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Temporality of Lying and forgetting

James H. Reid

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This study of the nineteenth-century French realist novel focuses on the difference, and fundamental incompatibility, between the narrative and the descriptive modes of discourse. James Reid shows how major novelists including Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola, like some of their twentieth-century successors, grappled with their belief or fear that their stories lied in their representation of time and history, or that their descriptions forgot (rather than remembered) the reality of their socio-historical world. He questions recent critical approaches which have tended to reduce the realist novel to individual or historically determined narratives or speech acts, demonstrating instead the writers' use of irony and allegory in struggling against the deceitfulness and forgetfulness of their own texts.

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NARRATION AND  
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*The temporality of lying and forgetting*

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## *Preface*

During the last thirty-five years or so, literary criticism has repeatedly questioned the historical significance of the French realist novel. Rejecting the illusion that it passively mirrors nineteenth-century reality, critics have redefined realist discourse as a repetition of contemporary discourses on what society thought to be real, and as the production of a realistic effect.<sup>1</sup> This discursive repetition and production efface any necessary link to the real, yet they take on the appearance of objective representation. Realist discourse forgets and lies, but it appears to forget its own forgetting, and to lie to itself about its own lying. Rather than an historical step towards scientific objectivity, the realist novel seems to constitute a falling away from an eighteenth-century awareness into a nineteenth-century blindness to discourse's forgetting and deceit.<sup>2</sup>

However, criticism has increasingly come to believe that realist novelists were not so blind to the forgetfulness and deceptiveness of their words as their third-person narrators' omniscience or some of their statements make them appear to be.<sup>3</sup> A subtle meditation on realist discourse takes as its object not the narrators', but the characters', use of words.<sup>4</sup> This meditation crystallizes around the realist characters' struggle with and against the power of words to lie or forget. It produces, in narrators and characters, a critical awareness of how the characters' words deceitfully produce or efface meaning, a consciousness that complicates any attempt to situate the realist novel historically in relation to seemingly less blind eighteenth- or twentieth-century French novels.

A major obstacle to interpreting this nineteenth-century

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meditation on lying or forgetting is the tendency to conceive of words as an inside, and of reality as an outside. When we say that words forget or lie about the real, we cannot help but distinguish between their fictional contents, their inside, and the reality they forget or misrepresent, their outside. But any reduction of words to the inside/outside polarity inevitably leads to a dead-end. It produces either the naive assertion that discourse's inside passively mirrors a real outside or the logically self-contradictory assertion that the reality of discourse is that it necessarily misrepresents the real.

The inside/outside polarity of realist discourse, I will argue, derives from the purely linguistic distinction between language's two temporal aspects: the perfective aspect of complete duration and the imperfective aspect of incomplete duration. The perfective/imperfective distinction, in other words, is the means by which discourse produces the notions of a misrepresented or forgotten outside, and a misrepresenting or effacing inside. This aspectual distinction, I will suggest, is at the heart of the novelistic distinction between the descriptive and the narrative. A central topic of this book will be the ways in which major nineteenth-century French realist novels used descriptive and narrative discourses to construct reality in temporal terms, both as a temporalized inside – words or consciousness in time – and as a temporalized outside – society in historical time. The goal will be to foreground the rhetorical means by which realist discourse went “beyond” the themes of lying and forgetting: its ways of disclosing that any identification of discourse with lying or forgetting misrepresents or effaces the reality of words.

The introduction provides a brief explanation of the relationship between the themes of lying and forgetting, the perfective and imperfective temporal aspects, and narrative and descriptive discourses. Those who read only a chapter on one author may wish to consult the introduction for a discussion of the terminology and theory that inform each chapter's argument. Those interested in the debates that this theory presupposes might also consult the notes, many of which relate its principal arguments to a number of contemporary theories. The three chapters on Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola, respectively,

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build on each other in an attempt to sketch out a process of change and repetition that structured, at least in part, the history of the nineteenth-century French realist novel.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout the text, the repetition of certain key words, such as “the descriptive,” and of arguments, like the distinction between the perfective and imperfective aspects, is part of a deliberate strategy. My hope is that this repetition will encourage readers to rethink the theoretical basis of the widespread presupposition that the novel is primarily a “narrative” recounted by a “narrator.”

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