TELLING STORIES

Postmodernism and the Invalidation of Traditional Narrative

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for
Barbara

PART ONE

Traditional Stories

CHAPTER

1

The Preclusive Form of Narrative

ALL STORIES ARE PRECLUDED

Every story is over before it begins. The novel lies bound in my hands, the actors know all their lines before the curtain rises, and the finished film has been threaded onto the projector when the houselights dim.

Stories appear to move into an open, uncertain future that the figures try to influence, but in fact report a completed past they cannot alter. Their journey into the future—to which we gladly lend ourselves—is an illusion.

We think we see differences between myth, in which fate and the gods determine the outcome, and the stories of today, in which people appear to be shaping their own lives. But all stories are over before they begin.

Story derives from the Latin *historia*, which is related to the Greek *histór*, "one who knows."[1] The Assyrians knew that Gilgamesh would fail in his quest for immortality, and the Greeks that Daphnis would be united with Chloe. Shakespeare's audiences knew that Shylock would not get his pound of flesh, just as we know that Bonnie and Clyde are doomed. *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* cannot end happily and the title of Bresson's *A Condemned Man Has Escaped* assures us he will not be executed, though we watch anxiously as he makes his getaway.

It is clear to us from the start how tragedies, fairy tales, and Westerns will end. We watch the figures from fate's elbow, knowing full well the one thing they cannot know: their future. Yet, despite our knowledge, we lend ourselves to their adventures, worry about Snow White, and hope against hope that Romeo and Juliet will escape their fate. Perhaps we are caught

up in their stories because we sense that with respect to our own future, we are as blind as they. Our vantage point would seem to be ironically detached but since we find ourselves deeply engaged, perhaps we suspect that our own apparently open future is as foreclosed as theirs, though we cannot acknowledge it in daily life.

All stories, including history and biography, are past and therefore precluded. When we watch a documentary film years after it was shot, we know the outcome that the figures on screen are trying to bring about or prevent. They have all aged or died, and what was present or future to them has become past.

We make distinctions between fiction and drama, but in their essential form all stories are alike. We might call tragedy an exacerbated story, for it makes us most vividly aware of the discrepancy between the intentions of the figures and what we know to be the outcome. *Oedipus Rex* is emblematic of all stories.[2] We know absolutely what will become of him, for it has already happened. His fate was announced before he was born and accomplished before the play begins. All *he* can do is find out about it. Like his parents, he thinks he has options, but we in the audience are without illusions. The preclusive structure of his story is softened by no palliatives.

THE FICTIVE FIGURE HAS NO FREEDOM

The figures in story are no freer than those in a painting. Their destiny is set out on a scroll that the storyteller unrolls before us in time, but it exists like a painting in space. All narrative is synchronic, though those who figure in it and we who are watching experience it diachronically.

No one would claim that the figures in paintings are endowed with free will. Yet, when a story unfolds, we are easily caught up in the illusion that what the figures do or fail to do will determine the outcome. We go so far as to praise or blame them, as if their actions were freely elected; we forget that what they intend is already done and what they are trying to change has already happened.

Stories in a Positivist culture—our movies, for instance—suggest that the hero's will is effective by letting him achieve what he sets out do do. But story's preclusive structure invalidates such a claim, and Positivist stories undermine themselves in the telling. Sherlock Holmes is no freer than Oedipus, and Rambo no more effective than Woyzeck.*

*When Positivism is capitalized in the text, reference is to the school of thought associated with Comte. In a later chapter, I endeavor to show that in a more general sense positivism is as old as consciousness and critical to our survival; it constitutes a necessary attempt to combat our sense of helplessness and to potentiate us vis-à-vis the gods, necessity or nature.

In traditional story, the manifest narrative is often in harmony with the preclusive plot: the events themselves suggest that our will is of no avail. What happens in comedy as in tragedy, in Brecht as in Sophocles, is seldom what the hero intends. He has an effect on the action but the results are not often those he has worked for, and when the outcome *does* reflect his intentions, it is not simply as a consequence of his own efforts. The hero of myth succeeds in his undertaking with the help of nonhuman forces: Perseus slays the Medusa because Athena has come to his aid; his own strength and courage are not adequate to the task. Fairy tales often center on a passive figure who survives and wins because the supernatural is on his or her side, while the villain—with his active, plotting will—is thwarted. In Shakespeare, the only figure to command the outcome of a play is Prospero, a magician who is no longer altogether human.

THE CENTRAL FIGURE IS OBLIGED TO ACT

We may think the hero *chooses* to be active, but when we look at traditional story we find that his actions are almost invariably imposed. He does not assume his task or mission voluntarily. *Task* is derived from the Latin *taxo*, "to tax," and *mission* means "a sending." The labors of Hercules, Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece, Parsifal's for the Grail, and the search undertaken by Oedipus are all obligations that *must* be assumed. Hansel and Gretel do not go into the forest of their own accord; they are abandoned by their parents. Hamlet may wish for the cup to pass from his lips, but he is heir to the throne and forced to act by an oath exacted by his father's ghost. Lear appears to give away his kingdom voluntarily, but the irrationality of his act suggests a compelling unconscious need. Raskolnicov attempts to prove his freedom by killing an old woman, yet proves the opposite, and though Captain Ahab seems to have an option when the *Rachel* asks for his help, he chooses the inevitable.

The central figure in traditional story is often double bound. Agamemnon must sacrifice his daughter or prevent the Greek fleet from sailing; Orestes and Electra must kill their mother or leave their father unavenged. The structure of Racine's *Andromaque* is a web of no-win situations, and *Godfather Death*—one of the few Grimm fairy tales that centers on an active figure—forces the main character to choose between losing his wife or dying himself. The situation of the double-bound figure is untenable. Either course of action has grave consequences, yet he must choose one: to do nothing is not permitted him. It has been said that the tragic figure is

incapable of compromise, but he might be delighted to compromise if it were an option.

Hegel points out that the classical tragic figure is never divided against himself—that Oedipus, Orestes, and Antigone are wholly committed to their course of action, whereas the modern tragic hero is often vacillating and self-divided.[3] But perhaps what he observed is a shift from an external double bind to one experienced *internally*. In the *Oresteia* and *Antigone*, the double bind is manifest in the *situation* of the figures, whereas Hamlet—who could attribute his dilemma to the suspected complicity of his mother—finds its source in his own make-up instead. A situational double-bind has been internalized as self-division.[4]

We think of heroes as eager to act but only a few, like Don Quixote and Emma Bovary, *seek* great deeds or adventure. Most of them do not go looking for trouble but do what they must to return life to an equilibrium. Odysseus, like Hansel and Gretel, is simply trying to get home. In comedy as in tragedy, action is *thrust* upon the figures. A crisis is upon them and they cannot afford to let time and process resolve their situation. Even Emma Bovary is doomed to act. She is not just a bored housewife led astray by romantic notions, who should be at home with husband and child. Though she is foolish, vain, and egotistical, she is also helplessly enthralled. The story places her in an implicit double bind: to do nothing would suffocate an essential part of herself, however shallow and vulgar its manifestations, while obeying it leads to disaster.

In religious stories, the heroes or heroines are obliged to act, but act in a different spirit. They are not blind to the forces that impel them, but know and trust them. They do not suffer the illusion of being free or self-started and are not in conflict with themselves or their situation; they accept their fate modestly instead of trying to change it 'arrogantly.'[5] Their story is seldom dramatic, for they are consciously and gladly God's servants. They start out with the very attitude that comes to most heroes and heroines at the close of their adventure, if at all.

Religious heroes are not often engaged in an active pursuit, like slaying dragons. It is their task, instead, to prove their absolute trust in God. Abraham is prepared to sacrifice his only son without questioning Yahweh's command: he is neither in conflict nor double-bound. Since the outcome of his story was familiar to those who heard it, an implicit no-win situation is resolved even as it is set up. His acceptance of God's will and his unquestioning obedience permit him to act with confidence—to walk hand in hand with his fate, instead of struggling against it. For Abraham, Yahweh's authority is absolute; there is no quandary. But Agamemnon is caught between two human imperatives: family and community, his obligations as

father and as leader. Though the gods, like Yahweh, demand the sacrifice of his child, they are remote and of no help in resolving his dilemma. Double-bound, he is forced to act against his own family, and must suffer both a father's anguish and the killer's fate.

EVERY ACTION IS A REACTION

Traditional story sees action as far from desirable. We who are watching may find it satisfying and even pleasurable, but to those who are trapped in it, comically or tragically, it is painful and frightening. Only fools and villains are eager to act, for they are more deluded than everyone else. In story, all action is unmistakably a *re*action: it originates not in the doer but in something within or beyond him over which he has no control. Even the evil that seems to erupt out of motiveless malignancy is the response to a wound. There *is* no *acte gratuit*. The actor is always an agent, and what he is and does has its origin in events that lie beyond the scope of his own story.

In daily life, our actions seem to constitute freedom and a potential mastery over events. But story tells us otherwise, for the figures are trapped into an *enchaînement* of causes and consequences. While our own small acts appear to be freely chosen and often produce the desired results, the actions in story have compelling causes and lead to immediate, equally compelled reactions. The figures are neither free to choose what they do nor can they predict or control the results. The crime at the heart of many stories is emblematic of all action. It cannot be undone: it commits him who commits it, and makes graphically clear the web of connections that constrain all of the figures.

Revenge, which is as central to television drama as it is to myth, illuminates vividly the reactive nature of action. In myth, the Trojan war begins as an act of vengeance. The *Oresteia, Medea, Phèdre,* much of the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, *Moby Dick*, and a whole range of popular fictions from *The Count of Monte Christo* to *film noir* are fueled by revenge. So are many comedies. Even *The Tempest* is a revenge play, albeit one in which revenge is averted.

The wrong that sets off a story is often a vengeful deed by one who has himself been gravely wounded. We call him a villain because his wound was struck in the past and his hurt has turned into malice, whereas the injuries he inflicts on others are done before our eyes and so arouse our consternation. But he, too, is reacting and in turn detonates an interlocking

series of reactions that come to a halt only when the evil has been extirpated and equilibrium is briefly restored.

The villain deludes himself into thinking he is in charge, just as the hero believes he has a measure of freedom. But neither is free and our own interest is focused on the figure under the greatest, most immediate constraint. In *Macbeth* and *Crime and Punishment* it happens to be a murderer. As Hitchcock points out, if a movie begins with a thief ransacking a house and we see the owner drive up, we find ourselves rooting for the thief. Perhaps we identify with the person under greatest pressure because we, too, often feel up against it and vulnerable, though we cannot afford to admit it.

THE CENTRAL FIGURE MUST ACT ALONE

Communal action is rarely story's domain. The wrong in most narratives cannot be righted by the community. Instead, the task falls to an individual—Hamlet or a rogue cop—who, for a variety of reasons, cannot go to the authorities and must act alone. Story centers on the very action society restricts: that of the loner. But whereas the villain acts entirely in his own interest, the hero acts on behalf of the group even when he appears to oppose it, and even when the meaning of his actions is not apparent to him. The community, in turn, does not always appreciate what he is doing. The Chorus turns away from Oedipus at the end of the play without a word of gratitude, and the lynch mob howls at the sheriff who saves the prisoner from its fury. In comedy and Positivist story—which includes most popular fiction today—the hero survives, whereas in tragedy he dies, but in most stories he is obliged to take upon himself a task the community cannot carry out.

TO ACT IS TO SUBMIT

Traditional story suggests that though our actions are ineffective, they are necessary and inevitable. The figures *must* attempt to change what cannot be changed—and in acting, they *submit*, though they are seldom aware of it. Pascal says all our troubles spring from the fact that we cannot sit in a room and do nothing.[6] Locke speaks of our "restlessness"[7] and Hegel of our *Unruhe*—our disquiet.[8] Perhaps we are not free to do nothing—to be

accepting and at peace—because consciousness, which is neither willed nor freely chosen but mandated by our very existence, obliges us to act. Unlike other creatures, we are aware of our situation and cannot help trying to do something about it.

CHAPTER

2

Stories Connect Us

STORY CONNECTS AND FRAMES US

The central figure sees himself as acting alone but is, in fact, everywhere connected. Like all structures, story integrates and relates. The narrative relates all of its parts to each other and is, in turn, "related" by a narrator to the audience. "Narration" derives from the Latin *narrare*, "to relate," which is in turn rooted in the Greek *gno*, "to know." To know *is* to connect.[1]

In narrative, no one is an island, however isolated or free he may believe himself to be. Some stories, like *Bleak House*, establish a web of explicit relationships: all of the figures and incidents are interconnected. But even when the relationships are not explicit, whatever is included is thereby connected. In a narrative of the absurd, deliberate disconnections *are* the connection, just as an *absence* of feeling can constitute the emotional tenor of a work. However disjointed and fragmented the elements, their very inclusion links them.

Text comes from the Latin *textus*, "that which has been woven or intertwined." The *context* of a story is always present to the audience, though we may on occasion become so deeply involved that we forget what we know. Positivist stories delude us into seeing the central figures free of their context, while in traditional story we tend to remain aware of the social, economic, or historical situation and almost never forget the absolute context constituted by story's preclusive form.

A visual narrative like film keeps the *physical* circumstances before us, whereas a novel can leave us freer to disregard them. Figures on the screen move through streets and crowds that establish scale and the relationship between human beings and their physical surroundings. In film, as in paint-

ing, the image is surrounded by an edge or frame that clearly limits it. We could think of the frame as an analogue of context and of context as a kind of frame. Our context imposes limits; it 'frames' us by setting us up for the roles we are expected to play.

IN LIFE, WE THINK WE ARE FREE OF CONTEXT

As we move through daily life, we are not generally aware of the frame that limits us. We tend to see ourselves as free individuals, albeit with a role to play in our community. Ideally, we perceive ourselves as at once independent *and* connected. Perhaps our sense of freedom derives in part from the fact that we do not actually *see* ourselves. We can hear our voices and feel our bodies, but whereas others see us, we catch only an occasional glimpse of ourselves. As we look out into the world, we are our own blind spot. We certainly have no sense of being inextricably framed by our context. We experience ourselves as separate or apart, and are more likely to attribute what happens to us to our own failings and accomplishments than to circumstance.

To see is often to know. So we say "I see" when we mean we understand.[2] In the theater—from the Greek *theaomai*, "to see"—we see or know that the figures are clearly bound, while they think of themselves as free and with a measure of influence over the outcome. *We* see and *they* don't—a discrepancy as evident in documentary film as in tragedy. In *Happy Mother's Day*, the mayor of a small town is no less convinced than King Oedipus that what he does is up to him, and of the greatest consequence in the scheme of things.[3]

STORY IS BUILT ON SITUATION

Traditional narrative renders the context that frames the figures by establishing their situation. No story begins at the beginning. There is always a given, something the figures did *not* make. "Situation" derives from *situ*, "a site." The site, place, or scene—from *skena*, "a covered place"—exists before the figures appear in it. We were the land's before the land was ours.

At the beginning, King Lear seems to be making his own situation, but his story has a long prehistory. What he does, moreover, is in large part done unconsciously and therefore not freely chosen. A *free* person is of no interest to story: he or she would float in a vacuum and fail to reflect the

reality of our own situation—a reality we sense even if we cannot afford to acknowledge it. As Henry James says:

> (Characters) are interesting . . . as subjects of fate, the figures around whom a situation closes, in proportion, as sharing their existence, we feel where fate comes in and just how it gets at them. In the void they are not interesting.[4]

Indeed, if they *were* in a void, or free, there would *be* no story.

It is often said that men like Napoleon are made by their situation. But the same is true of Hamlet. He too is crystallized by his circumstances and exists as a response to them. At Wittenberg, he might well be indistinguishable from other students and of little interest to us. It is in his encounter with the situation at Elsinore that we come to know him and recognize ourselves in him—just as the ordinary fellow in the *The Thirty-Nine Steps* becomes interesting once his life is in danger. The situation, whether it be existential or entertaining, *creates* the figures for us. We understand and identify with them because we can see ourselves in their *place*. Chaplin said that a comic situation must always be familiar to the audience, no doubt because it is their situation and not their character or feelings that gives us access to the figures.[5] It forces them to act—to commit and so to show themselves.

Fairy tales often establish their situation in the very first sentence: "Once there lived a king and queen who said every day: 'If only we had a child!' " "Once upon a time there were three brothers who became ever poorer till they had nothing left to eat." The situation in *Rumpelstiltskin* is as clear as it is in myth: the princess will lose her only child if she cannot discover Rumpelstiltskin's name—just as Admetos must die unless he can find someone to die in his stead. In the novel, situations emerge more slowly and may not attain the stark clarity of earlier narrative forms, but they are as central to Kafka, Hemingway, and Proust as in *Oedipus Rex*.

We can call situation an attenuated crisis and crisis an exacerbated situation. In myth, fairy tale, and both comic and tragic drama the figures are transfixed by a crisis. Even documentaries seek out those who are pushed to extremes: the man on death row or the mother of quintuplets. At the beginning of *Chronicle of a Summer*, Jean Rouch confronts people on a Paris street with the question: "Are you happy?" His camera provokes a minicrisis that makes them vulnerable and reveals them.

The situation may originate *within* the figures rather than outside them. Lear's crisis is triggered by an inner imperative: he rashly divests himself of power, promises the largest share of his kingdom to the daughter who loves him most, and disinherits and exiles Cordelia, who is devoted to him. We

can, of course, see his inner situation as a product of events in the world: he was for years an autocratic ruler and his long-neglected feelings assert themselves with a vengeance. Often, there is no clear dividing line between inner and outer realm. Events constitute us and we, in turn, constitute them. The two realms are a fluid continuum—which we must attempt to separate in order to achieve a measure, or necessary illusion, of freedom and control.

THE STORY IS ALWAYS PAST

Every situation is a product of the past. Though in Greek mythology memory, Mnemosyne, is the mother of *all* the muses, story is more clearly linked to the past than the other arts. By the time it is told every story is over, as if to suggest that, given our limitations, we cannot know an event of any complexity until we look back at it. *All* knowing is predicated on observation and experience, and therefore linked to the past.

A story not only *is* past but *has* one. Every narrative has a prehistory, and many start in *medias res*. Nothing can come from nothing. Even creation myths begin with a deity who makes the world. An *event*—from the Latin *e*, "out," and *venire*, "to come"—is an *outcome*, which implies that something preceded it.

If we are persuaded that the past is irrelevant to the present, we cannot tell stories, for they accrue their own past. Every action and incident *becomes* past for all that follows. Story's form makes it difficult if not impossible to sever the link between events, and every attempt to elicit a narrative out of nonrelationships quickly exhausts itself. The preclusive plot suggests that the past is always present and may, indeed, be our destiny.

In *Oedipus Rex*, the present is simply the arena in which the past asserts its primacy. The future of Oedipus lies behind him. Revenge stories are fueled by the past, and so are all ghost and many horror stories. The haunted house is the scene of past crimes, and the subhuman monster that roams our horror movies is a creature of primeval urges. As Freud suggests, the terrifying is often something we think we have overcome that suddenly reasserts itself—something we have buried in the unconscious that re-emerges into consciousness.[6] We used to speak of "rehearsing" stories—a word related to "hearse" and derived from the French *herser*, to "harrow." To rehearse a story is to uncover something that has been covered.

MOST STORIES ARE FAMILY-CENTERED

In childhood, the family is the arena in which we encounter both situation and past. It is our first 'given,' the structure into which we are born an

which at once holds and constrains us. Most stories, from myth to situation comedy, are family centered. *Oedipus Rex* begins with an issue of the greatest public concern but turns into a family tragedy; the survival of Thebes becomes so irrelevant that the play ends without a single mention of the plague, of which Oedipus has presumably freed the city. Since the family is the building block of most communities, what happens within it is, of course, of immediate public concern.

We do not choose our families any more than we do our bodies or innate capacities. We are enthralled to them during our most helpless and unconscious years; they constitute a first and often indelible encounter with necessity. Family experiences and relationships imprint or inform our lives. Just as Oedipus escapes the family of his origin only to reconstitute it in Thebes, so we too tend to reconstellate our original family in every deep and lasting relationship. It is easy to understand why, in other times, family was perceived as fate, for we neither choose nor altogether escape it.

Our relationship to family is necessarily complex and contradictory. We are at once determined by it and determined to free ourselves of it. It shelters and bonds us but must also cast us out. It has the power to nurture *and* undermine, to wound *and* heal, to sustain *and* strangle. Not infrequently, it does both. Those who are closest to us are the most dangerous; those who love us can also destroy us. As the critical interface between the community and the individual, the family gives rise to paradox after paradox, and holds us helplessly double bound. It socializes us and yet, throughout life, is our access route to the powerful and often disruptive energies of the unconscious. In story as in life, it serves as an intimate yet public stage, on which the critical issues of our existence are rehearsed and enacted.

IN STORY, CHARACTER IS GIVEN

"Character," says Heraclitus, "is fate for a man."[7] A Positivist reading might suggest that fate is *subject* to character—that we can influence what happens to us by changing who we are.[8] This coincides with the needs of society, for no community can sustain itself without the belief that we are in some measure responsible for what we are and do. Yet *character* originally meant "a distinctive mark made by cutting," and implies that the cutting was done by forces not under our command. Character might thus be defined, in keeping with depth psychology, as a response system generated either without or within us, over which we have little control. Perhaps it constitutes fate because, like family, it is a crystallization of the past and therefore subject to our will.

Character plays almost no part in myth or fairy tale, and though comedy and melodrama *do* have characters, they are locked into their roles from the start and hardly ever change. The villain is always and unambiguously evil, the heroine virtuous and incapable of deceit. Louie in *Taxi* is always nasty Louie, and if he surprises us with an act of apparent generosity, it turns out, most of the time, to be motivated by malice or greed.

Aristotle assigns character no primary role in tragedy.[9] Though there have been persistent attempts to salvage a measure of freedom for Oedipus Rex—and ourselves—by making his character in some way responsible for his fate, his situation was clearly determined before he was born and cannot be altered by what he is or does. Even if he took no pride in his responsibilities and past accomplishments, he would hardly be free to disregard the oracle of Apollo, turn away his subjects, and live on in blissful ignorance. His persistence in the face of repeated warnings is not simply the product of *hubris*: he has no viable alternative. The commonly held view that he is in some measure responsible for his own fate endows him with a freedom that both his situation and story's preclusive form deny him.

For Barthes, "there are no characters in the Racinian theater . . . only situations."[10] Schopenhauer says that tragedy never exhibits real "character development," only "character revelation"—the revelation of something "previously latent as disposition."[11] This is as true of documentary film. The figures do not change, even when they are observed over a period of time, but are simply *revealed* to us through the action. As Hebbel puts it: *Was einer werden kann, das ist er schon*; we already are whatever we can become.[12]

It is often said that Shakespearean tragedy is a tragedy of character, as against Greek tragedy of circumstance. But here, again, "character" is deemed to be separate from and free of situation, rather than its embodiment. Though *King Lear* and *Hamlet* have more "character development" than *Antigone*, they are as deeply rooted in circumstance as *Oedipus Rex*.

Given its larger time frame, the novel engages us most seductively with characters, which proliferate and flower and can easily become the focus of our interest. They effectively divert us from the main form and thrust of the narrative. They may even seem to originate the action, and so mask the grave doubt about our freedom that all story raises. Yet the figures in a novel do not choose or command their own characters any more than those in a play or fairy tale. Don Quixote and Captain Ahab are no freer than Medea or Phèdre.

WE NO LONGER BELIEVE IN CHARACTER

In our own day, the concept of character has become obsolete. Colloquially, a 'character' is now someone who is unintentionally funny. He is to

clearly defined and sticks out, albeit inoffensively. In a rapidly changing context like our own, we survive by continuous adaptation, and the Greek saying: "You are what each day makes you" is appropriate to us. In a fluid, often unpredictable world, to 'have character' in the traditional sense—to be predictable and therefore rigid—can spell trouble, if not disaster.

We have, moreover, lost all confidence that our once seemingly impregnable character can withstand real pressure. Traditionally, in both life and fiction, character or self derived from and served a stable context, though it also preserved our integrity when the context crumbled. But in an age of concentration camps, when so many have been crushed psychologically and not just physically, we have been forced to recognize that what we are and do is largely beholden to circumstance.

This can be true even of heroes. On a construction detail at Buchenwald, two Jews whose strength was failing drew the angry attention of an SS sergeant. He pushed them into a ditch and commanded a Polish prisoner to bury them alive. When the Pole refused, the sergeant, instead of shooting him at once, pushed *him* into the ditch and ordered the Jews to bury him:

> In terror of their lives and in the hope of escaping the ghastly fate themselves, (they obeyed). When only the head of the Pole was still uncovered, the SS man called a halt and had the man dug out.

Once again he commanded the Jews into the ditch and again ordered the Pole to bury them. This time he did.

> Slowly the ditch was filled with soil. When the work was done, the Detail Leader personally trampled down the soil over his two victims.[13]

CHAPTER

3

Fictive Figures Must Think They Are Free

THE FICTIVE FIGURE IS A VICTIM

In the *formal* sense, all fictive figures are imprisoned and victimized by their stories. René Girard has shown that in myth and tragedy their victimization is borne out by the narrative events themselves.[1] "The doer must suffer."[2] Lear, Antony, Othello, and Macbeth are men of action whom circumstance or proclivity has reduced to a state of near-helplessness. They bear an unexpected resemblance to Büchner's Woyzeck and Lenz's Hofmeister. There is no substantive difference between the royal hero as victim and the ordinary victim as hero—between King Oedipus and Kafka's K. Even villains are victimized in the end. Iago's plot goes awry and—in the view of some interpreters—leaves him on the verge of discovering that just as he gulled Othello into killing Desdemona so he has, himself, unwittingly destroyed the person he loves.

The hero of story is a victim who does not see himself as one. His blindness protects him. He does not know that his situation is hopeless. We who watch or listen are aware of the inevitable outcome, but he struggles blindly on. In his *own* eyes, even Woyzeck is not totally helpless. The figures do not see themselves as victims because they are blind, and we do not see them as victims because they refuse to quit. Sheer endurance, or the effort to understand what is happening to them, constitutes an action in the face of the unthinkable.

If they *knew* the truth, they might, like the religious hero, become [illegible] or surrender to utter passivity. Prometheus, in the *Pro-*

metheus Bound, is an exception, for though he knows he is immobilized, he keeps on fighting. But he is immortal and has a chance of outmaneuvering Zeus himself.[3] Our own, very different situation is rendered by mortal figures. Since they are obliged to act, they cannot *afford* to know the truth. Their ignorance of the outcome, and the illusion that it is open-ended, permit them to think they can do something about it. Their blindness keeps them going.

THE HERO MUST NOT KNOW

In life, we acquire knowledge to achieve some control over our fate, and try to understand the workings of necessity in the hope of arresting it. If we knew with certainty what lies ahead, we would be, *ipso facto*, incapable of preventing it. The Latin *certus* means "fixed, determined." Whatever is certain or ascertained is inevitable. Our knowledge of the future would, in most instances, permit us only one option: to act in accordance with it—whereas uncertainty gives rise to hope and the illusion of freedom.

If we could be sure of a positive outcome, foreknowledge would serve as a source of powerful, enabling energies. Religious movements potentiate their believers by predicting a happy outcome for them. Conversely, to know we are doomed is utterly disabling. Though we are aware we must die, there is a distinct change in our situation when, like a man facing execution, we know the hour of our death. It may potentiate us spiritually but is unlikely to engender the will to do anything about it. Few of us, given the option, would choose to know it.

"True knowledge," says Nietzsche, "kills action; to act one must be enveiled by illusion."[4] If we are to carry out the tasks assigned to us, we cannot afford a fatalistic attitude and must believe that what we do will make a difference. Our blindness, or 'enveilment,' is of critical consequence to the community and may well be fostered by it. It is, moreover, necessary to our survival as individuals, for it gives us the 'right' and strength to fight on our own behalf despite the claims of others, as though we were of primary importance. Our limited awareness protects us against a knowledge that would cripple us. As Yeats says:

> The knowledge of reality is always a secret knowledge. It is a kind of death.[5]

The blindness of the fictive figures, which at first seems a mere limitation, turns out to be necessary. The conviction that they can *change* their destiny is a crucial element *of* their destiny—and of story's design.[6]

Some figures are blind not just about their situation but about themselves. Othello, Don Quixote, and M. Jourdain are self-deceived. Though Iago masters the actions and reactions of others, he fails to uncover the motive for his own malice, and Hamlet, despite his awareness and insight, cannot penetrate to the source of his own malaise. Baudelaire says: "One of the most distinctive marks of the *absolute* comic is that it remains unaware of itself,"[7] and Bergson adds:

> The comic person is unconscious. As though wearing the ring of Gyges with reverse effect, he becomes invisible to himself while remaining visible to all the world.[8]

The blindness of the fictive figures can on occasion extend to those enacting them on stage. As school children, we once performed a Chinese folkplay, to which we lent ourselves wholeheartedly. When the curtain fell on the first act, we noticed that many adults in the audience were weeping, which greatly astonished us, since we were having a jolly time and saw nothing poignant in our doings. Like the figures in the play, we perceived the story from *within* our own roles, or parts. The connection between the parts and the meaning of the whole were not apparent to us.

HUBRIS

It is often said that an extreme form of blindness, *hubris*, causes the fall of the mythic or tragic hero. His *hubris* may have its origin in his obscure parentage—his illegitimacy, for instance—which leaves him without a clearly defined place or role in the community, and obliges him to establish himself by excelling. His status as an outsider engenders his immodesty: since he is different from others, he thinks the rules do not apply to him. The community may actually *foster* his alienation and blindness, so that he can be induced to undertake a difficult, dangerous task—like an encounter with monsters or the unconscious. By enhancing his sense of self-importance and distinction, he is persuaded to risk what most of us hold precious—safety, comfort, even life itself—in the hope that his actions will reward the community or extend our knowledge of the unknown. His reward is fame and a place in story or history.

Though the Shakespearean hero does not display *hubris* in its Greek form, he too sees himself as a figure of central importance. He talks at great length, explores and gives vent to his feelings, complains about his lot, and dramatizes his suffering. Even the actor playing him may need an exaggerated

sense of his own importance, for he too is at risk, albeit only in front of the audience.

In daily life, we do not take kindly to those with an inflated sense of themselves. Yet *hubris* may be nothing more than an extreme form of a common and *necessary* condition. We, too, as we go about our work, whether it be raising children or piloting an airplane, need an enhanced sense of our own significance. A measure of *hubris* is essential to the community, especially in an industrial society where even ordinary activities, like driving a car, involve the safety of others, to whom we have no actual relationship and feel only an abstract connection.

The limited and often distorted perspective of the fictive figures is glaringly apparent to us, yet we are just like them. We see further than they while we are watching, but as soon as the house lights go up, we pull in our horizons and re-enter the realm of our own narrow concerns. By disconnecting from the whole—by separating from the context, of which we, like the figures, are clearly a part—we can once again delude ourselves into thinking we are independent and free. This is not a matter of choice, but comes as first and second nature to us: it is rooted in biology *and* in our heritage as socialized beings.

Like the hero's *hubris*, our often intensive preoccupation with our own concerns is both necessary and dangerous to the community. It prompts us to meet our obligations but may tempt us to think we *are* more important than others. In just this way, all specialization of labor, with its urgent and exclusive concentration on a single task, endangers the community it benefits. The threat is gravest when it involves a heroic leader. Because he must take risks and make sacrifices, he may urge them on the entire community without regard for its welfare. Society is rightfully suspicious of the heroes it breeds. Since they are not given a place at birth but must earn it through unusual accomplishments, since their role—from *rotulus*, "wheel"—is to *have* no recurring, predictable role, and because their very function requires that they go beyond the bounds and control of the community, they cannot be trusted.

Story both fosters the importance of the hero by focusing on him and his actions *and* renders him as inflated and self-deluded. The central figure in comedy and tragedy believe they are special cases. Gilgamesh sets out to attain immortality, and M. Jourdain is deceived into thinking he is Mamamouchi whose daughter is marrying the Great Turk. Stories build up their central figures only to shatter or shrink them, while the modest nobodies in fairy tales end up as kings and queens. Even a sympathetic figure like Hamlet is 'reduced' by the play. After a great deal of frantic activity, several killings, and a suicide, he comes to the realization that revenge

and the righting of wrongs are beyond the scope of his will. He accepts, consciously, what fate has in store for him: "Let be."

Some figures never realize that they have been stripped of their power or pretensions. Don Quixote and Malvolio remain deluded to the end. But even their extreme, impenetrable *hubris* may touch a chord in us, for we know that a measure of stubborn blindness is necessary to our own survival. The whole truth, if we could attain it, would implode all but a few.

The mythic hero could not become a *theomachos*, or god-fighter, without the restricted consciousness that engenders his inflated state. But while he may be aware of the risk that his task entails, he hardly expects to be sacrificed if he succeeds. Yet this is often what happens, albeit in camouflaged form. The community—in order to distance itself from the trespasses he has committed on its behalf and to keep him from bringing home his dangerously enlarged sense of himself—may disown him. His death, if it should occur while he carries out his task, is not altogether unwelcome. It appeases the offended gods and permits the community to honor and mourn him at a safe distance.

Not only in myth and tragedy but in many stories the central figure is offered up as a sacrifice. At the very least, his restricted consciousness serves to enhance ours: he is blind on our behalf; if he were knowing, there would be nothing for *us* to know. He fails to see precisely what we *do* see—in *his* situation and, by inference, in our own. He seems different from us, but we are like him, for we too, when we become conscious, lose our 'natural' place, our 'natural' right to be, and must earn it back by slaying dragons—those *within* us. What we regain is not, of course, our place in the *natural* scheme of things, for it is lost irrevocably, but a surrogate place in the community.

THE AUDIENCE IS BOTH ABSENT AND ENGAGED

Between our knowing and the ignorance of the fictive figure lies an ironic gap on which traditional story is founded—a discrepancy that is always present, even when it is so narrow as to pass unnoticed. In comedy, it is unmistakable. The figures are so obsessed by their greed, lechery, ambition, folly, or cowardice that they become mindless of everyone and everything—leaving us at a comfortable distance. We may recognize ourselves in them, but their very attachment detaches us and makes it possible for us to laugh instead of identifying with them. Within the coordinates of the world that they do and feel makes perfect sense to them, but we, who are

privileged to watch from a safe distance, see it as exaggerated and laughable—though our own behavior is often no less absurd.

The top balcony in the nineteenth-century theater was called the *Gods*, but the audience has only the *knowledge* of gods and not their power. We owe our privileged perspective to our physical absence from the scenes on stage. In life, though we may be psychologically detached from an event, we remain bodily present and so potentially involved. But we cannot be drawn, physically, into a staged imitation of events that occurred in the past. There is nothing we can do to affect them and they, in turn, pose no physical threat to us.

Baudelaire suggests that comedy engenders a feeling of satanic superiority in the viewer.[9] But while we see the figures from the perspective of gods, we do not feel simply superior to them. We may laugh at the clown but our *impulse* to behave as he does, and our secret knowledge that we often do, bring him uncomfortably close. His behavior, like his ridiculous dress, is so extreme as to be unreal, yet his needs and impulses are utterly real and familiar to us. The tension between our presumed detachment and our unexpected identification explodes into laughter—especially when the laughter of others in the theater assures us that we are not the only shameful culprits. Consciously, we assume we are different, but our laughter reveals we are not.

Whenever we are truly superior and safe, a story holds no interest. The easy hindsight of historical re-creations that flatter the audience by displaying the limitations or prejudices of an earlier time—upper-class antisemitism in *Chariots of Fire*, for instance—is fatuous, for it fails to touch our own vulnerability. It is our *kinship* with the figures that makes them persuasive or 'real,' for it allows us to endow them with our own experiences and feelings. Indeed, the gap our awareness or knowing opens between them and us, the insight it affords us into their motives and conflicts, and the contradictions it reveals within their natures, do not distance us but bring us closer.

OUR DOUBLE EXPERIENCE OF STORY

Most of us don't go to the movies or read a novel to remain godlike outsiders but to participate. Historical and sociological accounts render *situations* clearly, but do not allow us to share the experiences, hopes, and fears of the figures; they don't engage us on a personal level. Lévi-Strauss assumes that when primitive peoples listened to their myths they did not become empathetically involved in the action but responded to the pattern or structure

of the whole. Personhood as we know it was not a factor in tribal life, and while there was surely a form of audience participation, it was no doubt different from ours. Myth, says Lévi-Strauss, was perceived in space—synchronically—rather than experienced in time: the figure was always seen in context or as part of the ground. A similar observation was made by Worringer in 1908, when he explored the preeminence of pattern or design in "primitive" art.[10]

In Western culture, however, story both contextualizes *and* decontextualizes. It allows us to remain detached and *yet* to become engaged—to know *and* feel. We are involved in a double experience, at once observers and participants—whereas in daily life we are apt to occupy one position or the other. Though comedy, as Chaplin says, happens in long shots, we are pulled into his movies by our kinetic, tactile, and emotional participation; though we know that Oedipus has no chance of extricating himself, we nonetheless share his hope and feelings. We are familiar with the plot, the general line of the action, and its outcome, yet participate in the action from moment to moment. There is a gap not only between the figure and us, but *within ourselves*.

Our double experience may be equivalent to Worringer's abstraction and empathy. In his view, visual art began with abstraction or design—which is impersonal, objective, and repetitive—and developed toward empathy: personal, subjective, and involving. In Western art, the two polarities coexist and an individual work will often oscillate between them, just as the audience in the theater oscillates between detachment and engagement. The divergent elements do not undermine but complement each other. Perhaps even the synchronic structure of Lévi-Strauss's oral myth produced a participatory response in the listener. Surely a Greek or Norse myth—in its unadorned, or summary, form pure pattern—inspired feelings of awe and communal participation when it was told by a gifted storyteller. Though listeners were aware of its synchronic structure, they may nonetheless have *experienced it in time*.

Our own double response is most apparent in the theater: we lend ourselves to the figures as if they could actually achieve their goals, though the preclusive context is clear. But prose narratives, too, are marked by the discrepancy between a completed past and an apparently open-ended 'now.' They are usually told in the past tense, yet prompt us to transpose fragments of action and dialogue into the *present*, for the storyteller makes them as immediate and vivid as possible. The scenes in a novel are clearly projected, but occur for us in the same 'now' as the scenes in a play and engage us as persuasively.

CHAPTER THREE

SURPRISE

Our knowledge or sense of what is about to happen allows us to anticipate it, and anticipation is a form of participation; we look forward to the expected moment, be it comic or tragic. The tension it arouses in us is pleasurable because, while the figures are up against it, we ourselves are safe. Storytellers often forewarn the audience or reader of an unexpected turn of events. By letting us in on something that will come as a shock or surprise to the characters, they enhance our involvement and pleasure.

When our expectations are upset, the story appears to lose its precluded form and to take on a spontaneous life of its own. Chaplin was asked how he would film a man slipping on a banana peel—whether he would show us the banana or keep it from us till the man slips. He said he would let us see it, then have the man himself notice it and step carefully over it—into an open manhole. He engages us through anticipation *and* surprise: we enjoy what we *think* is going to happen and laugh when our expectations are violated.

Surprise is as important to story as the known. A live performer is often of greater interest to us than the piece he is playing, for—unlike the author—he is at risk before our eyes, hazarding a fate we all dread: public failure and rejection. He may, moreover, do the unexpected even in a part we know well, and so generates uncertainty, unpredictability, and a kind of freedom in a familiar, predetermined text.

When surprise and tension in a narrative derive entirely from our ignorance of a *fact*—the identity of the killer, for instance—they barely affect us the second time around. But if we are engaged on a deeper level and move along with the action from moment to moment, the way we hum along internally with a familiar piece of music, surprises continue to work even though we anticipate them.

Once we have grasped a thought or *idea*, it ceases to be of narrative interest and doesn't bear repetition. But our senses and feelings respond to a stimulus even when it is familiar and repeated. Cold water will always shock the skin. Though sight and hearing are not as primary as touch and taste, the processes of story are akin to sensory experience. Keaton's action and movement continue to delight us even if we have seen the movie many times, just as a kettle drum will startle us though we know exactly at what point in the score it occurs. Familiarity and anticipation may, indeed, heighten the sensation. By engaging our sensory and emotional participation, story permits us to become 'innocent' despite our knowing, and gives us a direct experience of the very blindness—the envelope of sensation—that limits the fictive figure.

POINT OF VIEW

Though we know more than the hero or heroine, we tend to adopt their perspective even when it isn't explicitly rendered. Most narratives imply a point of view.[11] Even myths and epics are focused on an individual or small group, and by reporting only those events that are crucial to them, what happens to the other characters becomes less important. A central perspective is established and we, who watch and listen, adopt it almost unconsciously since it approximates our own experience. For better *and* worse, we are at the center of our own stories.

Our identification with a point of view is further enhanced in narratives that permit us to know the central figure more completely than we know our relatives, friends, and indeed ourselves. Hamlet keeps only those secrets from us that he also keeps from himself. Knowing him intimately and sharing his perspective intensifies our participation in the play. We quite literally take his part, which is of course our own as well. We become insiders even as we remain observers.

STORY ENCOURAGES US TO FORGET WHAT WE KNOW

The hero sees himself as at least partially free, and since we make the same assumption about ourselves, we tend to ignore his actual situation. In story—as in daily life—we gladly move from moment to moment, preoccupied with his actions and reactions as we are with our own. Story continually tempts us to forget what we know and to endow the figures with the very freedom it denies them. Of course their freedom exists entirely in our minds, much as the figures in a movie *move* only in the eye of the beholder. But just as there is no movie without the illusion of movement, so there is no story without the illusion of freedom. It is as critical to story as our—often dim—awareness that it *is* an illusion.

Some fictive figures seem free because they are powerful, important, or rich. Kings and gangsters play by different rules or make up their own, and so appear to have more options than the rest of us. They are active and have a clear effect on the lives of others; they make and implement decisions, and are more likely than most of us to get what they want. Options, decisions, and action suggest freedom, though—according to story—they do not actually constitute it.

When *we*, today, watch *Oedipus Rex*, it seems utterly precluded and hopeless. But to the Athenians, the figures may have appeared no more

helpless than those in our movies seem to us. Perhaps the presentation of the familiar myth in a new, dramatic form provided an experience that was so different and surprising that even the doomed figure of Oedipus appeared to enjoy a measure of freedom and choice.

It is generally assumed that before the inception of tragic drama, the dithyrambic singers at the festival of Dionysus sang about gods and heroes in events that were clearly past. But when first one and then several singers stepped out of the Chorus and took an independent role, the action was seemingly transposed into the present and the Chorus, instead of looking back at the events in omniscience, became just another participant—one who had no advance knowledge of the outcome. In the eyes of the audience this surely opened up the familiar and precluded story to human intervention, particularly since the playwright added characters and variations even as he preserved the basic 'facts' and outcome of the myth.[12]

Aeschylus presented some of his plays in linked trilogies like the *Oresteia*, and so maintained a sense of the connectedness or *enchaînement* found in the epic. But Sophocles wrote only one linked tragedy and clearly preferred the single play. With the shift from epic to linked trilogy and then to the single play, narrative became increasingly discontinuous. Aeschylus referred to his tragedies as "*slices* from the great banquets of Homer."[13] The German word for play is *Stück* or piece—in French, *pièce*—making explicit its fragmentary form. By separating the events on stage from all that has gone before, a dramatic presentation endows its figures with the appearance of greater freedom.

Though the epic is effectively centered on individuals, it keeps them connected to their temporal and spatial context. But the dramatic figure is isolated or decontextualized, and becomes the absolute focus of our attention. We remain knowing spectators but no longer see the events from the vantage point of Olympians, as we often do in the *Iliad*. Our perspective has become engaged, subjective, and limited. While the *Oresteia* continues to invoke the web of the whole, the link between the murder of Agamemnon and the events leading up to it has become partly internal or psychological: it cannot be verified 'objectively.' The audience is no longer just dealing with familiar 'facts' but with an inner or subjective reality as well.[14] Connections that were once concrete and unequivocal have become personal and ambiguous—endowing the figures with a semblance of freedom and individual responsibility.

TRAGEDY AND THE UNIQUE INDIVIDUAL

In its mythic form, the story of Oedipus is also the story of Laius and Jocasta. But in the theater, Oedipus occupies center stage. He appears as

the prime mover and we pay special attention to what he does, says, thinks, and feels. He has become unique: the gods have marked him; his is a special fate, and only *he* can save the city. A remote figure has been brought close. The myth is personalized.

The *Oresteia* has an atragic ending, for the life and death of the individual are set within a larger whole. But when the figures become unique and irreplaceable, their death or downfall ends a world and their story becomes tragic. Of course, even as drama appears to make the figures unique by liberating them from their natural and social context, it sets them more clearly within story's preclusive form—a context from which there is no escape and one in which the hero is unmistakably like the rest of us.

We have noted that while the action in comedy is often communal, in Western myth and tragedy collaborative effort is of little interest. The focus is on an individual acting alone, without the customary delays and safeguards, and often without the benefit of communal sanction. Because he is on his own, he seems solely responsible for what he does and is therefore praise- or blameworthy. Aristotle appears to support this view, for he assigns a central role in tragedy to *hamartia*, the mistake or blindness that leads to the hero's downfall. But one cannot help wondering how a figure so clearly determined by both fate and story's form could make a 'mistake' of any consequence. A modern tribunal would surely find him innocent of wrongdoing. His *hamartia*, like the pride of Oedipus, may simply be a means of persuading us of his freedom.

THE ILLUSION OF FREEDOM IN RENAISSANCE DRAMA

One suspects that Elizabethan audiences would have been as unwilling to sit through *Oedipus Rex* as most of us are today. They might well have rejected it as fixed, lifeless, and without relevance to their own world. But when Renaissance playwrights violated the classical unities of action, time, and place, the dramatic figure gained a semblance of liberty and stories could be told in which a venturesome people, living in a period of rapidly expanding horizons, could recognize their own experience.

Since the action in Greek tragedy has a single strand, fate seems more clearly in command than in Shakespeare's plays, where the double action obscures the working of the plot. His stories evolve along several convoluted lines, and whether they parallel each other as in *King Lear* or diverge as in *Antony and Cleopatra*, they obscure the underlying thrust of the narrative and make it seem less purposeful and prescribed. Greek tragedy is

unified in time and place, focused on a few figures, and easily summarized; but on the Elizabethan stage the action is complex, involves a great many people, extends over longer periods, and shifts freely from place to place. While the Athenian actors apparently moved little and most of the physical action occurred offstage, the Elizabethan figures were highly mobile and active; they fought and killed right in front of the audience.

In daily life, our physical activities—even those without substantive consequences, like gardening and shopping—can allay our sense of passivity and impotence without endangering anyone. We are apt to feel we are free and in charge of our lives because we can drive to the mall, where a wide choice of products awaits us. In much the same way, the activity and movement on the Elizabethan stage may lend the figures a persuasive if unsubstantiated appearance of freedom. As Conrad says:

> In our activity alone do we find the sustaining illusion of an independent existence as against the whole scheme of things of which we form a helpless part.[15]

Elizabethan and Jacobean drama is powered by the intrigues of villains or hero-villains, like Macbeth; even Hamlet is forever scheming and counterscheming. Their ceaseless plotting, and the action attendant upon it, create an illusion of the human will at work though almost none of the plots work out as they are intended. Hegel notes that in classical tragedy there are no figures of evil,[16] but the plays of Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Webster *depend* on them. In Greek myth and tragedy, the destructive element is nonhuman, while Shakespeare's audiences—and we—see evil largely as a product of the will. We don't think of Lady Macbeth, Edmund, or Goneril as helplessly enthralled, and assume that Claudius *chose* to murder his brother, usurp the throne, and marry the queen. The evil they do—their deceptions, betrayals, murders, and rapes—contribute to the apparent freedom of the Renaissance figure.

Yet, in the final analysis, the stories of Shakespeare and his contemporaries are as precluded as *Oedipus Rex*. Movement and sensory pleasure are precious to us, for they separate us from the inanimate and the dead, but they do not constitute freedom. If Hamlet's fate seems less foreclosed than Agamemnon's, it is only because we *discover* the design of his story as it unfolds, instead of knowing it from the start. The difference lies in the way we *learn* about it.

Auden suggests that "Christian tragedy is the tragedy of possibility—of hope,"[17] but Oedipus is no less hopeful than Romeo. The Shakespearean figures and their audiences just get a longer run for their money. The plays

begin at an earlier point in the action than *Oedipus Rex*, but something *has* happened before the beginning that turns out to be as binding. Hamlet's father was murdered, Antony is enthralled to Cleopatra, and the Capulets have been feuding with the Montagues for years. The power of the plays derives in large part from the gap between the very vitality and confidence of the figures and the foreclosed structure of their lives.

STORIES ARE AT ONCE NEW AND OLD

In the novel, the preclusive form of story is camouflaged even more effectively than in Renaissance drama. Its length and scope permit the multiplication of major and minor figures, extended digressions, shifts from objective to subjective reporting, and the inclusion of material no earlier narrative could accommodate. The action can extend over days or decades, proceed at a leisurely or accelerated pace, swing forward and backward in time, and render a world at war or the minutiae of domestic life. For several centuries, it presented readers with what appeared to be an accurate and complete record of their experience.

As its name implies, the novel claims to be new. But this is itself traditional, for story's province has ever been the new. From *Gilgamesh* to the movies, story is a journey of discovery, an encounter with the strange, abnormal, and frightening. Though the assumptions and coordinate systems of earlier cultures changed far more slowly than our own, their narratives, too, explored the unknown. Yet even as it ventures into the strange, story discovers the familiar. What Delacroix says about painting—that "the new is always the old"—is true for story as well.[18] As Brecht puts it:

> Nothing comes from nothing; the new comes from the old, but that is why it is new.[19]

In part, this is reassuring: our assumptions are confirmed, the alien becomes familiar, *terra incognita* turns into home ground. But it can also be seen as a form of colonization: the other is reshaped into the known, into the same, into oneself. It could be called a severe limitation, for if nothing is really and fundamentally new, the possibilities for change are very limited.[20]

To those who see traditional narrative as a defense of the status quo and a tool of the established power structure, story's presentation of the old in the guise of the new is self-deceptive or corrupt. Consciously or unconsciously, the storyteller engages in a manipulation of familiar narrative elements to persuade his audience that there is nothing new under the sun,

that nothing new is needed or possible. In the view of the Russian formalists, what the storyteller does is defamiliarize familiar material by reassembling a known chronological sequence into one that seems unfamiliar; he serves old wine in new bottles and so revitalizes and confirms the assumptions of his culture.

The formalist approach—which is clearly valid for genre narratives like the Western—has been adopted and extended by an influential sector of the critical establishment. Most theorists today hold that *all* narratives are entirely conditioned by their culture and therefore subject to genre formularization. Tragedy is deemed to confirm the coordinate system that produced it no less than *film noir.* But even if we define genre very broadly—as an "internalized probability system"[21] or "a set of fore-understandings exterior to a text which enable us to understand that text"[22]—the genre approach seems limited. For the preclusive structure of story makes *all* stories—in every age and every culture—fundamentally alike, and what is deemed to be a historically conditioned form may be subject to an *ahistorical* structural principle—one as old as humankind.

NOT ALL STORIES CONFIRM CULTURAL ASSUMPTIONS

Storytellers, like most of us, are apt to be prisoners of their perceptions—which, in turn, are almost entirely conditioned by society. But there have long been narratives that undermine rather than confirm our assumptions. Some storytellers seem to resemble the alienated, placeless individuals, or 'heroes,' who carry out tasks the community cannot accomplish or risk. They stand outside the coordinate system, less blinkered by its limitations, and may, indeed, have an interest in *invalidating* the very structures that excluded them. As outsiders, their experiences are often unprocessed, anomalous, and inexplicable—encounters with the unknown or unconscious that have not yet been filtered through the cultural sieve. If they succeed in assimilating their anomalous experience into the familiar context—if their stories familiarize the unfamiliar—they are welcomed as a useful extension of the coordinate system. If, however—like the scientist who observes and reports phenomena that undermine established theory—they render experiences that invalidate our basic assumptions, their work is often ignored or rejected as a threat. Their stories do not function as an endorsement of accepted wisdom and the status quo, but report encounters that are difficult if not impossible to assimilate.

It is nonetheless true that even unorthodox storytellers cannot escape

story's preclusive form. They must report the new and anomalous within a foreclosed structure—a structure that may stand for an inescapable fact of our existence, or perhaps merely confirms that the new can be reported only in the context of the old. Art, like science, must investigate the unknown with instruments predicated on the known, and in art, as in science,

> Anomaly appears only against the background provided by the paradigm.[23]

Stravinsky says we need traditional order so that we can cope with the new.[24] But one can understand the mistrust and impatience of those who see story as an instrument of institutions that inhibit our freedom and deny the possibility of change in order to safeguard their own power.

THE STORYTELLER RESISTS STORY'S PRECLUSIVE FORM

The storyteller himself is caught in the contradiction between the freedom of his figures and story's preclusive order. We don't know whether Sophocles, in the composition of *Oedipus Rex*, struggled against the external skeleton that both the myth and story's form imposed on him. Perhaps he accepted the limitations from the start and composed his play within them.[25] But modern writers, unless they are working within an established genre, resist the possibility that the story is over before they begin telling it—even if they sense that, like Michelangelo's sculpture, it 'pre-exists' in the stone and that their task is simply one of hewing it out.

Flaubert struggled against the inevitable in *Madame Bovary* and did what he could to arrest it. In the course of composing it, he wrote to Louise Colet:

> What I should like to write, is a book about nothing, a book dependent on nothing external, which would be held together by the strength of its style, just as the earth, suspended in the void, depends on nothing external for its support; a book which would have almost no subject, or at least in which the subject would be almost invisible, if such a thing is possible. The finest works are those that contain the least matter. . . . I believe that the future of Art lies in this direction. I see it, as it has developed its beginnings, growing progressively more ethereal. . . . Form, as it is mastered, becomes attenuated; it becomes dissociated from any liturgy, rule, yardstick . . . as free as the will of its creator.[26]

In another letter, he reports with satisfaction on "fifty uninterrupted pages in a row without a single event."[27] Indeed, the entire novel—encrusted with metaphor—seems intended to dam up all movement and flow. Flaubert called his scenes *tableaux*—motionless pictorial renderings—as though time had passed by Yonville and Tostes and all those who live there. Yet a contrary force is clearly at work. As Victor Brombert points out:

> Though he claimed he hated plans and outlines, Flaubert was an inveterate planner and plotter.[28]

He composed "a staggering number of outlines," and elaborated them with great care and patience, just as Beethoven ceaselessly reworked the melodic line, or 'plot,' of his compositions. Sainte-Beuve observes that nothing in *Madame Bovary* is left to chance.[29] *L'enchaînement* is Flaubert's own word for the inexorable sequence of cause and effect that moves Emma and everyone else along their paths.[30] He must have become aware that *Madame Bovary* was *not* a book "about nothing at all," without a subject and with an attenuated form, abandoning all liturgy and rule, "as free as the will of its creator." In a necessary and deeply meaningful contradiction, his left hand undermined the work of his right: his concrete, visual style seems to *arrest* time, while the plot carries the figures inexorably forward. Despite "fifty uninterrupted pages in which there is not a single event," the novel is a chain of linked events from which no escape is possible. Just as the earth *cannot* hold itself "unsupported in the air," so Emma is held and determined by forces beyond her control. *Madame Bovary* in no way controverts story's traditional form: Emma's life is utterly foreclosed.

When we look back at *Oedipus Rex*, the figures are so clearly bound that the play may seem pointless and irrelevant to us, whereas the figures in our own stories breathe *our* air, hold our assumptions, know what we know, see what we see, do what we do, make our discoveries, and are surprised when we are. We recognize ourselves in them, and since we must believe in our own freedom, we believe in theirs. *Willen wird hineinempfunden*, says Nietzsche;[31] because we think *we* have a will, so must they. When we declare, with unconscious irony, that we are 'determined' to do something, we think we are saying that we *will* it. As Trotsky puts it:

> If a thistledown, whisked this way or that by each passing breeze, were endowed with consciousness, it would consider itself the freest thing in the world.[32]

FILM ENGENDERS THE ILLUSION OF FREEDOM

Though novels seemed realistic to readers for centuries, they no longer persuade us; we are too aware that the game is fixed. Perhaps movies have become our preferred way of telling stories because they still permit us to become so deeply engaged that we forget what we know. They appear to render us and the immediacy of our experience so faithfully that, from moment to moment, we can ignore their foreclosed, predictable form.

We live in a Positivist culture and most of our movies are predicated on the assumption that human beings make significant choices and can work effectively to implement them. While secondary characters are often helpless victims, the central figures seem free and triumph over adversity by dint of applied effort. There are exceptions, like *Citizen Kane* and the comedies of Chaplin and Keaton, but even our documentaries—those shown on commercial television—tend to be Positivist. *Sixty Minutes* makes clear distinctions between right and wrong, good guys and bad. It usually tells us where the problem lies and what can be done about it. Like all Positivist narratives, it avoids situations that are ambiguous and cannot be resolved. In this sense, it subscribes to the philosophy of Ernst Mach, who said that if a problem *has* no solution, it isn't a problem—at least not one we need think about.[33]

POSITIVISM AND TRADITIONAL NARRATIVE

As we have noted, story's form undermines Positivist assumptions. In a precluded context, there is no way the figures can make significant choices or use their will effectively. While the hero of traditional story, acting on the assumption that he can predict the consequences of his actions, turns out to be wrong, the hero in Positivist fiction operates on the same assumption and turns out to be 'right.' But predicting a future that is completed and therefore fixed is Monday-morning quarterbacking. There is no way that narrative, with its preclusive form, can validate a Positivist coordinate system. If we need to believe absolutely that our will is free and that our actions lead to predictable results, we had best not tell or hear stories.

In the recent past, the critical establishment has made a concerted attempt to undermine narrative's claim to reality. The basic issue may well be the depotentiation of humankind inherent in story's structure. Positivism in all its forms was, like the Enlightenment before it, a potentiating force. Not illegitimately, it perceived itself as delivering us from physical, metaphysical,

philosophical, and political bondage. But traditional story turns *all* of us into victims and so could be said to inhibit action and change. By blurring differences between those who rule and the rest of us, it appears to serve the status quo and the prevailing power structure. If the rich and powerful are impotent, what the rest of us lack in freedom and possessions may not be worth having; we are all in the same leaky boat.

The contemporary *political* view of story maintains that there is a relationship, albeit one that is often distorted, between narrative and reality. A subtler, more complex challenge—with less obvious political implications—dismisses the link altogether and sees story as pure artifice, which could not render reality even if there *were* such a thing. It is a game played entirely by its own rules, a wholly independent formal arrangement. Though it may *use* elements we call "realistic," it in no way derives its form or 'meaning' from our existence.

Yet stories are at least as old as recorded time, and perhaps audiences believed in them and passed them on because they sensed that they, too, were caught in contradictions—that they, like the fictive figure, had to proceed as if they were free though they were bound. Traditional story is clearly predicated on human limitations. "Death," says Benjamin, "is the sanction of everything the storyteller can tell."[34] Perhaps facing our limits need not simply make us docile and mindful of our place. Tragedy thrived during periods of heady outward expansion and progress, even though it reminds the audience that we are neither free nor powerful, and one cannot help wondering why the Elizabethans, who believed in their freedom no less than we do, enjoyed such a forbidding view of human existence.

STORY AS A SAFE ARENA

Perhaps it has ever been a function of narrative to serve as a separate and safe arena in which we can confront what we cannot afford to face in daily life. Nietzsche's

> We have art so that we need not perish of the truth[35]

could imply that in art we can *encounter* the truth without perishing of it. Perhaps traditional story tells us what we already know but must forget or deny. Though we may sense that, like the fictive figure, we are absolutely connected and therefore helpless, we can acknowledge it only in the safe arena of art or religious ritual. Even here we must draw a clear line of demarcation: I may recognize myself in the hero-victim on stage, but must

remain fully responsible for my own actions in the theater. Though what is true for the hero is true for me, I cannot live in accordance with it.

We could consider story a compensatory realm—not because it fulfills our wishes or consoles us with visions of a better world, but because it counterbalances our daily existence. From time to time, for our own sake and the community's, we need to be released from the often intense involvement that family and communal life impose on us. A preclusive form, which limits the figures and by implication the rest of us, frees us briefly from our attachments. It liberates us, as well, from the sense of isolation and displacement that is the lot of many, and connects us to a larger whole.

In story, we are free to become vulnerable—to lend ourselves to the figures and their situation without risk. They make no claim on us and we are not responsible for what happens; nothing we think or feel will make any difference. While story appears to be a process of depotentiation, the helplessness of the hero does not render us impotent. His very effort to change what cannot be changed frees us briefly of the burden of willing, and permits us to acknowledge that we are not our own masters—that the consequences of our actions are not finally under our control. For a little while we are absolved of responsibility and guilt. If Oedipus is innocent, so are all of us.[36] Paradoxically, his very lack of freedom sets us free.

Yet once we leave the theater, we must forget what we know. According to an old Jewish legend, when the soul is about to be reborn, it remembers what it has suffered in past lives and begs to be spared, whereupon an angel touches it with forgetfulness.[37] We too, when we leave the safe arena of story, must forget what we know, become blind, and once again assume the illusion of our liberty, so that we can go forward into the future—which, in story, is also the past.

CHAPTER

4

Plot

CONTEMPORARY AND TRADITIONAL DEFINITIONS

In common usage, "plot" suggests a plan or scheme devised by human beings to achieve their own ends, often with unfortunate consequences for others. We tend to think of it as an intrigue or conspiracy. Significantly, the word has a similar connotation in contemporary criticism: the plot of a narrative is devised or constructed to manipulate, entertain, move, and surprise the audience. The Russian word for plot, *sjuzet*, is used by the formalists to describe the "*arrangement*" that an author makes of the original events, and it is this arrangement which they—and most analysts of narrative today—consider the important element, while the events themselves—the *fabula*, or "story"—are, in Shklovsky's words, "only material for plot formulation."[1]

Traditional storytellers had a very different perception. For them, the plot *is* the story, and many stories consisted of little *but* plot. Plot was not their handiwork; it was the component they inherited and passed on. When the events were well-known, as in myth, they might be rendered in a new or contemporary manner, with altered details and added characters, but the plot itself remained unchanged. In presenting his version of the Oedipus story, Sophocles preserved the basic structure of the myth. His "arrangement" of the events was a way of *serving* the myth and keeping it alive, but the events themselves and not his version of them constituted the telling element. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle defines plot as "the arrangement of things done in the story"—which seems to support the formalist definition.[2] But the word he uses for plot is *mythos*, and myth clearly preexists the storyteller and any arrangement *he* may make of it.[3]

Dostoevski says: "Never invent stories or plots."[4] Nineteenth-century storytellers often drew their narratives from historical or newspaper accounts—sources that were deemed 'objective.'[5] The events of *Crime and Punishment* and *Madame Bovary* are the central, form-giving force and hard to dismiss as "only material for plot formulation." The formalist distinction between story and plot—between the original events and the author's arrangement of them—is a radical departure from traditional storytelling, in which plot and story are one: the author knows or discovers it but—like his figures—he is not free to manipulate it at his will or pleasure.

PLOT IS SPATIAL

Plot derives from the Anglo-Saxon *plot*, "a spot of ground." It is related to the Gothic *plats*, "a patch," and the German *Platz*, "place." We still use the word in its spatial meaning as the site for a building, small garden, or grave. Synonyms for *plot*—"plan," "scheme," and "design"—originate in words with a spatial connotation. So do *theme* and *thesis*, which serve as the structuring principle, or 'plot,' of nonfiction. Several terms related to storytelling—"situation," "circumstance," and "background"—are *spatial* concepts that have acquired a *temporal* meaning. *Scene* originally referred to the covered place where the action occurs, but has come to mean the event itself; a spatial term has been redefined as an action. Conversely, we say that an event "takes place."

The original meaning of plot as "a spot of ground" suggests that it is perceived synchronously, like a plan or design. We might say that we see it from above. The word *synopsis*—the summary of a story or plot—means "a seeing together." The plot, which *we* see or know and the figures don't, exists in place before they discover it in time, and gives absolute expression to the fact that the story is over before it begins. They merely discover what already is.

LIKE THE FICTIVE FIGURE, WE EXPERIENCE OUR LIVES IN TIME

In life, our perception and awareness are so severely limited that we, like the fictive figure, are fated to perceive one thing *after* another, moment by moment, despite our effort to be aware of as much as possible. It was once thought that if we *could* perceive the world synchronously, like an Olympian, we might see the plot of our own lives as we see the hero's. If all

connections were apparent to us, perhaps we could read our own future as we read his—with the road clearly laid out for us though we have not traveled it yet.[6] But given our limitations, we too must experience our lives by burrowing through what a god might see as space in a tunnel we call time.

The concept that time and space are really one, or aspects of the same entity, is older than modern physics. In many religions, time is perceived as a limitation of mortal existence; to the vision of an immortal, it appears *as* space. Victor Hugo says: "Nothing sequential is applicable to God,"[7] and the parish priest of Combray tells us that from the top of the steeple "one encompasses at once things he can habitually see only one by one."[8] Our own intense and continuous preoccupation with causality is entirely time-bound. In a realm without time, cause and effect have no meaning. When we look at a painting, we see that everything is clearly connected and belongs together, but since no one thing *follows* another—since they coexist—we don't think of the connections as causal.

WE KNOW THE PLOT BUT EXPERIENCE THE ACTION

Inasmuch as we know the plot, it is synchronically present to us like a painting, yet we *experience* it in time. We rediscover the familiar plot alongside the figures, sensuously as it were. Our double experience at once attaches *and* detaches us. We become involved in the action, yet remain aware of the plot as the field of force that bounds and determines whatever happens. Though the action catches us up and surprises us, the plot stands in an ironic relationship to it. The action renders the immediacy of our experience, while the plot removes us from it. The action individuates or particularizes the figures, while the plot conjugates the particular to the universal.

THE PLOT MANIFESTS *AS* ACTION

Since the action consists of a willed effort on the part of the figures to change or thwart the plot, plot and action may appear to be opposites. Yet Aristotle equates them:

> It is the action . . . i.e., its fable or plot that is the end or purpose of tragedy.[9]

We can think of the action as the means by which the plot reveals or manifests itself. Just as Laius, Jocasta, and Oedipus bring about the very fate

they are trying to avoid, so the action in every story serves the plot: the figures are its agents and their will is its instrument. The action isn't plot's opposite—it *is* the plot. The figures are focused on the action while *we* see both action and plot. But in truth there is *only* plot—which is the inexorable, form-giving force of story.

E. M. Forster says, optimistically:

> There are in the novel two forces: human beings and a bundle of things not human beings.[10]

In his view, it is "the novelist's business to adjust these two forces and conciliate their claims."[11] But there may be just *one* force—the plot—with the action as a necessary illusion that catches up the storyteller, as it does the rest of us. If he is to tell the story, he cannot just observe it from a timeless, Olympian perspective, but must burrow through time in at least partial blindness, alongside his figures and focused on their action—just as we must immerse ourselves in our own limited concerns if the community is to function and children are to be born and raised. We are confined to our own small domain, yet it is out of the narrow strands of individual concerns that the broad pattern, or plot, of life and story is woven.

STORY'S PRIMARY CAUSE IS BEYOND OUR UNDERSTANDING

When Aristotle speaks of "the things from outside" that complicate the tragic story, he means those that lie outside the time frame of the narrative.[12] But we can think of the plot itself as an element "from outside"—a manifestation of 'forces' that are beyond the reach of the figures. The story begins when something goes wrong, when the social order is disturbed. In myth, this disruption is often caused by a supernatural force or figure, like the plague or sphinx. But even when the source of the trouble is human, it tends to come from a realm beyond our control. This is as true of the mad-dog killer in a Clint Eastwood movie as in *Medea*. Often the action begins with an eruption of the irrational or unconscious, which may well be a modern-day version of the supernatural.

The outcome of story is known but its origin is shrouded in mist. No story begins at the beginning. The roots of the action extend back into uncertainty, and the known is determined by the unknown and unknowable. Most narratives are presented as skeins of connections that reflect and depend on the cause-and-effect relationships which appear to govern

human life. But though they may unfold in an *enchaînement* of social, economic, and psychological links that are clear and plausible, the *primary* cause—the origin of the plot—remains beyond our understanding. Traditional story tells us *what* happens and *how*, but not, finally, *why*. We know the fate of Laius, Jocasta, and Oedipus, but are never told why it befalls them. Even *Genesis*, which places us close to the primary source, leaves shrouded why Yahweh permits—or wills—the fall of man.

At its edge, all story shades into darkness. The plot connects the action to a past that neither the storyteller nor we can penetrate. In myth even the gods, who seem all-powerful, are not the ultimate cause. Zeus himself appears in an ambiguous relationship to the three Fates, and beyond them stands a more mysterious figure still: Ananke, Necessity. In Norse mythology, the gods are powerless to prevent the end of the world and their own doom. The myth that traces the origin of the Trojan war back to the Judgment of Paris suggests that ultimate causes are beyond our reach and understanding. Paris is commanded by Zeus to award a golden apple to the fairest of three quarreling goddesses. Confronted with a no-win situation, he offers to cut it into three parts, but this is not acceptable and he is forced to make a choice—offending two of the goddesses, as he knew he would. By tracing the cause of a great war back to a hapless mortal, the myth suggests—as Tolstoy does of Napoleon's Russian campaign—that in the end "nothing is the cause":

> So all these causes—myriads of causes—coincided to bring it about. And so there was no one cause for that occurrence, but it had to occur because it had to.[13]

As Henry James says:

> Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally to draw, by a geometry of his own, a circle in which they *appear* to do so.[14]

STORY DOES NOT MAKE ORDER OUT OF CHAOS

Contemporary aesthetics claim that story creates order out of chaos, or makes sense of a welter of confusing experiences and impressions.[15] In this spirit, Peter Brooks calls the plot the "embracing concept for the design and intention of the narrative"[16] and Paul Ricoeur defines it as "the intelligible whole that governs a succession of events in a story."[17] He reads

Aristotle's *plot* as "emplotment," and calls it "the ordering of events"[18] or "the triumph of concordance over discordance."[19] For him, "the narrativists have successfully demonstrated that to narrate is already to explain,"[20] and "a narrative that fails to explain is less than a narrative."[21]

These definitions seem, however, to be hostage to an unacknowledged Positivism—one that takes the optimism of the Enlightenment to extremes. The plot of a traditional story is not really "intelligible." In human terms, it often makes no sense whatsoever. The events follow each other in a plausible causal sequence but allow for no clear meaning or explanation. This is most evident in myth. Agamemnon must sacrifice his daughter and is murdered by his wife, who is, in turn, killed by their son. In some versions of the story, moreover, Iphigenia is not actually dead but has been spirited to safety by Artemis. The "succession of events" is ultimately inexplicable and, in this sense, meaningless. Therein, of course, may *lie* its meaning:[22] the plot seems to render the unaccountability of the gods in their relationship to humankind; they are as unpredictable in their cruelty as in their kindness and may affect our lives no differently than chance.

Even the plot of religious story is not intelligible, despite its deceptively simple appearance. All rational understanding of it founders on the problem of evil. Since the narrative is predicated on an all-knowing, all-powerful, and just God, the evil that sets off the action contradicts the story's very premise. It can only be accepted on faith—as a mysterious dimension of the sacred. The existence of evil in a world created and ruled by a just deity is no more accessible to human reason than the sequence of events in the *Oresteia*. Neither 'makes sense;' neither is 'meaningful'—unless we take its meaning to be its inaccessibility. The plot of traditional story is rooted in an enigma, a word derived from the Greek *ainissomai*, "to speak darkly"—which, in turn, derives from *ainos*, "a tale or story."

Lévi-Strauss may be closer to the truth of narrative than contemporary narrativists:

> (Myth) gives man . . . the illusion that he can understand the universe and that he *does* understand the universe. It is, of course, only an illusion.[23]

Yet myths—and the plot that effectively reincarnates them—don't really give us this illusion. When we listen to story, we may well sense that it cannot be understood. It suggests, rather, that if there is an order in the universe, it plays havoc with our order, with the life of the individual and, indeed, with entire communities.

TRADITIONAL STORY AND SCIENCE

Rooted in uncertainty and the unknowable, traditional story is unlike most science, which is Positivist in spirit and approach. Yet some of the foundation theories of modern science penetrate no further into first causes than myth. They too elicit a causal sequence without accounting for its origin. The theory of evolution tells us by what means the species evolved but makes no attempt to explain what powered them with the 'will' or energy to propagate and survive. Many physicists believe that though we will come to understand everything that *followed* the creation of the universe, there is a point beyond which we may not be able to penetrate. Heisenberg says:

> Causality can only explain later events by earlier events, but it can never explain the beginning.[24]

In a similar vein, Heidegger speaks of "astonishment" at being—echoing Leibniz's question why there is "something" rather than nothing.[25] As in myth and story, we can only conclude that it occurred because it occurred. Very likely, we shall never know whether the universe, or life on earth, began by accident or 'design,' just as we may never know with certainty what, if anything, awaits us after death.

OEDIPUS REX EXPLAINS NOTHING

Since its primary cause is inaccessible, traditional story cannot tell us how the outcome could have been prevented. We don't find out how we can avoid the fate of Oedipus; like the Chorus, we can only be grateful it has not befallen us. While a cycle of myths or stories may contain cautionary motifs, they often contradict each other, just as proverbs do.[26] Actions that are life-preserving in one tale spell disaster in another. The only consistent cautionary motif in the fairy tales of central Europe appears to be that anyone who mistreats an animal is in for trouble.[27] The tales are exemplary but endorse contrary ways of being: Hansel and Gretel are saved by self-reliance, resourcefulness, and a capacity for deceit; Snow White by innocence, trust and kindness.

Though Grimm's fairy tales consistently reward virtue and punish wickedness, virtue and vice in them are intrinsic or innate qualities. Only a few of the figures have—or appear to have—a choice between good and evil. Most are what they are from the start, just like wicked witches and good

fairies. Moreover, since their lives are clearly determined by supernatural forces, any cautionary or exemplary meaning is countermanded. The word *fairy* ultimately derives from the Latin *fatum*, "fate." A fairy tale is a fate tale.[28]

THE INJUSTICE OF STORY

Snow White and Cinderella don't deserve what happens to them any more than do Oedipus or Othello. All are more sinned against than sinning. Though we, today, may assume that Lear contributed to the monstrous behavior of his daughters, he is justified in raising his anguished voice to the gods, for myth and tragedy are full of grave, inexplicable injustice. Not only individuals but entire families and communities are made to suffer for reasons we cannot fathom. Even in comedy, the figures—fixed in their tracks from the start—do not bring about their own fortunes or misfortunes. Charlie's poverty isn't his fault, and Malvolio's blindness is as involuntary as M. Jourdain's. In a preclusive context, no one can be held responsible or deserving of their fate. The lucky survive and the unfortunate perish. Justice has little to do with it.[29]

There is, however, one exception. Though traditional story—like religion—fails to explain why bad things happen to good people, it carefully avoids situations, common enough in life, when good things happen to the wicked. The guilty in story are always punished. Murderers and tyrants never die of old age and the villain reaps his just rewards. Though the evildoer is finally as unfree and helpless as everyone else, his punishment appears to be the one concession that story makes to our deep need to see justice, or order, wrought out of chaos.[30] In all other respects, the plot is profoundly indifferent to our merits and faults. The sun shines on the good and wicked alike. As Heraclitus says:

> To god *all* things are beautiful and good and just, but men have supposed some things unjust, others just.[31]

UNLIKE OTHER STRUCTURES, PLOT DOES NOT SHELTER US

Most communal structures serve to shelter us from the known and unknown. The law, by establishing and guaranteeing cause-and-effect relationships, enables our will and gives us a measure of freedom, responsibility,

and control. Within its context, our actions have—or are meant to have—predictable consequences: we can tell true from false and right from wrong, justice can be done, and order is created out of chaos.[32]

But though plot, too, is a structure, it appears to serve a different purpose. It embodies and confronts us with the very forces against which our institutions try to protect us, and so exposes the daily order of our lives to chaos. Communal structures are of no avail to a hero who is alone and face to face with forces he cannot control or comprehend. While our institutions may become more precious to us when we see what lies beyond them,[33] the plot renders them as frail and inadequate.

Yet facing the unknown within the safe arena of story does not frighten us. It may indeed be liberating. For though we prefer not to think about it, we are perfectly aware that our communal and religious structures are limited and often fail us. We are reminded every day that human justice is imperfect, that our judgment is often flawed, that good can come from evil and evil from good. We know our control is tenuous at best and that, despite all progress, we remain beholden for our very existence to processes and occurrences we cannot command. Much of the time we don't even know what is going on, or growing, in our own bodies. We are well aware that both good and bad fortune befalls us undeservedly, that our most carefully executed plans are often counterproductive, and that our lives continue to be determined by "Acts of God," though we no longer believe in Him.

IN STORY, EVERYONE IS INNOCENT

The law must affix responsibility and blame for everything that goes wrong. It draws a circle in which relations *do* stop. Yet the policemen who brutalize a black motorist are inextricably tied into a system that appoints them to a task the rest of us fear or disdain, and exposes them, day after day, to corruption and violence that desensitize them to suffering. If society is to function, our courts must try them as individuals responsible for their own actions, even though their brutality is an expression of *our* racism, and though it is we who pay them to protect us against the disadvantaged. Unlike the law, however, the storyteller is free to see his figures as helplessly constrained by what Balzac calls "the concatenation of causes,"[34] and in the safe arena of story we can face the possibility that "relations stop nowhere," that no one is free, and that the assignment of blame is likely to be an error.

TRADITIONAL STORY OFFERS NO SOLUTIONS

Our institutions must insist that problems have solutions. They cannot admit to uncertainty but must, instead, provide answers and explanations. We expect them to determine how an undesirable outcome could, and therefore should, be prevented. But traditional story renders events that cannot be averted and problems that can't be solved. Indeed, if there *is* a solution or explanation, there isn't much of a story. Emma Bovary brings about her downfall by violating the structures of her community but her nature—and so the causes of her actions—are a given, and she cannot escape them. Though, at times, Flaubert himself seems critical of her, he knew she could not avoid her fate. Story is focused on exactly those problems that the positivist Ernst Mach refused to acknowledge *as* problems because they cannot be solved.[35]

In farce, there often appears to be a simple solution to the predicament. Individual scenes and, indeed, the entire play may hinge on a missing piece of information—like a telephone call that could clear up the whole sorry mess. But while the solution is obvious to *us*, it utterly eludes the figures. They are frantic marionettes, as ineffective and helpless as Oedipus, jerked about by outside forces. No less graphically than tragedy, farce renders events that cannot be prevented or managed by those who are caught up in them.

Traditional story does not explain what determines our lives or how we might control them. Any explanation would, moreover, be countermanded by the plot, which demonstrates that we cannot for long harness cause and effect to our own purposes. In narrative all solutions are temporary. Even the harmony at the end—a wedding in comedy and death in tragedy—is but a brief respite before a new eruption or conflict sets off a new story. A true and lasting solution would constitute the end of narrative. It is no closer than utopia and would become possible only if we were to accept the dictates of the forces "from outside"—or brought them under our control. Until such a time, we shall continue to be out of harmony with the often incomprehensible whole of which we are a part—trying at once to accommodate to it and to find ways of bending it to our purpose.

It is often assumed that story endorses our social structures, and it is true that those in fiction who stand outside the community pay a price for violating its rules: communal laws are broken only to be reaffirmed when the perpetrator comes to a sorry end. But the relationship of traditional story to our structures is complex and contradictory. Though it seems to endorse them, and though the hero often protects the community against

an intrusion of chaos—like the sphinx or plague—the plot is *itself* an analogue of the very forces that play havoc with our lives.[36]

STORY IS AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE INCOMPREHENSIBLE

The chaos rendered by the plot is not simply a means of frightening us back into the bounds of our structures, but an encounter with the nonhuman, the incomprehensible, the 'meaningless.' Since the unknown cannot be rendered without becoming known and so losing its reality, story can only evidence it *indirectly*—in the effect of the plot on the figures, its shrouded origin, and its indeterminate meaning. It may seem as though the known outcome of story transforms the fearful and uncertain into the familiar. But knowing that Snow White will survive and marry a prince does not 'familiarize' or tame the supernatural powers without which she would perish, nor account for the evil in her stepmother. The assurance of a happy ending fails to dissipate the sense of human helplessness and marginality that pervades the tale, though it may make it easier for us to face them.

Traditional story is paradoxical and so is its effect on us. Confronting our fears can free us of them and facing the unknown can be liberating. For the unknown is less confining than the known, and we—like the figures themselves—may take hope from a situation that shades into ambiguity and uncertainty. Despite its precluded ending, traditional story is never deterministic, since its origin is indeterminate. We may, moreover, find comfort in our limitations, for if we *could* control our existence some people would surely get their hands on the levers and work them to their advantage. The knowledge that we are at the mercy of forces no one can long command is—like death itself—not simply devastating but also reassuring.