TZVETAN TODOROV "STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF NARRATIVE" (1969)

"Structural Analysis of Narrative." Novel 3 (1969): 70-76.

Here, Todorov declares that the goal of the structural analysis of narrative is not the description of a concrete work of art in and for itself: the work is, rather, "considered as the manifestation of an abstract structure, merely one of its possible reiterations" (70). Structural analysis is, as such, a theoretical rather than a merely descriptive approach. It is also, however, an "internal approach" (70), that is, it does not seek to relate the literary work to something external to language. For example, Marxism and Psychoanalysis seek to relate the work to an "abstract structure, social or psychic, which manifests itself through that work" (70). However, if Structuralism seeks to relate the work to an abstract structure of some kind, it seeks to do so in relation to a properly linguistic structure. Indeed, Todorov argues that "literature must be understood in its specificity, as literature, before we seek to determine its relation to anything else" (71). Structural analysis, in short, is not "satisfied by a pure description of the work nor by its interpretation in terms that are psychological or sociological or, indeed, philosophical" (70). It seeks not a "rational resume of the concrete work" (71) but to understand the literary properties of individual works as "particular instances that have been realized" (71) of a given set of rules, that is, as the parole of an underlying langue. Todorov argues that Structuralist narratology implies to some degree an inductive approach:

> in practice, structural analysis will also refer to real works: the best stepping stone towards theory is that of precise, empirical knowledge. But such analysis will discover in each work what it has in common with others (studies of genres, of periods, for example), or even with all other works (theory of literature). . . . [I]t is always a question of going continually back and forth, from abstract literary properties to individual works and vice versa. (71)

Todorov is not shy about his goal, in so doing: that of effecting a "propaedeutic for a future *science* of literature" (my emphasis; 71). He points out that to focus on the intrinsic properties of the work in this way constitutes a more objective approach than any other critical approach. If there are still elements of subjectivism that inhere in this approach, Todorov asserts, this is no disgrace because no natural or human science is devoid of all traces of subjective bias.

Todorov argues that the proper focus of structural analysis is plot. Todorov points out that the minimal complete plot consists of a movement from one state of equilibrium through a state of disequilibrium to a final state of equilibrium that is similar to, but not the same as, the first state of equilibrium. Traditionally, narrative was analysed according to theme and rhetoric, that is, attention was paid to what the text is about and the diction deployed to that end. Instead, Todorov wants to propose a form of analysis that focuses on the syntax of narrative, that is, one that zeroes in on the syntagmatic axis of the utterance (parole) that is a particular narrative. The goal of all this is to understand the workings of plot in general (this would be the *langue* underlying all plots) and to differentiate between various kinds of plot (i.e. the varying manifestations or *paroles* of this underlying langue). As in his other well-known essay on narratology “The Grammar of Narrative,” Todorov draws upon Boccaccio's collection of short stories called The Decameron to support his theory of narrative and manages to distinguish between two types of story here: a) stories of punishment avoided, and b) stories of conversion.

A careful study of the tales reveals that they share some elements in common, for which what he calls a "schematic formulation" predicated on the view that there is a

profound analogy between a sentence and narrative can be proposed. Todorov points out a number of things about this schematic formulation:
a) The minimal element of the plot can be considered as equivalent to a clause;
b) Each narrative 'clause' contains an agent / subject and a predicate that may consist of a verb (an action which will modify the preceding situation) and / or an adjective / epithet which describes the former;
c) Each action, and thus clause, has either a positive or a negative status;
d) Each clause possesses a particular modality (e.g. the indicative or the imperative), which are distinguished by the fact that they refer to actions that have actually transpired (the indicative) or exist in potentiality;
e) Each clause contains a particular perspective(s), the different points of view of a character(s) and the narrator;
f) There are identifiable relations between clauses: temporal (relations of succession), causal (relations of entailment versus presupposition) and spatial (parallelism);
g) The syntagmatic progression of the clauses form a sequence (sometimes the entire narrative, sometimes part of the narrative);
h) Each genre, too, may be distinguished by the modality of the clauses which prevails in a given sequence.

Todorov argues that the object of structural analysis is, ultimately, literariness, that is, what distinguishes literature from non-literary uses of language. What should be clear in the final analysis is that structural analysis, like any other form of criticism, attempts to provide, in so doing, an image of the literature it is analysing, that is, it seeks to reduce the given language of the works being investigated to a secondary or meta-language through which it can be rendered intelligible. In this sense it is no different from any other methodology. However, Structuralism is preferable to other methodologies in that this metalanguage is that of linguistics which, given the building block of literature, is entirely preferable to other metalanguages.