

G. Rossholm & C. Johansson (eds), *Disputable Core  
Concepts of Narrative Theory*

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**Book**

This is a review of the book: Rossholm, Göran and Christer Johansson, eds. *Disputable Core Concepts of Narrative Theory*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2012.

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The title is very promising for all scholars urged by intellectual honesty and interested in a direct confrontation between entailments, consequences, drawbacks and values of many concepts in the field of narrative theory. And the content of the book pays its debt: the volume edited by the two Swedish scholars is thought-provoking.

One of the first things that catch the reader's attention is that all contributors are from northern Europe and, in fact, «[a] secondary aim of the volume is to demonstrate the vigour of contemporary Nordic narrative theory» (12). In addition, as a 'Southerner' trying to figure out the differences and the communality with the Nordic Narratology Network, my attention was caught in particular by the many references to the work of Lars-Åke Skalin, Emeritus Professor of Comparative Literature at Örebro University, Sweden and, among other things, editor of *Narrative, Fictionality, and Literariness: The Narrative Turn and The Study of Literary Fiction* (2008). Skalin's influence is overtly declared by some of the contributors and it seems to me that most of the article in the volume owe something to his «aesthetic» approach. In order to answer the extremely important question «Is there a narrative method of text analysis and interpretation?», Greger Andersson analyses Skalin's theoretical framework with great attention (293-96), underlying his basic assumptions and his method: namely that «[t]erms as narrative do not [...] denote *things* with a particular essence but rather activities (narrations)» (287). And «if the term "narrative" alludes to a network of *rules*, to several *language games* corresponding to as many *forms of life*, it will have certain consequences for the analysis; that is, for our ways of talking about them» (288). That is to say, concepts are always developed with respect to a certain epistemology, to which all the assumptions and entailments of the concepts must conform (if one aspires to have a theory that is sound, of course). «Even though contextual narratology has added an ideological dimension and questioned the distinction between description and interpretation, the analysis is still based on these distinctions and concepts. Cognitive narratology and psychological empirical studies have widened the object and supplemented new methods, but are still assuming these central distinction and concepts» (302).

The editors of the book share a similar concern for narratology: as it is clearly stated in the introduction, the broad influence of narrative concepts and theories in many disciplines should solicit narratologists to take responsibility for their theoretical work, and «[t]he export of narratological key words such as *story* or *narrative* requires renewed reflections on what we should put into these terms» (9). In this anthology, many concepts are taken into exam and challenged critically: sometimes the objections are very direct («if the Principle has got her into such an amount of troubles [...] one cannot help but asking why she does not just get rid of it. Instead of solving problems it seems to constantly generate new ones», 26-27; Sten Wistrand about Marie-Laure Ryan's «Principle of Minimal Departure»); some other authors focus on more general principles that one could think to be granted achievements of narratology but whose importance, nonetheless, is sometimes underestimated («we cannot identify or describe the form of a given text as independently of a grasp or a description of it as an act of communication. This thinking will discourage the tendency to try to extract the content from the form, but also, and perhaps more importantly and surprisingly, it will deny us the possibility of extracting the form from the content», 255; Anniken Greve about the communicative approach to narrative).

The first topic under the lens is the thorny matter of *truth in fiction*. Sten Wistrand deals with it in discussing Marie-Laure Ryan's work and exploring «what the consequences will be when applying the principle of minimal departure [...] on fictional texts» (18). However, the point raised by Wistrand exceeds the difficulties in the use of the tools developed by Ryan: «[t]he problem is that I cannot see how you are to combine the concept of an aesthetic structure, which is able to generate genre, etc., with the concept of immersion and games of make-believe. If the former concept is subordinated to the latter it would be impossible to make out rules for how to fill in gaps, etc. – but if the latter concept is subordinated to the former, as argued in this article, there is no point at all to engage oneself in any games of make-believe» (24). In opposition to Ryan and philosophers like Lewis (1983), Currie (1990) and Walton (1990), Wistrand maintains that the semantics of literary fiction can be understood only if considered to be functional to its aesthetic configuration but, quoting Burke, Poe and Saklin, he even moves toward a more extreme position, claiming that «fiction is regarded as a game of its own, produced and processed according to its own logic» (38) and that «fiction is a human manifestation of its own, a unique form of cultural/communicative act, and must be understood and treated as such» (39). The new question might then be: are all external approaches based on the assumption of a radical subordination of semantics to aesthetics, as stated by Wistrand?

Staffan Carlshamre reflects on how fiction relates to historical truth, namely «about the gestalt properties that the story imposes on the annals, what distinguishes the story from a list of facts. What sort of properties can that be?» (46). The answer relies on a principle of «relative truth» and is very clearly put: fictional stories «makes us better at knowing that there are other aspects, and at imagining other stories that limits and complements the one that imposes itself» (50). Carlshamre's perspective also highlights the inevitable relation between narration and ethics due to the process of identification promoted by the story, a point important to Leif Søndergaard as well, who «discusses the ethical implications of blurring or transgressing the facts-ficta distinction» (10). This is a crucial aspects for narrative of all times but it is even more important nowadays, since the «reality effect» is a trend followed by many authors who «are prepared to give the audience exactly what it wants: sensational unveilings of the most intimate details of

family life with a *minimal fictionalizings*» (78). One could think this is an issue concerning only narrative genres and popular entertainment, nevertheless, narrative theory can help to shed some light on the rhetorical context of every narrative, be it fictional or not, where values are proposed, negotiated and eventually accepted in a dialogue between author and audience. Another scholar discussing how narrative theory should be concerned with «The Ethical Implications of Narrative Occasion» is Jeremy Hawthorne, according to whom the reader is presented with ethical challenges that arise from her experience of simultaneous narrative levels (a position better understood with respect to Johansson and Rossholm's proposals; see below).

A literary genre drawing the attention on the facts-ficta relation is that of the historical novel. With respect to it, Mari Hatavara claims that historiographic metafiction «not solely construct but also deconstruct the past» (84), since «specific fictional modes and means can have significance in understanding and communicating the past» (96). Affirming this, Hatavara interestingly questions Skalin's model of understanding fiction, enabling the possibility that the reader refers to actual events while reading historical fiction, eventually changing her knowledge of them. Beside the interest of the matter dealt with, Hatavara's contribution is also an example of how the attitude to critical discussion can be exercised even towards one's own academic formation, hopefully aspiring to a fruitful debate.

The second main topic under the lens is character. Per Krogh Hansen moves from the problem of reference in fiction and comes up with a definition of characters in agreement to his conceiving of «performative referentiality». That is, the creation of characters through discourse not only represents identities but can also challenge the reader's idea and experience of identity and subjectivity. Characters are always to be considered means to an end, «a system of motifs» (112) that can serve different purposes. This thesis strongly relies on Skalin's theoretical framework, which, in opposition to mimetic approaches, conceives of fiction as a communication act leading the audience «to an aesthetic whole» (123). Therefore, all reader's experiences of the fictional discourse are subordinated to a «superordinate *frame* [...] which comes to dominate the whole» (124). According to Skalin, «[c]haracters are in motifs, and motifs are components of tragedies, comedies and so on. They are not existents, i.e., particulars, in world» (128). A radical thesis that address all 'existentialist' scholars and solicit them to justify their epistemic choice.

The distinction between internal and external approaches is recalled by Marina Grishakova too: if the «[m]imetic reading treats identity as an individualized entity», on the contrary, in «the linguistic-rhetorical view [...] character assumes the form of an interpretative fiction» (133). And Grishakova's *performative-situational approach* to narrative identity [...] would partially fill in the gap between a mimetic reading and defining the character in terms of its authenticity, on the one hand, and the reduction of the character to a series of discursive positions on the other» (133-34). Again, fiction, thanks to aesthetic means, is said to play a stimulating role in the perception and creation of identity.

The contributions of the editors of the book share a common semiotic perspective dealing with the issue of representation in/through narrative. Christer Johansson argues in favour of conceiving narrative elements as icons or indices that operate as functions representing space, time, the narrator's subjectivity or characters. As Grishakova does, Johansson is somehow going beyond the mimesis/fictionality dichotomy and according to him it would be better to focus «on the iconic and indexical qualities of narrative and

narration» (177). Icons and indices are thus conceived as basic discursive modalities available to the author, means that can both be used, for instance, in the processes of showing or telling. Göran Rossholm suggests an analogous solution to overcome the problem of how to understand narrative representation, that is approaching narrative as a semiotic process which involves indexicality and iconicity at the same time. The reader «would be as directly perceiving/apprehending something and at the same time be well aware that he/she is only indirectly – via words, images or others symbols – informed (if informed at all)» (199). Rossholm calls this second kind of representation «metaphorical directness», following Nelson Goodman concept of *exemplification* (1976), a mechanism that could also be ascribed to W.G. Sebald's combination of “Verbal Narrative and Visual Image”, as analysed by Jakob Lothe.

All the contributors seems well aware that narrative theory faces some tough problems if it claims to deal with fiction and non-fiction using the same framework, methodology and concepts. Pekka Tammi insists on this while discussing the issue of unreliability, since «the fictional instances [...] differ functionally from the non-fictional ones [...] precisely because our response, or the *pleasures* we derive from them, are different» (225). Beside the relevance for narrative unreliability, the two answers proposed by Tammi to explain why we should use different framework for fictional and non-fictional discourse are noteworthy also because they show that there can be different functionalist narrative theories. Rolf Gaasland's contribution, for instance, relies on Tamar Yacobi's functional definition of unreliability (2000; 2001), whereas Tammi's reference was to Skalin's theory (224). Gaasland discusses the complex case of heterodiegetic unreliable narration, a phenomena that can only be explained within a functionalist framework. In the short story *Erstes Leid* by Franz Kafka, for instance, «the function of the heterodiegetic narrator is not only to convey a story with a certain theme; his [the narrator's] response to the story constitutes in itself the main interest of a text that warns us against negotiating the unthinkable: that a life reduced to bodily acrobatics is a life worthy of human beings» (250). According to him, a mimetic narrative theory could hardly explain the complex rhetoric of Kafka's text. With remarkable examples from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and Kafka's *Die Verwandlung*, Anniken Greve makes a similar point discussing the same topic: «the form, the way the text is organized as an act of communication, is developed in response to and as an expression of one's recognition of the complexities of the *issue* confronted. Or perhaps I should say: It is a response to the difficulties involved in *relating to* the issue the author confronts and invites the reader to confront» (267). Interestingly, both Gaasland and Greve underline the risk of misunderstanding that threatens discourses that exhibit a high degree of rhetorical complexity, a risk not necessarily tied to the theme but to the possibility of expressing with words the way we relate to it. Matti Hyvärinen, too, fights against a simplistic conception of narrative, namely criticizing Galen Strawson's article “Against Narrativity” (2004), remarking that «narratives are not one-sidedly about “form-finding”; indeed, they are often and functionally about *form-breaking*, *form-testing*, and *form-challenging*» (340). Consequently, narrative «could rather prompt side-shadowing; that is, thinking in reference to *options not taken*, the world and self(s) as contingent entities, not only in the form they now occupy» (343).

Through the analysis of the concepts of *style* and *idiolect*, Erik van Ooijen draws a sketch of the evolution of the narratological thought developed by Gérard Genette and Roland Barthes, coming to the point of even suggesting a possible comparison with Deleuze's conception of style (276). Van Ooijen remarks bring to the table of the

dispute not only narratological concepts but the very idea we can have of a specific narratology.

The last contribution displays a quite interesting feature if considered with respect to the overall content of the volume: a critic to Skalin's aesthetic approach, which, according to Markku Lehtimäki, is not suitable for analyzing «text as a whole, since that approach does not take into account the *experience* of the storyworld» (361), a crucial aspect in order to understand the function of description and «imagist narrative».

In conclusion, it can be said that the attitude shown by the contributors to the volume is very promising. A very tasty dish of the narratological banquet is prepared and served by the Nordic Narratology Network ([www.nordicnarratology.net](http://www.nordicnarratology.net)), with the substance of a main course and the flavour of an appetizer for future debates.

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