

dialogue (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1979) and *Dialogiques II: l'Espace logique de l'interlocution* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985).

61 This distinction between reading as stasis or pause and reading as impetus [envoi] explains Jauss's oscillations in his estimation of the role of application in literary hermeneutics. As stasis, application tends to be identified with aesthetic understanding; as impetus, it detaches itself from this in rereading and displays its cathartic effects; it then functions as a means of correcting other applications which continue to be subject to the pressure of situations and to the constraints imposed by decisions to be made concerning direct action ('Limites et tâches d'une herméneutique littéraire,' p. 133).

Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator

That life has to do with narration has always been known and said; we speak of the story of a life to characterize the interval between birth and death. And yet this assimilation of a life to a history should not be automatic; it is a commonplace that should first be subjected to critical doubt. Such doubt is the outcome of all the knowledge acquired in the past few decades concerning the narrative and the narrating activity – knowledge that seems to remove the story from life as lived and locks it away in the realm of fiction.

First I will traverse this critical zone with an eye to rethinking in a different way this all too rudimentary and overly direct relation between a story and a life, rethink it such that fiction helps to make life – in the biological sense of the word – human. To the relation between story and life I would apply the Socratic maxim according to which the unexamined life is not worth living. As a starting-point for crossing the critical zone I will take a commentator's statement: Stories are told and not lived; life is lived and not told. In order to clarify this relation between living and recounting I suggest that we first investigate the act of narrating itself.

The theory of narration I am going to sketch here is quite recent since in its elaborated form it hails from the Russian and Czech formalists of the 'twenties and 'thirties and from the French structuralists of the 'sixties and the 'seventies. But it is a very old theory, too, to the measure that I find it prefigured in Aristotle's *Poetics*. It is true that Aristotle knew but three literary genres: the epic, the tragedy, and the comedy. But already his analysis was sufficiently general and formal to allow room for modern transpositions. For my part, from Aristotle's *Poetics* I retain his central concept of 'composition' [*mise en intrigue*], *mythos* in Greek, which means both 'fable' (in the sense

of imaginary story) and 'plot' (in the sense of well-constructed history). This second aspect of Aristotle's *mythos* I will take as guide; and from this concept of 'plot' I will draw all the elements that are able to help us towards reformulation of the relation between life and narrative.

That which Aristotle denotes as plot is not a static structure but an operation, an integrative process which, as I hope to show presently, does not come to fruition other than in the living receiver of the story being told. By 'integrative process' I mean the work of composition which confers on the narrated story an identity one can call dynamic; what is being told is precisely this or that story, singular and complete. It is this structuring process of the plot that I would put to the test in a first section.

I. The Act of Plotting

The operation of plotting may very broadly be defined as a synthesis of heterogeneous elements. Synthesis of what? First, it is a synthesis of multiple events or incidents with the complete and singular history; from this first point of view the plot has the power to make a single story out of the multiple incidents or, if you like, of transforming the manifold happenings into a story; in this connection an event is more than a mere occurrence, something that just happens: it is that which contributes to the progress of the story as much as it contributes to its beginning and its end. In correlation with this the narrated story, too, is always more than mere enumeration in a simple or serial or successive order of incidents or events. Narration organizes them into an intelligible whole.

From a second point of view as well, the plot is a synthesis: it unifies components as widely divergent as circumstances encountered while unsought, agents of actions and those who passively undergo them, accidental confrontations or expected ones, interactions which place the actors in relations ranging from conflict to cooperation, means that are well-attuned to ends or less so, and, finally, results that were not willed; gathering up all those factors into a single story turns the plot into a unity which one could call both concordant and discordant (which is why I like to speak of discordant concord or concordant discord). One gains understanding of such composition through the act of following this story; to follow a story is a very complex business, unceasingly guided by expectations con-

cerning its course, expectations that we gradually adjust in line with the unfolding of the story right up until it reaches its conclusion. In passing I note that retelling a story reveals better this synthetic activity regarding the work on the composition, inasmuch as we are less captivated by the unexpected aspects of the story and more attentive to the manner in which it moves towards its close.

Finally, the plot is a synthesis of the heterogeneous in a profounder sense still, which will serve below in the characterization of the temporality proper to every narrative composition. One can say that two kinds of time are found in every story told: on the one hand, a discrete, open, and theoretically undefined succession of incidents (one can always ask: and then? and then?); on the other hand, the story told presents another temporal aspect characterized by the integration, the culmination, and the ending in virtue of which a story gains an outline. In this sense I would say: to compose a story is, from the temporal point of view, to derive a configuration from a succession. We already surmise the importance of this characterization of stories from the temporal viewpoint to the extent that, for us, time is that which is fleeting and passes away, as well as that which endures and remains. But we will come back to this below. Suffice for now the characterization of the narrated story as a temporal totality and the poetic act as the creation of a mediation between time as flux and time as duration. If one would speak of the temporal identity of a story, one must characterize it as something which endures and remains right across that which passes away.

From this analysis of a story as a synthesis of the dissimilar, then, we may retain three traits: the mediation between multiple incidents and the singular story accomplished in the plot; the primacy of concord over discord; finally, the struggle between succession and configuration.

I would like to present an epistemological corollary to this thesis regarding the plot viewed as synthesis of the incongruent. This consequence concerns the status of the intelligibility one should ascribe to the plotting activity. Aristotle did not hesitate to say that every well-told story teaches something; even more, he said that stories reveal universal aspects of the human condition and that, therefore, poetry is more philosophical than the history of historians, who are too dependent on anecdotic aspects of life. Whatever the relation of art and historiography may be, it is certain that the