

INTRODUCTION:
THE DYNAMICS OF THE CHARACTER

Carlos Reis and Sara Grünhagen

1. For what reason or reasons does it make sense to speak about the dynamics of a character? One relatively obvious response would be the following: because in the majority of narratives that we know of, the character does not remain immutable from his/her first appearance to the close of the story. The dynamic of the character involves a personal trajectory: we can see behavioural, social, and physical changes in the individual as the story unfolds, without prejudice to the relative continuity that assures our capacity to recognise the character, as well as his/her difference in relation to the remaining characters. The exceptions (which exist) are in fact just this, that is to say, singular cases that do not cancel out the generality that is dominant.

The dynamics of the character are clearly inseparable from the other components (from other categories) in which, perhaps in a more expressive fashion, some movement is manifested: changes of space, advances in the plot, transformations brought about by the passage of time, and the like. Although certainly important, it is not these movements — internal ones, so to speak — that are at stake in this case but rather those that current narrative studies have been highlighting in the framework of the revaluation of the character as a structuring element of the story. Thus, the international colloquium hosted by the Centre for Portuguese Literature of the University of Coimbra in 2017¹, and dedicated to the thematic areas

¹ Central theme: “Dynamics of the Character” (20, 21 and 22 November 2017; University of Coimbra Faculty of Arts and Humanities), project “Figures of Fiction”, held since 2012 (see <https://figurasdaficcao.wordpress.com/about/>). Some of the papers and conferences presented at the colloquium are published in this volume. Other papers were published in Reis (ed.), 2020.

in which the dynamics of the character are examined in-depth, addressed: first, the afterlife of the character, understood as the existence which guarantees a type of permanence in our lives and in our world, one enjoying its own autonomous features; second (and in close association with the afterlife), the transliterary manifestations, meaning, the projection of the character in diverse media ecosystems and in the process of remediation that does not blot out relevant semantic elements of the character's first existence; third, the metaleptic potential of the character and its ontological re-dimensioning (the so-called rhetorical metalepsis is less significant here), in breaking with the "frontiers of fiction", a metaphor that, in this context, reveals its fragilities, or at the very least, its condition of metaphor.

That which can be called the transliterary vitality of the character refers to other concepts with strong epistemological incidences in the context of current narrative studies. We refer first to the notion of transnarrativity and to the analytical procedures that it stimulates, namely the need not to read only narrative in the narrative, but also in practices whose prevailing modal feature is something else, for example, in lyric poetry, or more demonstrably, in drama. Secondly, the study of the character requires contributions that free the analysis of the story from the linguistic, and more broadly speaking, rhetorical constraints that structuralist narratology cultivated. Here, then, the dynamics of the character become more evident thanks to those contributions from disciplines that have made narrative studies a more plural field of inquiry, as in the examples of the cognitive sciences, cinema studies, media studies, feminist studies, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and others.

2. In addition to these premises, quite synthetically outlined here, the study of the character (including the analyses of cases found in this book) urges us to recall certain aspects of the theoretical debate about this category of narrative. To begin, we would be well reminded to recognise that critical reflection upon the character, in the due course which literary theory and narrative theory have amassed, has suffered from certain gaps and misunderstandings.

I would make quick reference to what has already been noted: how the famous and often cited analysis done by E. M. Forster nearly a century ago in *Aspects of the Novel* endured for quite some time, with

its reducing schematism, as a type of unquestionable dogma, feeding those analyses that limited the dichotomy to *round characters/flat characters*. On this very issue, a scholar on character in a classic book on the subject wrote: “What has been said about character since then has been mainly a stock of critical commonplaces used largely to dismiss the subject” (Harvey, 1965: 192), with “since then” referring to the year Forster published his study (which was 1927) and the dyad transformed into “critical commonplace”.

The 1960s and 1970s were not the bearers of good news for the study of the character. Indeed, if at the centre of the structuralist wave and the current of narratology there was narrative structure and the translinguistic dimension of its discourse, then all that was being said with respect to the character, its human and social density, and its mutations and winding conformations, was detached from theoretical reflection and the analysis of cases. In this epistemological scenario, it is quite well understood that Todorov had relegated the character — and all that had to do with its “psychological coherence or description of character”² — to the background. Or in other words: anything that might recall the spectre of “contentism”. In a more piercing way, and borrowing a *boutade* from Paul Valéry, Gérard Genette insisted on the lessening of the character. Criticised for its omission in the seminal *Figures III* (1972), Genette reaffirmed (and in tune, we recognise, with the logic of narratology) the need “to be more interested in the constituting discourse than in the object constituted — this ‘living being with no insides’, which in this situation (unlike that of the historian or the biographer) is only an effect of the text” (Genette, 1988: 136).³

Even so, it should be recognised that in the same year as *Figures III*, the then influential *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage*, by Ducrot and Todorov, sketched out a certain ‘overcoming’ of structuralist *doxa*. From the chapter entitled « Unités significatives », it reads that “the characters represent people, according to fiction’s own

² « Cohérence psychologique ou description de caractère » (Todorov, 1971: 78).

³ « S’intéresser davantage au discours constituant qu’à l’objet constitué, ce ‘vivant sans entrailles’ qui n’est ici (contrairement à ce qui se passe chez l’historien ou le biographe) qu’un effet de texte » (Genette, 1983: 93).

modalities”.⁴ Or in other words: fictional reference is on its way to being recovered as an element of the articulation of the narrative and its relationship with the world.

Nearing the close of the 20th century, Vincent Jouve revalorised that relationship with the world, adopting a contractualist view for the study of the narrative and affording special attention to the effects of reading that the character triggered. And thus, “the character, although established by the text, borrows [...] a certain number of his/her properties from the reader’s world of reference”⁵. It would not only be a question of a displacement (and this would be no small feat), in operative terms, from the text to the context and from immanence to transcendence. To invite the reader to the study of the character would be to involve Freudian psychoanalysis, pragmatics, and reception theory, and in the early days of the latter, Ingardenian phenomenology, although Jouve does not refer to Ingarden.

3. As David Herman stated with some irony, the “rumors of the death of narratology have been greatly exaggerated” (Herman, 1999: 1). Along the same vein and by extension, we affirm that the death of the character was not irreversible and that the transnarrative and interdisciplinary impulse of current narrative studies has contributed much to its resurrection.

This resurgence has been amply confirmed, so to speak, by a significant sample in the broad descriptions of the concept of the character that we have read in the most influential dictionaries on the material and in the inherent paths for further development that these descriptions stimulate. See, for example, the entries on the character by Uri Margolin in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (2005: 52-57), by Fotis Jannidis in the *Living Handbook of Narratology* (2013), by Manfred Jahn in *Narratology: A Guide to the Theory of Narrative* (2017) and by Carlos Reis in the *Dicionário de estudos narrativos* (2018: 388-398).

⁴ « Les personnages représentent des personnes, selon des modalités propres à la fiction » (Ducrot and Todorov, 1972: 286).

⁵ « Le personnage, bien que donné par le texte, emprunte [...] un certain nombre de ses propriétés au monde de référence du lecteur » (Jouve, 1992: 29).

A collateral effect of the development that is noted here is the constellation of concepts directly or indirectly associated with the notion of the character and deduced from the deeper conceptual elaboration that it inspires. We are not speaking merely of already established notions that may be now reviewed but also others that are still undergoing stabilisation, some of which will be analysed later, for example, characterisation, name, discourse (of the character), hero, type, identity, personhood, figure, figuration, afterlife, metalepsis, transfictionality, etc. As can be seen, this is much more than the elementary Forsterian classification that refers to *round characters* and *flat characters*.

More important, however, is to go further, bearing in mind the objectives of this book. The terms with which we refer to the dynamic condition of the character are related to the challenges that a concept (so to speak) in movement will set before the field of narrative studies, enjoying, in turn, a renewal in the submissions of work. The diversity of approaches found here shows this very thing, configuring an always provisional “state of the art”. Thus, if at present we are discussing non-natural narratology (which is examined by Brian Richardson in one of the chapters of this book), we are inevitably rethinking the conformation of the character, its logic or its fictional subversion, and its semantic and pragmatic potential. We are situated, then, in a position which goes beyond that “textualism” which dominated structuralism (as described by Marie-Laure Ryan) and, in part, the narratology which derived from it (and that which at times is called “classic”). This implies a contextualist and moderately referentialist vision of the character, with the correlated valorisation of questions such as “the culture, the gender, the history, the interpretation, and the process of the reading, highlighting aspects of the narrative that narratology had made parenthetical”.⁶

It is another dynamic feature of the character that is manifested when there are transmedial procedures at stake which offer evidence to the presence of narrativity in different media and in the contexts that accommodate them under the sign of transnarrativity. In this way,

⁶ « La culture, le genre (*gender*), l’histoire, l’interprétation et le processus de la lecture, en mettant en évidence les aspects du récit mis entre parenthèses par la narratologie structuraliste » (Nünning, 2010: 20).

the study of the character requires a confrontation of various semi-otic elaborations, with the understanding that “the distinct quality of ‘transmedial phenomena’ [...] is the fact that similar phenomena occur in more than one medium and that a possible origin in one medium [...] is either uninteresting or unknown” (Wolf, 2005: 84). The matter of the character as a transmedial category, and the consequences that the character elicits in terms of narrative tension, is an issue addressed precisely in one of the texts here presented, authored by Raphaël Baroni.

4. The present book serves to debate theoretical questions, in part already well known, but now re-examined from specific angles that the plurality of the studies on characters have favoured. In addition to the domain of theory, other analyses that appear here will take up those characters that have traditionally been undervalued, or distant, from a strictly literary and canonising vision of the narrative.

In “What are Characters Made of? Textual, Philosophical and ‘World’ Approaches to Character Ontology”, Marie-Laure Ryan carries out a review of the ontology of the fictional character from three different perspectives, which represents a critique and an updating of concepts at the same time. The first approach, which Ryan terms as textualist, is related with classic narratology, which conceptualised the character as an object of language, a being formed by words whose association to the human figure would pass as naïve, more fitting of a “Quixote-esque” reader unable to understand how the game of fiction is played. This vision is problematised by Ryan, who re-examines certain positions taken up by Barthes in *S/Z*, such as the defence of the *writerly* as opposed to the *readerly text*, and it is not by chance that this defence occurred at a time when the *Nouveau Roman* seemed to eschew the “conventional” categories, so to speak, of the construction of narrative, such as character and plot. Either one, however, continue to be essential elements in most stories, making it imperative to review the conceptual ambiguity that derives, for example, from the non-distinction between character and discourse: contrary to Barthes, Ryan understands that “there is more to characters than collections of semes” (p. 26).

The second perspective analysed by Ryan is that of philosophy, having previously shown interest in the ontological status of the fictional

character long before narratology emerged as a discipline. The focus adopted is that of analytical philosophy, as in Amie Thomasson's reflection, and takes up the question of the referentiality of the character. Ryan notes the striking difference in relation to textualism, since, from the philosophical perspective, the definition of the character takes authorial intentionality into consideration. However, even this "exteriorising" or contextual position would still present difficulties for the validation of affirmations on the narrative, the reason for which Ryan prefers the world approach, in the sense of exploring the duality of the perspectives in question more deeply. This theorization has been the subject of the work of narratologists for quite some time, recurring to the Possible World concept and founded on the principle that "fictional storytelling involves a doubling of world and a doubling of speech acts" (p. 32). The author lists a series of advantages to this approach toward the theorization of the narrative, and more specifically, of the character: in the fictional world, the characters have the same status as real human individuals, which explains, for example, the supposed naivety on the part of the reader, his/her capacity to feel empathy or repulsion and to connect with the characters. Akin to cognitivism, the world approach takes into consideration the experience that the reader enjoys with these figures, strengthened by "its ability to deal with behaviors that the textual approach regards as unworthy of an aesthetic appreciation of literature and ones that the philosophical approach regards as outside its field of expertise" (p. 35).

Theorization about the character, having recurrently favoured a certain aspect to the detriment of others, justifies the need to re-examine this imbalance. Brian Richardson's study, "Unnatural Characters", is interested in the character called antimimetic, that is to say, the one whose attributes "defy the realm of human possibilities and elude conventional types" (p. 42). Defined as "impossible persons", for Richardson these characters make a poor fit with many of the theories that are based on the similarity of the character with the human figure. Looking at the limitations of this type of exclusively mimetic approach, he presents a series of unnatural or impossible characters that "violate or parody the conventions of realism" (p. 43) and that, in this process, require a rethinking, not only of the narrative in which they are placed but also of the very category of character.

Richardson proposes five types of unnatural characters: first, Imperfectly Human Characters, many of whom are represented in post-modern works, having at times too few traits or contradicting themselves in terms of characterisation or incarnating an inhuman combination of human traits; second, Multiple Individuals, a category for which the multiplied character from the short story “August 25, 1983” by Jorge Luis Borges serves as an example; third, Parodic Characters, constructed in response to previous texts to insist on the absence of verisimilitude as a basic reference; fourth, Fabricated Entities, as in Gregor Samsa from *The Metamorphosis*; and fifth and finally, Metafictional Characters, to whom Richardson dedicates considerable attention, with examples of characters who are aware of their fictional nature and who, metaleptically speaking, question the elaboration at play and intervene at the discursive level. The level of unnaturalness may vary, but Richardson’s central point of analysis is this: characters that stray from the norm of mimetic representation cannot be ignored by a theory of fictional characters that claims to be broad and rigorous.

The emphasis in Carlos Reis’s chapter seeks to address something else, but even so, it is in line with Richardson, in terms of reviewing the overly restrictive definitions of the character. In “Figure, Person, Figuration”, at issue is a revision of concepts meant to have us reconsider premises and categories which, thanks to narratology, we have grown accustomed to. The key concept coined by Reis is that of *figure*, which touches upon others and which, without being restricted to a single field, serves as an operative tool for the analysis of literary texts, especially. Figure is understood as “all fictional or fictionalised entities, in general (but not necessarily) anthropomorphic, who carry out functions or live out events, in the development of one or various narrative processes” (p. 66). Here, what is being sought is a conceptual reconfiguration by extension, one which, in highlighting the reference to the person and to the respective process of individualisation, does not, however, exclude other possibilities: the very word *figure* encompasses different categories and entities.

For Reis, the character, as it is traditionally understood, is a figure, but it is not just this category that is being pursued: the concept also encompasses the narrator and even the entity that has become known as the narratee. The treatment given to these figures will thus

be referred to as *figuration*, which should not be confused with the mere characterisation of the character: figuration extends the description, which is only one of its components. At the same time, it brings to the discussion elements of the order of the discourse, interesting as well for the meta-fictional dimension, so explored by contemporary literature and exemplified in the text. On the other hand, Reis insists on the dynamic condition of the figure, given how it is not rare for the figure to transcend its origin and reappear in other texts and other supports; one speaks of *refiguration* and *afterlife*, pertinent notions when transmedial narrative processes are undergoing analysis. As a rule, the characters are the principal figures of the narrative, in accordance with what the examples being studied by Reis are demonstrating, with a special focus on Portuguese literary production, from Eça de Queirós to José Saramago.

Like Ryan, Raphaël Baroni re-examines the conceptualisation of the character carried out by classic narratology. In “How Paradigm Shifts and our Taste for Immersive Stories Have Transformed our Understanding of Plots and Characters” it is the relationship between the character and the plot which is at the centre of reflection; it is a question of not only exploring the terms of this interconnection but also of analysing the way in which the discussion on these central elements of the narrative has become possible and has been transformed in recent decades. There was a significant change of narratological *landscape*, according to Pavel’s metaphor recovered from the text (p. 78), with the alteration in the character’s perception and approach representing an important part of this phenomenon, which helps to understand it. If in the past it was viewed with a certain wariness by structuralism and eschewed in favour of other narrative categories, the character is now the object of renewed interest, which calls for a revision of its image as a “paper being”: the processes of identification of the reader and the character enter into the equation and thus the aesthetic experiences that the character and the plot can provoke are valorised. Baroni questions the motivations of such a transformation, understanding that in either of the cases, they are inevitably subject to ideological scrutiny, as in the example of the criticism of alienation made at the time of structuralism or the need to defend and justify literary studies at the present time.

In addition to the changes in paradigm occurring in narratology, Baroni highlights the interest being generated by the character within the framework of what is called *immersive stories*. From there, the character is examined together with the plot, at the same time that the main transformations in its status are retraced, stepping off from the principle that the two notions are interrelated. From Propp to Greimas and even arriving at Hamon, the character was analysed according to its sphere of action in the narrative, varying the number of roles that are attributed by each author. For Baroni, the problems arising with these perspectives of analysis have less to do with the orientation that consists of considering the character as the agent of the action and more to do with the valuation resulting from these reflections, as happens with Hamon, for whom the actant role of the character would be more important than, for example, his/her hair colour. And Baroni goes on to question: who defines this importance and based on what criteria? Such a feature could well be of the utmost importance in the construction of the plot, and to show this, Baroni points to the example of Daenerys Targaryen. What he finds interesting is the transmedial character (from the *A Song of Ice and Fire* saga and from the *Game of Thrones* television series) and the way that their attributes and their transformations influence the modulation of narrative tension. It is based on this criterion that Baroni proposes three functional axes of the character, taking into consideration their puzzling attributes, their mimetic attributes, and their autonomy. For Baroni, the entire construction of the character thus serves for the immersion, and consequently, the functioning of the narrative.

A case study based on the reflection on the dynamics of the character will also be the objective of the following chapter, “This is Not a Character: the Figuration of Fernando Pessoa in *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, by José Saramago”, written by Sara Grünhagen. Published in 1984, the novel by the Portuguese author sets out to continue the story of the heteronym Ricardo Reis, created by the poet Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935), who, already dead, will play the role of a secondary character in the narrative. The analysis shows how Pessoa is constructed in an opposite yet complementary way to that of Ricardo Reis: whereas the latter acquires awareness and enjoys prominence over the course of the novel, the former, although originally from the

real world, emerges as an “apparition about to lose his human contours and affirming himself as a fictional being while leaving both the field of vision and the memory of those who still live” (p. 105). The transfictional circulation of characters and the transposition of borders that it occasions in Pessoa’s work are highlighted in the chapter, which seeks to explore the extent to which these figures are central to the critical dimension of Saramago’s book. In this regard, the dialogue that *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* establishes with a tumultuous period in Portuguese history cannot be overlooked — with the narrative placed in 1935-1936, when the country was bearing the full brunt of the dictatorship under Salazar —, nor can we discount its effort to re-examine the “Pessoa myth”, alerting to the risk of it being reduced to a type, emblem of a programmatic nationalism, as with other figures in the canon who preceded him.

For this analysis, Grünhagen has employed Carlos Reis’ concept of figuration, as well as the concepts of twofoldness, elaborated by Murray Smith in the scope of literature, and of metalepsis, briefly formulated by Gérard Genette in *Figures III* (1972) and taken up once again in later and more recent works, especially *Métalepse: de la figure à la fiction* (2004). One of the objectives of the study is to show how Saramago’s novel plays with the perception that the reader may have of the various levels involved in a work of art: its formal and referential aspects, the real and the fictional, and what is unique to the narrative and the discourse. The juncture of diverse boundaries reveals itself as essential in Pessoa’s figuration, who, like other characters, is an important operator of metalepsis in the narrative. Envisioned, thus is “a revalorisation of the category of the character within Genette’s own theory” (p. 114), notable as he was one of the fathers of classic narratology, which, in its early days, relegated this figure to the background.

The concepts of metalepsis and figuration are equally important for the reflection proposed in the sixth and final chapter, “Voices in Travelling: Figurations of the Character in *The Murmuring Coast*”, by Marta Teixeira Anacleto, a case study centred on the protagonist of the 1988 book written by Lídia Jorge, adapted for the cinema by Margarida Cardoso in 2004. Different times, stories, and space cross and overlap in this novel structured as two narratives. The first, at the beginning of the book, entitled *The Locusts*, follows the life of Evita,

a young woman recently arrived in Mozambique to marry an *alferes*, that is, a junior officer in the Portuguese military. The second narrative is that of the following chapters, narrated in the first person by Eva Lopo, our Evita from twenty years earlier, looking back at the past and at the character she had been during that final period of the Colonial War. In this scenario, the metalepsis emerges “as a privileged way to read the text and the characters” (p. 134) and will be essential for the analysis of the specificity required for this novel’s adaptation to other media, especially in terms of “the movement of transposition or adaptive rewriting” of the protagonist (p. 120).

Thus, what is being explored is the way that the “vertigo of metalepsis” (p. 121) inherent in Lídia Jorge’s text is interiorized in the screenplay and the film, which adopted their own strategies to articulate the complex crisscrossing of the voices in the book. Playing with the images, the sound, the camera movements, and in particular, with the voices recreated in the screenplay and in the film, and by means of other resources, are elements that are underscored in the analysis. It is precisely the transgression of these voices, in the author’s view, that provides “basis of the final meaning of the novel and of the film” (p. 136), the mark of fragmentation of the narrative and of the character herself.

5. In the texts assembled for this book there is an important consensus to be acknowledged: the understanding is that in our search to finally update the tools of analysis, we need to re-examine definitions and theorizations, categories and typologies, in such a way as not to ignore the questions which the most diverse range of characters and narratives place before current narrative studies. The chapters open a debate in and amongst themselves, at times offering similar critiques — for example, some of Barthes’ positions are problematised as much by Ryan as by Baroni —, while at other times they diverge and develop themselves based on rather distinctive premises and characters. If, for Richardson, the concept of the character should take antimimetic figures into consideration, (p. 43, 54), Baroni defends that without plot and without characters acting as people would do, there is no reason to speak about narrative (p. 93). Although Reis deals mainly with mimetic characters, he sees no obligation to anthropomorphic likeness in his definition of figure (p. 66), and Ryan offers a similar caveat with respect to the world approach (p. 36-37).

To a certain extent, all are interested in the reader and in the way that characters are read. In this respect, the current-ness of the reflections proposed here is understood: if, as Ryan asserts, the role of the structuralist critic is to demystify and denounce the illusion of the text (p. 24), part of present-day narratology places itself in another position. It seeks to understand, in fact, how this illusion can be not only constructed but also metaleptically torn down, how it can play with and even oppose mimetic reference, and how it intertwines with different figures of the narrative, exploring the duality of the aforementioned perspective from which fictional worlds are constructed, and fulfilling an essential role in the development of the plot and the narrative tension.

In what has been said and in what will be read in the following, there remains the view, repeatedly affirmed in these pages, that the character is not a static entity, neither as a concept nor as a narrative figure. On this topic, it is noteworthy to recall both the content and the presentation of an issue of *New Literary History* entirely dedicated to the character. Published in 2011, the journal confirmed, in the field of theoretical reflection and epistemology, the reappearance of an area of study that had been deemed as dried out. “In the last decade, however, we have seen the sudden revitalization of a once moribund field” (Felski, 2011: v). And to complete the statement: “No doubt, a certain conception of what constitutes character — an idea of unified, unchanging, intrinsic, or impermeable personhood — is no longer sustainable on theoretical or historical grounds” (Felski, 2011: ix).

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