

The Affluence of Literature

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I. Barthes on Narrative Economy and Literary Luxuries

In his (early and structuralist) attempt to sketch out a general theory of “narrative”, that is, a scientific description and classification of the “[numberless] narratives of the world”, Roland Barthes repeatedly refers to a basic principle of “narrative economy” (Barthes 1978: 79-97). Narrative, used as an all-embracing category containing cultural practices and artifacts from all times,¹ thus designates a verbal communication arranged in accordance with the “the economy of the message”: what is told signifies, its elements are per definition always functional by merely being there, since “what is noted always appears as being notable” (Barthes 1978: 95).

However, already in this short summary a tension is revealed in the attempt to outline a general theory which concerns verbal conversations as well as novellas or tragedies. Barthes seems to operate with two distinct notions of the concept of economy, one applicable to conversational situations, and an entirely different one applicable to literary texts. As Paul Grice was to suggest, the pragmatics of conversation seem governed by a “Cooperative Principle” which can be summed up not only in rules of truth and relevancy, but also of quantity and manner (Grice 1989: 26-7). Verbal conversation is, according to Grice, in most cases regulated by demands of perspicuity, clarity, orderliness, briefness, and what may very well be termed an actual “economy of the message”. The manner (or style) of conversation should, in most cases, be brief and without “unnecessary prolixity”, and the rules regulating the informational quantity are by Grice summarized in the following two guidelines:

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required. (Grice 1989: 26)

Thus, a person listening to a conversational narrative may expect the teller to get to the point without too many misleading or simply prolific infor-

1 “[N]arrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think of Carpaccio’s *Saint Ursula*), stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversations.” (Barthes 1978: 79)

mational detours. The listener may of course also interrupt and reproach a teller who, in his opinion, departs from the Cooperative Principle.

Barthes' economy alludes to this principle of cultural discursive regulations relating to the conversational situation, but the concept is rather and in a crucial way developed in respect to Barthes' own main interest in the specific case of literary texts. Let us for instance consider the following definition of narrative functionality:

[A] narrative is never made up of anything other than functions: in differing degrees, everything in it signifies. This is not a matter of art (on the part of the narrator), but of structure; in the realm of discourse, what is noted is by definition notable. Even were a detail to appear irretrievably insignificant, resistant to all functionality, it would nonetheless end up with precisely the meaning of absurdity or uselessness: everything has a meaning, or nothing has. To put it another way, one could say that art is without noise [...]: art is a system which is pure, no unit ever goes wasted, however long, however loose, however tenuous may be the thread connecting it to one of the levels of the story. (Barthes 1978: 89-90)

As is clear by the concluding passages, this is a discussion of literary art rather than narrative. But it is obviously not an attempt to present guidelines for a normative poetics, precisely because it disallows any objections from the reader. In contrast to the case of the conversational listener, the reader may not interrupt the discourse by demanding the teller to "get to the point". The functionality of narrative elements does not therefore, according to Barthes, depend as much on the author's artfulness (on his ability to stick to the point) as on the mere logic of structurality: according to the structuralist notion, a structure is per definition a signifying system where no unit ever goes wasted. Even seemingly meaningless or insignificant elements in a literary work, then, carries the function of meaninglessness or insignificance in relation to the structure as a whole. This economy is obviously quite different from the "economy of the message", or the principle of informational restrictiveness: if art is a pure system without noise, everything has value and nothing may be questioned as irrelevant or superfluous. It could therefore be argued that a theory of literature has no need for the concept of motivation, since everything in literature is motivated just by its actual inclusion in the text which in itself gives it functionality. This could, perhaps, be one of the main points for distinguishing scientific criticism from normative criticism.

But the motivation of the seemingly insignificant detail is in fact central to Barthes' argument in the "Introduction": however loose, however tenuous the connection to a narrative deep structure may be, it is still there, and it is still important for Barthes. Take for instance the following analysis of two minimal excerpts from Ian Fleming's *Goldfinger*:

If I am told (in *Goldfinger*) that *Bond saw a man of about fifty*, the piece of information holds simultaneously two functions of unequal pressure: on the one hand, the character's age fits into a certain description of the man (the 'usefulness' of which for the rest of the story is not nil, but diffuse, delayed); while on the other, the immediate signified of the statement is that Bond is unacquainted with his future interlocutor, the unit thus implying a very strong correlation (initiation of a threat and the need to establish the man's identity). [...] When we are told that – the telephone ringing during night duty at Secret Service headquarters – *Bond picked up one of the four receivers*, the moneme *four* in itself constitutes a functional unit, referring as it does to a concept necessary to the story (that of a highly developed bureaucratic technology). (Barthes 1978: 90-1)

Once more we see how Barthes is torn between an understanding of narrative as on the one hand message and on the other art, as the notion of pure art without functional hierarchy (motivated elements vs. unmotivated elements) is still restrained by the concept of narrative economy or the importance to stick to the point, i. e., the underlying story. In the first example the insignificant detail is motivated by its relation to an event in the Bremondian sense, that is, a moment of risk with (at least logically) different possible outcomes. In the second example it is motivated as the setting of a milieu which makes such events intelligible. Thus, the pure system of given notability is stratified into a hierarchical system where notability is determined by every element's proximity to or distance from a stipulated plot-structure – a theory based, apparently, on an Aristotelian poetics of the superiority of the *mythos*. According to this view, the analyst may, with reference to this deep structure, determine each and every element's structural importance; Barthes makes a distinction between the “real hinge-points of the narrative” and those passages which “merely ‘fill in’ the narrative space separating the hinge functions”, calling the former “*cardinal functions* (or *nuclei*)” and the latter complementary “*catalysers*” (Barthes 1978: 93). The narrative point thus becomes the development of those cardinal events of risk (and one understands by this why Barthes uses a Bond-novel as his prime example), which in turn sets up a basic framework that other elements, different kinds of “*expansions*”, only “fill [...] out according to a mode of proliferation in principle infinite” (Barthes 1978: 97). And this hierarchical division of the important and the unimportant leads Barthes to the strange remark that “*expansions can be deleted, nuclei cannot*”, which obviously is inconsistent with the notion of pure art; rather, it implies a system of pure narrative infused with an abundance of various textual contaminations (Barthes 1978: 98). To synthesize these quite contradictory conceptualizations of literature as art *and* structure, Barthes needs to introduce an element of excess and productive unproductivity into the narrative economy:

Between these points of alternative [i.e., “the risky moments of a narrative”], these ‘dispatchers’, the catalysers lay out areas of safety, rests, luxuries. Luxuries which are not, however, useless: it must be stressed again that from the point of view of the story a catalyser’s functionality may be weak but not nil. Were a catalyser purely redundant (in relation to its nucleus), it would nonetheless participate in the economy of the message; in fact, an apparently merely expletive notation always has a discursive function: it accelerates, delays, gives fresh impetus to the discourse, it summarizes, anticipates and sometimes even leads astray. (Barthes 1978: 95)

This economy is obviously quite different from the one implied in Grice’s Cooperative Principle which is based on the communicative situation where, if I request something from you, I may expect you to fill this request to the best of your ability in a manner as quick and adequate as possible. The Barthesian economy, on the other hand, allows a situation where I, when turning to a detective novel, instead of a coherent structure of risky events receive only the scant framework of such a plot, expanded by a long autonomous essay on the delights of Chicago, a couple of hundred pages of nonsense dialogue written in gibberish, a few interposed short stories written by the author’s wife, or the full biographies of his several cats (all actual elements of Harry Stephen Keeler’s writings). In other words, for the narrative economy to be relatable to literature as a pure system with given functionality, it needs to accept waste as one of its central aspects. Barthes seems to intuit this, but instead of questioning the economic principle’s adequacy for a theory of literary texts, he, apparently constrained by a normative model of communicative efficiency, tries to restore an essential and hierarchical connection between these secondary luxuries and a primary event-structure.

However, only a couple of years later, Barthes himself questions his earlier standpoints. In “The Reality Effect” he abandons the universal claims of an all-embracing narratology and limits the discussion to concern literary texts exclusively (Barthes 1989b). This time his main examples come not from Fleming but Flaubert – a writer infamous for his predilection for prolonged descriptions rather than neat event-structures² – and Barthes’ argument is obviously intended as a critique of the kind of structural analysis he himself presented two years earlier in the same journal (*Communications*). Structural analysis, Barthes says, needs to leave out important elements of literature that “no function (not even the most indirect) can justify” – elements which simply cannot “be recuperated by structure” (Barthes 1989b: 141). Judged according to the rules of narrative economy, these aspects of literature become an outrage:

² For a summary on this topic, see for instance Le Calvez (2001: 99).

[S]uch notations are scandalous (from the point of view of structure), or, what is even more disturbing, they seem to correspond to a kind of narrative *luxury*, lavish to the point of offering many “futile” details and thereby increasing the cost of narrative information. (Barthes 1989b: 141)

Obviously, Barthes once again invokes his prior concepts, but this time to distance literature from, rather than surrender it to, the economical principle: passages or notations with loose or no connection to a basic structure are scandalous only from the point of view of structural analysis, which, accordingly, must be deemed an inadequate instrument in relation to its objects.

This insight instigates several more or less articulated revisions: first of all, Barthes needs to consider the useless detail as something inevitable for narrative in its new and primarily literary or aesthetic sense;³ secondly, he has to reevaluate the centrality of the Bremondian event (or, more generally, *mythos* as point), since these inevitable passages are without risk or action at all; and, most importantly, he must reject the principle of communicative efficiency when it comes to literature (Barthes 1989b: 142-3). With an odd reference to studies in the corporeal “languages” of bees, Barthes concludes that description is characteristic “of the so-called higher languages”, since it is “justified by no finality of action or of communication” (Barthes 1989b: 143). Instead, Barthes has to turn back to classical Rhetorics to find accounts of its purely “aesthetical function”, and, even, its “aesthetic finality”: ekphrasis for instance, Barthes notes, had “its end in itself” (Barthes 1989b: 143).

Thus, returning to Flaubert, Barthes finds that the extensive descriptions of Rouen in *Madame Bovary* do not function as setting for narrative events but as “a sort of setting meant to receive the jewels of a number of rare metaphors, [...] as if, in Rouen, all that mattered were the figures of rhetoric to which the sight of the city lends itself” (Barthes 1989b: 144). It should be noted that Barthes gives these lavish “jewels” a new motivation or a new functionality particular to the conventions of realism: according to him, they add a sort of pseudo-referentiality (the actual “reality effect”) by simulating historiography’s demand for exact verisimilitude. But what interests us here is not the specific poetics of realism (or a version thereof) or even the poetics of Flaubert, but the fact that literature renders the profusion of writing possible. As Barthes himself states, the Rouen-passages, from the point of view of aesthetics rather than structure or story, are not scandalous

³ “Even if they are not numerous, the ‘useless details’ therefore seem inevitable: every narrative, at least every Western narrative of the ordinary sort nowadays, possesses a certain number.” (Barthes 1989: 142) Even though the line between literary work and narrative form is not drawn explicitly, it remains implicitly functional in Barthes’ argument.

at all, but rather justified “by the laws of literature” (Barthes 1989b: 145). These laws even preclude the need for justification, if we accept Barthes’ conception of literature as a pure system with given notability.⁴

To sum up my discussion of Barthes I would like to consider the concept of waste found in Grice’s own suggested objection to the maxim regulating the quantity of information:

[I]t might be said that to be overinformative is not a transgression of the Cooperative Principle but merely a waste of time. However, it might be answered that such overinformativeness may be confusing in that it is liable to raise side issues; and there may also be an indirect effect, in that the hearers may be misled as a result of thinking that there is some particular *point* in the provision of the excess of information. (Grice 1989: 26-7)

If we accept the purity of the aesthetic system we must conclude that literature, in contrast to conversational communication, lacks any such hierarchy of centrality and marginality, of main and side tracks, or of guiding and misleading elements. Particular works may certainly still function through something like “guiding-effects” or “misleading-effects”, as in the case of all those (highly economical) red herrings of detective fiction, since a writer is always free to use structure as a style of composition. But the mere appearance of structured works does not prompt the equation of structurality with art itself. Rather, I would say, it is the astructurality of art that renders the composition of structured works possible, since astructurality makes possible all types of compositional forms. The aesthetic economy, then, is something entirely different from the narrative or the conversational economy in that it regulates an acentric system of valuable waste or indispensable dispense. If art is pure it lacks all external functionality beyond the mere actuality of the work, just as writing only functions by making possible the production of multiple forms. Perhaps there is reason to recall Georges Bataille’s plea for a theory not only of the “restricted” economy of particular systems organized by lack and shortage but also of the “general”

⁴ Barthes’ subsequent quest for alternative principles of economy, notably in psychoanalysis, comes as no surprise. For narrative theory the following remarks, presented in the “Proust Round Table” (where Barthes was joined by Gérard Genette and Gilles Deleuze, among others), are certainly interesting, not least because they, contra Peter Brooks, evoke a conception of pleasure detached from narrative desire: “I will simply say, in a word, that it may now be time, given the evolution of textual theory, to question the economy or economies of pleasure in the text. [...] We could for example start with the observation that for millennia, there was an undisputed pleasure in narration, anecdotes, stories, tales. If we now produce texts that are no longer narrative, what substitutive economy controls pleasure?” (Deleuze et al. 2007: 52) The interesting thing, which I think we should acknowledge, is Barthes’ attempt to move beyond the economy of point to, in his particular case, an affirmative theory of *jouissance*.

economy of affluence and waste that nature's play of living matter constitutes. (Bataille 1998: 22-6) A similar approach may well be needed in the field of aesthetics. If certain works or compositional styles seem neat and thrifty they are still but moments in art as grand exudation, as the immense production of capricious forms. The study of the singular work, then, leads not to the discovery of transcendent patterns but, perhaps, rather to the affirmation of writing as the production of pure abundance.

In what follows I will attempt to outline and clarify this idea of art as inherently non-economical in the restricted sense, and I will start off by examining two additional commentators on the descriptive (or "luxurious") passages in Flaubert. The first one, Marxist theorist Georg Lukács, takes a negative stance toward these, while the second one, literary theorist and "leading narratologist"⁵ Gérard Genette, has a more affirmative approach.

II. Narration vs. description: Lukács and Genette on Flaubert

It might seem strange to consider Lukács in a narratological context, but the fact is that his essay "Narrate or Describe?", published thirty years before Barthes' "Introduction", proves an early example of later narratology's tendency to emphasize the "dynamic" events of narrative at the expense of "static" descriptive passages in literature (Lukács 1970). Lukács' argument could perhaps be summarized as that of an Aristotelian devotee of the primacy of *mythos* as developed by an internal logic of necessity paired with a Platonist concern for art's ideological function in the State.

Let us start by considering the following classification of some canonized Western novelists:

In Scott, Balzac or Tolstoy we experience events which are inherently significant because of the direct involvement of the characters in the events and because of the general social significance emerging in the unfolding of the characters' lives. We are the audience to events in which the characters take active part. We ourselves experience these events.

In Flaubert and Zola the characters are merely spectators, more or less interested in the events. As a result, the events themselves become only a tableau for the reader, or, at best, a series of tableaux. We are merely observers. (Lukács 1970: 116)

This sums up Lukács' basic distinction between narration and description as main principles for artistic composition. If the first group of novelists is associated with totality, activity and identification, the latter ones are correspondingly connected to fragmentation, passivity and alienation. Thus, according to the early Marxist notion of literature as social reflection, Lukács

⁵ This consecratory act is performed by Seymour Chatman (Chatman 1990: 22).

concludes that while a writer like Balzac is able to give dynamic literary form to his *a priori* experience of participating in a world of conflict, Flaubert (or even more so Zola) is only able to describe his *a posteriori* view of a static or ready-made world in which he himself does not partake (Lukács 1970: 118-20). Since the Marxist ideology adheres to the former rather than to the latter view of life, Lukács deems dynamic narrative manifestations of “true”, and static description outbreaks of “false”, poetry.

What interests us here, however, is rather how narrative is coupled with a principle of necessary selection. If true poetry for Lukács consists in the representation of man’s actions in social situations based on conflict,⁶ *mythos* cannot be seen (as in minimalist theories of narrative⁷) simply as a narrative deep structure of connecting events, but must be understood as an integral aspect of *mimesis* itself, that is, as something infusing the totality of the work. Accordingly, that which is not an internal and necessary part of the *mythos* does not belong to the work but constitutes, as Lukács puts it, plain “ballast” (Lukács 1970: 128).

The combination of this view of the work as totality with the theory of literature as the representation of life and narrative as the perspective of direct retrospection rather than distanced observation of lived experience leads Lukács to a model of the “epic” author apparently based on Hegelian hindsight. The theory is concentrated in the following two formulas: “Description contemporizes everything. Narration recounts the past”; and “Narration establishes proportions, description merely levels.” (Lukács 1970: 130, 127) The author using the narrative method is thus, with the totality of the work in mind, in the favorable position of ordering his account by selecting and focusing those traits, things and events of *essential* importance, while the one using the contemporizing method of description, on the other hand, “loses himself in a whirlwind of details of apparently equal significance” (Lukács 1970: 128). In other words, while narrative is able to stratify its material in accordance with a hierarchic principle of significance, description must account for whatever comes in its way, paying both “the important and the unimportant” equal attention (Lukács 1970: 131).

Since the narrative principle or the restriction of material in relation to the point is not equated with literature as such, but only with true, or rather (aesthetically and ideologically) acceptable, literature, Lukács leaves the

⁶ “The inner poetry of life is the poetry of men in struggle, the poetry of the turbulent, active interaction of men. [...] Epic art – and, of course, the art of the novel – consists in discovering the significant and vital aspects of social practice. From epic poetry men expect a clearer, sharper mirror of themselves and of their social activity.” (Lukács 1970: 126)

⁷ Cf. the well-known narratological discussion on the requisite number of events in a narrative.

door open for us to still consider art as a pure system with given notability (or non-notability). In spite of his own argument, Lukács seems to agree that literature *as such* allows both compositional principles (narration *and* description), even though his own particular Marxist philosophy can advocate only one of these. Lukács' main objection against static description must therefore be seen in the specific context of a theory of reification. In abandoning the epic consistency, that is, *mythos* as the representation of the world as a dynamic totality, the descriptive style, according to Lukács, fetishizes the thing by disconnecting it from the fields of human production, situating man and object at the same level of autonomy. Thus, instead of describing the thing in detail, the author should narrate its history of production, so that the account properly may focus the underlying relations of power and conflict.⁸ But even more important is the fact that the descriptive method understood in this way proves to lack "humanity" (Lukács 1970: 140), since it "debases characters to the level of inanimate objects" (Lukács 1970: 133).⁹

Thus we may understand Lukács' aggression towards the seemingly harmless descriptive distractions in, for instance, Flaubert. If art represents reality, an axiom for Lukács' aesthetic theory, the literary work presents first and foremost an ideology, a way of looking at the world.¹⁰ A static and unchangeable composition, accordingly, implies a philosophy of society as equally static and unchangeable (that is, in Marxist terms, a quite *bourgeois* philosophy); and literary works with no apparent "point", with no rule for measuring significance or importance, denote a world without values. Hence, we may assume that Lukács finds Flaubert aesthetically deficient first

8 Lukács quotes a passage from *Laokoon*, where Lessing discusses Homer's depiction of the sceptres of Agamemnon and Achilles, as an example. Lessing highlights how the sceptres are contrasted not by descriptions of their mere appearances but by narrations of their historical and social backgrounds: one is crafted by Vulcan and wielded by Gods, the other "cut by an unknown hand in the mountains"; one is associated with nobility and force, the other with humility and justice; and so on (Lukács 1970: 137-8). Lukács' point, obviously, is that the central conflict of class and power appears not in the objects themselves, the sceptres as fetishized commodities, but in the history of their respective processes of manufacture.

9 Sara Danius, following a well-known essay by Proust, notices something similar regarding the flattened relationship between character and object in Flaubert: "In Proust's view, what is perhaps most characteristic of Flaubert's style is his predilection for turning objects into living entities. [...] What is even more important is that this grammatical inversion is perfectly symmetrical, for the reverse is also true: in Flaubert, human subjects readily turn into objects. [...] The result is an essentially leveled universe, one in which humans have no more, but also no less, agency than an Algerian silk scarf[.]" (Danus 2006: 69-70)

10 "Compositional principles of a poetic work are a manifestation of an author's view of life." (Lukács 1970: 140)

and foremost because he finds the implied world-view of his compositional technique politically deficient. But the important thing is that, even though he banishes Flaubert from the State, he never banishes him from the regime of art. Lukács' whole argument is based on the recognition that literature *as such* prohibits neither the descriptive technique nor static compositionality, and even that the seemingly insignificant detail is such a frequent trait of literature that it needs a thorough examination. Since he, implicitly, accepts that literature in itself is something entirely different from narrative (something which includes *both* the narrative and the descriptive style) we may conclude that he also, if tacitly and reluctantly, recognizes art as a pure system with given notability – and that this, from his particular political and aesthetic point of view, is what makes it dangerous.

Moving on to Genette, we find in his essay on “Flaubert’s Silences”, published in the same year as Barthes’ “Introduction”, statements quite similar to those of Lukács. Take, for instance, the following comparison to Balzac:

The abundance of the descriptions does not correspond in Flaubert, then, as it does for example in Balzac, to needs of a dramatic kind, but primarily to what he himself calls “the love of contemplation.” One certainly finds in his *oeuvre* a number of descriptive tableaux, like that of Yonville at the beginning of the second part of *Madame Bovary*, the presence of which is justified by the need to give to the action and to the character’s feelings a sort of explanatory framework: one has to know the setting of Yonville in order to understand what Emma’s life in it is to be. But more often description is elaborated for its own sake, at the expense of the action, which it does not attempt to elucidate, it might be said, so much as to suspend or distance. *Salammbô* is the best known example of a narrative crushed as it were by the sumptuous proliferation of its own setting. (Genette 1982: 192-3)

The last sentence may sound disapproving, but while Lukács declares such passages “artistically superfluous” by asking the rhetorical question “Who has anything to gain from such a description?” (Lukács 1970: 136),¹¹ Genette instead expresses his preference exactly for those “musical moments when the narrative is lost and forgets itself in the ecstasy of an infinite contemplation” (Genette 1982: 196). This is, perhaps, as close as we get to an actual account of the value of waste: in the scandalous luxuries of literature, the seemingly insignificant details and the prolonged, static descriptions, narrative is lost, but at the same time something entirely else is gained: musicality, ecstasy, infinity, contemplation. “Action”, then, abdicates in favor of

¹¹ Kahn actually has “What purpose does such a description serve?”, but I find my translation better adapted to Lukács’ German original: “Wem gibt eine derartige Beschreibung etwas?” (Lukács 1955: 127)

“reverie” (Genette 1982: 196), or the possibility for the reader to lose herself in a pure waste of time.

In Genette’s essay, Flaubert’s tendency to wander off appears not as a shortcoming but as an artistic merit, or rather as a vital feature of his art. We have already stated that literature considered as pure system with given notability lacks transcendent finality, and hence the need for external motivation. A writer, accordingly, cannot be reproached for textual vagrancies, since the articulation of these vagrant motions is the work’s only aim. Aesthetic purity, as Lukács reluctantly recognizes, prevents us from stratifying the textual materials into main and side tracks, central events and marginal fillings. Vagrant descriptive passages, then, cannot contaminate the pure essence of narrativity in a work, but are rather the work itself, its only manifestation.

Genette, as an aficionado of literature rather than narrative, is able to use the theory of narrative economy only to note the manners in which Flaubert diverts from this principle: narrative theory becomes a backdoor to the singularity of the artistic work, to “what is most specific in Flaubert’s writing” (Genette 1982: 199). Thus, when Genette notes a passage where a dramatic scene is aborted and replaced with what appears as memories from the author’s personal childhood, he is able to regard this not as a demonstration of Flaubert’s “clumsiness” or “inattention” as an architect of *mythos* but as something that rather actually “saves the whole scene, because in it we see the author forgetting the curve of his narrative and *going off on a tangent*” (Genette 1982: 197). Genette notes several similar passages where Flaubert exhibits this art of “forgetting”,¹² where one scene or another is developed “beyond its diegetic function and blossoms for its own sake” (Genette 1982: 194), and seems to recognize that to read Flaubert is to follow these processes of proliferation rather than the connecting chain of actions and events. The textual expansions, accordingly, cannot be deleted, and nothing is gained by economizing on narrative information: rather, Genette treats

¹² “Flaubert, however, becomes absorbed (and with him, his novel) in the incidental. He forgets the marquise, her walk, her love affairs, and becomes fascinated by some material circumstance: a door, behind her, that bangs to and vibrates, *interminably*.” (Genette 1982: 199)

the external exclusion of the seemingly insignificant detail in Flaubert as an act of artistic castration.¹³

In his affirmative account of the proliferation of writing, Genette gives an indirect account of the value of waste in literature, and hence a theory of literary affluence. But his argument too remains limited by an implied equation between narrative and literary forms. This is clear by the way Genette wraps up his discussion by stating that Flaubert's compositional technique is the first to effect that "*denovelization*" of the novel "with which the whole of modern literature seems to have begun" (Genette 1982: 200). The proliferation of writing, then, is somewhat paradoxically considered not as a negation of the principle of narrative economy, but of the laws of literature itself:

Flaubert continued to write novels while *refusing* – without knowing it, but with the whole of his being – the demands of fictional discourse. It is this refusal that is important to us, and the involuntary, almost imperceptible trace of boredom, indifference, lack of attention, forgetfulness, that he leaves over an *oeuvre* apparently aspiring to a useless perfection, and which remains for us admirably imperfect and as it were absent from itself. (Genette 1982: 200)

Here Genette is obviously caught up in the mythology of modernity and transgression, but what his essay describes is not a project of negation but of affirmation. Like Lukács, Genette temporarily mistakes the normative ideal of some particular realist aesthetics (a historical parenthesis, at most) for the true essence of the novel itself: the argument still implies that novel *is* narrative, that the demands of fictional discourse are demands for *mythos*, structure, economy, etc. But, as Genette simultaneously suggests, the artistry of Flaubert, the aesthetical value of his writings, has very little to do with such narrow demands. It may be true that these texts defy a particular model of literature, but what is important is, again, rather how their actual reality makes the contingencies of literature and writing visible. If art is a pure system, this actuality of the work is all what matters and the only motivation its elements need. And if Flaubert negates the principle of narrative economy it is only because he affirms the principle of literary affluence. Perhaps this is what Genette actually means in the following poetic sentences:

¹³ Genette discusses ten lost pages, describing the technology of a complicated toy, from *Madame Bovary*. Flaubert himself eliminated this section from the final version of the book on the instruction of a nit-picking critic. Rather than regarding the inclusion of these pages as a loss of narrative efficiency, Genette considers their exclusion a regrettable artistic loss. Genette even questions the "docility with which Flaubert, while protesting, gave in to [the critic's] censorship", and wishes that he had instead fully "dared to abandon himself to his deeper tendencies". (Genette 1982: 193)

[Flaubert's] project – as he said more than once – was to die to the world in order to enter literature. But language itself becomes literature only at the price of its own death, since it has to lose its meaning in order to accede to the silence of the work. (Genette 1982: 199)¹⁴

Genette continues by stating that this silence is “the very essence of literature” (Genette 1982: 199), and this, perhaps, sums up our argument. In literature language has to abandon its functionality, or, at least, the functionality of everyday discourse, of meaning, information and point. Rather than an instrument for effective communication it becomes an instrument for “silence”, that is, the aesthetically valuable proliferation of linguistic waste. The “silence of the work”, then, does not denote some restricted minimalist conception of art (as should be obvious from the example used), but announces the immanence and the singularity of the work: it asserts that the work does not represent, express or communicate anything beyond the articulation of its actual actuality.

III. The possibilities of literature

What brings all three theorists considered here – Barthes, Lukács and Genette – together is the apparent conflict between on the one hand an abstract theoretical model of how literature *should* function according to some presumed central principles (significance, structure, *mythos*, etc.) and on the other hand the pragmatic experience of reading actual literary works like, for instance, those of Flaubert. When related to the theoretical model, the singular work appears as divergent, deviant or transgressive: for Barthes it becomes “scandalous”, for Lukács “false” and for Genette a negative act of “denovelization”.

This tension lies at the heart of narratology used as a method for literary analysis. It becomes apparent in the treatment of Proust in one of Genette's later works, the highly influential essay on narrative discourse (Genette 1980);¹⁵ as, for instance, in Marie-Laure Ryan's concept of “diluted nar-

¹⁴ Obviously, the quote echoes from Maurice Blanchot, but also from Barthes. Cf. the following excerpt, dated as early as 1964: “Literature's substance is the general category of language; in order to create itself, not only must it kill what has engendered it, but even, in order to commit this murder, it can use no other instrument than this very language it must destroy.” (Barthes 1989a: 230)

¹⁵ Cf. Barthes' own comment on Genette: “Here is how Genette's project concerns us: what he discerns in Proust, with predilection (as he himself underlines), are narrative deviances (by which the Proustian narrative counters our possible notion of a simple, linear, ‘logical’ narrative). Now, deviances (from a code, a grammar, a norm) are always manifestations of writing: where the rule is transgressed, there writing appears as excess, since it takes on a language *which was not foreseen*.” (Barthes 1989c: 174)

rativity” (Ryan 1992). Ryan picks up the idea of a “textual economy” in an attempt, in conformity to the project of the narrative turn, to broaden the study of narrative not only to non-literary discourses (news media, historiography, soap operas, etc.) but also to more complex literary works (like those of postmodern fiction). In her classification of these various discourses according to their “degree of narrativity”, Ryan presents *Madame Bovary* as an example of “diluted narrativity”, a category which, obviously, relies on the conception of a central narrative core or deep structure contaminated by other kinds of aesthetic fillings. The levels of diluted narrativity are described as follows:

Far from forming the sole focus of interest, the plot of the diluted narrative competes for attention with nonnarrative elements such as extended descriptions, metanarrative comments, digressions, narratorial and authorial interventions, general considerations, and philosophical meditations. [...] While the highly narrative text keeps the reader looking ahead, the text of diluted narrativity invites her to linger on the scene, to step outside narrative time. The reader is less concerned with finding out how the story ends than with visualizing the setting, experiencing its atmosphere, and achieving intimacy with the minds of characters. (Ryan 1992)

This account is obviously prompted by the will to go beyond the restricted theory of narrative economy in an attempt to affirm the affluence of literature or that unstructured moment of reading where one gets lost in whatever comes by. But here too the luxuries of literature are, to use Barthes’ expression, “recuperated by structure”, retraced back to the *mythos* as setting, atmosphere or character psychology. Even more striking is Ryan’s obvious sense of conflict: narrative and nonnarrative segments are described as competitors of the reader’s attention. What Ryan actually seems to find is the lack of hierarchy in literature, but the repudiation of the presumed precedence of plot in writers like Flaubert becomes problematic in the theoretical context of narratology. Instead of a theory of art as a pure system with equal notability or non-notability, Ryan’s catalogue of the narrative degrees becomes a theory of contamination and the struggle for significance. Description, then, again becomes the suspension of narrative and an obstacle for narrative efficiency. Even though the reader is considered “less concerned” with the progression of the event structure, the protracted scenes are regarded only as aspects (“however loose, however tenuous”, as Barthes put it) of the totality of *mythos*. The reader’s compassionate lingering, then, becomes nothing but a more forbearing version of “reading for the plot”. This becomes clear in the following cognitive description of the act of reading diluted narratives: “Diluted narrativity asks the reader to sort out and condense information in order to retrieve the plot[.]” (Ryan 1992) But is this really what Flaubert

asks of his readers? Rather, we would respond with Genette, we are asked to lose ourselves in those musical moments of forgetfulness.

The interesting thing, however, is that all of these theorists still recognize these narratively troublesome texts as actual works of literature, and that, as I put it earlier, none of them banishes them from the regime of art *as such*. Thus, no matter how novel these techniques or these particular ways of writing may seem in a narrow historical-canonical comparison, they must at the same time be understood as contingent, i.e. possible and unforeseeable, manifestations of the multiplicities of literature. Every act of writing, then, even the one seeking to adhere to or transgress some particular normative model, becomes an affirmation of the infinite and indefinite possibilities of literature.¹⁶

Barthes' "pure system" and Genette's "silence of the work" could probably be seen as two different attempts at describing the immanence of the work. If art is pure, the need for motivation or justification is eliminated by the work's self-sufficient actuality; and if the work is silent, it is so only because it does not communicate beyond this actuality. Descriptions or similarly "luxurious" passages, then, are, to use Seymour Chatman's expression, "no textual handmaidens", they do not belong to a particular stratum or sub-form of the text, "ancillary and hence, by implication, inferior to Narrative" (Chatman 1990: 26). Rather, they are the text itself, considered as a plane assemblage of aesthetic materials situated at the same level of (non)given (non)notability. These passages are, accordingly, not a waste of narrative efficiency, but rather something which elucidates the differences between narrative and literature, between the economy of point and the possibility of pure profusion. The finality of the artistic work, then, lies in its mere actuality, and its elements and passages are motivated only by writing as the act of aesthetic articulation.

¹⁶ Perhaps this is nothing more than a paraphrase of the following sentence from Maurice Blanchot: "What attracts the writer, what moves the artist, is not directly the work; it is the search, the impulse that leads to it, the approach of what makes the work possible: art, literature, and what these two words conceal." (Blanchot 2003: 199)

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