

*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

tragedy, the epic, and the comedy – to mention only the genres known through Aristotle – develop a kind of intelligence we could call narrative intelligence, and which is much closer to practical wisdom and moral judgment than it is to science and, more generally, to the theoretical use of reason. This can be shown quite easily. Ethics as conceived by Aristotle, and as it can still be understood, speaks abstractly of the relation between ‘virtues’ and the ‘pursuit of happiness.’ It is the function of poetry, in its narrative and dramatic forms, to set before imagination and meditation situations each of which make up thought-experiments by means of which we learn to join the ethical aspect of human behaviour to happiness and unhappiness, to fortune and misfortune. By means of poetry we learn how changes in fortune result from this or that behaviour, as put together in the plot of the story. On account of the acquaintance we have come to have with types of composition received from our culture, we learn to link the virtues or, rather, the excellences to happiness or unhappiness. These ‘lessons’ of poetry constitute the universals of which Aristotle spoke; but they are (in his view) universalia inferior to those of logic and of theoretical thought. Nevertheless, we must speak of ‘intelligence,’ though in the sense that Aristotle gave to *phronesis* (which the Latins translated with *prudentia*). In this sense I like to use ‘proneic intelligence’ to distinguish it from theoretical intelligence. The story belongs to the first kind, not to the second.

This epistemological consequence of our analysis of the plot has, in turn, itself numerous implications for the efforts of contemporary narratology to elaborate a true *science* of the narrative; of all these undertakings, entirely legitimate in my view, I would say that they are justified only on account of the *simulation* of a narrative (or proneic) intelligence always already there, simulation that puts into play depth-structures unknown to those who tell the stories or follow the telling of them, but which place narratology on a level of rationality equal to that of linguistics and the other sciences of language. I characterize the rationality of contemporary narratology in terms of its ability to simulate (in a second-level discourse) that which we understood to be a story already when we were children. This characterization is not meant to discredit modern efforts; it is meant only to situate them accurately within the levels of knowledge. I could just as well have looked for a model of thought more modern than Aristotle’s, such as in the relation indicated by Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason* between the schema and the categories.

Just as in Kant the schema points to the creative source of the categories and the categories designate the ordering principle of the mind, so also the plot constitutes the creative well-spring of the story and narratology forms the rational reconstruction of the rules hidden underneath the poetic activity. On account of this, it is a science with requirements of its own: it seeks to reconstruct all the logical and semiological constraints, together with the laws of transformation that direct the course of the story. My thesis, then, does not express any hostility towards narratology; it limits itself to saying that narratology is a second-level discourse [*discours de second degré*], always preceded by a narrative intelligence which issues from creative imagination. Throughout the remainder of this essay my analysis will stay at the level of first-level narrative intelligence.

Before moving on to the question regarding the relation between story and life, I would pause at a second corollary which puts me on the way of the reinterpretation of this very relation.

There is, I would say, a life of the narrative activity given with the traditionality characteristic of the narrative schema.

To say that the narrative schema has a history of its own, and that this history possesses all the characteristics of a tradition, is not at all to defend tradition understood as an inert transmission of dead sediment. On the contrary, it is to point to tradition, as a living passing-on of innovation which can always be re-activated by a return to the most creative moments of the poetic composition. That phenomenon of traditionality is the key to the functioning of narrative models and, consequently, to identifying them. The shaping of a tradition in effect rests on the interaction between the two factors of innovation and sedimentation. To sedimentation we ascribe the models that constitute in retrospect the typology of compositions which allows us to order the literary genres; but we must not lose sight of the fact that these models do not embody eternal essences: they derive from a sedimented tradition whose genesis is obliterated.

But while the sediment does enable us to identify a work as, for example, a tragedy, a moralizing novel, a social drama, such identification by way of embedded models is not exhaustive: the opposite phenomenon of innovation must be taken into account as well. Why should this be so? Because the models, themselves arising from a prior innovation, provide a guide to further experimentation in the narrative domain. The rules change under pressure of innovation,

but they change slowly and even resist change in virtue of the sedimentation process. Thus, innovation remains the opposite pole of tradition: there is always room for innovation to the extent that whatever is produced in composing the poem is, ultimately, always a singular work, this particular work. The rules that together form a kind of grammar direct the composition of new works – new before becoming typical. Every work is an original production, a new being within the realm of discourse. The reverse, however, is no less true: innovation remains a strategy governed by rules; the work of the imagination does not come from nothing. In one way or another it is linked to models received through tradition. But it can enter into a variable relation to these models. The diversity in solutions is spread out between the two poles of servile repetition and calculated deviance, ranging through every degree of regulated deformation. Popular stories, myths, traditional narratives in general, stay closer to the pole of repetition. This is why they are the privileged realm of structuralism. But as soon as we move beyond the domain of these traditional stories deviance prevails over rule. Contemporary novels, for instance, can largely be defined as anti-novels to the measure that they themselves are the rules that become the object for new experimentation.

However that may be in the case of this or that work, the possibility of deviance is entailed in the relation between sedimentation and innovation which makes for tradition. The variations between these two poles confer on the productive imagination a historicity of its own and keep the narrative tradition alive.

## H. From the Narrative to Life

We can now attack head-on our paradox: stories are told, life is lived. A chasm seems to open up between fiction and life. To bridge this gap, it seems to me, a serious revision of both terms of the paradox has to take place.

Let us stay for a moment on the side of the narrative, i.e., the side of fiction, and let us see how it leads back to life. My thesis here is that the process of composition, of configuration, does not realize itself in the text but in the reader, and under this condition configuration makes possible reconfiguration of a life by the way of the narrative. More precisely: the meaning or the significance of a story wells up from *the intersection of the world of text and the world of the reader.*

Thus the act of reading becomes the crucial moment of the entire analysis. On this act rests the ability of the story to transfigure the experience of the reader.

Allow me to stress the terms I just used: the world of the reader and the world of the text. To speak of the world of the text is to emphasize that trait of every literary work by which it opens up a horizon of possible experience, a world in which it would be possible to dwell. A text is not an entity closed in upon itself; it is the projection of a new universe, different from the one in which we live. Appropriating a work through reading it is to unfold the implicit horizon of the world which embraces the action, the personages, the events of the story told. The result is that the reader belongs to both the experiential horizon of the work imaginatively, and the horizon of his action concretely. The awaited horizon and the horizon meet and fuse without ceasing. In this sense Gadamer speaks of the 'fusions of horizons' (*Horizontverschmelzung*) essential to the act of understanding a text.

I know very well that literary criticism is much concerned to maintain the distinction between the inside of the text and its outside. Literary criticism prefers to look upon every exploration of the linguistic universe as foreign to its aims. Text analysis should therefore stop at the limit of the text and deny itself any departure from the text. I would say in this connection that the distinction between outside and inside is an invention of the method of textual analysis itself, and does not correspond to the experience of the reader. This opposition results from the extrapolation to literature of the characteristic properties of the kinds of units linguistics works with: phonemes, lexemes, words; to linguistics the real world is extra-linguistic. Reality is not contained within the dictionary or in grammar. It is precisely this extrapolation from linguistics to the poetic that seems to me open to criticism: the methodological decision, proper to structural analysis, to deal with literature in terms of linguistic categories which impose the distinction between inside and outside. From a hermeneutic point of view, that is, from the point of view of the interpretation of a literary experience, a text has an entirely different significance from that which a structural analysis, deriving from linguistics, accords to it; it is a mediation between man and the world, between man and man, between man and himself. Mediation between man and the world is called *reference*; mediation between man and man is *communication*; mediation between man and himself

is *self-understanding*. A literary work brings together these three dimensions of reference, communication, and self-understanding. Thus, the work of hermeneutics begins where linguistics stops. Hermeneutics would uncover new traits of non-descriptive reference, of non-utilitarian communication, of non-narcissistic reflexivity – traits engendered by the literary work. In a word, hermeneutics takes hold of the hinge between the (internal) configuration of a work and the (external) refiguration of a life. As I see it, everything said above concerning the dynamics of composition proper to a literary creation is nothing but a lengthy preparation to understanding the real problem, i.e., that of the dynamics of transfiguration proper to the work. In this regard plotting is the work of the text and the reader jointly. One has to follow and accompany the composition, actualize its capacity of being followed, so that the whole work will have a configuration within its own proper limits. To follow a story is to reactualize the act of configuration which gave form to it. Furthermore, it is the act of the reader who accompanies the play between innovation and sedimentation, the play with narrative constraints, with the possibilities of deviating, even the battle between novel and anti-novel. Finally, it is the act of reading which completes the work, which transforms it into a reading *guide* with its zones of indetermination, its latent richness of interpretation, its ability to be reinterpreted in novel ways within historical context that are always new.

At this stage of the analysis we already anticipate how story and life can be reconciled to each other, since the reading itself already is a way of living in the fictitious universe of the work; in this sense we can already say that stories are told but also lived *in the imaginary mode*.

But now we must correct the second term of the alternative, that which we call 'life.' We must put in question the false evidence according to which life is lived and not told.

To this end I would insist on the pre-narrative capacity of that which we call a life. A life is no more than a biological phenomenon as long as it is not interpreted. And in the interpretation fiction plays a considerable, mediating role. To pave the way towards this new phase in the analysis we must attend to the mixture of doing and undergoing, of action and suffering which makes up the very texture of life. It is this mixture that the story seeks to imitate in a creative way. Indeed, in my reference to Aristotle I left out the definition itself which he gives to 'story'; it is, he says, the imitation of an action,

*mimesis praxeos*. Hence we must first look for the points of support which the story can find in the living experience of acting and suffering; that which in this living experience requires insertion of the narrative and perhaps expresses a veritable need for it.

The first anchor-point we find for the narrative intelligibility in living experience lies within the structure of human acting and suffering itself. In this regard human life is profoundly different from animal life and *a fortiori* from mineral existence. We understand what action and passion are in virtue of our ability to utilize in a meaningful way the entire network of expressions and concepts which the natural languages supply us with in order to distinguish 'action' from simple physical 'movement' and from psycho-physiological 'behaviour.' Similarly, we understand the meaning of project, goal, means, circumstances, and so on. All such notions taken together make up the network of what could be called the *semantics of action*. Now, in this network, we rediscover all the components of the story which above appeared under the heading 'synthesis of the heterogeneous.' In this regard our familiarity with the conceptual network of human action is of the same order as the acquaintance we have with the plots of the stories we know; the same phronetic intelligence guides the concepts of action (and of passion) and that of the story.

The second anchor-point which the narrative proposition finds in practical understanding resides in the symbolic resources of the practical realm – a trait which will decide which aspects of making, of being able to make, and of knowing and being able to know [*du faire, du pouvoir-faire, et du savoir-pouvoir-faire*] come out of the poetic transposition.

If indeed action can be narrated it is because it is already articulated in signs, rules, and norms; action is always mediated symbolically. This characteristic of action has been emphasized vividly in cultural anthropology. I speak more precisely of 'symbolic mediation' in order to distinguish among symbols of a cultural kind those which underlie action to the point that they constitute its primary meaning before they are detached from the practical level as autonomous wholes connected with speaking and writing. Such autonomous symbols are met with in ideologies and utopias. Here I limit myself to what one could call *implicit, immanent* symbolism, in contradistinction to such explicit or autonomous symbolism.

That which actually characterizes the symbolism implicit in action is that it forms a *descriptive context* for the singular actions. In other

words, it is in the context of this or that symbolic convention that we are able to interpret a given gesture as having this or that meaning; the same movement of the arm can, depending on the context, be understood as a way of greeting, of hailing a taxi, or of casting a vote. Before they are subjected to interpretation, symbols are the internal interpreters of an action. In this way symbolism confers on action a first readability. It makes of action a quasi text for which the symbols furnish the rules of significance, in the context of which such specific behaviour can be interpreted.

The third anchor-point of the story in life lies in what one could call the *pre-narrative quality of human experience*. Thanks to it we have the right to speak of life as of an incipient story, and thus of life as *an activity and a desire in search of a narrative*. Comprehension of an action is not limited to familiarity with its symbolic mediations. It extends even to recognition, in the action, of temporal structures that evoke narration. It is not by accident or by error that we are accustomed to speak of stories that happen to us or stories we are caught up in – or simply of the story of a life.

It may be objected here that my entire analysis rests on a vicious circle. If every human experience is already mediated by all sorts of symbolic systems, it is also already mediated by all kinds of stories we have heard. How then can one speak of a narrative quality of experience and of human life as an incipient story, since we have no access to the temporal drama of existence outside of the stories told to their subjects by others than ourselves?

To this objection I would oppose a number of situations which, I think, compel us to ascribe to experience as such already something like a virtual narrativity which does not proceed from – as is said – a projection of literature on life, but which makes for an authentic demand for a story. I introduced the phrase ‘pre-narrative structure of experience’ to characterize these situations.

Without moving away from daily experience, are we not inclined to see a certain chain of episodes of our lives as *stories not yet told*, stories that seek to be told, stories that offer anchor-points for the narrative? I do not overlook how incongruous it seems to speak of a story not yet told. Once again, are not stories, by definition, *narratives*? As long as we are speaking of actual stories, this is undoubtedly the case. But is the notion of a potential story unacceptable?

I attend a moment to two less common situations in which the expression ‘story not yet told’ imposes itself on us with extraordinary force. The client who turns to a psychoanalyst to present him with bits

of lived histories, dreams, ‘primitive scenes,’ conflicting episodes; one can indeed say that the goal and effect of the analytic sessions is that the person analyzed draws out from these bits and pieces a story that is both more intelligible and more bearable. This narrative interpretation of psychoanalytic theory implies that the story of a life arises from untold and repressed stories, in the direction of effective stories which the subject can be responsible for and which he takes as constitutive of his personal identity. It is the search for this personal identity that guarantees the continuity of a potential or virtual story and the purposive story for which we assume responsibility.

There is another situation where the idea of a story not (yet) told seems appropriate. When a judge tries to understand a suspect by unravelling the knot of complications in which the suspect is caught, one can say that, before the story is told, the individual seems entangled in the stories that happen to him. This ‘entanglement’ thus appears as a pre-history of the story told in which the beginning is still chosen by the narrator. This pre-history of the story is what connects the latter to a larger whole and provides it with a background. This background is built up into a living, continuous overlap of all the lived stories. Thus, the stories told must emerge from this background. In this emergence the story guarantees man. The major consequence of this existential analysis of man as entangled in stories is that the telling is a secondary process grafted on our ‘being entangled in stories.’ Narrating, following, and understanding stories is nothing but the continuation of such untold stories.

From this double analysis we learn that fiction, particularly narrative fiction, is an irreducible dimension of *the understanding of the self*. If it is true that fiction cannot be completed other than in life, and that life can not be understood other than through stories we tell about it, then we are led to say that a life *examined*, in the sense borrowed from Socrates, is a life *narrated*.

What is a narrated life? It is a life in which we recover all the fundamental structures of the story enumerated in the first section. Mainly, it is the play of concord and discord which seemed to me to characterize a narrative. There is nothing paradoxical or outrageous about this conclusion. When we open St Augustine’s *Confessions* at Book XI we discover a description of discordant concord that answers completely to the structure of discordant concord that Aristotle, some centuries earlier, had discerned in poetic composition. In his famous treatise on time Augustine sees time as being born in the

unceasing differentiation of the three aspects of the present: expectation, which he calls the presence of the future; memory, which he calls the presence of the past; awareness, which is the presence of the present. Hence the instability of time; nay, its ceaseless decomposition. Thus Augustine can define time as extendedness of the soul, *distentio animi*. It consists in the permanent contrast between the instability of the human 'now' and the stability of the divine 'now' which embraces past, present, and future in unity of creative vision and action.

One is led to juxtapose and confront Aristotle's notion of plot and St Augustine's definition of time. One could say that, in Augustine, discord is greater than concord; hence the misery of the human condition. To Aristotle concord outstrips discord; hence the incomparable value of the narrative to bring order to our temporal experience. But it would not do to push the opposition too far, since for Augustine himself there would be no discord if we did not tend towards a *unity of awareness*, as he shows in the simple example of reciting a poem: when I am about to recite a poem it is wholly present in my mind; next, as I am reciting it, its parts move one by one from being future to being past, crossing the present on the way, until finally, the future being exhausted, the whole of the poem has become past. Just so, a vision of totalizing intention guides the inquiry so that I feel the cruel talons of time that will not desist tearing my soul by bringing to hope, memory, and awareness discord without end. Nevertheless, if in this way discord outweighs concord in the living experience of time, even then the latter should be the permanent object of our desire.

In Aristotle's case we see the reverse. The narrative, I said, is a synthesis of the heterogeneous. But concord cannot be without discord. Tragedy is paradigmatic for this: no tragedy is without complications, with fickle fate, without terrible and sad events, without irreparable error committed in ignorance or by mistake rather than through evil-mindedness. If then concord wins out over discord, surely it is the battle between them that makes for the story.

Let us apply to ourselves this analysis of the discordant concord of the narrative and the concordant discord of time. It seems that our life, enveloped in one single glance, appears to us as the field of a constructive activity, deriving from the narrative intelligence through which we attempt to recover (rather than impose from without) *the narrative identity which constitutes us*. I emphasize the expression

'narrative identity,' because that which we call subjectivity is neither an incoherent succession of occurrences nor an immutable substance incapable of becoming. It is exactly the kind of identity which the narrative composition alone, by means of its dynamism, can create.

This definition of subjectivity in terms of the narrative identity has numerous implications. To begin with, it is possible to apply the play of sedimentation and innovation, which we recognized in the works in every tradition, to our understanding of ourselves. In the same manner we do not cease to re-interpret the narrative identity that constitutes us in the light of stories handed down to us by our culture. In this sense our self-understanding presents the same traits of traditionality as the understanding of a literary work does. In this way we learn to become the *narrator of our own story* without completely becoming the author of our life. It could be said that we appropriate in the application to ourselves the concert of narrative voices that make up the symphony of the great works, of the epics, the tragedies, dramas, and novels. The difference is that, in these works, the author has disguised himself as narrator and bears the masks of his many *personae* in whose midst he is the dominant narrative voice telling the story we read. We can become our own narrator, following these narrative voices, without becoming authors. That is the great difference between life and fiction. In this sense it is certainly true that life is lived and the story told. An unbridgeable distinction remains, but it is, in part, abolished through our capacity to appropriate in the application to ourselves the intrigues we received from our culture, and our capacity of thus experimenting with the various roles that the favourite *personae* assume in the stories we love best. And so we try to gain by means of *imaginative variation* of our *ego* a narrative understanding of ourselves, the only kind of understanding that escapes the pseudo-alternative of pure change and absolute identity.

Allow me to conclude by saying that the *subject* is never given at the beginning. Or, if it were so given, it would run the risk of reducing itself to a narcissistic ego, self-centred and avaricious – and it is just this from which literature can liberate us. Our loss on the side of narcissism is our gain on the side of the narrative identity. In the place of an ego enchanted by itself, a *self* is born, taught by cultural symbols, first among which are the stories received in the literary tradition. These stories give unity – not unity of substance but narrative wholeness.