THE CLASSICAL PLOT AND THE INVENTION OF WESTERN NARRATIVE

N. J. LOWE

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and the Invention of Western Narrative

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Preface

'Plot' is an unloved word in narrative theory: no longer quite the four-letter vulgarity it was to critics a generation or two ago, but still not much used in polite conversation.[1] Largely bypassed by narratology, it remains for many theorists a suspect term, worryingly slippery to define, and tangled up with lines of theory that have not fared well in the history of postwar criticism. Part I of this book tries to soothe these suspicions, arguing for the rehabilitation of 'plot' as a central term of narrative theory, and putting forward a model that seeks to repair the difficulties felt in definitions and analyses from Aristotle on. With the help of ideas borrowed from narratology and cognitive science, I argue that the vernacular notion of plot is anything but a disposable and methodologically suspect abstraction – that, on the contrary, it marks an attempt to describe a fundamental component of the mental machinery we use in the construction and reading of fiction.

But this is not centrally a work of theory. Part II is historical and text-specific, and the theoretical model proposed in Chapters 1–4 is there chiefly to make such a history writable. Rather, however, than a 'history of plot' in general – something nobody, let alone a classicist, would be easily persuaded to take on – it seeks to track the emergence of one very particular kind of plotting, which has held a position of extraordinary dominance in the traditions of Western literature for close on three millennia. If it has been comparatively neglected by modern criticism, that is partly because it has tended to be associated since the Romantics with 'low' or 'popular' narrative forms – farce, detection, adventure. But with postmodernism's dissolution of the boundaries between high and low art; with the sophisticated, ironic embrace of genre narrative traditions such as the mystery; and especially with the high cultural and critical status allowed to popular cinema, there is every sign that this system of narrative values is returning in esteem. It seems the right time to try writing the story of its roots.

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[1] 'What do we mean by the melodramatic phrase "heresy of plot"? Nothing very sensational; it is the notion that in a poem or a play or a novel there is an order of events that may be thought of in complete isolation from other structures and that "somehow" exists independent of the language of the work. So described, the idea is revolting; no self-respecting literary critic is guilty of this. Crude hypostasizing of plot and separation of plot from expression is a nineteenth-century error, left behind with character sketches and the well-made play' (Brower 1952: 48). 'Plot has no strong place in the pantheon of acceptable literary terms' (Dipple 1971: 1). 'In the great efflorescence of study of narrative in recent years, plot has been slighted as something apparently too old-fashioned to deserve prolonged attention' (Miner 1990: 147, and cf. Merrill 1999).

What I here call *classical* plotting is, broadly, the idea of plot we associate with Aristotle (a quite different thing from Aristotle's own idea of plot, which is only glancingly addressed here).[2] Its principles were in fact well established in narrative practice by the time Aristotle tried to articulate them in the fourth century BC; and though, like Aristotle, we may not always find it easy as readers to make these principles explicit, we are all of us well trained in recognising their effects. 'Classical' plotting is felt to evoke, for example, an impression of elegance, economy, and efficiency in the deployment of narrative resources. There is a strong sense of unity and closure to the narrative structure, with particular importance attached to a firm and satisfying ending. At the same time, the audience or reader is teased with guessing-games over what is to happen: twists, surprises, mischievously thwarted expectations. And yet, classical plots play fair: they do not allow us to feel cheated by the turn of events taken or the means used to achieve them. This book sets out to explain how these impressions are achieved, and why this way of making stories, despite all fluctuations in fashion, has remained the most resilient narrative paradigm in Western storytelling to this day.

Clearly, I use the term 'classical' here in its historical as well as its cultural sense, because I want to argue that for the study of plot the two senses merge into one. Classical plotting is an invention of the classical world. By the third century AD, the classical plot paradigm had already been refined and adapted to the three narrative forms in which it was passed on to the Renaissance, and which remain the basis for subsequent developments: epic poetry, tragic and comic drama, and the novel or short story. Its applications since the Renaissance, which have brought into its domain narrative media unknown or unimaginable to antiquity, are nevertheless modifications and extensions to ancient patterns, rather than essential

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[2] The difference is well illustrated by the way Aristotle's name is widely taken in vain in creative-writing handbooks, often for concepts that bear only the most parodically distant relationship to anything Aristotle wrote. Screenwriting tutors, for example, invoke Aristotelian authority for the now-canonical three-act model (for which see e.g. Field 1979: 56) of Hollywood film structure: 'You have a beginning, a middle, and an end. In other words, you get your character up in a tree, you throw rocks at him for a while, and then you get him down. And that's your basic three-act structure in the Aristotelian terms' (Francis X. Feighan, co-author of the interactive screenwriting program Collaborator, on *Moving pictures*, BBC2 6/2/94).

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departures from them. To understand the basic grammar of classical plotting, it is necessary and sufficient to understand plotting in the classical world – and, in practice, a surprisingly narrow canon of genres and works within that world. That, at any rate, is the argument of this book.

To put this case, I have had to wade further into the mainstream of theoretical debate than classicists are normally expected to go, though it will be all too evident that I have managed to keep my amateurism intact. It remains impenitently a classicist's book, mired in what will seem to some a crudely archaeocentric view of the Western narrative inheritance – according to which all literature is crumbs from Homer's banquet, and all criticism footnotes to the *Poetics*. Nevertheless, my approach sits with the small but swelling number of literary studies that see implications, not just for the redemption of narratology but for the future of their entire discipline, in the methods of cognitive science[3] – in the empirical study of how the human mind organises information in the operations of perception, memory, and thinking, and the structures or 'schemas' of mental representation we use as frameworks for knowledge, inference, and understanding. At the same time, I have tried to make the text sufficiently modular, and the theoretical model sufficiently accessible, for a reader innocent of any interest in these issues still to be able to make sense of the discussions in Part II.

Readers in a hurry are welcome to peek at the ending, but in outline the story is this. Chapter 1 reviews some main lines of approach to the theory and definition of 'plot', and the complex of questions such attempts have tried to address. Chapters 2–3 then describe the model proposed here to deal with those questions, beginning with a general consideration of the different mental operations involved in the reading of fictional narrative, and moving on to a detailed discussion of the descriptive mapping proposed between the representation of narrative universes and certain kinds of structure in games. Chapter 4 then uses this model to try to explain the distinctive qualities of *classical* plotting; and Chapter 5 looks briefly at each of the principal genres of Greek narrative excluded from the historical survey that follows, and at the rival possibilities they propose to the classical paradigm. Part II then deals in turn with the use and evolution of that paradigm in the four successive narrative traditions of antiquity that I argue embody its historical development: the Homeric epics (Chapters 6–7), fifth-century tragedy (8), Greek and Roman New Comedy (9), and the Greek love-novels of the Empire (10). It is largely a Greek history: aside from translated New Comedy, Latin literature remains marginal to this narrative, for reasons sketched at the end of Chapter 5.

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[3] An ambitious manifesto in Turner 1991, who notes that the cognitivist project is that with which Western literary theory begins; see also Spolsky 1993 (on the cognitive underpinnings of poststructuralism), and good narrative casebooks in Britton and Pellegrini 1990, Ryan 1991 (with a valuable emphasis on work in artificial intelligence), Branigan 1992, Gerrig 1993, Emmott 1997, and a useful introduction in Semino 1997 (esp. 117–224). The term 'cognitivism' is mainly bandied in film studies; see e.g. Andrew 1989, Bordwell and Carroll 1996 (index s.v.). In literary studies the cognitivist trend is most evident in stylistics, humorology, metaphor theory, and *Lesengeschichte*; a wide range of applications regularly appears in *Poetics*. I reserve my misgivings for the Conclusion (below, pp. 261–2).

It will be all too apparent from this summary that the very attempt to tell this story has wound up espousing the values of its subject: a totalising, teleological narrative with a beginning, middle, and end. 'It is not yet clear', says a recent textbook of narratology, 'what a history of narrative as such would look like';[4] this book is one attempt to imagine an answer, but some nettle-grasping is required. To come clean, I do not think that narratology can survive its postmodern critiques[5] without embracing the full implications of its (often tacit) cognitivist underpinnings. But the new cognitivism itself is an unabashedly positivistic, neo-Aristotelian response to the poststructuralist stance,[6] which has tended (for example) to minimise the closural, systemic elements in storytelling; to stress the anthropological otherness and distance of the ancient cultures which produced and consumed it; to mistrust the dehistoricising tendency of formalist approaches; and to recoil with alarm from any notion of confronting literary works as products of compositional processes, something that cannot be entirely evaded in a survey of writing on plot. These are embarrassments that need to be left at the door. It is a weary truism that *fin de millénium* aesthetics is caught between the classical values of order and closure still privileged in popular narrative culture, especially in cinema, and the postmodern values of polysemy and pluralism that our information- and irony-saturated world celebrates. One of the themes of this book is the centrality of that tension to all human narrative – including, obviously, attempts to tell the story of narrative itself.

I have done my best to keep jargon to a minimum, but a good deal has slipped through; the worst is collected for reference in a glossary at the back. Bibliographic references have been brutally compacted: wherever possible, I have made do with a single reference to a recent discussion through which the full literature and debate on a subject can be accessed. Most Greek words are translated or transliterated; Greek names other than Menandrean titles have been Latinised as severely as I could bear ('Posidon', but '*Oresteia*'), and other words transcribed for visual intelligibility rather than phonetic puritanism (*tyche* rather than *tukhē*). Unattributed translations are my own.

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[4] Onega and Garcia Landa 1996: 12. [5] See below, p. 21 n. 17

[6] But not necessarily at odds with it: Spolsky 1993 argues attractively that the poststructuralist model is itself cognitively well-grounded.

This book owes so much to so many colleagues in London and elsewhere that I blush to elide most of their names. But Chris Carey, Pat Easterling, Barbara Goward, Vassiliki Kampourelli, Andreas Markantonatos, and John Morgan read parts or all of the text at a variety of stages; Michael Silk, David Wiles, and especially Malcolm Willcock planted early seeds whose fruit they will not easily recognise; and Pauline Hire and the Press's readers surpassed all duty in helping to knock a ten-thousand-stade text into eusynoptic shape. My deepest debts are to students and colleagues in the Classics Departments of Westfield College and Royal Holloway; and to Margaret Welbank, who has shaped this project from the start, and will be glad to see the back of it.

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Part I

The Classical Plot

1 Approaches

Everybody knows what plot is. 'Readers can tell that two texts are versions of the same story, that a novel and film have the same plot. They can summarize plots and discuss the adequacy of plot summaries. And therefore it seems not unreasonable to ask of literary theory that it provide some account of this notion of plot, whose appropriateness seems beyond question and which we use without difficulty.'[1]

Yet in recent practice such an account of what we understand by 'plot' has proved extraordinarily elusive.[2] Narratologists, especially, have been unhappy with the word (and such equivalents as *intrigue/intreccio, trame/trama, action, Handlung, Fabel*). Some standard textbooks avoid the term altogether (Genette 1980, Bal 1985/1997); others push it to the margins (Prince 1982) or treat it as a casual synonym (Bordwell 1985ab; cf. p. 6 below), while some openly question whether it carries any useful meaning at all (Rimmon-Kenan 1984: 135). To find any extended, unembarrassed discussion of the concept one has to look underground: to the fascinating but rarely acknowledged literary-theoretical ghetto of creative-writing handbooks, with their deviant reception of Aristotle and forbidden fascination with the poetics of authorial composition. It may not be too late to reclaim the word, but the task has been made stiffer by the emergence in the last quarter-century of a widely accepted system of narrative categories in which 'plot' plays no recognised role. And yet, the idea of plot, in Aristotle's *mythos*, lies right at the centre of the theoretical system from which narratology begins. It is also probably the narrative term most people untouched by formal literary theory would find it easiest to use in everyday analysis; and this very intuitiveness makes it tempting to suspect that the idea of plot is a flag for something innate in our mental apparatus for understanding narrative. How, then, has it managed to fall through the terminological net?

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[1] Culler 1975: 205.

[2] Prince 1987: 71–2 and Wales 1987: 355–7 are useful starting-points, but the only extended treatments are the exemplary and complementary discussions by Egan 1978 (on prenarratological theories) and Ronen 1990a (on narratology and after). There are many surveys of broadly relevant theories of narrative structure and content; see especially Scholes 1974: 59–117, Culler 1975: 205–24, Chatman 1978: 43–95, Segre 1979: 1–64, Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 6–42, Ricoeur 1983–7 ii.17–91, Martin 1986: 81–129, Stewart 1987, Jonnes 1990: 1–54.

Much of the answer must lie in its very ease of use. 'Plot' is a vernacular term, and as such not only resists formal definition, but is in a way designed to substitute for it. We use the word to talk about a variety of things we recognise in the way stories are put together, and the way they affect us. But like 'heaven', 'common sense', or 'a federal Europe', it is really a tag to identify a *hidden* quantity – a quick answer to a question too loosely formulated to have one. Its usefulness and persistence lie precisely in the fact that it is a label for the absence of a more formal representation. To define one, it is not enough simply to lay down a definition *ex cathedra*, or to negotiate a diplomatic middleground between competing uses, or to hunt for some superinclusive formula that can encompass the range of applications. We need to look beyond, to the questions about the way narrative works to which the idea of 'plot' is part of the answer.

The difficulty here is that there are a number of competing priorities, not always clearly articulated, for what we want a notion of plot to do. Take what seems like a simple case. In a common, perhaps the commonest, vernacular usage, 'plot' is used as a synonym for *story*: what happens in a narrative, the sum of the events the storyline recounts. When we speak of 'summarising the plot' of a novel or play, we mean a paraphrase of what we perceive to be its basic story content, the events abstracted from the text that recounts them. Here, for instance, is Aristotle's summary of the 'story' (*logos*) of the *Odyssey*: 'A man being away from his home for many years, under the hostile eye of Posidon, and alone; and the situation at home, moreover, being such that his property is being wasted by suitors, and they are plotting against his son – the hero returns after great hardship, and after revealing his identity to certain persons makes his attack, saving himself while destroying his enemies' (*Poetics* 17.1455b17–23).

But there is one difficulty here already. How do we agree on what constitute the essentials in a story outline? Why does Aristotle feel that the wrath of Posidon is part of the *Odyssey*'s *logos*, and the support of Athene is not? Why does the suitors' wasting of Odysseus' property get a mention, but not their pursuit of his wife? Why does Aristotle, in contrast to most modern readers, feel the essence of the poem is concentrated in its second half, and that IX–XII contain no details significant enough to deserve explicit mention?[3] What makes the essentials essential, and how do we recognise their significance?

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[3] In fact Aristotle's distillation is extraordinarily acute. For answers to these questions see respectively pp. 139–40, 142, and 137.

And there is a more subtle problem as well. Even when we perform this everyday act of synopsis – of summarising the 'plot' of a book or a film – we convey far more than mere events. Inevitably, we find ourselves simultaneously trying to say something about those events' narrative *articulation*. We tend to distinguish, as Aristotle did in his abrupt shift of construction, between preparatory set-up and main action ('It's in 1943, when France is still occupied but the African colonies are technically outside Nazi control; and he runs this bar where all the refugees hang out while they're waiting for American visas to come through . . .') Like Aristotle, we use the present tense, as though we are living through the unfolding of the narrative over again ('. . . and Peter Lorre passes him a set of exit papers, but then gets shot, so he hides them in Sam's piano . . .') And we easily succumb to a further temptation that Aristotle resists only by straining both summary and syntax: we report events not in their own internal chronological sequence, but in the order they were reported to us ('. . . and it turns out they were lovers in Paris, when she thought her husband had been killed, but she never told him back then that she was even married . . .')

What we are already doing here, of course, is making an instinctive separation between the *events* of the story and their *telling*: what the Russian formalists distinguished by Shklovsky's famous terms *fabula* and *sjuzhet*. This distinction is a cornerstone of modern narrative theory, even though there has been huge disagreement over the precise definition of the two terms and the boundary between them, and scarcely less over how to present them in English. *Fabula* (in English, usually 'story') is the series of events the work recounts, but imagined stripped of all the artifices of storytelling: a series of actual events in their natural order, in what merely happens to be a fictional world. In contrast, *sjuzhet* is the account of those same events that we actually get, reordered and reshaped in the process of telling to reach and affect the audience or reader in a particular and deliberate way.[4] (The best of the English equivalents proposed is 'narrative', though it is a long way from ideal: see pp. 18–19. below, and the Glossary.) In some kinds of fiction – tales of detection, for instance – the reconstruction of the *fabula* from the *sjuzhet*, a hypothetical 'objective' story from the story told, is the *raison d'être* of the whole work. And when we run the two together in our attempt to describe the 'plot' of *Casablanca*, we are expressing our instinctive sense that there is something more to what we mean by 'plot' than simple story – that what is told may be less important than the shape it is given in the telling.

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[4] Ironically, this terminology works in every language but Russian, where the formalists' choice of everyday words to pressgang into technical service is the wrong way round to deal with some nuances we would nowadays want to include in the distinction. In ordinary Russian usage, *fabula* can mean a story in its actual manifestation as a text, but *sjuzhet* cannot; it can, however, as its etymology implies mean the 'subject' (whether story or theme) treated by a narrative, something *fabula* cannot cover.

But if our sense of plot is inadequately covered by *fabula*, still less can it be explained as a synonym for *sjuzhet* – which is unfortunate, as 'plot' has become the accepted English translation for the latter,[5] despite the strange nonsense it makes of the word's native usage. It is disconcerting to be told in a classic textbook of film theory: 'The term *plot* is used to describe everything visibly and audibly present in the film before us . . . The film's plot may contain material that is extraneous to the story world. For example, while the opening of *North by Northwest* is portraying rush hour in Manhattan, we also see the film's credits and hear orchestral music.'[6] (By analogy, the 'plot' of *Middlemarch* would presumably include the chapter numbers, and perhaps that of *Little Dorrit* the Phiz illustrations.)

Nevertheless, a distinction of this kind has long been felt important to pinning down a definition of plot. It is hinted at already in Aristotle, particularly in his use of the terms *logos* and *mythos* – the terms in the *Poetics* regularly rendered in English as 'story' (sometimes 'argument') and 'plot'. But it would be misleading to claim (as still suggested, for example, by Prince 1987 *s.vv.*) that Aristotle anticipates the formalist distinction. For one thing, both terms are polysemic in Aristotle's actual usage: *mythos* means sometimes 'plot', sometimes 'myth', sometimes both,[7] while *logos* (never formally defined) means 'speech' much more often than it means 'storyline'. What is more, the two terms are only once juxtaposed,[8] and never explicitly contrasted;[9] on the contrary, the distinction between story and narrative is blurred at least as often as it is observed. And most

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[5] Lemon & Reis 1965: 68; cf. Wales 1987: 357.

[6] Bordwell & Thompson 1993: 67.

[7] See the careful analysis by Downey 1984 (who properly points out that the problem is as much in our use of terms as in Aristotle); cf. Halliwell 1986: 57n16.

[8] 5.1449b8: Crates is describes as the first comic playwright to have composed 'stories and plots', a statement that does nothing to clarify the distinction (if any) between the terms.

[9] The closest is 17.1455a34 with 1455b8, where Aristotle summarises the *logos* of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris* and then labels as 'outside the *mythos*' the reasons for Orestes' Crimean voyage. But the passage can equally be invoked to support the view that *mythos* and *logos* are in fact synonymous (as argued by Belfiore 1992a: 108,128, cf. 1992b: 362). Ἔξω τοῦ μύθου is usually taken to mean either 'outside the primary action' (but this is also true of other events narrated in the prologue to *IT* and apparently accepted by Aristotle as part of the *mythos*) or 'inessential to the chain of causality in the play' (in this case, a debatable claim). The phrase occurs only here, though we find 'outside the play' (ἔξω τοῦ δράματος) at 14.1453b32 and 15.1454b2, and similar expressions at 15.1454b7, 18.1455b25, 24.1460a29. If consistency is to be found in Aristotle's usage, we must posit a *threefold* distinction between *logos* (the story or *fabula*), *mythos* (the set of events that constitute the essential causal chain), and *drama/tragoidia/mytheuma* (the subset of plot events included in the primary action of the play). See the thoughtful treatment by Roberts 1992.

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