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Talkin' bout a Revolution

Jarmila Mildorf on the Fictionality of Conversational Storytelling

Jarmila Mildorf: *Life Storying in Oral History. Fictional Contamination and Literary Complexity*. Berlin / Boston: De Gruyter, 2023, 211 pp. USD 114.99. ISBN 9783111072265

No longer a whisper, the shift away from the study of canonical narratives (i.e., literary fiction) to the analysis of non-canonical (i.e., non-literary, non-fictional, and non-verbal) forms of narration has been the hallmark of narrative studies in the past decades. As Monika Fludernik and Marie-Laure Ryan note in the introduction to their handbook on *Narrative Factuality* (2020, 13), the move towards the study of non-fictional (particularly conversational) narratives and the consequent reorientation towards linguistics and discourse analysis had a "transformative impact" on contemporary narratology. No less transformative, the recent surge of interest in theories of fiction and fictionality studies among narratologists gave rise to some of the first properly narratological theories of fiction since the 1990s, notably the rhetorical approach propounded by Richard Walsh, James Phelan, and Henrik Zetterberg-Nielsen. With her unwavering commitment to bringing together linguistics, social sciences, and narratology and her critical engagement with rhetorical theories of fictionality, Jarmila Mildorf has been at the center of both developments. *Life Storying in Oral History* is, in more than one regard, the culmination of these efforts.

On an obvious level, the book is a continuation of Mildorf's previous work in socionarratology (Mildorf 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2016, 2019), as well as her research on 'hybrid fictionality' or 'cross-fictionality' and vicarious storytelling published with Mari Hatavara (Hatavara/Mildorf 2017a, 2017b). Each of the central chapters of *Life Storying* explores a topic that readers will find familiar: conversational storytelling and oral history (Chapter 2), theories of fictionality (Chapter 3), socionarratology (Chapter 4), and the presence of literary techniques in ordinary conversation (Chapters 5–10). By bringing together these diverse topics, the book reveals a common theme running through Mildorf's previous work and underscores her central thesis – "that we have not yet fully fathomed the extent to which non-fictional forms of storytelling, also and especially conversational storytelling as is found, for example, in oral history and other interview contexts, can include fictionalized elements both on the levels of story and discourse" (p. 43).

Drawing on a linguistic tradition marked by seminal studies such as Deborah Tannen's *Talking Voices* (1989) and Neal Norrick's *Conversational Narrative* (2000) and the work of narratologists such as Monika Fludernik and David Herman, who already applied insights from discourse and narrative analysis to the study of conversational narratives, Mildorf shows how, when talking about themselves, 'ordinary' people do all sorts of things that one usually assumes only professional storytellers do. They see their lives as stories and shape them into *myths* (in Northrop Frye's sense of the term) with the help of fictional templates and clichés (Chapter 4); they think of themselves as characters (Chapter 4); they report long and detailed dialogues they couldn't possibly remember verbatim (Chapter 5); they play with pronouns and easily switch perspectives (Chapters 6 and 7); they engage in mind-reading (Chapter 10), and sometimes even use sophisticated literary techniques, such as free indirect discourse (Chapter 9), to render the representation of their lives more coherent, meaningful or interesting.

Mildorf extends the work of her predecessors in two ways – by tackling an underexplored corpus (oral autobiographical interviews or 'life stories') and by analyzing this material through the lens of ongoing debates about fictionality. Although she distinguishes between non-fictional and fictional narratives and does not embrace the panfictionalist stance advocated by some scholars of autobiography, Mildorf nonetheless argues "that the very *act of storytelling* already opens the door to potential fictionalization since the narrative discourse mode may entail features that – if pushed too far in non-fictional storytelling contexts – may diminish the credibility of the story told while also attesting to the creative impulse that storytelling, in general, accommodates" (p. 2). After all, she explains, "when we tell stories, we strive to 'draw in' listeners or readers, to engage and involve them in the actions and situations we present in our stories" (p. 2), and to do so we often resort not only to literary techniques but also to strategies long regarded as "signposts of fictionality" (Cohn 1990), e.g., mind attribution (the narrative representation of other people's thoughts and sensations).

Replacing her earlier notions of hybrid fictionality and cross-fictionality, Mildorf now labels this convergence between fiction and non-fiction in everyday storytelling 'fictional contamination'. The term 'contamination' strikes as an odd choice here, given its generally negative connotations and connection to notions such as purity, cleanliness, and healthiness. However, Mildorf is careful to specify that she uses the term "metaphorically," "in a non-medical sense," and "in analogy to how it is used in linguistics" (p. 51), notably in traditional morphology and lexicology, where contamination describes a hybrid, amalgam, or union of two elements that mutually influence each other, both semantically and structurally. Although distinct, these elements become so closely related by association that they start to merge, producing a new third element.

Mildorf's 'contamination' differs from similar linguistic notions, such as 'creolization' and 'hybridization,' as well as her earlier versions of the concept in how she conceives the relationship between the two elements, i.e., fictional and non-fictional storytelling. She no longer considers fictionality a discrete entity that 'moves' or 'travels' between different narrative modes and genres but sees

it as part of a complex relationship of mutual influence based on *narrative homology* – a fundamental likeness between fictional and factual storytelling based on shared narrative strategies. These include the employment of dialogue as a means of characterization; the creative use of pronouns to position tellers and characters, and the consequent shifting and blurring of referentiality in double deixis and second-person narration; perspective-taking and focalization as a way of engaging and guiding the recipients' perception of the storyworld; and free indirect discourse and other forms of thought representation. In other words, when it comes to storytelling, "fictionalization is already a built-in possibility, and there will be a point where the degree to which a story becomes fictionalized due to excessive or unexpected use of certain storytelling features may turn it into a story that people no longer trust or believe in" (p. 52).

But where might that point be? "When does the *fictional contamination* become too much, in the sense that one begins to question the validity or truthfulness of what has been told? When does a narrative make one feel suspicious or give one the impression that one has been duped?", asks Mildorf (p. 53), and concludes that this cannot be "measured in a quantitative way," since "each storytelling situation constitutes a unique context which draws on certain frames of reference and expectations in people's minds" (p. 178). I find Mildorf's skepticism here entirely justified: clearly, what makes a story fictional in the eyes (or, in this case, eyes and ears) of its recipients cannot be the mere occurrence of features typically associated with literary fiction. The fictional status of a narrative is not determined by whether storytellers use (proto-)typically 'fictional' techniques – as her analyses eloquently display, they often do – but by how these techniques are used, their purpose, and their overall interaction with the text's dominant or "focusing component" (Jakobson 1981: 751). In other words, it is a question of function, not quantity.

In this respect, Mildorf's stance on the issue of techniques and 'signposts' is not that far removed from the position of pragmatically orientated theorists of fiction, such as the authors of the "Ten Theses about Fictionality," who claim that "no formal technique or other textual feature is in itself a necessary and sufficient ground for identifying fictive discourse" (Nielsen et al. 2015, 66; cf. Phelan/Nielsen 2017). "There are no one-to-one correspondences between certain discursive features and fictionality," says Mildorf (p. 38), but "there are still features which one would typically associate with generic fiction more than with non-fictional narratives." These 'typical' associations naturally vary depending on the cultural, social, and historical context (cf. Nielsen et al. 2015). More to the point, they depend on the audience's generic expectations – and this rule, as *Life Storying in Oral History* compellingly argues, applies to both literary and discursive genres. Finally, when it comes to fictionality, not all techniques are created equal: a given narrative strategy, say, mind attribution, will have a different effect depending on the generic context where it appears. In the testimony of a World War II veteran about the demise of General Patton (analyzed in Hatavara/Mildorf 2017b), this effect is more disruptive than in the life story of the fiber artist Gerhardt Knodel, recounting how his grandparents met (see

Hatavara/Mildorf 2017a). It is more disruptive not because it is more 'fantastic,' 'romantic,' or 'invented,' but because it violates some of the constitutive generic features of testimony, notably the rule of autobiographic certification (see Dulong 1998).

The main source of disagreement between Mildorf and pragmatic/rhetorical approaches to fictionality concerns the issue of intentionality and the question of whether fictionality is necessarily 'communicated,' or 'signaled' invention, as Walsh (2019), Nielsen, Phelan and Walsh (2015) would have it. Mildorf rejects intentionalist views of fictionality by arguing that, although in the context of generic fiction (e.g., a novel) it makes sense to say that fictionality is fully intended by the author or that authors want their readers to recognize the fictional status of their work, there are many cases, especially outside of generic fiction, where this intention is far from unambiguous. Oral life stories are particularly illuminating in this regard since they provide ample evidence of vague, shifting, or contradictory intentions.

Although Mildorf is right to emphasize our propensity to misunderstand others and misread their intentions, her take on this issue could be further developed. One gets the impression, particularly in the discussion of the hypothetical 'adulterer's narrative' at the beginning of Chapter 3, that there is a tendency to blur the lines that separate (self-)delusions, instances of local fictionality, 'embellishments,' and plain lies. Mildorf seems to believe that because these phenomena lack factual content, they can all be categorized as "believed-in imaginings" (p. 8). However, setting aside the thorny issue of how fiction influences real-world beliefs and whether these beliefs are identical to those induced by conspiracy theories, reports of Satanic ritual abuse, or alien abduction, there are significant differences between them. One could argue that not every utterance without factual content qualifies as fiction – erroneous assertions, delusions, and outright lies are also utterances without factual content. However, unlike fiction, mistakes and delusions do not result from pretense, and lies – again, unlike fiction – are based on serious, not ludic, pretense. It is hard to see how one can distinguish between these phenomena without resorting to some form of intentionality. Mildorf, however, argues that what separates fiction from lying, deluded, or erroneous thinking is its inherent connection to narrative. "Without narrativization," she claims,

> stating the non-actual falls into other categories such as the misrepresentation of facts, deception or lying. When Anna Sorokin claimed she was Anna Delvey and a German heiress, she was telling a lie. However, as I already pointed out, she is likely to have told other people stories about her family, about her relationship to her parents, perhaps her upbringing, etc. This is when she began to create her own personal fiction (p. 35).

It is not entirely clear, to me, at least, why narrativization would necessarily entail fictionalization (narrative and fiction being distinct, though intersecting categories[1]) or why lies and delusions would be considered non-narrative. As Mildorf's example of the cheating husband's story confirms, a lie, no matter how elaborate or inventive, remains a lie – it does not change status merely because it is more creative. Admittedly, things tend to get slippery in conversational settings, where,

as Mildorf convincingly shows, speakers are not always aware that they are partially inventing or 'embellishing' their life experiences, and where the anecdotal often serves the same – ludic – purpose as the fictional. These questions undoubtedly merit deeper exploration than I can provide here, and it would be invaluable if Mildorf were to delve into them further – hopefully in another book.

To readers unfamiliar with the rich, varied, and fascinating corpus of oral life stories, including many narratologists, *Life Storying in Oral History* comes as a revelation (or, in keeping with the Tracy Chapman allusion from the title, a revolution). It debunks some of narratology's most persistent myths about literary narration and its specificities and takes a decisive step in elucidating the relationship between artistic and everyday storytelling. More importantly, perhaps, it draws attention and pays homage to the mundane, fleeting, seemingly insignificant Proustian exercises we engage in daily and with such gusto.

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[1] As Jean-Marie Schaeffer (2009, 100) reminds us, "not every fiction is verbal (paintings can be, and very often are, fictional), and not every fiction, or even every verbal fiction, is narrative: both a painted portrait of a unicorn and a verbal description of a unicorn are fictions without being narrations." Mildorf, on the other hand, claims that, although "it would be wrong to say that all narratives are automatically fictional," "all forms of fictionality – whether in generic fiction or outside of it – must include narrativization" (p. 35).