

MATTHEW GARRETT

Introduction

A book like this one should be companionable, and *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative Theory* wishes to be a true friend to the reader: in many ways a guide or introduction, yes, but also a challenge. Trustworthy but engaging. Dog and cat combined, let's say. If these essays inspire the reader to write, we will have done our job, which is to produce and also to stimulate exciting writing about narrative. For all along narrative theory – that is, the theory of how stories work and of how we make them work – has been a practice of critical writing. Its technical achievement in establishing a whole language for understanding stories is clear enough, and that achievement makes narrative theory essential to every aspect of the human sciences (and indeed to science itself, precisely at the point at which we begin to *make sense* of what we study, to give narrative shape to the non- or pre-narrative yield of research). But if we need a narrative *theory* because we really cannot help but *live* in narrative, then our theory, like life itself, deserves the pleasure and the challenge of a writing that takes the telling as seriously as the tale.

So *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative Theory* does not approach its topic as an academic discipline exactly, but rather as a critical practice of writing that cuts across – and therefore also unites – a number of different fields. If the contributors here are fundamentally literary critics more than anything else (despite, or maybe because of, the range of their work), then this is in part because narrative theory remains fastened, for better or for worse, to the literary text. But it is also because literary criticism is among the most promiscuous and eclectic of disciplines, and literary critics have tended to be especially attuned to both the texture and the infrastructure of stories across media, forms, and formats – as these essays attest, in their reach from, say, novel theory to lyric, from videogames to surveillance cameras.

Nor will the reader find here a technician's handbook. Indeed, the word "narratology" itself is mostly absent, at least as an organizing term, and it therefore may be worth stating explicitly that this volume conceives of narrative theory less as a scientific method than as a varied set of techniques –

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the authors here might even say the best techniques – for dialectically approaching the relationship between stories and their social and historical ground.¹ As a result, the reader will find narrative theory in some unexpected places, a narrative theory that eagerly courts the messiness of the countless narratives of the world. And the reader will find a narrative theory that attends to the moments when systems break down and when the smooth functioning of a narrative or narrative-theoretical apparatus jams.

Our attraction to such moments is not an allergy to system-building or totalizing thinking (although not all chapters share their editor's enthusiasm for both); on the contrary, the essays assembled here produce or imply ambitious systemic thought. Indeed, *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative Theory* sees narrative itself as a constant and active process of building up and breaking down structures and order: in these essays, narrative is best conceived, following Roland Barthes, as a *structuration* rather than a structure.²

This book's order, its structuration, is part of its argument. Part I, "Foundations," articulates the stakes of narrative theory as a *critical* theory, expanding its intellectual range and historical imagination. Gathering up the lessons of this first section, Part II, on "Motifs," turns inward to the smaller scale of concentration on three concepts – character, time, and pleasure – as threshold categories that mark the dialectical relationship between what appear to be the inside and the outside of narratives. Part III, "Coordinates," is the site of narrative theorizing, bringing together questions of form and history. Literary historians have long understood genre to be the meeting of form and history; Part III verifies and revises this lesson, arguing that race and sexuality are perhaps even more significant locations for grasping the way narrative forms connect with and rework social forms.

The volume's program is announced in Part I in Kent Puckett's treatment of key figures in what might be called the prehistory of narrative theory but which we prefer to consider simply part of its history understood at the scale of the long duration. Aristotle, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, among others, are taken by Puckett to be preeminently concerned with the relationship between story and discourse – between, that is, *what* stories tell and *how* they are told. One virtue of this opening chapter is that it suitably miniaturizes the achievements of narrative theory since its proper emergence in the 1960s, even if this is the period of codification and cross-disciplinary formation.³ But another, positive virtue is at least as important: namely, a generous opening of the house of narrative theory, a letting-in of air and history, so that students and scholars alike can approach reading and writing about narratives with

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a more capacious and dialectical imagination than the oxygen-depleting terms “narratology” and “narrative theory” too often invite.

From a question of historical scope, Chapter 2 turns to questions of narrative scale, in Yoon Sun Lee’s significant reflections on the perennial matter of the part and the whole. Lee’s essay is, among other things, an ambitious synthesis of several high points of what is often somewhat curiously called “classical” narrative theory, from Russian Formalism to structuralism, reaching to more recent considerations on description, explanation, interpretation, and narrative scale. In our time, when questions of scale have returned with force through digital methods for studying narratives en masse (in addition to more intrinsic methodological developments), Lee’s essay opens a path for further critical practice, not least by showing how formative the question of scale has been.

Chapter 3 turns from questions of the scale of the whole to ways of thinking about plot as a matter of the body. Ilya Kalinin’s bold reading of Viktor Shklovsky’s foundational work on the conceptualization and analysis of plot dwells on the great critic’s engagement with the embodied performing arts: dance, circus acts, cinema, folk buffoonery, and avant-garde theater. Kalinin presents Shklovsky’s narrative theory in a freshly utopian (and newly political) light, showing how plot itself may be understood as a kind of physical labor, both dependent on and transcendent of the everyday reflexes of body and mind alike.

In Chapter 4, Hannah Freed-Thall takes two classic works of narrative theory, Roland Barthes’s *S/Z* and Gérard Genette’s *Narrative Discourse*, as the occasion for rethinking the whole practice of reading for narrative structure, seeing in Barthes and Genette superlative performances that set the standard for the “adventure” of critical reading itself. Freed-Thall installs Barthes and Genette in their roles as major orientation points for *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative Theory*. Indeed, *S/Z* and *Narrative Discourse* are cited more than any other texts in this volume, and the reader will notice how varying their importance is for each of the critics who works with them. Our hope is that this return to touchstone texts will reopen the reader’s sense of what is possible in the analysis of narratives, as an insistence upon that “freedom,” as Barthes put it, of *rereading*. Those “who fail to reread are,” as he wrote, “obliged to read the same story everywhere.”⁴

Critical rereading nevertheless turns out, in the bright light of Judith Roof’s intervention on “The Feminist Foundations of Narrative Theory” (Chapter 5), to be determined again and again by the patriarchal politics of sexual division. Roof traces a feminist narrative-theoretical lineage, originating in an explicitly feminist path deriving from Virginia Woolf and

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Simone de Beauvoir, as well as in the work of early and mid-twentieth-century students of narrative structure like Vladimir Propp and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Joining these lines of descent with the feminist theories of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Roof delivers a decisive watchword for this volume as a whole: “*narrative theorizing is a feminist act.*”

That watchword informs Chapter 6, my essay on philosophies of history, which examines the narrative theory of historical writing through three moments: structural accounts of plot formation and periodization, the thematic organization of historiographical texts, and the radical interruption of alternative histories “from below.” One task of Chapter 6 is to engage with the question of historical narrative as a problem of writing, and to appreciate some formative examples of the variety of historiographical modes while retaining a strong sense of the political stakes of historiographical decisions – decisions about writing that are inseparable from the historical ground itself. The essay takes the view that effective formalisms are those thorough enough to touch that historical ground, to identify the forms already immanent within history’s raw materials, and to produce a writing open to and dialectically shaped by its relation to those forms.

Together, the chapters of Part I reanimate the sources of narrative theory, taking Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Woolf, and de Beauvoir, among others, as major figures in narrative theory’s formation. Those chapters also give a sharper sense of the base of narrative theory, recentring it on questions of history, feminism, writing, and the practical dynamics of scale; as a result, narrative theory is framed as a *critical theory of meaning making*, connected with the larger enterprise of what we now think of as “theory” *tout court*.⁵

Part II, “Motifs,” is an interlude or entr’acte that revisits the heart of narrative theory through the three major concepts or categories of character, time, and pleasure. Doubtless the reader will conjure other motifs that could appear in a section like this, so why have we chosen these? In short, because each sits on the threshold between what traditional criticism would call “intrinsic” and “extrinsic” approaches to a text.

Character is situated between language and implied person and, as John Frow shows in his lyrical and suggestive essay (Chapter 7), that relationship draws on (and itself shapes) the dense weave of collective social life. For Frow, the task of a theory of character is not simply to account for the linguistic or formal side of representation, holding constant the reference to the implied person. Instead, a theory of character requires analysis of social personhood, of naming, and of the body, all of which are entwined with narrative figuration.

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Time is both indispensable to narrative (part of its definitional core) and a category that enfolds questions about the duration of reading and the structure of temporal change *into* the representation of time within narrative. David Wittenberg's stirring essay (Chapter 8) instructs us in the time travel, and the truth travel, involved in all narrative acts. As Wittenberg shows, every narrative discourse, every *telling*, promises a certain kind of veracity or authenticity in its reference to a real or fictional *tale* that precedes the telling. But every narrative discourse, in and through its very truth-form, also opens itself to lying. *Formally* speaking, as Wittenberg eloquently explains, narrative's game with time erases the difference between a true and a false story.

For its part, *pleasure* entwines *what* keeps readers reading with questions about *why* they read in the first place, and perhaps what interrupts reading. Centered on Henry James, but shifting nimbly from *The Bostonians* to Roland Barthes, and from *The Wings of the Dove* to hardcore pornography, David Kurnick's essay (Chapter 9) links the pleasures in and of narrative with a certain kind of historical emergence, in the appearance of responses and bodily moods that are as resistant to straightforward representation as they are powerfully felt. In so doing, the chapter also sets an agenda for the engagement with narrative pleasure.

Thus our three "motifs" are a cross-sectioning of narrative theory along three of its constitutive thresholds. They also bridge the foundational concerns of the first section and the constellation of concerns that occupy Part III, "Coordinates," in which much of the real intrinsic territory of narrative theory comes into view.

Part III treats a set of topics that have sometimes been taken as miscellaneous or thematic adjuncts but which this *Companion* understands as integral to narrative theory and vital to its principal theoretical shape. Key here is the binding together of essays on race and sexuality with pieces on specific genres and media. The argument of Part III, and therefore of the *Companion* as a whole, is that the division between social "content" and narrative "form" needs to be rethought so that aspects of the social "raw materials" may themselves be understood as formal problems. Our insistence on this revision of the content/form relationship should encourage the reader to see the essays as interanimated *by* social and generic forms. So, for example, the lyric or the game may be read with and against the question of narrativity and normativity, and the poetics of race understood as a necessary articulation of the poetics of the novel or film narrative.

Amy C. Tang's authoritative essay (Chapter 10) surveys the relationship between race and narrative poetics and synthesizes a critical tradition across three narrative categories – break, border, and utopia – without subordinating the question of race to some putatively prior narratological framework.

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Moving dialectically from the historical ruptures underlying *breaks* to the problematic of the present foregrounded in the spatial concerns of *borders*, and finally to the question of ethnic literary studies' conception of the future in the figure of *utopia*, Tang recenters narrative theory.

In a consonant rhetorical mode, Valerie Rohy's lapidary contribution (Chapter 11) confirms that it is impossible to think of narrative without thinking of sexuality and, more particularly, without the intelligence of a queer analytical registration of the normative and normalizing gravity of narrative itself. Rohy's essay implies the possibility of a position against narrative itself, perhaps resisting the very order and integration of part and whole that is narrative's signature function. But it also shows that queer theory cannot abandon its engagement with narrative form: narrative is too important, and too prone to reversion to normative violence, to be responsibly let go.

Garrett Stewart's tour de force on "screenarration" (Chapter 12) – on image-repertoires old and new – constitutes both a genuine extension of current work on the narrative-film image and an introduction to the narrative analysis of images *tout court*. The essay also exemplifies the writerly ethos of the *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative Theory*, expressing its critical positionality at the level of prose style. That style is fitted to a chapter that turns from the filmic character of nineteenth-century narrative to a sampling of contemporary digital filmmaking. Stewart's essay is noteworthy both for its deployment of longstanding narrative-theoretical and film-studies categories and its lively attention to film-narrative mutations that demand fresh thinking and writing alike.

From the flickering and pixeled movement of the image, Chapter 13 turns to the present moment of lyric. Jonathan Culler's essay establishes, with characteristic measure and lucidity, a benchmark for grasping the narrativity of the lyric, which is no longer adequately understood as the static pendant to narrative kinetics. Culler's argument turns finally on the claim that lyric differs from narrative in that it is less a mimesis or imitation of past events than itself an event in our world. As Culler argues, lyrics include plenty of room for narrative effects, but that narrativity is framed or enclosed by an intervention *in* the world, without the mediation that seems to be so central to narrative. Culler's theory of lyric assumes a certain direct relevance for the study of poetry today, when narrativizing approaches sometimes threaten to subsume all forms of representation.

Matters of form concern every sentence of *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative Theory*, but Mark Currie's sharp-eyed essay (Chapter 14) takes formalist methods as its subject, assessing traditional lines of narrative-theoretical work and dwelling in depth on recent cognitive and deconstructionist approaches that help us rethink matters

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of temporality and reference. At the same time, Currie chronicles formalism since the 1960s, considering several of its iterations under the rubric of T. J. Clark's comment that Modernism constitutes our antiquity, and thereby asking what might constitute our "post-classical" inheritance. Among other things, Currie's chapter engages valuably with Paul Ricoeur's work on time and narrative, particularly Ricoeur's revision of the classical concept of mimesis (or imitation), with some aspects of cognitive formalism, and with the impact of Jacques Derrida (and possible misreadings of Derrida) on theories of narrative.

Formalisms of all kinds require some strong sense of form itself, and Patrick Jagoda (Chapter 15) helps us loosen and recalibrate our hold on form in his essay on narrative theory and digital games. Tacking from the analysis of playing ("ludology") to the analysis of narrative ("narratology"), Jagoda appraises the wide field of digital games as both an object of and a challenge to narrative theory. His essay invites readers to contribute to the next phase in the narrative analysis of games, even as gaming deepens its own reworking of our assumptions about the ways narratives shape and are shaped by our interactions with them.

That narrative forms are themselves energized by their potential transformations is one of the guiding lessons of Margaret Cohen's luminous essay "Narrative Theory and Novel Theory" (Chapter 16), which stands too as the valedictory moment in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative Theory*. Cohen instructs us in the long intimacy of narrative theory and the novel, and her piece is one final and consummate example of how to read narrative and narrative theory together with history, and of how to integrate an account of theory and criticism within that larger chronicle of the interrelation between form and history.

For some of us, that nexus – of form and history – is the constant goal or object of narrative theory, and it has been part of the tradition from the beginning. Certainly, as Kent Puckett shows in his essay, the split between the two realms is both asserted and tendentiously overcome even by Aristotle's *Poetics* (to say nothing of Marx), in the parallel tracks of what Jean-Pierre Vernant called the "time of men and the time of the gods." But even so aestheticist or purportedly antihistorical a thinker as the great Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky taught that "plot is almost always based on a real conflict that has been resolved in different ways at different times," pointing the way to a problem of form that is also (by its nature) a historical problem: both of the historical source of that "real conflict" and of the historical path of its "resolutions" in a series or sequence of different

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plots.⁶ And indeed Shklovsky's epoch-making concept of estrangement too is bound up with the historicity of the aesthetic object. Literary devices, for Shklovsky, slow things down, forcing the reader to work – that is, to work harder than is required by that normal or everyday language that passes unnoticed in its clear neutrality, like water or air: the “device of art makes perception long and ‘laborious.’”⁷ In so doing, for Shklovsky, art makes a break *with* its contemporary life-world; and that very break should be seen as a historical marker, a new object of attention for the critic (the narrative theorist), emerging out of what had appeared to be the least historical site, the sphere of the literary or the aesthetic.

And so with *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative Theory*. Concerned above all, and in diverse ways, with the conjunction of history and narrative forms, this volume too is of its moment. For as odd as it may be to think of Shklovsky as a historian, it is just as weird – on the face of it – to go to narrative theory to get a grip on history. One moral of this volume, stated and enacted in different registers across these essays, is that narrative theory tries to slow down over – to make laborious – that seemingly easy conflation of tales and their tellings. Paradoxically, when the world brims with more narrative (and more uses of the term “narrative”) than ever before, it has become harder than ever to get hold of a substantial narrative of where we are, and of where we are going. Too many stories at the small scale counterpointed by an absence of plot at the largest scale: here is a dilemma that seems to be addressed by every essay in this volume, and that marks *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative Theory* as a product of its times. For if it is natural to tell stories, as we are told, there is nonetheless nothing natural about the particular stories we tell. The gap between those two facts is the space of narrative theory.

Notes

1. In any case, although it has generally been assumed that Tzvetan Todorov was playing it straight when he invented the term in his *Decameron* book, “narratology” may be better thought of as a put-on – a provisional, and therefore provisionally useful, name that also functions as a joke about the scientific pretensions of the emerging field in the 1960s. Such a combination of playfulness and real thought announces itself outright in the work of Roland Barthes, in (for example) the wonderful word “arthrology,” Barthes's coinage for a “science of apportionment” at the methodological core of semiology's science of meaning. In both cases, as so often in the heyday of structuralism and semiotics, the words appear as portmanteau terms with a whimsical gesture – a wit that retains the rigor of the terminology without fully settling into the closure of a system. See Todorov, *Grammaire du Décaméron* (The Hague: Mouton, 1969), 10; and Barthes,

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Elements of Semiology, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1967), 57.

2. Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1974), 5.
3. Compare Fredric Jameson's recent notes on Ezra Pound's lesson for an imperialist US culture: "if you're going to rule the world, he seemed to be telling us, then at least do it right and inherit world culture, indeed construct a world culture in which your best moments [...] take their place modestly enough alongside China, Greece, the Renaissance, and modern revolution" ("Remarks on Henry James," *Henry James Review* 36 [2015]: 296).
4. Barthes, *S/Z*, 16.
5. Insofar as "theory" emerged in contradistinction to the field of philosophy, including within itself a dialectical grasp of its own historical and linguistic limits, narrative theory is in some ways an exemplary case. See Andrew Cole, *The Birth of Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).
6. Viktor Shklovsky, *Energy of Delusion: A Book on Plot*, trans. Shushan Avagyan (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2007), 116.
7. Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Device," in *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), 6.