

THE FUNCTION OF SIMULTANEOUS NARRATION IN GREEK LITERATURE FOR ADOLESCENTS

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ABSTRACT

A fundamental aspect of narration, one that has obvious implications in the construction of meaning, the reception of the text and the composition of interpretation, on the part of the reader, is the manipulation of narrative time. The paper examines the use of the so-called simultaneous narration in selected Greek literary works for adolescents. Particular emphasis is laid on homodiegetic narrative texts, in which the story unfolds during its very narration. In these texts, the temporal distance between the narration and the story vanishes, projecting the impression of complete identification between the narrating and the experiential self. The aim of the paper is to study the function of the above narrative choice in the frame of plot development and character presentation, as well as its probable impact on the building of interpretations by young readers, despite the, apparently, problematic nature, as far as the narrative logic is concerned.

Key Words: Simultaneous Narration, Fppt, Greek Literature For Adolescents.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the fundamental structural elements in a story, with obvious consequences on the construction of meaning and on the reader's reception of it, is the specification of narrative time. The concept of time, in its well-known distinction into *story time* (narrated time) and *discourse time* (narrative time), has occupied literary theory and criticism over an extended period, especially in the field of narratology.¹ Temporal order, including instances of anachronies (analepsis, prolepsis), duration and frequency, become objects of study not only *per se*, but mainly in light of their overall function in the text and their impact on interpretation.

In relation to the time of the narration, Genette, in his seminal study *Narrative Discourse* (1980: 216-220), proposed the distinction into four narrative types, according to the perspective of temporal stance. The most usual type, which predominates in both literature for adults and for adolescents, is that of *subsequent narrative*: the narrative act is retrospective, following temporally the narrated story. In the traditional ("third-person")² extra-heterodiegetic narrative, in its many variations, there is use of mainly past tenses that recreate a more or less defined (and definable) temporal distance between story and the narrative situation. The more rare type of *prior narrative* is found in texts of oracular, visionary, or prophetic nature, in which narration

Among others see Weinrich (1964), Casparis (1975) and Ricoeur (1984, 1985, 1988).¹

For reasons of convenience, we use the traditional terms "first-person" and "third-person" narratives, instead of ² the more precise "homodiegetic" and "heterodiegetic", accordingly (Genette 1980).

appears to precede the story, predicting future events. These “predictive” type narratives are usually part of broader narratives of different temporal structure. In the so-called *interpolated narrative*, story and narration are intertwined (eg. diary entries, letters, etc. in novels), as experiencing and recounting the events alternate, while the narration itself may have an impact on the story (eg. letter-writing is both a narrative means and a part of the plot).

In *simultaneous narrative* story and its narration, the focus of our interest, co-incide temporally. The emphasis in this type, according to Genette, may be laid either on the story or on the narrative discourse. In the first instance, the distance between story and narration is eliminated creating a «transparent» narrative, which «fades away in favor of the story» (cf. the French «new novel», «objective literature», «school of the look», etc.). In the second case, the narrative process obtains the leading role, rendering the plot pretextual. In both cases the use of present tense allows the above ambiguity, promoting the transcendence of the limits between story and its narration. Genette (1980), however, does not pay any more attention to this type in the rest of his study.

By and large, scholars have considered the concept of simultaneous narration problematic. According to Rimmon – Kenan (1983: 140, note 6), eg., “If one accepts Derrida’s view of *différance*’ (1973) no narration can ever be simultaneous with the action. What is conventionally accepted as ‘simultaneous narration’ is then a narration which is minimally distanced from the action.”³ In general, the simultaneity of action and its narration is considered as irrational. Any process of narrating is taken to be axiomatically referring to the past, if recent (Fleischmann 1990: 23 – 24, Ricoeur 1985: 98, Scholes 1980: 209-210).

The same notion is tacitly accepted by Andrea Schwenke Wylie (1999, 2003) in the case of first-person narration in novels for young adults, which is of special interest for our study. Schwenke Wylie (1999) has introduced the quite popular, by now, critical terms of *immediate-engaging*, *distant-engaging*, and *distancing narration* to distinguish among three types of first-person narration, according to the distance, in terms of time lapse and involvement, from which the reader relates to the narrator’s act.⁴ According to her, (1999: 186 – 187, 190), in this type of adolescent novels the *immediate-engaging narration* predominates. The narrating agent identifies with the focalizer, story and its narration are very close in time, while the employment of adult narrators, irony and obvious commentary on the story are avoided. In *immediate-engaging narration* the events have taken place in the narrator’s *recent* past (temporal closeness), although the time distance is not usually stated or identifiable. Moreover, the reader’s engagement comes as a result of privileging the voice and perception of the focalizer (the character who is perceiving, speaking, thinking or feeling) rather than that of the narrator. In this way there is a promotion of the readers’ involvement, their drawing into the story, and of a kind of *commitment* of the narratee to the narrator. The reader is drawn to the “embrace” of a reliable narrative voice (McGillis 1991: 38 – 39).

A minimal temporal distance between action and its narration is considered a feature of the so-called *current*³ *report* (eg. broadcasting sports events) (Casparis 1975: 43 – 45, Cohn 1999: 100).

On the terms *distancing* and *engaging* in relation to the narrator in children’s literature see Warhol 1986: 811 –⁴ 812.

What is again not acknowledged in Schwenke Wyile's typology is the type of narration where there is not only a marked proximity between the narrated and narrative time (Schwenke Wyile 199: 191), but a complete temporal identification between the two; a merging of the narrating and experiencing self, in Stanzel's terms (Stanzel 1984). Reading experience, however, proves that a great deal of contemporary fiction for adults, as well as for adolescents, is written in the **first-person**, combined with the use of **present tense (FPPT)**, in a more or less extended portion of the work, thus rendering this type of narrative device a popular means of temporal narrative structure. FPPT narration is also employed in an increasing number of recent Greek novels for young adults. Many authors (Alki Zei, Manos Kontoleon, Maroula Kliafa, Eleni Svoronou, Chará Gianakopoulou, etc.) use this device either in certain parts of their narrative, in combination with other temporal structures, or throughout their text. Indicative examples of FPPT narration may be found in many novels by Philippos Mandilaras. In his novel *Life like an elevator* (*Ζωή σαν ασανσέρ*) (2012) the popular theme "boy meets girl" (then loses girl and tries to find her again) is interwoven with apt references to contemporary Greek issues, such as financial and political crisis, unemployment, activism, etc, enriched by the eternal issues of youth (feelings of disappointment and pressure, rage, music and love). In the above-mentioned work Mandilaras employs the two central characters as "narrative voices" that undertake to mediate alternatively the plot of the novel through their perceptions:

Neither warm nor chilly - just cloudy. Cloudy in the morning, cloudy throughout the afternoon and the same on to this moment. At least, as far as I can tell from the first-floor window. The weather is indeed ideal for committing suicide! I'm taking my Math exam tomorrow, and I am currently revising the criteria for congruence of triangles- Side-Angle-Side/ Angle- side-angle/ side -side -side. Very intriguing! [...]

There is no commotion at the apartment next door, which is inhabited by the young female student. I reckon that the shitfaced bloke at the corner flat (I have never laid eyes on him, but in these underpants, how could he be anything but a shitface?) is playing the sappy love song for her. She's not in though. Ha-ha- you lose shitface!

(Life like an elevator, p. 7)

The abolishment of spatial and temporal distance of the narration from the narrated instance cannot be strictly ascribed to a "natural" narrative situation, in Fludernik's (1996) terms, one, i.e., that corresponds to real-life experientiality. One way of accounting for the use of FPPT would be to consider it a) as an incident of historical present extended over the entire length of the text, or b) as an expression of interior monologue (cf. Cohn 1999: 99-100). As far as the historical present tense explanation is concerned, one might argue that this tense is generally used in the frame of past-tense, subsequent narratives, in order to create a feeling of vividness and dramatic effect. In other words, historical present really stands for preterite, in the guise of present, and really refers to past time, while the narrative subject usually possesses and reveals knowledge of the development of the story and its outcome. Yet, in Mandilaras' work, as in many other FPPT narratives, there is no sign whatsoever of an anterior temporal stance from which the story is narrated and recreated in the guise of historical present. On the contrary, there

is an emphatic projection of the “here-and-now”, of the contemporaneity of events and their narration.

FPPT narrative cannot be accounted for as interior monologue, either. Interior monologue is, in essence, a non-narrative situation, a means of access to a character’s mind, thought, feelings, etc., without the medium of narration, an unmediated, as it were, reconstruction of a character’s consciousness. However, in most FPPT narratives, the impression of unmediated character’s consciousness is undermined by “a knowingly analytical voice” (Cohn 1999: 103) that mediates the experience, comments, describes, quotes thoughts and feelings (using, for instance, verbs like “I am thinking”, “I feel that”, etc.), records other characters’ speech and actions, etc. Moreover, there are examples of time compression, summary phrasing, etc., that clearly clash with the notion of the unfolding of a character’s consciousness (eg. in *Life like an elevator*: “For the next half an hour I remained stuck in the kitchen” p. 22, “Ten minutes later, and after a tedious preaching, I go back to my room”, p. 29, etc.). Cf., eg. the excerpt below:

I feel I’m caving. Now that she knows half the truth, I might as well divulge the rest. I tell her everything, literally everything! About the ipod, about my thoughts and conjectures, about my rambles around Philothei, about my pipe dreams of running into him at the concert... And while talking, what crosses my mind is the fact that tomorrow half the city of Athens will get wind of the tall guy. I couldn’t care less, though. Especially if the tall guy or a friend of his are among the people in this half of Athens. I tell Irene about it and she falls into my arms and dissolves into tears. It is a case of someone crying over another person’s troubles. At that moment I hear the front door open...

“What’s going on girls?” Mum came in

(Life like an elevator, p. 46-47)

In other words, FPPT narration may combine both reflection or self-reference, by verbalizing thought and feeling of the narrative voice, and current report of events taking place in his/her presence. It employs a discernible voice of a character to give the reader, as it were, a narrative “tour” around the fictional world, as well as this character’s understanding of it, together with expressing his/her feelings, thoughts, etc. In other instances, the narrative function of this character is made more obvious. For example, in Eleni Svoronou’s novel *Under Gemini* (2010), Leoni, a sixteen-year-old girl, attempts to tackle issues of adolescence and coming-of-age: her (poor, in her opinion) looks, relationships with the other sex, friendship, family, the internet, etc. The character undertakes to relate her predicament to some ambiguous audience, in whose place the readers come to position themselves:

Have you ever pictured yourself orating in front of a crowd? The crowd you’re addressing as well as the topic are irrelevant. You’re reasoning about everything and about nothing..... Anyway, I am admittedly, constantly afflicted by a harrowing oratory fantasy. Therefore, ladies and gentlemen, listen up.... This time I have a good story to recount to you. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, it’s true. I’m in a tight spot. It’s New Year’s Eve today, and the bell ringing of

carollers has driven us up the wall. Dad is trying to recall his pin numbers, while I feel utterly perplexed.

[*Under Gemini*, p. 9-10]

Excluding thus the possibility of properly classifying simultaneous narration under the rubric of historical present or interior monologue, one has to either modify existing narrative frameworks, in order to fit FPPT narration in, or to construct a new paradigm that befits this narrative technique that has become so widespread. In this direction, one could do worse than initially trace a number of features that, on the whole or partly, seem to characterize contemporary simultaneous narratives:

a. Narrative situation is obscure. There is an *implication of a narrative situation*, but “one that defies all manners of picturing it in verisimilar lines” (Cohn 1999: 105). However, as a rule, there are not many obvious narrative signs that project this improbable, in rational terms, narrative situation. The narration of the story unfolds without drawing the reader’s attention to questions concerning the incongruous temporality of the narrative situation, the “when”, “what”, “how” (Cohn 1999: 105) and, one may add, “why” of the narrative instance. In this way, **the narrative process and its improbability become obscure and inconspicuous**. They are not consciously noted by the reader, or at least they are not considered as destroying the narrative illusion.⁵

b. Present tense refers to non-specific time. The use of present tense does not refer to a specific “present” time, but is rather marked by temporal obscurity. Cohn (1999: 106) employs the term *fictional present*, a peculiar narrative tense that, although frail in temporal specificity (or perhaps due to it), may render a vast range of notional modes (iterative, instantaneous, potential, unreal, etc.), connotations, etc. Fludernik (1999: ch.6, 2003: 123) uses the term **narrative present tense**, a tense that loses its deictic quality and provides a metaphor for fictional distancing. This use of the present tense does not refer to the present (or the past), but acquires a *generic* narrative quality. In these lines, one may speak of a *fictional narrative situation*, an idiosyncratic literary device that does not need to draw on any notion of “natural” circumstance, but carries its own functional value, as proved by its popularity in modern fiction. The reader, by a kind of *narrative license*, so to speak, embraces the convention of living and simultaneous recording the experience, without raising any logical doubt about its possibility in real life communication frameworks.

c. This silent “pact” between reader and author, or rather narrator and narratee, that defies the real-life “un-naturality” of the narrative situation is enforced by **contemporary means of mediation of experience** with which readers (especially young ones) are quite accustomed (eg. cinema, TV, F/b, blogging, Twitter, Instagram, etc.). Cinematographic narrational forms have

It has been argued that, in some instances of present-tense narration (*performing narration*), the specific⁵ temporal use may even create a **sincerity effect**, due to its (seeming) lack of arrangement and manipulation (Casparis 1975: 77 – 94). However, basic types of performing narration (*emotive, emotive-cum-affective, affective*) are considered, in fact, to concern past events (Damsteegt 2005: 44-51).

exerted a deep influence on literary writing for many decades, while modern audio-visual media narration and modes of communication create the notion of immediate communication of experience: its (almost) instant transmission and access by others. In times when intrusion in other people's lives is facilitated and even sanctioned by the above communicational means, when privacy is often voluntarily nullified, not only is the young reader used to a sort of "inside" and/or "parallel vision", but also desires to have immediate access to other people's thoughts, feelings, life experiences, etc., and certainly appreciates the narrative opportunity to do so. Such means and their communicative techniques may in fact influence not only the readers' "suspension of disbelief" concerning the probability of the narrative situation, but also the very form of the narrative text.⁶

In Mandilaras' novel, for instance, one could trace this embedding of "cinematographic techniques", or at least the illusion of them, together with the use of relevant terms – in English, as seen in the excerpt below:

Tall guy, where have you been? It's been a week and I haven't seen you anywhere... I've played numerous screen versions of our encounter on my mind. Each and every one of them in *slow motion* [in English]. And they all end up in a hug or a kiss. I prefer the latter, although I'm aware of the fact that life is not a movie. I fancy the fairytale, though. Wasn't our meeting in the rain a meet-cute?

Play [in English]

I catch a glimpse of you across the road sprinting, then slowing down at a short distance from the truck, then again walking, I watch you glance at dad....And this is when I made the huge mistake of kissing you on the lips as I felt embarrassed- oh God I was so embarrassed all of a sudden) and of merely muttering "hi", without considering the silliest, simplest, the most common thing to do; get your phone number tall guy. Your phone number.... Yet, you didn't ask for it either, tall guy, even though you were incapable of reacting while being overrun by such a yellow storm/ (or, you were incapacitated by the sweeping force of such a yellow storm).

Stop [in English]

(*Life like an elevator*, p. 33-34)

In this cinematic frame may also be read the final paratextual note, at the end of the book, which the reader cannot but approach as a sort of "credits" at the end of actual movies.

The tracks that are "**heard**" in the novel are all included in Amy Winehouse's multi-awarded album entitled "Back to Black" (2006), thanks to which she established herself as a world- class female artist- composer who kick-started the revival of soul music.

[my emphasis]

In Svoronou's novel *Under Gemini*, for instance, the heroine is a blogger and this means of communication with⁶ her internet readers seem to influence the broader narrative situation of the novel. Cf. eg. "Ok. I don't want to freak you out any more. Neither you nor the readers of the blog. So, I wrote, that night, something softer" p. 31.

[end note]

d. There is a **consistent focalized self-narration**, that of the experiencing self (“absolute focalization of its narrated experience” Cohn 1999: 105), rare in other narrative circumstances, although sometimes afforded to more than one characters of the story, in order for the reader to access different perspectives on it (cf. Mandilaras’ *Life like an elevator*). Damsteegt (2005: 42) defines it as *Internal Focalization of Awareness (IFA)*: “actions are reported by the I-as-narrator but are focalized, in the sense of being mentally perceived, by the I-as-character. [...] The present-tense action reports, then, indicate an awareness on the character’s part of his or her actions at the very moment they are being performed.” The use of the same tense affords a perspectival immediacy, providing a direct link with the mind of the character.⁷ Declerck (2003) defines this type of perspective as *experiencer’s point of view*,

e. The **authorial role is obscured, it becomes vague**, usually confined to the **paratext** (rough structural division, foreword and afterword, typographic choices, etc.). The author, if not (seemingly) made redundant, at least recedes, projecting the narrative authority to this first-person narrator that undertakes the mediation of the story. In Cohn’s (1999: 104-105) words, simultaneous narration’s innovation is “to emancipate first-person fictional narration from the dictates of formal mimetics, granting it the same degree (though not the same kind) of discursive freedom that we take for granted in third-person fiction: the license to tell a story in an idiom that corresponds to no manner of real-world, natural discourse.”

f. The lack of the *kind* of discursive freedom that the traditional first – and third-person narrator possessed (ie. hindsight, knowledge of the development and ending of the plot, access to other characters’ thought and feelings, etc.), although enhancing the readers’ involvement in the story events and their empathetic stance – fostering, in fact, the closest possible relationship between reader and narrator – creates, at times, a **sense of unreliability**. This feeling of unreliability does not refer to the probability of the narrative situation, as mentioned above, but rather to the possibility of deep understanding of the events, as well as their interpretation, on the part of the character-narrator. Being immersed in the story that mediates, this character cannot be fully trusted to make complete sense of it. He/she does not have either the time or the distance to fully grasp the events happening. As a consequence, depending on the authorial design and narrative craft, the reader may be called upon to note misunderstandings, to account for certain events, to adopt, that is, when needed, a critical stance from the character-narrator, and to exert **interpretative effort**, in order to form their own interpretation of the situation and of the narrator’s understanding of it.

To sum up, one may note that there is a range of limitations in the use of FPPT narrative in relation to traditional first- or third- person narratives. In FPPT narration, however, the sense of “plot-in-evolution” enhances the reader’s sympathetic stance towards the character’s experience, which is foregrounded by the use of the present tense. Moreover, the illusion that the end of the story is not known (or even pre-defined) increases the reader’s suspense: everything is evolving.

It is, however, noteworthy that, in Damsteegt’s (2005: 76) view, all cases of IFA and their “adeictic” present tense⁷ belong to (**not refer to**) the past, regardless of whether there are indications to that effect contained in the texts.

Everything is at stake, and in any moment things may turn over to the character's damage or benefit. Last, but quite importantly, there may be noted a kind of concession, or at least negotiation of authority. There are no signs of authorial intervention. The author is marginalized. The character who mediates the plot, in a sense, renounces the knowledge and organizational power, with which he/she was invested in traditional narratives. He/she has no prior knowledge of the closure of the plot and does not partake either in determining the development and outcome of the story or in its narrative structuring from a posterior narratorial stance. This kind of authority remains, as it were, to be negotiated, calling for the young adult reader's involvement in the narrative procedure on almost equal terms.

As a result, this seeming lack of a higher structural and explanatory/interpretational narrative authority has the inevitable consequence on the demands potentially set by the text on the narratee, in terms of "accountability": in order to construct informed interpretations, readers have to rely more on their judgment, they have to draw on their own cognitive and evaluative system of approaching the fictional and the real world, and, furthermore, to be critical of both the characters' and their own values and ideology. Put otherwise, the more they are *drawn* towards the textual construct, the more they are expected to be aware of their own role in the reading process.

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