



DO COGNITIVE PREDISPOSITIONS PREDICT OR DETERMINE
LITERARY VALUE JUDGMENTS?
NARRATIVITY, PLOT AND AESTHETICS

by

Nancy Easterlin
Assistant Professor
Department of English
University of New Orleans
New Orleans, Louisiana USA

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Nancy L. Easterlin
Department of English
University of New Orleans
Lakefront
New Orleans, LA 70148

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Within literary studies, there exists very little theory that explores either the basis or purpose of literature from an evolutionary or biological perspective. In one sense this is a curious fact, since it appears logically unassailable and even obvious to suggest that aesthetic artifacts and their functions might best be explained by a knowledge of their producers, that is, of human beings. Though thinkers as removed from one another in time and diverse in philosophical perspective as Aristotle and Shelley have suggested that art develops out of and strengthens the basic nature of human experience, those in the twentieth century who have brought a contemporary scientific perspective to literary theory are few and far between. Theory, like epistemology, has successfully resisted an evolutionary approach, remaining ensconced in an outdated methodological dualism and the abstract methods of the western philosophical tradition.

The resistance to an evolutionarily informed perspective rests on some erroneous assumptions about what such a position implies. Humanists and social scientists lacking any recent background in the relevant scientific research tend to assume automatically that discussions of biological and

cognitive predispositions imply behavioral determinism. As a result of the abuses of evolutionary theory from social Darwinism onward, furthermore, many assume that a biological perspective is not only deterministic but racist and sexist in its determinations.

The answer to the moral and intellectual questions raised by these fears is best provided by scholars like Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, evolutionary psychologists who adopt an adaptationist paradigm. Differentiating their perspective from fitness maximalization, which has assumed that every specific behavior in the present contributes to individual fitness in the service of reproduction, Cosmides and Tooby assert that we share a panhuman psychic architecture adapted to the regularities of the environment in which we evolved. Rather than determining behavior in contemporary environments very different than that of our evolving Pleistocene ancestors, then, domain specific competences enable plasticity in individual response to environmental problems (Cosmides and Tooby 50-62, 113). In short, human behavior is the result of a dynamic relationship between organism and environment, and it makes no sense to couch discussions of human behavior in terms of the traditional binarism of nature vs. nurture, which inevitably tends toward an unwarranted determinism in either case. In the interaction of organism and environment, specific behaviors result from an array of factors. This point of view is essentially that of contemporary sociobiology, which stresses the importance of epigenesis in understanding human behavior and mind. In Charles Lumsden's words, "Epigenesis is a term referring to the total content, and results, of the interaction between genome and environment during development" (Lumsden 259). So-called

epigenetic rules--for example, the universal tendency to construe events causally, a rule whose implications are vital to this paper--guide this process but do not determine outcomes.

The adaptationist approach espoused by Cosmides and Tooby currently dominates evolutionary studies and, in recommending the view that a universal psychic architecture does not prescribe or predict individual behavior, it provides the nuanced perspective necessary for social scientists and humanists who daily face the complexity of real world human behavior and an impressive diversity of aesthetic artifacts. Although, as I have pointed out, few critics are willing or ready to address art from an evolutionary view, a few have begun to do so, including Joseph Carroll, Robert Storey, Frederick Turner, and Alex Argyros in literary studies, as well as Ellen Dissanayake in anthropology.

Because all humans share a psychological architecture, it seems obvious that some of our most enduring artistic forms, modes, and techniques would bear the marks of our fundamental cognitive predispositions. Detailing the manifestations of known cognitive tendencies and aesthetic forms is not my purpose here, however; even to the extent that it is possible to pinpoint such predispositions, it would not be possible to discuss them all in a brief conference paper. Rather, I wish to address the question of my title--do cognitive predispositions predict or determine literary values?--by discussing one particular mode, that of fictional narrative, most specifically as it is manifest in the genre of the novel. My answer to this question, a qualified "no," will be consistent with the adaptationist perspective: though aesthetic forms and modes certainly (perhaps obviously)

reflect cognitive predispositions, the degree to which works express underlying predispositions does not determine or predict the literary value of any given work. In other words, works that are considered valuable or timeless are not those in which normative patterns are most closely reproduced, much less do these works simply instantiate and reinforce those patterns. In a consideration of narrative fiction specifically, the causal frame and the accompanying concept of agency which undergird the novelistic paradigm are products of our innate tendency toward narrativity; nonetheless, the strength of these features in and of themselves provides no guide to the aesthetic worth of any given novel.

Across the humanistic disciplines, the little theory that exists on the relationship between aesthetic worth and human biology, psychology, and behavior tends to endorse one of two positions: 1) that artworks whose form and method is based most demonstrably on biological patterns is superior to that which is not, and 2) that art exists to break up patterns of behavioral response (presumably biologically based), and therefore is most valuable when it deviates from cognitive or behavioral norms. For instance, writing in the 1960s and basing his analysis of visual art on gestalt psychology, Rudolph Arnheim suggests that simplifications of form in pictorial representation are related to the ease with which humans are oriented in the environment based on shapes; following from this, Arnheim posits and that a preference for relative abstraction over realism in representation can be explained by physiological research indicating that "well-organized visual form produces in the visual projection areas of the brain a correspondingly balanced organization," which explains the relationship between "well organized form

and pleasure" (41-15). At this point, Arnheim is attempting to explain visual preferences based on existing artworks; he is not deducing value judgments from a preference that seems biologically based. Later, however, he attacks the abandonment of pictorial organization by twentieth century abstractionists such as Jackson Pollock, asserting that "a concern for unshaped matter is a melancholy surrender rather than the recovery of man's grip on reality" (191). For Arnheim, then, Pollock's aesthetics, divorced from our innate visual preference for structure and form, reinforce modern man's sense of chaos and alienation.

Also theorizing the function of art in the 1960s, Morse Peckham suggests that the human drive to order results in the suppression of much important information, and that it is the role of art to break up behavioral orientations and create new patterns of response. Peckham's theory is based on a somewhat problematic combination of evolutionary theory, gestalt psychology, game theory, and behaviorist psychology, and is concerned with a range of aesthetic media. Whereas Arnheim values structure and form for adaptative reasons, Peckham values discontinuities in form and style for the same reasons. And while Arnheim assumes that the pleasurable experience of organized form is the hallmark of true art, Peckham, suspicious of the mind's default tendencies of organization, emphasizes deviation from pattern as the sign of aesthetic superiority. Significantly, these two critics concern themselves, one exclusively and the other largely, with the visual arts, in which, in contrast to literature, the concreteness of the medium and the obvious predominance of one sense modality (vision) simplify the assessment of experiential response--though this indeed may only lead to deceptively

hasty judgments about merit, which rely too exclusively on perceptual response and ignore more complex cognitive processes. For it is one thing to say that organized form produces pleasure and another to jump to the conclusion that perceptual pleasure should be the sole or even predominant transhistorical, transcultural aesthetic criterion for visual art.

Unlike Arnheim and Peckham, Frederick Turner, in a more recent theorization of the biological basis of art, focuses on literature, asserting the value of classical literary forms and features over modernist methods because of their greater approximation of cognitive predispositions. Turner has conducted experiments indicating that traditional poetic meters stimulate a neurophysiological response responsible for the flow experience akin to that produced in ritual behavior; likewise, he asserts the value of plot, since it combines right and left hemispheric activity and connects these with the rewards of the limbic system (Classicism 61-105; 21-22, 24, 50). Turner eschews free verse and antinarrative modes in favor of formalist poetics and narrative on grounds very similar to Arnheim's argument against abstractionism in painting--the excesses of modern and contemporary forms reproduce alienation and fragmentation in developed cultures already suffering from lack of unity. Indeed, Turner is forthright about his commitment to the healing and redemptive potential of formalist poetics and plot-based organizations. In Turner's words, "plot promotes and exercises the relations between cortical world construction and limbic reward . . . Suffice it to say here that the modernist tendency to dispense with or demote plot may have been a grave mistake" (Classicism 21-22). Whether artistic methods that work against the grain can erode our fundamental

predispositions, as Turner here implies, is a question to which I'll later return.

In asserting that art's approximation of perceptual and cognitive patterns or its divergence from these patterns provides a guide to aesthetic considerations, these analyses are perhaps not so radically opposed as they are two sides of the same coin. They all assume biologically and behaviorally based patterns have a place of high significance in value judgments, though one commentator looks on such patterns skeptically, while the other two posit that their reinforcement is the basis of an authentic art. The adaptationist view, which stresses that behavior arises in the interaction of organism and environment and is guided by a broad array of psychic mechanisms--this view, combine with the insights of cognitive psychology, would tend to imply that neither is unilaterally true. First, flattering our innate cognitive modes may produce brain rewards that are in some respects psychologically healthy; on the other hand, such brain rewards were perhaps more adaptive to our Pleistocene ancestors than to modern men and women who live in a much different, rapidly changing environment. Psychological adaptations can prove to be constraints or limitations just as surely as they are enabling mechanisms. Second, the vast array of psychological adaptations combined with developmental and environmental variations indicates that the reproduction of a single cognitive pattern is unlikely to have an overarching significance within the real complexity of human cognition. Simply put, many other things, both formal and substantive, are going on in the mind of one viewing a painting or reading a poem than responding to a visual or metrical organization, so the liberative or

restrictive force of any single factor is mitigated by a host of others--including, for example, color, texture, and detail in painting, and sound, semantic content, figures of speech, and the like in verse. Third, the creation, development, and transformation of any artistic form or mode greatly influences the reception and understanding of aesthetic artifacts, and therefore warns us against reductive statements about biological pattern. Those who have identified biologically based patterns underlying the arts make a vital contribution to our knowledge of artistic behavior and human cognition, but beyond the recognition that biological patterns and divergence from them are characteristic of artworks, such research can tell us little about aesthetic worth. In the evaluation of works of art, there are, in short, too many factors that come into play.

It is worth noting that all three of the scholars discussed above focus on the significance of biologically based form rather than content. But particularly in discussions of literature, others like the anthropologist Robin Fox have discussed the biologically based content of stories and myths, such as the universally demonstrable competition between younger and older males. With respect to aesthetic considerations, the questions to be asked about this approach are similar to those about biologically based form: How greatly does this theme predominate over the full meaning of the story, and to what extent does the predominance of this theme correlate with judgments about the story's worth and value? Although such story lines and themes will not be discussed here, I would suggest that their function is similar to that of biologically based forms: while they supply human norms which are essential to the arousal of audience interest --indeed, at a fundamental

level, to invite audience comprehension-- their presence does not predict or determine the value of a given work.

For the remainder of this paper, I will narrow my focus to a discussion of narrativity as a cognitive mode and, following this, its relevance to fictional narrative. This will prevent arguing in generalizations and allow me to focus on individual works; discussions of art in general are most certainly doomed by their inability to address the complex and crucial differences between unlike media. Indeed, even when considering a single mode in a single medium, the issues are still imposingly complex.

In the past twenty years, research in cognitive psychology, philosophy of mind, and linguistics has significantly modified our notions of human cognition. While traditional objectivist semantics sought to explain meaning in terms of the satisfaction of truth conditions of logical propositions, contemporary research points increasingly to the fact that human thinking is essentially nonpropositional and nonlogical (in the formal sense of that term). Schema theory, a branch of cognitive psychology, suggests that many of our generalized knowledge structures are not categories but gestalt-like entities; for instance, story, script (event), and scene schemas based in experience--the restaurant script, the classroom script--guide our thinking and are far more easily remembered than taxonomies (Schank, Mandler). Consistent with this, philosophers and linguists suggest that the fundamental structure of our thought as reflected in language is not propositional but based in metaphors derived from our bodily experience which tend to concretized the abstract (Lakoff and Johnson; Johnson). These theorists speculate that the expression "I'm feeling down" derives from the physical

drooping posture of the depressed state.

In all of this recent literature, narrative thinking is probably the most widely discussed, because apparently the most basic, cognitive predisposition. Although some psychologists skirt the issue of the biological basis of narrativity, language acquisition theorists suggest that narrative thinking and the desire to share in the family's stories prompt infant language acquisition. Far from being produced by language and cultural ideology, as some current literary theorists, including Catherine Belsey and Anthony Easthope, assert, narrative is a primary mode of mentation that apparently precedes language acquisition in human development (Bruner, Lloyd, Carrithers). Children, in short, learn to construe events in a linear fashion, to identify causal relationships before they can speak. Apparently, the role of narrative is indispensable in human mental and social life; events and mental states are not only given meaning by plot, but the construal of action and thought in narrative facilitates the retention of these phenomena in memory (Mandler). Moreover, one of the single most important features of narrative is rooted the human propensity to think causally, a fact so consistently observable that E.O. Wilson identifies it as an epigenetic rule (Ruse, in Fetzer 262). Literary theorists who assert that linear organization inheres in capitalism or the patriarchy notwithstanding, we are apparently biologically predisposed to look for causes and effects in the world around us, and thus construe actuality in a linear fashion.

How, then, do we define narrative? Poststructuralist theories of narrative have been justly criticized for failing to define the term properly; those of us promoting an alternative theoretical perspective had

best not fall into the same trap (Livingston). The most basic feature of narrative is linearizing, a feature clearly connected to causal thinking, or to what Alexander Argyros identifies as the basic structure of narrative, the causal frame of actor-action-object (Argyros 310). Bruner's definition of narrative is consistent with this; narrativity is, in his words, as the ability to organize actor, action, goal, scene, and instrument into a sequential story. But as Dan Lloyd points out, it is possible to construct narratives that do not have all the elements Bruner mentions, to wit:

"During the thaw, a sheet of ice on the roof loosened and fell. It struck a parked car, cracking the windshield." Though hardly the stuff of great novels, this nonetheless seems to be a narrative. Yet it unfolds without human agency . . ." (Lloyd 225). Lloyd himself argues that narratives conform to three constraints, two formal and one semantic: the representations of narrative are singular and affirmative, they give information about the temporal ordering of events, and they represent events as dependent upon one another (Lloyd 219-221). Thus, the following does not meet the normative conditions of narrative: A person not named Peter McNamara, bearing no physically precise features, did not get out of bed, did not shave, did not watch the cat sleep on the sports section of the morning paper as he did not try to read it, and did not get stuck in the floodwaters not driving his car to work. And yet, notice that in reading this antinarrative, our mental habit is to recast it in the affirmative and reconstruct a linear sequence it repeatedly denies.

Because narrative is not amenable to precise definition, Lloyd suggests that it should be referred to as a texture rather than structure, for to make

affirmative statements about specific subjects and to organize them in a linear and causal fashion hardly represents a structure. Narrativity, the ability to construe agents and actions in an extended linear sequence, is the foundation of human folk psychology, that is, of our ability to infer the desires and intentions of others, to know our own desires and intentions and to act in the pursuit of long-term goals; at the same time, it is a cognitive mode or texture rather than a precise, rule-governed sequential structure, like a sentence (Lloyd 219).

As we move from the basis of narrative thinking in cognitive science to literary theory, what we see immediately is that a generalized, primary mode of mentation like narrative contributes little to our understanding of genres and forms, for it is such a basic way of thinking that it cuts across all literary categories. Since narrative is a primary means of making sense of things, logic suggests that it would be a pervasive and fundamental element of literary works, the authors of which, more than nine times out of ten, aim for coherence. And this is in fact so. Even if we assume that the arts are cognitively rewarding--a point of view I share with those theorists whose work I'm now questioning--we should be skeptical about our ability to pinpoint the exact cognitive rewards artworks provide. But it is another question to ask if the replication and reinforcement of our primary mode of mentation should be promoted as an aesthetic value. Narrative thinking has real shortcomings, including a tendency to prefer causal reasoning when other methods are equally or more precise, and we are lucky enough to have other cognitive modes, including the analogical and the logical, to counterbalance or correct over-eager linearizing (Lloyd 216).

One conclusion we might draw from the research exploring the primacy of narrative thinking is that literature adopting the causal frame as its basis of organization will be not necessarily better but more accessible than, say, works primarily organized around extended metaphors. Those of us who teach literature know that this is certainly so; untrained students who can easily follow the sequential events of a story have no idea how to interpret a literary metaphor. And if we consider the popular novel (not to mention television and film), we'll be reminded that subgenres focusing fundamentally on plot, the feature of literature derived from our propensity for narrativity--a pattern or structure of events linked by chronology and causality--are the subgenres that sell: romance, science fiction, thriller and horror novels. The manipulation of the causal chain in literature is hardly threatened with extinction. Clearly, we can't get rid of plot in literature anymore than we can get rid of narrative thinking in life; but just as clearly the implication that strong plotting is inherently connected with high cognitive rewards or literary values is dubious.

However, in contrast to the nineteenth century classics and to today's popular genres, twentieth century literary works frequently eschew plot as a primary mode of organization, though narrative organization remains pervasive at some level. Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway and James Joyce's Ulysses, though concerned with the accumulations of events and distortions of time in the mind, nonetheless make affirmative statements about specific agents, unfold chronologically and exhibit causality, though the causes of events may be more complex and less certain than in the paradigmatic realist novel. Likewise, postmodern antinarratives depend not only upon narrative thinking,

but upon stereotypical patterns of cause and effect within subgenres of the novel for their effects; Thomas Pynchon and Paul Auster, in writing detective stories that go nowhere, where no number of clues ultimately adds up to a coherent sequence of events and unravels the truth behind a mystery, invoke the reader's knowledge of the complex connections and pattern of enlightenment normative to the detective novel. To appreciate having the detective novel turned on its head, we must be able to think in terms of the detective novel's strong linear progression. Similarly, Donald Barthelme, primarily a parodist, invokes fictional as well as nonfictional discursive norms to break the rules of narrativity. Thus in "The Policeman's Ball," Barthelme shares the the cabbie's thoughts about basketball as he drives the policeman and his date to the ball:

Why do they always applaud the man who makes the shot?
 Why don't they applaud the ball?
 It is the ball that actually goes into the net.
 The man doesn't go into the net.
 Never have I seen a man going into the net. (62)

This nonsequitor announces the disruption of narrative, and its humorous effects depend upon our normative expectation of narrative order, as well as life experience suggesting the unlikeliness of such thoughts in cabbies.

Have critics of the twentieth century judged wrongly in valuing works highly that do not have a strong narrative organization? If one thing can be said of literary genres, change and transformation is of their essence, as it is demonstrably not of biological predispositions. Because of the growing complexity of our technology, our understanding of the universe and the human mind, citizens of the twentieth century are less apt to construe the world in

terms of clearcut causes and effects. Writers, in turn, do not create worlds that operate according to such rules when they no longer believe in them, and critics and professors do not promote works that they judge to be false or simplistic imitations of the world in which we live. Reflexive postmodern fiction, whether exuberantly decadent or actually critical of our generic and psychic norms, attests to the deeply entrenched narrativity that pervades literature; without this, such fictions would be, quite simply, nonsense. Thus, although biological predispositions such as narrative form a necessary substrate of literature, value judgments are relative not to that substrate but to the state of the culture's beliefs and the course of a genre's development. Postmodern antinarrative does not threaten to undermine narrative fiction, for parody always works against an author, style, form or genre strong enough to be mocked trenchantly. Postmodern antinarrative mocks the conventions of novelistic realism, perhaps both reinforcing and transforming the genre as it does so.

What antinarrative does to our capacity for narrative thinking, however, is a far different question. Turner suggests a direct link between the psychic results of commonsense narrativity and those of antinarrative fictional techniques:

By narrative . . . we tell ourselves the story of ourselves and thus learn how to be a coherent and effective self. The story is the central operation by which we are able to love and to work. Certain types of mental illness might well be characterized as lesions in the narrative capacity. The inability to see other people's point of view, and the inability to string moments of time together in a valuable and meaningful way, are characteristic of a certain type of narcissistic or borderline personality which is now showing up in the therapists' waiting rooms. It also shows up in the characters and implied narrators in deconstructive postmodern fictions by the likes of Raymond Carver and Anne Beattie. (35)

But I question Turner's implicit conclusion that the fictional representation of nihilism, malaise, and psychic distress is psychically and cognitively damaging to readers. A short story or a novel is a fictional world, and fictional worlds are not determinate realities, and because of this our feelings, beliefs, desires, and judgments in fictional experience are not consistent with those of real life (Currie 105-106, 196-198, 207). In Gregory Currie's words, "The response to fiction is a complex product of make-believe and judgments about the work that do not occur within the work at all" (Currie 119). What Currie is saying here can, I think, be extended to our understanding of imaginative experience and commonsense cognitive modes. That is, the psychological and intellectual impact of narrative or antinarrative material on a human being depends upon the form of the experience, with the indeterminate and ambiguous range of imaginative experience allowing for greater flexibility in response over direct experience. A reader's immersion in Raymond Carver's fictional world is controlled by his concern with a narrow range of experience, occupation, and socioeconomic class, as well as by the brevity, stylistic precision, and frequent satire of his technique; the stories counsel against being taken as life messages or global comments on late twentieth century man, even if Robert Altman reduced them to such cliches. Similarly, if I were to believe I was Thomas Pynchon's character Oedipa Maas, following a trail of undecipherable clues to the heart, possibly, of an impenetrable conspiracy, I would doubt my own agency and the causal frame of my reality. But the world Pynchon creates is too unlike mine for me to make this mistake, and this is not the result of specialized training. Elaborate conventions of

make-believe are part of human folk psychology; those who confuse make-believe with actual life are folk psychologically insane. By contrast, if I were to go through a day where my coffee shot up in a fountain out of my cup, my husband spoke to me in gibberish, my calls to colleagues were consistently rerouted to a secret society, and my tennis balls disappeared into the backboard, I would come to doubt the causal frame of reality and the efficacy of human agency--either that, or I'd lose faith in my own sanity. (I'd certainly stop paying all that money for tennis lessons.) While our commonsense narrativity has a straightforward application to daily life, its relation to a fictional world is more ambiguous, shifting, and flexible.

The extent to which we expect narrative organization in a fictional world depends upon the cues an author gives, and the successful realization of that world depends greatly on how well that author follows his or her own cues. Narrative thinking serves as a vital frame of reference for our understanding of literary fiction in any case. Narrativity, in fact, makes it possible for us to understand when a weakened sense of causality and human agency is central to the value of novel--in other words, when a weakened sense of narrativity contributes to novelistic aesthetics.

Nadine Gordimer's July's People, published in 1981, is just such a novel. The story takes place in South Africa at an unspecified time in the near future. Bam and Maureen Smales and their children have fled the city, presumably Johannesburg, where civil war has broken out, and are under the protection of their servant July in his rural tribal village. Because the Smales' are under his protection in a community that doesn't exactly welcome them--that does not understand urban life and sees them, understandably, as

nothing other than a potential source of danger and trouble--power relations have changed utterly, but in ways no one fully understands or can adjust to. The primary drama of the novel revolves around the Smales's attempts to recover two stolen items, first the keys to their jeep, and second a gun they had hidden in the thatch of the hut. This drama is carried out in arguments between Maureen and July, where mounting tensions and puzzling, angry dialogue reveal a lack of communication so great that no one comprehends the depth of misunderstanding. Finally, desperate and intent on her own survival, Maureen Smales runs into the bush toward what she hopes is the sound of a helicopter, leaving her husband and children behind. Such as it is, this is the plot of July's People.

Of course, there is a causal sequence in the novel and we can trace the results of human agency--July's appropriation of the keys results in an argument and thus the early signs of deterioration of (a probably illusory) mutual trust. But to focus on plot in this novel would mean overlooking Gordimer's significant psychological and technical achievement. This short novel of one hundred and fifty pages is divided into numerous short sections--fragments rather than chapters, as John Cooke points out. Causal and thematic links have been left out intentionally; likewise, the lack of transitions between scenes as well as between and within points of view contributes to the realization of an utterly disorienting fictional world, in which the disintegration of language and of the norms of novelistic realism mirror the loss of a comprehensible world along with any perception of control over it.

Gordimer places the reader right in this disjunctive experience on the

novel's first page by simply presenting the first scene without a narrative introduction to the fiction situation:

You like to have some cup of tea?--

July bent at the doorway and began that day for them as his kind has always done for their kind.

The knock on the door. Seven o'clock. In governors' residences, commercial hotel rooms, shift bosses' company bungalows, master bedrooms en suite--the tea-tray in black hands smelling of Lifebuoy soap.

The knock on the door

no door, an aperture in thick mud walls, and the sack that hung over it looped back for air, sometime during the short night. Bam, I'm stifling; her voice raising him from the dead, he staggering up from his exhausted sleep.

No knock; but July, their servant, their host, bringing two pink glass cups of tea and a small tin of condensed milk, jaggedly-opened, specially for them, with a spoon in it. (1)

Gordimer moves from July's opening question into an impersonal narrative voice that cryptically presents the situation of white to black--their kind doing for our kind--and then, without transition, moves into Maureen's fragmented thoughts. Maureen's thoughts are so disjunctive from the first page of the novel that they do not rightly constitute a perspective or point of view; we have glimpses of things in her head, but nothing ever so unified as a way of interpreting or understanding her situation. Maureen Smales, whose sense of self depends upon her life as a privileged urban white and on her memories of childhood as the mine shift bosses' daughter, has already lost her frame of reference for selfhood at the novel's beginning. Already dehumanized, she becomes explicitly animal by the novel's close:

She runs. She can hear the laboured muttering putter very clearly in the attentive silence of the bush around and ahead: the engine not switched off but idling, there. The real fantasies of the bush delude more inventively than the romantic forests of Grimm and Disney. The smell of boiled potatoes (from a vine indistinguishable to her from others: promises a kitchen, a house just the other side of the next tree. There are patches

where airy knob-thorn trees stand free of undergrowth and the grass and orderly clumps of barberton daisies and drifts of nemesia belong to the artful nature of the public park. She runs: trusting herself with all the suppressed trust of a lifetime, alert, like a solitary animal at the season when animals neither seek a mate nor take care of young, existing only for their lone survival, the enemy of all that would make claims of responsibility. She can still hear the beat, beyond those trees and those, and she runs toward it. She runs.

In addition to the overt comparison with a solitary animal, Gordimer's shift into the present tense and repetition of Maureen's singleminded action (she runs . . . she runs) emphasize the frantically instinctual (though surely misguided) nature of her flight.

If Maureen Smales does not have a perspective in this novel, Nadine Gordimer does, and I have known many readers who protest at the pervasive antihumanism of her view. Characters in this novel act with consistency, given their situation, but there is no sense of self-coherence or complexity of character underneath this, for very good reason--the breakdown of communication within a structure of shifting power-based relationships erodes individual agency, just as clearly as this social confusion frustrates positive courses of action. But if the purpose of this novel is to take systematic apartheid to its psychosocial conclusion, then narrative realism, with its demand for psychologically coherent characters and well-ordered plot based on the development of a central conflict and its resolution, is not only a problematic but an impossible generic mode for telling the story. Furthermore, the consistency of Gordimer's fragmentary, disjunctive style and organization of the novel forestalls the humanistic sympathy that realism typically elicits; in forcing us to confront a chaos humans have created, her method not only works, but works better than that of a novel like Burger's

Daughter, which mixes realistic techniques and assumptions with a disjunctive style in an incompletely unified approach.

Thus, the biological substrate of narrative, out of which we've evolved the literary concept of plot, is not crucial to the realization of a novel as a unified entity. On the other hand, a novel like July's People only works because of our inherent tendency to think narratively. One way to understand Gordimer's novel, in fact, is as a dramatization of the breakdown of narrativity, for, unable to comprehend the beliefs, desires, motives, and actions--the folk psychologies--of each other, the characters lose their own sense of agency, action, and selfhood. Whereas Donald Barthelme is primarily interested, as a parodist, in subverting literary conventions such as plot for the pleasure of disrupting literary expectations, Gordimer minimizes plot and dramatizes the breakdown of narrativity to depict the erosion of humanity under extreme social conditions. These two writers, then, have divergent aims in their antinarrative methods: if the pleasure of Barthelme's text inheres in the witty disruptions of convention, the pleasure, so to speak, of Gordimer's book is the result of a precise literary method that depicts the fragmentation of experience, her demand that the reader reassemble this experience, and her ruthlessly honest vision.

It could be argued that the works of Barthelme and Gordimer, representing extremes in purpose and subject matter, are exceptions that prove the rule that strong plot forms the predominant literary value for aesthetic judgments. Yet there are many novels describing worlds both more mundane than Gordimer's and more real than Barthelme's which display a weakened sense of causality and agency. Marilynne Robinson's Housekeeping

and the novels of Anita Brookner are not framed by the extreme social and cultural conditions that serve as the fundamental context for Gordimer's work, nor are they celebrations of the subversions of literary norms. Yet their narrators and characters generally fail to take clear and decisive action, to identify the causes of things, and to interpret the meaning of events. I would argue in any case that this is a legitimate perspective to adopt in a novel, as it is a legitimate response to life; it is also, however, as I think Turner rightly suggests, an outlook that often just appears trendy. Importantly, both Brookner and Robinson write self-consciously out of strong generic conventions--for Brookner, that of the novel of manners, and for Robinson, those American conventions of the novel as a romance defined by the theme of man in the wilderness, and its female counterpart, the popular domestic novels of the nineteenth century. The manipulation and transformation of these conventions, combined with an underlying conviction that the world does not organize itself in discernible causes and effects, gives these novels substance and force.

In the middle of Housekeeping, Robinson's narrator, Ruthie, relates the story of being lost in the woods for the night with her sister during her adolescence. Raised by an eccentric aunt, a transient, in a family whose history is full of unexplained ruptures, Ruthie crosses a threshold at this point:

I simply let the darkness in the sky become coextensive with the darkness in my skull and bowels and bones. Everything that falls upon the eye is apparition, a sheet dropped over the world's true workings. The nerves and the brain are tricked, and one is left with dreams that these specters loose their hands from ours and walk away, the curve of the back and the swing of

the coat so familiar as to imply that they should be permanent fixtures of the world, when in fact nothing is more perishable. (116)

Despite the stylistic beauties here, Robinson is not asking readers to share Ruthie's epistemological skepticism, for the conditions of her upbringing are extreme and bizarre. But though we recognize the distinction between Robinson's fictional world and our everyday reality--or perhaps because we recognize this difference--it is possible to see this novel as a profound meditation on the unstable nature of human domesticity.

Human narrativity makes fiction possible, but the literary manifestation of narrativity in plot cannot serve as a standard for judging novelistic worth. Literary history, generic conventions, and cultural and sociopolitical realities, along with a generalized predisposition for formal organization, form just part of the matrix in which aesthetic values and value judgments are made. Rather than proscribe an organization for fiction, narrativity makes possible the development of diverse styles and techniques for the communication of diverse experiences and themes. This is in keeping, I believe, with the view that epigenetic rules orient human beings rather than determine behavioral outcomes. A novel is the product of a human behavior, of putting pen to paper; the weakening of the causal chain in twentieth century literature attests, perhaps, to a recognition that our primary epistemic process--and, by extension, the generic conventions built upon it--has real limitations. To know this about ourselves may force us to cope with complexities we'd rather not address, but paradoxically, to know it is to gain, experientially and literarily, the measure of our freedom.

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