USELESS? UNWANTED? A VIEW ON CHANGE IN NARRATIVE STUDIES

Alina Buzatu
Senior Lecturer, PhD., „Ovidius" University of Constanţa

Abstract:There is no such thing as useless elements in a narrative: every detail matters, every semantic trait is relevant. However, when reading (or memorizing) stories, we compile and schematize the `proeminent` pieces of information and get rid of the details. Schematizing is an operation essential in order to represent the narratives in a way that is accesible and useful, but the choices of what is – in terms of information – useful (and should be kept) and what is unnecessary (so, dispensable) is neither universal nor unchanging.
Focusing on the various and varying cultural, experiential, situational, personal and idiosyncratic mechanisms involving in this complex process of decision, my paper raises some questions that problematise the status of reading and literary reception: What are the mental circumstances that encourage particular patterns of choice and validation of necessary / unnecessary narrative items? What if we exercise deliberate attention on what we generally believe it is useless in a narrative? Can we arrive at a sense of a narrative that is personally acceptable by means of what other might think as useless or irrelevant? Is it is possible to defamiliarize the readings and thus reach higher levels of literary competences? The methodologies of (post)classical narratology and cognitive poetics will help us formulate answers.

Keywords: narrative; useful / useless; narratology; cognitivism; narrative schema.

The conceptual dyad `useful` / `useless` participates in a large number of multidisciplinary reflections upon the nature and function of the fictional / nonfictional narratives.

The point of departure of my glosses is the observation that these two terms, though situated in the opposite corners of the semiotic square, permeate semantically throughout the recent history of literary ideas and, sometimes, reverse their meanings: what is considered useful in a theoretical construction may become negligible or useless in others. That is why I do believe that the preoccupation for their `liquid` semantics could raise interesting questions about contextual knowledge and concepts' pragmatic function; also, some of the answers outlined here could carry within valuable lessons, as these semantic fluctuations draw important changes of conception about narratives and narrativity.

Are narratives useful? No one would dare say `no`. Cohorts of theoreticians showed the essential role played by narratives (fictional or not)[1] in every human culture, but, in some way, after centuries of metacritical reflection upon the idea, we are not very far from Horatio: narratives instruct and pleasure.

But are they useful as *a whole*? Or are there some dispensable elements in every narrative? If we say that some elements[2] of a narrative are useless, this answer would cause perplexity, if not protests, and for good reasons: one intrinsic condition of an aesthetic artifact

[1] Not only that we now understand that the bordeline between fiction and nonfiction is difficult to draw (and postmodernism destabilized it for good), but also a great number of researchers proved that the response to either fictional or nonfictional is strikingly similar; in some psychological experiments, even if readers were told that some stories are real, and others are fictional, the different labelling did not affect identification, critical or emotional attitudes. The reality is that people do not care much about the distinction `fictional` / `nonfictional`; the lack of suspicion and even the appetite for fake news and invented stories are arguments in this respect.

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is its integrality and the slightest intervention or change would cause the loss of identity. But the question, brutal as it is, become relevant when the ways people schematize, compile and memorize narratives are taken in consideration.

A retrospective critique of some theories with great epistemological visibility along the XXth century - such as structuralism or semiotics (in their early stages, at least) – provides some exemple in this respect. In their prescriptions for comprehending and interpreting narratives, not only these theories tacitly abandoned some narrative content, but they also strongly recommended it and gave precise the readers precise instructions how to get rid of some elements. Of course, the implicit idea is that the `elements` we are talking about are not parts or segments of a given text and the reader is not a tailor cutting a material – within the text, they are classes of words taking different semantic forms, vertically organized and removed, `deleted` in a process which is neither trivial and easy to understand, nor objective; beyond the text, these `elements` are seen as conventions in the inextricable ceremonial that validates texts (narratives, in our case) as fiction.

First, the imanentist approaches (i.e. narratology, narrative semiotics) considered the author useless. An institution glorified by many centuries by virtue of tradition, essential in all `old` approaches, the Author is denounced in the 60's as a rationalist and empiricist pathetic invention of thought and repudiated, removed as a useless appendix. The furious structuralist necrologues after the `death of the author` had an endemic spread and produced sad consequences, especially when they were misunderstood or read in bad faith. Decades later, the author (as a human being, not only the abstract instantiation in the text) gained his job back; discourse analysis reinstated him in the textual domains. If we think of the stupor of a philosopher in the XIXth century when hearing that the author is `useless` for his intellectual propriety, we shall have a clearer image of the conceptual pragmatics.

The same imanentist methodologies considered `context` dispensable. In the challenge to conquer autarchy, narratologists dissolved the referential relation with a presupposed real world; all contexts (social, historical, psychological, political etc.) became irrelevant: the texts closed their border to ensure the structuring principles' sovereignity. We all know that, in a way, all narratives are dis-joined from their original context and have to power to generate its `internal referent`, which act as a context on its own. This theoretical inconsistence were also later amended by discourse analysis, that reinstated narratives on the world stage, where they do belong and context as a referential principle became `useful` again.

When reproaching these discretionary choices, we should not forget that structuralist and semiotic concepts and procedures had the most notable influence upon theoretical metadiscourses. Even now the model, augmented and transformed by ulterior theoretical interventions, is in use and provide substantial strategies of parsing narratives. Let me briefly examine the most important premises of some canonical narratological endeavours (the so-called `grammar of texts`) and observe the ways they formalize and schematize the stories.

Assuming the ambitious task of describing and classifying the infinite number of narratives, the founding model of narratology starts from the homology between the sentence and the text: although manifested in different signifiers, some extremely complex, one does find in narrative, expanded and transformed, the main discursive categories: aspect, tense, mood, persons etc. If a narrative is a combination of units, the first task of the interpreter is to divide up and determine the segments of narrative discourse and distribute these segments in a limited number of classes. Here Roland Barthes is subtle enough to ask: Is everything is a narrative functional? Does everything, down to the slightest detail, have a meaning? Can narrative be divided entirely into functional units? The reputed critic is radical when saying that everything in a narrative signifies, even were a detail irretrievably insignificant, resistant to all functionality; everything has a meaning, or nothing has. But the distance between theory and practice is huge, and we see that countless critical investigations are `sacrificing` some

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elements; in terms of information, some units of content (actions, scenes, dialogues, interior monologues etc.) are more `useful` because they hold a more important function; others, the so-called psychological units (modes of behavior, feelings, intentions, motivations etc.), which are not nil, but diffused, `delayed`, can be omitted. Even if their functionality is equally recognized, the distributional classes (also named *functions*, after Propp: the characters'actions)[3] have greater visibility that the integrational classes (orindices: data regarding the characters' psychology, identity, notations of atmosphere etc.).

Another structuralist / semiotic theoretical initiative was to resolve in a satisfactory manner the classification of the characters. The actantial model proposed by Greimas – a matrix of six roles: *Subject / Object, Sender / Receiver, Helper / Opponent* – was largely adopted and can still stand the test for a large number of narratives. Again, a real impediment for the model is the privileges given to the role of *Subject* (of the action, of the quest, of the desire), to the detriment of the other roles. A simple empiric test of memory would show us that – statistically - we can recall the main characters in a story (in many cases, those involved in `conflict`), and rarely the rest of the population within the literary worlds - and we accept this as a normal situation, even we recall the exigency of integrality.

Cognitive approaches of fictional / nonfictional narratives (particularly, cognitive narratology) integrated and put in a refreshing multidisciplinary perspective the structuralist / semiotic works of the 60's and 70's. Having the potential to offer a unified explanation of both individual interpretations and the interpretations that are shared by a group, community or culture, they preserved and updated the most resistant concepts, rectified the errors and attempted to overcome the apories.

Cognitive narratology explicitly states that certain aspects of a narrative are being more important and salient that the others; the dichotomy they use is *figure / grounding*. Among the many objects of a narrative world, some achieve `prominence` by means of specialized formal `devices`: repetitions, unusual naming, creative syntactic ordering, innovative descriptions, alliterations etc. For instance, in most narratives, characters are figures against the ground and the narrator manipulates us to follow them along their textual travel. This manipulation of attention, this continuous, dynamic `distraction` from one element onto a newly presented one is made possible by a set of formalized linguistic protocols.

The same prominence is given to the series of events that make up the story; the narrator's linguistic strategies put some events in the spotlight and shadow the others, and this is the way we are induced certain schemas that organize the epistemic values of the text. For cognitivists, schemas (or scripts) operate at three levels: world schemas (noticeable in the `content` of a narrative world); text schemas: our expectations of the way text schemas are structurally organized; language schemas, involving our educated ideas of the appropriate forms of linguistic patterning and style we think adequate for a subject. The more aware of these structuring convention a reader is, the more (literary) competence he/she possesses.

But cognitive narratology has not fallen into the trap of asserting that only prominent semantic objects are to be considered – because they are more `useful` in terms of information - when reading/ comprehending / interpreting a narrative. On the contrary, they systematically reflected upon the consequences of choosing to `deselect` the elements emphasized by means of textual strategies and, subsequently, giving preference to the neglected ones. In other words, they say that if we – as readers - are capable of deliberate control over our attention mechanisms, if we are competent enough to think of what we think, we should try to `reposition` our attention to marginal, neglected elements of a narrative in order to produce new and deconditioned interpretations. We understand that we should not treat the narratives as if we always summarize the, retaining only slots that construct their schemas (in most of

[3] The functions are not all of same `importance`: some are *cardinal functions* or *nuclei* (the real hinge-points of the narrative) and some are *catalysers*, merely filling the narrative space between the cardinal functions.

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the cases, props, participants, entry conditions, results, sequence of events). The many elements that are dispensable are thrown away by most readers; but, if minute, `useless `elements of textuality become the object of interest, new and rich possibilities of meaning emerge. After all, let us not forget that all narratives (all texts, in fact) actualize the schemas of an episteme, but also have an ambivalent need to subvert schemas – and their disruptive power is hidden in the elements that are not `useful` in the official knowledge. The same logic of change should be applied to interpretations; even if it is a difficult task, we should apply a new management policy to the narrative contents: we should recycle more.

Another strategy to decondition our response to narratives and boost up our literary competence and creativity is to use our emotions. The cognitivists are not interested – as so many before them – only in following the characters' emotional experiences or practicing forms of identification (associative, sympathetic, cathartic, ironic etc.). Instead, readers' personal emotions are the vector of the reading process and they are indexed and mapped as such - in the cognitivists' conceptual prospection, the literary competence (of the model reader) is built on the metacognitive capacity of mapping the personal, subjective, affective reactions.

Traditionally, emotion is the apanage of poetry; it convokes our heart, not our mind. On the other hand, if it were a user's guide for reading narratives, the first instructions would be, as some theoreticians sneered: `Attach yourself as reader.` / `Plug in your brain`. / `Engage your mind`. Here emotion is minimal and fortuitous, if not `useless`.

This binary logic – mind vs. body, sense vs. sensibility – is being ridiculed by the cognitivist approaches. Reading narratives is not a cold, algorithmic process, involving only reason and that is mainly because our rational mechanisms are not located in an autarchic and autocratic part of the brain, and emotions in a separate area. If so, we would have distinct neural systems for rational thought and emotions, which is nonsense. Empirically, we always knew that emotions and feelings could not be exiled form our mental life, but our cultural superego taught us (inaccurately) that we were not allowed to give credit to our emotions. But if we understand, as Damasio and many others have explained, that emotions are unconscious reactions that activate mental patterns, so they appear simultaneously mental and bodily, we see how important this cognitive mechanism is. Once a computation machine, the conscience is now the feeling of knowing a feeling. As a consequence, after centuries of thinking that reading narratives `takes place` in the head, we are perplexed when told that we (literally) read with our bodies (that contain hearts / souls).

I began my paper saying that everyone recognizes the cultural usefulness of narratives. Narratives are useful because they preserve, memorize and transfer knowledge, they help the sharing of knowledge within groups, they contain information easy to recall and understand, they provide comfortable explanations of the world, they transport memes etc. They also delight us, but this is a function rejected by cognitive thinkers: if `useful` is commonly defined in reference to ourselves (something is useful if it facilitates our goals, which usually involve being healthy, happy, wealthy, popular etc.), in evolutionary terms, something is useful only to the extent that it helps an organism pass its genes into another organisms (it has been underlined that natural selection does not care if we are happy or emotionally fulfilled).

The narratives that are passed from generations to generations and the instructions within transport paradigms of beliefs, norms, values, expectations, ethical standard, all intertwined with emotions. The cognitive phenomenologists explained that all our dealing with the world presuppose an intrinsic emotional dimension, that constitutes the pre-reflective background that enables cognition. They speak of `emotional consciousness` as a place where the heart, the brain and the living body come together, and from which action, perception, and cognition originate. The relation of an individual with the world(s), the way one sees the real or imagined constructs are shaped by `affective framing`. One way to better understand an

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affective frame is a sort or emotionally colored lens, whereby our bodily feelings influence our sense of the world (and its textual representations) and our sense of the self. `Affective framing` exemplifies the idea that our personal encyclopedias are linked to the individuals' lived bodily dynamics. As forms of judgement (and emotion *is* a form or judgement), emotion supply standards of interpretations and evaluation to our experience and constitute the framework in which these experiences define their meaning.

Given the centrality of emotions in human cognition at present, I suspect that the next big thing in cognitive literary theories is the emotional cartography, in spite of all difficulties (the conceptual inertia and prejudices, the idea that emotions are not always a matter of rationalized predications, etc.). And, incidentally, it would be interesting to see what concepts and methodologies will become useless in the emergent theories.

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