Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives

The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances – as though any material were fit to receive man’s stories. Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think of Carpaccio’s *Saint Ursula*), stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives, enjoyment of which is very often shared by men with different, even opposing, cultural backgrounds. Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself.

Must we conclude from this universality that narrative is insignificant? Is it so general that we can have nothing to say about it except for the modest description of a few highly individualized varieties, something literary history occasionally undertakes? But then how are we to master even these varieties, how are we to justify our right to

1. It must be remembered that this is not the case with either poetry or the essay, both of which are dependent on the cultural level of their consumers.
differentiate and identify them? How is novel to be set against novella, tale against myth, drama against tragedy (as has been done a thousand times) without reference to a common model? Such a model is implied by every proposition relating to the most individual, the most historical, of narrative forms. It is thus legitimate that, far from the abandoning of any idea of dealing with narrative on the grounds of its universality, there should have been (from Aristotle on) a periodic interest in narrative form and it is normal that the newly developing structuralism should make this form one of its first concerns – is not structuralism’s constant aim to master the infinity of utterances [paroles] by describing the ‘language’ [‘langue’] of which they are the products and from which they can be generated. Faced with the infinity of narratives, the multiplicity of standpoints – historical, psychological, sociological, ethnological, aesthetic, etc. – from which they can be studied, the analyst finds himself in more or less the same situation as Saussure confronted by the heterogeneity of language [langage] and seeking to extract a principle of classification and a central focus for description from the apparent confusion of the individual messages. Keeping simply to modern times, the Russian Formalists, Propp and Lévi-Strauss have taught us to recognize the following dilemma: either a narrative is merely a rambling collection of events, in which case nothing can be said about it other than by referring back to the storyteller’s (the author’s) art, talent or genius – all mythical forms of chance 1 – or else it shares with other narratives a common structure which is open to analysis, no matter how much patience its formulation requires. There is a world of difference between the most complex randomness and the most elementary combinatory scheme, and it is impossible to combine (to produce) a narrative without reference to an implicit system of units and rules.

Where then are we to look for the structures of narrative? Doubtless, in narratives themselves. Each and every narrative? Many commentators who accept the idea of a narrative structure are nevertheless unable to resign themselves to dissociating literary analysis from the example of the experimental sciences; nothing daunted, they ask that a purely inductive method be applied to narrative and that one start by studying all the narratives within a genre, a period, a society. This commonsense view is utopian. Linguistics itself, with only some three thousand languages to embrace, cannot manage such a programme and has wisely turned deductive, a step which in fact marked its veritable constitution as a science and the beginning of its spectacular progress, it even succeeding in anticipating facts prior to their discovery. 1 So what of narrative analysis, faced as it is with millions of narratives? Of necessity, it is condemned to a deductive procedure, obliged first to devise a hypothetical model of description (what American linguists call a ‘theory’) and then gradually to work down from this model towards the different narrative species which at once conform to and depart from the model. It is only at the level of these conformities and departures that analysis will be able to come back to, but now equipped with a single descriptive tool, the plurality of narratives, to their historical, geographical and cultural diversity. 2


2. Let us bear in mind the present conditions of linguistic description: ‘...linguistic “structure” is always relative not just to the data or corpus but also to the grammatical theory describing the data’ E. Bach, An Introduction to Transformational Grammars, New York 1964, p. 29; ‘it has been recognized that language must be described as a
Thus, in order to describe and classify the infinite number of narratives, a ‘theory’ (in this pragmatic sense) is needed and the immediate task is that of finding it, of starting to define it. Its development can be greatly facilitated if one begins from a model able to provide it with its initial terms and principles. In the current state of research, it seems reasonable that the structural analysis of narrative be given linguistics itself as founding model.

I. The Language of Narrative

1. Beyond the sentence

As we know, linguistics stops at the sentence, the last unit which it considers to fall within its scope. If the sentence, being an order and not a series, cannot be reduced to the sum of the words which compose it and constitutes thereby a specific unit, a piece of discourse, on the contrary, is no more than the succession of the sentences composing it. From the point of view of linguistics, there is nothing in discourse that is not to be found in the sentence: ‘The sentence,’ writes Martinet, ‘is the smallest segment that is perfectly and wholly representative of discourse.’ Hence there can be no question of linguistics setting itself an object superior to the sentence, since beyond the sentence formal structure, but that the description first of all necessitates specification of adequate procedures and criteria and that, finally, the reality of the object is inseparable from the method given for its description’, Benveniste, op. cit., p. 119 [trans. p. 101].

1. But not imperative: see Claude Bremond, ‘La logique des possibles narratifs’, Communications 8, 1966, which is more logical than linguistic. [Bremond’s various studies in this field have now been collected in a volume entitled, precisely, Logique du récit, Paris 1973; his work consists in the analysis of narrative according to the pattern of possible alternatives, each narrative moment – or function – giving rise to a set of different possible resolutions, the actualization of any one of which in turn produces a new set of alternatives.]


are only more sentences – having described the flower, the botanist is not to get involved in describing the bouquet.

And yet it is evident that discourse itself (as a set of sentences) is organized and that, through this organization, it can be seen as the message of another language, one operating at a higher level than the language of the linguists. Discourse has its units, its rules, its ‘grammar’: beyond the sentence, and though consisting solely of sentences, it must naturally form the object of a second linguistics. For a long time indeed, such a linguistics of discourse bore a glorious name, that of Rhetoric. As a result of a complex historical movement, however, in which Rhetoric went over to belles-lettres and the latter was divorced from the study of language, it has recently become necessary to take up the problem afresh. The new linguistics of discourse has still to be developed, but at least it is being postulated, and by the linguists themselves. This last fact is not without significance, for, although constituting an autonomous object, discourse must be studied from the basis of linguistics. If a working hypothesis is needed for an analysis whose task is immense and whose materials infinite, then the most reasonable thing is to posit a homological relation between sentence and discourse insofar as it is likely that a similar formal organization orders all semiotic systems, whatever their substances and dimensions. A discourse is a long ‘sentence’ (the units of which are not necessarily sentences), just as a sentence, allowing for certain specifications, is a short ‘discourse’. This hypothesis accords well with a number of propositions put forward in contemporary antro-
pology. Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss have pointed out that mankind can be defined by the ability to create secondary—‘self-multiplying’—systems (tools for the manufacture of other tools, double articulation of language, incest taboo permitting the fanning out of families) while the Soviet linguist Ivanov supposes that artificial languages can only have been acquired after natural language: what is important for men is to have the use of several systems of meaning and natural language helps in the elaboration of artificial languages. It is therefore legitimate to posit a ‘secondary’ relation between sentence and discourse—a relation which will be referred to as homological, in order to respect the purely formal nature of the correspondences.

The general language [langue] of narrative is one (and clearly only one) of the idioms apt for consideration by the linguistics of discourse¹ and it accordingly comes under the homological hypothesis. Structurally, narrative shares the characteristics of the sentence without ever being reducible to the simple sum of its sentences: a narrative is a long sentence, just as every constative sentence is in a way the rough outline of a short narrative. Although there provided with different signifiers (often extremely complex), one does find in narrative, expanded and transformed proportionately, the principal verbal categories: tenses, aspects, moods, persons. Moreover the ‘subjects’ themselves, as opposed to the verbal predicates, readily yield to the sentence model; the actantial typology proposed by A. J. Greimas² discovers in the multitude of narrative characters the elementary functions of grammatical analysis. Nor does

1. One of the tasks of such a linguistics would be precisely that of establishing a typology of forms of discourse. Three broad types can be recognized provisionally: metonymic (narrative), metaphoric (lyric poetry, sapiential discourse), enthymematic (intellectual discourse).

2. See below III.1. [Also, section II of ‘The struggle with the angel’ in the present volume. Greimas’s own account can be found in Sémantique structurale, Paris 1966, Chapter 10.]

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the homology suggested here have merely a heuristic value: it implies an identity between language and literature (inasmuch as the latter can be seen as a sort of privileged vehicle of narrative). It is hardly possible any longer to conceive of literature as an art that abandons all further relation with language—the moment it has used it as an instrument to express ideas, passion or beauty: language never ceases to accompany discourse, holding up to it the mirror of its own structure—does not literature, particularly today, make a language of the very conditions of language?¹

2. Levels of meaning

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 level of description.²

A sentence can be described, linguistically, on several levels (phonetic, phonological, grammatical, contextual) and these levels are in a hierarchical relationship with one another.

1. Remember Mallarmé’s insight at the time when he was contemplating a work of linguistics: ‘Language appeared to him the instrument of fiction: he will follow the method of language (determine it). Language self-reflecting. So fiction seems to him the very process of the human mind—it is this that sets in play all method, and man is reduced to will’ Œuvres complètes, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris 1961, p. 851. It will be recalled that for Mallarmé ‘Fiction’ and ‘Poetry’ are taken synonymously (cf. ibid., p. 335).

2. ‘Linguistic descriptions are not, so to speak, monovalent. A description is not simply “right” or “wrong” in itself...it is better thought of as more useful or less’, M. A. K. Halliday, ‘General linguistics and its application to teaching’, Patterns of Language, London 1966, p. 8.
another, for, while all have their own units and correlations (whence the necessity for a separate description of each of them), no level on its own can produce meaning. A unit belonging to a particular level only takes on meaning if it can be integrated in a higher level; a phoneme, though perfectly describable, means nothing in itself: it participates in meaning only when integrated in a word, and the word itself must in turn be integrated in a sentence. The theory of levels (as set out by Benveniste) gives two types of relations: distributional (if the relations are situated on the same level) and integrational (if they are grasped from one level to the next); consequently, distributional relations alone are not sufficient to account for meaning. In order to conduct a structural analysis, it is thus first of all necessary to distinguish several levels or instances of description and to place these instances within a hierarchical (integrationary) perspective.

The levels are operations. It is therefore normal that, as it progresses, linguistics should tend to multiply them. Discourse analysis, however, is as yet only able to work on rudimentary levels. In its own way, rhetoric had assigned at least two planes of description to discourse: dispositio and elocutio. Today, in his analysis of the structure of myth, Lévi-Strauss has already indicated that the constituent units of mythical discourse (mythemes) acquire meaning only because they are grouped in bundles and because these bundles themselves combine together. As too, Tzvetan

1. The levels of integration were postulated by the Prague School (vid. J. Vachek, A Prague School Reader in Linguistics, Bloomington 1964, p. 468) and have been adopted since by many linguists. It is Benveniste who, in my opinion, has given the most illuminating analysis in this respect; op. cit., Chapter 10.

2. 'In somewhat vague terms, a level may be considered as a system of symbols, rules, and so on, to be used for representing utterances', Bach, op. cit., p. 57.

3. The third part of rhetoric, inventio, did not concern language – it had to do with res, not with verba.


Todorov, reviving the distinction made by the Russian Formalists, proposes working on two major levels, themselves subdivided: story (the argument), comprising a logic of actions and a 'syntax' of characters, and discourse, comprising the tenses, aspects and modes of the narrative. But however many levels are proposed and whatever definition they are given, there can be no doubt that narrative is a hierarchy of instances. To understand a narrative is not merely to follow the unfolding of the story, it is also to recognize its construction in 'storeys', to project the horizontal concatenations of the narrative 'thread' on to an implicitly vertical axis; to read (to listen to) a narrative is not merely to move from one word to the next, it is also to move from one level to the next. Perhaps I may be allowed to offer a kind of apologue in this connection. In The Purloined Letter, Poe gives an acute analysis of the failure of the chief commissioner of the Paris police, powerless to find the letter. His investigations, says Poe, were perfect 'within the sphere of his speciality'; he searched everywhere, saturated entirely the level of the 'police search', but in order to find the letter, protected by its conspicuousness, it was necessary to shift to another level, to substitute the concealer's principle of relevance for that of the policeman. Similarly, the 'search' carried out over a horizontal set of narrative relations may well be as thorough as possible but must still, to be effective, also operate 'vertically': meaning is not 'at the end' of the narrative, it runs across it; just as conspicuous as the purloined letter, meaning eludes all unilateral investigation.


2. [This in accordance with the Baudelaire version of the Poe story from which Barthes quotes; Poe's original reads: 'so far as his labours extended'.]
A great deal of tentative effort is still required before it will be possible to ascertain precisely the levels of narrative. Those that are suggested in what follows constitute a provisional profile whose merit remains almost exclusively didactic; they enable us to locate and group together the different problems, and this without, I think, being at variance with the few analyses so far. It is proposed to distinguish three levels of description in the narrative work: the level of ‘functions’ (in the sense this word has in Propp and Bremond), the level of ‘actions’ (in the sense this word has in Greimas when he talks of characters as actants) and the level of ‘narration’ (which is roughly the level of ‘discourse’ in Todorov). These three levels are bound together according to a mode of progressive integration: a function only has meaning insofar as it occupies a place in the general action of an actant, and this action in turn receives its final meaning from the fact that it is narrated, entrusted to a discourse which possesses its own code.

II. Functions

1. The determination of the units

Any system being the combination of units of known classes, the first task is to divide up narrative and determine the segments of narrative discourse that can be distributed into a limited number of classes. In a word, we have to define the smallest narrative units.

Given the integrational perspective described above, the analysis cannot rest satisfied with a purely distributional definition of the units. From the start, meaning must be the criterion of the unit: it is the functional nature of certain segments of the story that makes them units – hence the name ‘functions’ immediately attributed to these first units.

1. I have been concerned in this introduction to impede research in progress as little as possible.

Since the Russian Formalists,¹ a unit has been taken as any segment of the story which can be seen as the term of a correlation. 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. If in Un Cœur simple Flaubert at one point tells the reader, seemingly without emphasis, that the daughters of the Sous-Préfet of Pont-l’Evêque owned a parrot, it is because this parrot is subsequently to have a great importance in Félicité’s life; the statement of this detail (whatever its linguistic form) thus constitutes a function, or narrative unit.

Is everything in a narrative functional? Does everything, down to the slightest detail, have a meaning? Can narrative be divided up entirely into functional units? We shall see in a moment that there are several kinds of functions, there being several kinds of correlations, but this does not alter the fact that a narrative is never made up of anything other than functions: in differing degrees, everything in it signifies. This is not a matter of art (on the part of the narrator), but of structure; in the realm of discourse, what is noted is by definition notable. 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. To put it another way, one could say that art is without noise (as that term is employed in information theory).² Art is a


². This is what separates art from ‘life’, the latter knowing only ‘fuzzy’ or ‘blurred’ communications. ‘Fuzziness’ (that beyond which it is impossible to see) can exist in art, but it does so as a coded element (in Watteau for example). Even then, such ‘fuzziness’ is unknown to the written code: writing is inescapably distinct.
system which is pure, no unit ever goes wasted, however long, however loose, however tenuous may be the thread connecting it to one of the levels of the story.2

From the linguistic point of view, the function is clearly a unit of content: it is ‘what it says’ that makes of a statement a functional unit,3 not the manner in which it is said. This constitutive signified may have a number of different signifiers, often very intricate. If I am told (in Goldfinger) that Bond saw a man of about ffty, the piece of information holds simultaneously two functions of unequal pressure: on the one hand, the character’s age fits into a certain description of the man (the ‘usefulness’ of which for the rest of the story is not nil, but diffuse, delayed); while on the other, the immediate signified of the statement is that Bond is unacquainted with his future interlocutor, the unit thus implying a very strong correlation (initiation of a threat and the need to establish the man’s identity). In order to determine the initial narrative units, it is therefore vital never to lose sight of the functional nature of the segments under consideration and to recognize in advance that they will not necessarily coincide with the forms into which we traditionally cast the various parts of narrative discourse (actions, scenes, paragraphs, dialogues, interior monologues, etc.) still less with ‘psychological’ divisions (modes of behaviour,

1. At least in literature, where the freedom of notation (in consequence of the abstract nature of articulated language) leads to a much greater responsibility than in the ‘analogical’ arts such as cinema.

2. The functionality of a narrative unit is more or less immediate (and hence apparent) according to the level on which it operates: when the units are situated on the same level (as for instance in the case of suspense), the functionality is very clear; it is much less so when the function is saturated on the narrational level – a modern text, weakly signifying on the plane of the anecdote, only finds a full force of meaning on the plane of the writing.

3. ‘Syntactical units beyond the sentence are in fact units of content’, A. J. Greimas, Cours de sémantique structurale (routodeed, 1964, VI, 5 [cf. Sémantique structurale, pp. 116f.]. The exploration of the functional level is thus part of general semantics.

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feelings, intentions, motivations, rationalizations of characters).

In the same way, since the ‘language’ ['language'] of narrative is not the language [langue] of articulated language [langage articulé] – though very often vehicled by it – narrative units will be substantially independent of linguistic units; they may indeed coincide with the latter, but occasionally, not systematically. Functions will be represented sometimes by units higher than the sentence (groups of sentences of varying lengths, up to the work in its entirety) and sometimes by lower ones (syntagm, word and even, within the word, certain literary elements only1). When we are told that – the telephone ringing during night duty at Secret Service headquarters – Bond picked up one of the four receivers, the moneme four in itself constitutes a functional unit, referring as it does to a concept necessary to the story (that of a highly developed bureaucratic technology). In fact, the narrative unit in this case is not the linguistic unit (the word) but only its connoted value (linguistically, the word /four/ never means ‘four’); which explains how certain functional units can be shorter than the sentence without ceasing to belong to the order of discourse: such units then extend not beyond the sentence, than which they remain materially shorter, but beyond the level of denotation, which, like the sentence, is the province of linguistics properly speaking.

2. Classes of units

The functional units must be distributed into a small number of classes. If these classes are to be determined without recourse to the substance of content (psychological substance

1. ‘The word must not be treated as an indivisible element of literary art, like a brick in building. It can be broken down into much finer “verbal elements”‘; J. Tynianov, quoted by T. Todorov in Langages 6, 1971, p. 18.
for example), it is again necessary to consider the different levels of meaning: some units have as correlates units on the same level, while the saturation of others requires a change of levels; hence, straightforwardly, two major classes of functions, distributional and integrational. The former correspond to what Propp and subsequently Bremond (in particular) take as functions but they will be treated here in a much more detailed way than is the case in their work. The term ‘functions’ will be reserved for these units (though the other units are also functional), the model of description for which has become classic since Tomachevski’s analysis: the purchase of a revolver has for correlate the moment when it will be used (and if not used, the notation is reversed into a sign of indecision, etc.); picking up the telephone has for correlate the moment when it will be put down; the intrusion of the parrot into Félicité’s home has for correlate the episode of the stuffing, the worshipping of the parrot, etc. As for the latter, the integrational units, these comprise all the ‘indices’ (in the very broad sense of the word¹), the unit now referring not to a complementary and consequent act but to a more or less diffuse concept which is nevertheless necessary to the meaning of the story: psychological indices concerning the characters, data regarding their identity, notations of ‘atmosphere’, and so on. The relation between the unit and its correlate is now no longer distributional (often several indices refer to the same signified and the order of their occurrence in the discourse is not necessarily pertinent) but integrational. In order to understand what an indicial notation ‘is for’, one must move to a higher level (characters’ actions or narration), for only there is the indice clarified: the power of the administrative machine behind Bond, indexed by the number of telephones, has no bearing on the sequence of actions in which Bond is involved by answering the call; it finds its

1. These designations, like those that follow, may all be provisional.

meaning only on the level of a general typology of the actants (Bond is on the side of order). Indices, because of the, in some sort, vertical nature of their relations, are truly semantic units: unlike ‘functions’ (in the strict sense), they refer to a signified, not to an ‘operation’. The ratification of indices is ‘higher up’, sometimes even remaining virtual, outside any explicit syntagm (the ‘character’ of a narrative agent may very well never be explicitly named while yet being constantly indexed), is a paradigmatic ratification. That of functions, by contrast, is always ‘further on’, is a syntagmatic ratification.¹ Functions and indices thus overlay another classic distinction: functions involve metonymic relata, indices metaphoric relata; the former correspond to a functionality of doing, the latter to a functionality of being.²

These two main classes of units, functions and indices, should already allow a certain classification of narratives. Some narratives are heavily functional (such as folktales), while others on the contrary are heavily indicial (such as ‘psychological’ novels); between these two poles lies a whole series of intermediary forms, dependent on history, society, genre. But we can go further. Within each of the two main classes it is immediately possible to determine two sub-classes of narrative units. Returning to the class of functions, its units are not all of the same ‘importance’: some constitute real hinge-points of the narrative (or of a fragment of the narrative); others merely ‘fill in’ the narrative space separating the hinge functions. Let us call the former cardinal functions (or nuclei) and the latter, having regard to their complementary nature, catalysers. For a function to

1. Which does not mean that the syntagmatic setting out of functions may not finally hold paradigmatic relations between separate functions, as is recognized since Lévi-Strauss and Greimas.
2. Functions cannot be reduced to actions (verbs), nor indices to qualities (adjectives), for there are actions that are indicial, being ‘signs’ of a character, an atmosphere, etc.
be cardinal, it is enough that the action to which it refers open (or continue, or close) an alternative that is of direct consequence for the subsequent development of the story, in short that it inaugurate or conclude an uncertainty. If, in a fragment of narrative, *the telephone rings*, it is equally possible to answer or not answer, two acts which will unfailingly carry the narrative along different paths. Between two cardinal functions however, it is always possible to set out subsidiary notations which cluster around one or other nucleus without modifying its alternative nature: the space separating *the telephone rang* from *Bond answered* can be saturated with a host of trivial incidents or descriptions – *Bond moved towards the desk, picked up one of the receivers, put down his cigarette*, etc. These catalysts are still functional, insofar as they enter into correlation with a nucleus, but their functionality is attenuated, unilaterial, parasitic; it is a question of a purely chronological functionality (what is described is what separates two moments of the story), whereas the tie between two cardinal functions is invested with a double functionality, at once chronological and logical. Catalysts are only consecutive units, cardinal functions are both consecutive and consequential. Everything suggests, indeed, that the mainspring of narrative is precisely the confusion of consecution and consequence, what comes after being read in narrative as what is caused by; in which case narrative would be a systematic application of the logical fallacy denounced by Scholasticism in the formula *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* – a good motto for Destiny, of which narrative all things considered is no more than the ‘language’.

It is the structural framework of cardinal functions which accomplishes this ‘telescoping’ of logic and temporality. At first sight, such functions may appear extremely insignificant; what defines them is not their spectacularity (importance, volume, unusualness or force of the narrated action), but, so to speak, the risk they entail: cardinal functions are the risky moments of a narrative. Between these points of alternative, these ‘dispatchers’, the catalysts lay out areas of safety, rests, luxuries. Luxuries which are not, however, useless: it must be stressed again that from the point of view of the story a catalyst’s functionality may be weak but not nil. Were a catalyst purely redundant (in relation to its nucleus), it would nonetheless participate in the economy of the message; in fact, an apparently merely expletive notation always has a discursive function: it accelerates, delays, gives fresh impetus to the discourse, it summarizes, anticipates and sometimes even leads astray.¹ Since what is noted always appears as being notable, the catalyst ceaselessly revives the semantic tension of the discourse, says ceaselessly that there has been, that there is going to be, meaning. Thus, in the final analysis, the catalyst has a constant function which is, to use Jakobson’s term, a phatic one:² it maintains the contact between narrator and addressee. A nucleus cannot be deleted without altering the story, but neither can a catalyst without altering the discourse.

As for the other main class of units, the indices, an integral class, its units have in common that they can only be saturated (completed) on the level of characters or on the level of narration. They are thus part of a parameterical relation³ whose second – implicit – term is continuous, extended over an episode, a character or the whole work.

¹ Valéry spoke of ‘dilatory signs’. The detective novel makes abundant use of such ‘confusing’ units.


³ N. Ruwet calls ‘parametrical’ an element which remains constant for the whole duration of a piece of music (for instance, the tempo in a Bach allegro or the monodic character of a solo).
A distinction can be made, however, between indices proper, referring to the character of a narrative agent, a feeling, an atmosphere (for example suspicion) or a philosophy, and informants, serving to identify, to locate in time and space. To say that through the window of the office where Bond is on duty the moon can be seen half-hidden by thick billowing clouds, is to index a stormy summer night, this deduction in turn forming an index of atmosphere with reference to the heavy, anguish-laden climate of an action as yet unknown to the reader. Indices always have implicit signifieds. Informants, however, do not, at least on the level of the story; they are pure data with immediate signification. Indices involve an activity of deciphering, the reader is to learn to know a character or an atmosphere; informants bring ready-made knowledge, their functionality, like that of catalysers, is thus weak without being nil. Whatever its 'flatness' in relation to the rest of the story, the informant (for example, the exact age of a character) always serves to authenticate the reality of the referent, to embed fiction in the real world. Informants are realist operators and as such possess an undeniable functionality not on the level of the story but on that of the discourse.¹

Nuclei and catalysers, indices and informants (again, the names are of little importance), these, it seems, are the initial classes into which the functional level units can be divided. This classification must be completed by two remarks. Firstly, a unit can at the same time belong to two different classes: to drink a whisky (in an airport lounge) is an action which can act as a catalyst to the (cardinal) notation of waiting, but it is also, and simultaneously, the indice of a certain atmosphere (modernity, relaxation, reminiscence, etc.). In other words, certain units can be mixed, giving a play of possibilities in the narrative economy. In the novel Goldfinger, Bond, having to search his adversary's bedroom, is given a master-key by his associate: the notation is a pure (cardinal) function. In the film, this detail is altered and Bond laughingly takes a set of keys from a willing chamber-maid: the notation is no longer simply functional but also indicial, referring to Bond's character (his easy charm and success with women). Secondly, it should be noted (this will be taken up again later) that the four classes just described can be distributed in a different way which is moreover closer to the linguistic model. Catalysers, indices and informants have a common characteristic: in relation to nuclei, they are expansions. Nuclei (as will be seen in a moment) form finite sets grouping a small number of terms, are governed by a logic, are at once necessary and sufficient. Once the framework they provide is given, the other units fill it out according to a mode of proliferation in principle infinite. As we know, this is what happens in the case of the sentence, which is made up of simple propositions endlessly complicated with duplications, paddings, embeddings and so on. So great an importance did Mallarmé attach to this type of structure that from it he constructed Jamais un coup de dés, a poem which with its 'nodes' and 'loops', its 'nucleus-words' and its 'lace-words', can well be regarded as the emblem of every narrative – of every language.

3. Functional syntax
How, according to what 'grammar', are the different units strung together along the narrative syntagm? What are the rules of the functional combinatory system? Informants and indices can combine freely together: as for example in the

¹. In 'Frontières du récit', Communications 8, 1966 [reprinted in Figures II, Paris 1969]; Gérard Genette distinguishes two types of description: ornamental and significant. The second closely relates to the level of the story; the first to that of the discourse, which explains why for a long time it formed a perfectly coded rhetorical 'piece': descriptio or ekphrasis, a very highly valued exercise in neo-rhetoric.
portrait which readily juxtaposes data concerning civil status and traits of character. Catalysers and nuclei are linked by a simple relation of implication: a catalyst necessarily implies the existence of a cardinal function to which it can connect, but not vice-versa. As for cardinal functions, they are bound together by a relation of solidarity: a function of this type calls for another function of the same type and reciprocally. It is this last relation which needs to be considered further for a moment – first, because it defines the very framework of the narrative (expansions can be deleted, nuclei cannot); second, because it is the main concern of those trying to work towards a structure of narrative.

It has already been pointed out that structurally narrative institutes a confusion between consecution and consequence, temporality and logic. This ambiguity forms the central problem of narrative syntax. Is there an atemporal logic lying behind the temporality of narrative? Researchers were still quite recently divided on this point. Propp, whose analytic study of the folklore paved the way for the work going on today, is totally committed to the idea of the irreducibility of the chronological order: he sees time as reality and for this reason is convinced of the necessity for rooting the tale in temporality. Yet Aristotle himself, in his contrast between tragedy (defined by the unity of action) and historical narrative (defined by the plurality of actions and the unity of time), was already giving primacy to the logical over the chronological. As do all contemporary researchers (Levi-Strauss, Greimas, Bremond, Todorov), all of whom (while differing on other points) could subscribe to Levi-Strauss’s proposition that ‘the order of chronological succession is absorbed in an atemporal matrix structure’.

1. Poetics, 1459a.
3. In his own way – as always perspicacious but left undeveloped – Valery well expressed the status of narrative time: ‘The belief in time as agent and guiding thread is based on the mechanism of memory and on that of combinatorial discourse’, Tel Quel, Œuvres Vol. II, Bibliotheque de la Pleiade, Paris 1957, p. 348 (my italics); the illusion is precisely produced by the discourse itself.

4. This idea recalls Aristotle: prooairesis, the rational choice of actions to be undertaken, is the foundation of praxis, the practical
the story and so to bring out what could be called an energetic logic, since it grasps the characters at the moment when they choose to act. The second (Lévi-Strauss, Jakobson) is linguistic: its essential concern is to demonstrate paradigmatic oppositions in the functions, oppositions which, in accordance with the Jakobsonian definition of the ‘poetic’, are ‘extended’ along the line of the narrative (new developments in Greimas’s work correct or complete the conception of the paradigmatic nature of functions). The third (Todorov) is somewhat different in that it sets the analysis at the level of the ‘actions’ (that is to say, of the characters), attempting to determine the rules by which narrative combines, varies and transforms a certain number of basic predicates.

There is no question of choosing between these working hypotheses; they are not competitive but concurrent, and at present moreover are in the throes of elaboration. The only complement we will attempt to give them here concerns the dimensions of the analysis. Even leaving aside the indices, informants and catalysts, there still remains in a narrative (especially if it is a novel and no longer a tale) a very large number of cardinal functions and many of these cannot be mastered by the analyses just mentioned, which until now have worked on the major articulations of narrative. Provision needs to be made, however, for a description

science which, contrary to poësis, produces no object-work distinct from its agent. Using these terms, one can say that the analyst tries to reconstitute the praxis inherent in narrative.

1. Such a logic, based on alternatives (doing this or that), has the merit of accounting for the process of dramatization for which narrative is usually the occasion.

2. ["The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence of the axis of selection on to the axis of combination." Jakobson, ‘Linguistics and Poetics’, p. 3.]


sufficiently close as to account for all the narrative units, for the smallest narrative segments. We must remember that cardinal functions cannot be determined by their ‘importance’, only by the (doubly implicative) nature of their relations. A ‘telephone call’, no matter how futile it may seem, on the one hand itself comprises some few cardinal functions (telephone ringing, picking up the receiver, speaking, putting down the receiver), while on the other, taken as a whole, it must be linkable – at the very least proceeding step by step – to the major articulations of the anecdote. The functional covering of the narrative necessitates an organization of relays the basic unit of which can only be a small group of functions, hereafter referred to (following Bremond) as a sequence.

A sequence is a logical succession of nuclei bound together by a relation of solidarity: the sequence opens when one of its terms has no solidary antecedent and closes when another of its terms has no consequent. To take a deliberately trivial example, the different functions order a drink, obtain it, drink it, pay for it, constitute an obviously closed sequence, it being impossible to put anything before the order or after the payment without moving out of the homogeneous group ‘Having a drink’. The sequence indeed is always nameable. Determining the major functions of the folktale, Propp and subsequently Bremond have been led to name them (Fraud, Betrayal, Struggle, Contract, Seduction, etc.); the naming operation is equally inevitable in the case of trivial sequences, the ‘micro-sequences’ which often form the finest grain of the narrative tissue. Are these namings solely the province of the analyst? In other words, are they purely metalinguistic? No doubt they are, dealing as they do with the code of narrative. Yet at the same time they can be imagined as forming part of an inner meta-

1. In the Hjelmslevian sense of double implication: two terms presuppose one another.
language for the reader (or listener) who can grasp every logical succession of actions as a nominal whole: to read is to name; to listen is not only to perceive a language, it is also to construct it. Sequence titles are similar enough to the *cover-words* of translation machines which acceptably cover a wide variety of meanings and shades of meaning. The narrative language [*la langue du récit*] within us comprises from the start these essential headings: the closing logic which structures a sequence is inextricably linked to its name; any function which initiates a *seduction* prescribes from the moment it appears, in the name to which it gives rise, the entire process of seduction such as we have learned it from all the narratives which have fashioned in us the language of narrative.

However minimal its importance, a sequence, since it is made up of a small number of nuclei (that is to say, in fact, of 'dispatchers'), always involves moments of risk and it is this which justifies analysing it. It might seem futile to constitute into a sequence the logical succession of trifling acts which go to make up the offer of a cigarette (offering, accepting, lighting, smoking), but precisely, at every one of these points, an alternative – and hence a freedom of meaning – is possible. Du Pont, Bond's future partner, offers him a light from his lighter but Bond refuses; the meaning of this bifurcation is that Bond instinctively fears a booby-trapped gadget.¹ A sequence is thus, one can say, a threatened logical unit, this being its justification a minimo. It is also founded a maximo: enclosed on its function, subsumed under a name, the sequence itself constitutes a new unit, ready to function as a simple term in another, more extensive se-

1. It is quite possible to identify even at this infinitesimal level an opposition of paradigmatic type, if not between two terms, at least between two poles of the sequence: the sequence *Offer of a cigarette* spreads out, by suspending it, the paradigm *Danger/Safety* (demonstrated by Cheglov in his analysis of the Sherlock Holmes cycle), *Suspicion/Protection, Aggressiveness/Friendliness.*

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sequence. Here, for example, is a micro-sequence: *hand held out, hand shaken, hand released.* This *Greeting* then becomes a simple function: on the one hand, it assumes the role of an indice (fabbness of Du Pont, Bond's distaste); on the other, it forms globally a term in a larger sequence, with the name *Meeting,* whose other terms (*approach, halt, interpellation, sitting down*) can themselves be micro-sequences. A whole network of subrogations structures the narrative in this way, from the smallest matrices to the largest functions. What is in question here, of course, is a hierarchy that remains within the functional level: it is only when it has been possible to widen the narrative out step by step, from Du Pont's cigarette to Bond's battle against Goldfinger, that functional analysis is over – the pyramid of functions then touches the next level (that of the Actions). There is both a syntax within the sequences and a (subrogating) syntax between the sequences together. The first episode of *Goldfinger* thus takes on a 'stemmatic' aspect:

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  Request               Aid
    Meeting Solicitation Contract Surveillance Capture Punishment
  Approach Interpellation Greeting Installation

  Hand held out Hand shaken Hand released
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Obviously this representation is analytical: the reader perceives a linear succession of terms. What needs to be noted, however, is that the terms from several sequences can easily be imbricated in one another: a sequence is not yet completed when already, cutting in, the first term of a new sequence may appear. Sequences move in counterpoint;¹ functionally, the structure of narrative is fugued: thus it

1. This counterpoint was recognized by the Russian Formalists who outlined its typology; it is not without recalling the principal 'intricate' structures of the sentence (see below V.I.).
is this that narrative at once ‘holds’ and ‘pulls on’. Within the single work, the imbrication of sequences can indeed only be allowed to come to a halt with a radical break if the sealed-off blocks which then compose it are in some sort recuperated at the higher level of the Actions (of the characters). *Goldfinger* is composed of three functionally independent episodes, their functional stemmas twice ceasing to intercommunicate: there is no sequential relation between the swimming-pool episode and the Fort Knox episode; but there remains an actantal relation, for the characters (and consequently the structure of their relations) are the same. One can recognize here the epic pattern (a ‘whole made of multiple fables’): the epic is a narrative broken at the functional level but unitary at the actantal level (something which can be verified in the *Odyssey* or in Brecht’s plays). The level of functions (which provides the major part of the narrative syntagm) must thus be capped by a higher level from which, step by step, the first level units draw their meaning, the level of actions.

III. Actions

1. Towards a structural status of characters

In Aristotelian poetics, the notion of character is secondary, entirely subsidiary to the notion of action: there may be actions without ‘characters’, says Aristotle, but not characters without an action; a view taken over by classical theoreticians (Vossius). Later the character, who until then had been only a name, the agent of an action, acquired a psychological consistency, became an individual, a ‘person’, in short a fully constituted ‘being’, even should he do nothing and of course even before acting.  

1. It must not be forgotten that classical tragedy as yet knows only ‘actors’, not ‘characters’.  

2. The ‘character-person’ reigns in the bourgeois novel; in *War and Peace*, Nikolay Rostov is from the start a good fellow, loyal, courageous and passionate, Prince Andrey a disillusioned individual of noble birth, etc. What happens illustrates them, it does not form them.

1. If one section of contemporary literature has attacked the ‘character’, it is not in order to destroy it (which is impossible) but to depersonalize it, which is quite different. A novel seemingly devoid of characters, such as *Drame* by Philippe Sollers, gets rid of the person to the benefit of language but nonetheless retains a fundamental play of actants confronting the very action of discourse. There is still a ‘subject’ in this literature, but that ‘subject’ is henceforth that of language.
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(popular tales, modern texts) comprising agents but not persons, or whether the 'person' is declared to be no more than a critical rationalization foisted by our age on pure narrative agents. Structural analysis, much concerned not to define characters in terms of psychological essences, has so far striven, using various hypotheses, to define a character not as a 'being' but as a 'participant'. For Bremond, every character (even secondary) can be the agent of sequences of actions which belong to him (Fraud, Seduction); when a single sequence involves two characters (as is usual), it comprises two perspectives, two names (what is Fraud for the one is Gullibility for the other); in short, every character (even secondary) is the hero of his own sequence. Todorov, analysing a 'psychological' novel (Les Liaisons dangereuses), starts not from the character-persons but from the three major relationships in which they can engage and which he calls base predicates (love, communication, help). The analysis brings these relationships under two sorts of rules: rules of derivation, when it is a question of accounting for other relationships, and rules of action, when it is a question of describing the transformation of the major relationships in the course of the story. There are many characters in Les Liaisons dangereuses but 'what is said of them' (their predicates) can be classified. Finally, Greimas has proposed to describe and classify the characters of narrative not according to what they are but according to what they do (whence the name actants), inasmuch as they participate in three main semantic axes (also to be found in the sentence: subject, object, indirect object, adjunct) which are communication, desire (or quest) and ordeal. Since this participation is ordered in couples, the infinite world of characters is, it too, bound by a paradigmatic structure (Subject/Object, Donor/Receiver, Helper/Opponent) which is projected along the narrative; and since


an actant defines a class, it can be filled by different actors, mobilized according to rules of multiplication, substitution or replacement.

These three conceptions have many points in common. The most important, it must be stressed again, is the definition of the character according to participation in a sphere of actions, these spheres being few in number, typical and classifiable; which is why this second level of description, despite its being that of the characters, has here been called the level of Actions: the word actions is not to be understood in the sense of the trifiling acts which form the tissue of the first level but in that of the major articulations of praxis (desire, communication, struggle).

2. The problem of the subject

The problems raised by a classification of the characters of narrative are not as yet satisfactorily resolved. Certainly there is ready agreement on the fact that the innumerable characters of narrative can be brought under rules of substitution and that, even within the one work, a single figure can absorb different characters. Again, the actantial model proposed by Greimas (and adopted by Todorov in another perspective) seems to stand the test of a large number of narratives. Like any structural model, its value lies less in its canonic form (a matrix of six actants) than in the regulated transformations (replacements, confusions, duplications, substitutions) to which it lends itself, thus holding out the hope of an actantial typology of narratives. A difficulty,

1. Psychoanalysis has widely accredited these operations of condensation. Mallarmé was saying already, writing of Hamlet: 'Super-numeraries, necessarily! for in the ideal painting of the stage, everything moves according to a symbolic reciprocity of types amongst themselves or relatively to a single figure.' Crayonné au théâtre, Œuvres complètes, p. 301.

2. For example: narratives where object and subject are confounded