

Narrative

A critical linguistic introduction

Second Edition

Michael Toolan

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Narrative

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**In loving memory of
Margaret 'Mac' McAloren
who told such stories,
and never told on us.**



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Preface

Narratives are everywhere, performing countless different functions in human interaction; therefore the area of inquiry of this book must be delimited rather strictly. As the subtitle indicates, it is intended as a critical introduction, and I hope to be genuinely critical and genuinely introductory. More narrowly still, this critical introduction is specifically concerned with language-oriented or linguistically-minded perspectives on narrative: ways of looking at narrative that attend systematically to the language of stories, and models of narrative-analysis that focus on the linguistic form of narratives or their linguistically-describable structure. The basic rationale for such an emphasis is the conviction that systematic analytical attention to the logic and dynamics of language behaviour can shed light on any sub-domain or mode of language behaviour. The mode spotlighted here is narrative.

What is it about narrative that makes it such a pervasive and fascinating phenomenon? And how can one begin to answer such a question without entering into a narrative of one's own? The fact is, as my opening sentence announces, narratives are everywhere. Or are potentially so. Everything we do, from making the bed to making breakfast to taking a shower (and notice how these combined – in any order – make a multi-episode narrative), can be seen, cast, and recounted as a narrative – a narrative with a middle and end, characters, setting, drama (difficulties resolved), suspense, enigma, 'human interest', and a moral. (The moral of the story of my making breakfast this morning could be stated as 'Don't try to clean the toaster while cooking porridge'.) From such narratives, major and minor, we learn more about ourselves and the world around us. Making, apprehending, and then not forgetting a narrative is making-sense of things which may also help make sense of other things.

Just how pervasive and important oral and written narratives are to our lives becomes startlingly clear if we stop to think of the forms of narrative we depend on as props and inspirations: biographies and autobiographies; historical texts; news stories and news features in many media; personal letters and diaries; novels, thrillers and romances; medical case histories; school records; curricula vitae; police reports of 'incidents'; annual performance reviews; and, often most crucially, the stories we tell about ourselves and others – stories of triumphs and disasters, pleasure and pain – in

the course of our everyday lives. These are only some of the materials shaping our lives that are palpably narrative in form and function.

But we might also consider many other preoccupations which, as a means of assisting comprehension, we 'narrativize'. Law students struggling to grasp and retain the ramifications of the law concerning theft may well, as a sense-making procedure, cast the law(s) as a developing story shaped by attendances to and departures from precedent, and by statutory revisions. And the criminal law in its entirety can be seen as a revisable story: the story is about socially impermissible conduct and the means of redress available when such conduct is exposed. This all-embracing 'story of the law' subsumes an infinite number of more specific episodes (actual and hypothetical), with probable but contestable outcomes: if you do this, in those circumstances, then you may be liable to such and such penalties.

Science, too, may at first glance look very different from narrative. We often think of it as an expanding storehouse of incontestable facts, the hallowed repository of objective knowledge of how things in the world work: a rich but static description, quite remote from 'storytelling'. But that turns out to be mistaken in both theory and practice. In theory, the emphasis on scientific enquiry as an ongoing revisable narrative (with revisions made on the rational grounds that the revised account brings enhanced descriptive or explanatory power, and greater generalizability) is now commonplace. And in practice, too, one has only to think of how science is taught in schools to see the centrality of narrative to understanding.

For instance, the concepts of fuel, energy and work might be taught in the primary school by telling stories about eating breakfast before running around, and putting fuel in the car before going on a long trip. If the child doesn't get the point of these stories, and see the logical connections between the stages within each story as well as the analogical parallels across the stories, they won't begin to understand the concepts involved. At secondary school the presentation may be less informal and more theorized, but narrative methods persist. Any laboratory exercise in physics, chemistry or biology, for example, is a planned and guided story in which the child is an essential participant. Testing for the hydrogen that is released when copper filings are added to sulphuric acid is, for teacher and lab assistant, an old, old story (ah, they don't make them like that any more!). But it's a new story, a narrative of enforced personal experience if you like, for the child, the moral of which is to be learned. And afterwards, in the passive voice style that tries to keep human interest out of the picture, they must 'write up' the experiment.

If the above is a reminder that narrative is a mode that, directly or more indirectly, may inform almost every aspect of human activity, I must now stress that the following chapters are concerned almost entirely with narratives in a narrower sense: literary narratives, folktales, stories by and for children, conversationally-embedded spoken narratives, and news stories in the media. There are linguistic similarities between these types of

stories which I hope, rather than leading to a boring sameness, will be thought-provoking, and linguistic differences, too, which are yet not so great as to make for unmanageable heterogeneity.

For this second edition, I have made many minor revisions and rephrasings, some cuts and several additions or expansions. The expansions have been kept in check by the need to keep the book to a manageable length, and the requirement that something linguistic and introductory could be relevantly said about each topic. The substantially new sections include ones on narrativity (1.3), modes of narration (3.8), surprise and suspense (4.7), film narration (4.8), Labov applied to literature (6.11), systemic story genres (7.6), the structure and analysis of hard news stories in print and online (8.2–8.4, 8.6), and gender (8.7). All the Further Reading and Notes and Exercises sections, at the end of each chapter, have been radically revised and brought up to date.

On the other hand, I have sometimes retained from the first edition particular demonstration analyses even where these use approaches that may have developed further in very recent years. The more recent work often builds on the earlier work, so that the latter remains both important and truly introductory.

In the following chapters, particularly the earlier and more literary-minded ones, presentation and discussion of models and theories often involves detailed reference to one or more of a few celebrated literary texts which I have taken as exemplary. So the best way to read these chapters is with those narratives both firmly in memory and close to hand for direct consultation. This special collection comprises the following stories: James Joyce's 'Eveline' and 'The Dead', from *Dubliners*; William Faulkner's 'That Evening Sun' and 'Barn Burning'; Katherine Mansfield's 'Bliss'; and Vladimir Nabokov's novel, *Invitation to a Beheading*. Many other narratives, short and long, oral and written, literary and non-literary, will be discussed in the course of the book. But those six are especially relevant to the first five chapters.

A linguistic introduction can hardly avoid the occasional use of more technical terms that may at first seem off-putting to those who have taken no linguistics courses. I have tried to keep specialist jargon to a minimum, explaining terms as the discussion proceeds.

Acknowledgements

Nearly all the work on the first edition of this book was done while I was a member of the Department of English Language and Literature of the National University of Singapore, while any better thoughts that have emerged in the second edition arose at my next academic home, the English department of the University of Washington, Seattle, or my present one, the Department of English of the University of Birmingham. Much of the material presented here has been used on courses in Stylistics or Narrative at all three institutions, and all kinds of small debts are owed to students on those courses. I still owe thanks to all those listed in the first edition, friends, colleagues and students, together with a goodly number of scholars who have one way or another influenced or unwittingly contributed to the second edition: Anneliese Kramer-Dahl, Betty Samraj, Brian Ridge, Carmen-Rosa Caldas-Coulthard, Carol Marley, Charles Owen, Chris Heffer, David Birch, David Butt, Gail Stygall, George Dillon, George Wolf, Hayley Davis, Heidi Riegenbach, Jim Martin, K. P. Mohanan, Malcolm Coulthard, Michael Halliday, Michael Hoey, Monika Fludernik, Nigel Love, Norman Macleod, Paul Hopper, Paul Simpson, Peter Verdonk, Peter White, Phil Gaines, Roy Harris, Ruth Page, Sandy Silberstein, Talbot Taylor, Thara Mohanan, Thiru Kandiah, Tony Hung, and Victor Li. Thanks also to Ms Gouri Uppal for permitting me to reproduce conversational data from her National University of Singapore MA thesis (1984).

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Very special thanks to Ronald Carter, general editor of the Interface series, for entrusting this project to me in the first place and for being a powerful advocate for literary linguistics these twenty years and more; and to Louisa Semlyen at Routledge who was unfailingly supportive when the second edition turned out to be harder and longer work than I had expected.

Mega special thanks to Julianne Statham, who has again gone above and beyond the proverbial in reading through chunks of this in draft, helping me absent the most turgid bits. And a verbal hug, too, for Roisin, Patrick, and Miriam, teenagers with attitude; [Chapter 7](#) was first written

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when only Roisin was old enough to enjoy *Burglar Bill*, and Miriam's story had not even begun. Now all three are old enough and smart enough to explain the new narratives to me.

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1 Preliminary orientations

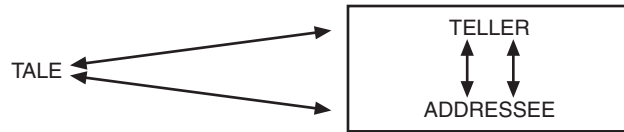
1.1 Teller, tale, addressee

What is narrative? What do we mean by ‘narrative structure’? Where does a linguistic approach come in, and how helpful can it really be? The following are introductory notes on these and other basic issues, which should at least indicate the terrain to be covered, and why it is significant.

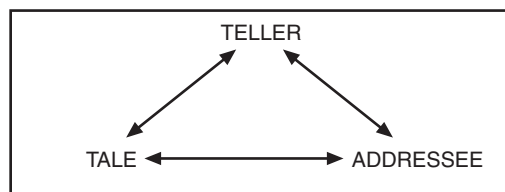
Commentators sometimes begin by stating the truism that any tale involves a teller, and that, therefore, narrative study must analyse two basic components: the tale and the teller. But as much could be said of every speech event: there is always inherently a speaker, separable from what is spoken. What makes narratives different, especially literary or extended spoken ones, is that the teller is often *particularly* noticeable. Tellers of long narratives can be surprisingly present and perceptible even as they unfold a tale that ostensibly draws all our attention, as readers or listeners, to other individuals who are within the tale. As a result we may feel that we are dividing our attention between two objects of interest: the individuals and events in the story itself, and the individual telling us about these. Thus when we read Coleridge’s ‘Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ or Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* or listen to the rambling anecdote of a friend, part of the experience is the activity of ‘reading’ or scrutinizing the character of the teller: the returned mariner, Lockwood, the friend. Already the two literary examples cited involve an enriching complication. In both texts mentioned, there is more than one teller: besides the mariner, for instance, is a ‘higher’ teller who writes, ‘It is an ancient Mariner/And he stoppeth one of three’. But we can address such complications later, and should concentrate here on narrative’s dual essential foci, teller and tale.

The possibility of achieving this effect of divided attention exploits a basic characteristic of narrative. Narrative typically is a recounting of things spatiotemporally distant: here’s the present teller, seemingly close to the addressee (reader or listener), and there at a distance is the tale and its topic. This selection of effects of closeness and distance can be represented graphically:

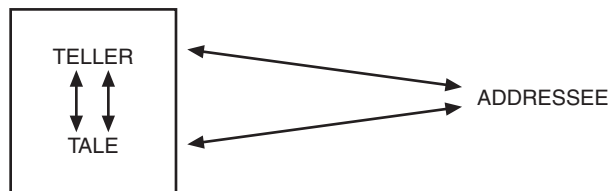
2 Preliminary orientations



But since the present teller is the sole access to the distant topic, there is a sense, too, in which narrative entails making what is distant and absent uncommonly present: a three-way merging rather than a division. Diagrammatically this merging-and-immediacy can be represented as:



However, since tellers can become intensely absorbed in their self-generated sense of the distant topic they are relating, addressees sometimes have the impression that the teller has withdrawn from them, has taken leave, so as to be more fully involved in the removed scene. This third type of relation between tale, teller, and addressee (a withdrawing and merging) might be cast thus:



In short, narratives always involve a Tale, a Teller, and an Addressee, and these can be 'placed', notionally, at different degrees of mutual proximity or distance. Hawthorn (1985) broaches these same issues, taking a painting by Millais, *The Boyhood of Raleigh*, as capturing something central to narrative. In that painting an old seaman, with his back to the viewer, appears to be addressing two young boys who are evidently fascinated and absorbed by what he tells them. The old man is using his whole arm to point out to the sea, visible in the distance. But the boys' eyes are on the man and his gesturing arm, not any distant scene he may be designating.

Narrative focusses our attention on to a story, a sequence of events, through the direct mediation of a 'telling' which we both stare at and

through, which is at once central and peripheral to the experience of the story, both absent and present in the consciousness of those being told the story. Like the two young boys we stare at the 'telling' while our minds are fixed upon what that telling points towards. We look at the pointing arm but our minds are fixed upon what is pointed at.

(Hawthorn, 1985: vii)

One of the distinctive characteristics of narrative concerns its necessary source, the narrator. We stare at the narrator rather than interacting with him as we would if we were in conversation; at the same time, in literary narratives especially, that narrator is often 'impersonalized', and attended to as a disembodied voice.

Thus there is a teller in every tale to a far greater degree than there is a speaker *in* any ordinary turn at talk. Because narratives are, relative to ordinary turns of talk, long texts and personalized or evaluated texts, there is a way in which, while your conversational remarks *reflect* who you are (your identity and values), in the course of any narrative the narrator's text *describes* that narrator. In brief snatches of conversation, a person may be able, through accent-mimicry for example, to 'pass' for someone of a different class or gender or ethnic identity; but to take on another's identity in a sustained fashion, across a number of personal narratives, is ordinarily very difficult, and may even imply disabling confusion or a personality disorder. The reflection/description contrast may be chiefly a matter of degree, but it is arguably an important contrast with far-reaching consequences – e.g. even for assessments of mental health or illness.

This brings us to another important asset of narrators: narrators are typically trusted by their addressees. In at least implicitly seeking and being granted rights to a lengthy verbal contribution, narrators assert their authority to tell, to take up the role of knower, or entertainer, or producer, in relation to the addressees' adopted role of learner or consumer. To narrate is to bid for a kind of power. Sometimes the narratives told crucially affect our lives: those told by journalists, politicians, colleagues, employers assessing our performance in annual reviews, as well as those of friends, acquaintances, enemies, parents, siblings, children – in short, all those which originate from those who have power, authority or influence over us. Any narrator then is ordinarily granted, as a rebuttable presumption, a level of trust and authority which is also a granting or asserting of power. But this trust, power and authority can be exploited or abused, as is reflected in literary critical discussion of 'unreliable narration'. Narrative misrepresentation is a complex process, difficult to unravel. One exemplification of it arises far from literature: in criminal cases of serious fraud. Where, after having pleaded not guilty, a defendant is found guilty, the sentencing judge often refers to the obfuscating detailed deception that has been uncovered as 'a complex tissue of systematic distortion and fabrication', or uses a similar revealing description.

Even before we attempt a working definition of narratives, it is clear

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that these are typically ‘cut off’ in some respects from surrounding co-text and context (their verbal and non-verbal environment, respectively: the former comprises any language that precedes or follows the narrative, the latter includes anything non-verbal of relevance, including the situation and the identities of teller and addressee). Narratives often appear to stand alone, not embedded in a larger frame, without any accompanying information about the author or the intended audience: they’re just ‘there’, it seems, like pots or paintings, and you can take them or leave them. They differ, at least in degree, from more transactional uses of language, as when someone asks you a question, or makes a request or a promise or warning: in such cases there is strong expectation that the addressee will respond or act in predictable ways. So some of the normal constraints on how we make sense of discourse seem to be suspended. And it seems we do not always have to relate narratives directly and immediately to their authors, or socio-historical backgrounds.

1.2 Typical characteristics of narratives

We can begin to define narrative by noting and inspecting some of its typical characteristics:

- 1 A degree of artificial fabrication or constructedness not usually apparent in spontaneous conversation. Narrative is ‘worked upon’. Sequence, emphasis and pace are usually planned (even in oral narrative, when there has been some rehearsal – previous performance – of it). But then as much could be said of, for example, elaborate descriptions of things, prayers, scholarly articles.
- 2 A degree of *prefabrication*. In other words, narratives often seem to have bits we have seen or heard, or think we have seen or heard, before (recurrent chunks far larger than the recurrent chunks we call words). One Mills and Boon heroine or hero seems much like another – and some degree of typicality seems to apply to heroes and heroines in more elevated fictions too, such as nineteenth-century British novels. Major characters in the novels of Dickens, Eliot, Hardy, etc., seem to be thwarted (for a time at least) in roughly comparable ways. And the kinds of things people do in narratives seem to repeat themselves over and over again – with important variations, of course. Again, prefabrication seems common in various types of writing and visual spectacle besides narrative, although the kinds of things mentioned above seem particularly to be prefabricated units of narrative.
- 3 Narratives typically seem to have a ‘trajectory’. They usually go somewhere, and are expected to go somewhere, with some sort of development and even a resolution or conclusion provided. We expect them to have beginnings, middles, and ends (as Aristotle stipulated in his *Poetics*). Consider the concluding words of children’s stories:

And they all lived happily ever after;
since then, the dragon has never been seen again.

and notice the finality and permanence conveyed by the *ever/never* pair. Or consider the common story-reader's exit-line:

And that is the end of the story.

which has near-identical counterparts in the closing sequences of radio and television news bulletins. All these examples mark this attention to the expectation of closure and finality, itself just one aspect of the broader underlying expectation of narrative trajectory. Relatedly, the addressee is usually given to understand, and does so assume, that even embarking on their story the teller knows how it ends up (not the precise wording, but the event-based or situational gist). Exceptions to this might include Dickens's serialized novels, and the bedtime story that a parent makes up for a child, *impromptu*. Even these, along with more planned-outcome narratives, can be distinguished from both diaries and live commentaries, in that in the latter new intervening acts, beyond the control of the witness/reporter, can dictate the shape and content of the report. In true narratives, arguably, the teller is always in full control although, like Dickens and the bedtime storyteller, they may not fully foresee at the outset that material which they will control.

- 4 Narratives have to have a teller, and that teller, no matter how backgrounded or 'invisible', is always important. In this respect, despite its special characteristics, narrative is language communication like any other, requiring a speaker and some sort of addressee.
- 5 Narratives are richly exploitative of that design feature of language called displacement (the ability of human language to be used to refer to things or events that are removed, in space or time, from either speaker or addressee). In this respect they contrast sharply with such modes as commentary or description. Arguably there has to be *some* removal or absence, in space or time, for a discourse to count as a narrative. Thus if I listen in my car to a radio running commentary on a simultaneously-occurring football match or funeral, this approaches the status of narrative by virtue of spatial displacement (it is not a narrative at all if I am at the football match directly witnessing, and listening to the radio commentary). But live commentaries, like real diaries, breach characteristic 3 above, and are arguably not narratives at all. More borderline are edited TV highlights of sports and other events (interestingly, one rarely finds edited highlights of matches and events on radio).
- 6 Narratives involve the recall of happenings that may be not merely spatially, but, more crucially, temporally remote from the teller and his audience. Compare our practices with those of the honeybee,

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whose tail-wagging dance overcomes spatial displacement, in that it communicates about distant sources of nectar, but cannot encompass temporal displacement. Thus it can only signal to its chums back in the hive immediately upon its return from the nectar-source. Accordingly, the honeybee's tail-wagging is no proper narrative in our sense, but merely a kind of reflex observation. As Roy Harris has remarked:

Bees do not regale one another with reminiscences of the nectar they found last week, nor discuss together the nectar they might find tomorrow.

(Harris, 1981: 158)

This is a lovely image (or narrative), partly because in fact it is something that (as far as we know) we humans alone do, and no other animals – even those with simple language systems.

A first attempt at a minimalist definition of narrative might be:

a perceived sequence of non-randomly connected events

This definition recognizes that a narrative is a sequence of events. But 'event' itself is really a complex term, presupposing that there is some recognized state or set of conditions, and that something happens, causing a change to that state. The emphasis on 'non-random connectedness' means that a pure collage of described events, even given in sequence, does not count as a narrative. For example, if each member of a group in turn supplies a one-paragraph description of something or other, and these paragraphs are then pasted together, they will not count as a narrative unless someone comes to perceive a non-random connection. And by 'non-random connection' is meant a connectedness that is taken to be motivated and significant. This curious transitional area between sequential description and consequential description is one of the bases for the fun of a familiar party game in which people around a table take turns to write a line of a 'story', the other lines of which are supplied, in secret, by the other participants.

The important role of 'change of state' has been celebrated in the more linguistic term *transformation* by the structuralist Tzvetan Todorov (1977: 233):

The simple relation of successive facts does not constitute a narrative: these facts must be organized, which is to say, ultimately, that they must have elements in common. But if all the elements are in common, there is no longer a narrative, for there is no longer anything to recount. Now, transformation represents precisely a synthesis of

differences and resemblance, it links two facts without their being able to be identified.

The one-line definition of narrative also suggests that consequence is not so much ‘given’ as ‘perceived’: narrative depends on the addressee seeing it as narrative – the circularity here seems inescapable. While most would agree that the traditional novel is a narrative, there can be legitimate disagreement as to the status, as narrative, of less familiar and complex structures. For example, imagine you enter a cartoonist’s studio and find three frames, on separate pieces of paper, on his desk. They have quite different characters, settings, furniture, etc., and seem to be about quite unrelated topics. They seem to be rough drafts, because on the corner of one is a coffee-ring, where the cartoonist has carelessly left a cup, and on the second one there’s a food stain in the top corner, while the third has some cigarette ash *and* a coffee ring on it! You think you see a narrative before you – though the cartoonist hotly denies this.

That example, however whimsical, tries to touch on a fundamental but problematic feature of narrative study. Perceiving non-random connectedness in a sequence of events is the prerogative of the addressee: it is idle for anyone else (e.g. a teller) to insist that here is a narrative if the addressee just does not see it as one (see 7.3). In this respect at least, the ultimate authority for ratifying a text as a narrative rests not with the teller but with the perceiver or addressee.

But, in practice, we expect and demand much more complex connectedness, non-randomness, and sequentiality in the events of narratives. In the terms first highlighted by Aristotle, we expect *ends* as well as beginnings and middles (something not commented upon in the quotation from Todorov above). In more twentieth-century terminology, we expect complex *motivations* and *resolutions* – even in quite ‘simple’ tales such as folktales. Thus Benjamin Colby has written:

Folk narrative in its simplest form is the verbal description of one or more concern-causing events and of the way in which the concern is eliminated or diminished.

(Colby, 1970: 177)

As we shall see in the next chapter, this definition is similar to that of the pioneer Russian narratologist Vladimir Propp. Propp studied the overarching structure of the Russian fairytale, identifying it as one in which an initial state of equilibrium is disturbed by various forces of turbulence. This turbulence brings disequilibrium and upheaval before some sort of action (perhaps an intervention) leads to the restoration of a modified version of the original equilibrium.

My skeletal definition emphasizes the role of the perceiver, but not that of an independent teller. This is because the two roles are not entirely separate. I have already suggested that the activity of perceiving

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consequential relatedness of states is the enabling condition for narrative: we might in addition speculate that it is an activity necessarily to be performed by all tellers and addressees, at least if they intend to be tellers or addressees.

1.3 Narratives and non-narratives

If a slightly less minimal definition were proposed, it might run something like this:

A narrative is a perceived sequence of non-randomly connected events, typically involving, as the experiencing agonist, humans or quasi-humans, or other sentient beings, from whose experience we humans can ‘learn’.

This definition introduces (1) one or more foregrounded individuals as experiencers, and (2) the idea of addressees ‘learning’ from narratives – i.e. the factor of human interest without which intended recipients might well not be willing listeners. And if one wished to elaborate this one step further, it might be to specify that our preference is often for the sequence of connected events to take shape around a state or period of turbulence or crisis, subsequently resolved. That is, while a sequence of events entails some sort of change of state, a sequence containing a resolved crisis or problem entails a pronounced change of state.

All these more contentious elaborations of the initial minimalist definition are useful when one attempts to distinguish narratives from all kinds of non-narrative texts. For *if* a narrative is a sequence of logically and chronologically related events, bound together by a recurrent focus (which may not be constant or exclusive) on one or more individuals (‘characters’) in whom the reader becomes interested (positively or negatively); and if the narrative is in addition that kind of chronological sequence in which a period of turbulence, crisis or uncertainty is superseded by a later stage of calm, solution or closure; and if these are indeed defining criteria of narratives; *then* texts which display few or none of the above features will not be narratives. And texts which have some of the above features, or all of the above but only weakly or barely perceptibly, should feel ‘marginal’, or ‘semi-narrative’. We can summarize those three chief or defining features as:

- sequenced and interrelated events;
- foregrounded individuals;
- crisis to resolution progression.

Now consider a literary text such as Michelle Roberts’ novella – if that is what it is – entitled *Une Glossaire/A Glossary*. This comprises a series of alphabetized glossary entries, with French headword and English-language commentary, which offer brief (typically one-page) glimpses or

recollections of the rural Norman childhood that the narrator, with French mother and English father, had access to. Cumulatively the text amounts to an act of recovery, of beachcombing for fragments, and of memorializing, all made the more poignant since the narrator's cherished French aunt, Brigitte, is dying of cancer as this glossary-compilation proceeds.

Is *Une Glossaire/A Glossary* (as a whole, not in its separate entries) a narrative, by the foregoing criteria? Certainly a conventional glossary would lack all three core desiderata listed above. And initially, at least, *Une Glossaire/A Glossary* appears to lack them too – unlike indisputably narrative texts, like 'Barn Burning' and *Pnin*, where the reader can almost immediately find indicators of the onset of an event-sequence, the beginning of a foregrounding of one or more individuals, and even the first sketching of conditions that may lead to a crisis. But is this 'glossary' in fact more a journal than a glossary? If it were genuinely a journal then, like a genuine diary, it would lack the possibility of mapping-out a before and after, one already known and past to the teller, who is now in a controlling position from which to recount them.

But the very first section of *Une Glossaire*, titled *Absence*, ends by asserting that in writing a sort of geography the writer aims 'to reclaim the past'; and s/he 'set(s) myself to remembering'. Both these suggest some activity of narrative recall may be what is going to be undertaken. Even this, however, can be removed from orthodox narrative if a number of *distinct* past scenes, objects, feelings, are recalled (just as an old person relating all their wartime memories may not integrate these into a unified story). Now consider Roberts' second section, *Artichauts*. There is very little in the way of narrative in this brief section: it is quasi-encyclopaedic, with only two sentences about how 'we' and Grandpère eat artichokes, individualizing the text. However, in subsequent sections, we do gradually learn more of particularly cherished or focussed-upon individuals: Grandpère and Brigitte and, indirectly but perhaps most crucially, the maturing narrator herself. A further feature suggestive of narrative status is the fact that the glossary terminates at the letter P (*Plage*). We can take this as an indication that the text is not really or merely a true glossary at all. The plage or beach of course is a place of termination, of profound transition, the end of one situation or status and the beginning of a very different one. So, an 'objective correlative' for narrative change, or resolution. And on the beach at low tide the narrator finds a kind of glossary of 'semiotic' fragments. And when the narrator says, 'I must put them [the fragments, the memories?] into some sort of order. Make a list,' we are reminded of course that she has done just that, in the foregoing text. An alphabetized list is sharply non-narrative. But since this is such an annotated and embellished list, one in which the whole becomes clearer as the later items on the list are reached, we still have grounds for saying that here is a narrative, albeit of a non-traditional kind. The decision in all such borderline cases is really based on what the reader takes the ultimate purpose of the

text to be: narrative, or hortatory, or persuasive, or informative, or argumentative, and so on.

1.4 Story – text – narration

In the next four chapters we shall look at some of the most influential linguistically-informed discussions of narrative as verbal art: written or oral, traditional and collective, or innovative and individual. These chapters thus review what has been suggested about the poetics of narrative. By this I mean the relatively abstract and theoretical commentary on the more systematic and recurrent aspects of stories and storytelling. The poetics of any type of verbal performance (revenge tragedies, sonnets, diaries, whatever) is the study of the ground rules that shape all the productions within that type. And most of these ground rules are not logical requirements at all, but conventional norms in the production of revenge tragedies, sonnets, and so on. Thereafter, [Chapters 6 to 8](#) explore narratives in various societal manifestations: in the social world of conversation, by and for children, and in the public worlds of storytelling in the media, the courts, and identity-construction.

Some warnings are in order concerning the way theorists of narrative poetics have split the subject of study into two, and more recently three, major domains or levels of inquiry. Thus the early-twentieth-century Russian formalists (Propp, Tomashevsky, etc.) spoke of *fabula* and *sjuzhet*, roughly equivalent to the more recent French (Benveniste, Barthes) terms *histoire* and *discours*. These are roughly equivalent in turn to Chatman's English terms, *story* and *discourse*. By the first term of each of these pairs is meant a basic description of the fundamental events of a story, in their natural chronological order, with an accompanying and equally skeletal inventory of the roles of the characters in that story.

A *fabula* [story] is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors.

(Bal, 1985: 5)

This is the level at which we may expect the possibility of 'total transfer' from one medium to another: everything at the level of story in, say, *A Christmas Carol*, can and perhaps should appear as easily in a film or cartoon version, or a ballet, as in the original written version. It may be worth applying the linguistic terms 'paradigmatic' and 'syntagmatic' here. A linguistic paradigm is a set or class of words (or other elements) that are especially related to each other in that they amount to alternatives, in contrast with each other, usable at the same point in the verbal sequence, without any regard for matters of sequence or progression. So the paradigmatic axis of language is a 'vertical' or static column cutting through the 'chain' of speech or writing: every 'link' in the chain relates to a distinct

paradigm, and at each point whatever has been chosen to fill the link or slot is tacitly contrasted with all the other members of the set or paradigm that might have been used but were not. The syntagmatic axis of language is the horizontal one, and concerns all our possible syntactic or usage options in chaining words and phrases together, fully focussed on the onward sequencing of items and paying no attention to the contrastive identity of those items. In a story outline all the events and characters are presented synoptically, with the minimum attention to, for example, complexities of sequence, as if we're getting the paradigmatic raw materials or ingredients; the syntagmatic dimension – the linear distribution of event and character presentation, disclosure, elaboration, and so on – is severely attenuated.

Above, I used the term 'version' to refer to actual cinematic or dance realizations of the core story of *A Christmas Carol*. And 'version' is as good a word as any to refer to the business of distinctive and creative working on a story to produce the discourse we actually encounter. In other words, *sjuzhet* or *discours* roughly denotes all the techniques that authors bring to bear in their varying manner of presentation of the basic story. As far as literary-minded people are concerned, discourse is much the more interesting area of narrative poetics. Story seems to focus on the pre-artistic, genre- and convention-bound basic event-and-character patterns of narrative, with scarcely any room for evaluative contrasts or discriminations – a level at which authorship seems an irrelevant concern. Discourse looks at the artistic and individualized working with and around the genres, the conventions, the basic story patterns, in the distinctive styles, voices, or manners of different authors.

For good or ill – as will become clear, I have my doubts – the above binary picture (of *histoire* versus *discours*, *fabula* versus *sjuzhet*, or *story* versus *discourse*) has in recent discussions been complicated by the argument that we need to posit three levels, not two. As I understand it, this rearrangement does not involve adjustment of both the binary categories outlined above, but rather is simply a bifurcation of the second one, discourse. In the accounts of poetics of Genette (1980; 1988), and in several of the books I will recommend as supporting textbooks in this area (e.g. Bal, 1985; Rimmon-Kenan, 1983), the business of technical manipulation and presentation of the basic story is said to involve two levels. That is to say, if we think of *histoire/story* as level 1 of analysis, then within *discourse* we have two further levels of organization, those of text and of narration. At the level of text, the teller decides upon and creates a particular sequencing of events, the time/space spent presenting them, the sense of (changing) rhythm and pace in the discourse. Additionally, choices are made as to just how (with what detail, and in what order) the particularity of the various characters is to be presented, together also with choices as to whose perspective or viewpoint will be adopted as the lens through which particular events or descriptions or characters are seen and reported (the business of focalization – to be discussed in [Chapter 3](#)). At the level of

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narration, the relations between the posited narrator and the narrative she tells are probed. An obvious contrast is that between a stretch of narrative embedded within a novel and told by a character, on the one hand, and a narrative told as if by a detached, external and omniscient onlooker, on the other. This is also the level at which speech presentation (the mimetic effects of pure dialogue, the deliberate ambiguities of free indirect discourse) can be analyzed.

This distinction between what we will call text and narration comes principally from Bal. It amounts to an attempt to separate a layer at which a narrative agent *relates* the text (a level of narration) from all the other aspects of text manipulation (involving choices over how the story is presented). So text presents story in a certain manner, and in the narration an agent relates that presentation. However, this latter separation is still a source of controversy, and we may well want to question this confident separation of narration from presentation. Two-level analysts, who find the story/discourse bifurcation complicated enough, will always counter with the claim that types of narration, and strategies of speech and thought-presentation, are aspects of the manner of presentation, part of a single domain of discourse.

These complex arguments will be returned to in passing but for now the chief thing to keep in mind is the disparity in terminology used. Latterly, in place of:

STORY – DISCOURSE

we have:

STORY – TEXT – NARRATION (as in Rimmon-Kenan, 1983)

with the added complication that these three terms are translated in Bal (1985) as, respectively:

FABULA – STORY – TEXT

In general I shall use the same terms as Rimmon-Kenan wherever possible, even though reference will also be made to Bal's study.

Further reading

Studies containing interesting general reflections on the nature of narrative and its typical or defining features, from a range of literary and linguistic perspectives, include: Bal (1985); Chatman (1978); Georgakopoulou and Goutsos (1997); Hoey (2001); Longacre (1983); Schiffrin (1994); and Scholes and Kellogg (1966).

Notes and exercises

- 1 There have been many proposals as to how to make fundamental distinctions between types of discourse. One such is presented in Longacre (1983), who suggests that discourses may be first distinguished from each other depending on whether or not they involve 'contingent temporal succession' and orientation to a particular agent. These yield four broad discourse categories: Narrative, Procedural (both +succession, but only the former is +agent), Behavioural, and Expository (both –succession, but only the former is +agent). Examples of the three non-narrative types include cookbooks and car manuals (Procedural), opinion-editorial exhortations and self-help books (Behavioural), budget proposals and scientific papers (Expository). Longacre's scheme, which forms a backcloth to further generic description of narrative elements, can be usefully applied to 'borderline' narratives.
- 2 A really strong sense of narrativity is often derived from contemplating (coherent) texts which are in sharp structural contrast with narratives. Chapter 5 of Hoey (2001) offers an informative account of the structure of 'discourse colonies': overlooked or 'Cinderella' written texts which Hoey suggests comprise elements which accumulate or combine rather like ants in an ant colony (and *not* like the non-interchangeable organs in a human body). Consider the items set out on a shopping list, or the entries in a phone book, or an encyclopaedia; or the distribution of distinct news items on the Sports page of a newspaper, or someone's listing of 'my favourite links' on their personalized web pages: each of these (the shopping list, the phone book) is a discourse colony. The 'texts' that make up a discourse colony may be one word long (e.g. the items in a shopping list), or many thousands of words long (e.g. essay-length articles in an encyclopaedia). So the texts *within* a discourse colony may well have their own kind of internal structure, which may be worth further study in their own right (e.g. the internal 'grammar' of the short film notices in the 'What's On' sections of many weeklies and weekend newspapers). Hoey's discussion of the 'discourse colony' as a neglected type of written text may be compared with Schiffrin's commentary on 'the list', as a 'nearly' narrative extended turn at talk, to be found often in everyday conversations (Schiffrin 1994: 291–315). See also Eggins and Slade (1997), on non-narrative genres in everyday conversation.
- 3 The idea of change (of state) is so crucial to narrative, and to the status of narrative as a definingly human activity, because without the recording of change that narrative enables, the *enactment* of further changes would be considerably hampered. In other words *talking to each other about changes/developments in the past* assists us in coming up with plans in which we initiate (or respond to) present or future changes – and this amounts to a profound resource with which to 'master' one's environment. (Cf. the discussion of narrative control in this chapter: 'master' needs to be put in hedging quotation marks here to acknowledge that attempted mastery by no means ensures success.) But notice that this reverses our everyday way of thinking about narrative: in everyday thinking, first something happens, and then you report it in a narrative. I am suggesting here that our enormous propensity for narrative (or narrativization of experience) is cognitively enabling: it helps us shape or present and plan futures to a degree far beyond the scope of other animals. In effect, first we make a narrative, and then we are able to make or adapt to real-world changes. An 'after the fact' activity, as soon as humans reflexively recognized it as such, must have equally become a 'before-the-fact' activity, of planning and projection.
- 4 None of this addresses death, which is perhaps the deepest human fact or anxiety underlying our narrative drive. Like a life terminated by death, narratives have endings but – perhaps more satisfyingly than we fear our lives and

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deaths sometimes are – narratives also very typically *make sense* (that is to say, usually they are coherent, they resolve or explain something). So while we live with the anxiety that our lives may have one of these key attributes but not the other (they come to an end, but they do not make sense), we comfort ourselves with narratives, which have both these desiderata: they have beginnings, middles and ends, and they make sense.

2 Basic story structure

2.1 Story/*fabula*/*histoire*

Narrative poetics have long worked with a theoretical division of their subject-matter into the domains of story (or *fabula*, or *histoire*) and discourse (or *sjuzhet*, or *discours*). Story is the basic unshaped story material, and (with qualifications) comprises events, characters and settings. The relations between these three are remarkably variable, but examples of all three are nearly always present in narrative, although it is possible to dispense with any explicit establishing of setting. Simply within the novel canon, compare the relative emphasis on event in an adventure novel with the relative emphasis on character in a Henry James novel, and the relative emphasis on setting in an historical novel. If events, characters and settings are all-important elements of story, the first of these three has nevertheless always been treated as pre-eminent and foundational by theorists of plot. For many theorists, the expressions ‘basic story structure’ and ‘event structure’ seem virtually synonymous. And a similar preoccupation with events and event structure, especially to the neglect of character, will be apparent throughout this chapter. Character and setting will be examined, however, in [Chapter 4](#).

In order to describe story we have to adopt a medium of communication such as language. But the notion of unshaped, uncrafted, ‘unaesthetized’ story, underlying every organized, shaped narrative we encounter, is one that tends to treat the basic stuff of narrative as medium-independent. Terminology introduced by Chomsky (1957; 1965) to explain syntactic relations between basic sentences and more complex ones, and how the latter are derived from the former, may be of some use here. Chomsky argued that beneath or behind the ‘superficial’ differences between such pairs of sentences as *John fed the cat* and *The cat was fed by John*, native speakers know there is structural relatedness and an identical meaning: the two surface structures differ, but these are minor rearrangements of a single deep structure. More generally, ‘deep structure’ has come to mean the underlying and core format of one or more texts (or other cultural product), out of which, with enrichments and transformations that do not *displace* that deep format, particular texts are produced. The idea of deep