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1

IN THE BEGINNING: THE END

In a fit of bombast all too typical of contemporary features journalism, Bryan Appleyard of the *Sunday Times* asserts that

> We tell stories to ourselves; of our journey from birth to death, friends, families, who we are and who we want to be. Or public stories about history and politics, about our country, our race or our religion. At each moment of our lives these stories place us in space and time. They console us, making our lives meaningful by placing us in something bigger than ourselves. Maybe the story is just that we are in love, that we have to feed the cat or educate the children. Or maybe it is about a lifelong struggle for salvation or liberation. Either way – however large or small the story – the human impulse is to make sense of each moment by referring it to a larger narrative. We need to live in a world not of our own making.
>
> (*Sunday Times Magazine* 7 February 1999: 39)

Omnipotent, pretentious, unsubstantiated and obvious: all these things are true of Appleyard's opening paragraph. Facing the millennium, and seeking to account for the previous thousand

years of human endeavour, he obviously wishes to utter something grandiose, exaggerated even. Yet, for all our recognition of this, there also appears to be an unavoidable kernel of truth in what he says. Human beings, especially after the development of the verbal faculty, have constantly told stories, presented events and squeezed aspects of the world into narrative form.

Wherever there are humans there appear to be stories. It is true that people tell stories about life history (Gee 1991) and about their psyches (Schafer 1983; Spence 1987); people read stories when they consume various media, including the one in which Appleyard operates (Kunelius 1994); different media, such as musical notation, might embody stories (McClary 1998); and, even when thinking about the world in an 'objective' fashion, scientifically or ethically, the tendency to 'storify' remains (Harré 1990; Levine 1997). Yet, as soon as we start to look more closely at this phenomenon, it is evident that the apparently natural impulse of storytelling and storylistening (or reading) is far from simple. Pronouncing that certain events in the world of human experience 'make a good story' invariably carries with it the contention that those events can be reduced to a few crude principles, that stories are very 'basic' ways of thinking about the world.

This book is dedicated to the opposite premise: that even the most 'simple' of stories is embedded in a network of relations that are sometimes astounding in their complexity. This is not to say that those relations are beyond the ken of all but the most technically orientated academic minds. The opposite, once more, is the case. The most familiar, most primitive, most ancient and seemingly most straightforward of stories reveals depths that we might hitherto have failed to anticipate. That we do not anticipate them is usually because we do not attend to the network of relations in which a story resides; but this is definitely not to say that we do not partake of these depths and the potential pleasure they yield.

So far we have referred to stories, but, strictly speaking, the chief object of our focus in this network is 'narrative', a communicative

relation which is often conflated with straightforward understandings of what a story is. We will see that narrative is a particular form of representation implementing signs; and in the rest of this chapter we will consider how it is necessarily bound up with sequence, space and time. Chapter 2 reflects on early narratives and confronts some of the thorny issues involved in the search to discover them, while Chapters 3 and 4 focus on arguably the most pre-eminent narrative form, the novel. Chapter 5 continues to focus on print fiction but discusses different forms of consciousness arising from inter-cultural exchanges, technology and the advent of 'modernism'. Then, in Chapter 6, another embodiment of narrative, the cinema, is discussed in relation to 'modernism'. Chapter 7 considers the phenomenon called 'postmodernism' and how it has impinged on the manifestations of narrative. Finally, Chapter 8 surveys recent developments in narrative technologies, considers 'openness' and 'closure' and suggests one direction for the future study of the narrative sign.

Throughout, we will be interested in narrative as part of the general process of *representation* which takes place in human discourse. Hall (1997) suggests that there are three general approaches to the question of the work done by representation. The 'reflective' approach sees meaning as residing in the person or thing in the real world; a representation such as narrative 'reflects' that meaning. The 'intentional' approach sees meaning in the control exercised by the producer of a representational form such as narrative; *s/he* uses representation to make the world 'mean'. The 'constructionist' approach sees meaning neither in the control of the producer nor the thing being represented; instead, it identifies the thoroughly social nature of the *construction* of meaning, the fact that representational systems, rather than their users and objects, allow meaning to occur. The following chapters will be mostly concerned with the 'constructionist' perspective on narrative as representation but will also consider some arguments regarding 'reflection' and 'intention'. They will also more specifically discuss some of the possible reasons for

changes in the components of narrative representation; among these is a concept so frequently synonymous with narrative that it must be defined now: 'story'.

STORY, PLOT AND NARRATIVE

To be sure, story and narrative are closely related; but even the most preliminary of investigations reveals that there are three fundamental items which, while they sometimes blend in a most pleasing way, are really separate. These are 'story', 'plot' and 'narrative'. Rather than relying on technical descriptions of each, let us turn to a reasonably familiar kind of contemporary illustration. In 1999, a four-part series, *Oliver Twist*, was broadcast on the commercial television channel ITV in Britain. As is well known in the literate world, *The Adventures of Oliver Twist* is an early novel of Charles Dickens, originally published in 1838. The *story* concerns a young orphan boy, Oliver, brought up in a workhouse, thrust out into the evil world and then preyed upon by Fagin, a small-time racketeer whose principal source of income is garnered from the petty criminal activities of a group of street urchins over whom he presides. The story of the character Oliver Twist, his adventures, what happens to him and the events connected with these, is therefore central to the novel.

The *plot* of *Oliver Twist*, the circumstances which involve Oliver in a specific series of events, is not quite the same as the story. The reason that Oliver is victimized by Fagin and his associates has to do with Oliver's parenthood. He is the illegitimate product of a union between Edwin Leeford and Agnes Fleming, both of whom are dead as Oliver takes his first breath in the world. Leeford, incarcerated in an unhappy marriage when he met Agnes, already had a son, Edward, by his wife. This shadowy young man, under the alias of 'Monks', later haunts Oliver and, in turn, is haunted by the orphan's very existence, a fact which could prevent him getting his hands on the considerable Leeford inheritance. 'Monks' is

determined to gain what he considers to be his birthright. He is, therefore, the main catalyst of the plot and, concomitantly, the events of the story.

In Dickens' novel, the full account of the events which bring Oliver Twist into the world and the web of circumstances in which he is enmeshed is not actually given until near the end. Although the events precipitating Oliver's genesis will, ineluctably, precede in a temporal sequence the events of his life, the *narrative* chooses not to disclose them. In short, the *narrative* of Oliver's story and the plot which drives it only reveal the relevant wider circumstances surrounding them in Chapter XLIX, 'Monks and Mr. Brownlow at last meet. Their conversation and the intelligence that interrupts it' and in Chapter LI, 'Affording an explanation of more mysteries than one, and comprehending a proposal of marriage with no word of settlement or pin-money'. Even with such an account, it can be seen that the narrative separates the revelations of these chapters with a chapter devoted to the narration of Sikes' demise.

The 1999 television version, dramatized by Alan Bleasdale, has a different narrative. The first episode of the four-part series consists of a detailed narration of the love affair between Oliver's parents, Edwin and Agnes. This narrative not only moves the facts of their story to the beginning, unlike Dickens' novel which leaves them at the end, but it also depicts the affair 'first-hand', with the characters speaking their own dialogue and acting out the events, rather than having them retold by 'Monks' and Leeford's friend, Brownlow. The narrative of the TV version also has additions: the *murder* of Leeford and the continued existence through subsequent episodes of Leeford's wife.

We glean from this example a sense of how narrative is different from 'story' and 'plot'. Put very simply, 'story' consists of all the events which are to be depicted. 'Plot' is the chain of causation which dictates that these events are somehow linked and that they are therefore to be depicted in relation to each other.

'Narrative' is the showing or the telling of these events and the mode selected for that to take place. As we saw above, the Dickens novel about Oliver has a narrative with certain key events narrated towards the end; the TV version has a narrative with those events appearing at the beginning. The novel's narrative tends to 'tell' what those events were through a scene involving the verbal testimonies of Monks, Brownlow and others. One could argue, though, that this is a 'showing' because the narrative selects for depiction this particular scene with these particular characters. The TV version 'shows' what happened between Oliver's father and mother; it presents them in a depiction at 'first hand'. At the same time, though, one could argue that this is a 'telling' because only certain scenes in the love affair and the genesis of Oliver are offered; the narrative 'chooses' to present some events and not others.

This example shows how narrative maintains the fragile distinction between 'showing' and 'telling', an issue to which we will return on more than one occasion in what follows. Yet we must also note that the act of selecting what is depicted here is also crucial in the process of narrative, and provides a demonstration of a general fact about representation: that representation allows some things to be depicted and not others. In order to prefigure some of the arguments about this, consider the following example. The film *Pleasantville* (1998) features the story of a contemporary American brother and sister in their teens. Near the beginning of the movie they find themselves inserted into the world of a late-1950s television sitcom, a world that is self-contained, black and white, squeaky-clean and ideologically unquestioning. Having reconciled themselves to their fate, they play the roles of son and daughter to their fictional parents, and the roles of friends to their fellow pupils at school. But this is not without its problems: in one humorous moment early in the film, the sister decides to go to the Ladies' Room while she is in a diner, only to find, once she is beyond the door, that there are no facilities there for answering the call of nature. The incident wryly tells us what

we all know: that, on television, people never (or very rarely) empty their bowels. More accurately, in the terms of the present discussion, we could say that narrative *selects* some events and omits others.

These comments should offer a few preliminary insights about narrative as it might be distinguished from the terms with which it is often juxtaposed and often confused, 'story' and 'plot'. Yet it remains to ask what is fundamental to narrative and what some of its chief components might be. In light of the above comments about selection and the (re)arrangement of events, it should be clear that the concept of sequence is crucial.

SEQUENCE

At the lowest level of simplification, narrative is a sequence that is narrated. As an example, we might consider any documentary series on television. Since the success of 'Life on Earth' in 1980, BBC 1 in Britain has made sure that the autumn schedules will be graced with a major 'life' documentary such as 'The Living Planet', 'The Life of Birds' or 'Walking with Dinosaurs'. Customarily we will assume that these consist of a series of pictures which we watch on the screen and which are *narrated* by a voice-over commentator. Quite often, in wildlife documentaries, the latter is a popularly recognized authority such as Sir David Attenborough. Thus, the narrative seems to come from the authoritative voice-over. But one might ask whether the actual pictures on screen and the way that they are organized into a sequence also constitute a narrative. This 'showing', in addition to the voice-over 'telling', might equally possess a narrative orientation.

By asking this question it is not necessarily implied that verbal and visual narratives are the same. The Russian semiotician, Jurij Lotman (1977), usefully illustrates that the verbal arts such as literature are characterized by sequences whose individual elements are themselves discrete units of meaning (words or

phrases). The iconic or pictorial arts, on the other hand, realize their meaning through their existence as an isolated *whole*, while music does it not through individual elements *or* through isolation but through its very sequence; film, television and video, in yet another way, combine these characteristics. So, with the simplest of definitions which aims to cover all media, serious questions begin to arise.

It is probably the fact that we rarely acknowledge such questions that makes us take narrative for granted; or even believe that it is natural and just happens for our instant gratification. Organized stories, once more, *seem* to be intrinsic to the fabric of everyday existence (cf. Forster 1962). On the other hand, as soon as we begin to think a little bit more deeply about the issue, we might easily reach the conclusion that the whole storytelling impulse is illusory: catching the bus, going out with friends, performing mundane tasks at work, watching football – none of these come to fruition as stories unless we choose to impose some kind of narrative form on them.

The contradictory coupling of these insights leads to the most fundamental observation that can be made of narrative: that it consists of signs. A sequence of any kind might exist in the world, but if that sequence is to consist of meaningful relations it requires human input; it needs to be understood as being made up of signs. A cat, for example, may jump onto a wall and, in so doing, nudge a terracotta pot which falls onto the concrete on the other side, spilling its load of compost and shattering into the bargain. This sequence of actions exists, but until I become aware of the breakage by being told or by actually witnessing the desolate fragments of the pot, I am unable to interpret it as a sign of the cat's clumsy wall-scaling activities.

What is apparent, then, is that as soon as we advance on the task of seeing relations between things, we are operating in the domain of signs. Moreover, these are thoroughly human signs. Undoubtedly, signs between and within animals, and signs

between plants make up the bulk of communication on this planet; but while it is possible that a second cat might pass by the broken vessel and catch the sign of another cat's scent, we have no way of knowing whether it could make the interpretation that we do on the basis of the breakage alone. Human signs, or what humans interpret as signs, therefore stand in for something else in the world. Put another way, they *re*-present it (Hall 1997).

This dynamic, which is so obvious that we tend to forget it, has been depicted most economically by the literary theorist Wolfgang Iser. Referring to the way in which representation works, he has stated succinctly, "no rendering can *be* that which it renders" (Iser 1989: 251). Put another way, as it is here by the historian David Carr, "real events do not have the character of those we find in stories, and if we treat them as if they did have such a character, we are not being true to them" (1991: 160). In the second quote we can see that there is much at stake in recognizing the transformations which take place in *re*-presentation. Yet, not only is the 'real' world different from the world as it is represented, as even 'reflective' and 'intentional' approaches would acknowledge, but representational systems such as narrative *work* to facilitate the recognition of such phenomena as sequence and causality. They facilitate the meaningful relations which will transpire with human input.

The general work of representation as we have described it can also be carried out by non-narrative forms such as statuary, still photography and even music. Therefore we are compelled to ask what is specific to narrative representation. At their simplest, all narratives are the movement from a beginning point to a finishing point. Narrative is just a sequence which starts and moves inexorably to its end. To understand this is to understand the most important principle behind narrative. Of course, any straightforward movement from start to finish runs the risk of being tedious; yet, as most of us are aware right from our first experiences of fairy tales as infants, narrative has the potential to

be thoroughly captivating. Furthermore, even tedious narratives cannot consist of an untrammelled journey from A to B; it is impossible, just as it is impossible to imagine an object that has only one dimension. The most crude and flimsy narratives must have something between their beginnings and ends.

The best way to indicate what makes up the body of narrative, or what comes between the beginning and end, is through the use of examples. We will start with one from probably the most famous contemporary writer of popular narratives, Stephen King (b. 1947). In his 1992 novel *Gerald's Game* Gerald and Jessie are a middle-aged married couple who own a country cabin where they go for weekends away from it all. Whilst there they have fallen into the habit of playing sado-masochistic games which invariably involve Jessie being tied up or handcuffed to the bed as a prelude to sexual intercourse. On the occasion narrated in the novel, however, Jessie has become sweaty and irritated, and demands that Gerald remove the handcuffs. Advancing naked to the bed, Gerald thinks she is just playing along in the game and makes no effort to release his wife. This only makes Jessie more angry and when Gerald is within striking distance she lashes out, kicking him in the groin.

Unfortunately, as a result of the kick, Gerald has a heart attack and dies on the spot, leaving Jessie chained to the bed with no clothes on and a dead husband on the floor. It is just after this point in the novel that the following sequence is narrated, in which a stray dog enters the cabin:

> The stray began to advance slowly into the room, legs stiff with caution, tail drooping, eyes wide and black, lips peeled back to reveal a full complement of teeth. About such concepts as absurdity it knew nothing.
>
> The former Prince [!], with whom the eight-year old Catherine Sutlin had once romped joyfully (at least until she'd gotten a Cabbage Patch doll named Marnie for her birthday and temporarily lost some of her interest), was part lab and part collie ... a mixed breed, but a long way from being a mongrel. When Sutlin had turned it out on Bay Lane at the end of August, it had weighed eighty pounds and its coat had been glossy and sleek with health, a not unattractive mixture of brown and black (with a distinctive white collie bib on the chest and undersnout). It now weighed a bare forty pounds, and a hand passed down its side would have felt every straining rib, not to mention the rapid, feverish beat of its heart. Its coat was dull and bedraggled and full of burdocks. A half-healed pink scar, souvenir of a panicky scramble under a barbed wire fence, zigzagged down one haunch, and a few porcupine quills stuck out of its muzzle like crooked whiskers. It had found the porker lying dead under a log about ten days ago, but had given up on it after the first noseful of quills. It had been hungry but not yet desperate.
>
> Now it was both. Its last meal had been a few maggoty scraps nosed out of a discarded garbage bag in a ditch standing beside Route 117, and that had been two days ago. The dog which had quickly learned to bring Catherine Sutlin a red rubber ball when she rolled it across the living-room floor or into the hall was now quite literally starving on its feet.
>
> Yes, but here – right here, on the floor, *within sight!* – were pounds and pounds of fresh meat, and fat, and bones filled with sweet marrow. It was like a gift from the God of Strays.
>
> The onetime darling of Catherine Sutlin continued to advance on the corpse of Gerald Burlingame.
>
> (King 1992: 77)

What is obvious about this undoubtedly gruesome scenario is that it does not have to be presented in this precise way. A minimal way to narrate the scene would be to write 'A dog came in and started to eat the dead body.' Slightly more satisfying might be 'A *starving* dog tentatively entered the room and, seeing that it

was safe, approached the corpse, its appetite whetted.' The addition of the word 'starving' adds a little bit of motivation.

The much longer digression in the passage above, however, offers a great deal of detail of the dog's recent past, all of which is germane and much of which it is quite diverting to hear about, including the fact that the dog, like a famous contemporary 'artist', was formerly called Prince. Perhaps more important than the mere information, though, is the fact that the readers of the novel, when supplied with the necessary details, will most likely be able to make up their own minds about what might happen in this room with this starved animal and this pile of meat on the floor. Despite this, a fine balance is imperative: King himself admits that he has "been accused over and over again of having diarrhea [sic] of the word processor" (King 1991: ix). These are matters of selection, once more, but there is a further matter of importance.

The progress of fictional narrative must, necessarily, be impeded; and this is the key point. Narrative must entail some kind of delay or even diversions, detours and digressions. Moreover, these can yield a certain amount of pleasure for the reader. Crucially, however, such delays or digressions are not foolproof mechanisms which guarantee enjoyment; instead, the space between beginning and end in narrative is where the reader will be involved in doing work. Immediately, then, in this simple definition, two further facts arise about narrative which demand some investigation. These are that a narrative might be said to possess 'space' in the movement from beginning to end, and that narratives enact in this movement a relation to 'time'.

SPACE

The whole notion of narrative progression or a movement from 'A' to 'B' implies that there is such a thing as 'narrative space'. A narrative must advance to its end whilst simultaneously delaying it, and in lingering, as it were, a narrative occupies a 'space'. This

dynamic has been most cogently expressed by the French critic and cultural theorist, Roland Barthes: in *S/Z* (1974) he analyses a Balzac short story, 'Sarrasine', by elaborating five codes through whose matrix the text passes. There is a code of action, the 'proairetic', which is concerned with the linear relation of narrative events; a code of character traits, the 'semic'; and a code of binary oppositions, invoking a specific meaning according to some latent and opposed, but nevertheless present, meaning, the 'symbolic'. All of these codes are germane to the study of narrative and assist Barthes in making a robust analysis of the Balzac story. But the fifth of these codes, the 'hermeneutic', is of particular interest to the present discussion as it has a dual function in relation to the establishment of narrative 'space': to push the narrative forward towards disclosure and simultaneously to retard the narrative's progress by way of 'equivocation', 'snares' and 'false replies'.

Peter Brooks (1982) suggests that the individual retardations on the way to a narrative's end which Barthes has recognized in his discussion of 'Sarrasine' and identified by way of the 'hermeneutic' code, can also be understood as *detours*. *Detours* are woven so imperceptibly into narratives that they may not be instantly apparent as pure delays but rather as snatches of dialogue or sequential description. In the popular genre of narrative known as the thriller, for example, *detours* are components of the process that creates the phenomenon known as suspense. Will the hero uncover the extent of the conspiracy? Will s/he survive this threatening situation? Will s/he triumph over the villain? These are fundamental questions about the *dis*pleasure that is created by stoppages, by the problems in story events and by the yield of pleasure in their resolution. Clearly, then, *detours* are a crucial site of potential enjoyment in a narrative.

Yet, this is not always an easy point to understand; consider the following statement by the American hard-boiled writer, Mickey Spillane:

> A fiction story is like a joke. The reason you listen to a joke is to get to the punchline. Pacing a story is like sex: you start off with the teasing, then work up to the rough stuff and then all of a sudden you get the real boom-da-boom-da-boom-da-BANG, the big explosion, then you're finished. The closer to the last word you can get the climax, the better. Nobody reads a book to get to the middle, you read a book to get to the end and you hope the end is good enough to justify all the time you have spent reading it.
>
> (Miller 1989: 36)

On the one hand, Spillane wishes to contradict those points about the necessity and potential pleasure in *detours* which we have made so far; but, on the other hand, by means of the analogy with sexual intercourse, he unwittingly makes our point for us by stressing the necessity of a build-up in any narrative. An alternative reading of the quote might suggest that Spillane has a pretty instrumental understanding of the act of sex.

There is more to delay, as well, than simply pulling back from the climax. Brooks notes that the movement towards disclosure in narrative, its linear dynamic, is equivalent to the poetic effect of metonymy, the sequential linking of items according to their common association in part or whole; for example, a shot of the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben in a film stands for 'London', or the phrase 'the Pentagon' may be used to refer to the US military establishment rather than simply its headquarters. Here, one thing calls upon another by linear association, thus linking narrative progression to sequence. In addition, though, Brooks states that narrative has a metaphorical aspect where something different is offered in place of the expected item. Love, for example, might be presented as a red rose. So, on the one hand, the movement towards conclusion is effected by a *re*-presentation which is culturally coded in a relatively general way and, on the other, by a trope which is more specifically culturally coded.

It is worth noting that, in pursuing this argument, Brooks utilizes two concepts distinguished by the Formalists, a group of literary theorists operating in Russia directly after the First World War. For them, *fabula* refers to the chronological sequence of events which make up the raw materials of a story; *sjuzet* is the way the story is organized. It is important to acknowledge here that these influential terms are usually translated as 'story' and 'discourse' respectively, conflating 'plot' and 'narrative' in the process (see Chatman 1978), although they are sometimes translated into 'story' and 'plot' (Shklovsky 1965; Hawthorn 1997). Either way, they fall into the difficulties we noted above. However, *fabula* and *sjuzet* have been crucial terms in the analysis of narrative, especially for Brooks. The reason that the concept of *fabula* is helpful is because it designates the prior events that are to be narrated; at the same time, however, such events are always *organized* in a way that presents itself as 'the same' as those events but, of course, is quite 'different'. That is, it is always *re*organized to highlight some events and downplay others, an activity designated by the term *sjuzet*. In purporting to relate a sequence of prior events, Brooks argues, narrative is therefore a transformation: like metaphor, narrative is "the same-but-different", and the level of unfamiliarity entailed by this formula also results in a temporary halt to the movement towards disclosure.

Some of the representation in a narrative, then, is based on principles which are fairly familiar and expected: metonymy, sequence; other aspects forge new associations: metaphor. Although this version of representation based on a dual formulation of *fabula* and *sjuzet* fails to tally with our identification of the separable entities 'story', 'plot' and 'narrative', it is instructive when considered in relation to our earlier observations about narrative as an ensemble of signs. The examples we used suggested that signs have reference to something real in the world which might actually be available for scrutiny; signs then act to *re*-present, in different ways, that to which they refer. Equally,

though, signs refer to things that are not easily available (for example, Utopia, Sherlock Holmes, the USS Enterprise) and, even so, they still *re*-present that to which they refer. This is the case with *fabula* and *sjuzet*. According to Brooks' argument there is a rationale for the *fabula/sjuzet* combination which lies in narrative's completion; but rather than Spillane's desultory vision of an impatient sexual journey to the climax, Brooks sees the *anticipated* "structuring force of the ending" in the movement through narrative space (1982: 283). A corollary of this is that the *detours*, all those delaying factors on the way to the ending of a narrative, are 'bound' to an end point. 'Binding' is the process by which a *detour* is created and a 'binding effect', therefore, is something that also produces all those retardations of the narrative's progress to denouement that Barthes discussed under the terms of the 'hermeneutic code': 'snares', 'equivocations', 'false replies'. What we might add to this is that story events will be caught up in this complex and often be bound 'in space' by a plot; but we must also say that the specific ways in which that binding will be related are due to narrative.

TIME

While the movement of narrative implies 'space', it must always also involve 'time'. Moving a football from one end of a field to another, moving the pieces of a broken terracotta pot from the ground to a dustbin, and moving through a narrative, are all activities which must take place within a particular time-frame. Yet the vicissitudes of time are notoriously difficult to understand, especially in light of the fact that all humans tend to apprehend time through its discrete measurements: days, weeks, years, as well as the way it is imposed on us – by the regularity of work schedules, railway timetables, licensing hours, and so forth. One of the most influential discussions of the nature of time, both in contemporary philosophy and in literary theory, is that of

the French thinker, Paul Ricoeur, especially his three-volume work *Time and Narrative* (1984–6). For Ricoeur, time is not just a part of the narrative apparatus; in fact, he understands time and narrative as being on intimate terms precisely because narrative *is* the human relation to time.

This obviously requires some elucidation, so let us consider that there are two types of temporality: 'objective' time and 'subjective' time. 'Objective' time co-exists with the universe, it is embodied in the movements of the heavenly bodies, it always has been and there is nothing that we can do about it. For most people, this is a difficult concept to grasp, although it is integral to modern physics (see Hawking 1988, Davies 1996 and Gribbin 1999 for introductions). 'Subjective' time is temporal passage as it is experienced by humans going about their lives. The obvious problem that arises, then, is that 'objective' time cannot be measured or even conceptualized unless it is done so by a 'subjective' human; similarly, 'subjective' time cannot exist without some reference to the possibility of 'objective' time. The two are linked for humans in an inescapable relation, and it is at this point that narrative comes in.

Commenting on Ricoeur, Stevens (1995) offers, as an example of narrative's mediating role between the two forms of time, the human invention of the calendar. The calendar corresponds to the movements of the heavens but it is also a linear narrative sequence: Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday; March, April, May; 1886, 1887, 1888. It provides a good starting point for thinking through Ricoeur's reasoning although, as the rest of the present book will make clear, from the very beginning strict linear sequence such as that espoused by the calendar has repeatedly been subverted in narrative.

Ricoeur's perspective on time and narrative is also a 'hermeneutic' one. That is to say it is one which is based on understanding the imperatives involved in the interpretation of phenomena. In respect of time, Freeman says

> We seek to revisit the morning before we arrived at work, or the previous day or month or year; we land back in the present, now informed by the visits just made; we concentrate on what's next, both in the immediate and distant future ... in coming to terms with the past, I can only do so from the present, through the act of interpretation.
>
> (Freeman 1998: 41)

For Ricoeur, this kind of understanding is crucial, especially in the interrogation of the relation of time and narrative.

The two philosophers who are probably most important to Ricoeur's analysis in his three-volume work are Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) and St Augustine (354–430), and a passage from the *Confessions* of the latter opens up the interpretative nature of the issue quite nicely, by introducing the idea of the 'three-fold present':

> Suppose I am going to recite a psalm that I know. Before I begin my faculty of expectation is engaged by the whole of it. But once I have begun, as much of the psalm as I have removed from the province of expectation and relegated to the past now engages my memory, and the scope of the action which I am performing is divided between the two faculties of memory and expectation, the one looking back to the part which I have already recited, the other looking forward to the part which I have still to recite. But my faculty of attention is present all the while, and through it passes what was the future in the process of becoming the past. As the process continues, the province of memory is extended in proportion as that of expectation is reduced, until the whole of my expectation is absorbed. This happens when I have finished my recitation and it has all passed into the province of memory.
>
> (St Augustine cited in Ricoeur 1984–6: 20)

It must be remembered that Augustine, a fifth-century Christian,

wishes to say something about eternity in these meditations as well as the origin of the universe. But it is notable that he chooses to use a *text* to conjure up the interpretative triad of 'expectation – memory – attention'.

Ricoeur insists that the kind of temporality encountered in narrative has more to do with the interpretative mode prefigured in Augustine's comments than it has to do with the commonplace version of time as a series of instants arranged along a line. Like Brooks, he stresses the importance of the end point of a narrative, arguing that the understanding of successive actions, thoughts and feelings in a narrative is dictated by anticipation of the conclusion, and also, that reaching the conclusion enables a backward glance at the actions that led up to it (Ricoeur 1981: 170). Narrative is therefore not just a matter of paying attention to individual incidents on the time-line; it is most importantly about 'expectation' and 'memory': reading the end in the beginning and reading the beginning in the end.

It follows from this recognition, then, that the cornerstone of narrative structure is the plot, or what Ricoeur, borrowing from Aristotle and, presumably, to avoid plot/*sjuzet*/discourse difficulties, calls 'muthos' or 'emplotment'. Emplotment is the intelligible whole which governs the succession of events in a story and thus "places us at the crossing point of temporality and narrative" (Ricoeur 1981: 167). Moreover, this is so for both fictional narrative and historical narrative, according to Ricoeur, and for three basic reasons. First, humans' knowledge of the world is largely framed by narrative. Despite what we said above about the non-story nature of catching the bus, going out with friends, performing mundane tasks at work and watching football, Ricoeur is keen to point out that "we are not born into a world of children ... as unspeaking children, we come in to a world already full of our predecessors' narratives" (1981: 181–2), that "The largest part of our information about events in the world is, in fact, owing to knowledge though hearsay" (1985: 156) and that

"action is already symbolically mediated; literature, in the largest sense of the word, including history as well as fiction, tends to reinforce a process of symbolization already at work" (1991: 182). Second, history is as shot through with emplotment as fiction, based as it is on a conception of time as 'expectation – attention – memory' rather than simple linear sequence. Third, historical narrative, like fictional narrative, strongly seems to invite these 'narrative-time' conceptions of readers in which movement through the narrative is guided by anticipation, focus and retrospection.

This last point is worth expanding a little in relation to what we have said about both space *and* time in narrative. Ricoeur, Barthes and Brooks begin their analyses in ways which suggest that they are discovering some objective facts about narrative as an empirical entity. All of them, however, give way to an understanding of their task as an exegesis of the status and functions of narratives in interactions which involve readers. With this in mind, Ricoeur's project in particular deserves a brief additional comment. Throughout *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur delineates the position he is against: the 'semiotics' of narrative. He outlines the way that various narrative theorists, such as Propp, Greimas and Lévi-Strauss, as well as some later 'narratologists', all act to 'dechronologize' narrative and reduce it to a series of dominating 'paradigmatic' functions, leaving sequence to the mercy of the common-sense linear interpretation of time. Lying behind this, I believe, is a critique of the *text-centredness* of such approaches (as opposed to understandings of narrative which are aware of the reader's roles in meaning-making).

In terms of the present book, Ricoeur's designation of the 'dechronologizing' tendency is rather unfortunate. Although 'semiotics' has been the term given to the study of the sign since at least 1969 (see Sebeok 2001), embracing the tradition stemming from the 'semeiotic' of Charles Sanders Peirce and the 'semiology' of Ferdinand de Saussure, the narratological work

under criticism from Ricoeur is, with the exception of the Russian folklorist, Propp, actually constituted by the latter, Saussurean, phalanx. Alternatively, the theory of the sign which underpins the earlier comments in this chapter and which will be implicit in the chapters that follow is Peircean. The signs which we will see as making up narratives are signs which have objects (in the world or not), signs which change and become other signs when the circumstances are congenial, and, above all, signs for an interpreting agent. In the case of narrative, this interpreter must be a human.

PHYLOGENY AND ONTOGENY

The fact that narrative consists of human signs leads to probably the most common questions about narrative: how, why and where did it come from? There are two broad ways of answering the question of where narrative comes from. The first would be to consider the psychology of telling stories: why is it that humans have such a strong propensity to think events in a narrative form as opposed to some other kind of organization? Is it a deep-rooted psychological impulse, or is it cultural habit? Implicit in these questions is the conviction that events do not always take place in the shape of a tidy narrative and that tentative answers or speculations in this area might contribute to lively and ongoing debate. It is a bit of a disappointment, then, to find that the most promising opening comments on the issue in a range of books on narrative tend to gloss over the psychological roots in order to move straight on to the historical progress of narrative (see, for example, Scholes and Kellogg 1966: 3–16; Bettelheim 1976: 3–6; Ong 1982: 5–12; Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 1–5; Brooks 1984: 3–7; Chatman 1990: 6–11; Berger 1997: 1–7; cf. Bell 1990).

The other way that the question is answered is by focusing on the evolution of narrative forms against the background of the evolution of peoples. Needless to say, such work will either be anthropological or heavily influenced by anthropology. It will

involve referring to the first known narratives which contain elements that are recognizable as the less-evolved features of modern narratives in an attempt to track historically the development of narrative (and different narratives) from its beginnings to the present.

The first approach, looking for the origins of narrative in psychological or biological constituents of humans, provides an ontogenetic perspective on narrative. The second, relying on evidence of developments from the diversity of humans' cultural heritage, is known as a phylogenetic approach. Occasionally, ontogeny and phylogeny can be seen to overlap; on other occasions, ontogenetic and phylogenetic understandings of human phenomena have been seen as thoroughly reciprocal, such that ontogeny 'recapitulates' phylogeny (see Gould 1977).

Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) takes an ontogenetic perspective on the origins of narrative. Specifically, he focuses on children's play activities. For him, stories are not themselves play, but many of the themes that appear in the narratives told by pre-school-age children are originally to be found in their play: being chased, fighting, and crashing cars (160). More complex narrative formations develop from this. By age seven, for example, he finds that children begin to create central, hero, characters in their stories (164), mirroring the trajectory of games with a winner. More sophisticated narratives such as nonsense, parody and satire stories also develop out of play situations. Indeed, there is strong evidence to suggest that such stories are allied to a propensity to similar play with the building bricks of language in general (see Crystal 1998). Yet Sutton-Smith does not remain fixed to an ontogenetic view: writing of comic and trickster tales, he adds a phylogenetic supplement by suggesting that "it is possible to suppose that these early childhood stories are very basic, perhaps universal, narratives of the human mind" (1997: 163).

Another ontogenetic argument, that of Anderson, is interesting for us partly because it will be replayed in a different guise in

Chapter 2, but also because it is offered by an anthropologist. She points out that

> the communication systems of other creatures permit no negation, no constructive fantasy, no manipulations of other times and places. Other animals cannot 're-call' a pheromone indicating 'fear' and replace it with another saying 'not-fear' or 'hungry'. ... Humans, thanks to language, find it easy to lie and deny, to transport both sender and receiver to other actual and imagined situations, and to construct elaborate shared narratives and simultaneously modify and contradict these stories.
>
> (Anderson 1998: 31)

For Anderson, the capacity for a specific kind of communication among humans not only 'permits' narratives but practically makes them obligatory in the organization of human experience.

Probably the most phylogenetic argument about the origins of narrative, although ontogenetic in some of its implications, is that of Julian Jaynes (1990). Writing on the origins of human consciousness, he argues that it arose from a period when the human brain ceased to be 'bicameral' and became more focused on one or the other of its hemispheres and the mental functions associated with them. In a long, but engaging, dissertation on this topic he comments on the phenomenon of 'narratization', which he sees as intimate and coeval with what we know as human consciousness. Put briefly, his contention is that humans develop a sense of 'self', an 'analog I', which acts in the world; they then see the actions of this 'I' as part of a narrative: "The thief narratizes his act as due to poverty, the poet his as due to beauty, and the scientist his as due to truth, purpose and cause inextricably woven into the spatialization of behavior in consciousness" (Jaynes 1990: 64). But he also suggests that 'bicameral'-minded humans did not have complex introspective thoughts; instead, they heard voices in their heads, the 'gods' of

the ancient myths and epics. Around 3000 BCE this began to change with the building of cities in Mesopotamia, the development of writing, and the impulse to narratization which arose from a meditation on, and the desire to record, past events. Although outlandish and sometimes speculative, we will see in the next chapter that this argument is not without its persuasive aspects.

Jaynes' observations on the human impulse to produce a 'meaningful' existence based on a narratization of the past, as well as the maintenance of a sense of self, are echoed in the findings of the Chicago psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1992, 1994, 1996; Beattie and Csikszentmihalyi 1981). In a range of psychological experiments with human subjects in different situations, Csikszentmihalyi developed the concept of 'flow' based on his discoveries. He found that various humans harboured the capacity to sense an immense satisfaction, commitment, rejuvenation and even joy in certain occupations and pastimes, a capacity that enhanced their lives and their 'selves'. Yet, specifically, he found that this capacity of 'flow', allied with the development of coherent life themes, was frequently spurred by an early engagement with narrative as a tool for making meaning of the world. By contrast, "individuals who never focus on any goal, or accept one unquestioningly from the society around them, tend not to remember their parents having read or told stories to them as children" (Csikszentmihalyi 1992: 236). Narrative in this instance is pre-eminently a matter of human interaction in meaning, rather than simply a process involving 'objective', sequential signs.

This 'humanness' of the origins of narrative can be thought of in two broad ways which invoke phylogeny and ontogeny. In a famous study of myth, Joseph Campbell (1975) considers the figure of the hero in the stories ancient and modern which are told across the globe. His contention is a phylogenetic one: that the human species shares a common story with broadly similar protagonists and events which respond to the riddle of life in the same way. However, Campbell's argument has a strong ontogenetic component, too; as

might be expected from a perspective so heavily influenced by (Freudian and Jungian) psychoanalysis, there is an attempt to root the principles of world myths in the putatively common experience of the infant:

> Apparently, the most permanent of the dispositions of the human psyche are those that derive from the fact that, of all animals, we remain the longest at the mother's breast. Human beings are born too soon; they are unfinished, unready as yet to meet the world. Consequently, their whole defence from a universe of dangers is the mother, under whose protection the intra-uterine period is prolonged.
>
> (Campbell 1975: 15)

This prolonged scenario gives rise to the "tragi-comic triangle of the nursery" (15): mother–infant–father. Essentially, the effects of the currents in this fundamental relationship are re-played, according to Campbell, in all myths.

Campbell's argument is not that dissimilar from the 'semiotic' or, more helpfully, 'structural' analyses of narrative that Ricoeur has criticized. Different cultures and different time periods may give rise to seemingly diverse narrative organizations; so, too, might they produce widely differing protagonists and situations. But, Campbell suggests, depth analysis reveals that these seemingly different myths are all the same because they derive from or 'reflect' identical primal relationships among humans. In outline, this is the same kind of reasoning which underpins the analyses of 'structural' theorists such as the anthropologist Lévi-Strauss and the folklorist Propp. It is a universalizing tendency, reducing a complex phenomenon to a limited set of universal principles; also, it may be said to be 'functionalist' in that it elides the possible conflicts within the complexity of the phenomenon in favour of a focus on the root, unifying features.

An opposing perspective on narrative is offered by sociolinguistics and social semiotics. This position is particularly well known in the sphere of literacy study and is notable for the way in which it takes account of localized, but profound, conflicts created by the context of communication. For example, a recent study of children's spelling by Gunther Kress focused on the mistakes made by youngsters at a North London primary school; as Kress shows, there exists considerable competition between the ways in which the children feel inclined to spell certain words and the ways in which they 'should' spell them as prescribed by teachers and the English language. But, at the same time, there is also great creativity in the children's spelling, especially the way in which it so accurately mirrors pronunciations of words in the all-pervasive local milieux outside the school (Kress 1999a, 1999b). In respect of narrative, the anthropologist and sociolinguist Dell Hymes makes an identical point. Analysing certain Native American myths and narratives, especially those told to children, he discerns a very complex patterning which, when placed in printed prose, is based on lines and verses. The effect of this patterning, however, is so subtle as to be inaudible to all but the most trained ear; further, the Native American languages do not provide a means of actually listing, categorizing and talking about these subtle narrative patterning devices. But this fact has not stopped the people steadfastly using them in the highly influential stories which they pass on to children. Why?

Hymes believes that the non-Native American fails to apprehend the localized creativity of the Native American narrative patterning. The conflict, in American schools, for example, between dominant narrative patterns and Native American patterns arises, perhaps, from the latter's basis in a culturally specific understanding of children's capacity for communication; Hymes writes,

> Among the Chinookans and some other peoples, children, when they first gave voice, were believed not to be babbling but to be speaking a special language they shared with spirits. There were shamans appointed who were believed to have the power to interpret this language. The concern was that if the children didn't like it here, they might go back to where they were before. The keeping of children was of tremendous importance. There was tremendous value placed on the individual child, and so, in a sense, children were being wooed into adult life.
>
> (Hymes 1996: 136–7)

For Hymes, this attitude to children differs from modern society, which, through its dominance and its own array of narrative patterning paraphernalia, "does debase local tradition and creativity but does not succeed in eradicating it" (140). More striking than this socio-semiotic tenet, though, is the possibility countenanced by Hymes that "the richness of syntax that linguistics finds in every normal child may be accompanied by a richness of narrative organization" (139).

The psychologist, Jerome Bruner, is one of those who, like Hymes, is keen to confront the idea that there may be an 'innate' human propensity towards narrative. While acknowledging that narrative has been built up through time and through tradition, he asks, "Is it unreasonable to suppose that there is some human 'readiness' for narrative that is responsible for elaborating and conserving such a tradition in the first place?" (Bruner 1990: 45). The notion that there is a 'readiness' in children to adopt syntax or grammatical forms has, since the work of the American linguist, Noam Chomsky, been well established (see Pinker 1994; Salkie 2001). But what Bruner suggests is that there "is a 'push' to construct narrative that determines the order of priority in which grammatical forms are mastered by the young child" (1990: 77). This 'push' consists of, and depends on (a) a means for emphasizing human agency or action; (b) a sequence of some sort;

(c) a sense of what is canonical, that is traditional or permitted in human interaction as well as what is non-canonical; and (d) a narrator's perspective. These features of narrative represent the bottom line for Bruner, and we will see in the chapters that follow how frequently they recur.

The following chapters, then, take a broad look at the history of narrative: how it has been seen to develop and how it has been thought to be used. Yet this is not just necessary to demonstrate how narrative embodies the four features of Bruner's 'push'; instead, it should also show that narrative, especially to its users, is much more than these root features. For, as Bruner adds, "the culture soon equips us with new powers of narration through its tool kit and through the traditions of telling and interpreting in which we soon come to participate" (1990: 80). In addition, as we will discover, there are a number of methodological problems in the enterprise of constructing an overview of narrative forms, some of which are very serious. But, as we will also see, accounts of the trajectory of narrative development are indispensable to the construction of any future, anticipated, hoped-for, 'definitive' account of narrative as a whole.

2

EARLY NARRATIVE

The study of narrative, as opposed to the 'pure' study of, say, the novel or film, obviously has a wide compass. Where analysis focuses upon one particular narrative genre it may be forced to neglect commonalities of process across different kinds of text in favour of investigating the specificities of enunciation in the genre in question. The advantage of general narrative analysis is that it identifies mechanisms which may be integral to linguistically or visually based genres without becoming embroiled in parochial questions to do with the 'effectiveness' of given modes, or the relative 'value' of different genres. This also allows narrative analysis to track the development of a specified process as well as its embodiment in a range of generic and technological forms.

Yet narrative analysis is not without its problems, one of the chief ones arising from the fact that narrative is used not only to record fictional events but also to record events that actually happened. At first glance, this fact might seem to pose no difficulty: discerning the difference between non-fictional and fictional narratives often appears to be an easy matter. Narrative accounts of contemporary events in discourses such as news are relatively simple to identify in the present as 'factual' in opposition to, say, the

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SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

The New Critical Idiom is a series of introductory books which seeks to extend the lexicon of literary terms, in order to address the radical changes which have taken place in the study of literature during the last decades of the twentieth century. The aim is to provide clear, well-illustrated accounts of the full range of terminology currently in use, and to evolve histories of its changing usage.

The current state of the discipline of literary studies is one where there is considerable debate concerning basic questions of terminology. This involves, among other things, the boundaries which distinguish the literary from the non-literary; the position of literature within the larger sphere of culture; the relationship between literatures of different cultures; and questions concerning the relation of literary to other cultural forms within the context of interdisciplinary studies.

It is clear that the field of literary criticism and theory is a dynamic and heterogeneous one. The present need is for individual volumes on terms which combine clarity of exposition with an adventurousness of perspective and a breadth of application. Each volume will contain as part of its apparatus some indication of the direction in which the definition of particular terms is likely to move, as well as expanding the disciplinary boundaries within which some of these terms have been traditionally contained. This will involve some re-situation of terms within the larger field of cultural representation, and will introduce examples from the area of film and the modern media in addition to examples from a variety of literary texts.