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NOTES TOWARD A CATEGORIZATION OF FICTIONAL "NARRATEES"

Gerald Prince

Any narrative presupposes not only a narrator but also a "narratee," a receiver of the narrator's message, and, just as the narrator in any tale is not its real author but a fictional construct having certain characteristics in common with him, the narratee in any tale should not be confused with a real reader or listener though he may very closely resemble him. From Henry James and Percy Lubbock to Norman Friedman and Wayne C. Booth, many critics have studied the narrator in narrative, his various manifestations, his function, his importance. No comparable examination of narratees, however, has ever been attempted, though some critics have begun in recent years to pay more than cursory attention to the question.[1] The fact that narrators have evoked much more interest than narratees is understandable. After all, the hero of numerous novels and tales is himself a writer, a narrator (Marcel in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Roquentin in *La Nausée*, Jacques Revel in *L'Emploi du temps*) whereas there has never been a hero who is primarily a reader or listener, a narratee, at least not to my knowledge. Furthermore, the narrator of a tale seemingly contributes much more to its shape than the narratee. Nevertheless, narratees are too essential a part of any narration not to deserve examination and their role may prove to be much more significant than it would at first seem.

Like narrators, narratees may be classified according to their degree of involvement in the events recounted in a narrative. Many narratives are ostensibly addressed to no one: no character is portrayed as the potential or actual reader or listener of the narrator's message and no reader or listener is referred to through a direct address ("Whoever you may be, my reader . . .")[2] or an indirect one ("few readers will have been deceived about the real feelings with which I read and reread it . . .").[3] Yet, just as a detailed study of a novel like *L'Education sentimentale* or *Bouvard et Pécuchet* reveals the presence of a narrator who tries to be invisible and not to intrude in the narration, a close investigation of narratives seemingly without a narratee leads to his discovery. In Camus'

Laye's *L'Enfant noir*, the I-narrator apparently addresses no one. There are, however, many passages in his narration which indicate that he is directing his tale of paradise lost never to be regained towards a reader having certain characteristics. When describing his father's house, his games, his village, the narrator often explains in detail a particular term he has used. Referring to the pots in his father's room, for instance, he writes: "elles contenaient les gris-gris, ces liquides mystérieux qui éloignent les mauvais esprits et qui, pour peu qu'on s'en enduise le corps, le rendent invulnérable aux maléfices, á tous les maléfices."[4] From this and other similar passages,[5] it can be inferred that the narrator is not addressing his tale to a fellow Guinean, or even a fellow African, but rather that he is telling it for a reader--probably a Westerner--who does not know the precise socio-cultural meaning of such terms as *gris-gris*. In Flaubert's *Hérodias*, Salomé is described as dancing "comme les prêtresses des Indes, comme les Nubiennes des cataractes, comme les bacchantes de Lydie."[6] It can be concluded that the tale is directed towards a narratee who knows how Indian priestesses, Nubian girls and Lydian maenads dance. A detailed examination of the explanations, similes, and other such signals to a narratee occurring in *L'Enfant noir* or *Hérodias* would allow for the drawing of an exact portrait of the narratee created by Camara Laye or Flaubert. More generally, a similar examination would reveal the kind of narratee implied by any given narrator who does not specify explicitly the receiver for whom his message is intended.

In other narratives, although no character constitutes an audience for the narrator, the latter refers more or less frequently to a narratee. The references may be direct as in *Eugen Onegin* and *Notes from the Underground* ("But do you know gentlemen, what was the chief point about my spite . . .")[7] or indirect as in *Doctor Faustus* and *The Scarlet Letter* ("We could hardly do otherwise than pluck one of its flowers and present it to the reader.")[8] Like the narratees in *L'Enfant noir* and *Hérodias*, such narratees are nameless, they do not know the narrator or the protagonists of his tale, and they do not participate in the events recounted. Thanks to the references made to them, however, it is easier to draw their portrait and to know rather well what the narrators addressing them think of them. In the very first pages of *Le Père Goriot*, for in-

stance, the narrator endows his narratees with white hands, suspects them of insensitivity, and predicts that they will accuse him of being a poet rather than a realist: "Ainsi ferez-vous, vous qui tenez ce livre d'une main blanche, vous qui vous enfoncez dans un moelleux fauteuil en vous disant: Peut-être ceci va-t-il m'amuser. Après avoir lu les secrètes infortunes du père Goriot, vous dînerez avec appétit en mettant votre insensibilité sur le compte de l'auteur, en le taxant d'exagération, en l'accusant de poésie."[9]

Very often, the narrator, instead of addressing narratees not represented as characters, addresses a character or characters who may or may not know him and the people he presents, but who do not have knowledge of the events narrated and are in no way involved in them. This occurs in *L'Immoraliste*, for instance, where Michel's friends gather in Algeria to hear his story, in *Heart of Darkness* where several of Marlow's companions listen to him on the deck of the *Nellie*, in *Portnoy's Complaint*, and in many of Maupassant's short stories.

Sometimes, the narratee is not only represented as a character but also as one who knows many of the incidents recounted by the narrator and who has taken part in at least some of them. In *Le Noeud de vipères*, for instance, Louis starts writing his diary in the form of a letter addressed to his wife, Isa. She is already familiar with many of the scenes he describes and has been a prominent actor in several of them, as Louis' comments frequently indicate ("Tu m'as dit, l'autre jour, que je devenais dur d'oreille . . .," "Tu as fait allusion à ma santé et à mon grand âge . . .," "Tu connais mon rire, ce rire qui, même au début de notre vie commune, te portait sur les nerfs . . . ").[10]

Finally, there are many instances in which the narrator does not direct his narration towards anyone but himself and is his own narratee. He writes for himself, he tells himself his own story, he constitutes his own audience. Thus, in the *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, as in most diary-novels, the curé d'Ambricourt keeps a diary for his own edification and often refers to himself as a reader ("Je relis ces premières pages de mon journal sans plaisir . . .,""Je relis ces lignes écrites hier soir. . ." "Je relis ces lignes écrites au réveil, ce matin . . ."). . .").[11] His language even reveals that he reads what he writes more than once.

So far I have distinguished five major categories of narratees, going from the ones who are so little involved in the events they are supposed to read or listen to that they are not even mentioned to the ones who narrate the very events they listen to or read. Other distinctions can no doubt be made. In the first place, in each of the categories outlined, the narratee may be a reader or a listener. Moreover, in each category it is possible to further discriminate between narratees. Thus, in both *Portnoy's Complaint* and *Arabian Nights*, the narrator addresses a listener who is represented as a character and who is unaware of and uninvolved in the events recounted. Yet, whereas in Philip Roth's novel Dr. Spielvogel mainly provides a frame for the protagonist's narration, in *Arabian Nights*, the role of the Caliph as narratee is far more essential. Scheherazade is forced to tell stories in order not to die, for, as long as she can hold the Caliph's attention, she will not be executed. It is obvious that the continuation of the telling rests not only upon the heroine's inventiveness and capacity for narration but also upon the Caliph's role as listener. Should he get tired of Scheherazade's stories and stop acting as listener, the heroine would be killed and the tale would come to an end.[12] Similarly, in both *La Nausée* and *Drame*, the narrator is his own narratee. In Sartre's novel, however, Roquentin is not presented as a narratee at the very moment that he is narrating; in Sollers' work, on the other hand, it is impossible to separate the protagonist as narrator from the protagonist as narratee. Finally, there are many cases in which a narrator becomes a narratee and vice-versa (Mme. de Merteuil, Valmont, or Cécile in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, Usbek or Rica in *Lettres persanes*), many in which a narrator addresses various narratees in turn (*Le Noeud de vipères*), and many in which the narrator does not know whether the narratee he addresses will be his only narratee: the hero of *Journal de Salavin* starts writing "touriste" whenever he means "saint" for fear that some reader--his wife or his mother, for instance--will discover his thirst for sainthood. All such distinctions would not only lead to a more exact description of the nature of narratees but also to a more exact classification of narratives according to the kind of narratees they imply or portray.

If the manifestations of narratees are varied, so are their functions in narrative. Sometimes, a narratee is used to underline a certain idea. It is through the Caliph

listening to Scheherazade that the author of *Arabian Nights* emphasizes what is perhaps his most fundamental theme: to find an audience and to captivate it is to live. Sometimes, the narratee is part of the setting of a narration, as in Boccacio's *Decameron* or *Portnoy's Complaint*. Often, for instance in epistolary novels, narratees are necessary for plot development. Often also, they are used to confirm part of the narrator's relation. In *L'Immoraliste*, if Gide has Michel tell his story to three of his best friends, it is, among other things, in order to make Michel's story more credible. Michel says, for instance, that he has changed drastically in three years, physically as well as morally. His friends can corroborate that statement. Most often, perhaps, narratees help the author situate himself in relation to his story and the world it presents. In *Le Père Goriot*, for instance, the way in which narratees are addressed by the narrator clearly allows Balzac to underline the reality of the universe he describes and to shake his potential real readers out of their complacency; and in *The Floating Opera*, the many outré references to narratees allow John Barth to stress the fact that his story is a story and nothing more.

Of course, the kind of narratee created in any novel or tale and the way he functions in it are both crucial to its overall narrative effectiveness. Indeed, many narratives owe at least part of their greatness to a superior use of narratees. In *Arabian Nights*, for instance, the author takes what is a very conventional fictional situation--one character listening to another one's stories--and uses it to comment on the activity of telling and its meaning. He also uses it to give a characteristic shape to his narrative: every night, Scheherazade interrupts her tale so that she may have one more day to live. In *L'Immoraliste*, Gide manages to use narratees not only as a verification device and as part of the setting for Michel's narration, but also to convey powerfully the idea that it is difficult to condemn the hero in spite of his behavior: at the end of Michel's tale, his audience is incapable of judging his actions. Similarly, much of the power of *La Chute* derives from Camus' use of an ambiguous narratee. The man addressed by Jean-Baptiste Clamence in Amsterdam seems to be at the same time absent from the novel since he does not utter one word, and a character in it since he is described as such by the protagonist; furthermore, as

the novel progresses, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine whether or not Clamence is talking to anyone else but himself. As for *Le Noeud de vipères*, many of its surprises are due to Mauriac's clever handling of narratees: the tone of the narrator, his style, and the kind of details he discusses in his diary vary according to the reader he has in mind. At first, Louis writes for his wife, Isa; soon, he decides to write for his illegitimate son, Robert, then for all of his children; but, very slowly, he comes to understand fully that he is writing mainly for himself and that he himself should be his most important reader.

In conclusion, it can be said that a more detailed investigation of the ways in which narratees are portrayed and handled may provide a tool for useful critical distinctions and for a more precise typology of narrative. Furthermore, it may shed light on the general problem of narrative strategy. Ultimately, it may contribute to a better understanding of the nature of narrative.

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Notes

[1] Thus, in "Les Categories du récit littéraire," *Communications*, No. 8 (1966), 146-147, Tzvetan Todorov carefully distinguishes between fictional narratees and real readers and listeners; in "Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits," *Communications*, No. 8 (1966), 18-19, Roland Barthes calls for an investigation of the ways in which narrator and narratee are linked throughout a narration; and in *Studies in the Eighteenth Century English Novel* (East Lansing, 1969), Arthur Sherbo shows how Fielding's narratees help him underline certain comic effects. On the question of narratees, see also Wolfgang Kayser, *Die Vortragsteise, Studien zur Literatur* (Bern, 1958), pp. 88ff. and Mikaï Bakhtin, *Problemi Poetiki Dostoïevskogo* (Moscow, 1963).

[2] Pushkin, *Eugen Onegin* (Modern Library, 1964), p. 301.

3 Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), p. 145.

4 Camara Laye, *L'Enfant noir* (Paris, 1953), pp. 11-12.

5 See, for instance, *L'Enfant noir*, pp. 28, 40 and 41.

6 Flaubert, *Trois contes* (Armand Colin, 1960), p. 168.

7 Dostoievsky, *Three Short Novels* (Anchor Books, 1960), p. 180.

8 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (Modern Library, 1950), p. 56.

9 Balzac, *Le Père Goriot* (Le Livre de Poche, 1961), pp. 18-19.

10 François Mauriac, *Le Noeud de vipères* (Le Livre de Poche, 1959), pp. 30, 45 and 93.

11 George Bernanos, *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (Le Livre de Poche, 1964), pp. 9, 71 and 94.

12 See Tzvetan Todorov, "Les Hommes-récits," *Tel Quel*, No. 31 (automne 1967), 64-73.