

# NARRATIVE

*Paul Cobley*



*the* NEW CRITICAL IDIOM



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Paul Cobley



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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.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This volume would not have happened without the vision of John Drakakis. Not only has he presided over an excellent series to which I'm honoured to contribute, he has given immeasurable help with this book. I have learned an immense amount from him. Where the cover notes of early Queen albums were able triumphantly to proclaim 'no synthesizers!', I hope I am able to reward him with 'no parentheses!'. (Well, only a few.)

Approaching the thorny issue of the origins of narrative was always going to be difficult, but it was made that much easier by the suggestions of my level-headed interlocutor on the subject, Myrdene Anderson. Although he may not know it, Federico Bonfanti gave me some valuable help; as did Kalevi Kull during a breakfast interrogation in Finland. I've benefited from discussions with Marcel Danesi and Christina Ljungberg. Also, my attempts to understand the consequences of heteroglossia and Bakhtin's work in general have been enhanced by Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio, both through discussion with them and through their crucial writings. My many hundreds of first-year students of the last eight years or so have been a fruitful source of ideas whenever I have even entertained the notion that there might not be anything new to say about the theory of narrative.

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# CONTENTS

SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE	IX
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	X
<b>1 In the beginning: the end</b>	<b>1</b>
Story, plot and narrative	4
Sequence	7
Space	12
Time	16
Phylogeny and ontogeny	21
<b>2 Early narrative</b>	<b>29</b>
Narrative and history	30
Orality, literacy and narrative	32
Universality and narrative	33
Narrative and identity	37
Hellenic and Hebraic foundations	41
Hybridity and the Western tradition	51
A voyage to the self	53
<b>3 The rise and rise of the novel</b>	<b>56</b>
Mimesis	57
Aristotelian mimesis	61
Imitation, quotation and identity	63
Epic, identity and the mixed mode	67
Questioning the voice in the Middle Ages	70
The low form of the romance and the rise of the novel	74
The triple rise thesis and beyond	77
Instruction, telling and narrative mode	81
<b>4 Realist representation</b>	<b>88</b>
Secretaries to the nineteenth century	89
Battles over realism	91

<i>Middlemarch</i> and 'classic realism'	94
Omniscient narration	100
Realism and the voices of narrative	104
Narrative with dirt under its fingernails	107
<b>5 Beyond realism</b>	<b>117</b>
Identity and the analysis of <i>Heart of Darkness</i>	119
Imperialism and repression	123
Imperialism and sexuality	127
Narrative, imperialism and the conflict of Western identity	132
The reader and the narrative	134
Narrative levels	138
<b>6 Modernism and the cinema</b>	<b>146</b>
Writing in light	153
The cinema and modernism	163
Just another 'realism'?	167
<b>7 Postmodernism</b>	<b>171</b>
'Meta' levels	174
History	179
The decline of the 'grand narrative'	183
New technologies	189
<b>8 In the end: the beginning</b>	<b>201</b>
Narrative in cyberspace	202
Reading narrative	205
Diversity and genres	209
Closure, verisimilitude and the narrative sign	215
The future of the narrative sign	223
GLOSSARY	229
BIBLIOGRAPHY	246
INDEX	261

# 1

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## 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 reveal 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 tem-