

Narrating Narrating

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Language rests on silence, but it is a meaningful silence that is broken by words. The world is meaningful; nonetheless we speak, to draw attention to some aspects of this meaning, or to draw upon this previous meaning to articulate a more complex one. Narrative, likewise, is built on silent or presupposed narratives, it is always retelling what is told in order to extract further meaning or to make it mean otherwise, to change the story (counternarratives). Sometimes the same events are retold by a different narrator, so that a new significance or perspective emerges, and sometimes the initial act of telling is itself narrated, and a peculiar doubling is produced. There are stories which narrate the way some events were told by someone—narrated narrations. I am aware that the story of “the story within the story” is a twice-told tale, but nonetheless I will tell it again, hoping to make it yield some additional meaning—if my initial contention is right.

A close examination of the narrated narrations should go hand in hand with a theoretical emphasis on the interactional value of narrative. Narrative is always a transformation of a previous narrative. Already narrativized elements are reinterpreted, reconfigured and retold through.

Alternatively narrative transforms quasi-narrative patterns of experience (which have been pre-structured by narrative schemata). Narrativity therefore involves repetition, a reworking of previous experience to produce new experience, a retrospective reconfiguration of previously available signs (Cf. Ochs 1997: we often narrate in order to rectify or restructure another person's account). Doubling effects therefore add semiotic density and increase narrativity, because the interactional value of the narration is added to its narrativization of the events: so we have both the history told by the narrative and the history of its telling, which in turn is reelaborated for the present retelling. Retelling, like rereading, produces an intensification of meaning (cf. Galef 1998 for an account of rereading). Communicative interaction is meaningful, therefore a more complex meaning is articulated whenever two sequences of reading are confronted, or a represented telling is set against its representational process.

In order to examine “retellings” we will proceed first through a reexamination of “telling”, of the interactional moment of narrative. “Telling” is giving an ordered account of something, and (like the word “account”) it has both a mathematical and a linguistic-narrative sense. A “teller” is someone that counts (figures and money, or stories); in Spanish, “contar” also has this double sense, to count and to narrate; the same sense lurks etymologically under French “raconter” (not, to my knowledge, in their etymological root, Classical Latin *computo*, which is purely numerical. On the other hand, “tell” is also a (partial) synonym of “say”, “speak”, “make known through language”. The use of language discloses the other person's mind, so that the result of “telling” something is that something which was not known is revealed through the use of speech. The numerical order implicit in “tell” may well refer to an order of rhetorical parts in a discourse, but it applies most adequately to a logical cause-and-effect sequence of parts—an action sequence—in which the effect follows

the cause as logically as “2” follows “1”, although the order of presentation may be altered, as in this sentence. *Tell* also suggests that there something exists which must be disclosed, and the discourse will be its disclosure: the discourse returns to what is hidden and brings it to light. The element of *repetition* implicit in *tell* (in the sense of ‘disclose’) converges with the element of *ordered sequence* also present in the word, so that the use of the verb “telling” foregrounds the narrativity of what is told.

When we *tell* that someone *told* us... whatever, what is told acquires an additional value by virtue of its being retold. If it was told once (perhaps not for the first time) and is going to be repeated *now*, there must certainly be something interesting, curious or valuable in it, at least something *tellable*—the story has some credit, and we are all the readier to add it to our personal account, as what has oft been told will be perhaps be retold by us, to our credit. Narrative value increases with repetition (it may also *decrease* if the story is too well known after all). Fictionalized (and controlled) repetition thus increases a story’s narrativity, insomucha as the interactional dimension of *tellability* is a major component of narrativity.

The traditional definitions of narrativity have suffered in recent years. Fludernik (1996) has criticized the focus on plot and emphasized the experiential dimension of narrativity; likewise, McQuillan (2000) has claimed that any act of semiotic inscription or of communication is a narrative; the pair story and discourse has fared equally badly with poststructuralist theorists. Perhaps we should stress that the connectedness of events in a plot, and the opposition between story and discourse, are constructed with reference to an evaluative space shared by the narrator and addressee; emphasizing also the oppositional (and reconfigurational) value of the narrator’s activity.

Narrativity involves, at its most basic, connectedness and movement through time (Gergen & Gergen 25, who correlate these terms with the

“selectivity” and “movement” in Scholes and Kellogg 1966). It should be emphasized that the connectedness of the events is not immanent, events are not connected “in themselves” but for someone, most notably for the teller; and their connexion is not merely a logical one, but an axiological one as well: “all events in a successful narrative are related by virtue of their containment within a given evaluative space” (Gergen & Gergen 1986: 26). Yet another element in narrative is emphasized by Gergen and Gergen: “one of the most phenomenologically salient aspects of narrative form: the capacity to create feelings of drama or emotion” (Gergen and Gergen 1986: 28). To me, Fludernik’s “experientiality”, while a prominent component of literary narratives, is logically subordinated to the more basic narrative dimension of “connectedness”, and ultimately to the dramatic or emotional dimension of narrative, in the sense that vicarious participation in subjective experience creates an emotional implication of the reader in the narrated events and strongly influences evaluation.

The reconfigurational value of narrative becomes more visible when its nature as narrative is foregrounded, through a variety of reflexive structures. Narrated narratives, and most particularly narrated narratings are one such structure, a thematization of the interactional value of narrative (a hypothesis which will need more substantiating).

The interactional value of narrated narrating is often instrumentalized: it is subordinated to the aesthetic and communicational (interactional) dimension of the framing narrative (interaction writer-reader often distorts and secretly interferes with the interaction between the narrator and the narratee). Therefore, fictional narrative interaction cannot be equated with real narrative interaction, although it draws on many of its protocols.

Some aspects of this phenomenon, narrated narratives, have been abundantly studied, most notably starting with Genette’s (1972, 1988)

account of metadiegetic narratives. Thus, Genette distinguishes six types of relationships between embedding and embedded narrative: analeptic explanation, metadiegetic prolepsis, purely thematic function, persuasive function, distractive function, obstructive function (1988 94). Genette also mentions the more specific issue of narrated narratings with reference to *La Recherche*, when “l’instance narrative est mise en vedette et le dispute en importance à l’événement rapporté” (1972: 248); otherwise Proust suppresses those hypothetical intermediary narratives and gives all the telling to Marcel (1972: 250). Genette’s sections on the functions of secondary narratives are also relevant, as is his awareness of the discourse’s reflexive dimension throughout (cf. Marcel’s “invasion . . . du récit par son propre discours” in Genette 1972: 265). Narratological studies of the narratee are also crucial: “l’existence d’un narrataire intradiégétique a pour effet de nous maintenir à distance en l’interposant toujours entre le narrateur et nous” (1972: 266): thus, a narrated narrating is a reminder of a crucial interactive element in narrative, as the implied reader is placed explicitly in the position of an overhearer. As Genette says right at the end of his “Discours du récit”, “il y a toujours du monde à côté” (1972: 267, quoting Bixiou from Balzac’s *La Maison Nucingen*)—an emphasis on overhearing and on the interactional dimension of narrative which is not too evident in the rest of Genette’s theory, incidentally.

A grid could be developed to measure some of these effects of narrative doubling, with special attention to the dimension of narrated narrating:

1. Who tells the first narrative?
2. To whom it is told?
3. Who tells the metadiegetic narrative (narrator 1? narratee 2? new narrator 3?)
4. To whom it is told (narrator 1? narratee 2? new narratee 4?)

5. Which is the medium of the first narrative? (Written, spoken: interaction in absentia or in praesentia).
6. Which is the medium of the metadiegetic narrative?
7. Is there a difference in medium between the first narrative and the metadiegetic narrative? Does this give rise to any intermedial effects?
8. Which is the genre of the first narrative? (Literature, anecdote, report, etc.).
9. Which is the genre of the second narrative?
10. Is there a difference in genre between the first narrative and the metadiegetic? Does this give rise to any intergeneric effects?
11. Is the metadiegetic narrative told at length, or summarized? When, why and how?
12. Is the narrating narrated (as well as the story)? To what extent, and to what effect?
13. Which is the function of the telling in the first narrative (a major event? a “filler”?)
14. Does the structural hierarchy of levels correspond with the hierarchy constructed in reading, or is there any surprising rearrangement as we read the story?

There is a structural/genetic continuity between everyday narrative of anecdotes and the forms of artistic narrative, with listeners gradually becoming an audience (cf. Goffman 1986: 522). Literary stories which narrate narratings keep us aware of this continuity, and build bridges between advanced literate and oral forms, reappropriating orality for literature, and constructing advanced interactional forms precisely through a return, with a difference, to the origins of narrative interaction.

In my paper¹ I will explore at greater length some of these issues with reference to a number of stories which exhibit different varieties of metadiegetic narratives and “narrated narratings” (Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, London’s “The Scarlet Plague” and “A Hyperborean Brew,” Gide’s *L’Immoraliste*, Barth’s “Menelaiad”, etc.).

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