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Introduction: Narrative Perspectives and Interior Spaces in Literature Before 1850

This special issue of *Style* investigates how writers present interior spaces (houses, drawing rooms, halls, offices, closets, etc.) in narrative literature.¹ A much greater variety of interiors could be focused on, for instance, prisons, covered markets, yacht cabins, or train compartments. The question of visual representation in narrative has been revived by recent research into readers' cognitive mapping activities and their participation in the co-creation of storyworlds. Marie-Laure Ryan commented in 2003 that "while it seems evident that narrative comprehension requires *some kind* of mental model of space—how else could readers imagine character movements?—the issue of the form and content of this model remains to be explored" (Ryan 216; original emphasis). According to Ryan, drawing on Linde and Labov as well as Tversky, spatial description can convey objects' intrinsic orientations relative to one another from a stable viewpoint (*gaze* perspective), or it can suggest a bird's-eye view that presents a totalized mental image of a specific setting in the shape of a *map* (216). A third possibility, one that bridges the temporal demands of narrative form and the spatial logic of a map, is the *tour*, which "represents space dynamically from a perspective internal to the territory to be surveyed, namely the perspective of a moving object. The tour thus simulates the embodied experience of a traveler" (Ryan 218). Though this strategy seems especially appropriate to the chronotopes associated with the novel, the demands of description antedate the novel as a genre.

The rhetoric of the catalog, the discourse of the tour-guide or guidebook, the conventions of ekphrasis, and other strategies may be deployed in interior descriptions with or without a situated focalizer, the most common technique in modernist narrative. Perspectival rendering of space makes it possible for the reader to visualize objects in relation to one another, even to map the room and its contents. In response to figural narrative situations rigorously employing a focalizer whose perspective provides a consistent center of consciousness, a tacit rule holds that "the description has to be felt by the reader to depend on the vision of the character who is responsible for it, on his ability to see, and not on the knowledge of the

novelist, on the contents of his files" (Hamon 149). If a character's perceptions do *not* govern representation of the space he or she enters or moves in, what does?

In addition to enriching the evidence for a developmental account of perspectivism, arising out of earlier aperspectival techniques, this special issue contributes to the understanding of description as a component of narrative fiction. Description has been a neglected stepchild in the very large family of narratological concepts. Traditional narrative theory of the mid-twentieth century often employed description as the *other* against which *narrative* proper was defined by juxtaposition. For example, Félix Martínez-Bonati—in the opening gambit of his *Fictive Discourse*, dedicated to describing the stylistic features of literary language—writes: "Narration is the purely linguistic representation of change in particular persons, states of affairs, and circumstances. Description, on the other hand, is the representation of permanent, momentary, or recurring things, or events of short duration, in their unchanging aspects" (Martínez-Bonati 22). Description thus comes to occupy the space between the events that constitute story, and as an element of discourse it is perceived to delay or even halt the action: a retardatory structure (Sternberg 161) or a "relatively autonomous expansion, characteristically referential" (Hamon 148).

In her 1985 original *Narratology* Mieke Bal charily defined *description* as "a textual fragment in which features are attributed to objects" (Bal 130), acknowledging that these marginally important passages are "practically and logically necessary" (129) and linking them to motivation (130–34). Similarly, in Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's classic textbook from 1983, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, which continues to be popular as an assigned text, description turned up only as a minimalist test for the perceptibility of the narrator (96–7) or as an aspect of that form of duration in which nothing happens, namely "pause" (Rimmon-Kenan 53).² Subordinate, if sometimes prior to the action, description plays a role in discussions of setting and characterization, and in the latter case is often associated with earlier narratives (including forms with roots in orature) where information about characters receives an externalized emphasis.³

A major breakthrough for the analysis of description occurred in 1990 when Seymour Chatman's *Coming to Terms* established a preliminary typology of text types: argumentative, descriptive, and narrative. Though narrative takes precedence in his analysis, Chatman asserts that "description has its own logic" (Chatman 10), rendering the "properties of things" (9) without evoking either a time-sequence or events (18). It is "subservient" to narration only when "the text makes more overall sense and rewards us more richly as a narrative than as a description" (21). Subsequent to Chatman's recuperation of description as a text-type in its own right,

narrative theorists such as José Manuel Lopes, Harold F. Mosher, and Ruth Ronen discussed narrativized descriptions and elaborated a poetics of description. The results of this revived interest in description are capably summarized by Torsten Pflugmacher in his entry "Description" in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (2005), which includes a call for more research: "a closer discourse analysis may be called for in order to investigate the full function and impact of description in specific texts" (101).

Earlier narratological work on description and mostly non-narratological research on ekphrasis have foregrounded a number of important issues and observations with regard to the forms and functions of description. This introduction is not the place to provide a summary of this quite extensive literature. Suffice it to enumerate a couple of major insights that may be useful to frame the analyses presented in the essays that follow.

As already noted, linguistically, description is frequently treated as a text mode (Fludernik calls this a macro-genre) alongside the narrative, argumentative, instructional, or expository text modes. On the surface level of texts in the narrative discourse, sentences, or even clauses, of report (narrative), argument, exposition, description, and/or dialogue alternate.⁴

Secondly, when looking at conversational narrative, description occurs mostly in initial orientation sections or in the delayed orientation slots.⁵ This *functional* correlation in the analysis of oral storytelling needs to be contrasted with narratology's focus on *what* is being described and on the *static* or *atemporal* nature of description. Thus, as Chatman—in alignment with the classical narratologists—puts it in *Story and Discourse*, narrative deep structure consists of "events" (subdivided into "actions" and "happenings"), and "existents" (distinguished as either "characters" or "settings") (26). These are treated as the "form of content," whereas the "substance of content" consists in "people, things, etc. as processed by the author's cultural codes" (ibid.). Space is therefore a backdrop on which reside individual entities, either animate or inanimate, with animate existents initiating events that deploy inanimate objects as tools, or collide with them, transfer them, or handle them in other ways. Just as humans are relieved against the backdrop of settings and objects, description provides a foil to plot.

Third, in contrast to this basic dichotomy, narratological studies and linguistic analyses have noted the imbrications of description with the depiction of events to the extent that a clear differentiation between description and narrative becomes impossible. The cohabitation of narrative and description within individual sentences is of ancient date: the classic example passage of *ekphrasis*—Homer's depiction of

the shield of Achilles in *Iliad* (Book 18, Verses 468–607)—is more narrative than descriptive in its deployment of verbs of motion and its focus on the depicted figures as agents. In literary texts, adjectival modifications and complements frequently add a descriptive element to the delineation of actions or events just as settings do not necessarily exhaust themselves in the static quality of being-in-existence but are often scenarios in which many things are in movement: horses cantering down the green, cars passing round the curve, governesses pushing prams, women hanging up washing, boats sailing to the island, and so on (see, for instance, Mosher on a passage from Conrad's *Secret Agent*—Mosher 436–42; Conrad 15–16).

Fourth, as Hamon has so persuasively demonstrated, descriptions in novels tend to be structured in long catalogues in which contiguous elements within the given frame are listed and expanded in order to provide for atmospheric or evaluative characterization. Metonymy is therefore a distinctive feature of nineteenth-century description. Moreover, particularly in relation to interiors, metonymy operates not merely on the level of the represented (fictional) world but also semantically on the level of implication or association. Settings provide telling information about their residents.

Descriptions, therefore, shade off into symbolism—this is our fifth and final point—especially where metonymy converges with metaphor, as Michael Riffaterre has so convincingly demonstrated. Descriptions not only correlate metonymically with characters' moods or the atmosphere current in a scene; they may moreover foreground macrostructural connotations that come to serve as guidelines for interpretation. Bal, for instance, notes the islands which Mme Bovary observes in the Seine at Rouen as she looks down on the town from the carriage on the hill; these are described as “stagnant fish,” a metaphor that resonates with the constraints experienced by Emma but also with the narrowness of provincial society as represented in the novel as a whole (Bal, “On Meanings” 128–30).

When do writers begin inviting readers into the imaginative construction of described interiors, by centering the description in an observer possessing an orientation that indicates a perspective? The contributors to the issue variously discuss the function of description of interiors and its relation to domesticity, leisure spaces, and psychological interiority. Some contributors relate the representation of interior spaces to the discussion of the spatial turn in literary studies, while others make connections to historical developments in literary and cultural practices. In terms of the analysis of perspectivism, this special issue contextualizes narrative perspective with reference to literature, psychology, the visual arts and architecture, and the poetics of space. A number of contributors also use their material to test

F. K. Stanzel's assertion in *A Theory of Narrative* that perspectivism in spatial representation of interiors emerges only in later nineteenth-century fictional prose description (Stanzel 122–123).

The issue proceeds by arranging a series of core samples from the fictional prose narratives of earlier and later literary periods, analyzing their representational strategies for the representation of interiors. Were these spaces presented perspectivally (or not) before the dominance of internal focalization? A focus on literature written prior to 1850—including medieval, early modern, and eighteenth-century texts—opens up this question and tests Stanzel's thesis. A good place to look for traces of perspectivism or for the alternative rhetorical techniques of aperspectivism occurs in descriptions of interiors, to which the contributors have turned their investigations. As an intervention in the literary history of narrative techniques, the detection of early perspectival renderings of interiors could push the date of a character-centered narrative situation back into the early modern or even medieval period, or it could validate Franz Stanzel's assertion that in the early centuries of prose fictional narration, aperspectivism ruled the day.

A point perhaps to be raised in this introduction concerns our choice of interiors and our decision to stop the diachronic survey at 1850. Since so much work on description has concentrated on the nineteenth-century novel and, less extensively so, on the *nouveau roman*, we have focused on earlier texts in order to compensate for the comparative lack of analysis of medieval to 1850 narrative. As regards our exclusion of landscapes (or gardens, or architecture, or people, or wildlife), we have restricted our material in order to allow for greater comparability between individual essays. Shying away from a situation in which the handful of essays that fit into one issue turn out to compare apples with oranges (descriptions of country houses with those of gardens, or of railway stations with depictions of animals or with portraits), we opted for interiors as a fairly manageable common denominator. However, as the reader will see, interiors have turned out to be more variable than we had thought possible, and external views (approaches to houses in Cynthia Wall's essay, London scenes in Robyn Warhol's contribution) also make an appearance by way of contrast and comparison.

Notes

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² The relevant passages in Bal's 1999 revised *Narratology* are only slightly modified but have been shifted to the front of the volume (36; 37–43). The equivalent passages in Rimmon-Kenan's 2002 second edition are unchanged (98, 53).

³ See, for example, Scholes and Kellogg's 1966 discussion of character description in Icelandic sagas (Scholes, Phelan, and Kellogg, 171–72).

⁴ Interestingly, a textual unit that as a rule does not have a corresponding text mode. See, e.g., Weinrich, de Beaugrande, Werlich, and Virtanen.

⁵ For the terminology see Labov and Waletzky.

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