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# Discussion “Narrator”

8 June 2011

Sylvie Patron

The present commentary concerns the article by Uri Margolin entitled “Narrator”, in the *Handbook of Narratology* first published by Walter De Gruyter in 2009 (see pp. 351-369). First remark, on the bibliography. In the “Further Reading” section, Uri Margolin mentions a work which he obviously has not read: “Sylvie Patron (2009), *Le Narrateur: Introduction à la théorie du récit* (Paris: Armand Colin)” (the correct subtitle is *Introduction à la théorie narrative* which replaces the author’s initial choice: *Un problème de théorie narrative* [The Narrator: a problem in narrative theory]). Since the work was published in March 2009, when Uri Margolin had probably completed his article, he had three options: 1) completely ignore the work; 2) skim through the work, refer to it in his article and list it in the “Works Cited” ; 3) not read the work, but mention it in the bibliography (as needs must, in “Further Reading”). Uri Margolin chose the third option which was clearly the worst both for him (for the scientific quality of his article) and for *Le Narrateur* (which, despite being the first ever monograph devoted entirely to the concept of the narrator in narrative theory, is relegated to “Further Reading” and thus, implicitly, to the works it is not really necessary to quote). Another hypothesis might be put forward which is more favourable to Uri Margolin, that the editors of the *Handbook of Narratology* added the reference to the bibliography without necessarily informing the author and without deference to the consequences their action might have for both the article and the work cited.

Second remark, or series of remarks, concerning the article itself. Despite quoting around forty books and articles, despite the sections and subsections offering multiple perspectives on the topic, Uri Margolin’s article can be considered an a-historical and a-critical presentation of the concept of the narrator in narratology.

1. An a-historical presentation. The lack of historicity is noticeable from the first section of the article ("Definition", p. 351). This short paragraph goes from a first definition of the narrator as "the inner-textual (textually encoded) speech position from which the current narrative discourse originates and from which references to the entities, actions and events that this discourse is about are being made" (in other words a mixture of Roland Barthes's definition in "Introduction to the Structuralist Analysis of Narratives" and a more recent referentialist perspective) to a second definition as "a presumed textually projected occupant of this position, the hypothesized producer of the current discourse, the individual agent who serves as the answer to Genette's question *qui parle ?*", via something Uri Margolin calls "a dual process of metonymic transfer and anthropomorphization". But the order of presentation does not correspond to any real or imaginary genealogy (in the sense of a theoretical imagination, expressions of which may be found elsewhere). Contrary to Uri Margolin's claim, in the history of the concept of the narrator, the anthropomorphic component came first. I refer the reader to the introduction to *Le Narrateur* where I describe the traditional view of the narrator. In this view, the term "narrator" (used contrastively in relation to the term "author") designates the character who has the status of narrator in fictional memoirs or the first-person novels. See Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Samuel Richardson's biographer (1804) : "[...] it [the genre] confines the author's stile, which should be suited, though it is not always, to the supposed talents and capacity of the imaginary narrator"; or Honoré de Balzac, in his preface to *Le Lys dans la vallée* (1835-1836): "Although it is a settled case, many people today are still fool enough to make the writer party to the feelings he attributes to his characters; and if he uses the pronoun 'I', almost all are tempted to confuse him with the narrator". The second section of Uri Margolin's article ("Explication", pp. 351-352) is characterized by the same a-historicism or presentism. The origin of concepts or ideas is rarely noted or when it is, it is done so erroneously or partially erroneously. The terms *sujet de l'énoncé* and *sujet de l'énonciation* cannot be found in the work of Émile Benveniste, as Uri Margolin implies; on the contrary, they are a later invention stemming from psychoanalysis. It is surprising, by contrast, not to find any mention of the opposition which did originate from Benveniste, between *énonciation de discours* and *énonciation historique* (the latter can be described as enunciative effacement or withdrawal, or non-enunciation). When Uri Margolin's presentation intends to be historical and epistemological, as the

title of the third section (“History of the Concept and its Study”, pp. 352-366) suggests, it contains errors and approximations. I will cite just a few examples. “Plato was the first to claim that the underlying difference between narrative and drama as basic types of discourse consists in the difference between directly showing and indirectly telling or reporting, rooted in the absence or presence respectively of a mediating instance between the character’s speech and the audience” (p. 352) — the problem being that Plato speaks of the “poet” and not of a narrator as distinct from the author (while Aristotle, on the other hand, implicitly speaks of a narrator in Chapter 3 of his *Poetics*). The presumed equivalence between *diegesis* and *mimesis* (Plato), *telling* and *showing* (Percy Lubbock), *direct* and *indirect presentation* (Norman Friedman) would also deserve closer enquiry. Another example: “The aesthetic desirability of such narratorial ‘intrusions’ or ‘telling’ beyond mere ‘showing’ has been the object of heated critical debate since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (e.g. Otto Ludwig, Friedrich Spielhagen, Käte Friedemann, Percy Lubbock and Wayne C. Booth)” (p. 356) — the problem being that the debate dealt initially with authorial, not narratorial, intrusions in the sense of a narrator as distinct from the author (except perhaps in Käte Friedemann’s work, where some formulations might be seen to anticipate narratological ones). One last example: on pages 352, 353 and 364, Uri Margolin projects the narratological understanding of the narrator onto the view held by Mixail Baxtin, who uses the term “author” to refer to the entity Margolin calls the “narrator”, and “narrator” for the narrator of first-person fictional narrative (which he terms *Ich-Erzählung*) and for the *skaz* narrator (which has no European, *i.e.* essentially English, French or German, equivalent).

2. An a-critical or a-problematic presentation. This characteristic is shown, first, in the abundance of propositions in the form of postulates, starting with the postulate of the distinction between author and narrator: “The narrator which is a strictly textual category, should be clearly distinguished from the author who is of course an actual person” (p. 351). (Uri Margolin is apparently unaware that the distinction stems from the traditional understanding of the narrator and originally implies not a textual category, but rather a fictional character, in other words a character existing in a fictional world which is indeed constructed by a text, as opposed to a real person, in other words a person existing in the real world of reference.) Other examples of postulates: “Since narrative utterances are a subset of the universe of utterances,

they too must therefore contain a sayer”; “For a claim to be made, there needs to be an agent who makes this claim, hence the narrator” (p. 352). (These two postulates could easily be contested on the basis of a simple consideration, to wit, that the narratives in question are literary narratives and therefore have an author, so that there is not logical or pragmatic necessity to also have a narrator as distinct from the author.) Other examples: “The whole essence of narrative would be missed if one were to deny the textual existence of a narrator as a stylistic and ideological position” (p. 353) ; “Using the narrated system as our point of departure, the main distinction is between narratives in which the narrator also participates in the narrated events (first-person narrative) and those in which he does not (second- and third-person narratives)” (p. 363) ; “By producing the words on the page, the author has given rise in such cases to a substitutionary speaker who performs the macro speech act of reporting and who is solely responsible for all claims, specific and general, made in his report (on this issue, Ryan 1981 ; Martínez-Bonati 1996)” (p. 365). All these postulates are those of classical narratology revamped with a few terminological variations by postclassical narratology. They could easily be contested in both theory and practice (the concrete analysis of a specific fictional narrative) — I have in mind the postulate that the essence of narrative would be missed if the textual existence of a narrator as a stylistic and ideological position were denied; in my article in the *Journal of Literary Theory* I have recently attempted to show the aporia resulting from postulating the existence of a narrator in cases where, empirically, there is none. On pages 355 to 356, also without the slightest critical distance, Uri Margolin adopts Seymour Chatman’s continuum approach (according to the “degree of narratorhood”) from *Story and Discourse* — it would not be difficult to show that Chatman’s work aims beyond its linguistic and epistemological means and is dependent on an established critical tradition from which it retains knowledge gained, but also a number of presuppositions. On pages 351, 352, 353, 354, 365, 366 and 367, Uri Margolin internalizes and reproduces an ambiguity which is frequent among narratologists, confusing the idea of internality or textuality (which takes its meaning from the linguistic or semiological opposition between “internal” and “external”, or “textual” and “extratextual”) and the idea of fictionality (which takes its meaning from the ontological opposition between “real” and “fictional”). However, if his presentation is a-critical or a-problematic, it is also, above all, because it fails to mention debates both within and beyond narratology, with the naturalizing, dogmatic result illustrated

by the preceding quotations. A few examples of internal debates: the debate between the early and the more recent Chatman (who, in *Coming to Terms*, revises certain claims in *Story and Discourse* concerning the absence of a narrator in particular fictional narratives); the contradiction between the typological and the linguistic approach in Lubomír Doležel's *Narrative Modes in Czech Literature* (which Uri Margolin does not mention). One last example: the debate concerning the possibility of the narrator (or pseudo-narrator) in third-person fictional narratives being "unreliable", to use Wayne Booth's term — I do not believe that this is a true debate, but I do consider that more than just a passing affirmation would be needed to settle the question (see p. 359: "Personalized narrators, and *only* personalized ones, may on occasion be deemed by the reader as unreliable [...]"). The most important debates are of course those which set narratology, defined as a narratorial theory of narrative (or a narrator-in-every-narrative theory) against alternative theories, which can be defined as poetic theories of narrative (or optional narrator theories, where the narrator is an option available to the author). In Uri Margolin's article, these theories are expedited in a few lines: "Hamburger (1957), for example, has argued that one can meaningfully speak of a narrator figure only in first-person narratives, while in all other cases the narrator is a mere metonymy for a narrative textual function" (it should be noted that the idea of "metonymy" is not mentioned by Käte Hamburger); "Banfield (1982) has argued on linguistic grounds that the notion of narrator is meaningful only in cases of overt, foregrounded narration, such as the *skaz*" (p. 365). Margolin has made an error in the latter presentation: Ann Banfield does not assert that the notion of narrator is meaningful only in cases of overt, foregrounded narration, such as the *skaz*, like Käte Hamburger before her, she states that one can only speak of a fictional narrator in the case of the narrator of a first-person fictional narrative and that, even in this case, the narrator need not necessarily be considered as a speaker, in the sense of the speaker in everyday communication — except in the type of first-person narrative she calls *skaz*, which is not strictly coextensive with *skaz* in Russian formalism and the identification of which, in addition, poses certain difficulties. As for Richard Walsh, whom Uri Margolin gives the last word on the question, it is clear that his proposition is no more than a variant of the traditional view of the narrator and narrating: there is narrator who is distinct from the author in first-person fictional narrative; in third-person fictional narrative the author narrates (or is the narrator). Käte Hamburger, S.-Y. Kuroda (whom Uri

Margolin does not mention) and Ann Banfield went much further with their theoretical propositions by criticizing, notably, the assimilation of “narrating” in the case of a fictional narrator and “narrating” in the case of the author of a fictional narrative (Hamburger), and by using as a basis a linguistic analysis of communication as distinct from that which can be understood not to pertain to communication (Kuroda, Banfield). But Uri Margolin is aware of few of these theoretical propositions, as is shown for example by the obstinate reoccurrence in his article of the terms “communicative” and “communication” (“a communicative role”, p. 351, “In terms of communication theory”, p. 352, “an ongoing process of narrative communication”, p. 353, “communicative intentions”, p. 355, “the current communicative transaction”, “an ongoing communicative exchange (telling)”, “his/her communicative intentions”, “in the communicative situation (narration)”, “the illusion of face-to-face communication”, p. 357, “in the ongoing communicative transaction”, “the current communicative situation”, “their communicative role”, p. 363, “in a communication-based model”, p. 366) or his recourse to the obsolete and unjustifiable hypothesis of the omniscient narrator (“Some, but by no means all, anonymous narrating voices telling their story in the third-person past tense are endowed with omniscience”, p. 358, “authors sometimes endow personalized narrators with intermittent omniscience”, p. 359, “an omniscient narrative voice”, p. 365). In these conditions, the “Topics for Further Investigation” put forward by Margolin in the last section of his article (pp. 366-367) appear to be inessential or created purely by theory (“It is assumed here that the diarist and letter writer are narrators, yet Chatman (1978) denies this: is it because he implicitly identifies narrator with global narrator ?”; “Can narrators be focalizers, and if so, when and to what extent ?”, p. 366; “Narrator unreliability as regards judgments and evaluations has been treated here entirely as a matter of readers’ criteria, unlike factual unreliability, for which there are objective inner-textual indicators. Why has this view emerged only recently, and is the resistance to it associated with the implied author postulate ?”, pp. 366-367).

To conclude, Margolin’s articles offers a presentation of the concept of the narrator *within narratology* (and not in narrative theory considered as including, but not as limited to narratology). Nearly all necessary information regarding theories or theoretical nodes prior to narratology and alternative contemporary theories are lacking. Also lacking is the evaluative epistemological dimension which stems from

theories themselves when they are sufficiently accountable for one another and do not persist in believing that they exist quite alone in superb isolation.

*Trans. Susan Nicholls*

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