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The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative

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Chapter 6

Narration

A few words on interpretation

We have all had the experience of arguing about the *meaning* or *meanings* of a narrative. In other words, we have argued about how to *interpret* the narrative. “Meaning” is yet another debatable term in this field, but in general we think of meaning as having to do with ideas and judgments. Do narratives have meaning in this sense? Do they communicate ideas and produce judgments? There are some who would say: No, a story is just a story and a narrative is just a narrative, just as a picture is just a picture and a song just a song. But this is a pretty hard position to maintain. To begin with, it is very hard *not* to take notice of the ideas that come up everywhere during the course of a narrative. As one reads, say, *The Brothers Karamazov*, it is very hard *not* to become engaged in the debate on the ethics of killing. As to the question of whether or not narratives actually arrive at judgments – that is, arrive at *closure* on the level of intellectual and moral questions – the answer is: some seem to and some don’t. Certainly, narratives that are satire or propaganda or advertising make judgments, some of them with hammer blows. But we have also just been acknowledging that many narratives refrain from closing at the level of questions. So there is a whole class of narratives, some of them very powerful, that don’t appear to arrive at judgments.

Nonetheless, a refusal to judge is quite different from having nothing to do with judgment. To go back again to *The Brothers Karamazov*, though we may feel that an issue is still open by the end of the novel, we are at the same time hard put to disengage ourselves from the effort to resolve the issue. In other words, it is hard to treat the novel’s debate on the ethics of killing as pure entertainment. It is hard to look at the novel as if it were a kind of music, orchestrated simply for our enjoyment. It is in fact arguable that no narrative can achieve such a “purely aesthetic” status – that all narratives, however playful, carry ideas and judgments with them. Be that as it may, certainly part of the value of Dostoevsky’s novel lies in the fact that, like so many narratives, it deals openly with issues that most of us do take very seriously. That the narrative

may not close with a judgment is not the same thing, then, as saying that judgment is irrelevant to it. Indeed, its openness is itself a kind of judgment. It is a judgment that the issue is too complex to warrant final judgment at this stage of our understanding.

The two chapters that follow this one are focussed squarely on the interpretation of narrative. But the subject of narration, and particularly of the narrator, is so central to problems in the interpretation of narrative that I have begun this chapter with these few words on the subject of interpretation.

The narrator

In this book we are considering all forms of narrative, including those that do not have narrators. Still, the number of the world's narratives that employ narrators is vast. And in interpretive disagreements, if there is a narrator, almost invariably the **reliability** of the narrator becomes a focus of dispute. This is because the first point almost anyone in the field of narrative will agree on nowadays with regard to narrators is that they should not be confused with authors. The narrator is variously described as an instrument, a construction, or a device wielded by the author. Some theorists (like Barthes) put this emphatically: "The (material) author of a narrative is in no way to be confused with the narrator of that narrative" ("Structural Analysis," 282).

But wait a minute . . .

I wonder about Barthes's "in no way." If I start to tell you the story of my life, should I "in no way" be confused with myself? If I should write my story instead of telling it, does my written voice now become utterly separate from who I am? Some might argue that in fact there is "no way" I can entirely hide myself, even if I wanted to – that whatever narrative voice I choose to narrate my story, there would be discernable traces of the real me lurking in it. Mark Twain caught this paradox neatly in a letter to William Dean Howells: "An autobiography is the truest of all books; for though it inevitably consists mainly of extinctions of the truth, shirkings of the truth, partial revealments of the truth, with hardly an instance of plain straight truth, the remorseless truth is there, between the lines, where the author-cat is raking dust upon it, which hides from the disinterested spectator neither it nor its smell . . . the result being that the reader knows the author in spite of his wily diligences."¹ Twain's remarks provide a good caution and advise us to go carefully when we generalize on this subject.

Whether or not you want to go as far as Barthes when he says the author "is in no way to be confused with the narrator," there is still no doubt about it: when you narrate you construct. This is true whether you are making up a story about creatures from another planet or telling the intimate secrets of your life. And though you can certainly lie when you narrate, and liars always construct, constructing is not the same thing as lying. Just as language comes to us with words and grammar ready made, out of which we construct our sentences, so narrative is always a matter of selecting from a great arsenal of pre-existing devices and using them to synthesize our effects. One of these devices is the narrator.

The device of the narrator, like the subject of point of view, with which it overlaps in a number of ways, has been intensely studied in the last fifty years. Out of the many discriminations that have been made with regard to the narrator, the three most useful are those of *voice*, *focalization*, and *distance*. But before taking these up, there are some distinctions that come up so frequently in discussions of narration, I introduce them here. They can be marshaled under the following question.

Does the narrator narrate everything?

On the face of it, the answer to this question would seem obvious: If it's called a narrative, and it's delivered in words, then the narrator narrates everything. Yet there are those (Cohn) who would disagree. For these scholars, the narration stops when someone is quoted.

He threw his glove on the pavement, the tears welling in his eyes, and said, "This is it, Rodney. I must ask you to choose your weapon."

Here the same logic is applied that keeps some narratologists from considering drama a narrative form. Right up to the quotation marks, the action is being narrated, but after that, the words seem to be coming directly from the speaker. Whichever way you answer the above question, citing a character's own words like this is called **direct discourse**. We hear him talking. But had the narrator written, "He threw his glove on the pavement, the tears welling in his eyes, and said that he saw no alternative but that Rodney should choose his weapon," then the words of the tearful challenger would have been converted to **indirect discourse**. As such they would have been indisputably a part of the narration.

The same distinction can be applied to the representation of thought in narrative. So we have **direct thought** ("No sooner had he spoken than he wondered,

'Now what have I gone and done? What if I kill him?'). And we have **indirect thought** ("No sooner had he spoken than he wondered what he had done and what would happen were he to kill him"). It's worth noting that, though we are quite used to direct thought in the representation of consciousness, it probably does not represent the way we think in anything like the way direct speech represents the way we speak. Some modernist novelists attempted to overcome this artificiality of grammatical speech by deploying a range of experiments in *interior monologue*, which were basically different forms of direct thought. But the inadequacy of words themselves for representing thought may be one reason why, as Alan Palmer points out, most thought in narrative is still represented by indirect thought, or what he terms **thought report**, which does not labor under the burden of trying to imitate the way characters think.

Direct and indirect styles of representing speech and thought go back thousands of years. But there is another way in which speech and thought can be narrated that is a much more recent development, showing up within the last two hundred years. This is **free indirect style**. I've left this subject for discussion later in this chapter after I take up the three highly flexible rhetorical tools that I promised at the end of the last section.

Voice

Voice in narration is a question of who it is we "hear" doing the narrating. This is yet another subject that begins with a simple distinction, and then gets richer and more interesting the further you look into it. The simple distinction is grammatical, that of "person," of which there are two principal kinds in narration: *first-person* ("I woke up that morning with a violent hangover") and *third-person* ("She woke up that morning with a violent hangover"). There have been some significant experiments with narration in the second person ("You woke up that morning with a violent hangover") and they have occurred with increasing frequency in recent years. But despite notable achievements (Michel Butor's *La modification* [1957], Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* [1979]) and a rising tide of critical interest, narration in the second person is still comparatively rare. The reason for this may be simply that we don't tell stories this way in the ordinary course of our lives. We grow up telling stories in the first or third person. For this reason alone, second-person narration will always seem strange – which, in turn, can be one of its great advantages, depending on the effect an author wants to create.

Who is you?

Second-person narration raises this interesting question: who (if anyone) is being addressed? Is it you, reader? When Balzac's narrator accuses "you" of "insensibility, as you hold this book in your white hand, lying back in a softly cushioned armchair, and saying to yourself, 'Perhaps this one is amusing',"² do you feel implicated? Can you separate yourself sufficiently from this shallow, self-indulgent creature so that you feel safely outside the line of fire? Or do you, somewhere inside, bridle at being misrepresented? As Brian McHale put it, "second-person narration is *par excellence* the sign of relation" (223), and therefore, as has also been argued, it is a kind of masked first-person narration (since a "you" implies an "I" addressing the "you"). Sometimes the personal relation is emphatic right from the start, as in this first sentence: "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought."³ But sometimes the effect is much more elusive: "At one o'clock you go out for a sandwich. Megan asks you to bring her a Tab. Downstairs you semi-revolve through the doors and think how nice it would be not to return, ever."⁴ Is the reader thrust in some way into the role of this unnamed protagonist? Or do we read this as someone talking to himself? Or does the second-person narration finally lose its veneer of strangeness, and we get so used to it that we read it as virtual third-person narration?

Regarding first-person narration, it is important to stress that it almost invariably includes third-person narration.

I woke up that morning with a terrible hangover. The phone rang. It was George. He said he was sorry. He promised never to harass me again. He had turned over a new leaf, he was going regularly to AA, he had opened a bank account and already, just that morning, had made a deposit that he intended to keep there until he had been sober for three consecutive months.

Most of this is told in the third person ("He said he was sorry. He promised..."). But technically we would call it first-person narrative because the narrator has used "I" and "me" to refer to herself, and she has a participating role (however brief it may turn out to be) in the story. As you can infer from this example, the degree to which the narrator refers to herself can vary greatly in narratives. This passage could, for example, be the beginning of a story about George with no more references at all by the narrator to herself. In other words, it might approach the status of a third-person narrative. But what we call narrative in the third person is most often told by a narrator situated outside of the world of the story. Such an *external* narrator generally does not include an "I" or "me" reference and, therefore, does not invite us to look at him or her (or it) as a character.

She woke up that morning with a terrible hangover. The phone rang. It was George. He said he was sorry. He promised Sally he would never harass her again. . . .

But here again, classifying in this area can never be neat. Third-person narrators have been known to refer to themselves. Henry Fielding referred to himself and his views frequently as he narrated *Tom Jones*.

It is now time to look after Sophia, whom the reader, if he loves her half so well as I do, will rejoice to find escaped from the clutches of her passionate father, and from those of her dispassionate lover.⁵

And even if third-person narrators strictly avoid using “I” or “me” in reference to themselves, they can still, by the quality of their language, convey the kind of personality we could well find in a character:

Poor girl, she woke up that morning with a terrible hangover. Would that the phone would never ring. But it did. It was George. He said he was sorry, and like the confused, naïve, trusting soul that she was, she believed him.

Though there are no first-person references to the narrator in this version, there is most definitely the sense of a personality doing the narrating, someone who cares enough to be a little frustrated by the behavior of this trusting soul. This third-person narrator in turn processes the scene for us as it passes through the screen of her (or his) personality.

So, to summarize, grammatical person is an important feature of voice in narration, but more important still is our sense of the kind of character (or non-character) it is whose voice colors the story it narrates. In this sense, narrative voice is a major element in the construction of a story. It is therefore crucial to determine the kind of person we have for a narrator because this lets us know just how she injects into the narration her own needs and desires and limitations, and whether we should fully trust the information we are getting. In some cases, when the voice is strong or interesting enough, it may be that the narrator herself, rather than the story, is the center of interest. There is a great range here, and sometimes our sense of a personal voice can evaporate entirely. Little wonder, then, that many narratologists, in Paul Hernadi’s words, “consider the narrator as a now you see him, now you don’t kind of entity: either as a mere ‘function of narration’ that can be personalized or as a virtual person whose personhood can be reduced to zero degree.”⁶

“Omniscient narration” and the authorial persona

Third-person narration and *omniscient narration* are often used interchangeably, but there is a risk in this. There are many instances of third-person narration that are anything but omniscient (literally “all-knowing”). Some critics reserve the term “omniscience” and “omniscient narration” for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novelists, like Fielding, who seem to preside over their fictional universes like all-knowing gods. But even in the texts of these authors, much is kept from view. In other words, even if the narrator seems omniscient, the *narration* is far from it.

In fact, you’ll note that the quotation above from Fielding’s *Tom Jones* expresses a distinctly human and this-worldly personality. Is this Fielding’s personality? Yes and no. It certainly came from Fielding. He devised the words. And yet it is also a construction that serves the purposes of narration. The real, historical Fielding was a complex individual with many voices. For the narration of his novel, he created a kind of mask or authorial *persona* (which means “mask” in Latin).

Focalization

Focalization is an awkward coinage, but it serves a useful purpose that the vaguer and more disputed term *point of view* cannot. It refers specifically to the lens through which we see characters and events in the narrative. Frequently, the narrator is our *focalizer*. Just as we hear her voice, we often see the action through her eyes. But this is not by any means always the case. Notice how, in the following scene from *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert’s narrator maintains a strict, external third-person narrative voice but lets us look through the eyes of someone else:

She nudged him with her elbow.

“What does that mean?” he wondered, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye as they moved on.

Her face, seen in profile, was so calm that it gave him no hint. It stood out against the light, framed in the oval of her bonnet, whose pale ribbons were like streaming reeds. Her eyes with their long curving lashes looked straight ahead: they were fully open, but seemed a little narrowed because of the blood that was pulsing gently under the fine skin of her cheekbones. The rosy flesh between her nostrils was all but transparent in the light. She was inclining her head to one side, and the pearly tips of her white teeth showed between her lips.

“Is she laughing at me?” Rodolphe wondered.

But Emma’s nudge had been no more than a warning, for Monsieur Lheureux was walking along beside them, now and then addressing them as though to begin conversation.⁷

Our focalizer in the long paragraph here is not Flaubert's unnamed narrator but Rodolphe, a character in the story who is at that moment walking beside Emma, planning his campaign of seduction. The intensity of his gaze, and by inference something of the character and intensity of his feeling, are indicated by the minute, highly focused anatomical details that we are allowed to absorb through his eyes. Flaubert's narrator keeps our gaze aligned with Rodolphe's for the full paragraph, then reverts to the neutral vantage of the narrator: "But Emma's nudge had been no more than a warning, . . ."

As you can see from the example, focalizing can contribute richly to how we think and feel as we read. Just as we pick up various intensities of thought and feeling from the voice that we hear, so also do we pick up thought and feeling from the eyes we see through. And just as the voice we hear can be either a character in the narrative or a narrator positioned outside of it, so also our focalizer can be a character within or a narrator without.

Distance

Usually, the extent to which the narrator plays a part in the story has an impact on our assessment of the information she gives us. Distance, as I am using the term here, refers to the narrator's degree of involvement in the story she tells. This is something that is almost infinitely variable. Pip, for example, tells the story of his own life in Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860); the servant Nelly Dean tells the story of the lives of others in *Wuthering Heights* (1848). Yet Pip is a grown man when he tells the story of his growing up, a wiser man who, both in time and maturity, has attained a distance from the youth who made so many mistakes. Nelly Dean, in contrast, tells a story that is still in progress and in which she has strong sympathies and even plays a part. Because of her closeness to the characters and events, the question of narratorial distance has proved to be more of a problem in Nelly's case than in Pip's. Much of the interpretive debate over *Wuthering Heights* has centered on the degree to which we can trust her representation of the story.*

At the other end of the spectrum from *Wuthering Heights*, there are texts in which the author has sought to create a narrative voice totally cut off from involvement in the tale. Hemingway could achieve this with considerable austerity:

Dick Boulton came from the Indian camp to cut up logs for Nick's father. He brought his son Eddy and another Indian named Billy Tabeshaw with him. They came in through the back gate out of the

woods, Eddy carrying the long cross-cut saw. It flopped over his shoulder and made a musical sound as he walked. Billy Tabeshaw carried two big cant-hooks. Dick had three axes under his arm.⁸

This is the entire first paragraph of the short story "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife." It shows how closely related are considerations of distance and voice. In order to create narratorial *distance*, Hemingway devised a narratorial *voice* that gives the impression of complete emotional *noninvolvement* in what it narrates. Each sentence is focussed on dispensing information, one following the other like bare statements of fact, each built on the same simple syntactic noun-verb structure ("He brought," "They came"). There are no evaluative terms to indicate personal judgment. Adjectives, which often give the impression of a feeling response, are at a minimum. And with the possible exception of "musical," the adjectives that are included ("long," "big," "three") are emotionally neutral, as are the common verbs ("came," "to cut up," "brought") and nouns ("camp," "logs," "gate"). In this example, impersonality and distance are very closely aligned.

Some distinctions that may help

The term **diegesis** (which Plato originally used to refer to the telling, rather than the acting, of stories) has been adapted to refer to the world of the story – that "reality" in which the events are presumed to take place. More recently, **diegesis** in this sense of the term has been replaced by **narrative world** or **storyworld**, both of which have the advantage of being clearer and unencumbered by another meaning. But Gérard Genette drew on the word **diegesis** to introduce a very useful distinction between **homodiegetic**, **heterodiegetic**, and **extradiegetic** narration. The first refers to narration that comes from a character in the storyworld (like Pip or Nelly Dean), and the second and third refer to narration that comes from outside the storyworld, as in the example above from Hemingway. Again, a more reader-friendly set of terms for the same distinction is James Phelan's **character** and **noncharacter** narration. Whichever set of terms you choose, the distinction is much more adequate than that between **first-person** and **third-person** narration for specifying where a narrator stands in relation to the world of the narrative.

Reliability

Voice and distance, especially, but also focalization have much to do with what Wayne Booth referred to as the narrator's **reliability**. To what extent can we rely on the narrator to give us an accurate rendering of the facts? To what extent,

once we have ascertained the facts, are we meant to respect the narrator's opinions when she offers an interpretation? Is Nelly Dean too harsh in her judgment of Catherine? Is she too soft in her judgment of Heathcliff? Booth, when he introduced the concept of *unreliable narrators*, was careful to point out that such narrators "differ markedly depending on how far and in what direction they depart from their author's norms" (159). And certainly, in order to interpret a narrative, we must have as fine a sense as we can of where a narrator fits on this broad spectrum of reliability.

But the difficulty this task can pose makes you wonder why authors would ever choose to entrust their narratives to an unreliable narrator in the first place. Yet they do, and the number is legion of narrators who are bumbling, madmen, jealous lovers, mean-spirited relatives, and even pathological liars. If this century has seen an increase in the number of unreliable narrators, they have nonetheless been around for a long time. Clearly there are advantages, besides willful obscurity, in handing narrative responsibility over to an untrustworthy narrator. One important advantage in such narratives is that narration itself – its difficulties, its liability to be subverted by one's own interests and prejudices and blindnesses – becomes part of the subject.

In some texts, the implied authorial vision emerges quite clearly, despite the narrator's unreliability. This is true in James Hogg's extraordinary novel *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824). Robert Wringham, the central figure and diarist-narrator of the second part of the novel, convinced of his own election (that is, that he is one of the rare "justified" sinners in the strict Calvinist scheme, pre-approved for salvation), writes with self-satisfaction of activities that appall the reader. These include Wringham's murder of his half-brother. Though we are picking up the narrative from his "unreliable" words, we nonetheless develop a clear judgment of his true character, as well as that of the mysterious friend (the Devil) who keeps encouraging him in his evil ways. In this narrative, then, there is not only great distance between the narrator's views and those of the *implied author*, but we have a clear understanding of the distance.

At the other end of this spectrum, and more unsettling because of its failure to arrive at some closure on the level of questions, is Akira Kurosawa's film classic *Rashomon* (1951). In this film, two travelers try to get to the truth of what appears to be a story of kidnapping, rape, and murder, involving a bandit (played by Toshiro Mifune) and two newlyweds. The story of the "crime" is told four times – once each by the three participants and a single witness. Each narrative tells the story in a way that is radically different from the others, yet still richly persuasive. By the end, we are left with the four narratives in suspension. Asked which was the true story, Kurosawa answered: "All of these, none of these."⁹

Between Hogg's novel, with its unreliable narrator but clear communication of what happened and how it should be judged, and Kurosawa's film, with its four competing narrators and its failure to render any judgment, there is a great range of unreliable narrators with a great range of impact. But the difference between Hogg and Kurosawa yields a helpful distinction among unreliable narrators: those whom we trust for the facts but not for their interpretation (Hogg's justified sinner), and those whom we cannot even trust for the facts (the narrators of *Rashomon*). Dorrit Cohn has referred to the former as *discordant narrators*.¹⁰ They are narrators whom we feel we can rely on for the facts of the case, but whose interpretation of those facts is probably in discord with what we infer would be the author's interpretation. Getting to this *implied author* is one of the central challenges of interpretation. We will address it in the next chapter, but first we need to take up two more considerations with regard to narration that can play a significant role in interpretation.

Free indirect style

Just as the focalization can shift from one pair of eyes to another throughout a narrative, as it does in the example from *Madame Bovary* above, so too voice can shift as readily. Most frequently this shift is accomplished by moving from the narrator's voice to that of a character by means of *direct* citation, either of thoughts or openly expressed words. You can see such a shift happen above when we read the words that Rodolphe speaks to himself: "What does that mean?" In this instance, Flaubert changes the voice we hear by directly quoting his character's unvoiced thought. But this kind of shift can also be done *indirectly* by filtering a character's voice through the third-person narrator. It can also be done *freely*, that is, without any quotation marks or other indicators like the usual "she thought/she said." This fluid adaptation of the narrator's voice in a kind of ventriloquism of different voices, all done completely without the usual signposts of punctuation and attribution, while maintaining the grammatical third person, is called *free indirect style* (or free indirect discourse). The author simply allows a character's voice or thoughts momentarily to take over the narrative voice. Flaubert was a master of this. Here is Emma later in the novel, musing on the insufficiency of another lover. Notice how Flaubert starts with the *direct* mode of citation and then moves into the *free indirect* mode:

"I do love him though!" she told herself.

No matter: she wasn't happy, and never had been. Why was life so unsatisfactory? Why did everything she leaned on crumble instantly to dust? But why, if somewhere there existed a strong and handsome

being – a man of valor, sublime in passion and refinement, with a poet’s heart and an angel’s shape, a man like a lyre with strings of bronze, intoning elegiac epithalamiums to the heavens – why mightn’t she have the luck to meet him? Ah, fine chance! . . .¹¹

Though this is written in the third person (“she wasn’t happy”), the voice is unmistakably Emma’s. You can hear her complaining (“Why was life so unsatisfactory?”), mildly despairing (“Ah, fine chance!”), and thinking throughout in the sentiments and overblown language of popular romance (“a man of valor, sublime in passion and refinement, with a poet’s heart and an angel’s shape”). Her thinking, feeling, and vocabulary momentarily seize control of what is still third-person narration.

When the narrative voice is so free and fluid, it makes you wonder about the status of the narrator and whether one can even speak of a narrator in the case of free indirect style. Also, because it is so fluid, free indirect style can at times present quite a challenge for interpreters who are trying hard to locate a unified sensibility on which to base their interpretation.

Stream of consciousness and interior monologue

Here are two terms that are often used interchangeably for a technique that is close to **free indirect style**. It is most useful, though, to keep all three terms as distinct as possible. “Stream of consciousness” is a phrase first used by William James in 1892 to describe the way we experience consciousness (as a continual stream of associated thoughts, without rational ordering and permeated by changing feelings). “Interior monologue” was first used almost at the same time by the French novelist Édouard Dujardin in his novel *Les Lauriers sont coupés* (1887) to describe a technique of *free direct* (not *indirect*) style in representing the stream of consciousness of his characters. Early in the twentieth century, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, William Faulkner, and others began experimenting with **stream of consciousness novels** in which the flow of consciousness of one or more characters was the principal focus. They used *interior monologue* to represent that subject.

But aren’t the passages above from *Madame Bovary* interior monologue? The answer is that, as long as they maintain the grammatical third person, the technique is free indirect style. Interior monologue is more thoroughly given over to a character’s stream of consciousness. It is therefore considered *direct* rather than *indirect*, and often characterized by a variety of innovative techniques. The final chapter of Joyce’s *Ulysses* is forty pages of unpunctuated interior monologue devoted to the immediate evocation of Molly Bloom’s consciousness: “. . . but I was sure he had something on with that one it takes me to find out a thing like that he said you have no proof it was her proof O yes her aunt was very fond of oysters but I told her what I thought of her. . . .”¹² Such writing can be an even greater challenge to interpretation than free indirect style.

Narration on stage and screen

Narration through a narrator, though not the rule in either film or theater, has been deployed often enough in these media. Plays like Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* (1938) and films like *Murder My Sweet* (1944) and Stanley Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) make highly effective use of a narrator. The major difference in effect between narration in these media and narration in print or through oral storytelling is the degree to which the presence of visual imagery absorbs attention. This is especially the case in film, where narration is most frequently *voice-over* narration in which a disembodied voice is heard in tandem with imagery which is often conveying in its own way incidents of the story. The term “voice-over” itself indicates that the sound of the voice must share the sensory arena with the visual. And in the great majority of cases, voice-over narration is only intermittent and serves usually as a framing device at the outset, giving way within minutes to a full reliance on the performance of actors to convey the story. The film theorist David Bordwell wrote that “in watching films, we are seldom aware of being told something by an entity resembling a human being.”¹³ And with good reason. Certainly films have often begun by drawing on the ancient appeal of being told a story, so that we start out hearing the voice (“I suppose nothing would have happened if I had never met her. I was down to my last buck, and then I saw her, seated at the counter . . .”). But at the same time we are already seeing the characters, watching them move and hearing them speak, and quickly the old form gives way almost unnoticed. “Maybe if I told you this story . . .” says Nelly Dean to Mr. Lockwood in William Wyler’s 1939 film adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*. Her voice carries on for a while over a fade-out as the setting changes to a time long ago in the realm of story when the Earnshaws were a happy family. A variation on this device, using print rather than an oral storyteller, is the opening of the original (1977) *Star Wars*. Viewers begin by reading a text – “A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. . . .” – that lengthens out into the universe. At one and the same time, viewers are taken back to an age (for some, quite “long ago”) when they first read adventures like this and drawn visually into a place far away (more recently, the device was used again at the beginning of the *Star Wars* prequel *The Phantom Menace*).

Voice-over was common in Hollywood films of the 1940s and 1950s and is still common today in European films. But rare as it may be today in Hollywood or on the stage, it is important to keep in mind that, simply by representing human life, plays and films are also crowded with instances of narration. They include narration in the dialogue in direct proportion as we narrate in life, which is many times a day. The same holds true for written narrative. The difference, again, is that on stage and in film we see and hear the characters

who are doing the narrating. Though we still have to fill in, imaginatively, the details of the stories they tell, we watch and hear them as they do their telling. We see the expressions on their faces and the gestures and meaningful pauses they make. In other words, the actors do work for us that, when we read, we have to do entirely by ourselves. To that degree, with plays and films it is generally easier to assess how we should feel about what is narrated, where the emphasis should fall, what is important and what is not, and how we should judge the characters involved. This is true at least insofar as we have a clear grasp of the character-narrator we observe. There is little wonder, then, that a performance of a play, or an adaptation of a play or novel to film, is called an “interpretation” – a point that we will come back to later.

Selected secondary resources

Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, after almost forty years, still serves as a lucid introduction to the narrator and the problems connected with this topic. Booth's treatment of both distance and reliability make a good foundation. Another book from the 1960s (now revised), Scholes and Kellogg's *The Nature of Narrative*, provides a somewhat contrasting take to my own in their chapter on “point of view.” Published almost thirty years ago, Franz Stanzel's *Theory of Narrative* still contains much invaluable thinking on the complexities of narration, beginning with a useful historical overview of earlier structuralist treatments of the subject. For more recent work, the third, concluding section of Mieke Bal's *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* provides a concise overview of the narrator and narration. Also look at the two chapters on narration in Rimmon-Kenan's *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. Genette's distinction between *homodiegetic*, *heterodiegetic*, and *extradiegetic* narration can be found in the chapter on “Voice” in his *Narrative Discourse: An Essay on Method*. An extensive and very helpful treatment of “character narration,” including the varieties of *unreliable narration*, can be found throughout James Phelan's *Living to Tell About It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*. Among studies of the representation of consciousness, Dorrit Cohn's crisply argued overview, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*, is still the first book to go to. I also recommend two recent and admirably lucid treatments of the subject, Alan Palmer's *Fictional Minds* and Lisa Zunshine's *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*. For a short, lucid exposition of a subtle version of free indirect style, see Hugh Kenner's chapter on “The Uncle Charles Principle” in his *Joyce's Voices*. Brian Richardson surveys a range of unusual twentieth-century modes of narration in his *Unnatural Voices*. Monika Fludernik has edited an entire issue of the journal *Style* (28:3, 1994) devoted to second-person narration. For a compact survey of second-person narration and its effects see Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* (223–7). David Herman treats the same subject together with the valuable concept of “contextual anchoring” in his *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative* (337–71). Regarding

narrative in film, David Bordwell in *Narration in the Fiction Film* uses the term “narration” differently from the way I do in this chapter, but his text is nonetheless one of the most accessible and useful texts on the subject. See also Edward Branigan's *Narrative Comprehension and Film*.

Additional primary texts

Here once again it is hard to single out texts for the demonstration of formal qualities that recur in almost all narratives. But narrators do get especially interesting when their reliability is open to challenge, and in widely discussed cases, the reliability of the narrator has been a crux issue in the interpretation of the narratives he or she tells. Among these are Werther in Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), Ellen Dean in *Wuthering Heights* (1848), the nameless narrator of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1863), the Governess in James's *Turn of the Screw* (1898), Nick Carraway in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Humbert Humbert in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), and Stevens in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989). An excellent novel to put beside Ishiguro's is Sheila Kohler's recently reissued *The Perfect Place* (1989). For an example of narration by a confessed liar, see Nigel Williams's *Star Turn* (1985).

In Lorrie Moore's *Self-Help* (1985) there are stories that not only use second-person narration but often in both the imperative mood and future tense, which introduces yet other facets to the reader's relationship with the narrative (“Escape into books. When he asks what you're reading, hold it up without comment. The next day look across to the brown chair and you will see him reading it too. A copy from the library that morning”¹⁴). Another rarity is the use of second-person narration in autobiography; you can find it deployed in much of the second volume of Mary Karr's remarkable memoirs, *Cherry* (2000). Marge Piercy employs a cyborg for part of the narration in *He, She, and It* (1993), and you'll want to check the robots' stories in Stanislaw Lem's *The Cyberiad* (1967), particularly “Tale of the Storytelling Machine of King Genius.” There have been several notable efforts to eliminate the sense of a narrator altogether, among them John Dos Passos's use of what he called “camera-eye” narration for sections of his *USA* trilogy (1930–6). Robbe-Grillet tried to erase even the faint glimmers of an “I” lurking in the voice of a third-person narrator with what he called *je-néant* narration in *Jealousy* (1957).

The use of voice-over narration in films comes in considerable variety. Frequently the voice is that of a character, often the central character, in the *storyworld*. When Raymond Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely* was adapted to film as *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), detective Philip Marlowe does the narrating. In François Truffaut's *Jules et Jim* (1962), the voice-over narration comes from an *extradiegetic* entity, that is, someone outside of the action and whom we never see. A third mode can be seen in the classic French farce *La ronde* (1951) in which Max Ophüls borrowed a narrative device from the stage – what the French call a *meneur de jeu*. This is a figure whom we do see and who talks directly to us, but who is not a part of the story. He or she connects the threads of the story,

provides bemused commentary, and sometimes engages in gentle moralizing. In my view, one of the most interesting and complex interweavings of narration and direct representation in film is *Six Degrees of Separation*, Fred Schepisi and John Guare's 1993 adaptation of Guare's 1990 play of the same name. It is, moreover, fascinating to compare the original play with the film, especially in the way the audience shifts from being the intimate recipients of narrative in the staged version to onlookers observing the response of filmed intimates. But both the play and the film are powerful renderings of the struggle to contain through multiple retellings an increasingly complex story as it evolves. It is a fascinating case study of the need to control the inexplicable through narration.