Contemporary thought about the nature of interpretation, especially in the human and social sciences, tends to stress the ways in which it differs from simple description, on the one hand, and from explanation, on the other. This is not to suggest that interpretation, description, and explanation are in any way mutually exclusive operations; indeed, we could well characterize description and explanation as different kinds of interpretation or, conversely, regard interpretation itself as a kind of explanation which features description over formal argument or demonstration as its *modus operandi*. But if we do wish to stress the differences between interpretation, on the one side, and both description and explanation, on the other, we would have to insist on the propaedeutic and heuristic aspects, the pre-classificatory and preexplanatory functions of interpretation. We might wish to say that interpretation is what we do when we are uncertain how properly to describe some object or situation in which we have an interest and when we are unsure about which of several available analytical methods should be used to explain it. As thus envisaged, interpretation is a product of thought in the preliminary stage of grasping an object by consciousness, thought in the effort of deciding not only how to describe and explain such an object but whether it can be adequately described or explained at all.

Because interpretation typically entertains different ways of describing and explaining some object or situation deemed worthy of the effort to comprehend it, its own modality of discursive articulation is characteristically more tropical than logical in nature. In this feature it will differ from
any technical description, carried out in conformity with the procedures of a given taxonomic system, and from any explanation provided by a specific analytical method. In interpretative discourse, thought moves by “turns,” which are unpredictable prior to their actualization in speech or writing and the relations among which need not bear any relationship of strict deducibility of any one from any other. Because interpretation is systemically doubtful as to the nature of its object of interest, the terminology best suited to the description thereof, and the most appropriate way to explain it, it can proceed only by departing from whatever passes for literal (or technical) language and stereotypical conceptualizations of possible objects of perception and by giving itself over to techniques of figuration by which to fix its referent in consciousness and thereby constitute it as a possible object of cognition. It is this process of prefiguring a referent, so as to constitute it as a possible object of cognition, which distinguishes interpretation from both description and explanation alike. And this is why rhetoric, considered less as a theory of persuasive speech than as the theory of the tropological bases of speech, discourse, and textuality, provides one promising way of comprehending what goes on in interpretative discourse in general.

Because interpretation is a predominantly tropical manner of discourse, it resembles narration, which, in fact, is a discursive tactic often utilized in interpretative discourse. Typically, the successive events that comprise the story line of a narrative are only retrospectively comprehensible after the plot structure of which they are functions has become perceivable; but even then, they are hardly deducible one from another in the manner of the component terms of a syllogism. Similarly, the sequence of turns taken in interpretative discourse resembles more the path traversed in the search for a plot structure adequate to the configuration of a diachronic series of events into a paradigmatic structure of relationships than it does the progressive accommodation of a set of perceptions to the exigencies of a nomological-deductive demonstration.

The similarities between interpretation and narration argue for the essentially figurative nature of the discourses in which they are typically represented in speech or writing. Which is not to say that interpretation, any more than narration, has no literalist dimension to its characteristic mode of articulation. On the contrary, like narration, interpretation does its work or achieves its peculiar effect of providing a kind of understanding of the objects of which it speaks precisely by virtue of its problematization of the relation between literalist and figurative speech. Although an inter-
pretation typically wishes to speak the literal truth about its objects of interest, it is generated by a fundamental sense of the inadequacy of any convention of literalness to the representation of those objects. And this is why all genuinely interpretative discourse must always appear as both a play of possible figurations of its objects of interest and an allegorization of the act of interpreting itself. Just as all narratives are also, at some level, more or less explicitly articulated metanarratives (discourses as much about narration as about their ostensible, extradiscursive referents), so, too, all genuine interpretations are metainterpretations (discourses as much about interpretation as about their ostensible primary objects of interest). And whereas in both descriptive and explanatory discourses, the metalevels of their articulation can be identified by a combination of grammatical and logical analysis, in interpretative discourse the discernment of the metalevel requires analysis by methods more distinctly rhetorical in nature.

Considerations such as these argue for a reconceptualization of the traditional notion of the relation between the form and the content of interpretative discourse. If we conceive of interpretation as a prefiguration of a given object of interest, then the sequence of turns from one modality of figuration to another must be considered less as an aspect of the form of the discourse than as one of its contents. This does not mean that it is impossible to distinguish between the form and the content of interpretative discourse, that its referential or conceptual content is indeterminable, or that the form of an interpretation is its content. For indeed, it is not only meaningful but also useful to discriminate between the linguistic and generic features of any given interpretative discourse, on the one side, and its referential and explicitly conceptual elements, on the other. But we must also count among the contents of the specifically interpretative discourse the structure of the modalities of figuration utilized in the process of transforming the referent from an object of perception into a possible object of cognition. It is the structure of the modalities of figuration that provides the basis for the equivalent of emplotment in narrative. It is the modalities of figuration which effect the correlation of the linguistic, generic, referential, and conceptual levels of the discourse on its paradigmatic axis; and it is the sequence of these modalities of figuration which presides over the transfers from the paradigmatic to the syntagmatic axes of its articulation. At any rate, this is one way of conceptualizing what a rhetorical approach to the analysis of interpretative discourse might consist of.

I have chosen as an example of interpretative discourse a passage taken from the volume entitled *Sodome et Gomorrhe* of Proust’s *A la recherche*
The passage consists of what appears to be a purely descriptive pause in the main action of the first chapter of the work, which tells of Marcel’s attendance at a party of the Princesse de Guermantes. This interlude comes just after Marcel has finally succeeded, with much difficulty, in getting himself introduced to the Prince de Guermantes and has immediately thereafter witnessed (what appears to be) the prince’s violent expulsion of his friend Swann from the gathering. It consists of a paragraph that relates Marcel’s contemplation of Hubert Robert’s fountain in the garden of the Guermantes’ palace.

The paragraph represents a scene of interpretation because it describes the effort of the protagonist to grasp by consciousness an object, a work of art, whose beauty is taken for granted but the nature of whose fascination is presumed to be unfathomable. That is to say, the passage belongs to the genre of the ekphrasis (descriptio). I have marked with italics the places at which the narrative turns from one characterization of the fountain to succeeding ones.

Dans une clairière réservée par des beaux arbres dont plusieurs étaient aussi anciens que lui, planté à l’écart, on le voyait de loin, svelte, immobile, durci, ne laissant agiter par la brise que la retombée plus légère de son panache pâle et frémissant. Le XVIIIe siècle avait épuré l’élégance de ses lignes, mais, fixant le style du jet, semblait en avoir arrêté la vie; à cette distance on avait l’impression de l’art plutôt que la sensation de l’eau. Le nuage humide lui-même qui s’amoncelait perpétuellement à son faîte gardait le caractère de l’époque comme ceux qui dans le ciel s’assemblent autour des palais de Versailles. Mais de près on se rendait compte que tout en respectant, comme les pierres d’un palais antique, le dessin préalablement tracé, c’était des eaux toujours nouvelles qui, s’élançant et voulant obéir aux ordres anciens de l’architecte, ne les accomplissaient exactement qu’en paraissant les violer, leurs mille bonds épars pouvant seuls donner à distance l’impression d’un unique élan. Celui-ci était en réalité aussi souvent interrompu que l’éparpillement de la chute, alors que, de loin, il m’avait paru inélastissable, dense, d’une continuité sans lacune. D’un peu près, on voyait que cette continuité, en apparence toute linéaire, était assurée à tous les points de l’ascension du jet, partout où il aurait dû se briser, par l’entrée en ligne, par la reprise latérale d’un jet parallèle qui montait plus haut que le premier et était lui-même, à une plus grande hauteur, mais déjà fatigante pour lui, relevé par un troisième. De près, des gouttes sans force retombaient de la colonne d’eau en croisant au passage leurs sœurs montantes, et parfois, déchirées, saisies dans un remous de l’air trouble par ce
jaillissement sans trêve, flottaient avant d’être chavirées dans le bassin. Elles contrariaient de leurs hésitations, de leur trajet en sens inverse, et estompaient de leur molle vapeur la rectitude et la tension de cette tige, portant au-dessus de soi un nuage oblong fait de mille gouttelettes, mais en apparence peint en brun doré et immuable, qui montait, infrangible, immobile, élancé et rapide, s’ajouter aux nuages du ciel. Malheureusement un coup de vent suffisait à l’envoyer obliquement sur la terre; parfois même un simple jet désobéissant divergeait et, si elle ne s’était pas tenue à une distance respectueuse, aurait mouillé jusqu’aux moelles la foule imprudente et contemplative.∞

The scene appears at first glance to be a pure description of an object that, because it is a work of art, can only be interpreted, rather than explained. The interpretation itself, however, consists of four successive characterizations of the object, given at different points in Marcel’s movement toward the fountain. It is this movement of the speaking subject through space and time, in what appears to be an activity directed at the effort of recognizing and identifying the object, which permits us, following the lead of Gérard Genette, to view this scene as a genuine narrative. Indeed, rather than being a descriptive pause, this scene can be regarded as a small narrative within the larger narrative that recounts the events of Marcel’s reentry into that society from which he had been absent for some ten years. And if we accept this characterization of the scene in question, we can then proceed to inquire into its structure as a kind of interpretation by narration, on the one side, and its metanarrational function (as a narrative sequence that has narration itself as an element of its subject matter), on the other.

In his commentary on the scene of Marcel’s interpretation of Robert’s fountain, Genette simply reproduces the text and marks the terms that indicate its duration and the activity of the protagonist as a “travail de la perception” and “du discernement.” It is an example, he says, of a typically Proustian description-as-narrative: “toute une précoce éducation de l’art de voir, de dépasser les faux semblants, de discerner les vraies identités.” If, however, we attend to the modalities of figuration in which the successive characterizations of the fountain are cast, we can note two features of this narrative interpretation of the “jet d’eau.” One is the tropological structure of the passage which endows it with a signified quite distinct from the thematic content observed by Genette (“l’activité perceptive du personnage contemplant, de ses impressions, découvertes progressives, changements de distance et de perspective, erreurs et corrections, enthousiasmes et déceptions, etc.”). In fact, the four successive characterizations of the foun-
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The other feature of the passage has to do with its structural resemblance to the three discernible scenes of interpretation which precede it in the larger narrative account that it seems to interrupt. These three units consist of (1) the opening chapter of *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, which recounts the narrator’s observation, from a hidden vantage point, of a scene of homosexual seduction, his reflection on the nature of the “descendants of the inhabitants of Sodom,” and his classification of the genera and species thereof. For the moment I will note only that the taxonomy provided features successive descriptions or characterizations of four species of the genus male homosexual. (2) This preface is then followed by the chapter in which related Marcel’s efforts to “recognize and identify” the various personages he encounters on the way to his presentation to the prince. Here, too, there are four extended descriptions, this time in the manner of a taxonomy of types of hangers-on of noble society: Marcel’s successive descriptions of Professor E——, M. de Vaugoubert, Mme. d’Arpajon, and M. de Bréaute, who actually presents Marcel to the prince. And finally, (3) we have the brief scene with the prince himself, in which Marcel is represented as achieving an illuminating insight into the differences between genuine nobility of character and its hypocritical imitation. This scene, too, is structured as a succession of four distinct perceptions as recognitions.

Each of these three scenes of interpretation features a distinct interpretandum, which we may distinguish as male homosexuality, certain marginalized social types, and nobility, respectively. The specific interpretations provided consist of narrative accounts of the narrator’s efforts to recognize and identify the nature and kinds of the objects contemplated. Each of these narrations, in turn, takes the form of four successive descriptions of the object in question, and each description is cast in a distinctive figurative mode. Each narration consists of an account of the narrator’s passage among the dominant modalities of figuration, a passage that consists typically, though not exclusively, of a movement from a metaphorical apprehension of the interpretandum, through a metonymic dispersion of its attributes and a synecdochic comprehension of its possible nature, to an ironic distancing of the process of interpretation itself.

It is this pattern, common to all three of the scenes of interpretation

...
preceding that in which the fountain of Hubert Robert is described, which serves as the principal signified of the fountain scene itself. And it is the identification of this signified which permits us to comprehend both the placement of the description of the fountain in the larger narrative of which it is a part and its metanarrational function. Its placement in the fourth position of successive scenes of interpretation allows us, on the basis of our understanding of the fourfold structure of the preceding scenes, to regard it as an ironic commentary on the process of interpretation itself; and the fact that it explicitly takes interpretation as its referent permits us to regard it as Proust’s own instruction on how to read or interpret the scenes preceding and following it. It is this feature of the scene that permits us to consider it as a condensed model of Proustian interpretation in general, for narrative interpretation specifically, and for the interpretation of the larger narrative of which it is a unit in particular.

I must now, however briefly and inadequately, interpret the scene in which the fountain of Hubert Robert is interpreted by Marcel. I note that this scene is framed by two figures of “deviation,” one social, the other natural. The passage ends with an act of désobéissance by one of the jets of the fountain, which results in the drenching of Mme. d’Arpajon, to the general (somewhat vicious) merriment of the assembled company. It begins just after Marcel’s conversation with the prince, when he observes this newly revealed paragon of “consideration” sweeping Swann, “avec la puissance d’une pompe aspirante, . . . au fond du jardin” (656), in order to show him the door.≥ It is this event that leads Marcel to remark on the depths of his absorption in the company, from which he seeks to recover “quelque faculté d’attention à la pensée d’aller voir le célèbre jet d’eau d’Hubert Robert.” The four descriptions of this celebrated work of art then follow.

The first description is introduced by a report of the appearance of the fountain seen from afar: “On le voyait de loin, svelte, immobile, durci, ne laissant agiter par la brise que la retombée plus légère de son panache pâle et frémissant.” It is an impression captured by or condensed into the image of the “pale and quivering plume.” The description itself consists of a specification of the image, as giving “l’impression de l’art,” and features the figures of speech of synecdoche (“le XVIIIe siècle”), pun (“style”), two metaphors (“nuage” and “faîte”), and a simile (“comme ceux qui”), all of which are advanced in the interest of suggesting the contrast between the impression of the image and the mere sensation that one might have had of it as “eau.”

Marcel (or Proust), having figuratively characterized the fountain in the mode of metaphor, might very well have let the matter rest there, but
instead he presses on to a second description, cast in an altogether different mode of figuration, that of metonymy. From a closer view ("Mais de près"), it was possible, apparently, to realize that ("on se rendait compte que"), while seeming to respect ("tout en respectant"), like the stones of an ancient palace, the design traced out for it beforehand ("comme les pierres d’un palais antique, le dessin préalablement tracé"), the spray of the jet was able to produce the “impression d’un unique élan” only by sending forth ever new streams of water that “springing upwards and wishing to obey the ancient orders of the architect, carried them out to the letter” ("les accomplissaient exactement") only by seeming ("qu’en paraissant") to infringe them ("les violer"). The “single flow” of which one had originally had an impression is now revealed to be “in reality as often interrupted as the scattering of the fall, whereas from a distance it had appeared to me unyielding, solid, unbroken in its continuity.”

This is a remarkable passage for my purposes in many ways. First, the passage features two contrasts: one between an original impression from a distance and the kinds of perception made from closer which yield insights into the reality of the object in question, and another between an artist’s designs and the realization of them in the work of art itself. But, second, it posits a complex relationship between the traditional rules of artistic composition ("ordres anciens de l’architecte") and the transgression of those rules which appears to be necessary for the creation of any work of art. Indeed, not only do these two sentences tell us much about Proust’s notion of the difference between appearance and reality in any object seeming to be whole, solid, unbroken in its continuity, and so on, but they tell us even more about his notion of the role of figuration in the production of literalness itself.

I wish to call the mode of figuration of this passage metonymic for two reasons. First, it reduces the aesthetic appearance of the jet to the material thing it is; it thereby substitutes the material cause of the appearance for its visual effect. This reduction is suggested figuratively in the simile that likens the fluid elements of the water play to the rigid “stones of an ancient palace.” Second, the passage explicitly reduces the appearance of orderliness of the spray to the reality of the necessity of appearing to violate the principles governing its composition. These reductions provide insights into both the nature of artistic creativity and the ways in which the products thereof are to be interpreted.

But Marcel (or Proust) does not leave us with these reductions. He presses on to yet another description of the fountain, “D’un peu près,” a
description I wish to call synecdochic because it consists of nothing less than a characterization of the actual structure, what might be called the structural secret, of the “jet d’eau.” This passage is cast in the most literalist language of all of the four descriptions provided; there is very little in it that might be called metaphorical in the common meaning of the term. Specifically, the passage consists of an explanation of how the effect of a “continuité sans lacune, . . . en apparence toute linéaire” was produced by the architect’s setting of the styles of the jets. It is possible actually to draw a diagram of the paths of the jets and of the relationships among them on the basis of this characterization of its structure, in a manner that one could not possibly do with any of the other descriptions.

At the same time, the sense of this passage, perhaps because it is so literalist, so barren of figures of speech, is the most difficult to grasp in a single quick reading. It seems difficult to form an impression of it because it is less about the impressions of the narrator than it is about the actual structure of the “jet d’eau” itself. Here Marcel asserts that “on voyait” (“one saw”) how the “uninterrupted continuity of the jet” was assured (“était assurée”) by the structure of its design, which he then proceeds to sketch out. The passage is not reductive, in the way the previous passage is, but rather essentializing: what we have is a representation of the relationships among the elements of the spray such that it is impossible to distinguish between its form and its content. In the manner of a synecdoche, the spray is “grasped together” as a whole indistinguishable from the parts that comprise it. Moreover, this description of the structure of the spray replicates the structure of the paragraph itself: the continuity of the paragraph — like the continuity of the jet that it describes — is assured by the “entering into line,” by the “lateral incorporation” of a succession of descriptions, each in a different mode, which “mount[s] higher than the first and [is] itself, at an altitude greater but already a strain upon its endurance, relieved by a third.” Thus, the third description of the fountain is a synecdoche not only of the “jet d’eau” but also of the paragraph, which describes the fountain in a fourfold manner.

It might seem that, after so totalizing a description of the object, the interpretation would have been completed. But not so. We still have not had a description from “close at hand” (“De près”). This, the fourth description of the fountain, is cast in yet another mode, which I wish to characterize as ironic — not only because, in the extravagance of its figurative technique, it draws attention to the arbitrariness of the figurative modes of the three descriptions that precede it; but also, and above all,
because it is internally ironic, consisting as it does of a virtual personification of the “jet d’eau” in its first two sentences followed by an abrupt reversal of this process, which returns the fountain to the status of a banal stream of water, in the third and final sentence.

In this last description, no speaking subject is overtly posited. There is no “on voyait,” “on avait l’impression de,” “on se rendait compte que,” or “il m’avait paru” of the kind met with in the other descriptions. The passage begins “De près, des gouttes sans force.” Scott Moncrieff translates this phrase: “Seen close at hand, drops without strength” (43), and this is certainly a plausible rendering of its sense. But the French does not say “Vu de près” or “De près, on voyait.” And indeed, why should it, since this has nothing of the aspect of a report of a perception or of an impression about it? It is, in fact, a hypotypotic or pragmatographic representation, shot through with metaphorical figures of speech but cast in a tone so different from the first description as to belie the adequacy of its dominant mode of figuration to its referent.

The referent of this passage is neither the spray as a whole, the bursts of water emanating from the jets, nor the structure of their relationships but the myriads of “gouttes” and “gouttelettes” which, now personified (“Elles contrariaient”) and gendered (“leurs soeurs”), are depicted as actants in a spectacle as chaotic and senseless as the stream of life of which it is an image. The casualties of the process, those “gouttes sans force,” who “fall back and float for a while” and “tease with their hesitations” before “being drowned in the basin,” are given the positive function of blurring “la rectitude et la tension” of the jet’s central stem—positive because the verb used is estom-paient, which suggests the artist’s toning down or softening of a line. The connotation of this figure is carried over to the characterization of the “oblong cloud” that crowns the stem (tige, with its connotation both of arboreality and of phallic erection). This cloud, although in reality “composed of a thousand tiny drops,” presents the appearance of having been painted (“en apparence peint”)—painted, moreover, in an “unchanging golden brown” (“en brun doré et immuable”). But the image of this cloud, which apparently rises, “unbreakable, constant, urgent, swift, to mingle with the clouds of the sky,” is abruptly dispossessed of its attributes of immutability, constancy, infrangibility, and urgency by the reminder that “unfortunately, a gust of wind was enough to scatter it [l’envoyer] obliquely on the ground”; and a report that “at times indeed a single disobedient jet swerved [divergeait] and, had they not kept a respectful distance, would have drenched to their skins the incautious crowd of gazers.”
It seems to me that this fourth description, which is by turns lyrical-elegiac and playful in tone, is at once ironical in its structure and radically revisionary with respect to all three of the preceding descriptions of the fountain. Its revisionary relationship to the first description, cast in the mode of metaphor, is especially striking. While it replicates the metaphorical mode of the first description, it substitutes images of mobility, change, and evanescence for those of immobility, stiffness, and continuity given in the original impression. So, too, the personification of the elements of the “jet d’eau” in the fourth description stands in direct contrast to the assimilation of the qualities of the fountain to those of nobility suggested by the figures of speech used in the first description: “panache,” “art,” and “Versailles.” While the fourth description metaleptically retrieves the metaphorical mode of the first description, it both radically alters the semantic domain from which its figures of speech are drawn and abruptly, almost violently, undercuts the very impulse to metaphorize by its reminder that the fountain is, after all, only a fountain (“Unfortunately, a gust of wind was enough to scatter it obliquely on the ground”).

As for the relationship of the fourth description to the second and third descriptions, it can be said that it revises in a significant way the figurative contents of both of the latter. First, the rising, falling, crossing movement assigned to the “gouttes” and “gouttelettes” picks up the images of infringement and scattering of the second description and confirms the metonymic mode in which it is cast even as it effectively denies it by way of its personification of the elements of the spray. Second, this personification of the drops of the spray stands in direct opposition to, not to say negation of, the essentializing schematism of the third or synecdochic description, in which the structure of the “jet d’eau” is set forth.

It is not that the fourth description is to be apprehended as the most precise, correct, comprehensive, or appropriate, in comparison with which the others that make up the set are to be adjudged in some way inferior. The fourth description is given from the point of observation closest to the object being described, but it is no more precise than those launched from the other points further away. Nor is the fourth description to be accorded the status of the kind of revelation or anagnorisis which is supposed to attend the completion of a well-made plot in the conventional narrative. The fountain has not been better comprehended in the fourth description than it was in any of the three preceding descriptions. It is not that we now comprehend the nature of the fountain in the way that we seem to comprehend the successive events of a story as we near its end and are given the crucial bit of information that allows us suddenly to grasp the point of it all.
It is true that, by the time we have registered the fourth description, in the full consciousness of its overtly ironical mode of figuration, we are permitted to discern something like the kind of plot that permits a retrospective correlation of the events of this story as a story of a particular kind—a specifically ironic story. But what we have been permitted to comprehend is less the nature of the “jet d’eau” than that of the nature of figuration itself. It was by the provision of this exercise in figuration that Proust has set before us a model for comprehending the other passages of description-by-narration in which the passage in question is embedded and which it only seems to interrupt.

I say seems to interrupt, because actually the passage in which the fountain is described in four successive modalities of figuration bears the same relationship to the three preceding and more extended scenes of interpretation that the fourth description of the passage bears to its three preceding parts. Recall that the fountain scene is the fourth of a set of successive narrative segments in which Marcel interprets, by the same process of fourfold figuration, the subjects of male homosexuality, types of social hanger-on, and nobility (in the person of the Prince de Guermantes). I will not try the reader’s capacities of toleration for pedantry (which have no doubt been strained to the maximum already) by attempting to demonstrate that these three preceding scenes of interpretation have substantially the same structure as that of the fountain scene. But a cursory rereading of the brief scene in which Marcel is finally introduced to the prince, the scene immediately preceding the interpretation of the fountain, will suggest the ways in which the latter scene is related to those preceding it in the larger narrative.4

First, there is no causal or logical connection between the scene in which the prince’s nobility is interpreted and that in which the fountain is interpreted. The relationship between them is tropical only. After having exchanged a few words with the prince, Marcel simply “moved away” (“je m’éloignai”). He then catches a glimpse of the prince expelling Swann, “with the force of a suction pump,” from the party. And he reports how his absorption in the company (“Tellement distrait dans le monde . . .”) had all but occluded his powers of perception (“. . . que je n’appris que le surlendemain, par les journaux, qu’un orchestre tchèque avait joué toute la soirée et que, de minute en minute, s’étaient succédé les feux de Bengale”). It is in response to this absorption “dans le monde” that he decides to seek to recover “some power of attention with the idea of going to look at the celebrated fountain of Hubert Robert.” A causal connection is implied between the decision to seek to recover some power of attention by going to
contemplate Robert’s masterpiece and the contemplation of it which follows, but not between the scene of the meeting with the prince and that of the interpretation of the fountain.

Nor is there any logical connection between the two latter scenes: there are no conceivable grounds on which the scene describing the fountain can be deduced from the scene describing the meeting with the prince as a logical consequence. The relation between the scene of the encounter with the prince and that in which the fountain is described is only tropical, which is to say that it is unpredictable, unnecessary, undeducible, arbitrary, and so on, but at the same time functionally effective and retrodictable as a narrative unit once its tropical relationship to what comes before (and what comes after) it is discerned.

It will be noticed that the prince scene is, like the fountain scene, clearly marked by a succession of four distinct recognitions: “je trouvai [l’accueil] du Prince compassé, solennel, hautain”; “je compris tout de suite que [le Prince était] vraiment simple”; “je trouvai dans sa réserve un sentiment . . . de la considération”; and “comprenant qu’il ne l’avait posée [sa question] que par de bonne grâce.” What is interpreted in this scene is the significance of the words and bearing of the prince for the comprehension of the nature of noble consideration in comparison with the merely feigned camaraderie of those members of the aristocracy who speak to their social inferiors from the first as “man to man.” The interpretation consists of successive characterizations of the prince’s manner of greeting, the style of his address, the tone of his words, and an example of his speech.

Like the fountain viewed from a distance, at first sight the prince appears “stiff [compassé], solemn, haughty,” quite in contrast to the “greeting of the Duc de Guermantes,” the prince’s cousin, which was, “when he chose, friendly, instinct with good fellowship, cordial and familiar.” The prince “barely smiled at me, addressed me gravely as ‘Sir,’” in the manner in which Marcel had, he says, “often heard the Duke make fun of.”

But then, “from the first words” spoken by the prince to Marcel, the latter realizes that “the fundamentally disdainful man was the Duke, . . . and that, of the two cousins, the one who was really simple was the Prince.” Marcel then reports that “I found in his reserve a stronger feeling, I do not say of equality, . . . but at least of the consideration which one may show for an inferior, such as may be found in all strongly hierarchical societies.”

And, finally, Marcel relates the question asked of him by the prince (“Do you intend to follow the career of Monsieur, your father?”) and his realization that, since “he had asked it only out of politeness,” it required no
answer and that it remained to him only to move away “to allow him to greet the fresh arrivals.”

The sequence of modes of figuration of this set of apprehensions and comprehensions follows the same pattern as that of the fountain scene. First, there are the two metaphorical apprehensions of the prince’s manner as seemingly “stiff, solemn, haughty” and that of his cousin the duke’s as seemingly “friendly, instinct with good fellowship, cordial and familiar.” These apprehensions are immediately reduced, however, in the manner of a metonymy, to the status of masks of two kinds of character (exactly as the “impression de l’art” is reduced to the status of a “sensation de l’eau” in the second description of the fountain), the one “vraiment simple” and the other “foncièrement dédaigneux.” In the third characterization of the prince’s manner, its aspects are, as it were, grasped together in the synecdoche of “un sentiment plus grand, . . . de la considération qu’on peut accorder à un inférieur, comme il arrive dans tous les milieux fortement hiérarchisés” and the identification of the “hauteur traditionelle” of the representatives of such milieus with a “simplicité réelle” utterly lacking in their more modern brethren “dans l’affectation de la camaraderie badine.”

But this comprehension of the prince’s consideration is forthwith sublimated into an apprehension of the mere politeness of his question to Marcel: “‘Est-ce que vous comptez suivre la carrière de Monsieur votre père?’ me dit-il d’un air distant, mais d’intérêt.” Moreover, the comprehension of the prince’s true nature is immediately belied by the prince’s comportment, reported in the paragraph immediately following. Instead of “waiting where he was” to receive the greeting of “fresh arrivals,” the prince goes to intercept Swann and rudely carries him off, “with the force of a suction pump, . . . in order . . . to show him the door.” This act of social rupture exactly parallels the swerve of that “single disobedient jet” which drenches Mme. d’Arpajon reported at the end of the fountain scene. The action of the prince has the effect not so much of canceling out as of putting under question the set of apprehensions and comprehensions related in the scene of greeting, in the same way that the unpleasant (désagréable) swerve of the disobedient jet of water distances and problematizes the fourfold description of the fountain in the scene in which it is reported. To be sure, later on in the chapter it will be revealed that the prince had intercepted Swann in order to tell him of his (the prince’s) conversion to the party of the Dreyfusards. But this revelation confirms less the prince’s authenticity of character than the contingency of the events that had led to his conversion.5

If it be granted that the two scenes analyzed do possess the common
structural features that I have ascribed to them, we can then proceed to specify the nature of their relationship considered as narrational units. I suggest that the scene describing the work of art bears the same figurative relationship to that describing the prince’s nobility of character that the fourth description of the fountain (in the ironic mode) bears to the third description of it (in the synecdochic mode). In a word, the paragraph describing the fountain provides an ironic commentary on the purported identification of the true nature of the prince’s character in the paragraph containing it. Being about perception-as-interpretation and, more precisely, about the interpretation of an object (a work of art) which is in principle uninterpretable, the fountain scene can be read as calling into question the interpretation of the nature of the prince provided in the scene immediately preceding it. The predominantly ironic structure of the fountain scene reinforces the ironic distancing of the interpretation of the prince’s simple and considerate character already given in the recognition of that nature as being only seemingly “de bonne grace” by the perception of the prince’s rude comportment vis-à-vis Swann. The irony informing the fountain scene is thus doubled, being directed, as it is, not only at Marcel’s efforts to interpret the fountain but also at the effort to interpret anything having the fascination of a work of art—which would include not only the nobility figuratively represented in the third scene of interpretation but also the representations of social hangers-on and of male homosexuality represented respectively in the second and first scenes of interpretation as well.

That the fountain scene is intended to serve the function of ironically distantiating the description of the prince’s seemingly noble nature given in the preceding scene is suggested by the figurative content of the first description of the fountain—as seen “from afar.” Recall that the first description of the fountain utilizes three images to specify its nature as a work of art: “panache,” “Le XVIIIe siècle,” and “Versailles,” all three of which are associated metonymically with the nobility of the ancien régime. The successive refigurations of the fountain given in the three descriptions that follow this first characterization have the effect of at once filling out and specifying the content of this attributed impression of nobility and of bringing it under question as an adequate characterization of the work of art itself. Especially the fourth description of the fountain, which purports to reveal the chaos and insubstantiality of the “jet d’eau” when viewed from “de près,” has the effect of both affirming and modifying the nobility attributed to the object in the first description.

Coming as it does as the fourth of four successive scenes of interpreta-
tion, Marcel’s effort to interpret the work of art casts its shadow back across the scene immediately preceding it in the narrative, that in which the nobility of the prince is described. And its relationship to that scene, I suggest, is structurally homologous with the relationship of the fourth description of the fountain (in the mode of irony) to the third description of it (in the mode of synecdoche). Once this relationship is recognized, it becomes possible to see the fountain scene as a fulfillment of the figure of noble character given in the prince scene. The figure of the prince, a synecdoche of nobility, is fulfilled in the figure of the work of art, which is to say that it is sublated in the irony with which both nobility and art are treated in the fountain scene.

I would now like to suggest that, on this reading of the text, we are in a position to comprehend the relation of both the fountain scene and the scene with the prince to the other two scenes of interpretation which precede them in the narrative: that is, the scenes that interpret male homosexuality and the types of social hanger-on, respectively. If the fountain scene provides the reader with a model for interpreting all objects that, like the work of art, are presumed to be by nature uninterpretable, and if the signified or implicit reference of the scene is indeed the fourfold refiguration of the object which I have attributed to it, then we are authorized, it seems to me, in looking at the first and second scenes of interpretation — those of male homosexuality and of social hangers-on — in terms of what must be taken as their predominant modes of figuration. And we are permitted, I would further argue, to inquire into the ways in which these earlier scenes may be related to each other and to the sequence of scenes of which they are units in a similar structure of figure and fulfillment.

In this reading, the four subjects of interpretation — male homosexuality, social hangers-on, nobility, and a work of art — can be seen to constitute a series in which the first term (male homosexuality) serves as a figure that is progressively filled out and ( provisionally) fulfilled in the fourth ( art). Fulfillment is not, of course, to be construed in the manner of medieval biblical exegetes, for whom, for example, the Moses of the Hebrew Bible was a figure finally fulfilled in the Jesus of the New Testament, but, rather, more in the way Dante used the notion as a structural principle of his *Commedia*, in which a life lived here on earth is treated as a figure of an immanent meaning that is finally made manifest only in a future ( beyond time and space, after death). In the case of Dante, the fulfillment of the life figured here on earth consisted of the revelation of the fourfold order of significance of the actions that comprise ( the story of) that life: literal,
figurative, moral, and mystical. Of course, for Dante, the fulfillment of a figure constituted a genuine revelation of its true meaning, so that the fulfillment of a figure results in a repetition of it, but now with its content revealed and its manifest meaning revealed to be only a container or sensory vehicle of its latent meaning—in short, only a figure.

For Proust, the absence of any ground for the revelation of the kind of ultimate meaning that Dante took for granted reduces all meaning to nothing but figuration. This is why it is legitimate to read Proust’s narrative as an allegory of figuration itself, with the modalities of figuration as he construed them serving as the basic units of his strategies for emplotting the drama of consciousness which is its manifest subject matter.

The plausibility of this reading can be supported by a number of remarks inserted into his text in the passages I have been considering: “Until then, because I had not understood, I had not seen.” “It is the explanation that opens our eyes; the dispelling of an error gives us an additional sense” (12; 613). “And here the word fertilise must be understood in a moral sense, since in the physical sense the union of male with male must be sterile” (22; 627). “But sometimes the future is latent within us without our knowledge, and our words which we suppose to be false forecast an imminent reality” (31; 639). And, finally, with respect to M. de Charlus:

Now the abstraction had become materialized, the creature at last discerned had lost its power of remaining invisible, and the transformation of M. de Charlus into a new person was so complete that not only the contrasts of his face, of his voice, but, in retrospect, the very ups and downs of his relations with myself, everything that hitherto had seemed to my mind incoherent, became intelligible, brought itself into evidence, just as a sentence which presents no meaning so long as it remains broken up in letters and scattered at random upon a table, expresses, if these letters be rearranged in proper order [dans l’ordre qu’il faut], a thought which one can never afterwards forget. (12–13; 614)

If it could be shown that the four successive scenes of interpretation which open this part of Proust’s novel describe the same tropological sequence—from metaphor through metonymy and synecdoche to irony—as that described in the culminating fourth (the fountain) scene, this would provide important insights into the nature of interpretation in general and of interpretation by narration specifically. Specifically, it would yield some
understanding of the paralogic of narrative, on the one hand, and of the extralogical dimensions of interpretative discourse, on the other.

What I want to suggest is that interpretative discourse is governed by the same principles of “configuration” (I borrow the term from Paul Ricoeur) as those used in narration to endow the events that comprise the story being told with the structural coherency of a plot. In other words, interpretative discourse tells a story—a story in which the interpreter is both the protagonist and the narrator and whose characteristic themes are the processes of search and discovery, loss and retrieval of meaning, recognition and misrecognition, identification and misidentification, naming and misnaming, explanation and obfuscation, illumination and mystification, and so on. The coherence of this story is the coherence of the plot structure or congeries of plot structures by which the story elements are fashioned into an identifiable story type (epic, romance, comedy, tragedy, satire, farce, etc.), what Frye has called an archetypal story. But, if this is a possible way of construing what goes on in interpretative discourse, it is not a matter of the interpreter simply imposing the pattern of a given plot type on the elements of the story being told, any more than, in a novel, it would be a matter of mechanically fitting the events that comprise the story into the form of a comedy or tragedy. The plot or congeries of plots has to appear to emerge gradually and, as it were, naturally from the events reported on the story level of the discourse, in the way that the tragic nature of a play like *Hamlet* becomes comprehensible over the course of the play’s unfolding as what appears to be merely a series of contingent events.

What, then, are the transformational principles by which a story can be progressively endowed with the structural coherence of a given plot type or, since I am arguing for the formal similarities between narration and interpretation, by which an interpretation can be endowed with a coherence quite other than the kinds of coherence it may possess at the level of the sentence (grammatical coherence) and at the level of demonstration or explicit argument (logical coherence)? Obviously, my answer to this question is figurative coherence, the coherence of the activity of (linguistic) figuration itself.

This having been said, however, we are still left with the task of specifying how figurative coherence is produced in discourse. And in my view, the process of progressive figuration, refiguration, and what (following de Man) we may call disfiguration, held up to us in Proust’s descriptive pause in his narrative, is the very model of such a process. That is to say, in the sequence of tropological modes which leads from an original meta-
phorical characterization of an interpretandum, through a metonymic re-
duction and a synecdochic identification, to an ironic apprehension of the
figurality of the whole sequence, we have something like the plot of all
possible emplotments—the meaning of which is nothing but the process of
linguistic figuration itself. This is not the only content of a narrative, to be
sure, but it is the one without which any story cannot be told or any plot
constructed.

That the four descriptions of the fountain are cast in different modes
of figuration and that they have a distinct (and, indeed, even conventional)
order of succession permits us to view this passage as Proust’s model of
what interpretation considered as figuration might consist of. The succes-
sive descriptions bear no logical relationship to one another, at least, no
relationship that could be mapped out according to the logic of identity and
noncontradiction. There is no argument about the nature of the fountain
and hardly anything that might be considered a predication about it. The
predications contained in the passage are for the most part about what
“one” saw, the impressions “one” had, or what “one” realized. Only the
fourth description contains direct predications about the spray: “drops . . .
fell . . . and . . . floated,” “they teased . . . and blurred,” “a single jet . . .
swerved,” and so on. Insofar as the passage has a referent, it is less the “jet
deau” (which is both never really quite described and overdescribed) than
the process of translating attentive seeing into language, with language
itself, rather than perception, providing the categories of whatever inter-
pretative matter the passage itself may contain.

The metanarrational and metainterpretative functions of the passage
can now be specified. Considered as a narrational unit, the paragraph con-
taining the fourfold description of the fountain is related to the three scenes
of interpretation that precede it by the four figurative modes that comprise
the substance of its own form. It is figuratively related to the scene of the
prince’s greeting by contiguity, formal similitude, structural homology, and
parodistic repetition, which is to say, metonymically, metaphorically, synec-
dochally, and ironically. Considered as a model of interpretation itself, the
fountain scene provides a paradigm of how to read the three more extensive
scenes of interpretation that precede it: those in which male homosexuality,
society, and nobility are interpreted. If we return to these preceding scenes
and reread them in the light of this paradigm, we can apprehend the ways in
which these scenes are to be taken as interpretations.

Each of the four subjects successively marked out for contemplation
in the opening pages of Sodome et Gomorrhe—male homosexuality, the
social types, an exemplar of high nobility, and a work of art—appears as an enigma resistant to both adequate description and definitive explanation. Each is interpreted, however, and interpreted in the same way, which is to say, submitted to successive characterizations in the four modes of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. This sequence of modes of figuration can be said to constitute something like an equivalent for interpretation to what is commonly called plot in narrative representation.

An emplotment (what Ricoeur calls a *mise en intrigue*) of a set of events or, as in the case under examination, of observations, recognitions, identifications, characterizations, and so on, does not constitute an explanation of the sort typically provided by “technical thinking, of an algorithmic nature ‘founded on objective modal necessity.’” Emplotment, rather, provides (or wishes to appear to provide) what hermeneutic theory calls an understanding of a referent, and it does so by what Ricoeur calls configuration, a term that might legitimately be used to translate the Greek *synecdoche* (“to grasp together,” “comprehend”; Latin, *subintellectio*). This understanding, in turn, is comprised of a twofold order of signification: a manifest one, in which the object of interest (a referent) is submitted to a succession of descriptions, and a latent one, of which the activity and effects of figuration itself are the referents. And if this can be said of the relationship between any two or more successive passages of an interpretative discourse, it can be said of interpretative discourse as a whole.

How is the scene of the contemplation of the fountain related to the scene of the contemplation of nobility of character, which immediately precedes it, and how are these two scenes related to the scenes of contemplation of social types and of male homosexuality which precede them in the narrative sequence? If, in response to these questions, we say, Figuratively, we shall mean not only that they replicate the kinds and sequences of the modes of figuration employed in their respective emplotments but also that each scene is a fulfillment of the figures of the scenes that precede it. As thus envisaged, the fountain scene gathers up, fulfills, and realizes the figure of the scene of nobility, just as this latter does with respect to that of society, and this scene that of male homosexuality. Each of the subjects of the sequence—male homosexuality, the social types, nobility, and art—is an interpretation of the subjects that precede it in the manner of a fulfillment of the figures contained therein.

It could be fairly asked whether there is any extratextual evidence for this argument. In response it could be pointed out that, if the fountain described in the scene is purely fictive, the artist who is credited with its
creation, Hubert Robert, was a real human being, a painter and architect whose career spanned the period of the French Revolution. Moreover, Robert was an artist fascinated with the subject of ruins, those caused by natural disruptions, such as floods, earthquakes, fires, and desuetude, and by political acts, such as rebellions, revolutions, jacqueries, sacking, looting, and so on. He not only painted real ruins but also imagined ones, such as his well-known canvases of the Grand Gallery of the Louvre in ruins. So obsessed was Robert with ruins that he earned the nickname of “Robert des ruines,” by which he is still known today. Is it too much to suggest that, in choosing to posit as the object of Marcel’s effort to recover “some power of attention,” the “celebrated fountain of Hubert Robert,” Proust was suggesting, by this act of nomination alone, his interest in the relation between art and ruination, the achieved form of a thing and its immanent deliquescence, its impression of solidity and beauty and its real nature as a chaos as senseless as the “jet d’eau” of Hubert Robert when viewed “close at hand”? 