The Dangers of Structuralist Narratology: Genette's Misinterpretation of Proust

Meili Steele
University of South Carolina - Columbia, steelem@sc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/engl_facpub

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Publication Info

This Article is brought to you by the English Language and Literatures, Department of at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.
ROMANCE NOTES

Founder: Urban Tigner Holmes
Editor: Carol L. Sherman

Editorial Board: María A. Salgado, Frank A. Domínguez, E. Jane Burns


ROMANCE NOTES is published in the Fall, Winter, and Spring. The Subscription rate for Volume XXIV is $15.00; the individual rate is $13.50; and the student rate is $8.00. Single numbers are $6.00. A fifty-cent surcharge will apply to all second binnings.

Contributions of approximately six double-spaced typewritten pages, including footnotes, are welcome. They should conform to the MLA Style Manual (1985) and must be accompanied by a return envelope and loose postage. The original, one copy, and a three-line abstract are required. Please note: The Editors have a policy of "blind submissions" to readers: authors shall therefore put their name and university affiliation on a separate cover sheet only.

All communications should be addressed to ROMANCE NOTES c/o The Department of Romance Languages, Box 014A, The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC 27514 (U. S. A.).

CONTENTS

The Dangers of Structuralist Narratology: Genette's Misinterpretation of Proust
Melii Steele
187

A leitura do Avalovara: Texto e tentação logocentrismo
Sérgio Luiz Prado Beliel
194

Louis Ménescas, Assassin and Source of the "Lilac Murder" in Genet's
Haute Surveillance
Harry E. Stewart
204

An American Co-ed Seen Through Spanish Eyes: Ramón Sender's Nancy
Jasie Spencer
209

Sexual Ambiguity in Mauriac's Thérèse Desqueyroux
Edward J. Gallagher
215

Pérez de Ayala's View of Intellectual Man as Seen in Prometeo
Thomas Feeny
222

Pablo Neruda's Noncelebratory Elementary Odes
David G. Anderson, Jr.
226

Chanson de la plus haute tour: Hugo palimpseste de Rimbaud
Alexandre L. Amprimoz
232

Barbey D'Aurévilly and Balzac: A Possible Source of
A Un Diner D' Athènes
T. A. Unwin
237

The Flståw Collection of Cronistas
Bernard Flståw
241

SPRING, 1986

VOLUME XXVI, NUMBER 3
Sueño y vida: la aventura de los cuerpos de vino
Alfred Rodríguez y Juan Maura

The Vaquera de la Finojosa: Was She a Vision?
Nancy F. Marino

Dolce Marina, ¿el destino de un nombre?
Tamara Holzapfel y Alfred Rodriguez

Simultaneity in the Libro de Alisandre’s Battle Scenes
Mary Jane Kelley

The Present Tense in Ennius and the Cantar de Mio Cid
Matthew Bailey

Commentary: Staging Hugo in 1985
Barbara T. Cooper

THE DANGERS OF STRUCTURALIST NARRATOLOGY: GENETTE’S MISINTERPRETATION OF PROUST

Meili Steele

Structuralist narratology, exemplified in Gérard Genette’s “Discours du récit,” has escaped the attacks of deconstruction and other post-structuralist critical currents. Indeed, the debate over this narrative theory has concentrated on the refinement of descriptive vocabulary rather than on the premises of the method. Thus, in Nouveau discours du récit published in 1983, Genette devotes almost the entire book to discussions of other narratological typologies and barely mentions attacks on the entreprise itself. One of the reasons for the theory’s wide acceptance is its descriptive stance that brackets questions of content, style, and interpretation. It claims to be only a taxonomy, not a theory. I shall criticize the theory on the text on which this method is based, examine some interpretative consequences of the theory, and propose an alternative.

Structuralist narratology is based on the opposition between histoire and récit, between story and discourse. The histoire is “le signifié ou contenu narratif” (“Discours,” 72), while the récit is the individual manifestation of this content, “le signifiant, énoncé, discours ou texte narratif lui-même” (72). The third aspect of the text is narration, “l’acte narratif producteur” (72). The distinction between histoire and récit permits narratologists to talk about different ways of telling the same story and to compare the narrative techniques of different texts. The basis for this opposition comes not only from Saussure’s distinction between signifiant and signifié but also from his opposition between langue and parole, in which langue defines the field of possibilities that are actualized by individual paroles (texts). Like Saussure, narratologists ignore “the world” or reference; unlike Saussure, however, they do not
ROMANCE NOTES

bracket it. (They cannot bracket it because the text proposes "a world.") Rather, they evaporate it by assuming that the "world" is an autonomous entity waiting for representation. This world exists independently of its naming. Langue is thus asked to fill a role in poetics that is far larger than the one Saussure assigns to it. First, as many critics have noted, the narratological use of the concept histoire (langue) is not limited to a given synchronic moment but is expanded to cover all historical possibilities. Hence, it is closer to the phenomenological notion of the essence of literature, of the work as such (e.g. Roman Ingarden) than it is to Saussure. Secondly, narratology confounds two notions of langue, a confusion shared by Saussure and corrected by Emile Benveniste. Benveniste distinguishes between the semiotic realm of langue, where its function is to signify, and the semantic realm, where the function of langue is mediate "entre l'homme et l'homme, entre l'homme et le monde, ... bref, organisant toute la vie des hommes" (II, 124). As we shall see, it is in this semantic conception of langue, which considers language's intralinguistic force of signification and extralinguistic force of reference, that poetics needs to seek its definition of the text.\(^1\)

Nonetheless, the weakness of narratology does not emerge in its categories for analyzing the surface structure of the récit — time, mode, and voice — but when the critic "reads out," in Seymour Chatman's phrase, with the assumption that the mass content/world of the histoire subsumes all texts. Genette's reading of the iterative will illustrate the dangers of the method.

One of the ways that narratology contains the ontological power of language is by explaining textual features with the psychology of the characters. The aberrations in the language "reflect" the peculiarities of the characters. Language does not shape the world; it merely reflects the closed field of content. For example, in speaking of the relationships between Odette and Swann and Gilberte and Marcel, Genette concludes: "L'itératif est ici, plus que de l'habitude, le mode (aspect) temporel de cette sorte d'oubli perpétuel, d'incapacité foncière du héros proustien à percevoir la continuité de sa vie... Penser deux

\(^1\) The importance of reference for the theory of the text has been pursued by Edouard Morot-Sir and Paul Ricoeur.

GENETTE'S MISINTERPRETATION OF PROUST

moments à la fois, c'est toujours pour l'être proustien, les identifier et les confondre: cette équation est la loi même de l'itératif" (169). Elsewhere he asks the character to do more work: "l'être proustien est aussi peu sensible à l'individualité des moments qu'il est au contraire spontanément à celle des lieux. Les instants ont chez lui une forte tendance à se ressembler et à se confondre..." (153-4).

In Genette's reading, La Recherche is simply the story of how Marcel discovers his vocation, a story that differs from other narrative texts only through its exploitation of certain formal features or through its psychology. The text's theory of representation — i.e. not just the commentary but the representation itself — has no place in narratological theory. In order to clarify this problem, I shall give a brief exposition of the narrative instance of La Recherche.

The text's narrative instance appears in terms taken from German Idealism (Kant and Schopenhauer).\(^2\) The ultimate je, the je scripteur, is a transcendental subject who englobes the various other je's of the text: the je who states universal prepositions, the je who tells the story, and the many je's of the past. Unlike the je of many other first person texts, this transcendental je has access to the essence of the past and not just to a series of events such as the hero has experienced them. The je scripteur's knowledge of this material is not gained through the concepts of habitual perception but through intuitions of essences. This access to the past is not just to what has happened, to the past as it has been experienced, but to an essential past and to a unique style. Thus, the work is not an imitation of what has happened. Proust's rejection of imitation is well-known: "Le monde des différences n'existant pas à la surface de la terre parmi tous les pays que notre perception uniformise, à plus forte raison n'existe-t-il pas dans le 'monde.' Le septuor de Vinteuil avait semblé me dire que oui" (III, 277). "Il me semble que le premier élément soit l'Idée, et le chagrin seulement le mode selon lequel certaines Idées entrent d'abord en nous" (III, 906). The vocabulary of Romantic Idealism thus creates a narrative instance that cannot be reduced to Genette's three divisions, which are
grounded in the realistic presupposition of histoire: “temps de la narration,” “niveau narratif,” and “personne.” We can now return to iterative narration.

In his discussion, Genette cites a reflection made by Marcel on a conversation with Gilberte: “... elle parlait d’un changement que j’étais bien obligé de constater du dehors, mais que je ne possédais pas intérieurement, car il se composait de deux états que je ne pouvais, sans qu’ils cessassent d’être distincts l’un de l’autre, réussir à penser à la fois” (I, 538). From this the critic concludes that the “loi de l’itératif,” which is founded on the sensitivity of “l’être proustien,” can be stated in the formula that I have already cited: “penser deux moments à la fois, c’est toujours pour l’être proustien les identifier et les confondre” (169). Yet the quotation from La Recherche is primarily a testimony to the theme of the dispersion of selves, a theme which, from the psychological point of view, does not require an iterative treatment. Indeed, the passé simple could render such a series effectively. The iterative gives a certain identity and duration to this succession of selves, such that what appears to the hero as mere dispersion is, from the point of view of the je scripteur, the individualization of an essence. The hero cannot unify and distinguish his successive selves because he has not yet found the mode of access to the temporal ideas nor the means of translating such an intuition into literature. Thus, the quotation that Genette cites expresses the failure of the hero to achieve what the work in which this comment appears does achieve. These “piliers itératifs” represent simultaneously Marcel’s inability to unify his successive selves and the je scripteur’s capacity to bring about such a unity through literature.

Although in the previous example Genette’s psychological position only limits his conclusions, in his discussion of the iterative treatment of Marcel’s attempt to predict the movement of the girls at Balbec, this position causes him to distort (154). In this example he confounds the iterative treatment of Marcel’s behavior with the hero’s desire to predict, to experience recurrence: “Mais le seul fait de la récurrence ne définit pas l’itération sous sa forme la plus rigoureuse, et, apparemment, la plus apaisante pour la sensibilité proustienne: il faut que la répétition soit régulière” (154). Marcel’s search for recurrence, for a familiar environment is an Idea that is individualized throughout the novel by the je scripteur. What the hero searches for is a deadening recurrence, which is not the same as the repetition with difference in the work as a whole. It is the hero’s torment, his failure to find this habitual repetition that diversifies the Idea, for suffering is “le mode selon lequel certaines Idées entrent d’abord en nous” (III, 906).

These problems continue in the critic’s analysis of what he calls “iterative description.” These descriptions “ne se rapportent pas à un moment particulier de l’histoire, mais à une série de moments analogues, par conséquent ne peuvent en aucune façon contribuer à ralentir le récit bien au contraire” (133-4). He does not say how this fits his law of the iterative—the remarks occur in the section on duration—but apparently this can be explained by the hero’s sensitivity to places and insensitivity to time. Among the examples that Genette cites is the famous description of the church at Combray (I, 48-9). An analysis of this passage will show the limitations of this category.

First, the description is not a series of analogous perceptions by the hero but a description of an essential past by the je scripteur. The organization of the paragraph does not reflect a sequence of perceptions, but the semantic structure of the work as a whole. The structure of the sentences in which the principal clause is dominated by the subordinate qualifications is indicative of the movement from concepts to Ideas, and this movement is paralleled by the well-known Proustian movements from words to names and from literal denomination to analogy. From “ce n’était qu’une église” the church becomes the unifying Idea for all the description. There is also an important shift by the je scripteur from his transcendental role to that of a limited narrator, a shift that is marked by a shift to the present tense: “et ces rues de Combray existent dans une partie de ma mémoire si reculée, peinte de couleurs si différentes de celles qui maintenant revêtent pour moi le monde, qu’en vérité elles me paraissent toutes, et l’église qui les dominait sur la Place, plus irréelles encore que les projections de la lanterne magique.” This shift throws into relief the preceding description by the transcendental je and anticipates the description and narration to come. The limited narrator confesses that “pouvoir encore traverser la rue Saint-Hilaire... serait une entrée en contact avec l’au-delà plus merveilleusement surnaturelle que de faire la connaissance de Golo et de causer avec Geneviève de Brabant.” The descrip-
tion of the church and the forthcoming description and narration in the Combray section are a rendering of this Au-delà of the past that seems so fantastic to the time- and concept-bound narrator. To call these descriptions a sequence of perceptions considered in their analogical similarity is to miss the point thematically and to confuse the different narrative levels of the text.

The foregoing analysis does not mean that we need to abandon narratological study and to consider each text as a closed object in the manner of the New Critics. Rather, we can turn to post-structuralist linguistics, particularly semantics and pragmatics, for terminology that embraces language and its relations to speakers and the world. For the text itself, which transcends linguistics, we can use the ambiguous but inevitable notion of intertextuality. The dialectic relationship between the text and the background of texts against which the given text appears replaces the vertical relationship of histoire and récit. Intertextuality also invokes the competence and finesse of the individual reader, who is part of but not reduced to the competence of the community; and it invokes the specular potential of the text. La Recherche suggests this kind of intertextual reading on almost every page, but the most obvious example is the pastiche of the Goncourts. The Goncourts' style is not simply a different way of saying the same "thing" that La Recherche says. Language does not efface itself before content but creates its own world. Comparisons between texts are not limited to technique (récit) and the content (histoire) but emerge through consideration of the powers of language that each text employs. Thus, time is not just a relationship between histoire and récit, but part of the text's ontological power, the power that Proust calls "vision." Moreover, a text does not have to resort transcendental philosophy in order to create its vision. Proust links time and ontology in his brilliant article on Flaubert's style: "un homme qui par l'usage en-

--- See for example the work of Oswald Ducrot and Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni.

--- On Intertextuality, see Jonathan Culler's chapter "Presupposition and Intertextuality" in The Pursuit of Signs, which summarizes current debates. Michael Riffaterre gives the following definition, which will serve my purposes here: "L'intertextualité est la perception, par le lecteur, de rapports entre une œuvre et d'autres qui l'ont précédée ou suivie" (4).