theories and methodologies

Adding versus Arguing: Narratology and Taxonomy

YOON SUN LEE

IS LITERARY CRITICISM A KIND OF SCIENCE? I WANT TO START WITH THIS QUESTION IN ORDER TO GET AT WHAT MIGHT BE AN ALTERNATIVE TO the terminology of the critical intervention. The type of criticism I focus on here is narratology. If theory is the ever-rebellious offspring of structuralism, then narratology could be seen as the latter's dutiful child, the inheritor of structuralism's methods and legacies. That portrayal exaggerates and simplifies, of course, but it does seem to me that narratologists have a way of arguing with each other that is rather different from the arguments of those working in other branches of theory. And it further strikes me that this difference has to do with narratology's image of itself as a type of science. To understand why, I want to suggest that we examine the history of narratology as a history of science.

Lubomír Doležel has argued, "If we posit poetics as a science of literature . . . then we will naturally seek a place for its history within the framework of the history of science" (2). In this essay, I place narrative theory within the framework of "normal science" and link it more particularly with the paradigm of natural history, one that Michel Foucault identifies with the classical episteme, or the assumptions about knowledge that prevailed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. I examine the attitudes and convictions that underlie narrative theorists' debates and shape their sense of the work they do. The larger question, though, is whether it is possible to disentangle literary criticism, as practiced outside narratology, from a rhetoric or temporality of crisis. This is not at all to deny that a real employment crisis exists in the academy. Rather, it is to consider whether a persistent invocation of epistemic crisis has been helpful, or the opposite, with regard to this situation.

According to *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, narratology is a "discipline dedicated to the study of the logic, principles, and practices of narrative representation" (Meister, par. 1). It sees itself as "a system of scientific practices" (par. 3). Such an understanding was present from the start of modern structuralist narratology. Tzvetan

YOON SUN LEE has published "Narrative Theory and Asian American Literature," in *The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (Oxford UP, 2019), and "Scale and Literary History," in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative Theory* (Cambridge UP, 2018), in addition to other essays and books. Her current book project examines objectivity and the history of science in relation to the development of plot in the realist novel. She teaches at Wellesley College.

© 2020 YOON SUN LEE

PMLA 135.5 (2020), published by the Modern Language Association of America

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.5.982 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Todorov, who coined the term *narratology* in 1969, opens his study of the genre of the fantastic thus: "one of the first characteristics of scientific method is that it does not require us to observe every instance of a phenomenon in order to describe it. . . . We actually deal with a relatively limited number of cases, from them we deduce a hypothesis, and we verify this hypothesis by other cases, correcting (or rejecting) it as need be." Though he cites Karl Popper on the ever-present possibility of falsification, Todorov concludes that the science of poetics is legitimate if it possesses a logical coherence: "To return from swans to novels, this general scientific truth applies not only to the study of genres, but also to that of a writer's entire oeuvre, or to that of a specific period, etc." (4). Todorov's view was not unprecedented; it appears in slightly varying forms throughout the history of poetics. Doležel asserts that "poetics is a cognitive activity governed by the general requirements of scientific inquiry" (4). More recently, Michael McKeon has also claimed that narratology draws "on scientific method" (40).

But to grasp why and how narratologists argue with one another, we need to move beyond narratology's self-characterization as science and situate the field in a broader history of knowledge structures. There are several points that I'd like to make. First, narratology can be seen to operate within the classical epistemic structure of natural history. Moreover, it largely functions as what Thomas Kuhn called "normal science" in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962 [23]). Most significantly, narratology's commitment to taxonomic ways of thinking allows it to minimize or even override the disruptive consequences of potential paradigm shifts. When knowledge is thought of in terms of allocating places in an ever-expanding field, there can be a place for everything, the new alongside the old.

As even a brief acquaintance with the field suggests, narratology is deeply invested in taxonomies. The Russian formalist Boris Tomashevsky, for instance, who is credited with the fundamental and field-defining distinction between the *fabula* and *syuzhet*, argued in his 1925 *Theory of Literature* that "[w]orks are divided into large classes which are subdivided into types and species" (qtd. in Todorov 4).[1] Todorov's theory of the fantastic also offers a clear example of this practice, situating this genre on the border between the genres of the "uncanny" and the "marvelous" (41). Just for good measure, Todorov offers a taxonomy of different species of the latter: "the hyperbolic marvelous" (54), "the exotic marvelous" (55), "the instrumental marvelous," and "the scientific marvelous" (56). He notes that "[t]he concept of genre (or species) is borrowed from the natural sciences. It is no accident . . . that the pioneer structural analyst of narrative, Vladimir Propp, employed analogies with botany or zoology" (5).

Narratology's dedication to cataloguing and describing the features of different types of narrative suggests that its roots may well lie in the classical episteme, within which natural history, with its categories of zoology, botany, and geology, flourished. While we often assume that narratology is descended from structural linguistics, I would argue that it builds on beliefs about order and knowledge from an earlier period: not the twentieth-century human sciences of psychology, sociology, cultural analysis, nor even their precursors in the nineteenth-century positive sciences of biology, political economy, and philology—but what Foucault called "the classifying systems of thought" that came to dominance in the eighteenth century (263). Foucault argues that the late seventeenth century saw a change in the nature, scope, and method of knowledge. In his view, this was the epistemic shift from thinking of knowledge as *interpreting* something to conceiving of knowledge as *locating* it in a "field of knowledge" organized by "identities and differences" (50). The operation of

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.5.982 Published online by Cambridge University Press

comparison became fundamental because of how it "establishes elements, the smallest that can be found, and arranges differences according to the smallest possible degrees" (53). The empirical world came to be seen as "infinite raw material for divisions and distributions" (58). The job of knowledge was to use language in a particular way "as an instrument of analysis and combination" (63). The goal of knowledge production in this era was to arrange the resulting empirical entities (plants, minerals, animals, words, languages) into an "articulated system . . . a table on which knowledge is displayed" (76). In other words, to know was to create taxonomies: "the fundamental task of Classical 'discourse' is to ascribe a name to things, and in that name to name their being" (120).

I am suggesting that narratology has embraced this task: the task of naming things based largely on characteristics that can be made visible, particularly through description, enumeration, and side-by-side comparison. Classical taxonomies both relied on and instantiated a new way of seeing what was in the world. They looked for "lines, surfaces . . . the form of the elements, the quantity of those elements, the manner in which they are distributed in space in relation to each other, and the relative magnitude of each element" (Foucault 133–34). They did not search for hidden meanings, origins, or conditions of being. An empirical being could be viewed as a stable structure or assemblage with clear parts; it could be placed within an existing system of classification and thereby known. In natural history, the clearest example was found in the Linnaean system, which counted in plants only the number, form, and disposition of their sexual organs—that is, the flower's stamens and pistils. Classical taxonomy relied on "variables of description . . . which could be scanned . . . by language and by the eye" (268). What's important to note here is the faith in the power of the eye to see, of language to name and describe, and in our ability to place diverse phenomena within a single field for representation and comparison.

Narratology, like Kuhn's "normal science," appears to have adopted similar assumptions. Normal science, according to Kuhn, proceeds within a model or paradigm that has come to be accepted by a community. A dominant paradigm will "define the legitimate problems and methods of a research field" (10–11). Normal science generates problems or puzzles that are challenging, yet solvable. Kuhn points out that it relies on implicit taxonomies: "the ability, acquired from exemplars, to group objects and situations into similarity sets" (199). Such groupings function at an almost automatic or habitual level as a result of professional training. A paradigm within which normal science works is both a "community structure" and a "disciplinary matrix" (175, 181). It is bound together by a commitment to a common way of viewing: "members of a group . . . learn to see the same things . . . by being shown examples of situations that their predecessors in the group have already learned to see as like each other and as different from other sorts of situations" (192). This approach is followed in works that are intended to train narratologists, such as *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates* (2012), whose coauthors cover four narratological branches, or perspectives. A different novel is invoked to illustrate each perspective: *Huckleberry Finn* for the rhetorical perspective, *Persuasion* for the feminist, *On Chesil Beach* for the mind-oriented, and *Midnight's Children* for the antimimetic (Herman et al.). While the authors acknowledge the uniqueness of their chosen illustrative text, they also teach us to see each text as exemplary and each perspective as a paradigm that is still unproblematically contained within the normal science of narratology. Each perspective is tested on its paradigmatic object, as David Herman's explanation shows: "I alternately zoom in on and back out from [McEwan's] novel, which I sometimes use as a

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.5.982 Published online by Cambridge University Press

basis for theory building and sometimes as a means for testing the possibilities and limits of [a mind-oriented] approach oriented around issues of worldmaking" ("Exploring" 18). As long as a paradigm is functional, the members of its group agree to see, or try to see, the same thing, even if its characteristics are still subject to debate. Sounding remarkably like Martin Heidegger by way of Bruno Latour, Kuhn writes that a paradigm, "like an accepted judicial decision in the common law, . . . is an object for further articulation and specification under new or more stringent conditions" (23). In other words, a paradigm is a gathering, an association, that, as Latour writes, depends on innumerable agents "to make it exist and to maintain its existence" (246).

The well-structured community of narratologists is committed, I believe, to understanding narrative phenomena by situating them within what Foucault calls a "homogeneous space of orderable identities and differences . . . a unitary field of visibility and order" (268). And this way of conceiving of the narratological enterprise contains, channels, or redirects the potentially disruptive effects of the narratologists' internal arguments. Indeed, one might say that this picture of knowledge as a unified, articulated, gridded space even insulates narratology from the revolutionary effects of a paradigm shift. Kuhn's argument suggests that a revolution occurs when what was thought to be perception comes to be recognized as merely interpretation (191–97). Interpretation throws visibility into question, subordinating the merely visible to the hidden truth. Such a paradigm shift happened, according to Foucault, at the start of the nineteenth century, when natural historians like Georges Cuvier (1769–1832) began to consider both organs and the organisms that housed them differently. The function of an organ with regard to life came to be seen as more important than its visible form or placement. The discipline of biology thus became possible on the basis of a belief in an "invisible focal unity," a need not displayed on the surfaces of bodies but hidden deep within the living organism (Foucault 259, 265). But such a revolution has not occurred in narratology, which retains its belief in the primacy of a cognitive mastery based on a shared visibility.

Narratologists seem to retain and to modify certain concepts, reallocating their referents, if necessary, instead of abandoning them. We can see this retooling in the concept of morphology, which links modern poetics with natural history. Doležel elaborates the importance to poetics of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's concept of the ur-type. He explains that, in relation to plants and animals, Goethe saw the ur-type as a "typological concept [that] creates a level of structural description over and above the level representing individual phenomena." This ur-type, in Doležel's words, "is a constructed invariant design in terms of which variable organic structures can be differentiated, compared, contrasted, and homologized" (59). In the early twentieth century, in the decade before Vladimir Propp published his *Morphology of the Folktale*, the German poetician Wilhelm Dibelius came up with an "Ur-type morphology" of the English novel (Doležel 130). The general concept of the ur-type, or prototype, remains important to the project of narratology. For example, Dan Shen argues that Monika Fludernik's *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* (1996) finds in "experiential natural narrative . . . *the* prototype of *all* narratives" (263). Fludernik's argument is particularly significant because it has been seen as itself inaugurating a Kuhnian shift from structuralist narratology to "cognitive narratology." In a recent forum on Fludernik's book in the journal *Partial Answers*, John Pier explicitly describes it as a "paradigm shift" that led people to believe "that narrativity is defined not by plot, as had been the case since the earliest structural theories of narrative, but by experientiality" (239).

Yet narratology's commitment to taxonomic thought, to organizing things on what

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.5.982 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Foucault called "a unitary field of visibility and order," in a sense *holds back* the destabilizing consequences of a paradigm shift and turns a new paradigm into a class or species category that can coexist unproblematically with others. Within the paradigm of cognitive narratology alone, for instance, which Pier praises for "the merit of not being a closed system, of remaining open to both criticism and developments by other narrative theoreticians" (239–40), new taxonomies proliferate. Shen, for example, modifies Fludernik by proposing a larger set of "natural narratives as prototypes" that also include "reportative natural narratives," "witness natural narratives," and so on (263). Pier calls Fludernik's model "a narratological model that continues to evolve in the face of a changing research environment" (240). But instead of bringing about a crisis or resulting from a crisis, this model seems to sit quite comfortably alongside other categories of narratological criticism. Herman thus takes stock of the present state of the field as what has now come to be called, in a nod to Kuhnian history, "post-classical" narratology:

> What is now required is to bring into closer dialogue the full variety of post-classical approaches—feminist, transmedial, cognitive, corpus-narratological, and other. By juxtaposing the descriptions of narrative phenomena . . . made possible by these approaches, testing for overlap among the descriptions, and then exploring the degree to which the descriptions' non-overlapping aspects might complement one another, theorists can begin to engage in a more coordinated effort to accomplish what remains the overarching goal of narrative inquiry: coming to a better understanding of what stories are and how they work.
>
> ("Directions" 159)

Note the emphasis on dialogue, rapprochement, juxtaposition, and complementarity rather than subverting or supplanting. It is narratology's continuing emphasis on description, whether of method or of object, its aim of bringing empirical features into full visibility in order to compare identities and differences, that leads me to think of narratology as situated, perhaps anachronistically, just at the threshold that links and separates the classical and the modern eras in Foucault's scheme. According to Foucault, the early decades of the nineteenth century saw the beginning of the modern era, in which the interior space of the organism, the locus and conditions of its own finite existence, and its relation to an exterior environment became the subject of scientific inquiry. But in narratology—even in cognitive or reader-oriented narratology—one does not get the sense of an inaccessible interior space. Perhaps this is another way of saying that narratologists, long before the term was coined, were doing surface reading.

What seems to enable Proppian morphologies or postclassical taxonomies is a particular understanding of nature, or the universe of narratives, as, in Foucault's resonant formulation, a "homogeneous space of orderable identities and differences" (268). Foucault's phrase is worth dwelling on; it reflects the belief that everything can be seen and represented, and that there is a place for all varieties. The natural universe of narratives for narratologists seems to be in a sense irreducibly plural in outward shape and form, an empirical diversity of narratives that can be gathered and ordered into multiple species, even as narratologists continue to search for the principles of order, and even as they propose prototypes. As "postclassical" a work as Marie-Laure Ryan's *Avatars of Story* (2006) posits "four basic approaches to digital narrative: the practical, the metaphorical, the expansionist, and the traditionalist" (xiii). Ryan positions herself between the last two, writing, "Fortunately for those who regard narrative as a cultural universal and as a stable foundation of human cognition, adherence to a reasonably strict definition does not exclude diversity." Thus, she argues,

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.5.982 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> [n]arrative is a cognitive construct with an invariant nucleus of meaning, but this construct can take a variety of shapes, which we may call *avatars of story*, and it can be actualized to variable degrees. . . . As a type of meaning, narrative can be called to mind and can manifest itself pragmatically in a variety of ways. I call these multiple manifestations the *modes of narrativity*. (xix)

Note the balance between the "invariant nucleus" and the "variety of shapes," the single "type of meaning" and "multiple . . . modes of narrativity." Such an attitude toward the work of narrative theory is founded on the assumption of the stable, objective existence of diverse phenomena within a single natural kingdom, of diverse narrative species (and species of approaches to narrative) whose identities and differences can be clearly seen, labeled, and arranged within a shared, unified discursive field.

So what does this mean for the way that narratologists argue? Narratology seems to work from the premise that narratives exist in the world as species and as specimens with morphological value. The goal is to establish the existence and characteristics of hitherto unrecognized types of narrative (for instance, "unnatural narrative"), or to use a particular specimen to further refine an existing model of a type. Narratology's commitment to naming, describing, and enumerating features, selecting and using types, and taxonomizing and ordering seems, to a remarkable extent, proof against disruptions and "interventions." Instead of the latter, we see what are described as dialogues, as "modifications and alternative perspectives," "timely problematics that readers will want to follow up on" (Pier 240), "latent positions," and "subject[s] that may herald the way to new domains of narratological research" (241). The work that many narratologists do could fall under the program of natural history outlined by the comte de Buffon in the eighteenth century: "We must gather together all the objects, compare them, study them, and extract from the totality of their connections all the insights which may be able to assist us to see them clearly and to know them better" (150). (As many have pointed out, such activities as Buffon recommends went hand in hand with the expansion of European empire.) Narratological poetics is relentlessly productive: it leads to the proliferation of taxonomies, new categories and species of knowledge; it aspires to identify new types of relations, interactions, and applications. I envy its confident belief in the totality of knowledge, and I admire its openness to new refinements, puzzles, and solutions. But we need to be careful. Diversity is a concept that invites complacency; taxonomy is a practice often blind to its own power. It can also be blind to its own historically contingent character, and to its social and political consequences.

The example of narratology does suggest, however, that what's more fundamental to criticism than agreeing on a single method is agreeing on an object constituted and held in a common world. Here, the rhetoric of perpetual crisis, of intervention that deems itself to be critical in every sense of the word, does not always serve us well. It focuses the gaze too much on the critic's action, the critic's singularity. I am not advocating a return to the traditional literary canon, or even to a delimited set of agreed-upon textual objects. But I do wonder whether some of the bitterness of theoretical debate, as well as some of the anomie of the profession, may have to do with the inability to look at something alongside other people looking at the same thing. The unwillingness to share even the phenomena, the appearances.

Note

1. *Fabula* refers to the narrative as encountered in the course of reading, *syuzhet* to the events in the plot as

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.5.982 Published online by Cambridge University Press

reconstructed and ordered by the reader afterward. The distinction allows the two to be compared.

Works Cited

Buffon, Georges-Louis Leclerc, comte de. "The 'Initial Discourse' to Buffon's *Histoire naturelle*: The First Complete English Translation." Translated by John Lyon. *Journal of the History of Biology*, vol. 9, no. 1, Mar. 1976, pp. 133–81.

Doležel, Lubomír. *Occidental Poetics*. U of Nebraska P, 1990.

Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Random House, 1970.

Herman, David. "Directions in Cognitive Narratology: Triangulating Stories, Media, and the Mind." *Postclassical Narratology: Approaches and Analyses*, edited by Jan Alber and Monika Fludernik, Ohio State UP, 2010, pp. 137–62.

———. "Exploring the Nexus of Narrative and Mind." Herman et al., pp. 14–19.

Herman, David, et al. *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates*. Ohio State UP, 2012.

Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. 1962. 4th ed., U of Chicago P, 2012.

Latour, Bruno. "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 30, Winter 2004, pp. 225–48.

McKeon, Michael. "The Eighteenth-Century Challenge to Narrative Theory." *Narrative Concepts in the Study of Eighteenth-Century Literature*, edited by Liisa Steinby and Aino Mäkikalli, Amsterdam UP, 2017, pp. 39–77.

Meister, Jan Christoph. "Narratology." *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, edited by Peter Hühn et al., 19 Jan. 2014, Interdisciplinary Center for Narratology, Hamburg U, www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/node/48.html.

Pier, John. "Two Decades after the Publication of Monika Fludernik's *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*: Introduction to the Forum." *Partial Answers*, vol. 16, no. 2, June 2019, pp. 239–42. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/pan.2018.0014.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Avatars of Story*. U of Minnesota P, 2006.

Shen, Dan. "Two Conceptions of Experientiality and Narrativity: Functions, Advantages, and Disadvantages." *Partial Answers*, vol. 16, no. 2, June 2019, pp. 263–70. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/pan.2018.0017.

Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Translated by Richard Howard, Case Western Reserve UP, 1973.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.5.982 Published online by Cambridge University Press