Afterthoughts on Narrative

II

Language, Narrative, and Anti-Narrative

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Narrative is a place where sequence and language, among other things, intersect to form a discursive code. I shall attempt to sketch out a few of the salient features of this code as it has operated in the narrative tradition of Western culture, but first it is necessary to consider the nature of language itself.

We *must* consider the nature of language because many of the problems and confusions in our thought about narrative stem from what seem to me to be a set of misconceptions about language itself. Saussure demonstrated that the link between "sound-image" and concept in language, that is, between the signifier and the signified, was arbitrary in most cases, which is unexceptionable; but he went on to assume that he had demonstrated the arbitrariness of all concepts themselves, which he had not. Charles S. Peirce argued most persuasively that every sign (Saussure's "signifier") must be interpreted by another sign (Peirce's "interpretant"), so that meaning is an endless network linking sign to sign to sign. Some of the most formidable later investigators into these matters, Umberto Eco and Jacques Derrida, for example, have followed Peirce in this, but I would argue that they have not always kept Peirce's notion of sign clearly enough in mind. For Saussure himself the word "sign" meant "verbal sign" most of the time, and this is what it means for nearly all of those who have followed him.

In this manner, taking from Peirce the notion that every sign must be interpreted by another sign and translating this into Saussurian terms, it is fatally easy to conclude that every verbal sign is connected to another verbal sign: crudely, every word is defined by another word, in

an endless chain which is hopelessly cut off from nonverbal affairs. This is the situation Fredric Jameson so aptly called the "prison house of language," and it is the basic misconception which underlies much of our present confusion. One way out of this situation is to attend more closely to Peirce's notion of semiosis:

> (It is important to understand what I mean by *semiosis*. All dynamical action, or action of brute force, physical or psychical, either takes place between two subjects [whether they react equally upon each other, or one is agent and the other patient, entirely or partially] or at any rate is a resultant of such actions between pairs. But by "semiosis" I mean, on the contrary, an action, or influence, which is, or involves, a coöperation of *three* subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant, this tri-relative influence not being in any way resolvable into actions between pairs. . . .)[1]

Peirce's "tri-relative" notion of semiosis places him close to Frege, to Carnap, and to Ogden and Richards and far from Saussure and his followers. We can display their terminologies in the following way, placing the comparable (but by no means identical) terms of each formulation in the same column:

Frege	Expression (*Ausdruck*)	Sense (*Sinn*)	Reference (*Bedeutung*)
Carnap	Expression	Intension	Extension
Ogden/Richards	Symbol	Thought	Referent
Peirce	Sign	Interpretant	Object
Saussure	Signifier	Signified	————

The Saussurian formulation, like most "linguistic" views of language, eliminates the third column and with this gesture erases the world. There are two possible justifications for this. One is that questions of reference are outside linguistic discourse. A discipline may set its own boundaries, and in the case linguistic scholars have chosen to eliminate

1. Charles Sanders Peirce, "Pragmatism in Retrospect: A Last Formulation," *Philosophical Writings of Peirce,* ed. Justus Buchler (New York, 1955), p. 282.

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a potentially awkward portion of their possible field. The second justification is more ambitious, more philosophical. It argues that reference is a mirage of language, that there is no simple reference or unmediated perception, that the world is always already textualized by an arche-writing or system of differentiation which effectively brackets or sets aside questions of reference, eliminating the terms in the third column not by choice but by necessity. This is (very roughly) the position articulated by Derrida in *Of Grammatology*.

In this view, the medium of language—the material out of which linguistic signs are constructed, whether conceived as "writing" (Derrida's *"écriture"*) or as "speaking" (Saussure's "sound-image")—is based on "difference." Whether one conceives of language grammatologically or phonologically, the linguistic medium is generated by a series of differentiations or displacements. For spoken language to exist, human sounds must be organized into a system of phonemic differences. If we assume that these differences have priority over perception, then we must accept that we are indeed in a prison house of language. This is why Derrida says, "I don't know what perception is and I don't believe that anything like perception exists."[2]

One great question, it seems to me, is whether we have to accept the *priority* of difference over perception. But I must confess myself unequal to the task of debating that question. Therefore, I suggest that we grant that major premise—at least provisionally—in order to raise some lesser but still crucial issues. Assuming the priority of difference over perception, does it make sense to equate all sign processes with difference? Do we, by our processes of signification, give a spurious order to chaos, creating selves and worlds both bounded by language? Or is there an order always already in place before we seek to shape it? Does the differentiating process meet no resistance in the phenomena it orders? Or is the play of difference itself shaped and systematized by a necessity outside itself we call "the world"?

To allow difference priority does not mean that we must allow it a solipsistic authority over the world. The arbitrariness of the sound-image does not guarantee the nonreferentiality of the concept. Perceptions are not pure, granted; they are affected by the very languaging process that enables them. But language is not pure either; to the extent that it deals with sensory data, it is contaminated by the resistances it encounters. In language, a play of difference and a necessary order of phenomena are engaged with one another, and what is produced by their interaction cannot properly be reduced to a neat Saussurian formula.

2. Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man,* ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore and London, 1970), p. 272.

A verbal sign is never simply a matter of a signifying sound-image tied to a single signified concept. A word in any language carries with it a semantic field of potential meanings which is partly governed by a social code and partly individualized by the unique features of whoever utters or interprets the word. When a word is incorporated in an utterance, the semantic field is narrowed by its situation in a syntactic structure, in a discursive pattern, in a social situation, and in a referential context. Thus each interpreter generates a distinct interpretant for each textual sign, and, to the extent that communication is achieved, the interpretants of all interpreters of the same utterance will correspond with one another and with that of the person who employed the sign in the original act of communication. This correspondence will never be perfect, of course.

Let me elaborate on this a bit. In terms of Saussure's indispensable distinction between language (*langue*) and utterance (*parole*), a verbal sign in language should be conceived of not in terms of a signifier/signified relationship (as Saussure himself formulated it) but in terms of a sign/semantic field relationship: one sign with many potential meanings, some determinate, some indeterminate. But when such a sign is employed in a speech act (or utterance), each interpreter (including the speaker) narrows the field down and so isolates an interpretant for that sign in this particular utterance, discourse, context, and situation. The interpretant is generated by the interpreter through a process of selection from and perhaps modification of the semantic field which the interpreter has developed for that particular sign in terms of its previous appearances in other utterances. A dictionary or lexicon of any language is simply an attempt to codify the results of this process.

Now comes the crucial question: Of what does the semantic field for any given verbal sign consist? The oversimple view which I am trying to correct suggests that one verbal sign is defined by another, and so on ad infinitum. The view I am offering here suggests, on the contrary, that each verbal sign is potentially defined by a semantic field and then acquires a more precise definition in any given utterance or speech act. But beyond that—and I believe this is the most important and controversial part of what I am suggesting—it seems to me self-evident that *the semantic field for many verbal signs is not exclusively verbal.* That is, we carry with us as part of our interpretive equipment—indeed, as a part of language itself—an enormous amount of information that is not normally considered linguistic. This information, which we need in order to interpret utterances of all sorts, is derived from our interactions with things and states of affairs other than words. If I say, "Beck's beer has a pleasantly skunky smell," those interpreters whose semantic field for the word "skunky" includes olfactory expriences with skunks will construct a different interpretant for my statement than those who have not had any sensory experience of skunkiness. Furthermore, our experience with the odor of skunk is not in itself a linguistically determined experience. The

smell of a skunk will wake most human beings from a sound sleep—whether or not they have a word for the sensation they encounter. My point is simply that sensations and perceptions of all sorts are a part of our languaging equipment. Beyond this, I would argue that traces of sensory data are a regular feature of our interpretants and that the vividness of this data contributes to the superiority of certain individuals' interpretations of certain signs.

Peirce, of course, has suggested that there are three distinct modes of signification and that any given sign situation may partake of one, two, or all three modes. In Peirce's terminology, a *symbol* refers to something by virtue of an arbitrary agreement (this is Saussure's "sign"); an *icon* represents something by virtue of qualities in the iconic sign itself—qualities that resemble aspects of the object that it represents, as in a portrait or a diagram; and an *index* indicates neither arbitrarily nor by resemblance but by carrying traces of the thing that caused its own existence or by pointing to this object in some other existential way. A portrait of Gertrude Stein by Picasso will be an icon of Stein but an index of Picasso. A photograph, on the other hand, will be both an icon and an index of its subject since the light rays bouncing from the subject to the film have "caused" this visible sign to appear. Peirce also argues that any successful act of designation must be indexical: when the symbol "this" is used to refer to a particular object, it functions as an index; proper names are also indexical.

I go over this familiar ground from Peirce primarily to direct attention to a less familiar aspect of his theory. He points out that the interpretant of a symbol will often include both indexical and iconic qualities. Put simply, for the phrase "Ezekiel loveth Huldah" to be meaningful, the interpreter must be able to identify Ezekiel and Huldah (an indexical process) and must also be able to generate an iconic interpretant for the verb "loveth." Peirce is quite specific on this matter: "Now the effect of the word 'loveth' is that the pair of objects denoted by the pair of indices Ezekiel and Huldah is represented by the icon, or the image we have in our minds of a lover and his beloved."[3]

In the development of any language, metaphors are made through the activation of this conceptual iconicity. Language—that system of phonemic and grammatical differentiation—grows and changes partly through semantic shifts that depend upon what Aristotle called "an eye for resemblances." The most able makers of metaphors—call them poets—are undoubtedly those whose semantic fields have the highest degree of iconicity. Metonymy, it is worth pointing out, is a highly indexical process of signification since it is based upon an existential contiguity, whether spatial, temporal, or causal. Both metaphor and metonymy function as linguistic processes in the perpetual motion of

3. Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs," *Philosophical Writings,* p. 113.

any given language. In this function, they keep language open to life, preventing closure of the arbitrary system of symbols by continually altering the symbolic fields that surround each symbol with potential meanings.

   This long digression into language was necessary because we cannot understand verbal narrative unless we are aware of the iconic and in-dexical dimensions of language. Narrative is not just a sequencing, or the illusion of sequence, as the title of our conference would have it; narra-tive is a sequencing of something for somebody. To put anything into words is to sequence it, but to enumerate the parts of an automobile is not to narrate them, even though the enumeration must mention each part in the enumeration's own discursive order. One cannot narrate a picture, or a person, or a building, or a tree, or a philosophy. Narration is a word that implicates its object in its meaning. Only one kind of thing can be narrated: a time-thing, or to use our normal word for it, an "event." And strictly speaking, we require more than one event before we recognize that we are in the presence of a narrative. And what is an event? A real event is something that happens: a happening, an occur-rence, an event. A narrated event is the symbolization of a real event: a temporal icon. A narration is the symbolic presentation of a sequence of events connected by subject matter and related by time. Without tem-poral relation we have only a list. Without continuity of subject matter we have another kind of list. A telephone directory is a list, but we can give it a strong push in the direction of narrative by adding the word "begat" between the first and second entries and the words "who begat" after each successive entry until the end. This will resemble certain minimal religious narratives, even down to the exclusion of female names from most of the list (the appearance of nonpersonal listings in the phone book complicates things, of course).
   Any set of events that can be sequenced and related can also be narrated: stages in the growth of a plant, the progress of a disease, the painting of a picture, the building of an automobile, the wrecking of an automobile, or the erosion of a stone. A narration, then, is a text which refers, or seems to refer, to some set of events outside of itself. Such a text always involves its interpreter in the construction of a very specific kind of iconic interpretant which we have learned to call "diegesis."
   A narrative is a specific sort of collective sign or text which has for its object (in Peirce's sense) a sequence of events and for its interpretant a diegesis (the icon of a series of events). It is a formal feature of narrative texts—a part of their grammar—that the events are always presented in the past tense, as having already happened. Even if the grammatical tense of the discourse shifts to the present, as in certain epistolary novels, the fact of textualization ensures that interpretation follows the event.

The difference between drama and narrative is not that characters speak in drama but that we hear them; not that they have bodies but that we see them. Drama is presence in time and space; narrative is past, always past. In viewing film, of course, we are not in the presence of actors but of their traces on a screen. To speak of events in the future tense is not to narrate them either. Science fiction novels are always told in the past tense. To speak of the future is to prophesy or predict or speculate—never to narrate.

A narration involves a selection of events for the telling. They must offer sufficient continuity of subject matter to make their chronological sequence significant, and they must be presented as having happened already. When the telling provides this sequence with a certain kind of shape and a certain level of human interest, we are in the presence not merely of narrative but of story. A story is a narrative with a certain very specific syntactic shape (beginning-middle-end or situation-transformation-situation) and with a subject matter which allows for or encourages the projection of human values upon this material. Virtually all stories are about human beings or humanoid creatures. Those that are not invariably humanize their material through metaphor and metonymy.

When we speak of narrative, we are usually speaking of story, though story is clearly a higher (because more rule-governed) category. And it is story of which I wish to speak in the remainder of this essay. My intention is to try to clarify certain aspects of "story" by examining the whole process of encoding and decoding stories in the light of the Peircean triad of semiosis: sign, object, and interpretant. The object of a story is the sequence of events to which it refers; the sign of a story is the text in which it is told (print, film, etc.); and the interpretant is the diegesis or constructed sequence of events generated by a reading of the text. Let us call these three aspects of a story simply the *events,* the *text,* and the *interpretation.*

Now, each of these three aspects of "story" has its own temporal structure. Events flow in "natural" time and receive there both an order and a duration that are fixed. A text is a set of signs that refer to a selection of events. These signs have their own order and duration which will not necessarily correspond to that of the events in their natural state. An *interpretation* of a textual story always includes an attempt to re-capitulate the natural order and duration of events. It is this structure that enables all of the intricate analytical treatment of narrative order, duration, and frequency developed by Gérard Genette in *Narrative Discourse.*[4] We must also observe that there is a necessary sequence among the three elements of story that we have been discussing. Narrative is

4. See Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method,* trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, N.Y., 1980).

always presented *as if* the events came first, the text second, and the interpretation third, so that the interpretation, by striving toward a re-creation of the events, in effect completes a semiotic circle. And in this process, the events themselves have become humanized—saturated with meaning and value—at the stage of entextualization and again at the stage of interpretation.

Our customary distinction between historical and fictional narrative can be clarified in terms of this structure. History is a narrative discourse with different rules than those that govern fiction. The producer of a historical text affirms that the events entextualized did indeed occur prior to the entextualization. Thus it is quite proper to bring extra-textual information to bear on those events when interpreting and evaluating a historical narrative. Any important event which is ignored or slighted by a historical narrative may properly be offered as a weak-ness in that narrative. It is certainly otherwise with fiction, for in fiction the events may be said to be created by and with the text. They have no prior temporal existence, even though they are presented *as if* they did. As Sidney rightly pointed out four centuries ago, the writer of fiction does not *affirm* the prior existence of his events, he only pretends to through a convention understood by all who share his culture.

Once this major distinction between fictional and historical dis-courses is accepted, we must acknowledge that they still have much in common. Both history and fiction assume the normal flow of events, and the interpretation of both kinds of texts involves the construction of a diegesis in which this flow is re-created by the interpreter with every event in order and all relationships as clear as possible. The reader's desire to order and to know are the sources of what Roland Barthes has called (in *S/Z*) the proairetic and hermeneutic codes in narrative. These codes, like all codes, are cultural; that is, they are the common property of all members of a cultural group. Or to invert the metaphor, all mem-bers of such a group are possessed by those codes. Our need for chronological and causal connection defines and limits all of us—helps to make us what we are.

Post-modernist anti-narratives, such as the one discussed at this con-ference by Jacques Derrida, can quite properly be seen as attempts to frustrate our automatic application of these codes to all our event-texts. Such anti-narratives are in this sense metafictional because they ulti-mately force us to draw our attention away from the construction of a diegesis according to our habitual interpretive processes. By frustrating this sort of closure, they bring the codes themselves to the foreground of our critical attention, requiring us to see them *as* codes rather than as aspects of human nature or the world. The function of anti-narrative is to problematize the entire process of narration and interpretation for us.

To what end? One may well ask. These metafictional gestures must be seen, I believe, as part of a larger critical or deconstructive enterprise

which is revolutionary in the deepest sense. From this standpoint, traditional narrative structures are perceived as part of a system of psycho-social dependencies that inhibit both individual human growth and significant social change. To challenge and lay bare these structures is thus a necessary prelude to any improvement in the human situation. In this view, narrativity itself, as we have known it, must be seen as an opiate to be renounced in the name of the improvements to come. I understand this project somewhat and even sympathize with it to some extent, but I must confess that I am not sanguine about its success. Even with respect to the narrative processes we are considering here, it seems to me likely that they are too deeply rooted in human physical and mental processes to be dispensed with by members of this species. We can and should be critical of narrative structuration, but I doubt if even the most devoted practitioner of anti-narrativity can do without it.