

FIGURES OF
LITERARY
DISCOURSE

GÉRARD GENETTE

TRANSLATED BY
Alan Sheridan

INTRODUCTION BY
Marie-Rose Logan

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"Ut Figura Poiesis": The Work of Gérard Genette
by Marie-Rose Logan

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FRONTIERS OF NARRATIVE

If one agrees, following convention, to confine oneself to the domain of literary expression, one will define narrative without difficulty as the representation of an event or sequence of events, real or fictitious, by means of language and, more particularly, by means of written language. This positive (and current) definition has the merit of being simple and self-evident; its principal inconvenience may be precisely that it confines itself and confines us to self-evidence, that it conceals from us what specifically, in the very being of narrative, constitutes a problem and a difficulty, by effacing as it were the frontiers of its operation, the conditions of its existence. To define the narrative positively is to give credence, perhaps dangerously, to the idea or feeling that narrative tells itself, that nothing is more natural than to tell a story or to put together a set of actions in a myth, a tale, an epic, or a novel. The evolution of literature and of literary consciousness in the last half century will have had, among other fortunate consequences, that of drawing our attention, on the contrary, to the singular, artificial, and problematic aspect of the narrative act. We must return once more to Valéry's amazement at a statement like "the marquise went out at five o'clock." We know how, in various and sometimes contradictory ways, modern literature has lived and illustrated this fruitful amazement, how it has striven and succeeded, in its very foundations, to be a questioning, a disturbance, a contestation of the notion of narrative. That falsely naive question "why narrative?" could at least encourage us to seek, or more simply to rec-

ognize, what might be called the negative limits of narrative, to consider the principal sets of oppositions through which narrative is defined, and constitutes itself over against the various forms of the non-narrative.

DIEGESIS AND MIMESIS

The first opposition to occur to us is that indicated by Aristotle in a few brief sentences in the *Poetics*. For Aristotle, narrative (*diegesis*) is one of the two modes of poetic imitation (*mimesis*), the other being the direct representation of events by actors speaking and moving before the public.¹ It is here that the classic distinction between narrative poetry and dramatic poetry is established. This distinction was already suggested by Plato in the third book of the *Republic*, though with two differences: first, Socrates denied to narrative the quality (that is to say, for him, the defect) of imitation and, second, he took into account aspects of direct representation (dialogues) that can be included in a non-dramatic poem like those of Homer. There are, therefore, at the origins of the classical tradition, two apparently contradictory divisions, in which narrative is opposed to imitation, either as its antithesis or as one of its modes.

For Plato, the domain of what he calls *lexis* (or way of saying, as opposed to *logos*, which designates what is said) is theoretically divided into imitation proper (*mimesis*) and simple narrative (*diegesis*). By simple narrative, Plato means whatever the poet relates "in his own person," without trying "to persuade us that the speaker is anyone but himself,"² as when Homer, in Book I of the *Iliad*, tells us of Chryses: "[He] had come to the Achaean ships to recover his captured daughter. He brought with him a generous ransom and carried the chaplet of the Archer God Apollo on a golden staff in his hand. He appealed to the whole Achaean army, and most of all to its two commanders, the sons of Atreus."³ Imitation, on the other hand, begins with the next line, when Homer has Chryses himself say, or rather, according to Plato, when Homer speaks in the person of Chryses and "does his best to make us think that it is not Homer but an aging priest that is

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talking." This is the text of Chryses' speech: "My lords, and you Achaean men-at-arms; you hope to sack King Priam's city and get home in safety. May the gods that live on Olympus grant your wish—on this condition, that you show your reverence for the Archer-god Apollo Son of Zeus by accepting this ransom and releasing my daughter." Now, Plato adds, Homer could equally well have continued his narrative in a purely narrative form, recounting Chryses' words instead of quoting them, which, for the same passage, would have given, in indirect style and in prose: "The priest came and prayed that the gods would allow the Achaeans to capture Troy and return in safety, and begged the Achaeans to show their respect for the god by releasing his daughter in exchange for the ransom."⁴ This theoretical division, which opposes, within poetic diction, the two pure, heterogeneous modes of narrative and imitation, brings with it and establishes a practical classification of the genres, which comprises the two pure modes (narrative, represented by the ancient dithyramb, and mimetic, represented by the theater), plus a mixed or, to be more precise, alternate mode, which is that of the epic, as we have just seen with the example from the *Iliad*.

At first sight Aristotle's classification is quite different, since it reduces all poetry to imitation, distinguishing only two imitative modes, the direct, which is the one Plato calls strict imitation, and the narrative, which he calls, as does Plato, *diegesis*. On the other hand, Aristotle seems to fully identify not only, like Plato, the dramatic genre with the imitative mode, but also, without taking into account in principle its mixed character, the epic genre with the pure narrative mode. This reduction may derive from the fact that Aristotle defines the imitative mode, more strictly than Plato, by the scenic conditions of dramatic representation. It might also be justified by the fact that the epic work, however important a part is played in it by dialogues or discourse in the direct style, and even if this part exceeds that of the narrative, remains essentially narrative, in that the dialogues are necessarily framed in it and induced by narrative parts that constitute, in the strict sense, the *basis* or, to put it another way, the web of its discourse. In any case, Aristotle recognizes Homer's superiority over all other epic

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poets in that he intervenes personally as little as possible in his poem, usually dramatizing his characters directly, in accordance with the role of the poet, which is to imitate as much as possible.⁵ This would suggest that he implicitly recognizes the imitative character of the Homeric dialogues and therefore the mixed character of epic diction, basically narrative, but dramatic in a wider sense. *

The difference between Plato's and Aristotle's classifications amounts, then, to a simple variation of terms; these two classifications certainly agree on the main point, that is to say, the opposition between the dramatic and the narrative, the first being regarded by both philosophers as more fully imitative than the second: an agreement on facts that is in a sense brought out more by the disagreement on values, since Plato condemns poets as imitators, beginning with the dramatists, and not excepting Homer, who is regarded as still being too mimetic for a narrative poet, admitting into the City only some ideal poet whose austere diction would be as little mimetic as possible; whereas Aristotle, symmetrically, places tragedy above epic, and praises in Homer whatever brings his writing closer to dramatic diction. The two systems, then, are certainly identical, except for a reversal of values: for Plato as for Aristotle, narrative is the weakened, attenuated mode of literary representation—and it is difficult, at first sight, to see how one could come to a different conclusion.

However, we must introduce here an observation which does not seem to have concerned either Plato or Aristotle, and which will restore to the narrative all its value and all its importance. Direct imitation, as it functions on the stage, consists of gestures and speech. Insofar as it consists of gestures, it can obviously represent actions, but at this point it escapes from the linguistic plane, which is that in which the specific activity of the poet is practised. Insofar as it consists of words, discourse spoken by characters (and it goes without saying that in a narrative work the role of direct imitation is reduced to that), it is not strictly speaking representative, since it is confined to reproducing a real or fictitious discourse as such. It can be said that verses 12 to 16 of the *Iliad*, quoted above, give us a verbal representation of Chryses' actions, but the same cannot be said of the next five lines; they do not

represent Chryses' speech: if this is a speech, actually spoken, they repeat it, literally, and if it is fictitious speech, they constitute it, just as literally. In both cases, the work of representation is nil; in both cases, Homer's five lines are strictly identical with Chryses' speech: this is obviously not so in the case of the five narrative lines preceding it, which are in no way identical with Chryses' actions: "The word 'dog' does not bite," William James remarked. If we call poetic imitation the fact of representing by verbal means a non-verbal reality and, in exceptional circumstances, a verbal reality (as one calls pictorial imitation the fact of representing in pictorial means non-pictorial reality and, in exceptional circumstances, a pictorial reality), it must be admitted that imitation is to be found in the five narrative lines and not at all in the five dramatic lines, which consist simply in the interpolation, in the middle of a text representing events, of another text directly taken from those events: as if a seventeenth-century Dutch painter, anticipating certain modern methods, had placed in the middle of a still life, not the painting of an oyster shell, but a real oyster shell. I make this simplistic comparison in order to point out the profoundly heterogeneous character of a mode of expression to which we are so used that we do not perceive its most sudden changes of register. Plato's "mixed" narrative, that is to say, the most common and universal mode or relation, "imitates" alternately and in the same register ("without even seeing the difference," as Michaux would say), non-verbal material, which in fact it must represent as best it can, and verbal material that represents itself, and which it is usually content to quote. In the case of a strictly faithful historical account, the historian-narrator must certainly be aware of the change of manner when he passes from the narrative effort of relating completed actions to the mechanical transcription of spoken words, but in the case of a partially or totally fictitious narrative, fictional activity, which bears equally on the verbal and non-verbal contents, no doubt has the effect of concealing the difference that separates the two types of imitation, one of which involves, if I may so put it, direct contact, while the other introduces a rather more complex system of levels. Even if one admits (as is difficult enough) that imagining actions and imagining spo-

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ken words proceeds from the same mental operation, "telling" these actions and telling these words constitute two very different verbal operations. Or rather, only the first constitutes a true operation, an act of *diction* in the Platonic sense, involving a series of transpositions and equivalences, and a series of inevitable choices between the elements of the *story* to be retained and the elements to be left out, between the various possible points of view, and so on—all of which are operations that are obviously absent when the poet or historian confines himself to transcribing a speech. One may certainly (indeed one must) challenge this distinction between the act of mental representation and the act of verbal representation, between the *logos* and the *lexis*, but it amounts to challenging the very theory of imitation, which conceives poetic fiction as a simulacrum of reality, as transcendent to the discourse that sustains it as the historical event is external to the discourse of the historian or the landscape represented to the picture that represents it: a theory that makes no distinction between fiction and representation, the object of fiction being reduced to a feigned reality that is simply awaiting representation. Now it appears that from this point of view the very notion of imitation on the level of the *lexis* is a pure mirage, which vanishes as one approaches it; the only thing that language can imitate perfectly is language, or, to be more precise, a discourse can imitate perfectly only a perfectly identical discourse; in short, a discourse can imitate only itself. Qua lexis, direct imitation is simply a tautology.

So we are led to this unexpected conclusion, that the only mode that knows literature as representation is the narrative, the verbal equivalent of non-verbal events and also (as the example made up by Plato shows) of verbal events, unless it vanishes, as in the last case, before a direct quotation in which all representative function is abolished, rather as a speaker in a court of law may interrupt his speech to allow the court to scrutinize some exhibit. Literary representation, the *mimesis* of the ancients, is not, therefore, narrative plus "speeches": it is narrative, and only narrative. Plato opposed *mimesis* to *diegesis* as a perfect imitation to an imperfect imitation; but (as Plato himself showed in the *Cratylus*) perfect

imitation is no longer an imitation, it is the thing itself, and, in the end, the only imitation is an imperfect one. *Mimesis is diegesis.*

NARRATION AND DESCRIPTION

But if literary representation defined in this way is identical with narrative (in the broad sense), it is not to be reduced to the purely narrative elements (in the narrow sense) of the narrative. We must now admit, within diegesis itself, a distinction that appears neither in Plato nor in Aristotle, and which will draw a new frontier within the domain of representation. Every narrative in fact comprises two kinds of representations, which however are closely intermingled and in variable proportions: on the one hand, those of actions and events, which constitute the narration in the strict sense and, on the other hand, those of objects or characters that are the result of what we now call *description*. The opposition between narration and description, which was so stressed by academic tradition, is one of the major features of our literary consciousness. Yet it is a relatively recent distinction, the birth and development of which in the theory and practice of literature should one day be studied. It does not seem, at first sight, that it enjoyed a very active existence before the nineteenth century, when the introduction of long descriptive passages in a typically narrative genre like the novel brought out the resources and the requirements of the method.⁶

This persistent confusion, or carelessness of distinction, which in Greek is shown very clearly by the use of the common term *diegesis*, derives perhaps above all from the very unequal literary status of the two types of representation. In principle, it is obviously possible to conceive of purely descriptive texts, the aim of which is to represent objects simply and solely in their spatial existence, outside any event and even outside any temporal dimension. It is even easier to conceive of a pure description of any narrative element than the reverse, for the most neutral designation of the elements and circumstances of a process can already be regarded as the beginnings of a description: a sentence like "The house is white, with a slate roof and green shutters," involves

no element of narration, whereas a sentence like "The man went over to the table and picked up a knife," contains at least, apart from two verbs of action, three substantives which, however little qualified, can be regarded as descriptive by the very fact that they designate animate or inanimate beings; even a verb can be more or less descriptive, in the precision that it gives to the spectacle of the action (one has only to compare "grabbed a knife," for example, with "picked up a knife"), and consequently no verb is quite exempt from descriptive resonance. It may be said, then, that description is more indispensable than narration, since it is easier to describe without relating than it is to relate without describing (perhaps because objects can exist without movement, but not movement without objects). But this elementary situation already indicates, in fact, the nature of the relation that unites the two functions in the overwhelming majority of literary texts: description might be conceived independently of narration, but in fact it is never found in a so to speak free state; narration cannot exist without description, but this dependence does not prevent it from constantly playing the major role. Description is quite naturally *ancilla narrationis*, the ever-necessary, ever-submissive, never-emancipated slave. There are narrative genres, such as the epic, the tale, the novella, the novel, in which description can occupy a very large place, even in terms of sheer quantity the larger place, without ceasing to be, by its very vocation, a mere auxiliary of the narrative. On the other hand, there are no descriptive genres, and one finds it difficult to imagine, outside the didactic domain (or semi-didactic fictions such as those of Jules Verne) a work in which narrative would serve as an auxiliary to description.

The study of the relations between the narrative and the descriptive amount, then, in essence, to a consideration of the *diegetic functions* of description, that is to say, the role played by the descriptive passages or aspects in the general economy of narrative. Without attempting to go into the detail of such a study here, one could at least mention, in the "classical" literary tradition (from Homer to the end of the nineteenth century), two relatively distinct functions. The first is of what might be called a decorative kind. We know that traditional rhetoric places description, together with

the other figures of style, among the ornaments of discourse: extended, detailed description appears here as a recreational pause in the narrative, carrying out a purely esthetic role, like that of sculpture in a classical building. The most famous example is perhaps the description of Achilles' shield in Book XVIII of the *Iliad*.⁷ It is no doubt this decorative role that Boileau has in mind when he recommends richness and splendor in this kind of piece. The Baroque epic was noted for a sort of proliferation of the descriptive excursus, very marked for example in Saint-Amant's *Moyse sauvé*, which finally destroyed the balance of the narrative poem in its decline.

The second major function of description, and the most obvious in our own day because it was imposed, with Balzac, on the tradition of the novel, is both explanatory and symbolic: physical portraits, descriptions of dress and furniture tend, in Balzac and his realist successors, to reveal and at the same time to justify the psychology of the characters, of which they are at once the sign, the cause, and the effect. Description becomes here a major element in the exposition, which it was not in the classical period: one has only to think of the houses of Mlle Cormon in *La Vieille fille* or of Balthazar Claës in *La Recherche de l'absolu*. But all this is too well known to be labored here. I would just like to remark that, in substituting significant description for ornamental description, the evolution of narrative form has tended (at least until the early twentieth century) to reinforce the domination of the narrative element: without the slightest doubt description has lost in terms of autonomy what it has gained in dramatic importance. As for certain forms of the contemporary novel that appeared initially as attempts to free the descriptive mode from the tyranny of the narrative, it is by no means certain that the question should really be interpreted in this way: if one considers it from this point of view, the work of Robbe-Grillet appears rather perhaps as an effort to constitute a narrative (a *story*) almost exclusively by means of descriptions imperceptibly modified from one page to the next, which can be regarded both as a spectacular promotion of the descriptive function and as a striking confirmation of its irreducible narrative finality.

Lastly, it should be noted that all the differences which separate description and narration are differences of content, which, strictly speaking, have no semiological existence: narration is concerned with actions or events considered as pure processes, and by that very fact it stresses the temporal, dramatic aspect of the narrative; description, on the other hand, because it lingers on objects and beings considered in their simultaneity, and because it considers the processes themselves as spectacles, seems to suspend the course of time and to contribute to spreading the narrative in space. These two types of discourse may, then, appear to express two antithetical attitudes to the world and to existence, one more active, the other more contemplative, and therefore, following a traditional equivalence, more "poetic." But from the point of view of modes of representation, to recount an event and to describe an object are two similar operations, which bring into play the same resources of language. The most significant difference might be that narration restores, in the temporal succession of its discourse, the equally temporal succession of events, whereas description must modulate, in discursive succession, the representation of objects that are simultaneous and juxtaposed in space: narrative language, then, would appear to be distinguished by a sort of temporal coincidence with its object, of which descriptive language would, on the contrary, be irremediably deprived. 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 spectacle that it describes: Apollinaire's calligrams or the graphic dispositions of Mallarmé's *Coup de dés* simply push to the limit the exploitation of certain resources latent in written expression. Furthermore, no narration, not even that of broadcast reporting, is strictly synchronous with the events that it relates, and the variety of the relations which can exist between the time of the story and that of the narrative have the effect of reducing the specificity of narrative representation. Aristotle already observed that one of the advantages of narrative over theatrical representation was that it could deal with several simultaneous actions;⁸ but it has to deal with

them successively, and from then on its situation, its resources, and its limits are similar to those of descriptive language.

It would appear then that description, as a mode of literary representation, does not distinguish itself sufficiently clearly from narration, either by the autonomy of its ends, or by the originality of its means, for it to be necessary to break the narrative-descriptive (chiefly narrative) unity that Plato and Aristotle have called narrative. If description marks one of the frontiers of narrative, it is certainly an internal frontier, and really a rather vague one: it will do no harm, therefore, if we embrace within the notion of narrative all forms of literary representation and consider description not as one of its modes (which would imply a specificity of language), but, more modestly, as one of its aspects—if, from a certain point of view, the most attractive.

NARRATIVE AND DISCOURSE

Reading the *Republic* and the *Poetics*, it would seem that, from the outset, Plato and Aristotle implicitly reduce the field of literature to the particular domain of representative literature: *poiesis* = *mimesis*. If one considers everything that is excluded from the poetic by this decision, we see the emergence of a last frontier of narrative that might be the most important and most significant. This frontier concerns nothing less than lyric, satirical, and didactic poetry: namely, to confine ourselves to a few of the names that would be known to a fifth- or fourth-century Greek, Pindar, Alcaeus, Sappho, Archilochos, and Hesiod. Thus, for Aristotle, Empedocles is not a poet, even though he uses the same meter as Homer: "Hence the proper term for the one is 'poet,' for the other 'science-writer' rather than 'poet.'"⁹ But certainly Archilochos, Sappho, and Pindar cannot be called scientists: what all those excluded from the *Poetics* have in common is that their work does not consist in the imitation, by narrative or theatrical representation, of an action, real or pretended, external to the person and speech of the poet, but simply in a discourse spoken by him directly and in his own name. Pindar sings the merits of the winner at the Olympics,

Archilochos inveighs against his political enemies, Hesiod gives advice to farmers, Empedocles or Parmenides expounds his theory of the universe: no representation, no fiction is involved here, simply speech that is invested directly in the discourse of the work. The same could be said of Latin elegiac poetry and of everything that makes use of eloquence, moral and philosophical reflection,¹⁰ scientific or parascientific exposition, the essay, correspondence, the journal, etc. All this vast domain of direct expression, whatever the modes, peculiarities, forms, eludes the consideration of the *Poetics* in that it neglects the representative function of poetry. We have here a new division, of very wide scope, since it divides into two parts of roughly equal importance the whole of what we now call literature.

This division corresponds more or less to the distinction proposed by Émile Benveniste between *narrative* (or *story*) and *discourse*,¹¹ except that Benveniste includes in the category of discourse everything that Aristotle called direct imitation, and which actually consists, at least as far as its verbal part is concerned, of discourse attributed by the poet or narrator to one of his characters. Benveniste shows that certain grammatical forms, like the pronoun "I" (and its implicit reference "you"), the pronominal (certain demonstratives), or adverbial indicators (like "here," "now," "yesterday," "today," "tomorrow," etc.) and—at least in French—certain tenses of the verb, like the present, the present anterior, or the future, are confined to discourse, whereas narrative in its strict form is marked by the exclusive use of the third person and such forms as the aorist (past definite) and the pluperfect. Whatever the details and variations from one idiom to another, all these differences amount clearly to an opposition between the objectivity of narrative and the subjectivity of discourse; but it should be pointed out that such objectivity and subjectivity are defined by criteria of a strictly linguistic order: "subjective" discourse is that in which, explicitly or not, the presence of (or reference to) *I* is marked, but this is not defined in any other way except as the person who is speaking this discourse, just as the present, which is the tense *par excellence* of the discursive mode, is not defined other than as the moment when the discourse is being spoken, its use marking "the

coincidence of the event described with the instance of discourse that describes it."¹² Conversely, the objectivity of narrative is defined by the absence of any reference to the narrator: "As a matter of fact, there is then no longer even a narrator. The events are set forth chronologically, as they occur. No one speaks here; the events seem to narrate themselves."¹³

We have here, no doubt, a perfect description of what is, in its essence and in its radical opposition to any form of personal expression on the part of the speaker, narrative in the pure state, as it may be conceived ideally and as it may in fact be grasped in a few privileged examples, like those borrowed by Benveniste himself from the historian Glotz and from Balzac. Let us reproduce here the extract from the latter's *Gambara*, which we will have to consider with some attention:

After a walk round the gallery, the young man looked in turn at the sky and at his watch, made a gesture of impatience, entered a tobacconist's, lit a cigar, placed himself in front of a mirror, and examined his clothes, which were somewhat richer than the laws of taste allow in France. He adjusted his collar and black velvet waistcoat over which was crossed several times one of those thick gold chains made in Genoa; then, after flinging his velvet-lined overcoat over his left shoulder, draping it elegantly, in a single movement, he resumed his walk without allowing himself to be distracted by the bourgeois glances cast in his direction. When the shops began to light up and the night seemed dark enough, he walked towards the Place du Palais-Royal like a man who was fearful of being recognized, for he skirted the square as far as the fountain, before reaching, under cover of the cabs, the end of the Rue Froidmanteau.

At this degree of purity, the diction proper to the narrative is in some sense the absolute transitivity of the text, the complete absence (if we ignore a few exceptions to which we will return shortly), not only of the narrator, but also of the narration itself, by the rigorous expunging of any reference to the instance of discourse that constitutes it. The text is there, before our eyes, without being proffered by anyone, and none (or almost none) of the information it contains needs, in order to be understood or appreciated, to be related to its source, judged by its distance from or its relation to the speaker or to the utterance. If we compare such a statement to a sentence like "I was waiting to write to you that

I had definitely decided to stay. At last I have made up my mind: I shall spend the winter here,"¹⁴ one appreciates to what extent the autonomy of narrative is opposed to the dependence of discourse, the essential determinations of which (who is "I," who is "you," what place is referred to by "here"?) can be deciphered only in relation 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 forcefully puts it, *no one speaks*, in the sense that at no moment do we ask ourselves *who is speaking, where, when, and so forth*, in order to receive the full signification of the text.

cit → But it should be added at once that these essences of narrative and discourse so defined are almost never to be found in their pure state in any text: there is almost always a certain proportion of narrative in discourse, a certain amount of discourse in narrative. In fact, the symmetry stops here, for it is as if both types of expression were very differently affected by the contamination: the insertion of narrative elements in the level of discourse is not enough to emancipate discourse, for they generally remain linked to the reference by the speaker, who remains implicitly present in the background, and who may intervene again at any moment without this return being experienced as an "intrusion." Thus, we read in Chateaubriand's *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* this apparently objective passage:

When the sea was high and it was stormy, the waves, beating at the foot of the castle, along the great shore, spouted up as far as the great towers. Twenty feet above the base of one of these towers was a granite parapet, narrow and gleaming, sloping outwards, from which one communicated with the ravelin that defended the moat: we would seize the moment between two waves, and cross the perilous place before the flow broke again and covered the tower.¹⁵

But we know that the narrator, who has momentarily effaced himself during this passage, is not very far away, and we are neither surprised nor embarrassed when he speaks again, adding: "Not one of *us* refused the adventure, but *I* have seen children pale before attempting it." The narration had not really emerged from the order of discourse in the first person, which had absorbed

it without effort or distortion, and without ceasing to be itself. On the contrary, any intervention of discursive elements within a narrative is felt as a relaxation of the rigor of the narrative part. The same goes for the brief reflection inserted by Balzac mentioned above: "his clothes, which were *somewhat richer than the laws of taste allow in France.*" The same can be said for the demonstrative expression "*one of those thick gold chains made at Genoa,*" which obviously contains the beginnings of a passage ("*made*" corresponds not to *which were made*, but *which are made*) and of a direct address to the reader, who is implicitly taken as a witness. Again, the same could be said of the adjective in "*bourgeois glances*" and of the adverb "*elegantly,*" which imply a judgment the source of which is here quite obviously the narrator; the relative expression "*like a man who was fearful,*" which Latin would mark with a subjunctive for the personal appraisal that it involves; and lastly of the conjunction "*for he skirted,*" which introduces an explanation offered by the narrator. It is obvious that narrative does not integrate these discursive enclaves, rightly called by Georges Blin "authorial intrusions," as easily as discourse receives the narrative enclaves: narrative inserted into discourse is transformed into an element of discourse, discourse inserted into narrative remains discourse and forms a sort of cyst that is very easy to recognize and to locate. The purity of narrative, one might say, is more manifest than that of discourse.

Though the reason for this dissymmetry is very simple, it indicates for us a decisive character of narrative: in fact, discourse has no purity to preserve, for it is the broadest and most universal "natural" mode of language, welcoming by definition all other forms; narrative, on the other hand, is a particular mode, marked, defined by a number of exclusions and restrictive conditions (refusal of the present, the first person, and so forth). Discourse can "recount" without ceasing to be discourse, narrative cannot "discourse" without emerging from itself. Nor can it abstain from it completely, however, without falling into aridity and poverty: this is why narrative exists nowhere, so to speak, in its strict form. The slightest general observation, the slightest adjective that is little more than descriptive, the most discreet comparison, the most

modest "perhaps," the most inoffensive of logical articulations introduces into its web a type of speech that is alien to it, refractory as it were. In order to study the detail of these sometimes microscopic accidents, we would need innumerable, meticulous analyses of texts. One of the objects of this study would be to list and classify the means by which narrative literature (and in particular the novel) has tried to organize in an acceptable way, within its own *lexis*, the delicate relations maintained within it between the requirements of narrative and the needs of discourse.

We know in fact that the novel has never succeeded in resolving in a convincing and definitive way the problem posed by these relations. Sometimes, as was the case in the classical period, with a Cervantes, a Scarron, a Fielding, the author-narrator, happily assuming his own discourse, intervenes in the narrative with ironically labored indiscretion, addressing his reader in a familiar, conversational tone; sometimes, on the other hand, as we also see in the same period, he transfers all responsibility for the discourse to a principal character who will *speak*, that is to say, both recount events and comment on them in the first person: this is the case of the picaresque novels, from *Lazarillo de Tormes* to *Gil Blas*, and other fictively autobiographical works, such as *Manon Lescaut* and *La Vie de Marianne*; sometimes, again, being unable to make up his mind whether to speak in his own name or to entrust this task to a single character, he distributes discourse between the various actors, either in the form of letters, as was often the case in the eighteenth-century novel (*La Nouvelle Héloïse*, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*) or, in the more supple and subtle manner of a Joyce or a Faulkner, by letting his principal characters assume the narrative successively through their interior discourse. The only moment when the balance between narrative and discourse seems to have been assumed with a perfectly good conscience, without either scruple or ostentation, is obviously in the nineteenth century, the classical age of objective narration, from Balzac to Tolstoy; we see, on the contrary, how the modern period has stressed awareness of difficulty to the extent of making certain types of elocution almost physically impossible for the most lucid and rigorous of writers.

We know, for example, how the effort to bring narrative to its highest degree of purity led certain American writers, such as Hammett or Hemingway, to exclude any exposition of psychological motives, which are always difficult to carry off without recourse to general considerations of a discursive kind, qualifications implying a personal judgment on the part of the narrator, logical links, and the like, to the point of reducing fictional diction to that jerky succession of short sentences without articulations, which Sartre recognized in 1943 in Camus' *L'Étranger*, and which were to turn up again ten years later in Robbe-Grillet. What has often been interpreted as an application to literature of behaviorist theories may have been no more than the effect of a particularly acute sensitivity to certain incompatibilities of language. All the fluctuations of contemporary fictional writing could no doubt be analyzed from this point of view, and particularly the tendency today, perhaps the reverse of the earlier one, and quite overt in a Phillippe Sollers of a Jean Thibaudeau, for example, to absorb the narrative in the present discourse of the writer in the process of writing, in what Michel Foucault calls "discourse bound up with the act of writing, contemporary with its unfolding and enclosed within it."¹⁶ It is as if literature had exhausted or overflowed the resources of its representative mode, and wanted to fold back into the indefinite murmur of its own discourse. Perhaps the novel, after poetry, is about to emerge definitively from the age of representation. Perhaps narrative, in the negative singularity that we have just attributed to it, is already for us, as art was for Hegel, *a thing of the past*, which we must hurry to consider as it retreats, before it has completely disappeared from our horizon.

[1966]

NOTES

1. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448a; *Poetics*, Gerald F. Else, tr. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967), p. 17.
2. Plato, *Republic*, 393a; *Republic*, D. Lee, tr. 2d. rev. ed., (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 150.

3. Homer, *Iliad*, Book I, lines 12–16; *Iliad*, E. V. Rieu, tr. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953), p. 23.
4. Plato, *Republic*, 393e; *Repub.*, p. 151.
5. Aristotle *Poetics*, 1460a; *Poet.*, p. 65.
6. It is to be found however in Boileau on the subject of the epic:

Soyez vif et pressé dans vos narrations;
Soyez riche et pompeux dans vos descriptions.
(*Art Poétique*, III, 257–58)

7. At least as interpreted and imitated by the classical tradition. It should be noted however that description here tends to become animated and therefore to turn itself into narrative.
8. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1459b; *Poet.*, p. 64.
9. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1447b; *Poet.*, p. 17.
10. Since it is the diction that counts here, and not what is said, we will exclude from this list, as does Aristotle (*Poetics* 1447b; *Poet.*, p. 17), Plato's Socratic dialogues, and all expositions in dramatic form, which belong to imitation in prose.
11. Émile Benveniste, "Les relations de temps dans le verbe français," *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, pp. 237–50; "The Correlations of Tense in the French Verb," *Problems in General Linguistics*, M. E. Meek, tr. (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1971), pp. 205–15.
12. Émile Benveniste, "De la subjectivité dans le langage" in *Problèmes*, p. 262; "Subjectivity in Language" in *Problems*, p. 227.
13. Benveniste, "Les relations des temps," p. 241; *Problems*, p. 208.
14. Senancour, *Obermann*, Lettre v.
15. F. R. de Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d'Outre-tombe*, Book I, ch. 5.
16. "L'Arrière-fable," *L'Arc* (1965), 29:6.