Narratology

by Peter Barry

Telling stories

This chapter is about narratology, which is the study of narrative structures. Narratology is a branch of structuralism, but it has achieved a certain independence from its parent, and this justifies it being given a chapter of its own. Also, because it takes much of its character and some of its terminology from linguistic theory, it seems logically to belong immediately after the chapter on stylistics. And because narratology is about stories, I will begin with one of my own.

A few years ago I was in a restaurant called 'Berries'. The menu featured those highly coloured, almost poetic descriptions of the meals on offer - it didn't offer 'cod and chips', for instance, but 'Fresh-caught, succulent North Sea cod, coated in a layer of light golden batter and served with a generous portion of delicious French fries' - you know the kind of thing. In the catering trade these descriptions are called 'narratives' - an interesting fact in itself. But they worry, in the trade, that customers may take them literally and hence complain that the batter isn't golden at all, but sort of brownish - perhaps leaving the restaurant vulnerable to charges of false description of goods or services. So at the bottom of the menu there is a footnote which reads: 'The narratives are guidelines only, and are not to be taken literally.'

This set me thinking about narratives and narrative theory, and about *narratology,* which we can define more closely as the study of how narratives make meaning, and what the basic mechanisms

and procedures are which are common to all acts of story-telling. Narratology, then, is not the reading and interpretation of *individual* stories, but the attempt to study the nature of 'story' itself, as a concept and as a cultural practice. Indeed, that distinction between the *actual* meal - cod and chips - and the *narrative account* of it - the 'succulent, fresh-caught cod' - is much the same as the narratologist's basic distinction between 'story' and 'plot'. The 'story' is the actual sequence of events as they happen, whereas the 'plot' is those events as they are edited, ordered, packaged, and presented in what we recognise as a narrative. This is a crucial distinction; the 'story', being the events as they happen, *has to* begin at the beginning, of course, and then move chronologically, with nothing left out. The 'plot', on the other hand, may well begin somewhere in the middle of a chain of events, and may then backtrack, providing us with a 'flashback' which fills us in on things that happened earlier. The plot may also have elements which flash forward, hinting at events which will happen later. So the 'plot' is a version of the story which should not be taken literally, just like those menu descriptions.

The distinction between 'story' and 'plot' is fundamental to narratology, but the story of narratology itself is that there are many competing groups, each tending to prefer its own terminology; hence, you will find the same distinction made with different terms. For instance, in his well-known essay 'Analysis and interpretation of the realist text' (in his book *Working with Structuralism* RKP, 1980), David Lodge prefers the Russian Formalist terms *fabula,* instead of 'story', and *sjuzhet* (pronounced 'soojay') for 'plot', though I don't myself see any advantage now in using these terms. Most current North American writing on narratology uses 'story', but instead of 'plot' the term 'discourse' is often preferred. This, I think, is sensible, because it isn't just 'plot' in the narrow sense which is at issue, but style, viewpoint, pace, and so on, which is to say, the whole 'packaging' of the narrative which creates the overall effect. Gerard Genette (see below, pp. 231-40) uses yet another set of equivalent terms, these being *his-toire,* which has the same meaning as 'story' or *'fabula',* and *recit,* which means the same as 'plot' or *sjuzhet.*

Aristotle

A second story relevant to narratology is the story of narratology itself. A truncated 'history' of narratology follows, centred on three main characters, the first of whom is Aristotle. In his *Poetics,* as we saw in chapter 1 (p. 21), Aristotle identifies 'character' and 'action' as the essential elements in a story, and says that character must be revealed through action, which is to say through aspects of the plot. He identifies three key elements in a plot, these being (using Aristotle's Greek words, which are here simply Anglicised, but not translated): 1. the *hamartia*

2. the *anagnorisis*

3. the *peripeteia*

The *hamartia* means a 'sin' or 'fault' (which in tragic drama is often the product of the fatal characterdefect which came to be known as the 'tragic flaw'). The *anagnorisis* means 'recognition' or 'realisation', this being a moment in the narrative when the truth of the situation is recognised by the protagonist - often it's a moment of *self*-recognition. The *peripeteia* means a 'turn-round' or a 'reversal' of fortune. In classical tragedy this is usually a fall from high to low estate, as the hero falls from greatness. In identifying his three key moments, Aristotle did what all narratolo-gists do, which is to look at a number of different stories (Greek stage tragedies in his case) asking what elements they have in common. This is similar to the way a physicist would look at different forms of matter (mountains, lakes, volcanoes, etc) and realise that they are all made from the same finite set of chemical elements. In both cases the skill lies in the trained ability to see the similarities and consistencies which underlie difference.

We can see traces of these Aristotelian elements in even the most rudimentary of narrative material, such as the cartoon diagram opposite, which is a very simple complete story, taken from a packet of

'Brekkies' (a British brand of cat food). Aristotle, I should emphasise, saw all three elements as centred on the 'protagonist' (the 'hero' or 'heroine' of the drama), but in what

follows I distribute the three elements amongst the figures involved in the story, partly because I believe that in using literary theory we don't have to follow the maker's instructions slavishly, and partly in anticipation of the methods of Vladimir Propp, the next figure I will consider. So, the 'hamartia' (or fault) is the cat's leaving dirty paw-prints over the table-cloth, an act which brings reproof and condemnation ('Oh, Bob, don't'), and involves a 'peripeteia', or fall from grace, so that the cat is out of favour. The fall is marked by the cat's literal descent from the table to the floor. But during the tea, the visiting aunt notices with pleasure that the cloth now on the table is the one she gave her niece as a present. Of course, *she* doesn't know that this cloth was not her niece's first choice, but *we* know this from our privileged overview position as witnesses of the whole sequence of events. Indeed, we might say that the key to story-telling is not the imparting, but the withholding of information - readers often know things that characters don't, and vice-versa, and narrators keep things back from both. The central mechanism in stories is delay, to be specific, delay in imparting this information - the Victorian novelist Wilkie Collins famously said that the formula for writing a successful novel is 'Make them laugh, make them cry - make them wait'.

The 'anagnorisis' in the cartoon is the cat-owner's guilty (offstage) realisation that she has missed an opportunity to show gratitude and proper feeling by using the guest's present when the guest comes to tea. This brings about a further peripeteia, which is the restoration of the cat to favour, not a fall from high to low, but a restoration from low to high. The restoration is marked by the thought bubble ('Thanks, Bob'), by the cat's expression of smirking self-satisfaction, and by its literal raising up now to the favoured position on the niece's lap.

Aristotle's three categories are essentially to do with the underlying themes and moral purposes of stories, being very much about what might be called 'deep content', since in an important sense they all concern 'inner events' (a moral defect, the *recognition* of its existence, and the *consequences* of its existence). The presence of these three is easy to discern beneath many

narratives, acting as the generative force of their moral impact. They are often the psychic 'raw materials' or 'ingredients' which are 'cooked' and transformed to make up a specific narrative 'dish', a specific 'plot'. All the same, in practice a great variety of plots is possible in stories, and to describe these we seem to need a different kind of system to Aristotle's, one which would give us a greater variety of possible actions and which would operate closer to the narrative surface, so to speak. Something like this was provided by the next of our three historical-marker figures.

Vladimir Propp

As we would expect, then, later narratologists have developed more wide-ranging lists and repertoires of the constants which can be detected beneath the almost infinitely varied surface of narratives. A second important figure is Vladimir Propp (1895-1970), a 'Russian Formalist' critic who worked on Russian folk tales, identifying recurrent structures and situations in such tales, and publishing his findings in his book *The Morphology of the Folktale,* first published in Russia in 1928. As Propp says in the Foreword, the word 'morphology' means 'the study of forms', so the book is about the structures and plot formations of these tales, and there is nothing in the book about their history or social significance. Already, by 1928, the tide in Soviet Russia was turning against this kind of 'Formalist' study, and the book disappeared from view until the 1950s, when it was re-discovered by the structuralists, especially the anthropologist Claude Levi-

Strauss, who used Propp's ideas in his own studies of myth. *The Morphology* was first published in English in 1958 (by the University of Texas Press), translated by Laurence Scott, with a second edition in 1968.

Propp's work is based on a study of his 'corpus' of a hundred tales, and he concluded that all these tales are constructed by selecting items from a basic repertoire of thirty-one 'functions' (that is, possible actions). No tale contains all the items in his list, but all are constructed by selecting items from it. The complete list of 'functions' given in the book is as follows:

1. One of the members of a family absents himself from home.

2. An interdiction [that is, a prohibition] is addressed to the hero.

3. The interdiction is violated.

4. The villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance.

5. The villain receives information about his victim.

6. The villain attempts to deceive his victim in order to take possession of him or his belongings.

7. The victim submits to deception and thereby unwittingly helps his enemy.

8. The villain causes harm or injury to a member of a family/or, 8a. One member of a family either lacks something or desires to have something.

9. Misfortune or lack is made known; the hero is approached with a request or command; he is allowed to go or he is dispatched.

10. The seeker [that is, the hero in 'questor' mode] agrees to or decides upon counteraction.

11. The hero leaves home.

12. The hero is tested, interrogated, attacked, etc., which prepares the way for his receiving either a magical agent or helper.

13. The hero reacts to the actions of the future donor.

14. The hero acquires the use of a magical agent [that is, an object, and animal, etc.].

15. The hero is transferred, delivered, or led to the whereabouts of an object of search.

16. The hero and the villain join in direct combat.

17. The hero is branded.

18. The villain is defeated.

19. The initial misfortune or lack is liquidated.

20. The hero returns.

21. The hero is pursued.

22. Rescue of the hero from pursuit.

23. The hero, unrecognised, arrives home or in another country.

24. A false hero presents unfounded claims.

25. A difficult task is proposed to the hero.

26. The task is resolved.

27. The hero is recognised.

28. The false hero or villain is exposed.

29. The hero is given a new appearance.

30. The villain is punished.

31. The hero is married and ascends the throne.

These are the basic building blocks of the collection of tales analysed by Propp. To make the plot of any given individual tale, you put together a selection of items from this list. No single tale has all thirty one functions, of course; each one has a *selection* of them, and furthermore, the functions always occur in the order listed: for example, a tale may consist of functions 5, 7, 14, 18, 30 and 31: thus, the villain receives information about the hero/victim (5), and deceives him (7), but the hero receives help from an animal with magical powers (14), defeats the villain (18), has him punished (30), then marries and becomes king (31). But no tale could have a formula in which the component numbers are out of sequence, say, with 30 coming before 18, for (in this instance) the villain cannot be punished before he has been defeated. The order of the functions is fixed, partly because, as Propp says, events tend to have a due order (witnesses may disagree on what they saw, but not usually on the order in which they saw it - a house cannot be burgled before it has been broken into). The method of analysis of the tales aims to show that beneath their 'amazing multiformity' lies a 'no less striking uniformity' (p. 21) - to revert to the metaphor used earlier, they are different dishes all cooked from the same range of ingredients.

Clearly, we are talking here about stories viewed in a more (literally) 'superficial' way than was the case with Aristotle, but since the variety of possible surface events is greater than that of the possible underlying motives, Propp has more variables in play than Aristotle. All the same, some of the problems thrown up by Propp's system will be evident after even a very brief study of the basic list of functions: 6 and 7, for instance, are *two* functions concerning deception of the victim/hero by the villain, but clearly, only *one* action is involved - the deceiver deceives and the deceived *is* deceived, for an act of deception requires two parties. These two events, then, are really the same event looked at from different points of view. Likewise, in 10 and 11, there are not really two distinct events, since in 10 the hero decides to do something, and in 11 he does it.1

The description of the thirty-one functions, and their sub-variants, takes up by far the longest chapter in the book, nearly fifty pages, which is getting on for half the main text. By contrast, the possible character types in the tales are much more briefly described (in the four pages of chapter six), the characters being for Propp mainly just the mechanism for distributing the functions around the story. To this end, he notes that the thirty-one functions seem to group naturally into 'spheres' (for example, pursuit, capture, and punishment have a natural grouping). Hence, it makes more sense to see the seven 'spheres of action' as *roles* rather than *characters,* as this reflects the subordination of character to action (a subordination which is also a feature of Aristotle's narratology, for Aristotle says that in narrative character is only expressed in action). Propp's seven 'spheres of action' are:

1. The villain

2. The donor (provider)

3. The helper

(1 A number of the major structuralists pointed out some of these limitations and suggested refinements: see Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology,* vol. 2, (Allen Lane, 1977), chapter eight, 'Structure and form: reflections on a work by Vladimir Propp': and Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose* (Basil Black-well, 1977), chapter fourteen,
'Narrative transformations'.)

4. The princess (a sought-for-person) and her father

5. The dispatcher

6. The hero (seeker or victim)

7. The false hero

Using the list of thirty-one 'functions' and the seven 'spheres of action', we can generate the plot of any individual folk tale in the entire Russian corpus, just as, armed with the grammar, syntax, and vocabulary of English (the *langue,* in Saussure's terms) we can generate any possible utterance in English (the *parole).* Folk tales are relatively simple, of course, but the versatility of a schema like this is much increased by what Robert Scholes reminds us of in his book *Structuralism in Literature* (Yale University Press, 1974), that 'One character may play more than one of these roles in any given tale (e.g. the villain may also be the false hero, the donor may also be the dispatcher, etc.); or one role may employ several characters (multiple villains, for instance); but these are all the roles that this sort of narrative requires, and they are basic to much fiction which

is far removed from fairy tales in other respects' (p. 65). This potential duplication, then, opens up the Proppian methods used to analyse relatively simple material, and begins to hint at the complexities of characterisation and motivation which form the basis of psychological, realist fiction. In realist fiction, the subordination of character to action is reversed, and roles cannot be simply demarcated as 'hero' and 'villain'. Henry James, the supreme psychological novelist, once said that he wrote not about good and evil, but about 'good-and-evil'. Hence, in a Henry James story, a would-be helper may inadvertently be a hinderer, or may even be unsure which they 'truly' are.2 So the Proppian approach seems to hint at the way simple archetypes from much more basic narrative material can provide the shadowy deep foundations of complex realist fictions - the way, for instance, the Cinderella archetype (a tale found in some form in cultures worldwide) lies beneath

(2 I examine a group of James's tales using an adapted Proppian method in Orbis Litterarum, 46/1, spring 1991, pp. 87-
104, 'Embarrassments and predicaments: patterns of interaction in James's writer tales'.)

novels like *Mansfield Park* and *Jane Eyre.* However, what Propp's system lacks is anything about the way the narrative is *presented,* such as the viewpoint or the style. These are the areas focused upon by the third of our 'marker' figures, and they need to be treated in a little more detail.

Gerard Genette

One of the most prominent narratologists since Roland Barthes has been Gerard Genette, whose work has as its focus, not the tale itself, so to speak, but how it is told, which is to say, the process of telling itself. What is meant by this distinction will become apparent if we consider six particular areas which Genette discusses (in his book *Narrative Discourse,* Basil Blackwell, 1972). In what follows I ask six basic questions about the act of narration, and sketch under each the range of possibilities identified by Genette, with some supplementary categories of my own.

1. Is the basic narrative mode 'mimetic' or 'diegetic'?

Genette discusses this matter in Chapter four, 'Mood'. 'Mimesis' means 'showing' or 'dramatising'. The parts of a narrative which are presented in a mimetic manner are 'dramatised', which is to say that they are represented in a 'scenic' way, with a specified setting, and making use of dialogue which contains direct speech. 'Mimesis' is 'slow telling', in which what is done and said is 'staged' for the reader, creating the illusion that we are 'seeing' and 'hearing' things for ourselves. By contrast, 'diegesis' means 'telling' or 'relating'. The parts of a narrative which are presented in this way are given in a more 'rapid' or 'panoramic' or 'summarising' way. The aim is to give us essential or linking information as efficiently as possible, without trying to create the illusion that the events are taking place before our eyes - the narrator just *says* what happens, without trying to show it *as* it happens.3

In practice, of course, writers use the two modes in tandem, moving from mimetic to diegetic, and back again, for strategic

(3 As Genette points out (p. 162), the distinction between mimesis and diegesis was originally made by Plato in Book III of The Republic. So, as with Aristotle, contemporary narratology has roots in classical Greek philosophy.)

reasons. This is partly because an entirely mimetic novel would tend to be infinitely long, and an entirely diegetic one could hardly be more than a couple of pages, and would read like a plot summary. Of course, there are 'single-scene' short stories which are written almost entirely in mimetic mode - for example, many by Ernest Hemingway, such as 'Hills like White Elephants', which is a 'single take' account of an American couple waiting for a train at a remote Spanish railway station. Their thoughts, words, and actions as they wait reveal the crisis in their relationship. We see what they do and hear what they say, and that is all.4 But the longer structure of a novel usually requires a *blending* of the mimetic and the diegetic, and the following brief passage illustrates the 'glide' between the two modes:

For five years Mario took the same route to work every morning, but he never saw Thelma again. Then one morning something very strange happened as he came out of the tube station and began to walk up Charing Cross Road. It was a bright, sunny day, and ...

The first sentence is diegesis - a rapid summary of a long sequence of events, but all taking place 'offstage', as it were. Clearly, it would be impossible to move a plot along efficiently without passages of this kind. The remainder of the passage is mimesis. Having 'fast-forwarded', the writer slows down again at the next crucial 'scene' and begins to construct it for us, telling us about the weather that day, and the exact location, so that we 'see' the scene in our mind's eye. Mimesis and diegesis need each other, and often work together so that the join between them can be difficult to discern exactly, but it is easy to see how fundamental they are as the building blocks of narrative.

2. How is the narrative focalised?

Focalisation (discussed in pages 189-94 of *Narrative Discourse)* means 'viewpoint' or 'perspective', which is to say the point-of-view from which the story is told. There are many possibilities: for example, in 'external' focalisation the viewpoint is *outside* the character depicted, so that we are told only things which are

(4 In Ernest Hemingway, The First Forty-Nine Stories (Arrow Books, 1993).)

external or observable - that is, what the characters *say* and *do,* these being things you would hear and see for yourself if you were present at the scene depicted. In the opposite, 'internal

focalisa-tion', the focus is on what the characters *think* and *feel,* these being things which would be inaccessible to you even if you had been present. Thus, the sentence Thelma stood up and called out to Mario' is an externally focalised representation of this moment, for you would see and hear these things if you were present when they happened. By contrast, consider the sentence 'Thelma suddenly felt anxious that Mario was not going to see her and would walk by oblivious on the other side of Charing Cross Road.' This is an internally focalised representation of her; it reveals her unspoken thoughts and feelings, which you could be completely unaware of even if you were standing next to her. If the story is told throughout mainly with this internal focalisation on Thelma, then she can be called the 'focaliser' of the tale (or the 'reflector', in another tradition of narratological terms). Though she is not telling her own tale in the first person, readers are being given the events from her 'point-of-view' - thus, for instance, Elizabeth Bennet is the focaliser (or reflector) *of Pride and Prejudice.* Some-times a novelist will freely enter the minds and emotions of more than one of the characters, as if privy to the thoughts and feel-ings of all of them. This kind of narrative can be said to have 'zero focalisation'; this occurs 'when no systematic conceptual or perceptual constraint governs what may be presented', as Gerald Prince elegantly puts it in his *A Dictionary of Narratology* (University of Nebraska Press, 1987). Prince says that zero focalisation is characteristic of 'traditional' or 'classical' narration. Its more familiar name is 'omniscient narration'.

3. Who is telling the story?

Of course, the author is, but not necessarily in his or her own voice or persona. One kind of narrator (the kind that often goes with a zero-focalised narrative) is not identified at all as a distinct character with a name and a personal history, and remains just a voice or a tone, which we may register simply as an intelligent, recording consciousness, a mere 'telling medium' which strives for neutrality and transparency.
Such narrators may be called

'covert', 'effaced', 'non-intrusive', or 'non-dramatised'. We may impatiently insist that it is simply the author speaking to us directly, but it is worth remembering that this is not in any sense the author's 'true' voice, since he or she only uses this precise tone, pace, degree of detail, and so on, when narrating a work of fiction. If we met the author at a party or in a bar we wouldn't be able to tolerate this narrative style for more than a couple of minutes. Hence, it makes sense to think of this kind of disembodied narrator as an 'authorial persona', rather than as the author in person.

The other kind of narrator is the kind who is identified as a distinct, named character, with a personal history, gender, a social-class position, distinct likes and dislikes, and so on. These narrators have witnessed, or learned about, or even participated in the events they tell. They can be called 'overt' or 'dramatised' or 'intrusive' narrators, examples being such tellers as Mr Lockwood in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights,* Marlow in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* and Nick Carraway in Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby.* These dramatised narrators can be of

various kinds: the 'heterodiegetic' narrator is one who is not a character in the story he or she narrates, but an outsider to it, as Mr Lockwood is, for example ('heterodiegetic' means roughly 'other telling', since the story being told is that of somebody else). By contrast, the 'homodiegetic' narrator 'is present as a character in the story he tells' (Genette, p. 245) - as Jane Eyre is, for instance ('homodiegetic' means roughly 'same telling', since the story being told is the narrator's own). Notice that first person narrators may be either heterodiegetic or homodiegetic, since they may be telling someone else's story, rather than their own. Omniscient narrators are necessarily heterodiegetic. The above concerns are discussed in Genette's chapter five, 'Voice', under the sub-heading 'Person'.

How is time handled in the story?

Narratives often contain references back and references forward, so that the order of telling does not correspond to the order of happening. Sometimes the story will 'flash back' to relate an event which happened in the past, and such parts of the narrative can be called 'analeptic' (from 'analepsis', which literally means a 'back-take'). Likewise, the narrative may 'flash forward' to narrate, or refer to, or anticipate an event which happens later: such parts of the narrative can be called 'proleptic' (from 'prolepsis', which literally means a 'fore-take'). For instance, in D. H. Lawrence's short story 'The Prussian Officer' a bottle of wine is spilt as a meal is served, and this gestures towards or hints at the bloodshed which will end the tale. Charles Dickens has a similar anticipating moment at the start of *A Tale of Two Cities,* when a barrel of red wine spilt in the street anticipates the bloodshed which will be caused by the revolution. These are 'proleptic' details, and they indicate in a slightly crude way how analepsis and prolepsis are often important in establishing and foregrounding 'themes' in a story. Typically, writers make strategic use of both analepsis and prolepsis in telling a story, for the beginning is seldom the best place to begin - stories tend to begin in the middle *(in medias res,* as the theorists of classical times said), with analeptic material sketching out what went before, and proleptic devices hinting at what the outcome will be, and thereby engaging the reader and generating the basic narrative momentum. These matters are discussed in Genette's first chapter, 'Order', under the sub-heading 'Narrative time'.

How is the story 'packaged'?

Stories are not always presented 'straight'. Often writers make use of 'frame narratives' (also called
'primary narratives'), which con-tain within them 'embedded narratives' (also called 'secondary narratives'). For instance, the main story in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* is embedded within a frame narrative of a group of people telling ghost stories round the fire in a country house at Christmas. One of the stories told by one of the guests in these circumstances is the one which forms the substance of James's tale. Notice that here 'primary narrative' really just means the narrative which comes first, rather than the *main* narrative, which in fact it usually isn't. The 'secondary narrative' is the one which comes second and is embedded into the primary narrative.

The secondary narrative is usually the main story. Thus, in James's tale, we first of all hear about the group assembled for the country-house Christmas, then we hear (in a far longer narrative) of the story which was told in those circumstances. Likewise, the main story in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is embedded within the frame narrative of a group of former deep-sea sailors telling 'yarns' as they wait for the tide to turn. Genette calls the embedded narratives 'meta-narratives' (he says, 'the *meta-narrative* is a narrative within the narrative', footnote 41, p. 228) - so, for instance, the individual tales of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales,* which are embedded within the frame narrative of the-pilgrimage to Canterbury, are meta-narratives, that is, tales within a tale.

It is possible, too, to go a little further and sub-classify frame narratives as 'single-ended', 'double-ended', or 'intrusive'. A 'single-ended' frame narrative is one in which the frame situation is not returned to when the embedded tale is complete. This is the case with *The Turn of the Screw,* when the story of the governess and the children has been told, we do not return to the frame situation (the Christmas ghost story setting) to hear the reaction of the listeners. Clearly, the frame is single-ended in this case because if we went back to the fireside group, many of the crucial ambiguities which are the essence of the tale would have to be explained or debated. So the frame is single-ended for very good strategic reasons. By contrast, the frame narrative in *Heart of Darkness* is double-ended, meaning that the frame situation is reintroduced at the end of the embedded tale. Thus, when the tale is over we return briefly to the group of listeners to whom Marlow, the dramatised narrator, has been telling the tale of his experiences in the Congo. Of course, Conrad doesn't attempt to 'solve' or elucidate the enormous moral dilemmas which have been the substance of the tale - he merely re-introduces some of the imagery (of half-light and surrounding darkness) which has been prominent throughout, so that the double frame is used to give a kind of reinforcement to the thematics of the tale.

Frames, finally, can also be what we might call 'intrusive', meaning that the embedded tale is occasionally interrupted to revert to the frame situation. This too happens in *Heart of Darkness,* when Marlow interrupts his own telling for a moment and makes the famous remark 'Of course ... you fellows see more than I could see then. You see me, whom you know...' This reminds us of the limitations of viewpoint to which all story-telling is subject, and shows Conrad's distaste for the traditional narrating stance of zero focalisation ('omniscient narration'). He has deliberately chosen a narrator whose outlook has distinct limitations, and the 'intrusive' passage goes on to stress the darkness and isolation of the listeners ('it had become so pitch dark that we listeners could hardly see one another'). The unnamed recorder, who will later writer down Marlow's story, voices the moral unease which the tale provokes, and seems to speak for us as readers, reminding us of the kind of alertness and guardedness which readers need ('I listened, I listened on the watch for the sentence, for the word, that would give me the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative that seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night-air of the river' (Penguin edition, ed. Robert Hampson, p. 50). Again, then, it is clear that the author uses an 'intrusive' frame for strategic reasons, seeming to insert at this point a kind of 'alienation device' which deliberately breaks the spell of the narrative, reminding us of its moral complexities, so

that we do not simply become uncritically engrossed in reading it as an adventure story which happens to have a colonial setting.

6. How are speech and thought represented?

Genette discusses this matter in his 'Mood' chapter under the sub-heading 'Narrative of Words'. Various options in this area are open to the writer. The easiest option is to present speech which is 'direct and tagged', like this:

'What's your name?' Mario asked her. 'It's Thelma', she replied.

This is direct speech, because the actual spoken words are given (inside the inverted commas), and the 'tagging' is the name for the attached phrases which indicate who the speaker is (as in 'Mario asked her' and 'she replied'). The speech can also be presented 'direct and untagged', like this:

What's your name?' 'Thelma'.

Clearly, this option might become confusing if more than two characters are engaged in conversation, or if the exchange is not

simply a sequence of questions and answers, so the preferred option might be 'direct and selectively tagged', like this:

'What's your name?' asked Mario. 'Thelma'.

Here the tagging is 'selective' because the first utterance is tagged (with 'asked Mario'), but not the second (there is no 'she replied', or equivalent). The differences may at first seem slight, but each inserted tag is a reminder of the presence of a narrator, and therefore tends to blunt the edge of the mimesis, edging the 'showing' back towards 'telling'. Another option is that of 'tagged indirect speech', like this:

He asked her what her name was, and she told him it was Thelma.

Here the speech is in 'reported' form, so that we are not given the actual spoken words (for instance, he actually said 'What *is your* name?' He didn't say 'What *was her* name?'). Also, the tagging is 'integral', so to speak (in other words, 'He asked her' and 'she told him' are not separated from the utterances but run into them). This way of reporting speech seems to introduce an element of formal distancing between the reader and the depicted events. The

distancing effect is perhaps slightly reduced by the final option, which is the use of 'free indirect speech', like this:

What was her name? It was Thelma.

Again, the speech is reported or indirect, which is indicated by the switching of verbs from the present tense to the past tense (so that 'is' becomes 'was', etc). The effect of this style is quite subtle, and one of its advantages to the writer is that it seems to suit an internally focalised narrative, since it seems natural to 'glide' from it into recording the thoughts and feelings of the speaker, like this:

What was her name? It was Thelma. Thelma, was it? Not the kind of name to launch a thousand ships. More of a suburban, lace-curtain sort of name, really.

Here the musings on the name are clearly those of the male who has asked the question, rather than the overview of an omniscient

narrator, but the narrative can also move easily from free indirect speech in the other direction, giving external indications of actions and reactions. Hence, it can be a usefully flexible tool for the writer.

Genette's terms for representations of speech in a narrative are actually slightly more generalised than those just described, envisaging three layers, which get progressively further away from the actual words spoken, as follows:

1. 'I have to go', I said to her. (Mimetic speech)

2. I told her I had to go. (Transposed speech)

3. I informed her that it was necessary for me to leave. (Narra-tised speech)

As Genette says (p. 172), transposed speech isn't quite the same as free indirect speech: to be precise, it's indirect, but it isn't free (since it has the declarative verb 'I told', which is a form of tagging). The essential difference between transposed and narratised speech is that the former allows us to deduce the actual form of words used ('I have to go'), whereas the latter conveys the *substance* of what was said, but not the actual verbal formula (which could have been 'I've got to go', 'I am obliged to go', 'I have no option but to go', etc.). Effectively, this converts living speech into narrated event, and interposes the maximum distance between the reader and the direct impact and tone of the spoken words.

'Joined-up' narratology

The material discussed in this chapter gives you a kind of basic narratological tool kit. Firstly, we have the crucial distinction between story and plot, which alerts us to questions of how the narrative is designed, and, indeed, what designs it might have upon us. Secondly, Aristotle's categories tune us in to some of the deep-lying, psychic fundamentals of narrative: thirdly, Propp's system provides data for considering some of the surface specifics of plots, and fourthly, Genette's material directs our attention towards how the story is told, how it sets about achieving its designs. We might add, finally, that the five 'codes' of Roland

Barthes which we considered earlier in the book (pp. 52-9) can be used as a supplement to all these, for if Aristotle is mainly focused on theme, Propp on plot, and Genette on narration, then Barthes can be said to focus on the reader, for it is the reader's 'de-coding' which makes sense of all of the factors that narratives bring into play. Taken together, in a kind of strategic blending, all these can provide a 'joined-up' form of narratology, in which the aspects of narrative which may be glossed over in one system can receive their due attention from one of the others.

STOP and THINK

One of the most striking aspects of narratology is the way it tends to provide several different terms for the same phenomenon, each one the creation of a different 'school' (see, for instance, 'zero localisation' and its equivalent term 'omniscient narration'). We might say that this is of little significance, since the English language has always had a 'layered' vocabulary, with several different available words for the same concept. Thus, the Old English word 'blessing' has an Anglo-Norman synonym 'benison', and the Latinate equivalent 'benediction'. The three words each have their own 'flavour' -'blessing' is plain, 'benison' a bit showy and archaic, and 'benediction' distinctly 'churchy'. Likewise, the terms currently most in vogue in narratology have a distinctly academic tone, being drawn from layers of the vocabulary which derive from Greek and Latin (like 'mimesis' and 'diegesis', for example), rather than from the more re-assuring Old English strata. It is very noticeable that the writers themselves, who began to discuss the theory of writing from the nineteenth century onwards, tended to prefer very plain terms - George Eliot and Henry James, for instance, spoke of 'showing' and 'saying', rather than 'mimesis' and diegesis', and E. M. Forster, in his book *The Art of the Novel,* liked to use homely terms which seem to declare their meanings very openly (such as his 'flat' and 'rounded' characters), without any attempt to impress us with their technicality or learnedness. Is it possible to offer a convincing defence of the narratologist's liking for learned-sounding terms?

This is, of course, a personal matter, and you should try to frame your own response to this question. Here is mine: I think the learnedness reflects the narratologists's greater distance from the actual telling of stories, and that it is ultimately due to the fact that they are not usually creative writers themselves. This is in line with the fact that the language used by practitioners about an art or craft tends to be very down-to-earth, for practitioners display their everyday

familiarity with the craft by *not* using technical language. Thus, a musician may be described by outsiders as a violinist in an orchestra, but may tell you in conversation that they play the fiddle in a band. In other words, the learned tone of narratological terminology is to be expected, since it reflects a certain distance from the craft itself. But it hardly ever seems just an empty attempt to impress, and there is an attractive concision and precision about these terms, especially in contrast to the much looser way terminology is used within poststructuralism.

What narratologists do

1. They look at individual narratives seeking out the recurrent structures which are found within all narratives.

2. They switch much of their critical attention away from the mere 'content' of the tale, often focusing instead on the teller and the telling.

3. They take categories derived mainly from the analysis of short narratives and expand and refine them so that they are able to account for the complexities of novel-length narratives.

4. They counteract the tendency of conventional criticism to foreground character and motive by foregrounding instead action and structure.

5. They derive much of their reading pleasure and interest from the affinities between all narratives, rather than from the uniqueness and originality of a small number of highly-regarded examples.

Narratology: an example

We will use Edgar Allan Poe's tale 'The oval portrait' again (Appendix 1) and try to give an impression of how the 'joined-up' narratology just mentioned might look in practice. The four basic areas outlined will be considered (the plot/story distinction, Aristotle, Propp, and Genette), but in an integrated way, rather than in sequence, and with no attempt to use all the categories we have discussed - effective use of literary theory is nearly always selective rather than comprehensive. We will omit Barthes's codes, since these were looked at in Chapter 2.

The distinction between plot and story is immediately apparent in the way the events in the tale are related to us in two 'blocks' which are presented in reverse chronological order: in the plot, we first hear of the civil war, the narrator's wound, his taking refuge in the castle, and his discovery of the portrait. Subsequently we are given the story of the life of the woman in the portrait, which must actually have happened many years before. Had the events been told in chronological order, the effect would have been very different, and the transition would be more difficult to manage than here (where the officer's picking up the book provides a natural-seeming link).

These two 'blocks' of the story are, of course, the 'primary' or 'frame' narrative (the part concerning the wounded officer) and the 'secondary' or 'embedded' narrative (the part concerning the circumstances of the portrait). We now have these more technical terms to describe what was mentioned more straightforwardly in Chapter 1 as the 'story-within-the-story'. It is notable that frame and meta-narrative are unusually balanced - usually the frame is tiny in comparison with the embedded narrative. Emotionally, too, there is a kind of implied equivalence between them, so that the narrator's wound, and the denotation of his processes of perception seem to have an almost equal weighting to the tragic story of the squandering of a young life. Perhaps there is the implication in the first part that the setting is a whole country which has been ravaged in the mistaken pursuit of some ideal - a kind of large-scale equivalent of what we see in the embedded narrative.

This raises the issue of what the frame is actually *for,* and answers by saying that it is a way of giving resonance and wider applicability to the themes of the embedded narrative. But the frame is a delaying device, the role of which is to evoke a certain mood or atmosphere (like the overture played before an opera). If the story had been a folk tale or a fairy tale, generic conventions would have dispensed with the frame, and the story would begin "There was once a young and talented artist ...' Again, the effect would be very different. The frame, we can also add here, is open-ended - we don't go back to the officer and valet at the end, so that the story ends with the climactic moment of the artist realising that his wife is dead. Clearly, a double-ended frame would risk dissipating the dramatic impact of this, and in any case, the narrator would have to make some kind of moralising comment, perhaps along the lines that sometimes the human price of great art can be too high, the effect of which would surely be bathetic.

The Proppian material is surprisingly fruitful in the case of this example, a way into it being to suggest that the pathos of the embedded story lies in the way it conflates two archetypal fairy tale motifs, the first being the tale in which a princess is captured by an ogre or villain, imprisoned in a tower, and perhaps incapacitated, paralysed, or put to sleep by some magical agent. Subsequently she is discovered and rescued by a hero who then marries her. The other motif this tale seems to play with is the Bluebeard myth of the suitor who is actually a serial monogamist and a serial killer, with the bodies of previous brides stored in his dungeon. So in Poe's tale too, the bridegroom is already married ('having already a bride in his Art') and is about to kill his bride. So with the kind of conflating of roles mentioned by Robert Scholes, hero and villain are the same figure, and the magical agency of art - the hero's artistic talent - which should enhance life, instead becomes its destroyer. Notice here that we are freely adapting Propp's function 14 ('The hero acquires the use of a magical agent') to the rather different focus of Poe's tale.

Turning to Genette's categories, we can say, firstly, that both primary and embedded narratives are mainly mimetic, but it is clear that there are *degrees* of mimesis. The opening, as far as the words 'a remote turret of the building', retains a degree of gen-

erality: for instance, when the valet 'ventured to make forcible entrance' of the chateau, the phrase has an element of the generalising touch usually found in telling rather than showing; the phrase is slightly 'narratised' (that useful term of Genette's), that is, packaged into 'narrator-speak', so that we don't actually 'see' what is happening - did the valet smash the lock with an axe, or shoulder the door repeatedly till it gave way, or run at it using a broken sundial as an improvised battering ram? Or did he just break a ground-floor window with the butt of his rifle and climb in? Clearly, all these phrases would give 'full mimesis', as we might call it, so that we would 'see' what is happening, whereas 'making forcible entrance' is a phrase which gives only a 'partial mimesis', leaving the actual method still a secret of the narrator's.

The description of the room (from 'Its decorations') moves closer towards full mimesis: the decorations are 'rich, yet tattered and antique', but what exactly, when we stop to think about it, are 'decorations'? What precisely are the 'manifold and multiform armorial trophies'? Are they shields, swords, helmets, suits of armour, or what? How many are there of each, and where exactly are they positioned? Well, this kind of 'mid-mimesis' (let's call it) doesn't precisely say, for its job is not to pan slowly round the room like a camcorder, but just to give us a series of vivid impressions of the nature and atmosphere of the room. Full mimesis is reached with the paragraph beginning 'But the action produced', where the pace of the telling is slowed further, and matched to the sequence of the officer's impressions. So we get very precise stage directions which place us exactly in the officer's position, so that we see *with* him, so to speak, and have the illusion that the events are happening before our eyes. The story then remains in full mimesis until the officer picks up the book and the embedded narrative begins, and that too goes through the same stages, from partial, to mid, to full mimesis.

The focalisation of the two narratives is also of interest: the frame narrative is first-person homodiegetic, told to us by an overt or 'dramatised' narrator who has a distinct personality and life history, which we can deduce from the details of the story, even though we do not know his name - he is educated (he knows the eighteenth-century Gothic novels of Anne Radcliffe, is aware of painterly techniques like '*vignetting',* and seems to have a strong interest in the processes and stages of the act of perception) and he is obviously well-to-do (he has a valet, for instance). The narrator of the embedded narrative is more problematical: the 'small volume' found on the pillow which 'purported to criticise and describe' the 'unusually great number' of paintings in the room suggests that he is what would now be called an art critic or connoisseur, but we know nothing else about him. He is, we presume, a heterodiegetic narrator, not part of the tale he tells, but the source of his information after the period when 'there were admit-ted none into the turret' is difficult to guess - either he is an omniscient narrator who assumes the privilege of entering and constructing the mind of his subject, or else he has some deeper intimacy with the painter. Perhaps he *is* the painter; certainly, we can assume that the 'unusually great number of spirited modern paintings' on the walls are all painted by the same artist, since they are all evidently in the same style, and perhaps each of them was produced in similar circumstances, each costing the life of the sitter, in a compulsively repeated 'primal scene' in which art and life struggle

together for supremacy. Interestingly, then, these at first technical speculations about the nature of the narrator seem to lead quickly to the deepest levels of content.

This brings us to that underlying Aristotelian level: the hamar-tia (the sin or fault which motors the whole story) is of course, the moral blindness of the talented artist, who elevates himself to god-like status, taking on the role of *creating* life, but being able to do so only at the *expense* of life. He lacks both *in*sight (knowledge of himself) and *fore*sight, being unable to see the inevitable outcome of his creative obsessions. Curiously for an artist, he also lacks empathy and imagination, and so cannot reproduce the real thing, only a simulacrum, a kind of spooky hologram from which the essence of the person is quite absent. The moment of self-recognition, or anagnorisis, comes too late, since he never has the thought 'she is dying', only the belated perception 'she is dead'. The peripeteia, or switch in fortune, is perhaps relevant to both characters, for the male figure changes from being an artist of 'high renown', and becomes a vampiric murderer, while the woman is at first a kind of embodiment of the energies of the life force itself, and then becomes the meekly yielding victim whose erotic appeal consists of listlessly allowing her life to be drained away (the fate of most of the women in Poe's tales).

So, approaching the story through these mainly technical narra-tological categories does seem to open up new avenues which do indeed suggest how meanings are constructed in narratives, at the same time as having the spin-off bonus of giving us new ideas about this particular tale and its well-worn thematic territory of the conflict and contrast between the claims of life and the claims of art.