CHAPTER 1

Narratology and Classics

1 The Success and Critique of Narratology in Classics

Classics is a demanding discipline. Before being able to read ancient texts, students have to learn Greek and Latin.[1] They have to memorize various declensions and conjugations, drill into their heads numerous irregular verb forms, acquaint themselves with a third voice in addition to the active and passive voices, master the uses of tense and mode in conditional clauses and so on. Once they have achieved this, Classicists face a long history of scholarship; when trying to come up with something new about Homer, Tacitus and Augustine, they have to plough through shelves of books and articles discussing these authors. Little surprise, then, that not all scholars in Classics delve enthusiastically into theory – the days when traditional philologists were in irreconcilable opposition to the disciples of Roland Barthes, Mikhail Bakhtin and Jacques Derrida are over, and yet there is still a considerable faction that avowedly uses their time for reading ancient texts rather than books on postcolonialism, new materialism and cognitivism.

There is, however, one approach that even conservative Classicists have gratefully embraced, and this is narratology, more specifically structuralist narratology.[2] Key to the dissemination of narratological analysis in Classics

[1] There is currently a lively debate on whether Classics departments should give up their language requirements. The main reason for such a change is the wish to be more inclusive – in some countries, Greek and Latin is taught chiefly at expensive private schools (on England, see https://cucd.blogs.sas.ac.uk/files/2021/02/Holmes-Henderson-and-Hunt-Classics-Poverty.docx.pdf), and therefore Classics departments tend to recruit their students from a small and ethnically as well as socially exclusive group. For discussions of the situations in the United States, UK and Italy, see the essays in *QUCC* 129/3 (2021). While I hope that there will be room for different tracks, some involving the languages, others doing without them, I do not dare to predict what Classics will look like in twenty-five years. At the moment, however, its scholarly practice is still premised on the knowledge of Greek and Latin.

[2] Fowler 2001: 68: 'It is an approach which has been taken up and adapted even by classicists relatively hostile to theory'.

was Irene de Jong's dissertation on *Narrators and Focalizers in the* Iliad (1987), but other pioneering works ought not to be forgotten. While de Jong utilized Mieke Bal's system, John Winkler's *Auctor & Actor. A Narratological Reading of Apuleius'* Golden Ass (1985) was inspired chiefly by Barthes, and Massimo Fusillo marshalled Gérard Genette's taxonomy for his examinations of Apollonius' *Argonautica* (1985) and the ancient novel (1989).[3] In the introductory chapter to a volume geared to bringing together theory and philology in Classics, Stephen Harrison parades narratology as an approach that illustrates the potential of this endeavour: 'The application of narratology to classical texts has been a success story.'[4]

One of the reasons for the popularity of narratology is 'its technical and descriptive nature', which 'is non-threatening to conventional models of interpretation'.[5] The classification of a narrator as extradiegetic or intradiegetic, heterodiegetic or homodiegetic is, after all, not that different from identifying the forms ϱ̃ or *missum iri*. However, what is appraised in Oxford is not necessarily *le dernier cri* at Cambridge. The formalism that renders Bal's and Genette's taxonomies so attractive to Harrison and many other scholars is a major weakness in the eyes of others. In his review of de Jong's *Narratology & Classics. A Guide to Narratology*, Simon Goldhill contends that the kind of analysis presented in this book 'is bound to seem like no more than a rather trivial formal observation'.[6] If narratology wants to cut some ice, it needs to confront semantic issues in the manner of Barthes' *S/Z*. From a slightly different angle, but also taking issue with narratology's formalism, Tim Whitmarsh notes: 'Like many readers, I suspect, I have long found the antiseptic formulae of narratologists incompatible with my experience of reading.'[7] The criticism of narratology is not confined to Cambridge – the US scholar William Thalmann exacerbates a feeling of discomfort shared by others when he chastises 'an often rebarbative jargon . . . that at best helps systematize features common to a great many narratives and at worst mystifies simple concepts'.[8]

And, in fact, narratology is best seen as a tool, not an end in itself. Narratological analysis becomes fruitful when it is used for interpretation.[9] De Jong's analysis of focalization in the *Iliad*, for example, has significantly improved our understanding of Homer's way of presenting his story.[10] Generations of scholars had called Homer's style 'objective'. However, de

[3] Scodel 2014a: 4 ignores these works preceding de Jong's landmark study. [4] Harrison 2001: 13.
[5] Schmitz 2015: 707. [6] Goldhill 2015: 328. [7] Whitmarsh 2013: 244.
[8] Thalmann 2014: 176. [9] For this point, see Grethlein and Rengakos 2009.
[10] See also, however, the critical discussion of Bal's concept of focalizers deployed and made popular in Classics by de Jong in Rood 1998: 294–6. It has already been criticized by Genette 1983: 48.

Jong showed that in Homer's narrator text, adjectives can be focalized by characters. When, for example, Homer reports that Priam 'kissed the hands/ that were dangerous and man-slaughtering and had killed so many of his sons' (24.478–9), the hands, de Jong suggests, are described through the lens of Priam. Far from objective, the account is emotionally charged through the perspective of the character. Now, de Jong was not the first to observe the emotional quality of such passages – Jasper Griffin had followed up comments on *pathos* in ancient scholia[11] – and yet her narratological examination put such interpretations on a new footing. De Jong's argument was corroborated not least by the observation that many of the adjectives deployed in embedded focalization were elsewhere confined to character speech.[12]

Another example illustrates that, whereas most narratological models were developed for fiction, our understanding of factual texts can also benefit from their deployment. In a pioneering chapter, Simon Hornblower considered anachronies in Thucydides.[13] The *History of the Peloponnesian War* is chronological and follows the course of the war from season to season, but some events are displaced in the narrative. As Hornblower shows, some of these displacements help downplay Athens' aggressiveness before the outbreak of the war. The narratological analysis thus backs up Ernst Badian's thesis about Thucydides' minimization of Athens' share in the escalation leading to the Peloponnesian War.[14] In itself, the examination of anachronies is worth little, but as part of an interpretation it can become powerful – in our example it sheds light on the bias of a putatively objective historian.[15]

It would be easy but also boring to fill pages with references to further studies that have deepened our understanding of a long list of Greek and Roman authors with the help of narratology. At the same time, it needs to be admitted that narratological analysis is less exciting when it is done for its own sake; the purposeless parsing of narrators and mere tracing of anachronies quickly become tedious. A case in point is the volumes of

[11] Griffin 1980: 103–43.
[12] The potential of the notion of embedded focalization is further illustrated by Fowler 1990, who gives it a different twist by calling it 'deviant focalisation' and uses it to reassess the *Aeneid*'s stance on power.
[13] Hornblower 1994: 139–45. His examination of the 'self-conscious narrator' in the *History of the Peloponnesian War* is also noteworthy, as it shows that the expression of doubts about particulars is a means of strengthening the credibility of the overall presentation or other details (149–52).
[14] Badian 1993.
[15] The fruitfulness of a narratological analysis for the interpretation of Thucydides is further proven by Rood 1998.

the *Studies in Ancient Greek Narrative*, a large-scale project spearheaded by de Jong.[16] The first volume examines narrators and narratees, the second time, the third space, the fourth characterization, each pursuing Greek literature chronologically from Homer to the Imperial era. By no means are the volumes without value – each of them contains chapters with intriguing observations, and yet, on the whole, the enterprise falls flat. None of the narratological categories yields an interesting trajectory for the history of Greek literature. We do not gain a better understanding of it by analysing the narratorial position or temporal orchestration diachronically. Interesting points often emerge when the different narratological categories are viewed in conjunction. Most importantly, the chapters that are rewarding to read illustrate that narratology ought to have an ancillary status – they illuminate Greek texts by using the narratological analysis for interpretation and combining it with other approaches.

2 The Priz/ce of the Modern Lens of Narratology

There is another issue with narratology in Classics that has not received much attention but is, I think, equally serious as the formalism decried by Goldhill and Whitmarsh and ultimately more challenging. Narratologists present their taxonomies as transhistorical tools, and, indeed, any narrative can be dissected with regard to voice, time and perspective (just as any flower can be classified as a daisy or a non-daisy). However, the categories of narratology were coined in readings chiefly of modern realist novels.[17] Genette, to name arguably the most influential proponent in the field, developed his taxonomy in a reading of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*. More recent approaches in narrative theory, including cognitive narratology, also tend to privilege modern texts as their basis. This does not undermine their applicability to premodern texts – such a claim would be hermeneutically naive – and yet it raises the question of how far it gets us.

At first sight, there seems to be no doubt about the fruitfulness of the endeavour, as 'classical texts themselves display the kind of narrative complexities which narratology can help to unravel and categorize'.[18] Indeed, as de Jong's investigation has shown, there are complex instances of focalization in Homer, just as the condensation of the action in both

[16] See, for example, the critical comments in Scodel 2005; Feeney 2008; Grethlein 2012a.
[17] The idea of realism is contested, and there are of course other novels in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that challenge realist conventions, but the very existence of these conventions attests to a mainstream – a mainstream that forms the material basis of many narratological studies.
[18] Harrison 2001: 14.

Iliad and *Odyssey* is premised on a complex temporal orchestration that can be captured through Genette's categories of order, duration and frequency. One of the reasons for the fruitfulness of analysing ancient texts with the help of narratological categories forged for modern novels is the genealogical links between ancient and modern literature. It is not always acknowledged in literary histories, but the ancient tradition had a significant impact on the rise of the modern novel. To mention just one strand, the ancient Greek novels were translated into the vernacular languages in the sixteenth century, and Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe* and Heliodorus' *Ethiopica* especially served as models for Baroque novels, which influenced the novels emerging in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[19] In an important monograph, Nick Lowe traced the emergence of 'the classical plot and the invention of Western narrative' in ancient literature.[20]

There are also strategic reasons for the infatuation of Classicists with narratology – the application of categories forged for the analysis of modern texts allows Classicists to prove the complexity and, closely linked to it, quality of their material.[21] The inclination of classical narratologists to demonstrate through their investigations that their authors compare to the likes of Henry James is tangible in the rhetoric of 'Homer first' pervading the works of de Jong. In *Narrators and Focalizers in the* Iliad, she triumphantly declares: 'Despite the uniformity bestowed upon the Iliadic text by the unity of metre . . . the formulas and the typical scenes, the narrative has more variety of presentation than many a modern novel.'[22] Besides the notorious NF1, the primary narrator-focalizer, the *Iliad* also features tertiary focalizers and hypothetical speakers! The same argumentative strategy can be found in all volumes of *Studies in Ancient Greek Narrative*. In the first volume, *Narrators, Narratees, and Narratives in Ancient Greek Literature*, de Jong proudly announces: 'The first texts we have, the Homeric epics, display much of the narratorial repertoire and handle it in a virtuoso manner.'[23] In the second volume, which focuses upon time in narrative, we read: 'This chapter has shown that just about the whole

[19] Pavel 2003 is a historical account of the modern novel that acknowledges the role of the reception of Heliodorus especially.
[20] Lowe 2000.
[21] The notion of complexity in scholarship would be worth investigating. It is, I suspect, a highly charged category through which scholars who have been trained not to call their texts 'great' implicitly convey judgements. Complexity as a value term is firmly embedded in the hermeneutics of suspicion, which attempts to uncover the deeper meaning hidden in texts. See below, p. 119.
[22] De Jong 1987: 227. [23] De Jong, Nünlist and Bowie 2004: 552.

arsenal of time-related narrative devices which modern narratology has identified is to be found in Homer.'[24]

The appeal of this rhetoric of 'Homer first' to Classicists is admittedly hard to resist. It shows that the texts we work on are far from primitive – they even rival the experiments of William Faulkner and other modern authors. In proving the sophistication of ancient authors, we can also showcase our own cleverness. Our colleagues in the English and Comparative Literature departments may ignore our texts and consider us brutish philologists, but with the help of their tools we can finally get the better of them. To a certain extent, this strategy works, because many of the features of modern novels can be found in ancient genres. At the same time, it comes at a considerable price. While permitting us to identify putatively modern features in ancient narratives, narratology has been less helpful for elucidating what renders them specific and different from modern literature. The taxonomies derived from the study of modern realist novels have let us see in ancient narratives primarily elements that these narratives share with modern texts. The victory march of narratology in Classics has thus had the unfortunate side effect of detracting from what distinguishes ancient from modern literature. The focus on continuity at the expense of alterity has seriously impaired our understanding of ancient narrative.

The problem we encounter here is not limited to structuralist narratology and has deep hermeneutic roots. Structuralist narratology is not alone in having been developed with an eye to modern novels; many other approaches in the broader field of narrative studies and literary theories in general were forged or at least tested in readings of novels of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Our reading expectations in general are shaped not exclusively but chiefly by modern texts. More profoundly, we always understand texts from other periods and cultures in the horizon of our present. Hans-Georg Gadamer envisaged this understanding as the melting of the horizons of author and reader, but this view has been criticized as overly optimistic.[25] Even if we do not subscribe to a radical scepticism that challenges the possibility of understanding what others mean in general, the gaps separating cultures ought not to be underestimated. The coining of narratological categories in readings of modern novels epitomizes our general tendency to view texts through the lens of our own time.

[24] De Jong and Nünlist 2007: 36.
[25] Gadamer 2013 [1960]: 263–4. For the controversy, see, for example, Derrida and Gadamer 1989. For an emphasis on the 'inter' of interpretation as marking an unbridgeable gap, see Grethlein 2022.

3 Alternative Approaches

If we wish to highlight the gap between ancient and modern texts and the understanding of narrative in antiquity and today, we can take different routes. First, Classicists have drawn on narratology mostly to show the complexity of ancient texts and to emphasize their similarity to modern literature, but narratological analysis can also be harnessed to spotlight differences. This is the goal of the diachronic narrative called for by Monika Fludernik in an influential article from 2003.[26] The examination of the history of narrative forms and functions, she argues, opens up a huge new field for narratological investigations. The *Studies of Ancient Greek Narrative*, however, reveal that a diachronic survey of major narratological categories can be unrewarding. Even if done differently, an examination of anachronies or pacing from Homer to Handke is unlikely to enhance our understanding of where ancient narratives deviate from modern ones.

Fludernik's case study illustrates that diachronic narratology has to proceed more subtly and circumspectly. She explores scene shifts from Middle English literature to modern texts in relation to larger narrative patterns and to their functions. In the oral delivery of episodic narrative, scene shifts had an important structuring function. They lost this function with the introduction of chapters in texts written to be read, notably the novel, and were refunctionalized as meta-narrative comments. The case of scene shifts reveals that it may be heuristically fruitful to focus on more specific narrative elements instead of the major narratological categories. Perhaps even more importantly, it shows that it will not do to survey the transformation of narrative forms – the forms need to be examined in conjunction with their functions. Such an examination may also lead to extratextual aspects, such as medium in Fludernik's discussion, which help to explain differences.

An article by de Jong throws into relief how important the consideration of the function of narrative forms is for diachronic narratology in delivering interesting results. In her contribution to Douglas Cairns and Ruth Scodel's *Defining Greek Narrative*, de Jong investigates the motif of the anonymous traveller in European literature.[27] After introducing the motif, she starts from an example in Proust, gives further instances from Flaubert and Stendhal, makes a huge jump to Procopius and works her way back through ancient literature until she arrives at Homer. She then raises the question of whether the anonymous traveller is a universal or a distinctly Greek device with an impressive reception history. Instead of doing the

[26] Fludernik 2003b. [27] De Jong 2014a.

work necessary to prove or disprove the existence of a literary tradition, however, she hijacks a concept of Richard Dawkins and declares the anonymous traveller 'an originally Greek meme that has proved to be an extremely fit survivalist'.[28] But even more disappointing than this conclusion is the diachronic survey itself. Where Fludernik considers the form in light of the functions it plays in different genres and cultures, de Jong merely lists examples and perfunctorily surveys the narrative contexts – all that we can note after her inquiry is that the anonymous traveller can be traced back to antiquity. Done in this way, diachronic narratology will certainly not help elucidate the distinctiveness of ancient narrative.

By no means do I wish to belittle the value of de Jong's article. The identification of the motif of the anonymous traveller in ancient literature is full of merit, and the juxtaposition of its occurrences in ancient and modern texts is interesting even without further analysis. This said, the article shows what is required if diachronic narratology is to shed light on the specific character of ancient literature. If we only trace forms back to antiquity without carefully scrutinizing their use and exploring the contexts of production, circulation and reception, all we learn is that ancient authors already deployed them. Another major challenge consists in identifying narrative forms that are specific enough to be analysed across a wide range of texts and nonetheless sufficiently significant to grant insights into different conceptions of narrative. Diachronic narratology can grasp only such differences as are related to narrative forms surfacing across epochs and cultures.

Pertinent to my discussion is a distinction that has recently been proposed. While many scholars use 'diachronic narratology' and 'historical narratology' indistinctly, some differentiate between them: in a programmatic article that advances the term 'chrononarratology' as an umbrella term for approaches that pay attention to the historical dimension of narrative, Dorothee Birke, Eva von Contzen and Karin Kukkonen envisage the diachronic approach as including 'texts from different periods' and aiming to 'trace developments across these periods, while the historical approach foregrounds a corpus of texts from a single historical period'.[29] In a survey of recent contributions, they note that diachronic studies tend to emphasize continuity, whereas the investigations of historical narratology rather come down on the side of alterity.[30] There are, however, also

[28] De Jong 2014a: 333.
[29] Birke, von Contzen and Kukkonen 2022: 30. See also von Contzen 2018: 23–8.
[30] In addition to diachronic versus historical and continuity versus alterity, Birke, von Contzen and Kukkonen 2022 propose the third axis of universalist versus particularist: whether scholars use terms that can be applied to narratives of all epochs or prefer epoch-specific terminology.

exceptions, as the authors duly note – the article of Fludernik just mentioned (n. 26), for example, is sensitive to the differences between historical epochs. De Jong's influential work, on the other hand, illustrates the inclination of diachronic analysis to stress continuity.

The distinction made by Birke, von Contzen and Kukkonen leads us to another way of approaching the distinct quality of ancient narrative, namely, turning directly to ancient texts. The careful scrutiny of ancient narrative is, of course, essential to all the approaches outlined here, but whereas diachronic narratology is premised on identifying narrative forms and tracing them across epochs, other scholars prefer simply to take a close look at ancient texts themselves. Ancient criticism in particular gives us glimpses of how ancient readers viewed their texts. While Aristotle's *Poetics*, Pseudo-Longinus' *de sublimitate* and Horace's *Ars poetica* have occupied scholars for a long time, recent work has done much to chart the scholia, using them to give us an idea of what questions were asked and which answers were given in the numerous critical treatises that have not been preserved.[31] For attempts to identify the ancient logic of narrative, the scholia are a priceless treasure.

Here too, however, we can see the tendency to view the ancient material either explicitly as prefiguring modern standards or at least through the lens of modern categories. Even René Nünlist, who considers a vast amount of ancient material and takes care not to present it as narratology *avant la lettre*, draws partly on major narratological categories such as plot, time and focalization to structure his foray into the field of Greek scholia.[32] The alternative of taking Greek terms as organizing principles would only conceal this tendency and is also rendered impractical by the lack of a coherent critical terminology in antiquity.

Stefan Feddern's *Elemente der antiken Erzähltheorie* illustrates how easy it is to slide from the inevitable process of translation to a view of ancient criticism as a prefiguration of modern narratology: 'In my investigation of ancient narrative theory, modern narrative theory serves chiefly to systematize the discursive field, in which – this is a second step – individual ancient positions can be distinguished from one another.'[33] Modern

[31] For example, Dickey 2007; Nünlist 2009; Montanari 2015; 2020. Richardson 1980 and Meijering 1987 remain important points of reference. Much attention has been given to the Roman grammarian Servius, whose commentaries on Virgil provide rich material, see, for example, Santini and Stok 2004; Casali and Stok 2008; Bouquet-Méniel 2011; Garcea, Lhommé and Vallat 2016.

[32] Nünlist 2009.

[33] Feddern 2021: 3: 'Die moderne Erzähltheorie dient in dieser Untersuchung der antiken Erzähltheorie vordringlich dazu, das diskursive Feld zu systematisieren, innerhalb dessen sich in einem zweiten Schritt die antiken Positionen ausdifferenzieren lassen.'

narratology seems to be the innocent grid through which ancient narrative theory is assessed; that this, however, implies reducing ancient views to anticipating modern categories is evident in the preceding sentence: 'In fact, the ancient narrative theory presented here consists of the most important reflections on narration, many of which, *mutatis mutandis*, correspond to those categories that modern narratologists such as Genette have coined and/or compiled (the adherence to them in this monograph will not be slavish).'[34] Genette's use of Greek terms makes it easy to use them for charting ancient theoretical reflections but should not detract from the fact that these are categories forged in the analysis of Proust. Looking only at reflections that correspond to modern categories risks losing sight of aspects that are different from what we encounter in modern literature.

I also wonder what justifies Feddern's notion of 'the ancient narrative theory'. One of the strengths of his study is its breadth – Feddern takes into account far more texts than other studies of ancient criticism, drawing attention to some that are relevant but rarely discussed. But 'the ancient narrative theory' suggests a unitary entity and veils the very different contexts from which the references stem. I do not take issue with the theory of *narrative*. There are several terms in Greek and Latin that we translate as 'narrative', and ancient authors often focus on specific forms of narrative – for example, song, tragedy or speeches – but if we take into account their focus, it is legitimate to explore their discussions as reflections on what we call narrative. It is *the theory* of narrative that is problematic, as it downplays the disagreements and the variety of genres in which narrative is addressed.

Another recent book, Genevieve Liveley's *Narratology*, circumvents this danger of claiming a single ancient theory by discussing author by author (at the price of a much smaller breadth than Feddern's study) but also reveals the pull to view ancient critics as the predecessors of modern narratologists.[35] Liveley advances an account of the history of narrative theory from Plato to Post-classicism. Her study is illuminating in many regards, not least because it lets us see the presence and transformation of ancient ideas in modern theory. At the same time, the teleological structure makes Liveley's history less apt at spotlighting the peculiarities

[34] Feddern 2021: 2–3: 'Vielmehr besteht die hier präsentierte antike Erzähltheorie aus den wichtigsten Reflexionen über das Erzählen, von denen viele *mutatis mutandis* denjenigen Kategorien entsprechen, die moderne Narratologen wie Genette konzipiert und/oder kompiliert haben, ohne dass sich diese Monographie sklavisch an dieser Norm orientiert.'

[35] Liveley 2019.