

Eva von Contzen

## **Narratology and Classics: A Transhistorical Approach**

Irene J. F. de Jong: *Narratology and Classics. A Practical Guide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014. Pp. 240. EUR 25.00. ISBN 978-0-1996-8870-8

Perhaps it is too enthusiastic to call the historicizing efforts in recent narratological work a new trend, but the evidence certainly points to a new phase of research into narrative forms and structures: the awareness that narration, despite its overarching stability as a cultural practice, is strongly historically dependent and subject to considerable change over time has led to a new interest in premodern narrative forms and functions and even challenged some of the core notions of narratology. Since the emphatic calls for diachronization by Monika Fludernik (2003) and Ansgar Nünning (2000), it has certainly become more common to include pre-seventeenth century texts in narratological debates.<sup>1</sup> The diachronic approach means putting narratives from earlier periods into a framework that traces links and continuities, but also ruptures and discontinuities; it is an approach interested in developments, in the larger patterns. A historical narratology, by contrast, assumes a synchronic perspective. It considers narrative practices at a specific point in time by taking into account various genres and contextual influences in order to understand how narrative worked. The two approaches implicate two divergent understandings of what narratology is and what it is for. Is it a tool that can be applied ahistorically, in which case a stable set of terms functions as a benchmark? Or is it a method of looking at configurations of narrative that is considerably influenced by the narratives themselves and thus requires, in some cases, to adapt existing theories?

Irene de Jong is a prominent figure in this trajectory because she has been an active promoter of both the diachronization of narratology and a historical narratology. In Classics, narratological approaches have become established as a theoretical field, owing not least to de Jong's influential works such as her study on narrators and focalizers in the *Iliad* (2004, first published 1987) and her narratological commentary on the *Odyssey* (2001). Also, the series *Studies in Ancient Greek Narrative*, of which three volumes have appeared so far, is de Jong's brainchild. While these works are too specialized to be of interest to narratologists not trained in Classics, de Jong has also published on aspects of diachrony and argued that many seemingly 'modern' narrative forms, such as certain patterns of focalization or metalepsis, can already be found in ancient

texts (see e.g. de Jong 2014). Her new book, *Narratology and Classics: A Practical Guide* follows this double interest in that it attempts to combine diachronic with historical narratology. It is thus of great interest to classicists and non-classicists alike. The underlying narratological agenda is decidedly transhistorical: de Jong aims at enabling students of Classics to tease out “the literary DNA of the most popular literary form of our times, the novel” (p. 11). In doing so, she admirably raises our awareness of the parallels and divergences between ancient and modern narrative texts on a more general level.

### **From Virgil to Woolf – Scope of the work**

The book has two parts: in the first part, entitled “A Narratological Primer”, five chapters are devoted to narrators and narratees, focalization, time, and space respectively. The bibliographical references, which round off each section, are comprehensive and will undoubtedly be of great use for anyone interested in ancient texts and narrative theory. For each category, plenty of examples are provided. What makes them stand out from other introductions is that in each case passages from both ancient and modern texts are used. To give a random example, in the section on analepses a passage from Dickens’s *Great Expectations* (1861) is followed by a passage from Thucydides. Both extracts exemplify the sub-type of “completing analepses”, which provide details that have not previously been included in the main story (p. 81). The range of authors and texts is broad: modern authors include Jane Austen, Miguel de Cervantes, Arthur Conan Doyle, J. D. Salinger, William Thackeray, and Virginia Woolf, while the Greek and Latin examples are taken, among others, from Apuleius, Catullus, Chariton, Euripides, Herodotus, Hesiod, Homer, Livy, Ovid, Plato, Propertius, Thucydides, and Virgil. The special case of lyric poetry is mentioned as well as drama; in both cases, de Jong confines her analysis to narratives embedded in these genres, such as cases of messenger reports in drama or passages in lyric poetry that feature a *narratio*. These tend to be mythical or historical. As to the selection of examples, from ancient literature both poetry and prose texts are discussed, while the modern examples are without exception prose narratives. Here it may have been useful to problematize the fact that much ancient literature is in poetry, whereas narratology was designed to cater for the analysis of prose narratives. The implications of narrative theory for narrative poetry, which in some respects works rather differently from prose narrative due to its formal constraints, still constitutes a lacuna in narratological debates.

There is much to be admired in this study: we embark on a journey through the many examples from ancient and modern texts, carefully guided by de Jong’s contextualizations and explanations. In the first part, de Jong introduces narratology as a practical tool; a shorthand for coming to grips with narrative patterns. The introduction to the various key concepts of narratological analy-

sis is concise yet comprehensive: readers are presented with narrative parameters as well as their functions: embedded narratives, for instance, can have an explanatory, a predictive, a thematic, a persuasive, or a distractive function, as well as a key function and an argument function for different kinds of narratees (p. 35). A particularly suggestive chapter is the one on space, in which, among other aspects, different kinds of ‘spatial standpoints’ are introduced (narratorial / actorial panoramic; narratorial / actorial scenic; pp. 60-65). The whole chapter goes beyond the traditional framework by Genette and aptly shows the need of including spatial parameters in narratological considerations. Another highly useful concept de Jong puts emphasis on is the referential level or ‘material’ as introduced by Dorrit Cohn (pp. 38-39). The ‘material’ is different from the traditional concepts ‘fabula’ and ‘story’ as it is outside the text and can be useful for discussing historians’ handling of sources or the different versions of myths. Thus an author may opt for leaving out information because he can rely on his audience automatically filling in the gaps (p. 98).

## Terms and terminology

Throughout her book, de Jong is strongly indebted to Gérard Genette’s narrative theory. This, however, is not immediately obvious from the terminology she uses or from the chapter divisions, where one might have expected the Genettian triad tense–mood–voice. The chapter on focalization, for instance, contains discussions of the representations of consciousness (pp. 56-60) as well as ideological evaluations. Though highly useful, they do not have their place in the Genettian model (pp. 50-56). The terms ‘perspective’ and ‘point of view’ are rejected (p. 60), but it remains unclear how exactly de Jong’s modification of Genettian focalization relates to these two terms. Unfortunately, it is not always signposted that new terms are being introduced. Genette’s extradiegetic and intradiegetic narrators, for instance, are substituted by primary and secondary narrators (p. 20), homo- and heterodiegesis (which are not mentioned at all) by external and internal narrators. Given the prominence of homo- and heterodiegesis, it would have been useful at least to mention them in order to ensure readers’ literacy in key narratological terms. The chapter on space contains overlaps with the concepts of duration and focalization (“The Presentation and Integration of Space”; pp. 116-120). Somewhat confusingly, ekphrasis is discussed separately from description, and with respect to its modern, much more restricted meaning of a description of a work of art rather than descriptive instances more generally (p. 120).

Sometimes less may be more when it comes to making further distinctions: in the classification of types of focalizers, we are introduced to the “overt external primary narrator-focalizer” (p. 48). While such distinctions clearly take their justification from their place in the overall order of the various possible types of focalizers, in actual analyses it seems less expedient to rely on such

schemes and rather describe the parameters of a focalizing instance as it occurs in the text. The concept of the focalizer is simply asserted (p. 47); it would have gained from one or two sentences about its source (Mieke Bal) and perhaps at least a footnote to the critical debates about it.

## **Narratology on trial: poetics and practice**

The second part of *Narratology and Classics* provides three “Narratological Close Readings” of ancient narrative texts: a Homeric hymn (*Hymn to Aphrodite*, 45-291) as an example from epic; a historiographic passage from Herodotus (*Histories* 1.34-45; Atys and Adrastus); and an extract from Euripides’ *Bacchae* (1043-1152; the death of Pentheus) for drama. The analyses are impressively thorough and offer valuable insight into the practical application of the many terms introduced in the first part. At the same time, de Jong underscores, if only indirectly, that it is absolutely necessary to situate narratological investigations within more general literary and historical pursuits. The interpretations rely on considerable background knowledge about the respective genre, contexts, and the materials used, whether historical or mythical, and of course require much philological skill as well. That the encounter between Aphrodite and Anchises in the Homeric hymn is a comedy of errors does not emerge strictly speaking from a narratological analysis alone (p. 164), and neither does Pentheus’s *anagnorisis* in Euripides’ tragedy.

Ultimately, de Jong raises crucial questions we sometimes lose sight of in our concerns with a specific text or period. To what extent is it possible and useful to approach narrative texts transhistorically? Throughout the book it is suggested that the key concepts of narratological analysis, and hence the key elements of narrative, have been relatively stable since antiquity. Ancient authors had already developed a kind of “proto-narratology” (p. 4). In many cases, the ancient and modern examples set side by side indeed seem remarkably similar. Yet there are special cases in which the fit is not perfect, as in texts in which ancient authors engage with their audience’s cultural knowledge of myths. Perhaps classicists should be more upfront about their material and the potential impact it could have on narratology. While it is undoubtedly true that “many Greek and Latin epic texts (and their main successor, the ancient novel) have already benefited from narratological analysis” (p. 137), I wonder why it should not also be the other way round. Concepts from antiquity, ancient rhetoric in particular, which could enrich narratological debates, are mentioned only briefly and in passing (once each Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Poetics* as well as Horace’s *Ars Poetica*). Also, the only two ancient concepts that are discussed at some length are *sphragis* (pp. 89-90) and the already mentioned *ekphrasis*. A final chapter on open questions and debatable issues or on the potential impact of ancient narratives on modern narratology may have been an additional treat. But I can see that such theoretical concerns would not dovetail

with the practical agenda of this stimulating guide: it will without doubt be of much use for classicists and narratologists alike, and I can only hope that it will play a key role in opening up the dialogue between the two fields and advancing the diachronization of narratology.

## Bibliography

- Alders, Max / Contzen, Eva von (2015) (Eds.): [Special issue on] "Social Minds in Factual and Fictional Narration". *Narrative* 23.2.
- Bayer, Gerd / Klitgård, Ebbe (2011): *Narrative Developments from Chaucer to Defoe*. New York.
- Contzen, Eva von (2014): "Why We Need a Medieval Narratology: A Manifesto". In: *DIEGESIS. Interdisziplinäres E-Journal für Erzählforschung / Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research* 3.2 (2014), pp. 1–21. URN: [urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20141118-103800-1](http://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20141118-103800-1) (01.10.2015).
- Fludernik, Monika (2003): "The Diachronization of Narratology". In: *Narrative* 11.3, pp. 331–48.
- Haferland, Harald / Meyer, Matthias (2010) (Eds.): *Historische Narratologie – Mediävistische Perspektiven*. Berlin.
- Herman, David (2011): *The Emergence of Mind: Representations of Consciousness in Narrative Discourse in English*. Lincoln, NE.
- Jong, Irene J. F. de (2001): *A Narratological Commentary on the Odyssey*. Cambridge.
- Jong, Irene J. F. de (2004): *Narrators and Focalizers. The Presentation of the Story in the Iliad*. London. [1978].
- Jong, Irene J. F. de et al. (2004) (Eds.): *Narrators, Narratees, and Narratives in Ancient Greek Literature*. Leiden. (= Studies in Ancient Greek Narrative 1).
- Jong, Irene J. F. de / Nünlist, René (2007) (Eds.): *Time in Ancient Greek Literature*. Leiden. (= Studies in Ancient Greek Narrative 2).
- Jong, Irene J. F. de (2012) (Ed.): *Space in Ancient Greek Literature*. Leiden. (= Studies in Ancient Greek Narrative 3).
- Jong, Irene J. F. de (2014): "The Anonymous Traveller in European Literature: A Greek Meme?". In: Douglas Cairns / Ruth Scodel (Eds.): *Defining Greek Narrative*. Edinburgh, pp. 314–33.
- Nünning, Ansgar (2000): "Towards a Cultural and Historical Narratology. A Survey of Diachronic Approaches, Concepts, and Research Projects". In: Bernhard Reitz / Sigrid Rieuwerts (Eds.), *Anglistentag 1999 Mainz*. Trier, pp. 345–73.
- Schulz, Armin (2012): *Erzähltheorie in mediävistischer Perspektive*. Berlin / Boston.

Dr. Eva von Contzen

Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg

Englisches Seminar, KG IV

Rempartstr. 15

79085 Freiburg i.Br.

Germany

E-Mail: [eva.voncontzen@anglistik.uni-freiburg.de](mailto:eva.voncontzen@anglistik.uni-freiburg.de)

URL: [http://www.anglistik.uni-freiburg.de/seminar/abteilungen/literaturwissenschaft/ls\\_fludernik/staff/evavoncontzen](http://www.anglistik.uni-freiburg.de/seminar/abteilungen/literaturwissenschaft/ls_fludernik/staff/evavoncontzen)

**Sie können den Text in folgender Weise zitieren / How to cite this article:**

Contzen, Eva von: „Narratology and Classics: A Transhistorical Approach [Review of: Irene J. F. de Jong: *Narratology and Classics. A Practical Guide*. Oxford 2014]“. In: *DIEGESIS. Interdisziplinäres E-Journal für Erzählforschung / Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research* 4.2 (2015). 97-102.

URN: [urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20151117-115242-8](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20151117-115242-8)

URL: <https://www.diegesis.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/diegesis/article/download/208/290>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

---

<sup>1</sup> See e.g. the volumes edited by Herman (2011) and Bayer / Klitgård (2011) respectively as well as the special issue 23.2 in *Narrative* (Alders / von Contzen 2015 [Eds.]). On medieval literature and historical narratology, see e.g. Haferland / Meyer (2010, Eds.); Schulz (2012); and von Contzen (2014).