The Classical Plot
and the Invention of Western Narrative

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Everybody knows what plot is. 'Readers can tell that two texts are versions of the same story, that a novel and film have the same plot. They can summarize plots and discuss the adequacy of plot summaries. And therefore it seems not unreasonable to ask of literary theory that it provide some account of this notion of plot, whose appropriateness seems beyond question and which we use without difficulty.'[1]

Yet in recent practice such an account of what we understand by 'plot' has proved extraordinarily elusive.[2] Narratologists, especially, have been unhappy with the word (and such equivalents as *intrigue/intreccio*, *trame/trama*, *action*, *Handlung*, *Fabel*). Some standard textbooks avoid the term altogether (Genette 1980, Bal 1985/1997); others push it to the margins (Prince 1982) or treat it as a casual synonym (Bordwell 1985ab; cf. p. 6 below), while some openly question whether it carries any useful meaning at all (Rimmon-Kenan 1984: 135). To find any extended, unembarrassed discussion of the concept one has to look underground: to the fascinating but rarely acknowledged literary-theoretical ghetto of creative-writing handbooks, with their deviant reception of Aristotle and forbidden fascination with the poetics of authorial composition. It may not be too late to reclaim the word, but the task has been made stiffer by the emergence in the last quarter-century of a widely accepted system of narrative categories in which 'plot' plays no recognised role. And yet, the idea of plot, in Aristotle's *mythos*, lies right at the centre of the theoretical system from which narratology begins. It is also probably the narrative term most people untouched by formal literary theory would find it easiest to use in everyday analysis; and this very intuitiveness makes it

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[1] Culler 1975: 205.
[2] Prince 1987: 71–2 and Wales 1987: 355–7 are useful starting-points, but the only extended treatments are the exemplary and complementary discussions by Egan 1978 (on prenarratological theories) and Ronen 1990a (on narratology and after). There are many surveys of broadly relevant theories of narrative structure and content; see especially Scholes 1974: 59–117, Culler 1975: 205–24, Chatman 1978: 43–95, Segre 1979: 1–64, Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 6–42, Ricoeur 1983–7 ii.17–91, Martin 1986: 81–129, Stewart 1987, Jonnes 1990: 1–54.

tempting to suspect that the idea of plot is a flag for something innate in our mental apparatus for understanding narrative. How, then, has it managed to fall through the terminological net?

Much of the answer must lie in its very ease of use. 'Plot' is a vernacular term, and as such not only resists formal definition, but is in a way designed to substitute for it. We use the word to talk about a variety of things we recognise in the way stories are put together, and the way they affect us. But like 'heaven', 'common sense', or 'a federal Europe', it is really a tag to identify a *hidden* quantity – a quick answer to a question too loosely formulated to have one. Its usefulness and persistence lie precisely in the fact that it is a label for the absence of a more formal representation. To define one, it is not enough simply to lay down a definition *ex cathedra*, or to negotiate a diplomatic middleground between competing uses, or to hunt for some superinclusive formula that can encompass the range of applications. We need to look beyond, to the questions about the way narrative works to which the idea of 'plot' is part of the answer.

The difficulty here is that there are a number of competing priorities, not always clearly articulated, for what we want a notion of plot to do. Take what seems like a simple case. In a common, perhaps the commonest, vernacular usage, 'plot' is used as a synonym for *story*: what happens in a narrative, the sum of the events the storyline recounts. When we speak of 'summarising the plot' of a novel or play, we mean a paraphrase of what we perceive to be its basic story content, the events abstracted from the text that recounts them. Here, for instance, is Aristotle's summary of the 'story' (*logos*) of the *Odyssey*: 'A man being away from his home for many years, under the hostile eye of Posidon, and alone; and the situation at home, moreover, being such that his property is being wasted by suitors, and they are plotting against his son – the hero returns after great hardship, and after revealing his identity to certain persons makes his attack, saving himself while destroying his enemies' (*Poetics* 17.1455b17–23).

But there is one difficulty here already. How do we agree on what constitute the essentials in a story outline? Why does Aristotle feel that the wrath of Posidon is part of the *Odyssey*'s *logos*, and the support of Athene is not? Why does the suitors' wasting of Odysseus' property get a mention, but not their pursuit of his wife? Why does Aristotle, in contrast to most modern readers, feel the essence of the poem is concentrated in its second half, and that IX–XII contain no details significant enough to deserve explicit mention?[3] What makes the essentials essential, and how do we recognise their significance?

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[3] In fact Aristotle's distillation is extraordinarily acute. For answers to these questions see respectively pp. 139–40, 142, and 137.

And there is a more subtle problem as well. Even when we perform this everyday act of synopsis – of summarising the 'plot' of a book or a film – we convey far more than mere events. Inevitably, we find ourselves simultaneously trying to say something about those events' narrative *articulation*. We tend to distinguish, as Aristotle did in his abrupt shift of construction, between preparatory set-up and main action ('It's in 1943, when France is still occupied but the African colonies are technically outside Nazi control; and he runs this bar where all the refugees hang out while they're waiting for American visas to come through . . .') Like Aristotle, we use the present tense, as though we are living through the unfolding of the narrative over again ('. . . and Peter Lorre passes him a set of exit papers, but then gets shot, so he hides them in Sam's piano . . .') And we easily succumb to a further temptation that Aristotle resists only by straining both summary and syntax: we report events not in their own internal chronological sequence, but in the order they were reported to us ('. . . and it turns out they were lovers in Paris, when she thought her husband had been killed, but she never told him back then that she was even married . . .')

What we are already doing here, of course, is making an instinctive separation between the *events* of the story and their *telling*: what the Russian formalists distinguished by Shklovsky's famous terms *fabula* and *sjuzhet*. This distinction is a cornerstone of modern narrative theory, even though there has been huge disagreement over the precise definition of the two terms and the boundary between them, and scarcely less over how to present them in English. *Fabula* (in English, usually 'story') is the series of events the work recounts, but imagined stripped of all the artifices of storytelling: a series of actual events in their natural order, in what merely happens to be a fictional world. In contrast, *sjuzhet* is the account of those same events that we actually get, reordered and reshaped in the process of telling to reach and affect the audience or reader in a particular and deliberate way.[4] (The best of the English equivalents proposed is 'narrative', though it is a long way from ideal: see pp. 18–19. below, and the Glossary.) In some kinds of fiction – tales of detection, for instance – the reconstruction of the *fabula* from the *sjuzhet*, a hypothetical 'objective' story from the story told, is the *raison d'être* of the whole work. And when we run the two together in our attempt to describe the 'plot' of *Casablanca*, we are

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[4] Ironically, this terminology works in every language but Russian, where the formalists' choice of everyday words to pressgang into technical service is the wrong way round to deal with some nuances we would nowadays want to include in the distinction. In ordinary Russian usage, *fabula* can mean a story in its actual manifestation as a text, but *sjuzhet* cannot; it can, however, as its etymology implies mean the 'subject' (whether story or theme) treated by a narrative, something *fabula* cannot cover.

expressing our instinctive sense that there is something more to what we mean by 'plot' than simple story – that what is told may be less important than the shape it is given in the telling.

But if our sense of plot is inadequately covered by *fabula*, still less can it be explained as a synonym for *sjuzhet* – which is unfortunate, as 'plot' has become the accepted English translation for the latter,[5] despite the strange nonsense it makes of the word's native usage. It is disconcerting to be told in a classic textbook of film theory: 'The term *plot* is used to describe everything visibly and audibly present in the film before us . . . The film's plot may contain material that is extraneous to the story world. For example, while the opening of *North by Northwest* is portraying rush hour in Manhattan, we also see the film's credits and hear orchestral music.'[6] (By analogy, the 'plot' of *Middlemarch* would presumably include the chapter numbers, and perhaps that of *Little Dorrit* the Phiz illustrations.)

Nevertheless, a distinction of this kind has long been felt important to pinning down a definition of plot. It is hinted at already in Aristotle, particularly in his use of the terms *logos* and *mythos* – the terms in the *Poetics* regularly rendered in English as 'story' (sometimes 'argument') and 'plot'. But it would be misleading to claim (as still suggested, for example, by Prince 1987 *s.vv.*) that Aristotle anticipates the formalist distinction. For one thing, both terms are polysemic in Aristotle's actual usage: *mythos* means sometimes 'plot', sometimes 'myth', sometimes both,[7] while *logos* (never formally defined) means 'speech' much more often than it means 'storyline'. What is more, the two terms are only once juxtaposed,[8] and never explicitly contrasted;[9] on the contrary, the distinction between story and narrative is blurred at least as often as it is observed. And most

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[5] Lemon & Reis 1965: 68; cf. Wales 1987: 357.

[6] Bordwell & Thompson 1993: 67.

[7] See the careful analysis by Downey 1984 (who properly points out that the problem is as much in our use of terms as in Aristotle); cf. Halliwell 1986: 57n16.

[8] 5.1449b8: Crates is describes as the first comic playwright to have composed 'stories and plots', a statement that does nothing to clarify the distinction (if any) between the terms.

[9] The closest is 17.1455a34 with 1455b8, where Aristotle summarises the *logos* of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris* and then labels as 'outside the *mythos*' the reasons for Orestes' Crimean voyage. But the passage can equally be invoked to support the view that *mythos* and *logos* are in fact synonymous (as argued by Belfiore 1992a: 108,128, cf. 1992b: 362). Ἔξω τοῦ μύθου is usually taken to mean either 'outside the primary action' (but this is also true of other events narrated in the prologue to *IT* and apparently accepted by Aristotle as part of the *mythos*) or 'inessential to the chain of causality in the play' (in this case, a debatable claim). The phrase occurs only here, though we find 'outside the play' (ἔξω τοῦ δράματος) at 14.1453b32 and 15.1454b2, and similar expressions at 15.1454b7, 18.1455b25, 24.1460a29. If consistency is to be found in Aristotle's usage, we must posit a *threefold* distinction between *logos* (the story or *fabula*), *mythos* (the set of events that constitute the essential causal chain), and *drama/tragoidia/mytheuma* (the subset of plot events included in the primary action of the play). See the thoughtful treatment by Roberts 1992.

importantly, Aristotle has *two* quite separate terms to describe the story the narrative recounts, depending on whether he is interested in its ability to be summarised (*logos*) or its internal unity (*praxis*); and it is the latter term, not the former, that is used contrastively for the definition of *mythos* itself.

In fact, like so much else in the mosaic of elliptical jottings and after-thoughts that is our *Poetics*, that definition of *mythos* is let fall almost in passing. It turns up in the middle of an ungainly sentence whose main purpose is to complete the famous list of the six qualitative elements of tragic drama. Spectacle, music, and diction have already been explained; there remain the three elements of *mythos*, *ethos*, and *dianoia*, all of which are now derived from the earlier definition of the object of tragic representation as a particular kind of action. Aristotle's deeply embedded periods, essential to the logical structure, are not reproduced in any English translation I know.

Since it (tragedy) is a representation (*mimesis*) of an action (*praxis*),
   and it (the action) is acted out (*prattetai*, cognate with *praxis*) by particular agents (*prattontes*, participle of the same verb),
      who will necessarily be particular kinds of person in respect of their moral character (*ethos*) and their ideas (*dianoia*) –
         for it is through these (character and ideas) that we assess people's actions,[10]
            and it is through their actions that all people succeed or fail –
   and (since) THE PLOT (*mythos*) IS THE REPRESENTATION (*mimesis* again) OF THE ACTION (*praxis* again) –
      for BY 'PLOT' HERE I MEAN THE ORGANISATION (*synthesis*) OF THE EVENTS (*pragmata*, passive cognate of *praxis*: 'things done' as opposed to 'doing'),
         by 'moral character' that which makes us say that the agents are particular kinds of person,
            and by 'ideas' passages of dialogue in which they argue something or express an opinion –
then there are necessarily six qualitative parts of every tragedy: these are plot, moral character, diction, ideas, spectacle, and music. (6.1449b36–1450a10)

Now, Aristotle clearly does here recognise the importance of a distinction between story and its narrative presentation. For Aristotle, and the current in early Greek critical thought to which he is responding, the distinction is expressed in the idea of *mimesis*, literally 'imitation'. The essence of art is to create *images of things*, and in the elegant opening chapter of the *Poetics* Aristotle has sketched out a general typology of the arts on the triple differentiae of what the things are, what the images are

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[10] At this point a marginal gloss has infiltrated the text as a parenthesis: 'there are two causes of actions, ideas and moral character'.

made of, and – a third criterion for the special case of narrative – how the image is created. In the case of drama, for instance, the *things* are human actions; the *images* are made of words, music, and movement; and the images are *created* by real people pretending to be those imaginary people.

Yet the kind of higher-level 'organisation' of story events Aristotle denotes by the term *synthesis*[11] has little to do with the interface between story and narrative as narratologists nowadays conceive it – the selection of what events to report, in what order, from what viewpoint, and with what kinds and degrees of emphasis or colouring. Aristotle's 'organisation' turns out to be something quite different, and to come much closer to our vernacular understanding of 'plot'. It is the *internal articulation of story events:* the composition of a story whose individual events link closely together in a satisfyingly coherent and interesting way.

But what does make a story interesting? What *kind* of organisation makes a set of story events cohere? This question is one that has risen high on the agenda of recent theory about the basic semantics of fiction: the problem of *narrativity*, of what distinguishes a story from a non-story, or makes one story more interesting than another.[12] And Aristotle's own solution to this fundamental question is surprisingly complex, protean, and finally elusive. But its consideration will take us right through a range of variously sophisticated modern views that attribute the coherence and affectivity of plot to a whole hierarchy of different narrative levels.

The simplest view would locate interest entirely in the choice of story *incidents* in themselves. After all, certain kinds of story event clearly do carry an intrinsic affective payload, irrespective of their structural context and narrative treatment. A kiss, or a punch on the nose, is intrinsically a more charged event than a handshake. And Aristotle himself did recognise that some kinds of affectivity could indeed reside at this level of the narrative process. Tragedy's delivery of pity and terror, for example, could be increased by the simple inclusion in the story of an element he called

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[11] Sometimes *systasis*: the terms are used interchangeably over the course of the treatise.

[12] 'Narrativity' (sometimes 'tellability') is necessarily a relative rather than an absolute term; good discussions in Prince 1982: 144–64 and Ryan 1992a, 1997. There have nevertheless been some engaging attempts to draw a line around what exactly constitutes a non-story. As a minimal instance, Leitch suggests an eventless narrative such as 'Once upon a time they lived happily ever after' (1986: 10). Ryan, however, suggests there can be failed stories even with a process of conflict and resolution: 'Mr Fox was hungry, so he asked the crow to give him some cheese. 'OK,' said the crow, 'let's share it and neither of us will be hungry.' Moral: sharing makes good friends' (1986a: 319). The classic showcase is Meehan's collection of 'mis-spun tales' from his pioneer program TALE-SPIN, which offers several enchanting clinkers: 'Henry Ant was thirsty. He walked over to the river where his good friend Bill Bird was sitting. Henry slipped and fell in the river. He was unable to call for help. He drowned' (1976: 94).

pathos – defined, in splendid deadpan, as 'a destructive or painful action (*praxis*), such as deaths in public view, agonies, injuries, and all that sort of thing' (12.1452b11–13).

But it is hard to imagine, and Aristotle was at pains not to propose, a view of plot that would attribute the interest of a story *entirely* to the kind of isolated events recounted – except perhaps in certain narrative forms of very limited affective range, such as pornography or slapstick. The nearest thing I know to such a theory is Polti's remarkable *Thirty-six dramatic situations*, much the most entertaining of the largely unrewarding modern attempts at a taxonomy of plot patterns,[13] which attempts to explain the intrinsic interest of all serious drama by the inclusion of items from an *à la carte* of affective predicaments. Yet even there many of Polti's 'situations' are concatenations of events rather than minimal or isolable motifs,[14] and it would be the height of perversity to claim that stories derive no significant part of their impact from the way groups of incidents *combine* in succession. If that were so, the most tragic tragedy would consist of nothing more than a pageant of executions or a plotless gladiatorial spectacle.[15]

Then does the affective component lie in the surface-level *sequence* of events? This has certainly been claimed in our time, and was tried out by Aristotle in one celebrated chapter (13), the bravura analysis of reversal patterns in tragedy. By careful consideration of how well each possible combination of categories delivers the prescribed emotional pay-off of pity and terror, Aristotle is able to identify one particular pattern that carries the strongest available affective charge – a good or morally undistinguished (but not evil) character whose fortunes take a turn for the

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[13] The most respected have been Crane 1952, Friedman 1955, Frye 1957; cf. Wright 1982: 108–36. The *Poetics* itself well illustrates the hazards of such an approach in the two systems it offers for tragedy, their relationship to one another obscure: the famous distinction at 10.1452a12 between 'simple' and 'complex' plots; and the notoriously problematic typology of tragedies at 18.1455b32–56a2 into 'complex', 'tragedies of suffering', 'tragedies of character', and a fourth category shrouded in textual corruption whose tantalising exemplars are '*Phorcides*, *Prometheus*, and all plays set in Hell'.

[14] *e.g.* 'Vengeance taken for kindred upon kindred' (4), 'Murderous adultery' (15), or 'Discovery of the dishonour of a loved one' (27).

[15] In a Souriauesque final chapter of considerable sophistication, Polti himself freely conceded that his 'situations' were not in themselves *elementary* structures, but could themselves be described in terms of an underlying system of three 'actors' – which he ingeniously equated with the Thespian protagonist (or hero), the Aeschylean deuteragonist (or opponent), and the Sophoclean tritagonist (the crucial complicating agent or object). Moreover, the thirty-six situations could themselves be concatenated by an '*Art de combiner*' to generate more complex scenarios (which Polti whimsically offered to supply on order to 'dramatic authors and theatrical managers' by the gross or dozen at prices to be negotiated, 1895: 182–3) – and to support the arresting claim that 'we cannot, however great our simplicity, receive from the drama, or from life, more than one thousand three hundred and thirty-two surprises' (178; Ray's translation).

worse (not the better) as a result of a gigantic mistake (μεγάλη ἁμαρτία: not a moral flaw or offence).

But the difficulty all such surface-structural theories of plot have to face sooner or later is the challenge of explaining *why* their particular sequence should work better than any other. It is possible to evade the question by claiming a correlation outside the realm of narrative altogether, such as a sub-Frazerian ritual pattern (as in Raglan's *The hero*), or a sub-Jungian archetypal allegory of psychic growth (as in Joseph Campbell's *The hero with a thousand faces*). But solutions of this kind have not won much credibility among theorists (though Campbell's model has been consciously adopted by story *tellers* as the template for some well-known American heroic fictions, most notably John Barth's novel *Giles Goat-Boy* and George Lucas's films *Star wars* and *Willow*). Without clear empirical evidence for the existence of the pattern claimed, such models find it hard to escape the charges of being arbitrary, methodologically naïve, poor in actual explanatory power, and insufficiently generalisable to account for more than a modest class of traditional or traditionalist narrative types.

A more ambitious solution is to look for a *deep structure* underlying the production of individual story patterns. At two points in the *Poetics* Aristotle himself attempts a limited version of this for particular constellations of plot motifs, by breaking them down into a system of elementary constituents and running through the permutations in which these can be combined.[16] But the attempt to extend and generalise this procedure to the analysis of narrative as a whole is largely a phenomenon of the structuralist era, inspired in the fifties by the pioneer projects of Propp and Souriau,[17] but driven by the new and initially attractive hypothesis that stories, like other kinds of mental and cultural structure, are organised and understood through syntactic mechanisms similar to those of natural language. This quest for a workable *grammar* of fiction became the Grail of narrative theory throughout the 1960s and 1970s – initially among French literary theorists, but increasingly and internationally amongst workers in the new disciplines of semiotics, cognitive science, and artificial intelligence,[18] who were looking for ways of designing and imple-

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[16] *Changes of fortune* are classed by moral status of subject, direction of change, and mechanism of change (13.1452b34–53a12); *pathe* or acts of violence by relationship of subject to object, subject's awareness, subject's intent, and degree of fulfilment (14.1453b14–54a10).

[17] *Morphology of the folktale* appeared in Russian in 1928, but its Western influence begins with the 1958 translation. On Souriau's *200,000 situations dramatiques* see Scholes 1974: 50–8, Elam 1980: 126–31, de Toro 1995: 129–30.

[18] In the mid-seventies, early AI researchers took on the ultimate challenge of *generating* story texts automatically by computer – an enterprise marked by some dramatic early successes, in particular the remarkable (though now very dated) computerisation of Propp by Sheldon Klein's team at the University of Wisconsin (Klein *et al.* 1974), and the

menting formal models of how narrative is apprehended by the mind. Some milestone works came out of this enterprise in the sixties, including Todorov's *Grammaire du Décameron*, Barthes's 'Introduction', Kristeva's *Texte du roman*, Greimas's *Sémantique structurale* and the classic papers that became the kernels of his two collections *Du sens*; while the seventies saw the proliferation (especially in North America) of the 'story grammar' model of narrative that sought to reduce the principles of narrative construction and comprehension to a formal syntax.[19] But by 1980 the story-grammar model was generally felt to have failed, and with it the prevailing linguistic model of narrative structure – partly because of doubts about its actual explanatory resilience, partly from disillusion with its tendentious assimilation of narrative forms to syntagmatic structures, partly in the face of stiff competition from rival event-based models,[20] but above all out of frustration with its worryingly arbitrary application of what were supposed to be rigorous formal categories.[21]

If there is a deep structure, then, to the syntax of well-formed narrative utterances, so far it has proved discouragingly elusive. Does this leave any hope for the story-structure view of plot? As it happens, a quite different principle of story organisation is suggested by a number of forceful passages in the *Poetics* itself. The clearest is 9.1451b33–5: 'Of simple plots and actions (*mythoi* and *praxeis*) the worst are the episodic ones. By an episodic plot, I mean one in which episodes follow one another in a way that is neither probable nor necessary.' This famous 'probable-or-necessary'

still classic TALE-SPIN program by James Meehan at Yale (Meehan 1977/1980, 1981). Klein's approach was structuralist and linguistic; Meehan's, in practice far more successful and influential of the two, adopted the quite different technique of programming a story 'universe' of characters, environment, props, and rules, and allowing stories to be generated by the characters' strategic interactions within that universe as they pursue the goals (such as the satiation of hunger) assigned them. Such work had fallen from fashion in AI circles by the time its significance began to trickle through into narratology: see Ryan 1986a, 1986b, 1988, 1991, and for related work Klein *et al.* 1973, Fournel 1977, Correira 1980; Dehn 1981; Lebowitz 1984, 1985. A fascinating recent development, independent of this earlier work, has been a vogue for commercial software assistants for film plotting, of which the best-established are Collaborator (a simple questionnaire-based knowledge-elicitation program acknowledging Egri's published and unpublished writings; cf. Brown 1994), Plots Unlimited (a moderately sophisticated combinatorial situation-generator inspired by Cook 1928), Blockbuster (formerly Storyline), and the extraordinary Dramatica (cf. Phillips and Huntley 1996).

[19] The principal attempts are Rumelhart 1975, Thorndyke 1977, Mandler and Johnson 1977, and Stein and Glenn 1979; important review symposia in special issues of *Poetics* (9.1–3, 1980) and *Journal of Pragmatics* (6.5/6, 1982).

[20] Schank 1975, Schank and Abelson 1977; Wilensky 1978; Beaugrande and Colby 1979; Black and Bower 1980; Lehnert 1981, 1982; Habel 1986; Seifert, Dyer, and Black 1986; Ide and Véronis 1990.

[21] Black and Wilensky 1979 (cf. replies by Mandler and Johnson 1980, Rumelhart 1980); Ryan 1979; Brewer and Liechtenstein 1981; Johnson-Laird 1983: 361–70; Wilensky 1983; Ronen 1990a. For attempts to revive the model see Mandler 1987, Shen 1989ab.

formula turns up regularly in Aristotle's discussion of the linkage between story events,[22] and is clearly crucial to his idea of their 'organisation'. Several key passages place judgemental stress on the *causal* connection between story events: the famous prescription that a well-made plot have a beginning, middle, and end (*sc.* of a causal chain); the rule-of-thumb recommendation for story length; the incisive remarks on what does and what does not constitute narrative unity.[23] And in one perceptive aside the principle is extended further: tragedy's affective payload of incidents arousing pity and terror 'will occur most, or more, when they occur because of one another but contrary to expectation' – in other words, when the *audience* can see the catastrophe coming, but the *characters* cannot.[24]

Yet even Aristotle stops short of claiming that the surprise (ἔκπληξις) generated by such tight causal programming is the sole or even the primary source of *interest* in a plot. More often, in fact, Aristotle's plea for a naturalistic mimesis of causality seems to be concerned not with affectivity or *surprise,* but with the principle of narrative *transparency* – avoiding the kind of obtrusive contrivance that might call attention to the artificiality of fiction, and thus snap the audience out of its narrative trance. It may be a necessary condition of successful plotting, but it is hard to see how it could be sufficient; and it is at this point in the search that the *Poetics* runs out of general answers.[25]

Even so, Aristotle's emphasis on the *causal* connection between story events has long been felt to touch something essential in our modern understanding of plot. Not surprisingly, then, the idea of causality stands at the centre of what is perhaps the most celebrated maverick definition of 'plot' in our century. Like Shklovsky's closely contemporary formulation, it is one of a contrastive pair: best remembered, and most often quoted, in its famous illustration.

We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. 'The king died and then the queen died' is a story. 'The king died and then the queen died of grief' is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality over-

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[22] An exception is 9.1451a36–8, where the emphasis is on the plausibility of the story events selected or invented.   [23] 7.1450b26–7; 7.1451a11–15; 8 *passim.*

[24] 9.1452a3–4. Else *ad loc.* thinks it is the audience, not the characters, who are surprised; Lucas's note on 1452b7 puts a strong, though not watertight, case against this view. Aristotle does not, of course, mean that plots have to be rigidly predictable and pedestrian: twice in the treatise he approvingly paraphrases a paradoxical couplet of Agathon's to the effect that unlikely things are quite likely to happen.

[25] To advance the argument for the special case of tragedy, Aristotle has to argue that the form – apparently uniquely – targets a specific affective range of narrow frequencies on the emotional spectrum. It is hard to see how any such claims might be made for, say, epic.

shadows it. Or again: 'The queen died, no one knew why, until it was discovered that it was through grief at the death of the king.' This is a plot with a mystery in it, a form capable of high development. It suspends the time-sequence, it moves as far away from the story as its limitations will allow. Consider the death of the queen. If it is in a story we say: 'And then?' If it is in a plot we ask: 'Why?' That is the fundamental difference between these two aspects of the novel.[26]

Narratologists like this celebrated paragraph, but find it hard to do much with it. Forster pretended to no academic rigour; his attractive distinction remains an isolated *aperçu*, floating free of any wider theoretical system. But there are some surprisingly clever things about his formulation, and they have pointed the search for an understanding of plot in one of its most important directions.

Forster's chapters on 'The story' and 'The plot' move away from Aristotle somewhat, by proposing two contrasting (though not exclusive) ways in which narratives can organise fictional events to produce an affective response from the reader. The first, story, builds its response on the affective interest of the bare events. Strong storytelling involves the minimum possible refraction of the fictional events through the prisms of narrative gimmickry. No gaps in the story, flashbacks and fill-ins, no mischief-making with sleights of viewpoint and narration: the text presents the tale with pure transparency, the flow of words evoking the life in time.

But a plot is different. In a plot, the text becomes a game of detection. The narrative snips, elides, or conceals key elements of the story, and the reader is challenged to piece it together again. There is just one clue: all events are linked by the logic of natural causality. By applying our own experience of cause and effect, we can rebuild a personal model of the story events from the text. Those events still carry their native charge; but the activity of repeatedly answering questions of 'Why?' has exposed a structure of dominating causes, and with it a sense of the life of value. For Forster, not surprisingly, this is incomparably the higher goal.

Forster's 'story/plot' division is clearly close in scope, as well as in time, to the formalists' *fabula/sjuzhet*. (The difference lies chiefly in Forster's debatable insistence that a story can exist without the higher levels of narrative organisation implied by his 'plot' – whereas formalists would argue that the story is always mediated through some kind of narrative recasting, however persuasive the *illusion* of transparency.) But the real strength of his formulation – and the reason, surely, for its impressive longevity – is the importance it places on the hermeneutics of *reading*. For Forster, plot is that property of narratives that forces us to read actively and intelligently between the lines: to use, to value, and ideally to extend our human

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[26] Forster 1927: 116–117.

understanding of people and causes through the process of making sense of events, whether real or imagined. The affective power of story may indeed, therefore, *reside* in its internal causal structure; but it is only *activated* by first being cast in the form of a hermeneutically challenging narrative, and then being worked on by an intelligent reader.

This is clearly a powerful and sophisticated solution, and its reader-centred model of how plot works has inspired – with varying degrees of directness and acknowledgement – some classics of modern narrative analysis.[27] But we have moved some way from a view of plot that treats it as a synonym for, or even a property of, story in the narrow sense; and we should consider whether the nature of what we think of as 'plot' does not lie entirely on the farther side of the categorical fence straddled by Forster's definition. If plots only become plots by being cast in a certain form and read in a certain way, is plot a property of stories at all? or simply a quality grafted on to them by the art of narration and the act of reading?

This is why the most recent views of plot have shifted attention away from the story content *per se* and on to the way it is *processed*: the way readers respond to stories as their texts unfold, and in particular the way our expectations of certain kinds of narrative fulfilment are manipulated from moment to moment as we read. A powerful example, and probably the best-known, is Brooks 1984, which uses a loosely Lacanian notion of 'desire' to analyse the pervasive and complex ways in which novels lead us on and, in the process, develop meanings of a uniquely *narrative* kind.

The main drawback of such a perspective, of course, is that it seems to make any *formal* definition of plot impractically difficult. In a sense, it is really an anti-definition, since in this view plot is necessarily *all* pattern read, or readable, in a narrative text: 'the logic and dynamic of narrative, and narrative itself a form of understanding and explanation'; 'a structuring operation deployed by narratives, or activated in the reading of narratives . . . the logic and syntax of those meanings that develop only through sequence and succession'; 'the global dynamic (goal-oriented and forward-moving) organization of narrative constituents which is responsible for the thematic interest (indeed, the very intelligibility) of a narrative and for its emotional effect'.[28] It is hard to see what, if anything, such a definition might exclude. In its extreme formulation, it obliterates the distinction between narrative and other textual forms: thus one occasionally encounters claims for the 'plot' of a non-narrative poem or essay.[29]

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[27] Explicitly Forsterian: O'Grady 1965, Falk 1965, cf. Sternberg 1978: 10–14. Other important reader-centred studies: Ruthrof 1981; Brooks 1984; Branigan 1992.

[28] Brooks 1984: 10; ibid. 113; Prince 1987: 72. For a book-length defence of such a view, see Pinnells 1983, and cf. Sturgess 1992 (who is careful to define this quality *not* as 'plot' but as 'narrativity').   [29] See *e.g.* Leitch 1986: 139–43 on 'Plot in the English sonnet'.

But we should be careful of falling victim here to a form of 'textual fallacy' – a reductive assumption that the properties of texts can be sufficiently described in terms of their internal linguistic or other textual structures, rather than of the interaction of those structures with the worlds in which they are created, transmitted, and consumed. On the one hand, plot is undeniably an attribute of *texts,* something that lies on a page (or in some equivalent public space) for the eventual use of a human consumer. Plots reach us not as events, or as conceptualisations of events, but as words (or other equivalent signs); and if our model cannot at least find room for this then clearly it is a failed, or at best incomplete, description. Yet at the same time plots, like every other property of texts, have to be *decoded*, by being processed in the brain of a reader. And when we attribute 'plot' to a text, we are describing not a property resident *in* the text, but an aspect of our *experience* of that text. The strength of Brooks' model lies precisely in its recognition that plot is not an inert assemblage of printed words but a complex, dynamic phenomenon constructed during and in the activity of reading. But his particular chosen approach has its self-set limitations too: its acknowledged distrust of formal methods (and especially of the achievements of narratology),[30] and its not unrelated preference for a Freudian model of the reading mind over more recent and empirically sanctioned research on mental processes.

Now, on the face of things, it might indeed seem attractively economical to assume that we use just the same decoding mechanisms on plots as we use to process any other set of squiggles and dots on a page of paper into the affective world of mental phenomena. All types of linguistic event, after all, share a common vocabulary and syntax; unfold identically in real time, in an orderly linear sequence; and depend similarly for their decoding on a background of semantic and cultural assumptions in the reader's experience. So a theory of how we understand plot would ideally be able to explain how we make sense of many, perhaps all, other kinds of dynamic organisation in discourse: persuasive arguments, say, or formal structures, or networks of imagery and verbal association. We might even wonder whether there is anything unique to the organisation of *narrative* that requires the specialised label of 'plot' to describe it.

But the evidence of cognitive science seems increasingly to argue that there is. Empirical studies of narrative comprehension and recall, which have returned from the wilderness with the resurgence of cognitive studies in discourse analysis, suggest that we do represent events in a way qualitatively different from our processing of language. Unitary models of discourse comprehension have proved inadequate and unwieldy, and

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[30] See the remarks by Pavel 1984 (esp. 361); Bal 1986 (esp. 558); Prince 1988: 361.

since the 1970s there has been growing acceptance of the inconvenient principle that the mental structures we use to apprehend events and propositions seem to involve a different *kind* of mechanism to those that process text.[31] In particular, the event-based empirical models sometimes lumped together as 'schema theories', whose achievement and remaining drawbacks are discussed in the next chapter, have largely killed off the earlier story-grammar approach. It seems increasingly unlikely that we can make sense of plot without invoking a mechanism of this kind – despite the once unthinkable Cartesian separation this seems to demand between the flesh of the text and what Aristotle resonantly dubbed its narrative soul.[32]

What seems needed, then, is a view of the process we call 'plot' that can make graspable sense of what increasingly looks like a complex, multi-tiered, and as yet imperfectly understood *cognitive* phenomenon; a view, moreover, which will somehow find room for the notions of affectivity, causality, and structure that seem so important to our sense of what plots do, while simultaneously respecting the family resemblances in traditional usage, preserving the provenly useful categories of mainstream narratology, and answering the practical needs of analysing and comparing how plot works in complex literary texts and other media. In the next two chapters, I try to suggest a way in which these very diverse specifications may perhaps after all be met.

[31] The literature is very large; a useful early review in Johnson-Laird 1983: 356–95, with more recent surveys in Gerrig 1993, Semino 1997, and especially Emmott 1997. Major contributors include Gordon H. Bower, William P. Brewer, Jean Matter Mandler, David S. Miall, and their respective collaborators.   [32] *Poetics* 6.1450a38.