Boundaries of Narrative*

Gérard Genette

WITHIN THE SPHERE OF LITERATURE, narrative[1] may be defined simply as the representation of a real or fictitious event or series of events by language, and more specifically by written language. This common formal definition has the merit of being obvious and simple. Perhaps its principal drawback is precisely that it encloses itself and us within the evidence. This definition masks that which in the very being of narrative creates problems and difficulties by somehow effacing the boundaries of the narrative's practice, the conditions of its existence. To define narrative formally is to accept, perhaps dangerously, the idea or the feeling that the origins of narrative are self-evident, that nothing is more natural than to tell a story or to arrange a group of actions into a myth, a short story, an epic, a novel. However, the evolution of literature and of literary consciousness in the last half century will have had, among other fortunate developments, that of drawing our attention to the singular, artificial, and problematic aspect of the narrative act. We must once again recall the shock of Valéry on considering a statement like "The marquise went out at 5 o'clock." We realize the extent to which modern literature, in diverse and at times contradictory forms, has lived and illustrated this fertile surprise, how it has willed itself and how, in its very meaning, it has made itself an interrogation, a shock, a contestation of the narrative term. The falsely naive question—"Why narrative?"—should at least be able to incite us to seek or more simply to recognize the negative limits of narrative, to consider the principal plays of oppositions through which narrative defines and constitutes itself in the face of various nonnarrative forms.

I. Diegesis and Mimesis

In several brief sentences of the *Poetics*, Aristotle has formulated a primary opposition. For Aristotle, narrative *(diegesis)* is one of two modes of poetic imitation *(mimesis)*, the other being the direct representation of events by actors speaking and performing before the public.[2] Here the classical distinction between narrative poetry and dramatic poetry is established. This distinction had already been outlined by Plato in the third book of the *Republic*,

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with the following two differences: Socrates denied to the narrative the quality (or, to him, the fault) of imitation, and he took into consideration those aspects of direct representation (dialogues) that nondramatic poems, like those of Homer, may include. Thus from classical origins two contradictory traditions seem to exist whereby narrative would be opposed to imitation as its antithesis or would constitute one of its modes.

For Plato, the domain of what he calls *lexis* (or manner of speaking, as opposed to *logos*, that which is said) can be theoretically divided into imitation properly speaking *(mimesis)* and simple narrative *(diegesis)*. By simple narrative Plato means all that the poet relates "in speaking in his own name, without trying to make us believe that it is another who speaks."[3] Thus in Book I of the *Iliad* Homer tells us of Chryses: "He came to the Achaeans' great boats to buy back his daughter, bringing a tremendous ransom and bearing the bands of Apollo the archer on the golden staff in his hand. He entreated all the Achaeans, but especially Atreus' sons, two fine military leaders."[4] In contrast, the next verses consist in imitation, because Homer makes Chryses himself speak, or rather Homer speaks, pretending to have become Chryses, and "strives to give us the illusion that it is not Homer speaking, but really the old man, Apollo's priest." Here is the text of the discourse of Chryses: "Descendents of Atreus, and you also, well-armed Achaeans, may the gods, dwellers on Olympus, allow you to destroy Priam's city and then to return without injury to your homes! But for me, may you also give me back my daughter! And for that, accept this ransom, out of respect to the son of Zeus, to Apollo the archer." But Plato adds that Homer could as well have continued his narrative in a purely narrative form by recounting the words of Chryses instead of quoting them. This would have made the same passage, in indirect style and in prose: "Having arrived, the priest implored the gods to allow the Achaeans to take Troy and to keep them from destruction, and he asked the Greeks to give him back his daughter in exchange for a ransom and out of respect for the gods."[5] Plato's theoretical division, opposing the two pure and heterogeneous modes of narrative and imitation within poetic diction, elicits and establishes a practical classification of genres, which includes the two distinct modes (narrative—represented by the ancient dithyramb—and mimetic—represented by the theater) plus a mixed mode, or more precisely an alternating mode, that of the epic, as we have just seen in the example from the *Iliad*.

At first glance, Aristotle's classification is totally different since it consigns all poetry to imitation, distinguishing only imitative modes: the direct, which Plato has designated as imitation, and the narrative, which Aristotle, like Plato, names *diegesis*. In addition, Aristotle seems not only fully to identify the dramatic genre with the imitative mode (as does Plato) but also fully to identify the epic genre with the purely narrative mode, without taking into consideration the mixed character of the epic mode. This reduction may be related to the fact that Aristotle defines, more strictly than Plato, the imitative mode by the scenic conditions of the dramatic representation. This reduction can justify itself equally by the fact that the epic work remains essentially narrative—no matter what the actual portions of dialogue or di-

rect discourse and even if this portion surpasses that of the narrative—because its dialogues are of necessity surrounded and brought about by the narrative parts which properly constitute the content or thread of the epic's discourse. Moreoever, Aristotle acknowledges Homer's superiority over other epic poets because Homer personally intervenes as little as possible in the *Iliad* and usually puts already defined characters on stage, thus conforming to the poet's role, which is to imitate as much as possible.[6] Aristotle therefore seems implicitly to realize the imitative character of the Homeric dialogues and thus the mixed character of epic diction which is narrative in its depth but dramatic in its largest extension.

The difference between the classifications of Plato and Aristotle can thus be reduced to a simple variation in terms. These two classifications agree on the essential opposition between the dramatic and the narrative. The dramatic is considered by the two philosophers as more fully imitative than the narrative. There is an agreement on this fact, in some ways underlined by a disagreement in value. Plato condemns poets, from the playwrights to Homer, as imitators, too mimetic for narrative poets. Plato admits into his City only one ideal poet whose austere diction would be as unmimetic as possible. In direct contrast with Plato, Aristotle places tragedy above the epic and praises Homer for all that brings his writing closer to dramatic diction. The two systems are thus identical except for a reversal of value. For Plato, as for Aristotle, narrative is a weakened, attenuated mode of literary representation. And at this point, it would be difficult to conceive of other interpretations of narrative.

However, it is now necessary to introduce an observation with which neither Plato nor Aristotle seems to have been concerned, and which will restore to narrative its value and its importance. Direct imitation as it functions on stage consists of gestures and acts of speech. Insofar as it consists of gestures, it can obviously represent actions, but here it escapes from the linguistic plane where the specific activity of the poet exercises itself. To the extent that it consists of acts of speech, of discourses delivered by characters (and evidently in a narrative work the portion of direct imitation is reduced to that), the literary work is not, properly speaking, representational. The work binds itself to reproduce, as is, a real or fictitious discourse. One can say that the above-cited verses of the *Iliad* (12-16) give us a verbal representation of the acts of Chryses, but one can't say as much of the five following verses. They do not re-present the discourse of Chryses: if they concern a discourse that was really uttered, the verses repeat it literally, and if they concern a fictitious discourse, they constitute it literally. In both cases, the work of re-presentation is nonexistent. In both cases, the five lines of Homer are completely identical with Chryses' discourse. Evidently it is not the same for the five narrative verses which come before and which are not in any way lost in the acts of Chryses. As William James says, "The word 'dog' doesn't bite." If poetic imitation is considered to be the verbal representation of a nonverbal reality, and in certain cases of a verbal reality (as pictorial imitation is considered the representation by a picture of a nonpictorial reality and sometimes of a pictorial reality), then imitation must be found in the five

narrative verses but not in the five dramatic verses. These dramatic verses consist simply of interpolating in the middle of a text representing events another text drawn directly from these events. It is as if, anticipating certain modern procedures, a Dutch painter of the seventeenth century placed in the center of a still life a real oyster shell rather than the painted image of a shell. This rather obvious comparison is included in order to emphasize the profoundly heterogeneous character of a mode of expression to which we are so accustomed that we do not perceive the most abrupt changes of register. According to Plato, the mixed narrative (the most popular and universal mode of telling a story) imitates alternatingly in the same tone and, as Michaux would say, "without even noticing the difference," a nonverbal matter which the narrative must represent as well as it can and a verbal matter which presents itself as itself and which the narrative need simply quote. If the narrative is rigorously faithful to historical events, the historian-narrator must be very sensitive to the changing of orders when he goes from the narrative work of telling the completed acts to the mechanical transcription of the spoken words. But if the narrative is partially or totally fictitious, the work of fiction, weighing equally on the verbal and the nonverbal contexts, doubtless has as an effect the masking of the difference which separates these two types of imitation. One type of imitation is in direct relation while the other type calls for the intervention of a more complex system of mediation. While we can admit with some difficulty that the operations of conceiving of acts and conceiving of words do proceed from a similar mental operation, "to say" these acts and "to say" these words constitute two very different verbal operations. More precisely, only the first act constitutes a real operation, that is, an act of diction in the Platonic sense, which requires a series of transpositions and equivalencies as well as a set of unavoidable choices between those elements of the story to be retained and those to be omitted, choices between the different possible points of view, etc. All of these operations are obviously absent when the poet or historian limits himself to transcribing a discourse. One can, and in fact must, contest that distinction between the act of mental representation and the act of verbal representation—between *logos* and *lexis*. However, this leads to contesting the very notion of imitation that conceives of poetic fiction as a simulacrum of reality, which is just as transcendent to the discourse which transmits it as the historical event is exterior to the discourse of the historian, or as a represented landscape is exterior to the painting which represents it. It is a theory which makes no distinction between fiction and representation, for the object of the fiction is reducible to a sham reality awaiting its representation. But it appears that in this perspective the very notion of imitation on the level of *lexis* is a pure mirage which fades away as one approaches it. Language can but perfectly imitate language; more exactly, a discourse can but perfectly imitate a perfectly identical discourse. In short, a discourse can but imitate itself. As far as *lexis* is concerned, direct imitation is a tautology.

We are thus led to the unexpected conclusion that, as far as representation is concerned, the only mode that literature knows is narrative, the verbal equivalent of nonverbal events and (as illustrated in Plato's example) of

verbal events. Except, in this representation of verbal events, narrative will efface itself before the direct quotation where all representational function has been abolished, just as when a judicial orator interrupts his discourse to allow the tribunal itself to examine an exhibit. Literary representation, the *mimesis* of the classical notions, is thus not the narrative plus the discourses. It is the narrative, and only the narrative. Plato opposed *mimesis* to *diegesis* as a perfect imitation to an imperfect imitation. However, a perfect imitation is no longer an imitation; it is the thing itself. Ultimately, the only imitation is the imperfect one. *Mimesis* is *diegesis*.

II. Narration and Description

But if literary representation so defined is lost in what is narrated, it is not reduced to the purely narrative elements of the narrative. It is now necessary to justify a distinction at the very heart of *diegesis* which does not appear in Plato or in Aristotle and which will draw a new frontier within the domain of representation. Every narrative includes two types of representation, although they are blended together and always in varying proportions: representations of actions and events, which constitute the narration properly speaking, and representations of objects or people, which make up the act of what we today call "description." Emphasized by scholarly tradition, this opposition between narration and description is one of the main elements of our literary consciousness. However, it concerns a relatively recent distinction, and one day it will be necessary to study the birth of this distinction and its development in the theory and practice of literature. At first glance, it does not seem to have had a very active existence before the nineteenth century, when the introduction of long, descriptive passages in a typically narrative genre like the novel put in evidence the resources and demands of the process.[7]

This persistent confusion or carelessness of distinction, which is indicated in Greek by the common term *diegesis*, may hold especially with the very questionable literary dogma of the two types of representation. In principle, it is obviously possible to conceive of purely descriptive texts which aim to represent objects solely in their spatial existence, outside of every event and even of all temporal dimension. It is even easier to conceive of a description free of any narrative element than to conceive of the inverse, for the most restrained designation of the elements and circumstances of a process can already pass for the beginnings of a description. A sentence like "The house is white with a slate roof and green shutters" does not have any narrative characteristics. However, a sentence like "The man approached the table and took a knife" not only contains the two action verbs but also three substantives which, be they ever so unqualified, may be considered as descriptive by the sole fact that they designate animate or inanimate beings. Even a verb can be more or less descriptive in the precision it gives to the spectacle of the action. It suffices to compare "seized a knife" with "took a knife"; con-

sequently, no verb is totally free of descriptive implication. One can thus say that description is more indispensable than narration since it is easier to describe without narrating. Perhaps this is so because objects can exist without movement but not movement without objects. But this basic situation already indicates the nature of the relationship which unites the two functions in the overwhelming majority of literary texts: description could be conceivable independent of narration, but one never actually finds it in a free state. Narration cannot exist without description, but this dependence does not stop it from always playing the first role. The description is naturally *ancilla narratienis* [the handmaiden of the narration], the slave always necessary, always submissive, never emancipated. Narrative genres like the epic, the short story, the novella, the novel, do exist where description can occupy a very large place, indeed the largest, without ceasing to be, by vocation, a simple auxiliary of narrative. However, purely descriptive genres never exist, and we can hardly imagine a work where the narrative acts as auxiliary to the description, outside of the didactic domain or semididactic fiction like that of Jules Verne.

Thus the study of the relations between narration and description amounts essentially to a consideration of the *diegetic* functions of the description, i.e., the role played by the descriptive passages or aspects in the general system of the narrative. Without attempting here to enter into the details of such a study, one can recall two relatively distinct functions of description in the "classical" literary tradition (from Homer to the end of the nineteenth century). The first is of a decorative order. One realizes that traditional rhetoric groups description and the other stylistic figures among the ornaments of the discourse. The extended and detailed description appears as a pause and an amusement during the narrative, in a purely aesthetic role similar to that of a piece of sculpture in a classical building. The most famous example of this is possibly the description of Achilles' shield in Book XVIII of the *Iliad*.[8] Boileau is doubtless thinking of this decorative role when he praises richness and pomp in this type of excerpt. The baroque period distinguishes itself by a proliferation of the descriptive excursus (very noticeable in works such as the *Moyse Sauvé* of Saint-Amant) and in its decline resulting in the destruction of the equilibrium of the narrative poem.

The second major function of the description, and the most evident now because it has imposed itself on the tradition of the novel with Balzac, is at once explicative and symbolic. In Balzac and his realist successors, physical portraits and descriptions of clothing and furnishings tend to reveal and at the same time to justify the psychology of the characters, of which they are at once sign, cause, and effect. The description becomes a major element of the exposition as it was not during the classical period. One need only consider the houses of Mlle. Cormon in *La Vieille Fille* or of Balthazar Claës in *La Recherche de l'Absolu*. All of this is too well established to need further emphasis. Let us simply note that the evolution of narrative forms, by substituting the signifying description for the ornamental description, has tended to reinforce the narrative's domination (at least until the beginning of the twentieth century). Description has doubtless lost in autonomy what it has gained

in dramatic importance. As for certain forms of the contemporary novel which first seemed to be attempts to liberate the descriptive mode from the tyranny of narrative, it is not certain that one must thus interpret them. If one considers the work of Robbe-Grillet from this point of view, it perhaps seems more an effort to constitute a narrative (a story) by the almost exclusive means of description imperceptibly modified from page to page. This is at once a tremendous promotion of the descriptive function and a powerful confirmation of its irreducible narrative finality.

One is thus forced to note that all the differences which separate description and narration are differences of context which do not, properly speaking, have a semiological existence. The narration links itself to actions or events considered as pure processes, and by this it puts emphasis on the temporal and dramatic aspects of narrative. On the other hand, description, because it lingers over objects and beings considered in their simultaneity and because it envisages the actions themselves as scenes, seems to suspend the flow of time and to contribute to spreading out the narrative in space. These two types of discourse may thus be considered two antithetical attitudes toward the world and existence, the one more active and the other more contemplative and thus more poetic (according to the traditional equivalence). But from the standpoint of modes of representation, to recount an event and to describe an object are two similar operations which put the same resources of language into play. The most significant difference may possibly be that the narration, by the temporal succession of its discourse, restores the equally temporal succession of the events, while the description must successively modulate the representation of objects simultaneously juxtaposed in space. Narrative language would thus be distinguished by a sort of temporal coincidence with its object, and descriptive language would be irremediably deprived of such a distinction. But this opposition loses much of its force in written literature, where nothing prevents the reader from going back and considering the text in its spatial simultaneity as an *analogon* of the scene which it describes. The calligrams of Apollinaire or the graphic arrangements of Mallarmé's *Coup de Dés* only push to the limit the exploitation of certain latent resources of written expression. On the other hand, no narration, not even that of radio newscasting, is rigorously synchronic with the event it relates, and the variety of relationships which the time of the story and that of the narrative may enjoy end up by reducing the specificity of the narrative representation. Aristotle himself observes that one advantage of narrative over scenic representation is that it can treat several actions simultaneously.[9] But it must treat them successively, and as a result its situation, its resources, and its boundaries are analogous to those of descriptive language.

Thus it appears clearly that description as a mode of literary representation does not distinguish itself sharply enough from narration, either by the autonomy of its ends or the originality of its means, to make it necessary to break that narrative-descriptive unit (with the narration dominating) which Plato and Aristotle named narrative. If description marks a boundary of narrative, it is an internal and rather ill-defined boundary. One may group

without distortion all forms of literary representation under the notion of narrative, and one may consider description not as one of narrative's modes (which would imply some specificity of language), but more modestly as one of its aspects, although it is from a certain point of view the most compelling.

III. Narrative and Discourse

From the *Republic* and the *Poetics*, it seems that Plato and Aristotle initially and implicitly reduced the field of literature to the specific range of representational literature: *poiesis* = *mimesis*. If one considers all that is excluded from poetics by this decision, one sees a final boundary of narrative defined, a boundary which may be the most important and most significant. It is a question of nothing less than lyric, satiric, and didactic poetry. Among names that a Greek of the fifth or fourth century B.C. would know, Pindar, Alcaeus, Sappho, Archilochus, and Hesiod are excluded. Therefore, for Aristotle, Empedocles is not a poet although he uses the same meter as Homer: "One must call the one poet and the other physician rather than poet."[10] But surely Archilochus, Sappho, and Pindar cannot be called physicians. Those writers excluded from the *Poetics* are similar because their work does not consist in an imitation by a narrative or a scenic representation of a real or a fictional action exterior to the person and utterance of the poet. Their work consists rather in a discourse conducted by the poet in his own name. Pindar sings the praises of an Olympic hero; Archilochus criticizes his political enemies; Hesiod gives advice to farmers; Empedocles and Parmenides expose a theory of the universe. Here there is no representation, no fiction, but simply an utterance empowering itself directly in the discourse of the work. One may say as much of Latin elegiac poetry and of what we today call lyric poetry, and in prose of all that is eloquence, moral and philosophical reflection,[11] scientific or para-scientific statement, essay, correspondence, personal journal, etc. The whole vast domain of direct expression, whatever its modes, devices, or forms may be, escapes from the consideration of the *Poetics*, insofar as it ignores the representational function of poetry. This is a new and very significant division, for it divides the whole of what we today call "literature" into two parts of apparently equal importance.

This division corresponds closely to the distinction proposed by Emile Benveniste[12] between "narrative" (or "story") and "discourse." The one difference is that Benveniste encompasses in the category of discourse all that Aristotle calls direct imitation and which actually consists (at least in its verbal portion) in the discourse attributed by the poet or storyteller to one of the characters. Benveniste shows that certain grammatical forms like the pronoun "I" (and its implicit reference "thou"), the pronominal "indicators" (certain demonstrative pronouns), the adverbial indicators (like "here," "now," "yesterday," "today," "tomorrow," etc.) and, at least in French, certain verb tenses like the present, the present perfect, and the future, find themselves limited to discourse, while narrative in the strictest sense is

distinguished by the exclusive use of the third person and of such forms as the preterit and the pluperfect. No matter what the details and the variations from one idiom to another, all of these differences dovetail sharply into an opposition between the objectivity of narrative and the subjectivity of discourse. But we must specify that this is a question of an objectivity and a subjectivity defined by a linguistic order of criteria. The discourse which explicitly or not contains the presence of (or reference to) "I" is subjective, but this "I" is defined only as the person who maintains the discourse. So, too, the present (the time *par excellence* of the discursive mode) is only defined as the instant in which the discourse is held, its usage marking "the coincidence of the described event with the segment of the discourse describing it."[13] Inversely, the objectivity of narrative is defined by the absence of all reference to the narrator. "Truly there is no longer a 'narrator.' The events are chronologically recorded as they appear on the horizon of the story. Here no one speaks. The events seem to tell themselves."[14]

This is doubtless the perfect description of pure narrative in its essence and in its radical opposition to all personal forms of expression by the speaker. It is narrative as one might ideally conceive of it, and as one might find it in several good examples like those chosen by Benveniste from the historian Glotz and from Balzac. Consider the following excerpt from *Gambara:*

> After a tour of the gallery, the young man looked first at the sky and then at his watch, made a gesture of impatience, entered a tobacconist's, and there lit up a cigar, placed himself in front of a mirror and glanced at his outfit which was a bit more opulent than the norms of taste in France permit. He re-adjusted his collar and his black velvet vest over which crossed and re-crossed one of those heavy gold chains made in Genoa. Then, in one gesture, casting his velvet-lined coat over his left shoulder and draping it with elegance, he resumed his walk without permitting himself to be distracted by the bourgeois ogling to which he was subject. When the small shops began to turn on their lights and the night appeared dark enough to him, he headed toward the Place du Palais Royal like a man afraid of being recognized, for he skirted the place up until the fountain in order to gain in the shelter of the coaches the entry to the Rue Froidmanteau. . . .

At this level of purity, the diction of the narrative is in a sense the absolute transitivity of the text, the total absence (except for several twists to which we shall return later) not only of the narrator but also of the act of narration itself by the rigorous expunging of all reference to the very instance of the discourse which constitutes the narration. The text is there before our eyes without being uttered by anyone, and none (or almost none) of the information it contains demands to be referred to its source, evaluated in terms of its distance or its relation to the speaker and to the act of speaking. If we compare such an utterance with a sentence like "I was waiting to write to you that I had a fixed abode. Finally I have decided. I will spend the winter here,"[15] we realize to what extent the autonomy of the narrative is contrary to the dependency of the discourse whose essential determinants (who is "I"? who is "you"? what place is designated by "here"?) can only be decoded by

reference to the situation in which it was produced. In discourse, someone speaks and his situation in the very act of speaking is the focus of the most important significations. In narrative, as Benveniste insists, no one speaks, in the sense that at no moment do we have to ask ourselves "Who is speaking?" "Where?" "When?" etc. in order to receive fully the meaning of the text.

But it is necessary to add that the essences of narrative and discourse as defined here are almost never found in the pure state in any text. There is almost always a certain proportion of narrative in discourse, a certain dose of discourse in narrative. Actually, the symmetry stops here, for everything happens as if the two types of expression find themselves affected very differently by their mutual contamination. The insertion of narrative elements into the fabric of discourse is insufficient to emancipate the discourse, for the narrative elements remain most often linked to the reference of the speaker, who stays implicitly present in the background and who can intervene anew at any time without considering this return an "intrusion." Thus we read this apparently objective passage in Chateaubriand's *Mémoires d'Outre-tombe:* "When the sea was high and there was a storm, the waves, sweeping the base of the chateau opposite the broad sandy beach, would surge as high as its lofty towers. Twenty feet above the base of one of these towers was an inclining granite parapet, narrow and slippery, by which one could reach the ravelin which defended the moat. One had to take advantage of the lull between two waves and cross the treacherous place before the tide broke and inundated the tower. . . ."[16] But we know that the narrator, whose person was momentarily effaced during this passage, didn't go far away, and we are neither surprised nor disturbed when he again assumes the act of speaking to add: "None of us would refuse the gambit, but I did see some children turn pale before trying it." The act of narration never really departed from the first-person discourse which absorbed it without effort or distortion and remained discourse throughout. On the contrary, any intrusion of discursive elements into the interior of a narrative is perceived as a disruption of the discipline of the narrative portion. Thus it is in the short reflection inserted by Balzac in the text cited earlier: "his outfit which was a bit more opulent than the norms of taste in France permit." One may say as much of the demonstrative expression—"one of those gold chains made at Genoa"—which obviously contains the first step of a clause in the present tense (with "made" corresponding, not to "which they used to make," but to "which they make") and of a direct address to the reader, implicitly considered as a witness. One may say as much of the adjective "bourgeois" in "bourgeois ogling" and of the adverbial locution "with elegance," implying a judgment whose source is obviously the narrator; of the relative expression, "like a man afraid," for which the Latin would use a subjunctive because of the personal valuation it implies; and finally of the conjunction "for" in "for he skirted the place," which introduces an explanation put forth by the narrator. Evidently, the narrative does not integrate these discursive insertions, aptly called "intrusions of the author" by Georges Blin, as easily as the discourse accepts narrative insertions. Narrative inserted into discourse transforms itself into an element of discourse, but discourse inserted

into narrative remains discourse and forms a sort of cyst, easily recognized and localized. One might say that the purity of narrative is more obvious than that of discourse.

The reason for this lack of symmetry is quite simple, but it highlights for us a definitive trait of narrative. Actually, discourse has no purity to preserve since it is the natural mode of language, the broadest and most universal mode, by definition open to all forms. On the contrary, narrative is a particular mode, marked and defined by a certain number of exclusions and restrictive conditions (no present tense, no first person, etc.) Discourse can "narrate" without ceasing to be discourse. Narrative can't "discourse" without betraying itself. On the other hand, narrative can't abstain from discourse without succumbing to dryness and sterility, which is why narrative exists nowhere in its pure state. The slightest general observation, the least adjective a little more than descriptive, the most discreet comparison, the most humble "perhaps," the most inoffensive of logical articulations introduces into the fabric of narrative a type of utterance which is foreign and somehow resistant to it. Numerous and minute textual analyses are necessary to study the particulars of these sometimes microscopic intrusions. One of the aims of such a study would be to enumerate and classify the means by which narrative literature (and especially the novel) has tried to organize in an acceptable way within the interior of its own *lexis* the delicate relationships which the demands of narrative and the necessities of discourse bring together.

We know that the novel has never succeeded in resolving the problem posed by these relationships in a definitive manner. Sometimes, as was the case in the classical period with a Cervantes, a Scarron, a Fielding, the author-narrator, complacently assuming his own discourse, intervenes in the narrative with an ironically insistent indiscretion, addressing his reader in a tone of familiar conversation. On the other hand, we see in the same period that he will sometimes transfer all the responsibilities of the discourse to one major character who will speak, i.e., will at the same time narrate and comment on the events in the first person. This is the case of the picaresque novels, from *Lazarillo de Tormes* to *Gil Blas,* and of other fictitiously autobiographical novels like *Manon Lescaut* or *La Vie de Marianne.* Or at times unable to be reduced to speaking in his own name or to conferring the task on one character, the author-narrator will divide the discourse among several characters, perhaps in the form of letters as the eighteenth-century novel did *(La Nouvelle Héloïse, Les Liaisons Dangereuses)* or possibly in making the interior discourses of his major characters assume the narrative in succession in the smoother and more subtle manner of a Joyce or a Faulkner. The only time when the equilibrium between narrative and discourse seems to have been assumed with a perfectly clear awareness, without scruple or ostentation, is evidently the nineteenth century, the classic age of objective narrative, of Balzac and Tolstoy. In contrast, one can see to what extent the modern period has accentuated a consciousness of this difficulty, up to the point of making certain manners of expression almost physically impossible for certain aware and exacting writers.

For example, we can clearly see how the effort to bring the narrative to its

highest degree of purity has led certain American writers like Hammett and Hemingway to exclude the exposure of any psychological motivation (always difficult to employ without recourse to general considerations of a discursive manner), qualifying statements implying a personal valuation by the narrator, logical liaisons, etc., up to the reduction of novel style to the abrupt succession of short sentences without conjunctions that Sartre posited of Camus' *L'Etranger* in 1943 and that we rediscovered ten years later in Robbe-Grillet. What has often been interpreted as an application of behaviorist theories to literature was perhaps only the result of a particularly acute sensitivity to certain incompatibilities of language. All of the fluctuations in the writing of modern novels are doubtless worth being analyzed from this point of view, and particularly the contemporary tendency, possibly the reverse of that of *L'Etranger* and Robbe-Grillet, which is totally revealed in a Sollers or a Thibaudeau, to absorb the narrative into the actual discourse of the writer in the act of writing, into what Michel Foucault calls "the discourse linked to the act of writing, contemporary with its unfolding and enclosed within it."[17] It seems here as if literature has exhausted or overflowed the resources of its representational mode and wants to fall back on the vague murmur of its own discourse. Perhaps the novel, after poetry, will definitively leave the age of representation. Perhaps narrative, in the negative singularity that we have attributed to it, is, like art for Hegel, already for us a thing of the past which we must hasten to consider as it passes away, before it has completely deserted our horizon.

ÉCOLE PRATIQUE DES HAUTES ÉTUDES,
PARIS

(Translated by Ann Levonas)

NOTES

1 [The term *récit* is translated throughout this essay as "narrative," meaning the story, that which is narrated. The term *narration* is translated as "narration," meaning the act or process of narrating. Because "narrative" and "narration" are used interchangeably in English, the distinction in the French should be kept in mind. Tr.]

2 *Poetics*, 1448a.

3 *Republic*, Les Belles Lettres (Paris, 1967), III, 393a.

4 *The Iliad*, I.12-16.

5 *Republic*, III, 393e.

6 *Poetics*, 1460a.

7 One does find the concept in Boileau, in relation to the epic: "Be lively and quick in your narrations,/Be rich and decorous in your descriptions" (*L'art poétique* [Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1966], III.257-58, p. 175).

8 At least as the classical tradition interpreted and imitated it. One must note that description tends there to animate itself and thus to "narrativize" itself.

9 *Poetics*, 1459b.

10 *Ibid.*, 1447b.

11 Since it's the diction which counts here, one may exclude from this listing, as

Aristotle does, the Socratic dialogues of Plato and all the accounts in the dramatic form which arise from imitation in prose.

12 "Les relations de temps dans le verbe français," *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (Paris, 1966), pp. 237-50.

13 "De la subjectivité dans le langage," *ibid.*, p. 262.

14 "Les relations de temps dans le verbe français," *ibid.*, p. 241.

15 Senancour, *Oberman* (Paris and Grenoble: Arthaud, 1967), I, 35.

16 (Paris: Le livre de Poche, 1964), I, 49.

17 "L'arrière-fable," *L'Arc* (Aix-en-Provence, 1965), p. 6. This is a special number devoted to the work of Jules Verne.