Incremental Perturbation: How to Know Whether You've Got a Plot or Not

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Storytellers, it goes without saying, tell stories. Fiction writers write them, playwrights and screenwriters script them, opera singers sing them, ballet companies dance them, mimes mime them. But what's a story?

Damned if I know, for sure. "A whole action," says Aristotle in effect in his *Poetics*, "of a certain magnitude." "A meaningful series of events in a time sequence," say Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. "That which is extracted from a novel to make a movie," says William H. Gass.

Yes, well. But . . .

Most working writers of fiction—myself included when the muse and I are at it—operate less by articulated narrative theory than by the hunch and feel of experience: our experience of successfully (sometimes unsuccessfully) composing, revising, and editing our stories and, prerequisite to that, our experience of the tens of thousands of stories that all of us audit, read, spectate, and more or less assimilate in the course of our lives. In his 1984 Hopwood Lecture at the University of Michigan, Norman Mailer confessed his tendency "to mumble about technical matters like an old mechanic." "Let's put the thingamajig before the whoosits here," said Mailer, "is how I usually state the deepest literary problems to myself." Me too.

But it's another matter when, as teachers of novice fiction writers and coaches of more advanced apprentices in the art, we find ourselves in the position of trying to explain to them and to ourselves why the manuscript before us, whatever its other merits, lacks something that we've come to associate with stories, and is in our judgment the less satisfying for that lack. "Gets off on the wrong foot," somebody in

the room may opine. "Something askew in the middle there." "The ending bothers me."

Okay: But exactly what about the beginning, the middle, the ending fails to satisfy? What keeps the thing from achieving proper storyhood? Sigmund Freud remarks that he didn't start out with such peculiar notions as the Oedipus complex; he was driven to their articulation by what he was hearing from the psychoanalytical couch. That's how I feel with respect to dramaturgical theory.

WHAT'S DRAMATURGY?

In my shop, *dramaturgy* means the management of plot and action; the architecture of story, as distinct from such other fictive goodies as language, character, and theme. Be it understood at the outset that mere architectural completeness, mere storyhood, doth not an excellent fiction make. Every competent hack hacks out complete stories; structural sufficiency is hackhood's first requirement. On the other hand, about a third of Franz Kafka's splendid fictions, for example, and a somewhat smaller fraction of Donald Barthelme's, happen to be "mere" extended metaphors rather than stories—metaphors elaborated to a certain point and then, like lyric poems, closed—and they are no less artistically admirable for that. More typically, however, the productions of these two writers, unconventional as may be their material and manner, are rigorously conventional in their dramaturgy. Kafka's "Memoir's of the Kalda Railroad" and Barthelme's "Bone Bubbles" are examples of nondramatic extended metaphors; "A Hunger Artist," "A Country Doctor," by Kafka and "The Indian Uprising," "Me and Miss Mandible," by Barthelme (and most of the rest) are classically constructed stories.

The fact is that most of the fiction we admire is admirable dramaturgically as well as in its other aspects. If we admire a piece of prose fiction despite its nonstoryhood, we are, precisely, admiring it despite its nonstoryhood. Even the late John Gardner—by all accounts a splendid writing teacher despite his cranky notions of "moral fiction"—used to advise, "When in doubt, go for dramaturgy." Amen to that.

Back to Aristotle: The distinction between plot and action can be useful to what we might call clinical dramaturgical analysis, since a story's problems may lie in the one but not the other. As a classroom exercise, one can summarize the story of Sophocles' Oedipus the King,

for example, entirely in terms of its plot with little or no reference to its action: "A happily married and much-respected head of state comes to learn that his eminent position is owing to his having unwittingly broken two major-league taboos, and in a day his fortunes are reversed." Clearly, any number of imaginable sequences of action might body forth that summarized plot. One then proceeds to examine for efficiency and effect the particular sequence chosen by Sophocles to do the job. Indeed, one may summarize the drama contrariwise, entirely in terms of its action with little or no reference to its plot: "A delegation of Theban elders complains to King Oedipus that a plague has fallen upon the place. The King sends his brother-in-law to the Delphic oracle to find out what's going on. That emissary returns with news of the gods' displeasure. The chorus of elders sings and dances apprehensively," et cetera.

Aristotle's stipulations that the action be (1) "whole" and (2) "of a certain magnitude" can be at least marginally useful, too: A "whole" action includes everything necessary to constitute a meaningful story and excludes anything irrelevant thereto. Got that? "Of a certain magnitude" means that the action of fiction ought not to be inconsequential, however much it might appear to the characters to be so. But if we ask, What's the meaning of meaningful? or, What do you mean by consequential? it turns out that meaningful means "dramaturgically meaningful" and consequential means "dramaturgically consequential," and around we go (likewise with Brooks and Warren's "meaningful series of events," even without their redundant "in a time sequence"). One is tempted to go back to Mailer's "whoosits" and "thingamajig"—but these preliminary distinctions and definitions are worth bearing in mind as we try to spiral out of their circularity, mindful that what we're interested in here is not "mere" theory but practical dramaturgy: applied Aristotle.

THE CURVE OF DRAMATIC ACTION

Not all fictive action is dramatic, either in the colloquial sense of "exciting" or in the practical sense of advancing the story's plot. And drama, to be sure, involves character and theme and language as well as action, although it's worth remembering that the Greek word *drama* literally means "deed," an action performed by a character, and that Aristotle declares in effect that it's easier to imagine a drama without characters than one without action, the without-which-nothing of

story. Dramatic action is conventionally described as rising to some sort of climactic peak or turning point and then falling to some sort of resolution, or denouement. In short, as a sort of triangle—not really of the isosceles variety sometimes called "Freytag's triangle" after the late-nineteenth-century German literary critic /\; but more like a stylized profile of Gibraltar viewed (in left-to-right cultures, anyhow) from the west /\; a ramp, let's say, which the story's rising action rather gradually ascends to a peak and then precipitately descends (punch lines are normally shorter than their jokes). Add to this ramp a bit of an approach and a bit of an exit -/_ and you've graphed the ingredients of story as conventionally formulated: exposition (the information requisite to understanding the action, or, as I prefer to put it, the "ground situation": a dramatically voltaged state of affairs preexisting the story's present time); conflict (or, in my shop, the introduction of the "dramatic vehicle": a present-time turn of events that precipitates a story out of the ground situation); complication (of which more presently); climax; denouement; and wrap-up (the little coda, closing fillip, or dolly-back shot often appended to the denouement like a jazz drummer's "roll-off" at the end of a number, and usually suggestive of what the story's completed action portends for the principal characters).

Seems arbitrary, doesn't it, this curveless classic curve: an uncomfy-looking bed of Procrustes upon which the action of fiction must be stretched or chopped to fit, or else. Or else what? Why not a story whose action graphs like this \/\/‾ or this \/‾‾‾ or that tracks more or less like Laurence Sterne's diagrammed flourishes of Uncle Toby's walking stick in *Tristram Shandy* \/\/\/\- or that simply flat-lines start to finish ______? In fact, that question touches a genuine mystery, in my opinion—and, of course, one can readily point to stories like the aforementioned *Tristram Shandy* that appear to proceed aimlessly, randomly, anyhow un-Aristotelianly; that digress repeatedly while in fact never losing sight of where they're going: up the old ramp to their climax and denouement. For practical purposes, however, the matter's no more mysterious than why one doesn't normally begin a joke with its punch line, a concert program or fireworks display with its piéce de rèsistance, a meal with its chef d'oeuvre, a session of lovemaking with its orgasm: Experience teaches that they simply aren't as effective that way, and "the rules of art," as David Hume

remarked, are grounded "not in reason, but in experience." Edward Albee has declared his preference for stories that have a beginning, a middle, and an end, "preferably in that order." Quite so—once one allows for another classical tradition, this one best articulated not by Aristotle but by Horace in his *Ars Poetica*: the tradition of beginning in medias res, in the middle of things rather than at their chronological square one. To tell the story of the fall of Troy, says Horace, we need not begin ab ovo ("from the egg" laid by Leda after her intercourse with Zeus-in-the-form-of-a-swan, and from which hatched, among others, fair Helen, whose face launched a thousand ships); we might begin not even with the opening hostilities of the Trojan War itself, but rather—like Homer—in the ninth year of that disastrous ten-year enterprise, and then interstitch our exposition retrospectively as we proceed.

In other words, the dramaturgical beginning need not be, and in fact seldom is the chronological beginning, and a story's order of narration (or a play's order of dramatization) need not be the strict chronological order of the events narrated. Dramatic effect, not linear chronology, is the regnant principle in the selection and arrangement of a story's action.

ISOMORPHS

Apprentice story makers may need reminding, however, that the world contains many things whose structure or progress resembles ("is isomorphic to" has a nice pedagogical ring) that of traditional dramaturgy. I have mentioned jokes, concert programs, pyrotechnical displays, multicourse meals, and lovemaking when things go well; one could add coffee brewing (an old percolator of mine used to begin my every workday with a rising action that built to a virtual percolatory orgasm and then subsided to a quiet afterglow), waves breaking on a beach—you name it, but don't confuse those same-shapes with stories. In truth, such isomorphism can be seductive. Many an apprentice piece hopefully substitutes the sonority of closure, for example, for real denouement; the thing sounds finished, but something tells us—a kind of critical bookkeeping developed maybe no more than half-consciously from our lifetime experience of stories—that its dramaturgical bills haven't been paid. Similarly, mere busyness in a story's middle does not necessarily advance the plot; an analogy may be drawn here to the distinction in classical physics between effort and work. Dramatic action, as afore-established, need not be "dramatic," although a little excitement never hurt a story; it does need to turn the screws on the ground situation, complicate the conflict, move us up the ramp. Otherwise, it's effort, not work; isomorphic to storyhood, perhaps, but not the real thing.

SO HOW DO WE TELL?

By never again reading your own stories or anybody else's—or watching any stage or screen or television play—innocently, but always with a third eye monitoring how the author does it: what dramaturgical cards are being played and subsequently picked up (or forgotten); what way points (and how many, and in what sequence) the author has chosen to the dramaturgical destination, and why; what pistols, to use Anton Chekhov's famous example, are being hung on the wall in act one in order to be fired in act three. By learning to appreciate the often masterful dramaturgic efficiency of an otherwise merely amusing TV sitcom, for example, while on the other hand appreciating the extravagance-almost-for-its-own-sake of François Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Maybe even by reciting like a mantra the definition of *plot* that I once upon a time concocted out of the jargon of systems analysis: the incremental perturbation of an unstable homeostatic system and its catastrophic restoration to a complexified equilibrium.

COME AGAIN?

With pleasure. The "unstable homeostatic system" is that aforementioned ground situation: an overtly or latently voltaged state of affairs preexisting the story's present time; one that tends to regulate itself toward equilibrium but is essentially less than stable (otherwise there could be no story). The Montagues and the Capulets have been hassling each other in Verona for a long time: a taunt here, a street scuffle there, but nothing the two families can't absorb; the city of Thebes appears to be doing quite satisfactorily under its new king, who fortuitously routed the Sphinx and married the widowed queen (somewhat his elder) after the old king was mysteriously slain at a place where three roads meet; et cetera: no ground situation, no story, however arresting the action to come, for it is its effect upon the ground situation that gives the story's action meaning. On the other hand, if the system merely continues on its unstable homeostatic way, there'll be no story either. One more dustup between Mercutio and Tybalt? Another child born to Oedipus and Jocasta? What else is new?

"And then one day," as the narrative formula puts it, the dramatic vehicle rolls into town: Young Romeo Montague falls for young Juliet Capulet, and vice versa; a murrain descends upon Thebes and environs and is determined to be owing to the gods' displeasure at the unsolved murder of old King Laius. Because most stories originate in some arresting experience or event—wait'll you hear what happened to me last night!—it's a common failing of apprentice fiction to be more interesting in its action and characters than in its theme and its ultimate sense, to launch an arresting or at least entertaining (potential) dramatic vehicle—a UFO lands on Fred and Mildred's patio one Sunday morning—without a clearly established and thought-through ground situation, as ripe as Shakespeare's Verona and Sophocles' Thebes for . . .

INCREMENTAL PERTURBATION . . .

Which is to say, for the successive complications of the conflict. The star-crossed lovers declare their love, but . . . That crazy old prophet Tiresias reluctantly claims that Oedipus himself was old King Laius' murderer. The conflict complications comprising a story's middle may in some cases be more serial than incremental: One can imagine rearranging the order of certain of Don Quixote's sorties against reality or of Huck and Jim's raft stops down Old Man River without spoiling the effect. Even in those cases, however, the overall series is cumulative, the net effect incremental; the unstable homeostatic system is quantitatively perturbed and reperturbed, until . . . In the most efficiently plotted stories, these perturbations follow not only upon one another but from one another, each paving the way for the next. In what we might call a camel's-back story, on the other hand, the complicative straws are simply added, one by one, as the story's middle performs its double and contradictory functions of simultaneously fetching us to the climax and strategically delaying our approach thereto. In both cases, however—as Karl Marx says of history and as one observes everywhere in nature—enough quantitative change can effect a comparatively swift qualitative change: The last straw breaks the camel's back; one degree colder and the water freezes; at some trifling new provocation, the colonies rebel. Here's how we'll arrange your tryst, guys: Juliet'll take this little potion, see, and then . . . You say the ditched baby had a swollen foot, like, uh, mine? And that the uppity old dude I wasted back at that place where three roads meet was actually . . . ?

So how many perturbatory increments does a story need? Just enough: Too few leads to unconvincing climax, faked orgasm; too many is beating a dead horse, or broken camel. And how many are just enough? Just enough—although one notes in passing the popularity of threes, fives, and sevens in myths and folk stories.

The climax or turn, when it comes, happens relatively quickly: It's catastrophic in the mathematicians' "catastrophe theory" sense—a comparatively sudden and consequential effect triggered by comparatively small incrementations, like an avalanche, or the click of the thermostat—whether or not (as Aristotle prescribes) it involves the fall of the mighty from the height of fortune to the depths of misery. Even in the most delicate of epiphanic stories, the little insight vouchsafed to the protagonist (or perhaps only to the reader), the little epiphany that epiphs, does so in a comparative flash—and, for all its apparent slightness, is of magnitudinous consequence.

Which consequence we measure by the net difference it effects in the ground situation. Like some pregnancy tests, the measurement is only one-way valid: If nothing of consequence about the ground situation has been altered, no story has been told; the action has been all effort and no work. If the ground situation has unquestionably been changed (all the once-living characters are now dead, let's say), then a story may have been told. The follow-up test is whether that change—be it "dramatic," even melodramatic, or so almost imperceptible that the principals themselves don't yet realize its gravity—is dramaturgically/thematically meaningful, in terms of what has been established to be at stake. The "equilibrium" of a story's denouement is not that of its opening: The surviving Capulets and Montagues are sadder but perhaps at least temporarily wiser in the "glooming peace this morning with it brings"; the lovers, however, are dead. Order may reign again in Thebes, for a while anyhow, under Kreon's administration; but Jocasta has hanged herself, and Oedipus has stabbed out his eyes and left town. It is an equilibrium complexified, qualitatively changed even where things may appear to all hands (except the reader/spectator) to be back to normal.

Otherwise, what we have attended may have its incidental merits, but, for better or worse (usually worse), it's not a story.