

STORY AND DISCOURSE IN THE ANALYSIS OF NARRATIVE

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More and more there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed.

Walter Benjamin

So much work has been done in the field of narratology that to attempt any sort of synthesis, identifying areas of fundamental agreement and the principal issues in dispute, would be a massive task. Limiting oneself to the obvious cases, there is the work of the Russian Formalists, particularly Propp and Shklovsky; an American tradition, running from Henry James's prefaces, through Lubbock and Booth, to modern attempts at synthesis such as Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse*, has been especially concerned with problems of point of view. French Structuralism has undertaken the development of narrative grammars (Barthes, Todorov, Bremond, Greimas, Thomas Pavel, Gerald Prince) and description of the relations between story and narration (Genette). In German the writings of Wolfgang Kayser, Eberhard Lämmert, Franz Stanzl, and Wolf Schmid come to mind; important work has been done in the Netherlands, notably by Teun Van Dijk and Mieke Bal; and there is an active group in Tel Aviv (Benjamin Hrushovski, Meir Sternberg, Menakhem Perry).¹ There is considerable variety among these traditions, and of course each theorist has concepts or categories of his own, but if these theorists agree on anything it is this: that the theory of narrative requires a distinction between what I shall call 'story'—a sequence of actions or events, conceived as independent of their manifestation in discourse—and what I shall call 'discourse,' the discursive presentation or narration of events.

In Russian Formalism this is the distinction between *fabula* and *sjuzhet*: the story as a series of events and the story as reported in the narrative.

Other theorists propose different formulations, whose terms are often confusing: *récit*, for example, is sometimes *fabula*, as in Bremond, and sometimes *sjuzhet*, as in Barthes. But there is always a basic distinction between a sequence of events and a discourse that orders and presents events. Genette, for instance, distinguishes the sequence of events, *histoire*, from the presentation of events in discourse, *récit*, and also from a third level, *narration*, which is the enunciation of narrative; but from the way in which Genette uses his categories Mieke Bal argues, rightly I believe, that 'in the end Genette distinguishes only two levels, those of Russian Formalism.'²

The American tradition has been less inclined than the others to formulate this distinction explicitly. It has been primarily concerned with the problems of point of view: the identification and discrimination of narrators, overt and covert, and the description of what in the novel or short story belongs to the perspective of the narrator. In order to do this, however, one must posit a distinction between actions or events themselves and the narrative presentation of those actions. For the study of point of view to make sense, there must be various contrasting ways of viewing and telling a given story, and this makes 'story' an invariant core, a constant against which the variables of narrative presentation can be measured. But to describe the situation in this way is to identify the distinction as a heuristic fiction, for except in rare cases the analyst is not presented with contrasting narratives of the same sequence of actions; the analyst is confronted with a single narrative and must postulate what 'actually happens' in order to be able to describe and interpret the way in which this sequence of events is organized, evaluated, and presented by the narrator.

Thus the American tradition, though it has never been much concerned to formalize its categories or attempt a grammar of plot, has relied on the same basic distinction that European narratology explicitly formulates, a distinction which, I claim, is an indispensable premise of narratology. To make narrative an object of study, one must distinguish narratives from nonnarratives, and this invariably involves reference to the fact that narratives report sequences of events. If narrative is defined as the representation of a series of events, then the analyst must be able to identify these events, and they come to function as a nondiscursive, nontextual given, something which exists prior to and independently of narrative presentation and which the narrative then reports. I am not, of course, suggesting that narratologists believe that the events of a Balzac story actually took place or that Balzac conceived the events first and then embodied them in narrative discourse. I am claiming that narratological analysis of a text requires one to treat the discourse as a representation of events which are conceived of as independent of any particular narrative perspective or presentation and which are thought of as having the properties of real events. Thus a novel may not identify the temporal relationship between two events it presents, but the analyst must assume that there is a real or proper temporal order, that the events in fact

occurred either simultaneously or successively. Mieke Bal defines this assumption with an explicitness that is rare among theorists of narrative: 'the story [*l'histoire*] consists of the set of events in their chronological order, their spatial location, and their relations with the actors who cause or undergo them.' And more specifically, 'The events have temporal relations with one another. Each one is either anterior to, simultaneous with, or posterior to every other event.'³

The analyst must assume that the events reported have a true order, for only then can he or she describe the narrative presentation as a modification or effacement of the order of events. If a novel does not identify the temporal relation between two events, one can treat this as a distinctive feature of its narrative point of view only if one assumes that the events themselves do have an order of succession.

Of course, it is only reasonable to assume that events do occur in some order and that a description of events presupposes the prior existence, albeit fictive, of those events. In applying these assumptions about the world to the texts of narrative we posit a level of structure which, by functioning as a nontextual given, enables us to treat everything in the discourse as a way of interpreting, valuing, and presenting this nontextual substratum.

This has been a fruitful way of proceeding. Indeed, it is indispensable, even for the analysis of contemporary fictions that seem to reject the very notion of 'event.' The assumption that narrative presents a series of events is necessary to account for the effect of narratives, such as Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur*, that make it impossible for the reader to work out what the real events are and in what order they occurred. Without the assumption of a real order of events, the repetitions of the narrative discourse would not be at all confusing and would be interpreted, flatly, as a repetition of motifs. However, indispensable as this perspective may be, its premise about the nature of narrative and the organization of narrative discourse is frequently questioned in narratives themselves, at moments when the hierarchy of narrative is inverted—moments that must be carefully investigated if one is not to oversimplify the way in which narratives function and fail to account for their force. Positing the priority of events to the discourse which reports or presents them, narratology establishes a hierarchy which the functioning of narratives often subverts by presenting events not as givens but as the products of discursive forces or requirements.

To illustrate the issues involved, let us start with a familiar example, the story of Oedipus. The analysis of narrative would identify the sequence of events that constitutes the action of the story: Oedipus is abandoned on Mt Cithaeron; he is rescued by a shepherd; he grows up in Corinth; he kills Laius at the crossroads; he answers the Sphinx's riddle; he marries Jocasta; he seeks the murderer of Laius; he discovers his own guilt; he blinds himself and leaves his country. After identifying the *fabula*, one could describe the order and perspective in which these events are presented in the discourse of the

play. Treating these events as the reality of the story, one then seeks to interpret the significance of the way in which they are portrayed. In the case of *Oedipus*, as in many other narratives, of which the detective story is only the most banal example, the discourse focuses on the bringing to light of a crucial event, identified as a reality which determines significance. Someone killed Laius and the problem is to discover what in fact happened at that fateful moment in the past.

One of millions of enthusiastic readers, Sigmund Freud, describes the play as follows:

The action of the play consists of nothing other than the process of revealing, with cunning delays and ever-mounting excitement, that Oedipus himself is the murderer of Laius, but further, that he is the son of the murdered man and of Jocasta. Appalled at the abomination he has unwittingly perpetrated, Oedipus blinds himself and forsakes his home.⁴

Freud emphasizes that the logic of signification here is one in which events, conceived as prior to and independent of their discursive representation, determine meanings: the play brings to light an awful deed which is so powerful that it imposes its meaning irrespective of any intention of the actor. The prior event has made Oedipus guilty, and when this is revealed he attains tragic dignity in accepting the meaning imposed by the revealed event.

This way of thinking about the play is essential, but there is a contrary perspective which is also essential to its force and which an apparently marginal element will help us to grasp. When Oedipus first asks whether anyone witnessed Laius's death he is told, 'All died save one, who fled in terror and could tell us only one clear fact. His story was that robbers, not one but many, fell in with the King's party and killed them.'⁵ And later when Oedipus begins to wonder whether he might not himself be the murderer he tells Jocasta that everything hangs on the testimony of this witness, whom they await. 'You say he spoke of robbers, that robbers killed him. If he still says robbers, it was not I. One is not the same as many. But if he speaks of one lone traveller, there is no escape, the finger points to me.' To which Jocasta answers, 'Oh, but I assure you, that was what he said. He cannot go back on it now; the whole town heard it, not only I.'

The only witness has publicly told a story that is incompatible with Oedipus's guilt. This possibility of innocence is never eliminated, for when the witness arrives Oedipus is interested in his relation to Laius and asks only about his birth, not about the murder. The witness is never asked whether the murderers were one or many.⁶

I am not, of course, suggesting that Oedipus was really innocent and has been falsely accused for 2,400 years. I am interested in the significance of the

fact that the possibility of innocence is never dispelled. The 'whole action of the play' is the revelation of this awful deed, but we are never given the proof, the testimony of the eye-witness. Oedipus himself and all his readers are convinced of his guilt but our conviction does not come from the revelation of the deed. Instead of the revelation of a prior deed determining meaning, we could say that it is meaning, the convergence of meaning in the narrative discourse, that leads us to posit this deed as its appropriate manifestation.

Once we are well into the play, we know that Oedipus must be found guilty, otherwise the play will not work at all; and the logic to which we are responding is not simply an esthetic logic that affects readers of literary works. Oedipus, too, feels the force of this logic. It had been prophesied that Oedipus would kill his father; it had been prophesied that Laius would be killed by his son; Oedipus admits to having killed an old man at what may have been the relevant time and place; so when the shepherd reveals that Oedipus is in fact the son of Laius, Oedipus leaps to the conclusion, and every reader leaps with him, that he is in fact the murderer of Laius. His conclusion is based not on new evidence concerning a past deed but on the force of meaning, the interweaving of prophesies and the demands of narrative coherence. The convergence of discursive forces makes it essential that he become the murderer of Laius, and he yields to this force of meaning. Instead of saying, therefore, that there is a sequence of past events that are given and which the play reveals with certain detours, we can say that the crucial event is the product of demands of signification. Here meaning is not the effect of a prior event but its cause.

Oedipus becomes the murderer of his father not by a violent act that is brought to light but by bowing to the demands of narrative coherence and deeming the act to have taken place. Moreover, it is essential to the force of the play that Oedipus take this leap, that he accede to the demands of narrative coherence and deem himself guilty. If he were to resist the logic of signification, arguing that 'the fact that he's my father doesn't mean that I killed him,' demanding more evidence about the past event, Oedipus would not acquire the necessary tragic stature. In this respect the force of the narrative relies on the contrary logic, in which event is not a cause but an effect of theme. To describe this logic is not to quibble over details but to investigate tragic power.

Moreover, one might note that this contrary logic is in fact necessary to Freud's reading of the play, even though he himself stresses in his account the priority of event to meaning. If we were to follow this logic and say that the prior deed, committed without understanding, is what makes Oedipus guilty of patricide, then Oedipus can scarcely be said to have an Oedipus complex.⁷ But suppose we stress instead that as soon as Oedipus learns that Laius is his father he immediately declares what he has hitherto denied: if Laius is my father, he in effect says, then I must have killed him. If we emphasize this point, we can indeed identify an Oedipus complex: that is to

say, a structure of signification—a desire to kill the father and a guilt for that desire—which does not result from an act but precedes it.

This logic by which event is a product of discursive forces rather than a given reported by discourse is essential to the force of the narrative, but in describing the play in this way we have certainly not replaced a deluded or incorrect model of narrative by a correct one. On the contrary, it is obvious that much of the play's power depends on the narratological assumption that Oedipus's guilt or innocence has already been determined by a past event that has not yet been revealed or reported. Yet the contrary logic in which Oedipus posits an act in response to demands of signification is essential to the tragic force of the ending. These two logics cannot be brought together in harmonious synthesis; each works by the exclusion of the other; each depends on a hierarchical relation between story and discourse which the other inverts. In so far as both these logics are necessary to the force of the play, they put in question the possibility of a coherent, noncontradictory account of narrative. They stage a confrontation of sorts between a semiotics that aspires to produce a grammar of narrative and deconstructive interpretations, which in showing the work's opposition to its own logic suggest the impossibility of such a grammar. If an analysis of the logic of signification shows that *Oedipus* requires a double reading, a reading according to incompatible principles, this would suggest both the importance of narratological analysis and the impossibility of attaining its goal.

If *Oedipus* seems a special case, in that the analysis turns on a possible uncertainty about the central event in the plot, let us consider an example from a very different period and genre, George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, as analyzed in a recent article by Cynthia Chase. Deronda, the adopted son of an English nobleman, is a talented, sensitive young man, moving in good society, who has been unable to decide on a profession. He happens to rescue a poor Jewish girl who was trying to drown herself, and later, in searching for her family, he meets her brother Mordecai, an ailing scholar with whom he begins to study Hebrew. He develops an intense interest in Jewish culture, falls in love with Mirah, the girl he has saved, and is accepted by Mordecai and others as a kindred spirit.

At this point, Deronda receives a summons from his mother, who, obeying her dead father's injunction, reveals to him the secret of his birth: he is a Jew. The novel emphasizes the causal force of this past event: because he was born a Jew he is a Jew. Origin, cause, and identity are linked in an implicit argument that is common to narrative. With the revelation of Deronda's parentage it is implied that his present character and involvement with things Jewish have been caused by his Jewish origin.

But on the other hand, as Chase notes,

The sequence of events in the plot as a whole presents Deronda's revealed origins in a different perspective. The account of Deronda's

situation has made it increasingly obvious to the reader that the progression of the hero's destiny—or, that is to say, the progression of the story—positively requires a revelation that he is of Jewish birth. For Deronda's bildungsroman to proceed, his character must crystallize, and this must come about through a recognition of his destiny, which has remained obscure to him, according to the narrator's account, largely because of his ignorance of his origins. The suspenseful stress on Deronda's relationship with Mordecai and with Mirah orients his history in their direction, and Mordecai explicitly stresses his faith that Deronda is a Jew. Thus the reader comes upon Deronda's Jewish parentage as an inevitable inference to be drawn not simply from the presentation of Deronda's qualities and his empathy with the Jews but above all from the patent strategy and direction of the narrative. The revelation of Deronda's origins therefore appears as an effect of narrative requirements. The supposed cause of his character and vocation (according to the chapters recounting the disclosure), Deronda's origin presents itself (in the light of the rest of the text) rather as the effect of the account of his vocation: his origin is the effect of its effects.⁸

By one logic Deronda's birth is a past cause of present effects; by another contrary logic, named by Deronda's friend Hans Meyrick in a flippant letter, one should speak rather of 'the present causes of past effects.'⁹ It is essential to stress here that, as in the case of Oedipus, there is no question of finding a compromise formulation that would do justice to both presentations of the event by avoiding extremes, for the power of the narrative depends precisely on the alternative use of extremes, the rigorous deployment of two logics, each of which works by excluding the other. It will not do to say, for example, that Deronda's involvement with Judaism is partly but not completely the result of his birth, and that the revelation of his birth is therefore in part an explanation and in part a narrative fulfillment. This sort of formulation is wrong because the power of Eliot's novel depends precisely on the fact that Deronda's commitment to Judaism and idealism, instead of to the frivolous society in which he has been raised, is presented as a free choice. To have exemplary moral value it must be presented as a choice, not as the ineluctable result of the hidden fact of parentage. It must also be presented as wholehearted, not as a dilettantish dabbling which would then be transformed into commitment by revelation of the fact of birth. The novel requires that Deronda's commitment to Judaism be independent of the revelation of his Jewishness—this is thematically and ethically essential—yet its account of Jewishness does not allow for the possibility of conversion and insists on the irreplaceability of origins: to be a Jew is to have been born a Jew. These two logics, one of which insists upon the causal efficacy of origins and the other of which denies their causal efficacy, are in contradiction but

they are essential to the way in which the narrative functions. One logic assumes the primacy of events; the other treats the events as the products of meanings.

One could argue that every narrative operates according to this double logic, presenting its plot as a sequence of events which is prior to and independent of the given perspective on these events, and, at the same time, suggesting by its implicit claims to significance that these events are justified by their appropriateness to a thematic structure. As critics we adopt the first perspective when we debate the significance of a character's actions (taking those actions as given). We adopt the second perspective when we discuss the appropriateness or inappropriateness of an ending (when we debate whether these actions are appropriate expressions of the thematic structure which ought to determine them). Theorists of narrative have always, of course, recognized these two perspectives, but they have perhaps been too ready to assume that they can be held together, synthesized in some way without contradiction. Not only is there a contradiction, but it will characteristically manifest itself in narratives, as a moment that seems either superfluous—a loose end, as in *Oedipus Rex*—or too neat, as in *Daniel Deronda*. Recent work on narrative has brought such moments to the fore, stressing their importance to the rhetorical force of narratives.

Though my examples so far have been classics of European literature, this double logic is by no means confined to fictional narrative. Recent discussions of the nature and structure of narrative in Freud enable us to identify a similar situation. In general, Freudian theory makes narrative the preferred mode of explanation. Psychoanalysis does not propose scientific laws of the form 'if X, then Y.' Psychoanalytic understanding involves reconstructing a story, tracing a phenomenon to its origin, seeing how one thing leads to another. Freud's case histories themselves are indeed narratives with a *fabula* and a *sjuzhet*: the *fabula* is the reconstructed plot, the sequence of events in the patient's life, and the *sjuzhet* is the order in which these events are presented, the story of Freud's conduct of the case.¹⁰ Like *Oedipus* and *Daniel Deronda*, Freud's narratives lead to the revelation of a decisive event which, when placed in the true sequence of events, can be seen as the cause of the patient's present situation.

One of Freud's more dramatic cases is that of the Wolfman, in which analysis of key dreams and associations leads Freud to the conclusion that at an age of 1½ years the child woke up to witness his parents copulating. Freud reconstructs a sequence of events that begins with this decisive 'primal scene' and includes the transformation of the memory into a trauma at age 4, a striking example of *Nachträglichkeit*. Though the event has been posited or projected ('constructed' is Freud's term) from the discourse produced by the patient, and thus might seem the product of discursive forces, Freud argues vigorously for the reality and decisive priority of the event. 'It must therefore,' he concludes, 'be left at this (I can see no other possibility): either the

analysis based on the neurosis in his childhood is all a piece of nonsense from start to finish, or else everything took place just as I have described it above.¹¹ To question the priority of the event is to court absurdity.

At this point Freud is attempting to hold together in a synthesis the two principles of narrative that we have found in opposition elsewhere: the priority of events and the determination of event by structures of signification. Indeed, he cites the fact that his construct makes sense, hangs together nicely, as evidence that the event must have occurred. He rejects the conception of the event as a meaningful, highly determined fiction by refusing to see it as a possibility; he admits only the two alternatives: a real, prior event or a narrative without significance. But later Freud comes to see another possibility, and in what Peter Brooks calls 'one of the most daring moments in Freud's thought and one of his most heroic gestures as a writer,' he allows his first argument to stand and adds a further discussion, by way, he says, 'of supplementation and rectification.'¹² It is possible, Freud says, in supplementation, that this primal event did not occur and that what we are dealing with is in fact a trope, a transference from, say, a scene of copulating animals to his parents to produce at age 4 the fantasy of witnessing at 1½ years of age a scene of parental copulation. To the possible objection that it is implausible for such a scene to have been constructed, Freud replies by citing as evidence for the possibility of this fantasy precisely the structural coherence that had previously been adduced as evidence for the reality of the event itself. For example, if the fantasized event is to work in a plausible narration, it must be imagined as taking place at a time when the child was sleeping in his parents' bedroom. 'The scene which was to be made up had to fulfill certain conditions which, in consequence of the circumstances of the dreamer's life, could only be found in precisely this early period; such, for instance, was the condition that he should be in bed in his parents' bedroom.'¹³

In this second argument, then, Freud separates the two principles of narrative instead of attempting to conflate them as he did previously. One may maintain the primacy of the event: it took place at the appropriate moment and determined subsequent events and their significance. Or one can maintain that the structures of signification, the discursive requirements, work to produce a fictional or tropological event. At this point Freud admits the contradiction between these two perspectives, but he refuses to choose between them, referring the reader to a discussion of the problem of primal scenes versus primal fantasies in another text.

When he does return to the problem in this case history it is with a rich and pertinent formulation: 'I should myself be glad to know whether the primal scene in my present patient's case was a fantasy or a real experience; but, taking other similar cases into account, I must admit that the answer to this question is not in fact a matter of very great importance.'¹⁴ Confronted with the difficulty of deciding whether a putative narrative event should be

regarded as a given or a product, Freud notes that it is not decisively important, in that either perspective gives us the same narrative sequence.

But Freud also recognizes that the reader or analyst can never calmly accept this conclusion when he has engaged with a narrative. There is no happy compromise, for the force, the ethical import of a narrative, always impels the reader or analyst toward a decision. Understandably, Freud desires to know whether he has discovered the decisive event of his patient's past—an event which, for example, other parents might on the basis of Freud's discovery be enjoined to avoid—or whether the parents' behavior was in no way decisive, since whatever they did could be transformed by the tropes of fantasy into what the forces of signification in the narrative required. The ethical and referential dimensions of the narrative, that is to say, make such questions of compelling interest, even though the theorist resists this interest with the suggestion that the choice does not matter.

In one sense, however, Freud is right, for the two alternatives give us very similar narratives. If one opts for the production of the event by forces of signification, it becomes clear that the primal fantasy, as we might call it, can be efficacious only if the imagined event functions for the 4-year-old as a real event from his past. And if, on the other hand, we opt for the reality of the primal scene, we can see that this event could not have had the disastrous consequences it did unless the structures of signification which made it a trauma for the Wolfman and gave it irresistible explanatory power were so suited to it as to make it in some sense necessary. The fact that the event supposedly experienced at age 1½ became a trauma only through deferred action at age 4 shows the powerful role of the forces of meaning. But however close these two accounts may be, the fact remains that from the point of view of narratology, and also from the point of view of the engaged reader, the difference between an event of the plot and a imaginary event is irreducible. As Brooks concludes, 'the relationship between *fabula* and *sjuzhet*, between event and its significant rewriting is one of suspicion and conjecture, a structure of undecidability which can offer only a framework of narrative possibilities rather than a clearly specifiable plot.'¹⁵ This undecidability is the effect of the convergence of two narrative logics that do not give rise to a synthesis.

The same pattern of narrative and analysis appears in another text of Freud's which tells not the story of an individual but the story of the race. In *Totem and Taboo* Freud tells of a decisive historical event in primitive times: a jealous and tyrannical father, who kept all the women for himself and drove away the sons as they reached maturity, was killed and devoured by the sons who had banded together. This 'memorable and criminal deed' was the beginning of social organization, religion, and moral restrictions, since the guilt led to the creation of taboos. This historical event, Freud claims, remains efficacious to this day. We inherit and repeat the wish if not the

actual deed, and the guilt which arises from this wish keeps the consequences of the deed alive in an unbroken narrative.

But clearly if guilt can be created by desires as well as by acts, it is possible that the originary act never took place. Freud admits that the remorse may have been provoked by the sons' fantasy of killing the father (by the imagination of an event). This is a plausible hypothesis, he says, 'and no damage would thus be done to the causal chain stretching from the beginning to the present day.'¹⁶ Choosing between these alternatives is no easy matter; however, he adds, 'it must be confessed that the distinction which may seem fundamental to other people does not in our judgment affect the heart of the matter.' As in the case of the Wolfman, emphasis on event and emphasis on meaning give the same narrative. But once again, one cannot fail to wish to choose, and Freud does: primitive men were uninhibited; for them thought passed directly into action. 'With them it is rather the deed that is the substitute for thought. And that is why, without laying claim to any finality of judgment, I think that in the case before us it may be assumed that "in the beginning was the Deed."'¹⁷

A safe assumption, perhaps, but safe because it is so equivocal. Freud here starts with the fantasy and asserts that for primitive men the deed was a substitute for the fantasy. The deed truly took place, he claims, but his formulation prevents one from taking the deed as a given since it is itself but a substitute for the fantasy, a product of this primal fantasy. And in claiming that in the beginning was the Deed, Freud refers us not to an event but to a signifying structure, another text, Goethe's *Faust*, in which 'deed' is but a substitute for 'word.' Faust is translating the opening words of *Genesis*, 'In the beginning was the Word,' and, unhappy with the German *Wort*, decides to substitute for it, in the very gesture Freud repeats, the word for 'deed': *Tat*. Quoting Goethe in asserting an originary deed, Freud cannot but refer us to a prior Word. Freud's text shows that even when one tries to assert the primacy of either word or deed one does not succeed in escaping the alternative one tried to reject.

I emphasize the impossibility of synthesis because what is involved here in narrative is an effect of self-deconstruction. A deconstruction involves the demonstration that a hierarchical opposition, in which one term is said to be dependent upon another conceived as prior, is in fact a rhetorical or metaphysical imposition and that the hierarchy could well be reversed. The narratives discussed here include a moment of self-deconstruction in which the supposed priority of event to discourse is inverted. The most elementary form of this deconstruction, somewhat different but still very relevant to narrative, is Nietzsche's analysis of causation as a trope, a metonymy.

Causation involves a narrative structure in which we posit first the presence of a cause and then the production of an effect. Indeed, the very notion of plot, as E. M. Forster taught us, is based on causation: 'the king died, then the queen died' is not a narrative, although 'the king died, then the

queen died of grief' is.¹⁸ This, one might say, is the *fabula* of the causal narrative: first, there is cause; then, there is effect; first a mosquito bites one's arm, then one feels pain. But, says Nietzsche, this sequence is not given; it is constructed by a rhetorical operation. What happens may be, for example, that we feel a pain and then look around for some factor we can treat as the cause. The 'real' causal sequence may be: first pain, then mosquito. It is the effect that causes us to produce a cause; a tropological operation then reorders the sequence pain-mosquito as mosquito-pain. This latter sequence is the product of discursive forces, but we treat it as a given, as the true order.¹⁹

This account of the production of causation does not imply that we can scrap the notion of causation, any more than the discursive production of events implies that narratives could function without the idea of causation, but there are moments when narratives identify their own tropological production and when the second perspective is indispensable to an account of their force. This is true not only of complex literary or theoretical narratives but also of what the sociolinguist William Labov calls 'natural narrative'—an interesting case for the narratologist.

In his studies of the black English vernacular, Labov became interested in the narrative skills displayed by adolescents and preadolescents. In interviews he would ask, for example, 'Were you ever in a fight with a guy bigger than you?' and if the answer were 'Yes' would pause and then ask, simply, 'What happened?' Labov begins his formal analysis of these stories by assuming the primacy of events: he defines narrative as 'a method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events.'²⁰ But, starting from this definition, he discovers that

there is one important aspect of narrative that has not been discussed—perhaps the most important element in addition to the basic narrative clause. This is what we term the *evaluation* of the narrative: the means used by the narrator to indicate the point of the narrative, its *raison d'être*, why it was told and what the narrator was getting at.²¹

Labov even concludes that the narrator's primary concern may not be to report a sequence of events, as the definition of narrative would suggest, but rather to tell a story that will not be thought pointless: 'Pointless stories are met [in English] with the withering rejoinder, "So what?" Every good narrator is continually warding off this question; when his narrative is over it should be unthinkable for a bystander to say, "So what?"'²²

Labov's narrators prove skilled at warding off this question. They construct their narratives so that the demands of signification are met and the story perceived as worthy of telling, as narratable. Labov's analysis distinguishes these discursive, evaluative elements from the sequence of actions

reported in the narrative clauses; it is thus based on yet another version of the basic narratological distinction between story and discourse. Labov's analysis works very well as long as he can distinguish story from discourse. If he can separate narrative clauses from evaluative clauses, then he can maintain the view that a narrative is a sequence of clauses reporting events, to which are added clauses evaluating these events, but when he comes to describe the evaluative devices, he discovers that some of the most interesting and powerful are not comments external to the action but actually belong to the sequence of actions. Instead of oneself remarking how exciting or dangerous or what a close call an incident was, one can emphasize the reportability of a story by attributing an evaluative comment to one of the participants and narrating this comment as an event in the story: 'And when we got down there her brother turned to me and whispered, "I think she's dead, John."' Or, as Labov says, the evaluation 'may itself be a narrative clause' in that an action one reports has the primary function of emphasizing the dramatic character of the event, as in 'I never prayed to God so fast and so hard in all my life!'²³

Labov is certainly correct to claim that many clauses reporting actions are in fact determined by their evaluative function; instead of thinking of them as reports of prior actions, he prefers to see them as in effect producing an action so as to comply with the requirements of significance and make the story one to which no one will say 'So what?' But given this possibility, the analyst finds himself in an awkward position. For every report of an action there is the possibility that it should be thought of as evaluative, determined by the requirements of significance, and not as the narrative representation of a given event. Since the analyst's most basic distinction is between narrative and evaluative clauses, since for him analyzing a tale is first of all a matter of sorting elements into these two classes, he must make this choice, which may be a very dubious one. Of course, in a sense, as Freud said, his choice may not matter, since however he describes a particular event we still have the same tale. But if we are concerned with the force of the story, and those who tell or listen to natural narratives are especially concerned with their force, then we are invited to choose.

In natural narrative the desire to choose, the urgency of choice, is likely to emerge in the form of suspicion: it sounds too neat, too dramatic, too good to be true: did it really happen that way, or is this incident an evaluative device designed to prevent us from saying 'So what?' Is this particular element of the story a product of discursive requirements? In so-called 'natural narrative' the choice usually emerges as a question about fictionality (Is this incident true?), but as soon as the narrative as a whole is placed under the aegis of fiction, as soon as we approach it as a short story rather than a narrative of personal experience, then the question of the relation of story and discourse finds no such simple outlet. We cannot ask simply whether an incident is true or false; it would be very odd to say of Daniel Deronda that

we do not believe he was actually born a Jew. We have to ask instead whether this is an event that determines meaning and discourse or whether it is itself determined by various narrative and discursive requirements.

The analysis of narrative is an important branch of semiotics. We still do not appreciate as fully as we ought the importance of narrative schemes and models in all aspects of our lives. Analysis of narrative depends, as I have argued, on the distinction between story and discourse, and this distinction always involves a relation of dependency: either the discourse is seen as a representation of events which must be thought of as independent of that particular representation, or else the so-called events are thought of as the postulates or products of a discourse. Since the distinction between story and discourse can function only if there is a determination of one by the other, the analyst must always choose which will be treated as the given and which as the product. Yet either choice leads to a narratology that misses some of the curious complexity of narratives and fails to account for much of their impact. If one thinks of discourse as the presentation of story, one will find it difficult to account for the sorts of effects, discussed here, which depend upon the determination of story by discourse, a possibility often posed by the narrative itself. If, on the other hand, one were to adopt the view that what we call 'events' are nothing other than products of discourse, a series of predicates attached to agents in the text, then one would be even less able to account for the force of narrative. For even the most radical fictions depend for their effect on the assumption that their puzzling sequences of sentences are presentations of events (though we may not be able to tell what those events are), and that these events in principle have features not reported by the discourse, such that the selection operated by the discourse has meaning. Without that assumption, which makes the discourse a selection and even a suppression of possible information, texts would lack their intriguing and dislocatory power.

Neither perspective, then, is likely to offer a satisfactory narratology, nor can the two fit together in a harmonious synthesis; they stand in irreconcilable opposition, a conflict between two logics which puts in question the possibility of a coherent, non-contradictory 'science' of narrative. But this identification of a certain self-deconstructive force in narrative and the theory of narrative should not lead to rejection of the analytical enterprise that drives one to this discovery. In the absence of the possibility of synthesis, one must be willing to shift from one perspective to the other, from story to discourse and back again.

Notes

- 1 For a bibliography and useful synthesis, see Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press,

1978. For more recent discussions and further bibliography, see the three issues of *Poetics Today* devoted to narrative: 1:3 (1980), 1:4 (1980) and 2:2 (1981).
- 2 Mieke Bal, *Narratologie: essai sur la signification narrative dans quatre romans modernes*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1977, p. 6.
- 3 Ibid., p. 4.
- 4 Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, New York, Avon, 1965, p. 295.
- 5 Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, translated with a commentary by Thomas Gould, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, 1970, lines 842-7.
- 6 See Sandor Goodhart, 'Oedipus and Laius's Many Murderers,' *Diacritics*, 8:1 (Spring 1978) pp. 55-71.
- 7 See Cynthia Chase, 'Oedipal Textuality: Reading Freud's Reading of *Oedipus*,' *Diacritics*, 9:1 (Spring 1979) p. 58.
- 8 Cynthia Chase, 'The Decomposition of the Elephants: Double-Reading *Daniel Deronda*,' *PMLA*, 93:2 (March 1978) p. 218.
- 9 Ibid., p. 215.
- 10 This is a simplification of a more complex account in Peter Brooks, 'Fictions of the Wolfman,' *Diacritics*, 9:1 (Spring 1979), pp. 75-6.
- 11 Sigmund Freud, *The Wolfman and Sigmund Freud*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973, p. 220.
- 12 Brooks, 'Fictions of the Wolfman,' p. 78; Freud, *The Wolfman*, p. 221.
- 13 Freud, *The Wolfman*, p. 223.
- 14 Ibid., p. 260.
- 15 Brooks, 'Fictions of the Wolfman,' p. 77. See also Brooks, 'Freud's Masterplot: Questions of Narrative,' *Yale French Studies*, 55/56 (1977) pp. 280-300.
- 16 Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, New York, Norton, 1950, p. 16.
- 17 Ibid., p. 161.
- 18 E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1962, p. 93.
- 19 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke*, ed. Karl Schlechta, Munich, Hanser Verlag, 1956, vol. 3, pp. 804-5. For discussion see Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Literary Theory in the 1970s*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press/Routledge & Kegan Paul, forthcoming, ch. 2.
- 20 William Labov, *Language in the Inner City*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972, p. 360.
- 21 Ibid., p. 366.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 William Labov, 'Narrative Analysis: Oral Versions of Personal Experience,' *Essays on the Verbal and Visual Arts: Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society* (1966) pp. 37-9.

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