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 Temporality of Lying and forgetting
 James H. Reid
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Introduction

Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions
 ... [O]ur truth drive rests upon a foundation of lies.
 (Friedrich Nietzsche)¹

To-day, forgetting has perhaps become more of a puzzle
 than remembering, ever since we have learnt from the
 study of dreams and pathological phenomena that even
 something we thought had been forgotten long ago may
 suddenly re-emerge in consciousness. (Sigmund Freud)²

Lying and forgetting have become privileged, but rival, themes in modern critical discourse on writing and reading. “[E]verything that can be *taken* as a sign,” Umberto Eco posits, should be defined as “*everything which can be used in order to lie*.”³ Writing and reading are acts of producing meaning, regardless of whether this meaning is true or false.⁴ But writing (and implicitly reading), Jacques Derrida writes, is also an “effacement ... de sa propre présence,” a forgetting of what discourse is or is not doing.⁵ If, on the one hand, writing and reading lie, then discourse remembers the act of producing meaning. If, on the other hand, they forget what if anything they are or are not doing, then discourse cannot know whether it produces anything at all.

Lying and forgetting play a critical role in the meditation upon writing and reading in the modern French novel. In Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*, the first-person narrator confesses that he is lying about his past: “Oui, j’ai été forcé d’amincir la chose et d’être mensonger.”⁶ In another passage he laments that he forgets his past: “[L]e souvenir d’une certaine

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image n'est que le regret d'un certain instant; et les maisons, les routes, les avenues, sont fugitives, hélas! comme les années."⁷ The statements of Proust's first-person narrator on lying and forgetting can be traced back to a similar meditation on the lying and forgetting of characters in nineteenth-century French realist novels. In the first half of the nineteenth century, not only do Balzac's characters come to believe that they must lie in society ("[S]i vous avez un sentiment vrai, cachez-le comme un trésor");⁸ historical discourse, indeed discourse itself, becomes, like Balzac's "auguste mensonge,"⁹ the *Comédie humaine*, an "Histoire officielle, menteuse."¹⁰ Near the end of the century, discourse develops into an historically determined process of forgetting signs of reality that makes Zola's impressionist painter "oubli[er] les premiers éléments du dessin."¹¹

The fates of lying and forgetting in the fictional world of their characters are the means by which many nineteenth-century realist novels questioned whether their own writing and reading produced or erased signs of reality. Lying and forgetting are locked in an apparent struggle for domination. In Balzac the power to lie is increased by memory, and decreased by forgetting. Lying achieves power by eliminating forgetting. By contrast, in Flaubert and Zola, lying and forgetting struggle to subordinate each other. Liars forget what they believe they are doing in order to lie more powerfully. Forgetters lie to others and to themselves in order to better forget the very need to act.

The subordination of forgetting to lying, and lying to forgetting, leads to divergent notions of writing and reading the realist novel. When forgetting is subordinated to lying, discourse takes on the temporality of an irreversible, linear transformation. This irreversibility is illustrated by Nietzsche's discussion of lying and forgetting in his essays, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," and "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," both published in the 1870s.¹² According to Nietzsche, "it is originally *language* which works on the construction of concepts."¹³ This construction is not motivated by truth, but rather by the "drive toward the formation of metaphors" which takes the form of a deceit.¹⁴ For society, "to be truthful means to employ the usual metaphors... to lie."

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Society lies “according to a fixed convention” in order to deceive itself into believing that it is truthful.¹⁵ These lies, however, change nothing. Art, on the other hand, acts as if it were truthful, it lies, purely in order to “[bring] forward new transferences, metaphors, and metonymies.”¹⁶ Rather than create the belief that it signifies a truth, rather than deceive, art’s lie shatters the “immense framework and planking of concepts” and “puts it back together in an ironic fashion,” “refashion[ing] the world which presents itself to waking man.”¹⁷ Art ironically demystifies its feint of being truthful, therefore, in order to make a change. For Nietzsche, the power to perform irreversible speech acts of transformation may be increased, as Balzac’s characters imagine, by remembering society’s old and deceitful metaphors, truths, and knowledge. But remembering often obstructs performance. Forgetting gives the most powerful support to art’s ironic lie: “As he who acts is, in Goethe’s words, always without a conscience, so is he also always without knowledge; he forgets most things so as to do one thing.”¹⁸

Although Nietzsche’s artistic liar subordinates remembering and forgetting to the act of transforming old into new metaphors, he presupposes that art remembers one thing, the act of lying itself: “Art works through deception – yet one which does not deceive us?”¹⁹ In contrast, Freud posits a forgetting that undercuts even the memory of action, including Nietzsche’s ironical lies. Indeed, lying in Freud often becomes a mere symptom of the forgetting he calls repression. Repression is an incomplete forgetting, a forgetting by consciousness only: “Since we overcame the error of supposing that the forgetting we are familiar with signified a destruction of the memory-trace – that is, its annihilation – we have been inclined to take the opposite view, that in mental life nothing which has once been formed can perish – that everything is somehow preserved and that in suitable circumstances ... it can once more be brought to light.”²⁰ Repression is not simply the name that Freud gives to a specific mode of neurotic defence. It is a constitutive part of the mental processes of all human beings: “the ego’s turning

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away from the Oedipus complex,” and the mind’s “constitution of the unconscious.”²¹

In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud foregrounds the threat that forgetting poses. He suggests that history may consist in the ever greater power of forgetting over remembering. Repression, he argues, is the means by which civilization tries to master the guilt produced by its prohibition of incestuous and aggressive desires. Since this prohibition of love and hate increases aggression, civilization’s laws are the paradoxical “cause of the hostility against which all civilizations have to struggle.”²² In other words, laws heighten the aggressive feelings they prohibit. As a result, civilization has been able to establish order only by sending aggression “back to where it came from.”²³ Its laws have turned humanity’s violence away from others and back towards the aggressive feelings themselves, towards the aggressive self. This aggression against aggression has created humanity’s “sense of guilt,” its “need for punishment.”²⁴ Guilt has increased as civilization’s laws have multiplied: “If civilization is a necessary course of development from the family to humanity as a whole, then... there is inextricably bound up with it an increase of the sense of guilt, which will perhaps reach heights that the individual finds hard to tolerate.”²⁵ “[P]ossibly the whole of mankind... [may] have become ‘neurotic.’”²⁶ Humanity’s only means of dealing with its growing feelings of guilt, its repression of aggression, is to repress guilt as well: “the sense of guilt produced by civilization is not perceived as such.”²⁷ Humans increasingly forget not only their growing aggressive desires, but also their forgetting. Forgetting its forgetting, civilization blindly augments the power of forgetting over the primary tool of the psychoanalytic cure, remembering.

Whereas Nietzsche’s subordination of forgetting to lying constitutes writing and reading as an irreversible act of transforming the old into the new, Freud’s subordination of lying to forgetting renders such a transformation reversible. It effaces change, action.²⁸ Symptoms of repression, he states in his paper on repression, are “not permitted to impinge upon the external world.” They “must not be transformed into action.”²⁹ If they appear to forget the old and create the new (a symptom),

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they do so purely in order to remember, albeit indirectly, the old: “[The] compulsion to repeat ... is [the patient’s] way of remembering.”³⁰ The resulting interplay between forgetting and remembering produces what Jacques Derrida calls a “réversibilité de temps et d’espace” which structures the hidden temporality of the unconscious in general.³¹ Civilization’s growing order, its “compulsion to repeat,” gives life an increasingly reversible temporality that is “inconciliable avec le déroulement apparemment linéaire, unilinéaire, des pures représentations verbales,” irreconcilable with Nietzsche’s irreversible lies.³²

Freud’s reversible forgetting is clearly not entirely compatible with Nietzsche’s irreversible artistic lies. Indeed, Freud questions temporal irreversibility when he proposes that the irreversibility of the conscious mind may always already be subordinated to the reversibility of the unconscious. In “A Note upon the ‘Mystic Writing Pad,’” he structures the mind as a “flickering-up and passing-away of consciousness,” a reversible process that may be “at the bottom of the origin of the concept of time.”³³ Unconscious reversibility makes the mind alternate between producing and effacing memory traces, remembering and forgetting. The seemingly irreversible memories that make consciousness possible are only deceptive moments within the overall unconscious process which produces then erases, constructs then deconstructs them. A memory is a mere “symptom of ‘being conscious.’”³⁴ If consciousness is only a reversible symptom of the unconscious, then all discursive memory, Derrida concludes, is “constituée par la menace ou l’angoisse de sa disparition irrémédiable.” Forgetting questions the very possibility of an irreversible transformation, whether it be called a Nietzschean artistic lie or a psychoanalytic cure.³⁵

The purpose of this introduction is not to reduce Nietzsche’s writings to passages that treat discourse as an irreversible lie or to limit Freud’s writings to passages where discursive forgetting appears to reverse all remembering and action. Despite his glorification of the power to lie, Nietzsche also questions the centrality of action and the irreversibility of time. Despite his apocalyptic fear of historically or unconsciously determined

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forgetting, Freud also reaffirms the irreversibility of the psychoanalytic cure and thus of time.³⁶ The purpose here is rather to suggest that certain frequent (if not necessarily dominant) meditations on lying and forgetting in Nietzsche and Freud foreground the discursive and temporal implications of the characters' lying and forgetting in the novels of Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola. These meditations show that the themes of lying and forgetting presuppose a distinction between temporal irreversibility and reversibility which is at the heart of the linguistic category that makes the representation of time possible: temporal aspect. And temporal aspect, I will propose, is at the root of the distinction between the novelistic discourses with which realist narrators construct time: the narrative and the descriptive.

Temporal aspects have been defined as “different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation.”³⁷ The fundamental aspects in the construction of time are the perfective and the imperfective. The perfective aspect “views” a situation as “complete ... with beginning, middle, and end.”³⁸ By positing an observable difference between a fixed beginning and end, it constructs the (fiction of the) temporal situation that produced this difference: an irreversible act of differentiation or transformation.³⁹ A familiar grammatical sign of the perfective aspect is the French *passé simple* tense, which constructs past events as irreversible acts of change. Although perfectivity characterizes the *passé simple* tense, it is not limited to verb tenses; it also characterizes a number of grammatical and lexical signs. Moreover, specific signs of perfectivity depend upon the discursive context in which they are embedded. A context can reinforce or negate the connotation of irreversible change that specific signs of perfectivity produce.⁴⁰

The perfective aspect makes possible the category of narrative. A. J. Greimas defines narrative discourse as a “trajectory leading from an initial state to a final state.” It is an irreversible transformation with a perfective aspect.⁴¹ Nietzsche's ironical lies are minimal narratives which are momentary and illogical. For Greimas, in contrast, individual transformations are always embedded within the duration of a narrative deep structure

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that renders them logical. But, whether narrative transformations be illogical and punctual as Nietzsche's writings suggest or logical and durative as Greimas argues, they presuppose the perfective aspect of irreversibility and change.⁴² In the novel, the perfective aspect creates a bridge between the momentary Nietzschean lies of individual characters and the overall duration of a realist narrator's (logical or illogical) narrative.

Whereas Nietzsche's lie and Greimas's narrative presuppose the perfective aspect, Freud's incomplete forgetting and descriptive discourse entail the imperfective aspect. The imperfective aspect views a temporal "situation from within" as incomplete.⁴³ By deferring marks of beginning or end – signs of the perfective aspect – it constructs the (fiction of the) temporal situation that produced this deferral: an ongoing state, a duration, whether of change or non-change. Precisely because the imperfective aspect puts off completion, the ongoing duration it constructs is always potentially reversible. The imperfective aspect is not limited to verb tenses like the French imperfect tense; rather it characterizes a number of grammatical and lexical signs. It, too, is a function of the overall context.

The imperfective aspect is the precondition of that discourse that views temporal states from within rather than from without: descriptive discourse. A familiar sign of the imperfective aspect, the French imperfect tense, thus tends to mark descriptive passages in nineteenth-century French novels: "[G]râce à la stricte observance des règles classiques de la prose du XIXe siècle dotant de marques temporelles particulières les unités textuelles distinguées en 'descriptions,' 'récits,' et 'dialogues': on sait que les unités descriptives y sont caractérisées par l'usage de l'imparfait et délimitées par des passés simples qui les encadrent."⁴⁴ The imperfective aspect of the imperfect tense does more than characterize the descriptive. It makes it possible as that act by which discourse constructs an ongoing temporal ("remembered") state in which spatial relations are possible.

Whether a discourse claims to describe a static object, such as a house, or a dynamic process, such as a passing car or the

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workings of a machine, it presupposes the temporal deferral and forgetting of marks of beginning and ending that define the imperfective temporal aspect. Deferral and forgetting construct the fiction of a temporal duration of the same in which a described object – people, place, thing, process – and an observing subject – a point of view within this duration – can also be constructed. The imperfective temporal aspect is thus a necessary precondition for the production of a seemingly atemporal spatial “background,” of simultaneously juxtaposed objects, and of a simultaneous atemporal observer of this background: in other words, a spatial relation between a described spatial object and a describing subject.⁴⁵

What is deferred and forgotten by the descriptive’s imperfective aspect is not time, but one aspect of time, its perfective aspect. Nevertheless, the perfective aspect has often been identified with time itself. The imperfective aspect’s deferral of the perfective aspect has been misread as a negation of time, and the descriptive has been reduced to the atemporal representation of space.⁴⁶ A first step in overcoming this misreading has been taken by Philippe Hamon, who has displaced spatial contiguity from the described object to descriptive discourse itself. Hamon’s descriptive does not necessarily represent a spatial world; rather it is an “*unité textuelle régie par des opérations à dominante hiérarchisante, taxinomique.*”⁴⁷ It is a “paradigmatic” structure composed of spatially contiguous signs.⁴⁸ Hamon calls for a reading of the specific textual function of the spatialized paradigms that the descriptive brings into play and that Greimassian narrative semiotics has backgrounded: “[L]es études narratologiques contemporaines nous semblent avoir un peu trop systématiquement mis l’accent sur cette dimension syntagmatique du récit, et avoir négligé les importants problèmes que pose la notion de hiérarchie d’un système.”⁴⁹

Hamon’s descriptive necessarily presupposes the imperfective temporal aspect of incomplete duration: “le signe emblématique du descriptif paraît être ... le ‘etc.’ qui clôture, sans la clôturer, toute énumération.”⁵⁰ His descriptive is thus temporally reversible.⁵¹ A descriptive paradigm can be unfolded in

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any order. If the descriptive could be extended to an entire novel, as Hamon tries to do in his reading of Zola, it would render all narrative transformations reversible. The novel would be structured as an alternation between passages that hide descriptive paradigms and “focal points” that reveal them: “un système à variations davantage concentriques, à éloignement réversible plus ou moins prononcé et variable d’un ou de plusieurs centres et ‘foyers,’ plutôt qu’un système à extension linéaire ou irréversible et à orientation constante.”⁵²

Once the imperfective aspect’s temporal reversibility has been added to Hamon’s spatialized paradigms, the descriptive turns out to be the discursive means by which Freud’s text structures the mind as an unconscious alternation between remembering and forgetting memory traces. This descriptive reversibility, like Freud’s description of the unconscious, is potentially subversive. It threatens to render all relations between signs, not only syntagmatic, but also paradigmatic, reversible, in other words, to “neutralise[r] les différences” between discursive remembering and discursive forgetting of meaning or structure.⁵³ The descriptive is thus not just a temporal means of constructing spatialized relations between signs, of constituting memory; it is, as in many modernist novels, a temporal means of effacing signifying relations, of forgetting them.⁵⁴ It is capable of transforming the most “realist” of passages into a mere symptom of remembering.

In the novels of Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola, statements about characters’ lying and forgetting give rise to meditations, albeit indirect ones, on the realist narrator’s reliability.⁵⁵ These meditations prefigure the contemporary debate over whether discourse can be constituted in purely temporal terms as an irreversible narrative act of transformation that is indifferent to truth, or as a reversible descriptive erasure that is indifferent to power as well. Rather than choose narrative time or descriptive time, these novels end up by putting both into question.

This indirect questioning of realist discourse is structured by two rhetorical modes: ironic reversal and allegorical irreversibility.⁵⁶ Irony, Paul de Man proposes, is directed against the “mimetic mode of representation in which fiction and

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reality could coincide.”⁵⁷ It appears when the cognitive function of discourse, which grounds the mimetic mode of representation, is treated by writer and reader ironically as a lie and subordinated to the performative function of narrative.⁵⁸ Such is the case with Nietzsche’s artistic lie and Greimas’s narrative deep structure. The hidden rhetorical mode of Nietzsche’s discourse on lying, de Man argues, and of Greimas’s discourse on narrative, I will propose, is an irony of irony that puts into question the referentiality of Nietzschean and Greimassian narrative. Each discourse claims to be “less deceitful” simply “because it asserts its own deceitful properties.”⁵⁹ Yet it cannot help but ironically characterize itself as a lie. It thus ironically undercuts its own power to reduce discourse to an ironical lie.⁶⁰ Irony of irony puts into question discourse’s sequential narrative relationships and replaces them with the simultaneous ironical juxtapositions that also characterize the descriptive.

Allegory, as de Man defines it, is directed against the “symbolic mode of analogical correspondences.”⁶¹ It is the “reversed mirror-image” of irony. Allegory transforms an analogical relationship between “the substance and its representation” (a relationship “of simultaneity, which, in truth, is spatial in kind”) into a sequential relationship, by spreading it “out along the axis of an imaginary time.”⁶² The analogical relationship that allegory “spreads out,” the one between representation and substance, is made possible by the reversibility of the descriptive. Romantic analogy, for example, asserts both the priority of the representing subject over the represented natural substance and the reverse.⁶³ Allegory spreads romantic analogy out over time by deconstructing its descriptive reversibility and disclosing a hidden “temporal difference” between itself as representation and its origin as substance.⁶⁴ This deconstruction of the descriptive “makes all the past appear as a flight into the inauthenticity of a forgetting,” while it makes the present appear as an irreversible movement from past forgetting to future remembering of this forgetting.⁶⁵ Whereas irony is the tendency of language towards the descriptive, allegory is the “tendency of the language toward narrative.”⁶⁶