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Existentialist Roots of Narrative Actants

Abstract

It is time to rethink the history of narratology, a field of study that is undergoing a recontextualization and renaissance. Examining ways in which classical narrative theory was embedded in its cultural milieu, this paper reconsiders one chapter in the history of structuralist narrative analysis as it emerges in France in the 1960s. The paper focuses on the genesis—and the genealogy—of the concept of narrative "actants." Actants were originally construed as names for the basic and general roles that can be assumed by characters in the unfolding of a narrative. Structuralist theories owed much to Vladimir Propp's actantial typology, which included the villain, the donor, the helper, the sought-for-person and her father, the dispatcher, the hero, and the false hero. But existentialist theories of the self may also have inflected the way structuralist narratologists drew on linguistic theory to redescribe characters in stories as actants. Further, a more historically particularized account of actants may have significant methodological consequences for present-day analysts interested in using actantial models to study narrative.

Keywords

narratology, existentialism, classical narrative theory, structuralist narrative analysis, narrative actants, Vladimir Propp, actantial typology, existentialist theory, narrative study

Existentialist Roots of Narrative Actants

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It seems that rumors of the death of narratology have been greatly exaggerated. Recently we have witnessed a small but unmistakable explosion of activity in the field of narrative studies; signs of this minor narratological renaissance include the publication of a spate of articles, special issues, and books that rethink and recontextualize classical models for narratological research;¹ the evident success of the journal *Narrative* (not founded until 1993); and the establishment of a book series devoted specifically to “The Theory and Interpretation of Narrative” at the Ohio State University Press. Thus a full account of narratology—a complete story of our ongoing *rapprochement* with stories—remains yet to be written. By the same token, narratology’s history sometimes gets told in ways that flatten it out into a monolithically (if not monomaniacally) scientific endeavor. Recounted too rapidly, the history of narratology can work to decontextualize a method of analysis that is itself sometimes charged with a lack of concern for context. In particular, it is important not to sever links between models for narrative analysis and surrounding critico-theoretical trends.

Here, in order to indicate ways in which classical narrative theory was embedded in its cultural milieu, I should like to reconsider one chapter in the history of structuralist narrative analysis as it emerged in France in the 1960s. My concern is with the genesis—and the genealogy—of the concept of narrative “actants.” In the narratological tradition, actants represent a new, linguistically informed approach to the very old problem of lit-

erary character. Actants are typically defined as “fundamental role[s] at the level of narrative deep structure” (Prince 1). In other words, “actants are general categories [of behavior or doing] underlying all narratives (and not only narratives) while [actors] are invested with specific qualities in different narratives” (Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative* 34).² After investigating the lineage of this key narratological concept, I shall go on to examine some philosophical contexts for the actantial model that first appeared in its canonical form in 1966 in A. J. Greimas’s *Sémantique structurale* (*Structural Semantics*). Refined by Greimas in his 1973 essay on “Actants, Actors, and Figures,” the model was widely influential, adopted (and adapted) in much subsequent narratological work. My claim is that, in what amounts to a series of disciplinary displacements, existentialist theories of the self may have inflected the way structuralist narratologists drew on linguistic theory to redescribe characters in stories as actants. Further, a more historically particularized account of actants may have significant methodological consequences for present-day analysts interested in using actantial models to study narrative.

In a certain sense, structuralist narratology began with the attempt to create a systematic framework for describing how characters participate in the narrated action. In his *Morphology of the Folktale*—a text first published in 1928 and one of the works associated with Russian Formalism that would exercise such a profound influence on Francophone narratology³—Vladimir Propp followed Aristotle in subordinating character to action or plot.⁴ Articulating a descriptive vocabulary based on the “functions” performed by characters in stories, Propp conceived of the function as “an act of character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action” (21). A function is thus a participatory slot in the syntagmatic unfolding of a narrative, and “character” is a relatively loose (if traditional) way of talking about kinds of slots and the relational networks linking them together. Arguing that many seemingly diverse functions join together to create a few, typifiable “spheres of action,” Propp developed a typology of seven general roles (the villain, the donor, the helper, the sought-for-person and her father, the dispatcher, the hero, and the false hero) that correspond to the ways in which

characters can participate in the plot structures found in the genre of the folktale (79-80).

Propp's subordination of characters to the action—his shift from personalities to participatory roles—provided the basis for structuralist accounts of actants. Rooted in contemporary linguistic theory, these accounts were also resolutely anti-psychological, displacing attention from the interior states to the manifest deeds of participants in a story. The issue became not what characters *are* but what they *do*; a character is nothing more than the sequence of (plot-relevant) actions that it performs. To anticipate: from a broadly Proppian perspective, as in existentialist theories of the self, characters' motivations do not precede and explain their actions, but are rather born with the actions themselves. "Interiority" or psychological essence is not a cause but an effect of the way characters (and people) behave; it is a hypothesis about behavior that can only be constructed *ex post facto* and at the risk of what Jean-Paul Sartre would call bad faith. To read characters in the traditional, familiar way—to construe them as psychological beings instead of emergent behavioral profiles—is to live in narratological bad faith.

Yet the structuralists made explicit appeal not to philosophical but to linguistic paradigms in elaborating the insights they took over from Propp. Thus Greimas's *Sémantique structurale* appeared in the same year that Roland Barthes recommended that "the structural analysis of narrative be given linguistics as founding model" ("Introduction" 82).⁵ Whereas Greimas (himself a linguist) was the first to invoke the term *actant* in connection with stories, he did not coin the word. Rather, in developing his actantial typology Greimas drew on the syntactic theories of Lucien Tesnière. In *Éléments de syntaxe structurale* (1959), Tesnière had likened the sentence to "un petit drame" 'a small drama,' and written that:

Comme un drame en effet, il comporte obligatoirement un procès, et le plus souvent des acteurs et des circonstances. Transposés du plan de la réalité dramatique sur celui de la syntaxe structurale, le procès, les acteurs et les circonstances deviennent respectivement le verbe, les actants et les circonstants. Le verbe exprime le procès . . . Les actants sont

les êtres ou les choses qui, à un titre quelconque et de quelque façon que ce soit, même au titre de simples figurants et de la façon la plus passive, participent au procès Les actants sont toujours des substantifs ou des équivalents de substantifs. Inversement les substantifs assument en principe toujours dans la phrase la fonction d'actants. (106; propositions 1-6)⁶

Like a drama, it [the sentence or "nœud verbal" 'verbal node'] comprises necessarily an action and most often actors and circumstances as well. Transposed from the plane of dramatic reality to that of structural syntax, the action, actors and circumstances become, respectively, the verb, the actants and the circumstants. The verb expresses the action. . . . The actants are beings or things that participate in the action—in whatever capacity and whatever style this might entail, even if it is as mere walk-ons and in the most passive way imaginable. Actants are always nouns or the equivalents of nouns. Inversely, in a given phrase nouns always assume, at least in principle, the function of actants.

Synthesizing Propp's and Tesnière's ideas, Greimas reframed and radicalized one of the theoretical postulates informing *Morphology of the Folktale*: namely, the assumption that if characters are to be described in a systematic as opposed to an *ad hoc* way, they should be viewed not as clusters of qualities or traits, but rather as variables in a kind of behavioral calculus, or alternatively units in a grammar of action, a syntax of doing.⁷ Adopting the Barthesian view that "a narrative is a long sentence, just as every constative sentence is . . . the rough outline of a short narrative" ("Introduction" 84), Greimas drew on Tesnière's work to interpret actants as syntactic elements that are distributed in narrative "sentences" in patterned, predictable ways.⁸ Thus, whereas actors are semantic units, actants are syntactic ones, such that "An actor functions as an actant only when it is put into play by either narrative syntax or linguistic syntax" (Greimas, "Actants" 114). Further, actantial roles, like syntactic units, are theoretical constructs pertaining to all narratives; they are part of the very grammar of stories. By contrast, actors are the equivalent of particular sentences realized within the grammar of a language; the output of grammatical rules and operations located in the deep structure of narrative, actors are surface structures specific to

particular stories (Greimas, *Structural* 197-201, 211-13).⁹ At stake, then, is the difference between examining the structure and the content of a given sentence, its actantial scaffolding in contrast to how it is used to characterize this or that actor. "Opponent" is an abstract grammatical category that can be used to generate structural descriptions of narrative sentences as diverse as those used to tell the stories of Claudius in *Hamlet*, the Devil in *The Brothers Karamazov*, and Léonce Pontellier in *The Awakening*. For the same reason an actor can embody more than one actantial role (a character can be both opponent and helper over the course of a story), and conversely an actantial role can be embodied by more than one actor (several different characters can be helpers in a narrative) (Greimas, "Actants" 106-07, 111-13; Coste 134-37; Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative* 35).

Subsequent narratological investigations of the problem of character bear the impress of Greimas's model—in particular, its reframing of Propp's ideas in linguistic (and more specifically syntactic) terms. In his 1969 *Grammaire du "Décaméron,"* where the term "narratologie" 'narratology' was first proposed, even as Tzvetan Todorov rejects Greimas's actantial typology he retains a grammatico-syntactic approach to characters. For Todorov, "the grammatical subject is always without internal properties; these can only come from its momentary conjunction with a predicate."¹⁰ What we call characters are the product of a quasi-syntactical operation—a reading procedure essential for story comprehension—by virtue of which predicates are attached to proper names to yield narrative agents (Todorov, *Grammaire* 19ff.; cf. Chatman 125-31; Herman, *Universal* 89-90). Narratological analysis of characters should therefore work to discover the combinatory system, the narrative *langue*, in terms of which subjects are assigned predicates by the reader:

[In a narrative] certain characters are placed in opposition to others. Yet an immediate opposition of the characters would simplify these relations without coming any closer to our goal. It would serve our purpose better to decompose each image into distinctive features and to put these in a relation of opposition or identity with the distinctive features of other characters in the same narrative. We would thereby obtain a reduced num-

ber of axes of opposition whose various combinations would regroup these features into representative clusters of characters. (Todorov, "Heritage" 253)

Todorov thus follows the Propp-Tesnière-Greimas tradition in viewing characters as the narrative equivalent of grammatical subjects; in the same tradition he subsumes narrative participants under a combinatory logic that regulates their functions vis-à-vis the plot. Yet it is Barthes who, in his "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," offers the most searching discussion of the actantial model, its conceptual bases, and its philosophical and ideological ramifications. Couched in language that is reminiscent of existentialism, Barthes's account suggests why Francophone structuralists may have been especially receptive to Propp's action-centered approach in the first place. It also suggests why the narratologists made character primarily a problem of narrative syntax (how do we determine the units out of which stories are composed and formulate their principles of composition?) and not narrative semantics (how best do we describe stories' propositional content and/or their referential properties?) or narrative pragmatics (what sorts of world-knowledge do readers bring to stories and how does such contextual information get paired with narrative form to yield nonrandom, predictable inferences about the meaning of stories?).

In his "Introduction" Barthes remarks that, whereas in Aristotelian poetics "the notion of character is secondary, entirely subsidiary to the notion of action":

Later the character, who until then had been only a name, the agent of an action, acquired a psychological consistency, became an individual, a "person," in short a fully constituted "being," even should he do nothing and of course even before acting. Characters stopped being subordinate to the action, embodied immediately psychological essences; which essences could be drawn up into lists, as can be seen in its purest form in the list of "character parts" in bourgeois theatre. . . . From its very outset, structural analysis has shown the utmost reluctance to treat character as an essence, even merely for purposes of classification. . . . Structural analysis, much concerned not to define characters in terms of psychological essences, has so far

striven, using various hypotheses, to define a character not as a "being" but as a "participant." (104-06)

This passage does have the ring of a structuralist manifesto. It is in part the programmatic statement of a method of inquiry that focuses not on timeless and enduring meanings but on the semiotic and cultural codes that constitute objects, situations, and events *as* meaningful to those who interpret them. The same codes, of course, underwrite human as well as literary identities; there is no bedrock or essence of the self but rather signifying practices that traverse the individual and make it readable as a self. But that is only part of the story. Barthes's formulations can also be compared with some of the tenets of existentialism presented by Sartre in an essay written in 1946, "L'existentialisme est un humanisme" ("Existentialism is a humanism")—originally intended to be a précis of the major ideas of Sartre's *L'être et le néant* (*Being and Nothingness*) (1943). Here Sartre wishes to dispute the kind of humanism associated with philosophers such as Diderot, Voltaire, and Kant. According to this earlier version of humanism, "Man has a human nature; this human nature, which is the concept of the human, is found in all men, which means that each man is a particular example of a universal concept, man. . . . Thus . . . the essence of man precedes the historical existence that we find in nature" (35). By contrast, in the atheistic existentialism championed by Sartre,

there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept, and . . . this being is man, or, as Heidegger says, human reality. What is meant here by saying that existence precedes essence? It means that, first of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself. If man, as the existentialist conceives him, is indefinable, it is because at first he is nothing. Only afterwards will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be. (Sartre 35-36)¹¹

For Sartre, the slogan "existence precedes essence" adumbrates important ethical as well as metaphysical propositions. It suggests that "there is no explaining things away by reference to a fixed and given human nature"; and because "there is no deter-

minism, man is free, man is freedom." Thus humanity, "with no support and no aid, is condemned every moment to invent [humanity]" (Sartre 41). In response to critics who charge the philosophy with exempting people from responsibility for their actions, the existentialist says: "There is no reality except in action." Even more tellingly, Sartre paraphrases existentialist doctrine as follows:

Man is nothing else than his plan; he exists only to the extent that he fulfills himself; he is therefore nothing else than the ensemble of his acts, nothing else than his life. . . . What we mean is that a man is nothing else than a series of undertakings, that he is the sum, the organization, the ensemble of the relationships which make up these undertakings. (47; 48)

Mutatis mutandis—with the philosopher focusing on human selves, the narratologist on narrative identities—Sartre and Barthes offer strikingly similar accounts. Both writers define identity as an ensemble of actions; both suggest that no psychological or moral essence precedes the acts (and choices to act) that make one become what one is. Indeed, the distinctly Sartrean overtones of Barthes's "Introduction" suggest the existential roots of narrative actants. Read against Sartrean philosophy, Barthes's account helps contextualize the two-stage process by which the structuralists combined Propp's and Tesnière's ideas to bring the "actant under the . . . categories of the grammatical (and not psychological) person" (Barthes 109). In a first stage, Propp's subordination of character to action paralleled—and offered independent confirmation of—the existentialist subordination of essence to existence, timeless "human nature" to the acts by which people create their own contingent identities. To this extent, the narratologists' redescription of characters as participants rather than beings was historically overdetermined; as research strategies, actantial models are of a jointly Proppian and Sartrean provenance. In a second, more explicitly grammatical stage of research on actants, Greimas chose Tesnière's syntactic model as a formalism for character analysis—a systematic notation for documenting story participants not as essences with a meaning but as sets of actions combined to create larger narrative structures.

Again, this “choice”—a confluence of ideas and methods that of course transcends Greimas as an individual—was overdetermined. It is true that, in hindsight, “Propp’s analyses approach the object from a syntactic perspective; each folk narrative belonging to the corpus is shown to manifest the same abstract structure, independently of the particular motifs in the story”—just as “syntax discovers combinatory patterns of abstract categories . . . independently of the lexical units which may form the actual sentence” (Pavel 87). Sartrean and more broadly existentialist theories of the self, however, may have made theorists like Greimas especially predisposed to fusing Propp’s scheme with syntactic models. Emptied of content or essence, the Sartrean self figures as a concatenation of acts and relationships to other, similarly content-less actors. Likewise, viewed from a syntactic perspective, narrative actants appear not as centers of meaning and value—not as a part of the semantics of story—but as placeholders in the structure of the ongoing action.

The existentialist bases of narrative actants may compel us to rethink the future as well as the history of narratology. Historically, the existentialist influence might help account for the preeminence of certain kinds of grammatical models in the heyday of structuralist narratology. Rimmon-Kenan points to “methodological considerations” as the primary reason for the grafting of Propp’s ideas onto Francophone structuralism, and in particular Propp’s subordination of character to action:

Like any scientifically oriented discipline, formalist and structuralist poetics recognizes the methodological necessity of reduction, especially in preliminary phases of an inquiry. Since action seems more easily amenable to the construction of “narrative grammars” (often based on verb-centred grammars of natural languages), it is convenient to reduce character to action. (34)

The more or less overt scientism of the structuralists, however, does not suffice to explain their reduction of character to action. The methodological imperative Rimmon-Kenan describes was itself part of a larger complex of cultural and intellectual forces. In the case of actantial models, the really interesting question is

why *certain* methodologies borrowed from the field of linguistics—e.g., those associated with syntactic analysis—took hold while others did not. In a different milieu, very different research hypotheses about actants might have suggested themselves. Indeed, a better understanding of narratology's past can help today's researchers envision new possibilities for narrative analysis. Whereas the structuralists for the most part drew on syntactic theory to develop their actantial typologies, more recent research has indicated the relevance of pragmatic and cognitive models for studying actants.¹² Thus Monika Fludernik has outlined an enriched narratology according to which readers "naturalize" stories—bring them within the domain of the natural or comprehensible—in order to interpret them as narratives in the first place. In order to naturalize stories, readers typically use "frames" or pre-stored sets of expectations, and for Fludernik expectations about action or behavior constitute one of the most basic frames in terms of which people make sense out of narratives (*Towards* 44-52).¹³ On this model, actants are not syntactic units built into narrative structure, but rather cognitive paradigms used to impute goal-directed behavior to narrative agents. After all, a story is not just an assemblage of discrete events; to be processed as a narrative, event-strings must also involve a specific configuration of participants or actants whose doings conform to known behavioral paradigms. Cognitively based inferences about actants thus allow story recipients to recognize certain modes of discourse as being narratively organized in the first place. More generally, though narrative actants may have had existentialist roots, and though those beginnings may have prompted narratologists to study characters in reductively syntactic terms at first, the concept of actants is in no way exhausted by the history of its uses.

Notes

1. For example, in 1990, *Poetics Today* published two issues entitled "Narratology Revisited." A few of the relevant articles and books are: Monika Fludernik's "Narratology" and *Towards*; David Herman's "Hy-

pothetical”; Susan S. Lanser’s *Fictions*; and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s “How.”

2. Greimas likewise posits a distinction “between *actants*, having to do with narrative syntax, and *actors*, which are recognizable in the particular discourses in which they are manifested” (“Actants” 106).

3. To get a sense of just how influential Propp’s text was, see for example Claude Bremond’s *Logique* and Todorov’s “Transformations” and “Heritage.”

4. Cf. Roland Barthes, “Introduction” (104); Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative* (34); and Aristotle, *Poetics*, Section VI, p. 52.

5. In “To Write: An Intransitive Verb?”—an essay written around the same time—Barthes makes similar claims about the singular importance of linguistic models for literary analysis.

6. Greimas invokes Tesnière’s theatrical metaphor at the beginning of chapter 10 of *Structural Semantics* (197-221).

7. In “Actants,” Greimas suggested that, in principle, a theory of character must include not just a typology of actantial roles but also an account of how actants manifest themselves in the “discursive structures” of stories—structures built up through “relational figurative network[s] that can be strung out over entire sequences” as well as through individual narrative utterances (115; 113-19). In fact, however, the lack of a “coherent discourse theory” has impeded the development of a systematic model of “actorial organization” that would complement the *actantial* model.

8. Culler, too, points out that “One function of [Greimas’s] scheme is to make the structure of the sentence roughly homologous to the ‘plot’ of a text” (82).

9. See Greimas, *Structural* (197-201, 211-13).

10. Quoted and translated by Culler (235).

11. Compare the similar account offered in 1887 by Friedrich Nietzsche: “. . . just as the popular mind separates the lightning from its flash and takes the latter for an *action*, for the operation of a subject called lightning, so popular morality also separates strength from the expression of strength, as if there were a neutral substratum behind the strong man, which was *free* to express strength or not to do so. But there is no such substratum; there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the

doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything. The popular mind in fact doubles the deed; when it sees the lightning flash, it is the deed of a deed: it posits the same event first as cause and then a second time as its effect" (First Essay, Section 13, p. 481).

12. Already in 1973, however, Greimas had pointed to important pragmatic dimensions of the concept of actants, arguing that actantial models "constitute an attempt to account for instances and trajectories of meaning that generate discourse. But their importance is also pragmatic. They have to be considered as models of predictability, as hypotheses presented in the form of logical articulations that, once projected onto texts, can enhance their readability" ("Actants" 113).

13. For related arguments, see Herman, "Socionarratology."

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