Focalization

As a starting point, a very basic and simple definition of this word may be used. ‘Focalization’ concerns itself with the analysis of point of view in a narrative text. A certain number of critics have tried to present the different possible points of view in a systematic way. One of the first tables was presented by the New Critics Cleanth Brooks and R. Penn Warren (cf. introduction) in their 1943 book, *Understanding Fiction*:

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<th>Internal analysis of events</th>
<th>Outside observation of events</th>
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<td>Narrator as a character in the story</td>
<td>Main character tells his story</td>
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<td>Narrator not a character in the story</td>
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A more readable, or usable, classification was proposed by Genette in *Narrative Discourse (Figures III in French)*, where he defines a 3-term typology:

The first term corresponds to what English-language criticism calls the narrative with omniscient narrator, […] which is symbolized by the formula *Narrator > Character* (where the narrator knows more than the character, or more exactly says more than any of the characters knows). In the second term, *Narrator = Character* (the narrator says only what a given character knows); this is the narrative with ‘point of view’, or with ‘restricted field’. […] In the third term, *Narrator < Character* (the narrator says less than the character knows); this is the ‘objective’ or ‘behaviourist’ narrative.

This classification, which is both useful and relatively simple, will be studied in depth in a moment. For the time being, it may be necessary to place it in a larger perspective, and to consider the two fundamental questions of distance and point of view.

**Distance**

In terms of distance, several possibilities of transcribing an event are available to the writer, especially when the episode implies a verbal exchange between several characters. Let us take the following example, adapted from the novel *A Passage to India* (1924) by E.M. Forster:

‘Madam,’ said Aziz, ‘this is a mosque, you have no right here at all; you should have taken off your shoes.’

‘I have taken them off,’ replied Mrs Moore.

‘You have?’

‘I left them at the entrance.’

- A first possibility would be to transcribe this dialogue in the most direct possible way, by suppressing all traces of external markers (such as ‘he said’, ‘she replied’…). The result, in the form of free direct speech, would thus be very similar to the kind of dialogue to be found in a play (except for the presence of quotation marks):

‘Madam, this is a mosque, you have no right here at all; you should have taken off your shoes.’

‘I have taken them off.’

‘You have?’

‘I left them at the entrance.’
At the other end of the narrative spectrum, the writer may choose to transcribe the dialogue in the most indirect possible way, by ‘narrativizing’ everything, i.e. by making the reader perceive the story through a constant narrative filter or mediation. Thus, not only will all traces of direct speech be erased, but some words will have to be changed in order to agree with the grammar and syntax of indirect narrative, and some will have to be added for the sake of clarity:

Aziz told the lady that she had no right there, and that she should have taken off her shoes. Mrs Moore replied that she had. He was surprised at this, but she maintained that she had left them at the entrance.

In this transcription, the verbal exchange is only reported; the reader cannot witness it at first hand, and the dialogue has been reworded by the narrator.

Free indirect speech has also been used by certain 20th-century writers (before that, such a way of transcribing dialogue would have been extremely rare). The rhythm of direct speech is left untouched, and no introductory clauses such as ‘he said’, ‘she replied’… ever appear, as in free direct speech. But simultaneously the grammatical markers (pronouns and tenses) must change in order to agree with the indirect transcription, and all forms of direct address must disappear (cf. ‘Madam’); all the quotation marks should also be left out:

This was a mosque, she had no right here at all; she should have taken off her shoes.
She had taken them off.
She had?
She had? at the entrance.

Transcription of this kind is not very common, because the referents are not always clear, and ambiguities or misunderstandings may arise. This is precisely why some writers (esp. in the 1920s and 30s, and esp. in short stories, as this technique might become tedious on a larger scale) made it one of their favourite narrative devices – their purpose was to produce an ‘unnatural’ impression and to force the reader to distance himself/herself from the story. The American short-story writer Katherine Anne Porter (1890-1980) is one of the best-known practitioners of free indirect speech in narrative fiction.

The first two types of transcription (direct rendering, as in a play / indirect, ‘narrativized’ rendering) point up the two major ‘directions’ of narrative fiction in history. In Republic, book 3, Plato (through his mouthpiece Socrates) tries to problematize the distinction between ‘diegesis’ and ‘mimesis’ by analyzing Homer’s Iliad. ‘Mimesis’ [think of the verb ‘mimer’ in French] means that the writer chooses to narrate an event by imitating the voice and the personality of his characters. In other words, he will let those characters speak for themselves as if he, their creator, did not exist, or at least as if his role only consisted in introducing their words. The result is the direct, ‘true-to-life’ rendering of those words in the form of dialogue and direct address (cf. ‘Madam, this is a mosque…’). On the contrary, ‘diegesis’ implies that the writer/narrator does not intend to recede into the background, and continues to speak in his own voice (cf. ‘Aziz told the lady that…’). This ‘diegetic’ function can also be fulfilled by a character in the story, if he/she starts telling us (or another character) about an event, and uses indirect speech only (‘I was about to go, but he stopped me and told me that… I replied that…’). In most novels and short stories, as well as in epic poetry (cf. Homer), ‘diegesis’ and ‘mimesis’ are constantly intermingled. Very few texts ever stick to only one form of narrative from beginning to end.

In the course of the twentieth century, Plato’s distinction was reworded by Anglo-Saxon critics who, in order perhaps to avoid pedantic terms, replaced ‘mimesis’ and ‘diegesis’ by the simpler terms ‘showing’ and ‘telling’. In The Rhetoric of Fiction (1961), the American critic Wayne Booth made a historical study of this distinction, and showed that initially, ‘telling’ referred to the self-assertive nature of the ‘author’/narrator who kept interfering with his narrative and passing judgements which were to be taken for granted (cf. in the Bible, when the anonymous author writes: ‘There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, one that feared God and avoided evil’, the information about Job’s perfection must be accepted without question). On the contrary, ‘showing’ referred to the ‘author’/narrator who chose to be less intrusive and preferred to give more ‘freedom’ to his characters. Nowadays, the distinction between ‘telling’ and ‘showing’ may even more simply be defined as follows: in ‘telling’, the narrator relates what happens through analysis, summary or commentary of the characters’ words and actions. This may be easily illustrated:

He had told them that he was planning to go back to Massachusetts, but as it happened, he soon found himself traveling in the opposite direction. That was because he missed the ramp to the

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1 These two words are not synonymous, although they may sometimes overlap. The distinction will be explained later on.
freeway, […], but in the brief time that elapsed between the two ramps, Nashe understood that there was no difference, that both were finally the same. He had said Boston, but that was only because he had to tell them something, and Boston was the first word that entered his head. (Paul Auster: The Music of Chance, USA, 1990)

In ‘showing’, the narrator only presents the words and gestures of the characters without explaining their motives and without rewording their sentences – which does not mean that he may not include elements of factual description, as will be shown by the following extract:

‘What should we drink?’ the girl asked. She had taken off her hat and put it on the table. It’s pretty hot,’ the man said. ‘Let’s drink beer.’ ‘Dos cervezas,’ the man said into the curtain. The woman brought two glasses of beer and two felt pads. She put the pads and the beer glasses on the table and looked at the man and the girl. (Ernest Hemingway: ‘Hills Like White Elephants’, USA, 1927)

Point of view

This issue raises questions that are at once simple and complex, such as: ‘who narrates?’ ‘Who perceives?’ ‘Who is talking in this text?’ In order to sort things out, it seems necessary to introduce a useful distinction between 3 literary entities:

the narrator (the one who speaks)

the focalizer (the one who perceives the events; sometimes called the reflector)

the narratee (the one who is being addressed, or spoken too; often the reader, but may sometimes be a character or a group of characters to whom the story is being told – in which case the story possesses a two-tiered narratee: the fictional narratee [character], and the real narratee [the reader]).

For every narrative text, the nature of these entities is determined by the study of focalization. Roughly speaking, there exist 3 types of focalization. These 3 types correspond to the 3 narrative situations examined by G. Genette in the quotation above (p. 2). But that preliminary typology may be sharpened up by the following terms:

zero focalization: the narrator is omniscient and outside the story. He moves freely in time and space, inside and outside the characters’ minds, and is often not materialized by any physical presence. This narrator may pretend to be transparent and non-existent (in which case he is more a ‘it’ than a ‘he’ or a ‘she’), as in the following extract:

Gerald Middleton was a man of mildly but persistently depressive temperament. Such men are not at their best at breakfast, nor is the week before Christmas their happiest time. […] The prospect of speaking to his wife on the telephone and, even more, of the family Christmas party greatly heightened his depression. He decided not to open his letters until he had read the news. It was an unwise decision: the optimistic presentation of decidedly bad news on the front page turned his passive gloom into active irritation. (Angus Wilson: Anglo-Saxon Attitudes, GB, 1956)

Whoever may speak and perceive here remains unlocated and undefined. It is clearly not Gerald, although the narrator can penetrate his consciousness and state of mind at will, and it is not a character in the story.

The omniscient narrator may also be intrusive and interfere with his story by throwing comments and remarks to the reader, as in the following extract:

‘Reader, take care, I have unadvisedly led you to the top of a hill, and how to get you down without breaking your neck, I do not well know. However, let us venture to slide down together, for Miss Bridget rings her bell, and Mr Allworthy is summoned to breakfast, where I must attend, and, if you please, shall be glad of your company.’ (Henry Fielding: Tom Jones, GB, 1749)

In this last example, it is clear that the novelist has created a narrator who is supposedly very close to himself, and might even be identified with him. However tempting this may be, we should keep in mind that this
so-called ‘author’ remains as fictional as the rest of the narrative – the personality of the real Henry Fielding may be totally different from that of the talkative, opinionated person (or persona\textsuperscript{2}) who says ‘reader, take care…’.

b) \textbf{Internal focalization:} contrary to the previous mode, it excludes external point of view, and requires that the focalizer (cf. above) should be physically materialized. The point of view will commonly be that of one of the characters, who may be an active participant in the story, or a mere observer or witness. The character thus becomes the focalizer of the narrative, i.e. the events are perceived through his/her eyes – generally in the first person singular (‘I’), but not necessarily. Either this character, if speaking of past events, has a global and synthetic view of the story (he/she now knows all the facts and is now in a position to analyze the motives of the other participants), in which case he/she may act as omniscient narrator, or for various reasons he/she has no access to a global understanding of the situation, in which case his/her field of vision is restricted or limited. The notion of restricted point of view may be illustrated by this extreme (and famous) example:

Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting. They were coming toward where the flag was and I went along the fence. Luster was hunting in the grass by the flower tree. They took the flag out, and they were hitting. Then they put the flag back and they went to the table, and he hit and the other hit. Then they went on, and I went along the fence. (William Faulkner: \textit{The Sound and the Fury}, USA, 1929)

This passage, which corresponds to the opening page of Faulkner’s novel, is notoriously unclear. The behaviour of the characters observed by Benjy (the focalizer) does not make sense, and the logic of their actions is replaced by a mere succession of disconnected facts (‘then’, ‘and then’…). The reason is that Benjy is mentally retarded. Although he is an adult, his intellectual development is that of a 3-year old child. Consequently he is unable to understand his own perceptions. The description is meaningless to the reader because it is meaningless to the focalizer in the first place. This text is an extreme instance of internal focalization, the vast majority of ‘internal’ narratives being of course far more accessible. It should also be added that in certain novels, internal focalization is complicated by the use of shifting focalizers. The events of chapter one, for example, may be narrated and/or perceived by a character, whereas the events in the next chapter are narrated and/or perceived by a different character. This technique is used for instance in another novel by Faulkner, \textit{As I Lay Dying} (1930), which uses as many as a dozen narrators-focalizers.

Internal focalization, when pushed to the limit, can become the ‘mimesis’ that is to say the imitation or representation of what passes in a character’s mind, when this character is not telling any story and not even addressing anyone in particular. This is called the stream of consciousness technique. The phrase was coined by William James (the father of the American novelist Henry James) in \textit{Principles of Psychology} (1890). It is a mode of expression which is close to what free association is in psychology and automatic writing in surrealist poetry. As a technique of fiction writing, it has been one of the distinctive features of Modernist fiction in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century. It was made much use of, for instance, by Virginia Woolf or James Joyce.

c) \textbf{External focalization}\textsuperscript{3}: this narrative technique is rather unusual, even in literature, and was used mostly by American writers in the 1930s and by French novelists of the ‘Nouveau Roman’ school in the 1950s and 1960s. Here is a typical example:

A telephone-bell rang in darkness. When it had three times bed-springs creaked, fingers fumbled on wood, something small and hard thudded on a carpet floor, the spring creaked again, and a man’s voice said:

‘Hello… Yes, speaking… Dead?… Yes… Fifteen minutes. Thanks.’

A switch clicked […]. Spade, barefooted in green and white checked pajamas, sat on the side of his bed. He scowled at the telephone on the table while his hands took from beside it a packet of brown papers and a sack of Bull Durham tobacco. […] He scratched the back of his neck and began to dress. He put on a thin white suit, black garters, and dark brown shoes. When he had fastened his shoes he picked up the telephone, called Graystone 4500, and ordered a taxicab. (Dashiell Hammett: \textit{The Maltese Falcon}, USA, 1930)

In this passage, the narrator, external to the scene, concentrates his gaze on a specific character. But ironically, he never penetrates Spade’s mind, so that he ends up describing the scene without knowing the

\textsuperscript{2} The language of literary criticism uses the word ‘persona’ to denote the fictional person who speaks in the first person in a novel or a poem, and assumes the identity of the writer (as a sort of alter ego).

\textsuperscript{3} N.B.: In \textit{A Handbook of Literary Terms}, Fr. Grellet gives a different definition of ‘external focalization’ (p. 101), which she equates with Genette’s ‘zero focalization’. In our opinion, it’s a mistake, as it leaves out an interesting, and specific, narrative technique.
motives of Spade or even the precise content of the telephone conversation. As in the preceding example, the narrator's point of view is restricted, but this time it is not because the character-focalizer cannot get outside the limits of his/her own brain, but because the external narrator cannot get inside the brain of the focalizer (Spade) he has chosen. This technique corresponds to Genette's 'Narrator < Character' (cf. quotation p. 2). The result could be described as dramatic irony in reverse. In dramatic irony, the narrator (as well as the reader, who is kept informed all along) knows things that the characters do not – for example, that such-and-such a character is going to be murdered tonight, while the victim is unaware of his/her fate. Here, it is the opposite: the narrator, and consequently the reader, are left ignorant of the important dramatic and psychological elements, and have to content themselves with superficial, mechanically factual description. (NB: the extract from Hemingway’s short story ‘Hills Like White Elephants’ [previous page] also uses external focalization.)

Reliability and distance:

The examination of the various types of focalization brings up the further question of the reliability of the narrator, as well as that of ‘his’ degree of involvement in the story. Is the narrative voice to be trusted in the novel or short story I am reading? If so, on what basis? If not, what may explain my suspicion? In the case of Faulkner’s narrator-focalizer Benjy (cf. above), the latter’s reliability may be easily rejected by his conspicuous lack of understanding of the things he perceives and describes. But distrust may also arise in narratives in which the voices are seemingly more reliable. This is often the case when there exists a tangible distance between the narrator of the story and what the critic Wayne Booth (cf. above) calls the ‘implied author’, i.e. the point of view and feelings of the real writer. In older texts, that distance was often expressed by means of a preface, in which the (real) author explained that the ideas and habits of his narrator did not at all reflect his own ideas and habits. Thus, in the preface to his novel Roxana; The Fortunate Mistress (GB, 1724), Daniel Defoe warns the reader that the narrator (Roxana, a debauched and immoral woman) is to be regarded with constant moral suspicion: ‘The history of this beautiful lady is to speak for itself: […] it is not as beautiful as the lady herself is reported to be.’ In more contemporary fictions, explicit warnings of this kind do not appear (or if they do, they are often ironic themselves and should be regarded with as much suspicion as the narratives!), and the reader must work out for himself/herself the gap (intellectual and/or moral) between the narrator and the implied author. For example, the narrator of Anthony Burgess’s novel A Clockwork Orange (GB, 1962; famously adapted by the filmmaker Stanley Kubrick) is a deranged youth who likes breaking into other people’s homes, raping women and beating up men whose faces he doesn’t like. Although Burgess has not written a preface, it is obvious that his moral values do not coincide with those of his character-narrator, and that his story should in fact be read as a condemnation of mindless violence.

Not surprisingly, it is in the case of ‘zero focusing’ narratives that the possible distance between narrator and implied author is the most difficult to work out, because the omniscient, disembodied narrator cannot always be placed. For instance, this is what we can read in the very opening lines of Jane Austen’s novel Pride and Prejudice (GB, 1813):

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.

What complicates matters here is that the opening sentence is contradicted by the second one. In the first sentence, it seems that the idea expressed reflects the view of the omniscient narrator, who himself (herself?) reflects the conventional opinion of the community (also called the ‘doxa’). But the next sentence shows such a ‘truth’ to be an absurdity – it turns out that not only are single men not in want of a wife, but that people trying to get rid of their unmarried daughters are in want of single men! We see therefore that the apparently neutral, or consensual narrator is in fact an ironic one.

Detecting distance and irony can become even far more difficult when the omniscient narrator of the ‘zero focusing’ type starts pretending that ‘his’ moral or intellectual authority does not exist, and that the events of the story narrate themselves in a transparent, unproblematic way:

Dinner was about to be served. Sitting on the balcony on the 25th floor, Robert Laing stirred the bright embers of the fire he had lit from pages of a telephone directory. The flames illuminated the handsome shoulders and thorax of the dog roasting on the spit. He methodically basted the dark skin of the Alsatian, which he had stuffed with garlic and herbs.
‘One rule in life,’ he murmured to himself. ‘If you can smell garlic, everything is all right.’ (J.G. Ballard: *High-Rise*, GB, 1975)

What ought to attract the reader’s attention here is the almost comic gap between the apparent normality of the narrator, who speaks in a neutral, ‘business-as-usual’ tone of voice, and the nature of the events he describes. Since when do people roast dogs on their balconies and light barbecues with their telephone directories?! Something definitely wrong is going on here, and the general malaise is reinforced by the character’s absurd remark that ‘everything is all right’. In other words, the reader’s task consists in evaluating the moral distance between the narrator and the implied author in this novel – the narrator seems to be emotionally detached and completely devoid of normal human feelings, and quite obviously the implied author does not share his affectless point of view. In fact, the implied author seems to be inviting us to decode the dangers of a society in which the most insane things might happen without causing particular emotional and moral reactions.

As you will notice, this kind of text is based on a discrepancy between narrator and author which is far more complex to perceive than in texts where irony and sarcasm are constantly foregrounded.

Narrative levels:

As a preliminary remark, I would like to point out to the students that the French critic G. Genette is the one who has so far conducted the most systematic inquiry into all the different narrative levels to be found in fiction. The typology he has devised is (once again) a useful and fairly rigorous one. But you ought to be aware a) that literary studies are not an exact science, and that Genette’s concepts have their own limitations or imperfections (if only because of their ‘jargonish’ quality!); b) that the identification of narrative levels through the use of Genette’s terminology remains a purely formal exercise, which does not exempt you from an aesthetic, ethical and even sometimes political reflection on the texts to be studied.

In *Narrative Discourse* (cf. above), Genette, with special reference to Marcel Proust’s *A la Recherche du temps perdu*, defines the following levels of narrative:

The level at which the events of the story take place and at which the characters exist is called the diegetic level.

The level at which the (fictional) narrator is supposed to be writing the story himself/herself is called the extradiegetic level. Thus in Charles Dickens’s novel *David Copperfield* (GB, 1849), David is supposed to be the author of his own autobiography, i.e. of the text we are going to read. There exists therefore a dichotomy between David the (extradiegetic) narrator or fictional author, and David the (diegetic) character to whom all kinds of adventures befall.

The level at which a character within the story narrates another story is called the metadiegetic level (you may also find the term ‘hypodiegetic’, as in F. Grellet’s *Handbook of Literary Terms* (p. 103) these 2 adjectives are synonymous here). That story is therefore embedded in the main (diegetic) story, and is at a further remove from reality than the diegetic story. The most famous example in literature, outside the field of Anglo-Saxon culture, is probably the Oriental collection of tales, *The Arabian Nights* [in French, *Contes des mille et une nuits*]. In these tales, the main character is a beautiful woman named Sheherazade. Her role is to entertain King Shahzaman for one night. In order to revenge himself on his unfaithful wife, the king has decided to spend every night with a different woman, then to have her executed in the morning! Sheherazade’s purpose is to avoid death at all costs by telling the king fascinating stories which will keep him breathless, and will delay the execution until the following morning. The ‘game’ goes on for 1001 nights, after which the king renounces his decision and marries his beautiful and clever story-teller. All of Sheherazade’s tales are embedded in the (diegetic) story of the king and Sheherazade herself, and can therefore be described as metadiegetic.

To conclude, let us point out briefly the distinction made by Genette between the heterodiegetic narrator and the homodiegetic narrator. The narrator is said to heterodiegetic if ‘he’ is not a participant in the events. Jane Austen’s narrator in *Pride and Prejudice* (cf. above), for example, is heterodiegetic. He is homodiegetic if he participates in the story. For example, in Charlotte Brontë’s novel *Jane Eyre* (GB, 1847), Jane, as both character and teller of her own life story, is a homodiegetic narrator.

Plot

The plot is more than a mere chronological presentation of an event, or series of events. Most classic narratives, which include epic poetry (Homer, Milton…), drama (Shakespeare, Racine…), novels and short stories, as well as films, tend to avoid the flat enumeration of disconnected facts, and to foreground the dramatic quality of their constituents, i.e. the organization of incident and character in such a way as to arouse curiosity, reflection and suspense.
Aristotle, in Poetics, defines plot in relation to tragedy, and does so in a normative way. He requires a plot to be ‘whole’ (with a beginning, a middle and an end) and to possess a unity of pattern – ‘the union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed.’ According to this principle, there should exist a strong structural and thematic link between the main plot and the sub-plot(s) that make up the narrative. For example, in Shakespeare’s King Lear (GB, c. 1606), the sub-plot involves the relationship between the Duke of Gloucester and his two sons, Edgar (his legitimate heir), a loyal man, and Edmund (his bastard son), a villainous intriguer who tries to kill his father. This story is meant to provide a serious variation or counterpoint to the main tragic plot, which is also about filial loyalty and betrayal (King Lear has been forsaken by his two evil daughters Regan and Goneril, but is still loved by his third, misunderstood daughter Cordelia). By contrast, in Shakespeare’s The Tempest (c. 1612), the sub-plot, which is about the ridiculous ‘adventures’ of the two drunkards Stephano and Trinculo, is to be read as a comic counterpoint to the serious (but not tragic) story of the main characters. Many narratives thus contain several story-lines. In most narratives until the 18th century, one story-line clearly dominates the others, which are there to enhance the themes and symbolism of the main plot (through analogy or contrast). In more recent fiction, the formal pattern has often evolved from a plot/sub-plot(s) structure to a set of concurrently running plots, or to a network of interpolated texts, or even to contradictory versions of the same plot.

A recurrent technique in narrative texts (and not only in contemporary ones) is the presence of elements which either interrupt the main story-line, or cause it to branch off into different directions (involving different settings, different characters, or even different periods of time). As far as interruption is concerned, the most frequent narrative device is the digression; in most cases the author – or in fact his/her persona [cf. previous chapter, note 3] – takes it upon himself/herself to pause in the middle of the plot and to start recounting an anecdote, or exposing his/her point of view on a particular issue. For example, the persona of Henry Fielding, the author of Tom Jones (GB, 1749), tells us early in the novel about his taste for such impromptu intrusions:

Reader, I think proper, before we proceed any farther together, to acquaint thee [= you], that I intend to digress, through the whole history, as often as I see occasion: of which I am myself a better judge than any pitiful critic whatever.

He will indeed be as good as his word – of the novel’s 208 chapters, at least twenty are not about the adventures of Tom Jones, but about all sorts of aesthetic, philosophical and political considerations in the form of short essays. This digressive method is also exemplified by the opening pages of Herman Melville’s novel Moby Dick (USA, 1851), in which, instead of ‘going straight to the point’ by presenting the plot, Ishmael, the (homodiegetic) narrator, embarks upon rather lengthy considerations on his passion for sailing, and on the existential complementarity between water and meditation.

Another device is the presence of inset or interpolated stories. Sometimes, those stories may even borrow their formal and discursive conventions from other genres. In the middle of Oliver Goldsmith’s novel The Vicar of Wakefield (GB, 1762), for instance, Sophy, one of the female characters, takes her guitar and sings a song called ‘An Elegy to the Death of a Mad Dog’; the story of the mad dog is written in the form of a narrative poem, which is included in the prose narrative of the vicar. Although it constitutes a parallel (and self-contained) story, and although its language pertains to poetry, it is part and parcel of the novel as a whole.

Influential though it may have been, Aristotle’s defence of a rigorously constructed dramatic pattern has never been the only valid narrative model in Western literature. To begin with, the rules he prescribes apply to tragedy, long regarded as the highest or noblest narrative genre (because staging high-born characters performing lofty actions), but certainly not as the only possible literary form. In Aristotle’s own words: ‘This is the difference that marks tragedy out from comedy: comedy is inclined to imitate persons below the level of our world, tragedy persons above it.’ The philosopher also adds that the unity of time, of crucial importance to tragedy, does not concern the older genre of epic, which ‘has no time-limit’. Not surprisingly, then, it was mostly in comic and epic fiction that alternative models to the well-wrought tragic plot were to be found. According to Aristotle, the standard tragic plot should include:

- ‘an imitation of an action of high importance, complete and of some amplitude.’
- the irruption of a catastrophe, which involves ‘irony of events and disclosure.’
- the protagonist’s reversal of fortune, brought about by he catastrophe.

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4 To interpolate: to insert (words) into a text or conversation; to insert something between other things or parts (Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary).
• a strong causal chain of events, which makes one progress from the initial exposition to the climax, then towards the resolution of the plot (also called the denouement).

Alternatives to this set of rules are to be found in a number of narratives which do not belong to the tragic genre. An outstanding difference, in particular, is the use of the episodic plot, which is a recurring feature in many adventure stories and comic epics. In such narratives, the story may be defined as a sequence of events following each other in an apparently haphazard way; in fact, coincidences often play a significant part here. There are abundant examples of such episodic plots in English and American fiction: Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* (GB, 1722), whose plot consists of the many reversals of fortune of the heroine, a dishonest, opportunistic woman who has many things in common with the heroes of picaresque novels; Charles Dickens’s first novel *The Pickwick Papers* (GB, 1836-1837) is about the manifold adventures of a group of some sixty disparate characters; the novel is not organized around a plot, but consists of a multitude of loosely connected stories. It is also worth pointing out that when Dickens began writing *The Pickwick Papers*, he had no overall pattern in mind. A different episode was produced every week in a magazine, and all were finally collected into a book a year later.

**Time — ‘Story’ and ‘Text’**

Roughly speaking, the distinction between ‘Story’ and ‘Text’ corresponds to the fundamental distinction, briefly mentioned in the introduction to the previous chapter (‘Narratology’), between ‘fabula’ and ‘sjuzet’, as introduced by V. Shklovsky and the Russian Formalists in the early 20th century – the story in its most ‘natural’ (i.e. linear, chronological) state on the one hand; the temporal and spatial reconstruction of that story by the writer (or narrator) on the other. Their complex relationship has been discussed and analyzed at great length by theorists of narrative fiction. While for the Greek philosopher Aristotle the analysis of plot and time had mostly to do with the definition of rules (a tragedy must be written in such-and-such a way, the representation of human actions and of time must comply with strict requirements...), for 20th-century critics it has more to do with a descriptive (not prescriptive) process, whose function may vary according to the orientation and concerns of the critics themselves.

A large number of critics have concerned themselves with the analysis of that distinction, and you will find a few differences as far as their terminology is concerned. The Russian Formalists spoke of ‘fabula’ and ‘sjuzet’ [cf. intro]; Rimmon-Kennan speaks of ‘story-time’ and ‘text-time’; G. Genette speaks of ‘narrated time’ (‘temps de l’histoire’) and ‘narrating time’ (‘temps du récit’), and acknowledges his own debt to the distinction in the German language between ‘Erzählte Zeit’ (the time of the narrated events) and ‘Erzählzeit’ (the reconstruction of the chronology by the story-teller). All in all, these critics have the same distinction in mind, although it is probably Genette who has conducted the most thorough formal research on the issue.

‘Story-time’ may be treated like real time. By real, I do not mean that the events really took place – in the case of fiction, they obviously did not. My point is that the chronology of the fictional events of the story must be treated in the same way as the chronology of real life. In Fielding’s above-mentioned novel *Tom Jones*, the ‘story-time’ of the protagonist begins when he is still a new-born baby, and spans about twenty years of his life, during which the reader must assume that every single minute had to elapse in the same way as for a real person.

‘Text-time’ is very different from ‘story-time’ in this respect. Unlike ‘story-time’, it should be treated as ‘pseudo-time’, in so far as it has far more to do with space than with time. The reconstruction of the chronology of the story by the author (or by a fictional narrator) is indeed first and foremost a spatial exercise (the space being that of the text itself) based on the following questions: in what order should the events be narrated? Strict adherence to chronology is not compulsory here. Which events and which periods of time in the characters’ lives may be either omitted from the narrative, or summed up in a few sentences? If the story begins with the protagonist’s birth, and if he/she dies at the age of ninety-five, should every single year of his life be represented?? In *Tom Jones*, the author clearly indicates that he has no intention of sticking to the biological time of Tom’s life, and that he will shorten and lengthen the moments of his life as he pleases:

> When any extraordinary scene presents itself, (as we trust will often be the case) we shall spare no pains nor paper to open it at large to our reader; but if whole years should pass without producing

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For a definition of ‘picaresque’, see Fr. Grellet, p. 132.
anything worthy his notice, we shall not be afraid of a chasm in our history; but shall hasten on to matters of consequence, and leave such periods of time totally unobserved.

As a matter of fact, some of the titles of the eighteen books of Tom Jones testify to his intention: ‘Book IV, Containing the Time of a Year’, ‘Book VII, Containing Three Days’, ‘Book IX, Containing Twelve Hours’…

Time’s Arrow, by Martin Amis (GB, 1991), is a novel about the life of Odilo Unverdorben, a man who turned into a Nazi criminal, then took refuge in the United States under an assumed name. His story-line begins with his birth in the early twentieth century, and finishes with his death in the United States, long after the end of the Second World War. ‘Text-time’, in this first-person narrative, is characterized by two outstanding features: the first (which is conventional enough) is that the reconstruction by the Nazi of his own life is selective – only a few periods of his existence are represented; in-between, the reader must fill in the silences of the text. The second feature (which is far more original, even in contemporary literature) is that the Nazi’s life is told backward. The book opens on the old man’s death, immediately followed by ‘resurrection’ (in fact, the minutes just before he died). As the chapters unfold, both the protagonist and the reader move back in time, from the 1980s to the Second World War, then to the 1920s, and finally to the time of his birth. This is what the hero-narrator himself writes at the beginning of the narrative:

I have a good look at the dateline. And it goes like this. After October 2, you get October 1. After October 1, you get September 30. How do you figure that? […] It just seems to me that the film is running backwards.

The technique of text-time as story-time in reverse is pushed almost to the point of unreadability in Time’s Arrow, when the reader starts realizing that causality is also inverted, producing an effect of tragi-comic absurdity:

A child’s wailing calmed by the firm slap of the father’s hand, a dead ant revived by the careless press of a passing foot, a wounded finger healed and sealed by the knife’s blade…

And that the dialogues themselves are written backward, and should be read from the bottom to the top of the page!

‘Uh, seventy-six. No, eighty-six.’
‘What’s ninety-three minus seven?’
‘1914-1918.’
‘What are the dates of the First World War?’
‘Okay,’ says the patient, sitting up straight.
‘I’m now going to ask you some questions.’

In most narrative texts, however, the gap between text-time and story-time is not as spectacular or as frighteningly systematic as this, and the distortions in time and space do not endanger the readability of the works – in fact, they are often meant to facilitate it. In Narrative Discourse [Figures III in French; cf. previous chapter], Gérard Genette sets out to examine the text-time/story-time relation in depth, and to this effect establishes a threefold distinction between ‘order’, ‘duration’ and ‘frequency’ (in French, ‘ordre’, ‘durée’, ‘fréquence’). Roughly speaking, ‘order’ corresponds to the question ‘when?’ in terms like: first, second, third, finally; before, after, simultaneously… ‘Duration’ answers the question ‘how long?’ in terms like: for a year, a month, two hours, from 8 o’clock to 12; but also in terms like: how many pages, or paragraphs, are devoted to this or that event?… ‘Frequency’ answers the question ‘how often?’ in terms like: twice a day, several times in three months, every morning at five; or again in more spatial terms like: six times in the same chapter, eight times in one stanza, only once in the whole play…

‘Order’: the relation between the succession of events in the story and their linear disposition in the narrative. The most common discrepancies (which Genette calls ‘anachronies’) between story-time and text-time are traditionally known as flashback and anticipation or, more technically, as analepsis and prolepsis. An analepsis is the narration of an event of the story at a point in the text after later events of the same story have been told; the narration returns to a point in time which is anterior to the time at which it has now arrived. Conversely, a prolepsis is a narrative incursion into the future, i.e. into events that have not yet taken place in story-time. Analepses are the privilege of omniscient narrators who can move freely in time and space.

‘Duration’: the relation between duration in the story (measured in minutes, hours, days, months…) and the length of text devoted to it (in lines, pages, chapters in a novel or acts in a play). This relation is once again perfectly illustrated by the quotation from Tom Jones on p. 3 of this chapter (‘When any extraordinary scene presents itself…’). In other words, ‘duration’ raises the question of pace (or speed) in a narrative text. Using the
‘norm’ of the constancy of pace (i.e. the equilibrium between story-duration and textual length; for example, each day in a character’s life is treated in the same number of pages throughout the novel) as a working hypothesis, Genette examines two forms of distortion: acceleration or condensation, and deceleration. The author/narrator may thus choose to devote a very short segment of the narrative to a long period of time (ex. five years of the hero’s life summed up in one paragraph), or on the contrary a very long segment of the narrative to a very brief period of time (ex. in the same book, 150 pages may represent one evening in the hero’s life).

‘Frequency’: the relation between the number of times an event appears in the story and the number of times it is narrated (or mentioned) in the text. Frequency therefore brings forth the notion of repetition, and implies a choice between telling once and telling several times an event that took place only once. In William Faulkner’s novel Absalom, Absalom! (USA, 1936), for example, the murder of Charles Bron is narrated thirty-nine times, but the repetition here does not mean that the thirty-nine versions are identical. The narrator changes, and so do the focalizer, the style, the duration…Likewise repetition requires a choice between telling several times and telling only once an event that took place several times. When the narration adopts the second method, it is said to be iterative (cf. the famous opening sentence of Proust’s A la Recherche du temps perdu: ‘Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure.’). This is for instance a recurrent device in pastoral poetry, based upon the representation of peaceful, unchanging village life, or in certain Romantic poetry, fond of depicting, day after day, year in year out, the never-ending joys of nature:

And in the frosty season, when the sun
Was set, and visible for many a mile
The cottage windows blazed through twilight gloom,
I heeded not their summons: happy time
On caves and trees, upon the woods and hills,
Impressed, upon all forms, the characters
Of danger and desire […] (William Wordsworth: The Prelude, Book One, GB, 1805, revised in 1850)