

Critical Terms for Literary Study

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J Hillis Miller, "Narrative"

Note:

- skim the first 2 pages
- interesting ideas revolve around the 3 key questions being asked
- skim the last 4 pages that provide a close reading of the poem

Narrative

J. Hillis Miller

To My Colleagues in Lit. X

NOTHING seems more natural and universal to human beings than telling stories. Surely there is no human culture, however "primitive," without its stories and habits of storytelling, its myths of the origin of the world, its legends of the tribe or groups of stories about folk heroes. Linguists use the ability to narrate as a measure of advanced language competence. From our earliest childhood we hear stories and learn to repeat them. An example is the story my two-year-old granddaughter echoed from her mother, speaking of herself in the third person as the heroine of her own story: "Mama will carry baby up and down, and then baby will feel *much* better." As adults, we hear, read, see, and tell stories all day long—for example, in the newspaper, on television, in encounters with co-workers or family members. In a continuous silent internal activity, we tell stories to ourselves all day long. Jokes are one form of narration. Advertising is another: "Use this product, and then you will feel *much* better." At night we sleep, and our unconscious minds tell us more stories in our dreams, often exceedingly strange ones. Even within "literature proper" the range of narrative is wide and diverse. It includes not only short stories and novels but also dramas, epics, Platonic dialogues, narrative poems, and so on. Many, if not all, lyric poems have a narrative dimension. Quite a different result is obtained if one approaches Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," say, as a miniature narrative rather than as an organically unified assembly of figures.

Narration, on the other hand, is so natural, so universal, and so easily mastered as hardly to seem a problematic region for literary theory. As Aristotle said long ago in the *Poetics*, plot is the most important feature of a narrative. A good story has a beginning, middle, and end, making a shapely whole with no extraneous elements. The other features of narrative—character, setting, diction, and so forth—are all subsidiary to the chief element of plot. That seems about all there is to say about it. The vast variety of different sorts of stories seems governed in one way or another by these simple laws of unity and economy.

A moment's reflection, however, will show that things are not quite so simple. For example, *why* is it that narration is so universal, present in all human beings

everywhere? The fact that narrative is so universal, so "natural," may hide what is strange and problematic about it. Exactly what psychological or social functions do stories serve? Just why do we need stories, lots of them, all the time? The answers to those questions are not so easy to reach.

Aristotle's answer, again in the *Poetics*, was that narrative—for example, tragic drama, one form of narration dominant in the Greece of Aristotle's time—plays a fundamental social and psychological role. Plays effect what he called, using a medical term, *catharsis* of the undesirable emotions of pity and fear. Tragedy purges these emotions by first arousing them. It works as a kind of homeopathic medicine: tragedy cures the disease by administering a controlled dose of it and then clearing it away. Various other explanations of the nature and function of narrative have been proposed over the centuries since Aristotle. Moreover, the recent decades of this century have seen a tremendous development of diverse theories of narrative, so many and so diverse that it makes the mind ache to think of them all.

Among these are Russian formalist theories of narrative; Bakhtinian, or dialogical, theories; New Critical theories; Chicago school, or neo-Aristotelian, theories; psychoanalytic theories; hermeneutic and phenomenological theories; structuralist, semiotic, and tropological theories; Marxist and sociological theories; reader-response theories; and poststructuralist and deconstructionist theories. As the reader can see, each of these explanations of narrative tends to have a barbarous or jargonistic name that does not tell much about the theory itself. An enormous secondary literature has grown up around each of these approaches to narrative. It would require a book-length study to explain in detail any one of them, but each can be distinguished from the others by distinctive assumptions about narrative each tends to make.

Moreover, though there is much overlapping and contamination of one theory by adjacent ones in the actual practice of teaching and criticism, each of these theories tends to be associated with one or two major figures who either originated the theory or were exemplary practitioners of it: Vladimir Propp, Viktor Sklovskij, and Boris Eichenbaum, for example, for Slavic formalism; Mikhail Bakhtin for the dialogical theory of narrative he originated; R. P. Blackmur, among many others, for American New Criticism; R. S. Crane and Wayne Booth for the Chicago Aristotelians; Sigmund Freud himself, Kenneth Burke, Jacques Lacan, and Nicholas Abraham for psychoanalytic theories of narrative; Roman Ingarden, Paul Ricoeur, and Georges Poulet for hermeneutic and phenomenological theories; Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Tzvetan Todorov, A. J. Greimas, Gérard Genette, and Hayden White for structuralist, semiotic, and tropological theories; Georg Lukács and Fredric Jameson for Marxist and sociological theories; Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss for reader-response theories; Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man for deconstructionist theories.

The inclusion of Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur in my list is testimony to the fact that in recent years history writing as well as fictional narratives have been addressed by narrative theorists. My focus will be primarily on fictional narratives, but the recounting of events that "really occurred" on the stage of history is of course a form of narrative too. The two forms of narration are closely related forms of "order-giving" or "order-finding," in spite of the fact that fictional narratives are subject to referential restraints in a way very different from the way histories submit themselves to history and claim to represent things that really happened *exactly as they really happened*.

The interested reader can go for himself or herself to the vast literature by these authors and their followers. It is not my business here to attempt to summarize all these theories. What is most important for my purposes is the abundance and diversity of them. This swarming diversity of narrative theories is evidence that for us today the question of the nature and function of narrative is a challenging intellectual problem: narrative cannot by any means be taken for granted.

Just why is this? What's the problem? An approach to answering this question may be made by refining a little the question with which I began. I asked, Why do we need stories? To this may be added two more questions, Why do we need the "same" story over and over? Why is our need for more stories never satisfied?

*Why do we need stories at all? Why do children listen so avidly to stories? Why do we never outgrow the need for stories and go on reading novels, mystery stories, seeing movies, or watching soap operas on television even as adults? Reading or watching fictive stories is, when one thinks of it, a strange activity. The reader of a novel detaches himself or herself from the immediately surrounding world of real-life obligations. With the help of those black marks on the page or images on the screen the reader or spectator comes to dwell in an imaginary world whose links to the real world are more or less indirect. One might have thought that by now the reality principle, growing more dominant as civilization grows, would have made storytelling obsolete. Nothing of the sort has happened. As Peter Brooks has observed, if man is the tool-using animal, *homo faber*, he is also inveterately the symbol-using animal, *homo significans*, the sense-making animal—and, as an essential part of the latter, the fiction-making animal. The word "fiction" comes from the Latin *figgere*, "to make" and "to make up." A fiction, as Brooks says, is made up in the double sense of being both fabricated and feigned. This make-believe is a fundamental human activity. It includes game playing, role-playing, daydreaming, and many other such activities, as well as literature proper.*

Why do we need fictions and enjoy them so much? Aristotle's answer at the beginning of the *Poetics* was a double one. We enjoy imitation, *mimesis* (his word for roughly what I have been calling "fiction") for two reasons. For one thing, imitations are rhythmic, orderly, and it is natural to human beings to take plea-

sure in rhythmic forms. In addition, man learns by imitation, and it is natural to man to take pleasure in learning. What do we learn from fictions? We learn the nature of things as they are. We need fictions in order to experiment with possible selves and to learn to take our places in the real world, to play our parts there. Think how many works of fiction are stories of initiation, of growing up—fairy tales, for example, but also great novels like *Great Expectations* or *Huckleberry Finn*. A more modern formulation of what Aristotle asserts might be to say that in fictions we order or reorder the givens of experience. We give experience a form and a meaning, a linear order with a shapely beginning, middle, end, and central theme. The human capacity to tell stories is one way men and women collectively build a significant and orderly world around themselves. With fictions we investigate, perhaps invent, the meaning of human life.

Well, which is it, create or reveal? It makes a lot of difference which we choose. To say "reveal" presupposes that the world has one kind or another of preexisting order and that the business of fictions is in one way or another to imitate, copy, or represent accurately that order. In this case, the ultimate test of a good fiction is whether or not it corresponds to the way things are. To say "create," on the other hand, presupposes that the world may not be ordered in itself or, at any rate, that the social and psychological function of fictions is what speech-act theorists call "performative." A story is a way of doing things with words. It makes something happen in the real world: for example, it can propose modes of selfhood or ways of behaving that are then imitated in the real world. It has been said, along these lines, that we would not know we were in love if we had not read novels. Seen from this point of view, fictions may be said to have a tremendous importance not as the accurate reflectors of a culture but as the makers of that culture and as the unostentatious, but therefore all the more effective, policemen of that culture. Fictions keep us in line and tend to make us more like our neighbors. (If this is true, then changes in the rise and fall in popularity of different genres over time or changes in the dominant medium—first from oral storytelling to print, then from printed books to cinema and television—will have an incalculable importance for the shape of that culture.)

There is, however, another cultural function of narratives, one going counter to the "policing" function I have just noted. Narratives are a relatively safe or innocuous place in which the reigning assumptions of a given culture can be criticized. In a novel, alternative assumptions can be entertained or experimented with—not as in the real world, where such experimentations might have dangerous consequences, but in the imaginary world where, it is easy to assume, "nothing really happens" because it happens only in the feigned world of fiction. If novels coach us to believe that there is such a thing as "being in love," they also at the same time subject that idea to effective demystification, while perhaps at the end showing the triumph of love beyond or in spite of its demystification. Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is a splendid example of this, but many great novels,

for example George Meredith's *The Egoist*, take the same form. There is reason to believe, then, that narratives reinforce the dominant culture and put it in question, both at the same time. The putting in question may be obliquely affirmative: we can ward off dangers to the reigning assumptions or ideologies of our culture by expressing our fears about their fragility or vulnerability in a safe realm of fiction. The officials of repressive regimes who have over the years censored or suppressed threatening novels may, however, have a shrewder sense of the political force a novel can have. It is not entirely an absurdity to say that the novels of Sir Walter Scott caused the Civil War in the United States and sent all those romantically infatuated plantation owners to their doom.

Second question: *Why do we need the "same" story over and over?* The answers to this question are more related to the affirmative, culture-making function of narrative than to its critical or subversive function. If we need narratives in order to give sense to our world, the shape of that sense is a fundamental carrier of the sense. Children know this when they insist on having familiar stories recited to them in exactly the same forms, not a word changed. If we need stories to make sense of our experience, we need the same stories over and over to reinforce that sense making. Such repetition perhaps reassures by the reencounter with the form that the narrative gives to life. Or perhaps the repetition of a rhythmic pattern is intrinsically pleasurable, whatever that pattern is. The repetitions within the pattern are pleasurable in themselves, and they give pleasure when they are repeated.

The quotation marks around the word "same" indicate another meaning for the sameness of the same story. If we, like children, want the same story over and over in exactly the same form, as though it were a magical charm that would lose its efficacy if a word were changed, we also need the same story over and over in another sense. We want repetition in the form of many stories that are recognizably variations on the same formula. If children want nursery rhymes and bedtime stories over and over in exact word-for-word order, they quickly learn even before the age of five or six the rules for proper storytelling. They learn the conventions of formulaic beginning and ending, "Once upon a time" and "They lived happily ever after." They learn the conformity to norm of a story that "works." Many kinds of narrative are demonstrably variations on a conventional form or formula: Greek tragedies, nursery rhymes, fairy tales, traditional ballads, Sherlock Holmes stories, James Bond novels, limericks, even such large genres as "the Victorian novel" or, within that, the forty-four novels of Anthony Trollope, all recognizably members of the same family. This repeatability is an intrinsic feature of many narrative forms. It is the whole point of limericks that there be lots of them and that they all have a family resemblance. The same thing can be said of mystery stories. Variations from the norm draw much of their meaning from the fact that they are deviations from the rules. An example would be a detective story in which the narrator is the murderer, for example Agatha Chris-

tie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, or a Victorian novel, such as Meredith's *The Order of Richard Feverel*, that unexpectedly has an unhappy ending.

The universality of this form of "the same in the different" in narrative has two implications. It implies that we want stories for something they can do for us, something we inexhaustibly need. It implies that this function is not performed primarily by the characters, the true-to-life setting, or even by the "theme" or "message," the "moral," but by the sequential structure of events, the plot. Aristotle, it seems, was right to give plot primacy in narrative. The plot structure of a given narrative seems to be transferable from one story to another with perhaps very different characters and setting. Plot is detachable, translatable. Much recent analysis of narrative—by the Slavic formalists, by French structuralists, by semioticians, and by "narratologists" generally—has been based on this notion. Such theorists have sought in one way or another to find out the secrets of narrative form, its "deep structure." Vladimir Propp's influential *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, for example, one of the classics of Slavic formalism, attempts to demonstrate that one hundred Russian folk tales are all variants of the same structural form. The number of functional elements is limited. Though not all of the elements are present in every story, the sequence of such functions (plot elements such as "interdiction," "interrogation," "departure," "return") is always identical. Narratologists have thought of the laws of narrative as something like a code or a language with a grammar of its own, perhaps something on a larger scale like the grammar of a sentence. Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, the first great work of Western narrative theory, was already a structuralist before the fact, not only in accord with the primacy of plot but in believing he could identify the essential structural features making a tragedy a tragedy and not some other thing.

Seen from this structuralist or semiotic perspective, narrative would be a process of ordering or reordering, recounting, telling again what has already happened or is taken to have already happened. This recounting takes place according to definite rules analogous to those rules by which we form sentences. This means that the secrets of storytelling are ascertainable by empirical or scientific investigation. This makes narrative theory part of "the human sciences." Hence, Propp's use of a term from biology as well as from linguistics: "morphology." The process of storytelling in a given culture or within a given genre at a particular place and time will be bound by certain unwritten but identifiable laws, so that a good story can be distinguished from a bad story, a story from a nonstory.

This structuring of events according to a certain design of beginning, end, and conventional trajectory connecting them is, it should be stressed, by no means innocent. It does not take things as they come. Reordering by narrative may therefore have as its function, as I have suggested, the affirmation and reinforcement, even the creation, of the most basic assumptions of a culture about human existence, about time, destiny, selfhood, where we come from, what we ought to do while we are here, where we go—the whole course of human life.

We need the "same" stories over and over, then, as one of the most powerful, perhaps *the* most powerful, of ways to assert the basic ideology of our culture.

Third question: *Why do we always need more stories?* This is the most difficult of my questions. It would seem that once a man or woman has reached adulthood, with the help of all the narratives with which a growing youth is surrounded, he or she would then be fully assimilated into the culture, with a definite self and a definite role in society and therefore with no more need for stories. This is obviously not the case. I can only hint at a possible explanation for this. But my discussion afterward of several examples may make the issue clearer. It could be that we always need more stories because in *some* way they do *not* satisfy. Stories, however perfectly conceived and powerfully written, however moving, do not accomplish successfully their allotted function. Each story and each repetition or variation of it leaves some uncertainty or contains some loose end unraveling its effect, according to an implacable law that is not so much psychological or social as linguistic. This necessary incompleteness means that no story fulfills perfectly, once and for all, its functions of ordering and confirming. And so we need another story, and then another, and yet another, without ever coming to the end of our need for stories or without ever assuaging the hunger they are meant to satisfy.

One example of this might be that form of narration, almost always present among the myths, legends, and tales of any culture, that has as its purpose the explanation of mankind's origins, where man came from. Anthropologists call these "etiological myths." Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book*, with its stories of "How the Elephant Got His Trunk," and so on, is a collection of etiological legends. Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, Aristotle's archetype of the perfect tragedy in the *Poetics*, has been interpreted by modern structural anthropologists as a narrative of this sort. A myth, that is, a fabulous narrative, may be necessary when no logical form of explanation will work, but the illogical premises will remain embedded in the story. The origin of man, his separation of himself from the beasts and from uncivilized nature, is a kind of chicken/egg problem. What- ever is chosen as the moment of origination always presupposes some earlier moment when man first appeared.

The story enacted with matchless power in *Oedipus the King* "solves" this apparently insoluble problem by presenting a narrative in which both incest and the taboo against incest are seen as simultaneously natural and cultural and in which Oedipus is both guilty and not guilty. Has he not murdered his father and slept with his mother? And yet he did not then know they were his father and mother, and so he has not intentionally committed the Oedipal crimes of parricide and incest. Like a beast he is innocent, since he did not know what he was doing. A beast cannot commit incest because it cannot understand the prohibition against incest. Incest exists only as the transgression of the taboo against it.

The taboo against incest, as the great structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-

Strauss has argued, is a basic trait distinguishing the human species from all other species of life. For a cat, a dog, or a bear, mother, daughter, brother, father may all be sexual objects, but all mankind everywhere at all times prohibits incest. This means that the taboo against incest occupies a peculiar position in human culture. It breaks down or transgresses the binary division between natural and cultural features of human life. Since the taboo against incest is absolutely universal, in the sense that there are no human cultures without it, it is natural to the human species, not cultural. On the other hand, it is a distinguishing feature of human, as against animal, societies, so it must be defined as cultural. The taboo against incest is neither cultural nor natural, or it is both, transgressing the barrier between the two, or, we could say, hovering on the border between them. The same thing might be said about Oedipus, who is like a beast in not recognizing that his mother is his mother and therefore someone he is prohibited from marrying. He recognizes that he has committed an abhorrent crime only when he discovers that she is his mother. Another way to put this is to say that the taboo against incest depends on kinship names; in other words, it depends on the distinctively human possession of language. Oedipus in his ignorance cannot name his mother as his mother and so, like an animal, can be said not to be guilty of incest. When he can name her his mother he knows he has committed incest.

On the other hand, Oedipus *has* in fact committed the horrible crimes of parricide and incest, whether he knew it at the time or not. Here too, it may be, ignorance of the law is no excuse. Certainly the power of the play depends on giving a striking example of that, an example arousing pity for Oedipus and fear that the same thing might happen to us. Oedipus accepts his guilt and punishes himself by blinding himself (a symbolic castration) and by exiling himself from the human community to wander the roads until he dies. On the other hand, again, how can Oedipus be held responsible for acts he did not intend to commit?

Nor is it even absolutely certain, as recent critics have argued, that he did in fact kill his father. There is a contradiction in the evidence about the massacre of Oedipus's father, Laius, at the crossroads. In one account, the murderer is said to have been one man. In another account, there were three murderers. As Creon observes, "One man and three men just does not jibe." Oedipus condemns himself by putting the somewhat ambiguous evidence together in a way that convicts him. He plays the roles of both detective and murderer in this aboriginal detective story.

But it may be this act of narration itself that creates the crime and points the finger of guilt at Oedipus. As Cynthia Chase has observed in a brilliant essay, the crime exists neither in the original acts, which were innocent, in the sense that Oedipus did not know that he was murdering his father and sleeping with his mother, nor in the "now" of the play, in which Oedipus bit by bit pieces together

the data he is given and makes a story out of them. The crime exists somewhere in between, in the relation between the events of the past and the present recovery and highly motivated ordering of them.

It might be argued that *Oedipus the King* does not so much tell a story as dramatize a striking example of the way storytelling, the putting together of data to make a coherent tale, is performative. *Oedipus the King* is a story about the awful danger of storytelling. Storytelling in this case makes something happen with a vengeance. It leads the storyteller to condemn, blind, and exile himself, and it leads his mother-wife, Jocasta, to kill herself.

Oedipus the King, then, far from giving a clear answer to the question of man's origin, is a story about generational confusion, in which a son is also a husband of his mother, a mother a wife to her son, Oedipus the brother of his own children, and so on. Insofar as clear kinship names and identifications are necessary to a man's or a woman's sense of who he or she is and where he or she has come from, *Oedipus the King* presents a story in which the possibility of such clarity is questioned and suspended. The play, it is true, gives a narrative form to the logically insoluble problem of the origin of man. What cannot be expressed logically, one is tempted to say, we then tell stories about. The power of *Oedipus the King* through all the centuries since it was written is testimony to its success as a narrative. The play gave a name, for example, to Sigmund Freud's fundamental psychoanalytic discovery, the universality of the "Oedipus complex." All men, Freud claimed, want to kill their fathers and sleep with their mothers. Recent feminists have had much to say about the way Freud's formulation leaves out one-half of the human race, that is, all the women. Another way to put this is to say that a given story may have a function quite different for a female reader or spectator from the one it has for a male one.

But even if we put that problem aside, we would still need to say that the perennial success of the story of Oedipus may lie more in its powerful narrative presentation of the problem of narration than in any solution it presents to the question of man's origin and nature. At the end the problem remains, though the spectators no doubt understand better what the problem is. Nagging loose ends to the story, such as the ones I have identified, keep the narrative from reaching final clarity, and there remains at the end the fundamental enigma of why Oedipus should be so punished for crimes he has not knowingly committed. And so we need another narrative that will try in a different way to solve these problems, for example, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and after that another story, for example, William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, and yet another, with never an end to our need for more stories.

A further approach to an answer to my questions may be made by looking at two extremely brief narratives in an attempt to identify the basic elements of a story. These are the elements that must be there if we are to say, yes, this is a narrative and not some other thing. What are those elements? I take as my min-

ature examples A. E. Housman's "The Grizzly Bear," and William Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal." Though they are "poems," they are surely narratives too. Here they are:

The Grizzly Bear
The Grizzly Bear is huge and wild;
He has devoured the infant child.
The infant child is not aware
He has been eaten by the bear.

A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal
A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears.
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.
No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

Both of these minuscule narratives contain what I claim are the basic elements of any narrative, even the longest and most elaborate, Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, say, or George Eliot's *Middlemarch*: there must be, first of all, an initial situation, a sequence leading to a change or reversal of that situation, and a revelation made possible by the reversal of situation. Second, there must be some use of personification whereby character is created out of signs—for example, the words on the page in a written narrative, the modulated sounds in the air in an oral narrative. However important plot may be, without personification there can be no storytelling. The minimal personages necessary for a narrative are three: a protagonist, an antagonist, and a witness who learns. Sometimes the protagonist, the antagonist, or the reader may be the witness. Third, there must be some patterning or repetition of key elements, for example, a trope or system of tropes, or a complex word. To put this third requisite another way, there must be some form of narrative rhythm modulating that trope or word. Any narrative, then, to be a narrative, I claim, must have some version of these elements: beginning, sequence, reversal; personification, or, more accurately and technically stated, *prosopopoeia*, bringing protagonist, antagonist, and witness "to life"; some patterning or repetition of elements surrounding a nuclear figure or complex word. Even narratives that do not fit this paradigm draw their meaning from the way they play ironically against our deeply engrained expectations that all narratives are going to be like that.

"The Grizzly Bear," for example, plays ironically against our assumption that we learn from experience. The infant child learns nothing from experience. The little story is an example of that version of narrative form in which the witnessing

narrator learns more than the protagonist does. In fact, it is a hyperbolic example, and that is part of the joke. No Oedipus, this child; nor does the "good guy," the infant child, have any chance at all against the "bad guy" in the form of the grizzly bear.

The pattern of rhythmic repetition with variation here takes the form of the reuse of the same grammatical pattern throughout the poem. The story is told in flat, declarative sentences, two of them turning on "is," two on "has." The last two lines can be read either as two sentences or as one. The fact that the first two lines are single end-stopped sentences prepares the reader to expect the third line to be the same, and then he discovers that the fourth line in fact continues the third. The patterning is what is called *chiasmus*, the crisscross reversal of elements. The grizzly bear is first at the beginning of a sentence, then at the end of a sentence. The infant child is first at the end, then at the beginning. The story begins with the bear and ends with the bear. The child is encompassed within the text, as indeed he is by the bear when he is eaten by him.

The basic trope in this minuscule narrative is also a prosopopoeia, the personification of the bear as a "he." This is repeated when the infant child is also called a "he," though neither the child nor the bear have the self-awareness and minimal mastery of language that justifies the use of the personal pronoun.

"A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" is a much more complex narrative than "The Grizzly Bear," but, like "The Grizzly Bear," it tells the double story of an unaware protagonist, the "she" of the poem, and a knowing narrating witness, the "I" of the poem. Here the narrator speaks for himself rather than being present as an implication of ironic, laconic truth telling, as in Housman's poem. Now the "she" of the poem (usually assumed to be the Lucy of Wordsworth's so-called Lucy poems, of which this is one) "neither hears nor sees," but Wordsworth's narrator can say, in effect, "Before I was ignorant. Now I know. I am one of those, unlike Lucy, who has eyes and sees, ears to hear with and understand." The covert reference is to Matthew 13:12-13, Jesus' commentary on the parable of the sower he has just told: "For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath. Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand."

According to Paul de Man, "The paradigm for all texts consists of a figure (or a system of figures) and its deconstruction. But since this model cannot be closed off by a final reading, it engenders, in its turn, a supplementary figural superposition which narrates the unreadability of the prior narration" (de Man 1979, 205). As de Man's use of "narrates" and "narration" here indicates, all "texts," for him, are narrations. To say that all narratives, including everything from "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" to big novels like Anthony Trollope's *He Knew He Was Right* or Henry James's *The Princess Casanovissima*, are no more than the exploration of a single figure or system of figures is to make a large claim, to say

the least. Nevertheless, it can be shown that Trollope's big novel is genetically programmed, as one might put it, by the question of what is figurative in the expression, "I know I am right," and that *The Princess Casanovissima* turns on the question of what is figurative in the expression, "I pledge myself."

In de Man's model "deconstruction" is a name for learning from experience, and "unreadability" is a name for the impossibility of doing that once and for all. The "unreadability" is indicated by the reuse of the figure or some new version of it even when it has been shown to be illusory or deceptive.

Another way to put this would be to say that a narrative, even a long multi-plotted novel like *He Knew He Was Right*, with all its wealth and particularity of character, incident, realistic detail, may be an exploration of the resonances of a single "complex word," to borrow William Empson's term for such words. A complex word is in a special sense a figure. It is the locus of a set of perhaps incompatible meanings, bound together by figurative displacements, as "worth" may have both economic and ethical meanings, or as "right" may mean to have the right, or to be right, or simply to be "straight," as in "right angle." In a narrative such a word may be explored by being given contexts or situations in which it may be appropriately used. This is like that exercise in language classes, "Use the following words in sentences," or, in more difficult assignments, "Invent a story in which the following words are used." For Empson, a complex word may be the locus of ambiguities, but these are held together in a unified structure, however complicated. I suggest that a complex word may, on the contrary, be the crossroads of fundamentally incongruous meanings. This fact may be revealed—unrolled or unfurled, so to speak—by narrative disjunctions that can never be brought back to unity.

What these somewhat cryptic formulations might mean, "concretely," as one says, may be made clearer by way of a return to "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal." The genetic, narrative-producing figure here is the trope calling a young girl a "thing." This trope is the symmetrical mirror image of calling a bear a "he." Wordsworth's figure is part of everyday speech, as in the refrain of the folk song: "She's a young thing and cannot leave her mother." "At first I thought she was a thing," says in effect the narrator of Wordsworth's little story, "therefore immortal, but now I know how wrong I was. Now I know she was mortal because she has literally become a thing, like a rock, or a stone, or a tree, though in another sense she shares the immortality of the earth, expressed in its eternal revolution. The earth goes round and round and round, and she moves with it. She neither hears nor sees, but I am one of those who has eyes and sees, ears to hear with and understand."

The second stanza, however, commits again the linguistic error that the blank space between the two stanzas demystifies by being the locus of Lucy's death. The death occurs in the blank, outside of language. Language begins again in the second stanza as the claim of a mastery over death, taking the form of the

ability to say the truth about it. "Before I thought she was immortal. Now I know all human beings are mortal, even Lucy. All human beings become, at last, things." But this claim of knowledge and of the right to speak the truth may ironically be not all that different from the first illusory assertion of knowledge: "She seemed a thing that could not die." Let me explain how that is the case.

The symmetrical counterpart of the trope in "thing" is the trope of personification in "touch." The two together form a miniature example of the sort of "system of figures" which de Man claimed might be the nucleus of a narrative. If Lucy is a mere thing, then time, or, more precisely, "earthly years," is personified as an animate being who might try to "touch" Lucy but who cannot touch her because she is a thing. In the same way, the narrator is "sealed" from the knowledge of death by the "slumber" of his naiveté. The word "touch" has a strong sexual implication here. Far from vanishing when the narrator learns about the universality of death, the personification returns intact in the second stanza, though in muted or covert form. It returns in the phrase "rolled round." "Earthy years" are personified as a rapacious being, something like that grizzly bear in the Housman poem, a being that would touch Lucy, seize her, take her. Not the earth but "earthly years" is the antagonist in this poem. In the last stanza that figurative personification remains intact in the image of the earth's motion, measure of earthly days and years, rolling Lucy round. The narrator's formulation also contradicts in the moment of making it his own statement that she now has no motion and no force (the two basic elements in Newtonian physics). As part of the earth, incorporated in it with rocks and stones and trees, as the infant child is incorporated in the grizzly bear in Housman's poem, Lucy now shares in the "rolling," obscurely animate, motion and force of that earth, even though she no longer has the voluntary motion and force she had as a living child.

The narrator-witness's error and guilt may be not simply the claim of a knowledge that his own words ironically belie in his reuse of another version of the same figures he had at first mistakenly used. The performative as well as epistemological dimension of narrative may also be at stake. By "performative" I mean the power of a narrative to make something happen, as opposed to its power to give, or to appear to give, knowledge. Seen as patterned around knowledge, the poem says, "Before he was ignorant as a child. Now he thinks he knows, but his words show he is still as ignorant as a child." Seen as patterned around the performative power of narration, the little story dramatizes the terrifying possibility that figures of speech may have a tendency to realize themselves by a kind of linguistic magic. He thought she was a thing. Death, in the personified form of those half-animate earthly years, obligingly turned her into a thing. It is as if I were to transform someone literally into a turkey if I said, "You turkey," or as Gregor Samsa, in Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," is turned into an enormous cockroach after having been treated by his family and by society as if he were a cockroach. In "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" it may be the poet's lin-

guistic touch that has turned Lucy into a thing. Another of the Lucy poems would support this: "Oh mercy to myself I said, / If Lucy should be dead," and then she *does* die.

"A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" is an example of the presence even in such a brief story of all those basic elements I identified. It is also an example both of the way a narrative depends on the trope of personification and of the way it may be a system of figures deconstructed and then blindly reaffirmed. It seems in this case that the narrator has not really learned what he claims to have learned. To put this another way, it seems as if personification, the fundamental trope of narrative, is so necessary a part of language as to be by no means effaced, not even by the clear recognition that it is illusory.

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