

Écritures de l'histoire, écritures de la fiction

Colloque international organisé par le
Centre de recherches sur les arts et le langage (EHESS-CNRS)
en collaboration avec le
Groupe de Recherche en Narratologie de l'Université de Hambourg (RFA)

Les 16, 17 et 18 mars 2006

Bibliothèque Nationale de France
Quai François-Mauriac
75706 Paris Cedex 13
Petit Auditorium

Clearly, narratives are “innumerable” (Barthes), and everyone knows, be it only intuitively, what makes it possible to distinguish between narrative and non-narrative. Numerous studies express the *sine qua non* of narrative or, relying on criteria and theses that are more or less explicit, provide an outline of the scope of narrative according to one schema or another. Among these schemas for the internal division of narratives, the distinction between factual narrative and fictional narrative is no doubt one of the best rooted in shared consciousness.

Narrative analysis, or narratology, has long tended to assimilate narrative and fiction, occasionally going so far as to express the former in terms of the latter, “What is a narrative?” becoming in effect “What is a narrative fiction?” Indeed, fictional narrative shares a number of traits, formal and otherwise, with non-fictional narrative. And there have been analyses, under the influence of post-structuralism and other developments, that have sought to erase the borders between fictional narrative and factual narrative and even to promote the emergence of a “panfictionism” at the core of discourse in all its forms. But at the same time, both by their use and by their epistemic status, the two types of narrative seem to be distinct from one another: both pragmatic arguments and semantic arguments would thus seem to argue in favour of a strict segregation between the two.

Can narratology – by which we mean a broadened narratology, one that is capable of taking into account the pragmatics and the semantics of texts and their mental operations – help us make headway on these questions? Can it help us overcome the dilemma that leaves us with a choice only between absolute segregationism and panfictionism? The stakes laid for this conference are that the tools of narrative analysis are indeed capable of providing some progress on these matters, and of doing so decisively.

To begin, however, this requires questioning the validity of the dualist scheme that opposes fictional narrative as such to factual narrative as such. If narratives are “innumerable,” this applies to both fictional and factual narratives. And it must be remembered, as Paul Veyne has shown, that systems of belief, while not “innumerable,” are in any case multiple, in other words, that the ways in which humans commit themselves to their narratives follow a continuous line breaking down into multiple programs of truth.

Two conclusions are to be drawn from this. Firstly, “pure” factual narrative and “pure” fictional narrative are no doubt idealisations of the two extreme poles of the pragmatics of systems of belief and programs of truth. The dichotomy is useful for determining the polar tension that structures the modes of commitment to narratives, but in no way can it replace a finer analysis, for in narratives as we know them it is between these two extremes that stories

unfold. Second, it is advisable to dissociate the two massive figures formed by factual narratives and fictional narratives. Under each of these labels there are in fact numerous genres and historical situations that lay out a figure of complexity in its own right.

Among the many types of narrative that the notion of factual narrative claims to cover, historiographic narrative (or historiographic narratives, for there are numerous practices in the writing of history) is no doubt the one most constantly coupled with the field of fictional narratives. This can be verified in the practices of writing narrative that effectively exist, in the naming of genres (from the historical novel to fictionalised history) and in theoretical reflection (from Aristotelian opposition to postmodern assimilation). Hence, the interest of studying it from a properly narratological perspective.

A number of responses, already put forth by theoreticians, narratologists or not, can serve as a point of departure for this debate. The historian, collector of signifiers rather than of facts, implements a process of signification that produces an *effect de réel* (Barthes); the emplotment resulting from the writing of history underlines the literary nature of historiography (White); the traits of narrative discourse that can be described in factual and in fictional narrative are comparable, whence a certain “gradualism” in the transition between the two (Genette); the story/discourse distinction, fundamental to the original narratological theories of the 1960s, does not hold for most historians, and the analysis of historical narratives must take into account a third level – reference – while “signposts of fictionality” set up a “separatism” between fictional narrative and factual narrative (Cohn); “crossed reference” provides a link between fiction and history while at the same time making it possible to distinguish between fictional experience and historical intentionality (Ricoeur).

These paths of reflection (and several others as well) are open to the researcher, but they are far from closing the debate. Indeed, study of the relations and distinctions between the two forms of narrative at the formal level represents one of the essential elements of analysis. But as already pointed out, it is important to take into account the questions of the semantics and the pragmatics of narrative discourse – questions that have already been taken up by researchers working in the field. Some are content to oppose fictional narratives to referential narratives. However, possible worlds narratology, for example, reminds us that fictional narrative also possesses its modes of referentiality, without fiction supposedly copying something “real” in the extra-textual world; correlatively, “counterfactual” history is a practice not unknown to historians (If Archduke Franz-Ferdinand of Austria had not been assassinated in Sarajevo...). From another perspective, fictional narrative can be regarded as a “feigning” or “simulation” of factual narrative; but can we then consider, from a pragmatic point of view, that historiographic narrative exemplifies a “serious” speech act? Then too, if some narratives can be distinguished thanks to “signposts of fictionality,” might there be “signposts of non-fictionality” characteristic of historical narratives? And finally, it may not be pointless to bear in mind that fiction does not lay claim exclusively to the literary narrative, but that it contributes to pre-discursive cognitive processes. The list of questions to be debated still remains open....

For Aristotle, poetry deals with the general, with what could have happened, while the chronicle deals with the particular, what in fact took place. However, if one accepts the idea put forth above, namely, that “pure” factual narrative and “pure” fictional narrative are idealisations, Aristotle’s distinction is one largely of principle, for notwithstanding Plato’s condemnation of the degraded status of all imitations of the real, narratives, in variable proportions, remain astride the factual and the fictional. This fact is capital for understanding narratives in their historical and cultural contexts, of course, but also, given the inevitable hybridisation of narrative discourse in all its forms, for any attempt to draw out and put into perspective the criteria and methods of a narratology capable of explaining fictional narratives and historiographic narratives without losing sight of their respective specificities.

John Pier

Jean-Marie Schaeffer

Philippe Roussin