Gérard Genette (b. 1930) is the most important French literary theorist after Roland Barthes. English-speaking critics associate Genette primarily with structuralism, and although it is true that Genette, like Tzvetan Todorov, produced much of his early work in the context of this movement for which Barthes served as intellectual leader and impresario, structuralism becomes one point of reference among many in Genette’s later career. When his multifaceted work over thirty years is viewed as a whole, it becomes clear that the single project that has guided it is poetics. Poetics may be defined as the study of shared or shareable properties of literary works, in contrast to the study of individual works. It does not require much reflection to see that the two kinds of study—of what features works share and of what is unique to each of them—are complementary rather than antithetical, but because poetics has received so little attention in the Anglo-American tradition, Genette’s resolute focus on it makes his work seem remote to critics largely preoccupied with, for instance, a particular novel or poem. And yet a sense of literature as a whole rather than as an aggregate of individual works remains a cardinal virtue of literary study: it is this sense that sets Northrop Frye, for example, apart from the New Critics (see New Criticism), and anyone who values the difference will respond to Genette’s work. In his early writings, collected in the first three volumes of Figures (1966–72), it is Jorge Luis Borges and Paul Valéry who articulate a vision of literature as a total field of exploration, a vision more fully realized in the work of Barthes and of Russian formalism (first translated into French by Todorov), culminating in the programmatic aim of a renovated poetics. But where traditional Aristotelian and neoclassical poetics had a strong prescriptive element, the new formalist-structuralist poetics limits itself rigorously to description. While endorsing descriptivism, Genette adds a further ingredient by emphasizing the need for an “open” poetics, a poetics responsive to literary innovations rather than one that formulates taxonomies into which all past and future literary works must be made to fit.

Genette is known best—and perhaps known only—for his work on narrative, in his treatise Discours du récit (1972, Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method, 1980) and its sequel, Noveau discours du récit (1983, Narrative Discourse Revisited, 1988), as well as in a number of essays. Yet narratology was never a primary concern of Genette’s. It was Roland Barthes who suggested this avenue of research to him ("Sketching " 74). Nevertheless, the Discours has deservedly become a standard citation in narrative theory. This is partly because it offers a paradigm of what systematic description—poetics—can accomplish. The Discours deals comprehensively with the major topics of modern narrative analysis: temporal relations, narrative levels, and viewpoint. Genette synthesizes and extends much previous work on these questions to provide a taxonomy and analysis of the presentation of narrative (what the Formalists called the sujet) under five headings: time, duration (later rechristened "speed"), frequency, mood, and perspective. Subsequent accounts of narrative have routinely been organized around a similar set of categories. Much of the technical vocabulary that Genette developed in the Discours—"analepsis," "focalization," "heterodiegetic," and so on—has also become common currency. Yet Genette’s treatment amounts to more than a taxonomy, advancing a number of original observations and hypotheses that invite a rethinking of narrative. Within the familiar notion of viewpoint, for instance, Genette distinguishes two distinct concepts: that of how a narrative is perceived and that of how it is presented (the analysis of one belonging to the category "mood," the analysis of the other belonging to the category "perspective"). Another insight that Genette achieved through descriptive analysis concerns frequency: the difference between recounting an event by itself (singulatively) and recounting it as part of a series of similar events (iteratively). Genette’s poetics of narrative is not universally accepted; notably, Dorrit Cohn has taken issue with him on point of view, and Mieke Bal has differed with him on focalization, or the way that narrative information is presented. However, it has certainly been universally recognized as the starting point for subsequent discussion.

However significant or influential Genette’s excursus in the poetics of narrative may have been, his major concern during the 1960s and 1970s was with another standard topic in poetics, the nature of literary language. Again taking a cue from Barthes, Genette devoted much work to the theory of figures of speech and its history. By producing new editions of such neoclassical rhetoricians as César Chesneau Dumarsais and Pierre Fontanier, as well as writing essays, Genette has drawn attention to the wealth of linguistic analysis submerged in the sector of traditional rhetoric that deals with figures, tropes, and schemes (elocutio, or ornamentation). He advocates a refunctioning of the theory of figures in modern—essentially, semiotic—terms and decries the progressive reduction of the multiplicity of figures recognized by Renaissance and baroque rhetoric to the single category "metaphor" typically recognized in modern criticism. Genette’s interest in poetic language is not limited to figures, however. The culminating
achievement of this phase of his career is *Mimologiques: Voyage en Cratylie* (1976, *Mimologics*, 1995), a massive essay in intellectual history. Its subject is "Cratylim, " the belief, first articulated in PLATO’s *Cratylius*, that elements of language—sonic or graphic, lexical or syntactic—do, can, or should imitate nonlinguistic facts somehow. Reinterpreted in Saussurean terms, Cratylysm amounts to the claim that linguistic signification may be motivated, at least in part; FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE himself rejects Cratylysm by his insistence on the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign. Although the emergence of modern linguistics meant the end of Cratylysm as a linguistic doctrine, the second half of *Mimologiques* shows how Cratylysm has continued to flourish as a literary ideal: in Mallarmé, Valéry, Proust, Bachelard, and Leiris, for example, there is a persistent image of literature as aspiring to linguistic mimeticism.

In *Introduction à l’architexte* (1979, *The Architext: An Introduction*, 1992)Genette explores yet another standard field of poetics, the theory of genre, albeit in a manner that differs from the *Discours du récit* in being primarily critical rather than synthetic. This difference in approach reflects the unequal development of the two areas. Whereas there are enough plausible ideas and established results in narrative theory to justify an attempt at an overview and systematic reconstruction, genre theory is still beset with myths such as the belief (debunked by Genette) that the triad of epic, drama, and lyric constitutes the three basic genres and that this doctrine is Aristotelian. The *Architexte* also outlines a new map of poetics by the addition of a number of fields dealing with the way texts relate to each other. (The prototype here is intertextuality, understood as the way one text is cited or alluded to in another.) Architextuality, for example, is the way in which texts resemble one another enough, formally or thematically, to be categorized as belonging to the same literary kind or type. The study of this kind of textuality would subsume the theory of genre, obviously. Transtextuality (unfortunately renamed "hypertextuality " in *Palimpsestes: La Littérature au second degré*, 1982 , *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, 1997) is the phenomenon of a new text’s being generated by transformations of some prior text or texts. This conception renews the idea of the Russian Formalists that parody is a fundamental literary mechanism; it also converges with Frye’s conception of literature as an order of words, enlarging itself by recombination. The first half of *Palimpsestes* showcases Genette’s analytic virtuosity by sorting out the mechanisms distinguishing the often-confused categories "parody, " "travesty, " "burlesque, " and "pastiche. " The second half turns from stylistic to thematic transformations, brilliantly exemplifying the profession that Genette makes elsewhere to the effect that the poetician’s patron saint is Proteus (Figures IV 105).

A third field of study in Genette’s outline of an enlarged poetics is that of paratextuality, the study of the way each literary work is enveloped by smaller texts, ranging from such microtexts as book and chapter titles, subtitles and subheadings, and running heads to such supplements as prefaces, afterwords, and even jacket copy. Such freestanding items as journals, letters, and interviews may also form part of paratext if they are supplementary to a work. Genette develops this useful idea in *Seuils* (1987, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, 1997), a study that marks the beginning of a turn toward topics in AESTHETICS, that has characterized Genette’s work in the past decade or so. *Fiction et diction* (1990, *Fiction and Diction*, 1993)deals with the definition of literature, the demarcation between factual and fictional discourse, and the nature of style. Familiar as these subjects may be to students of aesthetics, in the two volumes of *L’Oeuvre de l’art* (1994–97, *The Work of Art*, 1997–99)Genette turns to the most basic aesthetic question of all: what is a work of art? In these two volumes and in many of the essays in *Figures IV* (1999)literature features only as one art among others, with Genette devoting as much if not more attention to painting, architecture, music, and film. The ultimate significance of Genette’s turn from poetics to aesthetics remains unclear and may come as a surprise to critics who have admired his work in the theory of literature. Of course there is a similar orientation toward generality in both fields; and the analytic style of the aesthetic thinkers whom Genette engages (including Nelson Goodman and Arthur Danto) chimes with the systematizing, classificatory approach taken in all of Genette’s work. Having rethought the field of poetics, Genette currently seems focused on resituating that field within aesthetics.

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See also FRENCH THEORY AND CRITICISM: 5, 1945 TO 1968, NARRATOLOGY, and SEMIOTICS.

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