



Review

New Dutch Pathways in Literary Analysis: *Vooy's* 33:2 (2015). Special theme issue on 'The Fundamentals of Literary Theory'¹

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Vooy's is a long-standing, full-fledged scientific journal for literary studies, but because of its charming format, with a Utrecht-based student editorial board, its articles are more often endowed with a touch of freshness than in more 'established' journals. This is perhaps why in their 2015 theme issue on the 'fundamentals of literary theory' the contributing authors, though naturally building their arguments on established scientific work, have not shied away from expressing their sometimes bold opinions on the new pathways narratology should be heading toward. The five main articles that have developed new vistas of narrative theory don't propose to travel straight ahead but rather suggest turning back to previous, trusted coordinates after having been lost along the way. Each one then charts new, separate or partially coinciding pathways forward. For this reason a review of these Dutch contributions is of interest to the non-Dutch-speaking scholars of literary theory.

Probably the most eminent intervention from the Low Countries widely known in the field of literary analysis has been Herman and Vervaeck's fairly seminal 2005 *Handbook of Narrative Analysis*.² In the journal's opening article 'Fundamentals, Situations and Stances'³ (pp. 8-16), Korsten discusses what he sees as a 'vague' 'plea'⁴ of the two Flemish narratologists in favour of the 'great potential' of 'post-classical narratology'.⁵ Being more explicit than

¹ 'Fundamenten van de literatuurwetenschap'. All footnoted translations in this article are mine unless indicated otherwise.

² Originally published in Dutch four years earlier as: L. Herman en B. Vervaeck, *Vertelduivels: Handboek verhaalanalyse* (Brussel/Nijmegen: VUBPRESS/Vantilt, 2001). A third, revised edition in Dutch was released by the same publisher in 2005. When referring to the latter edition, 2005a denotes the Dutch *Handboek* and 2005b the English translation.

³ 'Grondslagen, situaties en houdingen'. 'Houding' can also be translated as 'attitude'.

⁴ Resp. 'vaag' and 'pleidooi' (p. 15).

⁵ 'Perhaps, narratology is now based on fewer certainties than structuralism has hoped for, but this is probably the reason why narrative theory has such great potential' (cf. 2005b, p. 175; cf. 2005a, p. 177; quoted by Korsten, p. 15). Guessing the authors' personal preferences between pre-, classical or post-classical narratology in their *Handbook of Narrative Analysis* seems to resemble a kind of academic pastime for some Dutch literary scholars – somewhere in between gambling and reading tea leaves. Joining in, Korsten implies that Herman and Vervaeck opted squarely for the

Herman and Vervaeck on the future of narratology, Korsten suggests reconsidering all hitherto established narratological frameworks neither as overhauled philosophical nor as merely quantifiable ‘fundamentals’ but as ‘tools’⁶ that, depending on the context, may or may not fit the investigation of a problem of literary study (pp. 15, 16). The literary analyst has to ‘take a stance’;⁷ as he calls it, depending on the ‘situation’. As a case in point, he talks about one of his students who was reluctant to use a feminist approach, and instead chose structuralism for her research on the winners of the annual Dutch book week gift. Adopting a ‘stance’ is thus little less than the strategic freedom one has in choosing the tools eclectically out of the narratological ‘toolkits’ assembled up over time.

There is an unspoken consensus in virtually all the main articles in *Vooy's* theme issue on this point. They all adopt their own ‘stance’ on various situational questions besetting literary studies today. Korsten himself favours an ‘alliance’⁸ between a renewed hermeneutics and a renewed poststructuralism (p. 14). As can be heard more often nowadays, the author thinks the floating signifier of poststructuralism has ‘seemingly been re-appropriated’⁹ by the powers that be, whereas initially it was conceived against the truth monopoly of the modern state. The current renewed need for ‘factuality’ – which has always been the strong point of hermeneutics according to Korsten – then demands the assistance of a ‘new’ hermeneutics. Redefining art and literature ‘in nationalistic terms’¹⁰ in the nineteenth century, the latter should shift away from that tradition and heritage and revert to its ‘initial humanistic impulse’.¹¹ His thought-provoking plea for a hermeneutic-cum-poststructuralist narratology in order to forge nothing less than a ‘European’ literature and ditto literary studies (p. 15) certainly deserves further investigation. However, the concept of ‘European literature’ – even if non-nationalistic – might need amending with a more appropriate term if literary studies are to truly break away from (all) traditional heritage.

Ammunition for Korsten’s alliance can also be found in Hans van Stralen’s article (pp. 28-39) on hermeneutics, which retraces its history in greater depth (though somewhat strangely, Van Stralen chose to leave out any mention of the concept of the hermeneutic circle). The author points out that hermeneutics and deconstruction have always shared a common task: to reveal the multi-layeredness of texts. Indeed, Van Stralen places Derrida in a hermeneutic

post-classical pathway, dismissing all too easily the analytic strengths of structuralism (p.15). However, when quoting the authors (through secondary literature) on the ‘potential’ of post-classical narratology, he omits the preceding sentence where they declare that classical narratology has ‘not’ to be ‘pushed aside’ (2005b, p. 175; ‘niet ter zijde geschoven’, 2005a, p. 176). Rather than adhering to one narratological ‘school’ in particular, the authors actually advocated holding a middle ground between the analytical strengths of structuralism on the one hand and the many-interpretations potential of poststructuralism that rehabilitated context and reader on the other. They prudently adopt this compromise as a default position in light of a more robust post-classical literary narratology (Herman and Vervaeck 2005b, p. 118; 2005a, p. 121).

⁶ ‘middelen’, literally: ‘means’.

⁷ ‘een houding aannemen’ (p. 15).

⁸ ‘alliantie’

⁹ ‘lijkt [...] over te zijn genomen’ (p. 14).

¹⁰ ‘in nationalistische termen’ (p. 13).

¹¹ ‘de eerste humanistische impuls’ (p. 14).

tradition, not least because Derrida built his insights through a critical engagement with phenomenology, another supplier of ideas to hermeneutics.

Yet a further echo of Korsten's plea can be heard in Hans Bertens' contribution (pp. 52-61), which carries a title that swings like a sword ('A Frontal Attack on the Humanist Tradition'¹²). The author focuses on the weak points in poststructuralist thought – much reminiscent, by the way, of how the early Derrida exploited the occasional scientism in Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology. Though acknowledging the 'irreversible' insights that poststructuralism bestowed on literary sciences, Bertens elaborates upon the premise that poststructuralism today has run out of steam; 'it is not so that sceptical humanism and poststructuralism have coalesced, but for the true poststructuralist contemporary poststructuralism isn't any more what it used to be'.¹³ As evidence, he cites recent works by Belsey, Gaskins, and Attridge and Elliott, which, to a greater or lesser degree, have all questioned the more radical poststructuralist excesses and in reaction have sometimes advocated a full return to a humanistic world view.

Less polemical in tone, but again making the case for a partial reappraisal of structuralism, are the essays by Mieke Bal (pp. 17-27) and Lucas van der Deijl (pp. 40-51). In her article 'Seeing Sense',¹⁴ Bal ponders over the question whether a classical narratological reading method can still prove itself relevant in what she – but also the editors and most of the other contributors – considers rather gloomily to be the lost significance of literary analysis and education in society at large. Bal does this by reviewing the narratological concept of focalisation – for which her own widely recognised work has been crucial – through an elegant reading of Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* (2003). For Bal, migrant literature proves to be a genre par excellence for the study of perspective due to the 'pluriformity of culture',¹⁵ but also because of the diversity of possible reactions towards migrants. Rather than siding against or in favour, Bal reveals that in various instances in *The Namesake*, the focalisation is ambiguous or ironic. Whereas the main character decides to change his name into Nikhil, which can sound Indian as well as American (Nick), the narrator stubbornly continues to call him by his original name, Gogol. Similarly, when a friend salutes Gogol-Nikhil with the words 'be my guest', this sounds as ambiguous as the migrant's own position in his new country of arrival. Through the only proper literary analysis in the journal – a classic sore of literary theory –, Bal convincingly demonstrates how classical narratology can still yield powerful text analyses, even if the complementary theoretical discourse (required to contextualise narratology, as she – along with Korsten – insists on), in this case a postcolonial one, would seemingly exclude the former. In my view, such a synergy in uncertain social times indeed espouses quite neatly what Herman and Vervaeck saw as the potential for 'post-classical' literary studies, discussed in Korsten's contribution.

Van der Deijl, for his part, examines what structuralism can mean for the study of what he coins as 'algorithm semiotics'.¹⁶ Drawing on Hayles and Ramsey, he advocates a reappraisal of

¹² 'Frontale aanval op de humanistische traditie'.

¹³ 'Het is niet zo dat poststructuralisme en sceptisch humanisme samen zijn gaan vallen, maar voor de echte poststructuralist is het huidige poststructuralisme niet meer wat het geweest is' (p. 61).

¹⁴ 'Zin zien'.

¹⁵ 'de pluriformiteit van cultuur' (p. 21).

¹⁶ 'semiotiek van het algoritme' (p. 46).

structural methods for the Digital Humanities. Van der Deijl boldly identifies code and algorithm as the manifestation of the *langue* of computer language; software and social media as its *parole*. The author does cite potential limitations in equating human with computational structures (because recognising data is not the same as acknowledging linguistic difference), to which I would add the advent of quantum computers. Van der Deijl might, however, want to dismiss overreaching claims: e.g. when positing that ‘against Derrida’s objections’¹⁷ the computer has become the new ‘centre’¹⁸ in the last thirty years (p. 46).

In conclusion, it seems that as far as most, if not all, authors discussed here are concerned, anything no longer ‘goes’. Without dismissing the merits of the position papers critical of the (recuperation of the) post-classical paradigm, an article that would have made the case for poststructuralism in carving out new narratological pathways in our allegedly post-factual days (by deconstructing the ‘post-fact’ concept itself, ‘appropriated’ by the powers that be, for example), might have been included for the sake of the argument.¹⁹

As indicated by the young editorial team at the start of the issue, innovative new pathways of literary theory need to be formulated ‘in keeping with the times’. The issue’s concluding article (pp. 74-9) – collecting a range of opinions of Dutch professors on this question – correctly underlines that this has to be linked with the need to permanently (re)connect literary theory to the academic classroom practice. Alongside exchanges *inter pares*, such engagements between the ‘old guard’ and a future generation of literary scholars will yield new, exciting pathways and ‘stances’ on the ‘fundamentals’, past and present, in literary theory. *Vooy’s* theme issue is a fine result of such a synergy. Furthermore, to this end, the five main articles can be of educational value as additional discussion material during introductory courses in literary theory in Dutch-speaking faculties, because of their accessible format – save for some unedited ‘typos’ and Proustian phrases – as well as their up-to-date overview of the various narratological ‘fundamentals’.

¹⁷ ‘Derrida’s bezwaren ten spijt’.

¹⁸ ‘centrum’.

¹⁹ Whatever their own personal wishes for narratology may be, in their *Handboek* Herman and Vervaeck did point out that it is an odd feature that the classical, structuralist paradigm(s) remain so hegemonic in Dutch narratology at the detriment of post-classical ones (2005a, pp. 17, 107). The dominant tone in the discussions in this special issue seems to confirm – once again (cf. L. Missinne’s review of *Vertelduijvels* in *Internationale Neerlandistiek*, 50 (2012), p. 123) – that this Dutch ‘partiality’ toward structuralism has, arguably, barely changed, even after the expansion of the chapter on post-classical narratologies in the new 2005 editions of Herman and Vervaeck’s *Handboek*.