

*t*ransitions



# Postmodern Narrative Theory

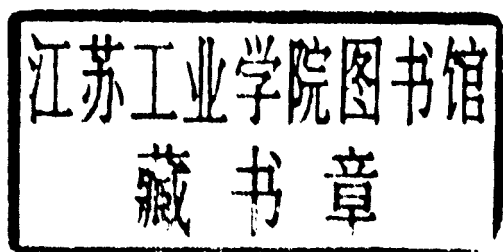
*Mark Currie*



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# Postmodern Narrative Theory

Mark Currie



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# General Editor's Preface

Transitions: *transition-em*, n. of action. 1. A passing or passage from one condition, action or (rarely) place, to another. 2. Passage in thought, speech, or writing, from one subject to another. 3. a. The passing from one note to another b. The passing from one key to another, modulation. 4. The passage from an earlier to a later stage of development or formation ... change from an earlier style to a later; a style of intermediate or mixed character ... the historical passage of language from one well-defined stage to another.

The aim of *Transitions* is to explore passages and movements in critical thought, and in the development of literary and cultural interpretation. This series also seeks to examine the possibilities for reading, analysis and other critical engagements which the very idea of transition makes possible. The writers in this series unfold the movements and modulations of critical thinking over the last generation, from the first emergences of what is now recognised as literary theory. They examine as well how the transitional nature of theoretical and critical thinking is still very much in operation, guaranteed by the hybridity and heterogeneity of the field of literary studies. The authors in the series share the common understanding that, now more than ever, critical thought is both in a state of transition and can best be defined by developing for the student reader an understanding of this protean quality.

This series desires, then, to enable the reader to transform her/his own reading and writing transactions by comprehending past developments. Each book in the series offers a guide to the poetics and politics of interpretative paradigms, schools and bodies of thought, while transforming these, if not into tools or methodologies, then into conduits for directing and channelling thought. As well as transforming the critical past by interpreting it from the perspective of the present day, each study enacts transitional readings of a number of well-known literary texts, all of which are themselves conceivable as

having been transitional texts at the moments of their first appearance. The readings offered in these books seek, through close critical reading and theoretical engagement, to demonstrate certain possibilities in critical thinking to the student reader.

It is hoped that the student will find this series liberating because rigid methodologies are not being put into place. As all the dictionary definitions of the idea of transition above suggest, what is important is the action, the passage: of thought, of analysis, of critical response. Rather than seeking to help you locate yourself in relation to any particular school or discipline, this series aims to put you into action, as readers and writers, travellers between positions, where the movement between poles comes to be seen as of more importance than the locations themselves.

*Julian Wolfreys*

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*MC*

# Abbreviations

- HD Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1902) London: Penguin, 1983.
- JH Robert Louis Stevenson, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Stories* (1886) London: Penguin, 1979.

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# Introduction: Narratology, Death and Afterlife

## Diversification, deconstruction, politicisation

Narratology is the theory and systematic study of narrative. It has been with us in one form or another throughout the twentieth century, and it has evolved into one of the most tangible, coherent and precise areas of expertise in literary and cultural studies. It began as a science of narrative form and structure, acquired a formidable dominance as an approach to literary narrative, overshadowed historical perspective for several decades and then, somewhere in the middle of the 1980s, ran into problems. After years of protest from the historicist camps and after two decades of assault from poststructuralists on its scientific orientation and authority, people started to declare the death of narratology.

Something may have died. Something inside. A certain youthful spirit perhaps. But narratology at large underwent nothing more dramatic than a transition, and a very positive transition away from some of the limits and excesses of its youth. This book aims to describe the transition from the formalist and structuralist narratologies of the recent past, to set out the principles and procedures of the new narratologies, and to illustrate the extended scope and continuing vitality of a narratology in the process of transforming into something much bigger than it was: a narratology capable of bringing its expertise to bear on narratives wherever they can be found, which is everywhere.

If there is a contemporary narratological cliché it is exactly this claim that narratives are everywhere. So many recent studies begin by pointing out that narrative is not confined to literature. But however often it has been repeated, it is a key characteristic of the recent

change in narratology: a massive expansion in the narratological remit, in the scope of objects for narratological analysis. Commonly cited examples of narrative in everyday life are films, music videos, advertisements, television and newspaper journalism, myths, paintings, songs, comic strips, anecdotes, jokes, stories of our holidays, and accounts of our day. In more academic contexts, there has been a recognition that narrative is central to the representation of identity, in personal memory and self-representation or in collective identity of groups such as regions, nations, race and gender. There has been widespread interest in narrative in history, in the operations of legal systems, in psychoanalysis, in scientific analysis, in economics and in philosophy. Narrative is as inescapable as language in general, or as cause and effect, as a mode of thinking and being. After seminal studies such as Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* it does not seem at all exaggerated to view humans as narrative animals, as *homo fabulans* – the tellers and interpreters of narrative. In the light of these recognitions it is hard to see how narratology could die out. There may be a crisis of self-importance, requiring that narratology adapt its methods to these new demands, or an identity crisis caused by this diversification. But this is diversification, not death.

Diversification is the first of three principles that can be used to summarise the transition in contemporary narratology. The second principle, if it can be called that, is deconstruction. Deconstruction can be used as an umbrella term under which many of the most important changes in narratology can be described, especially those which depart from the very scientific emphasis of structuralist narratology. As an *-ology*, narratology declares the values of systematic and scientific analysis by which it operated before poststructuralist critiques impacted on literary studies. Much of this book will be devoted to the importance of these critiques and their narratological legacy. At this stage it might be useful to convey some of the general characteristics of this legacy.

From discovery to invention, from coherence to complexity, and from poetics to politics: this is the short summary of the transition that took place in narratological theory in the 1980s. The first change – from discovery to invention – reflects a broad shift away from the scientific assumption that narratology could be an objective science which discovers inherent formal and structural properties in its object narratives. Poststructuralist narratology moved away from the assumed transparency of the narratological analysis towards a recog-

dition that the reading, however objective and scientific, constructed its object. Structure became something that was projected onto the work by a reading rather than a property of a narrative discovered by the reading. Structure came to be seen as a metaphor used by readers of a structuralist bent to give the impression of stability in the object – narrative meaning. Terms like construction, construal, structuration and structuring were preferred by poststructuralists because they point to the active role of the reader in the construction of meaning. Other terms, like process, becoming, play, difference, slippage and dissemination, challenge the idea that a narrative is a stable structure by borrowing their metaphors from the semantic field of movement. In short, poststructuralists moved away from the treatment of narratives (and the language system in general) as buildings, as solid objects in the world, towards the view that narratives were narratological inventions construable in an almost infinite number of ways.

The shift from coherence to complexity was part of this broad departure from the view of narratives as stable structures. Most of the formal sciences of narrative were effectively sciences of unity and coherence. Like the physicist, the chemist or the microbiologist, the role of the narratologist was traditionally to uncover a hidden design which would render the object intelligible. For the traditional critic, the most profound hidden design in a narrative was its unity, the exposure of which would also be a revelation of the work's formal, thematic or even polemic coherence. In other words, in the critical quest for unity there was a desire to present a narrative as a coherent and stable project. In the view of the poststructuralist critic, this was just a way of reducing the complexity or heterogeneity of a narrative: by suppressing textual details that contradicted the scheme, the traditional narratologist could present a partial reading of the text which saw it as a stable and coherent project. It was a key characteristic of poststructuralist narratology that it sought to sustain contradictory aspects of narrative, preserving their complexity and refusing the impulse to reduce the narrative to a stable meaning or coherent project. This will be illustrated later.

The deconstruction of narratology then, involved the destruction of its scientific authority and pointed to a less reductive kind of reading which was not underpinned by notions like the coherence of the authorial project or the stability of the language system in general. The deconstruction of narratology was also closely linked to what I called, a moment ago, the diversification of narratology, since decon-

struction was no respecter of boundaries, least of all the boundary between literature and the real world. But deconstruction became notorious in the early 1980s for what politically engaged critics such as Marxists saw as its fundamentally conservative character, for a political quietism. Intent as it was on the discovery of doubt and the celebration of irreducible complexity, deconstruction was perceived as another formalism, as a kind of anti-historicism, lacking any basis in historical and political reality and without any programme for social change. How then is it possible to argue that part of the legacy of deconstruction was the transition from poetics to politics?

There are several ways of approaching this issue. The first argument begins from the fact that formalism and historicism had been at war within literary studies through most of the century. In the United States there had been a long period in which the formalist approaches of New Criticism were dominant in literary studies. This was not an unchallenged dominance: American literary journals in the period from 1910 to 1970 attest to a constant opposition to formalist approaches from the historicist camps. When poststructuralist perspectives arrived in the United States in 1966 after a very brief period of interest in structuralism, they were seen by historicists as continuations of the New Critical emphasis on form, and as the next incarnation of the anti-historicist approach. This was not an accurate perception, ignoring as it does the extent to which poststructuralist perspectives were founded on a critique of the synchronic and atemporal nature of structuralist analysis. Many poststructuralists were poststructuralists exactly because they sought to reintroduce historical perspectives into criticism. Even if some of the main deconstructors looked like new New Critics in their formalist orientation, there were important aspects of their theory, which will be described later in this book, which allowed for the convergence of historical and formal critical approaches. This is an important principle which I will do no more than state at the moment: that deconstruction allowed for the reintroduction of historical perspective into narratology, and that this acted as a bridge towards a more political criticism.

The transition from poetics to politics can also be seen as a deconstructive legacy because deconstruction introduced new methods for the unmasking of ideology. While the term 'ideology' had, in the period of polemic warfare between historicism and formalism, been part of the armoury of the Marxist critic and therefore had been broadly perceived as an anti-formalist weapon, it was a term which

became a point of convergence for the interests of poststructuralist and Marxist criticism. It became common to hear critics such as Kenneth Burke, Mikhail Bakhtin, Louis Althusser, Pierre Macherey, Michel Foucault or Theodor Adorno invoked for a poststructuralist Marxism, reflecting the perception that there were common denominators between the two approaches traditionally viewed as polemic opponents. At a general level, there were common philosophical denominators. Poststructuralists and Marxists both demoted the individual or subject as an explanatory category and saw the individual as part of a larger social system. As a result, both camps viewed the production of language as the unknowing reproduction of ideological forms and values and not as an original act of undetermined creativity. Both therefore approached literature as an ideological form despite the individual intentions that authors may have held. Given these broad similarities, any new reading procedures from deconstruction which advanced the project of ideological unmasking were bound to be seen as critical resources by politically orientated critics.

A specific example of the way in which deconstruction advanced the unmasking of ideology was the approach it took to the binary opposition (further discussion of which can be found in Chapter 2 of Wolfreys' *Deconstruction • Derrida*, in this series). This was an area of critical procedure and theory which belonged specifically to the apolitical tradition of structuralism, but which took on a more political inflection in the hands of some poststructuralists. Structuralist linguists had perhaps overstated the importance of the binary opposition as a meaning-generating unit, and structuralist narratologists were sometimes obsessive about the structural role of the binary opposition in narrative. The poststructuralist critic often shares this obsession but tends to view the binary opposition as an unstable basis for meaning and as a place where the values and hidden ideologies of the text are inscribed. A deconstructive reading, for example, will characteristically view the binary opposition as a hierarchy in which one term of the opposition enjoys a privilege over the other, and the reading often proceeds to demonstrate that the text contains counter-suggestions which upturn the hierarchy.

These narratological procedures are illustrated thoroughly later in this book. My aim for now is to point to an emphasis in deconstructive reading on the uncovering of hidden values in a narrative – values which often subvert what might be called the conscious intention of the narrative. Even if deconstruction did not always see these aporetic

oppositions in obviously political terms, it was nevertheless part of the legacy of deconstruction to provide new approaches to the discovery of ideology in narrative. Since deconstruction, it is common to find overtly political narratologies articulated in an identifiably deconstructive vocabulary and bringing distinctly deconstructive approaches to bear on issues in the politics and ideology of narrative.

Diversification, deconstruction and politicisation then are the three characteristics of the transition in contemporary narratology. It will already be apparent that the three terms are mutually implicated, forming a triangular ménage. The transition they describe is a transition in the general assumptions and procedures of poststructural narratology, and the importance of each term varies in specific works of narratology and narratological theory. But it takes no more than a browse in the bookshop to confirm that a transition has taken place along these lines. Studies published before about 1987 often use the word 'narratology' in the title. They have chapter headings like 'Events', 'Characterisation', 'Time' and 'Focalisation'. They are abstract grammars which declare their allegiance to linguistics at every turn, in their style and terminology. And they are focused on literary narrative. Studies after that date are more interdisciplinary, harder to shelve and to find. They don't use the -ology word in their titles, preferring narrative theory or even narrativity, and often link the question of narrative to particular identity groups (gender, race and nation) or types of discourse. They are less abstract, less scientific and more politically engaged. They often begin by declaring that narrative is everywhere, that it is a mode of thinking and being, and that it is not confined to literature.

### **Models for narratological change**

In 1937, John Crowe Ransom wrote an influential essay titled 'Criticism Inc.'. It posed a very persuasive argument that in the new age of professionalism the literary critic had a weak academic identity. It argued that the critic had to develop an area of expertise which was distinct from that of the historian and the philosopher, and that departments of literature should no longer see themselves as branches of bigger trees: as the history of literature or the ethics of literature. For Ransom the identity crisis in literary studies was resolvable by the development of a distinct technical expertise which would

enhance the critic's ability to describe the text itself without reference to historical context or philosophical ideas.

In 1983, Terry Eagleton published an enormously influential introduction to literary theory which argued the opposite: that the formalist expertise that had been the dominant strain in literary studies through most of the century was a restriction on the professional literary critic because it excluded issues about the politics and ideology of literature and prevented the critic from working in the service of social change.

These two arguments represent the poles of historicism and formalism between which literary studies oscillated through most of the century. Whenever one camp seemed dominant, the other would declare a state of crisis resolvable only by the displacement of one kind of criticism by the other. In the 1970s and 1980s there was a new crisis every twenty minutes as textual and contextual critics sought to destroy each other in one of the most absurd debates in intellectual history. Perhaps because of the increased speed of the oscillation, the debate became increasingly about nuances of difference in the politics of reading. The so-called theory wars of the 1970s and 1980s actually tore departments of literature apart in debates organised around the narcissism of increasingly minor difference.

Perhaps a peak of absurdity was reached in 1989 when Paul de Man's wartime journalism was discovered by a Belgian scholar. For the politically committed, de Man's readings of narrative represented the dangers of a criticism with a formalist orientation, and in the 1980s his work was the subject of a kind of witch hunt, where the witchery was characterised as the presentation of a right wing politics in the disguise of radicalism. The wartime journalism – mostly inoffensive reviews for a collaborationist newspaper in Belgium – was widely viewed as confirmation of the latent fascism in deconstructive narratology. The case was aggravated by de Man's apologists who brought deconstructive narratological perspectives to bear on the new narrative of de Man's life. For many, the episode seemed to confirm the link between the deconstructive celebration of doubt and indeterminacy in narrative and the question of the critic's political responsibility, or, in stronger language, the link between deconstruction and fascism.

Eagleton's argument was part of an evolving political rectitude in criticism which effaced the difference between a formalist orientation in narratology and war crime. I would not want to understate the



ideological power of narrative in areas such as the legitimization of nation, of empire building, in attitudes to race and gender, or in the perpetuation of inequality. I would however contest the importance of narratological orientation to social change on two grounds. The first is a profound doubt about how much impact the unmasking of narrative ideology could ever have on political culture in general. If the role of an intellectual is to speak the truth to power, as Gramsci formulated it, the evidence suggests that power is not listening. Recent debates on education in Britain, for example, illustrate the greater impact of recent thought on the importance of spelling at school level than the dissident narratologies of university English. The second ground for doubt is the dubious alignment of historicist narratological orientations with social change and of formalism with political quietism. It is now much more apparent than it used to be that historicist and ideologically orientated critics depend on formalist narratological terminology and models for analysis in order to be able to say anything precise about the history and the ideology of narrative. The strength of contemporary narratology lies in the wealth of descriptive resources which were developed by mainly formalist critics and could then be used by critics of a more historicist bent. In other words, the issue of social change is a red herring, and the understanding of how ideology operates in narrative is an important subset of narratology which depends on the descriptive resources of its formalist history.

Part of the problem here lies in the absurdity of a debate which casts formalism as the polar opposite of historicism when the two camps have clearly forged a more co-operative relationship. But the problem also lies in the models that have been used to theorise critical change. One model, or metaphor, that has been widely used is that of fashion. According to this metaphor, no critical orientation is more capable than any other of conveying the truth about a text, but critical approaches have a built-in obsolescence. After a period of dominance they will give way to an approach whose main critical virtue is newness, even when that newness consists in the recovery and recontextualisation of the past. Criticism has adhered to the value of newness to an embarrassing extent in the twentieth century, where the names of critical approaches function as flags of allegiance to modernity – New Criticism, New Historicism, Poststructuralism, Postmodernism, Postmarxism, Postfeminism, etc. – and the terminology of each approach resorts to neologisms – the -ologies, -icities and