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Review Essay

How to Explore a Field

By Richard Walsh, University of York

***The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory.* David Herman, Manfred Jahn and Marie-Laure Ryan, eds. London and New York: Routledge, 2005. Pp. xi + 718. \$240.00 (cloth).**

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When the first encyclopedia of a field of knowledge is published, it amounts to a coming of age. So it is with *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, the appearance of which has staked a confident and substantial claim for its subject as an established intellectual frame of reference in the humanities, the social sciences, and beyond. It is not the first reference work in the field: indeed Gerald Prince's *Dictionary of Narratology*, which first appeared in 1987, is now in its second edition.¹ But whereas a dictionary is concerned primarily with the clarification of terms—very needful in this context, for narrative theory has endured more than its quota of neologisms—an encyclopedia takes as its object a certain consolidated domain of knowledge of which the tangle of terminology is only indicative. In the pioneering structuralist days of narratology it seemed plausible to build a science of narrative, and one interpretation of the appearance of such a landmark book is that the grand structuralist ambition has, in a sense, been realized. It is crucial, however, to inquire into what sense that is, and how it is qualified in the fabric of this encyclopedia.

Certainly the expansive ambitions of structuralist narratology have been, if anything, exceeded by the spread of narrative theory's influence in recent years. The encyclopedia's introduction invokes the "narrative turn" taken by an extraordinary range of disciplines reaching across the humanities and social sciences, including, for example, such far-flung subjects as medicine, law, cognitive psychology, and artificial intelligence. One risk that arises from this apparent ubiquity is that the encyclopedia's own object can begin to appear unmanageably diffuse. That object is designated, I think wisely, as "narrative theory," rather than, say, "narrative studies," or (worse) "narrative"; but in point of fact a significant proportion of the material included really belongs under the second or third of these descriptions. Testament to this is the large number of entries that take the form "[discipline/field] and narrative,"



or “[generic/historical/ethnographic modifier] narrative.” Under these heads the focus of discussion shades imperceptibly between theory of narrative, narrative approaches to another object of study, critical perspectives upon the narrative dimension of a given discourse, and narrative practice (as, for example, under “medicine and narrative”). I think such a diffusion of the encyclopedia’s object is an inevitable and salutary consequence of the current state of narrative theory, though its centrifugal quality sits uncomfortably with the book’s declared aim to be “a comprehensive reference resource—one that cuts across disciplinary specialisations to provide information about the core concepts, categories, distinctions and technical nomenclatures that have grown up around the study of narrative in all of its guises” (x). The main interest of much of the material in entries of this type tends in the opposite direction: that is to say, it merits inclusion for the light these various specialisations can throw upon the core concepts of narrative theory. Take the entry on “modernist narrative”: this is a substantial (four-page) discussion of modernist innovations in narrative form by Randall Stevenson, organized under the thematic and contextual heads, “consciousness and perception,” “temporality,” “sources and values,” “art and language,” and “literary and critical consequences.” It is an impressively condensed piece of literary history, but not really the kind of information you would seek out in an encyclopedia of narrative theory: indeed the only recent work of narrative theory cited in the entry’s bibliography is, inevitably enough, Gérard Genette’s *Narrative Discourse*.² The value of the entry in this context doesn’t really emerge until you start to pursue the many cross-references embedded within it, from the obvious “thought and consciousness representation” and “temporal ordering” to the more oblique “intermediality” and “genealogy.”

The reasons for the hazy boundaries of narrative theory as embodied in this encyclopedia are intimately related to the interdisciplinary scope to which it testifies, though the significance of that relation is incompletely and intermittently realized here. The structuralist view of narrative as an ideal object of study has been progressively abandoned, or repudiated, in favour of various contextualist or pragmaticist approaches in which narrative is an irreducibly situated, communicative phenomenon. It could be argued that the shift of focus in narrative theory has been merely symptomatic of the waning of structuralism, or of a certain boredom with the austere abstraction or clay-footed formalism to which narratology tended under structuralism’s banner. Allowing narrative theorists a little more intellectual credibility, however, I suggest that the contextualist trend has actually been a manifestation of genuinely theoretical developments in the way narrative is conceived: that the logic of narrative, pressed hard enough, positively demands a pragmaticist theoretical paradigm. Perhaps the most prominent instance of such a seismic shock to narratology’s foundations has been the rise of cognitive narratology. This aspect of the zeitgeist is amply represented in the *Routledge Encyclopedia*—unsurprisingly, given that all three of its editors have been influential in promoting the cognitive turn in narrative theory.³ The importance of the cognitive paradigm is not in doubt; the nature of its significance in the development of narrative theory, however, is more problematic.

Prior to the rise of cognitive narratology, the field was conceived almost exclusively in terms of a linguistic paradigm, both in the sense that linguistics was the “pilot science” of structuralism and in the sense that narrative in linguistic media was regarded as the paradigm case for narrative in general. Studies of narrative in other media have since proliferated, however, soon moving beyond passive acceptance of the conceptual apparatus native to linguistic narrative. The encyclopedia gives due consideration to work in these areas, offering entries considering the narrative dimension of media as diverse as animation, comics, computer games, dance, drama, dreams, film, music, opera, photographs, and television. Theoretical reflection upon narrative in such various guises has inevitably called into question a theoretical framework, the conscious horizons of which had not merely been narrative in language, but often written narrative, or even fictional literary narrative. In one respect, the emergence of a cognitive paradigm has been a vital response to this challenge: the reconception of a unitary frame of reference within which it is possible to accommodate the production and reception of narrative in all its forms. A corollary of this reframing has been a conceptual shift from narrative as object to narrative as activity: narrative as an intentional, communicative, sense-making process. Narrative logic has come to seem less objective, less “out there,” and more contingent and heuristic.

Much of the commentary upon cognition and narrative dispersed throughout the encyclopedia (the index contains extensive entries for “cognition,” “cognitive linguistics,” “cognitive narratology,” “cognitive parameters,” “cognitive psychology,” and “cognitive science”) engages positively with the fundamental and far-reaching implications of this paradigm shift. There is another side to the cognitive turn, however, which is also occasionally apparent, and which is rather more intellectually defensive in relation to the foundationalism of those core concepts of narrative theory. No doubt it is inevitable that certain theoretical terms, distinctions and oppositions are often treated as if they were axiomatic for any account of narrative, rather than contingent elements of a particular model, with particular assumptions about its descriptive object and goals of description. There is nothing remarkable in the fact that such fundamental concepts as story and discourse, narrator, and focalization are invoked in this way in most of the entries in the encyclopedia. They have currency, and where they are used incidentally, or the point is broad, it would be inappropriate to clutter the discussion with caveats and qualifications. Beyond a certain threshold, though, it is incumbent upon an encyclopedia of narrative theory to interrogate the relation between such theoretical terms and their notional objects, for otherwise it lapses back into the mindset of a dictionary: it traffics in terminology at the expense of ideas. This threshold is reached, I think, at the point when a problematic term (“mediacy,” say) appears nonetheless to legislate for the nature of its objects; or when a set of distinctions (for example, Genette’s typology of narration: homodiegetic, heterodiegetic, intradiegetic, extradiegetic) are explicated in terms of each other, to the extent that their reciprocal definitions seem merely tautologous. Terminological foundationalism of this sort is by no means a prominent feature of the encyclopedia, but the tendency is there; and it relates to a tendency within narratological scholarship as a whole. Its roots lie in the scientific aspirations that drove much early work in the field and that continue to inform its expansionist spirit of conceptual mastery. From this perspective, the overarching mission for scholars of narratology is a collaborative effort to fill out the paradigm. The risk, of course, is that such an intellectual environment can undervalue theoretical dissent, or seek merely to neutralize it.

Overall I think the balance between collaboration and contestation in this encyclopedia is healthy. My cautionary note relates to the general tenor of the cognitive turn itself, as an index of the current mood in the narratological community. Its significance is such that it ought to throw open even the most fundamental assumptions of narrative theory, but this potential is curtailed if it is regarded less as a paradigm shift than as a rearguard action to shore up the crumbling foundations of the linguistic paradigm. Something of the sort seems to be happening, for example, in the entry on “narrative” itself: here, the axiomatic concept of story is aptly critiqued (with reference to Hayden White), only to be rescued in cognitive terms. What is story, if it is not something found in the world itself, nor any (narrative) representation of the world (which is discourse)? “Story is a mental image, a cognitive construct that concerns certain types of entities and relations between these entities” (347). The only reason story is not discourse, then, is because discourse is defined in terms of material signs, in order to exclude mental representations. But the media of mental representations, whether sensory or linguistic, are as semiotic as material signs, and the representations themselves are as specific: is this really the same story-discourse distinction we were taught to think of as that between the “what” and the “how” of narrative representation? The invocation of a cognitive level here appears to serve as a way of placing a vulnerable concept out of harm’s way. The mental realm is still *terra incognita*, for the cognitive scientist as for the narratologist, but part of the appeal of cognitive narratology appears to be an assumption that it can provide the solid foundation no longer to be found in structuralism; a blind faith that it will turn out to be *terra firma*. I suggest that narrative theory has not found a new pilot science, but that the real intellectual excitement has as much to do with what an open, questioning narratological perspective can bring to the study of cognition, as the other way round.

One of the advantages of an encyclopedia, especially one on this subject, is that it is not itself a narrative. In an essay published in the *Blackwell Companion to Narrative Theory* (2005), Brian McHale argued that the two histories of narrative theory in that volume (by David Herman and Monika Fludernik) were inevitably led into a coercion of their subject matter by their own narrative form, and cited their omission of any reference to the awkward figure of Mikhail Bakhtin

- 4 as an example.⁴ So how well does the *Routledge Encyclopedia* do on the Bakhtin test? One of its organizing principles is an emphasis upon ideas rather than theorists, so although there are entries about schools and approaches (the Chicago School, the Tel Aviv School, Russian Formalism, Marxist approaches), there are no entries dedicated to individuals. The volume's index of names, terms, works, and subjects, however, runs to a comprehensive seventy-eight pages and is one of the chief reasons for the browsing pleasure afforded by this encyclopedia. Here it quickly becomes apparent that Bakhtin does pretty well, with almost as many references as Roland Barthes, and just as many substantial discussions. In truth, such a comparison exaggerates the extent of Bakhtin's representation in the encyclopedia: many of these entries prove to be part of the fairly superficial circulation of a few terms—dialogism, heteroglossia, polyphony, chronotope—and the discrimination with which they are used is variable. There can be a degree of repetitiveness or redundancy to this, certainly, but there is also a sense, in the incremental effect of the more careful discussions, of the gradual enrichment of connections and possibilities that can be gained from navigating the hypertextual environment of a good encyclopedia. It's striking, for example, that the main entry on "dialogism," the most commonly invoked of these terms, by no means exhausts its topic: much more food for thought about dialogism can be found distributed through the entries on "intertextuality," "polyphony," and "rhetorical approaches to narrative," among others. It is only by pursuing the proliferating chains of cross-reference in an encyclopedia that you gain a rounded sense of the complexities, tensions, and contradictions lurking within a topic—and, indeed, of the dialogic nature of the whole field. Much rests upon the navigability of an encyclopedia, then, and here the *Routledge Encyclopedia* does very well. I've already mentioned the richness of the index, and it will be clear that the density of cross-referencing, both within and at the end of each entry is rewardingly high. The entries themselves range from thumbnail definitions to 3,000-word mini-essays, and entries of different scales are typographically distinguished in both the cross-references and the sheer list of entries at the start of the book. All but the briefest entries have bibliographies and are signed. There is also a reader's guide, though this proves to be a relatively superficial resorting of the entry list under three headings: "key terms and concepts"; "approaches and disciplinary orientations"; and "genres, media, and regional forms." The triangulation of these multiple navigational aids provides for a very fruitful browsing experience, and that, I think, is the real value of the book. It is not a summation of knowledge about narrative theory, nor should it be: the field is better conceived as open to exploration, and the book as a generous and stimulating provocation to further thought.

Notes

1. Gerald Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 2003 [1987]).
2. Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980 [1972]).
3. David Herman, *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002); David Herman, ed., *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences* (Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications, 2003); Manfred Jahn, "Frames, Preferences, and the Reading of Third-person Narratives: Towards a Cognitive Narratology," *Poetics Today* 18 (1997), 441–68; Marie-Laure Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Marie-Laure Ryan, ed., *Narrative across Media: The Languages of Storytelling* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004).
4. Brian McHale, "Ghosts and Monsters: On the (Im)Possibility of Narrating the History of Narrative Theory," in James Phelan & Peter J. Rabinowitz, eds., *A Companion to Narrative Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 60–72.