

**Alojzija Zupan Sosič: *A Theory of Narrative*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022.**

Dr Alojzija Zupan Sosič, Full Professor of Slovenian Literature at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ljubljana, is a renowned researcher in the field of Slovenian literature, especially narrative. Her scientific monograph entitled *A Theory of Narrative* is the fruit of twenty years of systematic research into a wide variety of narrative texts. It was written with the aim of furthering the understanding of narrative in literature. The author herself describes it as a cross between a scientific monograph and a professional manual, taking into account the latest knowledge in the field of literary studies. Although Alojzija Zupan Sosič's scientific monograph is based on a knowledge of Slovenian literary studies, it also takes into account numerous foreign theoretical works. Despite the in-depth scientific discourse, it is transparent and readable. With its precision and breadth, it definitely exceeds the narrower Slovenian framework and can appeal to both literary researchers and students abroad, as its insights reach into the European and global space. It is therefore logical that the book was translated into Croatian soon after its publication (*Teorija privijesti*, 2021, translated by Ksenija Premur). In autumn 2022, it was also translated into English (by Helena Biffio Zorko) and published by the prestigious

Cambridge Scholars Publishing House in London.<sup>1</sup>

Since the original work is very extensive, comprising some 451 pages, the author and the publishing house decided to translate approximately half of the book, which has been condensed, updated and partially "adapted" for non-Slovenian readers in the process of preparation and translation. The English translation of the book is thus divided into three extensive parts and several chapters as well as an Introduction, which primarily illuminates the research area (theory, narratology, prose, narrative theory, narrative, narrative turn). This is followed by the first part, entitled Classical and Post-Classical Theory of Narrative. Classical narrative theory includes Russian formalism and structuralism, poststructuralism, semiotics and deconstruction, as well as postclassical cultural, cognitive, rhetorical and feminist narratology and gender narratology. While the classical theory of narrative emphasises intertextuality and breaks down the boundaries between literary and non-literary discourse, highlighting the multi-meaning of

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<sup>1</sup> Since the book already received positive (Slovenian) responses when it was published in 2017, this review is intended for all other readers, especially foreign ones. It has therefore been translated into English in order to reach a wider readership.

the text and the validity of different interpretations, the post-classical theory of narrative emphasises the context, the text, the reader and the critic, and has a more interdisciplinary orientation. It is directed at the circumstances and consequences of different readings. A special chapter is dedicated to feminist narratology, which is part of the movement for political, social and economic gender equality. The chapter is divided into several theoretical approaches: the starting point, for example, S. Beauvoir, and later J. Kristeva, L. Irigaray, H. Cixous, G. Deleuze, etc. Like other narratologies, feminist narratology is derived from methodological pluralism, whereby it is constantly updated and examines story and discourse with the help of a gender perspective. It produces a gender-aware reading of narrative texts, focusing especially on the evaluation and canonisation the texts by female authors. In *A Theory of Narrative*, Zupan Sosič also includes a chapter on the narratology of genders, so-called gender studies, which brings a very current approach to literature research.

The continuation of the scientific monograph deals with the analysis of wording methods in narrative. In the section entitled *Storytelling as a Human Universality*, the author explains storytelling as a universal human activity that has been treated by many theories, from Croce, Barthes, Jameson, Lyotard, Prince, Herman, Abbott and Brooks, to Biti and Koron. She then focuses on the wording modes of the narrative, such as narration, description and transmission of speech and their mixing, while also taking into account the structure and purpose of the text. In the author's opinion, the term narration

includes several meanings, from mode and procedure to action, as it takes into account the procedural nature of narration and its reception circumstances. The author then explains the terms narrative and narratability, taking into account the findings of Fludernik and Kernev Štrajn. She also addresses the mimetic nature of the narrative, pointing out that mimeticity includes not only imitation, but also the creative shaping of the presented reality. In the chapter *Realism of Narratives*, she states that, in the nineteenth century, for instance, literature was also based on found notes, memoirs and diaries, which influenced the literary direction and the method and technique of writing, as well as the appearance of so-called ordinary subjects in the narrative, in a shift towards objectivity and natural causality. All of this enabled many new narrative processes and trends in twentieth-century literature (social realism, neorealism, postrealism, etc.). In the chapter entitled *Theory of Possible Worlds*, the author writes that, although fictional worlds are often analogous and similar to the real world, they are not an imitation of the real world, but instead represent autonomous worlds and various possibilities surrounding the world of reality, since the fictional world has been constructed by the author. In the continuation, entitled *Fictional Narratives*, the author states that every narrative is a state of fictional truth, but is connected to the real world in a complex way. Here she quotes Eco, who wrote about the "fictional contract": when the reader reads a fictional narrative, he or she "plays" as if participating in the real event. The reader feels empathy, which is conditioned by imaginative role-taking. Eco

also wrote about the fact that narratology deals with the signs by which a fictional text differs from a non-fictional one. Among the mentioned factors, the role of the narrator is most often reflected. Zupan Sosič also considers Abbot's conclusions from his *Introduction to Narrative* (2009). She further discusses digressions in the narrative, viz. deviations from linearity, such as moving away or turning aside from the narrative line: essayisation, lyricisation and scriptisation. The scientific monograph teaches us that essayisation is a process that already appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century with the advent of modernism. It introduced major changes to the traditional narrative, leading to the birth of modern narrative techniques and the emergence of the so-called modern novel. All distances to the narrative belong to the subjective colouring of the essay, humour, irony, parody and grotesque. According to Zupan Sosič, essay writing deepens the narrative and gives it meaning. This chapter is supplemented by examples from literary works, e.g., Mira Mihelič and Milan Kundera. The author goes on to discuss lyricisation, which means enriching the narrative structure with lyrical elements, replacing realistic conventions. Scenarios in the context of scriptisation, the introduction of dramatic elements into the narrative text, are also common.

The second, more extensive section in the present scientific monograph deals with description. This second mode of wording mostly dominates modernist texts, in which description and speech are the most important elements. In literary theory, the author draws attention to the contribution of Slawinski, who

wrote about the fact that, in the modern novel, the individual is no longer the most important part of reality, having given up his or her place to objects, which is why description can become the central part of storytelling precisely in the age of modernity. Slawinski built his theory as a denial of Barthes's theses. He strove for the "emancipation of description" and argued that description does not interfere with the semantics of the narrative, and that it is an important guide to the narrative. Zupan Sosič also explains the characteristics and differences between condensed, dispersed and developed description, focusing on transparent and puzzle-like description and supporting her findings with the examples of novels such as *The Tin Drum* by Gunther Grass and *Prišleki* (*Newcomers*) by Lojze Kovačič.

In the next, more comprehensive chapter, Zupan Sosič focuses on the mediation of speech, the role of which has only gained importance in narrative theory in recent decades (Biti, Fludernik, Thomas et al.). Representation of speech, that is, dialogue, monologue, inner monologue, stream of consciousness and experienced speech, increased significantly in modernism, and dialogues are important for the cohesion of the action structure. In this context, Zupan Sosič examines two dialogue novels: Philip Roth's *Deception* and *Da me je strah?* (*That I'm afraid?*) by Maruša Krese.

In the continuation of her scientific monograph, Alojzija Zupan Sosič devotes herself to narrative elements: story and narrative, the beginning and end of the narrative, narrator, focalization, literary person, literary event, and literary time and space. In the section Story and

Narrative, she discusses the two-level conception of narrative. In this context, she considers intertextuality, which includes the reader's "weaving" of the current reading with all other readings interwoven in his or her reading memory and a certain cultural environment. This replenishment process, however, is never finished. She then analyses the elements of the narrative and, following Culler, draws attention to the so-called double logic of the narrative. The story is a precursor to narrative discourse, while at the same time emerging from it. This is followed by the definition of a framework narrative, examples of which can be found both in Boccaccio and Calvin, as well as in the Slovenian writer Tavčar.

Theoretical treatment of the beginnings and ends of narratives is rarer in literary studies, and it was the author of the present monograph who introduced them to Slovenian literary studies. The beginnings and ends of the narrative are indispensable in directing the reading narrative. At the same time, they belong to the so-called strong positions of the text, to which Zupan Sosič adds the title, the epigraph (motto), the subtitle, stylistic figures, proverbs, quotations and personal names. The beginning of the narrative can also be connected with the end, which often determines how we should understand the text as a whole (as discussed by Biti 1997; Prince 1987; Phelan 2007; Dillon 1980; Eco 1999, etc.). Furthermore, the preface can be both an extra-literary and an intra-fictional element, as it is part of the entire book (Lanser 1981), Genette (1997). There is also the so-called anti-beginning, when the reader is "thrown" into the action as a process, instead of

being introduced to it gradually, such as in the works *To the Lighthouse* and *Jacob's Room* by Woolf. According to Zupan Sosič, the title is the "text of the text", directing reading attention. Well-known examples are listed, such as the title *Ana Karenina*, which foreshadows the character's novel, the title *Beloved*, which is abstract, the title *Childhood*, which comments on the content, etc. In addition to the beginning, Zupan Sosič also devotes herself to the end of the narrative, which should be read as a conclusion, as the sum of the entire meaning, since it is supposed to "hide" the essence; although every narrative has an end, not every narrative has its own conclusion. Kafka's novel *The Trial*, for instance, does not have a conclusion; its end is a so-called open end.

The third chapter of this part of the monograph deals with the narrator, taking into account the research of Adorno, who, in *Notes on Literature*, dealt with the place of the narrator in the modern novel. Zupan Sosič writes that the narrator has never withdrawn from narrative texts, but recently he or she has reappeared in basic metaliterary texts (as noted by Abbott, Fludernik, Zerweck, etc.). The author treats the narrator as a structural part of the text or a linguistic subject, as he or she plays an important mediating role. German narrative science (Friedmann, Stanzel) has dealt with this extensively, while Anglo-American and Russian narrative science has devoted less attention to this question. In the narrative, in addition to the narrator, there is also the category of the narratee (a term introduced by Prince), that is, the person to whom the narrator is narrating. The narratee appears in the text as a fictional listener. Zupan

Sosič defines the types of narrators according to four criteria: grammatical person (first-person, second-person and third-person), mode of transmission of narrative information (authorial or omniscient and figural), reliability of information (reliable and unreliable) and typical declarative action, the so-called reporter, interpreter and evaluator. She also writes about the qualities of an authorial and omniscient narrator (who has an overview of the entire event) and a figural narrator (who narrates the viewpoints of the characters in the story, such as in Proust, Butor, Woolf, Zupan), as well as reliable and unreliable narrators. In this way, Zupan Sosič systematically introduces the unreliable narrator into Slovenian literary knowledge, which she supersedes with the category of a three-part division according to the narrative position: the division into the category of reporter, interpreter and evaluator of the narrative. This last innovation is also something new in the field of world literary studies, which until now has used the three aforementioned categories only to define an unreliable narrator.

In the fourth chapter, called Focalization, the author explains the concept of perspective and focalization, which was previously included in the field of the narrator in Slovenian literary studies. Since the term perspective is more general, encompassing both voice and eyes (Wales 1990), it defines the focalizer as “the owner of the point of view, of central consciousness”. This is followed by the division of focalization according to the theories of G. Genett and M. Bal, as well as the definition of internal and external focalization.

The fifth chapter is called Literary Characters. According to Zupan Sosič, the latter has a particularly emphasised position in the narrative, as it remains in the reader’s memory the longest. According to her, characters evoke sympathy or antipathy, love or hate, pity, etc. The author uses the designations literary person, literary character, protagonist or figure, claiming that the designation “hero” is outdated. Literary figures move between mimeticity and fictionality. The main literary figures, writes Zupan Sosič, can “emerge” from the texts and become part of general cultural discourse, such as *Don Quixote*, *Emma Bovary* and *Odysseus*. The author draws attention to the double identity of a literary figure: on the one hand, it functions as an illusion of imitation, while, on the other, it creates a new idea in a literary construction. She therefore uses a new term for them: amphibian. Zupan Sosič also researches characterisation and motivation in the context of flat and round literary characters (where the former is a typical, simplified character, and the latter is an unpredictable literary character), the reception of a literary character (when the reader creates fictional characters in his or her performance by composing textual details that are “transmitted” by the narrator) and the internal view (when we experience literary characters mainly from the inside, with the help of their thoughts, experiences and beliefs).

The penultimate and last chapters in the scientific monograph are entitled Literary Events and Literary Time and Space. Within the framework of the former, the event, situation, incident, etc. is analysed in terms of plot, suspense and

gap, while the latter examines the connection of time and space, objective and subjective time and space, simultaneous time, narrative and story time, anachrony (analepsis and prolepsis), space in the narrative, and narrative and story space.

Intended for both literary scholars and students, *A Theory of Narrative* by university professor Alojzija Zupan Sosič is the first synthetic scientific work of its kind in Slovenia. This testifies to the fact that writing such a book is a very ambitious and demanding task, which in the past was beyond many otherwise excellent Slovenian literary researchers. All of the research of her predecessors in the field of literary studies was more or less partial in the light of this monumental monograph, which is also reflected in the ranking of her monograph in the prestigious place of humanistic research in Slovenia. Despite the fact that the monograph is an in-depth and scientifically innovative work, Alojzija Zupan Sosič deliberately does not offer complete models for the analysis and interpretation of literary texts, as she wants her scientific work to remain open to further possibilities and research. I am convinced that, with its English translation, the monograph *A Theory of Narrative* will become an indispensable part of scientific literature abroad, just as it has been for some time in Slovenia.

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