Case studies in English

1.4 Discourse and subjectivity

Case study 1.4
The Huron: L'Ingenu
From Voltaire*'s Romances*, First published in French in 1767
(original title : *L'ingénu*).
Translated by William F. Fleming.

A satirical novella tells the story of a man from the Huron tribe transported to Paris in 1690. In this story Voltaire satirizes religious doctrine, government corruption, and the folly and injustices of French society. He advocates deism and lambastes intolerance, fanaticism, superstitions, sects, and the Catholic clergy.

He [Gordon] was affected at the fate of this young woman, like a father who sees his dear child yielding to a slow death. The Abbot de St. Yves was desperate; the prior and his sister shed floods of tears; but who could describe the situation of her lover? All expression falls far short of the intensity of his affliction.

His aunt, almost lifeless, supported the head of the departing fair in her feeble arms; her brother was upon his knees at the foot of the bed; her lover squeezed her hand, which he bathed in tears; his groans rent the air, whilst he called her his guardian angel, his life, his hope, his better half, his mistress, his wife. At the word wife, a sigh escaped her, whilst she looked upon him with inexpressible tenderness, and then abruptly gave a horrid scream. Presently in one of those intervals when grief, the oppression of the senses, and pain subside and leave the soul its liberty and powers, she cried out:

"I your wife? Ah! dear lover, this name, this happiness, this felicity, were not destined for me! I die, and I deserve it. O idol of my heart! O you, whom I sacrificed to infernal demons—it is done—I am punished—live and be happy!"

These tender but dreadful expressions were incomprehensible; yet they melted and terrified every heart. She had the courage to explain herself, and her auditors quaked with astonishment, grief, and pity. They with one voice detested the man in power, who repaired a shocking act of injustice only by his crimes, and who had forced the most amiable innocence to be his accomplice.

"Who? you guilty?" said her lover, "no, you are not. Guilt can only be in the heart;—yours is devoted solely to virtue and to me."

This opinion he corroborated by such expressions as seemed to recall the beautiful Miss St. Yves back to life. She felt some consolation from them and was astonished at being still beloved. The aged Gordon would have condemned her at the time he was only a Jansenist; but having attained wisdom, he esteemed her, and wept.

[...]

The beautiful and unfortunate Miss St. Yves was already sensible of her approaching end; she was serene, but it was that kind of shocking serenity, the result of exhausted nature being no longer able to withstand the conflict.

"Oh, my dear lover!" said she, in a faltering voice, "death punishes me for my weakness; but I expire with the consolation of knowing you are free. I adored you whilst I betrayed you, and I adore you in bidding you an eternal adieu."

She did not make a parade of a ridiculous fortitude; she did not understand that miserable glory of having some of her neighbors say, "she died with courage." Who, at twenty, can be at once torn from her lover, from life, and what is called honor, without regret, without some pangs? She felt all the horror of her situation, and made it felt by those expiring looks and accents which speak with so much energy. In a

word, she shed tears like other people at those intervals that she was capable of giving vent to them.

Let others strive to celebrate the pompous deaths of those who insensibly rush into destruction. This is the lot of all animals. We die like them only when age or disorders make us resemble them by the paralysis of our organs. Whoever suffers a great loss must feel great regrets. If they are stifled, it is nothing but vanity that is pursued, even in the arms of death.

Analysis

The Ingenu is a young Huron (originally from the territory of present-day Canada) who leaves his homeland to travel the world. When he arrives in Brittany, the abbot Kernabon and his sister believe him to be the son of a brother who died in Canada during an expedition against the Hurons. Voltaire models his character on the myth of the "noble savage." The protagonist's naivety serves to highlight the flaws of French "civilization."

The novel tells the story of the thwarted love between the Ingenu and Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves. Prejudice, irrationality, corruption, and the personal ambitions of certain characters determine the fate of the protagonists. The Ingenu is imprisoned for his heterodox religious views, and his confinement gives him the opportunity to meet Gordon, a cultured man who has been condemned for his adherence to Jansenism (a doctrine that the Catholic hierarchy considered heretical because it emphasized sin and, drawing on the ideas of Saint Augustine, denied free will and affirmed that only divine grace could bring about salvation). Gordon introduces the Ingenu to the study of philosophy and the humanities. The relationship between the two men gradually leads Gordon to question his own convictions, especially his Jansenist fanaticism, which he eventually renounces. Meanwhile, Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves tries to free her beloved. Her despair leads her to lose her honour, falling victim to the actions of M. de Saint-Pouange (a man as powerful as he is corrupt). The young woman loses her health and, ultimately, her life.

The chosen excerpt depicts the scene in which the Ingenu and Gordon, after being released, witness the agony and then the death of Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves. Voltaire turns it into a dramatic scene. Although it is a third-person narrative, the text is deeply imbued with subjectivity—not only that of the characters, whose words and thoughts are conveyed either directly or indirectly by the narrator, but also that of the narrator himself.

Among the devices used to express the subjectivity of the characters and the narrator, it is important to highlight the tone of pathos that characterizes the entire passage. This is a technique intended to move the reader. The pathos is expressed above all through what Benveniste calls the peripheral markers of enunciation—for example, the use of interrogative modality in rhetorical questions ("but who could describe the situation of her lover?" or "Who, at twenty, can be at once torn from her lover, from life, and what is called honor, without regret, without some pangs?"), and especially through the use of evaluative modalities in the statement by multiplying subjectiveness to evoke strong emotions, for example "affected", "desperate", "floods of tears", "intensity of his affliction", "almost lifeless", "departing", "groans rent the air", "he bathed (her hand) in tears", "inexpressible tenderness", "a horrid scream", "oppression of the senses", "(when…pain) subside(s)", "infernal demons", "tender but dreadful expressions", "terrified", "quaked", "astonishment", "grief", "pity", "shocking act of injustice", "crimes", "innocence", "unfortunate", "death", "shocking serenity", "exhausted nature", "miserable glory", "regrets", "pangs", "horror".

Although it is a third-person narrative that recounts a story in which the narrator does not intervene (the events take place in 1689 and the text was published in 1767), *L'Ingénu* also makes use of specific markers of enunciation. According to Benveniste, these are features that refer to the person who is speaking and the moment of that speech. Indeed, although it is a work of fiction, the philosopher's point of view can be heard. And although —as is always the case in fictional genres— the novel has a narrator who is as fictional as the characters he describes, the reader hears the philosopher's opinions. The use of the present tense in certain passages—an enunciative marker referring to the present moment of utterance—lets this voice come through, as we can observe in certain remarks:

> All expression falls far short of the intensity of his affliction. (line 4)

This type of specific index of enunciation appears above all when interpreting the story that has just been told towards the end of the excerpt:

> Who, at twenty, can be at once torn from her lover, from life, and what is called honor, without regret, without some pangs? (lines 36-37)
> or
> Whoever suffers a great loss must feel great regrets. If they are stifled, it is nothing but vanity that is pursued, even in the arms of death. (lines 43-45)

These are general truths formulated in Voltaire's present. The philosopher's subjectivity is also perceptible in the expression of a wish following the death of Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves:

> Let others strive to celebrate the pompous deaths of those who insensibly rush into destruction. This is the lot of all animals. (lines 41-42)

The philosopher's subjectivity is also perceptible in the first person plural deictic in the following sentence :

> We die like them only when age or disorders make us resemble them by the paralysis of our organs. (lines 42-43)

In these remarks, the pathetic register — understood here as a tone rich in pathos and emotional resonance — is interwoven with the philosopher's didactic register, as he approaches the end of his text and speaks directly to articulate what he aimed to demonstrate through this fictional narrative.

Beyond the narrator's voice, pathos is also strongly present in the voices of the characters—whether they are central figures in the story or briefly imagined ones ("She did not make a parade of a ridiculous fortitude; she did not understand that miserable glory of having some of her neighbors say, 'she died with courage.' ", lines 34-35). The inclusion of direct speech (with its set of interjections, exclamations, questions, and subjectiveness) heightens the dramatic nature of the scene.

Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves makes herself heard when she addresses both her lover and God:

> "I your wife? Ah! dear lover, this name, this happiness, this felicity, were not destined for me! I die, and I deserve it. O idol of my heart! O you, whom I sacrificed to infernal demons—it is done—I am punished—live and be happy!" (lines 13-15)

And a few paragraphs later :

> "Oh, my dear lover!" said she, in a faltering voice, "death punishes me for my weakness; but I expire with the consolation of knowing you are free. I adored you whilst I betrayed you, and I adore you in bidding you an eternal adieu." (lines 31-33)

The reader can also hear the voice of the Huron as he addresses Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves :

> "Who? you guilty?" said her lover, "no, you are not. Guilt can only be in the heart;—yours is devoted solely to virtue and to me." (lines 21-22)

As we can see from the cited examples, the vocabulary and tone used by the characters are just as emotionally charged as those of the narrator.

In conclusion, we can say that while it is natural for subjectivity to permeate the speech of a person or character, the analysis of this excerpt shows that subjectivity can also infuse the narrator's discourse, even when recounting a story in which he takes no part. Understanding the mechanisms identified by Émile Benveniste in his description of the formal apparatus of enunciation allows us to grasp how su bjectivity manifests itself in discourse.