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From the Representation of Narrative Actions to Emplotment: Another Look at Narrativity

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Françoise Revaz, *Introduction à la narratologie: Action et narration*, with a preface by Gerald Prince. Brussels: De Boeck Duculot, 2009. 222 pp.

"On the basis of the idea that narration is, firstly, a 'representation of actions,' the aim of this work is to consider the question of narrativity and to reflect on the nature of actions represented in texts" (193). So Françoise Revaz frames the argument of her book in the concluding remarks. In line with this statement, the author takes up two theoretical issues, each of which has been extensively studied on its own but whose interrelations still remain relatively unexplored: the distinction "event versus action" as worked out by analytic philosophy and a "scalar" conception of narrativity as a basis for narratology, one opposed to the "all-or-nothing" approach to classifying texts as narratives or nonnarratives. The former issue has not been widely taken into consideration by narratology (particularly among structuralists, who tended to use the terms synonymously). Here events, which occur in nature and are subject to the laws of physical causation, are opposed to actions, which introduce the additional element of intention and thus of human agency, thereby situating human action within a dialectic of natural cause and anthropomorphic motivation. The latter issue, narrativity, is approached in terms of its "ingredients" (75-82): rep-

All translations from the French are mine.

resentation of events or actions, chronological progression, transformation between initial and final state, causal linking, and unusual or unforeseeable development of action (tellability). Extending her earlier work on "action" texts (Revaz 1997), the author then incorporates into the combined system, which interrelates event versus action and narrativity, three "textual categories of narrativity": Chronicle, Report (*Relation*), Narrative (*Récit*). These three categories progressively include chronology, causality, and composition through emplotment.

This theoretical framework for the analysis of narration as a "representation of actions" is illustrated from a broad and varied corpus (fairy tales, literary fictions, the press, recipes, procedural and scientific texts), revealing a potentially vast spectrum of interplays between event versus action and the three principal axes of narrativity. Chronicles (e.g., diaries, journals) are strictly chronological (106–12); Reports (e.g., a scientific account of the formation of the earth) connect events by the laws of causality, forming a unity marked by chronological-logical sequence (112–23); Narration (as found in literary works, for example) is characterized by the additional elements of complication and denouement, constituting a plot or emplotment (123–36).

To mark the outer limits of the theoretical framework, Revaz presents two case studies. The first is devoted to the postmodern "minimalist" Belgian novelist Jean-Philippe Toussaint. In his novels, a disconnected series of fragmented minimal plots portrays indeterminate characters of unknown physical and mental attributes engaged in randomly ordered and unmotivated acts: to the extent that these texts might be said to have plots, this is because they are remote and barely recognizable rewrites of detective novels, adventure novels, or love stories (141–66). The other case study focuses on narratives whose development is subject to external circumstances, namely, serial stories in the press. Here, given the inevitable parceling out of the story under the constraint of narrating in "real time" as the unpredictable course of events unfolds, narration remains open-ended, allowing only for alternative scenarios with unforeseeable and tentative closure, subject at a moment's notice to revision (167–92).¹ The two case studies suggest that the outer boundaries of Revaz's model are reached when, as in Toussaint's novels, the criteria of narrativity are stretched to the limit by the piecing together of fragments and when, as in serial stories

1. As of this writing in April 2011, news reports of the Libyan revolution generate considerable reader suspense about the outcome; but even when the story finally comes to be judged "complete," it will arouse expectations, possibly never to be realized, of further developments and projected scenarios; or in more concrete fashion, the story may subsequently be brought back to life by the occurrence of unanticipated incidents.

in the press, the progression of the story is dictated by factors beyond the journalist's control.

By its very title, Revaz's *Introduction à la narratologie* might appear to be another "introduction" that sets out the bread-and-butter issues of the field in a comprehensive and systematic manner. We would then expect something that either builds on or proposes an alternative to established theories. It would, that is, take up one or more familiar issues or models, such as narrated/narrating (Prince 1982); story (events/characters), text (time/characterization/focalization), and narration (levels and voices/speech representation) (Rimmon-Kenan 2002 [1983]); story (events/existents) and discourse (nonnarrated stories/covert vs. overt narrators) (Chatman 1978); text (words), story (aspects), and *fabula* (elements) (Bal 1997 [1985]); basic story structure (story/*fabula*/*histoire*) and articulation of the narrative text (time/focalization/narration; character/setting/suspense; character discourse) (Toolan 2001 [1988]); action, story, and discourse (García Landa 1998); "how: representation" and "what: plot and narrated world" (Martínez and Scheffel 1999); "Who narrates the story?," "How does the narrator narrate?," and "What does the narrator narrate?" (Lahn and Meister 2008); and so forth. However, Revaz's book follows none of these patterns. Nor can her work be characterized as a general overview of narratology that takes into consideration questions of interpretation, adaptation across media, self, truth, and so forth (Abbott 2008 [2002]); or that inquires into the "fundamentals" of narratology (narrativity and eventfulness, entities in a narrative work, point of view, narrator's text and characters' text, narrative constitution) (Schmid 2010); or that frames the traditional questions in the context of postclassical narratology (Herman and Vervaeck 2005 [2001]; see also Fludernik 2009 [2006]; Neumann and Nünning 2008); or that proposes a global, "experiential," redefinition of categories under the influence of conversational storytelling and cognitive paradigms (Fludernik 1996); or that groups the "basic elements" of narrative into the cognitive categories of situatedness, event sequencing, world making/world disruption, and what it's like (Herman 2009). Revaz's book does not treat such a broad range of topics as those addressed by most of the authors mentioned above (its three parts being "Theories of Action," "Narratology" [devoted in fact to narrativity], and "Current Problems in Narratology: Case Studies"). But her work does nonetheless introduce us to questions with potentially far-reaching ramifications for these subjects by focusing on what is perhaps the core issue of all narration, namely, the representation of human action through narrative.

Behind this seemingly self-evident truism lies a wealth of topics bearing not only on the current state of narrative theory but also on the history

of poetics, on the theory of interpretation, on philosophy and logic, and on the social and human sciences. It is important to note that Revaz, not unlike other French-speaking narrative theoreticians in this regard, has been guided in part by Paul Ricœur's three-volume *Temps et récit* (1983–85) and related publications—a watershed in Francophone research, which in many ways marks the close of French classical narratology (cf. Pier 2011: 344–46). Among other things, Ricœur, in addressing the question of temporality as human time, a phenomenological question not taken into consideration by the structuralists, also took up two other topics neglected by the early narratologists: history versus fiction and emplotment (*mise en intrigue*). These and related matters stemming from Ricœur's vast production have entered Francophone narrative research in ways that are too numerous and complex to address here. Suffice it to say that, even though the philosopher's contribution bears on a number of issues of narratological interest, narrative theorists working in Ricœur's wake do not as a rule claim the title of narratologist.

Introduction à la narratologie begins by singling out three current conceptions of action in narrative contexts (11–15). The first, adopted by the structuralists, maintains that action can be understood and theorized only in conjunction with narration. The second, developed by analytic philosophy, holds that action can be elucidated in itself, independently of narration. This position is adopted by Ricœur, who postulates a “semantics of action” parallel to the theory of narrative, a “pre-comprehension” of the world of action that lends itself to the configuring forces of emplotment (cf. Ricœur 1977, 1983: 90). Finally, some phenomenological theories (e.g., Carr 1991: 210) see action and narration as indissociable, maintaining that people “live their lives before they tell them” (a position also embraced, I would add, by cognitive narratology, with its appeal to real-world knowledge in the constitution of narrative).

In keeping with the distinction between event and action, it is mainly the second of the above conceptions that Revaz is drawn to. This choice is particularly significant when viewed with reference to the structuralist origins of narratology: as the author argues in chapter 1, supported by the relevant philosophical literature, events are the effects of causes and thus phenomena to be *explained*, while actions, resulting from intentions, are to be *understood* (33 ff.). This of course recalls Wilhelm Dilthey's (1988 [1883]) influential and controversial argument that the natural sciences are objects of explanation and the human sciences objects of understanding. However, with reference to more recent developments (Weber 1954 [1925]; Anscombe 1957; von Wright 1971; Davidson 1980; Ricœur 1986), the author shows that to the extent that human action combines causality

and motivation/intention, it has both a physical and a mental dimension and is thus to be thought of as an “in-between.” The hybrid nature of human action is illustrated with an example from Max Weber (1954 [1925]: 11; quoted in Revaz, 27) in which a collision between two cyclists occurs (a physical phenomenon) despite their efforts to avoid the accident; moreover, given the responsibility attributable to the various parties and the accusations, disputes, threats, and attempts at reconciliation that might ensue, the incident also possesses a social dimension.

This and other intriguing examples discussed by Revaz suggest that, although human agency is rooted in intentionality—assuming that an individual who intervenes in a course of events is conscious, rational, responsible, and capable of control (25)—the intention behind a given action may prove difficult to construe by third parties: an intention may be conscious or unconscious, dissimulated, motivated by a mixture of obscure or conflicting aims and, when judged against the backdrop of social norms and values (or conventions), may involve various degrees of responsibility (hence in modern societies the courts are not indifferent as to whether a case of homicide is premeditated or involuntary). In view of such considerations and of the “interlacing” of physical causality and human intention, explanation and understanding are no longer seen as rigorously distinct from one another but as two epistemological moments. Thus according to Ricœur (1986: 181):

At the level of epistemology, there are not two methods, the method of explanation and the method of understanding. Strictly speaking, only explanation is methodological. Understanding is rather the non-methodical moment which, in the sciences of interpretation, comes to terms with the methodical moment of explanation. This moment precedes, accompanies, closes and thus *envelops* explanation. In return, explanation *develops* understanding analytically. This dialectical link between explaining and understanding results in a very complex and paradoxical relation between the human sciences and the natural sciences. Neither duality nor monism. (quoted in Revaz, 39)

In narrative contexts, however, the fine line between causality and intention may be governed by generic and cultural considerations. Thus in myths and other forms of traditional tales, natural events, such as storms and earthquakes, will be interpreted as signs of divine displeasure, while in children’s literature the movements of clouds may be portrayed in terms of human activities, such as “chatting,” “playing,” or “quarreling.”

In light of the theories of action developed by analytic philosophy and other human sciences, making it possible to distinguish between event and action but also taking account of the symbiotic relations between causality and intention, Revaz reviews a number of definitions of narrative. Event,

she notes, is customarily equated with the “what happens” of narrative, encompassing “both intentional actions and events based solely on a causality not under the control of an agent” (75). Gérard Genette (1988 [1983]: 16), for instance, does not distinguish between event and action: “There are chains of actions or events amenable to any mode of representation.” Some theorists (see, e.g., Greimas 1983) believe that a natural event can constitute a narrative, independently of human action.² In line with Aristotle, however, the majority of experts continue to favor the near-equivalence of represented action and narrative (e.g., “Narrative is the place of discursive representation of action” [Gervais 1990: 20; quoted in Revaz, 75]), while some consider intentional action to be a type of event (e.g., “Some of the events must be purposeful actions by these agents, i.e. the agents must be motivated by conflicts and their deeds must be aimed toward the solving of problems” [Ryan 2006: 194; quoted in *ibid.*]).³ Observing that there is little consensus on the definition of narrative, Revaz shifts the ground of debate significantly to the five “ingredients” of narrativity (listed in the opening paragraph of the present essay), where she notes “a relative agreement” (82). From this perspective, it can be seen that definitions of narrative tend to favor a certain ingredient, although the remaining ingredients are generally not left out of account. Ricœur (1983), for example, stresses the primacy of events unfolding in time, Algirdas Julien Greimas (1970) the centrality of transformation/inversion, and Marie-Laure Ryan (2006: 194) the predominance of causality (“The sequence of events must form a unified causal chain”; quoted in Revaz, 79), while William Labov (1972) favors the “point” or “tellability” of the narrated actions.⁴ By taking into account the interaction between event and action and then focusing on narrativity as a graded quality of narration—instead of defining narrative—Revaz has effectively introduced into the debate on narrativity an epistemological

2. Although formulated on different grounds, Wolf Schmid’s (2003, 2010: 1–21) notion of “eventfulness” implicitly excludes intentional action from the definition of narrativity; see also Hühn 2009. Monika Fludernik (1996), by contrast, downplays the representation of events as a criterion of narrativity, emphasizing the role of “experientiality” but including in her model no theory of action.

3. With his theory of mentally projected “action representations,” David Herman (2002: 1–84) favors a closer integration of events with actions. On the basis of the preference rule (cf. Frawley 1992) UNDERSTAND EVENTS AS ACTIONS, narrative is not considered a sequence of events but rather a series of “action sequences” involving the agents’ purposeful behavior. Jan Christoph Meister (2003) takes nearly the opposite stance by assimilating action to event. According to his reception-oriented constructivist “event matrix” model, Action I (intentional singular activity) and Action II (complex multiagential sequence of events) are resolved into “object event” in the narrative world and Action III (discursive meta-activity) into “discourse event.”

4. For a survey of tellability in its relation to narrativity, narrative interest, discourse structures, and context, see Baroni 2009.

question not widely debated in narratological circles: explanation relative to understanding and their overlapping modes of operation.⁵

The emphasis of *Introduction à la narratologie*, however, falls not on the epistemological issues of narrative and narrative theory but on redrawing the lines of the textual categories of narrativity. In place of the traditional opposition between narrative and description, Revaz (102–5), appealing to Ryan's (2005: 345) "fuzzy-set hypothesis," thus opts for a "scalar" conception of narrativity (cf. Ryan 2006; Prince 2008). Accordingly, three principal points along a spectrum are identified, all predicated on the representation of events and actions: (1) Chronicle, restricted to consecution (temporality); (2) Report, which combines consecution and consequence (causality); (3) Narrative, implemented through the tensions produced by complication and denouement (compositional form).⁶ The consequences of this tripartition are weightier than might appear at first sight, for it is shown, among other things, that present-day narratologists generally leave out of account the category of Report, holding that a text characterized by chronological-logical sequence is a narrative (123). Similarly with Ricœur (1986: 13), for whom the Aristotelian *muthos* (the chronological-logical "arrangement of incidents" into a "whole" marked by unity of action; cf. Aristotle 1997 [1895]: 1450b) produces emplotment (*mise en intrigue*)—a concept, I might add, that also includes the configurational principle of "seeing-things-together" (Ricœur 1983: 100–105). For Revaz, however, emplotment is constituted somewhat differently, resulting from the play between complication and denouement (cf. Aristotle 1997 [1895]: 1455b). In her scheme, this compositional principle marks the most intense degree of narrativity: "To compose a narrative is to *tie (nouer)* and *untie (dénouer)* a plot" (128).⁷

5. Jon-K Adams (1996) has devoted a monograph to these questions, three chapters of which are "Narrative Explanation," "Causality and Narrative," and "Intention and Narrative." His aim, starting with a critique of the fallacies of structuralist and post-structuralist textualism, is to develop a pragmatic theory of narrative discourse based on the narrator's use of the explanans (series of events) to bring about an understanding of the explanandum (ibid.: 110). Among these fallacies is narrativity, characterized as "not some essential property of narrative but rather a quantitative aspect of texts" (ibid.: 11). In effect, the question of "narrativehood" (Prince 2008) would apply here only to those portions of stories and novels that are not expository.

6. It is notable that Revaz, a professor of French linguistics at the University of Freiberg in Switzerland, relativizes the role of linguistic markers in the definition of narrativity: "In fact, from the moment one examines actual texts, it emerges that, according to genre or aim, each linguistic unit can be employed outside its so-called zone of attribution. This means that just as a proposition cannot be categorized as narrative independently of its insertion into a narrative co-text, an isolated linguistic mark [*sic*] cannot be defined *a priori* as a univocal trace of narrativity" (96).

7. By contrast, Ricœur (1983: 75n4) rules out the pertinence of the complication-denouement pair to emplotment on the grounds that complication bears on events that are "external" to the plot and thus does not form part of the *muthos*.

In addition to a discussion of Aristotelian poetics, this chapter includes a brief but insightful section devoted to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century rhetorical rules for the composition of plot structure and to Russian formalist and more recent narrative theories (126–33). Here, the author demonstrates that her understanding of emplotment has its roots in the poetics of classical dramaturgy, where plot is closely bound up with complication and denouement. The internal tensions produced by the interplay of this pair are captured in Jean-Michel Adam's (2001 [1992]: 45–74) prototype of the narrative sequence (initial situation—triggering complication 1—action or evaluation—triggering resolution 2—final situation), and the varying degrees of tension triggered are charted by a “dramatic curve” whose trajectory extends from “horizontal” to “hollows and peaks” (Bourneuf and Ouellet 1972: 43 ff.). Finally, Revaz likens her understanding of the internal tension produced by emplotment in Narrative to Raphaël Baroni's (2007: 121–41, esp. 122, 131) theory of “narrative tension” (itself inspired in part by “dramatic tension”), which unfolds in three phases: (1) complication, prompting the reader to interrogations about the past, present, and future of the story; (2) delay, triggering a dialectic between uncertainty and anticipation; and (3) denouement, or resolution of narrative tension.⁸

Now, it is clear that the narrative tension produced by complication and denouement can occur only over stretches of discourse that are sufficient to allow such a tension to develop. Minimal forms of narrative, such as Genette's “Pierre has come,” may well lend themselves to amplification into a story and thus contain a “virtuality of plot,” but as such, isolated from a series of utterances, they must be characterized as “action utterances” rather than “narrative utterances” (87). To achieve the status of Narrative in the sense outlined above, the utterances must be projected onto the Aristotelian *holos* (“A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end” [Aristotle 1997 (1895): 1450b; quoted in Revaz, 113]), for otherwise the dynamics of complication and denouement cannot come into play. On the other hand, a series of utterances does not necessarily suffice to produce narrative emplotment: “Last night I was dying of hunger, and I went to dinner and ate steak and lobster, and then I felt satisfied” (Eco 1996: 161; quoted in Revaz, 118).

For Revaz, this example is not a Narrative, for the actions are bound

8. Baroni's study of narrative tension reflects a rereading of Francophone narratology, but it also represents a variant of Meir Sternberg's theory of narrativity, in which the interplay of the telling and the told, by triggering the effects of suspense, curiosity, and surprise, in turn generates the strategies of propection, retrospection, and recognition. For a compact presentation, see Sternberg 2001.

together by consecution and logical succession, linking cause and effect, and thus it constitutes a Report—the “arrangement of incidents” in terms of the Aristotelian *muthos*.⁹ The emplotment that defines Narrative, by contrast, emerges not from *muthos* but from complication and denouement and thus from the parts-whole relations of *holos*.¹⁰

As this commentary has attempted to show, *Initiation à la narratologie* develops a number of themes (not all of them detailed here) that are fully in tune with the current state of narratological research. Among the book’s various points of interest with a potential for significant impact on future discussion, I will mention only two.

The first has to do with one of the basic distinctions adopted by narratologists of nearly all orientations: story and discourse. These terms have bedeviled much of mainstream narratology in that there is a widespread tendency to use them interchangeably with the Russian formalist *fabula* and *sjuzhet*¹¹ or with E. M. Forster’s (1965 [1927]: 93–94) story and plot. However, the tendency fails to accord with the respective sources and conceptual frameworks of the three sets of terms involved and with the alternative paradigms for delineating the major divisions of the narrative text. A look at these will reveal the extent to which it is necessary to be wary of terminological slippages between systems built up in accordance with differing criteria.¹² The attractiveness of Revaz’s Chronicle, Report, and Narrative is that they can serve as an antidote to the hybrid story/discourse dichotomy. To start with, this proposal has the merit of putting forward identifiable textual categories or degrees of narrativity (rather than immanent formal features of narrative) as an alternative to the widespread “what” and “how” formula: a formula associated with the superposition of modes of verbal utterance (*histoire/discours*) taken over from French linguistics on the highly simplified version of *fabula/sjuzhet* that has long cir-

9. Eco’s example would also be rejected by Fludernik. Disqualifying “the criteria of mere sequentiality and logical connectedness from playing the central role that they usually hold in most discussions of narrative,” she maintains that “*narrativity is a function of narrative texts and centres on experientiality of an anthropomorphic nature*” (Fludernik 1996: 26). In terms of Revaz’s graduated textual categories of narrativity, her critique actually bears on Report. Nevertheless, for Revaz, Report is endowed with narrativity, although to a lesser degree than Narrative.

10. Sternberg (1992: 474 ff.) studies the tension between *muthos* and *holos* in terms of teleology, i.e., functional, means/end relations, in the context of a “chrono-logical whole.”

11. The various meanings given these terms by the different members of the Russian formalists are rarely taken into account by non-Slavist scholars. For an overview, see Schmid 2009 and 2010.

12. For accounts of these systems that help clarify and disentangle the various issues, see Sternberg 1993 [1978]: 10–14; Pier 2003; Scheffel 2009; Schmid 2009. The diverse meanings associated with story, discourse, and plot are listed in the corresponding entries in Prince 2003 [1987].

culated among non-Slavic scholars. At the same time, Revaz's categories include one particularly notable distinction: they frame the constitution of narrative in a way that has escaped structuralist narratology and its post-structuralist heirs alike. With Report, a distinct category is introduced to cover chronological-logical succession (e.g., Forster's plot), but it is only emplotment as a compositional force that produces Narrative in the stronger sense. The story/discourse paradigm obscures the very distinction between story and discourse that it claims to make, because it conflates partially divergent conceptual systems. This paradigm therefore either overlooks the degrees along the spectrum of narrativity or reduces plot to chronological-causal succession.¹³

The second point has to do with an unspoken but intriguing leitmotif that runs through the book and invites further reflection. There is an implicit connection between the three graduated textual categories of narrativity, developed with reference to Aristotle, and the analysis of event and action based on analytic philosophy and the human sciences. Thus, for example, Théophile Gautier's account of snow falling in a forest or a scientific text relating the formation of the earth are analyzed as the Report of an event and as such are a manifestation of the laws of physical causality (113 ff.). But the presence of human agents does not in itself transform a Report into a Narrative, for human actions, as further examples show, can be recorded in chronological-causal order without reference to motivations or intentions, just as events. Hence the implicit affinity or correlation between Report and explanation. This being the case, it would follow that Narrative, by triggering narrative tension and engaging interpretive strategies, such as prospection, retrospection, and recognition, on the part of the reader, bears a strong relation to understanding. The hypothesis that Report, as a textual category conducive to explanation, might be profitably examined alongside Narrative as a textual category that reflects certain structures of understanding is not formulated in an explicit manner. However, such a possibility, together with the study of the interweaving of explanation and understanding in narrative, does open up stimulating and potentially innovative prospects for future inquiry into the expanding realm of narrativity.¹⁴

13. Not that plot in this sense is always taken into account among structuralists. When Roland Barthes (1966: 10) identifies the post hoc ergo propter hoc fallacy as "the mainspring of narrative activity" ("le ressort de l'activité narrative"), he goes on to qualify this activity as a "logical error," the analysis of which is to yield "an atemporal matrix-like structure" of narrative. On the relevance of the Scholastic fallacy to narrativity, see Pier 2008.

14. In a recent overview, H. Porter Abbott (2009) observed that research on narrativity can be divided into four headings: (1) inherent or extensional, (2) scalar or intensional, (3) variable according to narrative type, (4) narrative as one among a number of communicative

More generally, the entire question of how event/action interacts with narrativity, encouraging us to look anew at long-debated topics of narrative theory, has an incontestable role to play in today's vibrant narratological research. Revaz's book is therefore a valuable introduction to a number of vital concerns for narrative study, some of them followed up in this essay.

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and artistic modes. Revaz's approach clearly belongs under heading (2) but at the same time extends into (3). A fuller account of the role of explanation and understanding in narrativity might also reveal the pertinence of mode.

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