



Introductory article

Narratology and the study of lyric poetry

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Abstract

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This article provides a brief discussion of the theoretical and historical underpinnings of the study of narrativity in lyric poetry. As part of the justification of studying narrative aspects of lyric poetry, reference is made to contemporary paradigms in post-classical narratology of which transgeneric narratology is one. The project titled, "Verse and narrative: narrative structures and techniques in lyric poetry", from which the articles in this issue emanated, is described briefly by presenting the objectives of the research and by discussing the theoretical and historical implications of such a project. The theoretical part of the article concludes with a list of the preliminary findings. The article also serves as an introduction to this issue of "Literator", which contains the contributions on English and Dutch texts to the project.

Opsomming

Narratologie en die studie van liriese poësie

Hierdie artikel bevat 'n saaklike bespreking van die teoretiese en historiese aspekte van die bestudering van narratiwiteit in liriese poësie. In die motivering van die geldigheid van so 'n ondersoek, word verwys na die dominante paradigmas in post-klassieke narratologie, waarvan transgeneriese narratologie een is. Die navorsingsprojek, "Vers en verhaal: narratiewe

strukture en tegnieke in liriese poësie”, waarvan die artikels in hierdie uitgawe van “Literator” deel vorm, word beskryf deur die doelstellings van die navorsing te gee en die teoretiese en historiese implikasies van die navorsing te verduidelik. Die teoretiese gedeelte van die artikel sluit af met ’n lys voorlopige bevindings. Die artikel dien ook as inleiding tot hierdie nommer van “Literator” waarin die bydraes tot die projek wat handel oor Nederlandse en Engelse literatuur, opgeneem is.

1. Introduction

Narratology, originally defined as the theory of narrative texts (Bal, 1985:12) and as the study of the form and functioning of narrative (Prince, 1982:4; Du Plooy, 1986:274, 278), has, since the early days of its structuralist origins, proved itself a versatile discipline, adapting to and incorporating a variety of other theoretical approaches and contextual impulses and demands over the past three decades (Hühn *et al.*, 2009). The scope of the basic narratological models has been extended to include and accommodate a variety of theories, concepts and analytic procedures. Contemporary narratology or postclassical narratology therefore includes a variety of “new narratologies” which can, according to Meister (2009:340), be grouped into three dominant paradigms:

- Contextual narratology is directed at cultural, historical and ideological issues and concerns itself, apart from structural aspects, with the thematic and ideological content of narrative texts.
- Cognitive narratology extends its focus from literary narratives to “natural” narratives and oral narrative, assuming that these narratives represent a basic anthropological competence and that studying these forms of narrative provides insight into “the human and intellectual processing of narratives” (Meister, 2009: 340). Knowledge of the structure of the thought processes which underlie the making and understanding of stories is also used in the modelling and simulation of human narrative intelligence in the development of various forms of artificial intelligence.
- Transgeneric and transmedial approaches in narratology are concerned with the application of narratological concepts to genres and media which are not primarily regarded as narrative, but do possess narrative aspects. The application, adaptation and reformulation of narratological concepts for optimal functionality in the analyses and interpretation of poetry, drama, film, the visual arts, dance and games form part of the transgenerical and transmedial narratological project.

2. The project: Verse and narrative: narrative structures and techniques in lyric poetry

The articles in this issue of *Literator* form part of a research project titled, *Vers en verhaal: narratiewe strukture en tegnieke in liriese poësie* (*Verse and narrative: narrative structures and techniques in lyric poetry*). As the title suggests the project was set up to describe, analyse, interpret and theorise narrative aspects in lyric poetry in order to get an idea of the scope and the variety of manifestations and implementations of narrativity in poetic texts, specifically in lyric poems. The project is, therefore, linked to research in the third narratological category or paradigm mentioned above. The research was initiated by Heilna du Plooy (North-West University, Potchefstroom) who, as leader of the project, is also the guest editor of this selection of essays in *Literator*. The two co-leaders are Bernard Odendaal (University of the Free State, Bloemfontein) and Odile Heynders (University of Tilburg in the Netherlands).

In July 2009 a workshop was held at the North-West University in Potchefstroom and seventeen papers on Afrikaans, English and Dutch poetry were presented by scholars from South Africa, the Netherlands and Belgium. Various aspects of narrative in lyric poetry and the theoretical aspects of the narratological analysis of lyric poetry were discussed. The preliminary objective was to find and describe as many manifestations of the use of narrative structures and techniques in lyric poems as possible in order to obtain data which could lead to generalisation and theorisation about the adaptation of narratological concepts and methods for use in the analysis of poetry.

The idea for the project originated from a long fascination with Dylan Thomas's definition of poetry:

Poetry is the rhythmic, inevitably narrative, movement from an overclothed blindness to a naked vision ... (Sinclair, 1975:219).

Thomas qualifies his definition as follows:

Narrative is essential. Much of the flat, abstract poetry of the present has no narrative movement at all, and is consequently dead. (Sinclair, 1975:219.)

This statement must of course be seen as part of Thomas' idiosyncratic view of poetry and the historical debates of his time.¹ It remains important, however, that Thomas finds "movement" in poetry attractive and even essential, but also that the nature of this movement is often narrative. It is almost as if "narrative" is regarded as the opposite of "static". Even if this definition metaphorically illustrates Thomas's preference for movement so beautifully, research on the relation between narrative and lyric aspects of poems needs a solid theoretical basis to be convincing and relevant.

There are important questions that need to be answered before a study of the narrative content, structure and technique in lyric poems can be undertaken. What is meant by narrative when the term is used with regard to lyric poetry? Mere storytelling is not what is at stake, and thematic development and change do not necessarily imply narrative content or form. There is also the question as to where narrativity should be looked for: in the content of the poem, in the understanding or reconstruction of the poem, in the mind of the reader or in the allusions activated by the poem, to name but a few possibilities. Does narratology provide adequate methods and concepts to undertake the analysis and interpretation of relevant aspects of lyric poetry? If not, how can the scope of narratological concepts and methods be extended and refined to do justice to the narrative as well as to the essential poetic and lyric aspects of lyric poetry?

Whereas the intuitive poetic statement by Dylan Thomas, as well as experience in the reading and analysis of poetry suggest that a narratological approach to lyric poetry may be possible, viable and even desirable, recent research by various scholars (Hühn, 2005; Hühn & Kiefer, 2005; McHale, 2009; Dubrow, 2006) has proved beyond doubt that the analysis of the narrative aspects of lyric texts or a narratological approach to lyric poetry is indeed important and valuable. Their work shows that such an approach is theoretically sound and yields excellent analyses of new and old poems, illustrating that a "narrative/narratological reading" of a lyric poem opens aspects of the poem and its meanings which should not be ignored or neglected.

1 Sinclair (1975:218) explains that Thomas's views on poetry are influenced by his reaction to the work of contemporaries such as T.S. Eliot, whose work he admired, and Auden, whose ideas on engaged literature he detested.

The research generated in the *Vers en verhaal*-project is published in two journals. The essays on Afrikaans poetry, which are also written in Afrikaans, appear in the journal for the study of Afrikaans literature, *Stilet*, 22(3) 2010, and those on English and Dutch poetry in this issue of *Literator*, i.e. *Literator*, 31(3) 2010, which is a journal for comparative literature. The first article in *Stilet*, 22(3) 2010 is an extensive theoretical introduction to the study of the narrative content, structure and technique in lyric poetry specifically exploring the possibilities of using concepts from classical and postclassical narratology to analyse and interpret lyric poems.

3. Historical and theoretical background for the study of narrativity in lyric poetry

In order to explain and justify the aims, possibilities and limitations of a project such as this, important issues concerning both literary history and literary theory should be dealt with.²

Literary history must always be kept in mind in attempts to describe characteristics and make generalising statements about features in poetry. The poems which are studied can never be cut loose completely from their historical background, especially when addressing the question as to whether narrative is more conspicuously present in lyric poetry in certain historical periods or within certain literary trends. Therefore, cognisance should be taken of important literary movements and the trends within certain historical periods, of literary debates and other contextual issues and poetic positions before any conclusions can be reached about the prevalence of narrative aspects in lyric poetry. This issue is important, because it determines whether one has to do with a general characteristic of poetry or with a trend that belongs to a certain period or movement.

Initially this project focused on recent Afrikaans poetry, because poets such as D.J. Opperman, Antjie Krog en H.J. Pieterse make ample use of narrative material in the structuring of poems and volumes of poetry and employ narrative techniques in a variety of inge-

2 The next part of this introduction is a summary of the theoretical conclusions reached in the extensive discussion of the historical, theoretical and methodological aspects of the narratological analysis of lyric poetry in the article, *Narratiwiteit in liriese verse: teoretiese aspekte van die bestudering van narratiewe inhoud, strukture en tegnieke in liriese poësie* (*Narrativity in lyric poetry: theoretical aspects of the study of narrative content, structure and technique in lyric poetry*) by Heilna du Plooy, which is published simultaneously with this issue of *Literator* in *Stilet*, 22(3) (Du Plooy, 2010:1-35).

nius ways in specific poems. It soon became apparent that if we wanted to reach conclusive results and to theorise the phenomenon, the scope of the project should be extended to include poetry in other languages and from other historical periods, as was done in other studies (Hühn, 2005; Hühn & Kiefer, 2005; Hühn & Sommer, 2009; McHale, 2009).

Another important aspect in the analysis of poetry has to do with the manner and style of the original publication. It is important to know whether a poem was published in such a way that it can be regarded as a single poem which can or even should be read on its own, or whether it forms part of a cycle or a series of poems. A poem also has a specific position in a volume of poetry which provides the single poem with an important textual context. The poem can be or can become one narrative link in a larger narrative unit such as a cycle, a series or a volume (Toolan, 2009:44-45; Stolk, 2001:125-144). These considerations were confirmed by some of the contributions to the project, which illustrate that apart from technical or thematic coherence, coherence in cycles or series or volumes of poems is quite often dependent on narrative structures, or even deep structures in a variety of manifestations (Odendaal, 2009; Du Plooy, 2009; see also the contributions by Heynders and Du Plooy in this issue).

Even more important are the theoretical implications of a trans-generic project such as this. What is narrative? Which definition of narrative is to be taken as a point of departure? How does one distinguish between epic and lyric texts and how does one determine the relation and balance between epic and lyric features in specific texts which might be written in either prosaic or poetic form? Consequently it is essential to revisit the whole complex issue of generic distinctions and discuss the implications of different views on genre theory for the project.

Theoretical and methodological considerations must also be explicated. What would be considered as narrative in a lyrical poem? How does one discuss the narrative aspects of a poem without neglecting the essential poetic and lyric character of the poem? Can narratological concepts be used in this endeavour, and if so, which concepts? Where does one start with such a narratological analysis? To what extent can narratological concepts be adapted for optimal use in the analyses and interpretation of lyric poems?

4. Aims and preliminary findings

Keeping the above-mentioned aspects in mind, the most important aims of this study are the following:

- to study the use of narrative structures, techniques and narrative content in (lyric) poetry;
- to determine the prevalence of narrative aspects in contemporary lyric;
- to study narrativity in lyric poetry from other historical periods in order to reread older poetry in new ways so that new (and creative) rereadings can lead to reinterpretations;
- to inquire into the relation between manifestations of narrativity in lyric poetry and the so-called “narrative turn”;
- to determine whether the contemporary prominence of narrative content, structures and techniques in lyric poetry is a trend within postmodernist literature;
- to determine whether the use of narrative has anything to do with or corresponds to the contemporary preference for “expansive poetry”;
- to contribute to the debate about whether the more prominent use of narrative in contemporary poetry has anything to do with the need or the purpose to write more accessible poetry, poetry which is more humane and natural in opposition to modernist poetry which was esoteric and intellectual;
- to experiment with narratological methods and concepts in the analysis of poetry;
- to adapt narratological concepts for use in the analysis and interpretation of poetry in order to make a contribution to postclassical narratological studies.

On account of the results formulated in the contributions to the project up to now, some preliminary and provisional conclusions can be drawn. As far as historical issues are concerned, the following notions can be put forward.

- It is clear that narrativity is a prominent feature of contemporary lyric poetry, but lyric poetry from all historical periods and in many languages contain narrative aspects or narrativity in some form or other. The narratological study of any or all poetry can,

therefore, be undertaken in order to analyse and interpret the narrative content or structure of poems in which narrativity can be found.

- Narrative content, structures and narrative techniques appear in (longer and shorter) single poems, in cycles of poems, in series of poems and in volumes of poetry.
- An underlying narrative can characterise the oeuvre of a poet or the national poetry of a language or a country. Poems can thus be read in terms of their embeddedness in larger narratives, whether this narrative is the story of the poet, the cultural space or a historical period.
- According to contemporary views of genre, generic features enable and facilitate communication and should not be regarded as prescriptive or binding at all. Experimentation with genre is more common than ever before and the blending of features from different genres is at present an accepted procedure for writers of all genres. Contemporary generic theory, therefore, also justifies the study of narrative aspects in lyric poetry.

In recent decades poets have repeatedly expressed the need for “expansive poetry” or the use of “sequential form” (Feirstein, 1998: 265). Poets taking part in the project have confirmed this and explain that they want to and need to put poems into larger frames or textual contexts. The lyric quality of separate poems is retained, but the series or the cycle often develops a narrative character.

There are also theoretical views which can be formulated on account of the research done up to now.

- The relation between lyric and epic should be explained in terms of modes of communication rather than on the level of genre (Dubrow, 1982:4). This relation should also rather be seen as a sliding scale on which either epic or lyric aspects dominate, than as a clear and absolute distinction between lyric and epic texts. Generic theory will probably develop and terminology will have to be adapted to reflect the changing concepts and practices in contemporary poetry.
- The study of narrative in lyric poetry should focus on the variety and scope of manifestations of narrativity in lyric texts rather than on generic differences and their consequences. Dubrow (2006: 264) argues that one should not concentrate on “conflicts be-

tween lyric and narrative”, but should “recognize the frequency and variety of their cooperative interactions”.

- It seems that the focus on narrative aspects of lyric poetry provides an alternative approach which leads to new and exciting readings of poems and to ingenious new interpretations.
- These interpretations facilitate a wider and more inclusive view of poetry.
- Narrative functions as an important form of coherence in poetry. The analysis of the interaction between narrative and lyric features has highlighted a specific dynamic in poetry, namely the way in which the coherence effected by narrative (which binds the poem together by forming a narrative strand), is counteracted by the lyric and poetic incantative and metaphorically intensifying characteristics, thereby creating poetic tension within the poem.
- Temporality and sequential development link the separate parts of the poem together and constitute “narrative pull”, but the lyric quality of the poetic utterance holds back and intensifies the emotional experience of the reader. This notion can be linked to Roland Barthes’s theory of cardinal functions and indices, where the functions are described as elements of distribution and the indices as elements of integration. The narrative aspects of the poem will therefore create “movement” and push the textual content forward while the poetic features such as metaphoric density, syntactical and sound patterning, rhythm and metre will act as indices which constitute the aesthetic effects and functions of the text (Barthes, 1977:91-97).
- The contrapuntal tension between narrative segments and poetic segmentivity is an extension and complication of the textual tension in lyric poetry between syntax and typography.
- Narratives in poems are usually reductive or even elliptical, and often consist of a few cardinal elements (in Barthes’s terminology) spread through the poem. The meaning of the poem is suggested by scant narrative reference and explicated by poetic improvisation and density. Often a poem contains only one narrative moment (one change such as in a minimal story – Prince, 1973:31), but that single narrative movement will be a kernel event, a cardinal function in Barthes’s (1977:91) terminology or an event 2, that is an event which effects a radical and determining change in the course of a narrative according to Hühn (2009:80).

- The relation between narrative elements and indices, that is aesthetic or poetic elements, is also important. There will be more meaningful poetic elements than narrative elements in a poem, in opposition to a novel or short story in which the narrative elements will dominate both in quantity and in importance. Poems, therefore, have a low narrativity even if, in principle, they can and do contain narrativity.
- Poems are not (solely) about the narratives that they contain. Often the narrative becomes a metaphor and often the story will mean nothing without the amplification and explication contained in the poetic utterance as such. In other cases a narrative becomes an extended metaphor of which all the narrative aspects (the events, the characters and the development of the plot) can acquire metaphoric meaning in the poem. A narrative, especially when it is a well-known narrative such as a fairy tale or legend or myth, provides the poem with a whole arsenal of metaphoric material. A story which is intertextually activated in a poem can provide the poem with both a set of frames and a set of scripts in cognitive terms so that the range of possible improvisations of meaning is enlarged within a specific scope.
- Theoretically, both postclassical narratology and the theory of poetry can benefit and be enriched by an approach to literary texts which is at the same time more interactive and more integrated. If different modes and genres are blended in textual practice by poets, theorists should perhaps also adapt their theoretical approaches to be able to make adequate readings of the texts.

Narrativity in poetry is at present being studied by a number of narratologists and though much work still has to be done, fascinating studies have already been published. This issue of *Literator* wants to contribute to the growing corpus of research. In these essays different aspects of poems or oeuvres of poets are discussed and a variety of theoretical approaches are used.

5. Contributions in this issue of *Literator*

Peter Hühn's article, *Plotting the lyric: forms of narration in poetry*, focuses on general theoretical issues concerning the relationship between lyric and narrative in poetry. The article presents a comprehensive view and application of the possibilities of narratological analyses of poetry and thus provides a fitting introduction to this volume of articles. Hühn believes that lyric poems generally present

a sequence of mostly mental incidents (events) that are mediated and shaped and presented in such a way that these poems share with narrative fiction the fundamental constituents of story and discourse as well as the narrative act. An analysis of William Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud" explores and illustrates the possibilities of a narratological analysis of poetry focusing on the specification of types of plot, plotting and the presentation of plot in poetry. The argument in the article is heuristic and attempts to identify and highlight the specifically poetic forms and functions which instances of narrating adopt in poems.

In his article, *Affordances of form in stanzaic narrative poetry*, Brian McHale proposes a more specific approach to the study of narrative in lyric poetry. He argues that segmentivity and the spacing of language are distinguishing characteristics of poetry and uses this argument to explore the relation between narrative and poetic features in poetry. In order to develop a theoretical argument and method to approach the problem of transgeneric phenomena in poetry, McHale explains that, because poetry is measured and counter-measured, narrative in poetry can be analysed as a form of counter-measure to the poetic measured segmentivity in a specific poem. He analyses segmentivity in narrative poems in discontinuous stanzaic forms, using the concept of *affordances* (referring to different potentials for use) to discuss the stanzaic form in Edmund Spenser's "The faerie queene" (1590; 1596) and the "Ottava rima" stanza in Kenneth Koch's postmodernist narrative poem, "Seasons on earth" (1960; 1977; 1987).

Like McHale, John Gouws focuses on older poetry. In his article *Narrative strategies in Sir Philip Sidney's "Astrophil and Stella"*, he argues that historically lyric and narrative were not regarded as mutually exclusive categories. In pre-Enlightenment English poetic practice and theory sonnets that were fundamentally lyric, were also linked rhetorically and contextually to larger narrative frameworks, as in the case of Sir Philip Sidney's sonnet sequence "Astrophil and Stella".

The importance of the wider context within which poetry is written and understood, is also emphasised in Odile Heynders' article. She uses a rhetorical approach to analyse contemporary Dutch poetry, but by identifying and interpreting political and cultural issues in the poems, she inserts her argument into the contemporary cultural discourse in the Netherlands. In the article titled, *Politics in poetry: epic poetry as a critique of Dutch culture*, concepts from narrative theory are used to read *Roeschoofd hemelt* by Joost Zwagerman

(2005) as a poetical text with political implications as the poems address fundamental issues in contemporary Dutch society, such as mental illness and consumerism.

In his article, *Dan hecht ik eer geloof aan het verhaal: over enkele narratieve teksten van Martinus Nijhoff* (*Then, sooner, I give credence to the tale: on some narrative texts by Martinus Nijhoff*), Fabian Stolk argues that as short lyrical poems have for a long time been regarded as the poetical standard, long story telling poems can be seen as a provocative genre. He asks whether there are still modern epic poems. In an era in which it is common practice to undermine and ignore prescriptive poetics, it seems irrelevant to concern oneself with the distinction of epic poetry as a genre, but Stolk's interest in long poems has lead him to the conclusion that studying epic aspects of long and short poems can act as a heuristic instrument and can enrich interpretation. He then discusses short and long narrative poems by Martinus Nijhoff in order to identify and describe the characteristics of modern epic poems.

Dietlinde Willockx also focuses on the so-called "long poem". In her article, *Poëtische avonturen: over de verhouding tussen narratieve structuren en poëtische aspecten in twee lange gedichten* (*Poetic adventures: on the relation between narrative structure and poetic aspects in two long poems*), she argues that long poems seem to be cut out for narrative analysis, because the length of these poems provide scope for the development of different and more complex narrative strands. Yet these texts do not relinquish their poetic characteristics, so that the narrative and poetic characteristics seem to foreground each other. Because long poems combine two worlds, an epic and a lyric world, they provide the perfect opportunity to study the relation between narrativity and poeticity in poetic texts. Willockx then analyses two long poems "De poëtische avonturen van Polsmofje en het poesje Fik" from the volume *Geachte Muizenpoot en achttien andere gedichten* (1965) by Fritz Harmsen van Beek as well as *Lenteleven: een beurtzang* by Kees Ouwens (2000).

Heilna du Plooy's article reports on a series of interviews conducted with Dutch and Flemish poets in 2007 on the question: Is it possible that narratives may be lurking in lyric poems? In the interviews the poets, Robert Anker, Tomas Lieske, Leonard Nolens, Willem van Toorn and Eva Gerlach, were asked to state or explain their views on narrativity in their poetry. All the poets acknowledged that they use narrative content and techniques, though in a variety of ways. They also consider the narrative aspect in their work important. As they are at present actively publishing poets, their views, which

correlate to a great extent with the views expressed by the Afrikaans poets who participated in the project (see Marais, 2010; Naudé, 2010), provide insight into contemporary poetic views and practices. A short cycle of poems by Eva Gerlach is analysed and discussed to illustrate the subtle use of narrative in poems that are highly emotional and intensely lyrical.

John Gouws continues his historical approach in the next article, *Wallace Stevens's use of narrative markers in Harmonium*. Gouws demonstrates that though Stevens is undeniably a Modernist poet, he uses narrative markers in his poems to challenge "the restrictive figurative range of hegemonic Enlightenment cultural theory and practice". In his contributions to the project, Gouws strongly emphasises that a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between narrative and lyric depends on an awareness of strategic rhetorical figuration in poetry.

Heinrich Kahl was in the process of writing a master's thesis on the South African English poet, Douglas Livingstone when he wrote the article, *A narratological perspective on Douglas Livingstone's "A littoral zone"* (1991). Shortly after submitting the article Heinrich died tragically in a rock climbing accident on Sunday 8 August 2010. He was an enthusiastic climber and a lover of nature, but also a fine student and it was a pleasure for me to guide him in the writing of the article. It is extremely sad for all who knew him that his first academic article is published posthumously.

In Kahl's article Peter Hühn's narratological concept of the *event* and Rachel Blau DuPlessis' "hypothesis of poetry as segmentivity" are used to indicate how anecdotes and events are segmented in selected poems by the South African English poet Douglas Livingstone. The anecdotal content contributes to the thematic development in the poems, namely the symbiotic relationship between man and nature. The poet depicts the gap between humankind's supposed connection with nature and the current lack thereof. The main event of the volume is to be found in the reader's mind: the realisation that bridging this gap is absolutely necessary and that it starts with the individual.

6. Concluding remarks

I want to thank all the contributors for the work they put into these articles and hope that the collection will be received well. I am specifically grateful to Prof. Peter Hühn and Prof. Brian McHale for allowing me to publish their essays in this collection. As respected

and experienced narratologists and scholars they have done extensive research on this topic and their articles contribute greatly to the theoretical stature to this publication. I also wish to thank my collaborators, Bernard Odendaal en Odile Heynders, for their support and good advice. Last, but not least, I thank my two research assistants of the past two years, Ihethe Jacobs and Joannette van der Merwe, for their constant availability and the effort they put into the organisation of the workshop and the publication of the contributions.

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Key concepts:

lyric poetry
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narrativity in lyric poetry
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narratology, postclassical
narratology, transgeneric

Kernbegrippe:

liriese poësie
narratiwiteit
narratiwiteit in liriese poësie
narratologie
narratologie, postklassieke
narratologie, transgeneriese

