

Narrative Discourse revisited: a synopsis of Gérard Genette's *Nouveau Discours du Récit*

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It is five years since Jane E. Lewin translated, under the title of *Narrative Discourse*, Gérard Genette's *Discours du Récit*, which had appeared in *Figures III* in 1972. At the end of 1983, Genette published a sequel to this work, calling it *Nouveau Discours du Récit* (Seuil, 1983), in which he discusses his now famous work in the light of the criticism it has evoked and recent advances in narratology.

Reviewers have expressed regret that Genette did not see fit to revise his original text, instead of writing a commentary on it. However, the changes are minor and the additions few; it is the critical dialogue that is fascinating. My article can therefore in no way replace the work itself, being but a stopgap until a translation is available.

As most critics have been more interested in the theoretical side of his work, Genette now concentrates on the theory, abandoning the dual nature of *Narrative Discourse*, which was both an essay on method and a critical essay on Proust's narrative in the *Recherche*. I begin my detailed synopsis with chapter 3, following on 1 *Preamble* and 2 *Preface*.

3. Introduction

This chapter redefines certain keywords. Genette confirms his preference for the opposition *story/narrative* (as opposed to the Formalist *fable/subject*), but extends it into a triad: *story/narrative/narrating*. The order of the terms does not, however, correspond to reality, as it is the narrative act that produces both the story and its discourse, which are indissociable. Genette therefore proposes the following order:

narrating \leftarrow $\begin{matrix} \text{story} \\ \text{narrative} \end{matrix}$

His discussion of the term *diegesis* is of particular interest as the one English word translates two French words and Genette is careful to distinguish between them: *diégèse* (= the story universe or sphere in which the story unfolds), and *diégésis* (= pure narrative, without dialogue, as opposed to mimesis). Genette derives the adjective *diegetic* not from *diégésis*, but from *diégèse*, using it as the adjective for *story*.

4. Order

This chapter is almost entirely devoted to refuting an article by C.J. van Rees in *Poetics* 10, 1981, that criticized Genette's theory of narrative order.

5. Speed

A new title is proposed for this chapter: *Speed* instead of *Duration* (the term used in *Narrative Discourse*). Genette shows that what is important is not duration per se (either of the story or of the 'reception' of the written narrative), but narrative speed, which is measured by the relation between the length of the narrative and the duration of the story: so many pages for so much story time.

Three of the four 'movements' distinguished by Genette have easily determined speeds: the scene = isochronous (\pm the same speed as reading speed); the pause = zero; the ellipsis = infinite.

6. Frequency

A few more details are given on the use of iteration by Proust and others.

7. Mood

Genette defends his use of the terms *mood*, *distance* and *perspective* and explains why he prefers the term *narrative information* to *narrative representation* and *imitation*. Narrative can only 'inform', i.e. transmit meaning. Narrative does not 'represent' a story (real or imaginary), it 'tells' a story, with the exception of those elements of the story that are already verbal (dialogue, monologue), which it does not 'imitate', not because it is unable to do so, but because it is unnecessary, being able to reproduce or transcribe them.

The opposition *diegesis/mimesis* is therefore shaky, unless *mimesis* is understood to mean (as it was by Plato) *dialogue*. But this is not the only connotation of the Greek word *mimesis* and Genette therefore suggests replacing it with *rhesis*.

8. Distance

Genette clarifies his position with regard to the perennial debate on *mimesis* and its modern equivalent *showing*. Rather than choose sides in the debate, he wishes to displace it, claiming that the only acceptable equivalent for *diegesis/mimesis* is *narrative/dialogue*.

Genette also reaffirms the opposition *narrative of words/narrative of events*. Certain features of the narrative of events generate a *mimetic illusion*.

9. Narrative of Words

Genette proposes renaming this chapter 'Modes of (re)production of characters' speech and thoughts in written literary narrative'. (Re)production is written in this way to cover non-fiction (which supposedly *reproduces* actual speech). Genette accepts Dorrit Cohn's proposal to rename 'immediate speech' *autonomous monologue* and refers readers to her chapter 6 in *Trans-*

parent Minds (Princeton U.P., 1978). As far as free indirect speech goes, he refers readers in particular to Brian McHale's 'Free Indirect Discourse' in *PTL*, 3, 2, April 1978.

10. Narrative of Thoughts?

Cohn distinguished between speech and thoughts and objected to Genette's treatment of 'psychic life' as if it were interior speech. After examining her arguments, Genette concludes that not much is gained by this distinction, nor by her further distinction between first person and third person thoughts. Genette insists that narrative reduces thoughts either to speech or to events and admits no further categorization. He likens his 'brutal dichotomy' to that of Doležel (*Narrative Modes in Czech Literature*, Toronto U.P., 1973) and Schmid (*Der Textaufbau in den Erzählungen Dostoevskys*, Fink, 1973), who speak of *Erzählertext* (narrator text) and *Personentext* (character text).

11. Perspective

The distinction between 'Who sees?' (mood) and 'Who speaks?' (voice) is reaffirmed, but Genette regrets the restriction of 'Who sees?' to sight (it could be a case of hearing) and to a person (in the case of external focalization). He therefore suggests expanding the question to 'Where is the centre of perception?'

After discussing subsequent refinements of his theory, he verifies his hypothesis about a change that took place, during the latter half of the 19th century, in the way the main character is introduced in a narrative. He identifies, broadly speaking, two types of *incipit*: type A which supposes the character unknown to the reader, describing him first from the outside, then formally introducing him; and type B which supposes the character known, calling him from the outset by his name or even using a personal pronoun.

12. Focalization

Genette discusses Mieke Bal's revision, in her *Narratologie* (Klincksieck, 1977), of his definition of types of focalization. He disagrees with her idea that every narrative utterance necessarily has a *focalizing* character and a *focalized* character. As far as Genette is concerned, it is the narrative itself which is focalized and if anyone focalizes the narrative it can only be the narrator, or rather the author who delegates (or not) this power to the narrator.

He insists that *zero focalization* sometimes means just that and not only variable focalization, the centre of perception in a classical narrative often being so indeterminate, so vast, that it cannot coincide with any character. Focalization, on the other hand, narrows the 'field'. In *internal focalization*, the centre coincides with a character who becomes the 'subject' of all the perceptions, including those which concern himself as object. In *external*

focalization, the centre is situated at a point in the diegetic universe chosen by the narrator, outside any character, excluding therefore the possibility of anyone's thoughts being known.

The intricacies of Bal's theory of focalization are rejected by Genette. For instance he reduces her idea of 'second degree focalization' to a mere displacement of the centre of perception from one character to another. He offers, however, a refinement of his own concerning 'focalization on the narrator'. The narrative information in a first person narrative is restricted to what the narrator as hero knew at the time of the story (this is focalization) and to what the narrator learnt later (this being extradiegetic information). There is a correlation here between mood and voice that cannot be overlooked and Genette admits that he has been rightly criticized for often neglecting such correlations. He points out that the homodiegetic narrative, because of its choice of voice, is subject to a restriction in mood which he ventures to call *prefocalization*.

13. Voice

Genette re-examines the use of tenses. He retracts a remark that the use of the preterite 'inevitably' indicates the anteriority of the story, agreeing now with Barthes (*Degré Zéro*) and K. Hamburger (*The Logic of Literature*) that it merely proves the literary or fictional nature of the narrative. There are, however, three exceptions, which are then discussed.

14. Level

Genette re-examines certain terms that have evoked discussion or caused misunderstanding. One of these is *extradiegetic*, which has often been confused with *heterodiegetic*. Genette points out that the first is a question of level whereas the second is a question of person. Gil Blas is an *extradiegetic* narrator because, as the narrator of the primary narrative, he is *outside* of any diegetic universe, being on the same level as the reader. However, as he is also a character in the story he relates, he is (at the same time) a *homodiegetic* narrator.

Narrative Discourse classified metanarratives according to their relationship with the primary narrative. John Barth, in *Antioeus* 43, Autumn 1981 did the same (independently from Genette, whose work he did not know). After comparing the two, Genette offers a new typology of six functions: explanatory, predictive, pure thematic, persuasive, distractive and obstructive.

15. Person

Genette has been accused of neglecting 'person' and he admits that he maintains this term only as a concession to common practice. As far as he is concerned, every narrative is, explicitly or implicitly, a first person narrative, as the narrator can at any time introduce the pronoun 'I'. Therefore he

prefers the terms *homodiegetic* and *heterodiegetic* narrating to the more ambiguous *first person* and *third person narrative*.

Genette attacks the myth of the narratorless narrative, the 'story that tells itself'. This myth originated with Lubbock and Benveniste and Genette regrets the part he himself played in fostering it in 'Narrative Frontiers' in *Figures II*. He referred there to 'narrative in its pure state . . . perfect absence, not only of the narrator, but even of the act of narrating'. Genette nevertheless considered this 'pure' narrative to be a form of discourse, whose marks of enunciation had been provisionally and precariously suspended. He now adds 'and very partially', considering every utterance to be in itself proof of enunciation.

Genette is no longer sure of the absolute distinction between autodiegetic and homodiegetic narrating, as he can envisage a situation in which a secondary, but nonetheless important, character assumes the narrating. It would seem, however, that in practice the narrative function effaces the diegetic function.

The barrier between hetero- and homodiegetic is not insuperable. Thackeray in *Henry Esmond* uses both 'I' and 'he' and, in texts like *Madame Bovary* and *Vanity Fair*, the narrator does not seem very far away. Genette agrees with Philippe Lejeune that there is third person autobiography, or, to use the Genettean term, *heterodiegetic autobiography*.

16. Person (continued)

Authors sometimes practise *transvocalization* (= rewriting their narrative in a different voice). Genette himself has examined Proust's switch from third person (*Jean Santeuil*) to first person (*La Recherche*). The opposite practice (from first to third) is even more common. Genette cites several examples mentioned by D. Cohn and others, such as James' *The Ambassadors* and Kafka's *The Castle*. After examining different suppositions as to the reasons for transvocalization, Genette comes to the following conclusions:

1. The relative ease of the changeover (from autodiegetic to focalized heterodiegetic or vice versa) shows that the vocalic parts are more or less equivalent as far as the modal consequences are concerned;
2. the only inevitable consequence – the impossibility of focalizing on a character after having vocalized (and therefore prefocalized on) another – can be circumvented by more or less adroit paralectic infractions;
3. heterodiegetic narrative can do more (naturally and without infraction) than homodiegetic;
4. *but* an artist may prefer the stimulus of constraint to the ease of freedom;
5. vocalic choice need not be due to any advantage or restriction of mood (see above) or time (homodiegetic narrative is usually retrospective): it can be merely the author's personal choice at a given time.

17. Narrative Situations

Mood and voice were considered together as 'narrative situation' by Franz

Stanzel in 1955 (*Die typischen Erzählsituationen im Roman*, W. Braumiller). Since then he has continued to develop and revise his original classification. Genette agrees with D. Cohn that French narratologists have erred in ignoring Stanzel and praises her comparison (in 'The Encirclement of Narrative', *Poetics Today*, 2, 2, Winter 1981) of his own and Stanzel's theories.

In order to repair this neglect and to correlate mood and voice (a correlation missing in *Narrative Discourse*), Genette examines Stanzel's work and Cohn's commentary, finally reworking a circular diagram by Stanzel (already amended by Cohn) into a double entry table. This diagram is further developed by reflecting on Jaap Lintvelt's work, *Essai de typologie narrative: le point de vue* (Corti, 1981). Lintvelt distinguishes between two kinds of narrating and three narrative types according to the 'centre of orientation'.

Finally Genette adds another dimension to his table (level), doubling the entries through the addition of the intradiegetic level. There are three blank spaces which he asks the reader to fill in if he can. The narrative situations concerned exist in theory and perhaps also in practice, or may do so one day.

Relation ↓ \ Level →	Extradiegetic			Intradiegetic			
	Focalization →	0	Internal	External	0	Internal	External
Heterodiegetic		<i>Tom Jones</i>	<i>A Portrait of the Artist</i>	<i>The Killers</i>	<i>Le Curieux impertinent</i>	<i>L'Ambitieux par amour</i>	
Homodiegetic		<i>Gil Blas</i>	<i>Hunger</i>	<i>The Outsider?</i>		<i>Manon Lescaut</i>	

18. The Narratee

Genette admits that his section on the narratee was inadequate and refers readers to Gerald Prince's work, for instance *Narratology: The Form and Function of Narrative* (Mouton, 1982).

However, Prince does not always distinguish clearly between intradiegetic narratees (e.g. M. de Renoncour in *Manon Lescaut*) and extradiegetic narratees (e.g. the narratee in Balzac's *Père Goriot*). The distinction is essential because the extradiegetic narratee is not, like the intradiegetic, just a 'relay' between the narrator and the potential reader: he merges completely with the potential reader to become a 'relay' between the narrator and the real reader, who can (if he so wishes) take the remarks addressed to the extradiegetic narratee as addressed to himself.

Finally Genette discusses a case not treated by Prince: the narratee is identified with the hero in second person narrative (e.g. Butor's *La Modification*). According to Genette, this is a variant of heterodiegetic narrating, heterodiegetic being any narrating not in the first person.

19. Implied Author, Implied Reader?

In this chapter Genette replies to criticism by Shlomith Rimmon in 'A Comprehensive Theory of Narrative' (*PTL*, 1, 1, January 1976). One of the (few)

shortcomings specified by Rimmon was the omission of the 'implied author'. This meant that the extradiegetic narrator and narratee were coupled. The extradiegetic narrator is a voice in the text, whereas the extradiegetic narratee, or implied reader, is not an element of the text and should therefore be linked with the implied author, who is also outside of the text. Genette agrees that both the implied author and reader are beyond the text and concludes that they are no concern of narratology. However, they do belong to the wider field of poetics and so he consents to examine this knotty problem.

The term *implied author* was first used by Wayne Booth in 1961. (This was translated by French narratologists as 'auteur implicite', which was translated back into English as 'implicit author'. Genette prefers the translation 'auteur impliqué'.) Booth used the term to distinguish between the *real* author and the *implied* author, using the latter term to mean more or less 'narrator'. Since then the term *narrator* has gained ground, with the result that there is one term too many in the now widely accepted diagram:

[Real Auth. [Imp. Auth. [Narr' [Narrative] Narr^e] Imp. Read.] Real Read.]

Genette finds no place for the implied author between the narrator, who fictively produces the narrative, and the (real) author, who actually produces it. It has been argued that the implied author is the idea of the author conjured up by the reader. Genette concludes that such a designation is only necessary if the reader's idea of the author is incorrect and does not correspond to the real author. This incorrect image can be due to a naïve reading or to falsification.

It is claimed that the latter can be an involuntary revelation of the author's unconscious personality or of political and social opinions not consciously held by him. Genette is sceptical about such claims, but accepts them for argument's sake. This leads him to conclude that the (competent) reader's image of the author is more correct than the author's image of himself. Thus the *implied author* is the authentic *real author* (IA = RA). It follows that IA is superfluous. Exit IA.

A second hypothesis is that of voluntary falsification, for instance Sterne's in *Tristram Shandy*. However, only an incompetent reader would equate the extradiegetic-homodiegetic-narrator-fictive-author (Tristram) and the implied author, who is indistinguishable, from the real author. Once again IA = RA and exit IA. The case of the heterodiegetic narrator is more subtle, for we have an anonymous narrator-author whose personality can be voluntarily distinct from that of the real author (e.g. the naïve, right-thinking narrator of *Tom Jones*). By decoding the irony, the (competent) reader arrives at an image of the author (= implied author) and there is no reason why this image should be incorrect. For the third time therefore IA = RA, exit IA.

In fact Genette can think of only three instances when IA \neq RA. These are literary fraud, ghost writing and collaboration (for instance the naïve reader of a novel by the Goncourt brothers could imagine a single implied author).

Whereas the implied author is an idea of the *real* author in the mind of the reader, the implied reader is an idea of a *possible* reader in the mind of the real author. Thus Genette prefers the term *potential reader* to *implied reader*.

The above arguments lead Genette to modify the accepted diagram as follows:

RA(IA) → NR → Narrative → Nre → (PR)RR

Finally Genette thanks Wayne Booth for his praise (in 'Rhetorical Critics Old and New: the Case of Gérard Genette' in L. Lerner, ed., *Reconstructing Literature*, Blackwell, 1983) and answers his criticism. The main fault Booth found in *Narrative Discourse* was Genette's failure to show the use or function of the different procedures he identified. Genette explains that this was not his aim. As a formalist he is interested in form, i.e. narrative and narrating, and not in content, i.e. story and diegesis. In replying to Booth, he also clarifies his critical position, describing it as 'open structuralism'.

20. Afterword

Genette reflects on the task of the literary theorist. He admits he is still interested in what Barthes called the 'scriptible', in other words the possibilities of literature. Theorists should not just examine existing forms and themes, but should explore all possibilities and even impossibilities. Thus the time has perhaps come for theory to invent practice.

A 7 page bibliography cites books and articles on narratology published since *Figures III* as well as some earlier works omitted from the latter's bibliography.

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