

NARRATOLOGY = THE THEORY OF THE EPIC?

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In literary theoretical studies on the whole the theory of the novel and the epic is gradually being replaced by narratology. It seems expedient to more and more researchers to start from the postulation that the *sine qua non* of the epic is the narrator: he is the mythical creator of epic works, and so the task of the theory of the epic is to explore the characteristic features of narration as a way of presentation.

Certainly, the analysis of the features of the epic must inevitably include the discussion of the problems of narration as well: it is one possible ingredient of the text of an epic work. It is nevertheless evident that the investigations - even if we start from the narration - cannot be restricted only to the narration or only to the text. They must also include the answer to the question of what the text of an epic work represents, that is, they *must* deal with the characteristics of the text-world. For scholars of the epic, for researchers into narratology the basic "immanent" question is precisely what the relationship is between the two levels of literary works: the text and the text-world.

From the viewpoint of the theory of genres the relationship between the two levels can be defined by telling which level of the epic work bears genre-constituent markers.

According to the great majority of scholars dealing with the characteristics of epic works, as we have already

said, the class of works, analysed by them, have the *narration* as the determinative feature, narration being the most important component of the epic text; moreover, for some the whole epic text is a monologue, that is, purely narration where the linguistic manifestations of the figures are just quotations.

We, however, share the opinion of those who find the abolition of the genre-constitutive role of narration a more fertile solution. In this conception the works, the analysis and the theory with which narratology deals, are not necessarily results of narration but simply of speech, writing, printing. The "novelty", the 'novel', as this genre is called, appears *as writing on the wall* like 'mene, tekal, ufar-sin' on the wall of the palace of the Babylonian Belshazzar; thus we could call it the writing of a spiritual hand, of the spirit of the novel.

We seem to know the extent to which this standpoint can be attacked, which can be from at least two directions. Those who are willing to go along with our argument expressed in a rather mystical image can rightly ask: does not our opinion lead to the undesirable consequence that the possibility of classifying literature according to genres ceases to exist. Whether every form of manifestation of lyric, dramatic and epic poetry does not turn into 'novelty', 'novel'? Those who will not even take the first step with us obviously say: why should those things always be doubted that have seemed to be the most certain among the various suggestions? Since there is no other statement which arises more naturally than that the works constituting the class of epic literature be the expressions of some closed process by way of narration; that is, that narration is genre-constitutive feature.

Before showing what other possibilities the rejection of the genre-constituent function of narration opens for the classification of literary works from an essential aspect,

we must look to why the majority of scholars regard narration as an obvious genre-determinative feature.

In our view this opinion results from the following train of thought. Employing language for the creation of literary works is inevitably secondary i.e. posterior, as the false use of a statement is posterior and, in this sense, secondary, opposed to its true use. Since we can only speak of a lie if we know under what circumstances the statement would be true. Thus literary communication, that is, communication by literary works is in a general sense, and each class of work in the communication can be derived from non-literary communication. Thus epic poetry can be derived from a certain communicative situation, the so-called narrative situation, where the narration is the most important element.

The constituents of the narrative situation - as it is found in many theoretical works - are the following: the narrating person, the process forming the object of the narration, already enclosed in the moment of narration, the process of narration and the public listening to the narration. This communicative process becomes secondary, i.e. literary, when at least one of the four elements is modified. According to scholars, who regard narration as a genre-constituent element, it is the series of events forming the object of narration or the narration itself. The process narrated in an epic work differs from the object of ordinary narration in that a part of it (or the whole) may be virtual, without the narration itself becoming a lie. As a consequence of this (or distinct from this) the general rules referring to narration may also change. (With respect to the fact that opinions about the nature of this change are very diverse even in the case of scholars starting from the narrative situation, we must make do with this general remark in this connection.)

The deduction of the characteristic features of the epic from the ordinary narrative situation - in spite of appearances - is, in essence, the result of a historical approach: in spite of appearances the primacy of ordinary narrative situation is only temporal and not logical. Though we must know the historical connections these are, however, not enough to introduce the concept of narrative situation into theories the validity circle of which is not confined to the age of the emergence of the genre in question. Instead of a lengthy exposition on the theory of science, we would like to show the difference between the historical and the theoretical definition of a concept with the help of an analogous example; so much the more because the example to be quoted helps us in the establishment of our own standpoint.

In his *Poetics* Aristotle compares mimesis as a characteristic activity of poetry to ordinary mimesis, to imitation (of a child). This does not mean, however, that the artistic activity could be deduced from ordinary mimesis in Aristotelian poetics. Mimesis as a literary theoretical concept can no longer be identified with mimesis which is one of the natural reasons underlying the development of art. The difference between the two concepts of mimesis can be demonstrated, in the first approach, by saying that while mimesis in the earlier and ordinary usage supposes the existence of the imitated, in literary theory we also speak about Aristotelian imitation in the sense that the imitated only virtually exists.

The example, as we can see and as we promised, is not distant since (there is a similar difference) between the mimesis of art and ordinary mimesis there is a similar difference as between the object of literary narration and that of primary narration. Not the similarity but the possible virtuality of the imitated and the narrated process is essential from the viewpoint of literary theory. While the liter-

ary quality of the narrative situation comes from the fact that its narrator can also narrate virtual series of events, this circumstance in mimesis-theory is significant from another point of view. According to Aristotle a work of artistic value is attained if the *imitated* satisfies certain conditions, and it is another matter that the required conditions can be achieved more easily by imitating real or virtual events.

With this comparison of mimesis and the narrative situation we hope that we have argued convincingly that the historical approach cannot always substitute for the theoretical, and that the narration is not necessarily and self-evidently a genre-constituent feature. But we have not yet pointed to the undesirable consequences that can follow from the likely theoretical definitions of the narrative situation and the narration. We would like to cover these questions also, though within the present scope we can touch upon the problem from one point of view only, and referentially. But before this we must also reply to the objections which maintain that precisely the rejection of the favoured role of narration is followed by undesirable consequences: among other things the classification of literary works from the essential point of view becomes impossible.

Maybe many would not bother about this objection. There are theories which consider the classification of literary works a totally insignificant activity. For these, the value of a literary work lies only in its individuality. Such theories, however, over-emphasize the individuality of single works. It could be shown that a merely individual work of art would not be able to perform any function connected with cognition.

Anyway; if we think about the rationality of the classification of literary works, we must take into account the fact that it can be carried out basically from the follow-

ing points of view: rhetorical and hermeneutical. The importance of setting norms of genres is different for the writer - that is, from the theoretical point of view - and for the recipient - that is, from the hermeneutical point of view. The characteristics of genres determine strategies of creation and reception. Or conversely: the fact that the strategies of creation and reception serving the creation and the cognition of works, respectively have common characteristics can prove that there are genres and groups of genres.

In this conception the purpose of theories of genre, and so the criticism of their judgment is eventually to what extent they serve creation and reception.

(Intermediate summary: thus the two theories of genres - i.e. operation with rhetorical and hermeneutical viewpoints - must be well separated. But this does not mean that they cannot have an identical component: the form-aspects of genres, that is, the features of genres formally manageable are indifferent with regard to the rhetorical and hermeneutical viewpoints.)

When now presenting a classic example for the classification of the arts and, within it, that of literary works, we want to show, on the one hand, that relevant classification is also possible without the introduction of the narrative situation, while, on the other hand, this kind of classification is sensitive to the differentiation between rhetorical and hermeneutical viewpoints.

We turn again to Aristotle who, after separating 'the art of words' from other branches of art, classified literary works on the basis of the subject of imitation. He systematized those works explicitly which depict acting persons. Aristotle thought that the acting persons should be judged from an ethical point of view, namely, in their relation to men outside the text-world. In this way he saw the possibility of three judgements: characters may be bet-

ter, worse or similar to those existing independently of the text-world. And also on this basis works depicting acting persons can be divided into three classes.

If we take into account the social function of works depicting acting persons, - that they display the functioning of value-systems determining the action in a possible world, and so can orientate the recipients' action - it is easy to see that this classification is relevant from the viewpoints of both creation and reception. It is evident at the same time that the basis of comparison permitting the classification: i.e. persons that can be known independently of the text-world and *the ethics of measurements*, may be different for the creator and the recipient; and if we could exclude this discrepancy only then should we say that Aristotelian genres are forms of works of art.

Some may say we have been rash to use the expression 'Aristotelian genres'. Defenders of the narrative situation certainly will not hesitate to remark: it is true that Aristotle placed epic and tragedy in one class, for both imitate very worthy people. But did he not differentiate them as epos and tragedy on no other basis than that of presentation?

The question is more complicated than it appears. When Aristotle, independent of the classification mentioned before, classifies literary works according to the *law* of description, he relies on an already existing arrangement, that of Gorgius and Plato. Nevertheless, in this way three classes should be distinguished, too.

Works where the poet speaks himself and makes others speak belong to the first class. Those where only the poet speaks and does not make others speak belong to the second class. Those where the poet does not speak and makes only others speak belong to the third one.

So this classification also differs from the one which at present recognizes lyric, epic and drama. From our par-

ticular point of view the following is essential: even if we conceived that in the former arrangement the third class is 'pure drama', while the first two are epic, and within this, the first class is nothing but 'pure epic', we must realize that Aristotle does not prefer the first class which seems to realize the 'classic narrative situation', but he considers the mixture of 'pure epic' and 'pure drama' as the ideal epic, namely - if we can put it this way - few parts of 'pure epic' to many parts of 'pure drama'. Homer is a paragon for him because he seems to know that the poet is allowed to speak little for he is not an imitator in that sense! We admit that the characteristics of Greek culture, the almost total interpenetration of drama and stage, etc. may have contributed to the fact that Aristotelian poetics, to a certain extent, could become a source for the classification of literature as lyric epic and dramatic poetry where narration has become the major problem of epic. That this has not happened in the spirit of Aristotle may have appeared indirectly through the two - we stress, independently of each other - classifications already presented.

To sum up the lessons of examples from the *Poetics*: we must return to the Aristotelian programme which does not recognize the dominant role of narration. A theory of genres must be worked out which - at least from the hermeneutical point of view - attributed secondary importance to the differentiation between drama and epic, possible on the basis of the method of representation. The theory of the epic thus conceived must be less concerned with the technical questions of narration and more with what Aristotle deals with in the core of this *Poetics*: myth /series of events and actions/ which appears in works imitating a /praxis abstract, well-formed structure of the plot/ to be defined. Thus the theory of event or action becomes the central ques-



tion of the theory of the epic, namely the theory of a good or bad action leading is catharsis. For this reason the theory of the epic cannot be equated with narratology, in our opinion, which is just a non-central part of the former; the theory of the epic is, in the first place, a theory of science dealing with the explanation of series of events represented by devices of linguistic systems.

The realization of the Aristotelian programme, drafted before, has already begun. It is enough to refer to the activity of V. J. Propp, M.M Bahtin, C. Bremond and T. Todorov.

We cannot conclude our discussion at this point. There is still a question to be raised: is it not possible to connect the programme here called 'Aristotelian' with the theory of narration starting from the narrative situation? We ourselves have stated that the studies concerning the characteristic features of epic, even if they start from narration, cannot be restricted only to the narration or only to the text: they must cover the text-world, too. Moreover, it is also evident that the Aristotelian distinction between the methods of presentation, that can be traced back to Gorgius, may be considered exploded now. The secondariness of the literary narrative situation - according to relevant theoretical works - may start not only from the virtuality of the series of events to be narrated: other elements in the narrative situation may become virtual as well. So beside the actual narrator, the writer, a fictitious narrator, and beside the actual recipient, the existing reader, the work-immanent 'gentle reader', should be considered. Consequently the fictitious narrator, the fictitious process and the fictitious 'gentle reader' become the elements which determine the literary narrative situation. Now it is easy to see that narration as a form of communication is also fictitious, i.e. created. The fictitious narration is thus one possible, but not an exclusive, form of

information-relationship between the writer and the existing reader, and it would be impractical to restrict the epic to classes of those works where both the fictitious narrator and the 'gentle reader' appear. It may be true that scholars working with the narrative situation do not consider this restriction, but it is precisely this which leads them to find the narrator where no traces of him are found.

In any case, the reduction of the theory of the epic to narratology has more far-reaching consequences than we would imagine. In the following - which is also at the same time a conclusion - we cover only one of the most important problems.

If we turn from the analysis of narration to that of the narrated, i.e. the series of events in the text-world, there is the important question of what to analyse, what to explain. Which are the facts making up the text-world? And is the text-world homogenous, or does it have levels? If so, what is the relation between the levels? These questions can be answered if we give the truth-criteria referring to the statements of literary works that present series of events.

The question of truth-criteria, since it was not raised in this context, was rejected earlier, while it has achieved enormous popularity recently. To answer it, however, is impossible, or at least very difficult, if we start from the fiction of the literary narrative situation. This hypothesis forces solutions which are not proved by the practice of literary science. We would like to affirm our assertion with the help of an example again, this time from a more recent work. We are thinking of L. Dolezel's *Truth and Authenticity in Narrative*. His study is significant also because Dolezel intended to summarise the research made in this field. He considers here a so-called binary model as the simplest model of the narrative /epic?/ text. The tex-

ture performing the binary model results from the operation of two kinds of speech act, the speech acts of the anonymous Er-form narrator and the personalized narrative agents /characters/. So the binary model is a refined version of a classic type of presentation - the poet speaks himself and makes others speak - and it is based on the concepts of the theory of the speech-act. The improvement, - in our opinion - however, has no advantages concerning the determination of truth-criterium. Since, when Dolezel wants to make use of the statement of the theory of speech-acts that certain linguistic actions, performative speech-acts, can only be performed by authentic persons, empowered to produce the given linguistic action, then he is forced to accept the standpoint in the spirit of the theory of narrative situation that only those motifs /thematic units/ are authentic which are represented by way of speech-acts performed by the anonymous Er-form narrator, and thus the 'motifs' narrated by the characters are not. Only the anonymous narrator is empowered to tell the truth, the characters can only imitate truth-telling.

If we confront this opinion with the analysing practice, its problematic nature is apparent at once. There are only few works that can be assigned to the binary model where the series of events in the text-world can only be reconstructed on the basis of the manifestations of the anonymous Er-form narrator.

Of course, Dolezel is also aware of some inconsistencies in his starting-point. In spite of this he does not deny his starting hypothesis, only limits its validity and this leads to a very complicated, but what we consider in the end not satisfactory, system of suppositions.

We think that the abandonment of the binary model deduced from the narrative situation is a simpler solution and it corresponds better to the analysing, text-world explaining practice, too. In our opinion the anonymous Er-form

narrator must be cancelled and replaced by the text not attached to a character. Besides the text not attached to a character, the utterances of persons represented in the text-world may be also a text-constitutive part. The texts not attached to a character are the utterances not of a fictitious, hidden subject favoured by anonymity but *the linguistic images of sets of affairs belonging to a certain world*. The statements of the characters speak either about these very sets of affairs or about other sets of affairs in that world. But they can speak - if the text-world has levels - about sets of affairs belonging to another world /another level of world/, and in this case, but only in this one, the relationship between the worlds actually the levels of worlds is questionable.

This is a significant modification in contrast to the theory based on the narrative situation, since in this way the statements of a character can also be authentic and, in this sense, true and the statements not defined by a character can also be false, at least at one level of the text-world. The truth-criteria can be given not by the status of the statement deduced from the narrative situation but only by a theory establishing the coherence of the text-world elaborated by the recipient.