An Introduction to Narrative Travels

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Narrative is no doubt one of the great academic travellers of the last forty years. As such, there is nothing exceptional or sensational in this mobility: narrative simply belongs to the same group of travellers as "culture", "discourse", "gender", and many others. Epistemic ruptures obviously encourage such fast transformations of the scholarly vocabulary. Many of these overlapping re-evaluations have been categorized under the more or less hyperbolic title of "turn", be it linguistic, cultural, rhetorical, constructivist, or narrative. At least in the case of narrative, the term as such is highly ironic, as if there were one, distinct lineage of thought, and a clear turn of the storyline: a perfectly conventional story indeed. But by remembering to keep these terms descriptive rather than normative, and by presuming that all these turns are far from unitary one-plot stories, we may be entitled to reason that the turns pin down important aspects of a profound intellectual change, a change within a broader web of concepts. Perhaps more consideration should even be given to the possibility that narrative may not have travelled all alone, at least not all the way.

With these reservations in mind, one can still contemplate the qualities and contexts that made narrative such a quick and agile traveller. David Herman (2005) and Marie-Laure Ryan (2005) have recently made a similar argument about the birth of narrative as a distinct theoretical concept. The place of the birth, they argue, was not located within any conventional field of study. For example, study of the novel or fiction, as such, did not initiate the interest in narrative-in-general. Both Russian formalists from the 1920s and French structuralist narratologists from the 1960s were busy comparing different materials, from folk tales to gossip and high literature. This comparison of different text types required a more abstract concept and a more abstract theory. In other words, there was something comparative, abstract, and mobile in the concept right at the outset of its new career. Even though the concept was initially developed and theorized in terms of the scientific rhetoric of structuralist narratology, after coming to cultural studies it rather denoted subjective, diverse and socially constructed perspectives to identities, lives and social action.
In order to chart the myriad travels of narrative, we apparently need a multi-dimensional map. Narrative travels easily across media, from discipline to discipline, within disciplines, from theory to professional practices, from narrative to non-narrative, to identify just a few directions. Even novelists do not always agree upon the use of narrative. Both positivist and antipositivist historiographers have tried to erase it maximally. In this volume, the consequences of travelling across media and the subsequent repercussions for the concept are critically discussed in Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s essay, and articulated in articles by Itay Sapir and Ira Westergård, who map characteristics and aspects of pictorial narratives. Westergård subtly documents how fifteenth-century altarpieces were not confined to illustrating previously existing Biblical narratives but also revised and retold them. Not only paintings, films, and cartoons have inspired narrative analyses, but even tattoos have invited the presence of narrative (Oksanen & Turtiainen 2005). The question is whether or not these new uses of the concept fit to the minimal definition offered by Rimmon-Kenan: the existence of double temporality and a narrating agency.

While narrative seemed to win new locales, one after another, over the last forty years, its home base in the novel was challenged a few decades earlier just as often. From Jean-Paul Sartre to Samuel Beckett and Claude Simon, twentieth-century novelists seemed to be liable to question and resist the whole role of narrative. Among all its travels, narrative seems to have travelled back at least into the domain of French literature, as Hanna Meretoja argues in her article. The article illuminates the intriguingly close relationship between literature and theory, which explains why authors such as Flaubert, Sartre, Robbe-Grillet, Simon or Auster often enter as participants or milestones of the theoretical debates. That the narrative turn indeed is not exclusively a scholarly but a much broader cultural phenomenon, has been forcefully argued, among others, by Gary Saul Morson (2003).

The cross-disciplinary travels of narrative have been celebrated often enough. Perhaps the ironies and paradoxes of these travels have enjoyed less attention. In particular, the entrance of narrative introduced diverse impacts and seemingly oppositional positions in historiography and social sciences. Authors such as Louis O. Mink (1987) and Hayden White (1981) excelled in importing the narrative horizon into historiography. The formerly much more rigid borderline between fiction and fact was challenged, and both literary theorists and historians still debate on how the narratives of fiction and historiography differ from each other. In terms of epistemology, this move was directed towards naïve, unreflected and positivistic ways of writing “narrative historiography”. Like most of the twentieth-century modernist novelists, these historiographers wanted to take distance from the style of the nineteenth-century novel. If there is one message in White’s work, then it is this: narrative as a form is never neutral or innocent. This is not too difficult to accept; for example, the psychologist and Grand Old Man of the narrative turn, Jerome Bruner (2002), accepts it unreservedly.

In social sciences and psychology, the entrance of narrative was based on a similar criticism of the hegemonic epistemological stance. But now the target was
mainly the language of behaviourism, as well as the belief in experiments and quantitative surveys. There was no conventional, natural-looking narrative to resist; as a matter of fact, there were very few explicit narratives at all. Narrative came to offer a new and more humanistic language for life, action, identity, and experience. Narrative received its “elastic” (Rimmon-Kenan), hermeneutic (Meretoja) or “metaphoric” (Hyvärinen) interpretations. The narrativists of psychology and philosophy often came to argue that “we” are more or less living out narratives, and that life indeed is a narrative. The narrativists of historiography, as critics of epistemological naïveté and positivism themselves, came to resist that idea fiercely. Perhaps the consequent debate between these positions has been somewhat misunderstood. Perhaps both arguments have their validity within their own setting and manner of speaking. I have previously suggested that the relevance of these opposing discourses might best be studied in the context of fictional narrative (Hyvärinen 2006). One chilling example worth closer study on how people indeed live out narratives, often with far too strongly foreshadowed perspectives, and how life as it takes place also deviates from these narratives, may be found in Ian McEwan’s thought-provoking novel *Atonement* (see also Phelan 2005b).

Be that as it may, narrative turned out to be a successful traveller. It has reached psychology, sociology, anthropology, political thought, theology, education, law, medicine, and what not. But how should we appraise this narrative-is-now-everywhere situation? If we take narrative inquiry as social movement, as it is sometimes suggested, we probably should celebrate the situation and look for further victories. The opposite reaction would be to raise warnings “Against Narrativity” (Strawson 2004) or even declare the “End of Story” (Sartwell 2000). Narrative in those cases is considered to be so ubiquitous and overwhelming that its reign needs to be contained. Warnings against narrative imperialism have been raised even among narrative theorists themselves: look, for example, at James Phelan’s (2005a) cautionary “narrative imperialism” and at Pekka Tammi’s (2005) provocative title “Against narrative”.

Phelan and Tammi seem to be troubled both about narrative complacency and about the change of the concept over its celebrated travels. And that is exactly the problem Rimmon-Kenan is concerned with in her contribution in this volume. The new uses of the concept enrich and challenge the theory, she argues, but at the same time they run the risk of producing discourses on entirely different things under the same, and therefore misleading, title of narrative. How much do the different disciplines indeed understand each other? Jarmila Mildorf, in her contribution, recognizes the rather scarce methodological and theoretical exchange between literature, socio-linguistics and social sciences, and goes on suggesting “focalization” and “double-deictic you” as practical and resourceful imports from literature to social research.

In order to recollect the perplexity of the early days of the narrative turn, I return to a snapshot from the middle of the most hectic of travels. Amia Lieblich (1994, x), one of the editors of the well-known series *The Narrative Study of Lives*, caught the
atmosphere of the moment excellently: “At the same time, we were also encour-aged by the explosion of new books, articles, and conferences, using the concept of the narrative in a wide variety of contexts, that people brought to our attention. […] But what is narrative? we kept asking and being asked by our students and colleagues, as when we had prepared the first volume of The Narrative Study of Lives. Is it just any story, or history; does it have to conform to a certain structure or carry a message; how is it related to identity, culture, and language; does it differ, in any systematic way, from life-as-lived and constructed by men?” A very familiar feeling, indeed, among early students of the narrative turn in social sciences. Reflecting on this kind of ambiguity, Hyvärinen argues in his article that the travelling term narrative was more like a new and creative metaphor than a clear concept when it was adopted by the social sciences. Several contributions in this volume keep posing the question: could a more profound interdisciplinary exchange and focus on the concept itself help us further from the original “creative ambiguity”, as Lieblich had it. Be it as it may, as a movement this “creative ambiguity” was directed against the impermeable rhetoric of science, neutrality, and objectivity. Sylvie Patron, in her contribution, wants to replace even Genettian narratology in the name of the scientific study of narrative.

One obvious problem with the different turns is the unrealistically totalizing character they may acquire among proponents and adversaries. “There is widespread agreement that human beings typically see or live, or experience, their lives as a narrative or story of some sort, or at least as a collection of stories”, writes Galen Strawson (2004, 428). In addition to this empirical or psychological Narrativity thesis, he finds a Normative thesis: “This states that experiencing or conceiving one’s life as narrative is a good thing” (ibid.). By putting these theses together, “one may think that all normal non-pathological human beings are naturally Narrative and also that Narrativity is crucial to a good life. This is the dominant view in the academy today” (ibid., 29 italics mine).

Let me suggest that Strawson’s representation of academic thought is strongly hyperbolic. In literary narrative theory, the metaphoric talk on life and narrative has always remained marginal or been criticized. In historiography, the tone has been entirely different over the debates launched by Hayden White and F.R. Ankersmit. But what about the social sciences? Critics have been around for quite some time already (Atkinson 1997). My particular perspective is, of course, that of the Finnish periphery. In psychology, narrative is here rather marginal in comparison with the flourishing cognitive and neuropsychological approaches (alas, I keep hearing similar stories about the situation in North America). What about my own department of sociology and social psychology? From the curriculum, I can find such entities as “comparative research”, “cultural studies”, “social institutions and practices”, “discursive social psychology”, “interaction process”, and so on. And nothing at all under the keyword “narrative”. Scanning through the lists of textbooks produced just one single book that would perfectly match with the presumed “dominant view in the academy today”. If the view indeed is dominant, no one seems to be overly inclined
to teach this view to our students. For that matter, I am not entirely convinced that I could myself subscribe to this presumably dominant view.

Yet narrative studies have found their networks, journals, and centres. The editors of the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* present a compelling survey:

International in scope, this activity has also spawned interdisciplinary book series (e.g. *Studies in Narrative*, published by John Benjamins, *Theory and Interpretation of Narrative*, published by the Ohio State University Press, *Narratologia*, published by Walter de Gruyter, and *Frontiers of Narrative*, published by the University of Nebraska Press). Scholarship in the field has given rise, as well, to a number of internationally recognized journals in which articles about narrative figure importantly (e.g. *Image & Narrative*, *Journal of Narrative Theory*, *Language and Literature*, *Narrative, Narrative Inquiry*, *New Literary History*, *Poetics*, *Poetics Today*, and *Style*). Another manifestation of cross-disciplinary interest in narrative is Columbia University’s Program in Narrative Medicine (*http://www.narrativemedicine.org*), inaugurated in 1996 (Herman, Jahn and Ryan 2005, ix).

This massive list might be continued by the *Centre of Narrative Research* in the University of East London, and the *Scottish and Northern Narrative Network*, based in Edinburgh, and, why not, the *Finnish Network of Narrative Studies*.

One of the distant and more important locales to which narrative has arrived during its numerous travels consists in professional practices. Teachers, health care personnel, social workers and therapists have assumed new work practices, which emphasize telling and listening to stories. Here we can recognize how powerful a term narrative has become in some parts over its travels. Sigmund Freud, in introducing his famous talking cure, was of course interested in stories: both in the stories his patients told and that he himself constructed, as well as their connections to the heritage of ancient dramas. Psychoanalysts Roy Schafer and Donald Spence were influential figures in the movement which was later baptized “narrative turn”. In addition to this continuum of narrative-in-therapy, there is also a new school of therapy with the title “narrative therapy”. This indicates that during its many travels, narrative has managed to gather a good deal of positive aura.

The various travels of narrative have of course changed and stretched the concept, and created new difficulties in understanding. However, these changes during the travels should not disguise the fact that the concept of narrative and narrative theory have, all along, been reflected and reshaped within the narratological, or literary theory of narrative. Two outstanding publications confirm this recent blooming of literary narrative theory: the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (edited by David Herman, Manfred Jahn and Marie-Laure Ryan 2005) and Blackwell’s *A Companion to Narrative Theory* (edited by James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz 2005). Both books demonstrate keen interest in the concept of narrative and its history, and both of them open up towards the discussions in psychology and social sciences. But even the titles of these books point towards an important difference in perspectives. In cultural studies, there is a strong tendency to understand narrative predominantly as a *method*, and only to look for narrative ways of reading.
Narratologists have for a long time debated on what happened since the heyday of classical, structuralist narratology at the end of the 1970s. Was it a crisis? Or “rise, fall, and renaissance of narratology”? Or rather a steady continuum? (Rimmon-Kenan 2002, 135.) With the recent wave of publications, it is clear that literary theory of narrative is at least not suffering from apathy or lethargy. This situation could be understood as a major challenge for the social sciences: there is a long and, thus far, mostly uncharted path from Vladimir Propp to the contemporary theory of narrative. Considering the many attempts at understanding the narrative turn in humanities and social sciences by the literary theorists, the scene also appears to be exceptionally conducive for interdisciplinary exchange.

From the perspective of cultural studies and social sciences, literary theory of narrative often gives a more complex and sophisticated source for theorizing narrative. But in literary theory, there is a long history of resorting to the background of linguistics. For early structuralists, it meant above all Saussurean linguistics. Since then, Chomskyan, socio-linguistic and cognitive theories of linguistics have made their way to literary theory of narrative. This is the perspective of Sylvie Patron’s article in this volume. She no less than problematizes the whole position of narratology as the theory of narrative. She holds that narratology – by following Genette’s lead – presumes the necessity of a narrator for untenable reasons. Building on Ann Banfield’s work on free indirect speech, Patron argues for the possibility of a narrative without narrator.

Should we consider more closely some forgotten aspects of the metaphor of travel? Here, I think, Fiona Doloughan’s article on narratives of travel is a helpful source. Do we, for example, recognize ourselves in “all those who journey in search of happiness, pleasure, beauty, or a break from routine”? Certainly, at least the narrative turn in social sciences has embraced the aspect of a break from routines, and even a moment of happiness with the new, richer sort of materials, questions and theories. However celebrated, this interdisciplinary travelling has also included, metaphorically speaking, long and boring moments at airports, trying to kill time focusing on embarrassingly difficult books, and of course the notorious sleeplessness of overnight flights. The crossover of familiar fields always carries along with it the risk of dilettantism, and of not being accepted in the new locale. This might suggest the difference between a paying tourist and an accepted resident.

Indeed, “travel is a state of mind”, as Doloughan has it. Leaving the many other associations aside, I want to call attention to the aspect of returning. Travelling is not merely about experiencing new places, it is also about returning home, from wherever one finds it, and from the places visited earlier. I think that this travelling back, retracing the steps taken, and seeing the old sites in a different light is the connecting thread of this volume. Doloughan, in recounting a trip taken by Alain de Botton, mentions his disappointment in finding out that the city “had stubbornly refused to change” (de Botton, 243). Here, I think, our travels differ from those made by Alain de Botton. Travels back – hopefully – provide us with a different Genette (Patron), medieval and renaissance painting (Westergård and Sapir), narrative turn
(Rimmon-Kenan, Meretoja, Mildorf and Hyvärinen) and understanding of travel (Doloughan). Travelling back and forth, revisiting the old sites of memory and significance, reshaping the past and future – isn’t that precisely the kind of travelling that narrative is all about?

References