

# READING NARRATIVE

J. Hillis Miller

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# READING NARRATIVE

# OKLAHOMA PROJECT FOR DISCOURSE AND THEORY

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**For Barbara Cohen**

# SERIES EDITORS' FOREWORD

The Oklahoma Project for Discourse & Theory is a series of interdisciplinary texts whose purpose is to explore the cultural institutions that constitute the human sciences, to see them in relation to one another, and perhaps above all, to see them as products of particular discursive practices. To this end, we hope that the Oklahoma Project will promote dialogue within and across traditional disciplines—psychology, philology, linguistics, history, art history, aesthetics, logic, political economy, religion, philosophy, anthropology, communications, and the like—in texts that theoretically are located across disciplines. In recent years, in a host of new and traditional areas, there has been great interest in such discursive and theoretical frameworks. Yet we conceive of the Oklahoma Project as going beyond local inquiries, providing a larger forum for interdiscursive theoretical discussions and dialogue.

Our agenda in previous books and certainly in this one has been to present through the University of Oklahoma Press a series of critical volumes that set up a theoretical encounter among disciplines, an interchange not limited to literature but covering virtually the whole range of the human sciences. It is a critical series with an important reference in literary studies—thus mirroring the modern development of discourse theory—but including all approaches, other than quantitative studies, open to semiotic and post-semiotic analysis and to the wider concerns of cultural studies. Regardless of its particular domain, each book in the series will investigate characteristically post-Freudian, post-Saussurean, and post-Marxist questions about culture and the discourses that constitute different cultural phenomena. The Oklahoma Project is a sustained dialogue intended to make a significant contribution to the contemporary understanding of the human sciences in the contexts of cultural theory and cultural studies.

The title of the series reflects, of course, its home base, the University of Oklahoma. But it also signals in a significant way the particularity of the *local*

functions within historical and conceptual frameworks for understanding culture. *Oklahoma* is a haunting place-name in American culture. A Choctaw phrase meaning "red people," it goes back to the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek in Mississippi in 1830. For Franz Kafka, it conjured up the idea of America itself, both the indigenous Indian peoples of North America and the vertiginous space of the vast plains. It is also the place-name, the "American" starting point, with which Wallace Stevens begins his *Collected Poems*. Historically, too, it is a place in which American territorial and political expansion was reenacted in a single day in a retracing called the Oklahoma land run. Geographically, it is the heartland of the continent.

As such—in the interdisciplinary Oklahoma Project for Discourse & Theory—we are hoping to describe, above all, multifaceted *interest* within and across various studies of discourse and culture. Such interests are akin to what Kierkegaard calls the "in-between" aspect of experience, the "inter esse," and, perhaps more pertinently, what Nietzsche describes as the always *political* functioning of concepts, art works, and language—the functioning of power as well as knowledge in discourse and theory. Such politics, occasioning dialogue and bringing together powerfully struggling and often unarticulated positions, disciplines, and assumptions, is always local, always particular. In some ways, such interests function in broad feminist critiques of language, theory, and culture as well as microphilosophical and microhistorical critiques of the definitions of truth and art existing within ideologies of "disinterested" meaning. They function in the interested examination of particular disciplines and general disciplinary histories. They function (to allude to two of our early titles) in the very interests of theory and the particularity of the postmodern age in which many of us find ourselves. In such interested particulars, we believe, the human sciences are articulated. We hope that the books of the Oklahoma Project will provide sites of such interest and that in them, individually and collectively, the monologues of traditional scholarly discourse will become heteroglosses, just as such place-names as Oklahoma and such commonplace words and concepts as discourse and theory can become sites for the dialogue and play of culture.

Robert Con Davis  
Ronald Schleifer

*Norman, Oklahoma*

# PREFACE

This book, along with several others, was first conceived on a cold morning in Bethany, Connecticut, in the winter of 1975, as my old notebooks show. I had been writing an essay on Wallace Stevens's "The Rock" and had become obsessed with the proliferation of line images in narratives and critical readings of narrative, as well as by the relation of such images to various forms of repetition. I wanted to write an essay intertwining readings of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* and Walter Pater's "Apollo in Picardy." This was to be preceded by a relatively brief preface that would outline the various regions, nine in number, I thought, of narrative analysis in which line images function. Yielding shamelessly to the fallacy of imitative form, I imagined a prefatory essay that would be structured like a labyrinth made of successively smaller and smaller windings ending with that single straight-line labyrinth Jorge Luis Borges imagines.<sup>1</sup> When I got up to over one hundred pages with the second section of this project, after a brief antechamber on the line as letter, I realized my plan was in deep trouble. It has taken me all these intervening years to finish the project, which has undergone many mutations along the way. A sequence of books has emerged from the plan: *Ariadne's Thread* (1992), *Illustration* (1992), and *Topographies* (1994). *Fiction and Repetition* (1982) was closely associated with the project. This present book should have been first, or at least all of the part before the readings of *Cranford* and "Apollo in Picardy" in chapter 14. The latter was to have been last in my original plan. All those other books must be imagined as sandwiched between beginning and ending here. The finishing at long last of *Reading Narrative* completes the cycle and frees me from the promise I made to myself to work my insights out in detail on paper.



This book has a logical backbone of theoretical questions about the ends, beginnings, and middles of the narrative line. The Greeks called this line a "diegesis." *Reading Narrative* may be thought of as an extended commentary on what is problematic about Aristotle's formulations about beginnings, middles, and ends. What Aristotle says is cited and discussed in the first chapter, which raises all the issues of the book through an analysis of Aristotle's *Poetics* and Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*. This is followed by separate discussions of ends, beginnings, and middles, in that order. The sections on middles make up by far the longest section of the book. This, I claim, is appropriate, since middles, depending somewhat on how they are defined, take up most space (or time) in a narrative. Middles have also perhaps been less discussed as a separate problem in reading narrative than beginnings and endings. The chapters on middles take up various complications of narratives as they proceed from here to there, from start to finish. Such complications include shifts in narrators or speakers; anacoluthons, that is, abrupt shifts in syntax; indirect discourse; multiple plots; the use of tropes in narrative; and the master narrative trope that is not a trope, irony. These chapters are uneven in length. They just came out that way, according to the principle that one should say what one has to say and then stop. A more extended interleaved discussion of *Cranford* and "Apollo in Picardy" ends the book with a demonstration of how all these complications of the narrative line work together to generate meaning (or a suspension of meaning) in two salient examples.

*Reading Narrative* proceeds through analysis or invocation of a long series (or line) of citations and examples. Which takes precedence over the other, theory or example? It is impossible to answer that question. On the one hand, the theoretical formulations are important for me in their sequential development. On the other hand, the examples have received my full and fascinated attention. The strangeness of Aristotle's *Poetics* and the madness of Sophocles's language in *Oedipus the King*, the Sternean free arabesque that turns into a snake in Balzac, the portmanteau word "Ariachne" in *Troilus and Cressida*, Albertine's lying anacoluthons in Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, sundials facing north in Pater's "Apollo in Picardy," hats on top of hats in Gaskell's *Cranford*—

each of these has demanded an attention that exceeds their role as mere examples of some theoretical point, until I might say what Yeats says in "The Circus Animals' Desertion": "Players and painted stage took all my love / And not those things that they were emblems of."<sup>1</sup> Yielding joyfully to them in this exclusive way and following them as far as they lead allows them fittingly to play their role as examples and put in question the theoretical points I use them to exemplify.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As I have said in the preface, *Reading Narrative* has been many years in the making. Several segments have been previously published in preliminary form. All have been reworked to fit the general argument of the book and my current understanding. I am grateful for permission to reuse the following essays in this way: "Ariachne's Broken Woof," *The Georgia Review* 31 (Spring 1977): 44–60; "The Problematic of Ending in Narrative," *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 33 (June 1978): 3–7; "Narrative Middles: A Preliminary Outline," *Genre* 11 (Fall 1978): 375–87; "The Figure in the Carpet," *Poetics Today* 1 (Spring 1980): 107–18.

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# ONE

## ARISTOTLE'S OEDIPUS COMPLEX

The God at Delphi neither quite explains nor hides; he gives a sign.

—Heraclitus, fr. 93

Aristotle is a skeleton.

—Wallace Stevens, *Adagia*

King Oedipus has an eye too many perhaps.

—Friedrich Hölderlin

Multicultural approaches in the humanities have recently proliferated in the United States. One motive is a desire to win freedom from the dominance of the so-called hegemonic culture supposedly buttressed by the canonical works of Western civilization. One inadvertent effect of multiculturalism may be to establish a perspective by incongruity that may allow a glimpse of the strangeness and heterogeneity of the dominant culture. Careful study of that culture's works remains as necessary as ever. To tell the truth, most United States citizens are still dispossessed of it after years of schooling. Relatively few of us have it by birthright or by early training. We are born outsiders to the "Western tradition." We remain outsiders throughout early family and school training. At best we are most likely inside ideological misinterpretations of our culture's major canonical works. That culture and the often reductive accounts of it must be studied in order to be contested. Otherwise we risk replicating its presuppositions and even its injustices. Those who do not study history are condemned to repeat it, though studying is also a form of repetition.

For the purpose of cultural studies, investigating what people have made of canonical texts is as important as reading those texts themselves. It is the misreadings that have often been historically effective. Far more

people, for example, have been decisively influenced by Schiller's misreading of Kant in the *Letters on Aesthetic Education* than have read Kant himself, no easy task. In the case of such texts "reading" means studying them with care, word by word, taking nothing for granted beforehand.

Even the most familiar and canonical of texts in Graeco-Roman-Hebraic-Christian culture turn out to be exceedingly strange when they are read this way, that is, when they are looked at with a candid eye, or at any rate with an eye sharpened by the concurrent study of non-Western cultures or of minority discourses within the hegemonic culture. The canonical texts are as strange as any texts uncovered by anthropologists or by students of minority cultures. They are so odd, in fact, that one wonders whether they can ever really have been dominant at all, that is, whether they have ever actually been read. Has what they say ever been, or could it ever be, or ought it ever to be, institutionalized in social practice? Something else may have been put in their place all along. Some courses in "Western civilization," one is almost tempted to believe, are more a cover-up than a revelation of what "our" tradition really is. I begin this book by turning back to take another look, from the perspective of our current cultural situation, at two indubitably canonical texts of Western culture, Aristotle's *Poetics* and Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*.

All careful readers of the *Poetics* notice that Aristotle takes Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* as exemplary of tragedy in general. At key places Aristotle makes specific reference to it. Sophocles's play was clearly in his mind as a salient example of what his theory of tragedy would have to explain. That attempt to explain produced in the *Poetics* one of the great founding documents of the Western tradition. Almost all subsequent varieties of literary theory and criticism in the West down to the present day are in one way or another anticipated in the *Poetics*: formalism, structuralism, reader-response criticism, psychoanalytic criticism, mimetic criticism, social criticism, historical criticism, even rhetorical or so-called deconstructive criticism. Freud follows Aristotle in making Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* originary. For Freud, Sophocles's play presents the paradigm of the "Oedipus complex" that is, for him, universal in men. Claude Lévi-



Strauss's reading of the Oedipus story is exemplary for structuralist method and its results. Jacques Derrida's rereading of the *Poetics* in "La Mythologie blanche" is a crucial text of so-called deconstruction.'

The *Poetics* is exemplary in another way. If someone were to ask, "What do you mean by 'Western logocentrism?'" a good answer might be "Aristotle's *Poetics* is an example of what I mean by logocentrism. It is also a good example of what I mean when I say all logocentric texts contain their own undermining counterargument, their own deconstruction woven into them." Aristotle conspicuously assumed that everything can and should be explained rationally, returned to its presiding reason, or "logos." That may be what Stevens meant by calling Aristotle a skeleton. Aristotle also, notoriously, assumed that a good tragedy must itself be rational in the sense that everything in a good tragedy makes sense because everything is referred back to a single action and meaning. Nothing extraneous may be included. This rational unity is what one might call the "logos" of the play, taking that word in several of its chief meanings: as reason for being, as end, and as underlying ground. "Logos" in Greek also means mind, word, and order, arrangement, ratio, or proportion, as Aristotle's usage shows. "The tragic plot," says Aristotle in his imperturbably rational way, "must not be composed of irrational parts [meron alōgon]. Everything irrational should, if possible, be excluded; or, at all events, it should lie outside the action of the play."<sup>2</sup> Aristotle's example of the latter is, "in the *Oedipus*, the hero's ignorance as to the manner of Laius's death" (97; 24:1460a). Aristotle is right, as usual, or rather he is wrong but in an interesting way. It is absurd to suppose that Oedipus's wife, Jocasta, or someone else around the royal palace would not have told him about how Jocasta's first husband died. That might long since have started Oedipus putting two and two together. Yet the whole play depends on Oedipus's ignorance. Aristotle tells us what to do in such a situation, in a formulation that anticipates Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief." We must invest the irrational with a virtual rationality. We must take the irrational as rational, as one of the founding presuppositions of the play: "once the irrational has been introduced and an air of likelihood imparted to it, we must accept it in spite of the absurdity" (ibid.). Aristotle is wrong,