



G rard Genette and the Pleasures of Poetics

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Source: *Narrative*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Jan., 2010), pp. 3-7

Published by: [Ohio State University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25609380>

Accessed: 20-01-2016 00:47 UTC

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G rard Genette and the Pleasures of Poetics

G rard Genette does not like colloquia. He defined them as series of soliloquies supposedly pertaining to a common subject, given to all kinds of irrelevancies, and governed by everyone's impatient reactions to everyone else's papers. But his work is surely worth several such "intellectual jamborees" (*Bardadrac* 76–77).¹ With essays like "Structuralism and Literary Criticism," where he describes the latter as a kind of *bricolage* and locates the structuralist method between pure formalism and traditional realism; "Rhetoric Restrained," where he traces the gradual narrowing of the rhetorical domain and argues for the elaboration of a "new rhetoric," a semiotics of all discourses; and "Figures," where he characterizes the figural as "the tiny but vertiginous space that opens up between . . . two languages in the same language" (*Figures* 59), Genette helped to define and design a supple and sparkling structuralism. He illustrated its critical power in articles like "Stendhal," on the author's transgressions of the rules making up the literary game, like "Vertige fix ," on Robbe-Grillet's labyrinths, like "Flaubert's Silences," on the moments when the writer's narrative escapes narrative, and like "Proust Palimpsest," on the ceaseless merging and entanglement of figures and meanings that constitute *  la recherche du temps perdu*. Besides, he introduced literary structuralism into the leading avant-garde journal *Tel Quel*; he played a significant part in the publication of Tzvetan Todorov's influential collection of Russian formalist writing, *Th orie de la litt rature*, as well as in that of Roland Barthes's *Critical Essays* and of *Criticism and Truth*, Barthes's celebrated response to Raymond Picard's Lansonian attacks; with Todorov and H l ne Cixous, he founded *Po tique*, perhaps the finest journal dedicated to poetics; and he still directs for Editions du Seuil the series "Po tique," which

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NARRATIVE, Vol. 18, No. 1 (January 2010)
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published not only Vladimir Propp, Roman Jakobson, and Northrop Frye but also Arthur Danto, Käte Hamburger, Abdelfattah Kilito, and Jean-Luc Nancy. In 1972, Genette published “Discours du récit” (*Narrative Discourse*). Together with such essays as “Frontiers of Narrative” or “Vraisemblance et motivation” (“Verisimilitude and Motivation”), it made him a narratological household name. Indeed, so exemplary was *Narrative Discourse* that both the *Grand Larousse de la langue française* and the *Grand Robert* wrongly suggested 1972 as the date of appearance of the term “narratologie.”² Paradoxically, Genette had not been particularly interested by the mechanics of narrative, which he viewed as the least attractive dimension of literature. Whereas some of us skip the descriptive parts in texts to get to the narrative ones, he did the reverse. In fact, his favorite literary genre is not necessarily the novel nor is his favorite art necessarily representational (see *Figures IV* 15, *Bardadrac* 352, and *Codicille* 249–54).

The years following 1972 saw the publication of many other outstanding texts by Genette, including *Mimologics*, on the (Western) Cratylid tradition; *The Architext*, on genre theory; *Palimpsests*, on “literature in the second degree”; *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, which elaborates, refines, or corrects some of the arguments advanced in *Narrative Discourse*; *Paratexts*, which investigates textual elements like titles, subtitles, epigraphs, prefaces, or book jackets; *Fiction and Diction*, which explores the conditions for literariness. There was also *The Work of Art* and *The Aesthetic Relation*, on the modes of existence of artworks and on their modes of action; *Métalepse* and the transgressive interpenetration of distinct enunciative situations, narrative levels, fictional domains, or artistic worlds; *Bardadrac*, his thoroughly delightful autobiographical dictionary; and, most recently, in 2009, the splendid sequel to it entitled *Codicille*. Yet, in spite of this remarkable production, Genette successfully discouraged at least one conference that was to focus on his person and his work, probably because of some basic intellectual distaste and certainly because of the temperate modesty that, if he had to have a motto, would lead him to adopt “moderato ma non troppo” (*Bardadrac* 117).

Of course, modesty does not necessarily mean lack of firmness in rebutting unconvincing opponents, whether it be C. J. van Rees on anachronies, analepses, and more, Nicolas Ruwet on Roman Jakobson and poetry, or Marc Fumaroli on structuralism, tradition, and structuralist criticism (see *Narrative Discourse Revisited* 21–29, “Cratylisme,” and Fumaroli and Genette 144–57). Nor does modesty necessarily mean lack of reasonable consistency. From his first book onward, Genette’s production significantly involves the mapping of spaces constituting and delimiting literature (or art) as a kind of space between signifier and signified, two expressions with the same meaning or two meanings of the same expression (as in much of the *Figures* series); or between two different accounts of the same sequence of events (as in *Narrative Discourse* and *Narrative Discourse Revisited*); or between genre and text, between verbal signs and nonverbal referents, between one work and another, texts and paratextual practices, factual and fictional stories, the ontology of works of art and their function or their objective status and their subjective reception, and—last but by no means least—two different semiotic positions or even two different ontological levels. Genette is a narratologist whose attention to narrative form and

functioning manifests itself as recently as *Bardadrac* and *Codicille*, with remarks on autofiction, omniscient narration, or narratology, that jargon-ridden and “pernicious pseudo-science” (*Bardadrac* 254). But, more generally, Genette is a poetician (or perhaps an “artician”) interested in characterizing literature (and art) as well as the possibilities of literary discourse (or artistic expression) and making room for history (so long as it is an anonymous history of forms, a “Geschichte ohne Namen” rather than an anecdotal or symptomatic one), for criticism (which dialogues with poetics and complements it), and for aesthetics (which prolongs its consideration of artworks and art’s work).

If Genette’s modesty does not translate into lack of coherence, it does accord with certain fundamental characteristics of his production. Genette focuses on form rather than substance, prefers computation to meditation (he could never quite follow the adventures of Hegelian Spirit or Hegelian Mind), and favors analytical clarity over speculative profundity, a structural approach as opposed to a psychologizing, sociologizing, or generally thematizing one. He is more interested in relations between entities than in the entities themselves, which may partly account for his enjoying literature as (modestly) second, as imitation and transformation. For him, music is between the notes and the devil between the details (see for example *Bardadrac* 27). As a structuralist—not a poststructuralist: he claims that he never knew what poststructuralism was and that nobody else did either (see *Bardadrac* 343 and *Narrative Discourse Revisited* 151)—he does not believe in absolute meanings and values, since all meanings and values result from differences, positions, and relations within a system and are therefore relative by definition.

This relativism extends to methodological—and other—considerations. Few things are more alien to him than critical militancy. He rejects intransigent binarism—what he calls “the horrible binary logic of ‘all or nothing’” (*Bardadrac* 430)—and often likes to include the middle. Furthermore, at least in the realm of aesthetics, this relativism is inflected and prolonged by a subjectivism that results not from some belief in or aspiration to sovereignty but from the recognition of other subjects and of their ability to confer certain statuses and functions to certain entities. It is also prolonged by the empiricism that results from the structuralist rejection of a priori stipulations or metaphysical pretensions and that accompanies one of the many pleasures afforded by Genette’s work: its uncommon erudition. *Mimologies* goes from Plato (or Socrates) to Roman Jakobson, Michel Tournier, and beyond; *Métalepse* covers Homer but also Woody Allen; and I won’t even begin to mention the riches of *Palimpsests*. Nor is Genette’s material restricted to the verbal domain. Music (Bach and Ellington, Glenn Gould, Thelonious Monk, and Joe Henderson), painting, and architecture (perhaps Genette’s favorite art) are frequently invoked. Now, this remarkable erudition, whose hedonic value can prove at least double for us—the pleasure of learning and that of shining at cocktail parties (he doesn’t like them any more than colloquia)—this remarkable erudition is not really essential to Genette’s enterprise (except maybe when the domain studied—say, that of genre—is more sociologically than logically constituted). On the contrary. Genette’s categories, grids, and typologies are not developed inductively but deductively, on the basis of the possibilities offered by the domain under study, the terms that constitute

it and their combinations. Still, apart from helping to show the descriptive adequacy of Genette's accounts and apart from helping to stress their non-evaluative, anti-hierarchical nature, erudition can point to some of their possible insufficiencies or rigidities (as in the discussion of narrators in *Narrative Discourse*) and it can also underline the difference between the virtual and the actual, since some of the slots in Genette's accounts remain empty for lack of good examples or lack of readily available ones (see *Narrative Discourse Revisited* 120–29).

By indicating the field of the possible (and suggesting the field of the impossible), these empty slots provide further pleasures: that of emulation, of course, and that of creation. A good slot filler can perhaps be discovered or else it can be devised. After all, “what would theory be worth,” says Genette, “if it were not also good for *inventing practice*?” (*Narrative Discourse Revisited* 157 emphasis original). Like Borges, whose *Ficciones* and *Other Inquisitions* activated his *libido scribendi*, Genette believes that if a text is possible, it will exist. He has practiced what he preaches and has himself frequently “invented practice” through theorizing. In *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, he imagines the possibility of a metadiegetic narrative with external focalization to warn against overly hasty claims of “definitive incompatibilities” (129) and he starts converting *Remembrance of Things Past* into an embedded narration à la Maupassant. To emphasize various aspects of the mimological project, he plays the Cratylan game in *Mimologics*; and, to demonstrate the powers of hypertextual operations, he proposes in *Palimpsests* a retelling of *Madame Bovary* through the point of view of the protagonist's daughter Berthe; he rewrites the first stanza of Paul Valéry's “Le Cimetière marin” in alexandrines; and he envisions a recasting of Proust's “Combray” favoring singulative rather than iterative narration.

Genette's playful inventiveness—which is also manifest in *Bardadrac* and *Codicille*, in his pastiche of Robbe-Grillet titled “Capriccio,” in his textual mix of different versions of Chateaubriand's “Night Amid the Deserts of the New World” (see *Figures IV* 348–50 and 357–65)—is likewise very much in evidence in his passion for naming, his *libido nominandi*. Freed by Roland Barthes from fear of jargon (better jargon than confusion), he delights in defining, identifying, neologizing, and his terminological savvy is justly admired: homodiegetic and heterodiegetic, peritext and paratext, architextuality and mimology (see *Bardadrac* 172–73 and *Codicille* 194–95). But his ingenuity is perhaps most consistently apparent in his style. Apart from its clarity and precision, Genette's writing impresses through its freedom and suppleness, its cool. Though he proves tenacious and thorough in his attempts to describe and account for the fields and activities he explores, he does not hesitate to follow his fancy and seemingly roundabout courses in order better to get to the main road. This whimsical seriousness is accompanied by an acute sensitivity to the riches of language as well as its incongruities and to such verbal turpitudes as triteness and pretension. Genette can't stand what he calls “medialect,” the unfortunately smug mixture of received ideas and fractured expressions so common in the written press, on the radio, on TV, but also, sometimes, in a colloquium. He delights in *mots justes* or, barring them, in portmanteau words, and I will not resist mentioning at least a few of his finds along with their definition: a jargonaut is a master of technical language, a Castronome is a Cuban gourmet, and an octobiography is a life narrative in eight

volumes. Above all, as these last comments should suggest, humor constitutes an essential ingredient of Genette's manner. His is a funny science. His theorizing and typologizing never go without some witty story, jesting self-representation, ironic distance. He has written extensively and entertainingly about pastiche and parody, caricature and travesty but also about many other sources of laughter (see for example *Figures V* 134–225); Woody Allen and Groucho Marx count among his favorites; and there must be very few, if any, jokes, quips, or puns that he doesn't know. Indeed, along with the ability consistently to combine theory with practice, method with whimsy, and erudition with creativity, it is this capacity to mix the ludic with the serious that most characterizes Gérard Genette and the many pleasures of his poetics.

ENDNOTES

1. In this paper, a version of which was presented on June 6, 2009 at the annual conference of the International Society for the Study of Narrative, I draw extensively on *Bardadrac* and *Codicille*, as well as on "Du texte à l'œuvre" ("From Text to Work") in *Figures IV* (7–45). I have also found Christine Montalbetti's *Gérard Genette* very helpful.
2. The term was introduced by Todorov (10).

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