



PROJECT MUSE®

Safely Watching Wild Adventures

Thomas Pavel

Narrative, Volume 24, Number 1, January 2016, pp. 1-12 (Article)

Published by The Ohio State University Press

DOI: [10.1353/nar.2016.0005](https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2016.0005)



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/605248>



Safely Watching Wild Adventures

ABSTRACT: The article begins by examining the artistic effects of a formal device, narrative iteration, which consists in presenting the same events twice or more times. As an example from Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* shows, this kind of recounting has important artistic consequences: within the story's plot it emphasizes the characters' feelings and responses, thus offering the readers elements that naturally attract human attention: passions, conflicts, options, and decisions, in particular spectacular, risky decisions. Asserting that for a long time successful narratives were built around worthy topics of gossip and/or news—couple formation, individual violations of law, and fights between nations—the article argues that in twentieth-century high literature attractive, well-organized plots are less frequent, the main modes of modernist literary attention being a dispersal of attention that encourages detachment from the world and a self-involvement that entails an endless wandering within one's own inner depths. These two kinds of narrative attention, one naturally focused on human actions and passions, the other one turning away from them, either through dispersion or self-examination, shape the way in which readers relate to the world of the story, sympathize with its characters, and participate in it. Based on Jonathan Lear's theory of catharsis, the article concludes that "gossip/news" narratives induce a significant amount of empathy, while narratives of dispersal and self-involvement often fail to do so.

KEYWORDS: *iteration, attention, gossip, catharsis*

Thomas G. Pavel is Gordon J. Laing Distinguished Service Professor at the University of Chicago, where he teaches French and Comparative literature. He is the author of *Fictional Worlds*, Harvard University Press, 1986; *The Spell of Language: Post-Structuralism and Speculation*, University of Chicago Press, 2001; and *The Lives of the Novel: A History*, Princeton University Press, 2013. He can be reached at tgpavel@yahoo.com.

NARRATIVE, Vol 24, No. 1 (January 2016)
Copyright 2016 by The Ohio State University

WRITING narrative literature is a craft. Like all crafts, it involves the skill to use specific tools and methods in order to attain specific ends. Since narrative tools and methods haven't always been explicitly codified, one of the tasks fulfilled by narratology consisted in identifying those which hadn't previously been categorized, labeling them, and describing their use. By now, splendid catalogues of narrative tools are available, as well as important reflections about their various functions. This paper will continue the conversation about the ways in which narrative devices contribute to the artistic success of a literary work. After looking at the artistic effects of a specific temporal device, *narrative iteration*, I will examine some of the links between this device and *human attention*. I will conclude by reflecting on our vicarious *participation* in the stories we read or hear.¹

I

To begin, I will argue, in the wake of Jim Phelan, Peter J. Rabinowitz, and David Herman's considerations about narrative time (in Herman et al. 2012), that *narrative iteration* has a substantial impact on the meaning of the stories that use this device. It was successfully described by Gérard Genette (1972), who, in his *Narrative Discourse*, continued the line of work initiated by Wayne Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961). Differing from Booth, however, who was always sensitive to the links between narrative figures and the literary message, Genette emphasized the formal properties of the narrative devices he examined and classified in a remarkably systematic fashion.

Let me place this figure (iteration) within the ensemble of temporal figures described by Genette. He distinguishes between *order*, *duration*, and *frequency* in narrating the events of a story. *Order*, Genette shows, can be affected by chronological jumps—*anticipations* or *recollections*—which highlight the differences between the sequences of events in the plot of the story and the order of their presentation to the public. The term *presentation*, by the way, seems to me more appropriate in this context than Genette's *discourse*, because these temporal arrangements occur both in genres that *tell* stories (epic poems, romances, novels, and novellas) and in those which *enact* stories (plays and movies).

Certain kinds of chronological jumps are age-old and widely used. Epic poems as well as the idealist novels (traditionally called romances) whose model was *An Ethiopian Story* by Heliodorus, usually begin *in medias res*, during a crisis whose antecedents would be later told by one of the characters (Ulysses in the *Odyssey*, Aeneas in the *Aeneid*, Kalasiris in *An Ethiopian Story*). Formally, recollections are similar to one another, yet they may have various artistic functions and literary properties. The calm, deliberate narration of a character's recollections (e.g. Ulysses's, Aeneas's, and Kalasiris's stories), told both for the sake of the public and of the other characters, is quite unlike the long solitary remembrances, usually more impulsive, less controlled, found in elegiac stories (*The Portuguese Letters*, *The Sufferings of Young Werther*), and even more different from the sudden flash-backs frequent in modern novels, plays and movies, from *Remem-*

branch of *Things Past* by Proust to *The Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller.

Concerning *duration*, Genette described the mechanisms of *acceleration*, *slowing down*, and insertion of temporal *gaps*. Like chronological jumps, duration games affect the presentation of *narrated* stories (in epic poems and novels), as well as the presentation of *enacted* stories (in plays and movies). Seventeenth-century playwrights, for instance, who aimed at minimizing the gaps between the plots of their plays and their presentation on stage (hence their regard for the ancient rules of unity of space and time), wondered how to link successive scenes to one another in such a way as to hide the inevitable pauses and breaks in the course of action. Pierre Corneille, who discussed this issue in his *Discourses* on theater (1660), reflected on the inevitable acceleration of the pace of events at the end of a tragedy, when the curiosity of the public is so strong that stretching plausibility becomes possible, if not even necessary. Corneille's example was his own *Rodogune*, but one can find this effect in virtually any Elizabethan revenge tragedy (Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, for instance, or Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*), a sub-genre that implausibly accumulates successive catastrophes at the end of the last act.

Concerning *frequency*, iterative presentations narrate or enact the same section of the plot several times, often using various points of view. Drama has always been familiar with this device: in *Hamlet* the death of the prince's father is narrated more than once. Nineteenth-century novels frequently use this figure. In Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, the horse race during which Vronsky's horse fails to jump over an obstacle is presented twice, the first time from a point of view close to Vronsky's experience of the event, the second time to Anna's.

Let me say it again: the careful study of such devices is a fundamental task of narrative studies, precisely because, once these tools of the narrative craft are identified and labeled, it becomes possible to go beyond formal classification and examine their rapport with the plot-structure as well as their artistic relevance (as did so successfully Emma Kafalenos, 2006). Indeed, the various kinds of links between, on the one hand, the temporal presentation of the story in narratives, plays, and movies and, on the other hand, the internal organization of the plot, can generate a multiplicity of artistic effects. To give just one example, chronological jumps operate differently if the events that are anticipated or recalled belong to the *main* plot or to a *secondary* one. This is particularly true of stories in which information is not readily available to all characters. The reader of *Manon Lescaut* by Prevost learns at the same time as the young narrator that his beloved Manon, a young, beautiful woman with whom he cohabits in secret in order to avoid the wrath of his family, that this Manon has cheated on him with the wealthy Monsieur B. and that she has moreover disclosed the narrator's secret address to his family. The *revelation* of this double betrayal is much more shocking than the mere *reports* of Tiberge, a faithful friend of the narrator who informs him about various things that happened during his absence. In both cases, at a certain moment in the story's plot we learn about events that took place earlier. The chronological inversion is formally the same, yet the difference between revelation and mere information is essential for the proper understanding of the story. Whereas the reader and the narrator could have learned much earlier about Tiberge's fidel-

ity without this discovery leading to a change in the plot's meaning, the surprise of Manon's treason, found out by the young narrator while he is at home with his family (which is strongly opposed to his affair with the young woman), belongs to the core of the plot.

The following examples will reinforce this point. In epic poems, the remembrance of past ordeals (Ulysses's story in the land of the Phaeacians, or Aeneas's in Carthage) has a double role: to inform the reader and the other characters about the events that took place before the beginning of the actual poem, and to suggest that the misfortunes of the hero are *perhaps* close to an end. After narrating his wanderings, Ulysses would perhaps settle in with the Phaeacians, just as Aeneas could remain at Carthage and take queen Dido as his wife. In the end, none of this will happen: the temporal jump to the past only signals the *false end* of the protagonist's ordeals. In Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, by contrast, the return—the invasive return—of the past when the narrator ingests a tea-perfumed madeleine signals the *true starting point* of the plot. The false end and the true starting point of the plot use the same temporal figure—the *analepsis*, in Genette's Greek-sounding terminology—but for different effects.

In order fully to grasp the relevance of the links between formal temporal games and the plot of a story we need to look at plot as a structured sequence of *actions*—and in what follows my reflections will rely on Wayne Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction* as well as on the recent work of James Phelan, Peter Rabinowitz, Robyn Warhol, Brian Richardson, and David Herman (in Herman et al. 2012) who brought narrative theory closer to our actual perception and understanding of human action. Narrative time in literary works, I would accordingly submit, makes full sense only when it is understood as part of the artistic representation of our actions, that is, when, in Herman's terms, it is seen in the light of a *person-typical* outlook. Formal temporal devices enhance this kind of representation, often by making it more vivid, more plausible. They are particularly adept at attracting our *attention* and keeping it focused on the sequence of actions that make up the story.

II

Seeking to relate formal devices to the artistic aims they serve, we were thus led to think on ways in which narratives attract and keep our attention. One obvious fact of ordinary life is that when we listen to stories—fictional or not—which are not immediately relevant to our own existence and tasks, our attention naturally tends to weaken. Why should we follow the contorted adventures of Ulysses, Theagenes and Chariclea, Hamlet or Moll Flanders? For two reasons perhaps, none of them exceedingly strong: first, fiction is relevant to human interests; second, it is a playful activity. It teaches (*docet*) and it delights (*delectat*). Concerning teaching, thanks to our profession we teachers know that it is not easy to keep students attentive to our lessons. And concerning delight, as any fan of soccer games realizes, the best games include some long, boring episodes. This applies to stories as well, the best ones now and then having their dull moments.

We thus need to figure out which aspects of a narrative attract and hold our at-

tention, helping us build the virtual reality Marie-Laure Ryan (2003) described so well, and see how temporal games are used in order to achieve this goal. To suggest an answer, let's have a closer look at the iterative presentation of Vronsky's failed horse race in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. As we know, Anna Karenina is a beautiful Russian lady married to a competent but rather close-minded bureaucrat much older than she. She is courted by the young officer Vronsky, who has a successful worldly life and excels in the fashionable art of horse-riding. Soon, Anna falls in love with him. After they consummate their love affair, as Nineteenth-century people used to say, Anna and Vronsky wonder whether they would ever be able fully to devote their life to each other. Having stopped sharing her husband's bed, Anna realizes that she has been left pregnant by Vronsky. Just before an important horse race, she calls him to come see her urgently. Although Vronsky's English groom advises him that "The first thing is to be calm before you ride" (183), Vronsky rushes to see Anna, who tells him the news. Worried, distraught, he returns to the stable a bit late, but succeeds in joining the race in time. Everything goes well until the moment when, for unclear reasons, Vronsky fails to keep up with his horse's movement, lowers himself into the saddle and touches the ground with one leg, thus making the horse (a mare) topple over his foot (199). Vronsky manages to free his leg and avoids being hurt, but the mare falls on her side and breaks her back. Vronsky has lost the race, probably because, in his groom's terms, he failed to keep calm before the ride.

One of the memorable features of Tolstoy's novel is that, after focusing for a while on one character or group of characters, it suddenly switches to another milieu. Having presented the horse race and the accident from a position close to Vronsky's, the next sections move to the vicinity of Karenin and his wife. At this point the story goes back in time, just a bit, in order to follow the married couple on its way to the horse race. The race and Vronsky's fall—whose details the readers already know—are now seen from Anna's quarters, that is, from the ladies' pavilion situated so far from the racetrack that she needs to look at the race through her binoculars. Anna is quite "tormented by her fear for Vronsky, but tormented still more by the sound of her husband's high and, as it seemed to her, incessant voice . . ." (207). As for Karenin, who suspects that Anna is in love with Vronsky, he observes her face "trying not to read what was so clearly written on it, and against his will read on it with horror what he did not want to know" (209). Indeed, when Vronsky falls, Anna, who like everybody else mistakenly believes that the young man has been severely hurt, starts "trashing about like a trapped bird," thus betraying her culpable feelings in public. She leaves the race in the company of her husband and in their carriage, under the pressure of emotion, she confesses: "I love him, I am his mistress, I cannot stand you, I'm afraid of you, I hate you . . ." In a theatrical rush of imprudence, she adds: "Do what you like with me" (213).

The horse race is presented twice in *Anna Karenina* and to label these moments a *frequency-related iterative effect* is perfectly correct from a formal, technical angle. Yet, the iteration is not felt as simply repetitive, given that the two episodes that include the horse race reveal important aspects of their main actors' psychology—Vronsky's in the first, Anna's in the second—in particular concerning their motivations, their paths of action, and their range of choices. What counts is not only the *event* pre-

sented twice but also, and especially, the human responses it triggers: misery in Vronsky's case, despair, miscalculation, and rebellion in Anna's. Our attention as readers is thus guided towards what Wayne Booth calls "practical" sources of interest, that is, elements that *naturally* attract our attention: human passions, conflicts, options, and decisions—in particular towards spectacular, risky decisions, which form the object of "natural" narratives, to use the terminology of Monika Fludernik (1996). The formalist approach aptly points to the "frequency-related iterative effect," that is, in our example, the twice presented horse-race. But what is truly important at the level of narrative craft (at the artistic level) is that the horse-race sparks off a cycle of violent reactions on the part of the characters, widens the break between husband and wife, pushes the lovers closer to each other, and at the same time gives both Anna and Vronsky a sense that misfortune is deeply embedded in their relationship.

We pay attention to these clashes, fights, and premonitions because what interests us in the first place when we read fictional narratives or attend theatrical performances is the human *drama* or the human *comedy*: the people and the actions we observe, understand, and evaluate. When we read *Anna Karenina*, its frequency-related iterative effects are there to guide us toward *what happens* to this unfortunate Russian woman. Similarly, when read Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, its abundant free-indirect discourse passages help us turn the novels' pages in our *natural* eagerness to *find out the fate* of Charles Bovary's unhappy wife. We know these are just stories. We do not live *in* them, we just watch them unfold, and since our attention cannot focus on more than one narrow target, the storyteller offers it to us little by little and jumping back and forth. These movements back and forth, these order, duration, and frequency games guide our gaze towards what happens, who acts, why, and how, a bit like the light projectors, which, in modern theatrical performances, bring out actors and their movements.

We thus need to distinguish between our more or less neutral *perception* of the formal devices present in a narrative and the vivid *attention* we pay to its action and actors. We certainly realize at some level that the horse-race in *Anna Karenina* appears twice, but we are not moved, impressed, shocked, by this iterative effect. What moves us is Vronsky's sadness, what makes us sympathize with Anna is her anxiety, what shocks us are her impulsive reactions, and what perplexes us is Karenin's incompetent politeness. Assisted by the perception of formal devices, it is the attention to the plot, the characters and their actions that makes us *participate*, to a certain extent, in the novel's world.

This happens because certain life experiences are crucial for human beings—generally and, also, to a large extent, historically—and *so* crucial that a narrative of these experiences attracts our attention in an immediate, non-problematic way. Couple formation, for instance, without which it is difficult to imagine the survival of our species, acts both as a general human concern and, from one historical period to the next, as a set of changing social and moral guiding requirements (norms, as they are usually called). It is certainly not by chance that so many memorable literary narratives have, from the oldest times to our own days, dealt with couple formation. The Trojan war began because of it, Achilles's anger rose from it, as did Aeneas's troubles in Carthage, Chariclea and Theagenes's wandering from Greece to Ethiopia, the innumerable adventures narrated by Chaucer and Boccaccio, the tragedy of the bride

of Lamer Moor, the sufferings of Clarissa, of Pip and Estella, and so on. Legitimate couples difficult to form and stabilize (Dickens's *David Copperfield* and *Little Dorrit*), illegitimate ones (*Anna Karenina* and Theodor Fontane's *Effi Briest*), and impossible ones (Balzac's *Lost Illusions*, Verdi's *La Traviata*) populate the last few centuries' novels, novellas, plays, operas, and movies.

No less effective in mobilizing our attention are stories about violations of the civic order (murder—the fertile field of mystery novels; theft and fraud—the specialty of the picaresque), or of personal dignity (providing, from minor insults to the most terrifying abuses, the topics of innumerable myths, dramas, and stories: from a slap on the face in Corneille's *Le Cid* and a vague suspicion of infidelity in *The Doctor of His Honor* by Calderón, to the discovery of an unsuspected incest in *The Mayas* by Eça de Queiros).

Going one step further, from individual conflicts to those involving communities, the clashes between cities, states, nations, empires, and their consequences: war, destruction, survival, or rebirth of the community are equally widespread sources of narrative interest. The *Iliad* is about the ruin of Troy, the *Aeneid* about its re-birth in Italy, *The Song of Roland* about fighting invaders, *War and Peace* about saving mother Russia from an evil foreign conqueror. Rearranged in a variety of contexts, heightened as archaic struggles between good and evil or as futuristic interplanetary conflicts, these topics reoccur in recent popular novels and movies, from *Star Wars* to *Lord of the Rings*.

One can imagine two kinds of tests that would help writers figure out whether a given topic would provide a good story and catch the reader's attention. The first is the *gossip test*, the relevance of gossip for literature having been beautifully explored a while ago by Patricia Meyer Spacks (1985). Would the subject under consideration, say, the love between two young people belonging to families that hate each other, or the love affair of a married woman with an elegant young officer, would this subject generate a juicy gossip session in the real world of your friends and acquaintances? If the answer is yes, go, write the story, even if it doesn't take place in your own time and social milieu. Readers are interested in such stories even if they happened long ago, in another country. The second test is the *news test*: would the story, say, of an honest merchant who, having been hurt by an arrogant nobleman, protests, fails, protests again, and starts a rebellion which turns into a civil war (you recognize *Michael Kohlhaas* by Kleist), would this story, if its equivalent took place today, be a good topic for the latest news? Most probably, since the conflict, in spite of its modest origins, sets a whole country on fire.

III

But, you might ask, do literary narratives always attract our attention in this simple, natural way? Do they always help it concentrate on the plot and on its human factors—actions, passions, intentions, and goals? What about some modernist stories which, precisely, avoid these sure ways of catching our interest? What about Beckett's *Molloy*? Or about Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*? Beckett's piece would certainly fail the *gossip test*: none of the actions narrated by Molloy in the first part of

the book and by Jacques Moran in the second would qualify as a topic for a good gossip session. Joyce's first novel would fare better, since the path of Stephen Dedalus, if translated in a simpler, more direct language (and cleared up of Latin quotes), could provide the subject of a polite dinner conversation among well-behaved friends. Still, talking about a young man who watches a young woman wade in the sea on an Irish beach, and because of this sight converts from the Catholic religion to the worship of art would presumably be less exciting than gossiping about a beautiful woman named Anna, who is married to a closed-mind bureaucrat and has an affair with a young, handsome officer. Moreover, the suicide of this beautiful, adulterous Anna, being worthy of a newspaper story, would also pass the *news test*—something neither Molloy nor Stephen Dedalus's story could possibly achieve.

One must therefore admit that quite often modernist writers as well as the post-modernist ones identified and studied by Brian McHale (1987) devise their stories without relying on the ways in which gossip, news, and other natural narratives catch our attention. In these modernist and post-modernist stories, plots—if they have any—are rarely well structured. Can anyone tell us the anecdote of Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*? In Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, one can figure out—vaguely—what the story is about, but whether it has a true end, a decisive denouement, remains unclear. The problems of the three Compson brothers and their sister Caddy do qualify as gossip topics, but the novel goes in all kinds of directions, making it very difficult for the reader to grasp “what happened,” as though “what happened” weren't in this case the novel's main point. Other modernist novels fail the gossip test even more dramatically. Take Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*, a first-person narrative about a man's boring existence which, at some point, leads him to a lonely, nauseating identification with the surrounding material world. Who among your dinner companions would care to hear this story? Sometimes, even though the novel's subject seems to pass the gossip test successfully, as happens in Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, whose main character, fully insensitive to his mother's death, kills an Arab he doesn't even know on an Algerian beach, no one can say *why* this main character acted the way he did. Gossip is not just about reporting memorable actions; it is also, perhaps especially, about speculating about their reasons and, finally, identifying them.

Some modernist narratives ask their readers to pay attention in new, uncommon ways. These narratives require an unusual amount of patience, readiness to follow interminable conversations rather than actions (as happens in Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*), long introspective monologues (in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*), and strange poetic descriptions (in André Breton's *Nadja*). In some cases, the reader must show a remarkable sensitivity to small, barely perceptible bursts of information (all along Joyce's *Ulysses*) and tolerance for inexplicable attitudes and decisions (as in Kafka's *The Trial* and *The Castle*).

This approach to story-telling subverts the usual route of the readers' attention and attempts to retrain it, to guide it towards new ways of selecting its targets and focusing on them. The most obvious feature of this kind of story-telling is lower, sometimes minimal reliance on plot. Readers rarely, if ever, turn the pages of these books faster and faster to see what happens to the characters, as they do with most

other narratives.

Such works appear to *avoid* story-telling—in the usual sense of the term. They obey a different kind of principle, perhaps having to do with a profound re-evaluation of art. Indeed, at some point in the nineteenth century many assumed (as Stephen Dedalus and Joyce did later) that art's mission consists in answering a need earlier fulfilled by religious practices, in particular by mystic devotion. Arthur Schopenhauer's ideas on art's place in human life converge with this view, as do, in a more energetic fashion, Friedrich Nietzsche's. Whether this religion of art emphasizes contemplative withdrawal or ecstatic self-assertion, the kinds of literature that better reflect these movements of the soul are *poetry* and *essay* rather than narrative. This is perhaps the reason why modernist novels are either steeped in lyricism and self-contemplation, as is the case with Proust, Joyce, and Faulkner's, or give an unprecedented large place to essayistic ruminations as do Thomas Mann and Robert Musil. Contemplation requires a different kind of attention, less focused on action, more distant from the natural, usual, operation of the mind, more sensitive to strange details and detours, changes of mood and topic, sudden ideas, inconclusive musing, aggressive nonsense. The main modes of modernist literary attention are *dispersal*, leading to detachment from the world, and *self-involvement*, entailing an endless wandering in one's own inner depths.

In stories that encourage dispersal of attention and subjective roaming within, formal narrative devices often function as *topics* rather than *means* for highlighting the characters' actions, passions, and conflicts. This practice conforms to the notion defended by some critics—Clement Greenberg (1961), for instance—that in modern times the best kind of art, called “avant-garde” art, uses artistic *means* as its true *end*. Take narrative iteration: in *Molloy*, one of the most striking moments is an iterative gesture. On the road, Molloy plays with the stones that he holds in one of his pockets, takes them one by one in his mouth, sucks them and then puts them in the other pocket. Iteration appears to be displayed *for its own sake*, as it were: it suggests how repetitively senseless Molloy's life is, and yet how funny this non-sense turns out to be. We are far from the double presentation of the horse race in Tolstoy's novel, an iteration meant to bring to life Vronsky and Anna's drama.

IV

The two kinds of narrative attention, one naturally focused on human actions and passions, the other one turning away from them, either through dispersion or self-examination, shape the way in which readers relate to the world of the story, sympathize with its characters, and participate in it.

In his classic essay “Katharsis” (1988), Jonathan Lear argued that, in Aristotle's view, when we read a tragedy or attend its performance, “the tragic poet awakens us to the fact that there are certain emotional possibilities which we ignore in ordinary life” (324). These possibilities are so remote that they make us feel that ordinary life is led “inside the plain” and, at the same time, they make us desire to experience “life outside the plain” as an imaginary game (*ibid.*). “It is crucial to the pleasure we derive

from tragedy,” Lear continues, “that we never lose sight of the fact that we are an audience, enjoying a work of art. [. . .] We imaginatively live life to the full, but we risk nothing” (324–25). Catharsis, Lear concludes, is the relief of releasing our pent-up emotions in a safe environment. Why do we feel this relief? Because the world evoked by tragedy—in Aristotle’s view—is both coherent and meaningful. In it, human actions and passions are comprehensible even when they surprise us, and plausible even when they strike us as unheard-of. Attending a tragedy, we are safely watching wild adventures, grasp their meaning, and imaginatively participate in them.

Although as defined by Aristotle tragedy enacts a rather particular type of story—complete and well-motivated, involving reversal, recognition, and pathos, about heroes who are neither perfectly good nor entirely evil—the way it allows its public to safely participate in highly unusual events and actions seems to me to extend to virtually all stories that *naturally* attract our attention. It extends, in other words, to most stories that pass the two above-mentioned tests: the gossip test and the news test. The highly respected classical epics, tragedies, and novels *The Iliad*, *Oedipus Rex*, *An Ethiopian Story*, *Yvain*, *Lazarillo de Tormes*, *Hamlet*, *Don Quixote*, *The Princess of Clèves*, *Clarissa*, *Les Misérables*, *Anna Karenina*, as well as popular literature, including Raymond Chandler’s mystery novels and *The Lord of the Rings* (the movie), all invite us to live life to the full, yet imaginatively and without risking anything. Moreover, there must be something quite special about our daily gossip (and I am far from claiming that I know what) that allows us to experience a kind of catharsis, a plainer, more ordinary catharsis than the tragic one. It consists in the pleasure of hearing all these exciting natural narratives while knowing that most of them are not exactly about us, that the dangers, bad decisions, unfortunate events, ridiculous attitudes they report won’t necessarily affect us. (Sometimes they do, but learning how our family, colleagues, close acquaintances can impact our own life generates a special kind of satisfaction, a pleasant “arousal of prudence,” which includes a playful component not too different from the one provided by literary narratives.) I would even claim that the news, the daily news available on the internet, TV, and newspapers, although they are meant to terrify and mobilize us by the daily announcement of a mini-apocalypse, often make most of us feel safe, far from the areas of danger, protected from it by the platitude of our daily life. Similarly, we participate in all these exciting gossip- and news-like fictional stories, epics, novels, dramas, movies, while feeling at the same time that we are, in Lear’s terms, just part of an audience enjoying a work of literature.

But I am not sure that this sense of safety fully extends to the modernist narratives which encourage either dispersal of attention or incessant self-seeking, stories which linger in the darkest, less accessible areas of the world and the self. Most often, narrative studies, including Booth (1961), Franz Karl Stanzel (1984), Ann Banfield (1982), and Monika Fludernik (1996) rightly emphasize that many ways of telling stories are common to older and newer literary trends. It seems to me, however, that at least in certain cases, stories that rely on dispersal of attention and self-seeking tend to make the readers feel less certain that they are indeed, as Lear would say, “inside the plain” safely watching “life outside the plain.”

Two kinds of uncertainty confuse the public of these stories. It is often difficult to know, when reading a certain section of the text, at which point of the story one finds

oneself. In *The Sound and the Fury*, the switches between situations and narrators are particularly bewildering. In addition, it is often equally difficult to figure out the denouement, if there is one, and to infer the meaning of the story, again supposing it has one. Critics sometimes saw these effects as a result of *ambiguity*, a figure assumed by William Empson (1930) to mark out modernist writing. But I am not sure that the ending and meaning of Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady* or of Faulkner's novel are truly ambiguous, that they truly have two or more equally valid meanings: they rather seem to me to have been deliberately left unexplained, deliberately made difficult to fathom. Such stories aim at leaving the readers baffled, at telling them that they cannot possibly discern "life outside the plain." As a result, the readers' reflection after the end of the story becomes more and more difficult and yet, more needed than usual. Does this story apply to me, they would ask, in spite of all its vagueness, its incomprehensible aspects? Why am I not allowed to see exactly what is going on? Why am I invited to cross this labyrinth? Would this experience give me any relief, any catharsis?

To answer these questions one could perhaps surmise that as the fictional adventures we watch get wilder, we feel safer and safer "inside the plain." Conversely, as stories calm down, get closer to us, so close that their contours are more and more difficult to figure out, we feel less safe, less protected. Let me suggest, as a conclusion, that there are two good ways of greeting the stories we meet: "Welcome, wild ones, as long as you are far away!" and "Welcome, enigmas, and do come close—but not too close!"

Endnote

1. This paper was a keynote address at the 2015 conference of the International Society for the Study of Narrative, in Chicago, March 2015.

Works Cited

- Banfield, Ann. *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction*. Boston: Routledge, 1982.
- Booth, Wayne. 1961. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. 2nd edition. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983.
- Empson, William. 1930. *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. New York: New Directions, 1947.
- Fludernik, Monika. *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Genette, Gérard. *Figures III*. Paris: Seuil, 1972.
- Greenberg, Clement. "Avant-garde and Kitsch." In *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, 3–21. Boston: Beacon Press, 1961.
- Herman, David, James Phelan, Peter J. Rabinowitz, Brian Richardson, and Robyn Warhol. *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts & Critical Debates*. Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 2012.
- Kafalenos, Emma. *Narrative Causalities*. Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 2006.
- Lear, Jonathan. "Katharsis." *Phronesis* 33.3 (1988): 297–326.
- McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1987.

- Phelan, James. *Living to Tell About It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2005.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2003.
- Spacks, Patricia Meyer. *Gossip*. New York: Knopf, 1985.
- Stanzel, Franz Karl. *A Theory of Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984.
- Tolstoy, Lev. 1878. *Anna Karenina*. Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. London: Penguin, 2004.