

theology as the key discourse and central imagination in that historical explanation becomes nearly a necessary factor of any thought about human society: the question of what we are typically must pass through the question of where we are, which in turn is interpreted to mean, how did we get to be there? Not only history but historiography, the philosophy of history, philology, mythography, diachronic linguistics, anthropology, archaeology, and evolutionary biology all establish their claim as fields of inquiry, and all respond to the need for an explanatory narrative that seeks its authority in a return to origins and the tracing of a coherent story forward from origin to present.

The enormous narrative production of the nineteenth century may suggest an anxiety at the loss of providential plots: the plotting of the individual or social or institutional life story takes on new urgency when one no longer can look to a sacred masterplot that organizes and explains the world. The emergence of narrative plot as a dominant mode of ordering and explanation may belong to the large process of secularization, dating from the Renaissance and gathering force during the Enlightenment, which marks a falling-away from those revealed plots—the Chosen People, Redemption, the Second Coming—that appeared to subsume transitory human time to the timeless. In the last two books of *Paradise Lost*, Milton's angel Michael is able to present a full panorama of human history to Adam, concluding in redemption and a timeless future of bliss; and Adam responds:

How soon hath thy prediction, Seer Blest,
 Measur'd this transient World, the Race of time,
 Till time stand fixt: beyond is all abyss,
 Eternity, whose end no eye can reach. (Book 12, lines 553–56)

By the end of the Enlightenment, there is no longer any consensus on this prediction, and no cultural cohesion around a point of fixity which allows thought and vision so to transfix time. And this may explain the nineteenth century's obsession with questions of origin, evolution, progress, genealogy, its foregrounding of the historical

Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*
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narrative as par excellence the necessary mode of explanation and understanding.³

We still live today in the age of narrative plots, consuming avidly Harlequin romances and television serials and daily comic strips, creating and demanding narrative in the presentation of persons and news events and sports contests. For all the widely publicized nonnarrative or antinarrative forms of thought that are supposed to characterize our times, from complementarity and uncertainty in physics to the synchronic analyses of structuralism, we remain more determined by narrative than we might wish to believe. And yet, we know that with the advent of Modernism came an era of suspicion toward plot, engendered perhaps by an overelaboration of and overdependence on plots in the nineteenth century. If we cannot do without plots, we nonetheless feel uneasy about them, and feel obliged to show up their arbitrariness, to parody their mechanisms while admitting our dependence on them. Until such a time as we cease to exchange understandings in the form of stories, we will need to remain dependent on the logic we use to shape and to understand stories, which is to say, dependent on plot. A reflection on plot as the syntax of a certain way of speaking our understanding of the world may tell us something about how and why we have come to stake so many of the central concerns of our society, and of our lives, on narrative.

II -

These sweeping generalizations will bear more careful consideration later on. It is important at this point to consider more closely just how we intend to speak of plot, how we intend to work with it, to make it an operative analytic and critical tool in the study of narrative. I want to urge a conception of plot as something in the nature of the logic of narrative discourse, the organizing dynamic of a specific mode of human understanding. This pursuit will in a moment take us into the discussion of narrative by a number of critics (of the type recently baptized narratologists), but perhaps the best way to begin is through a brief exercise in an old and

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thoroughly discredited form, the plot summary, in this case of a very old story. Here, then, is the summary of a story from the Grimm brothers, known in their version as "All-Kinds-of-Fur":⁴

A dying queen makes her husband promise that he will remarry only with a woman as beautiful as she, with the same golden hair. He promises, and she dies. Time passes, and he is urged by his councilors to remarry. He looks for the dead queen's equal, but finds no one; until, years later, his eyes light on his daughter, who looks just like her mother, with the same golden hair. He will marry her, though his councilors say he must not. Pressed to answer, the daughter makes her consent contingent on the performance of three apparently impossible tasks: he must give her three dresses, one as golden as the sun, one as silvery as the moon, the third as glittering as all the stars, plus a cloak made of a thousand different furs. The king, in fact, succeeds in providing these and insists on the marriage. The daughter then flees, blackens her face and hands, covers herself with the cloak of furs, and hides in the woods, where she is captured as a strange animal by the king of another country. She goes to work as a scullery maid in his kitchens, but on three successive occasions she appears at the king's parties clothed in one of her three splendid dresses and dances with him; and three times she cooks the king's pudding and leaves in the bottom of the dish one of the tokens she has brought from home (a golden ring, a golden spinning wheel, a golden reel). On the third repetition, the king slips the ring on her finger while they are dancing, and when she returns to the kitchen, in her haste she does not blacken one hand entirely. The king searches her out, notices the white finger and its ring, seizes her hand, strips off the fur cloak to reveal the dress underneath, and the golden hair, and claims her in marriage.

What have we witnessed and understood here? How have we moved from one desire that we, like the king's councilors, know to be prohibited, to a legitimate desire whose consummation marks the end of the tale? And what is the meaning of the process lying between beginning and end—a treble testing, with the supplemental requirement of the cloak; flight and disguise (using the cloak to become subhuman, almost a beast); then a sort of striptease

revelation, also treble, using the three dresses provided by the father and the three golden objects brought from home (tokens, perhaps, of the mother), followed by recognition? How have we crossed from one kingdom to another through those woods which, we must infer, border on both of them? We cannot really answer such questions, yet we would probably all agree that the middle of the tale offers a kind of minimum satisfactory process that works through the problem of desire gone wrong and brings it to its cure. It is a process in which the overly eroticized object—the daughter become object of desire to the father—loses all erotic and feminine attributes, becomes unavailable to desire, then slowly, through repetition by three (which is perhaps the minimum repetition to suggest series and process), reveals her nature as erotic object again but now in a situation where the erotic is permitted and fitting. The tale is characterized by that laconic chasteness which Walter Benjamin found characteristic of the great oral stories, a refusal of psychological explanation and motivation.⁵ It matter-of-factly takes on the central issues of culture—incest, the need for exogamy—without commentary. Like a number of the Grimms' tales, it seems to ask the question, Why do girls grow up, leave their homes and their fathers, and marry other men? It answers the question without explanation, through description of what needs to happen, the process set in motion, when normal forms are threatened, go awry: as in "Hawthorn Blossom" (the Grimms' version of "Sleeping Beauty"), we are given a kind of counter-example, the working-out of an antidote. The tale appears as the species of explanation that we give when explanation, in the logical and discursive sense, seems impossible or impertinent. It thus transmits a kind of wisdom that itself concerns transmission: how we pass on what we know about how life goes forward.

Folktale and myth may be seen to show narrative as a form of thinking, a way of reasoning about a situation. As Claude Lévi-Strauss has argued, the Oedipus myth may be "about" the unsolvable problem of man's origins—born from the earth or from parents?—a "chicken or egg" problem that finds its mythic "solution" in a story about generational confusion: Oedipus violates the de-

marcations of generations, becomes the "impossible" combination of son/husband, father/brother, and so on, subverting (and thus perhaps reinforcing) both cultural distinctions and categories of thought. It is the ordering of the inexplicable and impossible situation as narrative that somehow mediates and forcefully connects its discrete elements, so that we accept the necessity of what cannot logically be discoursed of. Yet I don't think we do justice to our experience of "All-Kinds-of-Fur" or the Oedipus myth in reducing their narratives—as Lévi-Strauss suggests all mythic narratives can be reduced—to their "atemporal matrix structure," a set of basic cultural antinomies that the narrative mediates.⁶ Nor can we, to be sure, analyze these narratives simply as a pure succession of events or happenings. We need to recognize, for instance, that there is a dynamic logic at work in the transformations wrought between the start and the finish of "All-Kinds-of-Fur," a logic which makes sense of succession and time, and which insists that mediation of the problem posed at the outset takes time: that the meaning dealt with by narrative, and thus perhaps narrative's raison d'être, is of and in time. Plot as it interests me is not a matter of typology or of fixed structures, but rather a structuring operation peculiar to those messages that are developed through temporal succession, the instrumental logic of a specific mode of human understanding. Plot, let us say in preliminary definition, is the logic and dynamic of narrative, and narrative itself a form of understanding and explanation.

Such a conception of plot seems to be at least compatible with Aristotle's understanding of *mythos*, the term from the *Poetics* that is normally translated as "plot." It is Aristotle's claim that plot (*mythos*) and action (*praxis*) are logically prior to the other parts of dramatic fictions, including character (*ethos*). *Mythos* is defined as "the combination of the incidents, or things done in the story," and Aristotle argues that of all the parts of the story, this is the most important. It is worth quoting his claim once more:

Tragedy is essentially an imitation not of persons but of action and life, of happiness and misery. All human happiness or

misery takes the form of action; the end for which we live is a certain kind of activity, not a quality. Character gives us qualities, but it is in our actions—what we do—that we are happy or the reverse. In a play accordingly they do not act in order to portray the Characters; they include the Characters for the sake of the action. So that it is the action in it, i.e. its Fable or Plot, that is the end and purpose of the tragedy; and the end is everywhere the chief thing.⁷

Later in the same paragraph he reiterates, using an analogy that may prove helpful to thinking about plot: "We maintain, therefore, that the first essential, the life and soul, so to speak, of Tragedy is Plot; and that the Characters come second—compare the parallel in painting, where the most beautiful colours laid on without order will not give one the same pleasure as a simple black-and-white sketch of a portrait." Plot, then, is conceived to be the outline or armature of the story, that which supports and organizes the rest. From such a view, Aristotle proceeds to derive three consequences. First, the action imitated by the tragedy must be complete in itself. This in turn means that it must have a beginning, a middle, and an end—a point wholly obvious but one that will prove to have interesting effects in its applications. Finally, just as in the visual arts a whole must be of a size that can be taken in by the eye, so a plot must be "of a length to be taken in by the memory." This is important, since memory—as much in reading a novel as in seeing a play—is the key faculty in the capacity to perceive relations of beginnings, middles, and ends through time, the shaping power of narrative.

But our English term "plot" has its own semantic range, one that is interestingly broad and possibly instructive. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives seven definitions, essentially, which the *American Heritage Dictionary* helpfully reduces to four categories:

1. (a) A small piece of ground, generally used for a specific purpose. (b) A measured area of land; lot.
2. A ground plan, as for a building; chart; diagram.

3. The series of events consisting of an outline of the action of a narrative or drama.
4. A secret plan to accomplish a hostile or illegal purpose; scheme.

There may be a subterranean logic connecting these heterogeneous meanings. Common to the original sense of the word is the idea of boundedness, demarcation, the drawing of lines to mark off and order. This easily extends to the chart or diagram of the demarcated area, which in turn modulates to the outline of the literary work. From the organized space, plot becomes the organizing line, demarcating and diagramming that which was previously undifferentiated. We might think here of the geometrical expression, plotting points, or curves, on a graph by means of coordinates, as a way of locating something, perhaps oneself. The fourth sense of the word, the scheme or conspiracy, seems to have come into English through the contaminating influence of the French *complot*, and became widely known at the time of the Gunpowder Plot. I would suggest that in modern literature this sense of plot nearly always attaches itself to the others: the organizing line of plot is more often than not some scheme or machination, a concerted plan for the accomplishment of some purpose which goes against the ostensible and dominant legalities of the fictional world, the realization of a blocked and resisted desire. Plots are not simply organizing structures, they are also intentional structures, goal-oriented and forward-moving.

Plot as we need and want the term is hence an embracing concept for the design and intention of narrative, a structure for those meanings that are developed through temporal succession, or perhaps better: a structuring operation elicited by, and made necessary by, those meanings that develop through succession and time. A further analysis of the question is suggested here by a distinction urged by the Russian Formalists, that between *fabula* and *sjuzet*. *Fabula* is defined as the order of events referred to by the narrative, whereas *sjuzet* is the order of events presented in the narrative discourse. The distinction is one that takes on evident analytic force

when one is talking about a Conrad or a Faulkner, whose dislocations of normal chronology are radical and significant, but it is no less important in thinking about apparently more straightforward narratives, since any narrative presents a selection and an ordering of material. We must, however, recognize that the apparent priority of *fabula* to *sjuzet* is in the nature of a mimetic illusion, in that the *fabula*—"what really happened"—is in fact a mental construction that the reader derives from the *sjuzet*, which is all that he ever directly knows. This differing status of the two terms by no means invalidates the distinction itself, which is central to our thinking about narrative and necessary to its analysis since it allows us to juxtapose two modes of order and in the juxtaposing to see how ordering takes place. In the wake of the Russian Formalists, French structural analysts of narrative proposed their own pairs of terms, predominantly *histoire* (corresponding to *fabula*) and *récit*, or else *discours* (corresponding to *sjuzet*). English usage has been more unsettled. "Story" and "plot" would seem to be generally acceptable renderings in most circumstances, though a structural and semiotic analysis will find advantages in the less semantically charged formulation "story" and "discourse."⁸

> "Plot" in fact seems to me to cut across the *fabula/sjuzet* distinction in that to speak of plot is to consider both story elements and their ordering. Plot could be thought of as the interpretive activity elicited by the distinction between *sjuzet* and *fabula*, the way we use the one against the other. To keep our terms straight without sacrificing the advantages of the semantic range of "plot," let us say that we can generally understand plot to be an aspect of *sjuzet* in that it belongs to the narrative discourse, as its active shaping force, but that it makes sense (as indeed *sjuzet* itself principally makes sense) as it is used to reflect on *fabula*, as our understanding of story. Plot is thus the dynamic shaping force of the narrative discourse. I find confirmation for such a view in Paul Ricoeur's definition of plot as "the intelligible whole that governs a succession of events in any story." Ricoeur continues, using the terms "events" and "story" rather than *fabula* and *sjuzet*: "This provisory definition immediately shows the plot's connecting function between an event or