

GÉRARD GENETTE

Narrative Discourse

Translated by Jane E. Lewin

Foreword by Jonathan Culler

BASIL BLACKWELL • OXFORD

(1980)

Introduction

We currently use the word *narrative*¹ without paying attention to, even at times without noticing, its ambiguity, and some of the difficulties of narratology are perhaps due to this confusion. It seems to me that if we want to begin to see clearly in this area, we must plainly distinguish under this term three distinct notions.

A first meaning—the one nowadays most evident and most central in common usage—has *narrative* refer to the narrative statement, the oral or written discourse that undertakes to tell of an event or a series of events: thus we would term *narrative of Ulysses* the speech given by the hero to the Phaeacians in Books IX-XII of the *Odyssey*, and also these four books themselves, that is, the section of Homeric text that purports to be the faithful transcription of that speech.

A second meaning, less widespread but current today among analysts and theoreticians of narrative content, has *narrative* refer to the succession of events, real or fictitious, that are the subjects of this discourse, and to their several relations of linking, opposition, repetition, etc. "Analysis of narrative" in this sense means the study of a totality of actions and situations taken in themselves, without regard to the medium, linguistic or other, through which knowledge of that totality comes to us: an

¹ [Translator's note.] The French word is *récit*; in Genette's text it functions as "narrative" does in English, and it has been so translated throughout.

example would be the adventures experienced by Ulysses from the fall of Troy to his arrival on Calypso's island.

A third meaning, apparently the oldest, has *narrative* refer once more to an event: not, however, the event that is recounted, but the event that consists of someone recounting something: the act of narrating taken in itself. We thus say that Books IX-XII of the *Odyssey* are devoted to the narrative of Ulysses in the same way that we say Book XXII is devoted to the slaughter of the suitors: recounting his adventures is just as much an action as slaughtering his wife's suitors is, and if it goes without saying that the existence of those adventures in no way depends on the action of telling (supposing that, like Ulysses, we look on them as real), it is just as evident that the narrative discourse ("narrative of Ulysses" in the first meaning of the term) depends absolutely on that action of telling, since the narrative discourse is *produced* by the action of telling in the same way that any statement is the product of an act of enunciating. If, on the other hand, we take Ulysses to be a liar and the adventures he recounts to be fictitious, then the importance of the act of narrating expands, for on it depend not only the existence of the discourse but also the fiction of the existence of the actions that it "relates." The same thing can obviously be said of the narrating act of Homer himself wherever he undertakes to tell directly the account of the adventures of Ulysses. Without a narrating act, therefore, there is no statement, and sometimes even no narrative content. So it is surprising that until now the theory of narrative has been so little concerned with the problems of narrative enunciating, concentrating almost all its attention on the statement and its contents, as though it were completely secondary, for example, that the adventures of Ulysses should be recounted sometimes by Homer and sometimes by Ulysses himself. Yet we know (and I will return to this later) that Plato long ago found this subject worth his attention.

As its title indicates, or almost indicates, my study basically has to do with the most widespread meaning of the term narrative, that is, with narrative discourse, which in literature, and particularly in the case that interests me, happens to be a narrative *text*. But, as we will see, analysis of narrative discourse as I

understand it constantly implies a study of relationships: on the one hand the relationship between a discourse and the events that it recounts (narrative in its second meaning), on the other hand the relationship between the same discourse and the act that produces it, actually (Homer) or fictively (Ulysses) (narrative in its third meaning). Starting now, therefore, in order to avoid confusion and semantic difficulties, we must designate each of these three aspects of narrative reality by univocal terms. I propose, without insisting on the obvious reasons for my choice of terms, to use the word *story* for the signified or narrative content (even if this content turns out, in a given case, to be low in dramatic intensity or fullness of incident), to use the word *narrative* for the signifier, statement, discourse or narrative text itself, and to use the word *narrating* for the producing narrative action and, by extension, the whole of the real or fictional situation in which that action takes place.²

My subject here is therefore *narrative*, in the limited sense that I will henceforth assign to that term. It is fairly evident, I think, that of the three levels we have just sorted out, the level of narrative discourse is the only one directly available to textual analysis, which is itself the only instrument of examination at our disposal in the field of literary narrative, and particularly fictional narrative. If we wanted to study on their own account, let us say, the events recounted by Michelet in his *Histoire de France*, we could have recourse to all sorts of documents external to that work and concerned with the history of France; or, if we wanted to study on its own account the writing of that work, we could use other documents, just as external to Michelet's text, concerned with his life and his work during the years that he

² [Translator's note.] "Story" is the French *histoire* (tell a story—*raconter une histoire*); the gerund "narrating" is an English rendering of the French noun *narration*, and it is the rendering that will be adhered to throughout. In a note at this point Genette speaks of the acceptability of his terms with respect to current French usage, and apropos of *histoire* ("story"), he refers to Tzvetan Todorov's by now "fairly well accepted . . . proposal to differentiate 'narrative as discourse' (first meaning) and 'narrative as story' (second meaning)." He also explains his use of a term generally unfamiliar in America but used frequently in this book: "With the same meaning ['story'], I will also use the term *diegesis*, which comes to us from the theoreticians of cinematographic narrative."

devoted to that text. Such a resource is not available to someone interested in either the events recounted by the narrative that the *Recherche du temps perdu* constitutes or the narrating act from which it arises: no document external to the *Recherche*, and particularly not a good biography of Marcel Proust, if one existed,³ could teach us about either those events or that act, since both of these are fictional and both set on stage, not Marcel Proust, but the hero and supposed narrator of his novel. I do not mean to suggest that the narrative content of the *Recherche* has no connection with the life of its author, but simply that this connection is not such that the latter can be used for a rigorous analysis of the former (any more than the reverse). As to the narrating that produced the narrative, the act of Marcel⁴ recounting his past life, we will be careful from this point on not to confuse it with the act of Proust writing the *Recherche du temps perdu*. I will come back to this subject later; it is enough for the time being to remember that the 521 pages of *Du côté de chez Swann* (Grasset edition) published in November 1913 and written by Proust some years before that date are supposed (in the present state of the fiction) to have been written by the narrator well after the war. It is thus the narrative, and that alone, that informs us here both of the events that it recounts and of the activity that supposedly gave birth to it. In other words, our knowledge of the two (the events and the action of writing) must be indirect, unavoidably mediated by the narrative discourse, inasmuch as the events are the very subject of that discourse and the activity of writing leaves in it traces, signs or indices that we can pick up and interpret—traces such as the presence of a first-person pronoun to mark the oneness of character and narrator, or a verb in the past tense to indicate that a recounted action occurred prior to the narrating action, not to mention more direct and more

³ The bad ones present no inconvenience here, since their main defect consists of coolly attributing to Proust what Proust says of Marcel, to Illiers what he says of Combray, to Cabourg what he says of Balbec, and so on—a technique debatable in itself, but not dangerous for us: except for the names, such books never step outside the *Recherche*.

⁴ Here, to refer to both the hero and the narrator of the *Recherche*, we are keeping this controversial Christian name. I will explain this in the last chapter.

explicit indications. Story and narrating thus exist for me only by means of the intermediary of the narrative. But reciprocally the narrative (the narrated discourse) can only be such to the extent that it tells a story, without which it would not be narrative (like, let us say, Spinoza's *Ethics*), and to the extent that it is uttered by someone, without which (like, for example, a collection of archeological documents) it would not in itself be a discourse. As narrative, it lives by its relationship to the story that it recounts; as discourse, it lives by its relationship to the narrating that utters it.

Analysis of narrative discourse will thus be for me, essentially, a study of the relationships between narrative and story, between narrative and narrating, and (to the extent that they are inscribed in the narrative discourse) between story and narrating. This position leads me to propose a new demarcation of the field of study. My starting point will be the division put forth in 1966 by Tzvetan Todorov.⁵ This division classed the problems of narrative in three categories: that of *tense*, "in which the relationship between the time of the story and the time of the discourse is expressed"; that of *aspect*, "or the way in which the story is perceived by the narrator"; that of *mood*, in other words, "the type of discourse used by the narrator." I adopt, without any amendment, the first category with the definition that I have just cited, illustrated by Todorov with remarks on "temporal distortions" (that is, infidelities to the chronological order of events) and on relationships of linking, alternation, or embedding among the different lines of action that make up the story; but he added considerations about the "time of [narrative] enunciating" and the time of narrative "perception" (which he assimilated to the time of the *writing* and the *reading*) that seem to me to exceed the limits of his own definition. I for my part will hold those considerations in reserve for another order of problems, obviously connected to the relationships between narrative and narrating. The category of *aspect*⁶ basically covered

⁵ Tzvetan Todorov, "Les Catégories du récit littéraire," *Communications*, 8 (1966).

⁶ Rechristened "vision" in *Littérature et signification* (1967) and in *Qu'est-ce que le structuralisme?* (1968).

questions of narrative "point of view"; and that of mood⁷ gathered together the problems of "distance" that American critics in the Jamesian tradition generally treat in terms of opposition between *showing* ("representation" in Todorov's vocabulary) and *telling* ("narration"), a resurgence of the Platonic categories of *mimesis* (perfect imitation) and *diegesis* (pure narrative), the various ways of representing the speech of characters, and the modes of explicit or implicit presence in the narrative of narrator and reader. Just as with the "time of enunciating," here too I think it is necessary to cut off the last series of problems, in that it focuses on the act of narrating and its protagonists; on the other hand, we must gather into a single large category—let us provisionally call it that of the modalities of representation or the degrees of *mimesis*—all the rest of what Todorov split between aspect and mood. This redistribution thus ends us up with a division substantially different from the one that inspired it, a division that I will now formulate on its own account, having recourse for my terms to a kind of linguistic metaphor that should certainly not be taken too literally.

Since any narrative, even one as extensive and complex as the *Recherche du temps perdu*,⁸ is a linguistic production undertaking to tell of one or several events, it is perhaps legitimate to treat it as the development—monstrous, if you will—given to a *verbal* form, in the grammatical sense of the term: the expansion of a verb. *I walk, Pierre has come* are for me minimal forms of narrative, and inversely the *Odyssey* or the *Recherche* is only, in a certain way, an amplification (in the rhetorical sense) of statements such as *Ulysses comes home to Ithaca* or *Marcel becomes a writer*. This perhaps authorizes us to organize, or at any rate to formulate, the problems of analyzing narrative discourse according to categories borrowed from the grammar of verbs,

⁷ Rechristened "register" in 1967 and 1968.

⁸ Is it necessary to specify that by treating this work as a narrative here we do not by any means intend to limit it to that aspect? An aspect too often neglected by critics, but one Proust himself never lost sight of. Thus he speaks of "that invisible vocation of which these volumes are the *history*" (RH I, 1002/P II, 397; my emphasis).

categories that I will reduce here to three basic classes of determinations: those dealing with temporal relations between narrative and story, which I will arrange under the heading of *tense*; those dealing with modalities (forms and degrees) of narrative "representation," and thus with the *mood*⁹ of the narrative; and finally, those dealing with the way in which the narrating itself is implicated in the narrative, narrating in the sense in which I have defined it, that is, the narrative situation or its instance,¹⁰ and along with that its two protagonists: the narrator and his audience, real or implied. We might be tempted to set this third determination under the heading of "person," but, for reasons that will be clear below, I prefer to adopt a term whose psychological connotations are a little less pronounced (very little less, alas), a term to which I will give a conceptual extension noticeably larger than "person"—an extension in which the "person" (referring to the traditional opposition between "first-person" and "third-person" narratives) will be merely one facet among others: this term is *voice*, whose grammatical meaning Vendryès, for example, defined thus: "Mode of action of the verb in its relations with the subject."¹¹ Of course, what he is referring to is the subject of the statement, whereas for us *voice*, since it deals with the narrating, will refer to a relation with the subject (and more generally with the instance) of the enunciat-

⁹ The term is used here with a sense very close to its linguistic meaning, if we refer, for example, to this definition in the *Littre* dictionary: "Name given to the different forms of the verb that are used to affirm more or less the thing in question, and to express . . . the different points of view from which the life or the action is looked at."

¹⁰ In the sense in which Benveniste speaks of "instance of discourse" (*Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. M. E. Meek [Coral Gables, Fla., 1971], pp. 217-222). [Translator's note: "instance" with this very particular sense appears throughout Genette's text. In Benveniste's essay ("The Nature of Pronouns"), the "instances of discourse" are defined as "the discrete and always unique acts by which the language is actualized in speech by a speaker" (p. 217); "[each] instance is unique by definition" (p. 218). The narrating instance, then, refers to something like the narrating situation, the narrative matrix—the entire set of conditions (human, temporal, spatial) out of which a narrative statement is produced.]

¹¹ Quoted in the *Petit Robert* dictionary, under *Voix*.

ing: once more, these terms are merely borrowed, and I make no pretense of basing them on rigorous homologies.¹²

As we have seen, the three classes proposed here, which designate fields of study and determine the arrangement of the chapters that follow,¹³ do not overlap with but sort out in a more complex way the three categories defined earlier designating the levels of definition of narrative: *tense* and *mood* both operate at the level of connections between *story* and *narrative*, while *voice* designates the connections between both *narrating* and *narrative* and *narrating* and *story*. We will be careful, however, not to hypostatize these terms, not to convert into substance what is each time merely a matter of relationships.

¹² Another—purely Proustological—justification for the use of this term: the existence of Marcel Muller's valuable book entitled *Les Voix narratives dans "A la recherche du temps perdu"* (Geneva, 1965).

¹³ The first three (Order, Duration, Frequency) deal with time; the fourth, with mood; the fifth and last, with voice.

1 Order

Narrative Time?

Narrative is a . . . doubly temporal sequence . . . : There is the time of the thing told and the time of the narrative (the time of the signified and the time of the signifier). This duality not only renders possible all the temporal distortions that are commonplace in narratives (three years of the hero's life summed up in two sentences of a novel or in a few shots of a "frequentative" montage in film, etc.). More basically, it invites us to consider that one of the functions of narrative is to invent one time scheme in terms of another time scheme.¹

The temporal duality so sharply emphasized here, and referred to by German theoreticians as the opposition between *erzählte Zeit* (story time) and *Erzählzeit* (narrative time),² is a typical characteristic not only of cinematic narrative but also of oral narrative, at all its levels of aesthetic elaboration, including the fully "literary" level of epic recitation or dramatic narration (the narrative of *Théramène*,³ for example). It is less relevant

¹ Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York, 1974), p. 18. [Translator's note: I have altered this translation slightly so as to align its terms with the terms used throughout this book.]

² See Gunther Müller, "Erzählzeit und erzählte Zeit," *Festschrift für P. Kluckhohn und Hermann Schneider*, 1948; rpt. in *Morphologische Poetik* (Tübingen, 1968).

³ [Translator's note.] A character in Racine's *Phèdre*, proverbial for his narration of Hippolytus' death.