

Structures of Epic Poetry

Volume I: Foundations



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Narratology and classical epic

Abstract: Narrative theory or narratology, to use the term coined by Tzvetan Todorov in the late 1960s, has in recent decades evolved into a key concept of literary theory. Its subject, the oral and written, literary and non-literary narrative has become almost a principal paradigm of Cultural Studies. In this view, narrative appears as an anthropologically given (culturally and socially variable) fact, as a ubiquitous means both of individual and collective interpretation of the world and of the making of cultural meaning. No other literary genre of modern literature is so closely linked to the aspect of the search for meaning in an increasingly fragmented and uncertain world as the novel.

This gives rise to two aspects that are relevant for the narratological interpretation of ancient Greek and Latin texts: first, a significant portion of current narratological theorizing takes place around the (modern) novel. Second, the special role of the ancient epic as an object of narratological analysis within the study of Classical Philology is given by the fact that epic poetry has been viewed as the literary precursor of the novel since the 18th century. The occasional objection that narratology, with a certain arbitrariness, imposes unfitting, modern theories upon ancient texts proves problematic since the earlier research of the 20th century – in a time when the term ‘narratology’ was still unfamiliar – was partially based upon the same theoretical approaches that, together with (French) structuralism, led to today’s concept of narratology.

The first part of this article deals with the history, methodology, and terminology of narratological research from the late 1960s until now both in the general field of Literary Studies and in Classics. The second part responds to the ‘clash of cultures’ between traditional hermeneutics and modern theory. The third and final section discusses themes and trends in the area of narratology and Classics.

1 Narratology: beginnings and context

The study of classical literature in the West, both Greek and Latin, experienced a rather delayed application of theoretical approaches and methods – which also applies to narratology. This principle lack was diagnosed at an early stage by Segal (1968, 10):

When we come to consider specific methods of criticism, it is clear that classical critics have not of late been pioneers or innovators of new approaches, as they were in the early part of the century. No new critical theories have arisen from classical studies *per se*.

Among common explanations one finds the notion that Classics as the oldest philology and “leader in the field of literary interpretation” (de Jong, 2014b, 6–7) did not feel particular pressure of innovation. Therefore, it failed to keep pace with the literary theories and concepts developed within the neighbouring modern philologies.¹ Narratology’s delayed entry into Classics is all the more striking since, as de Jong (2014b, 3) has pointed out, “in fact, narratology can be said to have started in antiquity, when a number of central concepts were developed”. As examples de Jong refers to Plato’s differentiation between *dihegesis* and *mimesis* (Pl. R. 3.392–3) or Aristotle’s remarks on the tripartite structure of *plot* (Arist. Po. 7). In the 1970s Rubino (1977, 66) called on classicists to draw their attention to the works of French structuralism:

I am making a plea for active and strenuous reading, for the *lectio difficilior* of my title. There is no substitute for reading the structuralist texts themselves, difficult though that may be; for, with very few expectations, one page of Barthes or Lévi-Strauss is worth many pages of explanation by the Anglo-American interpreters and critics.

In this period, French structuralism being rooted in the theories and concepts of the Russian formalists and Ferdinand de Saussure, developed a wider response.² The journal *Arethusa* started to dedicate several issues to ‘modern’ interdisciplinary and theoretical methods, such as *Psychoanalysis and the Classics* (1974, *Arethusa* 7), *Classical literature and contemporary critical perspectives* (1977, *Arethusa* 10), *Women and their world* (1978, *Arethusa* 11), *Semiotics and Classical Studies* (1983, *Arethusa* 16), *Audience-oriented criticism and the Classics* (1986, *Arethusa* 19).³ One branch of greater importance became the study of signs or semiotics, initiated by the philosophical work of Charles Sanders Peirce and adopted by Roland Barthes (*Système de la mode*, 1967) and Claude Lévi-Strauss (*Mythologiques*, vol. 1, 1964). Their thinking influenced the classicist ‘Paris-School’ and the Greek studies of Jean-Pierre Vernant (*Mythe et pensées chez les Grecs*, 1965) and Pierre Vidal-Naquet (*Économies et sociétés en Grèce ancienne. Périodes archaïque et classique*, 1972).

1 Cf. de Jong (2014b, 6–7).

2 Cf. Rubino (1977). On the application of further modern literary theories on classical studies, see the volumes edited by Hexter/Selden (1992) and de Jong/Sullivan (1994) on psychoanalysis, aesthetic reception, speech act theory, gender studies, and Poststructuralism, as well as Schmitz (2006) and Schmitz (2007).

3 Cf. also Fowler/Fowler (2005, 873).

They also influenced North American classical scholarship: early examples are Charles Segal (*Landscape in Ovid's Metamorphoses*, 1969) and Froma Zeitlin (*The ritual world of Greek tragedy*, 1973). Another semiotic concept, which has had a vast impact on classical studies, was Julia Kristeva's intertextuality (*Word, Dialogue, and Novel*, written in 1966). Based on the general notion that "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another",⁴ this concept enhanced the idea that via 'allusions' and 'parallels' ancient authors intentionally referred back to literary predecessors. Classical philologists such as Gian Biagio Conte (*Memoria dei poeti e sistema letterario*, 1974; *The rhetoric of imitation*, 1986), Alessandro Barchiesi (*La traccia del modello*, 1984; *Homeric effects in Vergil's narrative*, 2015), and R. O. A. M. Lyne (*Further voices in Vergil's Aeneid*, 1987) then applied this approach to the interpretation of Latin literature, which had a far-reaching effect on classical scholarship – especially on the reappraisal of the so-called 'Silver Latin' works, such as Flavian epic.⁵

Another most influential branch of structuralism has been widely received until today: the formal analysis of narratives, also known as *narratology*.⁶ Building on Todorov's study *Grammaire du Décaméron* (1969), Gerard Genette (*Figures III*, 1972) elaborated a comprehensive and highly systematic framework analysing Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–1927). The main focus of Genette's *Figures* lies on the relationship between the narrated world (*histoire*), the narrative representation of the narrated world (*récit*), and the narrative representation through a narrating instance (*narration*). This concept proved to be an adaptable and fruitful approach to ancient texts, not only to narrative genres such as epic and the novel, but also to drama, lyric, elegy, hymns, didactic poetry, epistolography, and historiography.⁷

In the 1980s a breakthrough of structuralist-narratological analyses of classical texts took place, comprising a wide range of genres, such as on epinician poetry by Hurst (1983) and Köhnken (1983), on Greek epic by Fusillo (1985, with a special focus on Genette's notion of time), and on the Greek novel by Fusillo (1988). A prominent narratological study of the Latin novel was provided by Winkler (1985),

⁴ Kristeva (1980, 66).

⁵ Cf. Fowler/Fowler (³2005, 872) and Augoustakis (2016, 1–14).

⁶ For a concise overview of the history of narratology and its most influential theorists, see de Jong (2014b, 3–6).

⁷ On ground-breaking narratological studies in the various genres of ancient Greek and Latin prose and poetry, cf. Grethlein/Rengakos (2009b). Cf. also Suerbaum (1968) whose principle approach can be characterised as 'narratological', even though the term 'narratology' was not coined yet.

but it was especially de Jong's monograph *Narrators and focalizers* (2004) which leveraged narratology to advance the field of Classics and inspire Greek and Latin scholars to take up modern narrative theory. This fundamental study offers an analysis of focalisation in Homeric epic: its analytical categories are based on the narratological model provided by Mieke Bal (³2009), one of Genette's students, who refined his methodological instruments. Since then, a rapidly increasing amount of narratological approaches to ancient texts continues to appear.

Introductory monographs, volumes, and articles – some of them with emphasis, however, on literary theory rather than on narratology in its narrow sense – comprise Galinsky (1992), Hexter/Selden (1992), de Jong/Sullivan (1994), Harrison (2001c), Schmitz (²2006), Schmitz (2007), Grethlein/Rengakos (2009b), Konstan/Nünlist (2009), and Scodel (2014). Since 2012 the *Mnemosyne supplements* comprises a subseries dedicated to *Studies in ancient Greek narrative*. The most comprehensive introduction to the application of narratology and its methods to Greek and Roman literature is given by de Jong's influential monograph *Narratology and Classics. A practical guide* (2014; 2017). It deals with narratology in a systematic way (narrators and narratees, focalisation, time, and space) and draws examples from both modern and ancient sources – and here not only from narrative genres such as epic poetry, but also from historiography, biography, the ancient novel, and even drama and lyric.

Theory building in the area of narratology has been based mainly on the analysis of 19th and early 20th century novels. If one assumes ancient epic, in line with Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and others, to be the major forerunner of this genre, a tentative and careful application of these modern theories on ancient texts seems both inviting and justified.⁸ Narratological studies in the field of Classics add to an overall diachronic (transgeneric and transcultural) understanding of narrative and open up new perspectives for interdisciplinary cooperation: "It combines the synchronic and the diachronic, offering not only analyses of the handling of a specific narrative device by individual authors, but also a larger historical perspective on the manner in which techniques change over time."⁹ An example for the enrichment of our understanding of narrative texts on a diachronic axis is given by de Jong's observation that *metalepsis* in ancient Greek literature

⁸ Hegel characterises the modern novel as "moderne bürgerliche Epopoë" in the second volume of his *Ästhetik* (1965, 452).

⁹ De Jong (2014b, 11). See also Grethlein/Rengakos (2009a, 3–4), Scodel (2014, 2–3), and von Contzen (2015, 97); for narratology and Medieval literature, cf. von Contzen/Kragl (2018). Von Contzen/Tilg (forthcoming) are currently preparing an interdisciplinary handbook of historical narratology.

adds credibility and authority to the narrator rather than in modern literature where it often serves as an “illusion disturbing” device.¹⁰

2 Narratology and Classics: a clash of cultures?

Particularly in the 1990s the growing emergence of theoretical and narratological studies in Classics caused strong reservations and tensions within the Classics community. Hexter/Selden (1992, *p.* xii) made this internal friction a subject of discussion in their volume’s introduction:

Whatever the ultimate cause or value of the turn toward theory in modern language studies, this state of affairs contrasts sharply with the situation in most Classics departments today. Some would say our longer view holds us above fluctuations in interpretative fashions. Many, however, whether by accident or force of will, remain largely ignorant of even the basic issues that are being debated among contemporary theorists. Others have read and pondered the new theories, only to reject them, it would seem, or in any case their application to the Classics.

Schmitz (2007, 6–10) summarises the most prominent reproaches made against literary and narrative theory: “Theory for theory’s sake”, “modern theories are inappropriate to ancient texts”, “new wine in old wineskins”, “literary theory is too fashionable”, “texts must be approached unprejudiced”, “literary theory uses incomprehensible jargon”.¹¹ He states that these objections

are by no means a sufficient reason for flatly condemning the study of theory. . . . we, who have the privilege of a regular and easy access to the rich and enriching cultural heritage of antiquity, should view opinions that differ from our own not as a threat, but as a supplementation and a challenge, in the spirit of cheerful pluralism.¹²

In his general introduction, Harrison (2001a) emphasises this necessity of cooperation between theoretical studies and traditional scholarship within Classics. In the same volume, Fowler (2001, 68) argues in a similar way:

Viewed as a bundle of techniques, narratology fits as easily into such traditional concerns as the construction of authorial intention (why did Vergil narrate this event before this event?)

10 See de Jong (2009); cf. also Grethlein/Rengakos (2009a, 5).

11 For criticism against narratological methods and approaches, cf. Pearcy (1988) and Kullmann (2002).

12 Schmitz (2007, 10).

or of historical ‘reality’ (is this detail focalised from Thucydides’ point of view or that of one of his characters?) as it does into postmodernism.

Additionally, Harrison (2001a, 6) claims that both approaches should be considered not only with regard to academic research, but also to teaching:¹³

The ideal graduate student of the 21st century in classical literature should be able both to analyse and discuss the relative merits of variant manuscript readings, and to give a coherent account of the basic features of narratology and reader-response theory, and their possible effects on literary interpretation.

What seems to be most important and more and more generally accepted is the observation that narratology, though being theoretical in its foundation, does not lead away from the text, but conversely provokes its close and careful reading.

Today, the vigorous debate between the allegedly dichotomous approaches has noticeably cooled down. The great potential narrative theory has for the interpretation of ancient texts has become evident in the vast variety of articles, volumes, and monographs which have been published since the beginning of the 21st century. Even though the major part of those contributions does not offer narratological analyses in a strict sense, they at least demonstrate a strong affinity with models and categories of narrative theory. In retrospect, Donald and Peta Fowler’s observation from 1996, that “the narratology of Genette and Bal . . . , with a wealth of new terminology and methods, is often seen as the least ‘threatening’ approach by traditional scholars”¹⁴ appears to still hold true, especially for Greek and Roman epic, but more and more also with regard to genres which do not rely as much on narratives.

3 Themes and trends

Narratology in Classics has brought closer attention to multiple aspects of narration. Examples are narrators and narratees,¹⁵ the notion of focalisation or point of view,¹⁶ the determination of different levels of voices,¹⁷ the categories of time, and more recently, of space, the narrative potential of *ekphrasis* and other forms

¹³ For a recent example taking this approach, see Polleichtner (2018).

¹⁴ Fowler/Fowler (³2005, 871).

¹⁵ See de Jong/Nünlist (2004) and de Jong/Nünlist/Bowie (2004).

¹⁶ Cf. Fowler (1990), Nünlist (2003), de Jong (²2004), and Kirstein (2015a).

¹⁷ See Barchiesi (2002), Rosati (2002), Barchiesi (2006), and Slater (2017).

of description,¹⁸ the analysis of beginning and closure,¹⁹ or the phenomenon of *metalepsis*,²⁰ all aspects which are of central importance for the interpretation of large scale narrative texts, such as ancient Greek and Roman epic.

Grethlein/Rengakos (2009a, 2), taking up Harrison's and Fowler's positions, propose a furthering of classical narratology by cultural studies or theories from neighbouring fields in order to create new methodological resources and tools for interpretation: "the singular 'narratology' has given way to a plurality of 'narratologies' ... While many of these interdisciplinary and intermedial narratologies still rely on traditional structuralist concepts, some scholars have ventured to set narratology on a new footing." The notion of multiple narratologies reflects an on-going trend in narratology to enhance and refine traditional concepts by post-classical and post-structuralistic approaches, for instance cognitive (shifting from text to the act of reception and reader-response theory), cultural (e.g. post-colonial, feminist), functional, and historical.²¹

On a different axis of thought, when discussing the different major genres of ancient literature, there seems to be no need for modelling a variety of narratological toolboxes. De Jong (2014b, 171–2) makes this point with regard to ancient historiography:

All in all, for ancient historiography our position can be more that of Barthes, White and Genette: ancient historians make use of the same narrative devices as their literary counterparts. The reason is not difficult to imagine: the first historians were heavily indebted to the Homeric epics, in terms of both content (the focus on individuals) and form (the speeches and prolepses/analepses). ... Therefore, there is no need to develop a separate historiographic narratology, and narratology can help to detect how historians adapt traditional narrative devices or invent new ones to convey their view of the past.

There is also growing influence of postmodernism in literary theory and narratology which triggers an interest in themes and concepts, such as body and space,²² visu-

18 On this, see Fowler (1991), Putnam (1998), Harrison (2001b), Bartsch/Elsner (2007), Harrison (2009), de Jong (2011), and Koopman (2018).

19 Cf. Dunn/Cole (1992), Hardie (1997), Roberts/Dunn/Fowler (1997), Fowler (2000a), Fowler (2000b), Asper (2013), and Schmitz/Telg genannt Kortmann/Jöne (2017).

20 See de Jong (2009), Nauta (2013a), and Nauta (2013b).

21 Cf. Fowler (2001, 67), Nünning (2002), Herman (2009, 26), Alber/Fludernik (2010), Scodel (2014, 5), and Grethlein (2017). Psychological approaches can be problematic for the interpretation of ancient texts because of our limited knowledge and empiric data of the authors as well as the contemporary readers.

22 See de Jong/Nünlist (2007), de Jong (2012), Klooster (2014), Skempis/Ziogas (2014), Ziogas (2014), Kirstein (2015a), and Nelis (2015); for a digital approach to spatio-narratological issues, cf. Viehhauser et al. (2017). See also Kirstein in volume II.2.

ality,²³ concepts of character and characterisation,²⁴ the *Possible Worlds Theory*,²⁵ or the representation of violence in literature.²⁶

Particularly structuralist narratology has also led to a revision of traditional philological genres. The most prominent example is de Jong's seminal narratological commentary on Homer's *Odyssey* from 2001.²⁷ On Ovid's *Metamorphoses* there is a commentary of Book 8 by Tsitsiou-Chelidoni (2003) and a commentary of all books edited by a team around Barchiesi and Rosati from 2005 to 2015. There remains, however, still a great need of commentaries with a narratological focus in the field of Classics.²⁸

Narratology also plays an important role for this project (*Structures of Epic Poetry*). First, it allows for a more precise analysis of individual epic structures both within the poems under discussion and across time periods, authors, and works from Homer to Nonnus, especially, though not necessarily when questions of inter- or intratextuality come into play.²⁹ Secondly, narratological analyses provide a better understanding of narrative, for instance, by contributing to an overall diachronic research, which extends the vertical timeline beyond antiquity to medieval, early modern and modern literature.

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²³ Cf. Fondermann (2008), Lovatt (2013), Lovatt/Vout (2013), and Kampakoglu/Novokhatko (2018).

²⁴ Cf. de Temmerman/van Emde Boas (2017).

²⁵ Cf. Kirstein (2015b).

²⁶ Cf. Nill (2018).

²⁷ On the study's impact in the field, cf., e.g., Scodel (2008, 4).

²⁸ A new series on narratological commentaries is planned by de Jong and Kirstein: *Brill's Narratological Commentaries to Ancient Texts*.

²⁹ Recent examples are Barchiesi (2015), Fulkerson/Stover (2016), and Augoustakis (2016). On intertextuality and narratology in general, cf. Bal (³2009, 69); on intertextuality in the context of literary theory, see Schmitz (2007, 77–85).

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