Narrative Concepts in the Study of Eighteenth-Century Literature

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I'll begin with a narrative. Years ago in graduate school, as I became aware of the novel as something to study as well as to read, my eye was caught by two recent books whose claim was that the novel was getting a lot more attention than it deserved. Although very different in other respects, both Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* and Scholes and Kellogg's *The Nature of Narrative* made the point that in those days, the dominance of novel studies was such that to speak of the novel, it seemed, was to speak of narrative as such. Their influential books argued that it was time to put the novel genre in its place by resituating it within the narrative mode, thereby throwing into relief all the other genres that had preceded it.

I already had read Aristotle's *Poetics* in college, and I recognized this as an Aristotelian move. Aristotle's method, I'd learned, proceeds from the most general categories – those of human knowing, acting, and making – to divide and subdivide categories into their component parts until the analytic process reaches the limits of its usefulness. Aristotle describes poetics as an imitative kind of making, which can be subdivided (among other ways) according to three different 'manners' of imitation. The poet may speak in the same voice throughout; or 'dramatically', in the assumed voices of several characters; or in alternation between 'narrative' and an assumed character, 'as Homer does' (Aristotle, 1448a). These three manners of imitation distinguish between what came down to us as poetry, drama, and narrative, the three modes of poetic or literary imitation. Aristotle treats these three manners of imitation as covering the field of logical possibility, and for this reason Frye calls them the basic roots or 'radicals of presentation' (Frye 1957, pp. 246-47). But after this initial analysis, the *Poetics* turns from the logical to the historical, and summarizes the major stages in the development of poetry from its origins to his present day, a summary that accounts for the several genres that fall under each mode, and that, unlike the modes to which they belong, are contingent categories whose
existence and nature are determined by historical vicissitude (Aristotle, 1448b-1449b).

Frye, Scholes, and Kellogg wrote around the same time as the apotheosis of structuralist theory, which promoted the primacy of the literary modes – but with a fundamental difference from Aristotle’s usage. Ferdinand de Saussure had distinguished between langue and parole, synchrony and diachrony, the structural and the chronological axes of language. His followers in mid-century France and elsewhere treated this distinction as a dichotomous separation, and thought the understanding of literary modes is best attained when they are unconditionally separated from their historical instances – or more precisely, from the historicity of those instances. Structuralism looked to the operation of language for rules by which to challenge the authority of what it saw as un-self-critical historical practice – not just local and temporary literary usages but the category ‘genre’ itself. The effect was not only (in general) to divorce theoretical from historical study, but also (in particular) to redirect attention away from kinds of narrative that, like the novel genre, have a specific historical character, and toward narrative as such, from whose general language use, it was thought, might be derived a broad understanding unclouded by the specific biases of more narrowly historical practice.

In the years following its heyday, narratology based on a linguistic model has received considerable criticism of which the readers of this essay are no doubt aware, and it has been superseded by what might be called an inclusively eclectic narrative theory. My aim in this essay is to undertake at some length a theoretically coherent critique of structuralist narratology, and in a more synoptic fashion to ask if and how its successor has responded to the problems I describe.

Narrative theory or narratology – I’ll use the terms interchangeably – rose on a wave of structuralist enthusiasm, dedicated not, like Aristotelian method, to the relationship between the general or synchronic category and its particular or diachronic instantiations, but to analyzing the general mode in isolation from its constituent genres. But how could the universal nature of the mode be analyzed apart from the evidence provided by its generic instances? The answer to this question is of course that it could not. Drawing on scientific method, narratology necessarily employs the evidence of particular generic usage to identify the abstract mode; but it brackets, as immaterial to that result, the concrete formal

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2 Saussure (1959, pp. 79-81) himself disputed the correlation of ‘diachrony-synchrony’ at the linguistic micro-level with ‘history-structure’ at the macro-level.
circumstances from which the abstract modal form is generated. The particular variant features of generic forms provide the necessary means to the end of making intelligible the general and constant form of the mode; but the means have served their purpose once their variable elements have been winnowed away from what is constant to and constitutive of the mode as such. By this I don’t mean to deny that narratological studies cite particular narratives in their analyses. I mean that the dates of composition and the generic character of these narratives are treated as irrelevant to the issues at hand, which are not generic but modal, not local but universal.

This particularizing generic data plays no part in the final assessment of the mode of narrative, but it does of course appear in narratological accounts of the evidence on which conclusions are based. Do the temporal and spatial range of these narratives justify generalizations about the nature of narrative as such? Taking Genette’s *Narrative Discourse* (1972) and Bal’s *Narratology* (1985) as a sample of structuralist narratology, I find that most of the narrative texts and usages cited by these exemplary theorists are quite recent. That is, the abstract theory of the narrative mode is largely drawn from the concrete practice of the novel genre. Narrative theory, which aims to universalize its principles beyond the local practice of any historical genre, appears to derive those principles from the generic practice of one, chronologically localizable, genre in particular. One might conclude from this that the universalizing premise of narratology misrepresents generic historicity as transhistorical. Or to put it differently, one might conclude that what we call narrative theory is for the most part really the genre theory of the novel. The theoretical separation between modes (like narrative) and genres (like the novel) is indispensable. But the coherence and integrity of modes depend on their abstract accountability for the concrete genres that compose their domain. To generalize about the nature of narrative therefore requires an attentiveness both to the historical—the temporal and spatial—particularity of genres and to the difference between the particularity of the part and the generality of the whole. Eighteenth-century experiments and innovations in narrative form were remarkably rich and deeply consequential for the future of narrative. This is the eighteenth-century challenge to narrative theory—which also amounts to a reminder of the historicity of literary form.

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3 Quotations from Bal, 2009 may be assumed to appear also in Bal, 1985 unless explicitly noted.
Mimesis and Realism in Narrative Theory

Both conclusions would seem to follow from Genette’s and Bal’s analysis of narrative ‘mimesis’ and ‘realism’, which both critics use synonymously (e.g., see Genette, 1980, p. 165; Bal, 2009, p. 36). Genette in particular derives his understanding of mimesis and realism from Plato and Aristotle, and I therefore will begin by comparing Plato’s celebrated passages on narrative in Book III of The Republic with Genette’s reading of them.

Plato records the discourse of Socrates, who famously works with wholes and parts. In dialogue with Adimantus about the speech of the poets, Socrates uses the word diegesis or narration in a general sense, as a whole that contains three particular parts or kinds of narration: haple diegesis, or pure narration; diegesis dia mimesis, or narration through imitation; and narration that uses both of these kinds (392 D). But Adimantus seeks clarification, and Socrates replies: ‘I won’t try to speak in wholes and universals but will separate off a particular part and by the example of that try to show you my meaning’ (392 E). Using the Iliad as his text, Socrates recalls an early passage in which Homer speaks in his own voice, then quotes – speaks in the voice of – one of his characters. Socrates identifies the first kind of narration as haple diegesis and the second kind as diegesis dia mimesis – a term that for clarity he shortly will change to diegesis dia mimeseos hole, narration wholly through imitation – adding that it’s ‘in this manner’ – by combining the two kinds (into what English grammar calls direct speech) – that Homer ‘has carried on nearly all the rest of his narration’ in his epic poetry (394 B-C). And he reminds Adimantus that ‘it is narration [...] both when he presents the several speeches and the matter between the speeches’ (393 B). Finally, and in order to make the distinction as clear as possible, Socrates now ‘translates’ a longer excerpt of mixed narration from the Iliad into haple diegesis-pure narration. At this point Adimantus declares, ‘I understand’. So Socrates returns to the topic of the whole of narration with which he’d begun, aligning the three parts of narration with three genres of poetry: the dithyramb, or ‘the recital of the poet himself; tragedy and comedy, ‘which work wholly through imitation’;

4 In English we might use the word ‘narrative’ to distinguish the general sense from the three particular kinds of ‘narration’ it encloses. Plato’s translator usually uses ‘narration’, but occasionally ‘narrative’. Genette usually uses ‘récit’ for narrative, but sometimes the adjectival ‘narratif’ (or even ‘narrative’), as in ‘discours narratif’. His translator usually uses ‘narrative’ both as noun and adjective, although occasionally ‘narrating’ adjectivally. None of these texts use distinct words to distinguish between the general and the particular sense of narrative – nor will I in this essay.
and epic poetry, ‘which employs both’ (394 B-C). (Aristotle’s typology, with which I began, although it reminds us of his master’s, on examination is significantly different.)

‘As we know, Plato contrasts two narrative modes’: Genette (1980, p. 162) begins his commentary, reasonably enough, by focusing on the two kinds of narration that Socrates extracts from the passage of the third, mixed kind – epic – in which the first two coexist. What is odd is that even though it is here the source of those two kinds, Genette (1980, p. 172) neglects to mention Plato’s third kind of narration, not only here but throughout his entire explication of Plato on narrative (except once and to no analytic purpose). The result is that although for expressly heuristic purposes Plato has temporarily separated one part, narration through imitation, from another, pure narration, Genette refers to the former part simply as ‘mimesis’ and allows it to assume the aspect of a singular and exclusive whole, a kind of narration that appears only by itself. He reinforces that effect, moreover, by abstaining from Plato’s general and inclusive usage of diegesis-narration, thereby enabling that inclusive category to acquire an exclusive character while retaining its broader connotation of inclusiveness, hence universality. By this means mimesis becomes in Genette’s commentary not simply a kind of narration that is permanently detached from its counterpart pure narration: it ceases to be a kind of narration altogether.

Let me now be more concrete about the combined sleight of hand and sheer confusion with which this dichotomization of diegesis and mimesis is achieved. Socrates, we recall, rewrites an excerpt of Homer’s mixed narration into pure narration; Genette (1980, p. 163) erroneously reduces this to a rewriting of ‘mimesis’ into ‘diegesis’, then enigmatically equates mimesis with ‘direct speech in the manner of drama’. ‘Direct speech’ customarily refers to quotation mediated by a framing voice, applicable to the mixed narration of epic but not to dramatic dialogue, which of course lacks narratorial mediation. The former reference would redeem Genette’s identification of Socrates’s source text as ‘mimesis’, but he appears more intent on reducing mimesis to its stripped-down and minimal, unmediated and non-diegetic extreme of dramatic dialogue. That diegesis is ‘mediated by the narrator’, ‘told’ rather than ‘directly shown’, means for Genette that its object, communicated to the reader by the agency of language, is itself language rather than something that purports to exist outside it. ‘[T]he very idea of showing, [...] because of its naively visual character [...] is completely illusory: in contrast to dramatic representation, no narrative can “show” or “imitate” the story it tells’ (Genette, 1980, pp. 163-4).
The epistemological implications of the absolute opposition between telling and showing are equally absolute. To experience the narration of something is to apprehend it through the distancening mediation of a narrator. To experience the imitation of something is to apprehend it in the absence of mediation. Venturing into the theory of reader response, Genette characterizes imitation in the most reduced of terms, as a ‘direct representation’ ‘borrowed from the theater’, and its project as ‘making one forget that it is the narrator telling’, creating a ‘feeling [...] of literal fidelity’. This is best achieved when the object of imitation is speech, which can ‘impose itself with the documentary autonomy of a quotation’ (Genette, 1980, pp. 163, 166, 171). Indeed, Genette (1980, p. 169) associates the mimesis of sheer quotation with ‘that absolute imitation’ that consists in duplication. In other words, unlike Socrates’, Genette’s ‘imitation’ is a project in attaining formal transparency. And by implication, the simple fact of narration, however managed and modulated, would seem on the contrary to represent in the writer and ensure in the reader a knowing sophistication regarding the construction of meaning by language.

How do these slippery arguments serve Genette’s strategic avoidance of Socrates’ third kind of narration, the mixed mode that dominates Homer’s epic poetry? Homer’s mixed narration combines ‘pure narration’ and ‘narration wholly through imitation’ to achieve (as I’ve just pointed out) direct speech, in which narration mediates imitation. Genette avoids this simple recognition by the confusing presentation I have just tried to characterize – most of all by an illogical but unrelenting dichotomization of narration and imitation, depicting the two techniques as not just oppositional but linguistically incompatible, incapable of coexistence within the same linguistic structure – for example, the mixed narration of epic. Moreover Genette asserts the incompatibility of narration and imitation by construing the commonplace metaphor ‘showing’ in literal, ‘naively visual’ terms. First, he insists that only the imitation of words by words qualifies according to this gratuitously literal standard. Second, he collapses the full range of techniques for imitating language into the singular instance of dramatic dialogue, which is by definition unmediated by narration. Yet even taken on its own terms this rationale must fail. Genette is acutely sensitive to the way our experience of narratorial mediation can interpose itself between what we’re ‘told’ and what exists outside the telling. But surely the elaborate apparatus of theatrical presentation by which drama ‘shows’ us its spectacle is an experience of mediation at least as powerful as if drama were mediated by narrative language – unless words alone are deemed capable of mediation.
Much has been written over the years about the distinction between telling and showing, but it would be very difficult to find anyone who ever subscribed to the view – attributed by Genette to ‘the Anglo-American normative vulgate’ in the wake of Percy Lubbock – that narrative can do without a narrator and thereby achieve transparency (1980, p. 163). Genette’s strategic literalism embraces the putative naïve literalism that he has attributed to Lubbock and his followers. This allows him to use the false dichotomy telling vs. showing to reinforce the false dichotomy narration vs. imitation that he has been propounding. However, a more likely understanding of what is meant by showing as a narrative norm is that it refers to the “artistic” subtlety of narration that subtly veils the obvious agency of the narrator and the sheer force of narrative telling. If this is a plausible view of Lubbock’s meaning (which implies nothing about its value), there is an ironic similarity between the idea of showing that Genette reviles and the idea of focalization whose analytic precision he is commended for.

Transformed in Genette’s account by an excluded middle that in Plato had served an inclusive purpose by mediating between the other kinds, the Socratic triad becomes dichotomous and exclusive. Those instances of mixed narration that are no longer accounted for are silently folded into the other two kinds of narration, where their mixed character becomes invisible and they enable the dichotomization of diegesis and mimesis, the pure narration of the narrator and the pure imitation of dramatic dialogue (Genette, 1980, pp. 162-63). The presentation of an exclusive and partial system as inclusive and universal is perhaps an apt description of at least Genette’s practice of structuralist method.

Genette now consolidates his reduction of the Socratic triad to an oppositional dyad by advancing, from a ‘strictly analytic point of view’, the following axiom: ‘narration, oral or written, is a fact of language, and language signifies without imitating’. And for this reason, narrative mimesis is ‘the illusion of mimesis’. We might suppose that it all depends on what we mean by imitation. But Genette (1980, p. 164) anticipates recourse to other strictly analytic points of view by writing, in the very next sentence: ‘Unless, of course, the object signified (narrated) be itself language’. The absolute opposition of narration and imitation suddenly seems to dissolve. When it’s language itself that language narrates, narration must be mixed, both narration and imitation (that is, quotation). This is exactly what Socrates means by mixed narration, whose generic exemplar, combining pure narration and narration wholly by imitation, is epic. Is Genette proposing to restore the third, mixed part to the triadic whole of narration? Not so fast. His rationale, obscure as it is, seems rather to be this: The dichotomy between
narration and imitation must dissolve not through the addition of a third term but through the subtraction of the second term, imitation. However, narration, now reduced to a single category, by the logic of structuralism becomes itself susceptible to dichotomization, reproducing the absolute opposition of telling and showing, as it were, one level down.

What is the logic of this devolution? Structuralism is based on a principle of stability according to which categories are defined, and certified as definitive, by their absolute opposition to other categories. A case in point: Genette tells us here that his phrase ‘the poet can deliver a speech as someone else’ is ‘the Platonic definition of mimesis’. But as we know, this is at best an exclusive because partial meaning of mimesis as far as Plato is concerned, because it excludes the meaning of mimesis as one part of diegesis. And in any case, Plato’s ambition is not an austere inquiry into the nature of mimesis as such (which might support Genette’s notion that the only mimetic use of language is that whose object is language) but the applicability of that term to one particular usage currently under discussion – namely, quotation. Nor does Plato deal in ‘definitions’: Socrates is not a structuralist but a dialectician of wholes and parts. Nonetheless Genette concludes that having excised imitation from narration, the single category of narration must be divided: ‘we must distinguish here between narrative of events and “narrative of words”’ (Genette, 1980, p. 164). To achieve the structuralist stability of dichotomy, however, is also to risk its destabilization. Poised on dialectical process, it is the fate of structuralism to mistake this supersession of static structure as a fall from it. Genette’s scare quotes enclosing ‘narrative of words’ suggest that although the meaning of the phrase is that it is one kind or part of narrative, that meaning is also equivocal. (The same equivocation is achieved, in the passage I quote above, by the parenthetical juxtaposition of ‘narrated’ with ‘signified’).

In order to explain why what he calls the narrative of events precludes, and on the same grounds, both realism and mimesis, Genette (1980, p. 165) now draws on Roland Barthes’s essay on ‘the reality effect’ in ‘the realistic novel’ of Gustave Flaubert. According to Genette, Homer’s epic creates a ‘mimetic effect’ ‘fairly typical of’ Flaubert’s reality effect by including ‘redundant information’, like ‘useless and contingent detail[s]’, in the narration of events. The effect is a ‘referential illusion’, what Genette calls elsewhere a ‘feeling of literal fidelity’, an illusion that language is referring to something beyond itself. Because Genette has excluded from Plato’s capacious ‘narration’ all narration that isn’t ‘pure’, words that are otherwise

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5 Genette’s translator renders Barthes’s ‘l’effet de réel’ infelicitously as ‘realistic effect’.
functional in narration become ‘useless’, serving ‘no purpose other than to let us understand that the narrative mentions it only because it is there [...] and demands to be “shown”. Whatever words are used in the narration of events but don’t participate in telling the story have this mimetic-realist effect. The opposition is absolute. Such words may even have a clear and well-known narrative status or function neither to tell nor to refer – Genette cites the Homeric epithet ‘the loud-sounding sea’ (*Iliad*, I, p. 34), whose redundancy, we might suppose, is a feature of its mnemonic purpose – but if words don’t tell, the only alternative is that they must (illusively) refer (Genette, 1980, p. 165). Yet although Genette claims to be dealing with ‘strictly textual’ factors in making these definitive distinctions, he offers no criterion for defining which words have the exclusive function of ‘telling’ (ibid., p. 166). (Later on, in his commentary on the Socratic translation of mixed narration into pure narration, Genette acknowledges the relativity of this distinction by good-naturedly observing that Socrates might have ‘push[ed] further’ in that process rather than including in his target text of pure narration, as he has, ‘elements of a sort of intermediary degree’ (ibid., p. 170). And as we will see, when Genette extricates himself from narrative theory in order to account for some of the major varieties of narrative practice, he allows himself the looseness of phrases like ‘a little more mimetic’ (ibid., p. 171). Once a general structure of exclusive rules has been built into the universality claimed by the narrative mode, the inclusiveness that is the logical concomitant of universality can be imported into its interstices through varieties of generic historicity – so long as they’re recognized to be illusory or tautological.

How is the mimetic-realist illusion of reference carried off? Genette (1980, p. 157) uses several terms: ‘realistic motivation’ or ‘rationalization’ ‘justifies’ what otherwise would seem unaccountable. ‘The role of the analyst is not to be satisfied with the rationalizations, nor to be ignorant of them, but rather, having “laid bare” the technique, to see how the motivation that has been invoked functions in the work as aesthetic medium’ (ibid., p. 158). Genette’s allusion to Shklovsky suggests that motivation enhances the reality effect by somehow lashing the useless detail to narrative storytelling. Bal’s (2009, p. 36, 37) account of narrative motivation is more precise and full than Genette’s, training an attention on ‘description’ – ‘a textual fragment in which features are attributed to objects’ – that is comparable to his focus on the detail. For Bal, motivation is a technique of ‘naturalization – that is, making those interruptions known as descriptions seem self-evident or necessary, so that the inflections of the presentation, the attribution of qualities, and the ideological machinations remain invisible’. That is,
lashing descriptions to narration renders their extra-narrative function invisible or transparent and makes plausible ‘the referential existence of their described objects’ (Bal, 2009, pp. 41, 40; ‘remain invisible’ not in 1985).

The corollary is that if the lashing technique is ineffective and becomes visible, the mimetic-realist illusion fails. But Genette observes that this is a matter of degree, depending as it does on ‘a highly variable relationship between the sender and the receiver’. Truth may be one, but illusion has many forms and ‘varies according to individuals, groups, and periods’. Seventeenth-century readers, Genette speculates, likely ‘found more mimesis than we do’ in seventeenth-century narrative. But the bottom line is that the ‘narrative of events [...] is always narrative, that is, a transcription of the (supposed) non-verbal into the verbal’ (Genette, 1980, pp. 165, 166).

As a restatement of Genette’s strictly analytic but perplexing axiom, this one seems unexceptionable. Indeed, ingenuous. Does the rigorous apparatus of structuralist narratology come down to the insistence that language is ontologically of a different order than non-language – that art is not life? If the argument is that all varieties of mimesis-realism whose project is the imitation of the non-verbal are for this reason ‘illusory’, the point has the truth of truism: language does not transcribe objects into non-linguistic objects; mimesis-realism does not entail an identical reproduction of the object imitated.

Genette now turns from narrative of events to narrative of words – or rather, ‘narrative of words’. Having deemed illusory the verbal imitation of the non-verbal, he now wonders if his other invented category, the verbal imitation of the verbal, ‘is condemned a priori’ to being mere duplication, not illusory but tautological. Of a passage in Proust Genette writes: ‘The narrator does not narrate the hero’s sentence; one can scarcely say he imitates it: he recopies it, and in this sense one cannot speak here of narrative’ (1980, p. 169, Genette’s italics). Has the excluded middle absorbed the two poles as well? Even apart from the obscurity with which it has been presented, Genette’s dichotomy has come to seem no more than theoretical, diametrically refined to a vanishing point. Yet although the mimetic force of the narrative of events is notionally illusory, Genette (1980, pp. 165-66) observes (as we have seen) that it has had a historically rich and varied efficacy. Similarly, although the imitative narrative of words is dubious as both narration and imitation, Genette (1980, pp. 171-73, all italics are Genette’s) nonetheless constructs for it a three-part typology, applicable to both uttered and inner speech:

1 ‘Narratized, or narrated, speech’, the sort of target text that Socrates achieves in his translation of Homer’s mixed narration into pure narration.
2. ‘Transposed’ or indirect speech (also known as reported speech), ‘a little more mimetic than narrated speech’. However ‘the narrator’s presence is still too perceptible in the very syntax of the sentence for the speech to impose itself with the documentary autonomy of a quotation’. Includes the variant known by the name of ‘free indirect style’.

3. Homer’s mixed narration. Commonly known as direct speech but called by Genette ‘reported speech, dramatic in type’, ‘rejected by Plato’ because it is the ‘most mimetic’ of the three. This is the only occasion when Genette actually acknowledges that Homer’s narration is a mixture of his two polar kinds, which makes unaccountable his account of it, here and earlier (see above, p. 39), as dramatic.

Genette (1980, p. 175) follows this typology with a revelatory gloss on what he means by ‘theory’: ‘Needless to say, unless one is deliberately trying to prove a point [parti pris] (like the rejection, in Plato’s rewriting of Homer, of all reported speech), the different forms we have just distinguished in theory will not be so clearly separated in the practice of texts’. Certainly the work of theory, an abstracted overview of concrete practice, is to construct schematic categories that must blur the most particular differences between practices in the name of insight derived from generalization about their similarities. But when theory is motivated by an a priori impulse to prove a point, especially when the practice in question shows the point to be wrong, insight is the first casualty. I’ll return to the case of free indirect discourse because for several reasons it must hold a special interest in this inquiry. But the imbalance between rich theoretical generalization and the impoverished store of practical examples in structuralist narratology requires that having sampled the narrative theory of mimesis and realism, we turn first to the meaning of mimesis and realism as they’re actually deployed in, respectively, classical and eighteenth-century practice.

Mimesis in Classical Practice

It all depends on what we mean by imitation. As Genette (1980, pp. 172-73) elaborates his reading of Plato on narration, he becomes so committed to the exclusive structure he imposes on it that the entire discussion takes on the illusory quality of a definitive judgment, not a neutral description but a normative prescription: thus Plato has ‘rejected’ the purely mimetic and made an ‘appeal for the purely narrative’. Genette (1980, p. 173) finds support for this misreading in the supposed antithesis of Plato and Aristotle as,
respectively, partial proponents of narration and imitation: ‘Aristotle lost no
time upholding, with the authority and success we know of, the superiority
of the purely mimetic. We should not fail to appreciate the influence that
this prerogative, massively granted to dramatic style, exerted for centuries
on the evolution of narrative genres’.

There are two problems here. First, Socrates’s distinction between three
kinds of narration in these passages is instrumental toward a greater end,
which concerns the principle that the Guardians of the republic should be
expert in a single function, the craft of ‘civic liberty’:\(^6\)

It would not be fitting for these to do nor yet to imitate anything else. But
if they imitate they should from childhood up imitate what is appropriate
to them [,...] but things unbecoming the free man they should neither
do nor be clever at imitating, nor yet any other shameful thing, lest from
the imitation they imbibe the reality. [...][T]here is a form of diction and
narrative in which the really good and true man would narrate anything
that he had to say.

But such a man,

When he comes in the course of his narrative to some word or act of a
good man will be willing to impersonate the other in reporting it [...]
Then the narrative that he will employ will be of the kind that we just
now illustrated by the verses of Homer, and his diction will be one that
partakes of both, of imitation and simple [i.e., pure] narration, but there
will be a small portion of imitation in a long discourse (395 C-396 E).

In other words, Socrates’s distinction between narration and imitation in
these passages is a means to an end, rather than, as in structuralist method,
a self-standing and invariable opposition, an end in itself. By the same token,
Genette isolates one part of an argument, treating it as a whole or an end in
itself rather than recognizing the greater whole it subserves.

As he so often does, Socrates uses the analysis of one sort of human
activity – in this case language use – to think analogically about greater
philosophical principles – here, the nature of justice in the polis. (The Re-
public itself inquires into the nature of the ideal state in order to investigate
by analogy the nature of the soul). The end served by that distinction is to

\(^6\) On the idea of the work, function, virtue, or particular excellence of a thing, see Plato, 352
E-352 D.
establish the principle that for the most part, the speech and action of the Guardian will be an outgrowth of his own particular excellence, although he also will have imitative recourse to that of other good men. Plato locates this norm in epic poetry and its mixture of narration and imitation – or in his own terms, pure narration and narration wholly through imitation. What Genette (1980, p. 172) calls ‘Plato's appeal for the purely narrative’ in this passage is therefore really an appeal for the mixed speech characteristic, as Genette puts it, ‘first of the epic and then of the novel ...’: Bal, as well, finds in Plato a rejection of imitative form. He rewrites Homer, she thinks, because he finds the Iliad's passages of description (Genette's ‘narrative of events’) ‘problematic’ – in her view Homer does too – rather than to explain to Adimantus why the Guardian needs to master both narration and to a much lesser extent imitation (Genette, 1980, p. 36).

This may suggest the second problem. Genette not only imposes a dichotomizing fixity on Socrates's dialectical method. He also mistakenly assumes that Plato and Aristotle mean the same thing by imitation. So far from ‘rejecting’ it, Plato understands imitation to be ontologically foundational, the dialectical scale and measure of all entities, hence by its very nature not singular and abstract but differential and incremental across the entire range of existence. In the comparison of any given thing to any other, imitation measures the proportion between being and appearance, truth and probability, and the comparison can move up or down the dialectical chain revealing any entity – object, discourse, institution, art – to be by turns more or less proximate to the ideal forms of truth and being. For Aristotle, however, imitation pertains to one domain of philosophy in particular – the sciences of making, as distinct from those of nature and knowledge. That poetry is imitative says nothing about its qualitative status with respect to other, non-imitative arts or other domains of science. But because all aspects of poetic making are imitative, the dramatic, the narrative, and the mixed manner of poetry are all imitative. And because diverse means of making – language, instrumental music, dance – are comprehended in the category ‘poetry’, the fact that language can be said to signify doesn’t affect its status as an imitative art (see R. McKeon, 1952).

Returning to Genette, we can now see that Aristotle's Poetics doesn't uphold ‘the superiority of the purely mimetic’ to the ‘purely narrative’ (Genette, 1980, p. 173): it methodologically categorizes all poetry as mimetic (Aristotle, 1447a-b). Genette may base this erroneous claim on the fact that Aristotle judges tragedy to be superior to epic. But if all poetry is imitative, it should be obvious that this judgment has nothing to do with the imitative nature of tragedy in particular. It is based instead on other factors, most
important the respectively greater and lesser unity that tragic and epic plots are likely to possess (Aristotle, 1462a-b). Still, perhaps it is because the Poetics treats of drama that Genette is encouraged to conflate the entire range of poetic imitation, seemingly on Aristotle’s authority, with what he takes to be the extreme instance of dramatic dialogue.

So on the one hand, Aristotle’s understanding of the nature and scope of imitation is very different from Plato’s. Alien to both of them, on the other hand, is Genette’s model of the excluded middle, which reduces imitation to a single, absolute version that purports to reproduce reality with exactitude. We’ve already seen how contrary this model is to Plato. For his part Aristotle’s celebrated distinction between poetry and history makes clear its irrelevance to his thinking (1451a-b). Nor does Aristotle suggest that poetic imitation should aspire to raising in the reader a feeling of literal fidelity, whether to events or to words (Genette, 1980, p. 171). Rather, our pleasure in imitation is for him predicated on our awareness that it is art, and therefore can be compared to life: for it is ‘natural for all to delight in works of imitation’. ‘[T]hough the objects themselves may be painful to see, we delight to view the most realistic representations of them in art’ (‘tas eikonas tas malista ekribomenas’, literally ‘the artistic images the most perfectly and exactly made’). But ‘if one has not seen the thing before, one’s pleasure will not be in the picture as an imitation (mimema) of it, but will be due to the execution or colouring or some natural cause’ (Aristotle, 1448b). Here Aristotle uses the language of ‘seeing’ and ‘viewing’, perhaps because he soon will be focusing on dramatic imitations in particular. But because he regards all poetry as imitative, he argues that the pleasures of self-conscious illusion are also available through the mediating experience of reading a play, as they are in reading an epic (Aristotle, 1462a). For Aristotle, imitation is the crucial means of mediating between art and life, creating an illusion of their sameness whose pleasure depends on the recognition that it is illusory, not present/presence but representation.

I began this essay with the anecdotal observation that the texts treated by structuralist narrative theory are by and large modern, and suggested on that basis alone that narratology’s claims to be generalizing about the universality of narrative are illusory. In the previous section I’ve adduced evidence that what narratology takes to be, alternatively, the generic theory of epic mimesis or the modal theory of narrative mimesis is based on faulty assumptions and defective interpretations. The conjunction of these two sets of evidence might appear to predict that modern realist theory can be shown to diverge from the ancient theory of mimesis, thereby ‘proving
the point’, already adumbrated by its selection of primarily modern texts, that narrative theory’s claims to universality are groundless. However the best foundation on which to conclude the disparity between ancient mimesis and modern realism will be laid not by positing it at the outset, but by presenting historical evidence for the coalescence of a distinctively modern theory and practice of imitation by the end of the eighteenth century.

Realism in Eighteenth-Century Practice

In the structural analysis theorized by Genette and Bal, the function of realism is to sustain the illusion of reference beyond language by using descriptive details that lack a narrative function but are made to appear to subserve it. Genette and Bal also agree that realism is the novelistic equivalent of ancient epic mimesis – or perhaps more likely, that it is the novelistic expression of what is universally present in all instances of the narrative mode, mimesis. But in either case, close attention to the ancient texts on which the narratological reading of mimesis is based has revealed the need for a very different understanding of classical imitation. What are the results when we bring a comparably close attention to modern literary realism?

The historicity of realism is evident even in the nineteenth-century origin of the term itself (in contrast with mimesis, a transliteration of ancient Greek). And even in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century pre-history of the term, the practice to which ‘realism’ refers is not simply an illusory imitation of an external reality that conceals its motivating artifice. In Cervantes, and continuously from Fielding onward, what we now call realism is the technique of combining the representation of the real with a more or less explicit reflection on its status as a representation. In the words of György Lukács, novelistic realism involves a ‘double reflection’: a reflection of the world, and a reflection of the process by which that reflection is accomplished (Lukács, 1973, p. 202). Another way of putting this is that the novel is reflexive. It thematizes its formal procedure on the level of content: what the novel is about is, in part, what it does. The technique of realism as such takes no position on the further question of whether the real has an actual existence beyond language. The essence of the technique is the balance between an unprecedentedly detailed account of the real world – Ian Watt’s ‘formal realism’ suffices to describe this aspect of the technique – and an account of how that account has been created. This is the understanding
propounded by the three most important theorists of the novel,\textsuperscript{7} and in departing from this view Watt’s admirable and highly influential study of the rise of the novel, although it aims to historicize that genre, promotes a straightforward and non-reflexive view of realism as a formal technique. Not that Watt ignores or denies the ‘distancing effect’ of Fielding’s intrusions, their interference with the ‘sense of narrative illusion’. Rather, he thinks Fielding’s techniques run counter to and undermine novelistic realism, and that they could not and did not ‘become a permanent element in the tradition of the novel’\textsuperscript{8}. So in this respect, \textit{The Rise of the Novel} played a major role in detouring Anglo-American novel criticism to an extent from which it has not yet recovered. In structuralist terminology, Watt’s formal realism dovetails with the structuralist view that realism is a technique of imitative representation that is innocent of self-conscious diegetic representation.

Of course, reflexivity isn’t unique either to the novel or to narrative. Broadly speaking, all literary discourse as such is more or less reflexive or self-conscious in its formality, and novelistic reflexivity is only one of the ways in which literary reflexivity is achieved. What formally distinguishes novelistic from other sorts of literary reflexivity is the fact that the novel undertakes a representation of the real whose empirical ambition and insistence are unprecedented. These qualities are bound up with the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century revolution in empirical epistemology that coincided with the origins of the novel genre, and that evoked both sides of its double reflection: both the ambition to represent the world, and the will to display the means by which that representation is achieved.

I’ve made the unsurprising suggestion that narratology is indebted to scientific method. More surprising, perhaps, is the suggestion that novelistic epistemology is indebted to scientific method (although the divergence of the new narrative genre from the new philosophy is also crucial). To attribute the rise of realism in eighteenth-century Britain to the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century would reduce an overdetermined development to a single cause. Nonetheless the influence of the new science on the emergence of the novel was enormous (see McKeon, 2009). And this suggests that in terms of epistemology and method, the similarities between novelistic and structuralist ambitions are considerable – up to a point.

Francis Bacon’s notion of experiment proceeds on the basis of two principles. The natural world can be known only through the senses. But the

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\textsuperscript{7} György Lukács, José Ortega y Gasset, and Mikhail M. Bakhtin, all excerpted in McKeon, 2000a. For a comparison of Watt with Lukács, Ortega y Gasset, and Bakhtin see McKeon, 2000b.

\textsuperscript{8} Watt 1964, pp. 285, 286, 288.
sensible knowledge of nature is unreliable if sense data isn't analyzed so as to separate nature itself from the influence of what can seem to be part of it, the circumstances by which it has come to be known. Scientific method aims to achieve this separation by transforming the single and singular experience of knowing into an experiment that multiplies the occasions and varies the circumstances – the time, place, and agency – of knowing. The more such data accumulates, the more a pattern of constancy can be discerned in its interstices, one that repeats and confirms the invariable identity of the thing itself as distinct from the variables that pertain to the disparate circumstances of each single act of knowing. Once those variables have been winnowed away, the identity of the thing itself stands disclosed (McKeon, 2009, p. 208). Formulating a technique for accomplishing a narrative version of this process required trial and error; I'll devote a page or two to summarizing how it emerged.

In their earliest novels Defoe and Richardson attempt to apply empirical epistemology in the comparatively naïve form of what I've elsewhere called ‘the claim to historicity’: namely, the representation of their texts as authored by actual people, their protagonists (McKeon, 1987, p. 45 and passim). The immediacy effect that is achieved by the claim to historicity precludes any mediating distance between Pamela’s presence and her representation, between content and form, what happens and how it happens – in narratological terms, between mimesis and diegesis, story and discourse, fabula and sjüzet. In other words, this early attempt to create the illusion of external reference is analogous to the first of Bacon’s experimental provisos, that the world can be known through the senses. Richardson takes advantage of epistolary form as a first-person narrative technique that maximizes the immediacy effect of actual authorship in two distinct but related ways: by creating a sense of both subjective expression and documentary objecthood. And in his parody of Pamela (1740), Fielding capitalizes on that absence of mediation, exploding Richardson’s claim to historicity by providing his own damning mediation. Shamela (1741), he claims, is the actual set of documents that Pamela was designed to substitute for and misrepresent, and that express a very different sort of subjectivity.

In this commentary I will sometimes, as here, present the relation between ‘mimesis’ and ‘diegesis’ as dichotomous in order to make explicit the contrast between this narratological reduction of realism-as-mimesis, and the accurate understanding of realism as the dialectical relation between mimesis and diadé. In particular I urge the reader not to confuse this faulty sense of mimesis (again, in its narratological reduction) with the meaning of that term that I’ve found in classical usage, which like realism incorporates in itself the self-conscious dialectic of life and art.
Fielding’s parody might be said to have tolled the death knell for the claim to historicity. But *Pamela* also involves, less ostentatiously, a very different formal technique that lays the ground for the sort of reflexivity that will become realism. Richardson’s claim to historicity draws our attention to and objectifies *Pamela* by a standard that is external to the text and therefore susceptible to the sort of disconfirmation that Fielding imagines. But in his prefatory material to *Pamela*, Richardson makes another sort of claim, about the pleasing authenticity of Pamela’s literary style, a claim that is internal to the text and that is confirmed if our own reading confirms it. One of Richardson’s prefatory puffers, advising him not to revise, objectifies the relatively insubstantial and unelaborated nature of her literary style by comparing it to that of her clothing: ‘[L]et us have *Pamela* as *Pamela* wrote it; in her own Words, without Amputation, or Addition. Produce her to us in her neat Country Apparel, such as she appear’d in, on her intended Departure to her Parents; for such best becomes her Innocence and beautiful Simplicity’ (S. Richardson, 2001, p. 9). The comparison encourages us to anticipate a certain quality in Pamela’s writing style that stands out from mere writing as objectively as does her dress from the sort that Mr. B. would have her wear. In this way Pamela’s formal style becomes thematized on the level of content, and throughout the novel we’re sensitized to the way descriptions of dress reflexively evoke qualities of writing, an evocation that’s central to Richardson’s technique.

Also crucial are the responses of other readers to Pamela’s letters, readers who are also characters internal to the text we read. The most important of these is her master and would-be seducer Mr. B. Before his change of heart, Mr. B.’s desire to possess Pamela sexually is accompanied by his conviction that her letters are a tissue of misrepresentations that he also must possess and monitor. And because Pamela is therefore obliged to conceal her letters about her body and under her clothing, they’re thematized in a way that lends itself to her sexualization. So when at one point Pamela’s keeper Mrs. Jewkes seizes a packet of her letters, Pamela consoles herself that much of her writing ‘I still have safe, as I hope, sew’d in my Under-coat, about my Hips’. But Mr. B. forces Pamela to undress herself by threatening to do it for her:

‘Now’, said he, ‘it is my Opinion they are about you; and I never undrest a Girl in my Life; but I will now begin to strip my pretty *Pamela*, and hope I shall not go far before I find them.’ […] he began to unpin my Handkerchief. […] So I took off my Under-coat, and with great Trouble of Mind, unsew’d [my writing] from it. And there is a vast Quantity of it (S. Richardson, 2001, pp. 227, 235-36).
Earlier Mr. B. had acknowledged that

I long to see the Particulars of your Plot, and your Disappointment, where your Papers leave off. For you have so beautiful a manner, that it is partly that, and partly my Love for you, that has made me desirous of reading all you write; […] there is such a pretty Air of Romance, as you relate them, in your Plots, and my Plots, that I shall be better directed in what manner to wind up the Catastrophe of the pretty Novel.

By this point Mr. B’s sexual desire has modulated into a species of love for Pamela that’s inseparable from his desire to read her, and to have the kind of pleasure entailed in that experience. Most important in the present context, Mr. B’s generic terminology suggests his detachment from the question of Pamela’s veracity. He no longer cares to challenge (as he had earlier) the documentary-empirical ‘mimetic’ truth of what Pamela writes but is focused instead on the subjective and diegetic ‘manner’ of her writing, her style. Now he confirms this in response to Pamela’s final plea. Putting these papers into his pocket, Mr. B. says: ‘You have more than these. Yes, Sir [says Pamela]; but all that they contain you know, as well as I. – But I don’t know, said he, the Light you put Things in’ (S. Richardson, 2001, pp. 231-32, 239). And like Mr. B., we external readers learn to read self-consciously for Pamela’s manner, the light she puts things in, experiencing Richardson’s novel as a double reflection whose story is to some degree about itself. Recalling Genette’s naively literalistic rejection of narrative ‘showing’, Richardson internalizes a figuratively unmediated sense of being ‘shown’ within the process of reflexive mediation. Fielding doesn’t acknowledge the diegetic self-consciousness that is secreted at the heart of Richardson’s mimetic claim to historicity, but in Joseph Andrews (1742) he formulates the first coherent theory of novelistic realism (Fielding, 1999, bk. 3, ch. 1). Watt is right to emphasize the formality of novelistic realism. But he’s only half right, because he passes over the doubleness of its reflection, the fact of its reflexivity.

So the primary purpose of Richardson and Fielding’s realism isn’t simply mimetic (in the narratological sense of the term). Its purpose is to represent the real while accounting for how that representation has been accomplished. By the same token, novelistic self-consciousness, rightly seen as frustrating the naïve idea that empirical reality is subject to an immediate reflection, is also rightly seen as a skeptical instrument of empirical analysis, the narrative version of Bacon’s second stage of experiment. Novelistic narrative self-consciously reflects on the fact and method of its reflection
on the world. It doesn’t require Shklovsky or Genette to ‘bare the device’ by which the formal pleasures of reading are obtained.

But unlike the skeptical experimentalism of scientific method (and this is the crucial difference I refer to above), novelistic method doesn’t winnow out the variables it turns up. These variables, the dense circumstantiality generated by novelistic experimentation, also partially constitute the truth about the nature of human experience that is the object of experiment. They remain in the novelistic text both as a formal residue, the record of the author’s literary experiment, and as the thick and expansive mimetic-diegetic content that provides for the reader a second-order level of ‘experience’ in which to rehearse and learn the experimental method practiced by the author. To read a novel is (among other things) to encounter the diegetic thematization of an experiment in narrative form (McKeon, 2010, pp. 407-8). The experimentalism of structural narratology ignores this early history of novelistic method because it takes the novel to be governed by the universal principles that are assumed to govern narrative as such. On the one hand, the narrative constant of the novel is narration; on the other hand, all novelistic elements that narrative theory takes to play no role in storytelling it categorizes as variables under the broad category of illusory details or description. Although structural narratologists differ in the degree to which they bracket the analysis of novelistic description (Genette and Bal are a case in point), the normative dichotomization of narration and description, of diegesis and mimesis, directs relatively little attention or understanding to what is consigned to the latter category.

So far I have been describing the experiments in novelistic form that were practiced within the early novels. To this I’ll add a brief account of the closely-related debates about the nature of artistic reception and response that transpired during the same period and that shaped the ideas of realism and the aesthetic that were being formulated over the course of the eighteenth century. These debates evince an understanding very different from that posited by Genette in underscoring the structuralist axiom that ‘language signifies without imitating’. We recall his argument that whereas narrative can achieve only ‘the illusion of mimesis’, ‘dramatic representation’ literally does ‘show’ in a visual medium what it purports to imitate, and is therefore on the contrary ‘purely mimetic’. But Genette’s division between narrative telling and dramatic showing has only the logic of theory and bears no relation to the practical experience of Enlightenment commentators, for whom the problem of artistic illusion arose first with regard to drama, precisely because drama displays the real with visual immediacy. ‘In contrast to dramatic representation’, Genette (1980, p. 164) writes, ‘no narrative can “show” or
“imitate” the story it tells’. But neither can dramatic representation: the insight of the Enlightenment commentators both anticipates and supersedes him.

It was, in fact, not the subtle mediations of narrative language but the spectacular mediations of drama and the psychology of dramatic spectatorship that generated the first formulations of realism and the aesthetic, because theatrical presentation so patently intervenes between the viewer and the viewed. The issue was forced by the late Restoration ‘neoclassical’ doctrine of the two unities of time and place, which naively insisted that for dramatic imitation to be credited by its viewers requires a play to duplicate the reality it imitates as closely as possible in terms of the amount of time it takes and the quantity of space it traverses. Dryden represents the debate in Of Dramatic Poesy. An Essay. In the words of one speaker: ‘For what is more ridiculous than to represent an army with a drum and five men behind it, all which the hero of the other side is to drive in before him[?]’ How can plays please, and in some sense be ‘credited’ by, spectators who could not plausibly be thought to have taken their theatrical illusions for reality? (McKeon, 2009, pp. 232-33).

The answer to these questions, refined and sophisticated by a succession of authors from Dryden through Addison, Edmund Burke, Samuel Johnson, and William Wordsworth, was that it is neither the visual verisimilitude nor even the artistic medium that imitation depends on, but the creative imagination of its spectators. On the subject of staged warfare, another of Dryden’s interlocutors replies: ‘For my part, I can with as great ease persuade myself that the blows which are struck are given in good earnest, as I can that they who strike them are kings or princes, or those persons which they represent’. It is because playgoers don’t take theatrical imitations for reality that they are pleased by and credit them. Like Aristotle, Addison wrote that the pleasures of imitation are generated by the self-conscious comparison we make between what we see and how it is represented, ‘a new Principle of Pleasure, which is nothing else but the Action of the Mind, which compares the Ideas that arise from Words, with the Ideas that arise from the Objects themselves’. And as this passage suggests, Addison went even further than Aristotle by arguing that our aesthetic experience is not simply available but is positively enhanced by reading rather than watching a play, which only increases the imitative mediation required to obtain the greatest pleasure. ‘It will be asked’, wrote Johnson, ‘how the drama moves, if it is not credited. [...] It is credited, whenever it moves, as a just picture of a real original’. The results of these inquiries into dramatic response were later applied to narrative and poetry, and at the end of the century, Samuel Taylor Coleridge famously described our response to art as being achieved through the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’. That Coleridge wrote this in reference to novel reading makes
clear that these writers thought drama and narrative were analogous modes of imitation (McKeon, 2009, pp. 234, 237 [Addison’s italics], 239, 245, 250).

At one point in his commentary Genette (1980, p. 168) affirms ‘the millennial opposition between *diegesis* and *mimesis*’. But the notion that either ancient mimesis or modern realism aims to achieve the illusion of a transparent, unmediated imitation is itself a modern illusion, and it would be difficult to find anyone affirming Genette’s ‘millennial opposition’ before twentieth-century structuralist theory itself.

My brief review of realist theory at its modern origins brings it into close proximity with the ancient theory of mimesis. Does the resulting evidence of a greater diachronic continuity confirm narratology’s principle of narrative universality? It seems to me that by now the defects of dichotomous thinking and its model of the excluded middle suggest the need for a more balanced relation between continuity and discontinuity. One such relation is available in the system of modes and genres that we owe to Aristotle, a system that integrates the relative continuity between two genres, epic and novel, that belong to the same narrative mode, with the relative discontinuity of two narrative genres that thrived under very different historical circumstances.

**When Does History Matter?**

Earlier in this essay I affirmed the common wisdom that structuralist narratology entails a strict separation between narrative analysis and historical variation. The passages of narrative theory discussed here would seem to confirm that wisdom even though the nature of the narrative continuity they assert is mistaken. In the third edition of *Narratology*, however, Bal (2009, pp. 71, 62) draws our attention to her treatment of description and the embedded ‘mirror-text’ as evidence that ‘another preconception can be eliminated: that structural analysis is ahistorical’. We recall that in Bal’s analysis, description in the mimetic-realist text, inherently problematic, is rendered invisible by ‘naturalizing’ it to the narrative. Historical change enters with modernism. To demonstrate this difference between realism and modernism, Bal (2009, pp. 36, 38) devotes several pages to the analysis of a long passage from Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*, in which description ‘ruptures linearity’ and ‘stops narrative in its tracks’; her contrasting realist passages are straightforward snippets from James and Dickens and allusions to Hardy and Balzac. My quantifying language perhaps too baldly underscores one problem with Bal’s analysis. More daunting is the rapt overstatement of her exegesis, as though to compensate for the availability of comparable passages in realist novels.
(not least those of James and Dickens) (Bal, 2009, pp. 37-43). In a comparably historical vein, Bal (2009, p. 71) claims that ‘postmodernism has a special preference for the use of mirror-text’. Yet the ratio between postmodern and earlier texts Bal actually cites by way of example doesn’t come close to bearing out this generalization, and the far more frequent incidence of mirror texts before the mid-twentieth century measured against total number of publications must belie this easy claim (Bal, 2009, p. 71; cf. pp. 62-71).

Yet when a narrative technique is by consensus agreed to have attained broad acceptance at a recognized historical watershed, Bal sustains the ahistorical character of structural analysis by explicating it within a strictly linguistic classification. Free indirect discourse (FID) is a case in point. Bal treats FID within the logic of grammatical categorization without alluding to the chronologic of its dominant historical usage. Thus FID is one of the ‘intermediate forms’ in the progression of ‘levels of narration’ from more to less direct techniques by which the ‘language situation’ of the narrator introduces the language situation of the character (Bal, 2009, 51-56).

As already mentioned, Genette classifies FID as a variant of indirect style, and like Bal he characterizes it in soberly grammatical vocabulary. At the same time, Genette permits himself a less neutrally technical account. In fact it is in reference to indirect style that he (mistakenly) coordinates an imitative grammar of narration with the epistemological aim of raising the feeling of ‘literal fidelity’ (see above, p. 44). Indirect speech, still too shadowed by ‘the narrator’s presence’, fails in that aim. However FID, ‘allowing a greater extension of the speech’, thereby engineers the ‘beginning of emancipation’ (Genette 1980, p. 172). Sensitized by this strikingly qualitative metaphor for the relation between character and narrator in Genette’s account of FID, I returned to Bal only to find lurking within her own language an equally metaphorical term, but one of radically different import: not emancipation but invasion (ibid., p. 51). In Bal’s analysis, FID entails ‘text interference’, in which the language situation of the narrator is ‘invaded’ by that of the character. The implication of this terminological difference is that Bal and Genette bring to the analysis of FID the distinct forms intimated by their chosen categories of grammatical taxonomy: for Bal, the typology of ‘levels of narration’; for Genette, the typology of ‘states of characters’ speech’ (Bal, 2009, p. 48; Genette 1980, p. 171). As these terms may suggest, Bal’s analytic norm is (to use Genette’s terms) ‘who speaks’, whereas Genette’s is ‘who sees’ (Genette, 1980, p. 186). If so, the idea of focalization has succeeded for the most part in normalizing this crucial distinction, but it has not been successful in normalizing its application in narratological analysis.
What’s the significance of Bal’s unpersuasive revelation of antirealist techniques in modernist description that resists naturalization, and in the postmodern mirror text, as historically innovative? From the historically more rigorous perspective of genre history, these techniques are not antirealist. And from the perspective of actual usage, by the twentieth century they’re not innovative but conventional. Nevertheless Bal’s recourse to history does challenge the common wisdom about narratology and history. By way of amendment, it’s not that structuralist analysis eschews history but that it tends to get it wrong. More precisely, it abstracts moments or sequences from the diachronic continuum of history in order to erase some of them, and to give others the authority of the normative, even the universal, measure of narrative. A little history is a dangerous thing, especially when it’s selected with parti pris.

The comparison of how Bal and Genette analyze FID offers another insight. Both use structural typologies in their analyses, but both use figures – ‘invasion’ on the one hand and ‘emancipation’ on the other – to express the challenge FID makes to the coherence of those typologies. The reason for this is that structural typologies aim to be static taxonomies in the sense that they consist of ‘states’ and ‘levels’ that are fully separable from one another. However FID entails not a stasis but a process, a movement from one state or level to another and back again. I would like to suggest that there is an analogy between the challenge represented by FID at the micro-level of the sentence and the challenge represented by generic change at the macro-level of history. Both are processes that are inconsistent with static structures, but in certain cases both are seen to require accommodation.

Like Bal, Genette gestures toward eliminating the preconception that structural analysis is ahistorical, and the technique he refers to is more truly innovative than those of Bal. In what he calls ‘immediate speech’ and a further emancipation of the speech of the character, ‘the narrator is obliterated and the character substitutes for him’. Genette describes here the technique ‘whose inchoateness supposedly guarantees transparency and faithfulness to the deepest eddies of the “stream of consciousness”’, and this he regards as a ‘revolution in the history of the novel’ (Genette, 1980, pp. 173, 174, 180, his italics). That structuralist narratology might celebrate as a historical milestone the devolution of narrative to sheer imitation is surely unexpected. For non-structuralists, the importance of stream of consciousness is not to be doubted. But to see FID as no more than a halfway house on the road to stream of consciousness – or as, in contrast to it, undeserving of historical notice – would appear to bypass a consideration of the major difference between the two techniques.
Both Genette and Bal are interested in the affective response to narrative structures, but perhaps uncertain on how to integrate reader reception, presumably processual and variable under different micro- and macro-circumstances, with decontextualized and invariant form. Whether a matter of character states or levels of narration, Bal and Genette concur that to read FID is to experience the ‘merging’ of what normally are kept separate (Genette, 1980, p. 174; Bal, 2009, p. 51). In some cases, ‘a distinction into narrative levels can no longer be made’ (Bal, 2009, p. 56). In Genette’s (1980, p. 172) words, the experience of the reader can be one of ‘ambiguity’ and ‘confusion’. But although these descriptions seem accurate, they treat FID, and for that matter the syntagmatic axis of language itself, as though it were a snapshot rather than a cinematic unfolding in which something remarkable – a temporal ‘mediation’ – begins and runs its course. The point can be made by comparing what happens in FID to the temporality of stream of consciousness, which captures the character’s experience of interior dynamism but leaves the reader’s sense of it static and immobile because it is abruptly given rather than entered into or departed from by process.10 FID consists on the contrary of the process, self-conscious by virtue of being a process, of oscillating between the ‘voices’ of narrator and character, creating the effect of moving back and forth between ‘outside’ and ‘inside’, a movement that seems palpably to carve out a space of subjective interiority precisely through its narrative objectification.11

What makes FID distinctively different not only from stream of consciousness but also from direct and indirect discourse is that it enables us to ‘hear’ the difference between the voices of narrator and character along a grammatical and syntactic continuum that proceeds from the voice of the narrator to that of the character, and then back to that of the narrator. The sequence is continuous in that the tense of narration and the third-person reference with which it begins are maintained throughout. But the sequence is also a differential in that it takes us from (and finally back to) a narrative voice that’s more or less distinctive in its own right, but that is separated from the voice of the character by the fact that the character’s voice is represented in the recognizable expressive idiom with which direct

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10 Genette (1980, pp. 173-74) offers a tendentious reading of Joyce’s remark about stream of consciousness that makes a virtue of its abruptness as, rather than interiority, its ‘main point’. This is to sacrifice an understanding of FID that is within the supreme capacity of structural analysis alone – that is, the distinction between two correlative structures – to convey.

11 My scare quotes aim to shield myself from the charge of naïve literalism. By ‘voice’ I mean to evoke metaphorically how the words of narrators, and the thoughts of characters translated into words, would sound if spoken.
and indirect discourse have already made us familiar. (In the terminology of focalization, one might say that this difference in idiom corresponds to a shift in the focalized.) Although it reads like speech, FID represents at the level of thought. The representation of the character's speech would require a grammatical shift that would preclude continuity by interrupting it, rather than sustain continuity (as FID does) by modulating it along a differential. As a realist (and therefore self-conscious) technique, FID invites us to experience the character's consciousness by figuratively descending into that character's interiority, achieving the effect of depth by linguistic means that simultaneously displays and owns the technical artifice of that achievement. Stream of consciousness is the great example of realism in the faulty, structuralist sense of that term; FID exemplifies realism as the outcome of a macro-development in the capacity of novelistic narrative to thematize its formal technique of representation at the micro-level of the sentence.

Earlier in this essay I described Richardson's thematization of form through the representation of the character Mr. B. reading Pamela's letters and journal, the text that his readers are also in the process of reading. Exploiting Cervantes's techniques of self-conscious narration, Fielding achieves a similar but more striking effect by embedding impersonal abstractions of his narrator and his reader in the text of *Joseph Andrews*, at first belaboring the latter in the voice of the former for being little more than an ignorant and passive bystander at the site of narrative action, but gradually inviting the reader into a more active participation in the imaginative composition of the text. In passing, Fielding's reflexive textual intrusions might well be described as interferences or invasions, constituting narrator and reader as separate entities in order to bring them into explicit, sometimes jarring, relation. Several decades later, Burney and then Austen substantially refine Fielding's intrusive technique in the direction of FID. They forgo Fielding's obtrusive embodiment of his reader within his text as a distinct entity (although the unobtrusive invocation of the reader remains an occasional strategy), instead locating the reader function temporarily within one or another character (as Richardson does with Mr. B.). They transform Fielding's punctual moment of intrusion into

12 For example, in the last book of *Joseph Andrews* Fielding's (1999, p. 196) narrator tacitly invites the reader to anticipate the climax of the plot by employing one of the most familiar conventions of family romance, then begins his narration of the following day by personifying morning as a 'beautiful young Lady' who 'rose from her Bed [...] with a Countenance blooming with fresh Youth and Sprightliness, like Miss _____' – at which point a note directs us to the bottom of the page, where we read: 'Whoever the Reader pleases'.

an extended temporal process. And they conflate, then re-separate, narrator and character in that process, whose dialectical subtlety sustains the ‘illusion’ (Genette, 1980, p. 164) of interior depth, but not the illusion that the process that sustains this illusion is or should be ‘invisible’ (Bal, p. 41). The relation between Fielding’s innovative technique of narration and the institutionalization of FID offers one way to appreciate Fielding’s remarkable contribution to the development of novelistic narrative.

How is Fielding’s narrative practice accounted for in narrative theory? Given FID’s challenge to narratology, we might expect some comparable treatment of the way Fielding’s narrator ostentatiously intrudes into his own narrative. However he plays no role in Bal’s text, and no more than a cameo role in Genette’s. Is this because FID challenges the separation of narrator from character that defines their chosen typologies, whereas Fielding challenges, at a higher level, the separation of discourse from story? But are not the latter terms general categories or wholes that are made up, respectively, of particular parts like narrator and character? Genette dismisses the importance of narratorial intrusion on the basis of considering it within a typology of narratorial ‘person’ or ‘status’. In this framework, ‘[i]nsofar as the narrator can at any instant intervene as such in the narrative’, every act of narration is ‘presented in the first person’, and the ‘real question’ concerns not narratorial intervention in the narrative but ‘whether or not the narrator can use the first person to designate one of his characters’ (Genette, 1980, p. 244, his italics). The resulting typology gives us ‘the four basic types of narrator’s status’, none of which correspond to Fielding’s (or Cervantes’s) practice because none narrate from outside the narrative yet become intervening presences within it without also being named as first-person characters (Genette, 1980, p. 248).

But Genette returns to the topic of narratorial intervention when he considers ‘The Functions of the Narrator’, and it is here that Fielding’s name briefly surfaces (Genette, 1980, p. 255). Although Genette does number these functions, he is at pains to disclaim any system here: ‘These five functions are certainly not to be put into watertight compartments’. The ‘narrator’s interventions’ comes up almost by the way. ‘[E]veryone knows that Balzac “intervenes” in his narrative more than Flaubert, that Fielding addresses the reader more often than Mme. De La Fayette does […] but we will not claim to derive some cumbersome typology from that’ (Genette, 1980, pp. 256, 257). Of course Genette is at liberty to derive any sort of typology that would express his view of what is important enough to systematize for analysis; so his refusal to claim is less the scrupulous assessment of objective data it may sound like than the corollary of his judgment that the data he has
assembled lacks narratological importance. Or so it would seem. But it turns out that Genette’s diffidence relates not to narratorial intervention but to its eighteenth-century innovations. Shortly after this disclaimer Genette boldly characterizes the modernist interventions of Proust’s Marcel as an ‘invasion [...] of the narrative by its own discourse’. In fact this Proustian practice may bear responsibility ‘for the strongest shock given in this work, and by this work, to the traditional equilibrium of novelistic form’, and Genette speculates that the Recherche ‘concludes the history of the genre (of the genres) and, along with some others, inaugurates the limitless and indefinite space of modern literature ...’ (Genette, 1980, p. 259).13 This is a familiar argument from eschatology. Its effect is to efface the prior history of narratorial intrusion, which gathers momentum toward the end of the eighteenth century along with (pace Genette) the actual inauguration of literature as an explicit category. The problem is not entirely that structuralist narratology, thrown back on history, is likely to overemphasize modernism and to overlook its antecedents. As he explains in the Preface, Genette’s aim in writing Narrative Discourse was divided between his critical ambition to write a study of Proust’s Recherche and his theoretical ambition to use Proust as the basis for a study of narratology. But it must be said that the division of purpose that Genette describes, too comfortably, as ‘the paradox of every poetics’, may be itself a symptom of narratological overconfidence (Genette, 1980, p. 23). Not that Fielding should be put in competition with Proust’s incomparable text. My doubts concern more the way the stringent self-denial of ahistorical analysis is rewarded by the supreme confidence of ungrounded historical fiat. Perhaps the experience of deriving the totality of narrative theory from that single text created in Genette the illusion that in the process he had comprehended the totality of narrative practice.

Still, Genette’s remarks on Proust invite a more historically grounded reflection on modern attitudes toward genre. What is the relationship between the modern belief in the death of genre and the late modern notion of a non-genre literature, and the way the novel has been theorized, for most of its history, as a genre singularly deficient in generic identity? The idea of a separable ‘literary’ category is foreign to traditional culture. What looks like the special deficiency of the novel may rather be one of its

13 We might infer that Fielding’s intrusions fail to occasion the epochal shock delivered by Marcel’s because the structural absence of Fielding’s hypostatized reader from the internal terrain of the story somehow denies that reader the affective experience of intrusion. However, Genette, now describing what he calls the ‘ideological’ function of the narrator, has increased the range of his exemplary texts to include novels that diverge from the autobiographical structure exemplified by Marcel and Gil Blas (see Genette, 1980, pp. 256-58).
special functions: the role of enacting for modern culture the meaning of freedom as a negative quantity, a ‘freedom from’ what exists over against it. The modern shift in the idea of genre – from an enabling hermeneutic to a constraining taxonomy – is coextensive with the emergence of the novel because it marks a similar separation out of what formerly was held in relation. The novel is the great modern genre because it explicitly articulates a problem in matching particular instance to general kind or type that is only tacit, hence non-problematic, in traditional genre theory. The novel crystallizes genreness, we might say, self-consciously incorporating, as part of its form, the problem of its own categorial status. What makes the novel a different sort of genre is not in its ‘nature’ but in its tendency to reflect on its nature – which of course alters its nature in the process.

By the turn of the nineteenth century, FID was well on its way to becoming the new genre’s most distinctive method of narrating the speech and thoughts of characters in language that conveys their personal interiority. At this moment, the power of the new genre to evoke a range of positions along an epistemological continuum between documentary objectivity and emotional subjectivity was gathering at the latter end of that spectrum. To appreciate the importance of FID, the student of genre is likely to contextualize its emergence not only diachronically, within the history of novelistic form, but also synchronically, in relation to other analogous developments. At the turn of the eighteenth century, for example, the growth of so-called societies for the reformation of manners came to a head in the celebrity of the minister Jeremy Collier, who attacked playwrights for what he described as their profaneness and immorality. In Collier’s mind the basis for this attack was that “tis the Poet that speaks in the Persons of the Stage’, and when these dramatic characters are vicious, the playwright’s ‘private Sentiments fall under Censure’. Collier’s insistence that the characterization of a vicious person is necessarily a vicious characterization evoked many rejoinders, including the playwright William Congreve’s measured reply that nothing should be ‘imputed to the Persuasions or private Sentiments of the Author, if at any time one of these vicious Characters in any of his Plays shall behave himself foolishly, or immorally in Word or Deed’.14 This is the same moment that Swift, irritated at complaints that A Tale of a Tub is irreligious, felt obliged to point out ‘that some of those Passages in this Discourse, which appear most liable to Objection are what they call Parodies, where the Author

14 See McKeon 2005, pp. 99-102, where the Collier controversy is discussed in the context of other evidence that the modern separation between the public and the private was established in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.
personates the Style and Manner of other Writers, whom he has a mind to expose’ (Swift, 2010, p. 7). Neither Swift nor Congreve supposes himself to be breaking new ground. They’re insisting on tacit protocols of interpretation that, now made explicit, contribute to the period’s preoccupation with the nature and the limits of person, impersonation, personality, and personal identity.

Like the separation of the author’s from the character’s personality, the separation of narrator from character became an explicit protocol of literary characterization and interpretation. With hindsight, both separations can be recognized as the necessary precondition for modern experiments in their conflation. What the structuralists sequester in modernism and its aftermath as a strictly linguistic phenomenon is a far earlier, more gradual, and more expansive turn toward the modern that consists in the dialectical interaction between an unprecedented division of knowledge on the one hand, and on the other the multiple challenges to that division that were generated by it. Whether conceived as the ‘interference’ of one level with another or as its ‘emancipation’, what’s sacrificed through the analysis of FID as a strictly linguistic technique is an appreciation – seemingly a simple point – that language use partakes in larger intellectual and cultural movements with which it is contemporary, and shares structural similarities.

The structuralist separation of ‘structure’ from ‘history’ precludes this sort of insight by conceiving structure as ahistorical. I began this essay by describing the difference between the universal mode of narrative and its particular generic instances as structuralism has construed that difference in terms of a division between an abstract system of linguistic signification and the applications of that system in concrete use. Now, insofar as structure is an abstract universal, it seems justified to treat it as in itself suprahistorical; what’s been at issue in the foregoing discussion is the absence, in structuralist method, of analytic intercourse between the universal and the particular, structure and history. But there’s another sense of structure – structure as synchrony – that is related to universality in being devoid of temporality, but that is not for that reason devoid of a historical character.

Broadly speaking, until the later eighteenth century to do history had been to engage in diachronic or chronological study. At that time writers of the Scottish Enlightenment posited and began to practice a method of studying the past that abstracted a period, even a synchronic ‘moment’, apart from its diachronic temporality based on its similarity to other, structurally comparable moments in other diachronic sequences. Once returned to its chronology, the question was whether the distinctively layered character of
this synchronic moment bore a relation to its diachronic sequence similar to what transpired in those other ones. From these experiments emerged a comparative historiography. Half a century later Marx formulated a conception of history as the dialectical relation of diachrony and synchrony. Structuralism conceives the relation between synchrony and diachrony dichotomously. But the tradition that flows from Marx and the Scottish Enlightenment sees the synchronic departure from temporality as a condition under which the momentary suspension or freezing of diachrony allows historical understanding to be thickened along a different axis. It departs from temporality not by rising above it but by burrowing into it.

By this modern understanding, the study of history requires subjecting the diachronic dimension of sequential stages of temporality to the analysis of each moment’s synchronic dimension into levels of structure. Analogously, realism is a modern technique of representation that entails a double reflection: on the one hand, the ongoing representation of the real in the dimension of mimetic content; on the other hand, the representation of the real through the penetration of mimetic content by the dimension of diegetic formal self-consciousness, transforming the one-dimensionality of ‘the real’ into the reflexivity of ‘realism’.

**Postclassical / Postmodern / Unnatural Narrative Theory**

My argument thus far has concerned the ambition of structuralist narratology to theorize narrative form exclusively in terms of universal linguistic structure. On that basis narratology sought to isolate narrative form, both as diegetic form abstracted from mimetic content at the micro-level of a given narrative, and as modal structure abstracted from its generic variations at the macro-level of the history of narrative. Narratology’s ambition, I’ve maintained, is frustrated by its unrationalized reliance on one genre in particular, the novel, for its evidence of universal usage; by its reduction alike of generic, novelistic norms of realism and modal, narrative norms of mimesis; by its embedding of exclusive criteria within putatively inclusive criteria of narrative form; and by an ambivalent slippage between structural and affective standards in assessing narrative form.

In the last several decades, theorists of narrative impatient with the limitations of structuralist analysis have challenged this ‘classical’ narratology with increasing confidence and from multiple directions, culminating in a consensus that narrative theory has entered its second phase, far more inclusive than the first although profiting from the work done in
preparing the ground for the second. David Herman, who coined the term ‘postclassical narratologies’ and may be the most thorough explicator of this watershed, sees nearly as much continuity as break in the transition, but at the same time describes a new enterprise in which it would seem that just about anything goes.\textsuperscript{15} Another term for this second phase is ‘Postmodern Narrative Theory’, whose proponents see the first phase as more fully outmoded than does Herman, and from a more decidedly deconstructive and poststructuralist position (see Gibson, 1996; Currie, 1998). Finally, ‘unnatural narratology’ is the name given to work that understands structuralist narratology, itself a discloser of ‘naturalization’, to be a framework whose protocols ‘naturalize’ narrative, and therefore provide a negative guide to unnatural effects dictated by formal procedures or in any case achieved at the level of content (see Alber, Iversen, Nielsen, and Richardson, 2013).

So narratology has been radically reconstituted. No longer conceived as the systematic description of linguistic signification, narrative theory is currently defined by its rigorous inclusivity, forgoing the strict division of form from content, \textit{langue} from \textit{parole}, and structure from history and thereby accumulating a vast assemblage of new data, techniques, and narrative entities. And yet the relation between narrative and novel, mode and genre continues to be problematic. The great majority of texts analyzed and aduced as exemplary narratives continue to be novels, hence representative of only the most modern genre of that mode. Both mimesis and novelistic realism continue to be construed as epistemologically one-dimensional projects dedicated, whether naively or instrumentally, to the illusion of transparently representing the real. Moreover the classical partiality to the most modern genre, which persists in postclassical narratology’s common recourse to novels as representative of narrative, is aggravated by unnatural narratology’s preference for the most contemporary and self-consciously experimental novels to exemplify antimimetic/antirealist narrative. Yet as I have argued, the founding reflexivity of the novel genre exemplifies the formal and epistemological qualities of what continues to be called ‘antirealism’, while the richest trove of nonrealism in the ontological sense of supernatural and impossible contents is to be found in pre-modern romance, allegory, and the like.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{15} See Herman, 1999; Herman, 2005; Herman, 2012; Fludernik, 2005; Alber and Fludernik, 2010; Herman and Vervaeck, 2005.

\textsuperscript{16} Alber, Iversen, Nielsen, and Richardson, 2013; Mäkelä 2013; B. Richardson 2012; Phelan and Rabinowitz, 2012; Schaeffer and Vulture, 2005; Ronen, 2005; Palmer, 2005a; Fludernik, 1996, pp. 35-38, 130-31. In Fludernik’s argument mimesis is closely correlated with realism and realism with verisimilitude, thereby over-emphasizing illusion at the expense of self-conscious reflexivity.
In 1985, Bal cautioned against the term ‘theory of the novel’ because its practitioners have ‘obscured the precise position of the novel with respect to other genres and types of text’ (1985, p. 116; 2009, p. 175). Bal’s warning becomes unintentionally ironic with the realization that (as I’ve been arguing) theory of narrative of the sort she practices has had just this effect. In 2005, the postclassical narratologist David Herman wrote that ‘theories of narrative were entangled until quite recently with theories of the novel’ (Herman, 2005, 32n.1). Half a century ago this was, in the view of Frye, Scholes, and Kellogg, the result of novel imperialism (see above, p. 37). For the next forty years, I’ve been arguing, it’s been a function rather of structuralist narratology. Herman appears to suggest that with postclassical narrative theory this entanglement has ceased; yet this seems to me neither true nor, measured by the postclassical rejection of exclusive and analytic standards, desirable. Has structuralist narratology itself continued to exert a more powerful and lasting influence than the watershed thesis recognizes? Or was the structuralist paradigm only symptomatic of a larger phenomenon?

The differences between classical and postclassical narratology are most likely to be foregrounded when the topic under analysis is a concrete instance of language use like FID, where not narrative structure but its effect on the reader has become of unambiguous interest in postclassical writings. Recent commentary stresses how a focus on the reader (or hearer, in oral interchange) and the metaphorical nature of ‘voice’ generate rhetorical, pragmatic, perceptual, cognitive, medial, and contextual variables that militate against the adequacy of structurally systematic and unified typologies of language use. What nonetheless isn’t likely to be thrown into relief is the generic and historical specificity of FID, like narratorial intrusion and other expressions of realist reflexivity, as a novelistic technique (Walsh, 2010; Palmer, 2005a). The shift from a less to a more inclusive narrative theory cannot be doubted. Yet what seems most subject to inclusion is not the diachronic diversity of narrative but the diversity of theoretical postures that proliferated with the decline of structuralism and the rise of poststructuralism, and that has continued despite the decline of Theory itself.

However, her work is highly unusual if not unique in its methodological insistence that narrative theory must be informed by the history of genres (see below).
The exceptions to these (admittedly under-documented) generalizations, however, are of fundamental importance. I will limit myself to two scholars, who despite significant disagreement provide cogent and broadly complementary theorizations of FID as a historical phenomenon. Ann Banfield has argued that FID is a product of the ‘moment’ when orality or reported speech, which is dominated by the communicative function, is met and infiltrated by the expressive function of literacy or represented speech. In that engagement, the ‘self’ expressed by writing and the ‘now’ entailed in its subjectivity, tacit under conditions of orality, are separated out from the temporal ‘present’ of the ‘speaker’s’ act of communication and become explicit. FID enacts the dialectic between the speaker’s narration and the self’s expression. But because the moment of literacy is recurrent and variable, the moment of FID lies both in the linguistic potentiality of literacy and in its historical actualization – in Europe, when western culture becomes a literate culture. Monika Fludernik’s exhaustive study of FID combines a mastery of linguistics, an acute and imaginative engagement with classical and postclassical narratological scholarship, and a remarkably deep investigation of the historicity of FID, not only from the early novel onward but also in pre-novelistic, non-literary, and oral discourse. Fludernik argues that to come to terms with FID we need to acknowledge its presence in texts as early as the medieval and in forms more disparate than has yet been recognized. And we need to replace the familiar and misleading typology of direct, indirect, and free indirect discourse by a scalar model that can begin to account for its complex set of combinational variables, both linguistic and extra-linguistic, and for the subtly incremental range of its effects (Fludernik, 1993).

But the striking achievements of Banfield and Fludernik nonetheless leave the achievements of postclassical narratology itself uncertain. I am far from knowing the field well enough to submit that Fludernik’s achievement is not simply remarkable but unique; however both options leave the achievements of postclassical narratology itself uncertain. Narrative theory has been liberated from an analytic model far too rigid to do justice to its subject matter. And it may be in the nature of this liberation that the ambition implicit in the original project – to theorize narration in universal terms that therefore apply to all particular instances – will be transformed into a more eclectic aim of inclusivity, and the application of a priori principle exchanged for unregulated if not random profusion. Nonetheless, a looser coordination of the modal whole with its constituent generic parts still seems a viable aim. The problem is that apart from the
work of these two scholars and a few others, research in the field remains as partial as before the change, and in the same way. The a priori misconception of realism continues to skew the reading of the novel, while the already established tendency to focus on modern narrative (hence the novel) has become a yet more restrictive concentration on twentieth-century and contemporary narrative, especially as it entails non-literary discourses and media or is marked by their influence. That premodern narrative has comparable cross-discursive qualities but attracts little critical attention suggests that this ultra-modern emphasis has less to do with matters of form than with modernity itself.

Like classical narrative theory before it, postclassical and unnatural narratology seem to be trapped in what I have elsewhere described as the paradox of the ‘Novel Tradition’ (see McKeon, 2000a, pp. 268, 490, 587, 803–6). For such theorists, the wholesale valorization of novelty and free innovation that characterizes Western modernity at large (by which I mean the period that in England began around 1700) enforces a conviction that to be plausibly modern, modern history must be demonstrably or at least seemingly unprecedented, a conviction that interferes, even more than the historiography of progress, with the capacity to think historically. To have coherence, all historical things must display both the continuity of an integral entity and, within that continuity, the discontinuity that confirms its existence over time and space, its capacity to change without changing into something else. To have a historical existence, the novel therefore must possess a discernible continuity, a tradition. But the only tradition compatible with modernity must be characterized by the discontinuity of innovation. Consequently the history of the novel is intelligible only as a series of discontinuous stages – typically realism, modernism, postmodernism, and perhaps postcolonialism – each of which radically innovates on its predecessor, a claim that can be credited only by ignoring the formal coherence of realism’s dialectic of double reflection, which also grounds all later stages of the genre however distinct the terms of that dialectic may become. The longevity of FID is in this respect instructive. A remarkably subtle technique, FID brings the dialectic of form and content down to the micro-level of the sentence, and its affective power, structurally undiminished over time, nonetheless requires of its modern readers an undiminished capacity of attentive reception and response. We needn’t rehearse the force and consequence of life in late modernity – Benjamin’s storyteller virtualized and digitized – to conceive how the reflexivity of FID might be flattened.

18 E.g. see Alber and Fludernik, 2010, p. 13.
by familiarity to a merely one-dimensional reflection. This misrecognition then sets the stage for the putatively unprecedented self-consciousness of contemporary narrative. Adapting Giorgio Santayana, those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it as though it were new. David Herman has rightly observed that postclassical narratology ‘should not be conflated with poststructuralist theories of narrative’ (Herman, 1999, p. 2). But the overlap is considerable, especially with regard to what has become the taken-for-granted reduction of novelistic realism (e.g., see McKeon, 2000a, parts p. 10, p. 13). In this respect the legacy of structuralism has lived on in poststructuralism and postclassical narrative theory. Maybe we’ve learned to let the prefix ‘post’- do too much of our thinking for us.

Works Cited


