

Narrative as Communication

DIDIER COSTE

FOREWORD: WLAD GODZICH

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Theory and History of Literature, Volume 64

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Theory and History of Literature

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This book is dedicated to Nuria
who has given a name to my
happy ending

*Selbst der Styx, der neunfach flieszet,
Schlieszt die wagende nicht aus;
Mächtig raubt sie das Geliebte
Aus des Pluto finstern Haus.*

—Schiller

Foreword: The Time Machine

Wlad Godzich

When Tzvetan Todorov coined the term “narratology” in 1969 to designate the study of narrative he was responding to the then widespread belief that narrative was particularly amenable to being elevated to the status of an object of knowledge for a new science armed with its own concepts and analytic protocols. He was also responding to the hope, or perhaps more accurately, the desire, to lift all of literary and cultural studies to the dignity of science, a desire that strongly animated French structuralism. Todorov’s programmatic enthusiasm seemed warranted then: whereas the previous half-century had been punctuated by occasional studies of the art of the novel, some rare analyses of point of view, and limited disquisitions on narrative organization, the sixties had seen colloquia and conferences, entire issues of journals, significant translations from Russian and Czech in addition to the more common European languages, as well as new publications appearing almost daily, all dealing with narrative. Twenty years later, the graduate student who ventures into this area is faced with an almost intractable bibliography, a wealth of specialized terms, and, in some instances, symbolic notations ranging from the linguistic to the mathematico-logical. For some time now, some of the best minds in the field, notably Gérard Genette and Wallace Martin, have called for a moment of reflection and assessment to determine where we are in relation to all of the theorizing that has passed for narratology, and there prevails a general sense of unease suggestive of unfulfilled expectations.

It is the type of situation that calls for the instinctive reactions of complete dismissal that one finds here and there, or for some project of redemption of a field that has gone astray. Didier Coste’s book falls more into the latter mode, although

redemption is quite foreign to its idiom. Coste refuses, however, to dismiss all that has been done in narrative theory simply because the expectations that were vested in it have not been fulfilled. They were, in any case, beyond fulfillment, since these expectations represented murky responses to the general situation of humanists in universities undergoing rapid expansion. Coste is far more interested in drawing up an inventory of the analytic tools and concepts that have been elaborated and in showing that they constitute a workable overarching approach to the study of narrative, although not in the terms in which they were originally conceived. In other words, Coste proposes a new framework, that of a theory of communication, for the study of narrative, and he shows in the pages of this book that such an approach enables us to give narrative its due. At first sight, this claim may seem implausible. After all, in the eyes of most students of literature, communication theory is hardly in better shape than narrative theory, and it is therefore unlikely that the grafting of two lame legs on the same body would produce a smooth running animal; yet that is the very challenge that Coste has taken up in the pages that follow.

The narratology that Todorov and countless others in his wake have sought to elaborate represented an extension of the very poetics that was being revived in the sixties as part of a larger, if mostly unconscious, societal project of establishing, and policing, a lasting order. Much of that impulse has remained with us, gaining strength rather than weakening from the various instances of sociopolitical, economic, and cultural disorder that have occurred since. The possibility of such an order presided over by the Hegelian figure of the state rests upon our ability to determine all possible actions, calculate their potential combinations, and analyze their outcome. Individual texts, such as the *Decameron*, can be treated as equivalent to languages whose action grammars are yet to be described. Once we had a large number of such individual descriptive grammars, we could determine the deep structures governing all actions, establish the felicity conditions for their accomplishment, and set proper receptive framework for their interpretation. Even though it represented itself as politically progressive, such a narratology, as indeed all poetics, was in the service of a social engineering administered by an almighty state.

Roland Barthes is a case in point. In *S/Z*, his famous study of narrative in a Balzac short story, Barthes may have sought to separate himself from the hard structuralists by distinguishing between the classical readerly texts that are totalizable, decidable, continuous, and unified, and the writerly texts that are plural and open to the free play of signifiers and of difference, but his continued focus on the elementary action as the basic unit of narrative analysis firmly inscribes him within the narratological project. In his *Maupassant*, which resembles *S/Z* a great deal, Greimas cuts the text up in "segments" that correspond to units of the narrative without explicitly taking up the logic of this segmentation. Barthes,

who calls his segments "lexias" and "fragments," is far more conscious of the fact that these are artifices of reading, and he indeed seeks to recoup their artificiality in the service of his opposition between the writerly and the readerly. At stake is the very conception of action as denoted by discourse, for which Barthes invokes the Aristotelian term *prohairesis* (a transcription that stresses the term's etymological meaning). Unlike Greimas, Barthes is not seeking to establish the existence of an all-encompassing and all-deciding structure for his text; nonetheless, he is forced to consider action in ways that are not much different from Greimas's conception of it. He borrows the term *prohairesis* from Aristotle, who invoked it in the context of deliberative discourse to denote the future projection of a course of action, and simplifies its meaning to the rational determination of the result of an action. He recognizes, however, that nothing is more difficult than to arrive at such a determination unless one knows beforehand what the outcome of the entire sequence of actions is going to be. Armed with this knowledge, the analyst reads backward as it were and discards those elements that will prove unproductive, keeping only those that will contribute to the general result. This procedure is tantamount to cheating and makes a mockery of the claim that the determination of the result is a rational one. In point of fact, it is an interested determination based upon a form of privileged knowledge, *ex post facto* applied to a process that is supposed to be open-ended. Barthes acknowledges this by admitting that the prohairetic sequence is an artifice of reading, but he does not seem to notice what this entails.

He may well have thought of himself as arguing in favor of open-endedness, but in fact he was operating with concepts that require closure. The workings of his prohairetic code project each sequence unto a closed continuum that determines both its identity, by means of the labels that the code bestows upon it, and its place in the narrative continuum. This continuum is thus ruled by a form of purposive necessity, not unlike Kant's nature, that ensures that whatever is left to punctual judgment at the level of the individual prohairetic sequence is ultimately recouped in the service of the whole. Barthes seems to be unaware of the fact that having started from premises inherent to poetics in which the purposiveness of form is a foundational postulate, he inevitably winds up with a teleological conception of the narrative process, even though the movement of the *telos* can be established only through the intervention of the reader.

This conception of action in which the meaning of the action is determined by its place in the configuration of the whole, as assessed by a reader, lies at the center of all narrative theories. One is strongly tempted to say that it is no accident that this is so, but to yield to this temptation is to blind oneself to the very problem at hand, which is that of the commingling of story and history. The purposive necessity that binds the individual action or fact to the narrative whole finds its counterpart in the conception of history in which what Fredric Jameson calls "otherwise inert chronological and 'linear' data" (*The Political Unconscious*

[1981], 101) are reorganized in the form of Necessity: “why what happened (at first received as ‘empirical’ fact) had to happen the way it did” (ibid). Narrative analysis has stressed this sense of an inexorable logic working itself out through the course of the narrative. Jameson understands this full well and draws out the consequences: for him, history becomes the experience of necessity, that is, the experience of this inexorable logic. What we experience, however, is not this necessity as the secret meaning of history, for that would reify history, but rather as a narrative category imposing an inexorable form upon events. In other words, Jameson attributes to history the capabilities of an agency on the basis of its narrative properties. This agency is not the traditional Aristotelian or Thomistic one of first or ultimate cause of an action, but rather the shaper of intelligibility.

We have seen that Barthes vests the possibility of this shaping in the reader who “cheats” by bringing to bear upon the course of the text his privileged knowledge of the “outcome” of the text. Jameson knows that in order to make an equivalent claim in relation to history one would have to construct a transcendental position in relation to it, so that Barthes’s almighty and immanent reader capable of traveling back and forth across the linearity of narrative time would find its counterpart in an almighty God, or in a principle of rationality, or in the all-powerful state armed with the laws of history. Jameson rejects this totalitarian possibility, the nefarious effects of which have been historically well attested, to posit instead the workings of an immanent principle: that of a form.

In Jameson’s conception, history becomes then not only the experience of necessity, but the experience of the fact that necessity is the form of history. One may well suspect at this stage that there has been a transfer of properties from story to history, but the very impulse that led one to want to say that this was no accident earlier attests that it is not so, for Jameson’s account rests on the solid Hegelian ground in which the transfer of properties goes from history to story and not the other way around. Narrative, in this conception, inevitably espouses the form of history and thus provides us with cognitive access to the latter’s workings. In the formal terms that Jameson invokes, the transfer of properties from history to story is sublated; that is, the metaphor is annulled into its own catachresis, so that empirical readers need not play the role of transcendental readers and still can see the shaping of story by history. The catachresis itself is thus rendered necessary and indeed inscribed in the very process of history. The function of this process becomes apparent: to convert metaphor into catachresis or, in less formal terms, to convert linguistic operations into “natural” agency. Narratology, for its part, must redouble this process by analyzing this “natural” agency back into linguistic operations and thus making the latter appear to be the result of the process of narratological analysis and not of a prior massive catachresis. In Marxian terms one must posit the identity of the dialectics of nature and the dialectics of thought, the dialectics of history and of language.

The point of my retracing this ground is to help us recognize the underlying

philosophical assumption of narratology: it is the Parmenidean postulate of Being's manifestation in language and its inverse reciprocal that language states Being. To be sure, this Parmenideanism is quite sophisticated now so that it does not expect that every statement corresponds to a state of being, an expectation that would have made fiction impossible; it now admits that the "stating" of Being takes place at a larger structural level, where story and history are indeed a way of stating or manifesting one another. Again, this should not surprise us inasmuch as this sort of Parmenideanism underlies all of poetics and subtends its dependence on mimesis. And if there is one thing that narratology has taken very seriously it is the mimetic character of narrative representation since it is this foundational belief in mimesis that has permitted the elaboration of the concept of minimal action in the first place. Even the Proppian notion of function partakes of this dependence: the mimetic correspondence is established at the level of the whole tale rather than that of each individual action.

This Parmenideanism manifests itself especially strongly in those studies of narrative that are concerned with the effect of narrative upon its recipients, and thus appear to be moving in the direction of the communicational approach that Coste takes in this book. Such studies typically deal with this problem under the name of identification and provide an account of the reading, or the viewing, process as one in which the narratee finds himself or herself interpellated by the narrative program of the work he or she is receiving, and thus reconstituted into the subject of this narrative program. The working of identification is thus premised on the catachresis of story and history: the reader reads the story and is thus shaped by history.

Identification is indeed the name of the operation by which catachresis takes place since it transfers properties from one term to another and erases the memory of the transfer so that the two terms appear to be identical. In narratological studies of identification this operation is described in terms of cleaved consciousness and of the dilemma facing the reader who is thus faced with two distinct temporal frames corresponding to the before and after of the reading. This dilemma, which corresponds to the modern predicament, has to do with the reader's ability to both remember and forget the past, and to forget and remember the conditions under which he or she has come about in the present. It is no problem for a trope to hold both of these temporal frames within itself since tropes do not inhabit phenomenological time. But as soon as human beings are expected to behave like tropes, and especially as complicated a trope as catachresis (the description of which requires, after all, an anthropomorphized way of talking about language inasmuch as it is mediated through categories of remembrance and forgetting, i.e., categories of human time), we are likely to be facing major difficulties. Identification narratology avoids these difficulties by focusing on the secondary issues of ideological manipulation, for it could not face the fact that it operates on the assumption that human beings are catachretic.

Identification narratology originates in, and subscribes to, the modern project of the Enlightenment. Its interest in narrative stems from the desire to discern between narratives of liberation and narratives of enslavement. It is committed, in other words, to promoting the autonomy of the reading subject. To understand such a subject as catachretic would be tantamount to admitting that this autonomy is heteronomous in origin, and that the function of the claim of autonomy is in fact to occult this constitutive heteronomy. Identification narratology takes such a heteronomy to be the operator of a deprivation of agency for the modern subject who has to be reinstated as capable agent. Curiously enough, this agent then becomes capable of doing what history requires her or him to do, a strange definition of autonomy, though well attested in Western, and especially Christian, thought.

Coste seeks to effect a break with this Parmenidean conception of the relation of language to Being and with the mimetic conception of action to which it has led. He is, however, fully cognizant that earlier attempts to break with Parmenideanism in Western thought have tended to privilege the imaginary and to cancel out the notion of agency. We need to bear in mind that Parmenidean doctrine establishes a set of identity equations between language and Being, that is, between language and reality. It ensures that language can and indeed does function referentially. Any tampering with these identity equations precipitates a crisis of referentiality. In modern times this problem has taken the form of a predicament in which we, as language users and indeed as language-dependent beings, are forced to remember that language is a system of signs that is governed by its own internal economy and by the history of its past usages, and, at the same time, we must forget the artifactualness of language to continue to be able to refer to reality. Modernity is haunted by this nondialectical conjunction of forgetting and remembering, and it has become increasingly aware of its dependency on language. This has proved extremely disturbing to it because one of the foundations of modernity has been the distinction between fact and fiction, a distinction that did not have the same preeminence in premodernity, where it was the distinction between sacred and profane that was paramount. To bear in mind that referentiality is mediated through the workings of language is to make fiction the mode of access to fact, a disturbing notion if one sees fact and fiction as polar opposites. It is this disturbance that catachretic approaches to story and history are meant to dispel, thereby preserving the underlying economy of modernity.

Within the framework of modernity it does appear that anything short of such a catachretic solution would result in the dissolving of another major axis of opposition: that between real and imaginary. Much of the aesthetic activity of the late nineteenth century and of the twentieth has recognized, and sought to accelerate, this dissolution. But this movement toward the imaginary, in modernity's topology, continues to be perceived as that of agential deprivation and thus elicits resistance and opposition, especially in view of the fact that this agential deprivation

does not seem to strike at the major forces that shape our lives and our societies. This perception is incorrect, however, since it is grounded in modernity's conception of the imaginary where the latter is opposed to the real and can thus offer nothing but a simulacrum or at best a representation of the real. It must be understood that the dissolution of the opposition between real and imaginary results in a commingling of what the two terms stand for as the ground of their differentiation. And therein lies another consequence of note: the modern opposition between the real and the imaginary further mapped itself over the distinction between the collective and the individual, leading to the notion that all forms of collective imaginary were instances of ideological manipulation or illusion.

This is the new ground upon which Coste seeks to reconceptualize narratology. It is not a grammar of action but part and parcel of a theory of communication where the latter is understood not as the exchange of messages but as the management of this collective imaginary charged with establishing and regulating the conditions of referentiality in the society that shares it. I should hasten to stress that I do mean referentiality and not reference or even referents as is too often assumed to be the case. Coste is quite emphatic on this point himself.

What is the place of narrative in this conception, and what is the function of narratology? Since these are the questions that Coste addresses in this book I will limit myself to one aspect to which I have already alluded: *prohairesis*. As is well known, Aristotle considered narrative as part of the middle genre of rhetoric, that of deliberative discourse. The function of this genre is to prove to the assembled citizens of the city the need for, or indeed the necessity of, a particular course of action that one wishes to see them execute, or conversely, to dissuade them from a given course of action. Deliberative discourse, in other words, leads to action or to its abrogation. It is not, itself, a representation of an action, and is never meant to be a substitute for it. The best way of thinking about it is as enabling (or disabling) action. And this is where *prohairesis* comes in: we have seen earlier that Aristotle used this term to designate the future projection of a course of action. In other words, *prohairesis* has to do with time, with a special mode of representation called "projection," and with action considered as a course, that is, as a flow. The triggering mechanism for all of this is a decision, and decision is indeed the object of deliberative discourse. What we need to understand better is how decision relates to the constitutive features of *prohairesis*.

Aristotle and all subsequent narratologists have recognized that narrative has a special relationship to time. But they have all thought of time as infinite and homogeneous, analyzable in quantifiable moments of "objectively" equal value; such a time is linear, and ultimately absolute, experienced as a curse or at the very least as a predicament. Philosophy, which is concept oriented, has sought a limitless time in which to define them, and has had thus little patience with decisions. Our habits of thought have been built up around concepts, the proper deployment of which requires the suspension of decisions, a deferral of any decision making,

since the latter, viewed from the perspective of the essence of the concept, can only mark the concept's submission to temporality's least attractive feature: its limitation of extension. Decisions are profoundly antithetical to philosophy in this respect. They "rush" time. What philosophical reflection seeks to defer indefinitely, a decision concentrates in a point, the moment, the time of decision. And this concentration has fatal consequences, from a philosophical perspective: it does not allow us to judge whether a statement is true—that is, whether it stands for a state of affairs—or whether a concept has found its proper embodiment. In the concentrated time of decision, the true is not separable from the state of affairs it purportedly stands for, and the concept is not distinguishable from the materiality that confronts us. Insofar as representation occurs in the time of decision, and it does, it is always representation for the other and not representation in itself. This is the fundamental reason why a communication approach to narrative has a chance to avoid the pitfalls of the philosophically sounder narratologies. To put it bluntly, we need to recognize that a decision entails that the elements it manages and affects exist in a temporal dimension that is incommensurable with the infinite extension of concepts inhabiting an infinite and homogeneous time.

It would be tempting to interpret this statement as Nietzsche's statements on perspective have been interpreted, that is, as calling for relativism and advocating a pluralism of worldviews. Such an interpretation runs counter to what is most important in a decision: its sense of urgency. When an assembly deliberates upon a course of action, it is precisely because its members have the sense that an inexorable logic is working its way and they perceive the end of this process as inimical to them. The function of the decision is not to calculate the end product of the process but to figure out an escape from it. The decision is not meant to propose an alternate view or a new representation that will coexist peacefully with the older one, but to escape into a new temporal dimension free from as many of the constraints of the old one as possible.

To figure out how to escape involves a double catachresis: first, the historical predicament has to be converted into story so that its full dimension can be apprehended. This involves the projection of a course of action. But this story is then treated as story so that history itself may be arrested: the time frame of the story is easily manipulated, and the function of the decision is to open up a different time, to produce more time where none was otherwise available; and this production of time permits the second catachresis, which does go from story to history, for the new time is one that can be lived. The function of the story, of its telling within the context of deliberative discourse, is thus to fracture philosophical time, to mobilize its rupture in the service of an alternative, one that will be marked by the sense of a beginning.

It is thus not accurate to say that decisions concentrate time; rather, they produce it. Each such production entails a new mode of establishing referentiality,

of organizing the time that has been produced by the decision, of inhabiting a time of our own making as opposed to the inhuman time of concepts. Narratology has been in the service of inhuman time; it has occulted the place of decision to concentrate on concepts of action, analyzed into minimal units, linked into inexorable logics attributed to inhuman forces. Such narratologies go hand in hand with a conception of a time ruled by forces beyond our control, and are indeed in the service of such forces. We have all noted at one time or another that epoch of narratologies, the late sixties to the mid-eighties, has been one of limited and uninspired narrative production in the industrialized world. The celebrated success of Latin American novels, and indeed of emergent literatures, contrasted sharply with our Western orientation toward narratology, and frequently left the latter befuddled since this emergent writing refused to fit easily into its concepts. Such emergent writing has been putting into question narratology's methodological presupposition of an infinite and homogeneous time; better, it has been declaring itself incompatible and incommensurable with such a notion. Narratology's unconscious complicity in the assertion of a universal order, which would be that of "our" time, should not lead us, however, to jettison it altogether, for it is far from clear that a narratology that starts with different premises could not produce some time of its own. Such at least has been Didier Coste's courageous wager in this book.

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