



David Herman, *Basic Elements of Narrative*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford 2009

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Thirteen years after Monika Fludernik's groundbreaking *Towards a Natural Narratology* (New York-London, Routledge, 1996), David Herman's *Basic Elements of Narrative* (Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) stages a major revival of a longstanding problem: the definition of narrative. Coming as it does from one of the pioneers of cognitive narratology, it could hardly pass unnoticed. Ironically, while the title words "basic elements of" usually suggest a safe introduction to the specified discipline, the reader of this book finds herself confronted with what looks like a minefield. Narrativity, or "what makes a story (interpretable as) a story" (x), is contested territory: one should always tread carefully.

As a consequence, Herman steers away from rigid definitions: narrativity is no pure essence that scholars can capture and study *in vitro*. There is no single defining quality, but rather a set of features that pinpoint narrative objects because they prompt their interpreters (readers, spectators, etc.) to reconstruct them *as* narratives. It should be noted that, in Herman's view, narrative "artifacts" (as he calls them) are no more than "blueprints" (107); in other words, they are incomplete without the reader's (spectator's, etc.) concretization. For this reason, the very term "narrativity" (which Herman frequently employs) is suspect of essentialism.

It is in chapter 4 that the author lays out the philosophy "behind" his basic-elements approach. Drawing on Eleanor Rosch's and George Lakoff's research into category systems, Herman argues that narrative is subject to both category gradience and prototype effects. It is the former that interests us the most: in short, category gradience means that text types (such as narrative or description) allow various degrees of centrality. They are scalar rather than binary categories, as Herman had already suggested in *Story Logic* (Lincoln-London, University of Nebraska Press, 2002). For instance, since a reportorial narrative (like a brief newspaper article) usually lacks experientiality (Herman's fourth basic element, see *infra*), it could be seen as less central to the category "narrative" than – say – Joyce's *Portrait*. Obviously, this view validates "mixed" text types such as Mosher's famous descriptivized narration and narrativized description: a semiotic object can be "more or less" narrative according to the (degree of) presence of Herman's basic elements. (This doesn't imply that narrative is not subject to what the author calls "membership gradience" as well: a shopping list won't usually qualify as narrative, in that it fails to meet the minimum threshold of narrativity, which Herman has dubbed "narrativehood" in *Story Logic*.)

Let's now turn to the basic elements themselves. Interestingly, each of them can be related to one of the strands of research that come together in cognitive narratology. Herman's first element, which he terms "situatedness," stipulates that narrative "is situated in – must be interpreted in light of – a specific discourse context or occasion for telling" (37). Needless to say, it was Labov who, in his seminal work, paved the way for this discourse-oriented approach. However, whereas Labov studied interview narratives, the interest has shifted today to less

structured instances of conversational narrative – Georgakopoulou’s “small stories,” which are “presented as part of a trajectory of interactions rather than as . . . free standing, finished and self-contained unit[s]” (5). In the third chapter (which focuses on situatedness), Herman draws on sociolinguistics, conversation analysis and positioning theory to specify narrative contexts and how they are shaped by participants in a speech situation. This could throw light not only on instances of “natural” storytelling (one of Herman’s case studies is an oral interview), but also on seemingly non-negotiable stories such as Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants,” in which an interaction is meta-communicatively *represented*.

With his second element of narrative, Herman pays tribute to the tradition of structuralist narratology. After Fludernik’s bold attempt at doing without “event sequencing,” here’s its roaring comeback. “Narrative representations – writes Herman – cue interpreters to draw inferences about a structured time-course of particularized events” (75). Oddly enough, Herman’s fourth chapter, which should in principle be about event sequencing, ends up discussing (as we’ve seen) text types. Rather than directly addressed, this key element of narrative emerges from a comparison with description and explanation: narrative is particularized (which sets it apart from explanation) and, unlike description, emphasizes “the structure of risk or irreversible consequence” (96) resulting from characters’ actions. Although less exhaustive than his discussion of situatedness, Herman’s account of event sequencing is more than adequate, given the massive amount of scholarly work on the subject.

In the following chapter, Herman builds on Goodman’s classic *Ways of Worldmaking* to introduce his third element, “worldmaking” (coupled with “world disruption”: more on this in a moment). The label is transparent enough: narrative objects encourage the interpreter to map them onto “storyworlds” (this is Herman’s preferred term). The interpreter herself, in order to parse the narrative information correctly, must relocate to that world through a process variously known as “accommodation” (David Lewis), “fictional recentering” (Marie-Laure Ryan) or “transportation” (Richard Gerrig). On a linguistic plane, this operation causes a “deictic shift.” There’s hardly anything new here; what is truly remarkable in this approach, however, is its capability for integration. Consider, for instance, this claim: “by starting with world-creation as a basic cognitive and communicative function served by storytelling and then working backward to the formal structures that support this root function of narrative, it is easier to motivate – to provide warrant for – fine-grained analyses of the spatial and temporal dimensions of storyworlds” (128). Toward the end of the chapter, Herman correlates this “worldmaking” to Bruner’s notion of canonicity and breach on one hand and Todorov’s view that stories revolve around a conflict on the other. The idea Herman toys with is that narrative worlds contain the seeds of their own destruction: not only do they defy the expectations of their interpreters by contradicting “canonical” action sequences, but they also represent this breach through diegetic conflict.

Finally, Herman’s fourth element (the “consciousness factor” or sense of “what it’s like”) corresponds to Fludernik’s single defining trait of narrative: its experiential quality. Along with the study of situatedness, this is undeniably the most significant contribution Herman makes in this volume. First, he suggests that narrative could mediate between the irreducibly first-person ontology of consciousness (as Searle depicts it) and the third-person orientation of physicalists such as Dennett. As narratologists like Käte Hamburger and Dorrit Cohn have long pointed out, narrative *is* a means of observing another’s consciousness as if *from the inside*. Moreover, stories are the sole means of comparing and reflecting upon different “version of what it was like to experience situations and events” (151). (Think of how the characters’ unique experiential outlooks can be juxtaposed in the same narrative artifact.) But Herman’s claim is even more radical: if we could show – he argues – that cognitive processes are not prior to discourse but in

a way *constructed* by discourse, we could conjecture that storytelling enables us to explore the inner workings of our own consciousness. According to this hypothesis, “narrative [would afford] scaffolding for consciousness itself” (154). This is a promising development for narratology, and Herman’s call for further research on the “nexus of narrative and mind” shouldn’t go unheeded.