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The Rustle  
of Language

*Translated by Richard Howard*

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## The Discourse of History

The formal description of groups of words superior to the sentence (which will for convenience's sake be called *discourse*) is not of recent date: from Gorgias to the nineteenth century, it was the specific object of the old rhetoric. Recent developments of linguistic science nonetheless give it a new actuality and new means: a linguistics of discourse may henceforth be possible; by reason of its effects on literary analysis (whose importance in teaching is familiar to us), it even constitutes one of the first tasks of semiology.

This second linguistics, at the same time that it must seek out the universals of discourse (if they exist), in the form of units and general rules of combination, must obviously decide if structural analysis permits retaining the old typology of discourse, if it is indeed legitimate still to oppose poetic discourse to fictional discourse, fictive narrative to historical. It is on this last point that I should like to offer some reflections: the narration of past events, commonly subject in our culture, since the Greeks, to the sanction of historical "science," placed under the imperious warrant of the "real," justified by principles of "rational" exposition—does this narration differ, in fact, by some specific feature, by an indubitable pertinence, from imaginary narration as we find it in the epic, the novel, the drama? And if this feature—or this pertinence—exists, in what site of the discursive system, at what level of the speech-act, must we locate it? In order to answer this question, we shall observe here, in a free and by no means exhaustive fashion, the discourse of several great classical historians, mainly Herodotus, Machiavelli, Bossuet, and Michelet.



### 1. Speech-act

And first of all, under what conditions is the classical historian led—or authorized—to designate, in his discourse, the very act by which he utters it? In other words, what are, on the level of discourse—and no longer of language—the *shifters* (in the sense Jakobson has given this word) which assure transition from statement to speech-act (or conversely)?

It seems that historical discourse involves two regular types of shifters. The first type we might call *shifters of listening*. This category has been observed, on the level of language, by Jakobson, under the name *testimonial* and under the formula  $C^e C^{al} C^{a2}$ : besides the event reported ( $C^e$ ), the discourse mentions both the act of the informant ( $C^{al}$ ) and the speech of the “writer” who refers to it ( $C^{a2}$ ). This shifter therefore designates all mention of sources, of testimony, all reference to a *listening* of the historian, collecting an *elsewhere* of his discourse and speaking it. Explicit listening is a choice, for it is possible not to refer to it; it relates the historian to the ethnologist who mentions his informant; we therefore find this shifter of listening abundant in such historian-ethnologists as Herodotus. The forms they employ vary from interpolations of the type *as I have heard, to our knowledge*, to the historian’s present (a tense which attests to the speaker’s intervention) and to any mention of the historian’s personal experience; this is Michelet’s case, who “listens” to the History of France starting from a subjective illumination (the July Revolution of 1830), and accounts for it in his discourse. The *shifter of listening* is obviously not pertinent to historical discourse: we find it frequently in conversation and in certain artifices of the novel (anecdotes recounted as “heard from” certain fictive informants who are mentioned).

The second type of shifter covers all the declared signs by which the “writer,” in this case the historian, organizes his own discourse, revises it, modifies it in the process of expression; in short, arranges explicit references within it. This is an important shifter, and the “organizers” of discourse can receive many

different expressions; they can all be reduced, however, to the indication of a movement of the discourse in relation to its substance, or more precisely throughout this substance, something like such temporal or locative deictics as *voici / voilà*; hence we have, in relation to the flow of the speech-act: immobility (*as we have said earlier*), harking back (*altius repetere, replicare da più alto luogo*), the return (*ma ritornando all' ordine nostro, dico come . . .*), the halt (*on this point, we shall say no more*), the declaration (*here are the other memorable actions he performed during his reign*). The *shifter of organization* raises a notable problem, which we can only mention here: it is generated by coexistence or, to put it better, by the conflict of two time spans: the time of the speech-act and the time of the material stated. This conflict gives rise to important phenomena of discourse; we shall cite three. The first refers to all the acceleration phenomena of history: an equal number of “pages” (if such is the crude measure of time in the speech-act) cover varying lapses of time (time of the material stated): in Machiavelli’s *History of Florence*, the same measure (a chapter) covers several centuries here and some twenty years there; the closer we come to the historian’s own time, the more powerful the pressure of the speech-act becomes, and the more history slows down; there is no isochrony—the result of which is implicitly to attack the linearity of discourse and to reveal a possible “paragrammatism” of historical speech.\* The second phenomenon also suggests, in its way, that the discourse, though materially linear, when confronted with historical time apparently determines to explore this time, producing what we might call zigzag history: thus, with each character who appears in his *History*, Herodotus goes back to the newcomer’s ancestors, then returns to his point of departure, in order to continue a little further—and to begin all over again. Finally, a third phenomenon of discourse, and a considerable

\* Following J. Kristeva (“Bakhtine, le mot, le dialogue et le roman,” *Critique*, no. 239, April 1967), we shall designate as *paragrammatism* (derived from Saussure’s Anagrams) the double writings which contain a dialogue of the text with other texts and postulate a new logic.



one, attests to the destructive role of the *shifters of organization* in relation to history's *chronicle time*: this involves inaugurations of historical discourse, places where the beginning of the material stated and the exordium of the speech-act are united.\* The discourse of history knows, in general, two forms of inauguration: first of all, what we might call the *performative opening*, for in it speech is actually a solemn act of foundation; the model of this is poetic, the *I sing* of the poets; thus, Joinville begins his history by a religious appeal ("In the name of God Almighty, I, Jehan, Sire de Joinville, cause to be written the life of our Holy King Louis"), and even the socialist Louis Blanc does not disdain the purifying *introduction*,† so difficult does the inception of speech remain—or so sacred, let us say; subsequently, a much more common unit, the Preface, a characteristic speech-act, prospective when it announces discourse to come, or retrospective when it judges that discourse (as in the great Preface with which Michelet crowned his *Histoire de France* once it was completely written and in fact published). Our review of these units tends to suggest that the entrance of the speech-act into historical statement, through *shifters of organization*, has as its goal not so much to give the historian a chance to express his "subjectivity" as to "complicate" history's chronicle time by confronting it with another time, that of discourse itself, a time we may identify as *paper time*; in short, the presence, in historical narration, of explicit speech-act signs tends to "de-chronologize" the historical "thread" and to restore, if only as a reminiscence or a nostalgia, a complex, parametric, non-linear time whose deep space recalls the mythic time of the ancient cosmogonies, it too linked by essence to the speech of the poet or the

\* The exordium (of any discourse) raises one of the most interesting problems of rhetoric, insofar as it is a codification of the breaks in silence and a struggle against aphasia.

† "Before taking up my pen, I have questioned myself closely, and since I discerned neither partisan affections nor implacable hatreds, I have decided that I could judge of men and things without neglecting justice and without betraying the truth."—Louis Blanc, *Histoire de dix ans* (Paris, 1842)

soothsayer; in effect, the shifters of organization attest—if only by certain apparently rational detours—to the historian's predictive function: it is insofar as he *knows* what has not yet been recounted that the historian, like the agent of myth, needs to double the chronic splitting of events by references to the actual time of his speech.

The signs (or shifters) we have just mentioned bear uniquely on the speech-act's actual process. There are others which no longer concern the speech-act but, in Jakobson's terminology, its protagonists (T<sup>a</sup>), addressee, or "writer." It is a notable and rather enigmatic fact that literary discourse very rarely includes signs of the "reader"; we might even say that what specifies it as literary discourse is that it is—apparently—a discourse without *you*, though in reality the whole structure of this discourse implies a "subject" of the reading. In historical discourse, the signs of reception or destination are commonly absent: we find them only when History gives itself out as a lesson; this is the case with Bossuet's *Histoire universelle*, a discourse nominally addressed by the tutor to the prince, his student; yet this schema is possible, in a sense, only insofar as Bossuet's own discourse is supposed to reproduce homologically the discourse God Himself offers men precisely in the form of History He gives them: it is because the History of men is Scripture that Bossuet, mediator of this Scripture, can establish a relation of destination between the young prince and himself.

Signs of the "writer" (or sender) are obviously much more frequent; here we must list all the fragments of discourse in which the historian, an empty subject of the speech-act, gradually fills himself with various predicates intended to establish him as a *person*, provided with a psychological plenitude, with a *countenance*. We shall indicate here one particular form of this "filling," which relates more directly to literary criticism. This occurs when the historian intends to "absent himself" from his discourse and where there is, consequently, a systematic absence of any sign referring to the sender of the historical message: history seems to *tell itself*. This accident has had a considerable



career, since it corresponds in fact to so-called objective historical discourse (in which the historian never intervenes). As a matter of fact, in this case, the speaker annuls his emotive person, but substitutes for it another person, the "objective" person: the subject subsists in his plenitude, but as an objective subject; this is what Fustel de Coulanges called, significantly (and rather naïvely), the "chastity of History." On the level of discourse, objectivity—or lack of signs of the "speaker"—thus appears as a special form of image-repertoire, the product of what we might call the *referential illusion*, since here the historian claims to let the referent speak for itself. This illusion is not proper to historical discourse: how many novelists—in the realistic period—imagine they are being "objective" because they suppress signs of the *I* in the discourse! The combination of linguistics and psychoanalysis has increased our lucidity with regard to a privative speech-act: we know that the absence of signs has a meaning, too.

To conclude with the speech-act, we must mention the special case—anticipated by Jakobson, on the level of language, in the grid of his shifters—in which the speaker (or writer) of the discourse is at the same time a participant in the process spoken (or written), in which the protagonist of the text is the same as the protagonist of the speech-act ( $T^e / T^a$ ), in which the historian, an actor at the time of the event, becomes its narrator; thus, Xenophon participates in the retreat of the Ten Thousand and becomes their historian after the fact. The most illustrious example of this conjunction of the spoken *I* and the speaking *I* is doubtless the *he* of Julius Caesar. This famous *he* belongs to the statement; when Caesar becomes explicitly the "writer," he shifts to *we* (*ut supra demonstravimus*). The Caesarian *he* seems at first glance swamped among the other participants of the spoken process and, on this account, we have seen it as the supreme sign of objectivity; it seems, however, that we can formally differentiate it; how? by observing that its predicates are consistently selected: the Caesarian *he* supports only certain syntagms which we might call *syntagms of the leader* (*to give orders, to*

*hold meetings, to visit, to have done, to congratulate, to explain, to think*), quite close, as a matter of fact, to certain performatives, in which speech is identified with action. There are other examples of this *he*, past-tense actor and present-tense narrator (notably in Clausewitz): they show that the choice of the a-personal pronoun is merely a rhetorical alibi and that the true situation of the "writer" is manifested in the choice of syntagms with which he surrounds his past actions.

## 2. Statement

The historical statement must lend itself to a figuration destined to produce units of content, which we can subsequently classify. These units of content represent what history *speaks about*; as signifieds, they are neither pure referent nor complete discourse: their totality is constituted by the referent discerned, named, already intelligible, but not yet subjected to a syntax. We shall not undertake to explore these classes of units here, such an effort would be premature; we shall limit ourselves to a few preliminary remarks.

Historical statement, like sentential statement, includes "existents" and "occurrents," beings, entities, and their predicates. Now, a first inspection suggests that the former and the latter (separately) can constitute relatively closed, consequently controllable lists, in a word, *collections* whose units ultimately repeat themselves in obviously variable combinations; thus, in Herodotus, existents are reduced to *dynasties, princes, generals, soldiers, peoples, and places*, and occurrents to actions such as *to devastate, to subjugate, to make alliances, to make an expedition, to reign, to employ a stratagem, to consult the oracle*, etc. These collections, being (relatively) closed, must be accessible to certain rules of substitution and transformation, and it must be possible to structure them—a more or less easy task, obviously, depending largely on a single lexicon, that of warfare; we must determine whether, in modern historians, we must expect more complex associations of different lexicons, and if, even in that case, historical discourse



is not always based, finally, on "strong" collections (better to speak of *collections*, not *lexicons*, for we are here uniquely on the level of content). Machiavelli seems to have had an intuition of this structure: at the beginning of his *History of Florence*, he presents his "collection," i.e., the list of juridical, political, ethnic objects which will subsequently be mobilized and combined in his narration.

In the case of more fluid collections (in historians less archaic than Herodotus), the units of content can still receive a strong structuration, not from the lexicon, but from the author's personal thematics; such thematic (recurrent) objects are numerous in a romantic historian like Michelet; but we can quite easily find them in so-called intellectual authors: in Tacitus, *fama* is a personal unit, and Machiavelli bases his history on a thematic opposition, that of *mantenere* (a verb which refers to the fundamental energy of the man of government) and *ruinare* (which, on the contrary, implies a logic of the decadence of things). It follows that, by these thematic units, generally confined in a single word, we discover units of discourse (and no longer of content alone); here we touch on the problem of the *nomination* of historical objects: the word can economize a situation or a series of actions; it favors structuration insofar as, projected into content, it is itself a little structure; thus, Machiavelli employs *conspiracy* to economize explicitation of a complex datum designating the only remaining possibility of struggle when a government triumphs over all openly declared enmities. Nomination, by permitting a strong articulation of the discourse, reinforces its structure; strongly structured histories are substantive histories: Bossuet, for whom the history of human beings is structured by God, makes abundant use of successions of substantive shortcuts.\*

\* Example: "Here we see the innocence and the wisdom of young Joseph . . . his mysterious dreams . . . his jealous brothers . . . the selling of this great man . . . the loyalty he maintained to his master . . . his admirable chastity; the persecutions it drew upon him; his prison and his constancy . . ."—Bossuet, *Discours sur l'histoire universelle*

These remarks concern the occurments as much as the existents. The historical processes themselves (whatever their terminological development) raise—among others—this interesting problem: that of their status. The status of a process can be assertive, negative, interrogative. Now, the status of historical discourse is uniformly assertive, constative; historical fact is linguistically linked to a privilege of being: one recounts what has been, not what has not been or what has been questionable. In a word, historical discourse does not know negation (or very rarely, in an eccentric fashion). This fact may be curiously—but significantly—related to the arrangement we find in a "writer" quite different from the historian, the psychotic, who is incapable of subjecting a statement to a negative transformation; we might say that, in a sense, "objective" discourse (this is the case of positivist history) joins the situation of schizophrenic discourse; in either case, there is a radical censorship of the speech-act (in which feeling alone permits a negative transformation), a massive reflux of discourse toward statement and even (in the historian's case) toward the referent: no one is there to assume the statement.

In order to approach another, essential aspect of historical statement, we must say a word about the classes of units of content and about their succession. These classes are, as is apparent from a first exploration, the very ones we supposed we could discover in the narrative of fiction. The first class covers all the segments of discourse which refer to an implicit signified, according to a metaphoric process; thus, Michelet describes the motley of garments, the fading of blazons, and the mixture of architectural styles at the beginning of the fifteenth century as so many signifiers of a single signified, which is the moral division of the waning Middle Ages; this class is that of indices, or more precisely of signs (a very abundant class in the classical novel). The second class of units is constituted by the fragments of discourse of a reasoning, syllogistic, or more precisely enthymematic nature, since it is almost always imper-



fect, approximative syllogisms which are involved.\* Enthymemes are not proper to historical discourse; they are frequent in the novel, where bifurcations of the anecdote are generally justified in the reader's eyes by pseudo-reasonings of syllogistic type. The enthymeme arranges, in historical discourse, a non-symbolic intelligibility, and this is what is interesting: does it subsist in recent histories, whose discourse attempts to break with the classical, Aristotelian model? Last, a third class of units—and not the least—receives what since Propp we have called the “functions” of the narrative, or cardinal points from which the anecdote can take a different course; these functions are grouped syntagmatically into closed, logically saturated series or sequences; thus, in Herodotus, we frequently find a sequence *Oracle*, composed of three terms, each of which is an alternative (to consult or not, to answer or not, to follow or not), and which can be separated from each other by units foreign to the sequence: these units are either the terms of another sequence—and then the schema is one of imbrication—or else minor expansions (times of information, indices)—and then the schema is one of a catalysis which fills the interstices of the nuclei.

By generalizing—perhaps abusively—these few remarks on the structure of statements, we can suggest that historical discourse oscillates between two poles, according to the respective density of its indices and its functions. When, in a historian's work, indicial units predominate (constantly referring to an implicit signified), the History is inflected toward a metaphorical form, and borders on the lyric and the symbolic: this is the case, for instance, with Michelet. When on the contrary it is functional units which prevail, the History takes a metonymic form, it is related to the epic: we might cite as a pure example of this tendency the narrative history of Augustin Thierry. A third History, it is true, exists: one which, by the structure of its discourse, attempts to reproduce the structure of the choices

\* Here is the syllogistic schema of a passage in Michelet (*Histoire de Moyen Age*, Vol. III, Book VI, chapter II): 1. In order to distract the people from rebellion, they must be kept occupied. 2. Now, the best means is to throw them a man. 3. Hence, the princes chose old Aubriot, etc.

experienced by the protagonists of the process related; in it the reasonings dominate; this is a reflexive history, which we can also call a strategic history, and Machiavelli is the best example of it we know.

### 3. Signification

For history not to signify, discourse must be limited to a pure unstructured series of notations: these will be chronicles and annals (in the pure sense of the word). In constituted historical discourse, the facts related irresistibly function either as indices or as nuclei whose very succession has an indicial value; and even though facts are presented in an anarchic manner, they at least *signify* anarchy and refer to a certain negative idea of human history.

The signifieds of historical discourse can occupy at least two different levels. There is, first of all, a level immanent to the material stated; this level retains all the meanings the historian deliberately gives to the facts he reports (the motley of fifteenth-century garments for Michelet, the importance of certain conflicts for Thucydides, etc.); such can be the moral or political “lessons” the narrator draws from certain episodes (in Machiavelli, in Bossuet). If the “lesson” is continuous, we reach a second level, that of a signified transcending the entire historical discourse, transmitted by the historian's thematics, which we are thereby entitled to identify with the form of the signified; thus, the very imperfection of Herodotus's narrative structure (generated by certain *series* of facts without closure) ultimately refers to a certain philosophy of History, which is the accessibility of the world of men under the law of the gods; thus again, in Michelet, the very “strong” structuration of particular signifieds, articulated in oppositions (antitheses on the level of the signifier), has as its ultimate meaning a Manichaeistic philosophy of life and death. In the historical discourse of our civilization, the process of signification always aims at “filling” the meaning of History: the historian is the one who collects not so much facts as signifiers and relates them, i.e., organizes them in



order to establish a positive meaning and to fill the void of pure series.

As we see, by its very structure and without there being any need to appeal to the substance of the content, historical discourse is essentially an ideological elaboration or, to be more specific, an *imaginary* elaboration, if it is true that the image-repertoire is the language by which the speaker (or "writer") of a discourse (a purely linguistic entity) "fills" the subject of the speech-act (a psychological or ideological entity). Hence, we understand why the notion of historical "fact" has so often given rise to a certain mistrust. Nietzsche has written: "There are no facts *as such*. We must always begin by introducing a meaning in order for there to be a fact." Once language intervenes (and when does it not intervene?), a fact can be defined only tautologically: the *noted* issues from the *notable*, but the *notable* is—since Herodotus, where the word loses its mythic acceptance—only what is worthy of memory, i.e., worthy to be *noted*. Hence, we arrive at that paradox which governs the entire pertinence of historical discourse (in relation to other types of discourse): fact never has any but a linguistic existence (as the term of discourse), yet everything happens as if this linguistic existence were merely a pure and simple "copy" of *another* existence, situated in an extra-structural field, the "real." This discourse is doubtless the only one in which the referent is addressed as external to the discourse, though without its ever being possible to reach it outside this discourse. Hence, we must inquire more closely into the place of the "real" in discursive structure.

Historical discourse supposes, one might say, a double operation, one that is extremely complex. In a first phase (this decomposition is, of course, only metaphorical), the referent is detached from the discourse, it becomes exterior to it, grounds it, is supposed to govern it: this is the phase of *res gestae*, and the discourse simply claims to be *historia rerum gestarum*: but in a second phase, it is the signified itself which is repulsed, merged in the referent; the referent enters into direct relation with the signifier, and the discourse, meant only to *express* the real,

believes it elides the fundamental term of imaginary structures, which is the signified. Like any discourse with "realistic" claims, the discourse of history thus believes it knows only a two-term semantic schema, referent and signifier; the (illusory) merging of referent and signified defines, as we know, *sui-referential* discourses (such as performative discourse); we can say that historical discourse is a fake performative discourse in which the apparent constative (descriptive) is in fact only the signifier of the speech-act as an act of authority.\*

In other words, in "objective" history, the "real" is never anything but an unformulated signified, sheltered behind the apparent omnipotence of the referent. This situation defines what we might call the *reality effect*. The extrusion of the signified outside the "objective" discourse, letting the "real" and its expression apparently confront each other, does not fail to produce a new meaning, so true is it, once more, that within a system any absence of an element is itself a signification. This new meaning—extensive to all historical discourse and ultimately defining its pertinence—is reality itself, surreptitiously transformed into a "shamefaced" signifier: historical discourse does not follow the real, it merely signifies it, constantly repeating *this happened*, without this assertion ever being anything but the signified *wrong side* of all historical narration.

The prestige of *this happened* has a truly historical importance and scope. Our entire civilization has a taste for the reality effect, attested to by the development of specific genres such as the realistic novel, the private diary, documentary literature, the news item [*fait divers*], the historical museum, the exhibition of ancient objects, and, above all, the massive development of photography, whose sole pertinent feature (in relation to drawing) is precisely to signify that the event represented has *really* taken place. Secularized, the relic no longer has anything sacred about it, except that sacred quality attached to the enigma of

\* Thiers has expressed, with great purity and naïveté, this referential illusion, or this merging of referent and signified, by thus defining the historian's ideal: "To be simply true, to be what things are and nothing more than that, and nothing except that."



what has been, is no more, and yet offers itself as present sign of a dead thing. Conversely, the profanation of relics is in fact a destruction of reality itself, starting from the intuition that the real is never anything but a meaning, revocable when history requires it and demands a veritable destruction of the very foundations of civilization.\*

Since it refuses to assume the real as a signified (or even to detach the referent from its simple assertion), it is understandable that history, at the privileged moment when it attempted to constitute itself as a genre, i.e., in the nineteenth century, should have come to see in the "pure and simple" relation of facts the best proof of these facts, and to institute narration as a privileged signifier of the real. Augustin Thierry made himself the theoretician of this narrative history, drawing its "truth" from the very solicitude of its narration, the architecture of its articulations, and the abundance of its expansions (called, in this case, "concrete details").†

Thus, we close the paradoxical circle: narrative structure, elaborated in the crucible of fictions (through myths and early epics), becomes both sign and proof of reality. Hence, it will be understood that the effacement (if not the disappearance) of narration in contemporary historical science, which prefers to speak of structures rather than of chronologies, implies much more than a simple change of school: a veritable ideological transformation; historical narration is dying because the sign of History is henceforth not so much *the real* as *the intelligible*.

*Information sur les sciences sociales*, 1967

\* This is doubtless the meaning, beyond any strictly religious subversion, which we must give to the act of the Red Guards profaning the temple at Confucius's birthplace (January 1967); let us recall that the expression *cultural revolution* is a very inadequate translation of "destruction of the foundations of civilization."

† "It has been said that the historian's goal was to recount, not to prove; I do not know, but I am certain that in history the best proof, the kind most capable of arousing and convincing all minds, the kind which permits the least resistance and leaves the fewest doubts, is complete narration . . ."—Augustin Thierry, *Récits des temps mérovingiens*, Vol. II (Paris, 1851)

## The Reality Effect

When Flaubert, describing the room occupied by Mme Aubain, Félicité's employer, tells us that "an old piano supported, under a barometer, a pyramidal heap of boxes and cartons" ("A Simple Heart," from *Three Tales*); when Michelet, recounting the death of Charlotte Corday and reporting that, before the executioner's arrival, she was visited in prison by an artist who painted her portrait, includes the detail that "after an hour and a half, there was a gentle knock at a little door behind her" (*Histoire de France: La Révolution*)—these authors (among many others) are producing notations which structural analysis, concerned with identifying and systematizing the major articulations of narrative, usually and heretofore has left out, either because its inventory omits all details that are "superfluous" (in relation to structure) or because these same details are treated as "filling" (catalyses), assigned an indirect functional value insofar as, cumulatively, they constitute some index of character or atmosphere and so can ultimately be recuperated by structure.

It would seem, however, that if analysis seeks to be exhaustive (and what would any method be worth which did not account for the totality of its object, i.e., in this case, of the entire surface of the narrative fabric?), if it seeks to encompass the absolute detail, the indivisible unit, the fugitive transition, in order to assign them a place in the structure, it inevitably encounters notations which no function (not even the most indirect) can justify: such 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. For if, in Flaubert's description, it is just