

# Remarks on Narrative Space

Gerald Prince

**Abstract:** The founders of narratology paid relatively little attention to space in narrative but the importance of narrative spatial features and structures is now widely recognized and one can even speak of a spatial turn in the discipline. Yet, although many aspects of story space, of the space of the narrated, have been studied, few aspects of other spatial levels in narrative — the space of the narrating or discourse space, for instance, the space of the narration or spatial location of the narrator narrating, and the space of the reception or spatial location of the narratee — have been explored. Moreover, the relations between the different levels, including relations of frequency, of order, and of proportion, have been similarly neglected. Drawing on a variety of examples, from Iván Turguénieff's *The Diary of a Superfluous Man* to André Gide's *L'Immoraliste*, this paper discusses all four of the above mentioned spatial levels as well as fundamental links between them.

**Key words:** narrative space, frequency, order, proportion

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**标题：**叙事空间简论

**内容摘要：**叙事学的奠基者们很少关注叙事的空间问题，但是当下叙事空间特征与结构的重要性被广泛认可。我们甚至可以说叙事学产生了空间转向。尽管人们已经对故事空间与叙述对象的空间有所研究，但是对叙事中的其他空间层面——叙述行为的空间或话语，比如对叙述空间或叙述者的空间位置，接受空间或受述者的空间位置等研究不足。此外，不同空间层面之间的关系，包括频率、顺序、比例等也同样遭到忽视。本文以伊万·屠格涅夫《多余人日记》和安德烈·纪德《背德者》为例，讨论了上述四种空间层面及它们之间的

内在关系。

**关键词：**叙事空间；频率；顺序；比例

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The founders of narratology paid relatively little attention to space in narrative. Barthes (1-27) is primarily concerned with functional, actional, and narrational, rather than spatial, analysis. Genette (*Figures III*) is justly famous for his exploration of temporal relations. Bremond (*Logique du récit*) studies the logic of narrative actions. Todorov (*Grammaire du "Décaméron"*) focuses on temporal sequences and their relations. As for Greimas (*Du sens: essais sémiotiques*), he too privileges time over space in his account of spatiotemporal programming and narrative programs. This relative lack of interest is understandable, given that early narratologists were particularly attentive to distinctive and essential narrative traits and elements. Narratives are representations of asynchronous series of events and any such representations not only involve temporal changes of states, temporal relations between them, and temporal links between the representing and the represented, but they also point to them. On the other hand, though represented events, no doubt, occur in space — though they “take place” — it is quite possible to represent them without explicitly referring to their spatial positions and dimensions.

Still, early narratologists did not entirely neglect narrative space. Hamon (*Introduction à l'analyse du descriptif*), for example, devoted considerable attention to narrative settings as well as to description and Chatman (*Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*) preferred a distinction between story space and discourse space (see also Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*; Prince, *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative*; Sternberg, “Ordering the Unordered: Time, Space, and Descriptive Coherence”). Besides, students of narrative working in other traditions and having other preoccupations emphasized the importance of space. For instance, Bakhtin underlined the interdependence of time and space in narrative and showed that narratives model reality according to various chronotopes or time-space complexes and are definable in terms of them (Bakhtin 84-258). Similarly, Lotman (*The Structure of the Artistic Text*) pointed to the links between spatial configurations and symbolic force (e.g.

high/low and good/bad) or, more generally, between moves from one kind of space to another and plot deployment. Narratological work building in part on these traditions, like Zoran's ("Towards a Theory of Space in Narrative") discussion of different levels of spatial structuration in narrative, further increased awareness and consideration of the functioning of narrative space. So did the influence on narratology of possible worlds theory and, later, that of phenomenological and cognitive studies stressing the embodied nature of mind, say, or the receiver's creation of mental maps for navigating a narrative world (Herman, *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*; Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*; "Cognitive Maps and the Construction of Narrative Space"; "Space"; Ryan, Foote, and Azaryahu, *Narrating Space, Spatializing Narrative: When Narrative Theory and Geography Meet*). The importance of spatial features and structures is now widely recognized and one can even speak, like Buchholz and Jahn, of a spatial turn in narratology (Buchholz and Jahn 551).

Yet, although many aspects of story space, of the space of the narrated, have been studied, few aspects of the other spatial levels in narrative — for example, the space of the narrating or discourse space — have been explored and the relations between the different levels have been similarly neglected. Along with the space of the narrating, these levels include the space of the narration or spatial location of the narrator narrating and the space of the reception or spatial location of the narratee. In what follows, I will discuss various features of all four levels and various links between them. Note that I will not deal with the notion of spatial form associated with Frank (221-246), that I will not examine spatial imagery and the fundamental spatial schemata affecting many facets of language or cognition, and that I will not consider the spaces that are mentioned or evoked by the narrative but do not constitute locations of actually occurring events (e.g. "She said that she often thought of Paris and London"). Nor will I consider the space of the narrative text as material object, the space of the medium through which the narrative is manifested (sign, oral, or written language, pantomime, painting, sculpture, etc.). As Chatman argued, the level of narrative manifestation is different from the level of narrating or discourse (Chatman 23-24). Saying "Veni, vidi, vici" and writing it entails the use of different media and yields narratives with different manifestations but identical narratings. The same can be said of (oral or written) narratives like "Veni, vidi, vici" and "I came, I saw, I conquered." Of course, the medium of manifestation affects the powers and concrete shape of the narrative: "For instance, it is clear that verbal narratives express narrative contents of time summary more easily than cinematic narratives while the latter more easily show spatial relations." Of course,

too, “manifestation must further be distinguished from the mere physical disposition of narratives — the actual print in books, movements of actors or dancers or marionettes, lines on paper or canvas, or whatever” (Chatman 25, 26).<sup>1</sup>

The space of the narrated is the physical environment in which the situations and events represented take place. It contains many or few entities, all of which partly determine its nature, and it can be differently dimensioned, open or closed, changing or unchanging, mobile or immobile, variegated or unvaried, and so on. The space of the narrating can likewise involve different dimensions and prove fixed or fluctuating, moving or stationary, diverse or homogeneous, and so forth. The space of the narration is the space in which the narrator’s act of narrating takes place. In many narratives, it is not mentioned at all. For example, we do not know where Proust’s Marcel or the narrator of *Père Goriot* or that of a simple story like “Mary was poor and then she married John and she became rich” produce their narratives. Some narratives, however, do mention the space of narration and even describe it. In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow narrates at night aboard a cruising yawl at rest on the river Thames. *Manon Lescaut*’s des Grieux recounts his (mis)adventures to M. de Renoncour at the “Golden Lion” in Calais. Michel, in Gide’s *L’Immoraliste*, tells his story to his friends on the terrace of a house located at the edge of an Algerian village and the narrator-protagonist of *Diary of a Superfluous Man* notes the following the day before he dies: “I am writing these lines in bed. Since yesterday evening there has been a sudden change in the weather. Today is hot, almost a summer day. Everything is thawing, breaking up, flowing away. The air is full of the smell of the opened earth, a strong, heavy, stifling smell. Steam is rising on all sides. The sun seems beating, seems smiting everything to pieces” (Turgénieff 87). Like the space of the narrated and that of the narrating, the space of the narration can change and exhibit different characteristics, for instance if the narrator moves from one location to another. As for the space of reception, it can be (essentially) the same as the space of narration, for example when distinct narrators and narratees are *in praesentia*, as in *Manon Lescaut*, *L’Immoraliste*, or *Heart of Darkness*; and it can be different from that space, as in epistolary monodies or in *Père Goriot*, where the narratee is said to be reading Balzac’s novel “sinking into a comfortable armchair” (Balzac 2).<sup>2</sup> Of the many relations involving spatial levels in narrative, perhaps the most important and intricate ones are those that obtain between narrating and narrated space. Among them are relations of frequency: singulative, when a

1 As suggested by my examples, the level of manifestation itself comprises various levels.

2 Note that Genette (*Figures III*) hardly discusses the time of reception, which also deserves to be studied.

given narrated space or spatial unit is presented (depicted, described) once; repeating, when it gives rise to the same presentation more than once; and iterative, when two or more instances of its coming into play and being the focus of attention yield only one presentation.<sup>1</sup>

There are also relations pertaining to order. The space of the narrated can be shown in a systematic or unsystematic way, whether it is presented all at once or bit by bit (as called for by the situations and events, their enhancement, or their clarification) and whether a character's point of view is adopted or not. For instance, a given space or spatial unit can be presented from top to bottom, left to right, or front to back. If a given pattern is established, it can be disrupted (which gives rise to "anatopias"). Besides, the presentation of a given space or spatial unit can be temporarily set aside for the presentation of another one.

Still another set of relations pertains to matters of extent or, rather, matters of scale, or proportion, or ratio. Just as it makes little sense to use a clock for measuring the duration of the narrating (what is the duration of the narrating in *Vanity Fair* or in Benozzo Gozzoli's *The Dance of Salome and the Beheading of John the Baptist* in hours, minutes, or seconds?), it makes little sense to use the metric system, say, for measuring its extent: what is the length of the narrating of an oral narrative or of a narrative pantomime in kilometers, meters, or centimeters? Moreover, given that the level of the narrating is distinct from that of narrative manifestation, it makes little sense to calculate the extent of a narrating in numbers of words and pages or in number of gestures. A more useful way of measuring narrating extent, I think, is establishing the number of narrative statements that constitute it, whether they are stasis statements (in the mode of IS) or process statements (in the mode of DO or HAPPEN). Narrative statements are independent of the expressive medium employed and "[b]oth the English sentence 'He stabbed himself' and a mime's plunging an imaginary dagger into his heart manifest the same narrative process statement" (Chatman 31-32). Similarly, the narrating in an oral or written narrative like "John ate a hamburger and then he went to sleep" consists of two process statements and, in an oral or written narrative like "Mary was unhappy and then she met Jane and she was happy," it consists of three statements, two in the mode of IS and one in the mode of DO. Given a narrated space or spatial component, there could be many or few narrating statements setting it forth or "stating" it. Perhaps one could speak of micronarrating (or micro spatial narrating) when little narrating betokens the narrated space and of macronarrating when, on the contrary, a lot of narrating

1 Here, like at other points, I use Genettean terminology. If frequency and some other narratological categories can pertain to events, they can also pertain to existents.



does, with mesonarrating designating intermediate possibilities.<sup>1</sup> These are obviously not very precise measures. Furthermore, for many if not all cases, there is no table specifying correspondences between narrating and narrated extent, number of narrating statements and size of narrated space. Given a verbal or painted narrative, how many statements are required for presenting a nine by twelve bedroom, a small kitchen, or a large living-room? Indeed, should we speak of micro, meso, or macro-narrating, our assessment would be a function of the relative quantity of statements devoted to various spatial units in a given narrative (imagine that ten statements present a huge room and two hundred statements present a tiny one); or it would be a function of what, based on our experiences and knowledge, we take to constitute a large, or average, or small number of statements: imagine that one statement is devoted to an entire town or that one thousand statements present a small closet.

As Herman points out, the presentation of narrated space is “inextricably interlinked with the problems of perspective” (Herman 301). The latter may be that of a God-like narrator or that of a particular character, for example, and the position of the focalizer like the distance between focalizer and focalized may vary or it may remain unchanged. Moreover, in any narrative, only some of the indefinitely many aspects of the focalized space are selected as the object of the narrating statements: one narrative may present visual and auditory features while another may favor olfactory or tactile characteristics; one may concentrate on invariant traits and another on variable attributes; one may privilege volumes as opposed to surfaces or contours while another one may prefer lines and edges. Besides the selected aspects may be presented in a haphazard way or an orderly one (from left to right, say, or from top to bottom).

If the narrating can state various aspects of the narrated space, it can also state various aspects of the space of the narration. As mentioned above, it is often the case that no information at all is given about where the narration or narrating act occurs (just as there is often no information about when it occurs). But, sometimes, such information is provided in a more or less organized, frequent, and detailed fashion. Likewise, though the narrating often does not state anything about the space of the reception, it occasionally presents some of the attributes of the latter and can do it at length or very briefly, once or repeatedly, and in a methodical or unmethodical manner.

Clearly, the amount, frequency, and kind of arrangement of narrating space used in presenting the space of the narration may be more or less significant when

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1 A more discriminating measuring instrument might include, as extremes, meganarrating and nanonarrating.

compared with those used in the presentation of the space of the narrated or the space of the reception. Furthermore, the latter three spaces may be more or less different or distant from one another and the difference, like the distance, may be altered in the course of the narrative. As already noted, in *L'Immoraliste*, for instance, the marginal and isolated (“natural”) Algerian space in which Michel narrates is the same as that in which his three friends function as his narratees; but it is different as well as distant from much of the space where the narrated events occur (Normandy, for example, where nature and culture are in harmony, or Paris, which represents the height of artificiality) and both the distance and the difference change: Michel, who goes to Algeria for his honeymoon, travels from there to Normandy and then to Paris, moves back to Normandy, and, finally, returns to Algeria. Note that the space of narration, like that of reception, can function as a thematic, structural, or characterization device — in *L'Immoraliste*, for instance, it mirrors Michel’s marginalized status — and can also acquire significance through its relations to other narrative spaces. Consider a narrative in which the narration occurs in a prison cell but refers to events happening in wide-open spaces or a narrative in which the narration occurs in a war zone but the reception takes place in a peaceful hamlet.

There are, no doubt, many more spatial elements in narrative that should be examined, including various aspects of the spaces briefly discussed above and various aspects of their links. For example, a narrative may feature several distinct narrating instances, several discrete lines of action, several different narrators or narratees; it may contain logically impossible places or configurations; it may multiply paradoxical, metaleptic, or contradictory relations. Indeed, further examinations would not only add to the descriptive toolkit (and interpretive possibilities) of narratology but would also help answer questions about the role played by the different spatial levels in an actual receiver’s locating of narrative existents and events, for instance, about the links between the exploitation of (particular elements of) the different levels and specific real-world periods and spaces, or about the interaction of these levels with different media. In other words, they would contribute to the cognitive, historical, geographical, and material pursuits of narratology.

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