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PART I

**Problems of Definition,
Method, and Interpretation**

I

Is the Diary Novel Definable as a Genre?

Today we think of the diary as a periodically kept, secret, or at least private notebook in which the diarist writes down anything ranging from intimate details or introspective self-assessments to descriptions of the events of his day, random observations or aperçus, outbursts of anger, aphorisms, drafts for poems, or even quotations. If we think of a diary novel, we probably imagine something like Jean-Paul Sartre's *La Nausée*—an individual's record of his self-searching and self-finding, written by a reflective, perhaps even alienated, character; for a more self-certain person, a person of action, would live his life confidently and record his experiences later, if at all, in a memoir. The diaristic in medias res implies a state of turmoil or excitement, an inability to predict the future, an urge to master and purge overwhelming experiences or intense emotions. Obviously, however, we cannot expect diary novels written in earlier historical periods to conform to expectations aroused by recent diary novels. Especially in the earliest diary fiction, or what one might more cautiously call the earliest recognizable ancestors of our modern diary novels, the word “diary,” the periodic first-person form, and the autobiographical or confessional content we have come to associate with the diary novel did not all neatly converge.

How does one approach the question of deciding what a diary novel is, for the purpose, for example, of tracing its history? In other words, what exactly is the phenomenon whose history we want to trace? Or is the question best put the other way around: Does historical investigation yield a definition?

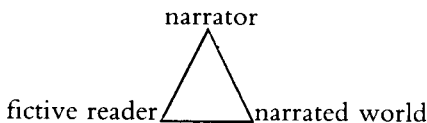
These questions bring us to the problem of genre. Despite the disagreements that exist between the various schools of genre theory, it is generally agreed that a genre is a set with a high degree of homogeneity. We speak of a genre when we perceive a group whose members resemble each other to a significant degree. Certain twentieth-century

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works—for example, Rainer Maria Rilke's *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910), Sartre's *La Nausée* (1938), André Gide's *La Symphonie pastorale* (1919), Georges Bernanos's *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (1936), Hjalmar Söderberg's *Doctor Glas* (1905), Simone de Beauvoir's *La Femme rompue* (1967)—are usually cited by critics as diary novels, and they could be seen to constitute such a homogeneous set. Among the characteristics they have in common, the predominant characteristic is the diary form—or, to give a more technical description, a first-person narrative that the narrator writes at periodic intervals and essentially for himself.

This provisional descriptive definition appears promising, especially from a typological point of view. If we look aside temporarily from the word “diary” and also from any connotations it might bear in terms of content, and define the diary novel exclusively in terms of formal characteristics, we have isolated a type of the novel that is similar to other recognized types, yet is distinctly different from any of them. Let us define the diary novel more precisely in terms of form: It is a fictional prose narrative written from day to day by a single first-person narrator who does not address himself to a fictive addressee or recipient.

This definition is based on the accepted distinction between first- and third-person narration. Within first-person narration, certain types of works purport to be *written* by the narrator. There are three main types of such works: memoir novels, epistolary novels, and diary novels. It is possible to describe the differences between these types in terms of a “narrative triangle” based on the communicative triangle of sender, receiver, and message. The poles represent the fictive narrator, the fictive reader, and the narrator's subject matter, or what one might call the narrated world:

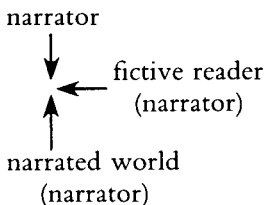


The diary novel is distinguished from the memoir novel by the narrator's relation to his subject matter. The memoirist or autobiographer is at pains to give an account of past events. The present moment, the time of writing, is itself of little or no interest. The memoirist rolls out the past like a rug, and the cohesiveness the chronological march of events projects, the unfolding of a “life,” provides the novel with its ordering principle. The diary novel, in contrast, emphasizes the time of writing rather than the time that is written about. The progressive

sequence of dates on which the diarist writes gives the narrative its temporal continuity. This present-tense progression tends to dominate the subject matter, so that the diarist usually writes about events of the immediate past—events that occur between one entry and the next—or records his momentary ideas, reflections, or emotions.

In its temporal structure the diary novel thus resembles the epistolary novel. As in the diary novel, the time of writing in the epistolary novel, represented by the sequence of letters, establishes the dominant temporal order; and what a correspondent writes in his letter is generally limited to what has happened to him since he wrote the last letter, or to his sentiments, ideas, thoughts, and recollections that reflect his present temper. But unlike the epistolary novel, the diary novel does not presuppose a fictive reader. Letters are by definition addressed to a recipient; diaries are normally private.

Is it possible to draw any conclusions from this typological definition, and from these distinctions? We can say, before actually looking at examples of diary novels, that the diary form offers a certain abstract or logical potential different from that of other narrative types. Potentially, the diary novel presents the possibility of something approaching the collapse of the communicative triangle as it is found in fiction. For the diarist does not have to bridge a gap between his writing self and his “subject”—his younger, temporally distant, different self—as does the autobiographer; nor are his utterances circumscribed by the presence of an addressee whose character and relationship to the narrator are apt to influence the content and color the tone of his communications, as are those of the letter writer. In the extreme case, instead of a narrator who creates a narrated world and addresses himself to a fictive reader, we have a narrator who takes himself as subject and is his own reader. When we consider that the narrator can take his *present* self as subject, the result is something like a folding over of the subject of discourse on himself. We can imagine a modification of the schema presented above:



The interior monologue and stream-of-consciousness technique come even closer to collapsing the distance between the narrator and the narrated world than the diary, for by doing away with the time it takes

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a thought to slide from the mind into the pen, they eliminate all temporal distance. But, unlike the diary novel, they place the reader under the strain of suspending his disbelief. The reader is implicitly asked to accept the convention that the thoughts got on paper somehow and not to inquire about the scribe. In contrast, the diary form is mimetic of what could be a real situation. No other form of narration can achieve comparable closeness between the narrator and the narrated world without being identifiably fictive.

With our provisional definition of the diary novel, then, we seem to have a tool, a working hypothesis, with which we can go looking for further examples. Even if we look aside from the diachronic dimension of the genre, however, and remain within the synchronic cut of twentieth-century diary novels, where the likelihood is greater that we will find repeated instances of a relatively stable organization of elements, it must be stressed that our provisional definition does not give us a criterion for deciding whether any given work is a diary novel or not. If we consider the entire time span during which diary novels were written, there is an even greater possibility that we will encounter examples that are not clearly either inside or outside the genre as we have defined it. By assessing the empirical evidence in a fairly impressionistic way, we have arrived at a definition of what might be regarded as the *ideal* characteristics of the genre. But we have not drawn borderlines around the set. The diary novel, like any genre, has blurred edges; and by defining the form more “precisely,” by enumerating attributes we call constitutive of the type, we have at the same time complicated the issue; we have multiplied the borderlines, or facets, that can be blurred.

One finds, for example, countless shadings between diary novels and other types of first-person narration. In the context of a large work like the novel, sequential time structures and retrospective narration can easily be combined. An author may wish to establish complex parallelisms or present a special kind of psychological development by emphasizing both past and present time. Thomas Mann’s *Doktor Faustus* (1947) could not be considered a diary, although the narrator-biographer Zeitblom frequently interrupts his account of his friend Leverkühn’s life to speak of current political events and to complain of his hand that trembles as he writes. Gerhart Hauptmann’s *Phantom* (1922) with its day-to-day writing about a single, consecutive past event, interspersed with present comments, is a borderline case. John Updike’s *Month of Sundays* (1975), a day-to-day record kept by an institutionalized clergyman mainly about the past, and François Mauriac’s *Le Noeud de vipères* (1932), in which a confessional memoir-letter changes gradually into a secret record of the events of the

increasingly recent past, are more diarylike. Finally, Wilhelm Raabe's *Die Chronik der Sperlingsgasse* (1857), whose first-person narrator presents his extensive but chronologically disorganized recollections as well as day-to-day events in a present-tense framework, is a work a bibliographer of diary novels would be likely to include.

Likewise, the fictive reader may be more or less absent. In particular, the borderline between the diary novel and the epistolary novel is fluid. An epistolary novel like Guilleragues's *Lettres Portugaises* (1669), in which a single correspondent directs letters to a recipient of ill-defined character who does not respond, approaches the diary form. If the recipient in an epistolary novel is a confidant, an alter ego whose personality does not affect the tone or content of the letter writer's utterances, the fictive reader all but disappears. Werther's letters to Wilhelm in Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774) and Hyperion's letters to Bellarmin in Friedrich Hölderlin's *Hyperion* (1797–9) are examples of this type of communication. On the other hand, a diarist may intend the "secret" diary for another person, perhaps posthumously, as does Sophie in Johann Martin Miller's *Sieewart, eine Klostersgeschichte* (1776), who bequeaths the record of her unrequited passion to the man she loves. A diarist may even hope to publish the diary, as Célestine in Octave Mirbeau's *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre* (1900), who is writing an exposé of her employers, hopes to do. The "secret diaries" of husband and wife in Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's *The Key* (1956) are, in a peculiar sense, letters: Each spouse knows that the other surreptitiously reads his or her diary, and consequently each one uses his or her journal as a roundabout means of communication.

Similarly, the diary convention that the first-person narrator is actually writing on a page of paper may be more or less strictly adhered to. We may have trouble imagining how a narrator finds the opportunity and implements for writing when, for example, he is shipwrecked at sea. Eighteenth-century letter-journal heroines often stretch plausibility by writing in moments of crisis or in other unlikely circumstances. The fiction of the written document was an eighteenth-century convention; the only existing technique for thought transcription was to have the narrator impart his thoughts by speaking or writing them. In later periods the convention of the written document was to prove more and more of a hindrance. In the late nineteenth century, before the autonomous interior monologue had found wide acceptance, works whose style was all but indistinguishable from stream of consciousness appeared in the traditional guise of diaries. In the twentieth century, the need to ground the narrative in a mimetic fiction, or even to establish a unified point of view, vanishes. In Sartre's *La Nausée*, Roquentin keeps a diary, but many entries are unconvincing as pieces of diary writing. In

L'Étranger (1942), Albert Camus leaves it unclear whether the narrator, Meursault, is writing or not; and he perplexingly changes his perspective from one contemporaneous with narrated events to a retrospective one.

Finally, even the question of voice, of first-person narration itself, is not unambiguous. A first-person narrator can write chiefly about himself, but he can also write mainly about events or other people. In Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), for example, Lockwood's diary, the frame narrative, is scarcely more than a vehicle for recording the gossipy Mrs. Dean's oral serial story about the lurid goings-on at Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange through three generations. Lockwood's personality colors the story, but Lockwood himself is not of essential interest. A "first-person narrator" can shade imperceptibly into the "intrusive narrator" of a third-person story. In general, the dividing line between first- and third-person narration is not so clear as is usually supposed; these terms deserve a more precise and critical differentiation than they are normally accorded. Within the field of diary fiction one also finds juxtapositions of first- and third-person narrative; for instance, Uwe Johnson's *Jahrestage* (1970–3) is a work divided into daily entries but only in part written in the first person.

2

The Impasses of Genre Criticism

The concept of genre, then, is not an especially useful tool for converting empirical data into neat, abstractly describable divisions. In trying to set limits, one constantly arrives at the impasse described by Armand in André Gide's *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* when he tries to find "the dividing line, below which nothing exists."¹ This is the evident flaw of any genre theory that tries to satisfy typological requirements and at the same time retain its descriptive applicability. Even though a typological definition may be derived from empirical evidence, it cannot effectively be reapplied descriptively. An even more serious objection to a typological use of the concept of genre is that we have no reason to suppose that real genres, as they emerge historically, yield a contrastive system of types. Whatever mechanisms produce historical genres, conformity to an abstract scheme of contrasting types—or, for that matter, to any other abstract scheme—can hardly be supposed to be one of them. One could go so far as to say that insisting on the subsumption of actual genres in an ulterior order is a denial of their historicity, a suppression of the acts of repetition and modification that produced the resemblances between the texts. Even though the formulation of that order may originally have been the outcome of description, it cuts short inquiry into why resemblances between literary texts exist by subordinating such continuities to philosophical or taxonomic considerations.

Theories that view genres absolutely, prescriptively, or ideally are of course inimical to a historical explanation of genres. This is notably true of theories that stand in the tradition of the deductive and speculative poetics of the German Romantics, which reached its anti-empirical extreme with Friedrich von Schelling and is known for postulating a "holy trinity" of genres.² But even contemporary structuralist genre criticism tends to overemphasize the systematic aspect of genre at the expense of history.

Let us take Tzvetan Todorov's theoretical argument in his genre study *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to Literary Genre*. Todorov maintains that genre criticism must reconcile theory and description; according to him, such criticism "must constantly satisfy requirements of two orders: practical and theoretical, empirical and abstract." Yet his contention that "everything suggests that historical genres are a subgroup of complex theoretical genres" shows that he favors theory.³ For Todorov, theoretical genres are defined according to a contrastive model, in terms of the presence or absence of features. He formulates the relation between real and theoretical genres in such a way as to give priority to the originally derivative order of theoretical genres. Todorov continues:

The genres we deduce from the theory must be verified by reference to the texts: if our deductions fail to correspond to any work, we are on a false trail. On the other hand, the genres which we encounter in literary history must be subject to the explanation of a coherent theory. . . . The definition of genres will therefore be a continual oscillation between the description of phenomena and abstract theory.

I would argue that it is misleading to contend that the principal task of genre criticism consists in reconciling description with a systematic and deductive theory. The empirical task of describing texts and the abstract project of constructing a system, coming as they do from entirely different points of departure and serving different interests, are fundamentally irreconcilable. Wishing to reconcile them reflects a scholarly desire to bridge the gap between the two dominant critical traditions of genre theory, between the inductive, descriptive Aristotelian tradition and the deductive, speculative Romantic tradition, rather than an attempt to deal with texts themselves. In fact, if we are interested in actual genres, it seems to me that "theoretical genres" can be left to one side entirely. Todorov himself makes a similar point in a later essay, where he asserts, in contradistinction to his theory in *The Fantastic*, that it is a mistake to confuse genres (which are found inductively, through "the observation of a period of literary history") with types (which are postulated deductively, starting with "a theory of literary discourse"), and to describe genres as if they were types.⁴

Converting an empirically won definition into a typologically satisfactory definition is, I would argue, not difficult. Any perceived literary type can be defined in contrastive, typological terms if we choose to define it that way. Such definitions are useful as heuristic devices. As we have seen, they can be used to illustrate the abstract potential of one form versus another. Yet as far as descriptive or historical study is concerned, they yield hypostatized categories that the concrete con-

stantly threatens to elude; the more perfectly they suit the requirements of a system, the more rigid and unsusceptible they become to modification by actual texts. They do not lead back to works in their specificity and also do nothing to illuminate the relations between works belonging to the same genre. They are not, therefore, a satisfactory first step with which to approach historical genre criticism. But where does this disqualification of typological definitions leave us? Can it not be extended to all definitions? Even the most purely descriptive definition is, obviously, at the mercy of new evidence. Does the difficulty in drawing up boundaries put into question the idea of genre itself—or, in other words, is the idea of genre the wrong question? Yes and no. Provisionally, we can say that definition is not the end of genre criticism. Making definition the end would be to superimpose a critical concept, a critical convenience, onto actual relations between texts. Rather, definition is at most a beginning, a working hypothesis. But this essentially *critical* problem of definition does not put into question the stubborn repetition of forms and themes in literary history, a fact we cannot overlook even though the process does not seem to submit to any easily discernible order.

At this point one might do well to consider how resemblances between texts actually come into existence. We can assume that, aside from whatever factors, like social conditions or market changes, create favorable circumstances for the emergence and popularity of certain art forms, imitation is an irreducible component in the explanation. If genres exist, it is because people imitate one another. The only other possible explanation would involve assumptions about human nature and its natural expression; such an account, which would explain the existence of genres in terms of an ever repeated spontaneous genesis, seems manifestly improbable. It also suggests that literary genres are analogous to biological species, an equation that contemporary critics of genre are—understandably—explicitly anxious to avoid.⁵ One might complain that citing imitation as an explanation is to remove the problems surrounding genre to an even shakier ground. One can, however, swiftly limit the types of imitation involved in the creation of genres to two. The first, more limited case would involve the imitation of specific models. An artist may study an “original” in order to create a similar work. Such acts of direct imitation alone do not suffice to explain the existence of genres, however. The second, more general case involves imitation in the broader sense of encoding. The artist locates his activity with reference to already existing types; he brings his creation into conformity with a certain type, where this type is in turn determined by the existence of other objects of the same type.