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Translated by Catherine Porter



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Prefatory Note

The texts that follow should need no special introduction here. Indeed, the first essay can be read as a project that the remaining texts pursue and exemplify. The first of the three groups of essays is general and theoretical in nature; in it the notions of literature, discourse, and genre are defined or discussed. The next section consists of studies in the two principal literary “genres,” fiction and poetry; they deal with the shared problem of representation by means of language. The third section presents analyses of specific texts. These analyses are linked by a problematics common to language and the human mind: they take as their starting point the rejection of a certain idea of interiority, even a rejection of the inside/outside dichotomy. Although the essays are all rooted in the same set of preoccupations arising from the idea that literature is an exploration – the most intense exploration we know – of the powers of language, they were written separately, between 1971 and 1977; this may account for certain redundancies and inconsistencies. I have not sought to eliminate these systematically, judging that the process by which an idea is formulated and expressed may be (at least) as instructive as its simple statement.

As I reread these texts, I am struck by one feature about which the reader may well have some reservations: their “intermediate” character. I am not interested in speculation pure and simple, or in the description of facts as such; I continue to move between the two extremes. The entire field of literary theory has this intermediate status: it is challenged by a wholly general reflection on the one hand, and by the study of concrete texts on the other. The same ambiguity persists even in my writing style. I try to avoid both impressionistic writing – which I judge irresponsible, not because it is devoid of theory, but because it refuses to acknowledge theory – and terroristic formalism, where the author’s sole object is to discover a more precise notation for an observation that is often quite imprecise in itself. I should like my discourse to remain permeable without becoming formless. Clearly, in trying to have it both ways, one risks losing on both counts: an unenviable fate, to which I shall nevertheless adhere.