Narrative and Narratives: The Incoherence of Postmodern Pluralism

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Summary

Despite the continued prestige of narratology as a field of inquiry, narrative itself in both fictional and factual form, has come to be viewed with increasing suspicion, especially by Postmodernists. The standard analyses of early narrative fiction invariably point out that narrative must be understood as intrinsically ideological, while more recent accounts of both fictional and non-fictional narrative argue that it is necessarily linked to realism in art and humanism in thought, and therefore open to the limitations of both. By contrast it is argued here that a formal analysis of history such as the one undertaken by Danto, as well as instances of literary modernism such as the work of Robbe-Grillet, both attest to the fact that the presence of narrative in no way vitiates either their critical or epistemic claims. Instead, the attack mounted by Post-modernists on narrative must rather be seen as stemming from the incoherence of Post-modern pluralism.

Opsomming

Ten spyte van die status van narratologie as 'n ondersoekveld, word vertelling in sigself in sowel sg. fiksionele en nie-fiksionele vorm toenemend met agterdog bejeën, en dan veral deur die postmodernisme. Die standaard analise van vroeë vertellende fiksie beweer sonder uitsondering dat vertelling verstaan moet word as intrinsiek ideologies van aard, terwyl meer onlangse beskouinge van sowel fiksionele as nie-fiksionele vertelling beweer dat die verskynsels noodwendig verbonde is aan realisme in kuns en aan humanisme in denke en dus vatbaar is vir die swakhede van albei. In teenstelling hiermee word in hierdie artikel betoog dat 'n formele analise van geskiedenis, soos die wat Danto onderneem, sowel as gevalle van literêre modernisme soos byvoorbeeld die werk van Robbe-Grillet, albei getuig van die feit dat die teenwoordigheid van die vertelling nie hulle epistemologiese kritiese eienskappe ondermyn nie. In plaas daarvan behoort die aanval van die postmodernisme op die vertelkunde eerder beskou te word as die gevolg van die onsamehangendheid van postmodernistiese pluralisme.

Literary theory, as its practitioners would be the first to admit, is an alarmingly ambitious project. No longer content to define itself in opposition to commentary or to confine itself to making general statements about fiction, it construes the whole of culture as its object and all of critical thought as its ally.

Whether ambitions of this consuming kind have or even can be met to any appreciable degree is certainly open to question, but there is little doubt that what validity they do have leans heavily upon literary theory's privileged position with regard to narrative. Like Chicken man, only narrative can truly claim to be everywhere and only narratology itself can with any justification be seen to have made direct and recognizable contributions to critical thought.

In the light of these aspirations it is not surprising that Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, an essay which sets out to characterize postmodernism itself as a crisis of narratives, should have attracted so much quite

unwarranted attention from literary theorists. The fascinating limitlessness of the postmodern, the glamor of a crisis and the spotty reputation of narrative itself make for a seductive combination – more especially as Lyotard's findings in epistemology come very close to literary theory's own findings in the field of fiction.

At first glance this celebration of the downfall of narrative seems treacherous. After all, a modest estimate would probably put some two thirds of all literary theoretical work in the field of narratology. But the phenomenon is not quite so surprising when one realizes that literary theory's claim to critical territory is actually won at the expense of narrative itself, and not on the basis of its support.

If Lyotard sees narrative as a problem for knowledge roughly because of its insurmountable ideological components, so in fact do almost all the narratologists down on record as having advanced literary theory's critical wing in some way.

Certainly any defense of narrative like the one I am undertaking here will have to consider these findings if for no other reason than that literary narratologists have either generated or annexed the best thought on the matter available.

A classic example of this borrowing is that of literary structuralism's appropriation of Levi-Strauss on myth. Seeing the study of myth as stranded between platitude and sophistry, Levi-Strauss begins with a paradox – how is it that on the one hand myth is a form in which anything appears to happen, and on the other myths throughout the world display obvious similarities? In other words, how is it that myth, quite unlike poetry, survives through every telling?

The way in which Levi-Strauss proceeds is by now familiar. He ignores all those items in the myth which have anything to do with what we might call a narrative; the plot, the style, the characters, and moves instead to the myth-themes – a set of recurring problems or preoccupations which he organizes in such a way as to drive a wedge between telling and analysis, between the story and our understanding of it. We tell the myth, he points out, by reading the rows from left to right and from top to bottom. By contrast we explain it by reading it left to right, column after column.

Levi-Strauss's conclusion is by now equally renowned. If its aim is the overcoming of contradiction, then the Oedipus myth must be construed as an attempt to find a satisfactory transition from the theory of the autochthonous origin of man, to the knowledge that human beings are actually born from the union of men and women.

On this basis Levi-Strauss concludes that we must not think of a myth as having versions, some "truer" or more authoritative than others. A myth is a structure made up of all its variants, and what counts for myth – its capacity to do cultural work – is quite independent of the narrative surface.

Though Levi-Strauss's analysis deserved a better fate it soon became especially appealing to literary structuralists who wanted to show that a whole way of thinking about literature, one which focuses upon the words on the page, was misguided, – that literature, like myth, can only be explained by

looking to the underlying structures occluded by, not revealed, in the narrative.

This appropriation of Levi-Strauss in the name of structuralism was the most influential of a series of devaluations of narrative on the grounds that its real meanings or effects are hidden ones and that narrative itself, if not quite a deception or a disguise, is finally irrelevant.

Literary narratologists, following upon Levi-Strauss certainly did nothing to check this impression. Propp, Greimas and Bremond share a common project: to explain a corpus of narrative works by reducing the differences between individual works to a set of minor variations upon a limited number of themes. Propp for example, demonstrates that a body of some two hundred Russian folk tales contains a mere thirty-one functions. In order to achieve this goal Propp insists that some aspects of the narratives in question should be suppressed in favour of others. In other words, what really counts is that a limited number of functions or roles are available to the actors in the folk tale, and that only by way of an exposure of these hidden operations can we hope to explain the plethora of narrative detail.

Once more, what is actually the case, the very limited number of functions available to the actor in the folk tale, is disguised. In order to explain narrative we must turn away from its prolific charms and reveal secret procedures of an altogether more austere and unflattering kind.

Of course not all literary narratologists believe narratives can or ought to be explained by way of secrecy and disguise. All too many narrative genres, the epic and the romance, for example, wear their ideological uniform with confidence. No reader of the epic could fail to be aware of what is being advocated, of who the hero is, and who the villain, and how the status of either might be achieved. And no reader of the romance, however critical, could accuse it of pretending to convey the world as it is rather than as the source of a greater yield of pleasure – that is, how we might like it to be.

Narrative (and this is the second major criticism which has traditionally been levelled against it) has never been short on teaching, on preaching, or even on dreaming. In fact precisely because the conclusions reached by Levi-Strauss and Propp are so much more counter intuitive, so much harder to derive, literary narratologists have often been content to take a quicker and cheaper shot, the more updated version of which we find in Lyotard – that narrative is the handmaiden of all those who are culturally powerful, of king, state or country; the voice of god, the father, or family. That is, until the advent of realism.

Few events in the history of a genre have been so well documented, so much discussed, as the rise of narrative realism, so there is no merit in rehearsing the fundamentals.

Novelistic realism is regularly accorded the status of the first secular writing to claim for itself the status of truth, for taking on and believing itself capable of producing an accurate account of the world – that reality which supposedly lies so bare and unadorned before us. The manifestoes of the great novelists themselves make their awareness of their pioneering status clear and in fact they speak charmingly in exactly these terms. What they see themselves as

setting out towards, as to a brave new world, has no more elevated a task than to provide a faithful account of the quite un- brave and un- novel one in which we actually live.

Within this gesture it is common to see the origin of a new style, a new set of subjects and a new set of procedures. But it is all too easy to settle upon novelties of a quite inappropriate order. Chaucer for example dealt with the superficial lives of ordinary people, genteel or otherwise, accurately described as involved in adventures of a none too splendid variety.

Much more important to an understanding of realism is the advent of a new set of criteria, of a new set of standards by means of which the realist invites judgement, and brings judgement upon her own efforts. As the experience of the world is presumably given to us all, this experience is thereby capable of being judged by anyone. It is this new form of judgement and a massively extended set of judges, which constitutes realism's bona fide novelty.

It takes no more than a little thought to see that the standards by means of which previous narratives were assessed were not open to experience, not necessarily because experience in any thing like its modern sense was not available (although this is of course true) but because by definition the world to which writing opened itself was another world – not available to experience at all. And this other world, because it was in the hands of experts only, could only be judged by them. Chaucer's tales, however realistic they may in retrospect seem, were explicitly there to amuse, forewarn, or edify and these effects are judged by criteria other than resemblance, established by those specially trained in edification and forewarnings – priests, and their lighter followers, poets and minstrels.

This may be labouring a familiar point, but the upshot is important. The realist, as a result of the self-confessed mania for accuracy, accuracy to experience what's more, opens the criteria established by the book and the bookish to those of the world – sees a desirable continuity between our experience as we may narrate it in life, and as we may narrate it in a work. Novels that is, are open to the universal nonexpert standards which are the mark of post-enlightenment culture to the regime of the "common weal" which would have been unthinkable previously.

At first glance, realism then, looks like an enlightened position. However, with this more liberal stance, the realist is exposed to a set of almost intractable problems. The fact that realism was seen unequivocally to represent an advance for so short a period – for about a hundred years or so, is not actually surprising.

The first objections to realism are always of a particular kind. Realism is problematically relative. Realism insofar as it aims to reflect the real is always committed to an historically determined real, is always in a questionable relation to what that real is. Where does the real congeal long enough to be represented fairly?

This argument is telling but trivial. It simply suggests that experience, which necessarily includes that of the world and that of other books, may not in fact coincide – that style may have a life of its own and thereby be unwilling or unable to capture that which is not its own. Realism is always criticised for

insufficient vigilance, for being, despite itself, conservative. While this may well be true in practice it is contingently but not necessarily so. For this reason it is to a stronger version, one of more direct relevance to narratology, that we must turn to assess these objections to realism.

It is not, so this objection runs, a question, of being left behind, but rather one of positive complicity. The modes of fictional realism reinforce what we take to be real in the world, and vice versa. The moment we conceive of, in fact, intend, there to be a resemblance between the two, we will naturally find an accuracy we have already established. Realism cannot in this view be critical and realist in the same place.

This we know to be one of the most recurring and vociferous objections to realism, one which forms the backbone of the case against narration. It surfaces, in a very similar form, in Lyotard's essay which is concerned with narrative's epistemic configurations, and is implemented practically in the works of the new novelists.

This argument usually points to the fact that it is surely more than coincidental that novelistic realism and theoretical humanism display marked similarities at crucial points. Both are said to be inherently anthropomorphic, unacceptably historicist, and naively empirical. Both, that is, are said to be open in exactly the same place to exactly the same objections. The characteristics of the notion of agency are exactly parallel in theoretical humanism and novelistic realism. The ways in which agency unfolds in a novel and in a human science case display the same features, open in the same place to exactly the same objections. The characteristics of the notion of agency are exactly parallel in theoretical humanism and novelistic realism. The ways in which agency unfolds in a novel and in a human science case display the same ramifications, are subject to the same potential diversions, and are geared towards the same goals. The world, in each case, seems to be conceived of as a totality of facts which both our languages and our notational systems are perfectly adequate to represent accurately. Men and women are creatures of their egos, in control of, for the most part, their experience, and it is experience which they could easily learn by, and change from, if only they were open to more of it.

Despite, or because of the realist novelist's implementation of narrative at the heart of this project, and the similarity between fictional realism and human science, the plot procedures or narrative forms themselves, come to bear the responsibility for much of what is objectionable in both programs.

Underlying any argument of this kind, one which sets so much store by the narrative component, is a barely expressed theory of how language relates to the world – that is how the forms of our representational systems use, or touch upon, that which they represent. No-one would raise objections to a way of representing the social which may be inaccurate or complicit if they did not believe that the mode of representation was somehow relevant to an understanding of these slippages. But how is this the case?

So far the arguments against narration which we have considered suggests that narrative operations may simply occlude the real, make it out to be different from what it is – do unsuspected work, or even no useful work at all.

These objections to the forms of language themselves, can be traced to Whorf.

Whorf's argument is the inevitable outcome of linguistics' discovery that at the heart of language itself is a set of rules which we willingly obey but which nevertheless are arbitrary in their relation to the particular sentences and statements in language itself. In the face of this discovery, what else of an equally arbitrary nature, Whorf asks, may we take on? Attached to these rules as an unseen consequence is an ontology which we ignore only at our peril. The price, Whorf suggests, which we pay for parts of speech, is parts of the world. The arbitrary taxonomy that language produces on the auditory spectrum might be reproduced on the level of things and our world then, is as artificial, might do as unsuspected a violence upon the world of things, as we now know it to perform upon that of sounds.

If this is true of language on both the sentential and the propositional level, if our words and sentences condition our perceptions, what of those larger linguistic units or narratives? There is surely, so the argument runs, ample evidence to suggest that a linguistics of the supra-segmental level reveals a set of rules as inviolate, as arbitrary and as potentially influential, as those operating on the level of the sentence.

If the rules for putting words and phrases together coherently to produce meaningful sentences can, unbeknown to us, determine the forms of our perception, what reason have we to believe that those governing the relations between sentences may not do the same, constraining the very form of our experience itself. And the answer of course is, none whatsoever.

Anyone who believes, as Whorf does, in what we might unkindly call the cookie-cutter view of language must at least consider this possibility. If language as he suggests consists of a fixed series of forms which cut up the world in the same ways, in the same shapes that is, whenever it touches it, then the world is at the mercy of the cutter. If language consists of a series of larger and smaller shapes which roughly approximate those of words and sentences, then the larger the shape, the more damage it can do ... if words are bad, sentences are worse, and narratives take the cake.

The problem is that if narrative configurations remain intact as a set of particular examples, then by cutting up the world in the same way on numerous occasions, narrative realism reinforces rather than restructures reality. What realism appears to explain, then, it, in fact, merely redescribes. This position is exacerbated by the argument that language, in its fictional form, in attempting to be realistic, will necessarily cut up reality in exactly the same places as those operated by our actual or nonfictional utterances. It would be quite inconsistent, in fact, if narratology, much of which quite explicitly construes itself as a variant of discourse linguistics, should do otherwise.

In fact critiques of narrative on these grounds – that what appears as the most familiar and transparent construal of the forms of experience should really be seen as the most virulent of ideological operations – abound. Lyotard deploys in the epistemological field precisely what anti-realist literary narratologists have been using for some time. The so-called stranglehold of the realist-humanist alliance is one of the most pervasive threats of our time.

Perhaps this view of the underlying ideological concomitants of language, the consequences of Whorfianism and its elaborations suggests too, the forms of its own solution. What is the common rejoinder to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in its own terms? The implications of linguistic relativity and its solutions filter more or less vulgarly into all our thoughts concerning how to combat the crisis of the interlinguistic and the intercultural, and to replace them with a less ominous transculturalism. Crudely, the solution is to fight language in its own terms – to oppose these constraints by applying either another, that is, an alternative cookie cutter to the same dough, via an act of translation, or because this is not always possible, to apply smaller and smaller cookie cutters set at every possible angle so as to impose and super-impose endlessly hoping that the grand incision is blurred by smaller, less invasive procedures. A solution construed in these terms has a familiar ring to readers of Lyotard – the offending large scale incision is, of course, none other than the master narrative, and the more acceptable alternative is the localized and therefore less invasive, petit rècit – that believed to have a softer, lighter, less ideological touch. The suspicion of master narratives and the advocacy of minor ones is then nothing more than the inevitable outcome of linguistic relativity applied to the discursive, that is, to the narrative level. What we are dealing with in Lyotard's exposition is a barely updated version of a pre-formalist, pre-Quinean view of language, surfacing at the heart of a supposedly postmodern problematic.

And this is not the only occasion on which Lyotard's Postmodernism strikes us as characteristically uninformed as an uncalled-for dragging of the feet. Let us take the more common objections to the master-narrative, and fight it on more familiar terrain. The master narrative, it is argued here, is to be condemned because of its invocation of a naive historicism and the shaky epistemological procedures characteristic of the human sciences.

In the place of a model or theory which could, so this argument runs, be explanatory, we have a guiding tale, a story already replete with plot, personnel, theme, and outcome – a myth, such as the "Geist" or "History" disguising itself as an explanation by way of a Name. Habermas and Hegel are, predictably, the villains of the Postmodernist piece.

What is recurringly frustrating about a confusion of this kind is how close it comes to the truth. What is important and correct in the "master – narratives – must – die" theory is that the human sciences do in fact implement unviable procedures in order to achieve explanatory effect. It is quite true that all narratives, master or otherwise, make explanatory claims more or less explicitly, more or less consistently and more or less acceptably. What is not true however, is that in order to explain narratives must either shrink in size or be abandoned altogether. Confined, however, to this view, what worries postmodernism, is what the yield of such small stories and such modest truths might be set against a sea of chance? What are narrative's weapons compared to those of science?

Postmodernism as Lyotard reveals, is classically ambivalent about science. On the one level science is the wished-for solution, the kind of knowledge which truly offers an opposition to the vagaries of narrative, one which cannot

or ought not, to legitimate them or to be legitimated by them in turn. When science resorts to master narratives, to the epic forms of customary knowledge to which it is staunchly opposed in principle, part of Lyotard sees it as abandoning its more rigorous procedures for an unjustified compromise, for an unflattering fall into another world. The impression is one of déjà vu. A crisis of narratives formulated in these terms has surely come some twenty five years too late. It reminds us in all essential respects of a problematic which reverberated noisily in both serious and popular thought in the fifties: the famed two cultures debate in another guise. There are two irretrievably separate forms of knowledge, customary knowledge which must have narrative as its fabric and scientific knowledge, which has at its disposal all the certainties but all the cruelties and limitations of experiment. Is Lyotard saying anything more than what is summed up in the two worlds hypothesis? Lyotard if not a straw man, is a Snow man.

For narratology, this return to the terms of an old debate should not involve us in recasting the familiar aspersions levelled at the frailty of the human wing. Demonstrating that there are arguments against narrative operations in the sciences is a much more interesting task. Lyotard suggests that the introduction of narrative knowledge into scientific knowledge amounts to no more than the bringing in of a plausible outsider to explicate the workings of an esoteric cult to a plebeian audience. The problem of narrative in science is redescribed as little more than that of inappropriate P R O. It hardly presents to Lyotard a serious difficulty for knowledge and, to this extent he is correct. Science really has no problem with narrative, but not for the reasons he suggests. It is perfectly clear that narrative configurations are the only means at our disposal for accounting for actions and events, and that science is therefore irretrievably narrative.

Narrative in science, insofar as it is the means by which science conveys and accounts for the actions of the scientist is not a source of epistemic loss, but exactly the opposite. The forms of action that are repeatable by any actor is what counts, and the view that individual scientists could be responsible for problems in science is merely the misconstruel of a humanist problematic, and a problem or representation in the same place. The question of observer- bias in the sciences which has received so much attention mainly by human scientists has nothing to do with the kind of bias which we associate with the prejudices, distortions or interests of individuals. The political may be a problem for science, but it is not an epistemic problem, and to redescribe it as such is quite illegitimate. The construel of narrative knowledge as somehow dangerous to science can, in fact, be countered without involving the standard humanist concepts of agency.

The natural and physical sciences are narrative knowledges which do not have to go via the route of representation. The world in which science thinks is not the world in which we live. Science proceeds by way of experiment, and experiment has as part of its identity conditions the performance of a set of actions which produce rather than match events. Science is a set of prescriptions for action. It produces a set of events which has these actions and not any others as their causes. While it is simply impossible for science to have a

problem with representation, it is equally confusing to think that science must therefore somehow be a non-narrative knowledge, one in which the problems of narration are avoided by elimination. Narrative, we know, does not have to loop through either the humanist position of the subject, or the problems of representation. It can, and does present actions and events which have no status prior to the act that produced them and no reasons to have that form, other than those which caused them. The actions of the scientist are made to conform to those of other scientists, are made to comply with their own identity conditions by way of a rigorously nominalist procedure.

The regularities which science produces do not, it is true, involve narration alone. Nor do their upshots or hypotheses have a narrative form. What is important is that the procedural aspects of scientific knowledge, the actions upon which it is based, are rightly dependent upon a narrative account. It is certainly not at the expense of narrative that scientific knowledge with its greater legitimacy than human science knowledge, is produced. In fact, a grid of prescriptions for action, and a narrative account of the performance of those actions, that is, a history of experiment is an integral part of scientific knowledge. Science can prescribe and convey actions of a similar form to produce events which are not possible without them. It does not ever have to cash in one kind of thing for another.

This privileged relation of narration to a history of actions is precisely what binds the problematics of narrative in fiction to those of narrative in knowledge. The usual objections to a history stem from the fact that as an account of past actions it is somehow separate from that which it represents and can therefore have not more valid status than that of a version. And the novel similarly, in evoking a nonexistent world so vividly suggests that it is also doing it accurately. Both, so the argument runs, as histories of the actual or of the possible, deal only in conviction; they have no way of guaranteeing themselves truth or certainty. Customary knowledge, true histories, and those histories of the possible forms of men and things, which we call novels are all open to the same kinds of objections. They all implicate the forms of our experience, the forms of our selves, and the forms of our actions in one place. And this one place is the procedure of narrative.

The dismissal of this human problematic by way of a radicalization of the problems of action, that is, by science, also not surprisingly has its parallels in the field of fiction. Modernism does deliberately what science does spontaneously, that is, a critique of representation.

Tellingly, two aspects of narrative realism are the target of modernist critiques. The first of these is that of the narrator conceived of as a unified ego and the second is of the fictional world construed as a source of facts. All of modernity gamble on replacing the unity of the narrator with a unified regime of action and all of the world's logic, with a series of self-sustaining events.

The problem of realism, so the practitioners of the nouveau roman remind us, is grounded in a conception of narrative which construes it as a communicative or expressive form. Realism takes writing to be a set of signs which represent a world outside itself. In Barthes's terms, the problem of the readerly is in fact grounded in an expressive or communicative concept of

language, one which sees narration as necessarily passing through the regime of signs. The modernist project, or that of the writerly, gambles on proceeding by way of a language construed in a position of radical imminence: Of action not of representation. The writerly proceeds, goes on, by way of relating each action to itself. Modernism is concerned to demonstrate what may be done with language, sound, paint, the material, on the basis of prior events of that kind. The famed self-reflexiveness of modernity is aligned to the position of experimentation in science.

To proceed by way of secondariness is not to implicate anything outside the logic of inference, but to proceed by way of the productive actions themselves. In what way may the implementation of this essentially experimental procedure in the field of fiction produce actions which are explanatory not of something outside themselves, but of their own actions? Here art is in an essentially advantageous position. Like science it can bypass representation because it produces events, not signs, by way of actions. The events it produces are in fact the product of an experiment in the abstract sense. Their criteria of success or failure have nothing to do with a regime of evidence outside themselves or with the criteria of representation. They stand or fall on the form and fact of their going on.

What the nouveau roman wishes to achieve, and what its apologists correctly see it as having achieved, is not merely an instance of non-realist narration, but a laboratory of narrative itself. These works demonstrate that it is possible to narrate outside a representational regime, that is outside an expressive or communicative notion of narrative. Despite the twists and turns of the narrative form, despite the sustained attack upon plot, character and theme which the new novelists mount, their works do not fall outside the canon of narration. They are narrations despite themselves, narrations which reveal, by means of narrative, the conditions of possibility of other narratives. In reflecting the limits of a genre, the generic is put in check rather than obliterated. All writing is finally one.

But, the critics of narrative may retort, to demonstrate that we are able to produce narratives of a critical character, in science and in fiction, is surely loading the dice. We may have established that critical narration is possible, but only at the expense of confining it to a particular type of object and task.

In abandoning human action as object in the one case (that is via science) and in abandoning actual or real action (that is via fiction) we have saved narrative by illegitimate means. Any full defence must necessarily take on the case of history. What challenge does history offer and why would this constitute the epitome of narrative revived?

History, on this account, is seen as the place where all of the narrative's most characteristic operations concentrate. Its subject matter is actual human actions and events, and its method is necessarily a narrative one. If fiction escapes by not having to be true, and by not necessarily having to go via the route of signification, history in implicating the field of evidence, and standing in relation to actual events, cannot do the same.

Danto in his *Analytic Philosophy of History* begins by pointing out that all calls to knowledge have in the interests of certainty pitched themselves

towards the present and displayed an obvious suspicion towards the past, that is, to narrative accounts.

In order to test whether a secure descriptive phenomenology of the present is actually possible, Danto begins by analyzing a number of uncontroversial, apparently present tense statements such as his father came into the room and "look at that scar".

Would it, he asks, make any difference to these sentences if we were to eliminate any reference to the past. The answer is obviously, yes. To call something a "scar" rather than, say, a "white mark", is to describe the effect of a past event, an injury, while to call somebody "father" rather than a "man", is to necessarily refer to a past action, that is, the conceiving of a child. It is not possible to produce even a present tense description of what we would be willing to call the same things, without using tensed, that is past, referring terms. Imagine a world consisting only of statements such as "look at that white mark" or "that child has no man".

The first important point for narrative has already been made. Danto's analysis demonstrates that, in most instances, language's capacity to pick out things, to get a grip on objects themselves, presupposes a latently narrative procedure. But if this is so of things, what may we say of the rest of our descriptions? The substance of the universe is not nearly made up of things or objects, but of events and that particular class of events we call actions. Whereas some of our descriptions of things may, at great cost, eliminate tensed terms, events are irreducibly temporal. What space and time is for objects, cause and effect are for events. Our capacity to characterize events at all, let alone with any degree of precision is wholly dependent on refinements in the language of cause and effect.

Talk of the present then, is in reality an amalgam of object talk and event talk, neither of which can be wholly derived from the present itself. Without tensed vocabulary, that is, without narration, we would find ourselves literally blind to objects and events.

Danto has shown by way of a careful anatomy of our descriptions that whatever our reservations about narration might be, it is certainly impossible to do without it. Narration is indeed a prerequisite for inhabiting a world anything like the one which we habitually describe. But narrative's capacity to do critical work is by no means vitiated thereby. Danto's substantial analytic project for a critical history then, evolves upon a critical narratology. It is, in fact, only in the context of narration that we may establish the identity conditions for specific past events. And he adds that it is also only possible to use evidence from history at all, when we use narrative as its support.

If history is an irreducibly inferential form based upon the postulation of a causal link between prior and subsequent events, its efficacy as an explanatory account depends on the recounting of these events in a narrative series. What, Danto asks, may we say about the epistemic status of that form of knowledge which uses the series as a necessary prerequisite for its explanatory upshots?

Firstly, Danto insists, the particular power of narration is its capacity to single out events in their uniqueness. What previously seemed impossible,

that is, their introduction into a supposedly limitless field is achieved not by way of the attempt to evolve general laws to cover their inscription, but as a result of the stringently individuative apparatus of narrative. Danto achieves this aim – of implementing a rigorously causal apparatus – by showing that the object of inquiry becomes specific to the extent to which it is caused and realist to the extent that it is accurately described.

If events are separated from narrative procedures, Danto argues, their specificity is lost, and thereby their capacity to function in an explanation. If narrative in its most basic sense, is the form by which events are connected to events, then the type of explanation produced as well as the way in which it can grasp events, may alter with the form of the narrative. What limits narrative if it is not limited by the forms of deduction from a governing law?

Danto's answer is, at first glance, surprising. The limits of narrative are established between the time of the events described, and the position of the narrator. A complete description of past events is not possible, because certain utterances are simply not available to any given narrator by virtue of his own position in time. The end of history alone could guarantee a unified narrative position. The occasion of the narrative utterance therefore plays an important part in determining its status as truth. The validity of any narrative form always depends, first and foremost, upon an act – the utterance of the narrator in relation to his object. For Danto, history, like all critical narratives, necessarily implicates the form of its own activity.

Such a view, the anti-narrativist would be quick to point out, but quite without justification, should be lamented on the grounds of its inherent subjectivity and relativization. But it must be remembered that the position occupied by the Dantonian historian/narrator is attributable to the formal properties of tensed sentences, and in no way implicates us in the quagmire of humanist subjectivity. It is the properties of sentences and not of utterers that occasion the utterance, and not the other way around.

Having established the first limitation of narrative as that stemming from the position of the utterer (an argument which could correctly remind us of the position in relation to action adopted in the modernist narrative manifestos) Danto confronts the question concerning every historian – that is, given the irreducibility of narrative in history, and its necessarily definitive role in explanation, how can we judge, or compare histories? How does the historian go on to produce that particular explanatory series and not another, such that one, and again not another emerges as convincing or plausible.

Unlike the writer of fiction, the historian cannot go on on grounds determined by the form of his going on alone. That is, by writing at the zero degree. Going on in history is an activity which necessarily implicates something outside itself. Paul Veyne may say that history is a novel, but he adds that it is a true novel. History, unlike fiction, may not choose to put itself in relation to evidence, it simply has to do so in order to count as history at all.

In the light of this, Danto makes what is for narratology his most productive and salient point. There are, he suggests, two major classes or forms of evidence which every narrative genre may consider as the basis for its going on. The first of these is what could be called conceptual or formal evidence,

and the second, documentary or trace evidence, corresponding roughly to the categories immanent or extrinsic respectively. A narrative logic of inference may proceed by way of both or of either, what has efficacy in generic explanation is that form of evidence which is finally held responsible for validating the explanatory form of the series. If the evidence which justifies the narrative in the last instance, is of the trace or documentary variety, we are dealing with the genre of truth. If not, we are faced with the forms of fiction.

Perhaps more interesting is how those generic shifts which occur within the fictional itself can be understood by way of the operation of this distinction on the meta or mimetic level. Realist novels refer to and imitate the forms of history – proceed as though by way of the document, while writerly works imitate the formal procedures of experimental linguistics, that is, the logic of words and their ramifications. This account gives a precise underpinning to those explanations of modernism which construe it as the end point of a radicalization of rhetoric. If fiction is the meta-language with natural language as its object, then the genres of fiction are determined by which language is its object. It is thus the forms of fiction which set limits to the forms of truth, and not the other way around. And it would take little more than a move towards filling in the details to demonstrate that what Danto's critical analytic of history has provided is the basis for the critiques in relation to the rhetorical – for the place of the unconscious in Freud, the commodity in Marx, and truth in Nietzsche.

Such sweeping claims call for an example despite the fact that this is an old fashioned move which literary theory considers unwarranted.

How might Danto account for each of the steps undertaken in solving a murder case successfully – an operation which popular opinion quite rightly sees as akin in many respects, to those involved in scientific work? Given a death of unknown aetiology and the task of isolating its cause, how may we characterize the first step? In Danto's terms the detective story always opens within the field of the trace – the first search will be for those signs upon the body which alone may determine the basic form for the rest of the procedure. Will it be that confined to the slab, to what is available at the autopsy – or will it justify a move outside the confines of the laboratory to that vastly extended field of possibly useful events which follows logically upon the opening up of a murder docket?

At this point something very interesting happens. The event of a possible murder which is established on the basis of trace evidence is replaced with the sign "murder" and a formal or conceptual operaton begins, in which the logical concomitants of the term "murder" itself are used to pick out yet another field of trace evidence. The word "murder", like the word "scar", is simultaneously an event, the effect of a latent narration, and a representation, the site of a set of conceptual evidence stemming from the semantic features of the term.

The important point is that the status of murder as evidence cannot be determined by its particular use, that is, by its position in a particular narrative series.

As the investigation proceeds, similar switches of function are made. Both the efficiency and economy of the investigation is, in fact, dependent upon the detective's capacity to cash conceptual evidence in for documentary evidence and visa versa: the talent of Sherlock Holmes stems from his being able to do just that – to return to a particular set of traces in the world on the basis of contemplations in his study and visa versa, and to effect this switch at precisely the right moment. This is, after all, what it means to have reasons for actions, and actions (either actual or possible) as the source of reasons. Successful acts of detection and convincing detective stories attest in practical terms to precisely this possiblity. Small wonder then, that the detective genre is the paradigm case of both novelistic realism's and the ego's rationality.

If what the modernist and the paranoic alike – Kafka, Robbe-Grillet and Godard, as well as Schreber – produce, is narrative at the limits of narration, then it should come as no surprise that their work plays persistently upon the forms of detective fiction, the model, that is, of knowledge today.

But it must be said at once that this state of affairs is a temporary one. Forensic fiction in its present form has not been with us for very long and its future is already uncertain. Neither detection as a genre, nor an account which explains its conditions of possibility is a master narrative. As Danto demonstrates on the formal level and Foucault spells out in the *Birth of the Clinic*, we can legitimately say no more of narrative than that it is a logic of inference implemented by way of a series of tensed utterances. Anything else is radically contingent – any attempt to fill in, in advance (that is, independent of the form of the series itself) either the nature of the utterer, the structure of the series or the category of evidence strips narrative of its explanatory function and leaves us empty handed.

We do narrative no service by giving it an inevitable plot, character or theme, especially as we have no need to do so. We do it no service either by separating it from the status of a knowledge by suggesting that it is encumbered by inherent operations detrimental to explanation. The answer to the master narrative is not the trivial tale. Any position which seeks to divide narrative along these lines, which pluralizes its forms in order to provide it with spurious respectability, is caught in a familiar problematic: in an inability to think the relation between narrative as action and the world as event.

Lyotard's characterization of postmodernism as a crisis in narratives is symptomatic of no more than the inability to think the relation between form and evidence, that is, it is the re-enactment in familiar terms of the long established philosophical impasse in which dogmatic idealism confronts skeptical empiricism at every turn.

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