rengakos the observation that *Ilias* and *Odyssey* include a dense net of anachronies may not merit attention in itself but becomes important only if we explore the potential impact of such temporal structures on the readers’ perception and experience of the plot or if it is linked to a discussion of how to place Homer’s epics between orality and literacy in a historical sense (Grethlein and Rengakos 3).

¹⁵ One example of such a rejection can be found in Liisa Steinby and Mäkilä’s introduction to the anthology *Narrative Concepts in the Study of Eighteenth-Century Literature* (2017). In it, the authors claim that due to the system-immanent nature of all narratological analysis and narratology’s supposed belief in the absolute conceptual

may overlap. Thus, it must be noted that both the transhistorical and the combination strategy can understand narratological categories as universals. In contrast to both options, the historicizing strategy treats the categories themselves historically and as potential traces of history that can represent kinds of thought and expression, beliefs and ideology, worldview and experience. At one extreme, then, the narratological concepts become an object of historical study themselves. In addition, the distinction between the second and the third strategy may become blurred, as both approaches subject narratological analysis to historical inquiry. Their difference, as I see it, lies in the question and the degree to which the narratological categories themselves are historicized.

The distinction between these strategies is further complicated by the question of whether narratological analysis is conceived of as a form of literary interpretation or as a tool of analysis that does not constitute an actual interpretation of texts. Some existing research in the field foregrounds the division of labour between (decontextualized) narrative analysis and a more comprehensive interpretation or the (contextualized) study of historical narrative practices. Thus, narratological analysis can be perceived as a preliminary, preparatory work for the interpretation of and historical research about a given text's narrative elements.¹⁶ However, in other approaches this distinction is not made, as the categories of narratological analysis and interpretation can become more or less fused.

accuracy of its notions (few narratologists would agree!), the historical changes that diachronic narratology claims to identify and study can never be anything but modifications in some aspects of the theoretical system (Steinby and Mäkikalli 15; 26). At best, Steinby and Mäkikalli argue, diachronic narratology can decode historical changes as variations in the distribution of the paradigmatic possibilities, implying that "certain traits defined in the theory are present or absent in narrative literature at a certain historical moment" (15). However, despite the writers' (paradoxical) presupposition that diachronic narratology can only succeed as literary history if it ceases to use narratological notions, several articles in this anthology promote diachronic narratology as a form of historical knowledge.

¹⁶ Thus, for instance, Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller see narratological "analysis" as different from any actual theory of interpretation. For them, it is heuristics, not a theory for interpreting texts (Kindt and Müller; Kindt 37).

The Division of Labour or the Incompatible Objectives of Narrative Theory and History

One claim that can be brought against diachronic narratology is that the study of narrative forms and the study of the history of narrative can never exist in a complementary relationship. Brian McHale made this point strongly in his 2005 article, “Ghosts and Monsters: On the (Im)Possibility of Narrating the History of Narrative Theory,” where he argues it is never possible to reconcile, except perhaps for an exceptional critic like Mikhail Bakhtin, narrative theory and the study of literary history, since the interest in narrative structure and history constitute two vastly different kinds of knowledge and research objective. In this respect, McHale’s main references were the turn-of-the-millennium orientations of contextual narratology, such as poststructuralist narratology, cultural studies narratology, and cognitive narrative studies, including the subcategory of historicist cognitive narratology. Diachronic narratology is not mentioned, possibly because in 2005 this recently established field had not yet emerged from among the various contextualising tendencies of the day.

In his article, McHale contends that the attempt to reconcile the study of narrative structure and history at best results in research writing that looks like Frankenstein’s monster: a creature of hideous contrasts or a messy patchwork of alternating narratological and historicist elements. More precisely, McHale argues that

under the big tent of narrative theory, structuralism and historicism jockey for position, each seeking to outflank or overcome the other, to *contain* the other, and if that doesn’t work, then to forget or *repress* [or pre-empt] the other – a risky strategy since, as we know, the repressed is apt to return.

(McHale 64)

In the history of narrative theory, this dynamic is reflected for instance, as McHale points out, in the motivation concept of Russian formalism (i.e., the way in which literary devices and the thematic elements must be motivated in terms of composition, realism, or artistic effect), which enlists historical contingency in the service of the study of formal structure. Similarly, this tension can be identified in Gérard Genette’s classical “*Discours du récit*,” where the critic’s attempts to build a systematic theory of narrative outflank his literary historical claims (or asides) about Marcel Proust’s place within literary Modernism. McHale

then concludes that the relationship between narrative structure and history “has always been, and is likely to remain, a conflicted one. It may be that structure and history are finally irreconcilable; or rather, they may be reconciled, but only on terms congenial to one of the rival orientations and not to the other” (67). Therefore, using the metaphor of “two ships passing in the night,” McHale further concludes that “[w]hat we’re really doing, at best, is alternating between narratological moments and historical moments” (68).

McHale’s article captures the basic tension between narrative form and history that characterizes the enterprise of diachronic narratology. At the same time, one must consider the implications of the metaphors and terms in this pessimistic vision. What, for instance, might *reconciliation* or *reconcilable* actually mean in this framework? Indeed, not all narrative studies or theories, which may seek to lead narratology onto the terrain of history, try to reconcile structure and history. Furthermore, any adjustments, additions and changes that are made to narratological categories in historical inquiry can be done in a conscious and theoretically self-reflective way. For diachronic narratology, in particular, as long as it seeks to be a credible form of historical inquiry, the relationship between narrative form and history is a question that *needs* to be openly acknowledged and examined. This relation is, in a sense, the very subject of the investigation or the object of research, rather than a matter of reconciliation or the return of the repressed, as McHale would have it. Furthermore, if narrative form and literary history are reconciled in terms that are congenial to one of these orientations – and for diachronic narratology the dominant orientation should be history, since it is not a new theory of narrative – those terms can be opened to critical scrutiny.

McHale contends that historicising narratology or what he calls period-based narratology, must choose between revisiting the concepts of narrative theory from a historical perspective, thus rethinking them “as historically contingent and variable – malleable and adjustable, varying from period to period” or treating them as “permanent features of a system that *applies* differently at different epochs” (McHale 64). Therefore, when historicism tries to outflank or contain narratology, it is the narratological notion and, potentially the whole narratological “system” that becomes subjected to or is “repressed” by historical inquiry.¹⁷

¹⁷ I agree with McHale’s self-critical suggestion that his use of the term “repress” could strike one as rhetorical overkill (McHale 65). Indeed, the language in this article,

These options reflect the three strategies for diachronic narratology that I have sketched above. They also mirror von Contzen's distinction between historical and diachronic narratology. Furthermore, all these formulations seem to point to the fact that research in this field needs to choose whether it perceives the narratological categories as transhistorical universals and, consequently, must determine what it means for historical inquiry to a) treat and use them as such or b) reject that universal quality. Nonetheless, the choice between treating these categories either as permanent fixtures and universals that can be differently applied in various contexts or as historically contingent and basically malleable terms, are not the only options available to historicising narratology.

Could we also approach the dilemma of narrative theory (or structure) towards history by accepting the tension between them as a necessary and inescapable condition and in a sense the basis for doing diachronic narratology? This would require, as far as I see it, an acknowledgement and appraisal of the necessary division of labour and organization of knowledges between narrative poetics and historical inquiry (instead of blaming that division or psychoanalysing it). Thus, Dan Shen has insightfully argued that whenever various types of contextualised narrative poetics, ranging from feminist to cognitive narratology, investigate generic structures, they "have to leave aside varied specific contexts and focus on the decontextualized structural properties shared by specific uses in narrative texts of the same genre" (Shen 22). Therefore, she also suggests that the failure to clearly identify this division of labour – between narrative poetics examining generic structures across specific contexts and the study of sociohistorical contexts of narrative types, genres, and practices – is a fundamental tenet that underlies many (misguided) criticisms of formal narrative poetics (10).

To achieve a form of diachronic narratology that would be more than just a typology of narrative universals in each period is indeed a challenge, although one that can be met. Indeed, one must ask whether a typology really constitutes a form of history or suggests a patchwork of

including not just the metaphor of repression but those of combat, blindness and monstrosity as well, is effective in overdramatizing the opposition between structure and history or what McHale also identifies as the opposition between the (impossible) "stable synthesis or seamless integration" of structure, the contingencies of history and the (possible, but repressed) "messy patchwork" of alternating and rivalling orientations (68).

alternating structural and historical elements. To make that goal more realistic would require that diachronic narratology: 1) acknowledges that narrative theory and historical inquiry of narrative changes are different forms of knowledge that cannot be easily pursued at the same time; 2) conceives of their relationship in terms of a division of labour; and then 3) focuses on the way in which the narratological findings can be contextualized, including theoretical self-reflection of the preconditions of that application and the limitations of those concepts in a specific context. Thus, narratology would be understood as a heuristic technique at the service of the history of narrative and diachronic narratology as a form of history, not a theory of narrative.¹⁸ At the same time, it could be acknowledged that the historical study of narrative forms can contribute to narrative theory, at least indirectly, as a historical testing ground for narratological concepts and categories. In fact, the existing research in this field has already contributed significantly to the relativizing of narratological distinctions, in terms of their historical relevance, such as the prominent role of the (fictional) narrator and the focalising character in narrative theory based on modern prose fiction.

In a sense, I am thus calling for a new kind of diachronic narratology, one that compounds the historicizing sort with theoretical self-reflection drawing specific attention to the relationship between narrative theory and history. In this regard, I find helpful both Dan Shen's principle of co-validity and von Contzen's notion of re-alignment. For Shen, even if the study of generic structures in narratives, the rhetorical analysis of the hypothetical generic reader models and the empirical study of real readers reading, cannot be conducted simultaneously, there is much potential for "co-validity of, and the mutually-benefiting relationship among, the different kinds of inquiry" (Shen 10). This means, in other words, that the study of narrative forms and practices and the historical inquiry of their functions and meanings, do not need to be reconciled with one another or fused. On the contrary, it may benefit them both to keep them clearly distinct as forms of analysis, research practice and a sort of knowledge. In this way, it becomes clear how they may be best related to each other in each case (complementarity being just one option).

¹⁸ And, in fact, the name of this field, diachronic *narratology*, remains somewhat misleading if narratology refers, first and foremost, to a *theory* of narrative.

In turn, by re-alignment, von Contzen refers to the critical and context-sensitive use of the existing narratological theories and categories in medieval studies so that they “will be tested for their usefulness against the medieval texts in order to determine whether or to what extent they may require a careful and nuanced re-alignment” (von Contzen “A Manifesto” 16). I acknowledge that re-aligning the theory with the period-based corpus is not different, in essence, from claiming that the theoretical model is “malleable and adjustable, varying from period to period” (McHale 64). Thus, for von Contzen, medieval narrative texts, as they reflect their specific time and space, “lead to the theoretical and descriptive apparatus (and not the other way round)” (“A Manifesto” 16). However, even if the core concepts of this kind of study, including categories such as author/narrator, plot structure and motivation, character, perspective, time and space (16), are modified and re-aligned, these modifications can be performed in a systematic dialogue with the relevant narratological theories.

Furthermore, we can choose from among many other useful concepts, metaphors and kinds of descriptive language to designate the relation between narrative form and history and to approach the dilemma they produce. These can carry connotations completely different from rivalry, blindness, the return of the repressed or imagining (naive) forms of seamless integration, reconciliation and complementary functions. Among the ideas of co-validity, conversation¹⁹ and re-alignment, I would also like to list the notion of division of labour, the metaphor of conflict (to be solved or appreciated), the principles of *sprezzatura*²⁰ and learning from failure.

¹⁹ Seeking to distance themselves from some heady (and illusory) ideas of synthesis in “contextualist narratologies,” Divya Dwivedi, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Richard Walsh argue that formalist narratological analysis and ideological contextual criticism are antithetical methodologies, but potentially interdependent practices, “each serving as ground to the other’s figure” (Dwivedi *et al.* 8). This view, they believe, can facilitate “dialogue between narrative theory and criticism more effectively than the idea that there is some intermediate ground – the specific terrain of a contextualist narratology – in which a synthesis occurs” (8).

²⁰ De Jong borrows *sprezzatura* (*Narratology & Classics* v) from Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier* while referring less to a certain nonchalance or graceful style of action concealing art, as in Castiglione, than to the principle of theoretical self-reflection. Thus, the analysed passages should not be made to conform to narrative theory but, on the contrary, research should allow for the fact that the narratological categories cannot in every case be used satisfactorily. Furthermore, textual complexity in, and the unique qualities of an individual work of art should be given prominence over theoretical uniformity (v).

At the end of this essay, I would like to quote Evelyn Birge Vitz, who concludes her study *Medieval Narrative and Modern Narratology. Subjects and Objects of Desire* with this insight:

In my case, the tools of narratology helped me to focus on some fundamental features – some structural features – of medieval narrative that I had simply never grasped before. The success of these models was, for me, in their failures: what they *failed* to account for in medieval literature was thrown in sharper relief. Can one really ask for more of any methodology?

(Vitz 222)

Analysing medieval autobiographies and legends, and *Roman de la Rose*, Vitz discovered that much of modern narrative analysis was far more radically modernist in its analytical and ideological orientation than she had thought. At the same time, she became convinced that it was highly problematic to apply narrative theory, which brackets “off as irrelevant all *but* the narrative elements in a *récit*” (Vitz 8) to medieval narratives rooted in the rhetoric of oral tradition, period-specific genres and their social practices and, furthermore, thoroughly influenced by Christian conceptual structures.

At first sight, Vitz’s conclusion that narratology must revise its theories and paradigms to fit the data and realign itself with medieval literary practices, if it is to make any sense at all, appears to confirm the sceptical view about bringing narrative theory and literary history into a meaningful relation. Her approach subjects the narratological system to literary history, while emphasizing that the theoretical concepts must be contained within literary history and literary interpretation. Her stance finally rejects the applicability of these concepts. Thus, the result is no longer narratology but a historicization of scholarship placing chosen bits and pieces of narratology in the service of history. However, I would like to underscore Vitz’s conclusion that narrative theory and history do not need to be reconciled. Instead, literary historical study can also openly highlight the conflict between them, from which important lessons can be learned.

Coda: the Narratologist, the Historian and the Comparatist

Diachronic narratology makes great demands on individual scholars. It goes without saying that to do convincing research in this field, one needs

to be both a good narratologist and a good historian. The field requires a researcher to formulate questions and produce findings relevant both in terms of narrative theory and literary history simultaneously. Moreover, this area of scientific inquiry unites vastly different research cultures and traditions. The historian's willingness to take the risk of historical interpretation is not necessarily something that comes easily for someone trained in narrative theory, while the categorization of narrative devices and elements may seem irrelevant for someone engaged in historical inquiry.

Perhaps partly because of these potentially conflicting demands placed on scholarship, the existing work in diachronic narratology has most often focused on a single narrative form within one particular literary period and in one literary tradition. Such a limited focus may not be exactly what was originally envisioned for this promising research field.

The comparatist framework of literary history, not commonly adopted in diachronic narratology today, makes even more considerable, linguistic, culture-specific and historical, demands on scholarship in this research field. One evident challenge in this respect is how to subject literary genres, and their fund of expectations, that are unique to traditions outside the Western Canon, to narratological analysis. Nonetheless, it is highly justified to ask how historicizing narratology could benefit from a comparative study of narratives across language areas and literary traditions, given the fact that narrative devices – indeed kinds of narrative – travel across borders and develop through intercultural relations. In fact, the comparative perspective of cross- and international relations looms large in much existing diachronic narratology, as it studies the development of narrative forms and practices. One obvious place to look at would be the changing forms and uses of first-person narration and subjective point-of-view in the context of early modern European fiction. Among the many cross-national trajectories of development in this area feature, at least, the trajectory of the picaresque novel from *La vida de Lazarillo de Tormes* (circa 1554) and other Spanish models across Europe to Alain-René Lesage's *Gil Blas* (1715–35); the emergence of the eighteenth-century first-person memoir and epistolary novel;²¹ and the rise of the so-called focalized (or reflector) character in works ranging from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. A multilingual and comparative

²¹ Recently investigated in a large body of French examples in Paige, "The Artificuality of Narrative Form" and *Technologies of the Novel*.

viewpoint would, without doubt, require much larger “telescopes” and forms of collaboration than before but could be best equipped to shed light on the relations of such developments. Furthermore, the comparative approach could function as a corrective to English-language literary history, which often equates the rise of modern narrative fiction with the eighteenth-century British novel.

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