

The Role and Status of Narrative in Contemporary Theatre

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Abstract

At a time when many other academic and practical disciplines are eager to embrace narrative as a means of accounting for human experience and interaction, much contemporary theatre work is engaged in jettisoning it. Aristotle rated story (*mythos*) as the most significant element within drama and western theatre has tended to follow this model ever since. Twentieth-century experiments with non-narrative and anti-narrative work and the breakdown of rigid categories have suggested new possibilities. What is the role and status of narrative in this new context? This thesis brings together insights from narratology, narrative psychology, and performance studies, in an attempt to shed light on the operations of narrative within the context of contemporary theatre.

Studies in narrative psychology demonstrate that narrative is a fundamental mode of cognitive thinking and that identity is constructed around narrative. Significantly, however, the root metaphor has shifted from mechanism to contextualism.

Postmodernist cultural production increasingly privileges the recycling of pre-existing materials. Through a close analysis of two exemplar texts – *Play-boy* by desperate optimists and *(Uncle) Vanya* by Howard Barker – the suggestion is made that such experiments are opening up fresh ways of deploying narrative elements. In particular, both works demonstrate that it is legitimate and necessary to interrogate the presumed link between strictly causal narrative and the possibility of moral debate.

The application of game theory to the study of narrative is one helpful way of moving from structural analyses of narrative to more dynamic models. Narrative is likely to continue to play a significant role within theatre, but its operations will almost certainly become increasingly open, dispersed and multiple.

This thesis is the result of my own independent work/investigation, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes, giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

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The Role and Status of Narrative in Contemporary Theatre

Introduction

It may certainly be the case that in our postmodern world there is now a substantial “incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv). However, it would also appear that narrative *per se* is going from strength to strength. From any bookseller, it is now possible to purchase titles on narrative and psychotherapy, narrative-based medicine, narrative ethics, narrative in cyberspace, narrative-based primary care, narrative in business, a narrative approach to social transformation, narrative theology, narrative mediation, narrative interviewing, narrative gerontology, narrative and the law, narrative as a means of treating alcoholism, or Attention Deficit Disorder, narrative and economic studies, the use of narrative in organisational change, narrative as female empowerment, narrative and identity, narrative as a teaching strategy, narrative as the fundamental basis for designing artificial intelligence, even a narrative analysis of water management.¹

Narrative, it would seem, is the new buzz-word. A moment’s further reflection will reveal how profoundly immersed in narrative are our everyday interactions and experiences. For example, two friends meet briefly on a street-corner. One asks how the other is. Fine, comes the reply, I’ve just been over to see Geoff and he sends his regards. Oh, says the first speaker, I saw Geoff myself only last week - he’d just had a bad fall and hurt his wrist. Is he any better, now...? And so it goes on. Mini-narratives of our own and other people’s experiences shared as the basic

¹ By way of example, indicative texts include: J. McLeod (1997) *Narrative Psychotherapy*, T. Greenhalgh et al (1998) *Narrative Based Medicine: Dialogue and Discourse in Clinical Practice*, A. Z. Newton (1997) *Narrative Ethics*, J. H. Murray (1998) *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, J. Launer (2002) *Narrative-based Primary Care: A Practical Guide*, B. Czarniawska (1997) *Narrating the Organization: Dramas of Institutional Identity (New Practices of Inquiry)*, B. Bradshaw (2002) *Change Across Cultures: A Narrative Approach to Social Transformation*, G. W. Stroup (1997) *The Promise of Narrative Theology: Recovering the Gospel in the Church*, G. Monk & J. Winslade (2000) *Narrative Mediation: A New Approach to Conflict Resolution*, T. Wengraf (2001) *Qualitative Research Interviewing: Semi-structured, Biographical and Narrative Methods*, G. Kenyon (2001) *Narrative Gerontology: Theory, Research and Practice*, B. S. Jackson (1991) *Law, Fact and Narrative Coherence (Legal Semiotics Monographs)*, J. Diamond (2002) *Narrative Means to Sober Ends: Treating Addiction and Its Aftermath*, D. Nylund (2002) *Treating Huckleberry Finn: A New Narrative Approach to Working with Kids Diagnosed ADD/ADHD*, D. N. McCloskey (1990) *If You’re So Smart: The Narrative of Economic Expertise*, D. Snowden (2002) *Using Narrative in Organisational Change*, E. J. Lawless (2001) *Women Escaping Violence: Empowerment Through Narrative*, H. L. Nelson (2001) *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*, G. Bage (1999) *Narrative Matters: Teaching and Learning History Through Story*, R. C. Shank (1996) *Tell Me a Story: Narrative and Intelligence (Rethinking Theory)*, W. Dicke (2001) *Bridges and Watersheds: A Narrative Analysis of Water Management in England, Wales and the Netherlands*.

currency of everyday conversation. What's more, there's a good chance that, later in the day, one or both of these two friends will settle themselves down and catch up with the latest happenings in their favourite television soaps: the virtual, ongoing narratives of our media-saturated society, with which the thoughts, emotions and aspirations of millions are, it would seem, deeply intertwined. "Narrative has existed in every known human society", Edward Branigan (1992: 1) tells us; "wherever there are humans there appear to be stories", says Paul Cobley (2001: 2); or as Roland Barthes still more succinctly puts it: "narrative [...] is simply there, like life itself" (1977: 79).

It comes as somewhat of a surprise, then, to realise that in theatre, the natural home of narrative one might imagine, concerted efforts appear to be being made to strip narrative out of the process altogether, and to construct plays and performances, which are, at best, non-narrative and, at worst, very definitely *anti*-narrative. What is happening? How is it that just at the point when virtually every other academic discipline seems to be rushing headlong to embrace narrative with the freshly-awakened fervour and evangelical zeal of a new convert, New Theatre is determined to jettison it? What is it about narrative that is making it so unpopular with contemporary practitioners and some audiences alike? In what ways has narrative functioned up till now as a vital constituent of drama, and why is it no longer considered to be such? Are there any reasons to suppose that narrative will eventually disappear entirely from theatre and performance, or will it, in fact, begin to operate in radically different ways from before?

This study is an attempt to address these and other questions. It therefore seeks to determine both the role and status of narrative within contemporary theatre, by first undertaking an historical and analytical survey of narrative form in theatre, and then relating the findings from that survey to two key works: one from the area of new performance, *Play-boy* (1999), devised and performed by Irish theatre company desperate optimists;² and the other, *(Uncle) Vanya* (1993), a published playtext by Howard Barker. These works have been chosen partly because of the particular avenues of exploration that they open up: by the very fact that both texts are contemporary re-workings of pre-existing narratives, they raise useful questions that apply, not simply to any story structure, but specifically also to postmodernism's predilection for pastiche and the recycling of

² The uncapitalised typography represents the company's preferred format and will be used throughout the thesis.

'found' material. They also serve to represent the two main strands of theatre work being carried out at the present time – text-based drama and devised work – though they can in no way be exhaustive of these two categories.

Along the way, I will also attempt to draw in key findings from the fields of cognitive psychology and narratology. One particular focus will be the link that has frequently been made between narrative coherence and morality (Gilligan, 1982; Macintyre, 1985; Peter, 1987; Winston, 1998). My researches into this aspect of narrative have led me to some surprising conclusions. Is it actually the case that moral debate has to take place within a particular form of narrative, whose operations and events directly mirror the causality of 'real-life', or is it possible that disjointed, fragmented, 'impossible' narratives might equally well bear the weight of moral speculation? Starting from a position somewhat similar to that taken by John Peter (long-time drama critic for *The Sunday Times*) who, in *Vladimir's Carrot* (1987), argues strongly for a vital link between narrative and morality, I have found myself revising my own views considerably during the course of the research.

There are, of course, legitimate and important questions to be asked in relation to the politics of story; for instance, the ways in which the fundamental structures of narrative could be seen to privilege a 'masculine' form of writing over the idea of *écriture féminine* (as posited by Hélène Cixous [see Barry, 2002: 126–30]), or the relationship between narrative and ideologies of control (cf. Althusser [see Goldstein, 1990: 164–74]). In some senses, though, it could be argued that these are supplementary questions, since they tend to leave to one side what is, in my view, an altogether more fundamental issue: the extent to which we actually 'need' narrative in the first place. For that reason, I have consciously restricted the scope of this particular investigation primarily to the structuralist / post-structuralist discourse.

The thesis is set out in the following way. Chapter 1 sets the scene, by placing Aristotle's views on plot directly alongside those of contemporary practitioners and theorists, in order to get some immediate sense of the kind of gulf that has opened up between them. Chapter 2 then gives an account of the fundamental structures of narrative, as well as providing some initial thoughts from the field of cognitive psychology in relation to narrative. Chapters 3 - 5 make up the historical survey of the role and status of narrative within theatre practice, with Chapter 3

providing a broad sweep from early Greek theatre up to the end of the nineteenth century, Chapter 4 examining some of the alternatives to narrative that were being tried out during the first half of the twentieth century, and Chapter 5 looking at some of the more aggressively anti-narrative strategies of practitioners like John Cage, Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman and The Wooster Group. Chapter 6 provides a more detailed consideration of narrative psychology and, in particular, looks at the proposition that narrative should be seen as a fundamental mode of cognitive thinking, which enables us to make sense of the experiences and impressions with which we are constantly bombarded.

The second section of the thesis begins at Chapter 7, which is a detailed analysis of desperate optimists' *Play-boy*, placing particular emphasis on the work's subtle exploration of narrative operations within an overarching context that is both playful and ethically-charged. Chapter 8 considers the plays of Howard Barker, with a specific focus on *(Uncle) Vanya*, a text which, in a rather different way, and with a much darker tone, also subverts the conventional expectations of narrative. Chapter 9 then considers the precise relationship between morality and narrative, drawing on aspects of narrative game-theory to account for some of the hidden constraints of causal narrative. Finally, Chapter 10 looks at narrative in the context of postmodernism and proposes an alternative model for evaluating its role and status within contemporary theatre / performance work.

A final observation on the significance of the current study: although there has been an impressive array of excellent books and articles written on the subject of narrative in general, the vast majority of these focus on narrative within a primarily literary context. A notable exception to this is Stanton B. Garner's *The Absent Voice: Narrative Comprehension in the Theater* (1989), which is a study of the active, cognitive role played by the audience in piecing together a dramatic performance, and of the absolutely central function of narrative within this. Nick Kaye's *Postmodernism and Performance* (1994) also opens up a number of important areas in relation to theatre, and Michael Roemer's extremely wide-ranging *Telling Stories: Postmodernism and the Invalidiation of Traditional Narrative* (1995) draws some aspects of theatrical narrative into the broader philosophical debate. But there is undoubtedly a dearth of titles that focus specifically on questions of narrative in relation to theatre in performance, as a subject in its own right. It is, therefore, hoped that the present study will be a positive contribution to this important debate.

Chapter One – Losing the Plot

All human beings have a need to hear stories...

(David Hare, *The Designated Mourner*)

... a story is not compulsory, just a life. (Beckett, *Texts for Nothing 4*)

Aristotle was definitive on the subject: “Plot [*mythos*] is the first essential – the very soul, as it were, of Tragedy” (Aristotle, 1963: 14). This first “narratological treatise”, as Susana Onega and José Angel García Landa (1996: 1) describe Aristotle’s *Poetics*, situates story at the core of the dramatic process, making it the dynamic centre-point, without which the drama simply cannot happen.

Whatever Aristotle understood by the term *mythos* – a point, to which we shall return in a moment – it is immediately apparent that much contemporary performance work radically challenges this confident assertion concerning the role and status of narrative. Plot has become a ‘dirty’ word, and postmodern suspicions to do with the very nature of reality have led us to a deep scepticism about constructs, which claim to supply us with ‘meaning’, including any kind of narrative structuring.

This “anti-narrative” strategy is obvious within modern and contemporary drama, in its rejection of the values of classical narrative, and within the justification of such drama by theorists as opposed as Brecht and Artaud, who – despite their different theatrical aims – share the dramaturgical belief that “Stories we understand are just badly told.” (Garner, 1989: 35)

And yet at the same time, there is another line of thought (articulated, for example, within Peter Brooks’ *Reading for the Plot* [1984] and, specifically in relation to theatre, Stanton B. Garner’s *The Absent Voice: Narrative Comprehension in the Theater* [1989]), which would wish to see

narrative as fundamental to our experience of being human and as impossible to escape from as our genetic code.

At this very early stage we should, perhaps, seek to differentiate the three key terms, which will recur repeatedly throughout the discussion: *story*, *plot* and *narrative* are frequently used in ways which tend to blur the distinctions between them, and indeed there is considerable overlap to be found. One starting-point is provided by Paul Cobley in his 2001 *Narrative* reader:

Put very simply, ‘story’ consists of all the events which are to be depicted. ‘Plot’ is the chain of causation which dictates that these events are somehow linked and that they are therefore to be depicted in relation to each other. ‘Narrative’ is the showing or the telling of these events and the mode selected for that to take place. (Cobley, 2001: 5-6)

At the risk of gross over-simplification, we might say that ‘story’ is the *what*, ‘plot’ is the *why*, and ‘narrative’ is the *how*.

These definitions will be useful ones to keep in mind throughout the discussion. However, as we shall see, different academic disciplines tend to use the terms in more or less specific senses. Within cognitive psychology, for example, story and narrative are frequently used in ways that are roughly synonymous, referring simply to the ordered accounts that we make for ourselves of otherwise scattered life-events. For narratology, on the other hand, as Onega and Landa point out, the term ‘narrative’ means something rather more precise, though it can be taken either in a very broad, or else a considerably more restricted, sense: “A wider Aristotelian definition of narrative might be ‘a work with a plot’ (e.g. epic poetry, tragedy, comedy); a narrow one would be ‘a work with a narrator’ (epic poetry, but not, in principle, drama or film)” (1996: 1-2).

Although Onega and Landa determine to concentrate their attention mainly upon the more restricted sense of the term, for the purposes of this study we will be concerned with the wider Aristotelian version, enabling a full consideration of narrative as it occurs within a dramatic context. Their final, and more technical definition of narrative is, though, a helpful one: “A narrative is the semiotic representation of a series of events meaningfully connected in a temporal and causal way” (1996: 3).

Within this careful arrangement of terms, all the key elements of narrative are to be found. Firstly, there is a recognition of the constructed nature of the narrative project; secondly, that connections are made on the basis both of causality and signification (plot); and finally, account is taken of the temporal dimension of story. During the course of the discussion, we will have cause to examine each of these aspects carefully.

Aristotle

Returning to Aristotle, it may be helpful to examine in a little more detail the sense in which he uses the word *mythos* (most commonly translated as ‘plot’). A detailed and helpful consideration of this question is to be found in Lowe (2001: 1-16) and his amplified translation of the relevant passage from the *Poetics* is illuminating:

THE PLOT (*mythos*) IS THE REPRESENTATION (*mimesis* again) OF THE ACTION (*praxis* again) –
for BY ‘PLOT’ HERE I MEAN THE ORGANISATION (*synthesis*) OF THE EVENTS (*pragmata*, passive cognate of *praxis*: ‘things done’ as opposed to ‘doing’)
(Lowe, 2000: 7)

Again, it is this use of the word ‘organisation’, which indicates a structuring process at work on the part of the writer, an organising principle which binds the story elements together in some kind of meaningful pattern; for it is certainly questions to do with structure which lie at the heart of the debate.

For Aristotle, of course, Plot is just one of “six (and *only* six) parts”, which determine and delineate Tragedy, the other five being “Spectacle, Melody, Diction, Character and Thought.” Interestingly, not only is Plot identified as the most important: we may also note the fact that Aristotle places Spectacle at the very *bottom* of the pecking-order. More of that in a moment.

Aristotle went into some detail as to what constituted a good plot for the stage. It must be well-constructed, whole and complete, of an appropriate magnitude, and of course, it must have a “beginning, middle and end” (Aristotle, 1963: 15). His careful definition of what actually constitutes beginning, middle and end makes curious reading nowadays, after our exposure to the texts of practitioners like Brecht and Beckett, and literary theorists such as Derrida and Barthes:

A beginning is that which is not itself necessarily after anything else, and which has naturally something else after it; an end, on the contrary, is that which is naturally after something itself, either as its necessary or as its usual sequel, and with nothing else after it; and a middle is that which is by its very nature after one thing and has another after itself. (15)

He insists upon this sense of order throughout his discussion of the topic: “A well constructed plot ... must not begin or end at any random point; it must make use of beginning and end as just described” (15).

Plots may be simple or complex, not of necessity involving *anagnorisis* (discovery) or *peripeteia* (reversals), but all the more interesting and satisfying if they do. They must be possible or probable, but it is not required that they be historical. “Poetry.. is more philosophic and of greater significance than history, for its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are particulars” (11).

In some supplementary remarks, we can find his simplest definition of essential plot construction: “Every tragedy is in part Complication and in part Denouement. The complication consists of incidents that have taken place before the opening of the play and often some also of those that occur within it; the remainder form the denouement” (32).

Compare all this with our contemporary distrust of “beginning, middle and end”. Narrative, and indeed any kind of structure or organising principle, has become suspect, a mechanism of closure and hence inherently deceptive. Gary Taylor, reflecting on the ways in which our understanding of narrative has changed in his book *Reinventing Shakespeare*, comments that,

Closure arbitrarily privileges one moment out of a continuum of equal intervals.. By choosing one.. [moment] as ‘the end’ we artificially unchoose others. And this suspicion of arbitrary closure affects beginnings as well as ends, for the commencement of one state necessarily ends another. Birth has become as problematic for us as death...
(Taylor, 1991: 361)

Later on in the same chapter, Taylor approvingly quotes Terence Hawkes' essay "Telmah" which:

...seeks 'to undermine our inherited notion of *Hamlet* as a structure that runs a satisfactorily linear, sequential course from a firmly established and well-defined beginning through a clearly placed and signalled middle to a causally related and logically determined end which, planted in the beginning, develops, or grows out of it.' (cited in Taylor, 1991: 370)

Similarly, Richard Foreman, in his 1975 theatre piece, *Pandering to the Masses: A Misrepresentation*, worked deliberately to subvert any expectations of narrative:

... signs of plot or narrative are evident, yet no plot emerges ... Such a resistance to a reading of the elements of what would be the 'play' through the construction of a sensible or organised pattern, serves to stave off the emergence of the 'object', a sense of a 'whole' to which meaning and purpose might be attributed. (Kaye, 1994: 52-53)

Clearly this is not just in order to be perverse. Through the refusal to reach closure, Foreman is asking his audience to question their expectations both of theatre and of reality.

Setting these modern perspectives on narrative directly alongside Aristotle's gives an indication of the nature and size of the shift that has taken place. One need only compare the jigsaw-like plot of *Oedipus Rex* with that of, say, *Waiting for Godot*, where, famously, "nothing happens...twice" to see textual evidence of this. A primary task in this research will therefore be to trace the gradual processes of experimentation and shifts of thought, by means of which Aristotle's insistence upon plot as the central organising principle of narrative has been so fundamentally challenged. For a final thought on the complete mirror-image of his dramatic values that we now inhabit, it is worth looking at his comments on Spectacle:

Spectacle is certainly an attraction, but it is the least artistic of all the parts and has least connection with the art of Poetry... the organisation of Spectacle is more a matter for the costumier than the poet. (1963: 15)

These are dismissive words. Aristotle would, presumably, struggle with a great deal of contemporary performance work, which frequently allows for a generous helping of spectacle; a

fair amount of Melody; Thought – well, yes, but more randomly distributed than Aristotle had in mind, perhaps; minimal Character; precious little Diction; and very often no Plot whatsoever.

So how have we managed to lose the Plot in the intervening centuries? Was Aristotle mistaken in stressing its essential nature? And will theatre's further development be seriously compromised, if deprived of its "most important part": a narrative?

Chapter Two – Narrative Structures

Narrative theory has no critical axe to grind. Its objective is a grid of possibilities, through the establishment of the minimal narrative constitutive features. (Chatman, 1978: 19)

Two performers, one male and one female, enter the stage space. There is no set to speak of: we notice a table, upon which is placed a record-player and, in front of that, two chairs. The record-player is manned by a stage manager, who will punctuate and underscore the performance with varying musical motifs. “Act One begins with five great nuclear explosions”, explains the publicity material for the show.¹ But in the event, it doesn’t. It begins with words, phrases, sentences; isolated fragments of plotlines stitched together into a stream of measured ‘announcements’ to the audience. We are told what is happening, endlessly told, but nothing ‘happens’. The fragments cannot be joined in any meaningful way, there is no story to be narrated and yet there are any number of story splinters.

Forced Entertainment’s *Dirty Work*, which toured British venues from November 1998 to February 1999, is typical both of the company’s work and of the postmodern crisis of faith in narrative. “There is a kind of broken story getting pieced together in this landscape of old electrical equipment and torn curtains, a new kind of theatre with the scenes out of order, the centre missing”.² But perhaps the strongest ‘story’ that is being told here on this empty stage is that of a lack of confidence in narrative itself, the performance embodying its message in its physical form and presenting us with a complete *mise-en-abyme* of the essential dilemma.

In order to investigate what performances such as this are trying to achieve by the total disruption and subversion of the narrative process, it is first necessary to examine that process and lightly sketch its workings.

Although Peter Brooks’ 1984 study of narrative and plot design, *Reading for the Plot* is concerned mainly with literary, rather than dramatic narrative, he usefully traces the development

¹ <http://www.forced.co.uk/forced/dirty.html>, accessed 22/09/99

² *ibid.*

of narrative handling, from one of the earliest novels in the Western tradition, *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554), through to contemporary experiments, such as the *nouveaux romans* of Robbe-Grillet, where “the reader is asked to build a novel, not as the traditional plenum of meaning, but as a possible model of narrative itself, a kind of laboratory experiment”. (Brooks, 1984: 315).

Throughout the whole account the narrative process is seen to be one of careful construction, design with intention, the precise arrangement of plot, or, as he would prefer to express it, ‘plotting’.

The narrative organisation of material in order to construct a sense of meaning corresponds, in Brooks’ account, to processes upon which we are engaged at every moment of our lives:

Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories that we tell and hear told, those we dream or imagine or would like to tell, all of which are reworked in that story of our own lives that we narrate to ourselves in an episodic, sometimes semi-conscious, but virtually uninterrupted monologue. We live immersed in narrative, recounting and reassessing the meaning of our past actions, anticipating the outcome of our future projects, situating ourselves at the intersection of several stories not yet completed. (1984: 3)

This view of narrative as a natural, everyday activity, a ceaseless quest for meaning, accords with similar findings in the field of cognitive psychology. For example, Jerome Bruner describes the cultural “dramas” in which we participate, whereby “the young entrant into the culture comes to define his own intentions and even his own history in terms of the characteristic cultural dramas in which he plays a part – at first family dramas, but later the ones that shape the expanding circle of his activities outside the family” (1986: 67). In seeking to define the cognitive mechanisms by which we appropriate such “scripts and scenarios” (68), Bruner identifies two “modes of thought” which he asserts are fundamentally different, yet complementary in importance:

There are two modes of cognitive functioning, two modes of thought, each providing distinctive ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality. The two (though complementary) are irreducible to one another. (11)

These two modes are identified by Bruner as the paradigmatic and the narrative. The paradigmatic mode typically employs categorization, quantification as its central operations, it is

scientific, logical and rational, open to verification by empirical processes. The narrative mode, by contrast, is concerned not so much with verifiability as verisimilitude, or believability, and its operations are imaginative, intuitive and discursive, striving “to put its timeless miracles into the particulars of experience, and to locate the experience in time and place” (13). By means of this narrative mode of thinking, we seek to extract meaning and order from the ostensibly meaningless and random experiences of life, we construct narratives of our own and other people’s lives, making use, as we do, of all the elements and structures to be found within formal narratological studies.

What exactly is a ‘narrative’?

Narratology, an essentially twentieth-century science, has been able to uncover much about the nature of the construction project, and as a result of various efforts in the field, there are now a range of analytical tools available. Although the structuralist bias of narratology has come under increasing fire in recent years (cf. Gibson [1995] whose ideas will be more closely examined in chapter 10), early studies came to the conclusion that all narratives can be said to be ‘layered’. Mieke Bal, drawing upon the work of the Russian Formalists, and Tzvetan Todorov in particular, distinguishes three distinct layers of narrative: *text*, *story* (also identified by various writers on the subject as *sjuzhet* or *récit*) and *fabula*.

A narrative text is a text in which an agent relates (‘tells’) a story in a particular medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof. A *story* is a *fabula* that is presented in a certain manner. A *fabula* is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors. (Bal, 1997: 5)

In other words, although the *text* is the physical form in which a reader will actually encounter the narrative, beneath that can be discerned the other levels: both the basic *fabula*, the components of action without which any rendition of the tale would be incomplete, and the intermediate layer of this particular ‘telling’ of the *story*, this particular arrangement of the events. (Confusingly, some writers use the terms *fabula* and *story* interchangeably, simply reserving *sjuzhet* to describe the ordering of events.) Within a dramatic context, of course, the narrative *text* as defined by Bal should itself be further subdivided into two distinct elements: the *dramatic text* and the *performance text*, thus clarifying an important distinction to be made between the verbal signs of

the script and the signs of performance that are necessarily added as that script is realised in any given production.

Although these deeper layers are only theoretical ones, they can be valuable as analytical categories. For example, whilst the *fabula* behind, say, Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and Euripides' *Electra* is essentially the same, the events are told in two very different ways, reflecting different moral concerns and questions, and resulting not just in different physical texts, but very different 'stories' as well. And as has already been indicated, these layers also find their equivalents within our everyday narratives. The raw materials, the loose collection of events, incidents, characters, locations, and so on, of our experience – the elements of the *fabula* – are woven into a coherent *story* as we recount them, first to ourselves and then to others. Inevitably, we employ sounds, words, gestures, facial expressions to recount our story and these together form the *text* of our narrative.

Fabula, story, text; these are the formal subdivisions of narrative, reflecting its underlying aspects of construction. Within these structural elements of narrative lurks the most controversial of all: the 'plot', or *mythos*. In some discussions on this subject, plot has been directly aligned with *story*, in other words it has been seen as synonymous with the telling of the tale. However, Peter Brooks is keen to situate it somewhere between the layers of *story* and *fabula* and for this reason seeks a definition of plot which will encompass aspects of both:

“Plot” in fact seems to me to cut across the *fabula/sjužet* distinction in that to speak of plot is to consider both story elements and their ordering. Plot could be thought of as the interpretive activity elicited by the distinction between *sjužet* and *fabula*, the way we *use* the one against the other... let us say that we can generally understand plot to be an aspect of *sjužet* in that it belongs to the narrative discourse, as its active shaping force, but that it makes sense (as indeed *sjužet* itself principally makes sense) as it is used to reflect on *fabula*, as our understanding of story. Plot is thus the dynamic shaping force of the narrative discourse. (Brooks, 1984: 13)

And ultimately, Brooks prefers to deploy the more active participle 'plotting', since it favours dynamic processes of meaning-giving rather than presenting us with a merely static and artificial model:

If I emphasize plotting even more than plot, it is because the participle best suggests the dynamic aspect of narrative that most interests me: that which moves us forward as readers of the narrative text, that which makes us ... want and need plotting, seeking through the narrative text as it unfurls before us a precipitation of shape and meaning. (35)

Plotting, in Brooks' model, is thus seen to be inextricably linked with the reader-response, a function of our engagement with text and not an inherent, pre-existing structure within it – a feature to which we will return later.

But although we can define narrative in these formal, structural categories, it is also helpful to view it in terms of its phenomenological properties, causality and temporality:

... most fabulas can be said to be constructed according to the demands of human 'logic of events,' provided that this concept is not too narrowly understood. 'Logic of events' may be defined as a course of events that is experienced by the reader as natural and in accordance with some form of understanding of the world. (177)

The course of events must, in other words, make some kind of sense to us, even if that 'sense' is best understood in terms of its apparent contradiction of everyday 'reality'. Bruner cites research by a Belgian student of perception, Baron Michotte, which demonstrates that causality is a basic, or 'primitive', perceptual category, such that, "when objects move with respect to one another within highly limited constraints, we *see* causality" (Bruner, 1986: 17). In later experiments carried out by Alan Leslie, this was seen to be the case even with babies as young as six months.³

Equally, and here is where narrative derives its most basic quality, a story must unfold along some kind of timeline; again, however distorted, inverted or subverted the presentation of that timeline may be. There are at least two distinct aspects also to this question of time, the timescale contained within the story itself, narrated time (*Erzählte Zeit*); and the time taken to tell / read / hear the story, the time of narrating (*Erzählzeit*) (Ricoeur, 1984).⁴ For dramatic purposes, the latter category is of particular importance, since drama is, by definition, and more than any other

³ A. Leslie, "The Representation of Perceived Causal Connection" (unpublished D.Phil. Thesis, Department of Experimental Psychology, University of Oxford, 1979).

⁴ Ricoeur adds a third category, which he calls 'the time of life', related to the writer's selection and arrangement of material.

narrative medium, contained within a strictly regulated experience of the time dimension. Indeed, a sense of the immediacy of the time of narrating makes us aware that Aristotle's basic requirements of beginning, middle and end will inevitably be embodied, in experiential terms at least, within the performance itself.

These two properties, causality and temporality, provide essential homologies between our experience of dramatic narrative on the one hand, and everyday narrative on the other. To look first at the aspect of time in more detail, the most influential work on this subject in recent years has undoubtedly been that of Paul Ricoeur and in particular his detailed account of narrative time, *Temps et Récit II* (1984). Ricoeur argues that there are essentially three aspects to our experience of time, summarised by Wallace Martin thus:

The first is the beginning state, when human beings find themselves in a situation that they want to change or simply to understand. This is the time of "prefiguration": given our knowledge of social practices and human inclinations, we can envisage what is likely to happen next and plan to intervene, if that seems wise, to affect the outcome. The second time is that of action, or "figuration": we try to do, or understand, as events unroll. Finally, there is "refiguration": we look back at what happened, tracing the lines that led to the outcome, discovering why plans did not succeed, how extraneous forces intervened, or how successful actions led to unanticipated results. (Martin, 1986: 76)

Or, the threefold division could be seen more simply as a time of origins (birth), a time of experience (life) and a time of closure (death). In order to make sense of our experiences of life/time we look backwards in order to try to establish a sense of *who* we are, a sense of identity; we examine the ongoing succession of events and incidents, seeking to establish *where* we are, a sense of context; and we look forward to a final moment of closure, in repeated attempts to determine *why* we are, to give our lives a sense of purpose or meaning.

In repeated situations, we encounter this tripartite structure: we wake up, we go through the day's activities, we go to bed; we open a book, we read, we close the book; we embark on a journey, we travel, we arrive (if not at our destination, at least at a staging-post along the way). Over and over, the repeated cycles of our lives present us with beginnings, development and a sense of closure, if not final termination. (We shall look at alternative modes of perceiving the world around us in the next chapter, and how these have influenced the structuring devices of drama.)

These patterns, by means of which we perceive reality, directly affect our expectations of narrative. We expect to uncover a beginning, to experience some kind of development ('crisis' is a requirement of classical plotting, not necessarily of narrative), and to arrive at a sense of closure, temporary or final. In just the same way that we 'read' the narratives of our own lives, so too we seek to impose a sense of order upon the dramatic and literary narratives we encounter. Brooks makes a specific connection between this temporal awareness and the aspect of plot, now so problematic for us:

Narrative is one of the large categories or systems of understanding that we use in our negotiations with reality, specifically, in the case of narrative, with the problem of temporality: man's time-boundedness, his consciousness of existence within the limits of mortality. And plot is the principal ordering force of those meanings that we try to wrest from human temporality. (Brooks, 1984: xi)

In other words, for Brooks plot is not simply an aesthetic convenience: it is a term which we can, with equal justification, apply to human reality, provided we understand his basic premise, that plot is not a 'given', either in drama or in life, but a construct which is remade each time the dramatic narrative/life narrative is encountered. "It is my simple conviction, then, that narrative has something to do with time-boundedness, and that plot is the internal logic of the discourse of mortality" (22).

Causality is the other key factor in the discussion, and possibly the more controversial of the two within the postmodern setting. We have already mentioned research which suggests that causality may be considered to be a primitive category of perception. It is with respect to this feature of narrative that E. M. Forster, writing in *Aspects of the Novel*, identifies the difference between a story and a plot:

'The king died and then the queen died' is a story. 'The king died and then the queen died of grief' is a plot. (cited in Brooks, 1984: 262)

This is a neat distinction, and plausible enough at first glance; however, it assumes a basic paradigm of plot as object rather than as process. Bruner points out that what distinguishes great literary narrative is the extent to which it "subjunctivises" the story (1986:35). The gaps which a writer leaves in the narrative are of crucial importance in providing the reader with the possibility

of engagement, inviting a rewriting of the story in a new 'virtual' text. This accords fully with Brooks' picture of plotting as an active, dynamic process, initiated by the text but completed by the reader. Bruner picks up the same "story" as Forster, yet draws a rather different conclusion. Referring to his suggested two modes of thinking, he comments that:

... the types of causality implied in the two modes are palpably different. The term *then* functions differently in the logical proposition 'if x then y' and in the narrative *recit* 'The king died, and then the queen died.' One leads to a search for universal truth conditions, the other for likely particular connections between two events - mortal grief, suicide, foul play. (1986: 11-12)

The 'gap' in the narrative, which for Forster indicates that the story has not yet been rendered in plot form, is the very same gap which, for Bruner, initiates the reader's search for causality. In much the same spirit, Postlewait, examining the role of narrative in historical studies, points out that:

The representation of these actions takes the form of some kind of narrative order because the actions are not simply chronological or sequential. *They are joined*. In other words, the task of describing and explaining what happened also includes the need to interpret how and why human events occurred. Narrative provides coherence, a process of emplotment which configures these actions into a meaningful, comprehensible interpretation. (1992: 361, italics mine)

Here again it is the reader's role, in this case the historian, that is crucial in providing coherence. It would be nonsensical to say that the events of history have neatly fallen into some pre-ordained plot format: quite clearly it is the interpretive task of the historian to contribute to the "process of emplotment," in order to facilitate the process of extracting meaning from an otherwise merely chronological sequence.

And even though Georg Lukács, in his essay "Narrate or Describe", insists that it is the job of the epic poet to provide "a proper distribution of emphasis" (Lukács, 1970: 126), when arranging the story elements, this is specifically so that the *reader* will then be able to pick out the meaning of a sequence of narrated events:

In narration the writer must move with the greatest deftness between past and present *so that the reader may grasp the real causality of the epic events*. And only the experience of this causality can communicate the sense of a real chronological, concrete, historical sequence [...]. (1970: 133, italics mine)

It is to this aspect of reader-response theory which we will need to return, when considering the question of whether even the fragmented and disjointed ‘stories’ of much contemporary theatre work can nevertheless be considered to demonstrate the phenomenological properties of narrative.

From the discussion above, it is apparent that the narrative enterprise is inescapably one of structuring, organising and shaping raw material into forms that are both transmissible and susceptible to question. Equally clear, however, is an emerging sense that these operations are not simply aesthetic artifices with no bearing upon the wider human experience. In fact, the categories by which we analyse narrative can be found to apply equally within the field of cognitive psychology, with its distinctive view of how the mind ‘reads’ experience. Our view of what constitutes plot may also need to be readjusted in the light of evidence from both narrative, psychological and historical disciplines, which suggest the reader’s vital role in plot construction. How much credence, therefore, should we give to the argument that jettisoning plot and narrative construction more nearly reflects our actual perceptions of reality and will ultimately result in a more honest theatrical experience? In order to appreciate the origins and extent of the contemporary disillusionment with plot, it may now be helpful to consider in greater detail the wider context, tracing its historical development from Greek tragedy and Aristotle’s theorising about it to the present day.

Chapter Three – Classical Narrative

A note of caution

Before embarking upon any kind of account of the position of narrative within dramatic performance, it is perhaps worth stating the obvious: this account will itself be a narrative, subject to the usual conditions of narrative production, that is to say it will be selective, reductive, shaping its questions in anticipation of possible answers. The story could be told in many different ways. My own narrative of narrative history implies an infinite series of counter-narratives, excluded from this particular account (McQuillan, 2000: 22-27). Such a dilemma is inevitable, but it should be noted.

Plot and plotting

As we have already seen, the terms *narrative*, *story*, and *plot* are by no means synonymous. Nevertheless, one helpful point of departure for this account is the shift of emphasis we have previously noted from an understanding of *plot* as static construction, to that of *plotting* as a dynamic model involving active audience participation in the process of narrative comprehension. A glance at the linguistic origins of the English word *plot* is revealing in the light of this transition:

As a noun, its literary applications developed, in the mid-sixteenth century, out of its earlier designation as a ‘ground plan’, the area on which a building is situated and constructed. (Garner, 1989: 106)

In fact, as Garner goes on to point out, although this “explicitly spatial metaphor” arises directly out of a specifically English language usage, a similarly atemporal conception of plot underlies Aristotle’s own descriptions of *mythos* in the *Poetics*. At one point in his comments upon the primacy of plot, Aristotle notes in passing, “You find the same sort of thing in painting: if an artist lays on even the most beautiful colours without order, he will not give the same pleasure as will be derived from a simple black-and-white sketch for a portrait” (Aristotle, 1963: 14). Here then is a visual image which speaks of an orderly arrangement of parts, combined together to make a pleasing whole – a neat, but essentially static, construction in which proportion and

balance play the crucial roles. Comparisons which follow, to a “beautiful living creature” (16) do not substantially replace this first impression of a structural organisation of component parts.

Plot, Aristotle informs us, is of Sicilian origin and is “nothing more or less than the combination of incidents or things done in the story” (13). As we read through his specifications and requirements for a well-made plot, it soon becomes apparent that, in common with much of the discussion of the previous chapter, causality seems to be an issue of primary importance. The combination of incidents must be made on the basis either of what is necessary or what is probable; and his most scathing criticisms are reserved for poets who refuse to stick to these regulatory norms: “Of simple plots and actions the episodic are the worst. By an episodic plot I mean one in which the episodes do not follow one upon another in accordance with probability or necessity” (19).

Aristotle’s criteria for determining what is probable or necessary, however, owe as much to his conception of what is morally proper as they do to what lies within the realm of simple cause and effect. For instance, he insists that a good man must not be portrayed as passing from happiness to misfortune, nor must a bad man be depicted as passing from misfortune to happiness, since such transitions are “an outrage upon our moral feeling” and “as untragic as can possibly be” (21). It is clear that *ethical* determinants are as important in this argument as aesthetic ones. He describes it as “fundamentally wrong” to construct plots on any other basis than this kind of necessity or probability. Interestingly, in the final analysis it is more acceptable to break the rules of probability in favour of verisimilitude, than it is to violate these ethical strictures, given that he goes on to observe that, “a likely impossibility is preferable to an unconvincing possibility” (46).

Clearly, then, we may discern principles other than merely structural ones at work in the argument. Throughout his apparently technical account, Aristotle is not, in fact, so much concerned with whether the kind of necessity or probability he insists upon actually resembles reality, as with a quality of necessary ‘seemliness’. The arrangement of incidents which we find in the course of an ordered plot must not cohere merely in the way that everyday experiences of life do, they must be fitted together above all by virtue of a clear *moral* appropriateness. No matter that our lives consist of a series of episodic events, often without immediately obvious

connections: there are formal requirements for moral order which must govern the arrangement of incident within an acceptable plot structure. This whole view of dramatic structuring depends, of course, upon a wider world-view which sees the gods busily at work in the affairs of humans, ordering lives – and in particular the lives of those “better than the average man” – so that they will ultimately reflect the ethical imperatives of a highly patterned universe, “for we recognise that the gods know everything” (27). A good plot will, of course, reflect the virtues of harmony and justice which are ‘apparent’ in the world: how could it be otherwise? In such a model, although the technicalities of form are clearly still important considerations, the writer’s primary concern will, nevertheless, be to ensure that – in terms of its content – the story ends ‘as it should’.

The role of the spectator

What is the spectator’s role in all of this? If plot is to be conceived of not as a static construction, or pre-determined “ground plan”, but as the end product of a dynamic negotiation between performance text and audience, what precisely is the nature of that negotiation? In fact, despite the static pictorial metaphor already noted, Aristotle clearly anticipates a transaction of some kind: “The plot ... should be constructed in such a way that, even without seeing the things take place, he who simply hears the account of them *shall be filled with horror and pity at the incidents...*” (23, italics mine).

And he also notes the possibility of a ‘wrong’ response to the kind of plot which does not follow his model pattern: “... it makes no appeal either to our sense of poetic justice, or to our pity, or to our fear ... such a story may stir the human feeling in us, but not our pity or fear” (21). Pity and fear, then, are the appropriate responses to a properly constructed narrative: “pity [...] for undeserved misfortune, and fear for the misfortune of a man like ourselves” (21-22).

It is precisely this eliciting of a pre-determined audience response which leads Augusto Boal to the conclusion that Aristotelian drama is “coercive” (1979), a form of narrative construction which demands not merely that the story be re-constructed in the spectator’s imagination, but that (s)he give full assent to every detail of the playwright’s moral universe. It may be noted in passing, though, that Boal’s argument shows almost wilful naiveté in some respects, neglecting

to take into account, as it does, either the notion that a single, unified audience response can never actually be achieved, or the aspect of narrative subjunctivity, to which Bruner (1986) draws our attention. Euripides' plays, for example, display a noticeable ambivalence towards the whole idea of moral 'certainties' and it is significant, in this context, that his plays also make far less narrative use of the Chorus than those of Aeschylus and Sophocles.

Formal structure of Greek tragedy

Nevertheless, Aristotle's arguments, taken within the context of the moral universe he inhabits, make perfect sense. Not only that, they also reflect an intelligent and considered response to a theatrical tradition still in its infancy, despite Aristotle's rather charming assumption that the development of tragedy has now come "to a halt on attaining to its natural form" (ibid: 10); a form, moreover, which was both highly organised and strictly adhered to: *prologue*, followed by *parodos*, followed by a sequence of dramatic *episodes* punctuated with *choral odes*, finally completed by the *exodos*. The role of the Chorus is central in this model of narrative construction. From the *parodos* forwards, the Chorus interprets for the audience, constructing meaning, delivering judgements upon the action, asking questions about decisions being taken and acted upon within the narrative movement, and rendering a final interpretive summing-up in the *exodos*:

Citizens of our ancestral Thebes,
Look on this Oedipus, the mighty and once masterful:
Elucidator of the riddle,
Envied on his pedestal of fame.
You saw him fall. You saw him swept away.
So, being mortal, look on that last day
And count no man blessed in his life until
He's crossed life's bounds unstruck by ruin still.
(Sophocles, 1996: 81)

In this way, narrative meaning and the interpretation of causality are strictly controlled for the spectator by the dramatic form. Boal was not the only one to react strongly to this imposition of ethical meaning through narrative construction: his theatrical forebear, Bertolt Brecht, similarly rejected Aristotelian form as coercive. Yet despite Brecht's dislike of conventional dramatic structure, we are furnished here with a narrational device which is fully in keeping with his own

requirement for a story to be presented to an audience within a clear interpretive framework. The ideological basis for the presentation may not be to his liking, but the structural device of using the Chorus to point up the message cannot be faulted, and it is, of course, taken up and used in various forms in Brecht's own plays.

Each individual Greek tragedy also took its place within a formal tripartite structure. Although we now have only one surviving example of a complete trilogy, Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, we know that the requirement for any writer of tragedy who wished to compete in the great Dionysian festivals was to provide three plays linked by theme, together with a satyr-play to round off the entertainment in a lighter mood. The narrative structure of any individual play was thus framed within a larger pattern which echoed on a grand scale the three stages of narrative time: *prefiguration* (Agamemnon's return and murder in *Agamemnon*), *figuration* (the return to Argos of Orestes and his revenge-killing of both Clytemnestra and Aegisthus in the second play of the trilogy, *The Libation Bearers*) and *refiguration* (the resolution of the dilemma proposed by Athena, goddess of wisdom, in the final part, *The Eumenides*). Within this highly organised pattern, the significance of each small event is determined by the larger structures surrounding it.

Horace

Horace, writing his own *Ars Poetica* more than 300 years after Aristotle's, nevertheless draws upon similar principles, stressing the need for propriety and decorum, and strongly warning against an inappropriate mixing of subject matter, styles and genres. He brings both a more strident tone to his precepts and a particular talent for delivering them via memorably visual imagery:

Supposing a painter chose to put a human head on a horse's neck, or to spread feathers of various colours over the limbs of several different creatures, or to make what in the upper part is a beautiful woman tail off into a hideous fish, could you help laughing when he showed you his efforts? (Horace, 1965: 79)

Where Aristotle seeks to persuade by force of calm reason, Horace employs ridicule and derision ("...if your speeches are out of harmony with your feelings, I shall either fall asleep or burst out laughing..." [82]), but essentially he makes similar appeals for order, clarity and appropriateness. There are familiar restrictions upon amplitude ("...it should not be either shorter or longer than

five acts...” [85]), comparable concerns about the central role of the Chorus, and some interesting additional details, such as the strict prohibition on using a *deus ex machina* unless absolutely necessary. Their aims in writing, of course, are also slightly different: Aristotle largely describes and accounts for known examples of dramatic ‘best practice’, whilst Horace is more clearly intent on giving advice to an aspiring writer. But whether the intention is to be essentially descriptive or prescriptive, the same message seems to emerge: form, order, balance, proportion, suitability – these are inviolable virtues arising out of the natural order of things and applying equally to life and literature.

Almost casually, Horace makes a significant observation with respect to narrative organisation when he says that a good dramatist does not necessarily attempt to give a full account of a situation in his play, but rather “plunges his hearer into the middle of the story as if it were already familiar to him” (84). This suggestion that a writer may begin the narrative *in medias res* is a useful gloss on Aristotle’s preference for a beginning which is “not necessarily after anything else”; it reflects a more flexible view of narrative construction and is already beginning to take account of the audience’s role in the process of narrative comprehension.

Essentially, then, we may discern in both writers a clear, though not always fully conscious, allegiance to a shaping *grand récit*, or metanarrative, of divine ordering that defines the parameters, within which causality and signification in a dramatic context are to be understood.

The Medieval Metanarrative

Between the classical theatres of Greece and Rome, and the Medieval theatre which followed centuries later, there was a huge disjunction. Theatre-as-literature managed to survive in the works of writers such as Seneca and Hroswitha, but there was no continuous Western tradition of theatre-as-performance. The reasons for this are well-documented elsewhere (for example, in Hartnoll and Brater [1998]), but for the purposes of this study, the key question is the extent to which the nature of narrative was affected by this discontinuity.

The liturgical drama, which emerged during the medieval period, marks an interesting new phase in the development of theatrical narrative form, restraining it not merely within moral and ethical

boundaries, but theological imperatives as well. Where Greek drama had explored the nature of moral choice within a loose collection of myth and legend, mixing god-like human characters with all-too-human gods, the Christian grand narrative which overarches both the medieval Mystery Cycles and the allegorical Morality Plays is, by its very nature, a highly patterned and organised story, presenting us with beginning, middle and end on a cosmic scale. Whether we look at an individual morality play such as *Everyman* or any of the larger play-cycles, we find the same essential narrative seen from different perspectives. The lost-ness into which the entire human race has fallen is mirrored in the ‘individual’ story of *Everyman*, and the remedy to both is the same, namely the salvation of souls effected by God’s entry into history in the person of Jesus Christ (plus, in *Everyman*, the necessary additional appearance in the story of “Good-Deeds”). The narrative force exercised by this *grand récit* subsumes all of the smaller narratives contained within it, so that even the anarchic and highly original comedy provided by Mak and his wife, in the *Second Shepherds’ Play* from the Towneley cycle (possibly the first subplot in English drama), is abruptly terminated when the angels appear to announce the birth of the Christ-child and thus return the story to its proper course.

There is a distinction to be drawn, of course, between the plot of a play like *Everyman* and the narrative construction of any of the individual plays taken from any of the Mystery cycles. Although they are fed by the same grand narrative, the story of *Everyman* is complete in itself and formally detached from the *grand récit*, whereas a play such as, for example, *The Harrowing of Hell* from the York cycle, can only be properly appreciated within the context of the larger structure. Like the formal trilogies of Greek theatre, then, although much more sprawling in their overall patterning, the Mystery cycles also direct and control narrative understanding by means of a larger and explicitly demonstrated framework.

Whilst the elements of the *fabula* are dictated by the Biblical originals, the telling of the *story* can, of course, vary within certain parameters, allowing for the emergence of particular comic cameos, local detail and colour, as well as stylistic variations. Accordingly the surviving *texts* vary widely, both in terms of literary merit and what they choose to include and exclude. Nevertheless, in these plays we essentially see plot – according to Brooks (1984), the constructive interaction between *fabula* and *story* – operating in its most static, fixed form. There

is little or no room here for Bruner's 'subjunctivisation' of the story (1986). The correct dénouement is always known right from the start; audience-response is to be strictly orchestrated within the prescribed limits, there will be no debate or fresh interpretation. By contrast, everything must be explained, delineated, predetermined:

DOCTOR: This moral men may have in mind;
Ye hearers, take it of worth, old and young [...]
Amen, say ye, for Saint *Charity*.
(Anon. in Rhys, 1909: 25)

As in the theatre of Aristotle and Horace, the narrative 'rules' are laid down not primarily by the demands of literary theory, but by socio-cultural necessity, and here the push towards orthodoxy in audience interpretation is even stronger.

Shakespearean narrative

The explosive creativity which Shakespeare brought to all aspects of dramatic production has been widely and well documented. Coming at a moment in history when medieval certainties were being swept aside, to be replaced by more open-ended, questioning approaches to all aspects of being human, his plays demonstrate an adventurous freedom with regard to plot construction and narrative handling, as to all other aspects of playmaking.

So much so, in fact, that early editors of the plays, chafing under the authoritarian strictures of French neo-classicism, regularly felt the need to defend him against charges of 'sloppy' plotting and his apparent 'ignorance' of the classical rules of plot construction.¹ Although early plays, like *The Comedy of Errors* or *Titus Andronicus* clearly show the influence of classical models in their selection of narrative materials, they nevertheless make no attempt to obey the unities supposedly prescribed by Aristotle (which can, in any case, be seen to be descriptive rather than prescriptive). In his later work particularly, as Shakespeare gains confidence and experience, he is more than ever willing to experiment with new forms and new ways of telling his story.

Rawdon Wilson's detailed study of *Shakespearean Narrative* provides a useful account not just of Shakespeare's own model and usage of narrative, but of the wider Renaissance background.

¹ See, for example, Johnson's comments, noted in Atkins (1951: 241 – 242).

According to Wilson, this broadly humanist tradition was “committed to the moral, and generally educative, effects of all literature, but seeing narrative as particularly efficacious” (1995: 25) and he argues strongly for a central emphasis upon narrative within Renaissance thinking:

... narrative played a fundamental role in humanist education: the texts studied in sixteenth-century schools were commonly narrative [...] For Renaissance thinkers, the world is a story to be told, a nest of stories, parts, and motifs of stories to be reassembled, and in all respects the patient subject of the storyteller’s art. (1995: 22-23)

Shakespeare’s own use of narrative is seen to be, typically, exploratory and experimental. He not only understands the power of narrative to persuade and convince, he also problematizes the question of how narratives are personally constructed in the first instance, as well as transmitted to, and received by, others. Consider *The Winter’s Tale*, a play which in its construction alone takes huge liberties with the rules of narrative. The enormous disparity between the two worlds of Sicily and Bohemia is immediately apparent and obviously deliberate. However, this spatial disjunction is further elaborated by a bold sixteen-year jump in the action, presided over by the allegorical representation of Time. Explicitly identifying this character as the tale-teller (IV.i.14) and speaking through his voice, Shakespeare openly admits that he is re-writing the rules of narrative as he goes along:

... since it is in my power
To o’erthrow law, and in one self-born hour
To plant and o’erwhelm custom.

(IV. i. 7-9)

This is the consummate assurance of the experienced storyteller, handling his materials, and his audience, with easy confidence. But within the play’s story itself he forms his own model, or *mise-en-abyme*, of the process of narrative construction.

We have already noted the causal aspect of narrative, and the fact that in order to ‘write’ a story, it is necessary to forge such links between the basic, raw materials provided. In the opening scenes of the play, observing Hermione and Polixenes together, Leontes does exactly this, constructing, from the physical signs of gesture, facial expression and eye contact (“... paddling palms and pinching fingers ... making practis’d smiles ...”), a false narrative for himself of adultery and betrayal.

The play's action arises from Leontes' jealousy, but this externalizes itself in the form of a story that the king tells himself. Like all narrators, Leontes draws together a number of scattered observations into a coherent whole... The observations from which Leontes constructs his narrative, otherwise fragmentary and noncohering, may have no basis in reality, but they may have some in hypothesis. (Wilson, 1995: 98)

This process of constructing a narrative from "scattered observations" is explored also in *Cymbeline*, *Hamlet*, *Much Ado About Nothing* and – a particularly close study – *Othello*. In this latter play, Iago repeatedly exploits his own considerable skill as a narrator to recount an alternative story, parallel to the 'real' events of the action, out of a series of carefully engineered situations. Iago remorselessly weaves the innocent looks, gestures, remarks and even physical accessories, of Cassio and Desdemona into a compellingly credible account. Gross physical proof in the form of the 'lovers' caught together *in flagrante delicto* is not to be had, warns Iago, but,

If imputation, and strong circumstances
Which lead directly to the door of truth,
Will give you satisfaction, you might ha't.
(III, iii, 411-13)

Through this compelling display of skill, Shakespeare demonstrates the way in which radically alternative narrative accounts can develop out of the same raw materials. Accounts whose claims to authority must be rigorously questioned, before they can be accepted as 'true'. Narrative credulity is clearly a dangerous matter. In a broader sense, also, Shakespeare is decentralising the unarguable authority of medieval narrative, warning us instead not to believe every tale we hear. Everything is up for questioning, and anything can be misconstrued and re-deployed within a different version of the 'truth'.

In fact, the listener's reconstructive role is repeatedly noted in Shakespearean texts. In another striking image of the power of narrative to elicit and shape response within the same play, it is Desdemona's "greedy ear" that lends the stories of *Othello* such authority and force. Equally, Mark Antony, asking the crowds to "Lend me your ears" in *Julius Caesar*, is fully aware of the crucial importance of the listener. And in *The Tempest*, before recounting the narrative of his own life to Miranda, Prospero comments that "The very minute bids thee ope thine ear", repeatedly berating her, when he suspects she is not attending: "Dost thou hear?" As Wilson notes, "[t]here

are many references to ears, but they always point to Shakespeare's awareness that a narrative's prosperity lies in the ear of the hearer, not upon the tongue of the narrator" (1995: 27).

Shakespeare is fully cognizant of the role of the audience in receiving the narrative and that the narrative gaps will be completed by the attentive listener. 'Plot' is becoming 'plotting': an active listener-response is called for, indeed is unavoidable.

One other distinctive and innovative feature of Shakespeare's handling of narrative is worth remarking upon. Unlike the essentially 'closed' worlds of Greek drama and most of the Medieval dramas (one interesting exception being the previously-mentioned *Second Shepherds' Play* from the Towneley Cycle), Shakespeare's plays possess the ability to suggest a huge number of unexplored worlds lying just beyond the edge of the dramatic frame. There are characters whose past lives are lightly touched upon, but not explored (e.g. Jaques from *As You Like It*), whose motives or inner struggles are hinted at but never fully explained (Iago, Hamlet), and realms whose existence is glimpsed but whose inner territory remains unpenetrated (the fairy kingdom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*). Above all, there is an understanding of the fact that complete narrative worlds can be suggested by the provision of a few fragments: and this is to be viewed, not in terms of careless, untidy plotting, but as providing an allusive richness which adds depth and scale to all that is seen onstage.

Restoration and beyond

Shakespeare was happy to work with very loose plot structures in his plays, allowing different narrative threads to compete for our attention or to suggest different possibilities for production. This flexible approach to plotting is one significant factor, I believe, in his continuing popularity with contemporary directors and audiences. With the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, however, and the re-establishment of an aristocratic hegemony, comes also a renewed passion for order, balance and symmetry in the cultural, as in the political, sphere. Equally, European aesthetic influences brought back to England by Charles II and his entourage, begin to have an effect upon all aspects of drama. Although a number of Shakespeare's texts are still being performed and enjoyed during this period,² the tendency in newly-written pieces is towards more

² It should be noted that they were subject to considerable revision and re-working at this time, to bring them into line with conventional plot 'expectations', providing a play like *King Lear*, for instance, with an ending, in

enclosed worlds, contained within more tightly structured plots. However, it should also be noted that, free of the overarching grand narrative of Christian theology to be found in the Mystery Plays, and to some extent discernible still beneath the surface of many of Shakespeare's plays, they are able to flirt with a wider range of *moral* possibilities (within, of course, a much narrower social ambit). These modish comedies of manners, written for the influential aristocratic audiences of the time, largely reflect a preference for the neo-classical unities of time and action, if not of place, and their plotting generally favours a more obviously mechanistic model. Just like the increasingly elaborate timepieces of the period, these narratives can be relied upon to function like 'clockwork': put the right elements into the right sequence, tighten the spring and watch the machinery whirr into life.

Given the structural origins of the word 'plot' already mentioned, it is apposite that one of the leading playwrights of the period, Sir John Vanbrugh, should have been both a writer of comedy and an architect. His play *The Provok'd Wife* may usefully stand as an example of the genre. The first act of this piece serves to wind up the mechanism: Sir John Brute and Lady Fancyfull are both on display in these opening scenes as exemplars of the worst kinds of male and female behaviour possible. Sir John is a boor, a drunken sot, who takes no care of his beautiful, young and faithful wife (faithful, at least, in her actions, if not in her desires). Lady Fancyfull is self-regarding, shallow and vain. Both are ready to be taught a lesson about the human heart. And a lesson, of course, is what the narrative delivers, gathering momentum throughout the play and reaching a breathless climax in the final moments of Act Five, when Sir John learns that he has been spared the indignity of being cuckolded (this time, at least), and Lady Fancyfull's malicious and self-serving schemes are exposed. The intervening movements of the play are all schematically ordered: a pivotal block of action in Act Three, at the centre of the play, and set in Sir John's house, brings all of the main characters together, enabling the plot to thicken nicely, and making use of an elaborately structured sequence of entrances and exits; whilst the surrounding Acts Two and Four provide neatly balanced scenes of open-air intrigue, set in St. James's Park and Spring-Garden respectively.

which Cordelia is revived and Lear does not die of a broken heart, but lives happily ever after.

The whole play, in fact, delivers proportion and symmetry at both the macro-level of plot structure and the micro-level of individual exchanges:

Lady B. How strong is fancy!
Bel. How weak is woman.
Lady B. Prithee, niece, have a better opinion of your aunt's inclinations.
Bel. Dear aunt, have a better opinion of your niece's understanding.
Lady B. You'll make me angry.
Bel. You'll make me laugh.

(Vanbrugh, 1994: 410)

Plots like this are constructed in formal patterns that resemble story-puzzles. That is to say, any given plot seems to fit together in one way and one way only. Remove or re-order any of the sections and the puzzle no longer 'works'. To put it more formally, the *fabula*, or story elements, can only be combined in *this particular* pattern in order to achieve *this particular* plot. The individual stories do not offer themselves up for endless re-telling in fresh versions. Rather, it would be truer to say that any one Restoration Comedy playtext is itself one particular 'telling' of the *fabula* common to them all: the patterns of interaction between the boorish husband, the flirtatious (though ultimately chaste) wife, the preening fop, the vainglorious peacock, the gallant lover, the boastful coward, and so on.

And while it is true to say that the comedies of this period are self-consciously aware of their artificial status, this is manifest mainly in frequent asides to the audience of the 'nudge-nudge' variety, and arch, onstage discussions about such topics as the 'correct' social behaviour when sitting at a play, rather than any overt commentary on the narrative-artifice itself.

This passion for neatly balanced, tightly-sequenced plots gathers pace, if anything, throughout the following centuries, culminating in the excessively structured, 'well-made'³ plays of writers like Scribe and Sardou, and the very obviously plot-driven melodramas of the Victorian stage. Within an age of rapid industrialisation, which privileges still further predominantly mechanistic paradigms, it is interesting to note the emergence of the new genre of detective story, under the

³'well-made' was intended as a compliment when first coined, however the phrase quickly came to signify the very opposite, denoting a piece that is mechanical in its plot construction, devoid of interesting characters or credible scenarios

aegis first of Poe, and then Conan Doyle. Here the strict logic of enchainment and effect, described by Peter Brooks as “the urgency of narrative explanation” (1984: 269), is pushed to its very limits. It is interesting too, to note that the freedom, which Shakespeare had allowed himself, to range freely in and around his dramatic narratives, is now being employed primarily within the emerging novel form, whereas during the same period of time, drama is tending increasingly to close down its scope.

Moving to the latter half of the nineteenth century, we find Ibsen offering a useful illustration of the tension created, as writers seek to escape from this narrative straitjacket. *A Doll’s House*, first published in 1879, is a particularly good example of this trend, operating as it does, for the major part, as a conventional melodrama, in which the plot twists and turns are dictated by ostensibly ‘random’ life-events (carefully controlled and stage-managed, of course, by Ibsen himself), and then transforming in the final scene into what feels like a completely different play, in which the momentum of narrative suddenly gives way to the momentum of argument and the exploration of ideas.

And it is, in fact, the ‘drama of ideas’, which forms the first significant challenge to the primacy of story. Although narrative is still the major structuring device in the plays of Shaw and Chekhov, it has begun to give some place to the imperative of argument (in the case of Shaw) and of character-based exploration (in the case of Chekhov). Of the two, Shaw is still the more reliant upon conventional narrative frameworks, Chekhov being prepared to experiment with larger narrative gaps. But even Shaw, by the time of *Heartbreak House* (1919), has taken Chekhov as his model and moved into very different territory in relation to story. His own subtitle to the play designates it “a fantasia in the Russian manner on English themes” and whilst thematically it does explore the familiar Shavian preoccupations – money, marriage, morality – its tone and structure are noticeably more lyrical and ambiguous. Act One ends with the gnomic remark, “Give me deeper darkness. Money is not made in the light”, and the final, apocalyptic scene is also deeply equivocal: the pragmatic millionaire, Boss Mangan, is blown to pieces during the course of an air raid (he has taken shelter in a gravel pit stocked with dynamite), whilst Ellie and Mrs. Hushabye greet the attack with almost devotional fervour:

MRS. HUSHABYE: Did you hear the explosions? And the sound in the sky: it's splendid: it's like an orchestra: it's like Beethoven.
ELLIE: By thunder, Hesione: it is Beethoven.

(Shaw, 1964: 158)

One other noteworthy development over this whole period has been the gradual disappearance of any kind of narrator figure. Greek tragedy employed a full Chorus, onstage for most of the action and commenting directly on the drama. Shakespeare frequently makes use of some form of 'stand-in' Chorus, and Restoration drama had its regular asides to the audience, not to mention the accompanying Prologues and Epilogues. But by the time we reach the late nineteenth century, we see that drama has gradually, "freed itself of the narrative voice, as 'the narrator buried himself completely in the text, disappeared beneath the voices of his characters' " (Ong, cited in Maclean, 1988: 9).

And as the twentieth century opens, and the momentum for radical change increases, it becomes apparent that the presence in drama of narrative itself can now no longer be relied upon. We begin to see the proliferation of a whole range of formal and structural experiments, which will lead ultimately, although at a noticeably slower pace than in most other artforms, to the kinds of work in which 'nothing' happens.

Chapter Four – Alternatives to Narrative

Since the turn of the [twentieth] century, most art forms have vastly expanded their materials and scope. Totally abstract or nonobjective painting and sculpture, unheard of in 1900, is practised by major artists today. Composers tend to discard traditional Western scales and harmonies, and atonal music is relatively common. Poetry has abandoned rhyme, meter and syntax. Almost alone among the arts, theatre has lagged.
(Kirby in Sandford, 1995: 29)

In his general introduction to “The New Theatre”, taken from the collection *Happenings and Other Acts*, Michael Kirby draws attention to the relatively conservative nature of theatre, in comparison to work being done within other artforms from the early part of the last century. Largely speaking, the structuring forms of drama continued to be those required by meaning and the transmission of highly organised, verbal information. Plays, even those that were improvised, tended to be literary in their nature, informed by the primacy of the word and by a need for clarity and coherence.

Surveying the same period, Christopher Innes notes that where there was theatrical experimentation, it was characterised in general by a trend towards primitivism, and he identifies two distinct, and complementary, facets to this: “the exploration of dream states or the instinctive and subconscious levels of the psyche; and the quasi-religious focus on myth and magic, which in the theatre leads to experiments with ritual and the ritualistic patterning of performance” (Innes, 1993: 3).

Explorations of dream states can be traced, in particular, through several key plays of Strindberg, *To Damascus* (1898-1904), *A Dream Play* (1902) and *The Ghost Sonata* (1907), leading into the German Expressionist movement. Although these texts make extensive use of visual imagery, and their internal ‘logic’ is distinctly dreamlike and *illogical* in quality, they are, nevertheless, essentially word-based plays and not inherently anti-narrative in construction. The twists and turns of the narrative may be hard to follow at points, may be confusing to an audience, but narrative itself is still present. For all of its swift transformations and hallucinatory repetitions, the essential *fabula* of *A Dream Play*, for example, is very clear and can be very quickly summarised: Indra’s daughter must, herself, live through the sufferings of humankind, in order that she may at last return to heaven, sadder and wiser. As John Peter notes, commenting on

another of Strindberg's works, "the essential linearity of drama does assert itself after all. All three parts of *To Damascus* tell their story, such as it is, in a recognisably sequential movement. The play as story proves stronger than the play as a system of dislocations" (Peter, 1987: 255).

Nor is ritual, in and of itself, anti-narrative. Genuine ritual, after all, is the acting out of communal myth in a stylised form. Underpinning the apparent arbitrariness of the ritual acts sits the logic of an ancient narrative. If anything, the active participle, *plotting*, is more than ever appropriate to describe this corporate activity: the celebrants of any ritual connect themselves to the underlying story by their participation within it. The story circle is once again completed by their involvement. The major problem facing more recent attempts at creating a contemporary ritualistic theatre, by contrast, has been precisely the fact, as Innes notes, that there is a lack of any shared *story* sustaining or holding it all together:

... what the Performance Group approach demonstrates is that meaningful participation requires an established ritual familiar to all, not an alien rite where, however authentic the imitation, the performance is bound to be fake. This is not only impossible in a society where cohesive religious belief has gone and its ritual forms have lost their validity, but doubly so, given a political radicalism that rejects the social context, since whatever communal forms do exist are there. (Innes, 1993: 176)¹

Early experiments that are more directly concerned with the formal aspects of narrative can typically be seen to be founded upon a political radicalism, which seeks to reject the whole gamut of bourgeois values, including those to do with logic, order and structure:

The identifying signature of avant garde art, all the way back to Bakunin and his anarchist journal *L'Avant Garde* in 1878, has been an unremitting hostility to contemporary civilization. Its most obvious aspect has been negative: *the rejection of social organization and artistic conventions, aesthetic values and materialistic ideals, syntactical structure and logic*, as well as everything associated with the bourgeoisie. (1993: 6, italics mine)

Arguably then, behind modern and postmodern assaults upon narrative lies a more fundamental rejection of both logic and syntax. One of the many 'offensive' characteristics of Alfred Jarry's provocatively subversive *Ubu Roi* was the deliberately childish nature of its plot construction. This play was not just an attack on narrative, however, or even just the prevailing vogue for

¹ The Performance Group was Richard Schechner's company, working in the United States during the 1960s and 70s.

theatrical naturalism, but rather a full-blooded assault upon the institutions and conventions of contemporary bourgeois society itself. On the opening night of *Ubu Roi* on December 10th, 1896, Jarry managed to outrage and frustrate his audience even before the curtain had gone up, by lecturing them on the finer points of the play they were about to watch.

The Futurist experiments of the early twentieth century also embodied this confrontational approach. The *Manifesto of Futurism* (1909), as expressed by F.T. Marinetti, is intentionally, and even cheerfully, subversive of the prevailing cultural norms:

So let them come, the gay incendiaries with charred fingers! Here they are! Here they are! ... Come on! set fire to the library shelves! Turn aside the canals to flood the museums! ... You have objections? - Enough! Enough! We know them ... We've understood! ... Our fine deceitful intelligence tells us that we are the revival and extension of our ancestors - Perhaps! ... If only it were so! - But who cares? We don't want to understand! (Marinetti in Huxley & Witts, 1996: 252-53)

And in their 1915 manifesto, *The Futurist Synthetic Theatre*, Marinetti and others argued passionately for the kinds of dislocation, fragmentation and sheer chaos found in everyday life to be reflected in theatrical texts, rejecting utterly the strained logic of carefully arranged cause and effect and pursuing instead the thought that simultaneity and abstractions more closely reflected the true energies of modern existence.

It's stupid to want to explain with logical minuteness everything taking place on the stage, when even in life one never grasps an event entirely, in all its causes and consequences, because reality throbs around us, bombards us *with squalls of fragments of interconnected events, mortised and tenoned together, confused, mixed up, chaotic...* *It's stupid* to submit to obligatory *crescendi, prepared effects and postponed climaxes.* (Marinetti et al in Kirby, 1986: 199)

The *syntesi* themselves are extremely varied: childish sketches, very self-consciously making a 'point' about art; brief, abstract 'anti-theatre' impressions; and completely nonsensical sound-poems. They are all very short, with a huge emphasis placed on the immediacy of sensation, of concrete experience, of the 'now' of performance. All things modern and technological are enthusiastically embraced, all that smacks of the past, of 'dead' literature, is belligerently rejected.

Giuseppe Steiner's *Il "Saul" di Alfieri* in particular is an amusing illustration of the Futurists' manifesto pledge to rid theatre of long and unnecessary plot detail. Reducing Alfieri's epic original to a mere page or two, Steiner tells the entire story of King Saul and his troubled relationship with David in five extremely brief 'acts', the longest of which contains approximately eleven lines of dialogue.

Yet although the majority of the plays demonstrate a determined effort to jettison narrative elements of *any* kind (take, as just one further example, Francesco Cangiullo's *Non c'è un Cane* – There Is No Dog – in which the one character is identified as HE WHO IS NOT THERE, and the entire action of the play, set on a deserted road, at night, is a dog crossing the street...), the most striking feature of Marinetti's own writings *about* the movement is his repeated use of classic narrative techniques and his unabashed appeals to an overarching metanarrative involving notions of progress, excitement, revolution and technological innovation:

An immense pride was buoying us up, because we felt ourselves alone at that hour, alone, awake, and on our feet, like proud beacons or forward sentries against an army of hostile stars glaring down at us from their celestial encampments. Alone with stokers feeding the hellish fires of great ships, alone with the black spectres who grope in the red-hot bellies of locomotives launched down their crazy courses, alone with drunkards reeling like wounded birds along the city walls. (Marinetti in Huxley & Witts, 1996: 248)

This is storytelling in the grand style. Possible narrative realms are constantly being evoked by means of allusive fragments; these fragments are then threaded together into a larger world of fire, passion and hostility, and driving the whole piece forward is a tremendous sense of being champions of destiny. With a neat irony, then, this awareness of being artistic pioneers, reaching for the future by thrusting aside the encumbrances of the past – including the use of narrative – has been perfectly captured in a compelling piece of self-narrativisation.

In her foreword to the volume *Performance Art from Futurism to the Present* (1988), performance historian Roselee Goldberg identifies the 1909 Manifesto as the point of origin for all twentieth-century performance art to come. However, although foreshadowing major developments to appear later in the century, the Futurists' efforts at subverting meaning were scorned by most of their contemporaries and had relatively little immediate impact upon the prevailing theatrical culture. Stressing the often neglected, although significant, influence of the

Futurists upon individual playwrights such as Pirandello and Thornton Wilder, and the continuing reverberations into the Surrealist drama which was to follow, Michael Kirby nevertheless has to conclude that, “[t]hese developments had little effect on the mainstream of theatre that progressed in a generally realistic direction, and encompassed both stylization and naturalism” (1986: 153).

And he opens his account of the movement by stating flatly that, “Futurist performance is virtually unknown in the United States” (1986: 3). In fact, it was to be some years yet before the emphasis would shift decisively from the literary to the performative and in the meantime there would be other significant developments with regard to the role of narrative, in the greatly contrasting works of Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Beckett.

Brecht

Brecht’s solution to the irresistible pull of narrative was not to remove it from his plays, but to take away its centre of gravity. By replacing Aristotelian plot with Epic narrative, Brecht worked to dilute the force of story, its power to compel assent by its apparent inevitability. The false illusion of ‘beginning, middle and end’, created by the drama of Naturalism, is replaced by fragmentation, and the series of broken beginnings and partial endings formed by a sequence of disconnected mini-narratives. In this, he was undoubtedly influenced by Büchner’s *Woyzeck* (1837), which, by means of its unexplained narrative leaps from one scene to the next, undermines an audience’s sense of narrative competence and forces a re-evaluation of the storytelling process itself. Nevertheless, Brecht was able to extend his explorations over a larger body of work, and a much longer timescale.

From his earliest play, *Baal* (1918), Brecht made use of this alternative storytelling approach. The scenes do combine to tell a larger narrative, certainly, but the ‘jump-cuts’ from one to another, and even the apparent *non sequiturs* within the dialogue of any given scene, work to distance an audience from the story material and the characters within it. The influence of the German cabaret-revue theatre can also be clearly seen, for example, even in a very serious piece such as *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* (1938), whose structure is that of a sequence of vignettes, connected only by theme and the desire to tell many stories rather than just one.

Another strategy Brecht employed to fragment and frame the story was the reintroduction of a narrator figure, in direct contrast with what was to be found in naturalistic theatre. As Kirby notes, “[t]he narrator was no longer missing, along with the fourth wall” (1986: 71).

But there is always a tension in Brecht’s work. Certainly he uses narrative in a new way, questioning the easy ‘neatness’, the convenient sense of closure, to be found in conventional dramatic forms, but he nevertheless still gives narrative a leading role: “Everything hangs on the ‘story’; it is the heart of the theatrical performance [...] The ‘story’ is the theatre’s great operation” (Brecht in Willett, 1978: 200).

And in some instances, his love of storytelling can outweigh his other, more overtly educative, aims. *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1944) is a good example of this. Grusha’s perilous and emotive quest to ‘save the baby’ is a satisfying fable in its own right and, whatever the political message Brecht seeks to bring to the play, it could be argued that the effect upon a spectator is more to do with seeing the story-circle neatly closed than with pondering the merits of Soviet agrarian policy. Similarly, I suspect that at the end of *The Life of Galileo* (1938), an audience member is much more likely to be emotionally convinced of the triumph of the individual human spirit in the face of coercive authority, than troubled by any strong sense that this outcome was by no means assured.

Brecht made a significant contribution towards a process of narrative fragmentation, then, and – particularly in *Man Equals Man* (1926) – raised important questions over covert assumptions to do with a unified sense of self, but there was to be a much more radical assault on the coherence of narrative – and personhood – in the work of Samuel Beckett.

Beckett

It is a commonly held view that Beckett’s plays are plotless, devoid of narrative. Colin Counsell, for instance, in his excellent survey of twentieth-century theatre *Signs of Performance*, tells us that the plays “...lack narrative... none have a narrative in the usual sense... the usual cause-and-effect narrative is absent... we are denied narrative...” (Counsell, 1996: 112-142). And Stanton B. Garner describes Beckett as, “[a]ttacking at its roots the conventional transformation of performance into narrative” (Garner, 1989:150). In fact, close examination of the plays

themselves reveals that they are shot through with narrative, and in very many instances the ‘action’ of the drama is that of the narrative project itself. Quite clearly what Beckett does *not* give us is narrative in the sense of linear plot, or a grand overarching structure with beginning, middle and end. However, he shows us instead ‘characters’ working constantly to *construct* stories, in order to allay their own restless hunger for significance and closure. For example, in *That Time* (1976):

B: ...just one of those things you kept making up to keep the void out just another of those old tales to keep the void from pouring in on top of you the shroud [...]

A: ... making it all up on the doorstep as you went along making yourself all up again for the millionth time...

(Beckett, 1984: 230, 234)

Kristin Morrison is quick to point out that, when she speaks of narrative in the plays, she too is not talking about *plot*, but rather about the use to which narrative is put, as a means of avoiding, or at the very least controlling, painful emotional experience:

But in this discussion ..., the terms ‘story’ and ‘narrative’ do not indicate plot or ‘what you would have if you summarized the play’. In this discussion those terms refer only to actual narrations (of whatever length) delivered during the course of the play by one of the characters in the play, units which comprise an important part of the dramatic action, units involving self-revelations and evasions of a most subtle kind on the part of the speaker himself: what he tells, when he tells it, and why he tells it are often the real drama. (Morrison, 1983: 6)

The very language used by Morrison, the distinction she draws between *narrative* and *plot*, returns us once more to the uneasy relationship within which these two terms co-exist. What she draws our attention to, through this careful use of terminology, is the fact that narrative has not been ‘removed’ from this new form of drama: rather it has been resituated, and its role redefined.

In *Endgame* (1957), for example, one of the few significant activities left to Hamm is that of constructing his “chronicle”:

HAMM: It’s time for my story. Do you want to listen to my story?

CLOV: No.

HAMM: Ask my father if he wants to listen to my story.

(Beckett, 1968: 34)

As he begins to tell his story, Hamm is described as adopting a “*narrative tone*”, deliberately framing the enterprise of narrative construction, the conscious selection, rejection and presentation of material, with a suitable ‘voice’. And he frequently interrupts himself, in order to comment on his success or failure as a storyteller:

HAMM: ...Pale, wonderfully pale and thin, he seemed on the point of - [*Pause. Normal tone.*] No, I’ve done that bit. (35)

But Beckett makes it clear that Hamm needs an auditor, for the narrative effort to be worthwhile. Having failed to persuade Clov to listen to his story in the first place, he then demands that Clov ask him about it:

HAMM: ... I’ve got on with my story. [*Pause.*] I’ve got on with it well. [*Pause. Irritably*] Ask me where I’ve got to.

CLOV: Oh, by the way, your story?

HAMM: [*Surprised.*] What story?

CLOV: The one you’ve been telling yourself all your ... days.

HAMM: Ah, you mean my chronicle?

CLOV: That’s the one.

[*Pause.*]

HAMM: Keep going, can’t you, keep going! (40)

Clov’s questions and comments elicit a few more narrative details, but Hamm soon reaches the point at which his story always breaks off. And although Clov, echoing Hamm’s own words, urges him to “Keep going, can’t you, keep going!”, Hamm seems unable, or unwilling, to bring his story to completion:

CLOV: Will it not soon be the end?

HAMM: I’m afraid it will.

CLOV: Pah! You’ll make up another.

HAMM: I don’t know. [*Pause.*] I feel rather drained. (41)

Ultimately, though, in his final speech of the play, Hamm seems, albeit rather inconclusively, to attempt this closure:

HAMM: ... Oh, I put him before his responsibilities! [*Pause. Normal tone.*] Well, there we are, there I am, that’s enough. (52)

Reluctantly, he has – perhaps – reached a possible ending, that which he has both desired and feared: “reckoning closed and story ended”.

This issue of narration, and particularly self-narration, the process of telling our own lives, is repeatedly under scrutiny in the plays. Krapp sits alone, revising and reworking his life narratives on tape; similarly, the Listener in *That Time* makes constant efforts to recall and reorganise key events of his life (“...was that the time or was that another time...” [1984: 230]); the relentless stream of words in *Not I* (1972) is a loose jumble of story fragments, which Mouth cannot fully make sense of, partly because of her inability, or refusal, to make herself the subject of her own narrative; in *Ohio Impromptu* (1981) the Listener regulates the story told by the Reader, visibly engaged in a process of controlling and ordering the narrative, by means of his knocks upon the table, until at last, “Nothing is left to tell” (1984: 288).

In these and other texts we see the central figure(s) engaged in the process of telling their own stories, always from broken fragments, always in a characteristically sparse and compressed language. These narratives are distilled, reduced, pared right down to the barest details. Beckett’s approach in writing the plays would appear to have been to start with a clear storyline in his own mind, and then strip it back to mere hints and fragments, requiring a huge reconstructive effort from the audience themselves, as well as the figures onstage. Kristin Morrison has noted this process at work in her examination of draft versions of a number of the texts:

Changes in detail often involve a move away from specificity.... The overall direction of these changes, however, is toward concision: ‘Simp.’ as Beckett wrote in the margin of a recently revised version of *Endgame*. The spoken words are usually refined in rhythm and meaning, explicit information is often suppressed, and plot line usually becomes more obscure. The result is not obfuscation, however, but condensation. The entire play has been ‘boiled down’ to its essence. (1983: 112, 113)

In one particular instance, as Morrison points out, an unusually detailed and sexually explicit narrative in a draft version of *Come and Go*, is finally reduced, in the published text, to “two innocent phrases, ‘Dreaming of ... love’ and ‘I can feel the rings’ (i.e., wedding rings)” (1983: 114). In this fashion, the narrative gaps, of which we have previously spoken, are opened up to the point at which they become yawning chasms of space, crossable only by huge speculative leaps on the part of an audience, but nevertheless demanding this interpretive effort from any

listener. And whatever the struggle, however great the awareness of dislocation and fragmentation, the primary task is clearly one of understanding and making sense of (attributing meaning to) *narrative*.

John Peter, however, writing about Beckett's work in general, and *Waiting for Godot* in particular, is disturbed by the apparent arbitrariness of the events of the play, and the clear message he derives from this is that there is no narrative sense to be made of it after all:

Experiencing such a play is always somewhat like experiencing both arbitrary imprisonment and unexpected liberation. We sense that no personal will is at work in these characters, but that a single, impersonal, 'unquestion-able' will, rather than the multiple causes and complications of life, drives forward its events. We sense that, though the play is clearly an artefact of human imagination, both its beginning and its end are beyond our computing. This is why the experience of a closed play is, ultimately, always the experience of being alone. (1987: 357)

Peter makes an important connection between the exploration of moral experience and what he terms an 'open' play, in the sense that it is open to question, or will allow us to enter into a dialogue with it. He argues that the search for narrative is no less than a quest for significant moral and ethical frameworks, which is why, in his view, the plays of Beckett can be accurately described as amoral. This is a significant issue, and one to which we will return in chapter 9.

If we look momentarily at the writings of Beckett's Absurdist contemporaries, Ionesco, N.F. Simpson and the like, then it would seem that here we are encountering plays which truly have no story, no narrative, nothing coherent to be found, reconstructed, re-assembled. On first impression, this might appear to be the case, but although these are obviously more definitively *nonsensical* narratives, it is worth bearing in mind that the strength of their effect still depends to a very great extent upon an implicit contrast between their strange, irrational elements, and some pre-existing point of reference: the 'real' world, in which conversations, actions and ultimately narratives, do indeed 'make sense'. As Michael Roemer notes in *Telling Stories*:

In a narrative of the absurd, deliberate disconnections *are* the connection, just as an *absence* of feeling can constitute the emotional tenor of a work. However disjointed and fragmented the elements, their very inclusion links them. (1995: 11)

Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, for example, concerns the gradual metamorphosis of almost the entire population of a small French provincial town into the eponymous animals. Yet although the scenario is absurd at a surface level, the underlying questions of the play are rooted solidly in our experience of the real. What exactly are the benefits of Enlightenment rationalism, for example, within the contexts of a philosophical tradition which is endlessly fascinated by the paradoxical properties of language (embodied above all in the character of the Logician), and a society which is rushing headlong (literally, in the play) to embrace primal, animalistic energies?

DUDARD: You seem very sure of yourself. Who can say where the normal stops and the abnormal begins? Can you personally define these conceptions of normality and abnormality? Nobody has solved this problem yet, either medically or philosophically.

(Ionesco, 1962: 98)

Meanwhile, as Beckett was straining against the limits of narrative drama and the Absurdist were smashing recklessly through them, a new kind of performance exploration was being undertaken in North America, under the auspices of Black Mountain College, which was decisively to change the nature of theatre in the Western world.

Chapter Five – Anti Narrative

Black Mountain College and John Cage

In the same year that *En Attendant Godot* was published in France, and extracts from the play were recorded for French radio, a performance of a quite different nature took place on the other side of the Atlantic. By definition it was a unique, unrepeatable event, but its contribution to the ongoing development of theatre was, in its own way, as significant as that of Beckett's radical new text, although in a quite different arena, shifting the focus definitively from theatre-as-drama, to theatre-as-performance.

Untitled Event was staged by John Cage and others as part of the Black Mountain College summer school of 1952. Cage was primarily a musician, of course, but his work explored a very wide range of performance possibilities, which – quite deliberately – cut right across previous definitions and boundaries, and in particular the boundaries between different creative disciplines. In this, and a number of other respects, he drew consciously upon the ideas and practice of the Futurists. But he added other elements too, such as a deep, personal commitment to the philosophies of Zen Buddhism, and, in contrast to the earlier efforts of Marinetti and others, his experiments were to have a more immediate and obviously discernible impact.

In this seminal piece, Cage and Merce Cunningham, the dancer, decided to create a performance which would simply combine dance, film, art, poetry and prose readings, and music. Members of the audience, each holding a white cup, which had been placed without explanation on their chairs, were seated in the performance space in an arrangement of four triangles, the points of which converged towards the centre of the room. In the centre itself was a large space that could be used for dance and movement, as could the aisles between the triangles and spaces along each of the four walls.

White paintings by a visiting student, Robert Rauschenberg, hung overhead. From a step-ladder, Cage, in black suit and tie, read a text on 'the relation of music to Zen Buddhism' and excerpts from Meister Eckhart. Then he performed a 'composition with a radio', following the prearranged 'time brackets'. At the same time, Rauschenberg played old records on a hand-wound gramophone and David Tudor played 'a prepared piano'. Later Tudor turned to two buckets, pouring water from one to the other while, planted in the audience, Charles Olsen and Mary Caroline Richards read poetry. Cunningham and others danced through the aisles chased by an excited dog, Rauschenberg flashed

‘abstract’ slides (created by coloured gelatine sandwiched between the glass) and film clips projected onto the ceiling showed first the school cook, and then, as they gradually moved from the ceiling and down the wall, the setting sun. In a corner, the composer Jay Watt played exotic musical instruments and ‘whistles blew, babies screamed and coffee was served by four boys dressed in white’.

(Goldberg, 1988: 126-27)

In contrast to Beckett’s approach, which was to work within the constraints of drama, whilst pushing them to the limits, here was a piece of performance that simply sidestepped any such constraints, and refused to acknowledge any boundaries between previously separate disciplines. As in the work of the Futurists, attention was focused upon the concrete actuality of the performance, the theatricality was that of immediate presence. There were no hidden metaphors. Nothing in the work ‘stood for’ anything else. There was no intended connection between any of the different elements. The relationship of one to another was deliberately alogical. They simply occupied the same performance space at the same time, location and duration being the only common factors. They were not designed to comment meaningfully upon each other, nor were the audience expected to draw any of the threads together in anything other than a purely subjective and personal way.

Moreover the ‘text’ for the performance was not something that had been carefully crafted in advance of the event. Even the very brief *sintesi* of the Futurists had been written and rehearsed prior to the actual performance, but *Untitled Event* was simply the placing together of widely varying material in an alogical, spatio-temporal relationship. As such, it worked directly against the kind of coherence normally to be expected from a conventional performance text, which relies upon the careful arrangement of parts to form the whole, even if this careful arrangement is then deliberately disguised by the artful re-organisation of material.

In this and other pieces, Cage was not so much “anti-narrative”, as he was uninterested in specific content or intention of *any* kind, these things being irrelevant to his concept of theatre. In a discussion with Richard Schechner and Michael Kirby, he (reluctantly) provided a definition: “I try to make definitions that won’t exclude. I would simply say that theatre is something which engages both the eye and the ear” (Sandford, 1995: 51).

He went on to add that, for him, theatre must also be defined in terms of being a “public” occasion: “I think of theatre as an occasion involving any number of people, but not just one” (1995: 52).

By Cage’s own definition, at least, *Untitled Event* qualifies as theatre. However, this is a theatre without characters, setting, or situation, and from which narrative is simply discarded as an irrelevance, to be replaced instead by a collage of non-intentional, although still highly structured, actions. Underlying everything is a philosophy, which asserts that surprising combinations may produce equally surprising, and interesting, results: a notion that chance, indeterminacy, randomness, are capable of producing a level of interest and engagement which the repeated careful re-arrangements of the expected could never achieve. It could be argued, though, that the ‘narrative’ of the performance is, in effect, the story of each individual audience member being in the performance space and responding to the performance materials.

Although Cage is known for his reliance upon the ‘chance method’, it is over-simplistic to define his theatre performances purely in terms of “anything can happen”. In fact, whilst turning his back on a conventional structuring device such as narrative, he creates new kinds of structures and notations to hold the random elements in place. What Cage does is to open up an almost unlimited range of possibilities within a tight, carefully pre-defined range of performance parameters. In *Theatre Piece* (1960), performers are required to carry out various activities over measured units of time. The activities themselves are not stipulated by Cage, but are to be decided in advance by the individual performer, with each activity written as verbs and nouns on to twenty individual cards. These are then shuffled and laid out face down in an arrangement which enables each card to be identified by number (for example, in four rows of five, or five rows of four). By reading the number on the score, the performer knows which activity to select and by measuring the timeline on the score, (s)he knows for how long the activity should be sustained. The measure is determined by rulers provided by Cage, or if preferred, by the performer. Different rulers may be used at any point in the preparation process. Additional numbers on the score may be used to indicate the ‘adjectival’ information, such as the intensity, pace, size, and so on, of the activity.

His work can thus be described as *stochastic*. As Peter Van Riper, a musician and artist working in the same tradition as Cage, explained in a letter to the *New York Times*: “A sequence of events is said to be stochastic if it combines a random component with a selective process so that only certain of the random outcomes are allowed to endure. In Cage’s method, as in evolution, the new is accessed through the random, and selection ensures survival of certain content”.¹

There are significant philosophical and aesthetic issues raised by this kind of work. Given that it rejects most of the elements which have been considered, up to this point in history, to be ‘artful’, to what extent can it be judged as ‘art’? Can it be viewed meaningfully alongside those other works we have already considered? This is not a new question, of course. Ever since Marcel Duchamp exhibited his ‘ready-mades’, which included a snow shovel, a bicycle wheel, a bottle-drying rack, and most notoriously of all, *Fountain* in 1917, a porcelain urinal, the controversy over what really constitutes artistic production, or whether such categories as ‘art’ and ‘non-art’ can even be said to exist, has raged on.

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There are other questions too. How are we to understand the precise relationship between randomness and structure in this process? It is significant that Cage feels a need to come up with new structures, in order to replace those of character, narrative, purposive action, which he discards. But do the structures proposed by Cage have any more, or less, inherent validity than those provided by narrative itself?

No way ahead?

And, more significantly, have we reached a dead end at this point? How is it possible to trace the presence of narrative through such work, which excludes narrative as a category of any kind?

In fact, this kind of work is highly relevant, to the extent that it provided a catalyst for a whole range of new experiments, many involving similar kinds of decontextualised, or what Kirby calls ‘non-matrixed’ activity (Kirby in Sandford, 1995: 7-9), but equally many others quickly discovering ways of *combining* this new set of radical performance possibilities with elements of broken narrative, and thus revealing an underlying sense of the ‘dis-order’ of everyday stories.

¹ <http://www.vanripereditions.com/filter/cagenyt/cagenyt.htm>, accessed 28/01/00

Word of Cage and Cunningham's *Untitled Event* quickly spread, in particular to New York, where Cage was now running a course on the composition of experimental music, at the New School for Social Research. It provoked a rash of new performance pieces and Happenings, which sought to make use of visual, musical, spatial, gestural and theatrical material in constantly new and changing combinations. Some of these undoubtedly incorporated allegorical narrative 'echoes', for example, Allen Kaprow's *The Courtyard*, produced in 1962, which was staged in the courtyard of a derelict hotel in Greenwich Village, and included, "a twenty-five-foot-paper 'mountain', an 'inverted mountain', a woman in night dress, and a cyclist, all of which had specific symbolic connotations" (Goldberg, 1988: 130).

Kaprow was recycling the raw materials of his own personal experience, drawing inspiration from Cage's radical explorations of form and structure, though using them, arguably, in a more 'intentional' way. The raw materials could also include previously published verbal texts, of course. *Untitled Event* made use of the writings of Meister Eckhart and a variety of poetry selected and read by Olsen and Richards. In a similar vein, Cage himself proposes a new way of using old dramatic texts:

Our situation as artists is that we have all this work that was done before we came along. We have the opportunity to do work now. I would not present things from the past, but I would approach them as materials available to something else which we were going to do now. They could enter, in terms of collage, into any play. One extremely interesting theatrical thing that hasn't been done is a collage made from various plays. (Sandford, 1995: 54)

Robert Wilson

The early Happenings were typically brief and fragmented pieces, even when at times, as in the case of Kaprow's *Self Service* (1967), which involved the creation of a variety of scattered 'events', they spanned many different locations and time periods. Robert Wilson, often working within more traditional theatre spaces, took this a step further, by extending these shorter moments of performance into full-scale theatre works, some lasting as long as twelve hours. One work, *KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDenia TERRACE: a story about a family and some people changing* (1972) spanned an extraordinary seven day (and night) period (on a mountainside in Iran).

The use of the word “story” in the title (a reference to Scheherazade – the teller of tales *par excellence*) is indicative, in more general terms, of Wilson’s teasing approach. Clearly the possibility of some kind of narrative contract is signalled, and he incorporates numerous elements normally considered to be within the province of narrative, but then does not permit them to coalesce into any kind of narrative form. All sorts of iconic figures and images appear on his stages – cowboys, a spaceman, dinosaurs, creatures from fairy-tale, Albert Einstein, Abraham Lincoln, Queen Victoria, Stalin and Freud – yet they are divorced from their customary roles as characters within any kind of story (historical or fictional), and are pressed into service simply as figures in a landscape, or rather, series of landscapes.

These recognisable images hold out the prospect of meaning, lead audiences to expect that there may be some thematic or narrative centre to the work, but the possibilities of signification multiply dizzyingly, whilst eschewing any obvious causal, or even associative links. Adding to the effect are sets which evoke extraordinarily detailed and seemingly ‘realistic’, though often surreally distorted, locations. A description of *The King of Spain* (1969), an early work, shows this process at work:

The King of Spain was a spectacular, large-scale production performed within an orthodox proscenium arch stage. Much of the action took place in a Victorian drawing room, the location conjured with traditional *trompe-l’oeil* effects, flats painted to create realistic illusion. But the illusion was interrupted. A section of the room’s rear wall was missing and through the gap a second part of the set was visible, representing an area of sunlit countryside. The figures who entered the room seemed undisturbed by this anomaly, behaving for the most part in the kind of dispassionate and genteel manner appropriate to their environment. Yet their activities were incomprehensible; characters piled straw on the stage, lit a shelf of candles, played indecipherable games at a table and slid brass rings along a wire. Periodically an athlete in shorts and singlet appeared in the meadow ‘outside’, running across the room’s missing slice. The piece drew to a close as a set of giant mechanical cat’s legs walked across the stage, its body ‘out of sight’ in the flies. No explanation was offered for any of these occurrences, for like all Wilson’s ‘plays’, *The King of Spain* had neither plot nor dialogue, and followed no discernible logic. Spectators were left to make of the piece what they could. (Counsell, 1996: 179-80)

Within many of the other dreamlike worlds that Wilson conjures up, there is, in fact, plenty of dialogue to be found. But typically, this is dialogue that is devoid of semantic content. It is non-sequential, nonsensical, sound- and rhythm-based. Sometimes the verbal texts consist of assembled fragments of conversation, sometimes of apparently random words and word-like

sounds, and once – in *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) – of just the words of the diatonic scale (*doh-rey-mi, etc.*) and the numbers one to eight. Collaborations with Christopher Knowles, a disabled artist who had been brain-damaged at birth, and who perceived the world around him, language in particular, in complex and unusual ways, gave rise to highly idiosyncratic texts, constructed from words used simply as visual and aural patterns.

But it is not the dialogue/language text which is at the core of these pieces, in any case. The performances/plays show signs of immensely detailed structuring and organisation, but the principles involved are visual and rhythmic, occasionally mathematical. Wilson, who trained as an architect, describes his principal working method as one of dividing the performance space into a series of zones:

... the stage is divided into zones – stratified zones one behind the other ... in each of these zones there's a different 'reality' – a different activity defining the space so that from the audience's point of view one sees through these different layers, and as each occurs it appears as if there's been no realisation that anything other than itself is happening outside that particular designated area. (Kaye, 1994: 66)

The key organising principle is thus spatial, perceptual, and it is the juxtaposition and patterning of these different spaces that defines the structure of the performance. Wilson often calls his productions 'operas', conceiving and presenting them on a scale which consciously invites comparison with Wagnerian epics. This kind of allusion to narrative form, combined with spectacle, and held within clear, patterned structures, encourages audiences to look for narrative meaning, but the space at the centre is ultimately 'empty':

Even when we are offered no story as such, as spectators we still assume that stage events comprise some kind of purposeful sequence. We thus try to link one image with the next, and ascribe significance to changes and continuities, seeking to make of the unfolding action a temporal chain whose links are meaningful; that is, we seek to narrativise it by other means, find a conceptual rationale in the absence of any obvious plot. But Wilson's stagecraft frustrates all such attempts. (Counsell, 1996: 196)

Richard Foreman

Many different examples of this kind of non-script-centred work could be cited. But what is the result when these kinds of influences are incorporated into the work of someone who is specifically a writer, one whose aim it is to provide a literary text as the basis for performance?

Richard Foreman, the American playwright and theatre director, explicitly rejects Cage's use of random, non-intentionality, but his work was nevertheless hugely influenced by the proliferation of new work in the 1960s. Originally trained in 'classic' playmaking technique at Yale Drama School, "I wrote, one year, my imitation Arthur Miller; one year my imitation Murray Schisgal (believe it or not); one year, my imitation Brecht; one year, my imitation Sartre" (Rabkin, 1999: 118), Foreman quickly rejected this way of working. A chance encounter with the underground cinema movement propelled him in a radically different direction. He was fascinated by the rawness of the films, the fact that they made no attempt to hide their construction (for example, the film splices were crude and visible, the holes punched into the end of a reel were often included) and their energy and everyday subject matter. Foreman began to experiment with writing plays which incorporated that same sense of rawness, the same fascination with the minutiae of everyday existence. He also replayed effects again and again, aiming not for the development of a story, but the multi-layering of sounds and images.

I began thinking of the attempt to write a play as the attempt to work and rework the same material, much as the alchemists would keep working on their combined metals to transform them into gold. I really thought of writing a play as taking certain basic physical givens of the situation in the play, repeating them with slight variations again and again and again in the text. (Rabkin, 1999: 119)

Typically, Foreman's productions have no formal narrative, no 'beginning, middle and end', yet they are clearly *plays*, this is writer's theatre. There are usually several performers, but no characters as such; there is plenty of dialogue, essentially coherent, but making no obvious sense; and the stage is full of movement: anarchic, jumbled, frequently very funny, and punctuated throughout with repeated sound effects and wild bursts of music. As a designer, he favours the use of 'over-determined' sets, which allow performers to encounter and interact with a large number of bizarre and extraordinary props. His 2000 piece, *Now That Communism Is Dead My Life Feels Empty*, featured, amongst other items, a toy dog's head, wearing a party hat, peering over the top of a brightly painted disc; five chickens perched on tall black poles, with party streamers hanging down; a larger-than-life, two-dimensional, cartoon-like Yiddish head seen in profile, which loomed in through an open doorway at various moments; happy, pig-like face-masks; an oversized painted clock face with no hands; a huge glass globe; an equally huge rubber

mallet, with which to hit it; two ornate pipes; an obviously fake 'radio' into which an arm could be inserted; and large bright red flags on poles, some fluttering free, others held rigidly in place.

A primary goal throughout is the exploration of impulse, spontaneous and alogical, although his plays are crammed with ideas and argument too, drawn from his own extensive reading, so that they invite responses on a variety of different levels: cognitive, as well as sensual and visceral. His output is prolific, writing at least one play per year since 1968, the year in which he founded his *Ontological-Hysteric Theatre Company*. One example from *The Cure* (1986) gives a flavour:

DAVID: *(After a pause, during which we compare the image of JACK, upside down with his legs up, with the image of the painted ship)* Are you staring at the fruit? Or listening to the radio?

JACK: What's wrong?

DAVID: Can you see things and hear things at the same time?

JACK: *(Sitting up)* What's wrong?

DAVID: Seeing them ... or hearing them.

KATE: *(Coming out from behind the rack)* I know the unfortunate answer to that question.

JACK: What's wrong?

KATE: *(Using her finger to trace one of the energy swirls in the painting)* I know the answer unfortunately determined by the particular psychophysiological-metaphysical orientation of our Western civilization.

DAVID: *(Holding a giant rock over his head)* No more graven images!

JACK: *(Staring at the ripe fruit he holds in his hand)* No more graven images.

(Foreman, 1993: 133-34)

This dialogue is not 'meaningless'. There is a clear sense of a developing idea, centred on the notion that something is wrong with the way in which Western civilization is structured, which has to do with the worship of "images" (expressed here in the language of the Bible, one of the foundational texts of Western culture). And yet there is very little genuine interlocution between the various speakers, and certainly no clear, developing narrative that is holding this dialogue in place. The speakers express ideas, perhaps even individual attitudes, but they are not characters in a story. And yet, there is also a 'matrix' established by the unified setting ("*The stage suggests a ceremonial room of some kind, overtones of a funeral parlour*" [1993: 113]) and the temporal flow of a piece that is basically linear and uninterrupted, however surreal the dialogue itself becomes. In some of his other pieces there is even more of a sense of a narrative 'space', such as *Symphony of Rats* (1988), originally written for The Wooster Group, which explores the scenario

of a US president convinced that he is receiving telepathic messages from outer space. (Much to Foreman's amusement, fellow avant-garde theatre director, Peter Sellars, described this particular play as "so Aristotelian.")²

In form, then, his work tends to track a deliberate, middle route between the purely chance-based approach of John Cage and a more consciously-crafted avoidance of narrative. This is a long-established method, first articulated in his *Ontological Hysteric Manifesto I* of 1972, in which he defines three principal "distortions" available to theatre:

- 1) logic - as in realism, which we reject because the mind already 'knows' the next move and so is not alive to that next move.
- 2) chance & accident & the arbitrary - which we reject because in too short a time each choice so determined becomes equally predictable as 'item produced by chance, accident, etc.'
- 3) the new possibility (what distorts with its weight) - a subtle insertion between logic and accident, which keeps the mind alive as it evades over-quick integration into the mental system. **CHOOSE THIS ALWAYS!**
(Reprinted in Rabkin, 1999:146)

And perhaps the best description of how this works in practice is his own account, published on the company's website, of his regular writing-method:

For many years I have created plays in the following manner. I write, usually at the beginning of the day, from one half to three pages of dialogue. There is no indication of who is speaking, just raw dialogue. From day to day, there is no connection between the pages, each day is a total 'start from scratch' with no necessary reference to material from previous days' work. Though it sometimes – infrequently – happens that there is a thematic carryover. Every few months, I look through the accumulated material with the thought of constructing a 'play'. I find a page that seems interesting and possible as a 'key' page, and then quickly scan through to find others that might relate in some way to that 'key' page. The relationship is not narrative, but loosely thematic – in a very poetic sense, even in simply an 'intuited' way... When I have forty to fifty pages, I consider this the basis. I then arrange the pages in search of some possible loose thematic 'scenario', which again, is more 'variations on a theme' rather than strictly narrative. I look to establish a 'situation of tension', then imagining how the other pages somehow augment and 'play with' that situation, rather than leading to story and resolution. Imagining a loose scenario, I re-write a little for continuity, then assign lines to imagined characters, and eventually have a play.

(<http://www.ontological.com>, accessed 29/11/99)

² This comment is from an unpublished interview with Richard Foreman, given to the author on 10th November 2000

Despite his assertion that the relationship is not narrative, the use of words and phrases like “scenario”, “situation of tension”, re-writing “for continuity”, nevertheless implies the re-introduction ‘by the back door’ of a kind of narrative form. However, Foreman is concerned to avoid a unity of reading, preferring to create contradictions, tensions, perceptions which unbalance, de-centre our usual responses – primary amongst which, of course, is our impulse to construct stories from the fragments we encounter – and which provide opportunities for multiple readings and responses:

...generally what I am trying to achieve is to block the ability of the audience to read a line or a gesture as having only one possible outcome, only one possible reference. I want to make the audience have the feeling that each phrase, each gesture, could refer to many different outcomes. (Quick, 1997: 1)

The Wooster Group and Elizabeth LeCompte

We have previously noted Cage’s suggestion that a piece of performance could be constructed from a “collage” made up of various pre-existing texts. The Wooster Group, under the artistic direction of Elizabeth LeCompte, has been doing just this, of course, since the early 1980s. In one form or another, their regular working method has been to bring together a whole range of different kinds of textual elements, and allow these conflicting voices to play themselves out, one against another. Their pieces have also been characterised by an extensive use of multimedia, incorporating sound, film and video into the theatrical experience. A regular performer with the company, Willem Dafoe, describes it as a theatre disconnected from the absolutes of text and psychology, which speaks to an age “where we can talk on the phone, look out the window, watch TV, and be typing a letter at the same time”.³

The Wooster Group emerged out of another avant-garde theatre company of the 1960s and ‘70s, Richard Schechner’s Performance Group. However, where Schechner’s company had sought particularly to extend and develop the theatre of communal ritual, the Wooster Group wished to explore much more personal themes, intertwining these with a variety of other materials. The new company also sought to move away from a theatre centred upon the personality and ideas of a single individual (Schechner) towards a more collaborative approach: in their publicity

³ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/cultureshock/flashpoints/theater/wooster.html>, accessed 08/04/03

material, the Wooster Group explicitly describes itself as “an ensemble of artists who collaborate on the development and production of theater and media pieces”.⁴

Rather than offering fresh answers to old questions, the work can be seen as opening up new questions, developing a performance method shaped by deconstructive philosophies, and seeking always to interrogate, rather than to assert. It disconnects itself from any absolute notion of text, aiming instead to create collages of audio, video, movement, and word-based materials. In performance, frequently changing energy levels are important, as is the use of both comedic and painfully personal fragments in close proximity. Verbal sequences are juxtaposed with physical, movement-based ones, which may comment on, or simply ‘bounce off’ each other.

LeCompte has cited both Wilson and Foreman as significant influences on her own ideas about theatre (Savran, 1988: 4), both in terms of their use of abstract, non-representational action and of structures which rely more on a kind of musical patterning than any form of narrative framework. “ ‘I am looking for some substitute for plot. Non-linear,’ writes LeCompte” (Savran, 1988: 18). But whereas Foreman writes his own new texts from scratch and Wilson uses verbal texts which have been completely drained of cognitive meaning, the Group have developed ways of cutting and pasting texts of various kinds into these collages of contrasting and often contestatory meanings. Like Foreman, LeCompte wants to create a space in which multiple readings, multiple interpretations are possible. There is no intention to put across any kind of stable meaning or authoritative content, rather the pieces are highly personal explorations of thematic material, that can vary widely both in terms of the nature of that material and of the theatrical languages used to communicate it. Thus a show such as *L.S.D. (...Just the High Points...)* from the early ‘80s contains the taped recollections of Ann Rower, babysitter to Timothy Leary’s children, texts by Leary himself, Aldous Huxley, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg and others, two formal dances, both making use of a visual trick, apparently connecting a pair of men’s legs to a woman’s body, video footage, reenactments of historical events, and excerpts from Miller’s play *The Crucible*.

All of the Wooster Group pieces begin with a body of found “objects” much as the lecture-demonstration always begins with a phenomenon or case in point as its subject.

⁴ <http://www.thewoostergroup.org/twg/about.html>, accessed 08/04/03

These raw materials are of five different orders: first, recordings of private interviews or public events, such as, in *Rumstick Road*, Spalding Gray's interviews with his father and grandmother, or in *L.S.D.*, the excerpts from the Leary/Liddy debate; second, previously written dramatic material, either from "classic" works such as *Our Town*, or from comic skits, or from plays written specifically for the Group, such as Jim Strahs's "Rig"; third, prerecorded sound, music, film and video, such as the video of *Our Town* or Ken Kobland's film, "By The Sea," as used in *Point Judith*; fourth, the performance space that is left from the last piece, containing various architectonic elements that will be used in the development of a new piece; and finally, improvised action-texts: gesture, dance and language to be used either as an independent strand in the work or as an elaboration of material from one of the other categories. (Savran, 1988: 51)

Recordings of private interviews, or public events, previously written dramatic material, pre-recorded sound, music, film and video material, architectural and spatial elements, improvised action-texts (dance, gesture, pure movement), are all combined in ways which overlap, clash, disrupt and constantly re-frame each other. Thus, the work both re-presents and re-evaluates iconic texts, particularly in terms of their hidden assumptions and cultural value-systems. Plays that have been explored in this way have included T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* (in *Nyatt School* [1978]), Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (in *Point Judith* [1980]), Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (in *Route 1 & 9* [1981]), Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (in *L.S.D [...Just the High Points...]* [1984]), Chekhov's *Three Sisters* (in *Brace Up!* [1991]) and Racine's *Phèdre* (in *To You, The Birdie!* [2001]). Above all, the Group's approach questions the 'innocence' of text, its apparently objective 'take' on the world. By constructing this re-patterning of different, yet linked, texts and allowing them to interrupt each other, the company is able to question the various cultural perceptions, assumptions and habits represented within them. The authoritative narratives played out through culturally-affirmed 'classics' are simultaneously presented *and* questioned by the smaller, conflicting narratives around them.

Events surrounding the highly controversial 1981 work, *Route 1 & 9*, graphically illustrated the essential element of risk within this approach. When the New York State Council on the Arts cut the Group's funding by almost fifty percent the primary justification given was that *Route 1 & 9* had presented blatantly racist stereotypes on stage, whilst never making a clear and unequivocal statement about the evils of racism. In fact, the work in performance was a much more elusive and uncomfortable experience. By presenting uncritically the territory and parameters of racism, both fictional and non-fictional, *Route 1 & 9* forced the audience to confront their own residual

racist tendencies. The message of the piece was that there is no message: it allowed, instead, for a multiplicity of interpretations, a complexity of vision. As a result, the performance was incomplete without a spectator:

...each piece must be considered only partially composed when it is presented to the public, not because it is unfinished, but because it requires an audience to realize the multitude of possibilities on which it opens. As each spectator, according to his part, enters into a dialogue with the work, the act of interpretation becomes a performance, an intervention in the piece. (Savran, 1988: 55)

This openness of meaning can easily be seen to be both an inevitable and a wished-for outcome of this type of work.

More controversial still, perhaps, is the Wooster Group's transgressive appropriation of others' texts. Their performances of *L.S.D. (...Just the High Points...)* involved them in considerable debate, and ultimately legal conflict, with Arthur Miller, who felt that his play had been inappropriately treated in the Group's rendition. Their scepticism and 'irreverence' towards the 'classics' of western drama has brought them, inevitably, to the point where they have explicitly questioned the accepted definitions of ownership, in relation to textual material. As they see it, Miller's play, once published, is public property, open to question, open to re-interpretation, open to re-construction:

As the theatre dies, it is being protected by a clique of people who are narrowing it back to the writer. And because we don't work that way, we trespass everywhere. We plagiarize. We steal. We are outlaws. (Savran, 1988: 94)

Narrative Transgressions

This goes to the heart of the matter. According to Roland Barthes, those seeking to transform art must not seek simply to displace the cultural products of the past, but rather, like the Futurists, they must break the *rules* of the past:

The revolutionary task . . . is not to supplant but to transgress. Now, to transgress is both to recognize and to reverse; the object . . . must be presented and denied *at the same time*. (in Savran, 1988: 94)

The Wooster Group certainly operate in this transgressive territory: co-opting texts to their own purposes, making and breaking narratives as they re-write the texts both of their own past and that of the wider culture. But Foreman too operates by transgression: he utilises many of the components of narrative, whilst denying the possibility that any singular coherent narrative might ultimately emerge. Similarly, Robert Wilson makes narrative offers of a kind, tantalises his audiences with the prospect of story, whilst never delivering it. Of the practitioners examined in this chapter, Cage alone seeks to supplant narrative altogether with completely non-intentional, non-matrixed performance.

We may usefully draw a distinction, then, between those kinds of works which exclude any kind of narrative elements whatsoever, such as *Untitled Event* or *Theatre Piece* – a smaller number, perhaps, than might at first be thought – from those which, although they are certainly not structured in a conventional narrative format, nevertheless play with the conventions, the components, the form and content of traditional, linear narrative, transgressing the limits and suggesting new possibilities as they do so.

Chapter Six – Narrative Psychology

Having arrived at a defining moment in this brief survey (though not, assuredly, a moment of closure...), are we in a position to say that narrative *has* been substantially removed from the theatre of the postmodern? Or are we looking at an expanding picture of what narrative might be, of ways in which we might understand narrative to work?

In *Theory of the Modern Drama*, Peter Szondi takes as his reference point the drama of the period from the Renaissance up to, and including, the late nineteenth century, arguing that this particular expression of dramatic literature can be defined as the drama of interpersonal communications, expressed primarily through the medium of dialogue.

The Drama of modernity came into being in the Renaissance. It was the result of a bold intellectual effort made by a newly self-conscious being who, after the collapse of the medieval worldview, sought to create an artistic reality within which he could fix and mirror himself on the basis of interpersonal relationships alone.... The verbal medium for this world of the interpersonal was the dialogue. (Szondi, 1965: 7)

Dialogue, the primary medium through which the interpersonal is explored, is thus understood to be the exchange of ideas, the ebb and flow of inter-relational communication. As such, it is a form which is essentially congenial to linear narrative, and this within a category of drama which Szondi goes on to describe as *absolute* in its construction, in the sense that it has to work its effects within a closed system of ideas, characters, situations and locations. “The Drama is absolute. To be purely relational – that is to be dramatic, it must break loose from everything external. It can be conscious of nothing outside itself” (Szondi, 1965: 8).

We have already seen Foreman using dialogue in a quite different manner, of course, and we shall return to this point again (see below, p.140). Narrative, in this ‘pure’ setting, would seem to consist of the neat, linear, sequential plotting of events, such that each movement contributes to the next, each character defining his or her own destiny by exercising responsible choices, exploring the tension between freedom and obligation, and communicating feelings, ideas and intentions by means of the dialogue. But this model, often taken as normative, is clearly a restrictive one, which can give only an impoverished account of the kinds of examples of new theatre we have been considering. Could it be that what we have come to think of as narrative is,

in fact, just one – rather artificial – form taken by narrative, in one very specific epoch of dramatic history? Perhaps this sheds further light on the distinction to be made between *narrative* and *plot*, reserving the latter for this more constrained form of narrative structure, and allowing for further examination of our definitions of what narrative might be and the purposes it might serve within a wider context.

A “talent” for narrative

... language, rather than narrative, has always been my concern (Richard Foreman)

...I am looking for some substitute for plot. Non-linear... (Elizabeth LeCompte)

The narrative form is dying in our hands... (Howard Barker)

Loneliness may be defined as the inability or refusal to share stories with others. (Theodore Sarbin)

Whilst much new theatre has been about rejecting story, over the same period of time in *other* areas of study, there has been a steadily increasing focus upon narrative. Within psychology, narrative has been variously described as: the survival mechanism of the species (Sarbin, 1986: 11), an indicator of mental health (Marcus, 1984: 61), the engram of our species (Fuller, 1982: 134), and the basis for a sense of self (Kerby, 1991: 6). In his book *Narrative and the Self* (1991), Anthony Kerby calls narrative “the privileged medium for understanding human experience” and brings together much evidence in support of this claim.

Particularly striking, though, is Sarbin’s assertion (in his excellent, and comprehensive, collection of essays from various writers on the subject of narrative psychology) that narrative “facilitates survival”. In his words, “Survival in a world of meanings is problematic without the talent to make up and to interpret stories about interweaving lives” (Sarbin, 1986: 11). This “talent” for narrative is not necessarily to be seen as the result of a “deep structure within the nervous system”, or the ‘hard-wiring’ of story into human physiology. Rather, it could be understood as a facility, which develops through the necessary efforts of a growing human individual to make sense of, and interact with, the world around her/him.

James Mancuso (in Sarbin, 1986: 103) invites us to consider the situation of a baby, lying in a cot. The child is fascinated by the sight of a rattle, suspended above her and attached to the cot.

As a result of some movement made by the child, the rattle moves also, evoking surprise and pleasure in the infant, as she hears the noise and sees the jerking motions above her. At a certain, critical point, she realises that there is some kind of vital connection between the sensory information from her legs and the sensory information from her eyes and ears: whenever her legs move, the rattle moves. What is more, by moving her legs, she discovers that she can ‘control’ the interesting sights and sounds above her. The child has thus encountered a structure, through which she can learn a fundamental lesson about cause and effect. This structure, with others, will form a basis for the development of narrative competence, which is, essentially, a process of successfully linking events we see / hear of / encounter around us into a coherent pattern:

The stories we make are accounts, attempts to explain and understand experience. Narrative thinking is, therefore, a type of causal thinking. The power and versatility of narrative thinking are rooted in the cognitive schema which serves as the generative base for any story. The narrative schema identifies several categories of information (for example, protagonist, situation, outcome) and relevant types of relationships among them (for example, temporal, motivational). Narrative thinking consists of creating a fit between a situation and the story schema. Establishing a fit, that is, making a story out of experience, is a heuristic process, one which requires skill, judgment, and experience. When it is successful, the outcome of story making is a coherent and plausible account of how and why something happened. (Robinson and Hawpe in Sarbin, 1986: 111)

This is the “narratory principle” (Sarbin, 1986: 8), a predisposition towards emplotment, which each of us carries within us, and which explains why it is that even in theatrical performance where no story is intended, audiences will nevertheless struggle to construct one. James Mancuso opines that the majority of people are able to access the main elements of narrative structure by the time they are three years old. Moreover this does not appear to be culturally-bound: “Current knowledge suggests that people in widely diverse cultures acquire narrative structure” (Mancuso in Sarbin, 1986: 103).

The example given above of the baby in her cot provides an illustration of the necessary development of causal thinking, but this is only one part of the process. A developing child will need to learn to identify and organise various other relevant categories of information, all of which will help to make sense of the world he inhabits. The alternating faces which (quite literally) loom large in his field of vision must be differentiated into different ‘characters’, both ‘central’ (father, mother, siblings) and ‘supporting’ (doctor/nurse, health visitor, family friends,

and so on), each with their own distinctive character traits (or expected patterns of behaviour). There must also be formed a sense of spatial and geographical awareness, as the qualities of different 'locations' are experienced and remembered, and indeed become linked, in many cases, with those differentiated characters. Finally, the child must begin to develop a practical awareness of how time operates, becoming competent at distinguishing between past (remembered), present (perceived) and future (anticipated) events.

Then, with the beginnings of language development, comes the possibility of generating 'original' stories within the emerging schema. At this formative stage, there is a primary interest in the *sounds* made by spoken words and the earliest narrative fragments generated by very young children tend to have more to do with melody than meaning ("fat cat... the cat is fat...") (see Sutton-Smith in Sarbin, 1986: 75). Over time, these 'poetic' or lyric stories, similar in form and effect to nursery rhymes, will develop a greater complexity in conscious or unconscious imitation of the larger narratives transmitted and received as part of the child's wider cultural context.

As time goes by these first poetic stories give way to plot stories and with age these approximate to the hero myths of the Western world within which heroes and heroines brought under duress, undertake tasks which resolve their problems. Although thinking within developmental psychology tends to privilege these later plot stories over the earlier poetic ones, because of their greater complexity, the display of stories we have given here shows clearly that the bias on behalf of complexity and abstraction simply does not do justice to the characteristic fictional competences of the young. Nor does that bias recognize the child's highly aesthetic renderings, which still remain sensitive to prosody, when those of their elders do not. (Sutton-Smith in Sarbin, 1986: 89)

Much of this development can be traced back to issues of 'survival', as Sarbin suggests, but the mention of aesthetics in that assessment is an indication that there is much too that is just as clearly linked to the matter of narrative *pleasure*. A growing mastery of story brings with it a sense of ludic enjoyment that is based on the strategic disruption of, as well as conformity to, the rules previously acquired. And a major element of this enjoyment is experienced as we share and compare narratives with others.

In order that the exchange of stories will be successful and pleasurable, however, certain conditions must be met, which are summarised thus by Mancuso:

... a story is interesting if (1) a reader has acquired a general system of cognitions by which to assimilate the particular text input, (2) the input generates uncertainty about how the text is to continue, and (3) the ambiguity which generated the surprise is postdictably resolved. (in Sarbin, 1986: 101)

For our purposes, this may be understood in the following terms: firstly, an audience member will naturally bring to any performance this “general system of cognitions”, or basic narrative competence, acquired over the course of many exposures to dramatic narrative within theatre, television, cinema or radio. Secondly, any narrative *or non-narrative* performance text which “generates uncertainty” is likely to stimulate a cognitive interest in the spectator, to set in motion the “narratory principle”, which will lead to the development of a personal narrative response to all that is seen and heard as part of the performance. Both narrative and non-narrative texts can be said to conform to Mancuso’s pattern thus far, but it is in the final matter, of whether the original ambiguities are “postdictably resolved” by the performance, that we may wish to consider a range of possible outcomes.

Typically, the linear narrative, or plot, which we have been accustomed to regard as a primary element of theatre in the West, particularly in its ‘absolute’ form, as posited by Szondi, will look for clear, neat resolution in all, or nearly all, points. Ambiguities established in the exposition and complication must be satisfactorily concluded by the time we reach the *dénouement*. Loose ends must be tied up. The audience must be guided through the narrative in such a way that they are able to make sense of previous uncertainties.

This process of what may be termed *narrative repair* is not simply a feature of dramatic narratives, but is also to be located in the everyday exchange of stories. Robinson and Hawpe (in Sarbin, 1986: 112) argue that, “most instances of narrative thinking involve efforts to get from an inadequate story to a complete and convincing story. This is not a question of competence in *storytelling* or narrative performance. It is a matter of effective causal thinking”. The efforts to close the “gaps” (Bruner, 1986) are of two kinds: either a story is deemed to be incomplete, in which case further information needs to be supplied, either by the storyteller or by the hearer; or it will be judged unconvincing (the causal links are improbable) and the hearer will search for more plausible connections. Where the gaps cannot be closed to the hearer’s satisfaction, the narrative will be felt to be incomplete, unsatisfactory, failed.

‘Well-made’ plots were designed to resolve all such ambiguities. Many plays written in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, from Büchner’s *Woyzeck* onwards, have allowed for ever-increasing uncertainty in the final resolution of their various plotlines. Some narrative gaps are satisfactorily resolved, but others may be left incomplete, failing to reach closure. However, the greater the level of uncertainty has become, and the larger the gaps, the greater the potential for narrative ‘disappointment’ in those who have come to expect that all the answers should be provided, or at least resolvable.

Pure non-narrative texts, on the other hand, such as those devised by Cage, operate in a fundamentally different manner, at least with respect to their intentions. Organised on radically different structuring principles, they hold out no such offer of resolution: there is, quite simply, nothing to be resolved. In such instances, the narratory drive will presumably be frustrated, inescapably blocked. The ‘naive’ spectator may, of course, still express their frustration in conventional terms of not understanding ‘what on earth it was all supposed to mean’. However, even in these cases, we may also observe that cognitive interest will again be stimulated where *apparently* intentional interactions, or observable patterns, are perceived as emerging.

But there is much other work, falling between these two poles, which has often been classified as non-narrative, or even anti-narrative, whose effect upon an audience may, nevertheless, be best understood in terms of *narrative* processes. If it is true that the narratory principle continues to operate in performances of these works, and we have good reason to suspect that it does, then we can assume that the majority of audiences will continue to seek to apply the usual principles of narrative logic, and to explain ambiguities in the most satisfactory way possible.

Closure and followability

In his study of narrative as the basis for a sense of self, Anthony Kerby highlights the importance of ‘closure’ as a constituent element of narrative: “Closure... is not only a literary device but is a fundamental way (perhaps *the* fundamental way) in which human events are understood” (Kerby, 1991: 6).

Closure is not merely a convenience, a way of bringing events to a satisfactory endpoint: it is also significant for the generation of meaning. Only when we know the outcome of a series of events, are we in a position to suggest what those events might *mean*. This closure need not necessarily be final, or absolute, although some kind of putative conclusion is desirable. But Kerby makes a significant additional comment: “Failing this structure of closure, narrative at least aspires to followability, that is, to plotting a meaningful or ‘logical’ development for our lives – which is not to say that it imposes linearity or simplicity on life” (1991: 6).

This could provide a helpful key to the re-positioning of narrative in new theatre. If we accept the suggestion that closure need not be the *essential* component of narrative form, and that the notion of ‘followability’ could be used instead, we are able to reassess a wide range of theatrical material. Beckett’s plays rarely – perhaps never – achieve narrative closure. By contemporary audiences they were felt to be incoherent, disconcertingly fragmented, almost wilfully difficult to follow.

Without exception, the popular press dismissed [*Waiting for Godot*] as rubbish. Milton Shulman called it ‘another of those plays that tried to lift superficiality to significance through obscurity . . . his symbols are seldom more demanding than a nursery version of Pilgrim’s Progress.’ *Punch* called it ‘a bewildering curiosity.’ W. A. Darlington called it ‘admirable as a serious highbrow frolic, but would not do for the serious play-going public.’ (Bair, 1978: 453)

Over a period of time, however, as audiences’ narrative competences have incorporated a greater level of sophistication, and as the immediate shock of the new has worn off, it has been possible to discern a great many *followable* narrative threads running through the plays, as this study has already sought to demonstrate. Richard Foreman’s plays raise similar issues: they have no describable plot, no characters in the conventional sense, and they play with audiences’ perceptions in a bewildering way. But although he seeks constantly to avoid any kind of unified narrative, Foreman himself is ready to admit that audiences will, nevertheless, continue to look for stories: “... sometimes I’m forced to sit down and I tell people the ‘story’ of the play, but to me that’s not the focus. But I think it *is* there, yes”.¹

¹ From an unpublished interview with the author, given on 10th November 2000

In that sense, audiences may be described as seeking to follow, or track, narrative lines through the plays. And there is also another way of considering the matter. The language used above by Kerby suggests that *closure* and *followability* are two distinct entities. In fact, this need not necessarily be the case. Followability may, in fact, turn out to be just a way of naming a more open paradigm of closure. Closure would normally be understood to mean the bringing to a conclusion of a process, action, or series of events. Such a conclusion would, by implication, be definitive, terminal, and would provide some kind of satisfactory ending. Hilary Lawson's "story of everything", *Closure* (2001), however, seeks to redefine the term in a way that may prove helpful. Since closure itself is the central paradigm of Lawson's 'story', any brief summary of the ideas developed in great detail in that book must of necessity be highly reductive. At the risk of oversimplifying, though, Lawson essentially defines a closure as an 'intervention in openness', where *openness* refers to the chaos of undifferentiated flow that we call the 'world' around us. Any such intervention will produce the sense that a stable meaning has been created from the flow, but this sense of stability is merely an illusion, a temporary staving off of openness. Closures are thus seen to be provisional strategies, applicable in some local contexts, inappropriate in others. But they do, nevertheless, operate as a means of grasping and fixing the flow, and whilst only ever temporary, they may nevertheless be effective and useful. (In Lawson's view they are a way of defining the central activity in which we are all engaged.) The narrative principle may thus also be seen to operate on a provisional basis, not reliant upon finality or absolute conclusions, and therefore no longer dependant upon any fixed ideas concerning 'beginning, middle and end'.

However, whether we decide to settle upon closure or followability as our chosen metaphor, further questions remain: do we still need to agree new limits of closure? How shall we determine what is followable? Followable by whom? And on what basis? Still that of causality? Or maybe plausibility? Are we still looking for the same kinds of *causal* links between events or are there other models available?

Root metaphors

We have suggested that the dominant model for narrative understanding in the theatre, from Aristotle onwards, has been that of the *plot*, the 'ground-plan' laid out in advance by the writer and then gradually revealed to a watching audience. Within this architectural model there is a demonstrable need for clear connections between the various narrative components, based on structure and 'appropriateness'. From the Enlightenment onwards, there was a gradual shift towards a new model, based on an alternative root metaphor: that of the machine. Mechanism, suggests Sarbin, becomes the dominant worldview of western civilization during this modern period:

The mechanist world view sees events in nature as the products of the transmittal of forces. Modern science has taken this world view as its metaphysical foundation – a view that supports the scientist's search for causes. Efficient causality description is the goal for scientists working with one or another paradigm within the mechanist world view... (Sarbin, 1986: 6)

Although the model has altered, the essential 'connectedness' thus remains. However, as Sarbin goes on to note, another radical shift has been taking place over the course of the last hundred years or so. Arguably dating from the historic moment in 1889, when the public at large were first able to climb the Eiffel Tower and access a view of the city as they had never seen it before – laid out in visual form, "mapped" from above (cf. Hughes, 1980: 9ff.) – the dominant worldview has been undergoing a gradual process of transformation once again, this time from mechanism to what Sarbin calls contextualism:

The root metaphor for contextualism is the historical event [...] The imagery called out by the historical event metaphor is that of an ongoing texture of multiply elaborated events, each leading to others, each being influenced by collateral episodes, and by the efforts of multiple agents who engage in actions to satisfy their needs and meet their obligations. Contained in the metaphor is the idea of constant change in the structure of situations and in positions occupied by actors. *The texture of events does not require linearity* [Sarbin, 1977].

To those steeped in the traditions of mechanistic science, traditions that emphasize order, predictability, and causality, contextualism at first appears chaotic. The categorical statements of contextualism assert change and novelty. Events are in constant flux, the very integration of the conditions of an event alters the context for a future event.

(Sarbin, 1986: 6-7, italics mine)

Where *mechanism* reinforced notions of objective linearity, causality, predictability and hierarchical structure, *contextualism* allows for subjectivity, proximity, novelty and networks of

association. Association, rather than linearity, is the key to contextualism. And recent cultural and technological developments have only served to accelerate this change of emphasis. The main ways in which most children and young people in the Western world access culture, knowledge and leisure, are all dominated by contextual, associative models.

Television is the primary cultural medium of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. And television, of course, is fundamentally about choice, and the rapid juxtaposition of contrasting material, conflicting/overlapping narratives, especially with remote control in hand. At the same time, access to knowledge is channelled increasingly via computers, making use of encyclopaedias on CD-ROM, educational software of various kinds, and the internet. All of these media present information in formats which enable and encourage personal selection of material and free associative leaps from one aspect of a subject to another, the hyperlink being the quintessential expression of this knowledge-consumer freedom.

In the field of leisure, computer games have also had a part to play in this cultural shift. Many of the most popular games of recent years have been those which have contained all the elements we would normally expect to find within dramatic narratives. The series of *Tomb Raider* games, for example, combine a variety of different locations, temporal sequences to be followed through by players, clearly identifiable characters which interact (often in the crudest way possible, of course, by shooting at each other), and any number of narrative *puzzlements* and complications. However, the significant difference has been that these narratives are under the direct control of the player, such that (s)he is able to choose her/his own, personal route through the story development, in the course of which a variety of different outcomes are possible. (We shall return to the link between games and narrative in Chapter 9.)

Within this changing cultural context, it is only reasonable, therefore, to expect that *theatrical* narrative will also have undergone significant transformation, some aspects of which have already been discussed in the preceding chapters.

Big stories and little stories

From the latter part of the twentieth century onwards, there has also been another contributing factor at work. A key thinker in this respect has been Jean-François Lyotard, whose report *The Postmodern Condition* identified clearly the gradual shift away from the grand narratives of the Enlightenment and beyond – the march of science, the triumph of rationalism, the inevitable establishment of global communism, and so on – towards much smaller, more personal narratives.

We no longer have recourse to the grand narratives - we can resort neither to the dialectic of Spirit nor even to the emancipation of humanity as a validation for postmodern scientific discourse. But as we have just seen, the little narrative [*petit récit*] remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention, most particularly in science. (Lyotard, 1984: 60)

Lyotard's analysis is not *anti*-narrative, in the sense that he affirms the continuing importance of story in the transmission of ideas and knowledge, but he raises the important issue of narrative legitimacy. Within the post-modern condition, as he identifies it, narratives are legitimated not so much by any *inherent* validity or truth-claim, as by the pragmatics of the way we position ourselves in relation to them:

In a sense, the people are only that which actualizes the narratives: once again, they do this not only by recounting them, but also by listening to them and recounting themselves through them; in other words, by putting them into “play” in their institutions - thus by assigning themselves the posts of narratee and diegesis as well as the post of narrator. (1984: 23)

In this scenario, there are no ‘universal’ stories. If stories are validated by people, then no one ‘big’ story can claim preeminence. Instead of listening to a single ‘authorised’ narrative, we are free to construct and compare our own *petits récits*. However, there is a paradox within Lyotard's position, as Fredric Jameson points out in his preface to the English-language edition, and it is this: the affirmation of smaller, local narratives and the breakdown of the grand narratives of the past makes sense only within a new grand narrative: that of a global crisis in narrative. It is as if narrative has gone ‘underground’, rather than disappeared. Or as Jameson succinctly sums it up: “The formal problem involved might be expressed this way: how to do without narrative by means of narrative itself?” (Lyotard, 1984: xix)

Grand narratives are replaced by little narratives. Contextualism asserts the possibility that these individually generated narratives can be as authoritative as any single narrative imposed by a writer. An understanding of the provisional nature of closure opens up the possibility of similarly provisional narrative readings, and The Wooster Group's work offers one possible model for allowing *multiple* narrative readings to emerge from a single core text. In this changing theatrical landscape, what new experiments are currently being undertaken, which can help us to understand and explore these possibilities further? What alternative models are emerging, for investigating the breakdown of narrative, *by means of narrative*?

Stories are natural mediators between the particular and the general in human experience. We should strive to improve and refine this mode of thinking, not eschew it. (Robinson and Hawpe in Sarbin, 1986: 124)

Chapter Seven - Narrative against Narrative: desperate optimists

For much of the latter part of the twentieth century, the dominant philosophical and literary project was one of deconstruction. Derrida's realisation that meaning is always deferred, never complete, has changed our broad understanding of how narratives are communicated, and has contributed significantly to the development of new forms and new ways of working in theatre also. "To present 'deconstruction' as if it were a method, a system or a settled body of ideas would be to falsify its nature and lay oneself open to charges of reductive misunderstanding," warns Christopher Norris (1986: 1). That said, it is possible to identify a number of companies whose overall approach to the process of theatre-making has been significantly shaped by this new way of reading the world as a combination of ever-shifting sign-systems. We have already considered the Wooster Group's methodology and praxis in relation to such an approach.

But they are by no means the only theatre company to have worked in this way, although they were certainly one of the first. Within the UK context, Forced Entertainment have drawn significantly on models provided by the Wooster Group, frequently structuring their work around the principle of 'lists', but, interestingly, making regular use of narrator-like figures in the process. Blast Theory, Stan's Cafe, Reckless Sleepers, desperate optimists – these are all companies, that have attempted to find new vocabularies of performance, creating structures based variously on mathematics, scientific formulae, or purely visual approaches.

desperate optimists

For the purposes of this study, it is the intention to focus on the work of Joe Lawlor and Christine Molloy, who together form the UK-based Irish company, desperate optimists. Whilst they do not necessarily have the highest public profile of those groups mentioned above, their work has taken them into a range of different experimental areas, whilst evidencing throughout an unusually strong sense of the continuing usefulness of narrative, albeit narrative used in radically non-conventional ways. Although they themselves do not cite the Wooster Group as a defining influence, useful comparisons can, nevertheless, be made between the two companies, as a starting-point for understanding their work. Like the Wooster Group, desperate optimists have placed considerable importance upon the incorporation of personal narratives, building their first

performance work, *Anatomy of Two Exiles* (1992) upon the collision of personal and public narrative materials:

Two people had gathered around them a collection of artefacts - objects, tape recordings, texts, costumes, stories - in order to explain who they were. Objects or narratives from their own lives were presented next to historical stuff of one kind or another and the borrowed iconography from their shared cultural history. (Etchells, 2000: 1)

Prominent too is the use of technical media, such as microphones to amplify normal speech, video – both live and recorded – and digital photography. Their pieces are similar to those of the Wooster Group in structural terms also, depending upon a collage effect, in which motifs appear and re-appear throughout, loosely clustered around a central thematic core, but allowing for the introduction of many different kinds of materials, which may comment upon each other, often to deliberately ironic effect.

Their work is characterised above all by a highly effective, deadpan humour, which provides a counterpoint to, and often totally belies, the seriousness of the issues under consideration. *Dedicated* (1995), for example, a surreal journey through the political and social landscape of nineties Britain, combined earnest questions about the nature of living in a ‘dedicated’ way within a culture of compromise, with stick-on Pinocchio noses, red wigs and clown masks. Playing on the various shades of meaning within the title, the piece also generated a series of ‘dedications’ during the performance: taped messages to prominent, or significant individuals, asking questions about their role in shaping the world around and offering thoughts and ideas for possible change. *Dedicated* serves as an instructive example of postmodern performance, which can legitimately be described as political theatre – a point to which we shall return in more detail in chapter 9.

Play-boy

Play-boy (1999), the sixth major performance piece created by desperate optimists over a seven-year period, bears the company’s customary hallmarks of whimsical humour, wit and strange narrative meanderings. It takes as its central motif the J.M. Synge play, *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), though it is far from being a simple re-telling, or even an interpretation, of that original text.

As an acknowledged 'classic' of Irish dramatic literature, Synge's text has received its fair share of critical scrutiny, and its themes have been exhaustively treated by editors and commentators over the century. The central narrative of the play concerns the appearance, in a country shebeen, of a 'murderer' on the run: Christy Mahon. Far from being horrified by the revelation of his crime, however, the locals are enthralled by his 'grand story', hailing him as a hero, and offering him shelter and protection from the law. When his supposedly dead father turns up in pursuit, Christy's over-imaginative version of events is exposed for what it is, and the genuine violence that ensues turns out to be rather more shocking and brutal than its fictional counterpart.

This central question of 'talk' as opposed to reality, in relation to violent action, was clearly something that attracted desperate optimists to the play, and these issues re-surface in their own piece. The villagers who frequent Michael Flaherty's shebeen are more than happy to listen to Christy Mahon recounting colourful tales, but the reality of the violence itself, when played out in front of them, produces a quite different reaction. In the same way, as part of the source material for *Play-boy*, individual volunteers were brought into a television studio, and invited first to talk about the Synge play and about the nature of violence in particular, and then to fire a real gun (loaded with blanks) directly at the camera. The disjunction, between an inevitably glamourised or tamed account and the much more shocking physical reality behind it, emerges clearly in the video recordings, and, in Joe and Christine's view, speaks very pertinently to one aspect of what it means to be 'Irish'. Also central to both works, as we shall discover, is the issue of the precise relationship between 'reality' and the narrative accounts that attempt to 'contain' that reality.

Joe and Christine take as their starting point the violent riots that accompanied the first performances of *The Playboy of the Western World* at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin in 1907 and, by making use of a characteristically bizarre series of connections, they move us swiftly from there to an eclectic variety of different time-periods and imaginative locations, including, most persistently, a small town in Mexico. This is achieved not through the use of a rapidly changing set, however, or even, despite the presence of video monitors onstage, through any kind of visual imagery. In fact the staging is austerely simple: a low, green catwalk running from left to right across the front of the stage, two stools, a microphone stand from which hang three mikes, and the two large video monitors, form the only stage furniture, behind all of which hangs a pale

green backcloth. It is almost exclusively through the use of words and descriptive narration that the action is conveyed to us; descriptions that are underscored by a single looped piece of Latin American music, varying in volume and therefore prominence, at different points in the performance, but remaining a constant auditory presence throughout.

From the very beginning, then, a simple narrative tension is established between the opening account of a significant moment in Irish theatre history and the Latin dance rhythms running beneath it. In the context of all that has been said so far concerning the search for causal links that is a defining characteristic of the narrative process, the question that is immediately set before an audience is this: how will two such disparate elements be resolved into any kind of coherent whole? As the performance develops, these narrative puzzlements are repeated and multiplied with dizzying rapidity until any kind of coherence seems an utterly impossible goal.

And yet, at the very beginning of the piece, an explicitly narrative contract is established with the audience. Joe begins the show by offering up a tiny, but fundamental, personal narrative. The two of them (Joe and Christine) have, he tells us, been wrestling for some months now with a single question, and that question is (he spells it out very slowly for us): “What – do – we – need – to – know?”. The answer, he then informs us, is “the facts”. There is a humorous ambiguity even about this opening gambit. What do we need to know about *what*? The precise object of enquiry has not been defined, so the ‘facts’, whatever they may turn out to be, also remain undefinable. The facts about what? The facts about the first performance of *The Playboy of the Western World*? The facts about any one of the apparently unconnected subjects that are going to be introduced during the course of this presentation? Nevertheless, with great solemnity and seriousness it is “the facts, plain and unadorned, the facts unencumbered by opinion,” that we are explicitly promised in this opening declaration to the audience.

There are a number of other important, subliminal signals that we are about to engage with a narrative enterprise. The very fact of a direct address to the audience, an intimate, reflective form of speech via the microphone, a hint of the exploratory, all help to establish Joe as a benign storyteller, one who will buttonhole us for the evening, entertain us, narrate to us. From the start, then, this deconstruction of narrative is positioned explicitly within the conventions of narrative, and we are invited to sit back and enjoy an entertaining story - about the *unreliability* of story.

From Joe's personal mini-narrative, we move swiftly to a concentrated account of the first performance of Synge's play, on Saturday, 26 January, 1907, and the rapid descent from audience attentiveness into riotous violence. We are told of the audience's growing restlessness, the catcalls and stamping that began to interrupt the second act and an outburst of actual violence that, in Joe's account, actually prevented the performance of the third act. The following day, a Sunday, the company held a meeting to determine how to respond to this extreme audience reaction. One conclusion, Joe informs us, was that the auditorium should be lined with felt to deaden the noise of stamping feet (Joe gives us a quick demonstration of stamping, to show us how you can quickly become worked up in such a situation). The other decision was that on its second performance, the play would be presented without the one element which seemed to have caused all the trouble: the words. The play would be acted in total silence, with only movements and sound effects left to indicate what was happening.

Already, tiny cracks have begun to appear in the narrative façade. We have been promised "facts", yet the account, though presented with a proper degree of gravity, is already moving into territory that sounds distinctly unreliable. This gentle, almost imperceptible because so smooth, transition into what sounds like fiction signals the opening gambits in a deliberate and frequently repeated process of narrative teasing.

As Joe has been speaking, the video monitors behind him have flickered into life and begun to display images: first a simple title, "act one", then different shots on each monitor of various individuals seen in close-up, obviously listening and responding to instructions, although the volume at this stage is very low, too low to make out anything that is being said.

Suddenly and without warning the narrative focus shifts abruptly. We are now, Joe tells us, in eighteenth-century Chile. These are dangerous times, moreover, in which strong leadership is called for: leadership that will be supplied by.... Don Bernardo O'Higgins (Irish father, Spanish mother). This rapid transition from a detailed and almost credible, if rather odd, account of the opening night of *The Playboy of the Western World* to a weird and patently fictional (or is it?) story of an Irishman abroad takes its charge from the swiftness of the motion. Our uncertainty about the possible truth of the events now being recounted to us is maintained partly by this

rapidity of narrative momentum and partly by Joe's previously established 'authority' as narrator. His sincere, dry delivery, commands our belief, or at least, the continued suspension of our disbelief.

The narrative continues: O'Higgins manages to bring order and stability to his beloved Chile, but although he rules with benign authority and is held in great affection by the people, there is a problem...

At this moment, the two video screens present for the first (and only) time, a double, synchronised image: a man in a blue denim shirt looks into the camera, slowly raises a gun and fires directly at the lens. The noise is sudden and shocking. We are pulled away from the spoken narrative for an instant and the interruption is accompanied by a sudden increase in the level at which the music is playing. Joe rushes to pick up a pair of white cowboy boots by placing his arms into them and proceeds to execute a bizarre and rather comical dance with them. Soon he is using not just the boots on his arms, but an identical pair which he is wearing on his feet, and the two-boot dance becomes a still more anarchic four-boot performance.

The explosion of onstage energy, which this dance represents, is one of the few moments of 'action' during the piece. A very small number of other events are physicalised for us, but largely the action is reported, and the energy is provided by the mental and imaginative momentum of the descriptions. With a few exceptions, then, virtually the entire performance depends upon narration, and hence narrative techniques - another important irony within a piece which reveals the attractive untruthfulness of story.

As the dance (performed with deadpan expression and completed without comment) comes to an end, Joe takes up the story once more. The 'problem', it seems, is that "you can't have a Latin American dictator with the surname O'Higgins". And so O'Higgins retires to Peru, a lonely and broken man. Now, it has occurred to Joe and Christine that we may not all be equally familiar with Synge's play (we have returned, without comment or explanation, to the first narrative line), but no matter, because they have managed to rope together a few of their friends and family to talk about it for us. Some of them have read the play, others have seen it performed, and a couple of them have done neither, "but being Irish, they're willing to give it a go anyway". And

so, right on cue, one of the monitors switches to “helen”, who is going to give us her account of the plot of *The Playboy of the Western World*. Helen is a chatty, silver-haired woman in her late 50s or early 60s. She is clearly not an actress – none of those speaking on the videos are professional performers – but she provides an engaging and amusingly idiosyncratic account of the play’s central narrative.

While this is going on, the purpose of some white strips, visible on the trouser legs of both performers, becomes apparent. Joe is taking advantage of this pause in his own narration to use the strips (of sticky tape) to strap blood-pouches to his upper body, under his shirt. This done, he carefully begins to pierce the pouches with a needle, so that the blood stains slowly onto the white cloth, creating an impression that he has been wounded in some way.

As Helen’s account comes to a conclusion, Joe now picks up a *third* narrative strand, and introduces us to HUAC: the House Un-American Activities Committee. A brief account of the committee’s activities ensues, in particular their attempts to get Hollywood writers, directors and actors to “name names”. No sooner have we begun to grapple with this new element than the volume of the music rises once again and a second dance begins, performed this time with carefully-mirrored movements by both Joe and Christine.

The dance over, yet another new character is introduced: Leon Trotsky. We are told of a seminal encounter as a small boy with another boy of similar age, seen begging at the roadside. A hugely compressed account of “organising lots of revolutions, most notably, of course, the October Revolution” brings us swiftly to Trotsky’s flight from Russia to Mexico. Meanwhile, behind Joe, Christine is carefully loading the handgun. Our attention is then pulled back to the video monitors, where more friends and family are discussing first the role of the men in *The Playboy of the Western World*, and then the familiar theme of the outsider who enters the community and in so doing reveals its petty narrow-mindedness. These observations, like all those that will be spoken from the monitors, are both reflections upon a central narrative, the plot of the original play, yet also contain their own narrative fragments: a core ‘objective’ story refocused through the lenses of subjective experience.

Joe picks up the narrative again. José Miguel O'Higgins, great-great-grandson of Don Bernardo, is feeling trapped. In a desperate attempt to escape his ancestral history, he simply leaves home one day and heads north. He walks and walks until... he reaches a small town in Mexico, where he settles and decides that he will establish a night club, by the name of *Casa Amore*, the House of Love, designed for him by the architect Juan O'Gorman (curiously, also the offspring of an Irish/Spanish mixed marriage...). The *Casa Amore* is a huge success: couples come and feel themselves enfolded in an atmosphere of love and happiness. There are wonderful cabaret performances, including the famous Mexican boot-dance (hence Joe's earlier rendition), and extraordinary live animal acts. Joe abruptly interrupts his own account. He has the distinct impression that when he mentioned live animal acts there were at least two people in the audience who had immediately imagined acts of a sexual nature. A brief, but detailed, account of what we *might* have been imagining is provided and then interrupted by another gunshot from the video monitor. "Whatever you were thinking," he continues, "can we get one thing straight? This was a family establishment".

* * * *

By this point in the performance, we are being asked to hold onto a bewildering variety of narrative threads and, somehow, to attempt to bring them together. What precisely is being asked of us, the audience? How can these disparate narrative elements be connected? How much of it are we intended to believe? What appears to be outrageous fiction is being presented as apparently historical account and yet we have been told at the outset that we are to be given only "the facts". Serious political issues are positioned next to absurdly deadpan comedy without any clear signals as to how we are intended to read them. Surely there are moments when we are being 'spun a yarn', but at which precise points and how much of it *might* be true? The narrative contract has been established, so an expectation of finding some level of meaning and connection seems justified, but so far, each time narrative coherence seems to be emerging, the process has been violently disrupted. Can these fragments possibly connect? And meanwhile, what actually hooks us in and what keeps us hooked is the most basic narrative question of all: what is coming next?

* * * *

After a brief account from another family member or friend about the role of Christy Mahon, the “good guy” in the play, Joe introduces us to yet another character and yet another narrative line: the story of Elia Kazan. Starting with his birth in Istanbul in 1909 (by coincidence, the same year that Synge died) and his parents’ emigration to New York, where they opened a haberdasher’s business, he tells us that Kazan wanted a different career for himself. He began to work first in theatre, then the movies, creating, amongst others, such films as *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *On the Waterfront* and one particular 1952 work, set in Mexico, and starring Marlon Brando and Anthony Quinn, *Viva Zapata!* As Joe describes an early, crucial scene in the film in which Zapata (Brando) sees, like Trotsky, the poverty all around him and decides that this must not be allowed to continue, his voice rises in volume and tone and the emotional level also begins to increase. “Take out the words, take them right out,” he exclaims, “violence is the only thing these people understand”. He switches to another scene from the film, where Brando confronts his friend, played by Quinn, with the accusation that he has betrayed the revolution and the friend says in return that he is sick of all the violence and asks, “Can a good thing come from a bad act?”. Joe rounds on the audience: “Does anyone here know the answer to that simple question? Can a good thing come from a bad act?”. When no one (predictably) responds to the challenge, Joe is deflated. He has lost confidence, he tells us, in the whole process. He thought we were getting somewhere but now he’s not so sure. Christine steps forward and ‘shoots’ him with the handgun. Of course, his shirt is already stained with blood and, rather than falling to the floor, Joe merely looks back at her. The video monitors announce that we are now entering “act two”.

* * * *

Whereas previously the questions to the audience were merely implicit, arising out of the structure of the performance, they have now been brought to the surface. Joe’s reaction, when there is no response from the audience, throws doubt on the previously established narrative contract. Were we really getting anywhere at all? Can we not agree upon an answer to this one, simple question? Christine’s ‘shooting’, without cause and without consequence, only confuses things further. And yet, just when we, the audience, are similarly losing faith in our ability to connect the apparently random sequences presented to us by the play, we are thrown this crumb of encouragement. We are reminded by the simple announcement of a second act, that there is a

structure, there is an ordering principle to the material: it is not going to fall easily into a classic narrative model, but there is, nevertheless, forward movement through a pre-constructed arrangement of events.

* * * *

“geraldine” on the video monitor is shocked: “he killed his own father!”. For this second leg of the story-sequence, Christine takes over the role of central narrator. She would like to stick to the facts, she insists. (So what was Joe supplying us with then?) For example, the “fact” that *gringo*, a word we customarily associate with Mexican cowboy films, actually originated in Spain as a negative description of Irishmen. (Again we are faced with the question, are we being enlightened or teased? Is this a revelation of previously unsuspected information or just another gameplay?) And, she goes on, it was a “word” that got Synge into trouble: the word ‘shift’ provoked such strong reactions at that first performance, that Chris speculates aloud whether it might even have been a contemporary euphemism for ‘cunt’. But she doesn’t think it was that word in particular that caused the trouble. It was all the words, taken cumulatively, that Synge used to describe the Irish people. They didn’t like being pictured in such negative terms, and it got so difficult for Synge, Christine tells us, that eventually, dying of Hodgkins disease, he was forced to flee the country with his lover, Olga – rather like José Miguel O’Higgins, he just had to get up and walk away.

While “stephen” on the video monitor now reflects upon the question of whether Christy Mahon ever actually explains *why* he killed his father (he does, as it happens: it is because Old Mahon has attempted to force his son into an arranged, and highly unsuitable, marriage with his former wet-nurse), and the more personal issue of whether there are situations in one’s own life when one is prepared to use violence, Christine goes through the same operation of taping and piercing blood-pouches under her shirt. Joe reloads the gun.

Then after Stephen’s intervention is complete, Chris takes up the narrative (or one of them) again. Elia Kazan was one of those Hollywood directors brought before the House Un-American Activities Committee. And he was someone who named names. He gave the names of many writers who, like himself, were card-carrying Communists. The effect was that from that moment

those writers were (rather like the actors performing *Playboy of the Western World*) silenced, deprived of the right to speak.

The friends on video begin to interrupt the live action more frequently. They muse on the attraction of violence, the desire that people have to see something happen, to see “blood”. Helen, clearly very unhappy about the process, is required to fire the handgun at the camera and finds the experience draining. When Christine begins to speak about loneliness and asks whether anyone in the audience would like to say something about the subject, it is an on-screen friend who responds: “muiris” talks about the loneliness of Widow Quin and how it affects her motives in the play. Chris then embarks on the most extraordinary digression yet, concerning how plagues of leprosy were dealt with in medieval Europe, by isolating the individual concerned. There are yet more reflections on the nature of loneliness, both in Synge’s play and from personal experience.

Then we are returned to the story of *Viva Zapata* and a scene between Brando and his screen-wife on their wedding night. The wife questions the need for an armed struggle and Brando explains with rising passion why the violence is necessary and must continue. Just as Joe’s voice began to show excitement, when describing other scenes from the film, Christine’s vocal delivery intensifies the emotion. She invites us to picture the climax of the scene – a moment, significantly, of wordless silence – and this time, the brief, but tense interval of stillness thus created is broken not by a gunshot, but by a voice from the video monitor: “Hello? Hello?”

“It’s all right, Muiris,” says Chris, “we’re still here.”

* * * *

This establishment of a more direct interplay between the live performers and the pre-recorded video, first through Muiris’s ‘response’ to Christine’s question and then in the reassurance offered to Muiris by Chris, complicates further our perceptions of what is real and what is fictional. Where does story end and reality begin? What kind of relationship exists between the artificiality of the present theatrical moment and the apparent authenticity of the video material?

* * * *

Another pre-recorded musing from “stephen” ensues, on the subject of loneliness and the desire it is possible to experience, to communicate with someone you miss very much, a desire which can sometimes be frustrated (just as Christy Mahon and Pegeen fail to communicate at the end of *The Playboy of the Western World*).

When Elia Kazan was filming *Viva Zapata!*, Christine then continues, he liked to “hang out” in Mexico to get the feel of the place. One particular house he liked to visit was that which had been occupied by Leon Trotsky; a house which was riddled with hundreds of bullet-holes, put there, she tells us, by a group of drunken surrealist painters who had attempted, on one occasion, to assassinate Trotsky. But Stalin had his own plans. Discovering where Trotsky had retreated to, he dispatched a hired killer...

As Chris tells us the details of his murder, Joe is slowly lifting his arms to shoot her with the gun. The suspense is palpable: we are getting used to the fact that gunshots are a feature of the production, but we haven’t yet accustomed ourselves to the noise and the shock when it happens. However, when it does come, the shot is fired not by Joe, but by another of the friends on video. Joe simply lowers his arms and Christine continues her narrative of Trotsky’s death. As the murderer approached the exiled revolutionary, ice-pick in hand, Trotsky was apparently writing these words: “Is there another way to live?”.

* * * *

“act three” appears on the screens. Joe fires three times at Chris and, like Joe before her, her shirt is already blood-stained. She does not move. While we are waiting for her response, we are startled again as another woman on-screen fires at the camera and is clearly shocked herself at the physical impact of the explosion. More video reflections on Synge’s play, this time on the violence that can be provoked by an outburst of temper and the madness that can come over men when they try to outdo each other in boasting of their exploits.

Joe takes up the microphone again, and with it the explicit role of storyteller, returning us once more to the second performance of *The Playboy of the Western World*. The rioters had turned out

again, and so too had seventy policemen. As the play unfolded before them in total silence, their violent intentions turned first to bewilderment and eventually to disinterest, as they drifted away during the third act. So on the first occasion that they were ever performed to an audience, the closing moments of the drama were presented in absolute silence. In silence Christy Mahon turned his back on the community he had briefly entered and stepped through the open shebeen door towards the carefully painted backcloth of Irish hills behind. In silence, the audience were required to “fill in the gaps, join up the dots” and make sense both of the scene and of the entire, highly controversial play.

Jimmy (another friend on the video) fires at the camera. Joe, now slumped to one side, as if in long-delayed response to the earlier shooting, begins to describe for us a final, climactic scene, one night in the *Casa Amore*.... Everyone is there: Zapata, Kazan, Brando, Anthony Quinn, “practising his Mexican accent”, Leon Trotsky, twenty surrealist painters sharing one drink between them, Juan O’Gorman, José O’Higgins. After a stunning performance by Pablo and his dancing chihuahas, John Millington Synge and his lover Olga turn up to perform their favourite extracts from *The Playboy of the Western World*. As Synge and Olga enact the moment from Act Three where Christy declares to Pegeen that he wants to share his life with her, Pegeen/Olga pulls out a gun and, with the drunken spectators looking on in bewilderment, shoots him at point blank range. In the silence that follows, Brando and Quinn, Kazan, Trotsky and all the others present are also required to fill in the gaps, join up the dots and make sense of what they have just witnessed. The fictional scenes from the play have turned into a ‘real’ moment of death as the blood spreads slowly across Synge’s shirt. (And yet, of course, this is within the most obviously fictionalised moment in the entire piece.) While Joe has been painting this truly bizarre scene for the audience, Chris has danced gently to the Latin American music. Now she begins to sink to the floor – a gracefully artificial stage ‘death’ – and lies there, microphone in hand.

The final moments of the performance are punctuated by fragmentary comments from the video monitors. “I’m attracted to men who can defend themselves.” “I don’t think violence is attractive.” “I think we are drawn to violence, that there’s a dark side in all of us.” Another gunshot.

Joe is now lying on the floor as well. Using his microphone, he questions Chris about the truthfulness of her account. When she said that Trotsky had died writing ‘Is there another way to live’, was that true?

“No, it’s not true.”

“So, you just... made that bit up?”

“Yes.”

“Why? Why did you make that bit up?”

[A final gunshot from the video. Muiris is the last person to shoot directly at the camera – he holds the pose.]

“I don’t know.”

On the video, Helen gives her reaction to the ending of Synge’s play. “It just ended. I expected more action at the end of the play.” Chris and Joe are ‘dead’ in front of us. The video screens display a final message: “curtain”.

* * * *

The full complexity of *Play-boy*’s construction is revealed in these closing moments. Bizarrely messy at first sight, it ultimately reveals a ‘hidden’ structure every bit as ingenious as that of a traditional well-made plot. The assorted narrative lines, each with their own internal logic, are cleverly made to converge upon each other during the final moments of the performance, whilst never making claims to coherence or closure. We are certainly no closer to knowing the ‘facts’ of anything under discussion than we were at the beginning, and this is a deliberate, consciously ironic strategy. Yet although we can find no plot or story in any traditional sense, we see strands of narrative criss-crossing and overlapping, certainly *plotted* – in the way that intersecting lines are plotted on a piece of graph-paper – through an eclectic range of material, both historical, fictional and fantastical, that can be revealed and *re-plotted* by an engaged audience member. The

piece draws us repeatedly into a project of re-construction, on the clear assumption that there are stories here to be examined, compared and re-assembled.

Thus *Play-boy*, in common with Wooster Group performances, demands that those watching complete the work, “requires an audience to realize the multitude of possibilities on which it opens” (Savran, 1988: 55). The interpretative challenge is playfully set out within the language of the piece itself: how will we, as the audience present at this performance, choose to “fill in the gaps, join up the dots”? This narrative puzzlement is framed almost entirely within a context of ludic enjoyment. How do we choose between competing narrative strands? Which route through the work shall we take? How shall we separate fact from fiction? Is such a separation even possible? In publicity material for the show, the multiple possibilities of narrative progression are made explicit:

against a background of latin dance rhythms
and the occasional outburst of stray gunfire, *Play-boy*
attempts to charm
and disarm with tales of
great deeds and conquests
or...
against a background of
latin dance rhythms and
the occasional outburst of stray gunfire,
Play-boy attempts to engage with
serious moral and social issues
or... against a background of latin
dance
rhythms
and the occasional outburst of
stray gunfire, *Play-boy* airs the
dirty laundry
of a couple in a long-standing relationship
or... against a background of latin

dance rhythms and the occasional outburst of
 stray gunfire, Play-boy rejects reality and opts
 for the fantasy world of wondering what
our lives would have been like
 if - and it's a big if -
we had made a different set of decisions
or...¹

The dizzying multiplication of possibilities inherent in that account is echoed repeatedly within the performance itself. Multiple narrative pathways are opened up, we are invited to go so far down a particular route before being abruptly switched to another. The accounts of early performances of *The Playboy of the Western World* are interrupted by the history of Don Bernardo O'Higgins. Descriptions of the proceedings of the House Un-American Activities Committee are suddenly replaced by a scene from the early life of Leon Trotsky.

The competences demanded of an audience member, however, are demonstrably and repeatedly those of narrative. In effect, the work exploits a wide range of narrative conventions, although these do not combine to produce anything even faintly resembling a linear narrative. Or, to express it another way, the structure of the performance is in no way constrained within conventional narrative limits, despite the fact that it is shot through with numerous narrative strands.

The invisible narrative

For desperate optimists, although they work within what has been described as New Theatre, narrative continues to play an "absolutely crucial" role. Joe Lawlor insists that any kind of performance work designed for an audience must continue, in one way or another, to take narrative principles and narrative structures into account.² There may not be a narrative in the traditional sense in a lot of New Theatre, but it is very often the case that a work will "play with and around" the elements of classical narrative. Some engagement with the basic principles of

¹ Taken from a publicity flyer for *Play-boy*

² Unpublished interview with the author, given on 21 November, 2001

narrative will, and must, occur, even where these principles are in no way taken as normative models or patterns. Lawlor's view is that, in practice, it is actually very difficult indeed for a maker of theatre even to *think* outside the boundaries of narrative structure. The new models are thus defined precisely by their relationship, and responses, to the old. The *act* of transgression must have an *object* of transgression, in order to make any sense: non-narrative theatre, or at least that which is prepared with an audience in mind, is dependent upon the pre-existence, and continuing vitality, of narrative work.

That object may, however, be 'invisible'. In this respect, it is interesting to note that although *Play-boy* is ostensibly all about Synge's play, not a single word of Synge's text is actually spoken during the performance. This 'disappearance' of the primary text is of fundamental importance: it mirrors the process whereby a canonical work such as *The Playboy of the Western World* is assimilated into people's cultural awareness, to the point that it is familiar by its 'trace', rather than in its original textual form. As a result, the reconstructed text formed from the recollections of the various friends and family members is both incomplete and sometimes inaccurate, whilst at the same time revealing what are, *for them*, the most significant and memorable aspects of the Synge play. By reading *into* the text, they both re-form existing material and add their own, self-generated fragments, thus bringing aspects of their own personalities and experiences into the frame. Helen is able to provide a reasonably coherent account of the narrative up to a certain point, but then she falters and cannot supply a conclusion. Later on, she describes the ending as disappointing, whilst Stephen is puzzling over whether Christy Mahon provides any kind of reason for killing his father. Geraldine is simply appalled by the violence of Christy Mahon's original act, focusing upon the parricide in Synge's play almost in terms of an accomplished reality, rather than the story it so patently is.

Each of the speakers on video, in fact, remembers different things, gives a significantly different account of the play, commenting on different aspects and revealing, in the process, their own specific cultural expectations and preoccupations. And this process of what might be called 'prejudicial memory' takes place, of course, in response to *Play-boy* also. For the CD-ROM *Stalking Memory*, published as part of the *On Memory* edition of *Performance Research* (November 2000), desperate optimists probed this very question, asking a number of academics

and practitioners to record what details they could remember of the company's various productions. These are some of Alex Johnston's recollections of *Play-boy*:

What I remember best about "Play-boy": the stuff about guns, the carefully framed panic, always soothed by the lulling salsa music, the noise and the blood and the sound and fury. Which is unfair, because an elderly man with a potatoey sort of face spoke at length on video about the meaning and significance of Synge's "The Playboy of the Western World", and I can't remember anything he said... The central narrative, such as there was one, was blatantly simple, a cobbled-together series of revolutionary clichés. (Alex Johnston, 2000: *Play-boy*, [hyperlink 2](#))

This impressionistic collage is interesting both in terms of what it includes and what it leaves out, and could well prove to be typical of the way in which many of us tend to recollect any performances we have seen, whether narrative or non-narrative: a series of images, a sense of tone, an awareness of the core subject-matter, and a more or less tenuous grasp of the (re-constructed) narrative sweep.

Fact or fiction?

Another essential quality of the piece is to be located in the precise relationship between fact and fiction, and the deliberate uncertainties created over this highly questionable distinction. In a very explicit way, this is physically embodied by the deft use of video, with the incorporation of real-time 'interactions' between Joe and Christine and characters seen on the monitors. It is also, though, embedded at a deeper level in the way that the documentary elements of the piece are handled. To get some idea of how this effect is achieved, it is instructive to compare the narrative Joe Lawlor provides of the first production of *The Playboy of the Western World*, with contemporary accounts of the *Playboy* riots. There is no doubt that Synge's play was embroiled in controversy from its very opening performance. However, the situation on that first night was not quite as Joe paints it:

The first act was applauded, and though there were protests in the second act, 'Faint calls and ejaculations like "Oh, no! Take it off!" came from various parts of the house ...' Lady Gregory was confident enough to send a telegram to Yeats, lecturing in Scotland, 'Play great success.' W.G. Fay [playing the role of Christy Mahon] says he felt hostility grow in the third act from the entrance of the Widow Quin; Padraic Colum blames Old Mahon's entry, 'That scene was too representational. There stood a man with horribly bloodied bandage upon his head, making a figure that took the whole thing out of the atmosphere of high comedy.' There were hisses and cat-calls at the word 'bloody' and loud howls greeted Christy's words about a drift of chosen females standing in their shifts

(an image made more real and shocking, according to [Joseph] Holloway, by Fay's substitution of 'Mayo girls' for 'chosen females.')

The noise increased and *'by the time the curtain fell on the last act, the crowd was arguing and fighting with itself. People in front leaned over the backs of the seats and demanded quiet – a lot of people seemed to be doing this – and those at the back responded by shouting and hissing loudly. The crowd which eventually emerged into the streets was in an ugly mood.'* Lady Gregory sent Yeats a second telegram, 'Audience broke up in disorder at the word shift'. (Berrow in Harmon, 1972: 76, italics mine)

Joe's definitive assertion that the third act remained unperformed on the opening night can thus be seen to be the first of a number of fictionalisations of genuine historical events and characters. Even more intriguing, however, is the fact that this fictionalising process was not necessarily a deliberate strategy on the part of Joe and Christine, but appears, in fact, to have arisen, either out of different and conflicting narrative versions of the event, or as a result of incomplete readings of the same source materials. Talking about researching the facts behind the account, Joe expresses genuine uncertainty on this point:

I'm trying to remember now. I think the show was stopped, but I think when they performed it again, completely, they did it in silence. They literally just mimed everything, they went through the entire actions, but they were allowed to get through to the very end that time, those actors. So the very *first* time they attempted to perform it, which would, I guess, would have been its premiere, I suppose, they never got through it, they actually - it *was* stopped. And so the actual - the very first time they got through it from beginning to end, successfully, they didn't talk. It *was* actually done in complete silence.³

If this is the case, not only the piece itself, but also the process of *making the piece* can be seen to be 'about' the unconscious slippage between events and their re-telling in narrative form.

The underlying conflict and violence, along with *some* of the specific details of Joe's version, are real enough, though, and drawn, it would appear, from eyewitness accounts. However, the compression and re-shaping of significant elements is typical of the kind of narrative process, which takes place whenever *fabula* is transformed into *sjuzhet*, for the purposes (whether explicit or implicit) of creating a 'good story'. By contrast, improbable as it sounds, the theatre auditorium really was lined with felt during the course of the week, in order to stifle the noise of stamping feet (Berrow in Harmon, 1972: 82). And undoubtedly there was a meeting on the

³ Unpublished interview with the author, given on 21 November, 2001

Sunday immediately following the opening night, at which cuts were made to the text, but Joe's suggestion that the entire verbal text was removed is another exaggeration of actual events. Lady Gregory, one of the founder members of the Abbey Theatre, gives her account of the situation thus:

I remember his bringing the play to us in Dublin... We were almost bewildered by its abundance and fantasy, but we felt – and Mr. Yeats said very plainly – that there was far too much 'bad language', there were too many violent oaths, and the play itself was marred by this. I did not think it was fit to be put on the stage without cutting. It was agreed that it should be cut in rehearsal. A fortnight before its production Mr. Yeats, thinking I had seen a rehearsal, writes: 'I should like to know how you thought *The Playboy* acted... have they cleared many of the objectionable sentences out of it?'

I did not, however, see a rehearsal and did not hear the play again until the night of its production, and then I told Synge that the cuts were not enough, that many more should be made. He gave me leave to do this, and in consultation with the players I took out many phrases which, though in the printed book, have never since that production been spoken on our stage. I am sorry that they were not taken out before it had been played at all, but that is just what happened. (Gregory, 1972: 80-81)

That said, the image of a word-less second performance is not as far-fetched as it first sounds, or at any rate, that far removed from the actual audience *experience* on the evening of 28 January, 1907:

On the Monday night *Riders to the Sea*, which was the first piece, went very well indeed. But in the interval after it, I noticed on one side of the pit a large group of men sitting together, not a woman among them. I told Synge I thought it a sign of some organised disturbance and he telephoned to have the police at hand. The first part of the first act went undisturbed. Then suddenly an uproar began. The group of men I had noticed booed, hooted, blew tin trumpets. The editor of one of the Dublin weekly papers was sitting next to me, and I asked him to count them. He did so and said there were forty making the disturbance. *It was impossible to hear a word of the play.* The curtain came down for a minute, but I went round and told the actors to go on playing to the end, even if not a word could be heard. The police, hearing the uproar, began to file in, but I thought the disturbers might tire themselves out if left alone, or be satisfied with having made their protest, and I asked them to go outside but stay within call in case of any attempt being made to injure the players or the stage. There were very few people in the stalls, but among them was Lord Walter Fitzgerald, grand-nephew of the patriot, the adored Lord Edward. He stood up and asked that he and others in the audience might be allowed to hear the play, but this leave was refused. The disturbance lasted to the end of the evening, *not one word had been heard after the first ten minutes.* (1972: 67-68, italics mine)

And thereafter, during the whole of that first week, anyone applying for tickets to see Synge's new play were presented with the following letter, along with a voucher:

Dear Sir,

In response to your application, we enclose Voucher to be exchanged at Booking Office at Theatre, or at Messers Cramer's, Westmoreland Street for Numbered Ticket. Should it be impossible to hear the play the night you select we will send you another Voucher on receiving your application.

Yours faithfully ,

W. A. Henderson,

Secretary.

(in Hunt, 1979: 72)

So although the description of a mimed performance is, in itself, a playful exaggeration, in some respects, Joe's assertion that those first audiences were required to fill in the gaps and join up the dots for themselves, working purely on the evidence of what they could see, is demonstrably based upon the genuine audience experience at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin. As a poem written shortly after the controversy amusingly put it:

Our own opinion, we admit,
Is rather – well – uncertain,
Because we couldn't hear one bit
From rise to fall of curtain . . .

(Berrow, in Harmon 1972: 81)

And, as it turns out, a final ironic twist is added by the fact that there was a contemporary grain of 'truth' behind this particular fiction, provided by "La Lingue", who wrote to the Editor of the *Evening Mail* on 31 January, 1907 to make the following suggestion:

SIR – If Mr. Synge wishes to turn the 'Sinn Fein' howlers into an applauding clique, he need only write a play portraying the Irish peasant as a flawless demi-god, using language as reticent as that of a Bishop when denouncing an editor who dares to think. It might, perhaps, be safer to leave out words altogether, and give a play in pantomime like 'L'Enfant Prodigue' (the artistes thinking carefully-pruned thoughts in Gaelic).

(Kilroy, 1971: 54)

Fact into fiction

The means by which fact becomes fiction, and real-life narratives are transformed into fictional ones, is also, of course, at the heart of Synge's original. If we trace the way in which Christy's account of the 'murder' develops during the course of the play, we can see this process at work. During his first encounter with Pegeen and all of the men who are gathered at Michael's shebeen, before departing for Kate Cassidy's wake, he is unwilling even to name the deed:

MICHAEL: It should be larceny, I'm thinking?

CHRISTY [*dolefully*]: I had it in my mind it was a different word and a bigger.

PEGEEN: There's a queer lad. Were you never slapped in school, young fellow, that you don't know the name of your deed?

(Synge, 1964: 81)

But once forced into admitting that he has 'killed' his father, he describes it in terms which are both blunt and sparing:

CHRISTY: I just riz the loy and let fall the edge of it on the ridge of his skull, and he went down at my feet like an empty sack, and never let a grunt or groan from him at all. (84)

Left alone with Pegeen, however, he begins to exaggerate the details, making them just that little bit more dramatic:

CHRISTY: ...it was a bitter life he led me till I did up a Tuesday and halve his skull. (89)

His next account of the event, told on the following day to the village girls, eager to hear his story, provides much more of a build-up to the killing. We are given a lot more circumstantial detail, for example when Christy, beginning to revel in his role as storyteller, describes the woman his father wanted him to marry:

CHRISTY [*with horror*]: A walking terror from beyond the hills, and she two score and five years, and two hundredweights and five pounds in the weighing scales, with a limping leg on her, and a blinded eye, and she a woman of noted misbehaviour with the old and young. (97)

And when he gets to the murder itself, Christy really lets his imagination play freely:

CHRISTY [*flattered and confident, waving bone*]: He gave a drive with the scythe, and I gave a lep to the east. Then I turned around with my back to the north, and I hit a blow on the ridge of his skull, laid him stretched out, and he split to the knob of his gullet. [*He raises the chicken bone to his Adam's apple.*] (98)

The reaction he gets from his listeners more than rewards his storytelling bravado:

SUSAN: That's a grand story.
HONOR: He tells it lovely. (98)

Later still, at the height of his self-confidence, and just before he catches sight of his 'dead' father, Christy extends the deed still further in his own imagination:

CHRISTY: From this out I'll have no want of company when all sorts is bringing me their food and clothing [*he swaggers to the door, tightening his belt*], the way they'd set their eyes upon a gallant orphan cleft his father with one blow to the breeches belt. (106)

In this way, the narrative grows in the repeated telling: the simple, plain knock to the edge of the skull has become a mighty blow that split his father to the waist (with some of the more earthbound details now omitted), and Christy himself has also grown into a "gallant orphan".

Joe and Christine's own narratives are propelled along a similarly dizzying path of exaggeration, where fact and fantasy become interwoven and self-sustaining. A vital clue to this aspect of the performance is supplied by the hyphenation of the title, *Play-boy*, which draws our attention to the subtle interplay of significations involved. According to Maurice Bourgeois, an early commentator on Synge's play, the word is redolent with meaning:

The word "playboy" (Irish *búachaill barra*, literally "boy of the game"), a term used in the Irish game of "hurling" (*camánaidheacht*) is Hibernian slang. Its exact meaning (not to be found in Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary* (iv. 543, s.v. "play-boy"), which gives only the older acceptations of the word: 1. the devil; 2. a playful woman) is "hoaxer, humbugger, mystificator (*not* impostor), one who does sham things." ... In Synge's use of it, it seems to have three implicit by-meanings: (a) one who is played with; (b) one who plays like a player (*i.e.* a comedian and also an athlete or champion: witness the sports in the play); (c) one who is full of the play-spirit: "a wild dare-devil is called a play-boy [as in Synge's well-known comedy]" ("The Irish Dialect of English," by Mary Hayden and Marcus Hartog, *Fortnightly Review*, April, 1909, p.779 & n.1). The word, which is half-humorous and half-poetical is a very rich one, and (like "philanderer," which, Mr. Bernard Shaw tells me, has its exact equivalent only in Swedish) is exceedingly difficult to translate. (Bourgeois, 1913: 193-94, note 1)

These descriptions perfectly capture desperate optimists' own spirit of play, as they create a multiplicity of fantastic narratives out of the extraordinary events of history and gently tease the audience's narrative credulity. For the surprising fact is that the first Supreme Leader of Chile genuinely *was* the offspring of an Irish-Spanish marriage by the name of Bernardo O' Higgins;

and there really was an early twentieth-century Mexican architect called Juan O’Gorman, unlikely though both of these characters sound. By contrast, it is clear, as we reach the climax of the narrative, in which Juan O’Gorman, José O’Higgins, Zapata, Kazan, Brando, Anthony Quinn, Leon Trotsky, and twenty surrealist painters are joined by the terminally ill Synge and “Olga”,⁴ with their re-enactment of a section of dialogue from his controversial drama, that we are firmly in the realms of fantasy. This makes the impact of Joe and Christine’s final exchange, where he ignores the blatantly fictional quality of this entire scene and merely asks why she “made up” a tiny detail to do with Trotsky’s death, all the more bathetic, and thus effective, in its understatement.

It is apparent that Joe and Christine are playing with the audience by means of these narrative games. It is interesting to note that both J. L. Styan (in Whitaker, 1969: 111-16) and T. R. Whitaker discern similar forces at work in Synge’s original. Whitaker brings this aspect into sharp relief when he notes that:

The Playboy locates itself in a much-disputed territory: the ‘educational’ function of role-playing in ‘life’ and in ‘art’. The play’s very ambivalences, I think, are clues to its meaning. Its grotesque style elicits from us an unusually sustained combination of spontaneous sympathy and detached irony. We share in Christy’s passionate improvisation and in the formal patterns of Synge’s precise comic control [...] we share Synge’s marvellously balanced awareness of the wry fictiveness of the seeming actual and the potent actuality of our most profound fictions. But these effects all point to the central mysteries of drama itself. For drama is that art of cooperative role-playing which submits passionate improvisation *and its spontaneously doubled response in the spectator* to formal control, locates us both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the action, and so brings to immediate awareness much that otherwise remains hidden in the more compulsively histrionic texture of our lives. (Whitaker, 1969: 6, italics mine)

Later on in the same essay, he states the audience’s role in this process even more succinctly when he adds, “[t]he full meaning of *The Playboy*’s text begins to appear, I think, only when we try to read it as a ‘score’ for a participatory event” (1969: 11).

⁴ Synge did, in fact, die of Hodgkins disease, although he himself was probably unaware of the true nature of his final illness (Greene in Harmon, 1972: 183), and his final days were spent, not in Mexico, but in a Dublin nursing home. The strongest romantic attachment he formed seems to have been with the actress Molly Allgood, whose surname presumably inspired the assonantally similar ‘Olga’, and who did, indeed, play Pegeen Mike in the original production, under her stage-name, Maire O’Neill.

Narrative - a participatory event

A number of important provisional conclusions may be drawn from this close study of *Play-boy*. We have already suggested in the previous chapter that it may be possible to find a way of investigating the breakdown of narrative, by means of narrative. It is evident that this performance makes deliberate use of narrative processes to raise crucial questions about the role of the spectator in the reconstruction of narrative, as well as the wider role of narrative, both fictional (and plausible) and non-fictional (and implausible), in human experience. Audience engagement with a theatrical presentation of any kind must surely involve a complex set of responses, at a variety of levels, but the central importance of narrative processes would seem to be undiminished. However, we can also say that audiences do not read merely for a pre-formed plot, designed and 'closed' in advance by an all-seeing, all-knowing writer. They bring their own personal narratives to bear upon the narratives they encounter, or construct for themselves, within the theatrical experience. They enjoy the play of openness and contradiction within this interchange of forces. The re-construction of a narrative by an audience is both a psychological imperative – looking for pattern, repetition, development, interaction – and a ludic pleasure, which includes, amongst other things, the discerning of, and an enjoyment in, the fluid boundaries, which separate art from life, and fiction from non-fiction.

Chapter Eight - Howard Barker: A Bargain With Impossibility

If that's art I think it is hard work
It was beyond me
So much of it beyond my actual life
(First Prologue to *The Bite of the Night*, ll.18-20)

For playwright Howard Barker, “honouring the audience” means offering them plays they cannot easily understand. In his self-styled Theatre of Catastrophe, all the elements of what he critically calls “the theatre of Clarity” come under attack, narrative form included. Yet a close examination of Barker’s writings about theatre, and of the plays themselves, reveals not so much the removal of narrative, as a re-definition of its role and status.

In order to appreciate how Barker repositions narrative within his work, it is first necessary to understand the wider project, with which he is engaged, and the central criticisms he makes of the majority of contemporary “humanist drama”. For Barker, there are no questions as important as those that must be asked in moments of catastrophe. As he expresses it, the theatre of Catastrophe “inhabits the area of maximum risk, both to the imagination and invention of its author, and to the comfort of its audience” (Barker, 1997: 52). Only in the most extreme of situations, as both individuals and social structures are placed under the most intense pressures, can the deepest questions about human motivation, animal desire, the reasons for hope of any kind, for dignity in any measure, authentically be asked. The characters in his plays are contradictory, obsessive, ridiculous, and occasionally heroic in their desperate search for reasons that will be sufficient to sustain the experience of living in a world where such passions and such cruelties are possible. Barker is certainly not interested in playing with aesthetic form for its own sake, but seeks to re-define forms and structures in order that they may more appropriately contain his transgressive moral speculations and bold imaginative adventures.

As Charles Lamb points out in his succinct overview of Barker’s theatrical career (1995: 1-16), early critical attempts to position the playwright alongside other emerging political writers of the Seventies, such as Howard Brenton, David Edgar and David Hare, quickly proved to be inappropriate. Superficial similarities, such as the plays’ overtly critical stance in relation to existing social and political structures and their hard-edged picture of the world, tended to obscure far more significant differences of approach, particularly in relation to their handling of

character and narrative. These differences, if they were noted at all, were usually seen in negative terms: "...I'm not sure that Barker's unprecedented engagement with his characters doesn't finally fudge his conclusion" (Gilbert, 1977).

The Love of A Good Man (1978)

The Love of a Good Man, first performed in October 1978, provides an instructive early example of the way in which political spleen in Barker's plays is undercut by a much more ambiguous perspective on the actual complexities and contradictions of human behaviour. As it happens, it also supplies a clear and perfectly followable storyline. The narrative structure of the play is linear and direct, following its own internal logic throughout. Whilst we may balk at some of the views expressed, and the choices made, during the course of the play, there is no faulting the chain of causality that so carefully links them together.

The scene throughout is a hill near Passchendaele, in 1920. Hacker, an English undertaker, has been charged with the job of laying out a war cemetery – its topography ironically modelled upon the Union Jack – and re-burying the British soldiers who have fallen there. His task is immediately complicated by the arrival of Mrs. Sylvia Toynbee, an attractive middle-aged woman, intent upon recovering the body of her son and transporting it, illegally, back to England for burial there. Enthralled by her "white widow's arse" and motivated by promises of sexual favours in reward, Hacker does everything in his power to assist her.

Given the locus of action, it follows that there is plenty of scope for sharp political comment. The very first scene, which frames all that is to follow, presents the Prince of Wales kneeling to kiss the hand of "a common soldier", by way of apology for all that has happened during the Great War. The gesture turns out to be a cynical one, however. The Prince is hopeful that the ex-soldier now turned gravedigger will at once report this symbolic "cameo of m-m-modern history" to the newspapers, and is disgruntled when his chosen agent proves to be rather more reticent about the incident. ("Don't d-d-damned well keep it to yourself, that's what symbolical means!" [Barker, 1993: 59])

And there is a definite thread of socialist ideology running through the play. This is informed, in part, by another early scene, in which Bride, a Commissioner for Graves, quotes elliptically from an article in *The Times*:

BRIDE: Ferocious argument in the House. Copies of *Hansard* employed as missiles following the Government's decision to enforce the standard model headstone for officers and all other ranks. Described as creeping socialism. As lowering downwards. As further evidence of the persistent erosion of individual choice. (31)

The Prince's occasional re-appearances throughout the play, dogged by his Equerry, who is constantly alert to the repeated breaches of royal etiquette, provide further opportunities for wider satirical comment, particularly since he feels it is his duty to mingle with his subjects at rather closer quarters than normal, in order to uncover the views of the "common" man:

PRINCE: As a king in the making, I feel I should know what's making 'em beef. As soon as we've done the battlefields I intend to do the slums. I will go to them at their cottage doors, and pulling aside the rambling roses I will say tell me what is wrong. Do not be frightened. I am only a king. (48)

The character who comes closest to embodying some degree of principled behaviour is Lalage, Mrs. Toynbee's daughter, who is much more aware of the absurdities and inconsistencies of the situation, and who vehemently opposes her mother's plans to transport the purported body of her son back to England, in a box "labelled tools":

LALAGE: I think we are creating a new world now. A new world of equality and justice. This is 1920, isn't it? And the way we treat the dead will show our intentions about all the rest. They have decided to abolish all distinctions in the graveyards. The same style for everyone. I accept it. If we cannot even manage that, what will happen to the rest of it?

MRS. TOYNBEE: You are a socialist.

LALAGE: Is that what it is?

MRS. TOYNBEE: Yes.

LALAGE: Probably I am, then. (44)

But for all her emergent socialist tendencies, Lalage herself is also a deeply damaged and dysfunctional individual. When she is not fighting with her mother, she is seeking out the sexual attentions of Riddle, a disturbingly amoral and rootless character, who treats everyone, himself included, with a chilling detachment.

RIDDLE: Bride thinks the dead matter. I don't. But I don't think the living matter, either. (23)

And it is through the character of Riddle in particular, that Barker explores a more profoundly pessimistic view of human behaviour and of the likely responses of human beings to the experience of catastrophe, than an uncomplicated socialist stance would suggest. The actions and motivations of most of these characters are difficult to understand, not because Barker is confused in his political worldview, but because human beings themselves are difficult to understand. Generally, Barker suggests, their behaviour is not motivated by high moral principles, or when this *is* the case, as with Bride in the play, the result can be fragmentation and disorientation, caused by the disjunction between their own, deeply held convictions and the realities they see around them:

BRIDE: I had a practice in Bermondsey before the war. It was all rickets and TB. The same dirty infants kept on coming back. The smell! Piss and infestation! I had a vision of the perfect world. Trim grass, rose trees, clean homes, square and brilliant white. My silent city. My just society... (*He goes out.*)

HACKER: Bride's mad.

MRS. TOYNBEE: Yes. He is. (54)

Those best able to survive in Barker's world are, rather like the protagonists of Orton's plays, the cynical, the chancers, the pragmatists. But even for Hacker, the key representative in the play of this more morally jaded approach to life, the price of survival is high:

HACKER's gaze falls on MRS. TOYNBEE's chair. *Surreptitiously, with a glance over his shoulder, he examines the chair, then picking it up, he kisses the seat.*

HACKER: Fuck it . . . I have the moral fibre of a rat . . . (73)

Barker does not make things easy for his audience. There is no unambiguous moral centre in the play, the stage is filled with damaged, self-seeking, self-harming individuals. They behave in ways which are morally dubious, sometimes repugnant, and yet although these are not intended to be fully-rounded, psychologically consistent characters, their actions are identifiably realistic, or truthful, at a level that is deeper than we are generally accustomed to looking.

As we have already noted, however, the narrative itself is a straightforward one in terms of its structure and development. There are no significant narrative *gaps*. The story has its beginning, middle and end: closure is achieved. Alan Thomas identifies Barker as a modern allegorist and points out that there are two basic plot structures within the allegorical method: the progress and the battle. He notes that, certainly in the early plays, the plots are organised “as linear narratives in which societies and individuals are shown in a state of journeying, journeying downward it appears” (Thomas, 1992: 435). This is a pattern which Barker himself also acknowledged in a 1986 interview, where he commented:

...I know I could carry on writing the kind of play for which I’m quite well-known – which is the ‘rolling epic’, or what you might call the linear-epic play. But I’m determined not to write any more linear-epic plays. [. . .] I’m trying to get an epic quality which is vertical [. . .] I want the scale, but I don’t want the narrative unfolding the way it does in *Victory*, for instance, any more. I’m tired of that. (in Donesky, 1986: 337)

And so it is to the later plays that we must look for examples of narratives that are yet more distanced from the realities of the recognisable world, more interrupted in their flow, and less reliant upon the classical, linear format.

Rome (1989)

A significantly different approach has been adopted in the 1989 play, *Rome*. Whereas in *The Love of A Good Man* the setting was historically recognisable, though dislocated by absurdities of action and distortions of character, here the place of action is both identified (as Rome, falling to the invading barbarians) and unidentifiable, through a series of renegotiations and redefinitions.

This is a surreal landscape, of no fixed historical period, through which iconic figures, expressive of brute force, repression, privilege, power, corruption, high and low culture, eroticism, suffering and pain are seen to “revolve” (Barker, 1993: 201), locatable as the echo of a specific place at a specific time in history, but now re-invented, and intensely speculative in its investigative force. Here too we are invited to examine the topography of catastrophe, to admire and to endure, without shrinking back, both what is most spiritual and most base about human nature:

BEKNOWN: I think, when I look at you, I see all that is ridiculous in us – and all that is powerful in us – and weak in us – in one incomprehensible, unfathomable ball of flesh and mischief! (245)

Just as the setting is wrenched apart and broken into fragmentary landscapes, so too is the narrative structure constantly interrupted and violated. There is a definite forward momentum to the play, but the use of juxtaposition and counterpoint serves frequently to impede and frustrate this forward motion.

As the play opens, the dying Pope Pius is revealed, “descending” (201). His erstwhile mistress, Beatrice (also endowed with a “perfect arse”), makes love with a stranger on the floor below, the violence of the encounter heightened by the stylised rapidity with which it takes place. Rome itself is under siege to the barbarian hordes, and the soldiers, the last “wall of Christianity”(212), are variously fighting, dying, getting drunk or attempting to desert.

Against this backdrop of chaos, both Beatrice and her daughter, Smith (another mother/daughter pairing in which the elder partner is representative of a sexually-jaded and world-weary experience, and the younger of a more hopeful, but equally damaged and disappointed, form of idealism), seek fresh modes of survival which can contain passion at least, if not dignity. A new pope is elected, Rome falls to the invading armies, and the city is looted, to the despair of the cultured classes:

DOREEN: (*to the looters*) Do you really need that? Sorry, but wouldn't something smaller do as well, I just – (*They beat her. She totters. . .*) [. . .] That isn't in the least bit valuable, only my father –
My people are in it you
Repulsive
Scrap
Of
Animal
Disorder (244)

After a brief interval of power, Park, the newly-elected Pope is swiftly removed from office and brutally tortured, by a highly efficient, though rather unsettlingly parental Torturer:

TORTURER: The eloquence I found somewhat corrupting, even of my toxic nature. He gave a running commentary on his own decline, which distracted me [. . .] (*A CHILD enters, crying out a greeting.*) I was so nearly late! My little one! Today I was so nearly late at the school gate my loved and loving! (250)

Indeed, this curious juxtaposition of tender caring and vicious cruelty is to be found in virtually all the main characters in the play, and above all in Benz, described in the list of characters as a Vagrant, but quickly identified as a God-like figure – made, however, very much in the image of Man. Benz makes contradictory demands of the other characters, cajoles them, orders, seduces, even rapes and kills them. That, for Barker, is the role of deity, to orchestrate and shape the suffering and catastrophe of human beings, to attract adoration and compel belief, but ultimately to prove his own humanness, both in character and in origin (“It’s you, isn’t it, who longs to be human?” [286]).

By the end of the piece, Beatrice is dead; the puppet-pope Lascar, Park’s replacement, whose attentions have been divided between doubts about his own position and a fascination with his attractively “modern” throne and illuminated mitre, has been consigned to a future of pathetic retirement (“SMITH: Go away now. The Barbarians will give you a caravan with curtains in a field. And a little pension. Every morning, over the stiles with your blue-veined legs, and your testicles will go flop-flop, how smart he was in his papal suit the locals will recall . . . Goodbye. Goodbye.” [288]); Benz has been revealed as no more or less than weakly human, and Park achieves a kind of apotheosis, in which his experiences of suffering succeed in somehow “annihilating the absurdity” of his existence:

PARK: All I believed has lost significance
And time has left me
A rock
Of
Screaming
Birds (290)

Smith, abused first by her education and upbringing, then by her contacts with Pius, Park, Benz, and ultimately and most poignantly by herself, through an act of self-blinding, is seen to be utterly alone at the end of the play, an image of survival, possibly of hope, but also of dereliction.

In contrast to *The Love of A Good Man*, however, this kind of brief linear overview of the play’s content is utterly inadequate to convey the many more complications, twists and turns of the main narrative line, quite apart from the significant asides and digressions which punctuate and even bleed into the main flow. Chief among these is a sequence of mini-narratives which re-imagine

the biblical story, in which Abraham is required by God to sacrifice his only son Isaac. In the first of these, Abraham is able to obey God's command only by first persuading himself that his son is a "piece of, tissue of, scrap of human detritus", and that "To love is to inflict impossible pain. On self, and others" (205). In the second, he attempts to justify his action by announcing to Isaac that, "I honour you with deeper truths my son. (*Pause*) I tell you, rather, the savage and relentless nature of all life. (*Pause*) What other parent would? What other parent cast aside the consoling lies of parenthood? None I promise you" (228). At the climax of this episode, Benz/God, having rather irritably explained to Abraham that, "You were to submit, in all clarity, in the fullness of understanding, to the wholly irrational act. You were to kill your son without the benefit of philosophy" (229), is himself knifed by Isaac, who then flees from the scene and "runs into a street in Rome" (230). Isaac becomes a character in the main narrative, marrying a young housemaid, Beknown, and quickly proving to be wittily resourceful, as he avoids both his own and his new wife's sexual abuse at the hands of the barbarians, by claiming that the recently-elected pope has invented fiendish new weapons of war, including the deadly "exploding whore" (238). His instinctive reaction to suffering is almost always one of compassion and a willingness to offer help, and although these instincts are aggressively challenged and resisted by Beknown, who is more acutely conscious of the inherent danger of empathy, he remains to the end of the play an atypical representative of generosity of spirit:

BEKNOWN: He never abuses me.
He never ridicules our sex.
Or strikes me in a temper.
And when I have a child he will lift it from my womb so skilfully. (287)

This narrative game is repeated again in a further series of interruptions, this time involving a character plucked from the period of the French Revolution, the Marquis of Dreux-Breze. On his first appearance (242-43), the Marquis is a pathetic figure, a "comic and archaic manifestation" of the aristocracy, futilely ordering the assembled Deputies to disperse, and being chased off by them in his turn. The second "perception" of the Marquis of Dreux-Breze (270-72) discovers him making his escape and forcing a "distinguished philosophe LE NOUVEAU" to aid and abet him, by threatening him with violence. At gunpoint, he also attempts to make the philosopher ask for God's forgiveness, again to largely comic effect. By the third occasion, on which we encounter him, he is enjoying the lazy privileges of birth once more, alternately entertaining and insulting

three female companions (“You sprigs of the rising classes, I am hardly thirty but steeped in sexual invention!” [278]); and in his final scene, the Marquis too, like Isaac, becomes incorporated into the central narrative line, interacting first with Doreen, the “cultured woman of Rome” destroyed by the barbarian invasion, and then with Benz, finally exposing Benz’s all-too-human qualities, which are betrayed by his tears:

D-BREZE: Oh, be careful!

Be careful, God! (*He laughs loudly and cruelly.*) (286)

It is evident, then, that this bold, almost playful, approach to narrative structure challenges the audience to do its work without the safety net of naturalistic clarity. This strategy is discussed frequently in the collected essays which go to make up *Arguments for a Theatre*:

The restoration of dignity to the audience begins when the text and production accept ambiguity. If it is prepared, the audience will not struggle for permanent coherence, which is associated with the narrative of naturalism, but experience the play moment by moment, truth by truth, contradiction by contradiction. The breaking of false dramatic disciplines frees people into imagination. (Barker, 1997: 38)

Ambiguity takes the place of clarity, the single, unified narrative line is replaced by versions which contradict, overlap and conflict, and by what Barker describes as, “Too many narratives / too many digressions / too many themes” (1997: 140). Again and again in his writings, Barker insists on the right to challenge the audience with stories that do not make sense, that are neither accessible nor comprehensible.

The theatre must start to take its audience seriously. It must stop telling them stories they can understand.

It is not to insult an audience to offer it ambiguity.

The narrative form is dying in our hands. (1997: 18-19)

But this is not for the sake of being difficult, or so that audiences and critics may admire his cunning construction of obscurity; rather, it is for the purpose of stimulating and releasing the creative imaginations of those watching and reading the plays, through their encounters with the pain of characters from worlds which have never been, and which never could be, but which resonate deeply with our own. “The theatre is not a disseminator of truth but a provider of

versions. Its statements are provisional. In a time when nothing is clear, the inflicting of clarity is a stale arrogance” (1997: 45).

Crucially, narrative has not been removed, but it does play a different role. Barker describes the narratives within his plays as “not construable” (1997: 80), part of which is certainly to do with the fact that their ‘meanings’ are not easily extractable. However, if not immediately comprehensible, they are, to use the terminology previously adopted in this discussion, certainly *followable*. The responsive audience-member can, indeed must, make their own sense of the broken narratives. “It is the audience who constructs the meaning. The audience experiences the play individually and not collectively. It is not led, but makes its own way through a play whose effects are cumulative” (1997: 38).

As we have already seen, the fact that narrative gaps are much larger than would normally be the case within more traditional forms of drama, does not mean that these gaps are unbridgeable. The ambiguity so valued by Barker provides the necessary stimulus for the audience to begin its own journey through these difficult landscapes, “without maps” (1997: 83).

Narrative causality has tended to depend upon easily understood connections: psychological consistency (Stanislavski) or social benefits (Brecht). Barker deliberately steps outside questions of psychology or social behaviour to those of desire, seduction, impulse, intuition – behaviour in catastrophic, or post-catastrophic situations, behaviour which doesn’t ‘make sense’, which defies conventional narrative ‘logic’. Nevertheless, the plays demand their own logic, requiring new links to be forged between speech acts and actions; they call for the free play of narrative reading and comprehension, but along new and unexpected lines.

As Charles Lamb points out, causality, understood in the usual terms of consistency or predictability, is inadequate to account for the choices made by Barker’s characters. He posits a theory of seduction, which can provide the actors of Barker’s dramas with a new line of character exploration, and which relies neither on the Method approach of identification with character, nor the creation of a Brechtian distance, but instead provides a set of ‘negative’ choices, based on the seductive powers of language, and the strong attractive force of the irrational.

In the world of reason, motivation is founded always in positive causality and individual behaviour is structured upon biological drives modified according to various social and psychological determinants. In the world of seduction, purely negative forces are capable of intervening decisively like pools of accumulated anti-matter. The secret is a negative force. So is the meaningless. (Lamb, 1997: 52)

This theory provides not only the actors, but the audience also, with creative ways into the texts that will help them to ‘make sense’ of the abrupt narrative chasms, which open up every time a character makes a choice which seems to be utterly inexplicable or meaningless. Nevertheless, any ‘making sense’ can only ever be provisional and personal. There is no authoritative narrative, “the play being open not to a single interpretation, but to many” (Barker, 1997: 90).

The interruptions and disjunctions that characterise the narrative structure of *Rome* are mirrored at the level of language and sentence construction also. Gaps open up within the characters’ speech acts, the grammar is compressed and fractured, and we are invited to complete their thoughts in our own heads, join up the dots to our own liking. In a short philosophical interlude, which forms yet another departure from the central narrative flow, an old woman, a man, two younger women and a soldier attempt to reconcile themselves to what Benz, at the end of the scene, describes as “the inadequacy of love” (225). What is particularly interesting about this scene is that not only has Barker managed to construct it as a form of *mise-en-abyme* of the play as a whole, but this is reflected back again in its use of language:

MAN: Are we sufficiently caring I ask myself for one another do you think are we taking adequate responsibility for. (*He pokes in his bags.*) Oh, we are so separate and so cold let’s gather round let’s pull together and (*Two YOUNG WOMEN enter. They sit.*) You are too late as if on purpose were you nursing were you in attendance on the sick perhaps you found another orphan oh you said and orphan grab that orphan. (223)

This extraordinary shorthand compression is one of the chief characteristics of Barker’s verbal style. Sentences are unfinished, thoughts are provisional and open – they invite completion. At another point in the play, Lascar’s desperate search for the meaning contained within a single word, as used by Park, is emblematic of the audience’s parallel search for answers:

LASCAR: **What did he mean by Rome?**

I think you have to ask that question really I do it can’t be simply taken for granted we must examine the appalling inequalities and lack of flexibility that he

during his short Rome yes but whose Rome Rome for whom etcetera and (*Silence but for the same music of spoons and plates.*) Many people had no Latin therefore what was being said was simply sound where was the sense in my view people need to draw their own conclusions not to be **what did he mean by Rome I ask perhaps only** (251)

And there are moments, such as the election of the new pope, at which the only expressions needed to convey the import of what is being said are those which, though formulaic and devoid of all meaning content, perfectly signify the characters' underlying attitudes and intentions:

SLIPMAN: I am the candidate for continuity. I was under the impression I was not opposed. (*The CARDINALS murmur in unison.*)

CARDINALS: **On the one hand/on the other.**

SLIPMAN: I represent those currents of opinion of which I fervently believe a modern papacy must be composed.

CARDINALS: **On the one hand/on the other.**

SLIPMAN: Neither radical nor cautious I anticipate an age of reconciliation which.

CARDINALS: **On the one hand.**

SLIPMAN: I flatter myself I am neither rigid nor a compromiser but.

CARDINALS: **And again.** (216)

These are the provisional utterances of unresolved characters, within a narrative that is always incomplete and therefore open to many kinds of re-negotiation.

(Uncle) Vanya

Nowhere can this be better seen, perhaps, than in Barker's treatment of the classic Chekhov text, *Uncle Vania*.¹ First published in 1993 without the parentheses, the piece was then performed three years later by the Wrestling School as *(Uncle) Vanya*. This provisionality even of title neatly conjures up the sense of ambiguity which runs throughout the work. Barker, as we have noted, likes to revisit the narratives of the past, reworking them, restructuring and altering them, and allowing new possibilities to emerge from the stories' constituent elements (consider also his treatments of *King Lear*, Middleton's *Women Beware Women*, and, most recently, *Gertrude – The Cry*, a radical re-working of *Hamlet*). Like desperate optimists, he has turned his attention to one of the classics of turn-of-the-century naturalism, but unlike them, he has done so, not by

¹ Throughout this section, Chekhov's character (Vania) can be quickly distinguished from Barker's (Vanya) by the specific spellings of the name, which follow those of the printed editions of each text.

exploring the stories that have clustered around it, but by entering and transforming it from within.

Chekhov's original play presents us with a characteristically dysfunctional group of people, bound by ties of love and loathing in fairly equal measure. The eponymous Vania has sunk into lethargy and depression since the return home of the Professor, Alexandre Serebriakov, and his new, young wife, Yeliena. It quickly becomes apparent that Vania is obsessed with Yeliena, urging her to obey the instincts of her "youth, her vitality, her capacity to feel" (Chekhov, 1959: 192), by having an affair with him. Yeliena is portrayed as a beautiful, languorous, idle creature, "You give the impression that life is too much of an effort for you . . . Oh, such an effort!" (199), who struggles, nevertheless, to resist both Vania's advances and, later in the narrative, those of the doctor, Astrov. None of the men in the play emerge with any great credit, it must be said: Astrov – who is totally oblivious to the romantic interest shown him by the Professor's daughter, Sonia – and Vania devote most of their energies to attempting to seduce Yeliena, whilst Serebriakov sinks into self-pity, accusing her of finding him "repulsive", and Telyeghin, a local landowner reduced to poverty, merely complains pathetically of his own marital disasters. Early in the play, Yeliena eloquently captures this pessimistic view of male behaviour:

YELIENA: Why can't you look at a woman with indifference unless she's yours? Because . . . there's a devil of destruction in every one of you. You spare neither woods, nor birds, nor women, nor one another. (199)

The hinge-point of the narrative comes at the beginning of Act Three, when Serebriakov summons a meeting of the extended family, so as to reveal his solution to the problems and frustrations of their life together. He proposes that they sell the entire estate, buy a small villa in Finland, and live off the interest of what is left. Vania is outraged at this act of betrayal and storms out of the room. A few moments later, Serebriakov follows in order to try and calm him down, and from offstage we hear a gunshot. Serebriakov re-enters shocked, but unhurt, and closely pursued by his enraged brother-in-law, and it is immediately obvious that Vania's attempt to take some decisive action has, quite literally, misfired.

The play ends, as so often in Chekhov's writings, with no real resolution, but rather a failure of nerve. Serebriakov and Yeliena escape the mess simply by running away from it. Vania, Astrov

and Sonia, who cannot run, are compelled to follow Telyeghin's example and embrace an extended future of monotonous frustration and constantly thwarted hopes.

Though this is certainly compelling theatre, and the character of Uncle Vania himself is both credible and engaging, Barker's response is to argue that the experience of reading or watching it is actually an enervating one (Barker, 1997: 168-70). According to him, Chekhov leaves his audience feeling as powerless as his characters: like them, we can choose either to run away, or to embrace the frustration, but what we cannot seem to do is find any way out of this listless, despairing world. Vania's miserable failure to make any kind of difference to the situation is comically encapsulated in his bodged attempt to shoot the Professor:

VOINITSKY: To have made such a fool of myself – firing twice and missing both times! I shall never forgive myself for that! (236)

And what is Chekhov's final homily, delivered to the audience by Sonia, but a stoic's charter, an exhortation to grin and bear it, in the hopes that something better will be waiting for us in the life to come?

SONIA: Well, what can we do? We must go on living! [*A pause.*] We shall go on living, Uncle Vania. We shall live through a long, long succession of days and tedious evenings. We shall patiently suffer the trials which Fate imposes on us; we shall work for others, now and in our old age, and we shall have no rest. When our time comes we shall die submissively, and over there, beyond the grave, we shall say that we've suffered, that we've wept, that we've had a bitter life, and God will take pity on us. (244)

So although Barker responds passionately to Chekhov's rage against life, in his re-written version, he is also passionate about finding the exit:

It is necessary therefore to demonstrate the existence of will in a world where will is relegated to the comic or inept. (Barker, 1997: 292)

* * * *

Barker's text opens with Vanya repeating his name – "Unc - le, Van - ya" – in a sing-song fashion, emphasising its power over him, the fact that it has become a 'sign' of his enfeeblement, a point which is made explicit later in the play:

VANYA: The word uncle castrated me. I forbid the word. (Barker, 1993: 305)

The narrative elements are artfully reconstituted in Barker's first act. The original story is swiftly reprised in a compressed, re-ordered version, which takes its basic content from the *fabula* supplied by Chekhov, but its urgency and surreal qualities from Barker's characteristic linguistic style:

ASTROV: Man is endowed with reason and creative power so that he can enhance what he has been endowed with but up till now he has been destroying and not creating there are fewer and fewer forests the rivers are drying up the wild creatures are almost exterminated the climate is being ruined the land is becoming poorer and more hideous every day when I hear the rustling of the young saplings I planted with my own hands I (*Pause*) (295)

Running in this kind of fast-forward mode, the characters behave more-or-less as they are required to by Chekhov's original plotting mechanism: Vanya lusts after Helena and rails against Serebryakov; Astrov endlessly articulates his hopelessly idealistic views and criticises Vanya; and the ageing nanny, Marina, seeks to calm the situation down, mainly, in Barker's version, by attempting to shush Vanya into silence. His response to being handled like a naughty child exemplifies another aspect of Barker's treatment:

VANYA: I detest your futile and transparent attempts to suffocate my hatred in what you call compassion what you call what you call your absurd maternal and anodyne endearments what you call what you call . . . (295)

These criticisms operate not only as an expression of Vanya's rage, they also bring to the surface of the text some of the hidden workings of Chekhov's original. For it is indeed Marina's role, at moments of crisis in Chekhov's story, to express herself in reassuring, parental, but also heavily sentimental, terms:

MARINA: You're shivering as if you were out in a frost! There, there, my little orphan, God is merciful. A drink of lime-flower tea, or hot raspberry, and it'll pass off . . . Don't get so upset my little orphan . . . (232)

This deconstructive disclosing of concealed elements of the original is analogous to the approach taken by the Wooster Group in their re-presentations of classic texts. In a similar way, they also re-contextualise and re-focus aspects of the originals, by finding ways to lay bare their covert assumptions and mechanisms.

Barker pointedly draws our attention to yet another device from Chekhov's play: the infamous gun. It is certainly the case that Chekhov regretted the 'necessity' of such melodramatic plot mechanisms. In a letter to Alexander Suvorin written in 1892, he commented on the difficulty of finding "creative new endings for plays [...] The chief character either gets married or shoots himself, no way out" (in Yarmolinsky, 1974: 213).

Chekhov retains the gun, but there is a strong sense that this is a rather reluctant (and ironically comic) concession to the conventional plot expectations of nineteenth-century drama. In Barker's version of events, as Vanya's mother, Maryia, struggles vainly to understand her son's frustrations, and quotes almost exactly Chekhov's words about his 'inspirational' character, Vanya replies by insisting upon the gun:

MARYIA: Forgive me for saying so, Jean, but you have changed so much in the last year
I positively don't recognize you –

VANYA: **I have a gun**

MARYIA: You were a man of positive convictions, an inspiring personality and now –

And then, as Vanya interrupts his mother once more, the audience is able, for the first time, to appreciate the full intent of Barker's deconstructive method:

VANYA: **This gun**

ASTROV: Oh, shut up about your silly gun –

VANYA: **Was given me by Chekhov.** (*Pause*) And having given it to me, he was profoundly sorry . . . (298)

By this powerful device of introducing Chekhov himself into the story, Barker is then able to release the characters into a higher potential level of self-awareness and self-expression. They can become conscious of their 'existence' as fictional creations, and begin to voice their concerns about the ways they are being manipulated into the pre-arranged routes that have been laid down

for them, although only Vanya himself explicitly acknowledges Chekhov's god-like involvement in the narrative at this stage:

VANYA: I know Chekhov's fear! I know his terrible fear!
SEREBRYAKOV: You are insane. (300)

This is not a wholly original idea, of course. Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* had previously explored the notion of dramatic characters, who gradually become aware of their fictional status. And the notion of seeing a canonical work from a fresh perspective was given one of its most well-known outings in Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, in which we are given access to the world of Shakespeare's original play, *Hamlet*, by seeing it through the eyes of two of its minor characters. Barker, though, turns the metaphor inside out: by introducing Chekhov as a character in one of his own plays, and thus asserting its 'reality', he paradoxically draws our attention to the self-fictionalising processes that are constantly at work in our own everyday existences.

This assertion of 'reality' is accomplished in a number of ways. One interesting device used by Barker to make the gun a yet more solid, more 'real' object, is the way in which Vanya dwells repeatedly upon its physical properties: its weight, feel, colour and ivory decorations. Above all, Barker gives it a specific serial number, which Vanya recites on more than one occasion. This linkage, between a sense of personal identity and the material properties of existence, becomes crucial in the final act, when Vanya, struggling to re-assert his existence as a character, altogether independent of Chekhov, has great difficulty recalling the serial number:

VANYA: I've forgotten the number. The number of the gun, I've forgotten it. What does it mean! (337)

We have already noted that one aspect of Barker's treatment is the way that he wrenches the subtext into the spoken dialogue, and in this modernised version, the sexual undercurrents are also made far more explicit. Vanya talks repeatedly about wanting to "fuck" Helena, he asks her to give him an item of her underwear, he dwells unhappily upon images of Serebryakov's ageing body making love to her, and Barker has raised the stakes still further for Vanya, by transforming the general level of impotence he feels into a physical inability to put his sexual desire into action.

Although compressed, and quite different in tone, the action of much of Barker's first act does follow Chekhov's narrative line. At the point at which Serebryakov goes out to speak with Vanya, however, the real divergences commence. Crucially, Barker's Vanya does not miss. While Sonya recites the obligatory litany about the unavoidable socio-economic pressures which cause them all to act as they do, Vanya fires four (offstage) shots, which not only kill Serebryakov, but disfigure his body as well. He then returns to the scene giddy with triumph and orders Helena to "get undressed" (305).

All of the Chekhovian characters are suitably shocked by this sudden, highly unorthodox turn of events. Maryia asks again who gave him the gun, and again Vanya replies, "Chekhov":

MARYIA: Oh, pathetic man, who thinks the act of violence will –

VANYA: Yes violence is the door. **Oh beautiful ivory gun of ivory my doorway my birthplace . . .** (305)

Temporarily roused to action by this defiant act of the will, Astrov similarly exerts himself sufficiently to kiss Helena passionately upon the mouth. But an authorial response to these motions of rebellion is swift in coming. The dead Serebriakov re-enters and gives Vanya a solemn ticking-off:

SEREBRYAKOV: Chekhov says put the gun away before it leads to

VANYA: No

SEREBRYAKOV: More trouble and

VANYA: No

SEREBRYAKOV: Disturbs the fragile

VANYA: No

No

No

SEREBRYAKOV: Balance of characters and

VANYA: **He gave me the gun he supplied me with the means**

SEREBRYAKOV: He knows this perfectly well

VANYA: **He provided me**

SEREBRYAKOV: He profoundly regrets this

VANYA: **Does he now**

SEREBRYAKOV: Melodramatic interlude

VANYA: **Too bad too late too everything** (308)

Although Sonya makes a desperate attempt to restore the proper order, she is swiftly silenced by Vanya:

SONYA: You see we are a dying class who cannot actually control our destiny because of the high level of inflation.

VANYA: **Shut up**

SONYA: The marginalisation of the intelligentsia is

VANYA: **Sonya shut up (308)**

Vanya struggles aggressively for autonomy, with Chekhov's point-of-view still being represented at this point by his fictional creation, Serebryakov:

SEREBRYAKOV: The problem with an action Chekhov says is that it leads to others

VANYA: I do not wish to know what he says

SEREBRYAKOV: Each action more ridiculous than the last

VANYA: So be it

SEREBRYAKOV: Ramifications of such outlandish character the perpetrator [sic] forfeits every sympathy

VANYA: **I don't require sympathy tell him. (309)**

Sonya now grasps what Vania has already discovered – that they have been released to exercise their wills in a completely new manner (“This is a long way from knitting!” [310]) – and partners him in an exuberant, laughing dance around the stage. Their exhilaration is abruptly interrupted, however, by the next of Barker's remarkable ‘openings’ of the text as, with the sound of splintering wood and breaking glass, the set begins literally to come apart at the seams.

This provokes a flurry of activity from the characters. Sonya is momentarily terrified that this is the beginnings of a punishment, inflicted by Chekhov on his wayward creations. The only resistance available to them is further exercising of the will. Thus, Vanya orders Helena to go upstairs to the bedroom and wait for him there, and Sonya, now also resisting the Chekhovian imperative of inactive resentment, boldly insists that Astrov impregnate her:

SONYA: You see, what is terrible, what is unforgiveable, what is **pure toxin** is – resentment, isn't it? And we all – oh, we all **resented everything!** (*Pause*) Which was comic. Which was pitiful. Which was utterly demeaning and hateful of mankind **Get your clothes off, Mikhail. (313)**

Before this can be accomplished, however, there is a further catastrophic disintegration of the set. At this moment in the 1996 Wrestling School production, the back wall crashed open with a tremendous noise, to reveal a bare seascape, simultaneously expressive both of great freedom and of great terror. That icon of Chekhovian drama, the samovar, is spotted floating in the water and Sonya and Marina start throwing stones at it, whilst Maryia paddles ecstatically. Serebryakov, however, continues to issue oracular warnings:

SEREBRYAKOV: Chekhov knows the brevity of pleasure
The insubstantiality of [. . .]
All euphoria he knows to be merely the prelude
All ecstasy the mere preparation for
The inevitable [. . .]
Inevitable
Solitude (314)

And sure enough, the actions initiated with such vigour and life-affirming purpose begin to turn in on themselves and to provoke increasingly disturbing reactions of frustration and violence. Vanya is unable to consummate his passion for Helena; Astrov rapes Helena; Sonya strangles Astrov with her “strong arms”, and Maryia protests against this uncontrolled exercise of freedom, even as she begins to embrace it for herself:

MARYIA: What do you expect? All this. What do you expect? This. Nakedness and so on. No, I don't mean nakedness I also love nakedness I always have the wind the air I mean the throwing down of things to go to bed with a man yes but freedom is a place somewhere between desire and I was the first to be naked believe me the first but every impulse cannot be every urge just licensed oh yes very very naked and to look at me you might not think it why shouldn't I reveal since everyone is yes with all sorts but never painful never hurtful never did I trespass on the rights of others freedom is the point of balance surely nights of passion yes but violation I . . . (*She dries.*) I have not been happy . . . (*She closes her eyes.*) Why? Why? (318)

Eventually, a boat is spotted, clearly in trouble, sinking in the turbulent waves; the man who had been sailing it flounders in the water, desperate, in need of rescue. As in *Rome*, the immediate impulse to help those in distress is brought into question, as Vanya challenges his mother to restrain her natural “instinct” (324) and to let the man drown. She, however, rejects his arguments and, together with Sonya, rushes to the man's aid. As this frenzied activity gathers momentum, Vanya suddenly realises who the stranger is and begins to search frantically for the

gun. Finally, at the climax of this first act, Maryia re-enters joyfully exclaiming, “He’s alive!” (325), only to be brutally slapped across the face by Marina.

* * * *

“He” is Chekhov, and the second act opens with all the characters “*standing in a row. Their heads hang like penitents. They are motionless.*” Chekhov, both amused and cross, lectures his characters on their mutinous behaviour, taunting Vanya and repeating the hated phrase, “Uncle, Uncle, Uncle Vanya!” (326).

By presenting the author himself on the stage, Barker arrives at an intriguing impasse in his narrative deconstruction, for whilst Serebryakov and Astrov explicitly question the role of the author in the process of creation –

SEREBRYAKOV: We know what a play is but what is an author?

The author also sins

The author is not very clean

Is he clean

I often wonder

ASTROV: His impeccable authority I must say I

SEREBRYAKOV: His infallibility sometimes strikes me as (326)

– Barker himself, of course, remains ‘invisible’. He is able to call Chekhov to account for his handling of narrative, his presentation of character, whilst remaining himself beyond the reach of such criticism.

Nevertheless, Chekhov’s presence provokes an intriguing variety of reactions from the characters. Vanya is sullenly hostile towards him, and Marina flatly refuses to reassume her required role as a servant, calling him a “creeping priest” (329). Maryia is physically cowed into submission, and Telyeghin ‘tells’ on the others, complaining to the author about the treatment he has received at their hands, like a frightened schoolboy:

TELYEGHIN: I nearly died! They nearly killed me! She especially, wanted to castrate me and tread on my eyes! (326)

Most telling is Helena's response. She adamantly resists his influence over herself and Vanya, and her plea for self-realisation is offered as a hard-won statement of existential freedom:

HELENA: I want to say
Without temper
If possible without the least sense of the heroic
Without even that measured ambition to speak the truth which is only another
vulgarity

To say
I am not what I was
Indeed
I was nothing and now I am at least a possibility of something
And this
I will defend (329)

Chekhov is portrayed as both admiring and dismissive of his characters. He is viciously cruel towards them, and, in the end, absolutely dependent upon them. Finally, he asks for permission to sit alone, with Vanya, in order to die, and as he does so, he asserts, once more, his philosophy of utter solitude, and the complete futility, indeed the total illusion, of any kind of purposive action:

CHEKHOV: One day I hoped I would reach out and tell myself, pour myself like a liquid from a jug into the void of another, all, entire, to the last drop, how I struggled with this dream to pour myself into another man! A woman! To be drained . . .!
(Pause) And in abandoning that dream, I found something like freedom. In discarding all that was arguably, the best in me, I found a peace of sorts. We are entirely untransferable. (333)

The characters are left alone. The sea has disappeared with the death of Chekhov, but they remain, temporarily frozen in time and space, authorless, containing within themselves the potential for further action, but giving grounds for considerable uncertainty about whether they will actually realise that potential.

* * * *

Stylistically, and in terms of its narrative structure, the play has already undergone a series of transformations. It began as a dislocated retelling of the original story, placed in an undefined location, and cut adrift from its temporal moorings, but, nevertheless, with a close relationship to its source material. From its key point of divergence, however, the gap widens rapidly. Although

the dialogue still retains echoes of Chekhov, the sudden shift into violent and decisive action, together with the reappearance of the dead Serebryakov as Chekhov's mouthpiece, represent the first of a series of intrusions of 'external' forces into the world of the play, and the cracking-open of the narrative is then physicalised in the breaking-apart of the set. Finally, the introduction of Chekhov into the re-configured story both re-emphasises its fictional nature and interrogates the nature of its relationship to the real world beyond the play. Now, in the third and final act, a further shift takes place.

Helena begins the action with the longest single speech of the play so far. It is Chekhovian, to the extent that, in its form, it carries echoes of those long, self-disclosing monologues, which he gives to his characters, but in tone and content it is pure Barker. At its core is an assertion of the primacy of physical reality over every other aspect of human experience:

HELENA: . . . all things lead to my body what else is there but my body **all things lead to it including physics mathematics linguistics where else could they lead psychology hygiene and weapons training ask the student on the train who seems consumed by numbers where his efforts lead my body is the end of thought the terminus of rationality and instinct . . .** (336)

She is surrounded by the other characters, who are "*sprawled lifelessly around the stage like the remnants of a party*" (336). Vanya too has been wounded by his encounter with Chekhov, but not fatally. Helena, by now the stronger of the two, urges him to act decisively. He struggles to recall the gun's serial number and thus reassert his grip on 'reality'. Their conversation is elliptical, ambiguous, and punctuated by offers of tea, or vodka, from Marina, who, together with most of the other characters, seems to have relapsed back into Chekhovian inertia. Finally, he raises the gun, aims it at Helena, and shoots her as the first act of what appears as if it is going to be a suicide pact. He raises the gun to his own head to fire the final bullet, but, after an emotion-filled pause, he re-directs it towards the floor and 'misses'. Calling for a coat, he readies himself to venture out into the unknown:

VANYA: This – is – a contract with – partly with Helena – partly with myself – the clauses of which demand of me the highest – [. . .] The highest responsibility towards – me – my own potential obviously – but also – [. . .] Also – (*He stops suddenly.*)

Where am I going (*A catastrophic silence.*)

Where am I

VANYA *closes his eyes, and with an effort of will, strides out of the room. Pause.* TELYEGHIN *lets out a small cry of satisfaction at a chess move.* SONYA *murmurs to MARYIA.* *Time passes.*

SONYA: He'll be back . . . (*Insignificant moves. Time passes.*)

MARYIA: He'll be back . . .

They proceed with their lives. The lights diminish. VANYA does not return. (340)

And thus the play ends. In this closing image, Vanya stands for action over passivity, self-expression over self-annihilation, the realisation of potential over the resignation of submission, but he has no direction in which to move, other than outwards. Barker's 'catastrophe-survivor' knows that action is called for, without knowing what that action should be and where that action might take him. Crucially, though, he does not return.

Narrative and moral exploration

The significance of this piece of theatre is not simply that Barker has chosen to retell a story and provide it with a different set of outcomes. As Charles Lamb has pointed out, the form in which the story is told is also a defining element of the work:

For any art – and we are considering here the question of theatre – the problem of form is crucial. The principal mode of almost all popular television/film/theatre fiction is realism – the simulation of *prima facie* authenticity. In the light of the theoretical position outlined above [postmodernist deconstruction] it is useless as a vehicle for a radical, critical art. It is, however, the dominant popular form not only in 'democracies' but it is also the only genre with which totalitarian states can feel comfortable; it lends itself easily to academicism – the purveying of 'messages', ideology, role models, etc. but one of its chief functions is reassurance... (Lamb, 1997: 22)

Since, as we have seen, Barker explicitly rejects both the "purveying of 'messages'", and the provision of easy reassurance, it follows that the realistic, linear, easily comprehensible narrative must also be discarded. With it, too, go the component parts of traditional narrative: a sense of place, a sense of period, psychologically consistent characterisation, chains of causality based upon psychological or social realities, naturalistic dialogue or behaviour.

For the theatre to regain the initiative in a society which offers a superfluity of dramatic product it must address itself to its own uniqueness. This entails the creation of structures

in both language and narrative that do not owe their legitimacy to representation of the world beyond the stage. (Barker, 1997: 83)

This rejection of narrative clarity, as a formal constraint, is thus a rejection of the world beyond the stage, as it is customarily perceived. Nevertheless, whilst many, or even most, of the properties of narrative may have been altered, defaced or completely removed, the *process* of narrative reading remains in operation. Barker does not repudiate narrative clarity in order to prove that there are no meanings to be found in the work. Instead, just like his own character Lvov in *The Last Supper* (1988), he problematises the very nature of narrative reading, in order to goad his audiences into making their own moral choices and highly personal responses. Questions of morality, as we shall see in the following chapter, are at the centre of Barker's plays and these moral explorations are powered, in a vital way, by his rupturings of the narrative model.

Honouring the audience, making a bargain with impossibility, involves opening up the stories that still exist within the work to the most rigorous of readings – open narratives, offered by the writer and remade by the audience.

Chapter Nine – Narrative and Morality

To tell a story is inescapably to take a moral stance, even if it is a moral stance against moral stances. (Bruner, 1990: 51)

Bruner is not alone in believing that narrative and morality are inextricably linked. We saw in an earlier chapter that the ancient Greek dramatists consciously patterned the outcomes of their narratives around ethical imperatives, and John Peter is thinking along similar lines when he asserts that, “Drama is character in moral action” (1987: 37). Yet it is not immediately obvious why this should necessarily be the case. Peter would like to make the connection in terms of a clear logic of causality:

In both Sophocles and Ibsen, the past we are discovering has caused the present we see. The two narratives, one turning us towards that past and the other carrying us forward, are bound together by the moral chains of cause and effect. They create a sense of movement, both complex and inevitable, which is the true dynamic of both drama and morality. It is also a forward movement: by the end of such plays the world is a different place for everyone in it. And so when we say that we understand a dramatic narrative we mean that we perceive the causes which created its forward movement. (1987: 255-56)

And again:

...we live in, and are conditioned by, a dynamic world where things happen, and happen with causes and consequences; so that we are naturally baffled by a play in which things happen with neither. (1987: 328)

Baffled perhaps, but is Peter right when he states that to encounter such a play is to encounter “the amoral” (328)? In a 1997 article for the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, Roger Freeman is similarly concerned that, “while causal narrative representation may present a distorted perspective on the world, there seems no guarantee that less causally-oriented forms can offer a more accurate depiction” (Freeman, 1997: 53). However, we have seen, in our examinations of Barker’s *(Uncle) Vanya* and desperate optimists’ *Play-boy*, that while these are texts which repeatedly flout the conventional laws of cause and effect, it could still be argued that both seem able to engage with serious questions of moral exploration and choice, albeit in very different ways. Barker himself is adamant that, “I also am a moralist, but not a puritan” (Barker, 1997: 76). Perhaps we should look more closely at Peter’s “true dynamic”.

A universal morality?

Of course, the moral debate itself has long since moved away from being a pursuit of universal truths, applicable at any time, to any and every culture, and has become, along with many other aspects of the postmodern world, relativised and particularised. Rejecting the modernist view of morality, as defined by absolutes of fairness, justice and impartiality, the feminist moral researcher Carol Gilligan, for example, has sought to describe morality in terms of the particular needs of others, in the context of particular relationships (Gilligan, 1982). In his book *Drama, Narrative and Moral Education*, Joe Winston explains that it is this understanding of morality, as based in relationships and in the wider networks of social care, that has led Gilligan and others to the conclusion “that narrative story-telling is the form best suited to hold and convey such knowledge” (Winston, 1998: 17). Telling stories, exploring interactions, setting such interactions within their cultural context: the emphasis here is placed primarily upon the everyday usage of story as a means of making sense of the world and our place within it, rather than on literary narratives *per se*; however, from this starting-point, Winston goes on to examine the role of more formalised narratives within the classroom setting and the way in which the active exploration of many traditional tales can help to externalise a surprisingly complex set of moral questions for primary school children.

Drawing upon Bruner’s comments about the subjunctivity of narrative (1986, cf. Chapter 2), Winston argues that the value of such stories is not that they teach a set of ‘moral rules’ to receptive minds, but that they stimulate ethical debate. As before in this discussion, we find that an emphasis is being placed upon reception, and on the processing of narrative elements in a way that invites both affective engagement and critical evaluation. Moreover, the very nature of such an engagement precludes the idea that morality is simply ‘taught’ by such narratives, however traditionally they may be structured:

There can be no one universal clarification or emotional response within a drama, of course; it is patently evident ... that a drama has no *single* effect, predictable or otherwise, upon an audience or a group of children. Responses can depend upon a number of variations within the individuals watching or participating: their personal cultural baggage, their past narratives and future aspirations; the social nature of the group who share the drama; or, as Robinson insists, whichever ‘self’ happens to be prominent at this moment in time. (Winston, 1998: 66)

And it is this potential for ambiguity of response, this vital personal engagement with the clashes and contradictions of moral imperatives embedded within social narratives, that Barker too both exploits and extends in his work, to the point at which he is able to describe the moral explorations in the plays as a necessary “exposure to pain and the illegitimate thought” (Barker, 1997: 47).

The exhaustion felt by the audience in a theatre of this nature is not enervating, but the imagination is stimulated and the structures of morality are tested, even if only to be affirmed. *But it is the audience who must calibrate and assess.* (1997: 54, italics mine)

Is it possible, then, to posit a continuing relationship between the use of narrative and the exploration of moral questions, without of necessity invoking Peter’s “true dynamic” of cause and effect? What kind of alternative model might enable us to take a fuller account of this active engagement with questions of morality, which Barker insists will happen as audiences engage with the story materials? And how would a text like *(Uncle) Vanya* fit such a model, when its own narrative is so fragmented and so inimical to the conventional logic of causality?

Game theory

An extremely valuable contribution towards an understanding of the workings of causality in the narrative process has been N. J. Lowe’s *The Classical Plot and the Invention of Western Narrative* (2000). In it, Lowe invokes game theory as an alternative paradigm for describing the structuring of narrative. His starting-point is the recognition that the cognitive processes involved in reading narrative actually have very little to do with formal, structural, or literary descriptions of a text, but are vitally connected with the way we process our experience of the world around us. As discussed in a previous chapter, acquiring this narrative competence is not simply a matter of learning to read events in terms of the logic of cause and effect, but also of developing an awareness of the flow of time, of the nature of geographical space, and of the ‘characters’ inhabiting that space. There are also various kinds of rules which must be learnt: not just the rules of causality, but also rules about how people around us are likely to behave, which kinds of behaviour we can safely indulge in and which are dangerous, or forbidden. Some of these will be in the nature of universal laws (‘If I put my hand on to a hot-plate, I will experience pain’) and many others may be arbitrary and determined by context (‘If I throw a tantrum, I will be sent to my room’). Finally, there is an ever-expanding catalogue of experiences which incorporate a

substantial degree of provisional closure, even if this is only very rarely – as in the event of the death of a close relative, friend, or perhaps a much-loved animal – absolute. Lowe points out that all of these elements are also to be found within the patterning of game-worlds and finds that it is possible to account for narrative structure under the following headings: the narrative clock, the board, players and moves, rules and endgame.

The narrative clock

Stories happen in time; and narrative [...] likes to mimic this flow of time in telling its story. (Lowe, 2000: 20)

The narrative clock can be said to measure the progress, direction and rate of flow of the *primary* (or central) *narrative*, but in order to understand exactly how it functions, it is necessary to distinguish between the different time-layers involved. First of all, there is what Lowe describes as the *story time*: this is the absolute calendar time it takes for the story events to occur, i.e. the earliest event in the story that is being narrated marks the commencement of *story time* whilst the final event marks its end. Secondly, *text time* is the fixed period that it takes for the story to be narrated, which, in a theatrical context, would be the clock-time between the start and end of the performance. Finally, there is the *narrative time*, which is “entirely fluid: it can start, stop, run faster or slower, suspend movement, or reset to an earlier or later date. In some cases, it can even run backwards” (2000: 36-7).

Essentially, then, the narrative clock makes us aware of the many disjunctions between *story time* and *text time*. In the telling of any dramatic narrative, it is extremely rare that the time needed for the events on stage to unfold will exactly match the clock-time of the performance (although Alan Ayckbourn has provided an intriguing example of just this in *House & Garden* [2000]), so there will usually be a need to find ways of compressing the story events into the fixed time available for performance. Sometimes this is accomplished by a kind of theatrical sleight-of-hand, so that in *Othello*, for instance, the events of the play simply do not ‘work’, if you examine the extremely limited space of calendar time available for them. Shakespeare’s skill lies in his ability to distract our attention away from the ticking of the narrative clock. But more typically, scenes will be arranged in such a way that jumps in the *story time* are accomplished by a change of location, or a clearly signposted re-setting of the clock-hands, such as a lighting change. More

sophisticated devices would include the re-ordering of narrative units, the introduction of simultaneous sub-plots, even the reversal of time, such as Pinter uses in *Betrayal* to tell the story of an adulterous relationship backwards, with the last chronological scene being played first in theatrical sequence, and so on.

The board

Whilst in theory there would seem to be no upper limit to the number of locations that could be used to tell a story, in practice only a relatively small number will actually be needed. The *board* can thus be imagined as a narrative space containing the totality of different locations required.

According to Lowe, the board has three main functions:

- 1 to *limit* the sphere of action, since too many narrative locations within a finite story-world would potentially be confusing and too ‘open’,
- 2 to *structure* the narrative, by providing ‘significant’ spaces (these may often be spheres of *power*, in which one character is able to be more in control of the space than another), the most significant of which is usually reserved for the *endgame*, and
- 3 to *reify* the narrative, by providing ‘recognisable’ spaces, which increase the sense of verisimilitude and therefore engagement (in theatre these are often evoked by the use of significant props, sounds, images and so on, rather than by the full re-creation of real spaces).

Players and moves

Not all the characters within a story-world will be *players*. Some will be merely walk-ons or have minor, functional roles to play. Normally a character can be identified as a *player* when we are invited to empathise with them, to care about what happens to them, or to see events and other players (even if only briefly) through their eyes.

A player can be defined in relation to three essential character elements:

- *motivation* (the Stanislavskian *super-objective*): usually (though not necessarily) introduced or explained early in the narrative, and requiring the achievement of specific *goals*,
- *knowledge*: characters may need to acquire more information before they can perceive their *goals* properly, or approach them realistically, and

- *power*: characters may have the motivation and the necessary information, but still need to acquire more power before they can achieve their *goals*.

It follows that the two basic *moves* available to a player are *moves of communication* (acquiring or releasing *knowledge*) and *moves of power* (acquiring or conceding *power*). However, not all moves will be allowed by the *rules of the game*.

Rules and endgame

The clock, board, and players define between them the contents of a narrative universe, but they do not in themselves determine the actual course of play – the sequence of moves that assembles into a finished story. Two last conditions need to be established: what kinds of moves the players are *allowed*, either collectively or as individuals; and how the game must *end*. (Lowe, 2000: 54)

The rules of the game are summed up by Lowe as “the *logic of causality* in the world of the story” (2000: 54). In almost all cases, this will bear a superficially close relationship to real-world causality. However, many of the rules are, in fact, heavily determined by *genre*. For example, within the modern cinema thriller, repeated fights and blows to the head will never result (at least for the hero) in anything worse than minor cuts and bruises; the villain must finally be killed by his own treachery rather than by the hero’s direct action, and so on. Similarly, in a conventional romantic comedy, “the course of true love never did run smooth”.

The most powerful influence of all within the story universe, however, is the *endgame*. This is the point towards which the narrative must convincingly move from its very outset. It must satisfy our sense of justice, or rightness that things have turned out as they ‘should’. Yet in a well-told story, as Aristotle observed very early on in this debate, the route towards the *endgame* must not be a straightforward one and should usually include a pleasing number of frustrations, reversals and surprises. In theatre, for instance, the traditional endgame expectations of comedy and tragedy have been that:

- in a comedy, we are likely to end the evening with a number of marriages (but only for those deemed ‘worthy’), with folly exposed, vice unmasked, but no one seriously harmed;
- in a tragedy, the result will probably be several dead bodies (including the central protagonist along with the main villain), and folly and vice being equally punished.

The steady progress towards the endgame must ideally seem both plausible and inevitable: any sense of a false note being struck will jar on our sensibilities, remind us that this is, after all, 'just a story'. For that reason, the rules of the game and the narrative compulsion exerted by the endgame should conventionally remain hidden from the audience throughout, or *transparent*.

Alternatively, as in classical Greek tragedy, it is possible to impose an explicit *control level* upon the narrative, by positing that the gods are active in the affairs of men, influencing and directing their outcomes. Even at a very early stage, though, it is possible to discern a feeling of awkwardness with this strategy: Euripides employs their services far more opportunistically than the deeply-religious Aeschylus, or the rather more circumspect Sophocles. Within a broadly theistic world-view, however, this control level remains more or less active, although it becomes gradually less explicit in English drama once we move beyond the medieval Mystery plays. Divine intervention can therefore explain much that might otherwise appear contrived or forced. (What is also apparent is that within later naturalistic drama, the control level has never really gone away: it has merely been shifted from 'the influence of the gods' to 'the god-like influence of the author'.)

It is less immediately obvious why a similarly tight set of genre expectations should have developed in relation to comedy, but here too Lowe makes some interesting observations. In his view, the precedence of tragedy meant that the Greek audiences' fundamental experience of theatre was shaped by the watching of familiar stories, whose outcomes were safely predictable. The narrative interest, therefore, as every good student of Greek tragedy knows, lay in *how* the story events unfolded, rather than in what the end result would be. The development of early Greek comedy, however, required playwrights to generate original stories, whose basic plots would not have been known in advance by their audience. How could a corresponding sense of 'familiarity' be generated in such conditions? The solution was to shift the site of predictability from the story level to that of the narrative rules. If the specific endgame could not be known in advance, tight generic rule-systems could ensure that the *type* of endgame would. The shorthand of quick genre recognition thus makes the cognitive processing of narrative both easier and more controllable.

Local modifications

Lowe's analysis provides us with a number of helpful keys to identifying the core reason for the sense of unease felt by many with an assumed mapping of cause and effect, as experienced in the real world, on to the world of narrative. It is not difficult to see why narratives should, fundamentally, seek to reflect our sense of the world as we experience it, including, therefore, a general awareness of causality. As Mike Alfreds has observed:

There must be a recognisable human experience. Stories are about people. Theatre is about people. [...] The important thing is that the experiences portrayed should be recognisable, identifiable – an unfashionable word, but if the audience can't identify, how can they relate? (Alfreds, 1979: 7-8)

It is also reasonably uncontentious to observe that the use of narrative, the telling of a story, necessarily involves some degree of structuring and re-ordering of reality, usually to make events fit into a rather neater pattern than life generally provides. What it *also* involves, as Lowe demonstrates forcibly, is the *absolute necessity* for local “modifications to the operation of ‘natural’ causality” (2000:54):

It is never, for instance, an option in the *Odyssey* for Penelope to die in the measles epidemic of 1216 BC. *Why* this is impossible is not instantly easy to say, let alone how the reader comes to know it. Indeed, it is precisely questions of this kind that existing theories of plot seem unable to address. But classical narrative is permeated by such restrictions on the real-world structure of causality. (2000: 28)

The need to tell a particular story gives rise to a specific set of game rules. The game rules then define the precise workings of the narrative world. According to Lowe, this is necessary because what he calls the ‘classical plot’ requires an extremely high degree of closure in order to work as it should. This is not just a simple case of everything ending happily – or unhappily – ever after. The game model supplies us with another vital clue in this respect: the classical plot needs a closed universe specifically in order to ensure that, in the progress towards the final resolution – just as in the world of a game – there are no wasted moves, and narrative energy is neither expended unnecessarily, nor leaks out of the system. The entire movement of the classical plot is thus determined by the various redistributions of knowledge and power demanded by the endgame, towards which everything is moving.

The total information content of a narrative universe cannot be added to or reduced, but only *redistributed* among elements of the system; and that redistribution will always be in

the direction of increased *entropy*, the more even distribution of information amongst players in the game. [. . .] Like games, narrative universes are constructed as a *closed system*. Within that system, narrative power is effectively *conserved*: it cannot be created, destroyed, or even transferred between players in the course of the game, but only converted into differently harnessable forms. (2000: 50, 52)

An aspect of narrative has been revealed here that might remain hidden in a more formal, structuralist analysis. The issue at stake can now be summarised thus: how can a free and open moral debate be fully enabled within a world which is artificially constrained by a series of hidden, genre-based rules and controls, which go way beyond the more fundamental requirement to reflect the basic laws of causality within the story universe?

(Uncle) Vanya and negative entropy

What Lowe has identified here is the full extent to which narratives have tended to be constrained within the classical plot paradigm. And there is a connection to be made between this ‘ideal’ of a closed system and Barker’s insistence that we must “stop telling [the audience] stories they can understand” (1997: 18). This is not so much a question of basic intelligibility, as of a refusal to serve up neatly ordered narrative worlds that operate according to this closed system format. Frequently, things just do not ‘add up’ in Barker’s story worlds, nor can they be explained by a simple mapping of the play-world on to the equivalent ‘real’ world. In fact, it can be demonstrated that *(Uncle) Vanya*, in particular, breaks these entropic laws in a most interesting manner.

In the original version of the story, the moral debate centres on questions of regret and aspiration, and a certain view of action/inaction. The arrival of Yeliena and Serebriakov has brought an atmosphere of enforced indolence and boredom to the whole estate. At the same time, it has disturbed the household’s habitual routines, so that both Vania and Sonia are required, each in their own way, to examine the motivations behind their normally frantic activity, and to turn their attentions towards two separate, yet equally unattainable, objects of desire. Astrov too is distracted from his customary absorption in environmental concerns and drawn instead into an obsessive interest in Yeliena’s youth and beauty. Vania rails against traditional morality as a way of justifying his own passions (“To be unfaithful to an old husband whom she couldn’t bear would be immoral – but to do her utmost to stifle within her all her youth, her vitality, her

capacity to feel – that is not immoral!” [192]), but the self-interest is all too evident. Astrov is more witty and direct in his flouting of traditional values: “... sooner or later you’ll be bound to give way to your feelings – it’s inevitable. And it will be better if that happens not in Harkov, or somewhere in Kursk, but down here, in the lap of nature. At least it’s poetical here, quite beautiful in fact... There are forestry plantations, half-ruined country houses in the Turgenev style...” [239]). But whether witty or just plain irritable, the moral debate finally settles down to asking the question: how is one to live, when the choices one would like to make are simply not viable? These questions are framed within a narrative pattern which perfectly imitates the causality of ‘reality’, but it is also clear that there are only a limited set of options available to the characters within the tight game-structure of the play. Whose rules are actually in force here? Barker wants us to see that they are imposed by Chekhov, rather than by the workings of an irresistible higher moral order.

In order to demonstrate this, he plays a number of tricks with the game-world. We have noted, for instance, that Chekhov’s *primary narrative* forms the basis for the first part of Barker’s play, but that Barker could be said to be deliberately speeding up the workings of the narrative clock, re-figuring the original as a kind of fast-forward summary. Then he ‘breaks’ it altogether by his introduction of Chekhov as a character within the play. How are we to measure the difference between *story time* and *text time*, once its (implied) author has stepped into the narrative? The *board* is introduced as solid and ‘real’, and then it too is subverted and broken as the back of the set opens up into a strange, hinterland between fictional space and real space. And into what place on the board or beyond it does Vanya exit at the end of the play?

The *players* are initially those of Chekhov’s original, yet the historical Chekhov then enters the scene in fictionalised form, once again rupturing the boundaries of the narrative system, and questioning the relationship between the fictional characters inhabiting the world of the play, and the play’s audience looking in. What is more, the players are clearly unsure of what *moves* are permissible, what will they be allowed to do, once they have begun to question and break the rules of the control level.

In relation to Lowe’s thesis, this is probably the most striking feature of the play: the way in which Barker makes the control level of the original narrative explicit. Quite clearly, it is

Chekhov's rules, not universal laws, which hold sway in this narrative universe. But Barker's challenge to the very assumptions, on which that universe is founded, is neatly played out by this device of allowing the players to interact with their god-like maker. Chekhov's control is thus shown to be entirely arbitrary, the players begin to be aware of other possible moves available to them, outside the strict confines of the game rules, and, once the restrictions are lifted, alternative endgames become possible. Morality is opened up for question in the same way that the story world itself is opened up: its fractured boundaries make possible a kind of negative entropy, and energy can leak both into and out of the narrative space, now that it is no longer hermetically sealed and closed. "Vanya's quitting of the Chekhovian madhouse became a metaphor for the potential of art to point heroically, if blindly, to the open door" (Barker, 1993: 293).

Of course, as we noted in the previous chapter, this sense of freedom is itself paradoxical, for the control level has not been removed: the god-like power of absolute control has merely been transferred from Chekhov to Barker, who himself remains 'transparent' throughout.¹

The question to which we must now return is whether the fact that this narrative universe is patently a construct, in which the laws of cause and effect have ceased to operate as expected, means that we have entered, as John Peter would have it, an amoral landscape. Are Barker's moral explorations invalidated within a narrative which deliberately exposes its own artifice? Are they in any way less rigorous than Chekhov's? I would suggest not. What we have here is, in fact, an alternative arena for the debate. Barker repudiates the kind of theatre which comes bearing a message, but is fiercely conscious that there is still a place for another type of theatre, one which asks many questions of its audience, often extremely uncomfortable ones. If genre expectations and the accumulated rules of narrative story-telling constrain the story outcomes, they will also, by implication, constrain the possible scope of the moral debate, and Barker's response is to write plays which, amongst their other innovations, consciously violate the narrative rules in order to create an arena in which new outcomes are possible. As in the original version, the moral debate in *(Uncle) Vanya* is concerned with questions of freedom and constraint, however, in this patently non-causal universe, these existential choices are not constrained by a 'hidden' control level, and this is effectively embodied as the central metaphor of the play. By refusing to allow the moral

¹ Transparent, that is, in the sense in which Lowe uses the word, to mean 'unseen'.

space of the play to be hermetically sealed off within a separate narrative world, Barker forces the questions out into the audience.

Play-boy

In a rather different way, desperate optimists' *Play-boy* also manages to reconfigure some of the central issues of Synge's original. *Playboy of the Western World* invites us to consider the proposition that whilst violence can be glamorous in its fictional form, it is generally much more ugly when encountered for real. Within that, there are also questions about the nature of relationships based on a romanticised view of others, and the inevitable slippage of fact that narrative processes involve.

All of these issues find their equivalents in *Play-boy*, and although the moral questions are very subtly inserted into the mix, it is nevertheless possible to identify them. Again, Lowe's model provides us with a useful way of describing the disruption of the narrative process. Firstly, although there are many mini-narratives within the piece, there is no clear *primary narrative*, other than the fact of Joe and Christine's own journey through the story-materials for our benefit. Thus the narrative clock is irrelevant from the start – it has no definitive *story time* to measure. Even if it were operational, it would certainly be 'wrong'. It is demonstrably 'impossible' to bring all the characters together for the final scene in the way that it happens: the characters all come from different *story times* and do not fit together in the way that their false narrative insists that they did.

The board too is confusing. There are a great number of different narrative spaces mentally evoked for us, including the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, Chile, Mexico, Fifties America, the film-set of *Viva Zapata*, and the *Casa Amore* nightclub, but they do not 'cohere', and none of them is created illusionistically. The only spaces we can actually see are the real ones of the performance space itself and the television studio captured on the video clips.

The players are a mix of real, virtual, historical and fictional. The only two actors we can see are the performers, Joe and Christine. They are joined by friends and members of their family, real people present to us as virtual figures in the television monitors. The other players are presented only in terms of their narrative descriptions, we can access them only by means of Joe and

Christine's accounts. Known historical figures such as Marlon Brando, Leon Trotsky and John Millington Synge mingle confusingly with the more exotic sounding (but also historical) Juan O'Gorman and Don Bernardo O'Higgins. These are supplemented by the fictional characters played by Brando, Quinn and others in *Viva Zapata*, as well as gangs of surrealist painters and shadowy hired assassins. More solidly, we the audience are also invoked as players, explicitly drawn into the narrative process by Joe's direct questions and challenges.

Whereas in *(Uncle) Vanya* the rules were invoked in order to be deliberately smashed, here we have the sense that the rules are being made up as we go along. They are open to negotiation, the narrative offer from the outset is that we are watching an experiment, indeed it is one in which we are invited to participate. The opening question, "What do we need to know?" invokes a sense that we will never, for all our investigations, actually arrive at the truth of anything, but we will need to revise the rules of the game at every stage.

The game rules of stage narrative are broken in front of us: the 'natural' laws of cause and effect embedded within an illusionistic story dictate that when someone is shot on stage, blood will begin to flow. Instead, we watch as Joe and Christine sew the blood-pouches onto their costume and then pierce them *before* any shots are fired. The rules which seal off the narrative world, and which delineate the spheres of fiction and real-world action are ignored and it becomes very hard to find the boundaries between them. How much of what is delivered to us as the truth about Joe and Christine is actually made up, and how much that seems blatantly fictional within the narrated events is actually based upon fact? At the very end of the performance, the arbitrary nature of the game is made explicit within the closing dialogue:

JOE: So, you just... made that bit up?
CHRIS: Yes.
JOE: Why? Why did you make that bit up?

The question is left hanging, open-ended, for us to answer. In fact, in direct contrast with the tightly-closed narrative universe of the classical plot, this story world is left teasingly open throughout.

And yet, in ironic contrast to this, the performance also faithfully invokes the classical plot device of endgame. There is a final climactic scene, for which all the participants in the narrative are – impossibly – gathered. The tense showdown in the *Casa Amore* culminates in the shooting of Synge. The drama ends as Joe and Christine sink to the floor, acting out the requisite moments of ‘death’ before the eyes of the audience.

Yet although it works its materials in very different ways indeed from Barker’s play, again it is by interrogating and foregrounding the devices of narrative that the piece is able to ask whether the moral conclusions we are frequently invited to draw in the theatre are not in fact based upon highly artificial worlds, in which the outcomes are rigged from the start. And behind this complicated and engaging dance of fact and fiction, the figures on the video screens, the non-actors, speaking directly of their own thoughts about the issues raised for them by Synge’s original play and experiencing their own moments of genuine panic/exhilaration, as they are required to fire a real gun directly towards the camera, are rehearsing for us the truly genuine moral questions of the performance. Their reflections on violence, on relationships, on the experience of handling, loading (with blanks), and firing the gun are lightly painted in, but affecting because of their honesty and immediacy. The directness of their unprepared and spontaneous responses contrasts starkly and effectively with the fictional games being played out around them.

Closure and followability – again

These two different approaches to the normally concealed problematics of narrative suggest that there are certainly alternative ways of raising and investigating moral questions without needing to stay within the tight confines of the classical plot, or indeed of natural causality. There are new questions which can be asked within these new landscapes and what both pieces of work also achieve is a useful critique upon the traditional narrative forms which have tended to work within the rule-bound, closure-orientated format of the classical plot. And we should not be tempted to suppose, says Lowe, that just because this became the dominant narrative form in the Western cultural tradition, that the ancient Greek writers, who had developed it, had fooled themselves into thinking that what happened in stories was a true model for life, or that closure was quite as easy to achieve in the real world:

‘Call no man happy till he is dead’: the Sophoclean platitude articulates an uncomfortable awareness that in real life stories do not terminate in a happy-ever-after stable state. But this does not in practice prevent us from viewing the future in terms of short-range goals, and their attainment as the moment when everything comes vaguely right. Classical fiction simply takes this goal-based life-model and treats it as conventionally true. (Lowe, 2000: 59)

What both pieces also have in common, however, is that they could both be described as *followable*. Ethical questions would still be much more difficult to ask – if not impossible – within work that is anti-narrative to the point at which any possibility of coherence finally disappears. Precisely when that point is reached becomes ever harder to define, however, as audiences grow more skilled in reading fragmented, multi-strand narratives. Presumably, we could count the deliberately non-sensical works of John Cage or the Dadaists in this category, but Richard Foreman’s plays, for instance, though anarchic in content and non-linear in form, still seem able to accommodate a great deal of philosophical and cultural speculation. The Wooster Group’s work, again usually non-linear in format and reliant upon broken narrative and incomplete apprehensions, nevertheless engages with serious ethical and political questions, such as *Route 1 & 9*’s dangerous exploration of the politics of race, or their investigation into the social and personal implications of recreational drug-taking in *L.S.D. (...Just the High Points...)*. Forced Entertainment, fragmentary and splintered as their pieces are, also raise significant questions about the ‘ethical spectator’, and the moral role of the audience in relation to seen events.

We have reached a point in the investigation where we can posit, once again, that closure – a fundamental requirement, it would seem, of the classical plot – is not necessarily a function of narrative, though some kind of followability almost certainly is. The sequence of narrative need not necessarily be linear in its presentation, but it is still likely to be *read* in ways that will be an attempt to ‘re-construct’ such a linearity. Causality, as it is experienced in our everyday realities, does not appear to be an essential pre-requisite for an exploration of moral questions, nor an absolutely indispensable requirement of the narrative process, though for many formal definitions of narrative, it has been the lynchpin. We are now at a stage, at which we can begin to re-examine the difficult question of postmodern narrative: what is it, and in what ways might it be said to differ from the traditional model of narrative; how does it operate and what implications does this have for the role and status of narrative in contemporary theatre?

Chapter Ten – Postmodern Narrative

We no longer have recourse to the grand narratives – we can resort neither to the dialectic of Spirit nor even to the emancipation of humanity as a validation for postmodern scientific discourse. But ... the little narrative [*petit récit*] remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention... (Lyotard, 1984: 60)

Postmodern thought is inherently antinarrative. (Roemer, 1995: 78)

Within the multi-faceted, much-debated cultural shift that is postmodernism, narrative has been both discredited and rebranded. Whilst we are no longer able to call upon the grand narratives of the past, we seem to be ever more indebted to the little narratives of our fragmented ‘now’. In his seminal account of the condition of knowledge in the closing decades of the twentieth century, Jean François Lyotard writes of “the preeminence of the narrative form in the formulation of traditional knowledge” (1984: 19). His argument that the narrative form is self-legitimizing, primarily as a result of the pragmatics of its own transmission, is borne out strongly by the ‘reverse-image’ quality of the two examples we have been considering. Both of these, as we have seen, problematise the instance of their own re-telling, forcing us to remain aware of their status as constructed narratives, and thereby revealing both the limitations of such a process – its inability to supply an ‘authoritative’ discourse – and also its continuing potential for provoking affective engagement and open moral exploration.

This foregrounding of the ‘telling’ of the tale, is perhaps the most obvious characteristic of postmodern narrative – more so, even, than that other notable key signature, fragmentation – in whatever form we encounter it. It was the French linguist, Émile Benveniste, who first identified two distinct modes of telling as *histoire* and *discours*. Characterising *histoire* as a form which presented its narrative material in a ‘historical’ manner, he observed that in such an account there is little or no sense of the subjective speaker behind the narrative, but rather it is impersonal, detached and – crucially – the present moment of the utterance is excluded. *Discours*, on the other hand, is acutely conscious of the narrating moment, the contract between speaker and listener is made explicit, and narrative transparency – one of three key requirements of the classical plot, according to N. J. Lowe (the other two being amplitude and economy; Lowe, 2000: 62) – is deliberately ruptured. We know that we are being ‘told a tale’ and there is a consciousness of the constructed nature of the narrative.

It could be argued, of course, that throughout theatre history, many different forms have been developed, through which the 'present moment' of narration has been made explicit. The Chorus in Classical Greek tragedy, the narratorial devices of the medieval Morality Plays, Shakespearean soliloquy, Restoration asides, the direct audience engagement of *commedia dell'arte*: all of these conventions have made extensive and varied use of theatre's ability to have direct contact with its audience. In fact, there has only been a comparatively short stretch of time, from the late nineteenth century onwards, for which fourth-wall realism has been the general expectation. What has changed, however, is that whereas, in all these earlier instances, the constant reminders of the narrating moment served ultimately to reinforce the authority of the narrative, now the *discours* is made explicit in order to undermine and question its own reliability and integrity. Instead of watching the presentation of a series of events, we are made acutely conscious of the fact that we are watching a *re*-presentation, and that that *re*-presentation is subject to all the flaws, inaccuracies and falsehoods of that narrating moment.

And so there has developed an ambivalence towards narrative: on the one hand it remains an extraordinarily powerful communicator of experience, of ideas, and of new possibilities; yet, on the other, it appears to be fatally trapped and constrained within its own inability to tell the 'truth'.

Nick Kaye's *Postmodernism and Performance* (1994), traces this uneasy new relationship with narrative through detailed readings of Wooster Group's *Route 1 & 9*, Karen Finley's *The Constant State of Desire* and Yvonne Rainer's *This is the story of a woman who...* Each of these pieces is shown to be resisting the usual dynamics of narrative, by foregrounding and questioning the narrative processes at work in their own construction, and by their setting of multiple narrative voices and perspectives against each other. In particular, he examines the tendency for conventional narrative to operate as a vehicle that tells us 'what we already knew', and highlights the ways in which each of these works both challenges, and is implicated in, that tendency. (And so, in the spirit of the new *grand récit* of postmodernism, these fragmented narrative voices do, paradoxically, tell us the same story: we must not hope to find a unitary meaning or coherent worldview amidst these multiple and conflicting perspectives.)

Some contemporary playwrights are also beginning to demonstrate an awareness of this new ambivalence and are both drawn repeatedly back to narrative, and nervous of it. Consider first this proposition taken from Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking*:

ROBBIE: I think... I think we all need stories, we make up stories so that we can get by. And I think a long time ago there were big stories. Stories so big you could live your whole life in them. The Powerful Hands of the Gods and Fate. The Journey to Enlightenment. The March of Socialism. But they all died, or the world grew up or grew senile or forgot them, so now we're all making up our own stories. Little stories. But we've each got one. (Ravenhill, 1996: 63)

And take now these opening lines from an experimental script created in 1995 by Peter Barnes, over the course of a two-week workshop at the National Theatre Studio:

JACK If only I'd done that instead...
ALICE I know how it works, the side-thought-chasers.
JACK Hish-hash, his-hash, hushie, hushie.
ALICE We're both gromish; sad and gromish.
JACK Let it out, you and me, any girl or none, glad it was you.
ALICE I'm not in the mood for arches or the sound of white.
 (Barnes, 1996: 204)

There are echoes here of Richard Foreman's style, although without his idiosyncratic combination of sense and non-sense, or his feel for comic, aphoristic rhythms. This is how Barnes himself describes his method:

The intention in *Luna Park Eclipses* is not to depict plot or character but show directly the contrast between what viewers apprehend and what they provide for themselves as in an abstract painting or collage. The audience is faced with the same dilemma the author faced when writing the play – it must make choices. [...]
There is no conscious plot, or characters, only actors. The play relies on the audience to provide the absent plot and characters. The dialogue consists of non-sequiturs, and the audience makes a connection between them because it must. (1996: 203)

Through the character of Robbie, Ravenhill explores the view that narrative must continue to play a central role in what it means to be human, and therefore in theatrical expressions of that human-ness, but Barnes is less sure – he seems uneasy about the whole process of storytelling, exploring instead the possibility of transferring all responsibility for narrative coherence to the audience. And in many ways, these views are representative of the two most common responses

to the crisis of narrative in contemporary work: on the one hand, a continuing and persistent bias *towards* story, on the basis that story-telling, and the need for stories, continue to lie at the very centre of our being; and on the other, an uncertainty, a lack of confidence, a move *away from* forms that, up till now, have been taken as normative.

An escape from geometry

One valuable contribution to the debate is provided by Andrew Gibson's *Towards a Postmodern Theory of Narrative* (1996). Gibson's central thesis is that narratology, with its roots in early twentieth-century Structuralism, has remained inexorably bound to a view of narrative that is essentially geometric in nature. The search for a narrative 'grammar' (Greimas, 1971, for example) was a search for 'deep structures', for patterns, recurrences, regularities and rules. Underlying all of this, says Gibson, "is a fantasy of a geometrical clarity, symmetry and proportion to narrative or the narrative text" (Gibson, 1996: 3). Even so-called post-structuralist accounts, like that of Peter Brooks (1984), he argues, are essentially presenting us with a narrative space that is describable, homogeneous, controllable and fixed. Gibson seeks, instead, to find new forms of language to describe what he sees to be the multiple, flexible, changeable spaces of narrative. A journey through such spaces is not to be conceived as a linear course through a mappable landscape – a narrative discourse – but rather as a 'parcours', a voyage or 'course through' many dispersed and scattered spaces (ibid: 16). And where there can be no formal geometry, so too there can be no fixed centre, no point of reference, no 'safe' place to stand. There are only shifting points-of-view, unstable sites of meaning.

So fiercely does Gibson interrogate both structuralist and post-structuralist definitions of narrative, that there are points in his argument, at which the very possibility of any kind of meaningful description of narrative form seems to dissolve into an endless regression of paradoxes and contradictions. Nevertheless, of particular interest for the purposes of this present debate is his contention that this preference for the geometry of a narrative text has been at the expense of what he calls its 'energetics'. Within a fixed, static concept of narrative, he says, there can be little effective vocabulary for describing the dynamic interplay of forces at work within its shifting movements. It seems to me that this is precisely an area in which dramatic narrative, viewed in the context of live performance, can offer some helpful alternative perspectives.

Theatre provides us with a space in which narrative can be viewed, above all, in terms of its mobility and its forceful energy. The text is always and only ever perceived in motion, its agents repeatedly shown to us via the processes of constant change. The performance event itself necessitates a dynamic reading: this is a format, which must take place within time, which must work its effects by means of the live, interactive dynamics set up between performer and spectator, which cannot be 'stopped', and which is new at every showing. Performers, above all, understand how the unique instant of saying a line, playing a moment, before an attentive and responsive audience can change its meaning, by revealing fresh possibilities, unperceived until that precise point in time.

Both *Play-boy* and *(Uncle) Vanya* make explicit use of this liveness, and both foreground and problematise their own *discours*, although in quite different ways. In *Play-boy* it is a matter of establishing an immediate relationship between performers and audience, with questions and challenges thrown out to those watching, although without space being created, perhaps, for them to give a genuinely direct, vocal response; as when Joe interrupts the performance to ask, "Does anyone here know the answer to that simple question? Can a good thing come from a bad act?" This liveness is then contrasted with the mediated images provided by the video material. Here there is no possibility, even, of response and yet there is the 'performance' of interaction, in Christine's reassurances to the onscreen characters ("It's all right, Muiris, we're still here.").

By contrast, *(Uncle) Vanya*'s liveness is most apparent through its very artificiality. Although the action never moves outside the theatrical frame, we find our attention drawn repeatedly back to that frame by the many violations of theatrical and narrative convention that take place within it. By eschewing the methods of realism and adopting instead a starkly overcoded artificiality, Barker reminds us constantly that we are watching a theatrical world that is incommensurable with any conventional experience of the social world in which we live. In this way, Barker's play embodies another strand of Gibson's argument concerning the particularities of postmodern narrative. By conjuring up a world that can only be read in its own terms, that has no direct, one-to-one correspondence with the world as we perceive it to be, or to the general laws of cause and effect, *(Uncle) Vanya* demonstrates the means by which narrative can 'inaugurate' a perception of the 'real', rather than merely imitating it (Gibson, 1996: 87-88). Barker tells us stories we cannot

understand in order to lead us into worlds we have never seen. This opening up of possible new worlds Gibson sees as a distinctively postmodern form of narrative, and the words he uses in this context to describe the films of Jean-Luc Godard, could just as easily, it seems, be applied to the plays of Howard Barker:

[He] refuses to allow realism and reference to have any kind of founding or final status within a given work. He grants them no privilege over other narrative elements. They are rather caught up themselves within a play of appearance and disappearance, and thus resituated, transformed, 'reinaugurated'. (1996: 94)

In accordance with Derrida's thoughts concerning *différance*, Gibson lays particular stress upon the deferral of meaning, and he is ultimately sceptical about any form of narrative schematisation, whether that is to do with thematics, voice, narrative layers, narrative time, or whatever, seeing these strategies as the imposition of a false geometrics upon a text, and even as an illegitimate exercise of power, through systems of categorisation and control (1996: 107). He is also suspicious of reception theory, viewing it, like Nick Kaye, as a way of "pushing the reader backwards into a particular perception of what is already known" (1996: 272).

Redefinitions

Is such scepticism justified? Both *Play-boy* and *(Uncle) Vanya* are exploring alternative models of narrative which not only compel the reader towards a process of personal engagement in the meaning-making process, but which, it could be argued, also question and challenge the familiar categories by which we normally read theatrical narrative. It is my contention that we need neither abandon narrative, nor cling too tightly to the forms in which we have encountered it in the past.

Let us remind ourselves of the definition of narrative with which this discussion began:

A narrative is the semiotic representation of a series of events meaningfully connected in a temporal and causal way. (Onega & Landa, 1996: 3)

In the previous chapter, we examined the question whether causality was a pre-requisite for moral debate and it was argued that we could explore such issues without, of necessity, relying upon causal narrative. Indeed, should we now go further and ask whether causality is therefore an

essential element of narrative itself? The point has already been made, in fact, that it is closely tied to (em)plot(ment), which can more properly be seen to be a sub-category of narrative, a tighter, more restricted story-universe in which natural causality is modified to fit a pre-determined set of genre-rules and reader-expectations. Perhaps, then, we should re-phrase the question: should the element of causality be seen to reside primarily in the work itself, or in the reader's re-construction of it?

To answer such a question, it is necessary to return once more to the question of how narratives are cognitively processed as we read/watch. A further implication of the definition given above – “a series of events meaningfully connected” – is that narratives are essentially linear in their construction, even if that linear sequence has been provisionally disrupted, or, as in Brecht's non-Aristotelian theatre, has become disjointed and uneven. The temporal dimension is also important to the definition: this too suggests linearity, since temporal flow is all about the presentation of a series of events over a measurable period of story time. This is very much in keeping with Gibson's objections to this way of viewing narrative, where even time is contained within a primarily geometric, spatial matrix. A typical description of the process of reading narrative would, therefore, involve some account of the way in which we re-construct that linear and temporal sequence in our heads as we assemble the information provided. Such a description, however, would seem to give an inadequate account of the actual complexities involved, even in relation to traditional narratives.

Postmodern narratives, moreover, have relied increasingly on fragmentation, interruption, the opening up of multiple spaces, and inadequate closure, and such devices disrupt sequential and temporal flow, sometimes only partially, sometimes fatally. Whilst the cognitive process of reading narrative has conventionally been seen in terms of reconstructing a strictly linear path through a unified space – relying upon a basic predisposition to interpret contiguity in terms of ‘expressive’ causality (a rather loose forging of connections between otherwise apparently unconnected elements), and thus exploiting the notion of narrative ‘gaps’ (Bruner, 1986) – there are almost certainly other concurrent processes at work.

N. J. Lowe has further insights to bring to this question. In his account of the cognitive mechanisms used for reading and interpreting narrative (2000: 17-35), he proposes a three-fold

model, rather like the notion of a triptych, containing a central panel, which is then flanked by two side panels. The central panel can be imagined to be the mental 'screen' on which we are 'seeing' the story events unfold. If these are presented to us in a linear format, then there will be little or no re-ordering of events needed for this version of the story. This central panel, then, represents the conventional picture of how the process of narrative reading tends to be conceptualised. However, the side panels are also crucial. One of them, Lowe suggests, can be seen as the 'jigsaw puzzle' of the narrative. Here is where we lay out the pieces of the puzzle, as they are presented to us. They are not necessarily given to us in the correct order, of course, nor are they joined at first. Pieces begin to be slotted into the puzzle only when we become aware of their correct placing. In some narrative genres, we may be positively encouraged to place the piece in the 'wrong' place in the puzzle. This is particularly the case, for example, in a murder-mystery story, where wrong-footing the reader is a central part of the narrative game, but consider also the rather more subtle instance of *Oedipus Rex*, in which, despite our pre-existent knowledge of the story outcomes, we are nevertheless (temporarily) encouraged at various moments to try placing pieces in the 'wrong position', and to see the story from Oedipus' perspective:

If I can foretell the future,
Either by prophecy, or common sense,
I predict that by tomorrow morning
This truth will be dawning:
That mysterious Cithaeron,
That magical mountain
Was father and mother and nurse
To Oedipus our king,
And our voices will sing
Praises for his outlandish birth,
A child of the earth,
And glory to Apollo, and thanksgiving.
(Sophocles, 1986: 45-6)

As any narrative continues to unfold and more pieces are provided, so we are slowly able to build up the picture and to grasp the shape of the story as a whole. Rather than a jigsaw, however, which must, by its nature, be something to be 'completed', or closed, it is even more fruitful to envisage this second panel as a kind of gradually-forming hologram: a three-dimensional narrative shape that is built up by the reader. Details are filled in – or not – as relevant

information becomes available. However, a basic form can be imagined at a very early stage in the process and re-configured / filled-in as more information becomes available.

Meanwhile, the other side-panel is also being altered as the story is told. This third panel can be imagined as recording a list of the game-rules of the given narrative. Some of these are determined in the first place by the basic ground-rules of the genre, and others are then added during the course of the narrative, as further, more local information becomes available to us. So, for example, in *Oedipus Rex*, there are general rules about the nature of tragedy, which will dictate the eventual outcome and the manner of its arrival; but there are also more specific rules emerging, such as the fact that Oedipus has already acquired a considerable reputation as a “genius for solving riddles”, a guarantee that, once the question of his parentage has been opened up, he will in no way be dissuaded from pursuing it to its final, disastrous conclusion.

So what we are fed as we read the text is actually three things. First, there are the raw *sequential* data of story: ‘She entered the room. The telephone rang.’ These we use as our axis of internal orientation, our index of where we ‘are’ in the time of the tale. Second, there are *non-sequential* facts, whether purely narratorial (‘This was to be their last evening together’) or tied to the simulated mental processes of viewpoint (‘It dawned on him that the woman at the bar was Juliette, whom he had last seen six years ago in Vienna’). This second stream of information feeds directly into our holographic story-model. And finally, and most subtly, there are coded *rules* about the universe of the story, from which we can ourselves deduce further conclusions about missing elements of the global model (‘She knew that Peter was not the kind of man who breaks a promise given in good faith’). (Lowe, 2000: 25)

This three-fold model is helpful, since it maps out the reading of narrative not merely as the re-arranging of events into a linear flow, but also as a process of developing a sense of the story-as-a-whole, and of the story-world as a locus of intersecting possibilities and restrictions.

Testing various forms of postmodern narrative experimentation against this paradigm, it could be argued that they tend to rely more heavily on the second, ‘holographic’ side panel than on the traditionally ‘central’ screen. (At the same time, often, the third panel is either removed altogether – the whole notion of narrative ‘rules’ being utterly inimical to postmodern narrative – or it is spotlighted as the artificial construct that it so obviously is.) Whilst we no longer view many new forms of theatre with an expectation that we will be able to reconstruct a linear narrative, we may nevertheless remain confident that we can create a satisfying narrative shape

from the materials available to us. And what we end up with, of course, may well be, not one neatly ordered story universe, but a pattern of interlocking, partially completed, partly open narrative worlds, as in *Play-boy*, where loose ends are not tied up and where such closure as there is, is to be viewed ironically, playfully. The closing line of Synge's original text (PEGEEN: "Oh, my grief, I've lost him surely. I've lost the only Playboy of the Western World.") may allow us a certain wistfulness in the contemplation of possibilities now lost forever to Pegeen, but it is hardly undecideable; Synge has neatly closed the narrative loop as required by the classical plot structure. The conclusion of *Play-boy*, by contrast, is summed up succinctly in Chris's final line: "I don't know". We have failed to arrive at the clearly-signposted terminus of a neatly-ordered, logical sequence of events, causally and temporally linked. Instead, the invitation throughout has been to enjoy the process of constructing our holographic picture(s) of the story-as-a-whole, sharpening the image in as many places as possible, whilst remaining willing to live with necessary gaps and imprecisions in the final object, and with the possibility of closure infinitely deferred.

Possible responses

It is this picture, I believe, which helps us to model new ways of reading, and therefore also of creating, narrative. Indeed, there are any number of possible responses to this changed storytelling environment. Howard Barker, as we have seen, has developed an approach, which involves finding new ways of engaging the human imagination and shocking it into resistance and action. This "de-civilising" method, as he calls it, both exploits and explodes the narrative process; its properties and its rule-bound nature are exposed, as audiences are required to wrestle with ambiguity and a multiplicity of possible interpretive readings, none of which are identified as authoritative and all of which are problematic in some way.

desperate optimists' strategy has also been to question the notion of the authoritative, centred narrative, but in their case, this has been achieved by subjecting it to a playful, ironic scrutiny; by allowing competing narratives and multiple voices to jostle for our attention; by juxtaposing blatantly fictional elements with unlikely truths, and framing both within genuinely open and spontaneous sequences of reactions recorded on video (though, it should be noted, still controlled and selected via the editing process).

Another, slightly different, perspective on the possibilities open to postmodern narrative is supplied by Edward Bond. His own reading of postmodernism identifies both a specific movement away from materiality and a possible response in terms of “a radically new role for imagination in society” (Bond in Köppen, 1997: 99). Bond’s view is that,

we have to invent stories in order to be human. In the past, ideologies would tell us stories and those stories related the individual to the world. What has happened now is that there are no longer any coherent stories. If there may be coherent stories, we don’t yet tell them. (1997: 102)

Portraying human history in terms of an evolving three-way dynamic between human beings (what we are biologically and psychologically), society (how human beings relate to each other), and technology (the extent to which we can manipulate and control the world around us), he suggests that technology has now advanced to the point, at which imagination can no longer “keep up with it” (1997: 103); it is now capable of providing any kind of reality that we desire to create, of turning even our illusions and our fictions into ‘reality’: and yet the precise danger of this, says Bond, is that “there is no new reality”. The role of human imagination in this situation, he therefore proposes, is to relocate itself in the material:

In postmodernism you do not relate to a material world in a direct way. Before, our relationship to the material world was always disciplined. It is so no longer. The technological circumstances have changed. If we continue to survive as spiritual beings, we have to be materialist. (1997: 102)

Yet it is not immediately clear from Bond’s comments what structural form this might take in relation to narrative. The only specific suggestion he makes in this context is a comment in relation to the aspect of closure: “It could be possible for stories to become more truthful about the threefold relationship – *not* about an ultimate ‘closure’, an end to the story” (1997: 102).

Thus we are returned to a certain kind of open-endedness, the notion of closure as a provisional, temporary strategy in a local situation, rather than the final resolution of all questions, contradictions and ambiguities that it has tended to be in classical narrative.

Difficult narratives

Ultimately, the debate is always going to come back to a question of structuring: to what extent does the imposition of a structure also impose an absolute inevitability that certain truths will be privileged at the expense of others that are then excluded from the mix? Narrative, as we have seen, is essentially the way in which a story is told, and thus the process, in theatre, by which the fabula, or story elements, are selected and combined together, relayed to and reconstructed by, an audience.

And yet, since the experiments and disruptions of the twentieth century, from the Futurists onwards, through Cage, Kaprow, the Wooster Group, Richard Foreman, Forced Entertainment and others, we have become profoundly aware of the tendency for narrative in general, and plot in particular, to falsify as it tells. Selection and re-presentation also excludes, privileges, silencing some voices, whilst allowing others to speak.

It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances, too many gestures, which could mean this or that, too many shapes which can never be fully described, too many flavours in the air or on the tongue, half-colours, too many. (Atwood, 1985: 144)

This process of selection and combination, far from being a purely formal, literary device, however, turns out to be fundamental to the ways in which we organise and make sense of the world around us. We should not be tempted to view narrative as an optional extra, something to be abandoned as an inherently untruthful way of presenting and communicating information, feelings and understandings. Selection and re-presentation of everyday narrative materials (time, place, people, 'rules' and consequences) creates our sense of personal identity, our place within a particular social and cultural space, and makes 'sense' of our otherwise disparate emotional and cognitive responses.

The theologian, Alisdair MacIntyre, reflecting on the idea that it is not so much a question of narrative imposing a structure on an otherwise formless reality, as that narrative appears to reflect our fundamental cognitive interactions with reality, finds it difficult to view disjointed narrative fragments as anything other than a story waiting to be assembled:

...what would human actions deprived of any falsifying narrative order be like? [...] the only picture that I find myself able to form of human nature *an-sich*, prior to the alleged misinterpretation by narrative, is the kind of dislocated sequence which Dr. Johnson offers us in his notes of his travels in France: ‘There we waited on the ladies – Morville’s. – Spain. Country towns all beggars. At Dijon he could not find the way to Orleans. – Cross roads of France very bad. – Five soldiers. – Women. – Soldiers escaped. – The Colonel would not lose five men for the sake of one woman. – The magistrate cannot seize a soldier but by the Colonel’s permission, etc., etc.’ (quoted in Hobsbaum 1973, p. 32). What this suggests is what I take to be true, namely that the characterization of actions allegedly prior to any narrative form being imposed upon them will always turn out to be *the presentation of* what are plainly the disjointed parts of *some possible narrative*. (MacIntyre, 1985: 214-15, italics mine)

We can, of course, explore alternative ways of organising performance material – structuring along the principles of lists, as in the work of Forced Entertainment, or mathematical formulae, perhaps – and these are helpful and necessary experiments. But whilst they throw up interesting new strategies, they continue to beg the question of what is excluded and on what basis, and of course they also impose their own peculiar kinds of falsehoods at the same time.

The fundamental requirements of any new narrative paradigms would seem to be that, a) they find ways of telling which allow for multiple narratives to clash and combine without feeling the need to impose full coherence or closure upon them, and b) they facilitate the emergence of those voices and perspectives which tend normally to be excluded by the formal structures of conventionally linear, unitary narrative. These new forms will almost certainly be ‘difficult’ narratives: however hard we try, we will not be able to resolve their tensions or inconsistencies. Nevertheless, perhaps what we are realising is that we will have to learn to accommodate such paradoxes.

Narrative in the cinema

We have looked at particular examples whereby the dominant modes of theatrical narrative have been challenged and opened up to questioning, but there are wider forces at work in culture and society, which are also having a huge influence upon the way we now read stories. Crucial amongst these has been the rapid development of the cinema, from its birth in the late nineteenth century to its present state of technical sophistication and narrative complexity.

It is significant that at its earliest previews, Ridley Scott's dystopian film *Blade Runner* was felt by its financial backers to be incomprehensible, unclear and in pressing need of narrative explication. With this in mind, Harrison Ford, who played the central character, Deckard, was reluctantly returned to the recording studio in order to lay down a suitably clear voice-over to run alongside the otherwise 'baffling' visuals. It has passed into the folklore surrounding the film that Ford, who knew of Scott's distaste for such a device, deliberately contrived to make the narration as downbeat and as dull as possible. The film was slow to find its audience, but ten years later, Scott was in a position to release his own director's cut, restoring scenes that had been excised from the original cinema version in the interests of narrative 'clarity', and removing the explanatory voice-over. Seen in a form that was closer to his original conception, it is clear that Scott had always intended to place a great deal of responsibility upon the audience to read their own version of the film, and that he demanded and expected considerable narrative sophistication of his audience. (Stanley Kubrick, of course, had offered his own 'difficult' narrative quite some time earlier, in his 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, but not being under the same contractual constraints as Scott, had been able to retain its bafflement without opposition.)

This trend towards increasingly fragmented and difficult narrative presentations has been imitated and further developed by other filmmakers, such as David Lynch, Peter Greenaway and Christopher Nolan. Although the pace is slower and the examples fewer, these same techniques are increasingly finding their way into television drama, and audiences are being asked to piece together ever-more complicated and broken narratives, such as Lynch's influential *Twin Peaks*.

...and in cyberspace

Even more significant, though, has been the development of the interactive narrative, whereby readers are able to follow their own route through a story. These kinds of developments are foreshadowed in a number of literary narratives, for example Jorge Luis Borges's *The Garden of Forking Paths* (1941), which explores the notion that the repeated choices of our lives give rise to an infinite series of possible parallel worlds. In the earliest examples of genuinely interactive fiction, where readers are encouraged to follow multiple paths through many possible narratives, by means of choices made at regular intervals, the format of the printed book imposed strict limitations on what was possible, but since the development of web-based storytelling – an area to which desperate optimists have been turning their attentions since 1997 – the potential for

audience selection and control of narrative materials has increased dramatically. These new hyper-narratives are experienced within a narrative timeframe determined by the individual surfer, the selection of narrative spaces has been under their control, the sequencing of events down to their choice from a range of possible hyperlinks. The same is true of CD-ROM based games, in which, in the most sophisticated recent examples, parallel narrative lines continue to develop out-of-sight of the game-player, but can then be glimpsed at various moments later in the game (as, for example, in Revolution Software's *Lure of the Temptress* and *Beneath a Steel Sky* [Gibson, 1996: 276]). Most significantly, in such interactive fiction the closure of the narrative is determined directly by the choices made throughout the reading/journey.

An alternative definition of narrative

One key to understanding all of these developments is Bruner's notion of narrative gaps. Such gaps have always been crucial to determining the precise nature of the contract between storyteller and story-listener: gaps are essential for the engagement of the audience. What will follow next? How is it possible to explain that behaviour? Why should anyone venture into such an experience and how will they be changed by it? Traditional narratives have tended to supply answers for all of these questions. Guided by the template of the classical plot, working to ethical and moral frameworks which constrained both their view of the world in which they lived and the possibilities available to drama, writers constructed dramas which followed, not just the rules of narrative, but the requirements of emplotment. Constrained within narrative game-worlds which not only reflected the image of the world they experienced, but sent back subtly changed images from distorted mirrors, modified to fit the local requirements of that narrative space, they followed the rules of the genre, the 'laws' of that country. And so, all questions were answered, all tensions resolved, all narrative energy conserved and re-distributed. Stories confirmed to us what we already knew.

Now, though, the narrative gaps are opening up in any number of different and interesting ways. Audiences are more frequently being asked not just to make their own connections between the story elements, but often to bridge gaps between many different competing narrative possibilities. The contradictory paths offered by Barker dispute the possibility of neat closure and demand a critically active response. How shall we interpret a situation, in which the characters of (*Uncle Vanya*) 'resist' their own narrative destinies? By what rules are we able to explain Chekhov's

appearance, and death, in 'his own' play? Into what world 'outside' that play can Vanya be understood to be exiting?

By contrast, the playful questions posed by desperate optimists invite and tease, rather than compel, but in their own way, they too take the audience down a similar set of impossible 'forking paths'. These strategies can be seen as attempts to retain the most useful elements of narrative – affective engagement, cognitive connection, and the possibility of continued ethical and political debate – whilst removing, or at the very least exposing to open scrutiny, other, more problematic aspects such as false empathy, an inherent artificiality imposed by unitary plotting, and the constant drift towards invisibly-weighted conclusions.

At the same time, audiences are becoming more sophisticated in their responses to narrative. Through a variety of media, they are learning to interact with narrative elements in more complicated ways. They are increasingly aware both of the artificiality of narrative conventions and the possibilities and pleasures of interactive engagement in narrative.

With all this in mind, we might argue that narrative should be seen as a *followable means of communicating experience*, rather than any kind of strictly linear or causal structure; and that closure must be seen as a provisional strategy for the sake of generating local and time-bound meanings, rather than one that actually closes down all alternative possibilities. An alternative definition of narrative in performance, which seeks to take all of these factors into account might therefore be that it is: *a followable, interactive process involving performer(s) and spectator(s), whereby experiences and explorations of time, space, individual cognitions and social interactions are both presented and perceived, such that some sense of 'story-as-a-whole' is communicated, and in which any apprehension of closure may be held as provisional rather than final, thus leaving the way open for further clarifications and alternative outcomes.*

Conclusion

There is no way that narrative, with its preclusive form, can validate a Positivist coordinate system. If we need to believe absolutely that our will is free and that our actions lead to predictable results, we had best not tell or hear stories. (Roemer, 1995: 35)

Looking back over the historical development of theatre, it is possible to see that narrative has always tended to operate in a more-or-less coercive fashion. In the earliest surviving dramas of Western theatre – the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides – we have noted narrative patterns that reflect a strong sense of what are, and are not, appropriate outcomes in any given story-situation. These determinants are dictated by certain views of how men – and gods – are expected to behave, as well as by emerging genre-rules. The morality is often complex, the lessons uncertain. However, latent character flaws are ruthlessly exposed and allowed to drive the protagonists towards their inevitable doom, as audiences watch, moved to both pity and fear. Aristotle later articulated these narrative rules and, in the process, contrived to make them normative and binding, but they were rules that were already very much in operation.

The medieval dramas of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries continued this pattern, constraining their own narratives within a more broadly theological framework, but yet again, showing us characters and events, which could only properly be understood with reference to the inevitable *endgame*, and the local modifications to natural causality within that particular story-universe.

Shakespeare, along with other Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, began to open up the narrative possibilities available to theatre and, specifically, he chose to dramatise the very nature of narrative construction, questioning its claims to transparent authenticity, its authoritative status as a means of portraying ‘reality’. But with the theatre of the Restoration there came a return to the tighter constraints of order and balance, proportion and symmetry. More than ever, narrative outcomes were determined by the required endgame and the mechanisms of plot, which dictated the precise movements towards that endgame.

The emergence of the theatre of ideas (Ibsen, Shaw, Chekhov) at the end of the nineteenth century provided a significant challenge to this mechanistic model of narrative, and this was swiftly followed by a diverse range of experiments ranging from the dream-plays of Strindberg to the Futurists' *synthesi*, in most of which, however, and to varying degrees, it is still possible to discern continuing traces of the narrative process at work.

The performance experiments of John Cage and others, though, marked a decisive turning-point in this development: by opening up the whole area of non-matrixed performance, these experimental pieces – whilst themselves being non-narrative in form – nevertheless pointed the way towards new forms of theatre which would be able to take far greater account of contradictions, of multiplicities, and of audience interventions, whilst still making use of many of the elements of traditional narrative.

For narrative *is* a crucial factor in how we continue to read not just theatre, but life itself. It provides a mechanism for developing our own sense of personal and social identity within a world that would otherwise remain an unsorted, unintelligible mass of impressions and events. It shapes our perceptions of who we are, where we are, and ultimately why we are.

Nevertheless, there is also a growing sense of how much more complicated and fragmented those cognitive processes are than had previously been imagined, and of the fact that our constructed narratives, in particular, might be shaping our experiences of reality, as much as reflecting them. In this cultural setting, the experiments of practitioners like Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson, and of companies such as The Wooster Group, Forced Entertainment, Blast Theory and Stan's Cafe, have a vital role to play in exposing and questioning our expectations of narrative.

In particular, a piece like desperate optimists' *Play-boy* demonstrates one specific way of using and playing with narrative conventions that both feeds and interrogates our thirst for story, as well as acknowledging the fundamental importance of narrative strategies in our grasp upon the world(s) we inhabit. Similarly, Barker's *(Uncle) Vanya* makes use of story, at the same time as it explodes and subverts it, honouring the audience by goading them into making their own moral choices in response to the 'impossible' choices made by the characters.

The deployment of apparently non-causal narratives does not necessarily imply that all moral, or political, debate is now impossible. In fact, the reverse can be said to be true, in that it is possible to demonstrate that the outcomes of more traditional narratives have been so far constrained within the rules of the story-universe and the requirements of the particular endgame, as to distort invisibly the moral arguments contained within them. A significant factor, then, is a growing awareness of the ability of the audience to interact with, and intervene in, the narrative outcomes of any given story.

With all of this in view, it is possible to suggest that narrative will continue to thrive within a postmodern setting, but its operations will almost certainly be more open and less obviously 'geometric'. The presence of multiple narrative spaces and possibilities within a single performance will be seen, not as heralding the imminent death of narrative, but as a reflection of its inherent validity, as a means of intervening in openness. These interventions will be less likely to provide the kind of narrative reassurances of earlier forms, but they will take far greater account of our understanding that stories are constructed at the moment of performance, rather than in the rehearsal room or the study. Audiences will be increasingly required to join the dots, fill in the gaps, and they will also, perhaps, be increasingly ready to encounter narratives that offer a more open-ended form of followability, rather than the easier, but ultimately less satisfactory, option of pre-determined closure – "reckoning closed and story ended".

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