

A PASSION FOR PLOT:  
PROLEGOMENA TO AFFECTIVE NARRATOLOGY

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Human beings have a passion for plots. Narratives are shared in every society, in every age, and in every social context, from intimate personal interactions to impersonal social gatherings. This passion for plots is bound up with the passion of plots, the ways in which stories manifest feelings on the part of authors and characters, as well as the passion from plots, the ways stories provoke feelings in readers or listeners. Passion is also inseparable from the structure of stories and even from the definition of the constituents of stories. In short, emotions make stories.

Over the last two decades, there has been an enormous increase in attention to emotion as a crucial aspect of human thought and action. This attention has spanned a range of disciplines, prominently including the fields gathered together under the rubric of *cognitive science*--thus parts of psychology, neuroscience, philosophy, anthropology, and so on. Narratology has perhaps been the area of literary study most closely connected with cognitive science. However, relatively little research on emotion has made its way into theoretical treatments of narrative. Of course, everyone recognizes that emotion is important in stories, and theorists of narrative usually have some place for emotion in their work. However, narratological treatments of emotion have on the whole been relatively undeveloped, particularly in comparison with other aspects of narrative theory.

Given recent advances in research on emotion, it seems clear that any theory of narrative would benefit from a more fully elaborated treatment of emotion based on this research. Indeed, I would go further, and argue that narrative is fundamentally shaped

and oriented by our emotion systems. (I have partially argued this already in *The Mind and Its Stories*.) Of course, other neurocognitive systems play a role in the production and reception of narrative--perceptual systems, long-term and working memory systems, language systems. But, in my view, the distinctive aspects of narrative--or, more properly, the distinctive aspects of stories--are to a great extent the product of emotion systems. Thus, in order to formulate a systematic theoretical account of stories, we should turn first of all to affective neuroscience and related fields of study. I cannot make an argument for this claim in a short paper. However, I would like to establish some of the groundwork for such an argument, particularly in relation to the current state of narratology.

### *Emotion and Narratology*

From what I have just said, it should be clear that an emphasis on emotion in narrative is somewhat unusual. In fact, it is more than unusual. Consider, for example, the recent *Cambridge Companion to Narrative* (edited by David Herman)--a lucid, highly informative, scholarly volume that is representative of the best current theoretical approaches to narrative. The index entry under "emotion" includes no page numbers, but rather four cross-references--to "cognitive approaches," "consciousness," "narrative," and "storyworld." (Similarly, the related entry for "empathy" gives only "focalization" and "identity.") The substantive treatment of emotion in this 300-page book amounts to one page in David Herman's essay. This page draws a distinction between "naturalist" and "social constructionist" approaches to emotion. It goes on to note the importance of understanding character emotions for understanding a story. Herman observes in particular that "what the characters say and do can be sorted into classes of behaviors in which one is likely to engage when motivated by happiness, resentment, fear, sadness, etc." ("Cognition" 255). The distinction between social constructionist and naturalist is a simplification, but a useful one for orienting the reader initially. The

comments on character motivation are unexceptionable. But it should be clear that this hardly goes beyond commonsense--unlike Herman's insightful and nuanced discussion of consciousness. Again, this discrepancy is not by any means unique to Herman. Indeed, Herman is the only one in the volume to give emotion any substantive consideration at all.

Why might this be? In order to get a better sense of the place--or rather absence--of emotion in narratology, it is useful to consider some aspects of the history and organization of the field.

The standard narrative of narrative theory distinguishes between "classical" and "post-classical" narratology. Classical narratology, which continues to be widely practiced, comprises the fundamental works of Structuralist narrative theory. Its main figures--Genette, Greimas, Barthes, Todorov--were setting out to use Saussurean linguistics to understand narrative structure, just as Lévi-Strauss was using Saussurean linguistics to treat kinship and myth, Lacan was using Saussurean linguistics to rethink Psychoanalysis, and so forth. Though this work was enormously valuable, it was embedded in linguistic theories that had nothing to say about emotion. In and of itself, this is not necessarily a problem. However, it tended to orient research programs in narratology toward issues and explanations that had little to do with emotion.

Consider, for example, the study of time in narratology. I have argued that narrative time is fundamentally organized by emotion (see "Before"). For example, our isolation of something as an event and our attribution of a cause to that event are both crucially a function of emotional response, even if other systems are necessarily involved as well. However, as Brian Richardson points out, "The starting-point for most theories of time in narrative is Genette's account of the categories of order, duration, and frequency" (147). In keeping with the prevalent linguistic model, this division is closely related to distinctions of tense (thus order) and aspect (thus duration and repetition). This is not to dismiss or belittle Genette's ideas. His three categories

certainly correspond to real properties of narrative. However, they are not the only ways in which we might understand narrative time. Nor, I have argued, are they the most important.

Seymour Chatman's enormously (and rightly) influential *Story and Discourse* is a case in point. Chatman devotes an entire chapter to "Story: Events." He expertly treats order, duration, and frequency. However, his account of events as such barely goes beyond our intuitive understanding that events are "actions (acts) or happenings" or, more generally, "changes of state" (44). His first point about the connections among events in stories is that they are often causal. He goes on to distinguish different sorts of causal relations. However, he does not ask just how our minds select, segment, and structure temporal units (i.e., events--or sub-event incidents, or supra-event episodes). Nor does he consider how our minds select, segment, and structure causal relations (relations that are, in real life, highly complex and multiple—much more so than the stories we tell about them). But a good case can be made that both event formation and causal attribution are largely a function of our emotion systems (on the latter, see chapter four of my *Understanding*). If this is correct, it is unsurprising that Chatman did not explore these issues. Indeed, his linguistic model may have particularly occluded these problems.

In principle, post-classical narratology broadened the sources for narrative theorization. Specifically, it incorporated work by a range of "Post-Structuralists," such as Derrida, Foucault, and later Lacan. However, due to the nature of the new theories, particularly Deconstruction, it tended to limit the range of sources actually taken up in research. Derrida himself was deeply concerned with exploring the writings of pre-Deconstructive philosophers (whatever one thinks of the ways in which he undertook this exploration). Despite this, however, many of his followers took the putative phallocentrism of pre- and non-Deconstructive theories as a reason to dismiss a wide range of insightful work. Even more importantly, Deconstruction too tended to rely on a

version of Saussurean linguistics. Moreover, the highly linguicentric<sup>1</sup> approach of Deconstruction did not open a place for emotion--still less for emotion as treated in scientific research that seemed dangerously tainted by the metaphysics of presence.

One problem with the standard division into classical and post-classical narratology is that it involves an implicit "telic narrative" (see my *Politics* 47-49) of the sort used by many post-structuralists. It tends to suggest a division between the old fashioned and inferior way people used to do things in the past and the sophisticated, superior way people do things now. Personally, I do not share that evaluation. It seems to me that there was misguided work and work of continuing value in the past and that there is misguided work and work of continuing value in the present. Moreover, it is hardly the case that everyone studying narrative has shifted over from "classical" to "post-classical." In addition, this division joins together diverse tendencies. I have given a somewhat reduced account of what theories belong in each category. Chomsonian models of narrative and perhaps even Aristotelian accounts would seem to fall into the "classical" category, while "post-classicism" would presumably lump cognitive theories together with Deconstruction.

Another way of framing the varieties of narrative theory may be more clarifying--both for the history of narratology and for the place of emotion in narratology. In this revised schema, I would first distinguish the Aristotelian tradition. Anyone familiar with Aristotle will know that he did indeed stress emotion in his treatment of stories. That emphasis is diminished, but not entirely absent in the work of his modern followers. We may divide these into two main groups. The first comprises the Chicago School and their descendants (R. S. Crane, Wayne Booth, James Phelan, and others). We may refer to these theorists as the "rhetorical" school, due to their emphasis on the rhetorical function of narrative (for an outline of this approach, see Phelan). This approach does have a place for emotion. Indeed, writers in this school frequently mention emotion.

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<sup>1</sup> That is, language-centered. I borrow the term from Spolsky (ix).

However, the terms of discussion in rhetorical narratology were set relatively early, before emotion became more tractable through cognitive and neuroscientific analysis. As a result, the work of these theorists has tended to rely on fairly commonsensical views of emotion.

The other major school of Aristotelianism is that of Northrop Frye. However, it makes sense to expand this category beyond Frye to all writers who have adopted an empirical approach to story structure (or form, thus the term “formalist”). Theorists in this “empirical/formalist” category range from Vladimir Propp to Joseph Campbell and beyond. This work too has tended to leave aside emotion. However, like rhetorical narratology, it invites the incorporation of emotion research into its explanatory apparatus. Indeed, there have been three weaknesses in the research of these writers. The first concerns the theorists’ approach to empirical study—for example, the degree to which their sampling of data is adequate. Problems in this area are very consequential. But they are nonetheless the least serious, as they are the most readily corrected. The second, more serious weakness concerns the organization of the data and the precise derivation of narrative patterns. Finally, the most significant weakness concerns explanation. Accounts of story patterns by these narratologists are notoriously thin in explanatory principles.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Consider, for example, Scholes and Kellogg’s work on story structures, which is roughly of this general sort. Scholes and Kellogg seek to organize their account of plot structures by reference to “the annual cycle of vegetative life” (220). As Frye also noticed, there are some parallels between literary structure and seasons. Scholes and Kellogg see these parallels as mediated by rituals (220). It not entirely implausible to think that at least some sorts of literature have an historical relation with ritual. But it is not clear why story structures would continue to manifest the structures they do, once they become disconnected from ritual. Indeed, it is not even clear that ritual came before stories--or that it even could come before stories, since rituals themselves involve stories. I take it that a more plausible account would be something along the following lines. Insofar as there are parallels among verbal art, ritual, and ideas about the seasons, these all derive from underlying emotion systems, in their interaction with other neurocognitive systems, such as long term and working memory. Moreover, verbal art, ritual, cosmology, agriculture, and other discourses and practices interact with one another in various ways at different times and in different social circumstances. That interaction is allowed by the shared emotional (and cognitive) substrate.

To some extent, my own work falls into this category, particularly *The Mind and Its Stories*. I follow Propp, Frye, and others, in seeking to isolate story patterns. However, in order to respond to the problems of data collection and organization, I use the study of language universals as a model. Linguistics has been the discipline in which cross-cultural patterns have been explored most rigorously and most fruitfully. Linguistic theorists have therefore dealt with many of the problems facing researchers who wish to treat cross-cultural patterns in other areas.

Of course, neither Propp nor Frye made universal claims for the structures they isolated. However, I believe that the narrow focus of their research leads them to partially misunderstand the key structural components found in their own corpora. This leads us to the second problem, bearing on the organization of the data and the derivation of narrative patterns. Here, too, we might think of linguistics as a model. In order to formulate an adequate grammar of English, French, or Russian, we are well advised to understand what grammatical categories seem to recur cross-culturally. There are different ways of formulating the grammars of individual languages. It makes most sense to, for example, class lexical items in ways that appear to recur across languages rather than arbitrarily choosing a different organizational system for each language.

Finally, and most importantly, I differ from the empirical formalist narratologists in my explanatory framework. In order to account for cross-cultural patterns in stories, I turn to emotion research. (Thus, unlike many writers, I do not turn to linguistics here. I will consider the explanatory use of linguistics in narrative theory below.) The process here is not simply unidirectional. The research on emotion helps to organize the data and the resulting narrative patterns themselves affect the ways in which we might formulate and develop specific emotion theories. In short, the isolation of story patterns should be integrated with emotion research in order to produce both a more adequate

description of the patterns and a psychologically plausible and well-supported explanation of those patterns.

In formulating this emotion-based account, I have drawn on another tradition of narrative theory. Like the Aristotelian tradition, this too extends back to the pre-modern period, in this case to India, rather than to Greece. Sanskrit dramatic theory, like Aristotelian theory, stressed emotion. Moreover, it stressed a much wider range of emotions and connected these with a more character-centered treatment of stories. This tradition was more or less absent from modern narrative theory until it was, in effect, re-invented by the cognitive psychologist, Keith Oatley. Oatley's *Best Laid Schemes* is almost unique in giving a rigorous, theoretical account of the relation between narrative and emotion. However, initially at least, Oatley set out to understand emotion, not narrative. His treatment of novels was designed, first of all, to develop and illustrate points about emotion, not to develop an account of narrative. This is not true of all his work. Some of Oatley's writings do focus on literature as such. Indeed, some of this sets out the relation between his work and that of the Sanskrit theorists. But I believe it is fair to say that the center of Oatley's work has been emotion, not narrative.

Most forms of narratology appear to privilege some component of narrative. Rhetorical narratologists may be viewed as stressing the author, along with the reader as the target of the author's rhetorical appeal. Formalist narratologists tend to stress the events of the story. The early South Asian narratologists as well as Oatley may be seen as stressing the other main component of stories--the characters.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, they tend not to stress the personality of characters so much as their aspirations and the actions those aspirations inspire. I might therefore refer to this group as "character action" narratologists.

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<sup>3</sup> Other, largely non-narratological Sanskrit theories placed greater stress on the emotional effect of the work, thus (roughly) the audience or reader.



Readers may have been struck by the fact that none of the theories treated in the first or standard account of narratology has yet reappeared here. That is because they all fall into a third large category. We might say that a broad range of theorists have seen narrative not primarily as a rhetorical appeal by an author to a reader and not primarily as a series of events or character actions. Rather, they have viewed narrative, first of all, as a linguistic operation. This was part of the “linguistic turn” manifest not only in French Structuralism (and Post-Structuralism), but in a range of developments in the Anglo-American world and elsewhere as well. These various trends had a profound impact in narratology.

The first and undoubtedly largest group of linguistic narratologists (as we might call them) were the Saussureans. These are the writers mentioned above in the context of the “standard narrative” of narratology and may be divided, as is commonly done, into “Structuralist” and “Post-Structuralist.” As I have already noted, none of this work was particularly hospitable to emotion research. The use of Saussurean linguistics as a basis for studying meaning, communication, narrative, etc., is also highly problematic for linguistic reasons. (On some of the problems, see my *Politics* 28-95 and *Philosophical* 244-52.)

The single major post-Saussurean linguist is Noam Chomsky. Some of Chomsky’s very early work inspired a “generativist” approach to narrative in the theories of Gerald Prince and others. Given Chomsky’s stress on the autonomy of syntax, it seems clear that this approach is unlikely to invite emotional analysis--since emotion would be modularly separated from syntax and thus the formal aspects of narrative treated by the theory. This approach too was problematic in itself. First, the syntactic theory on which it drew was tentative and quickly replaced within generativism. Second, there is no particular reason to believe that narrative structure is based on or follows the same principles as syntactic structure anyway.

The influence of Chomskyan linguistics on literary theory has not been absent in recent years (see, for example, Frederick Aldama's recent work). However, at least in some cases, the use of this work has been much broader, drawing on general patterns of cognitive processing suggested by Chomskyan linguistics, rather than specific theories. For instance, parts of my own work are broadly generativist, particularly my treatment of "idiolectal" patterns in the work of individual authors (see "Narrative Universals, Heroic Tragi-Comedy")--patterns that are, in this case, inseparable from emotion systems.

A third set of language-based approaches (after Saussurean and Generativist narratologies) derives from Cognitive Linguistics, thus the work of George Lakoff, Ronald Langacker, and others. Cognitive linguistics is very popular among cognitively oriented literary theorists. However, most of this popularity relates to the cognitive linguistic treatment of metaphor. There has certainly been cognitive linguistic work on narrative that has gone beyond metaphor. However, this work has been somewhat limited. Moreover, it is not always clear that it goes beyond rephrasing commonplace observations in a technical terminology. Such a project is by no means valueless. It serves to indicate the compatibility of cognitive linguistics with well-established views in narrative study. However, it does not necessarily advance or develop narratology itself. In any case, here, as elsewhere, the linguistic focus has probably contributed to the relative absence of emotion from narratological analyses. For example, in a standard and very valuable collection of essays on "cognitive poetics" (Gavins and Steen), only the essay by Oatley ("Writing and reading") includes any significant treatment of emotion--and, of course, Oatley is not following cognitive linguistics. On the other hand, there is no necessary incompatibility between cognitive linguistics and emotion theories, so work on emotion could certainly be integrated into this approach.

Perhaps the most salutary development out of the linguistic turn has been the use of discourse linguistics to study narrative. This is unsurprising, since narrative is

