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John Holloway

Excerpt

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1

Supposition and supersession: a model of analysis for narrative structure

I

The first and preliminary part of this chapter examines Todorov's remarks, in his article 'Structural Analysis of Narrative' (*Novel* 3, no. 1, Fall, 1969), on certain tales in the *Decameron*. These are advanced as dealing with a 'concrete problem' which 'illustrates' what Todorov 'conceive[s] to be the structural approach to literature'. The second part (sections II–V) offers an alternative analysis of the *Decameron* tales. The third part comprises some observations, from a similar point of view, on *Crime and Punishment*. The anterior purpose of the whole discussion is to identify at least some points where insights about 'structure', in a fairly strict sense, seem to bear genuinely upon the insights of the literary critic.

Todorov considers four *Decameron* tales in his essay: day 1. tale 4, day 9. tale 2, and day 7. tales 1 and 2. The first pair are about nuns or monks with lovers, the second pair about wives with lovers. 'It is easy to recognize that these four plots . . . have something in common', he says. He endeavours to 'express that' by means of a 'schematic formulation' which displays what is common to the four plots. This common something is expressed as a series of 'actions', put in generalized terms. Todorov acknowledges an extent of difference between the first two tales, where the key point in both narratives is that 'authority' proves to be as guilty as the culprit; and the second two, where the key point is that 'authority' supposes the culprit not to be a culprit at all. He therefore offers alternative statements of the fourth 'action' in the sequence of actions common to all the tales. His total account (the spatial arrangement below I believe clarifies Todorov's interpretation rather more than he clarified it himself) runs as in table 1. Todorov annotates and expatiates a good deal, but this is the core

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Narrative and structure*

2

Table 1

		Action no.	
		1	X violates a law
entails		2	Y must punish X
entails		3	X tries to avoid being punished
entails		4	either Y violates a law
			or Y believes that X is not violating a law
entails		5	Y does not punish X

of his account as to the essence of the findings of the 'structural approach to literature' in this case.

It must be conceded that this account falls short of adequacy. First, the above is barely 'structure' of narrative, because it is too near to summary of narrative. To talk about structure is to talk about form *in the sense that what one says can be formalized*: which means that it can in principle be expressed in a formal notation, a symbolism. Thus Propp's discovery about the Russian folk-tales he analysed¹ may be expressed by saying (1) that the events in any such folk-tale are a subset of a basic set; (2) that a sequential relation holds between any two events in the basic set; and (3) that every ordered pair of events in any existing tale must reappear as such in the basic set. That was the core of Propp's discovery, and it related wholly to form. The same cannot be said of Todorov's analysis, and I do not see how it could be generalized so as to be stated formally without becoming vacuous.

Second, the analysis is imperfect in that it effectively elucidates neither the structural similarity, nor the structural difference, between the first pair and the second (wife/husband) pair. To be sure, the two pairs are, as Todorov says, alike. But the structures of all four do not in the least look identical. On mere inspection, the two members of each pair are more like each other than either is like either member of the other pair; and if analysis of the likeness does not, almost of itself, throw up an account of the difference also, it is likely enough to be inadequate even over likeness. This problem will be resumed in section IV below.

The third point is surely the decisive one. Todorov envisages the relation between individual actions (as he calls them) to be one

1. V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, transl. L. Scott (2nd edn, University of Texas, 1968).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Supposition and supersession*

3

of *entailment*. Certainly, this is nearer the truth than to think of them as one simply of *sequence*. Clearly the relation to be identified is not that of sequence ('occurs subsequently to') alone, because the whole point and interest of these stories (as of almost any) is that each 'action' is somehow 'called out' or rendered appropriate, or something of that kind, by its immediate predecessor (or more truthfully, by all its predecessors collectively). On the other hand, there is certainly not an entailment relation. To say '*a* entails *b*' is to say 'if *a* then not-possible not-*b*'. Self-evidently, no such relation, or anything like it, holds between actions 2 and 3 in Todorov's sequence (see table 1), nor between his actions 3 and 4. Mere inspection is enough to show the suggestion for an extravagance. The matter need not be pursued.

More important is the fact that no entailment relation can be thought to hold between actions 1 and 2, or 4 and 5. I will not appeal to Hume's exposure of attempts to argue from *is* propositions to *ought* propositions, though I note in passing that propositions such as 2 are for the most part entailed by several propositions together, not just one. But the fact is simply that entailment is not a characteristic relation between contiguous narrative events. To think it is so is to suppose that the narrative *could not possibly* take a turn other than what it does, that there could not possibly be a narrative beginning with Todorov's 'action' 1 that does anything other than proceed through 2, 3, and 4 to terminate at 5. No one believes that. We know at once that the matter is otherwise. We also know surely, with a like immediacy though for quite other reasons, that 'action' 4 in these tales is not 'entailed' by action 3 (nor by actions 2 and 3, nor 1, 2, and 3 if it comes to that). Here the relation seems to be different from that between 1 and 2: but even more clearly, it is not entailment.

II

These two facts bring the discussion to its first point of real interest. What sort of relation do we in fact see between 'actions' 1 and 2, or 3 and 4, once we have set ideas of entailment aside? There appear in fact to be two more or less contrasting relations. For that between 1 and 2 in Todorov's analysis the Scots word *propone* seems to be appropriate. *To propose* is to 'propose for consideration, acceptance, or adoption' (*OED*). To say that a monk has violated a law *brings up the matter* of his abbot's punish-

ing him. This does not mean that it is not possible for the abbot not to do so, nor that he will do so, nor anything of the kind. Nor will it do to say that it ‘creates an expectation . . .’, though that is certainly nearer the mark. Narrative expectations are determined not only by the items of the narrative but also – and more – by the whole context of the narration, and are a complex and dubious matter. The title heading of *Decameron*, ‘Day Two’ (‘*si ragiona di chi, da diverse cose infestato, sia oltre all sua speranza riuscito a lieto fine*’) in fact makes us confidently expect, for example, that in these tales abbot will *not* punish errant monk. But action 1 above certainly raises the possibility of punishment. It proposes that for acceptance or adoption. To narrate 1 is, we may say, to ‘propone’ 2. We might call 2 a ‘proposition’ if we were drawn towards coining terms. I propose instead to call such an item, more simply, a ‘supposition’. Todorov is right to speak of its ‘modality’. The exact status of the suppositions which make part of any narrative warrants further elucidation. Suppositions, one may note, do not arise in a narrative only in respect of (to put the matter inadequately) events which do not happen. Rather, they arise all the way through, and in quantity. Then, as a regular thing there is a supposition of some event X which is fulfilled or realized if X eventuates. These four stories will illustrate that. When the reader finds in the first pair that the abbot or abbess also has a lover, he is at once disposed to think something more or less like ‘then no doubt he (she) will have to let him (her) off’ – that is, there is a supposition that (5), and thus the story is that (5) eventuates. It may be helpful at this point, incidentally, to distinguish what I might call minor suppositions, which relate to what the characters will do or say *next*, for example, and major suppositions, which relate to the outcome and resolution of the whole tale. It is the latter which concerns the rest of this chapter.

The relation between Todorov’s 3 and 4 is something else. Here, there is not the faintest hint of ‘entailment’ (to revert to that misnomer). So far from that, we have the sense, at any such point in a work, that the narrative is taking a quite new turn: as if the last thing we should expect about, say, a nun who was involved with a lover would be that her abbess would be involved with a lover too. This is only a *prima facie* way of looking at the matter: as we become familiar with the *genre*, our expectations are probably reversed, and we must remember that ‘expectations’ is anyway not the right word for the reading experience. The question, here

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John Holloway

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Supposition and supersession*

5

as elsewhere, is in fact of what the narrative 'propones': of the suppositions that it progressively puts forward for acceptance or adoption. At every stage in the action some new one is being added or some of the established ones eliminated. The reading experience, at least for narratives like those of the *Decameron*, is created within what might be termed the system of *two sets or series*: the series of events (Todorov's 'actions') on the one hand, and the suppositions which generate and proliferate along with these. Thence come the intrigue and suspense of the narrative.

To say that the suppositions proponed by the narrative are numerous is probably true in all cases and certainly in some. But in the *Decameron* tales analysed by Todorov in his article the suppositions are only numerous if we have regard to the minor suppositions. With regard to suppositions relating to the resolution and outcome of the tales, there are on the whole *only two*: and it is at this point that we reach matters about structure which may be expressed in formalized terms but which are of genuine interest from a literary standpoint.

Speaking in broad terms, we may say that narratives comprise (1) events which happen in (2) states of affairs: neither (1) nor (2) is sufficient to make up a narrative by itself. In the *Decameron* tales, we recurrently find an opening section which establishes a state of affairs, and then this is followed by something of quite another kind, something that constitutes the first significant event of the story. Let us call this event the *initiating event* of the narrative (e_i). The key fact about it is not that it is the *first* event in the tale (events may occur in the preliminary section, that which establishes the initial state of affairs) but that it is the first item of any kind in the narrative to *propone a supposition* in the sense explained above. Hence its significance.

Tales 7.2 and 9.2 follow rather similar and rather conspicuous patterns in their earlier stages. What is meant by that may be shown, briefly, by summary as follows. In 7.2 there is an initial preliminary set establishing the first state of affairs: the poor mason who lives in Naples and has a 'bella e vaga giovanetta' as wife. This story sets up a small social group, a sub-society, established in a stable way of life; and it uses the appropriate grammatical marker as regards tense in doing so. 'La lor vita *reggevano* come *potevano* il meglio.' The initiating event then follows, however, and replaces the past continuous tense by the

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John Holloway

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Narrative and structure*

6

past definite. '*Avvenne* che un giovane de' leggiadri . . . s'innamorò di lei.' Something of a new stable society is created once the 'giovane' becomes the lover and joins her in the house of a morning as soon as he sees the husband go off for the day. '*Così molte volte fecero.*'

There then comes a second event of consequence. One morning the husband returns ('*a casa se ne tornò*'). In 9.2 the preliminary set ('*Sapere . . . dovete in Lombardia essere un famosissimo monisterio . . . nel quale . . . v'era una giovane . . .*', etc.) is once again followed by the initiating event that the 'giovane' '*s'innamorò*' with a handsome young man, who then visits her '*occultissimamente . . . non una volta ma molte*'. Once again, something approaching a new but stable order is established: what happens not once but many times over proposes no supposition about the future save perhaps that it will happen more times still – and there would be nothing to narrate. That is not the situation however, '*avvenne una notte che egli . . . fu veduto*'. There occurs, that is, a second event of consequence much like that in 9.2.

The narrative of 1.4 is somewhat more condensed, but the same pattern of preliminary set ('*era un monaco*', etc.), initiating event ('*fa* accordato con lei e seco nella sua cella ne la menò'), and significant second event ('*avvenne* che l'abate . . . sentì lo schiamazzio') may be identified, and of course in each case the significance of these second events – that the husband returns unexpectedly, the young man is seen, the abbot hears the commotion – is that they also each propose a supposition which is somehow the contrary of that proposed by the initiating event. That event, each time, proposed the termination of a stable state for a certain social group and its replacement by another condition. The second event, hereafter called the *reversing event* (e_r), proposes, in some form, the termination of what the first initiated.

III

If tale 7.2 is considered more closely, it transpires that the polarity set up by these two events is sustained repeatedly by the detail of the narrative. For convenience I summarize this below (see table 2). Such a narrative may be seen in terms of a fairly sharply defined structure constituted by (1) *relations between the events of the narrative* and (2) *relations between the suppositions they propose*.

Supposition and supersession

7

Table 2

Event in the narrative	Propones the supposition
Husband returns unexpectedly, finds door locked, knocks, gets no answer.	Wife's illicit love affair will be discovered (A).
Husband praises wife's honesty for locking door.	Converse of (A): the love affair will not be discovered (\bar{A}).
Wife is obliged to admit husband while lover hides (in a barrel) in the same room.	(A)
Wife takes initiative and complains of husband's idleness in returning.	(\bar{A})
Husband says, on the contrary, he has found a purchaser for the barrel.	(A)
Wife says she already has one, at a higher price.	(\bar{A})

This may be the moment to introduce a complication which would render the discussion more exact; though for the most part, having mentioned it, I shall ignore it in order to avoid cumbrousness of expression. Strictly speaking, what in any narrative propones a supposition is not an individual item in the narrative but the *total* of items up to and including that one. What will be said about narrative structure in the rest of this discussion will be based throughout on the model of thinking of a narrative not as one set of events but as a *set of sets*: each member of this total set is a set of events which represents the narrative *so far as we have read* (or listened) *up to a certain point in it*. The distinction is fundamental, and it seems to me to conform significantly to our actual reading experience. We read, say, sentence (n) of the narrative and have a certain sense of that as a whole, *so far*. Then we read sentence ($n + 1$), and form a new total sense; likewise again when we have read sentence ($n + 2$). A diagram (of a narrative with five events, as in Todorov's analyses) may clarify this (see table 3). Strictly speaking, the proponing relation relates a line in

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Narrative and structure*

8

Table 3

1. Successive events in the narrative	2. Successive narrative sets in the reading	3. Supposition Proposed by a set
e_1	e_1	
e_2	$e_1 e_2$	
e_3	$e_1 e_2 e_3$	A
e_4	$e_1 e_2 e_3 e_4$	\bar{A}
e_5	$e_1 e_2 e_3 e_4 e_5$	A

column 2 with an item in column 3, though in the discussion which follows the terminal item alone will usually be cited. Narrative structure is being considered here not in terms of column 1 (which represents the *text*, not the structure of the text) but by what may be said of the set of sets constituted by the total contents of column 2, line by line.

In these narratives there appear to be two major suppositions: they are proponed, respectively, by the initiating event and the reversing event – or rather, to speak once again more strictly, by the items comprising the narrative up to and including the former of these, and by the same up to and including the latter. At this point, one can perhaps begin to indicate the structure, in a mathematical sense of that word, of such narratives as these; and in doing so recognize how this has interest for literary study.

To begin with, we can see the structure of such a narrative as not a single set of event-items but as a set of sets or rather series of sets, each greater than its predecessor by one item, and each representing our sense of the narrative as we read it progressively on. We shall have the set of event-items $\{e_1 . . . e_i\}$, say, where the event (e_i) is the initiating event. That set, therefore, will be the first to propose a supposition. Somewhat further on, our reading up to a later part of the narrative will supply the set $\{e_1 . . . e_r\}$ where (e_r) is the reversing event, and this will be the first set to *propone the converse* of the supposition proponed by the set $\{e_1 . . . e_i\}$.

Both of these suppositions, we should note, relate in fact to a *final term* in the series of sets, to how the narrative will resolve and conclude: either the lovers will continue indefinitely to meet ‘molte volte’ (‘and if they have not left off, they are feasting still’, to recall a familiar narration marker for a certain type of tale

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Supposition and supersession*

9

resolution), or, there is a last time, and part of the resolution of the narrative is that they do not meet again.

The structure of narrative may now be further articulated from the summary schema offered above for *Decameron* 7.2; for here, the set $\{e_1 \dots e_r\}$ propones the supposition A, the set $\{e_1 \dots e_{r+1}\}$ propones the converse (call it \bar{A}), the set $\{e_1 \dots e_{r+2}\}$ propones A once again, and so on. Since in no case is it the last item, in isolation and by itself, which propones the new supposition, but rather the new member in the series of sets, we may regard the fact that such-and-such a set propones A (or \bar{A}) as a *relation between the members of that set*. Thus, the members of the set $\{e_1 \dots e_r\}$ are related by an r -adic relation² by virtue of which they propones A, the set $\{e_1 \dots e_{r+1}\}$ by an $(r + 1)$ -adic relation by virtue of which they propones \bar{A} , and so on. It should be noted that of the two suppositions proponed, one is a stasis and the other is the opposite: we might say, cataclysmic. One perpetuates a social order, the other violates or terminates it. Which is which, is not constant from tale to tale. The matter is one way round in the ‘molte volte’ narrations, the other in the others: and this indicates a significant difference in structure between narratives like 1.4, and narratives like 7.2 and 9.2, where the disruption of social order itself becomes a matter of ‘molte volte’ and thus a kind of new order.

We are now in a position to set out such a structure schematically. This structure comprises a series of sets, each one greater than the last by one item (the new item, the ‘next step’ in the tale as we call it); and each proponing, alternately, the supposition A or \bar{A} . We may set this out, calling to mind the idea that the set $\{e_1 \dots e_r\}$ propones by virtue of an r -adic relation between the n members and so on, and treating the reversing event as (e_r) where $(r - i)$ may = 1, as in table 4, and so on. The structure of the whole is then represented by the entire *series* of these relational propositions. On reflection, however, we may simplify this. For if we consider on the one hand what is to be understood by these i -adic or r -adic relations, we see that all we know about them is that they are what makes $\{e_1 \dots e_i\}$ propones A, $\{e_1 \dots e_r\}$ propones \bar{A} , and so on; and if we consider, on the other hand, what we understand by A or \bar{A} , it seems to me – I am not very sure about this – that we mean simply that the whole narrative has one last term (like ‘and the lovers never met again’) or another (like ‘and if they have not left

2. An r -adic relation being simply a relation between r items or elements, as a diadic relation is a relation between two, triadic between three, etc.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Table 4

$\{e_1 \dots e_i\}$	R_i	A	(The events up to and including the <i>initiating</i> event propone . . .)
$\{e_1 \dots e_r\}$	R_r	\bar{A}	(The events up to and including the <i>reversing</i> event propone a contrary outcome.)
$\{e_1 \dots e_{r+1}\}$	R_{r+1}	A	
$\{e_1 \dots e_{r+2}\}$	R_{r+2}	\bar{A}	

off, they are doing it still') – whether these are explicit or merely implied making no difference. Therefore, the structure may be stated more simply by thinking of a *single* relation between members of the successive sets (that pointed to, in our common readers' parlance, by an expression like 'at this stage it looks as if . . . will . . .') and by treating the two suppositions as two alternative possible terminal sets – that is, total narratives. By that expression is meant the narrative as we shall have it on concluding our perusal of it (not of course its structure, but merely its contents). We then have the structure of such a narrative represented by a series of sets of the kind in table 5: the *structure* of the whole narrative still being represented by the entire series of these relational propositions.

IV

This kind of analysis strikes me as apposite to the most striking literary qualities of the tales: their basic simplicity (for the structure indicated above, though elaborate, may in fact be seen to be relatively simple); their constant stimulation of the reader's curiosity as to outcome; and the binary, yes–no nature of that curiosity. It also enables us to indicate a structural distinction between the two monastery tales (1.4, 9.2) and the two marital tales, which is obvious enough in fact, but of which Todorov had nothing to say. This distinction may be elucidated if we consider more closely the preliminary set of items as indicated above (p. 5). For if this preliminary set consists of the item $\{e_1 \dots e_{i-1}\}$ – the items, that is to say, up to but not including the initiating event – then it is clear that in every narrative there are many items in the preliminary set which are not explicitly stated but which the