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Narratological Concepts and Interpretation

- 1st Philosophy meets Literary Studies Workshop, University of Hamburg, December 12–13, 2014.

1. Motivation and Idea

With the rise of narratology during the 20th century narratological concepts such as *narrator*, *fictional world* and *plot* have become increasingly important tools for approaching literary texts. However, research over the past decades has substantiated the suspicion that many narratological concepts are ill-understood.¹ Thus, it is one of the most pressing desiderata of literary studies to improve the understanding of narratological notions. Ways of doing so include giving precise definitions, scrutinizing application conditions, and investigating the structure of narratological concepts by specifying which notions are fundamental and which are derivative.

Relatedly, the interdependencies between narratological concepts and interpretation remain to be clarified. It is often presumed that narratological concepts are neutral with respect to interpretation in at least two ways: (i) they can be invoked by any school of interpretation and (ii) applying them is not an interpretative move.² These assumptions, however, have been challenged.³ It is therefore time to reassess how narratology relates to interpretation.

Since all of the above is essentially conceptual work it is natural to seek support from experts in dealing with concepts. Analytic philosophy seems particularly apt because it provides powerful tools and methodological means to guide and focus the envisaged research. Moreover, analytic aesthetics already offers decades of research relating to the foundations of literary theory.⁴ However, exchange between the disciplines has been rather modest. This may be, in part, due to the fact that philosophical research is often ignorant of the needs, insights and theoretical frameworks of literary studies. The result is rather unfortunate. Frequently, philosophers do not capture the concepts literary scholars are after. And even if they do, their results cannot be put to use when interpreting literary texts.

The idea of the workshop *Narratological Concepts and Interpretation* was to support ongoing endeavors of shedding light on narratological concepts and interpretation by bringing literary scholars and philosophers who work on these issues together. Contributions were supposed to tackle either particular narratological concepts or more general issues concerning interpretation, narratology or the relationship between these two. The long-term goal of the organizers (Christian Folde, PhD student in philosophy, and Janina Jacke, PhD student in literary studies) is to promote cooperation and exchange between philosophy and literary studies. In particular, the organizers hope to launch a series of workshops concerning issues at the intersection of the two disciplines.

The workshop took place from December 12th-13th at the University of Hamburg and was sponsored by PHLOX, a philosophical research group headed by Prof. Benjamin Schnieder, and heureCLÉA, a literary studies project led by Prof. Jan Christoph Meister. Speakers included (in order of appearance): Prof. Tilmann Köppe, Dr. Christiana Werner, Dr. Stacie Friend, Dr. Thomas Petraschka, and Prof. Peter Lamarque. In the following, we will give a brief summary of each talk and appendant discussion. We conclude by indicating how our idea of pooling philosophers and literary scholars panned out.

2. Köppe on Narrative Closure

In his talk »Narrative Closure« **Tilmann Köppe** (Göttingen) primarily addressed the difficulties in defining the narratological concept of narrative closure – roughly, the property of stories to have a proper ending. Different approaches to the phenomenon indicate that there are no shared intuitions concerning both concrete cases and the grounds for classification (textual features vs. response-dependence). However, the project of defining narrative closure can still be of some use since it can provide important insights concerning the phenomenon. In the remaining part of the talk, Köppe analyzed a definition proposed by Noël Carroll. According to Carroll, a narrative exhibits narrative closure if and only if it evokes in its informed reader a feeling of finality which is brought about if and only if the reader realizes that all presiding macro-questions posed by the plot of the narrative have been answered. The main challenges of this approach include (i) that readers' feelings of closure do not necessarily coincide with questions being answered, (ii) that plot and/or macro-questions are difficult to identify, and (iii) that it leaves open the question of whether closure is a gradable phenomenon.

One of the issues in the discussion was the question what exactly the bearer of the property of narrative closure is: the narrative, the plot, or something else. It was also questioned whether all fictional narratives exhibit closure (alleged counterexample: Beckett), and whether closure is not a phenomenon in non-fictional narratives and in music, too.

3. Werner on Emotions towards Fictional Characters

Christiana Werner's (Göttingen) talk »The problem with *The Purple Rose of Cairo*: fictional characters as intentional objects of emotions« focused on the question of how the fact that we can have emotions towards fictional characters affects theories of emotions and ontological accounts of fictional characters. Werner started by describing the so called paradox of fiction which arises from the following three assumptions: (i) the emotions a person *S* experiences towards fictional characters are genuine (Response Condition), (ii) does not believe that fictional characters exist (Belief Condition), and (iii) in order to have genuine emotions towards objects of a kind *k* one has to believe that objects of kind *k* exist (Coordination Condition). There are several solution strategies to the paradox discussed in the literature. Werner focused on three of them: (a) accept all three claims but assume that *S*'s emotions towards fictional characters are inconsistent (Radford), (b) reject the Response Condition and argue that the emotions *S* has towards fictional characters are not genuine but quasi-emotions (Walton), and (c) deny the Belief Condition by accepting a popular version of fictional realism, viz. that fictional objects exist and that they are abstract, i.e. non-spatial, artefacts. According to Werner, neither of these solutions is convincing. Radford's approach classifies too many of our emotions as irrational. Walton's approach presupposes intentional pretense of our emotions towards fictional characters, which contradicts our experience. Fictional realism, finally, needs to explain how fictional entities – conceived of as abstract objects – can be intentional objects of emotions.

Among other things the discussion addressed the idea that rationality does not necessarily seem to be an adequate requirement for emotions in the first place. However, Werner pointed out that some component theories of emotions take beliefs to be components of emotions, which makes irrationality a possible feature of emotions.

4. Friend on Truth in Fiction

The second day of the workshop started with **Stacie Friend's** (London) talk »Realism and Reality«. Friend addressed the problem of truth in fiction by defending the reality principle (or: principle of minimal departure). As is well known, what is true in a story – roughly, what a work of fiction authorizes us to imagine – exceeds what is explicitly stated in the text. Friend's basic idea is that stories, whether fiction or non-fiction, invite us to imagine about the real world. The naïve reality principle has it that everything that is actually true is true in a story. Obviously, this needs refinements since what is explicitly true in a story may contradict reality. The standard formulation respects this requirement by invoking a counterfactual: given all explicit story truths p_1 - p_n , something q is true in a story if and only if, were it the case that p_1 - p_n , then it would be the case that q .

However, according to Friend, this formulation is too strong because primary story truths are not the only reason for departure from reality. Her modified principle of reality reads: given all explicit story truths p_1 - p_n , something q is true in a story if and only if, if it was the case that p_1 - p_n , then it would be the case that q , *except if a correct interpretation of the work requires otherwise*.

Her arguments in favor of the reality principle included empirical evidence that knowledge about the real world actually plays an important role when interpreting story worlds. Friend closed her talk by defending the principle against several objections and came to the conclusion that the reality principle, in comparison with alternative principles, has the most accurate scope in identifying story truths. Thus, it not only describes the actual practice of interpreting story worlds, but can also be taken as a normative guideline to interpretation.

In discussing the question of how knowledge on story worlds can be acquired the talk gave important insights on the relation between narratological *histoire*-concepts and interpretation. However, one important weakness of Friend's account was pointed out in the discussion: the exception clause Friend added to her version of the reality principle (»except if a correct interpretation of the work states otherwise«) makes it virtually invulnerable to counter-examples.

5. Petraschka on Intentions and Interpretation

Thomas Petraschka's (Regensburg) opened his talk »On categorial and semantic intentions and on their relevance for interpretation, theory of fiction and narratology« by elaborating on Levinson's distinction between semantic intentions – what meaning does the author wish to express with his text? – and categorial intentions – what type of text does the author wish to produce? According to Petraschka the distinction is problematic since two commonly given distinctive criteria do not seem to hold: neither are categorial intentions infallibly instantiated nor can they be infallibly identified.

In the second part of his talk Petraschka criticized Levinson's proposal that *actual* intentionalism should be applied to identify the text type whereas *hypothetical* intentionalism helps identify the meaning of a text. Since we cannot clearly distinguish between semantic and categorial intentions Levinson's proposal has to be rejected. In addition, the distinction seems unfit to solve the main problem of actual intentionalism: the fact that the implementation of intentions in a text can fail.

The discussion focused on the question what exactly categorical intentions are (are they Gricean?) and whether they are sufficient for the determination of a text type (what about standard and non-standard features?). In addition, categorical intentions seem to play different roles in determining whether something is an artwork, a work of fiction, or of a particular genre.

6. Lamarque on The Opacity of Narrative

The final talk of the workshop was given by **Peter Lamarque** (York) on »Interpretation and the Opacity of Narrative«. By the opacity of narrative Lamarque points to the characteristic of narratives that the represented world is inseparable from the way in which it is presented. This includes referential opacity (i.e. the idea that substitution of co-extensional terms changes the content of a narrative) as well as representational opacity (i.e., the idea that if a fictional narrative represents an object a, and a is identical to b, it does not represent b). Narratives aim at representation instead of being merely the end product of a causal process (like photographs). However, opacity – at least in the former sense – is not an intrinsic feature of literary narratives. Instead, the question of whether form and content are inseparable depends on the interests brought to the text: we decide to read for opacity when we lay emphasis on the way in which narrative content is presented. In the remaining part of his talk, Lamarque used a scene from *Jane Eyre* to demonstrate how reading for opacity can not only bring out the brilliance of a literary work and heighten our reading pleasure, but also helps us *interpret* literature in the way that it makes us explore ways of reflecting on the fictional world and heightens our experience of that world.

It was pointed out in the discussion that if we read for opacity then the exact linguistic wording may matter. Consequently, even a translation of a poem, say, into another language would result in there being two different literary works. In contrast to literature scientific prose must be transparent: if the enterprise of science is to work, then there have to be different ways of saying the same thing (in the same as well as in other languages).

7. Conclusion

Judging from its content the workshop succeeded in collecting some perspectives from philosophy and literary studies on narratological concepts and interpretation. However, the workshop was not as thematically focused as one might have wished. Moreover, all talks were more on the philosophical side of things – a genuine literary studies perspective in terms of historical surveys or literary interpretations was lacking. All contributions focused on the theory of fiction in the wide sense and can be characterized as more or less analytically aesthetic. At the same time the shared common theoretical background resulted in informed and lively discussions. This is not to be expected in general when philosophers and literary scholars come together and exchange ideas about common issues. In fact, we suspect that the selection of speakers greatly helped to enable a smooth exchange between disciplines without fundamental differences in methodology. Putting this consensus into question could be a possibility for a future workshop.

The workshop very much focused on theory. Many literary scholars, however, look for applications of theory in their everyday work. Having this practical perspective on board would certainly be a desideratum for workshops to come.

Notes

¹ A pertinent example is the criticism launched against one of the fundamental assumptions of literary theory, viz. that every fictional narrative has a fictional narrator. Cp. John Morreall, *The Myth of the Omniscient Narrator*, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52:4 (1994), 429-35; Richard Walsh, *Who is the Narrator?*, *Poetics Today* 18:4 (1997), 495-513; Berys Gaut, *The Philosophy of the Movies: Cinematic Narration*, in Peter Kivy (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics*, Malden, Mass. et al. 2004, 230-53; Andrew Kania, *Against the Ubiquity of Fictional Narrators*, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63:1 (2005), 47-54; Tilmann Köppe/Jan Stühling, *Against pan-narrator theories*, *Journal of Literary Semantics* 40:1 (2011), 59-80; Tilmann Köppe/Tom Kindt, *Erzähltheorie: Eine Einführung*, Stuttgart 2014, 91ff; and Christian Folde, *Three Dogmas of Narratology*, (manuscript).

² Cp. Tom Kindt/Hans-Harald Müller, *Narrative Theory and/or/as Theory of Interpretation*, in idem (eds.): *What Is Narratology? Questions and Answers Regarding the Status of a Theory*, Berlin et al. 2003, 205-219. This position can be seen as a consequence of the structuralist roots of narratology (cp. Roland Barthes, *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives*, in idem, *Image Music Text*, New York 1977, 79–124; Gérard Genette, *Discours du récit*, in idem, *Figures III*, Paris 1972, 67–282).

³ Skeptical accounts are often linked to the position of cognitive narratology (cp. David Herman, D.: *Cognitive Narratology*, in Peter Hühn et al. (eds.): *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, http://wikis.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Cognitive_Narratology (07.01.2015) or postclassical narratology in general (cp. Jan Alber/Monika Fludernik (eds.), *Postclassical Narratology. Approaches and Analyses*, Columbus, Ohio 2010). For a more detailed analysis of the claim of narratology's non-interpretivity see Janina Jacke, *Is There a Context-Free Way of Understanding Texts? The Case of Structuralist Narratology*, *Journal of Literary Theory* 8:1 (2014), 118-39.

⁴ Pertinent philosophical research primarily concerns (i) the concept of fiction, (ii) the semantics and pragmatics of fictional and metafictional discourse, (iii) the metaphysics of works of fiction and fictional objects, (iv) truth in fiction, (v) emotional responses to fiction, (vi) the concept of imagination, and (vii) the interpretation of art works in general. Some important papers in these domains have been translated into German and made available in Maria Reicher (ed.), *Fiktion, Wahrheit, Wirklichkeit. Philosophische Grundlagen der Literaturtheorie*, Paderborn 2007.

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