Chapter 1

Introduction

Story/Discourse

We tell ourselves stories in order to live.
Joan Didion, "The White Album"

There are lots of ways to think about narrative theory. We might consider the countless casual interactions people have with books, movies, news stories, stump speeches, comics, conversations, and rumors. Whenever someone (on the phone, in a book club, online, or in line at the store) talks about a story's beginning or end, its pacing, the believability or the likability of its characters, he or she is engaging in a kind of narrative theory, an effort to understand particular narratives in relation to assumptions and expectations that govern either some kinds of narrative or narratives in general. We might also consider more professional efforts to understand or to evaluate narratives, the work and writing of critics and academics who make their livings assessing or analyzing stories either in terms of particular aesthetic, social, or political values or in terms of the expectations and ideas that circulate at a given moment in time. We might think here of the film critic who sees every film in a season and so can say with authority what films work best and why; or of the think-piece blogger who looks at a handful of contemporary novels in order to see how the war on terror or the new ubiquity of social media affects the way we tell stories now; or of the literary critic who reads Renaissance drama or Victorian fiction in order to identify how history's different ideas and practices shape the form and content of narratives (how Elizabethan stage design limits or conditions the beginnings and ends of plays, how serialization affects thinking about suspense, how culturally specific ideas about death and dying affect thinking about the possibility of closure, and so on). These are also theories of narrative, attempts to understand both the role that narratives play in particular cultures at particular times and the shaping effects that a culture's assumptions and beliefs have on the development and evaluation of narrative as such.

A third kind of narrative theory is the subject of this book. Narrative theory in this more limited sense names a more and less coherent intellectual

tradition that works explicitly to understand the general rules of narrative alongside the many particular forms that narratives can take. It is often associated with the rise of structuralism in the 1960s and includes but is not limited to what is sometimes referred to as classical or postclassical narratology.[1] It in fact goes back at least to Aristotle and draws on and influences many of the major intellectual movements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: phenomenology, psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism, postcolonial theory, queer theory, cognitive science, evolutionary psychology, and so on. It takes as its subject the question of how different kinds of aesthetic order, arrangement, and inflection can differently manage and thus make meaningful different and sometimes the same events; it considers both the *what* and the *how* (and sometimes the *who* and the *where*) of the stories we tell. Narrative, in this sense, is what results from the effort to make real or imagined events and objects meaningful in relation to one another, whether that effort is fictional, historical, political, financial, psychological, social, or scientific; *narrative theory* is, in that case, what we do when we try in a variety of ways to understand those different efforts to arrange events and make them meaningful. This narrative theory focuses, in other words, on the necessary relation between two aspects of narrative: (1) the events, the actions, the agents, and the objects that make up the stuff of a given narrative and (2) the shape that those events, actions, agents, and objects take when they are selected, arranged, and represented in one or another medium. In what follows, I will try to focus on this sense of narrative theory as *a study of relations* without losing sight of its connection to other efforts to understand and to make stories.

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The last few decades have seen the publication of a number of important works of narrative theory in this third sense, works that take up one or another aspect of narrative – narrators or ideal readers, the cognitive or ethical aspects of narrative, narrative and new media, narrative and evolutionary biology, and so on – as well as works that offer differently broad accounts of the questions, the methods, the controversies, and the texts that make up the wide field of contemporary narrative theory. A number of these have been indispensable to me as I have tried to think about what belongs in a critical introduction to narrative theory.[2] Where, however, this book differs from some of these others is in how it understands its role as an introduction. That is, where these books are often excellent at addressing the *what* and the *how* of narrative theory, they are – and, I think, properly so – less invested in the *why*. That is, much of the work in narrative theory since the late 1960s has been

dedicated to establishing the discipline, to clarifying its methodological investments, to laying out and demonstrating its tools, and to identifying what does and does not qualify *as a narrative* in one or another sense. It is because this work is so good that I feel free to turn my attention to a different but related set of questions: why is there or why should there be narrative theory in the first place? What motivates our shared and broadening cultural interest in the analysis of narrative as well as in narrative itself, a broadening interest that some critics have cast as a "narrative turn" felt throughout the humanities and social sciences? As Martin Kreiswirth puts it, "Narrative has become a significant focus of inquiry in virtually all disciplinary formations, ranging from the fine arts, the local and natural sciences, to media and communication studies to popular therapy, medicine, and managerial studies."[3] When did it become self-evident that narrative ought to be treated not only as a fact of human life but also as an especially pressing problem for these different fields? What drives individual writers and thinkers to turn when they do to the theory of narrative?

I hope, in other words, to make a historical and conceptual case for the use, the force, the apparent necessity, and the real intensity – sometimes even the pathos – of some theories of narrative. As a result, I will try here both to construct a loose history of efforts to think about narrative, an account – another narrative, if you will – of how it was and when it was that narrative began to take on the disciplinary and cultural centrality that it has today; I will also try to read some of these works against the grain, to see them as sometimes talking about narrative in order also to talk about *something else*. Once again, there are many fine books that do great and essential work explaining how some of these different texts work; there are books on narratology or structuralism, Aristotle or Hegel, Henry James or Roland Barthes. I will refer to these more particular works often; several are listed in Suggested Further Reading. Instead, though, of once again explaining or defining narrative theory, I will try rather *to interpret* it, to reveal some of its motivations, and to understand what other ideas or desires govern a particular writer's particular turn to narrative as an especially important aesthetic, cultural, or historical problem. In this sense, I will want to think both about theories *of* narrative and about some of these theories *as* narratives, as sometimes more and sometimes less linked efforts to think about how meaning is made at different moments in time.

What will emerge, in that case, is a maybe idiosyncratic prehistory and history – a *genealogy* – of narrative theory, an account that treats narrative theory as a powerful way of thinking about the world and our efforts to make sense of what the world means. In a fine account of the beginnings of

narratology, David Herman, drawing on Nietzsche and Michel Foucault, writes that "genealogy is a mode of investigation that seeks to uncover forgotten interconnections, reestablish obscured or unacknowledged lines of descent; expose relationships between institutions, belief-systems, discourses, or modes of analysis that might otherwise be taken to be wholly distinct or unrelated."[4] While I will often draw on and refer to recent work on and developments in narrative theory, I will also look at works and movements that appeared *before* or *alongside* and that seem to me to have made narrative theory possible. I will thus look at a number of works and fields that seem initially to have little to do with narrative theory proper, at works of philosophy or political theory or history, at works that seem dedicated to particular narrative genres as opposed to narrative in general. My claim is that in order to appreciate why and how writers and thinkers from Aristotle to the present have turned when they did to questions about the representation of events, about plot, about character, about narration and narrative discourse, we have to understand not only what narrative theory is but also why it has, at particular moments in time, seemed capable of answering questions that both include and exceed the nuts and bolts of narrative structure. I hope, in that case, both to situate narrative theory within a wider field of inquiry and to identify some necessary qualities or concerns that have made thinking about narrative so vital.

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In *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative Theory*, H. Porter Abbott defines narrative as "the representation of an event or a series of events," as, in other words, a relation between, on the one hand, a real or imagined action or event and, on the other, a *representation* of that real or imagined action or event.[5] Abbott goes on to suggest that, while there is and always will be controversy about how exactly to define narrative, his definition "allows us to look at the full range of the most interesting and vital aspects of the field: the complex transaction that involves events, their manner of representation (whether it be by narrator, actor, paint, or some other means), and the audience. The difference between events and their representation is the difference between *story* (the event or sequence of events) and *discourse* (how the story is conveyed)."[6] I will rely both on this definition and on the *story–discourse relation* it assumes in nearly everything that follows; that said, I am less interested in supporting a particular definition of narrative than I am in understanding how competing definitions work within narrative theory. Indeed, as Abbott says, part of what makes his definition "controversial" is its reliance on the idea of *representation*, a fact that has seemed to some critics

too limiting or ideologically loaded.[7] We will see as we look at writers such as Lukács, Bakhtin, Barthes, and Genette how different theorists have made thinking about the ideological character as well as the historical limits of representation into an important part of narrative theory.

So, despite important reservations, most definitions of narrative do tend to assume one or another relation between events and the representation of events: Gérard Genette writes that "if one agrees, following convention, to confine oneself to the domain of literary expression, one will define narrative without difficulty as the representation of an event or sequence of events, real or fictitious by means of language and, more particularly, by means of written language."[8] Marie-Laure Ryan notes that "most narratologists agree that narrative consists of material signs, the *discourse*, which convey a certain meaning (or content), the *story*, and fulfil a certain social function."[9] For Jonathan Culler, "there is considerable variety among these traditions, and of course each theorist has concepts or categories of his own, but if these theorists agree on anything it is this: that the theory of narrative requires a distinction between what I shall call 'story' – a sequence of actions or events, conceived as independent of their manifestation in discourse – and what I shall call 'discourse,' the discursive presentation or narration of events."[10] Monika Fludernik holds that "the story vs. discourse distinction perhaps constitutes the most basic of all narratological axioms."[11] Suzanne Keen refers to it as a "basic and ubiquitous convention of structuralist narrative theory."[12] And Abbott writes that "this analytically powerful distinction between story and its representation is, arguably, the founding insight of the field of narratology."[13] Although it ends up going in many different and sometimes conflicting directions, narrative theory almost always begins with the *story–discourse* relation.

Some of the theories at which we will look do manage to add one or another third term to the basic opposition between story and discourse. These third terms tend to take one or another form: such critics as Barthes and Genette take care to distinguish the narrator or narration from story and discourse – the *who* from the *what* and the *how* – and, as we will see, critics including Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Lévi-Strauss, A. J. Greimas, and even Nietzsche acknowledge the existence of a deeper structure at work in narrative form, a level of structuration or experience that sits somewhere beneath or beyond the event. That said, although there are these third levels, the analysis of narrative form tends nonetheless to restrict itself to the basic pair: "The supplementary terms or layers," writes David Wittenberg, "are motivated in part by the difficulty of ascertaining how 'discourse' could remain a coherent figuration for representing 'story' without reference to a material or quasi-material substratum in an actually produced text. Yet even

this tripartite or multiple usage tends to devolve back into the more basic or convenient binarism" of story and discourse.[14]

What, though, do narrative theorists really mean by story and discourse? As the represented events as opposed to a representation of those events, *story* tends in mimetic or classic or "natural" narratives to follow certain rules of chronological and spatial order: effects follow causes, one day comes before or after another, you cannot be in two places at the same time, some things – birth, death, April 1, 1987, the first moon landing – happen once and only once. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan writes that "the notion of story-time involves a convention which identifies it with ideal chronological order, or what is sometimes called 'natural chronology.'"[15] As the representation of events as opposed to the represented events themselves, *discourse* follows an entirely different set of rules: where story is limited by certain apparently "natural" laws, discourse is relatively unbound in how it can arrange, attend to, and manage events; unlike story, discourse "can expand and contract, leap backward and forward."[16] A whole *narrative* is in that case the relation and tension that exist between these two different levels; it is the fact that we can read back and forth between them and follow the different rules that organize them.

Because of the difference between story and discourse, the same events can be represented in a more or less unlimited number of ways and can thus lead to an unlimited number of different narratives. For instance, Raymond Queneau's *Exercises in Style* (1947) tells and retells a single, simple story – someone sees a young man in a funny hat and then sees him again two hours later – in ninety-nine different ways: one story and ninety-nine narratives. Another story – a man walks around Dublin – can take up one sentence, ten sentences, or 680 pages (the Gabler edition of James Joyce's *Ulysses* [1922] ships at 2.1 pounds). Similarly, the narrative representation or *discourse* of a failed marriage (we will represent its chronologically fixed *story* as ABC) might begin at the beginning, looking at the hopes and aspirations of a couple, before moving on to the rocky middle and forlorn end (ABC); it might instead begin with the middle, when tensions have begun to rise, and track back to the beginning before moving on past the middle to the end (BAC); or it might begin at the end, flashing back from breakup to beginning and then representing the events that brought about the end (CAB). In each case, the story – a once-happy marriage fails – remains the same while different arrangements of similar or the same events at the level of discourse make for very different narratives, which is to say very different senses of what those same events might mean or how they might make us feel. What defines each narrative is, in that case, how it manages a particular relation between these two levels – story and discourse – and their respective rules.

Many classic narratives work to naturalize or to obscure the artificial or made quality of the *story–discourse* relation (they seem to want us to "lose ourselves" and to become absorbed in the content and not the form); Brian Richardson writes that "mimetic texts" – his term for texts that assume a "natural" relation between events and representations of events – "often try to disguise their artificiality."[17] Other kinds of texts can instead call self-conscious attention to the constructed nature of the narrative relation. Just for instance, *unreliable narratives* depend on an intuited and motivated difference between the appearance of discourse and the imagined truth of a story; when we know that a narrator is unreliable, we look for places where discourse will not or cannot lead to an accurate reconstruction of events at the level of story. When, for instance, the narrator of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864) tells us, "I lied about myself just now when I said I was a wicked official. I lied out of wickedness," he not only offers up a beguiling paradox (does lying wickedly about one's wickedness amount to a kind of truth?) but also drives a wedge between story and discourse.[18] Because he is the narrator and can thus choose what and how to narrate, the possibility that the underground man is a *wicked* narrator willing to "misreport" the facts of the case makes it hard if not impossible to square the rules that govern the two levels of his underground notes. James Phelan has identified six types of unreliable narrators: "They can underreport or misreport; they can underread or misread (underinterpret or misinterpret); and they can underregard or misregard (underevaluate or misevaluate)."[19] In each case, narrators can be unreliable because they "abuse" and thus call attention to the *story–discourse* relation.

Some types of experimental narratives – Alain Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie* (1957) is a classic case – go further and sever the connection between story and discourse insofar as the represented events break or ignore or imply the absence of the natural laws of story (characters die more than once, they appear in two places at the same time, the laws of "natural" chronology are disrupted, etc.). Richardson, the major theorist of "unnatural narratives," writes that the *story–discourse* relation does "not work if applied to many late and modernist and postmodern texts, since they are predicated on distinctions that experimental writers are determined to preclude, deny, or confound."[20] We might also look, as David Wittenberg does in *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative*, to cases in which the imagined mechanics of time travel seem to make events at the level of story just as fungible as their representation at the level of discourse: "In a time travel fiction, even a relatively normal one, no such underlying coherence in the *fabula* [or story] may be assumed."[21] That said, in most cases even these extreme and outlying

examples nonetheless rely on the *story–discourse* relation as a norm against which to work; as Richardson writes, "They nevertheless bear a dialectical relationship to the concept of mimesis, since it is only through that concept that we can understand its violation."[22] By *mimesis*, Richardson means something like the representation of events and thus something like the *story–discourse* relation (I will return to the concept of *mimesis* in the next chapter). To understand a narrative *as* narrative has thus often been seen as the effort to understand how a given case manages or pointedly refuses to manage a representational or "mimetic" urge implied by the relation between story and discourse.

Indeed, one of the fullest and most influential applications of the story–discourse relation appears in Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method.* Although I will discuss *Narrative Discourse* at length in Section 6.3, it will be helpful to introduce some of its terms now. In each of Genette's several chapters, he details another aspect of the story–discourse relation, using it to offer an increasingly complex reading of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu.* How, he asks, are the events that make up a story arranged and shuffled, sent forward or pushed back to produce a particular temporal "order" of discourse? In what ways can the same event be stretched, shrunk, accelerated, or stopped cold so as to produce different effects of discursive "duration"? How are events staggered, punctuated, or repeated in order to produce a "tempo" specific to one or another narrative? In the process of describing the different modulations of story and discourse, Genette develops an elaborate taxonomy, one that relies on a whole set of odd-sounding but powerfully analytic terms: "anachrony," "paralepsis," "paralipsis," "metalepsis," "diegetic," "extradiegetic," and "intradiegetic" as well as more homely but no less useful terms including "scene," "summary," "ellipsis," and "pause." As we will see, we can take the act of naming the different things that narrative can do is part of a larger effort to make narrative strange, to reveal what can seem "only natural" as a complicated and intentional human activity; this urge to show narrative's work aligns Genette with the modernist or postmodern writers Richardson described earlier. It also, as we will see, connects him directly to the Russian Formalists, whom I will discuss in Section 5.2. Genette focuses on the variable relation between story and discourse as a source of aesthetic tension particular to narrative, as that which gives narrative an apparently inexhaustible and disturbing power. Put differently, looking at and naming different aspects of the story–discourse relation give us the ability *to see* what is weird about almost any narrative.

As I have already said, although many texts work to disguise or to naturalize the relation between these two levels, to subordinate the particular

machinations of discourse to the whole effect of a given novel or film, others call alienating and productive attention to the fragility or artificiality of the story–discourse relation, a fact that Genette's scheme helps to explain. For instance, in the devastating third act of *King Lear*, Lear's Fool addresses the audience directly, offering a "prophecy" that foretells chaos, reversal, and social collapse: "Then shall the realm of Albion / Come to great confusion."[23] He then goes on to comment on both the content and the form of his own prophecy: "This prophecy Merlin shall make; for I live before his time."[24] The joke is a hard one: because *Lear* is set chronologically *before* Merlin's later Arthurian setting, the Fool offers not only a prophecy but also a prophecy of a prophecy, foretelling a time when Merlin will in turn foretell a future that looks a lot like the narrated present of *King Lear*; he imagines a future Merlin looking into his future (the future's future) and seeing something like the past. While it might be impossible or at least unwise to try to tease out the whole temporal logic of the Fool's vision, we can say that it is a moment that pushes story and discourse to the verge of collapse, to a point when the relation between events and the possibility of events meaning something appears to have been shattered or almost shattered; of course, by the third act of *Lear*, the failure of social and filial bonds has led to the edge of civil war. The narrative structure of *Lear* seems thus to reflect the play's painful content, as an otherwise intelligible relation between narrative levels and narrative times seems to short-circuit. Shakespeare uses the Fool's anticipation of Merlin's prophecy, which is also a vision of a past that is the present of *Lear*, in order to register in the fractured space between story and discourse what it feels like when history and violence conspire against narrative and social coherence, when, in other words, our familiar narratives are no longer adequate to our experience.

There are, as Genette points out and as we will see, a number of other questions, paradoxes, and contradictions that can make the apparently straightforward relationship between story and discourse both complicated and aesthetically rich. There is, for instance, the basic question of which comes first, story or discourse. On the one hand, it might seem clear that story is a sequence of real events that must precede its appearance in textual, spoken, or cinematic form. We understand that the Second World War and its various events had to have happened before they could be narrated in the form of novels, films, history books, etc. It is impossible to imagine *Saving Private Ryan* (1988) or *Catch-22* (1961) or *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (1960) preceding the Second World War; it might in other words seem obvious that story must occur before discourse and that discourse is simply an aesthetic or conceptual way to organize the raw and abundant data of already available experience

into one or another meaningful form. On the other hand, we can also imagine story as happening not *before* but rather *after* discourse; this is to imagine a particular discourse – a novel, a film, and so on – as a script or a blueprint that allows us retroactively to imagine or to create a "natural" order of story events; Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck write that "just like any deep structure, the story is an abstract construct that the reader has to derive from the concrete text."[25] Emma Kafalenos defines *fabula* (the Russian Formalist equivalent of "story") "as a construct that readers make from a *sjuzhet*" (the Russian Formalist equivalent of "discourse").[26] Monika Fludernik writes that "the story is *always* a construction and an idealized chronological outline."[27] Richard Walsh asserts that "fabula is always relative to and contingent upon both a given sjuzhet and a specific act of interpretation."[28] Writing about the case of postmodern or experimental narrative, Brian Richardson writes, "The representational model of a writer transcribing a preexistent story is here dissolved and supplanted by one that stresses the act of invention and the free play of an author who invents what he claims to recount; or to put it another way, mimesis is here replaced by poiesis."[29] David Wittenberg offers an especially robust philosophical account of what he takes as the narratively necessary but finally false priority of story over discourse: "I will call the ruse of fictional historicity the 'postulate of *fabular* apriority'."[30] And, because she sees story as a conceptual effect rather than an empirical cause of discourse, Rimmon-Kenan write that "far from seeing story as raw, undifferentiated material, [her book, *Narrative Fiction*] stresses its structured character, its being made of separable components, and hence having the potential of forming networks of internal relations."[31] As opposed to standing as the unprocessed occasion for one or another narrative, the stuff of story is in these accounts always already a structured part of a larger narrative process. For these writers, it is only the textual presence of discourse that allows us to imagine and conceptually to construct a series of events that may or may not have happened and that, in any case, cannot exist *as story* (whatever their real status as a series of events) outside our narratively-primed minds.

For some, the chicken–egg question of priority in narrative theory is essentially unanswerable. Jonathan Culler writes that "either the discourse is seen as a representation of events which must be thought of as independent of that particular representation, or else the so-called events are thought of as the postulates or products of a discourse."[32] He goes on to argue that the tension between these two possibilities is essential to narrative theory: "Neither perspective, then, is likely to offer a satisfactory narratology, nor can the two fit together in a harmonious synthesis; they stand in irreconcilable opposition, a conflict between two logics which puts in question the