

## Narratology and Narrative Theory

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### *Kristeva, Barthes, and Genette*

Eternity is in love with the productions of time.

William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

As we begin at last to approach our end, we end up, as it were, back at the beginning of what is usually understood as narrative theory. While I have, in other words, been looking closely at some of the movements, individuals, and ideas that together form what I have been calling a prehistory of narrative theory, our turn now to Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, Gérard Genette, and the consolidation of these ideas in the form of structuralist narratology takes us to the point where most accounts of narrative theory rightly begin. Indeed, as I said in the Introduction, although the story–discourse relation is one that we can trace conceptually from Aristotle to the Russian Formalists and beyond, the terms derive their current disciplinary force from a moment in the late 1960s and early 1970s when a combination of intellectual and political conditions – particularly in France – made not only possible but also seemingly necessary a narrative theory that could draw at once on structuralist linguistics, Russian Formalist poetics, and critical theories derived from Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. As I will suggest, it is with the appearance of Kristeva’s, Barthes’s, and Genette’s major works (along with a number of others that I will mention along the way) that narrative theory begins to take its current institutional shape and to be defined in terms of controversies, problems, questions, and developments internal to it as a discipline.

Where, however, their place as founders of contemporary narrative theory is obvious and secure, what is less visible is their own vital and contested relation to the messy and exciting intellectual context I have been working to sketch out over the course of this book. Although works such as *S/Z: An Essay* (1970) and *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1970) can seem to have come from nowhere, they are in fact situated responses to the long tradition of thinking about representation and narrative, story and discourse that I have been trying to map out, a tradition that moves from Aristotelian theories of tragedy to the appearance of the Hegelian dialectic; from the post-Hegelian critical

theories of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud to the literary critical politics of Lukács, Bakhtin, and the Russian Formalists; from the structural linguistics of Saussure to Lévi-Strauss and the structural analysis of myth. More immediate was the effect of the literary journal *Tel Quel* and the writing of Julia Kristeva; where Kristeva's work offered opportunities both to imagine a synthesis among a number of different intellectual traditions (especially those of Hegel, Marx, Freud, Bakhtin, and Saussure) and, even more importantly, to rethink the status of writing *as* writing, *Tel Quel's* varied aesthetic and political trajectory provides a complicated backdrop for both Genette and Barthes. This is, here at the near-end of our story, to take them as the methodological and self-conscious and contested culmination of a longer and larger intellectual history.

My point here is that, while Genette and Barthes are rightly read as the start of a narratological project that has unfolded in particular ways over the last several decades, it is important to see where narrative theory begins, how it responded to its own moment in time, and what these contexts might have to tell us about necessary if obscure aspects of narrative theory as a whole. That is to say, seen in relation to the rest of their work, their influence, and their historical moment, Kristeva's, Barthes's, and Genette's narratologies appear not only as moments of methodological consolidation, moments when the different threads of stylistics, aesthetics, formalism, and structuralism meet in a potent and self-conscious form of narrative analysis but also as reflections of the larger political and historical problems that run through the whole tradition that I have been working to lay out. Seen – as they must be – in relation to this intellectual history, these works are powerful if tacit efforts at political, cultural, and historical critique as well as some of our most fully elaborated theories of the manifold ways in which story and discourse can be aligned, misaligned, put to work for the status quo, or imagined as an alternative to life as it is. In what follows, I want to look at some of the shared contexts in which Kristeva, Barthes, and Genette worked before moving on to a look at their most influential works of narrative theory, works that, as we will see, do much to set the terms and establish the limits of subsequent theories of narrative.

## 6.1 It Is What It Isn't: Julia Kristeva and *Tel Quel*

The journal *Tel Quel* was launched in 1960 by Philippe Sollers and subsequently published works by Barthes, Genette, Todorov, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, and many others. The journal took its name from a line of Nietzsche's, which appeared on its masthead: "I want the world

and I want it *as it is* [*tel quel*], and I want it again, eternally; I cry insatiably: again! – not just for myself alone, but for the entire play and the entire spectacle; not for the spectacle alone, but fundamentally for me, since I require the spectacle – for it requires me – and because I make it necessary.”<sup>1</sup> The journal changed aesthetic and political tack frequently and radically over its more than twenty years of operation, shifting from an aesthetic embrace of Alain Robbe-Grillet and the *nouveau roman* to structuralism and poststructuralism while also making more overtly political moves, which included its tense alliance with the French Communist Party (PCF) in 1967, its reaction to the student protests and strikes of May 1968, and finally its break with the PCF and turn to Maoism in 1971, which culminated in an “ill-advised expedition to the People’s Republic of China” in 1974. Despite these several shifts, the journal remained at the center of French intellectual life, helping to launch and to sustain a number of figures crucial to twentieth-century intellectual history.<sup>2</sup> Most importantly for us, the journal helped within this shifting political and intellectual context to further the intellectual synthesis of Marx and Freud with the works of the Russian Formalists and Saussure, an intellectual act that led very directly to the specifically narrative questions that motivated Kristeva, Todorov, Barthes, Genette, and others as they turned their attention more and more to the different types of literary and historical narrative. As I will suggest, it was Kristeva’s particular synthesis of political and aesthetic questions along with her systematic and syncretic engagement with Saussure, Levi-Strauss, Marx, Freud, the Russian Formalists, and Bakhtin that set the intellectual stage for some subsequent and very influential works of narrative theory.

Part of *Tel Quel*’s project was archival, an effort to look back and to recover writers and thinkers who had fallen out or to the side of official academic culture. The journal was especially interested in recovering what it saw as the revolutionary quality of some of the nineteenth-century writing that we have already considered, especially writing by Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. Alongside its new and differently engaged interpretations of these figures, the journal also helped to reintroduce a number of more or less outré characters such as Sade, Roussel, Lautréamont, Artaud, Joyce, and Bataille. What is more, the journal was – through the particular efforts of Kristeva and Todorov – directly responsible for the appearance of both Russian Formalism and Bakhtin on the French scene; especially important here was Todorov’s 1965 anthology of Russian Formalist essays, which he translated and published as part of the Collection *Tel Quel*; Danielle Marx-Scouras writes that “the publication of the *Théorie de la littérature* was viewed as nothing less than a major event, and it gave *Tel Quel* a new ‘scientific’ status . . . on the

French cultural scene, at a time when the structural analysis of literary texts had become the new intellectual trend.”<sup>3</sup> The sudden success of Russian Formalism in France was the result of at least two factors: first, it introduced a rigorous method of poetic analysis into a critical tradition that had more or less lacked a stylistics. According to Marx-Scouras, official “university criticism was suspicious of any critical approach that dared to use conceptual tools tied to linguistics, that dared to return to what Paul Valéry, the French formalist precursor, had called ‘the verbal condition of literature.’”<sup>4</sup> Jean-Michel Rabaté writes, “By the mid-1960s *Tel Quel* could be seen as a serious, committed, and unrivaled magazine aiming at disseminating the theory and practice of a literary structuralism which looked very much like a revised version of Russian Formalism.”<sup>5</sup> Second, the appearance of Todorov’s translations was politically timely as well; where the French intellectual Left had in the past tended to follow the French Communist Party in its opposition to Formalism, the decline of the party over the course of the 1950s and 1960s opened the door to a reassessment of Russian Formalism as a different representative of the communist East, one that could see its way past the aesthetic limits of party-approved socialist realism, on the one hand, and Sartrean “engagement,” on the other.

This story is complicated by *Tel Quel*’s alliance with the PCF in the late 1960s. The journal’s fraught relationship with the party took several forms: colloquiums held on the relation between Marxism and the new theoretical methods held at Cluny in 1968 and 1970; a partnership between the journal and the party’s own monthly publication, *La Nouvelle Critique*; and the establishment of a weekly seminar that, writes Dosse, “identified its objective as putting together an overall Marxist-Structuralist theory. The group included Barthes, Derrida, Klossowski, and many others.”<sup>6</sup> These different efforts to relate the journal’s work on language and textuality to Marxism and, more, to the particular work of the French Communist Party now seem strange, backward, and, perhaps, simply opportunistic given, first, the party’s continued support for the Soviet orthodoxy in the wake of both the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 and the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and, second, the PCF’s lack of support for and understanding of the events of May 1968. As the editors of the British *New Left Review* expressed it in a special issue responding to the event in the winter of that year, “The French Communist Party went to great lengths actually to prevent the union of the revolutionary forces.”<sup>7</sup> As a result of these and other difficulties, the relationship between *Tel Quel* and the PCF was strained from the start and led in time both to the journal’s rejection of the party and to its embrace of a Maoist as opposed to Soviet version of Marxism: “Rejection of the

Communist Party signaled for *Tel Quel* the beginning of a period of considerable interest in, occasionally verging on enthusiasm for, Mao Zedong's version of communism; this lasted until the Chinese leader's death in 1976.<sup>8</sup> More directly relevant for us is the wedge that the developing politicization of *Tel Quel* drove between the journal, on the one hand, and Todorov and Genette (Genette had already left the party in 1956 in the wake of Soviet intervention in Hungary) on the other: "Todorov and Genette would part company with *Tel Quel* circa 1968, as the journal embarked on its phase of 'theoretical terrorism' – the ill-fated alliance with PCF Stalinism – in order to found the more scholarly *Poétique*."<sup>9</sup> As we turn from *Tel Quel* to Kristeva, Barthes, and Genette, it will be important to keep in mind the specificity of this cultural and political moment, its possibilities, and its conceptual limits; it was a moment when different figures were forced to make choices and declare allegiances that cut across levels of politics, political history, literary history, theory, and, at last, assumptions and expectations about the power and potential of narrative forms to reflect, respond to, or, indeed, rewrite the social world. To what degree can or should we see Kristeva's or Barthes's or Genette's narrative theories in relation to the events of May '68 or the differently perceived failure of the French Communist Party to react to those events? Does it make sense to read an apparently apolitical book such as *Narrative Discourse* as having something to say about not only story and discourse but also the unfolding political history of the twentieth century?

Julia Kristeva was one of the most important figures associated with *Tel Quel*, the thinker who turned the journal's attention fully to *writing* as its primary object of analysis and its chief value. Indeed, Kristeva's appearance on the scene in 1965 marked a turning point in Parisian intellectual life: "When the twenty-four-year-old Julia Kristeva arrived in Paris in a snowstorm just before Christmas 1965 with only five dollars in her pocket, this young Bulgarian woman never imagined that she would become the Egeria of structuralism. Indeed, the structuralist period was, along with everything else, an encounter between a daring cultural adventure and a talented woman."<sup>10</sup> Kristeva's influence resulted in large part from her ability to synthesize and to motivate Marx, Hegel, Freud, Saussure, and, later, Bakhtin; and, at the same time that Kristeva was drawing these different figures together, she was also working to make methodologically clear what it meant to see language *as* language, what it meant, in other words, to see language's possibilities and limits alongside and against the insights of other, more or less related fields. In other words, like Propp and Saussure and Lévi-Strauss and the Russian Formalists before her, Kristeva was engaged in an act of methodological reduction, an attempt to identify what was essentially poetic about poetic

language. As opposed, in that case, to looking to who wrote it, what it represented, or where it originated, Kristeva was interested in *the writing itself*, in how it worked and in what roles writing and poetic language might have to play in the midst of the enormously significant political events and debates of the day. Kristeva would, of course, go on after the early period I discuss to produce important and controversial works that develop her ideas about writing in the related contexts of psychoanalysis, feminism, and nationalism; given the limits of this project, we will have to focus on what her initial critical synthesis made possible for the specific development and consolidation of narrative theory.

First, from Saussure and Lévi-Strauss she took and advanced the idea that all language exists in the space between the general and the particular, between *langue*, seen as a socially shared system of rules that govern an individual's expression within a linguistic community, and *parole*, the particular forms that language takes as it finds embodied expression in speech and writing. Where, however, all language depends upon this relation between the particular and the general as an implicit structural precondition, specifically poetic language "realizes," embodies, and makes explicit the relation itself, thus calling attention to what other types of language tend to erase:

Only in poetic language is found the practical realization of the "totality" (though we prefer the term "infinity") of the codes at man's disposition. From this perspective, literary practice is revealed to be the discovery and the exploration the possibilities of language; an activity that frees man from certain linguistic (psychical, social) networks; a dynamism that breaks the inertia of language-habits and offers the linguist a unique opportunity to study the becoming of the signification of signs.<sup>11</sup>

Poetic language shows *langue* – the codes – at work in *parole*; as we saw with Lévi-Strauss and the deep structure of myth, poetic language reveals the otherwise hidden presence of the general at the heart of the particular; and because these codes represent the limits of what is sayable and thinkable at a given moment in time, Kristeva's sense of *writing* as an activity that can reveal the presence and influence of the codes takes on an intensely critical and even political aspect; it calls our attention to the fact that expression is never merely natural, never without its historical or ideological causes and effects.

In this way, Kristeva adapts both Shklovsky's concept of *defamiliarization* and Jakobson's analysis of the "poetic function"; as with both of those models, poetic language appears as language that calls attention not only to its own material form but also to the whole psychosocial apparatus that makes communication between and thus life with other people possible in a

particular way at a particular place and time. Kristeva's understanding of *writing* as a form of historical or ideological analysis thus also recalls Bakhtin's understanding of the "chronotope"; she would, in fact, go on to translate Bakhtin's book on Dostoevsky into French in 1973. Susan Stanford Friedman writes that "Kristeva's earliest essays pose a critique of the static analysis of structuralism and call for an identification of textual process. Invoking Bakhtin, Kristeva identifies this process as fundamentally dialogic and intertextual—at the level of word, sentence, and story."<sup>12</sup> Finally, she turns this sense of *writing* into a portable critical method, into a way of drawing an openness out of texts that would otherwise seem committed to closing things down:

The *book* . . . situated within the infinity of poetic language, is *finite*: it is not open, but closed, constituted once and for all; it has become a principle, *one*, a law, but it is readable as such within a possible opening onto the infinite. This readability of the closed opening onto the infinite is only *completely* accessible to the one who writes, that is, from the point of view of that reflexive productivity which is writing.<sup>13</sup>

Because, as opposed to *writing* as such, the finished book seems to close matters, to imagine the finished collapse of *langue* into *parole*, it is the job of critical reading to reopen the book, to show how all language is always a play between particular expression and a shared set of social and thus ideological rules. It is, in other words, the work of criticism to take the *book*, which is to say language that presents itself as natural, as closed, as monologic, as finished, and to reveal it as *writing*, which is to say as language that knows itself as opening up onto the infinite. (In some of her later work, the opposition between writing and the book will be recast as the opposition between what she calls the *genotext* and the *phenotext*, with the former standing in for a poetic or ironic embodiment of "language's underlying foundation" and the latter denoting language that "obeys rules of communication and presupposes a subject of enunciation and an addressee"; the phenotext is thus what Bakhtin might refer to as an official or monologic text.)<sup>14</sup>

Her take on what she identifies as the *arbitrary* nature of the book or what she elsewhere refers to as *the bounded text* recalls arguments that we saw at work in both James and Lukács:

All ideological activity appears in the form of utterances compositionally completed. This completion is to be distinguished from the structural finitude to which only a few philosophical systems (Hegel) as well as religions have aspired. The structural finitude characterizes, as a

fundamental trait, the object that our culture consumes as a finished product (effect, impression) while refusing to read the process of its productivity: “literature” – within which the novel occupies a privileged position. The notion of literature coincides with the notion of the novel, as much on account of chronological origins as of structural bounding. Explicit completion is often lacking, ambiguous, or assumed in the text of the novel. This incompleteness nevertheless underlies the text’s structural finitude.<sup>15</sup>

Kristeva’s argument here is that the novel occupies a privileged position in relation to narrative and ideology because of the way it reveals a relation between two apparently opposed ideas. On the one hand, the novel does in fact rely on arbitrary forms of competition or closure, forced biographical or sentimental ends that seem designed to create an effect of finitude and thus ideological closure. On the other hand, precisely because this work is arbitrary, because a novel cannot pretend to achieve the levels of synthesis associated with Hegel’s system or with religion, it calls ironic attention to the failure of finitude at exactly the same moment that it attempts – however halfheartedly – to produce finitude as an aesthetic effect: “Nothing in speech can put an end – except arbitrarily – to the infinite concatenation of loops.”<sup>16</sup> This play between the effect of finitude and closure and an ironic acknowledgment that finitude is not for us is a version of what we saw both in James when he admitted that the novelist’s art consists in drawing a provisional aesthetic circle around relations that “really, universally . . . stop nowhere,” and in Lukács when he identified the novel with the fact that we moderns want but know that we cannot have totality: the novel, for Lukács, “is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality.”<sup>17</sup> Kristeva characterizes what Lukács would call irony as a text’s *productivity*: “The text is therefore a productivity, and this means: first, that its relationship to the language in which it is situated is redistributive (destructive-constructive), and hence can be better approached through logical categories rather than linguistic ones; and second, that it is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another.”<sup>18</sup> In another context she makes the critical force of a text’s productivity – its materiality, its irony, to use the Russian Formalist phrase, its literariness – more apparent: “this thinking points to a truth, namely, that the kind of activity encouraged and privileged by (capitalist) society represses the *process* pervading the body and the subject, and that we must therefore break out of our interpersonal and interracial experience if we are to gain access to what is



repressed in the social mechanism: the generating of significance.” Stated differently, Kristeva takes literature’s self-conscious attention to its own matter and rules as a semiotic (which is to say as a self-consciously and immanently *in-process*) basis for a frankly revolutionary way of thinking about the body, about desire, about gender, and about possibility insofar as these have been limited by but continue nonetheless to exceed the symbolic structures (Bakhtin might again have called them chronotopes) that define an individual’s relation to a social world at a given moment in time.

As both a methodological advance and as an intellectual consolidation, Kristeva’s work is enormously important to the history of narrative theory. Although, like other figures we have looked at (and most immediately Bakhtin), she tends to focus her attention on particular narrative genres, Kristeva’s large and rigorous synthesis of Russian Formalism, structuralism, psychoanalysis, and Marxism form an important backdrop for methodological assumptions necessary to the subsequent development of narrative theory (this is especially so for Barthes, whose sense of the readerly and the writerly is, as we shall see, taken directly from Kristeva). We need, however, also to see the enormous political hopes that Kristeva and others had for this theoretical synthesis as well as for the kind of attention she and others at *Tel Quel* paid to language in general and to literary language in particular. This is to return to how thinking about narrative in relation to Saussure’s semiology or about the novel as bound or unbound is related to *Tel Quel*’s fraught political backdrop, its encounters with Marxism, the PCF, and, later, Maoism. What does the study of narrative and the novel have to do with revolution? In a 1971 essay on Barthes’s work, Kristeva makes big claims for the role that literature and literary analysis have to play in world history:

How does literature achieve this positive subversion of the old universe? How does there emerge, through its practical experience, a negativity germane to the subject as well as to history, capable of clearing away ideologies and even “natural” languages in order to formulate new signifying devices? How does it condense the shattering of the subject, as well as that of society, into a new apportionment of relationships between the symbolic and the real, the subjective and the objective?<sup>19</sup>

Although cast as a series of questions, Kristeva’s passage makes clear that writing is or ought to be a revolutionary activity, one that might finish or at least further the practical or imaginative efforts of, for instance, a party mired in old orthodoxies or a student movement that went far but not far enough. She goes on to associate the radical work of literature with a version of Hegel: “At the same time, it is clear that it is the Hegelian dialectic (whose transcendence

veils the objective progress it has achieved since Descartes, Kant, and the Enlightenment) that first pointed to the masterly lines of this interplay between limit and infinity, rationale and objectivity – a stumbling block for contemporary sciences. It succeeded in this by imposing at its foundations the *knots*, invisible without it where the opposites – *subject* and *history* – are interwoven.”<sup>20</sup> This is a complicated passage, too complicated to explicate fully here. A few points: first, we will want for now simply to notice that Kristeva identifies what is important about her and Barthes’s methods with Hegel, a fact that creates yet another link among the beginning, middle, and end of our story. I will turn to Barthes’s Hegelian inheritance shortly. Second, what Kristeva identifies as the essence of the dialectic is its ability to reveal the “knots” that seem to structure antinomies on which our culture and beliefs are based, antinomies or oppositions between subject and object, limit and infinity, fact and value, particular and general, etc. In other words, the work of the dialectic is not to overcome oppositions but to reveal the degree to which seemingly necessary and structuring antinomies always carry within them their own logical and existential limits. Literature – thanks to its irony, its productivity, its self-consciousness or its dialogism – reveals those knots; it shows how systems of belief that seem *only natural* always in fact rely on historical contradictions that can be exposed and thus – potentially – undone.

And third, as we turn now to Barthes and Genette, we can see that Kristeva’s particular interest – in narrative, in the novel, in narrative genres that try and fail spectacularly to draw a circle around relations that really stop nowhere – depends on ideas and techniques that depend on what I have already identified as the antinomy at the heart of narrative theory: the story–discourse relation. As we will see, both Barthes and Genette draw on and tactically back away from one of the hopes that seemed to emerge from Kristeva’s synthesis: the hope that the structuring opposition between story and discourse (she might call it a *thetic* opposition, which is to say an opposition or event that makes subsequent acts of socially recognized signification possible), the opposition, in other words, upon which narrative depends, might be overcome, and that overcoming that opposition might result in something like the revolutionary pulsation on which much of her work with *Tel Quel* seemed to depend. As I will suggest, Barthes and Genette both emerge from the same political scene, from the same encounters with the PCF, with the promise of Maoism, with the unexpected, unimagined events of May ’68; instead, however, of working or, rather, continuing to work to imagine a radical or antimimetic form of narrative that could overcome the story–discourse relation, both Barthes and Genette turn in the late sixties and early seventies back to classic forms to narrative, to works that would seem

from one perspective to offer a conservative (a younger Barthes would say *readerly*) alternative to the revolutionary potential that Kristeva and others associated with *Tel Quel* saw in experimental narratives, in *Finnegan's Wake*, in the aleatory logic of Raymond Roussel, in the “new novels” of Robbe-Grillet, and elsewhere. What is more, these works – *S/Z* and *Narrative Discourse* in particular – form one basis for much of what we continue to understand as narrative theory. The question then becomes, what would it mean to see Barthes and Genette as not only writing about narrative but also writing about narrative at a moment when narrative and the possibility of its political and historical end were tied up with the sharpest political hopes and enthusiasms? What did it mean, after the new novel, *Tel Quel*, and May ‘68, to turn back to familiar or narrative forms, to “classic” versions of the story-discourse relation?

It is in this context, in the mix of intellectual synthesis, political contingency, and cultural risk that we should read Barthes and Genette, two writers who were associated with *Tel Quel*, who also worked to further the compromise between structuralism and Russian Formalism, and who might be said to take the relation between story and discourse to one of its logical conclusions. It is, of course, no surprise to see Genette and Barthes as central to the development of narrative theory as we understand it today; *S/Z* and *Narrative Discourse* appeared within a year of one another and remain two of the most powerful examples of narrative theory at work. They also share another quality: while both works are justly celebrated for their ability to articulate methods and rules that could apply to almost any narrative, they both do so in the context of extremely detailed readings of single texts. Barthes reads Balzac's short story “Sarrasine,” and Genette reads Proust. So, in addition to isolating some of the salient aspects of this founding moment of narratology and structuralist narrative theory, I will want both to anticipate some important developments in the field and, more importantly, to show how a look at its relation to the whole complicated history that I have been working to lay out helps to make clear the assumptions, hopes, and limits of narrative theory at one of its high points.

## **6.2 Parisian Gold: Roland Barthes and the Analysis of Narrative**

A few years before *S/Z: An Essay*, the book on which I will focus here, Roland Barthes published “An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives,” a powerfully compressed and foundational work of narrative theory. The

essay first appeared in a 1966 special issue of the journal *Communications* that included a number of now-classic narratological essays: essays by Greimas, Bremond, Todorov, Genette, Umberto Eco, Christian Metz, and others. Barthes begins his essay, the most influential in that very influential issue, with the observation that “the narratives of the world are numberless”; he then lists a few of many, many narrative types: “myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think of Carpaccio’s *Saint Ursula*), stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversation.”<sup>21</sup> Barthes begins by arguing that, because the sheer number of narratives makes an empirical, inductive method impossible, the analysis of narrative instead requires a “theory,” a single model or method that could account more or less for a phenomenon that is “international, transhistorical, transcultural” and yet nonetheless expressed in the sublimely particular form of “millions” of particular narratives.<sup>22</sup> Barthes goes on to invoke Saussure, Jakobson, and Lévi-Strauss, while also engaging contemporary efforts by Todorov, Bremond, Benveniste, Greimas, and others who had already begun to imagine the application of Saussure’s analytical tools to specifically narrative forms in the wake of the recent French synthesis of structuralist linguistics and Russian Formalism. At once crisply synthetic and utterly original, Barthes’s work occupies a central place in the emerging field that Todorov would soon name *narratology*.<sup>23</sup>

By the time he wrote his “Introduction,” Barthes was already well-known. In 1953 he published *Writing Degree Zero*, a text that worked to nominate and thus potentially to surpass what he took as the historical and political limits of literary writing in France; because, following Saussure, Barthes understood that writing (as a form of *parole*) relies on language and that language (*langue*) is an expression of a society as it stands at a given moment in time, he argued that “literary writing carries at the same time the alienation of History and the dream of History; as a Necessity, it testifies to the division of languages which is inseparable from the division of classes; as Freedom, it is the consciousness of this division and the very effort which seeks to surmount it.”<sup>24</sup> Literary writing thus both reflected and, to a degree, supported a particular political situation and seemed, however dimly, to allow readers and writers to imagine the utopian or revolutionary possibility of something else. A few years later, his *Mythologies* (1957), a collection of short essays on different aspects of everyday life and culture in France that had appeared as columns in *Les Lettres nouvelles* from 1954 to 1956, drew explicitly on Lévi-Strauss’s model of myth analysis and a mode of semiological analysis adapted from Saussure’s account of the relation between signifier and signified, an account that he later worked to codify and present in a short volume of 1964, *Elements*

of *Semiology*: “The *Elements* here presented have as their sole aim the extraction from linguistics of analytical concepts which we think a priori to be sufficiently general to start semiological research on its way.”<sup>25</sup> Barthes had also published works on Michelet (1954) and Racine (1963), the latter of which created a scandal when the Sorbonne’s Raymond Picard attacked Barthes in “the evocatively entitled work, *New Criticism or New Imposture?*” which “denounced the tendency toward generalization, toward taking a single, concrete example for a category of universals in a critical game that confuses everything.”<sup>26</sup> The subsequent Barthes–Picard debate (including Barthes’s response, *Criticism and Truth*) marked an important moment in the rise of structuralism in France.

In “An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives,” Barthes applies these different ideas directly to the study of narrative, which he understands once again in terms of the structuralist play between *langue* and *parole*, the shared and general rules that govern the production of individual stories and those individual stories themselves, as well as the play between signifier and signified, the matter or content of a given story and the particular verbal form that the story takes. Put in other words, Barthes understands a structural analysis as one that focuses not on one or another aspect of narrative but rather on a *relation* that articulates different aspects of a structure into a more or less meaningful whole: “From the outset, linguistics furnishes the structural analysis of narrative with a concept which is decisive in that, making explicit immediately what is essential in every system of meaning, namely its organization, it allows us both to show how a narrative is not a simple sum of propositions and to classify the enormous mass of elements which go to make up a narrative. This concept is that of *levels of description*.”<sup>27</sup> By levels of description, Barthes means our now-familiar relation between story and discourse, which he expands here into a three-tiered system of *functions*, *actions*, and *discourse*. The idea of *narrative levels* is important to Barthes because it demands at least two modes of interpretation. On the one hand, one needs to read across the *syntax* of a particular level, to see how one event follows or occurs before another at the level of story or how word follows or precedes word at the level of discourse. This reading along the contiguous or combinatory line of story or discourse is what Roman Jakobson, following Saussure, would call a *syntagmatic* mode of reading. On the other hand, one needs also to read across or between levels, to treat the *relation* among levels as itself a significant aspect of a narrative’s whole structure. This other kind of interpretation, one that occurs not along but across different levels of narrative, is what Jakobson would refer to as a *paradigmatic* or metaphoric mode of reading, a mode

that “jumps” vertically among choices made at those related levels of story and discourse.<sup>28</sup>

Barthes calls the minimal unit of narrative a *function*, an explicit reference to Propp, who, as we saw, reduced all possible iterations of the folktale into a nonreversible sequence of thirty-one functions: lacking, seeking, testing, being tested, fighting, marrying, etc. Barthes, however, takes the term in a more flexible sense (something closer to Tomashevsky’s *motif*), using it to account for whatever elements count as irreducible within the context of a particular narrative structure. In other words, Barthes’s account of the relation between a given narrative and its functions seeks, in a self-consciously Aristotelian vein, to account for the reciprocal relation between parts and whole. As opposed, that is, to cataloging narrative functions in the abstract, Barthes posits a specific and generative relation between each narrative whole and the parts that compose it; once again, we can look to the Russian Formalist notion of *motivation*, the sense that all parts of a whole narrative structure will or should be motivated in relation to another as well as to that whole. Barthes is, in other words, interested in structure at several related levels: there is, at the top, the structural relation between all the rules that govern the production of narratives in general and all the individual narratives; there is, at a lower level, the structural relation that orders the relation between the parts and whole of a particular narrative, the rules of combination, substitution, and order on which a narrative relies (those rules would, for instance, be different for a detective and a romance novel); and then, at an even lower level, there is the structural relation between the signifiers and signifieds that together make up the various signifying elements that are those parts. Herman and Vervaek write that, Barthes “starts from minimal components such as functions and indexes, proceeds to create minimal relationships between these components (arbitrariness, implication, mutual implication), and so arrives at larger units in the story such as sequences and their combinations.”<sup>29</sup> What, in that case, makes a “structural analysis” powerful is the fact that it identifies a single structural *relation* (loosely, the relation between part and part and the relation between part and whole) that works in the same way at several levels of abstraction and analysis. Because Barthes understands a narrative as a nested set of structures or, rather, a structure of structures, every part of that structure must by definition have a significant role to play: “The essence of a function is, so to speak, the seed that it sows in the narrative, planting an element that will come to fruition later – either on the same level or elsewhere, on another level.”<sup>30</sup> Every function, which is to say every part of a particular narrative structure no matter how apparently trivial or random, will turn out to have a *meaningful* relation with the other parts and thus the structure as a

whole. Indeed, even when an object or event appears meaningless, that meaninglessness can and in fact must become its own kind of meaning: “Even were a detail to appear irretrievably insignificant, resistant to all functionality, it would nonetheless end up with precisely the meaning of absurdity or uselessness: everything has a meaning, or nothing has.”<sup>31</sup> (Barthes later pursues this argument – that even insignificance is a form of significance in classic narratives – in his great essay on “The Reality Effect.”)<sup>32</sup> Meaning is in this context equivalent to Saussure’s understanding of *value*, the significant quality that individual units take on as a result only of being part of a whole and internally differentiated structure; and Saussure’s value is in turn related to the ideal of value that Simmel, Weber, and Lukács sought to derive from or to locate in the mass of otherwise inert social facts, a connection that Lévi-Strauss made when he saw that the abstract rules of structuralism, rules that help us to see how individual linguistic facts emerge *in context* as values, could be used to understand how the most important kinds of significance, the deeply human stuff of myth, kinship, and culture, could in the end be understood as and only as a significant, value-producing structural play between units and rules.

Barthes then goes on to develop a number of important and influential oppositions. First, he distinguishes between *functions*, which initiate, sustain, or conclude narrative activities and thus stitch together earlier and later moments, and *indices*, which add significance, color, and sense to a narrative without necessarily affecting, initiating, or concluding events. When, on the one hand, Queequeg climbs into bed with Ishmael, it is a *function* if only because *climbing in* seems to necessitate a later *climbing out*; the fact, on the other hand, that Queequeg is covered with tattoos when he climbs in is an *index*: it is a meaningful detail; it adds significance or color (in this case “a dark, purplish, yellow color”) to the narrative without opening, sustaining, or closing off an action. Barthes then further divides his *functions* into two categories, those that are necessary to a narrative and those that are not; he refers to the first as *nuclei* and the second as *catalysers*. *Nuclei*, which he also refers to as cardinal functions, are events that “open (or continue, or close) an alternative that is of direct consequence for the subsequent development of the story”; they are events that “inaugurate or conclude an uncertainty.”<sup>33</sup> *Catalysers*, on the other hand, “merely ‘fill in’ the narrative space separating the hinge functions.” (In *Story and Discourse*, Seymour Chatman adapts Barthes’s distinction, renaming these differently necessary narrative functions *kernels* and *satellites*.) Once we have a better sense of their parts, narratives become visible as a rhythmic and harmonic sequence of these different elements, with more and less necessary functions marking time while indices give tone and emphasis to what unfolds.



We could think here of *Wuthering Heights* (1847). When Heathcliff runs away, when Cathy marries Edgar Linton, when Lockwood decides to make a second trip to visit Heathcliff: all of these are *nuclei* (or kernels) because, without them, the narrative as a whole could not proceed in the way that it does; the narrative structure as a whole needs these events to happen, needs them in order to make its way from beginning to end. When, on the other hand, Hindley shows Isabella his knife-gun or when Lockwood mistakes a pile of dead rabbits for a bundle of cute kittens, these are *catalysers* (or satellites). Although they are actions or events with beginnings and ends (showing and mistaking), they are not strictly necessary to the progress of the plot; but, while they are not necessary, they nonetheless contribute at this other level to the whole meaning and sense of the narrative. Lockwood's inability to distinguish between dead rabbits and living cats helps us to understand and to anticipate his more necessary role as a surrogate for the reader first coming to terms with the alien and violent nature of life in and around Heathcliff; the *catalyser*, "mistaking dead rabbits for cats," resonates with and deepens the more necessary *nucleus*, "working to understand the mysteries of *Wuthering Heights*." What is more, narrative *indices* such as the gothic murkiness of the interior of Heathcliff's house, its speaking difference from the lightness of Thrushcross Grange, Joseph's heavily marked regional dialect, or the number as opposed to the brute fact of Heathcliff's dogs provide a static but significant symbolic and atmospheric network against which to see the events and characters of the novel. Indeed, we can say that the novel as narrative is and only is the play among nucleus, catalyzer, and index, and part of its particular aesthetic effect, its music, as it were, emerges from the experience of feeling the tempo with which different orders of signification and structural necessity take each other's place.

Barthes goes on in the essay to identify several other aspects of narrative as such, which is to say the model of narrative that he proposes to use in order potentially to analyze any and all individual narratives, which is, in turn, to say the narrative *langue* against which he can measure narrative *parole*. He writes about *actions*, which he associates with a narrative's character system and the way it distributes the ownership and effects of functions across what he understands as a narrative's grammatical subjects and objects. Characters stand as the grammatical nodes against and around which functions occur. He writes about *narrative communication*, the implied position from which a narrative as a communicative act makes its way to an implied receiver. That position – the narrative *I* of enunciation – can, he suggests, take several forms: the author as "real" person outside the narrative, the impersonal narrator as tacit and immanent guarantor of the narrative, and, finally, the "narrator



[who] must limit his narrative to what the characters can observe or know, everything proceeding as if each of the characters in turn were the sender of the narrative.” In his account of the productive limits of the *I* of enunciation, Barthes draws on the linguist Émile Benveniste’s essay “The Nature of Pronouns”: “*I* is ‘the individual who utters the present instance of discourse containing the linguistic instance *I*.’”<sup>34</sup> Just as the *I* limits and situates the source and possible scope of discourse, so does it draw an implicit circle around a narrative world, functioning grammatically like biography in Lukács or point of view in James. Barthes also writes about the narrative discourse itself, that level at which the functions of a particular story find textual expression and undergo a whole series of distortions as the narrative reverses, slows, or collapses the chronological order of events: “This generalized distortion is what gives the language of narrative its special character. A purely logical phenomenon, since founded on an often distant relation and mobilizing a sort of confidence in intellectual memory, it ceaselessly substitutes meaning for the straightforward copy of the events recounted.”<sup>35</sup> As we will see, it is this last aspect of narrative structure that will occupy Gérard Genette in his *Narrative Discourse*.

As we have seen, it is the play between the events as they exist at the level of *story* and the events as they are represented at the level of *discourse* that gives a narrative its particular capacity for meaning; with this, Barthes draws out a paradox that was already implicit in Aristotle, the fact that although narratives will always take the form of a mimetic representation of real or imagined events, they derive neither all of their interest nor all of their meaning from those events. It is rather *the relation between* the event and its representation, the relation itself that constitutes the real and, again, paradoxical matter and force of narrative:

It may be that men ceaselessly re-inject into narrative what they have known, what they have experienced; but if they do, at least it is in a form which has vanquished repetition and instituted the model of a process of becoming. Narrative does not show, does not imitate; the passion which may excite us in reading a novel is not that of a “vision” (in actual fact, we do not “see” anything). Rather it is that of meaning, that of a higher order of relation which also has its emotions, its hopes, its dangers, its triumphs.<sup>36</sup>

The founding gesture of the structural analysis of narratives is, in other words, an act of nomination, of naming *the relation* among narrative levels – as opposed to the levels themselves – as that which is essential to narrative and to the study of narrative. As with Freud and the work that goes on between

the manifest and latent content of a dream; or with Lukács and his commitment to irony, which is to say the experience of narrative form as form; or with Kristeva and her sense of *writing* as a form of critical thinking that foregrounds the relation between verbal expression and historically specific social code, Barthes sees literary narrative as effective because it thematizes its own form, because it forces us to confront the idea of *the relation among levels within a structure* as essential to the production of narrative significance.

As I said before, it is important to see Barthes's narratology not only as a methodological effort or experiment but also within the context of the social and political shifts that made his particular synthesis of Freud, Marx, Saussure, and Shklovsky possible. Although, as we will see, this meeting of the political and the aesthetic is more obvious in *S/Z*, it is also a real if quiet aspect of "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives." One trace of that connection is Barthes's odd choice of examples throughout the essay. Although, in the nature of things, he could have chosen anything, he relies in his essay on examples from Ian Fleming's *Goldfinger*, a James Bond novel that first appeared in 1959 and that was then made into a movie in 1964. From one point of view, we can see the purely methodological appeal of the novel for Barthes. The novel is technically achieved without being high art, it is an avowed work of genre fiction that works and, indeed, excels as a familiar form without trying to exceed the rules of the form; it is, as Herman and Vervaek point out, simply a book in which "many things happen." Also, because it had already been made into a film, its presence in the essay makes a tacit argument for the portability of plot from one to another narrative medium, for the fact that something about *Goldfinger* can make its way from one medium to another, a fact relevant to Barthes's claim for the generality of narrative as such, for its ability to cross divides between novel and film, painting and conversation.<sup>37</sup>

The novel also, it could be said, allegorizes two different assumptions about narrative that stand behind Barthes's whole project and that will be especially important to his thinking in *S/Z*. *Goldfinger* is, perhaps, an appropriate example not only because it offers instances of what Barthes will later refer to as the *readerly* and the *writerly* but also because it presents that distinction in terms that resonate within the Cold War historical context of Barthes's writing and narratology's emergence. On the one hand, Bond is the man of action, someone who excels because training and disposition have reduced the space between thought and deed to something close to zero. Jeremy Black writes that "Bond can be seen . . . as a central figure in the paranoid culture of the Cold War. The novels and early films chartered a period when Britain was making adjustments to her world status in uneasy alliance with the United

States against Communism, and, increasingly, offering skill, brains and professionalism, instead of mere might.”<sup>38</sup> In this way, Bond stands as a figure for a naturalized, motivated view of narrative, the ideological notion that narrative *discourse* could or should be reduced to a single practical or “professional” significance; and, in the context of the Cold War, that certainty, that lack of ambiguity or nuance jibes with a view of politics and society that reduced the possibility of meaning or nuance in the name of a false political or ideological certainty. Bond is thus a *readerly* hero, someone who succeeds precisely because he treats a situation as a more or less stable code to be cracked, broken, or shot. And, on the other: although the character appears in the movie and not the book, one is tempted to see Barthes’s critic as something closer to Q, the scientist–artist figure who attends productively if eccentrically to the gadgets and doodads of the spy trade and who counts on the fact that even the most innocuous of devices can conceal – in broad daylight, if for your eyes only – all manner of overlapping and counter-intuitive significance. This is to see the narratologist or critic as the effective and only apparently distracted purveyor of exploding pens and cameras secreted within cigarette lighters, seemingly homely but really sophisticated terms that hold out the possibility, one embraced by Shklovsky, Jakobson, Kristeva, and others, that literary narrative works precisely because it forces us to look for the hidden or unexpected uses of what habit would otherwise reduce to the everyday. (Catalyzer! Function! Motif! Please return them in one piece, Mr. Bond.) We might extend this reading, seeing Goldfinger’s ultimate goal – to steal all the gold in Fort Knox – in relation to some of the larger questions about the nature of value that I have been asking throughout; to what degree does gold stand in (1) as a value in and of itself, (2) as a signifier for a value that in fact resides elsewhere, or (3) as what any reader of fairy tales would recognize as an almost pure narrative *motif*, an ultimately empty object of desire – Hitchcock called them MacGuffins – that serves in this context to motivate plot and little else. Indeed, despite or maybe because of his defining love of the stuff, Auric Goldfinger characterizes it best: “No, no, gentlemen. Fort Knox is a myth like other myths.”<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Goldfinger wants to steal (or in the film to irradiate) all the gold in Fort Knox, a scheme that would make him rich while also destabilizing the United States and related economies. As Colonel Smithers, a Bank of England security expert and, as Fleming puts it, a man who “looked exactly like someone who would be called Colonel Smithers,” explains to Bond, “gold and currencies backed by gold are the foundation of our international credit. We can only tell what the true strength of the pound is, and other countries can only tell it, by knowing the amount of valuta we have behind our currency.” Seen

in these terms, gold is not only a value; rather, under the terms of the 1944 Bretton Woods Agreement, the relative and exchangeable value of different currencies was tied to and thus regulated by the value of gold, which was in turn pegged to the value of the U.S. dollar. Gold was thus a value that made other values possible, insofar as it brought different monetary systems together into a strategic, regulated, uneven, and, one might say, an internally motivated system. It is, in other words, a nice figure for a narrative structure, for which, as Barthes says, “everything has a meaning, or nothing has.” Gold was, in other words, what allowed individual values within the contested and internally riven structure of the Cold War economic system to have what meaning they did; this became clear in the early seventies when Richard Nixon at last severed the tie between gold and the dollar and let the currency float free (it took Nixon to do, in other words, what Goldfinger could not). Fleming thus casts gold as a very particular historical fact, one tied to the last gasp of a particular postwar economic arrangement as well as to Britain’s own late imperial anxiety about the shifting bases of social and cultural values that were very much on the wane. Bond’s presence as *the* example in “An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives” raises a hint – a bare hint but a hint nonetheless – of another layer to the essay, of a political meaning that Barthes sought to register as connotation, as opposed to denotation, because, as we will see, the difference between those two modes of signifying was for him indeed a crucial political difference.

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Barthes’s next major work of narrative theory – indeed, one of *the* major works of narrative theory – is *S/Z: An Essay*, a book that makes explicit the relations that exist among narrative, ideology, and history. In *S/Z* Barthes offers a long, sustained, and incredibly – one might say manically – detailed reading of Honoré de Balzac’s novella *Sarrasine* (1830), a reading presented as a “starred” analysis of 561 *lexias*, Barthes’s term for what, following Propp, Tomashevsky, and his own work in the “Introduction,” he takes as his minimal unit of analysis: “The lexia will include sometimes a few words, sometimes several sentences; it will be a matter of convenience: it will suffice that the lexia be the best possible space in which we can observe meanings; its dimension, empirically determined, estimated, will depend on the density of connotations, variable according to the moments of the text.”<sup>40</sup> In addition to his numbered analysis of the *lexias*, Barthes offers ninety-three short essays that address questions of method, broader interpretive possibilities, his sense of the limits and possibilities of writing. Because the book is divided in this way, because it divides – indeed shatters – its source text into pieces, it is both

functionally unreadable and exquisitely beautiful, a practical mix of the virtues and limits of the *readerly* and the *writerly*, the two styles of writing that he takes as his larger subject in *S/Z*. It is thus one of only a few books – we might think also of Mallarmé, maybe Beckett, maybe the late Flaubert – to make its own unreadability into a productive and moving part of its design. *S/Z* is not only a theory of the *writerly*; it is a practical instantiation of it:

The *writerly* text is a perpetual present, upon which no consequent language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed; the *writerly* text is *ourselves writing*, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages.<sup>41</sup>

Barthes's account of both the *writerly* and the *readerly* owes a clear debt to Kristeva; as I said earlier, Kristeva identified *poetic language* as language that foregrounds and thus makes problematic the open relation between the particular text or utterance and the world of codes on which that text or utterance draws. As a result, the poetic or the *writerly* calls critical attention to its own preconditions; and, as was the case with Lukács's sense of novelistic irony and Bakhtin's sense of the dialogic, this ability to confront a form with both its limits and conditions of possibility results ideally in a text that is open, critical, productively self-conscious. The *readerly*, on the other hand, is like what Kristeva called "the book," an utterance or text that naturalizes or obscures its rules and limits.

Although he reiterates the preference for the *writerly* that he laid out in *Writing Degree Zero*, Barthes acknowledges in *S/Z* that his chosen object *Sarrasine* is indeed a "classic" and thus apparently *readerly* text; but, just as Kristeva saw a certain kind of critical reading as capable of opening the closed book, of giving it something like the status of poetic or revolutionary language, so does Barthes see his "step-by-step" method as one that opens a story by revealing and problematizing, by defamiliarizing the universe of codes upon which it relies. As D. A. Miller writes, one of *S/Z*'s tasks was "by evincing the artifice of signifying procedures at work throughout the classic realist text, to render what one may have been used to considering their natural operation as fully weird as anything that one may have been prepared to call *unnatural*."<sup>42</sup> This shift from the innate literariness of the object to the applied literariness of reading is one that Barthes enacts via a set of procedures adapted from the Russian Formalists:

For the step-by-step method, through its very slowness and dispersion, avoids penetrating, reversing the tutor text, giving an internal image of

it: it is never anything but a decomposition (in the cinematographic sense) of the work of reading: a slow motion, so to speak, neither wholly image nor wholly analysis; it is, finally, in the very writing of the commentary, a systematic use of digression . . . and thereby a way of observing the reversibility of the structures from which the text is woven.<sup>43</sup>

Barthes, in other words, takes technical aspects of what Shklovsky and others saw at work in the poetic text itself – digression, slowness, inversion, etc. – and turns them into a style of interpretation; as opposed, then, to seeing some texts as essentially more poetic than others, Barthes invites the reader to see any text as possibly writerly, which is to say as a text that can be made to reveal its relation to historically specific ideological codes. Read rightly, every text can be writerly because every text owes a structural debt to ideology that can in turn be disclosed.

Barthes casts the relation between the text and its ideological context in terms of what he calls the code: “The code is a perspective of quotations, a mirage of structures; we know only its departures and returns . . . they are so many fragments of something that has always been *already* read, seen, done, experienced; the code is the wake of that *already*.”<sup>44</sup> The code is, in other words, a version of what Saussure called *langue*, the shared, social, and historically specific rules that established the limits of what it was possible to think or to say at one or another time; and, just as *langue* stands behind any particular utterance (*parole*), so does the code stand behind any particular textual performance. Barthes goes on to identify five particular codes, five related but different sets of rules that govern the production and reception of any given text (we might instead think of them as five aspects of *the* code). The work of the critic is, in that case, to reveal the several codes at work, to show how a text that would seem reducible to one or another meaning is in fact characterized by the plurality of its significance. Barthes calls this work *interpretation*: “This new operation is *interpretation* (in the Nietzschean sense of the word). To interpret a text is not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what plural constitutes it.”<sup>45</sup> Although the codes form the practical basis of Barthes’s mode of interpretation and allow him to parse Balzac’s tale out into a series of differently significant fragments, they are less a real fact of narrative structure than a heuristic device, a way to reveal the significant relations – both *paradigmatic* and *syntagmatic* – that exist among the different parts of a given narrative: “We are, in fact concerned not to manifest a structure but to produce a structuration.”<sup>46</sup> Once again, the analysis of the codes allows Barthes to reveal and to deal with the ideologically motivated relation among different aspects of the whole structure that is a narrative.

The five codes run as follows: (1) *The hermeneutic code* involves “all the units whose function it is to articulate in various ways a question, its response, and the variety of chance events which can either formulate the question or delay its answer; or even, constitute an enigma and lead to its solution.”<sup>47</sup> The hermeneutic is the code of question and answer, tension and release, mystery and revelation, the initiation and the cessation of suspense; and, along with the proairetic code, it is the most “narrative” of the five: because an answer to a question needs always to follow a question, the hermeneutic code unfolds in time and is irreversible. (2) *The proairetic code* is the code of action: actions “can fall into various sequences which should be indicated merely by listing them.”<sup>48</sup> For Barthes, actions (*stroll, murder, rendezvous*) are events that involve some kind of movement or change and that must in that case open and close; they are in this sense equivalent to what he had identified in his earlier essay as functions as opposed to indices. Like the hermeneutic code, the proairetic code is irreversible. (3) *The semic code* is the code of “meanings,” the level at which significances, suggestions, senses, themes gather “like motes of dust” on the surface of the narrative; the *semes* are thus atemporal and related to what Barthes referred to as *indices* in “An Introduction to the Structuralist Analysis of Narrative.” That a given character is “old” or “musical” or “feminine” might or might not matter to the plot, but it will “tell” us something about the values contained in or evoked by a whole narrative; Barthes will go on, in fact, to suggest that literary characters are always more or less reducible to a number of *semes* grouped around or organized under a proper name. (4) *The symbolic code* is the code of mostly antithetical relations that underwrite and organize and highlight the cultural significance of events and things in a narrative: good and bad, light and dark, male and female. *The symbolic code* is close to the base network of relations that Lévi-Strauss saw running among different versions of a myth in his “The Structural Study of Myth” or to what Greimas refers to as the *deep structure* of narrative systems; the symbolic code is, in other words, made up of positions and limits that “define the fundamental mode of existence of an individual or a society, and subsequently the conditions of existence of semiotic objects.”<sup>49</sup> (5) *The cultural code* activates “references to a science or body of knowledge; in drawing attention to [the cultural code], we merely indicate the type of knowledge (physical, physiological, medical, psychological, literary, historical, etc.) referred to, without going so far as to construct (or reconstruct) the culture they express.”<sup>50</sup> The cultural code is the code of allusion, the code that links the discourse of a particular narrative to other discourses. Taken together, the five codes give Barthes a way, however provisional, to begin to name both the relation



among parts of a narrative and that narrative's relation to the social rules that more or less make it possible.

Barthes goes on to cast the difference between the text seen as having a single significance and the text as having a "parsimoniously plural" set of more or less apparent meanings in terms of the difference, taken from linguistics, between *denotation* and *connotation*. Where *denotation* refers to a single or at least dominant meaning of a given text or utterance, *connotation* is "a correlation immanent in the text, in the texts; or again, one may say that it is an association made by the text-as-subject within its own system."<sup>51</sup> Connotations are, in other words, an utterance's or an image's or a text's secondary meanings, the levels or layers of significance that are present in a text even if they seem somehow unnecessary to it. To state this in Saussure's terms, where a given signifier (word, sentence, text) appears to point more firmly toward one or another signified (the concept), that signifier will also suggest at some other, more or less proximate distance, a indefinite number of other, less dominant concepts. Where, for instance, "dog" would seem to denote a four-legged domesticated mammal, it might, depending on the context, also connote loyalty, good humor, hunger, danger, luxury, poverty, envy, love, and so on. And, because they can seem unnecessary, connotations are typically understood as minor, as merely associative, or by-the-way, as meanings that might add to or distort a signifier's primary sense without getting to the heart of the matter (they are the *indices* as opposed to the *functions* of textual interpretation). Denotations, on the other hand, seem to stand as the *ground* of a text's meaning, as that which guarantees thought and allows patterns or plots or ideas to be taken to a narrative or ideological close: "It is to return to the closure of Western discourse (scientific, critical, or philosophical), to its centralized organization, to arrange all the meanings of a text in a circle around the hearth of denotation (the hearth: center, guardian, refuge, light of truth)."<sup>52</sup> Where denotation stops reading and allows us to feel that we have figured out what a particular text at last means, connotation serves to open up the text, pointing to the layered plurality of its significance.

*S/Z* is, in part, an effort to revalue the relation between denotation and connotation, releasing the latter from its position as merely secondary or minor; more than a minor distraction, "connotation is the way into the polysemy of the classic text, to that limited plural on which the classic text is based."<sup>53</sup> That is not to say that Barthes attends to connotation at the expense of denotation, that he sees the text as a pure or frictionless play of secondary as opposed to primary significances; it is, rather, to see the classic text as a kind of compromise between the singularity of denotation and the pure play of connotation; it is, in other words to see the text as a



“parsimonious plural,” as a signifier that means more than one thing, that means a lot of things, but that does not mean anything or everything. This revalued sense of connotation and denotation is especially important in *S/Z* because it allows Barthes not only to think about the indefinite but not infinite play of the signifier but also and more particularly to reimagine the relation between story (as signified) and discourse (as signifier). As opposed, in other words, to seeing narrative *either* as a simple, direct, or denotative relation between one story – one sequence of events – and one discursive representation of those events *or* as an ideally or infinitely plural text, a purely and impossibly connotative writing whose discourse refers to anything or everything or nothing, Barthes reveals Balzac’s classic narrative as itself “a parsimonious plural,” a text in which the overlapping and even contradictory play of codes does not deny the possibility of representation but rather underscores the degree to which any narrative representation is an encounter between a complex discursive totality and a life or world that must exceed or, at least, strain narrative discourse. *S/Z*, in other words, attempts – after Lukács – to imagine classic narrative as that which would not reduce but rather show respect for the essential complexity of life. The point here is not to suggest that discourse *really* represents a world; it is rather to see that the particular relation between story and discourse that Barthes associates with the classic narrative is itself a representation or, rather, a textual embodiment of complexity.

Of course, some readers have taken Barthes as suggesting that narrative is indeed reducible to its discourse, to a play of signifiers floating freely without reference to this or any world; as suggesting that, because it does not mean any one thing, narrative can in fact mean anything. This, though, is to miss the point of Barthes’s argument. Rather than arguing for the pure and free play of the text, Barthes suggests that the writerly text (or a readerly text read in a writerly way) is what allows discourse to come to terms with the full and productive richness of story, with the real complexity of a life and a history that must exceed any one interpretation and yet nonetheless really exist; it is to imagine a form of narrative that would really represent history or life without reducing either to one and only one idea. This takes us back to some earlier figures including Nietzsche, Lukács, Bakhtin, James, and others who understood successful narrative in terms of its more or less successful urge toward an open relation between form or discourse, on the one hand, and life or history as imagined in story on the other. While narrative form can sometimes give real meaning to the events, it can also distort those facts, can reduce our ability to understand or to engage with life, its complexities, and thus its connotations. In these terms, we need to see Barthes’s style of

reading in both analytical and ethical terms. While he is indeed interested in articulating a method that might be able technically to address the parsimoniously plural nature of narrative signification, he is also interested in a critical mode that would be able not only to respect the real and essential richness of history's meaning but also to counter ideological efforts to limit history to one or another ideologically motivated meaning. More than a work of literary criticism, *S/Z* is a demand that we acknowledge both the reality and the bewildering complexity of life, that we reconcile ourselves to the imperative to confront a world the totality of which must exceed our best efforts at representation.

Indeed, we need to see Barthes's method, his interest in seeing what a writerly narrative can really say about the complexity of life, in relation to some of *S/Z*'s key concerns: money, to which I will turn in a moment, and sex. How, for instance, should we understand what *S/Z* has to say about the narrative representation of sexual desire and sexual difference? Balzac's story of the male sculptor Sarassine's passionate and doomed love for the castrato La Zambinella allows Barthes to explore ways in which the truth of sexual desire can be left unsaid; can be made to say one and only one thing; or can be allowed simply to drift over the surface of the text and its connotations. Is Balzac's story "about" the sculptor's mistake, his seeing the castrated man as a woman? Is it "about" a man's real love for a boy in drag? Is it "about" the ways in which sexual difference is itself always a kind of connotation, a secondary expression of a prior and inexplicable cut? Is it "about" all of these things at once or none of them at all? We might look here to D. A. Miller's *Bringing Out Roland Barthes*, which seeks to explain and overcome what he takes as a homophobic silence around Barthes's own homosexuality and the complex, often unacknowledged role that it plays in *S/Z*: "To refuse to bring Barthes out consents to a homophobic reception of his work."<sup>54</sup> Miller argues not only that a homosexual significance is at the heart of both Balzac's and Barthes's texts but also that readings of Barthes that exaggerate either the text's denotative singularity or its discursive, connotative plurality can work to screen or to repress that significance. On the one hand, to reduce the text denotatively to one or another meaning is a way to suppress the possible consequence of Sarassine's real desire for La Zambinella: "It was *only*," one might say, "a mistake, an infatuation, a symbol, a convention, a joke, etc." On the other hand, to leave Sarassine's real and passionate love for a "boy in drag" as one connotation among an indefinite number of others and thus as evidence of the text's immanent capacity for play and polysemy is similarly to reduce its consequence. Seen from this perspective "Barthes's general problematic of the text contours La Zambinella as nothing more or less than

an instance of a classificatory disturbance, the local habitation and name of that hemorrhaging of meaning which tends to occur – to the great scandal of the *bien-pensant* guardians of the readerly, to the overwhelming delight of the avant-garde prolocutors of the writerly – when a binary opposition breaks down.”<sup>55</sup> In other words, treating Barthes’s analysis either simply as this or that thing or simply as a celebration of plurality or ambivalence or play for its own sake is not only a form of denial but also an interpretative or methodological error; it is to miss that homosexual desire is a real part of the plural that Balzac’s story is and that Barthes’s method counts on a real and reciprocal relation between that story and the discourse of *Sarrasine*. Sarrasine’s love for La Zambinella is both a fact really to be represented as part of the text’s “parsimonious plural” and a fact that resists representation because it is, as it were, a *living* fact; as we know from Nietzsche, Lukács, and Bakhtin, living facts are complex facts. Life both demands and resists representation. To fail, in that case, “to bring out Roland Barthes” is thus not only to participate in a homophobic disavowal of what *Sarrasine* and *S/Z* are all about but also to miss the critical force of Barthes’s method, which is, above all, a demand that we try to see, to engage with, and to respect life, history, sex, and desire as they really and complicatedly are.

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Sex and money: the initiating mystery of *S/Z*, the mystery that opens the hermeneutic code and thus provides the tale with its narrative frame and much of its motivation – where did the de Lanty family get its enormous wealth? This question is at the heart of Balzac’s whole project; a historian of the passage from the French Revolution to the Bourbon Restoration and beyond, Balzac follows the money to origins that always reveal themselves as compromised, scandalous, or bloody. For the de Lantys, whose wealth is gained from their elderly castrato uncle, it is indeed all three. We might think of *Père Goriot*, which derives much of its own tragic energy from the desire of Goriot’s daughters to distance themselves from the source of his and thus their wealth; a former pasta maker, Goriot acquired his money hoarding and selling grain at an enormous profit during the revolution. For Barthes, this Balzacian split between the synchronic appearance and the diachronic history of money provides an opportunity to reflect on the larger logic of value as it drifts analogically between Balzac’s reflections on the history of money and his own thinking about semiotic value, on the difference between wealth as an index of a particular history and money as an ideological fantasy that works precisely to deny the past. “Parisian Gold,” Barthes’s name for a value that works in spite of being based on

nothing, thus links his own thinking about the bourgeois instability of the sign to a quietly Marxian critique of the money form as a value that is paradoxically both full and empty. Barthes writes that

Parisian indifference to the origin of money equates symbolically with the non-origin of money; a money that has no smell is money withdrawn from the basic order of the index, from the consecration of origin: this money is as empty as being-castrated: for Parisian Gold, what corresponds to the physiological impossibility of procreating is the impossibility of having an origin, a moral heredity: the signs (monetary, sexual) are wild because, contrary to the indices (the meaningful regime of the old society), they are to based on an original, irreducible, incorruptible, immovable otherness of their component parts: in the index, what is indicated (nobility) is of a different nature from what indicates (wealth): there is no possible mingling; in the sign, which establishes an order of representation (and no longer of determination, of creation, as does the index), the two elements interchange, signified and signifier revolving in an endless process: what is bought can be sold, the signified can become signifier, and so on. Replacing the feudal index, the bourgeois sign is a metonymic confusion.<sup>56</sup>

Barthes argues that Balzac uses the story of the de Lantys' fabulous and fabulously obscure wealth to track a broader historical shift from one kind of value to another. Where an earlier system was based on the relatively fixed form of the *index*, bourgeois capitalism is based on a logic of pure exchange that Barthes associates both with money and with the *sign*; and, as the de Lantys' efforts to hide their history demonstrate, that logic of pure exchange is one that the bourgeoisie both enjoy and need to conceal. This is why the de Lantys hide their uncle.

We can see Barthes returning here to an argument he had made in *Mythologies*; if, he argued, the move from feudalism to capitalism is a move from the clarity of the index to the mystery of the sign, it also corresponds with the invention of the bourgeois myth, a figural representation that neutralizes the arbitrariness and, thus, the connotations of the sign, allowing it to take on the look if not the actuality of denotative truth: "What the world supplies to myth is a historical reality, defined, even if this goes back quite a while, by the way in which men have produced or used it; and what myth gives in return is a *natural* image of this reality . . . myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they once were made."<sup>57</sup> Parisian Gold aligns an economic history that moves from that stability of wealth to the instability of money to *the myth of money as wealth* (the de Lantys or the Goriots) with a semiotic history that moves

from index to sign to myth, from value as achieved in use, to value set free in the process of exchange, to value transformed into a static and mystified representation of itself. To quote Auric Goldfinger once again: “Fort Knox is a myth like other myths.” In *S/Z*, this twinned analysis takes a particularly narrative form, with Barthes looking to a changing relation between story and discourse in order to track the ways in which narrative follows money, moving from an imagined sacred or archaic narrative stability (where discourse simply denotes story) to narrative instability (where discourse and story exist in a parsimoniously plural relation), to the myth of instability as stability (where the market encourages us to read books, no matter how complex, once and only once; to treat them, in other words, as commodities to consume and then throw away). Lukács would cast this progression as a move from the simplicity of *epic* to the self-conscious irony of the novel to the crassly ideological myth making of the *entertainment novel*, a last turn that both exaggerates and obscures the ubiquity of the writerly in the classic readerly text. It is, in that case, the work of the critic to reveal the degree to which narrative presents itself both as the denial and as the culmination of economic or, rather, a revolutionary logic that Barthes and Kristeva identify with writing as such.

Barthes characterizes this kind of reading, a reading that can reveal the ambiguity and thus the history behind the readerly narrative, as *rereading* in the strongest possible sense:

Rereading, an operation contrary to the commercial and ideological habits of our society, which would have us “throw away” the story once it has been consumed (“devoured”), so that we can then move on to another story, buy another book, and which is tolerated only in certain marginal categories of readers (children, old people, and professors), rereading is here suggested at the outset, for it alone saves the text from repetition (those who fail to reread are obliged to read the same story everywhere), multiplies in its variety and its plurality: rereading draws the text out of its internal chronology (“this happens before or after that”) and recaptures a mythic time (without before or after); it contests the claim which would have us believe that the first reading is a primary, naive, phenomenal reading which will only, afterwards, have to “explicate,” to intellectualize. . . ; rereading is no longer consumption but play (that play which is the return of the different).<sup>58</sup>

Barthes thus understands rereading not only as necessary to the kind of close and seemingly exhaustive analysis he applied to Balzac’s tale but also as a tactical response to a capitalist culture that treats books – and, we are to take it, nearly everything else – as disposable, as consumable, as easy. (We should

remember here the difference between the Lord and the Bondsman in Hegel's story; where the Lord simply consumes things and throws them away, the Bondsman *works* them over, learns about them, and thus develops a more and more active, which is to say dialectical, relation to the world.) Rereading emerges for Barthes as a way to work against the dehumanizing logic of life under capitalism precisely because it refuses to see narrative discourse as a simple representation of an event or series of events. This resistance to the logic of disposability and the single reading mirrors Barthes's interest in moving past *denotation* as the sole logic of reading, the reduction of a narrative to one and only one meaning, toward the parsimonious plurality of *connotation*, to a style of reading capable of engaging with the richness, the resistance, and – seen from an “entrepreneurial” or “bourgeois” point of view – the revolutionary waste of the literary work.

Barthes's commitment to readers as opposed to writers represents an important adjustment to the radical project that began with *Writing Degree Zero*. Where that book imagined a kind of writing – namely, the writing of avant-garde figures such as Robbe-Grillet – as carrying a directly revolutionary potential, as possibly leading to a real shift in thinking and thus in life, his effort in *S/Z* represents a kind of compromise between his hopes for revolution and his acceptance of the world as it was. It is, after all, a book that appears *after Tel Quel's* misguided alliance with the PCF, *after* Todorov and Genette's break away from the journal, *after* the events of May '68, after, in other words, a brief and exciting but ultimately inconclusive period of revolutionary possibility. As Lukács had thirty years before, Barthes comes to terms in *S/Z* with the tenacity of capitalism, with Parisian Gold, with the persistence of what he understands as an inauthentic mode of life; for Lukács, this took the form of a Hegelian “reconciliation with reality” that “made possible an understanding of the connection between logical categories and the structural forms of bourgeois society. By rejecting the utopian ought and focusing philosophy on the understanding of the present, grasped dialectically, Hegel had pointed to the only way of knowing that which was alone knowable about the future – the tendencies in the present that impel history forward.”<sup>59</sup> Where, in that case, revolution had come to seem unlikely or impossible, Barthes turns – again as Lukács did in his reading of Hegel – to moments or flashes of dialectical possibility in the midst of everyday life, to see how even the greatest and most conservative of readerly texts can contain or can be seen as immanently alternative, as always already expressive of possibilities that exceed the status quo; and, also like Lukács, Barthes sees that possibility as woven through narrative, as reflected in the polysemic drift of the five codes that took the place of story as well as in the narrative spots

where, as Barthes understands it, the difference between signifier and signified, between story and discourse dissolves. As with the later Lukács and the Russian Formalists, Nietzsche, and Bakhtin, Barthes turns to reading narrative in an effort to see the *ought* at the heart of the *is*, as, in other words, a way to maintain radical possibility in the face of the flexible durability of a late and indefinitely persistent capitalism.

Barthes was explicit about what he took as the historically penultimate status of modern narrative, as its particular position between bourgeois culture as it was and had been and a possibility that he had seen at work in avant-garde writing and began to look for in a particularly rigorous style of reading informed by structuralist narratology. In a short piece on Genette, Barthes writes in terms that he could have applied to his own work:

Now, a theory of “skidding” is necessary *precisely today*. Why? Because we are in that historical moment of our culture when narrative cannot yet abandon a certain readability, a certain conformity to narrative pseudo-logic which culture has instilled in us and in which, consequently, the only possible novations consist not in destroying the story, the anecdote, but in *deviating* it: making the code skid while seeming to respect it. It is this very fragile state of the narrative, at once conforming and deviant, that Genette has been able to see and to make us see in Proust’s work. His work is at once structural and historical because he specifies the conditions on which narrative novation is possible without being suicidal.<sup>60</sup>

His point is that Genette’s style of narrative analysis works because it accepts the culture’s social and political need for the coherence of narratives, for the order of the classically readerly, for narrative ends that help us to understand or rather to believe in the logic of beginnings and middles while showing how those stories work against or in spite of themselves and thus reveal what’s excessive or dialectical in even the most conservative of narratives. So, while his analysis is committed to showing how the narrative antithesis between story and discourse works, it is also and ultimately concerned with revealing the very idea of antithesis as a historically specific and ideologically potent myth: “The several hundred figures propounded by the art of rhetoric down through the centuries constitute a labor of classification intended to name, to lay the foundations for, the world. Among all these figures, one of the most stable is the Antithesis; its apparent function is to consecrate (and domesticate) by a name, by a metalinguistic object, the division between opposites and the very irreducibility of this division.”<sup>61</sup> As with Bakhtin’s chronotopes, Lévi-Strauss’s structural analyses of myth, Greimas’s deep structures, or Barthes’s own account of the ideological motivation of signifier and signified

in *Mythologies*, antithesis is the most powerful of many figures that structure and limit our apprehension of the world in historically and ideologically specific terms.

In one way, this recognition of the historically specific nature of antithesis links *S/Z* to *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), where Lukács revealed what he called the “antinomies of bourgeois thought,” oppositions between subject and object, idea and experience, noumena and phenomena that shape our philosophical view of history and the world, while deriving their own form and force from a set of specific socioeconomic conditions. Barthes’s interest in demonstrating the need to see, to understand, but ultimately to think past the antitheses that structure our social world offers him a way to push narrative theory to and potentially past its own immanent limits. That is, if, as I have been saying, the project of narrative theory depends on an antithesis between story and discourse, the overall logic of *S/Z* can be read as the effort to think past those terms, to make the case that what seem to be two different substances are, in fact, two aspects of one and the same substance. Barthes’s “parsimonious plurality,” his confrontation with the real but bewilderingly complex nature of events thus takes us back to the paradox of the story–discourse relation. Where other critics ask which occurs first, story or discourse, Barthes’s method recognizes that they rather represent two aspects of the same effort, the effort to come to terms with the political imperative really to represent a life, the complexity of which must and will resist efforts at representation. Seen in this light, the story–discourse relation does not name an opposition or an antithesis; it rather names two aspects of a single problem, the problem that accompanies our need to find forms in which to represent a life that will resist exactly those forms. Or, as Lukács might put it, story and discourse are necessary and coterminous aspects of “an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality.”<sup>62</sup>

In *S/Z*, Barthes offers an account of readerly narrative – which is to say an apparently or ideologically single or natural relation between story and discourse – that recognizes its power, its appeal, and, most importantly, its necessary relation to a particular historical moment, a moment characterized by the logic of capitalist exchange, on the one hand, and by the heteronormative logic of bourgeois sexuality on the other. At the same time, using structuralist methods to delineate the operational terms of that logic – the logic of the narrative antithesis between story and discourse – he offers the reader a glimpse of an alternative way of thinking about and ordering experience, a way that he characterizes as *writerly* and that he imagines as the



revelation of antitheses not as fundamental to all understanding but rather as characteristic of how a particular historical moment thinks; and, just as Hegel saw history as the dialectical overcoming of opposition, so does Barthes use *S/Z* to imagine conditions under which antithesis would no longer be the governing logic of life and thus conditions under which narrative could no longer be understood in relation to an opposition between story and discourse, events and the representation of events. It was with something like this in mind that Kristeva made the relation between Barthes and Hegel explicit: "It is clear that it is the Hegelian dialectic . . . that first pointed to the masterly lines of this interplay between limit and infinity, rationale and objectivity. . . . It succeeded in this by imposing at its first foundations the knots, invisible without it, where the opposites – subject and history – are interwoven. They are indeed the ones that we encounter at the crossroads of the Barthian reflection."<sup>63</sup> Barthes's work in and beyond *S/Z* represents one culmination and, perhaps, one conclusion to narrative theory as such. Imagining conditions under which the two could become one, conditions under which story and discourse would be at least revealed as different aspects of one and the same thing as opposed to two things different in kind, Barthes offers *S/Z* both as one of the most sophisticated versions of narrative theory and as suggestion that, along with the other antitheses of modern life, the antithesis that governs the analysis of narrative – the antithesis of story and discourse – might someday be overcome. In the meantime, while "we are in that historical moment of our culture when narrative cannot yet abandon a certain readability," the analysis of narrative must rather reveal *knots* within the antithetical logic of that historical moment that suggest at least the possibility of *something else*. In a short 1974 note, "Utopia," Barthes writes, "But it is the elements, the inflections, the obscurer nooks and crannies of the utopian system that reappear in our world as flashes of desire, as thrilling possibilities. If we were more receptive to them, they would prevent Politics from congealing into a totalitarian, bureaucratic, moralistic system."<sup>64</sup> The idea here is that, where we can no longer imagine an end to a capitalist world system based in the alienating antinomies of bourgeois thought, we need to look to local moments where that system and the antinomies that underwrite it slip or skid, where dialectical possibility remains immanent to a system that would seem otherwise unchangeable. In narrative, where that system takes the form of a readerly, which is to say totalizing, story–discourse relation ("these novels crop up in a system that hasn't ceased to be capitalist"), we need, as he does in *S/Z*, to look to moments of writerly excess, moments when the limits of the apparently "natural" operations of narrative are – however fleetingly – revealed.<sup>65</sup> In *S/Z*, Barthes suggests at the beginning of narrative theory that

the utopian and thus the impossible end of narrative theory must always have been to make any narrative theory unnecessary.

### 6.3 The Knowable Is at the Heart of the Mysterious: Genette's Narrative Poetics

Alongside Barthes's *S/Z: An Essay*, Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* represents a key moment in the development of narrative theory. It is almost certainly the one text that allowed a subsequent generation of narrative theorists to develop and to consolidate a field. In a recent piece on the history of narrative theory from "structuralism to the present," Monika Fludernik writes that "most prominent [in that history] is, obviously, the paradigm instituted by Gérard Genette in *Narrative Discourse*, whose international influence was cemented by its early translation into English and by its adoption on the part of prominent American, European, and Israeli scholars."<sup>66</sup> *Narrative Discourse's* appeal is partly the result of what Genette refers to with half-joking exasperation as "all this technology," the frankly daunting number of terms that he invents and then divides and subdivides in order to account for how real or fictive events at the level of story find more or less coherent form at the level of discourse.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, the book has been both appreciated for and sometimes misunderstood as a result of its spiral of arcane but instantly useful terms of art: *prolepsis*, *analepsis*, the *iterative*, the *pseudo-iterative*, *focalization*, *paralipsis*, and so on. While some of these terms have not caught on, others have become broadly indispensable to the analysis of narrative and literature in general: "Genette's term for a flashback, *analepsis*, has become a household word in literary criticism, and – especially in work dealing with postmodern fiction – the term *metalepsis*, which refers to a transgression of narrative levels, occurs again and again."<sup>68</sup> Because he names and thus sharpens our sense of some of the most important aspects, movements, and paradoxes of narrative form, *Narrative Discourse* represents a moment at which several of the ideas, problems, questions, and terms that I have been looking at throughout are at last joined into a whole, robust, and more or less self-contained system; for many critics, the classical period of narrative theory at least begins and maybe begins already to end with Genette. I, for one, could not have written this book without Genette and *Narrative Discourse*; I already discussed some of his key terms in the Introduction both because they were necessary to my provisional definition of narrative as the relation between story and discourse and because the clarity of his work and his distinctions helped us to see different anticipations of the story–discourse

relation in concepts that might otherwise seem remote from the mainstream of narrative theory: base and superstructure, latent and manifest, soul and form, fact and value.

What is more, as much as Genette's system can seem to stand alone, it not only motivates but also draws more or less explicitly on the whole complicated history that I have laid out here. Genette's double role in this project – he helps us to see an intellectual history that made it possible for him to help us see that intellectual history – produces an interesting narrative problem of its own: insofar as Genette is both one of my last subjects and a thinker whose articulation of the story–discourse relation enabled the historical view I take, he sits both at the beginning and at the end of my story. As he might say, his appearance in the Introduction and elsewhere amounts to an intellectual *prolepsis* of an *analepsis*, the early anticipation and, indeed, *assumption* of a later critical position that allows us to look meaningfully back. Genette thus stands as an Aristotelian end to a newly visible beginning and middle of narrative theory; he does this partly because his book *defamiliarizes* narrative, because it lays bare narrative techniques, devices, patterns, and relations that would otherwise have remained invisible. For instance, Genette makes explicit use of the Russian Formalist vocabulary when he writes, “The role of the analyst is not to be satisfied with the rationalizations, nor to be ignorant of them, but rather, having ‘laid bare’ the technique, to see how the motivation that had been invoked functions in the work as aesthetic medium.”<sup>69</sup> To “lay bare” the device or the technique was, as we saw in Section 5.2, at the heart of the Russian Formalist project. Genette goes on in the next sentence to refer explicitly to Shklovsky, and, indeed, it was Genette who encouraged Todorov to produce *Théorie de la littérature* (1965), his enormously influential translation of Russian Formalist writings. In terms that also echo the Russian Formalist practice of *making strange*, Jonathan Culler writes that Genette “achieves something that most interpreters do not: he leads us to experience the strangeness of the text.”<sup>70</sup> Similarly, Roland Barthes asserts, “Genette *names* what his classification finds: he argues against received acceptations, he creates neologisms, he vivifies old names, he constructs a terminology, i.e., a network of subtle and distinct verbal objects.”<sup>71</sup> As I will go on to describe, we should see Genette's method in relation not only to the Formalists and Barthes but also to several other figures whom we have considered thus far: Saussure, Propp, Lévi-Strauss, and Aristotle, to be sure, but also less expected figures such as Marx, Freud, James, and even Hegel. Seen in this light, Genette represents an important culmination of the intellectual sequence that I have been tracing; he offers one possible end to a long, digressive, and sometimes shaggy story.

There is yet another aspect of Genette's writing in *Narrative Discourse* that I would like to consider, a quality that exceeds the book's deserved reputation for clarity, methodological austerity, and analytical efficacy. There is, in other words, a kind of critical intensity or even pathos at work in Genette's treatment of both narrative in general and its particular instantiation in Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*; this aspect of Genette's book is harder to talk about and tends as a result to go missing in most accounts of Genette's work. In addition to being an indispensable guide to narrative technique, *Narrative Discourse* is an oddly funny, sometimes moving, and deeply strange book; like Proust's own great work, it is its own self-consciously futile effort to capture time's passage, to try and to fail to develop *enough* terms, *enough* schemes, *enough* paradoxes somehow to get hold of what will not remain still: the protean experience of life lived in and through time.

Read in this light, it seems that, instead of simply offering a reading of Proust, Genette is following Proust's conceptual path in his own way; as Malcolm Bowie suggests, Proust's representation of time

ordains that past, present and future are composites rather than simples; that recapitulations of the past are projections into the future too; that synchronicity comprises, and maybe broken down into, myriad diachronic sequences; that certain time-effects are intelligible only if spatially extended; that parallel universes may be conflated tiny a single newly conceived space-time continuum; and that any temporally extended system of differences may collapse into an undifferentiated flux. This is the time of human desire, and the time that Proust's book inhabits sentence by sentence.<sup>72</sup>

This description of Proust could apply just as well to *Narrative Discourse*, a book that is, after all, committed to what it acknowledges as the impossible task of naming and thus capturing narrative time. In addition, then, to offering a systematic account of narrative discourse, Genette's book lends itself to a number of distinctly Proustian meditations: how can we make sense of the past in the present while anticipating the future? What will the present look like once it has become the past in what will be the future? What allows the temporally distinct events of a story to become something more than the sum of their parts? Despite its reputation for dryness, these big, messy, emotional questions are, to my mind, what *Narrative Discourse* is all about. I want, in other words, to read *Narrative Discourse* against the usual grain, to see it as a book about narrative *as* narrative but also as a book about something *more*, as a book that seems quietly committed to recognizing and then slipping self-consciously past the methodological limits of a narrative theory that it more or less invents.

Genette makes this point in his preface, when he acknowledges that the book might seem to some readers to fall between the poles of what he calls *criticism* and *theory*:

I confess my reluctance – or my inability – to choose between these two apparently incompatible systems of defense. It seems to me impossible to treat the *Recherche du temps perdu* as a mere example of what is supposedly narrative in general, or novelistic narrative, or narrative in autobiographical form, or narrative of God knows what other class, species, or variety. The specificity of Proustian narrative taken as a whole is *irreducible*, and any extrapolation would be a mistake in method; the *Recherche* illustrates only itself. But, on the other hand, that specificity is not *undecomposable*, and each of its analyzable features lends itself to some connection, comparison, or putting into perspective. Like every work, like every organism, the *Recherche* is made up of elements that are universal, or at least transindividual, which it assembles into a specific synthesis, into a particular totality. To analyze it is to go not from the general to the particular, but indeed from the particular to the general: from that incomparable being that is the *Recherche* to those extremely ordinary elements, figures, and techniques of general use and common currency that I call anachronies, the iterative, focalizations, paralipses, and so on.<sup>73</sup>

Genette thus understands his work not only as negotiating between criticism and theory and thus the particular and the general but also as moving toward a dialectical synthesis of the two positions:

This is the paradox of every poetics, and doubtless of every other activity of knowledge as well: always torn between those two unavoidable commonplaces – that there are no objects except particular ones and no science except of the general – but always finding comfort and something like attraction in this other, slightly less widespread truth, that the general is at the heart of the particular, and therefore (contrary to the common preconception) the knowable is at the heart of the mysterious.<sup>74</sup>

Genette's claim to see "the knowable at the heart of the mysterious" connects him with other figures we have examined. Genette is – like Propp, Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Greimas, Kristeva, Barthes, and others – interested in isolating a set of shared basic and deep rules and structures that underwrite some or all narratives, that would stand as a historically specific way of organizing experience into something more or less meaningful; to see "the knowable at the heart of the mysterious" is, in other words, to look for a culture's shared patterns or deep structures that govern the arrangement of story and

discourse at particular moments in time. And, indeed, because he chooses Proust's great novel, a text that represents both the culmination of and the limits immanent to a particular narrative genre, Genette is able to place his arguments about narrative form in relation to the historical specificity and the historical limits of narrative genres.

Genette is indeed explicit about the historical consequence of his project, calling it a contribution to "the (as yet unborn) *history of literature*."<sup>75</sup> His interest in the specific generic conditions that govern the arrangement of story and discourse in Proust connects him to other figures whom I identified with *the comparative analysis of narrative forms*: Lukács, Bakhtin, Propp, and so on. To see the shared rules that make individual utterances possible is to see the knowable in the mysterious, the general in the particular. (With this I take up Monika Fludernik's suggestion that someone look at the relation between narratology and history in Genette.)<sup>76</sup> That said, Genette also remains committed to the idea that that real and constitutive generality, that real relation to the shared rules that make narratives possible at a given time, will not account fully for what is particular and, indeed, strange about narrative discourse: "Here the code, like the message, has its gaps and its surprises."<sup>77</sup> This is what Genette sees in Proust and what, importantly, he models in *Narrative Discourse*: a practical, dialectical, and felt confrontation between the particular and the general. We can, in other words, see in Genette what Theodor Adorno also saw in Proust: "Just as the temperament of his work challenges customary notions about the general and the particular and gives aesthetic force to the dictum from Hegel's *Logic* that the particular is the general and vice versa, with each mediated through the other, so the whole, resistant to abstract outlines, crystallizes out of the intertwines individual presentations."<sup>78</sup> For Genette, the work of narrative theory is to trace out how narrative can stand as a practical embodiment of that Hegelian principle, how it can synthesize without reducing or subordinating either the general or the particular, either the knowable or the mysterious.

I will begin by laying out some of the most obviously useful and influential distinctions that Genette offers in *Narrative Discourse*, terms that have become more or less necessary to the classical and postclassical analysis of narrative. There is not space to cover everything, so I will rely on a few representative examples and gesture toward their relation to the whole of his system. I will turn then to Genette's initially bewildering decision to focus not on moments of "normal" narrative functioning in Proust but rather on moments when narrative form breaks down, when the relation between story and discourse ceases to make sense, when, from a certain perspective, narrative *fails*; Jonathan Culler writes that "it might be the case that Genette's work

is testimony to the power of the marginal, the supplementary, the exception.”<sup>79</sup> I will, in that case, look to some special uses of the exceptional in *Narrative Discourse*. Finally, I will try to situate Genette’s book both within its historical context and in relation to other figures with whom I have already dealt. I will consider both Genette’s relation to the intellectual context of *Tel Quel* and Paris in the 1960s as well as his reliance on the longer critical tradition that I have been laying out. Once again, I will want to suggest that beneath the exoteric surface of Genette’s justly indispensable theory of narrative is an esoteric reflection on narratology as a way to manage the politics of everyday life.

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Genette makes clear at the outset that his is a study not of objects but rather of relationships: “As we will see, analysis of narrative discourse as I understand it constantly implies a study of relationships: on the one hand the relationship between a discourse and the events that it recounts. . . , on the other hand the relationship between the same discourse and the act that produces it.”<sup>80</sup> As with several of the figures we have looked at – Marx on the relation between base and superstructure, Freud on the relation between latent and manifest contents, Saussure on the relation between signifier and signified, etc. – Genette looks not simply at one or another part of the system, either story or discourse, but rather at the relations that characterize narrative as a whole and significant system. Genette thus identifies three aspects of narrative: *story*, or the real or fictive represented events; *narrative discourse*, or the discursive representation of those events; and *narrating*, or “the producing narrative action and, by extension, the whole of the real or fictional situation in which that action takes place.”<sup>81</sup> He then turns to the relations that exist among those different aspects of narrative, using a scheme adapted from Tzvetan Todorov’s work on the morphological equivalence between narratives and the grammatical structure of sentences; for Todorov, “To combine a noun and a verb is to take the first step towards narrative.”<sup>82</sup> Genette writes,

This perhaps authorizes us to organize, or at any rate to formulate, the problems of analyzing narrative discourse according to categories borrowed from the grammar of verbs, categories that I will reduce here to three basic classes of determinations: those dealing with temporal relations between narrative [discourse] and story, which I will arrange under the heading of *tense*; these dealing with modalities (forms and degrees) of narrative “representation,” and thus with the *mood* of the narrative; and, finally, those dealing with the way in which the narrating itself is implicated in the narrative, the narrative situation or instance,

and along with that its two protagonists: the narrator and his audience real or implied . . . this term is *voice*.<sup>83</sup>

Genette then divides the category of *tense*, which names the different temporal relations between story and discourse, into three subcategories – *order*, *duration*, and *frequency* – while leaving *mood* and *voice* to stand on their own. In each of the chapters that follow, Genette takes up one of these grammatical or, rather, pseudogrammatical categories or subcategories and offers terms and tools with which to make the particular relations that govern narrative visible, to understand the ways in which they work, and to see where they inevitably reach their limits. (Recent narratological work by Monika Fludernik, Marie Laure-Ryan, David Herman, and others has sought to show the limits of exclusively grammatical models, turning instead to approaches taken from discourse analysis, possible-worlds theory, and cognitive science.)

For instance, in the case of “Order,” Genette looks at what we have seen again and again as the two different temporalities of story and discourse: “To study the temporal order of a narrative is to compare the order in which events or temporal sections are arranged in the narrative discourse with the order of succession these same events or temporal segments have in the story, to the extent that story order is explicitly indicated by the narrative itself or inferable from one or another indirect clue.”<sup>84</sup> Genette suggests a couple of points here: first, as we have seen time and again, while it might seem self-evident that story needs to occur ontologically *before* discourse, that events need to happen *before* any representation of those events, narrative can in fact offer us a paradox whereby the story not only does not precede discourse but also allows us to imagine or to reconstruct events only *after* the fact of their discursive representation; which happens first, the event that makes representation possible or the representation that allows us to perceive or to imagine the event? As I said in the Introduction, Jonathan Culler and others have offered this as a paradox essential to narrative theory, a possibility that both animates detective stories (it is the sleuth’s power to make story out of discursive clues after the fact) and, according to Culler, is thematized in the venerable *Oedipus Rex*:

Oedipus becomes the murderer of his father not by a violent act that is brought to light but by bowing to the demands of narrative coherence and deeming the act to have taken place. Moreover, it is essential to the force of the play that Oedipus take this leap, that he accede to the demands of narrative coherence and deem himself guilty. If he were to resist the logic of signification, arguing that “the fact that he’s my father doesn’t mean that I killed him,” demanding more evidence about the past event, Oedipus would not acquire the necessary tragic stature. In



this respect the force of the narrative relies on the contrary logic, in which event is not a cause but an effect of theme. To describe this logic is not to quibble over details but to investigate tragic power.<sup>85</sup>

In some cases and for different reasons (thematic, formal, cognitive), ontological priority within narrative seems to drift between story and discourse, and Genette builds exactly this paradox as paradox into his account.

More importantly, Genette expands on the idea that where temporal sequencing at the level of story needs to follow a set of “natural” rules more or less particular to a particular text or a narrative genre, discourse is free to arrange and rearrange the order of events (although, as we saw with Propp, some genres such as the folktale or myth can be characterized exactly by their unwillingness to do so). Herman writes that

the sequence ABC can be told chronologically as ABC, the sequence of the telling exactly matching the order of the events being recounted. Through analepsis (flashback), the same sequence can be narrated BCA. Through prolepsis (flashforward), it can be told as CAB. Genette calls such departures from chronological sequence “anachronies”; these departures from linear narration not only have a “reach” that bears them more or less far from the present into the past or the future, but also a wider or narrower “extent” insofar as they can cover a duration of the story that is more or less long.<sup>86</sup>

Where, in other words, events need to appear in one and only one order at the level of story (A–B–C–D–E) those events can be rearranged in any number of ways at the level of discourse. Some narratives more or less match discourse to story, beginning with the beginning and ending at the end. In others, for instance, *Citizen Kane* (1941) or *The Lorax* (1971), we begin at the end and then flash back to the beginning in order to see what how we got from A to E (E–A–B–C–D–E): “What was the Lorax? / And why was it there? / And why was it lifted and taken somewhere / from the far end of town where the Grickle-grass grows? / The old Once-ler still lives here. / Ask him. *He knows.*”<sup>87</sup> Other types of narrative – such as detective stories – might repeat the same sequence of events from two or more perspectives: if we take A and B as the events leading up to the crime, and C as the crime itself, D as the arrival of the detective and his or her investigation, and E as the crime’s ultimate solution, we might see something like this: C–D–A–B–C–A–B–C–A–B–C–A–B–C–E. Each of the A–B–C sequences would refer to moments when the detective returns to and rehearses the events leading up to and including the crime from the perspective of each of the story’s suspects and with the addition of newly discovered clues; we might, in that case, want to bracket each of those sequences in order

to represent them as nested narrative acts within the larger narrative (Genette, as we will see, might call them “internal homodiegetic analepses”): C–D–[A–B–C]–[A–B–C]–[A–B–C]–[A–B–C]–E. This pattern is common in whodunits such as *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) or in television series such as *Columbo* or *Murder, She Wrote*, where the internal (often metadiegetic) analeptic narration of events from different perspectives (flashbacks) will make up much of a given narrative. (As we can already see and as Genette acknowledges, while each of his chapters is devoted to a different single aspect of narrative discourse, in practice questions related to one category will always imply or invoke another; we often cannot talk about *order* without also talking about *frequency*, *mood*, or *voice*. This is another way in which Genette’s narrative theory is first and last a study of relationships.)

In order to account for the indefinitely large number of moves forward and back that narrative discourse can make in relation to story, Genette identifies two basic varieties of what he calls *anachronies*, or “types of discordance between the two orderings of story and narrative [discourse]”: *prolepses* and *analepses*.<sup>88</sup> *Analepses*, the more common of the two, are evocations “after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment.”<sup>89</sup> *Analepses* are, in other words, flashbacks, and there are several varieties of them.<sup>90</sup> *External* analepses are flashbacks that both begin and end in a past prior to the proper beginning of a narrative; *internal* analepses are flashbacks that begin and end after the proper beginning of a narrative; Genette also describes *mixed* analepses, which begin before the proper beginning of the narrative but “catch up” and overlap with what has already been narrated. We might think here about the fifteenth chapter of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, where the narrator reveals an “interesting” passage in the romantic history of Tertius Lydgate, an account of his love affair with the murderous French actress Laure. Although important to us as a way of understanding Lydgate’s character, the passage remains unknown to any of the novel’s other characters: “At present I have to make the new settler Lydgate better known to any one interested in him than he could possibly be even to those who had seen the most of him since his arrival in Middlemarch.”<sup>91</sup> The analepsis remains external because it stands both before and outside anything else in the narrative; it began and ended before the start of the novel’s main events. If, however, Lydgate had met and had an affair with Laure while on vacation in Paris after first arriving in Middlemarch or, perhaps, if Laure had reappeared in the novel, directly linking his earlier time in Paris with his present in Middlemarch, an external analepsis would then become either an internal or a mixed analepsis. Genette also differentiates *heterodiegetic* analepses, which are introduced from *outside* the main line of

the narrative in order to explain or to shed light on events, from *homodiegetic* analepses, which refer to events that happened earlier within the main line of a narrative but that were for one or another reason left unnarrated the first time around. These can either *complete* a narrative, filling in necessary information that somehow has been “skipped over,” sidestepped, or elided (as we will see, he uses the terms *ellipsis* and *paralipsis* to name two ways in which story information goes missing in narrative discourse) or *repeat* a narrative, retracing steps and re-presenting events and information that we have seen before, albeit in a different discursive form: “in these the narrative openly, sometimes explicitly, retraces its own path.”<sup>92</sup>

Genette then goes on to discuss *prolepses*, moments when narrative discourse flashes forward instead of back; he breaks down the kinds of prolepsis into a similarly precise set of kinds, which I will not lay out in detail here.<sup>93</sup> Suffice it to say that different types of narrative use prolepses to produce suspense, to give readers real or false “advance notice” of what events mean or what is to come, and to evoke the sense or feeling of a narrative in progress as a nonetheless coherent whole (this last function is especially important in Proust, where all *anachronies* are “obviously connected to the retrospectively synthetic character of the Proustian narrative, which is totally present in the narrator’s mind at every moment”).<sup>94</sup> As I have already said, because Genette’s account of narrative discourse is a system, attending to one of its categories often if not always requires that we turn to others at the same time; in order to talk about an instance of analepsis, we need often also to talk about *ellipses*, about how a given narration is *focalized*, about whether the remembered event took place only once or whether it was something that happened more often (the *singulative* or the *iterative*). Rather than go through each chapter of *Narrative Discourse*, I want now to turn to an example in order to touch on several of Genette’s other terms and, more importantly, to show how, in practice, they need often if not always to be thought of together. In order, in other words, to look at how *Narrative Discourse* is, in fact, a study of relationships, I will turn briefly to Jacques Tourneur’s 1947 film noir, *Out of the Past*.

Like Proust’s great novel, *Out of the Past* announces its interest in time and the presentation of fractured narrative temporalities with its title, one that evokes a traumatic version of time in which the past will not stay put; it is not only that events emerge *out of the past* to haunt us in the present but also that the past has somehow been put *out* of its usual place, has been knocked, as the man says, “out of joint.” And as with Proust, it is the job of narrative and its surrogate hero to put matters back into order. The film opens with Jeff Bailey (Robert Mitchum), an ex-private detective, formerly known as Jeff Markham,

who has escaped his troubled past and taken on the role of a small-town mechanic; after being discovered by Whit Sterling (Kirk Douglas), a powerful “operator” whom he had double-crossed, stealing (and then also losing) the girl he had been hired to find, Jeff decides to stop running and to confront Whit directly. He then proceeds over the course of a long drive to share his story with and to seek forgiveness from his trusting new sweetheart, Ann Miller (Virginia Huston). He describes how he had been hired in New York by Whit to find Kathie Moffat (Jane Greer) and take her back; he tracked her down to Acapulco and instead fell in love with her; she betrayed him and he was forced to go on the run and to hide out in Ann’s small town, which draws us out of the past and into the film’s present. Like many classic noirs, *Out of the Past* makes extensive use of voice-over during this sequence, a fact that periodically returns us to the level of the film’s soundtrack from the represented past to the implied narrative present of Jeff as he tells Ann his tale. After finishing both their drive and what amounts to his confession, we arrive more or less where we started, ready now to move into the film’s future, to the rigged assignment that Whit gives to Jeff in order to “square things”; to his second encounter with Kathie; and, at last, to Jeff’s final and fatal meeting with Whit and Kathie; they all manage to kill each other and the film ends with Jeff’s funeral, which confers hard-won closure on both Ann and the narrative as a whole. The past, which had encroached on the present in terms of its ethical and practical consequence as well as of its formal presence as the unruly stuff of narrative, returns to where it apparently belongs.

At the level of *story* we can represent *Out of the Past* like this: A (Jeff’s first meeting with Whit, who hires him to find Kathie); B (Jeff meets and falls in love with Kathie in Mexico; they make their way to San Francisco; she double-crosses him and makes off with Whit’s money); C (Jeff hides out in the Sierras as a small-town mechanic and is discovered by one of Whit’s henchmen); D (he confesses to Ann while driving to Whit’s Lake Tahoe home, taking us back into the past); E (he is offered and warily pursues Whit’s second case and reconnects with Kathie in San Francisco); F (he encounters Whit and Kathie for the last time, a meeting that leads to all of their deaths); G (we witness his funeral and the film’s end). If, in that case, the story must proceed “naturally” from beginning to end – A–B–C–D–E–F–G – it takes a far more complicated form at the level of narrative discourse: something loosely like C–D–A–D<sub>1</sub>–B–D<sub>1</sub>–C–D<sub>1</sub>–E–F–G (I have changed D to D<sub>1</sub> where the position appears in the form of Jeff’s voice-over narration of B). The film thus depends heavily both on *analepsis* (much of its narrated material is dragged “out of the past” in the form of Jeff’s narration) and, in a way, also on *prolepsis*; although, from the perspective of the film as a whole, much of what is told has *already*

happened, from the perspective of Jeff's present narration of his past (it is a framed narrative-within-a-narrative, or what Genette would call the *metadiegetic* narrative), he is able as narrator to anticipate and to gesture toward what as a narrated character he could not have known: the nature and consequence of Kathie's duplicity when revealed in the future. As a narrated narrator, Jeff is thus able proleptically to signal the future outcomes of past events as they were experienced in their present. The displaced temporal position of the voice-over (it is the present narrating a past for which it is the future) in fact represents something like an *analeptic prolepsis*, a figure that draws out temporal complications essential to this film and to the noir genre as a whole. *Out of the Past* represents this complexity in visual terms as Jeff's narration and his subsequent trip to San Francisco take him from the wide and light open spaces of the Sierras into the dark, claustrophobic, high-contrast urban interiors of noir.

*Out of the Past* indeed forces at least three different kinds of narrative order into one highly impacted form: from the perspective of Jeff as narrator, the film follows a flashback structure, moving analeptically from the narrating present D to the narrated past A–B–C; from the perspective of the film's representation (and thus its narration) of Jeff's own automotive narration, it follows that same sequence A–B–C but adds a zigzag rhythm that pings from past to present to future as it returns us again and again to the voice-over's temporal point of origin D; and from the perspective of the film as a whole, which includes both Jeff as *narrator* of a *metadiegetic* narrative and Jeff as *narrated* by the unmarked but organizing point of view implied by the film as a whole (Jeff is both a narrator and the subject of another, higher-level narration, what Genette might call an instance of *zero focalization*), the film follows a more straightforward narrative pattern beginning in the present C, moving through D and E and F, and ending, as narratives often do, with the death of a protagonist – G.<sup>95</sup> With this in mind, Jeff's narrative should perhaps be represented as a single event “containing” other events – Jeff's narration of his past. We might from that perspective represent the narrative discourse of *Out of the Past* like this: C–D–[A–D<sub>1</sub>–B–D<sub>1</sub>–C–D<sub>1</sub>–E–F–G.

It makes a certain structural as well as thematic sense that D/D<sub>1</sub>, Jeff's confession, takes place in a moving car; the close, isolated, but nonetheless mobile space of the car thematically underscores both its nested separateness from the rest of the film's narrative and the way in which it is threaded through and punctuates the representation of events A–B–C as a kind of temporal counterpoint. We might think here of the car trip as an example of what Bakhtin would call a *chronotope*, with the space of the moving car representing a space in which it might be possible to tell the awful truth

about the past; in this way, the car is the narrative equivalent of what Michel Foucault once referred to as *heterotopias of crisis*, “privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis.”<sup>96</sup> Jeff’s confession is itself a narrative representation of time and, as it takes place over a long drive, it is an act that both falls out of fully or richly narratable time of events and yet also takes its own kind of time; it is a discursive representation of a sequence of events that includes as an event someone’s making a discursive representation of another event or sequence of events. It is not only a present representation of past events but also a present representation that takes place while Ann and especially Jeff literally *move* on toward an inexorable future. In this way, the setting and the form of Jeff’s narration oddly plot a difference between two ideas about narration and what, in the chapter “Voice,” Genette calls “the time of the narrating.”<sup>97</sup>

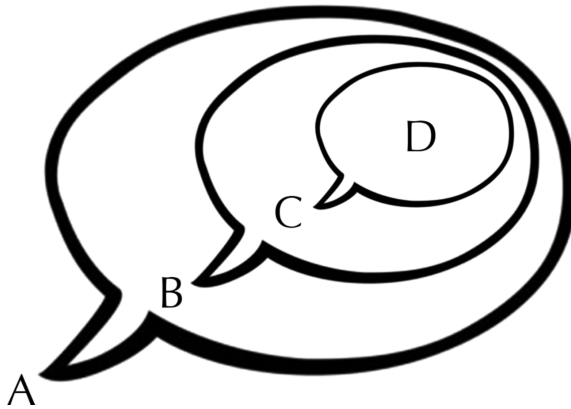
On the one hand, we know that, like everything else, telling a story takes time; that Jeff will need to speak to Ann for ten, twenty, or ninety minutes in order to tell the story of his past; on the other hand, it is unusual for fictions to dwell on the time of narration – on how long it actually takes to tell the tale – as opposed to the time of narrative: “Nevertheless – and this is finally very odd – the fictive narrating of . . . almost all the novels in the world . . . is considered to have no duration; or, more exactly, everything takes place as if the question of its duration had no relevance.”<sup>98</sup> In other words, as much as we attend – sometimes obsessively – to the time of a story, we tend paradoxically to assume the essential timelessness of certain kinds of narration. While, for instance, we track Pip’s growth from child to man with some care in *Great Expectations*, we never wonder what happens to the already-grown, narrating Pip while he narrates; in other words, although it must have taken the imagined Pip (as opposed to Charles Dickens) some time to arrange and deliver his narrative, we act rather as if the narrative arrives all at once from some instantaneous future present. Where the narrated Pip is entirely a creature of time, the grown, narrating Pip exists somehow *out* of time – *out*, as it were, of the past. Joseph Conrad makes a dry-as-dust joke about this strange kind of narratorial no-time in the “Author’s Note” to *Lord Jim* when he reflects that Marlow *could* have spoken the whole of his long part of the narrative if, perhaps, he had had “a glass of mineral water of some sort to help” him on; the joke is that it makes no sense to imagine the timeless abstraction that is narration drinking *anything*.<sup>99</sup> In the case of Jeff’s own indeterminately long metadiegetic narration in *Out of the Past*, the film tries, it seems, to have it both ways: we are given one sense of how long the narrating act takes because it takes place over the course of a drive from

eastern California to Whit's place on the Nevada side of Lake Tahoe; because, however, we cannot know exactly how long the drive takes or where Jeff's voice-over in fact fits in with the duration of the drive, it is an especially elastic marker. More to the point, the eventless, merely instrumental driving that Jeff does is at last an almost empty kind of time, a time that, as anyone who commutes to work knows, lacks *narrativity* and seems to approach without quite becoming the abstract no-time of classical narration. The film uses the space of the car ride to navigate what might otherwise seem uncomfortable about Jeff's dual role as narrator and character.

As I have already said, any analysis of narrative will require that we move beyond any single one of Genette's categories. In order to account for the *order of Out of the Past*, we had to consider how its different narratives and narrators are situated in relation to one another, an issue that Genette takes up in the chapter "Voice," where he lays out his influential account of narrative levels: the relation, in other words, that exists between a narrator and the discursive world that he, she, or it narrates: "We will define this difference in level by saying that *any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed.*"<sup>100</sup> He goes on to distinguish among *extradiegetic*, *intradiegetic*, and *metadiegetic* events: *extradiegetic* objects and events stand outside the narrated world produced by a narrator's discursive act and thus include the narrator as narrator. As Jeff narrates his past, he and Ann stand *outside* the frame of that discursively rendered narrative; they thus exist in an *extradiegetic* relation to his representation of the past; when Marlow and Pip narrate their past experiences, *as narrators* they too exist in an *extradiegetic* relation to the worlds they narrate; the unnamed, abstract, "omniscient" narrator of *Pride and Prejudice* is also an *extradiegetic* narrator, a figure that exists "outside" of narrative discourse because it is the source of that narrative discourse. Events take place at the same level as other events within a given narrative world exist in an *intradiegetic* (sometimes simply *diegetic*) relation to one another. As Jeff and Ann sit together in a car in the film's narrative present, they exist at the same narrative level, a level immediately "below" the cinematic act that is the whole of *Out of the Past* and immediately "above" the material that makes up the story that Jeff tells Ann about the past; because they exist at the same discursive level, because they exist in the same relation to the narrative act that is the film, they exist in a *diegetic* relation to one another. When, however, Jeff the *diegetic* character begins to narrate his past, his discursive act produces what Genette refers to as a *metadiegetic* narrative; as he tells the story of his past self, of a character who lived in New York, met Kathie in Mexico, etc., he thus produces a second-degree discursive world



within a world that stands in a *metadiegetic* relation to the film as a whole. An image might help to clarify the relation among these different levels: in the image, A represents an extradiegetic narrator producing a narrative in which an (intra)diegetic character B is also an (intra)diegetic narrator of another narrative in which a metadiegetic character C could in turn become a metadiegetic narrator of a narrative in which we might learn about character D, and so on. Put in terms of *Out of the Past*, A would stand in for an extradiegetic act of cinematic representation that includes Jeff as one of its (intra)diegetic characters; and because Jeff goes on to tell his story to Ann, he becomes an (intra)diegetic narrator (B) of the metadiegetic narrative of his time with Kathy (C); if, within *that* narrative, the metadiegetic character Kathy told Jeff a story about *her* past, then metadiegetic Kathy would become a metadiegetic narrator C; and so on.<sup>101</sup>



Genette goes on to describe both the “normal” state of these different relations and some transgressive instances when events seem paradoxically to cross between narrative levels: “The transition from one narrative level to another can in principle be achieved only by the narrating, the act that consists precisely of introducing into one situation, by means of a discourse, the knowledge of another situation. Any other form of transit is, if not always impossible, at any rate always transgressive.”<sup>102</sup> *Metalepses*, moments when the line between one and another level is “impossibly” crossed, are common in different kinds of postmodern or experimental fiction, where narrators often exert undue influence on or appear in the midst of what they narrate or where the events of a story told within a story seem somehow to bleed out into that higher level; we might think of fictions that rely on metalepses by

Sterne or Diderot or Cortázar or Borges; of a novel like Muriel Spark's *The Comforters* (1957); or of a film like *Stranger than Fiction* (2006), in which Harold Crick (Will Ferrell) manages somehow to *overhear* the extradiegetic voice narrating his intradiegetic life. Although less spectacular, *Out of the Past* has, as I suggested previously, its own relation to metalepsis insofar as the film's represented past seems to exist not only as a story to tell but also as a force or a fate that, in the nature of noir, exceeds its position as metadiegetic content to exert an almost occult influence on the present. More than simply a past cause that produces present effects, the past rather seems to be a living, disturbing, and traumatic *presence* in *Out of the Past*, a fact that encourages us perhaps to think of noir as perhaps an essentially metaleptic genre. (See Section 3.2 for a discussion of metalepsis in relation to Nietzsche's account of the chorus in Greek tragedy.)

We could also look to the chapter on "Duration" in order to ask how Tourneur manages the relation in what Genette offers as the four classical ways of representing the passage of story-time at the level of discourse-time: *scene*, in which there is a rough equivalence between the time taken by story and the time taken by discourse; *summary*, in which more story-time is squeezed into less discourse-time; *pause*, in which a narrator "stops" events in order to speak at the level of discourse about ideas or events that *do not* occur at the level of story, a limit case in which there is discourse without story; and *ellipsis*, in which events occur either explicitly ("two years passed") or implicitly without being represented in discourse, another limit case in which there is story without discourse. While most of the film would seem to exist as *scene*, its highly edited use of retrospective narration in the form of voice-over allows the film to play with the relation among *summary*, *pause*, and *ellipsis*, as Jeff moves quickly over the details of his life with Kathie while they are on the run (summary), as he stops to reflect ironically on the nature of life and fate (pause), and as he obviously but tacitly passes over less important or uncomfortable aspects of his past so as not to wound Ann (ellipsis).

We might think here of the film's famous love scene. Jeff narrates (to Ann) returning to Kathie's little Mexican bungalow after getting caught out in the rain: "It was a nice little joint with bamboo furniture and Mexican gimcracks. One little lamp burned. It was all right." They fall onto a couch and, as they begin to kiss, Jeff throws a towel, knocking the "one little lamp" over and out. At this point, the camera pans coyly away from the couple, across the apartment, and out into the wind- and rain-swept courtyard, where it pauses for a moment accompanied by a swell of romantic music. We then return to

the bungalow and the scene resumes. Seasoned filmgoers would of course know what they *were not* seeing; in the classic Hollywood vernacular, panning to a rain-swept window almost always means sex. Taken *within* the level of Jeff's metadiegetic narrative, the turn to the window is a form of *paralipsis*, a turn to a parallel event that allows one to sidestep but still to signal the presence of another, less narratable event. Seen in relation to Jeff's intent, the matter is more complicated. Insofar as what we see is a record of what Jeff is *saying* to Ann as they drive along, it is impossible to know what he has actually said to "produce" this image. Did he say something more or less tactful like "We went back to her place and you know the rest"? Did he, in fact, say, "We had sex," making the pan away from the event to the courtyard more a matter of the film's care for the viewer than of Jeff's care for Ann? (In this case, we would need to consider the relation not only between two narratives but also between two narrators, between what we cannot hear but what Jeff must nonetheless be saying to Ann and what the film as narrative "decides" to show us of or instead of what Jeff narrates.) Or, both more and less plausibly, did Jeff in fact begin, when he arrived at the sex, to describe wind blowing and rain dripping off palm trees, hoping that Ann would understand his strange euphemistic effort to handle the embarrassing details of the encounter in the sanitized terms of symbol? That none of these explanations really works points to one of the limits of the voice-over as a form of metadiegetic cinematic narration and thus to the inevitability of transgression; what is more, because the turn away marks a moment when what Jeff implicitly says and what we explicitly see are clearly distinct, it is impossible to say whether we are dealing with scene, summary, ellipsis, or pause precisely because it represents a moment when story and discourse fall into an insolubly indeterminate relation.<sup>103</sup>

Similarly, we could look to Genette's section "Mood" in order to ask how the film is *focalized*, or rather how focalization works differently at the level of the film as a whole (I have already referred to Genette's controversial category, *zero focalization*) and at the level of Jeff's metadiegetic narrative (which is more clearly because necessarily focalized from Jeff's perspective). We could consider the previous discussion – who sees and says what in and about the bungalow – also in terms of focalization. (See Section 4.1 for a longer discussion of these issues.) Or, finally, we could consider Genette's discussion of narrative "frequency," in which he introduces the difference among the *singulative*, the *iterative*, and what he calls *repeating narratives*. The *singulative* occurs when a single event at the level of story is represented once and only once at the level of discourse: on Sunday, March 20, I went to the park. The *iterative* occurs when an event that has occurred in the same or

different ways many times is narrated only once: on Sundays, I would go to the park. *Repeating narrative* – “I went to the park, I went to the park, I went to the park” – are less common in classical narratives, but are a feature of some experimental fictions and time-travel narratives including *Groundhog Day* or *Edge of Tomorrow*, a film with the tagline “Live. Die. Repeat.” Again, although one might think that a film such as *Out of the Past* would rely almost solely on the singulative – it represents once what happened once and only once – the film in fact makes occasional and surprising uses of the iterative mode. For instance, after arriving in Mexico, Jeff counts on the fact, because Kathie is on the run, that she will have to catch a boat in Acapulco; as a result, he sets up shop in a cafe and waits:

You say to yourself, “How hot can it get?” Then, in Acapulco, you find out. I knew she had to wind up here because if you want to go south, here’s where you get the boat. All I had to do was wait. Near the plaza was a little cafe, called La Mar Azul next to a movie house. I sat there in the afternoons and drank beer. I used to sit there half-asleep with the beer and the darkness. Only that music from the movie next door kept jarring me awake.

This, obviously, is an instance of the iterative, the representation of several related but not identical afternoons at the bar represented in a single act of narration: “I used to sit there.” The move is particularly effective insofar as the form of the iterative manages to join aspects of the scene – its heat, languor, and boredom – not only to imply some of the more mundane qualities of life as a working private detective but also to establish those slow afternoons at La Mar Azul as a kind of narrative calm before the storm, a period of nearly nonnarratable quiet before Jeff falls in love with Kathie, an event that puts his story into a different and more frantic kind of motion, one less suited to the pseudotemporality of the iterative mode.

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I have rushed through these categories for a few reasons. First, the precision with which Genette himself lays these out in *Narrative Discourse* means that anything like a full presentation of his terms would amount to telling the whole story over again, an effort that would be undoubtedly worthwhile, but for which we do not have time. I will thus encourage the reader to look both at *Narrative Discourse* and at some of the works that take up, develop, and challenge Genette’s terms. Second, while Genette’s “technology” is, as I hope I have begun to suggest, immensely powerful as a set of descriptive, analytical tools, it is only one aspect of the larger work that Genette takes on in

*Narrative Discourse*. That is, while he indeed provides tools that might be used to account for almost any narrative, he does so in the context of an act not only of analysis but also of interpretation; he, in other words, offers a critical evaluation of Proust's *Recherche*, a text that in his account not only exhibits many if not all of the narrative techniques that he describes but also regularly exceeds, undermines, or undoes them:

It has no doubt become evident, in this comparison of Proustian narrative with the general system of narrative possibilities, that the analyst's curiosity and predilection went regularly to the most deviant aspects of Proustian narrative, the specific transgressions or beginning of a future development. This systematic valuing of originality and innovation is perhaps somewhat unsophisticated and altogether romantic as well, but today no one can entirely escape it.<sup>104</sup>

If, in other words, *Narrative Discourse* has a subject, it is not (or at least not only) narrative in general but rather the particular ways in which narrative discourse does and, indeed, must fail in Proust. Barthes writes that "what [Genette] discerns in Proust, with predilection (as he himself underlines), are narrative deviances (by which the Proustian narrative counters our possible notion of a simple, linear, 'logical' narrative). Now, deviances (from a code, a grammar, a norm) are always manifestations of writing: where the rule is transgressed, there writing appears as excess, since it takes on a language *which was not foreseen*."<sup>105</sup> This is a large part of Genette's project that sometimes goes missing in accounts that move more directly to the contested normative value of one or another of his terms. Why, after all, dedicate the book *Narrative Discourse* to a text that seems defined by the beautiful failure of its narrative discourse? Why begin such a project with a novel that seems to move classical narrative close to its finish? In what follows, I want to look at a few of the more spectacular moments of transgression that Genette picks out as especially vital in Proust before going on to suggest *why* his narrative theory, which is, after all, the most immediately influential of them all, must appear first and foremost as a theory of narrative failure. I will want to suggest that Genette's love of failure points to the strange and radical politics of *Narrative Discourse*.

In the section "Order," Genette offers an extreme example of *analeptic paralipsis*, his term for the introduction of material into the present of the narrative not only from another and earlier point but also from the outside of the story; a paralipsis is, as we saw with the rain-swept window in *Out of the Past*, an event not narrated in its given place but also not simply "skipped over" as in the case of a straightforward ellipsis. A paralipsis does not skip

over but, Genette says, rather *sidesteps* an event that can thus be introduced into the narrative at another point. He offers this as an especially complicated example:

But the most remarkable case – although it is rarely picked up by critics, perhaps because they refuse to take it seriously – is the mysterious “girl-cousin” about whom we learn, when Marcel gives Aunt Leonie’s sofa to a go-between, that with her on this same sofa he experienced “for the first time the sweets of love”; and this happened no where else but at Combray, and at a fairly early date, since he makes clear that the scene of the “initiation” took place “one hour when my Aunt Leonie had gotten up,” and we know in another connection that in her final years Leonie no longer left her room. Let us set aside the probable thematic value of this belated confidence, and let us even admit that the omission of the event from the narrative of *Combray* is a purely temporal ellipsis: the omission of the *character* from the family tableau perhaps for that reason comes even closer to being censorship. This little cousin on the sofa will thus be for us—to each age its own pleasures – analepsis on paralipsis.<sup>106</sup>

There are a couple of features that make this example “remarkable.” First and most importantly, it is one of many moments in Proust when the tools of narrative discourse appear turned more or less against themselves; instead of clarifying or explaining Marcel’s youth and his initiation into sexual life, the unexpected introduction of the “girl-cousin” produces an unwonted and yet trivial sense of mystery, a potential but also apparently insignificant error in the chronology of Marcel’s time at his aunt’s house in Combray. Where, in other words, we might imagine so important an event to be firmly situated, sharply delineated within the history of his youth, it is instead introduced almost haphazardly from a past that seems not only to have been almost forgotten but also to have run disconnectedly parallel alongside the main currents of Marcel’s narratable life. What makes this all the more notable is the fact that the “girl-cousin” herself is a sort of oddly familiar stranger in Proust’s narrative, a pseudocharacter whose relation to the time of the *Recherche* is both decidedly oblique and taken oddly for granted despite the importance she could have had in another version of the story. On the one hand, this feels, as Genette suggests, something like the result of misplaced or, in the nature of paralipsis, a *misplacing* tact, an implied feeling on Marcel’s part that one should handle such an event with delicacy. On the other hand, despite the low-key awkwardness of its presentation, the moment has, as Genette suggests, higher stakes at the level of narrative form; it seems, in other words, to threaten the internal coherence of Proust’s story-world. As it seems,

it is nonetheless a moment when narrative almost ceases to function; and because it almost ceases to function, it threatens to call the rest of Proust's represented world into question as well; it is a moment that reveals "narrative [discourse]'s capacity for *temporal autonomy*," which is to say its finally *antinarrative* freedom from story.<sup>107</sup> By itself, this points, as many of Genette's examples do, to places where ordinary narrative functions are stretched to the point where they threaten the whole logic of Proust's narrative, where, for different reasons, narrative form seems to have been turned against itself.

Left at the level of form, it is one of many instructive moments when we can see the nature of the narrative norms better when they are compared to the exceptions; thought of rather as a point where form and a particular content join, it suggests something more about Proust's method, a pointed way in which the local failure of narrative form has a role to play in relation to the *meaning* of the *Recherche*. It is, in other words, significant that this particular exception appears at a moment of sexual initiation, a fact that suggests a deeper relation among sexual knowledge, sexual desire, and the limits of narrative representation. In other words, in a manner that is characteristic of the *Recherche*, the strangely managed scene of the "girl-cousin" implies that narrative *failure* might at last be better suited than narrative *success* when it comes to the representation of sexual pleasure and sexual desire. This possibility is, I think, highlighted in the winking manner in which Genette handles the transgression's appearance. Instead of simply naming it, he indulges in a couple of uncharacteristic jokes. First, his slightly resigned and dry acknowledgment that each age has "its own pleasures" opens up his commentary in a couple of directions. On the one hand, it is an ironic nod to what is slightly ridiculous about the pleasure of the critic; compared to Marcel's experience of first, illicit love on his aunt's couch, the critic's truffle hunting after abstruse narrative figures must appear a little empty, a little belated, a little beside the point. On the other hand, the comparison also works in another direction, suggesting that there might be more of an erotic pull to the act of interpretation than the wider world could perhaps know, that the play of narrative form, the movement of one narrative level over another might indeed be understood not only as the object of a technician's gaze but also as something at least like erotic pleasure. Indeed, Genette lets himself become slightly carried away here, allowing himself what must surely be *Narrative Discourse's* only dirty joke: "This little cousin on the sofa will thus be for us . . . analepsis on paralipsis." The odd, implied, and, I think, intended spatial analogy between the cousin on the couch (and, of course, Marcel on the cousin or the cousin on Marcel) and an "analepsis on



paralipsis” stands as an oddly funny because absurd moment of bawdy humor. More, though, than a bit of fun, the association of sexual desire and narrative transgression points to a deeper significance to Genette’s categories in *Narrative Discourse*. As we know from Freud, sexual desire often emerges into discourse in the barely disguised form of both the slip and the joke, a fact that Genette wryly acknowledges by turning a narrative slip in Proust into his own mildly dirty joke. Although there is a lot more to say here, I will just observe that the unexpected eruption of desire in the second-degree form of jokes in Genette about slips in Proust not only points to the possible existence of a narratological unconscious but also makes a tacit point on which Proust and Genette would agree: that the truth of sex and sexual desire sometimes shows itself where narrative stops.

In a sense, Genette’s distinction between the erotic possibilities of success and failure anticipates a distinction between textual *pleasure* and textual *bliss* that Barthes will subsequently make in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973):

Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language.<sup>108</sup>

Barthes’s point, familiar to us from *S/Z*, is that where some texts or some ways of reading merely reinforce the code – which is to say that some texts support and reproduce the rules that govern the limits of the sayable or the narratable at a given moment in time – other texts and other ways of reading show the cracks in that system and point, however tentatively, to the possibility of something *beyond the code* (the old distinction between the *is* and the *ought*). This is also the distinction between the *readerly* and the *writerly* that we looked at in the previous section and traced back to Julia Kristeva’s distinction between *the book* and *writing*. In the early Barthes of *Writing Degree Zero*, this distinction named two different kinds of writing, *bourgeois* and *revolutionary* writing; it was in this period that Sollers, Barthes, and others associated with *Tel Quel* began to celebrate the narrative experiments of Alain Robbe-Grillet, “the doyen of the nouveau roman.”<sup>109</sup> “Robbe-Grillet’s innovative approach, in which nineteenth-century conventions such as plot and character counted for little, meshed seamlessly with *Tel Quel*’s formalist preoccupations, as well as its distaste for realism.”<sup>110</sup> If his sense of the writerly initially focused on the act of writing itself, in *S/Z* the responsibility for seeing through or even

undoing the codes that organize saying and thinking in everyday life moves from the author or the text on to the reader, a reader who *works* to see moments of revolutionary or writerly possibility within an otherwise readerly bourgeois text; as we saw in the last section, Barthes associates his particular work of reading with the socially subversive act of *rereading*: “Rereading draws the text out of its internal chronology (‘this happens *before* or *after* that’) and recaptures a mythic time (without *before* or *after*).”<sup>111</sup> Rereading, because it suspends the experience and the idea of chronology and thus undoes the meaning of the story–discourse relation, can thus reveal what is already or immanently writerly about even the most classic text. *Writerliness*, in other words, comes to name a reader’s relation to what is read as opposed to a quality of the writing itself: “the work of the commentary, once it is separated from any ideology of totality, consists precisely in *manhandling* the text, *interrupting* it.”<sup>112</sup>

It makes sense, in that case, that Barthes’s shift of attention from the text to the reader would correspond with a shift in examples, a move away from the more obviously experimental work of a Robbe-Grillet back to a “classic” such as Balzac’s; the point for Barthes is that, rather than distinguishing between readerly and writerly texts or between texts of mere pleasure and texts of bliss, the critic should turn to apparently bourgeois models in order to find moments of writerly bliss *within* the readerly, to see traces of something other than the code *within* the code itself. To reread is to see the multiple ways in which every text – and especially the great ones – is tacitly, immanently, necessarily plural and thus already writerly. As I suggested in the previous section, we can also see Barthes’s methodological shift as part of a political move that follows the path of Lukács’s earlier “reconciliation with reality,” his coming to terms with the fact that, because authentic proletarian revolution did not appear *imminent*, one had to look at what was *immanent* to a tenacious culture of bourgeois capitalism in order to see and appreciate the revolutionary potential within it. In other words, just as Lukács began to look for moments of dialectical and thus revolutionary possibility within “conservative” novelists such as Sir Walter Scott, so does Barthes turn to Balzac and the working of moments of writerliness within the readerly text.

This search for the writerly *within* the readerly, for moments of suggestive transgression within an otherwise working code, is also at the avowed heart of Genette’s project, a point he makes explicit in *Narrative Discourse Revisited*. After once again acknowledging what might seem overly “romantic” about his focus on the “innovative or ‘subversive’ aspects of” Proust, he writes that giving up its “romanticism” would be difficult because

I still feel very close . . . to the Barthesian valuing of the “writerly,” which I invoked at that time. Today I would simply give it a slightly different meaning, one that obviously commits no one but myself. I would contrast the “writerly” with the “readerly” no longer as the modern to the classical or the deviant to the canonical but, rather, as the potential to the real, as a possibility not yet produced, the theoretical approach to which has the power to indicate its place (the famous empty slot) and its nature.<sup>113</sup>

He goes on to say:

What is certain is that poetics in general, and narratology in particular, must not limit itself to *accounting for* existing forms or themes. It must also explore the field of what is possible or even impossible without pausing too long at that frontier, the mapping out of which is not its job. Until now, critics have done no more than interpret literature. Transforming it is now the task at hand. That is certainly not the business of theoreticians alone; their role is no doubt negligible. Still, what would theory be worth if it were not also good for *inventing practice*?<sup>114</sup>

Genette is in part making an argument about his literary critical methodology, about how and why he values the exception over the rule, the transgression over the norm. The point is not just that one can learn a lot about a system by looking to its occasional and exceptional lapses; it is rather that the transgressions that he tracks in Proust are points where possibility reveals itself in the midst of the everyday; they are places where something essentially resistant to narrative and the novel manages to break through the surface of one of the greatest representatives of narrative and the novel, where one of the most perfect and fullest expressions of a particular cultural logic is at one and the same time one proof of the internal limits of that cultural logic. Because Genette follows many of the figures we have looked at – Lukács, Bakhtin, the Russian Formalists, Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, etc. – as seeing particular narratives as both conditioned and limited by the generic or linguistic or social rules that govern experience at a particular moment in time, he sees the writerly or transgressive or antinarrative moments in Proust, the moments of what Barthes would call textual *bliss*, as expressions of radical literary possibility emerging in the midst of literary tradition.

There is also a more explicitly political or historical argument or response at work here. A few years before *Narrative Discourse*, Genette wrote the essay “Frontiers of Narrative”; in it, he followed Barthes and others in looking to

Robbe-Grillet, Philippe Sollers, and others associated with the *nouveau roman* as offering an imminent and revolutionary alternative to the narrative genre of the bourgeois novel and the culture that it represented:

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 representations. 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.<sup>115</sup>

In 1966 Genette seemed to think and maybe to hope that a form of narrative best represented by the classic bourgeois novel, a form of narrative that he associated most strongly with the story–discourse relation, would pass away; this is, as we saw, something he shares with the early Barthes and *Tel Quel*, which held on to the hope that, as Jean-Michel Rabaté puts it, “by showing the codes, cogs, and wheels of literary language, the production of a new poetic and political truth would . . . shatter the dominant repressive ideology.”<sup>116</sup> By 1968, however, Genette had separated himself from *Tel Quel* and its more extreme claims about history, the novel, and theory partly because of the journal’s belated alliance with the French Communist Party, which Genette had left in 1956 in the wake of the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian Revolution (a revolution in which Lukács, the subject of Section 4.2, was himself an ill-fated participant).<sup>117</sup> He then formed, along with Todorov and Hélène Cixous, the journal *Poétique*, a more academic and strictly literary alternative to *Tel Quel*: “As academics, Todorov and Genette were a minority at *Tel Quel*, and it is not surprising that they would leave *Tel Quel* as it embarked on its (‘terrorist’) avant-garde course. . . in order to found a theoretical, university journal, *Poétique*, with Cixous in 1968. *Poétique* would be everything *Tel Quel* had struggled not to be.”<sup>118</sup> And, as he moved away from *Tel Quel*, he moved *back* from the experiments of Robbe-Grillet and Sollers to Proust and the *Recherche*, a novel that represents the greatest hopes for and achievements of the novel form; and, also like Barthes, he did not see this return to the classics as form of reaction. It was, as he says, rather an effort to see the *possible* or the *potential* within the real, to look *within* as opposed to *beyond* the present and the everyday, the code and the norm for intimations of how things might or ought to be. It is significant that, with his attention to the significant failures of narrative in Proust, Genette reproduces an observation that Lukács made in *The Theory of the Novel*, the observation that “by a

strange and melancholy paradox, the moment of failure is the moment of value; the comprehending and experiencing of life's refusals is the source from which the fullness of life seems to flow."<sup>119</sup> This is, perhaps, why he finds the relation between eros, between sexual desire, between bliss and narrative failure worth highlighting. Barthes, you'll remember, calls what Genette looks for "places where the story 'skids'" and makes the stakes of that 'skidding' clear:

Now, a theory of "skidding" is necessary *precisely today*. Why? Because we are in that historical moment of our culture when narrative cannot yet abandon a certain readability, a certain conformity to narrative pseudo-logic which culture has instilled in us and in which, consequently, the only possible novations consist not in destroying the story, the anecdote, but in *deviating* it: making the code skid while seeming to respect it. It is this very fragile state of the narrative, at once conforming and deviant, that Genette has been able to see and to make us see in Proust's work. His work is at once structural and historical because he specifies the conditions on which narrative novation is possible without being suicidal.<sup>120</sup>

Faced with the tenacity of late capitalism and its official culture, Genette looks not away from but rather deep within the classic bourgeois text in order to catch a glimpse of something different; and, like the early Lukács, he glimpses that something different in spaces between the "normal" operations of narrative, in the places where narrative *as* narrative fails but where *something else*, whatever that might be, might be said to succeed. This is, perhaps, also to suggest that, contrary to some accounts, Genette and Barthes effectively anticipate more recent efforts to highlight differences between "natural" and "unnatural" narratives; instead, though, of taking this difference as a difference in kind, they understand that the tension between operative and paradoxical forms of narrative is rather evidence of the political and social contradictions that characterize our moment in history.<sup>121</sup> They reveal, in other words, the apparent difference between *natural* and *unnatural* narrative as a historical problem; this is why "a theory of 'skidding' is necessary *precisely today*."

Later in *Narrative Discourse*, Genette points to another moment of transgression, one he associates with *completing analepses*, instances when discourse reaches back to an earlier moment in the main line of the story in such a way that the end of a particular analepsis would normally meet back up with the present. He opposes completing analepses to *partial analepses*, self-contained narratives of past events that both begin and end at a point prior to the narrative present. Because completing analepses need to meet up with

the present, they offer particular opportunities for the kinds of narrative transgression that he associates with Proust: “This junction could hardly be without some degree of overlapping and thus an appearance of awkwardness, unless the narrator has the skill to extract from this awkwardness a sort of playful charm.”<sup>122</sup> Where some writers – Genette points to Balzac – have a variety of more or less successful ways of acknowledging the resumption of present narration after a detour into the past, Proust often attempts instead to “elude” the juncture between the analeptic narrative and the point where the present resumes: “The typical behavior of Proustian narrative seems to consist, quite to the contrary, of *eluding* the juncture, either by dissimulating the end of the analepsis in the sort of temporal dispersion that iterative narrative procures . . . or else by pretending to be unaware that the point in the story where the analepsis closes had already been reached by the narrative.”<sup>123</sup> Genette goes on to describe a number of moments at which the Proustian narrative seems to paper over, to ignore, or to finesse the point at which narrative past and present meet again; these moments of short-circuited temporality tend to coincide with moments of confusion or, in fact, the breakdown of the narrative system.

Genette then describes what he takes as Proust’s “boldest” move in this regard, an instance of temporal confusion or dissonance associated with one of the most important events in the novel – the death of Marcel’s beloved grandmother:

the boldest avoidance (even if the boldness is pure negligence) consists of forgetting the analeptic character of a section of narrative and prolonging that section more or less indefinitely on its own account, paying no attention to the point where it rejoins the first narrative. That is what happens in the episode – famous for other reasons – of the grandmother’s death. It opens with an obviously analeptic beginning: “I went upstairs, and found my grandmother not so well. For some time past, without knowing exactly what was wrong, she had been complaining of her health.” Then the narrative that has been opened in the retrospective mood continues uninterruptedly on up to the death, without ever acknowledging and signaling the moment (although indeed necessarily come to and passed beyond) when Marcel, returning from Mme. de Villeparisis’s, had found his grandmother “not so well.” We can never, therefore, either locate the grandmother’s death exactly in relation to the Villeparisis matinee, or decide where the analepsis ends and the first narrative resumes.<sup>124</sup>

Although Proust opens the sequence as what appears to be a completing analepsis, the narrative never returns to and in fact overshoots the moment of

his going upstairs to find the grandmother “not so well.” It is as if a memory that was meant to mark out and to delineate a past event *as* past instead overflows and swallows up the present, as if it were an instance when the past was simply too much for the present or for the memory that would try to bind or to contain it. What is more, because it sets the moment of her death chronologically adrift, that death threatens to overwhelm the novel itself; that which cannot be tied to a particular place could be anywhere or, indeed, everywhere. There are two points to make. The first is the immediate and formal observation that, although Genette takes care to lay out the different types of temporal relations that can exist between story and discourse, his system is in the end more heuristic than descriptive; his categories are thus something like Max Weber’s ideal types, models that are not found in practice but are nonetheless methodologically necessary. That is, as much as the whole of *Narrative Discourse* betrays something like a mania for categorization, for piling distinctions on distinctions, in practice the apparent conceptual purity of Genette’s system comes again and again to grief. This is not a shortcoming of Genette’s system; as I have already said, he owns his primary commitment to the local failure not only of narrative but also of his own system on a number of occasions. So, a moment like this, a moment when it becomes impossible to pinpoint when the past ends and the present resumes, reveals something essential about Proust’s and Genette’s method; it reveals, in other words, Genette’s interest in both developing a truly robust narrative theory and exploring the very real limits of that system, in ironically folding what a system cannot do into the same space of all the things it can do. In this way, we might once again associate Genette’s method with the early Lukács. That is, just as the early Lukács saw the novel as a powerful form because it was able to synthesize its urge toward totality with its immanent knowledge that totality is *not for us*, so does Genette’s paradoxical interest in the rule and the exception, the general and the particular, the description and the inevitable failure of description point to what is immediate and necessarily critical about his project.

The second point is related to Genette’s particular example of a transgressive or an incomplete completing analepsis. Although he mentions other examples, his main case is the death of Marcel’s grandmother, an event of enormous importance to Marcel, to Proust, and to the reader of the *Recherche*. Genette returns to the temporally oblique death scene later in his chapter “Duration,” where he talks about the fact that Marcel’s period of mourning is more or less passed over in silence (an ellipsis), that it is, in other words, an event whose absence is not in any way marked and so has to be inferred:



This ellipsis is perfectly mute: we left the grandmother on her deathbed, most likely at the beginning of the summer; the narrative takes up again in these terms: "Albeit it was simply a Sunday in autumn. . . ." The ellipsis is apparently definite, thanks to this indication of date, but it is very imprecisely so, and will soon become rather confused. Above all it is not characterized, and it will remain not characterized: we will never, even retrospectively, know anything of what the hero's life has been during these few months. This is perhaps the most opaque silence in the entire *Recherche*, and, if we remember that the death of the grandmother is to a great extent a transposition of the death of the author's mother, this reticence is undoubtedly not devoid of significance.<sup>125</sup>

There are different ways to think about this. We might simply say, and so it seems, that thinking about the aftermath of his grandmother's/mother's death was simply too painful to manage and that Marcel/Proust preferred, whatever the aesthetic cost, not to "remember"; we might also say, with Malcolm Bowie, that the character of the grandmother's death somehow falls outside while remaining at the center of the Proustian system: "The scenes devoted to the final illness and death of the narrator's grandmother seem often to belong to a world apart, in which the ironic imperative that governs so much of Proust's writing is by sheer force of grief suspended."<sup>126</sup> In these terms, the chronological "skidding" that takes place around the scene might be read as cutting across the difference between form and content, a phenomenon that we saw at work for different reasons in the case of Marcel's paralytic sexual encounter with the "girl-cousin."

If, however, the process of recovery is unnarrated, the resulting absence is significant for its own sake. That is, although silence about an experience of loss and subsequent recovery is technically unreadable (because it escapes representation as discourse), we know from psychoanalysis that the absence of a word or act can be just as symptomatic and, thus, just as significant as its presence. In the terms of psychoanalysis as well as narrative discourse, silence speaks. It, in other words, shares the status of similar slips, gaps, stutters, or omissions that significantly punctuate Freud's case studies; indeed, Freud's method turns on measuring the strains, tensions, omissions, and exaggerations that appear in the manifest expression of latent psychic content. We could in similar terms take it that Genette's method might stand as the narratological equivalent of a psychoanalysis that works not because it decodes the latent content of the unconscious but rather because it is capable of motivating and thus making significant the structuring relation between psychic events and the representation of those events, the psychoanalytic equivalent of story and discourse. This is one way to begin to understand

Genette's commitment to the mistake or transgression or failure, a commitment that he shares with Freud. In the same way that the mistake stands not only as proof of a relation on which psychic life depends, so does it stand in Genette's method as that which animates narrative as such. The exception, the deviance, the mistake: these are proof of what brings narrative to life.

I want to make a final argument here, one less about how Proust may or may not register loss in the story-world of the *Recherche* at the level of discourse (although that is undoubtedly important) and more about ways in which Genette's method might respond to some of what he understands and appreciates about Proust. There is, in other words, a sense at this point in *Narrative Discourse* that the whole and variegated apparatus that Genette has developed, his seemingly endless spiral of terms, distinctions, and caveats, might stand as a beautiful and deeply and self-consciously inadequate response to what appears to have gone missing in Proust: the act of mourning. Freud writes that, faced with the loss of a beloved object, the mind initially denies the reality of the loss:

This opposition can be so intense that a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis. Normally, respect for reality gains the day. Nevertheless its orders cannot be obeyed at once. They are carried out bit by bit, at great expense of time and cathectic energy, and in the meantime the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged. Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hyper-cathected, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it.<sup>127</sup>

Freud's point is that the fact of mourning, the fact of confronting the lost object, leads to a work that involves rebuilding a system around that lost object, of building or rebuilding a coherent world around or in spite of the absence in question. I do not want to say that Genette is engaged in some unconscious act of mourning; what I rather want to say is that where his system – his theory – has real and dialectical contact with the particularity of the Proustian text is in the way that he weaves a series of ruminations on death and loss throughout *Narrative Discourse*. Indeed, once you start to look for them, references to the death of particular characters, comments on the relation between represented deaths and particular narrative techniques, and brief but immensely suggestive comments on the nature of death appear everywhere in *Narrative Discourse*; this is another way in which Genette's book not only reads but also oddly *lives* through Proust. In each of these cases, the idea of death as that which drives the Proustian text, which pushes it on

from volume to volume toward more events, more writing, more plots but that also must in the end exceed or undermine even the fullest faith in narrative as a means of mastering time, suggests a different kind of investment in narrative, one that connects Genette to other figures we have considered who understand narrative partly as a way more or less to give value or significance or shape to the otherwise discrete events that make up a life. In other words, one can, I think, make the case that, although they use very different tools, both Genette and Proust are dedicated to understanding the potential and the real limits to narrative as a means of making life meaningful in the face of death, decay, and the passage of time.

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I have been arguing that these great works of narrative theory, *S/Z* and *Narrative Discourse*, are not only two of our most thorough practical analyses of narrative at work but also quiet responses to a more and less recent critical history. In the short term, both works represent a moment in intellectual history when a series of revolutionary missteps, misunderstandings, and disappointments had forced a confrontation with the very idea of historical possibility. What could it mean in the second half of the twentieth century (after two world wars, the apparent collapse of the communist project, and a series of more local but no less dispiriting failures) to hold out hope still for the new: for a New Novel, a new kind of writing, a new way to work, a new way to live? I argued that for both Barthes and Genette, this crisis of the new resulted in a practical turn back toward classic, readerly texts, to Balzac and Proust. Rather, though, than seeing these turns as some kind of depressed or conservative reaction, I suggested that we should see them in light of what Lukács, following Hegel, called a “reconciliation with reality”; we should, in other words, see them as a recognition that, rather than reaching, as so many had hoped, any kind of decisive end, the dispiriting plot of modern life had revealed itself as more or less open-ended. It was a recognition that, for instance, capitalism had simply become late capitalism (to use the phrase that Fredric Jameson takes from the Marxist economist Ernst Mandel) and that to hope for *something else* requires that we look not to the end of stories but rather to the possibilities that they might manage dialectically to hold within. This is one way to understand Lukács’s earlier turn in *The Historical Novel* to the politically conservative novels of Sir Walter Scott. It is precisely because the Tory Scott tries to find a specifically narrative form for the resolution of oppositions that had characterized and threatened social life in Britain that he manages to capture the dialectical and thus radical potential within the real and everyday experience

of history as it happens: "Scott then becomes a great poet of history because he has a deeper, more genuine and differentiated sense of historical necessity than any writer before him."<sup>128</sup> At the level of narrative technique, Scott's critical project relies on what Lukács, following Goethe and Hegel, calls *necessary anachronisms*, the insertion of the heterogeneous and thus disruptive story-material of the present into discursive representations of the historical past; the *necessary anachronism* "can emerge organically from historical material, if the past portrayed is clearly recognized and experienced by contemporary writers as the *necessary prehistory* of the present."<sup>129</sup> In other words, these anachronisms are moments when a seemingly bad or ironic fit between story and discourse reveals narrative form at work and thus turns the novel into a kind of embodied criticism, into an opportunity to see and to reflect on the ideological schemes we use to organize our experience and understanding of past and present. To use the language of the Russian Formalists, the *necessary anachronism* is a formal device that defamiliarizes the narrative relation between story and discourse, revealing it as a form of historical and thus political criticism.

Like Lukács thirty years before, Barthes and Genette develop a critical method that looks not to the end of narrative but rather to technical moments of dialectical and even utopian possibility contained within narrative, to moments when the otherwise "natural" logic of story and discourse seems to break down. As a result, then, of lingering with these mistakes, these "knots," these "necessary anachronisms," these moments of what recent narrative theorists call "unnatural narrative," Barthes and Genette use narrative theory to reveal transient, immanent, and real moments of aesthetic and political paradox and thus possibility at work within classic instances of the story–discourse relation. This is one way to understand the paradox with which we began, the fact that it is, as Jonathan Culler suggests, difficult if not impossible to know whether the events of story occur *before* their representation as discourse or whether the events are rather a conceptual backformation that occur *after* narrative discourse establishes its necessary imaginative blueprint. Put differently, once we acknowledge that the story–discourse relation is both an enormously useful heuristic tool and an apparently intractable conceptual problem, we can begin to see why narrative theory is powerful not only as an account of "natural" narratives but also as a critical theory. Narrative theory is based on and alerts us to the presence of paradox and allows us to locate some of the sources of and critical energy behind narrative theory as an important and influential part of intellectual history. Because, in other words, narrative theory is based in and helps to reveal the presence of paradox, of antinomy, of contradiction in the midst of "normal" or "natural"

narrative representation, it can help too to reveal the presence of the ought in the midst of the is, the general in the midst of the particular, value in the midst of fact, freedom in the midst of necessity. As imagined by both Barthes and Genette, narrative theory is, in that case, a practical extension of a critical project that goes back, as I have tried to show, to Hegel.

In the longer term, then, we can see Barthes's and Genette's attention to moments when the story–discourse relation is pushed to and past its structural limits as a late and refined response to several of the figures we have considered. They recall Aristotle's account of tragedy as a genre that turns the perspectival conflict between the "time of men" and the "time of the gods" into a kind of plot; Hegel's dialectical sense that conflict and contradiction motivate history and force us to imagine perspectives from which those contradictions might be resolved; Marx's understanding of the generic, which is to say, discursive difference (tragedy and farce!) among historical events understood in relation to class struggle; James's case that the novel reveals its sense not in its content but rather in its form, in the discursive circle it draws around events in order to give those events significance; Lukács's sense of the novel's ironic relation to its own formal limits as a way to confront a modern crisis of fact and value; Bakhtin's suggestion that narrative *chronotopes* not only represent but also produce the ideological conditions that give life its meaning in history; the Russian Formalists' effort to use form to defamiliarize narrative, to reveal the story–discourse relation at work; Levi-Strauss's effort to reveal the deep and deeper narrative structures at work behind myth; Kristeva's opposition between the ideological closure of *the book* and the critical open-endedness of *writing*; and so on. In each case, the figures I have considered turn to narrative genres in order both to reflect on the variable nature of the story–discourse relation and, more or less explicitly, to reveal that structural relation as part of a larger historical network of ideas, expectations, and beliefs about history, value, ethics, aesthetics, and politics. Stated differently, by developing narrative theory into a method that allows one to see places where the story–discourse relation breaks down, Barthes and Genette fulfill the promise of a much longer critical endeavor: the attempt to identify, describe, and analyze the forms, structures, assumptions, and ideas that allow us to see our lives and the lives of others as meaningful. And, insofar as they associate this critical project and its object with a specific set of social conditions, with, in other words, a social world that accepts complexity, insignificance, and disenchantment as *its* problems, they help us to see the historical stakes of narrative theory understood as a critical theory. Taken together, the figures I have looked at help us to see some of the intellectual sources of narrative theory, to understand why it seems self-evident that in

order to know the world we need to know narrative, and to trace out limits and possibilities that attend the larger effort to understand why ours is an experience best captured somewhere between story and discourse. Put differently, the figures I have examined develop a narrative theory not only in order to reveal narrative as a problem but also in order to show why narrative has been and, indeed, why it remains *our* problem.