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Narrative Theory's *Longue Durée*

In 1958 – roughly the same time that *narratology* began to emerge as a coherent intellectual project in France – the historian Fernand Braudel offered a broad account of what he called the *longue durée*, a scale of historical reckoning that exceeded the historian's traditional focus on the “short span” and the singular event: “For the historian, accepting the *longue durée* entails a readiness to change his style, his attitudes, a whole reversal in his thinking, a whole new way of conceiving of social affairs.”¹ Where, in other words, the glamor of the moment, the evidentiary illusion of cause and effect, and the blunt but deceptive force of the singular event had distracted historians from the deep rules and patterns that underwrote social experience over a definite if definitely protracted span of time (“its delusive smoke fills the mind of its contemporaries”), looking to the *longue durée*, to temporal intervals that exceed both the pull of the passing crisis and the seductive, speaking example of the individual life, could allow the historian to grasp unconscious patterns and tacit rules that really limit and condition social experience.² The point is not to deny the existence or the significance of the single event: Braudel's argument is rather that looking at the same stuff – a political revolution, a certain style of painting, apparently sudden shifts in the price of grain or coats or mobile phones – from the perspectives of very different but ultimately related temporal scales gives us a better sense of what those events and their contexts might at last mean: “For nothing,” he writes, “is more important, nothing comes closer to the crux of social reality than this living, intimate, infinitely repeated opposition between the instant of time and that time which flows only slowly.”³

Seen in this light, Braudel's argument for the *longue durée* is itself a theory of narrative, an effort to understand how different moments, people, and events come together both for the individual historian and for entire societies to form intelligible – which is to say *narratable* – wholes. Braudel's effort to draw our attention to the methodological as well as the ideological importance of scale is thus also an effort to call our attention to the different, the

more or less accurate, and the sometimes incommensurate narrative techniques with which the historian, the political leader, or the ordinary citizen can make the matter, the facts, the stuff of history *mean* something; it makes us aware, in other words, that different and seemingly opposed aspects of the same events can be revealed when we consider those events from different narrative perspectives, when we differently order and accentuate events in relation to other events as well as to apparently whole, if wholly different, stories.⁴ In order to understand the immanent and essential complexity of history, we need thus to acknowledge the historical and conceptual specificity of the tools, the methods, and the narrative perspectives we bring to bear on that history. We need to reflect on *how* we narrate the *what* of what really happened.

Although there's a lot more to say about Braudel's influential account of historiographic method as a potent if implicit theory of narrative, I'm more interested here in what it might mean to use Braudel's terms to see narrative theory from the point of view of different but related historical scales – to see it, on the one hand, as a “short-span” institutional event and, on the other, as an embedded and eloquent expression of rules and unconscious assumptions that quietly structure the *longue durée* out of which it emerges. I'm interested, in other words, in seeing narrative theory not only as a way to analyze the work of historians but also as a historical event in and of itself. Narrative theory is thus both a more or less transhistorical method that helps us understand how discrete events, both real and imaginary, can be brought together to create significance in almost any narrative from almost any period of time (as an analytical method, it seems somehow to float *above* history) as well as an embedded historical set of practices that can themselves be understood as events that are differently significant at different levels of scalar abstraction. Seen from this other, longer perspective, what narrative theory ultimately *means* will depend on how we choose to manage its relation to other events and other histories. As with any historical event, narrative theory exists simultaneously at the level of the short span and the *longue durée*. What should that mean for what we can and can't say about narrative theory? What, in other words, are the different scales at which narrative theory – seen both as a methodological innovation and as an institutional event – might make different kinds of sense?

Taking the short view, most critics trace the mid-century emergence of narrative theory as a more or less coherent discipline to technical innovations derived from a pair of earlier intellectual movements: Russian Formalism and structuralism. On the one hand, in an effort to delimit that which was specifically *literary* about literary narratives, the Russian Formalists put forward a distinction between the *what* and *how* of a given narrative,

referring to them as *fabula* and *sjuzhet* (others use the analogous pair *story* and *discourse*). Distinguishing between the real or imagined events that make up a given narrative and the particular way in which those events are arranged by that narrative allowed writers like Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Eichenbaum, Boris Tomashevsky, and others to *defamiliarize* the aesthetic strategies and conventions that make a particular narrative association of event and representation or story and discourse possible. On the other hand, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's founding distinction between the two necessary aspects of the linguistic *sign*, between the *signified* and the *signifier* (private concepts and the public forms those concepts take when linguistically expressed), provided early narrative theorists with a rigorous and seemingly timeless semiotic architecture with which to articulate, advance, and ground their analyses of particular narratives as well as narrative structure in general. If the individual sign could be better understood when seen heuristically as a relation between private concepts and their public expression, perhaps narratives could also be better understood when seen heuristically as a relation between real or imagined events and their material expression – as, once again, *story* and *discourse*.

As a result of this specific twentieth-century synthesis of formalism and structuralism, early and later theorists of narrative could develop and consolidate what remains one of narrative theory's necessary postulates: that narrative is a specific relation between story and discourse; it is, in other words, a specific relation between the real or imagined events that a narrative represents and the particular ways in which particular narratives in fact represent those real or imagined events. Narrative theorists have again and again recognized the rough centrality of this formula: Gérard Genette writes that “if one agrees, following convention, to confine oneself to the domain of literary expression, one will define narrative without difficulty as the representation of an event or sequence of events, real or fictitious by means of language and, more particularly, by means of written language.”⁵ Marie-Laure Ryan notes that “most narratologists agree that narrative consists of material signs, the discourse, which convey a certain meaning (or content), the story, and fulfil a certain social function.”⁶ For Jonathan Culler, “there is considerable variety among these traditions, and of course each theorist has concepts or categories of his own, but if these theorists agree on anything it is this: that the theory of narrative requires a distinction between what I shall call ‘story’ – a sequence of actions or events, conceived as independent of their manifestation in discourse – and what I shall call ‘discourse,’ the discursive presentation or narration of events.”⁷ And Monika Fludernik acknowledges that “the story vs. discourse distinction perhaps constitutes the most basic of all narratological axioms.”⁸

Seen from this perspective, narrative theory is perhaps best understood as an enormously powerful and professionally situated analytic technique, as a set of descriptive terms and tools that allow us to break narratives down into their component parts in order to see how they fit together in ways that follow and sometimes transgress norms that generally govern the association of story and discourse. What, though, if we accept this indisputable short-span account of narrative theory while supplementing it with a somewhat longer view? What would it mean to see narrative theory within the context of another, more capacious and perhaps speculative historical frame? What would it mean to look past the short span to narrative theory's *longue durée*?

I want to make two claims for narrative theory's *longue durée*. First, we can perhaps see narrative theory taken in its local and technical sense (it is the systematic analysis of the relation between story and discourse) as one evocative expression of a longer intellectual history that in turn depends on an embedded conceptual infrastructure that both conditions and limits the terms of our varied relations to our own *longue durée*. More to the point, I want to make the case that, seen not as a merely technical distinction between narrative levels but rather as a broadly philosophical effort to understand why events come to mean what they do, narrative theory is an important expression of an older and deeper but ultimately still contingent endeavor to understand the nature and the production of social values – a contested and often political endeavor that reaches back at least to Aristotle and could include figures such as St. Augustine, Geoffrey Chaucer, Miguel de Cervantes, Jane Austen, Hegel, George Eliot, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Henry James, Max Weber, Hannah Arendt, and others. Starting with narrative theory and its effort to understand how discrete or “raw” events find significance in narrative discourse, we might be able to see better how a similar question – what allows an isolated fact to take on the status of a shared value, what allows the raw stuff of life to appear to us and to others as something significant – links together a number of other signal moments in a broad but still discrete intellectual history. What's more, seeing narrative theory in the context of an expansive but nonetheless historically limited *longue durée* might help us at once understand its powerful and seemingly universal methodological appeal and at least imagine the historical and political limits of that appeal. After all, and among other things, looking to the *longue durée* helps us understand how ideas that feel necessary at one level of abstraction can reveal themselves as wholly contingent at another.

The second claim is about narrative theory as opposed, or rather in addition, to its various historical contexts. Turning back from narrative theory's *longue durée* to narrative theory itself, we will see that, in addition to its considerable technical power, there is perhaps a quiet

political force, a desire, and even a pathos to narrative theory that is sometimes obscured by its rightful status as a formidable and efficient approach toward the structural analysis of story and discourse. Turning back from the *longue durée* to the practice of narrative theory, we might, in other words, ask *why* individuals try at different moments in time to understand narrative; we might also ask *why* it seems at some times more than others urgent to understand how stories work. Some of the most potent expressions of narrative theory are also efforts to confront what stories can and can't do for us. Some of our most powerful theories of narrative are theories of the historical and practical limits of narrative's capacity to account for things as they are. Because it would be impossible in so short a space as this essay to tell so long a tale, I will instead look at just a few of its scenes in order both to broaden our sense of what might count – in a strong sense – as narrative theory and, perhaps, to gesture toward some of the unconscious beliefs or rules that tacitly structure narrative theory and a lot more.⁹

We might begin by looking all the way back to one of the first systematic works of literary analysis, Aristotle's *Poetics*. Although it addresses a number of different aspects of specifically tragic narratives, the *Poetics* is at bottom a theory of plot, which Aristotle takes as the structural and affective heart of any successful tragedy: "the first essential, the life and soul, so to speak, of tragedy is the plot."¹⁰ For Aristotle a plot is not simply what happens in a given tragedy; it is the particular way in which the events of that tragedy – the riddle of the Sphinx, the blinding of Oedipus, Antigone's burial of her disgraced brother, Polyneices – are ordered, arranged, and accentuated. A tragic plot is, in other words, a generically specific configuration of real or imagined events and the representation of those events (it is both *story* and *discourse*), and the *Poetics* is an early – maybe the earliest – example of a systematic narrative theory. Aristotle offers a technical and deceptively muted definition of tragic plots:

We have laid it down that a tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete in itself, as a whole of some magnitude; for a whole may be of no magnitude to speak of. Now a whole is that which has beginning, middle, and end. A beginning is that which is not itself necessarily after anything else, and which has naturally something else after it; an end is that which is naturally after something itself, either as its necessary or usual consequent, and with nothing else after it; and a middle, that which is by nature after one thing and has also another after it. A well-constructed plot, therefore, cannot either begin or end at any point one likes; beginning and end in it must be of the forms just described.¹¹

Aristotle's focus on a tragedy as an ordered imitation of a whole action is notable for a few reasons. First and most immediately, his understanding of a plot as an ordered mimetic representation once again anticipates the distinction between the *what* and the *how* of a given narrative. Second, because he acknowledges what is more or less "well-constructed" about a particular plot, he calls tacit attention not only to the shaping intention of the author but also to the possible and perhaps inevitable existence of other, differently constructed versions of the same plot. This would have been especially clear to Aristotle because the tragedies he considered were almost always specific and, as it were, competing discursive representations of a few familiar legends. Because audiences seeing Sophocles' tragedies would already have been familiar with the basic "facts" of Oedipus' case, they and Aristotle would have been acutely aware that the value of any single performance was as much about the *how* as about the *what* of a given version. And because an audience member would already have known the story, he or she would have been free to attend comparatively to the discourse – or, rather, to the specific relation between story and discourse that structures a given tragedy.

Third, as becomes clear in the *Poetics*, the importance of construction wasn't only a matter of aesthetic design for Aristotle; to order real, fictional, or legendary events in one as opposed to another manner was tacitly to argue about the *meaning* of those events: "The plot in fact should be so framed 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; which is just the effect that the mere recital of the story in Oedipus would have on one."¹² The point is that the whole plot should have at least as much of an effect on an audience as the events that the plot contains. It is the arrangement of real or imagined events – once again, discourse as opposed to story – that allows tragic narrative to do the work it does so well.

Seen as an account of story and discourse, Aristotle's *Poetics* is thus not only a narrative theory *avant la lettre* but also a narrative theory that makes clear the difficult relation between the nuts and bolts of narrative technique – the discursive representation of real or imagined events – and the question of value in a broader and perhaps more critical sense. To confront Sophocles' unique discursive rendering of Oedipus' well-known story was not only to see a master technician at work; it was also – and this is of course the point of Athenian tragedy – to confront essential questions about the essential and informing mystery of things. The great classicist Jean-Pierre Vernant argues that Athenian tragedy addresses the simultaneous and only apparently incoherent social experience of two different orders of time: "The drama brought to the stage unfolds both at the level of everyday existence, in a human, opaque time made up of successive and limited present moments, and also

beyond this earthly life, in a divine, omnipresent time that at every instant encompasses the totality of events, sometimes to conceal them and sometimes to make them plain but always so that nothing escapes or is lost in oblivion.”¹³ For Vernant, this tension between what he calls “the time of men and the time of the gods” is what gives tragedy its capacity to reflect deeply on questions of fate and free will. What feels and indeed is contingent from any situated human perspective must also and at the same time seem fated to the gods. For Hannah Arendt, “This paradox, that greatness was understood in terms of permanence while human greatness was seen in precisely the most futile and least lasting activities of men, has haunted Greek poetry and historiography as it has perturbed the quiet of the philosophers.”¹⁴ It is the necessary difference between those nonetheless necessary aspects of one and the same narrative that gives tragedy its emotional and explanatory force.

Vernant goes on to relate this essential aspect of tragic form to a disorienting moment within Athenian political history, a moment at which, increasingly, secular legal innovations existed uncomfortably alongside older beliefs in the direct presence and legislative power of the gods. Tragic forms thus “reveal disagreement within legal thought itself and also betray its conflicts with a religious tradition and moral thought from which the law is already distinct but whose domains are still not clearly differentiated from its own.”¹⁵ Put differently, the narrative relation between story and discourse, between individual events and what those events might mean when seen as differently related from one or another perspective, might be taken as a structural expression of a more fundamental question: From what perspective or in terms of what narrative can or will the things that happen to us be made to make sense? Why is this political situation, this society, this world one way and not another? Beginning with Aristotle, we see that the narrative relation between story and discourse might be seen as part of something larger: a culturally embedded and historically specific effort to understand why things happen and what they might come to mean over time.

We could then turn to another, later figure less often associated with but no less important to the development of narrative theory, the philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Although it might seem rash to skip over so many years and so many important and intervening figures – St. Augustine, Chaucer, Dante, Corneille, Racine, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Herder, Defoe, Rousseau, Austen, and so on – turning to Hegel makes sense both because his work stands as one influential answer to Aristotle’s tragic theory of plot and conflict in the *Poetics* and also because that work turns on and expands the consequence of a specifically narrative distinction between discrete historical events and what those events might mean when considered from the point of

view of some larger and more coherent discursive arrangement. Hegel's theory of history, which extended from the very smallest to the very largest events that history contained, depends on what we might see as a perspectival difference – Hegel might say a *dialectical* relation – between individual events and what sense those events might make when seen as part of a whole discursive arrangement. Put in our terms, to understand history and our place in it, one needed a theory of narrative, which is to say an account of the meaning-making relation between story and discourse. Hegel's early turn to narrative (or, rather, to a comparative theory of narrative) should be seen partly as a result of historical events – the French Revolution, the rise of European nationalism, the emergence of Romantic ethnography – that made it necessary to think differently and seriously about the fact that other people, other nations, other social classes can and do make different, competing, and nonetheless coherent narratives out of one and the same set of events. To understand how the same events, the same story, could be differently represented in different discursive arrangements required a narrative theory. It was, as I will suggest, partly Hegel's deep commitment to narrative that made it possible and even obvious for subsequent critics to look to narrative as an autonomous object of study as well as a potent way to understand life, history, and ourselves.

What was it about the French Revolution that encouraged Hegel to develop and to rely on a prescient theory of narrative? The French Revolution had an effect on Hegel in part because of how it began and ended – because, in other words, of how it seemed to succeed or fail as a whole and, as it were, Aristotelian plot. The early enthusiasm of the French Revolution, its overthrow of a seemingly intractable *ancien régime*, and its initial promise of universal *liberté, égalité, and fraternité* seemed to Hegel and many others not only to inaugurate a set of specific political and democratic improvements but also to embody an Enlightenment ideal of radical human freedom that could transcend specific political oppression and, more broadly, natural necessity. If, however, the Revolution began in hope, it quickly collapsed into what Hegel took as the disappointment of the Terror, the late period of the Revolution during which thousands died under the guillotine. This period of violence ended Hegel's hopes for the Revolution and, indeed, hastened the collapse of the revolutionary government and the concomitant rise of Napoleon as the emperor of France and, for a time, much of the world. A question thus emerged: Was it possible to save or to recuperate the promise of the Revolution's beginning in spite of its end? Would it be possible to see the failed narrative of revolutionary promise as, in fact, just one part of a much larger and longer narrative of progress and hope? What would it do to see the Revolution not only as an isolated if enormously

consequential event but also as an expression of an order that Braudel would later call the *longue durée*?

The point is that, where the Revolution seemed to begin in 1789 as an event that would make sense of much that had come before, its collapse in 1793 threw the ultimate significance of that event into question. Where the Revolution had seemed at its beginning like an organic part of a shared and unfolding Enlightenment plot, it seemed at its end like a repudiation of order and, perhaps, of narrative itself. The apparent failure of revolutionary promise thus led Hegel to a kind of crossroads: Did one give up on a whole sense of history, on its immanent significance, or did one instead look for terms in which or, rather, a perspective *from* which to account for what seemed unaccountable? Was it possible, as Georg Lukács put it in *The Historical Novel*, “to demonstrate the necessity of the French Revolution, to show that revolution and historical development are not opposed to one another”?¹⁶ Was there, in other words, a way to see the Terror not as an exceptional failure but more as an event that would, in time, be revealed as an important if bloody part of a larger narrative of human liberation? Philosophy thus appeared for Hegel as a possible narrative response to a time that had been put out of joint. Rebecca Comay writes that “This is why the French Revolution will remain the burning center of Hegel’s philosophy: the event crystallizes the untimeliness of historical experience. The task of philosophy is to explicate this untimeliness.”¹⁷ Or, as Fredric Jameson puts it, “The experience of defeat of the various revolutionary movements in this period has a paradoxical consequence: it does not discourage its followers theoretically, but rather intensifies their attempts to conceptualize that mysterious historical moment which is the passage from one system to another.”¹⁸ The question Is it possible to resolve the local contradictions of the past and the present in terms of some larger process or narrative? provides one important and influential basis of Hegel’s project and its reliance on a particular and broadly influential theory of narrative. On the one hand, to see history as the unfolding and inexorable resolution of conflicts and contradictions that made the past is a theory of history and, perhaps, a kind of faith. On the other hand, to see different scales of history (the short, the long, the longest) as perspectives from which exactly the same events will look entirely different – as, in other words, levels of discursive abstraction capable of fundamentally *revaluing* those same events – is a narrative theory in a rigorous and technical sense.

We could, then, perhaps look forward to three later figures, each of whom was responding to Hegel’s narrative turn and who also had a direct influence on early theorists of narrative such as Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, and Gérard Genette. Where, however, Hegel looked to narrative as a way of

ultimately and hopefully resolving the apparent disconnect between discrete and sometimes tragic events and history as a rational and progressive whole, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud all call attention to the limits as well as the strengths of a narrative approach toward history and life. In *Freud and Philosophy*, Paul Ricoeur famously cast Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as an unwitting but more-or-less coherent “school of suspicion.”¹⁹ Suspicion takes different forms in each of the three. For instance, Marx’s account of history as a history of class struggle depends on the idea that different classes have different stories to tell about the way things are, and that the goal of criticism is to strip those ideologically driven stories down until we reach something like a base. Hayden White writes that “the relation between the form and the content of any social phenomenon in any specific historical situation, Marx argues [...], is a product of a conflict between specific class interests as they are envisaged and lived by a given class.”²⁰ And Jameson writes as follows:

The most influential lesson of Marx – the one which ranges him alongside Freud and Nietzsche as one of the great negative diagnosticians of contemporary culture and social life – has, of course, rightly been taken to be the lesson of false consciousness, of class bias and ideological programming, the lesson of structural limits of the values and attitudes of particular social classes, or in other words of the constitutive relationship between the praxis of such groups and what they conceptualize as value or desire and project in the form of culture.²¹

Put differently, particular classes will arrange the materials of life into narratives that more or less reflect or support their interests insofar as those interests are defined against those of other, competing classes; they will of necessity order the same events, the same story, into discursive arrangements that support and further their interests as a class. Criticism, in that case, is the effort not only to compare those narratives but also to understand the total conditions and relations – the particular “mode of production” – that made them possible in the first place (the young Marx famously called for “a ruthless criticism of everything existing”). Criticism is to see past the different narratives that classes use to make events make sense for them and, perhaps, to see, once and for all, the events themselves. As Marx and Engels put it in *The Communist Manifesto*, “All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.”²²

Like Marx, Nietzsche looks to narrative both as a source of delusion and as a way critically to resist bad ideas about things as they are. For instance, in

his “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life,” Nietzsche offers an account of history and historiography as a context between different attitudes toward both narrative and life. As opposed to the two main schools of historical reckoning – a “monumental history” that preserves the past and distorts life in the service of a status quo and an “antiquarian history” that values the past over the present and thus chooses death over life – Nietzsche offers “critical history” as the kind of history that can best deal with life as it really is: “In order to live, [the critical historian] must possess, and from time to time employ, the strength to shatter and dissolve a past; he accomplishes this by bringing this past before a tribunal, painstakingly interrogating it, and finally condemning it. But every past is worthy of being condemned – for this is simply how it is with human affairs: human violence and weakness have always played a powerful role in them.”²³ To live is not to obscure the past and the present in exchange for the comforts of one or another narrative; it is to see both that we cannot narrate away what is tragic or painful about life and that, even so, we cannot live without narrative. As opposed to Marx, who broke narratives down in order to see events as they really are, Nietzsche both recognizes our limited, “human, all too human” reliance on narrative and celebrates the paradoxical freedom of this forked condition: if we have to narrate the stuff of life to understand life and if we know that those narratives will always be *more or less* untrue, we can at least recognize that fact and choose what narratives we will. Jacques Derrida characterizes this position as “the joyous affirmation of the freeplay of the world and without truth, without origin, offered to an active interpretation.”²⁴ This tragic tension between the will to narrate and narrative’s necessary limits is the critical knowledge or, as Nietzsche puts it in *The Birth of Tragedy*, the Dionysian wisdom required in order to be able truly to live.

Like Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud built a theory of great complexity around a basic human need to narrate, a need to put life’s events into order. Freud’s lifelong project, psychoanalysis, is in its way also a historical project, the effort to understand how the past, present, and future of an individual life might add up to something significant and thus legible. Patients traveled to Freud’s office in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Vienna when it seemed that their lives no longer held together – when they could not understand their pasts, manage their relations with others, or parse how their incomplete understanding of self and desire appeared in the at-times-debilitating form of neurotic symptoms. In response to this inability to make sense, Freud encouraged his patients to talk, to free-associate, to cast their feelings, experiences, and anxieties in linguistic or, we might say, textual forms. This is why one of Freud’s earliest patients referred to psychoanalysis as a “talking cure”; if it worked, it worked because it encouraged

both analyst and patient to narrate, to read, and perhaps to revise the memory of past events in relation to the present and future. This therapeutic and critical reliance on talk, on stories, on narrative is one that stretches from the beginning to the end of Freud's work, from his first efforts to encourage his patients to make sense of their lives and problems by talking about them to his late reflections on the relation among beginnings, middles, and ends that drove his wildest and most disturbing reflections on the interminable and essential conflict between the forces of life and death. Indeed, many of Freud's most important concepts rely on an implicit theory of narrative form: the idea that a child must pass more-or-less "successfully" through oral, anal, phallic, and genital stages of development; that the Oedipal scene is a threshold or narrative middle that everyone needs somehow to cross; that the story of psychosexual development is only meaningful because its infantile beginning is separated from its mature end by the middle barrier of what he calls the "latency period"; that an obscurely narratable process allows the ego to emerge out of the chaos of raw biological instinct; and that there is an idiosyncratic path that we all must follow, in our own way, on the way from life to death. In each of these cases, Freud imagines human life as a partial and inherently fraught process of arranging the latent events of individual and collective human lives in a more or less significant and manifest discursive form.

Given world enough and time, we could look to many other figures who would both fit into and cast light on what I'm imagining as narrative theory's *longue durée*. We could look to St. Augustine, who writes in the eleventh book of the *Confessions* that "when a true narrative of the past is related, the memory produces not the actual events which have passed away but words conceived from images of them, which they fixed in the mind like imprints as they passed through the senses."²⁵ Or to Chaucer's reflections on the structure of tragedy in the prologue to "The Monk's Tale." Or to Cervantes's embedded reflections on the comparative power and limits of romance as opposed to realism in *Don Quixote*. Or to Jane Austen's thoughts on the narrative efficacy and sufficiency of "3 or 4 Families in a Country Village."²⁶ Or to Henry James's many reflections on the narrative relation between life and form in the prefaces to the New York edition of his novels: "Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so."²⁷ Or to the sociologist Max Weber, who sought to define culture as an informing and fragile relation between a society's facts and the shared and tenuous values that a community might derive from and impose on those facts: "The concept of culture is a value-concept. Empirical reality becomes 'culture' to us because and insofar as we

relate it to value ideas. It includes those segments and only those segments which have become significant to us because of this relation to value."²⁸ It is, in other words, only when we agree to see empirical social facts within a shared and informing discursive frame – a narrative – that those facts can take on value, significance, meaning.

This last example is especially useful because Weber makes clear something I take as implicit in all the figures I've discussed: the idea that the relation between things and what things might mean, between facts and values, cannot – when seen from the perspective of the *longue durée* – be taken as given. Indeed, Weber claims, in "Science as a Vocation," that the conditions of our "disenchanted" modernity (secularization, technological advance, the tyranny of exchange, and so on) have undone our old ability to agree on shared discursive frames in which to understand even the basic facts of existence; this is what he and other figures important to this story – Georg Simmel, Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin – took as the "tragedy of culture." Weber goes on to suggest that even death, that most obviously meaningful of events, seems to have lost its immanent narrative value; we now catch "only the most minute part of what the life of the spirit brings forth ever anew, and what [we] seize is always something provisional and not definitive, and therefore death is for [us] a meaningless occurrence. And because death is meaningless, civilized life as such is meaningless; by its very 'progressiveness' it gives death the imprint of meaninglessness."²⁹ Weber bases his thinking about the changing narrative status of death in a discussion of Tolstoy's novels. And, indeed, his idea about the modern dissolution of the specifically narrative significance of life and death returns again and again in more and less technical terms in later discussions of narrative and the novel: in, for instance, Lukács, Benjamin, Kristeva, Barthes, and Genette. In Benjamin's great essay "The Storyteller," he writes,

Yet, characteristically, it is not only a man's knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life – and this is the stuff that stories are made of – which first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death. Just as a sequence of images is set in motion inside a man as his life comes to an end – unfolding the views of himself in which he has encountered himself without being aware of it – suddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges and imparts to everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him. This authority is at the very origin of the story.³⁰

And, in Genette's *Narrative Discourse*, a work that more or less set the terms for narrative theory as we now know it, he dwells on the exceptional, almost anti-narrative status of Proust's representation of the death of

Marcel's grandmother and the mourning that followed: "Above all it is not characterized, and it will remain not characterized: we will never, even retrospectively, know anything of what the hero's life has been during these few months. This is perhaps the most opaque silence in the entire *Recherche*, and, if we remember that the death of the grandmother is to a great extent a transposition of the death of the author's mother, this reticence is undoubtedly not devoid of significance."³¹ Garrett Stewart makes a similar point in explicitly narrative-theoretical terms: "This is the narratological hold death has over any text. The idea of death, otherwise known as the sense of an ending, becomes the inevitable incarnation of plot in the world of sheer story, the imposition of discourse on the course of random account, of form on the amorphousness not of death but of life without it."³² Put differently, for a certain kind of culture and for the narratives that give that culture meaning, death served to give individual lives and life in general what Frank Kermode calls "the sense of an ending," a discursive form that helped retroactively to shape the raw stuff of story into something significant.

In these terms, death is not only a social and biological fact but also proof of a symbolic order that for a long time seemed successfully to underwrite and to inform culture; it was one of the structures or rules that allowed life to make sense. For Weber, Benjamin, Genette, and others (Hegel, Tolstoy, Lukács, and so on), modern life and its various disenchantments seemed to undermine death's narrative capacity to impose discursive order onto the stuff, the facts, the raw story of life. We should, in these terms, see death as an evocative example of what can happen to ideas that structure a *longue durée*. Braudel writes, "Some structures, because of their long life, become stable elements for an infinite number of generations: they get in the way of history, hinder its flow, and in hindering it shape it. Others wear themselves out more quickly."³³ Weber and the others were, I think, trying to capture a moment at which an idea that had been necessary to the larger structure of the *longue durée* had begun to "wear itself out." I want to suggest – and I can't do much more than that – that these various figures, all of whom look like narrative theorists from the perspective of narrative theory's *longue durée*, begin to theorize narrative, which is to say the relation between story and discourse, when its status as a self-evidently preminent social form is under threat. If death can wear itself out, then why not story and discourse? If, in other words, Weber and others imagine that death can lose or has lost its ability to order life, to shape story into discourse, that is proof less of death's reduced place in a given cultural imaginary than of limits that were always already immanent to both it and the narratives it helped shape. All of that is simply to say that, seen from the perspective of the *longue durée*, narrative theory is not

only a descriptive account of how narratives work; it is also, at its best, a confrontation with the historical limits of narrative to order experience, to make facts into values, to turn story into discourse. And all of that is, in turn, to say that when we begin to see narrative theory as deeply historical, as an event that reflects, however obscurely, the immanent logic of one and not another *longue durée*, we see not only that its terms and explanatory reach have their own limits but also that narrative theory is at its best when it is able to address those limits, when it is able to see what narrative can't do, when it is able, however quietly, to see or to imagine a time or a world that would look beyond story and discourse for its significance. A critical theory is a theory capable of reflecting on limits necessary to its basic assumptions about how things work; seen from the perspective of the *longue durée*, narrative theory is, indeed and at its best, a critical theory.

Notes

1. Fernand Braudel, *On History*, trans. Sarah Matthews (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 33. Although the structural analysis of narrative had been going on for a decade or more, the term "narratology" first appeared in Tzvetan Todorov, *Grammaire du Décaméron* (The Hague: Mouton, 1969).
2. Braudel, *On History*, 27.
3. *Ibid.*, 26
4. For a classic account of how the expectations that come along with different narrative genres affect the telling of history, see Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, new ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).
5. Gérard Genette, "Frontiers of Narrative," in *Figures of Literary Discourse*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1982), 127.
6. Marie-Laure Ryan, "Toward a Definition of Narrative," in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. David Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 24.
7. Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 169–170.
8. Monika Fludernik, *Towards a "Natural" Narratology* (London: Routledge, 1996), 333.
9. Some of what follows is adapted from arguments I make in Puckett, *Narrative Theory: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
10. Aristotle, *Poetics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 2: 2321 (1450b).
11. *Ibid.*, 2: 2321–2322.
12. *Ibid.*, 2: 2326
13. Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York, NY: Zone Books, 1988), 43.
14. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (London: Penguin, 2006), 45–46.

15. *Ibid.*, 25.
16. Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah Mitchell and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 28.
17. Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 5.
18. Fredric Jameson, "In Hyperspace," *London Review of Books* 37, no. 17 (September 10, 2015): 17–22.
19. See Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970).
20. Hayden White, "The Problem of Style in Realistic Representation: Marx and Flaubert," in *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1957–2007*, ed. Robert Doran (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 180.
21. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 281–282.
22. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in *Collected Works*, 50 vols. (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1976–2004), 6: 496.
23. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Volume 2: Unfashionable Observations*, trans. Richard T. Gray (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 106–107.
24. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (New York, NY: Routledge, 1995), 292.
25. Saint Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 234.
26. *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. Deirdre Le Faye (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 287.
27. Henry James, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* (New York, NY: Scribner's, 1937), 5–6.
28. Weber, quoted in Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (London: Humanities Press, 1981), 18.
29. Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London: Routledge, 1970), 140.
30. Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3., ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 151.
31. Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 108.
32. Garrett Stewart, *Death Sentences: Styles of Dying in British Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 194–195.
33. Braudel, *On History*, 31.