THE NATURE of Narrative

FORTIETH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

ROBERT SCHOLES
JAMES PHELAN
ROBERT KELLOGG

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REVISED AND EXPANDED

ROBERT SCHOLES
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In Memory of
Robert L. Kellogg
(1928–2004)

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Contents

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Preface to the Second Edition by Robert Scholes

Forty years is a long time for an academic book to remain in print—especially one written by a couple of brash young scholars with no academic standing to speak of. But that is the case of the present volume. The book began in discussions between Bob Kellogg and myself about a sophomore course we had invented at the University of Virginia, in which we spent a year covering narrative literature from Homer to Joyce. We taught the course more than once and used to walk home together talking about it nearly every day. The book emerged from those classes and those conversations—and from the studying the course required on our parts, which was considerable.

In some ways, we were the ideal people to have done such a course. Kellogg had gone to Harvard for graduate study, driven by an interest in James Joyce. Since he was a thorough person, he started his studies with the middle ages—and never emerged from them. When we met he was working on Old Icelandic literature in particular, but his mastery of both medieval European literature and literary modernism was impressive. I had gone to Cornell, partly because their graduate program allowed for a concentration in the novel as a genre, which was quite rare in the 1950s. My MA thesis and doctoral dissertation were in twentieth century American and English fiction, but my training covered the novel as a whole, and at Virginia I taught everything from eighteenth century British fiction

to twentieth century American. Together, Bob and I had more historical range in narrative literature than any single person our age could have had.

We had been talking about collaborating on a book for a while, when I won a year's fellowship to the Humanities Center at the University of Wisconsin in Madison with a proposal for studying the history and theory of narrative literature. This opportunity meant that I would try to draft as much of our projected book as I could, leaving gaps for Bob to fill using knowledge that I didn't have. Deep in my own past were five and a half years of Latin study in the public schools of Garden City, NY, and I undertook to learn at least the rudiments of ancient Greek while in Madison. Bob knew a number of the languages of medieval Europe, and we both knew some modern languages. Neither of us knew Russian, but I had taken a year-long course in the Russian novel with René Wellek as an undergraduate. So, we had the basics.

At Madison I was able to pick the brains of a number of senior scholars ranging from Marshall Claggett, a specialist in medieval science, to Germain Brée, a scholar of modern French literature, and this was an enormous help to me. In the Humanities Center, Marshall Claggett, who was then Director of the Center, asked me if there were any books the Center could get that would help my studies. I gave him a list of some Loeb Classics—ancient Greek and Latin texts with facing English translations—and he mused on it for a while, finally saying that he thought the Center should have a complete set. A few weeks later I helped him unpack and shelve such a set, which was an great aid to my work, since I could find key passages quickly in the English texts and then study the Greek or Latin original more carefully, making my rusty Latin and rudimentary Greek functional in this way.

Well, I drafted my chapters, and Bob edited them, and then he drafted two (on the oral heritage of modern narrative and meaning in narrative) and I edited those. In this way the book got written, and ultimately published by Oxford. Nearly thirty-five years later Bob and I happened to sit opposite one another at a dinner, where

we decided to see if our publisher was interested in a second edition. They were, and we planned it, but the work went slowly, and then Bob died. He was a fine scholar, a great human being, and a dear friend. His death meant the death of the edition as well as far as I was concerned, since I did not have the heart to go on alone. But time eases such pains, and our publisher was very patient, so, after a while, I began thinking about how the book might be revised.

Reading the book over again after so many years, I was impressed by how much those brash young men had read, remembered, and pondered. They knew things that I do not know now, and they had thought about them in ways no longer available to me. Situated firmly in its own time, the book seemed to resist revision to the point of impossibility. The *Nature of Narrative*, after all, had helped to create the field of narrative studies, and I had extended my own thinking on narrative in such other books as *The Fabulators, Structuralism in Literature, Structural Fabulation, Fabulation and Metafiction, Textual Power*, and *Paradoxy of Modernism*. Many other scholars had also entered this field, producing rich and powerful studies on both the theoretical side and the historical side—scholars like Bakhtin, Todorov, Genette, Barthes, and McKeon, to mention only a few of the most obvious. Yet *The Nature of Narrative* had remained in print and seemed still to offer a useful perspective on the history and theory of narrative. This place, however, was to some degree historical—a perspective from a particular point in time, the middle of the twentieth century.

Given all those considerations, I saw no way to re-write the book and produce a new edition. Gradually, however, I realized that it might be possible to republish the original text, making minor stylistic adjustments, and to invite some younger scholar to supplement that text with a section on developments in the study of narrative since the first edition. And that is what has happened. The author who has joined this project is not a brash young man, but he is younger than me, and in a better position to speak of what has happened to narrative studies in the past few decades than anyone else I know. James Phelan has been for many years the editor of the

leading journal in the field of narrative studies, the official journal of the Society for the Study of Narrative, called simply *Narrative*. Without his collaboration, this second edition of *The Nature of Narrative* would not exist. And I think he has done an excellent job of covering what has happened to narrative studies in the forty years since this book first appeared.

Preface to the Second Edition by James Phelan

I was first introduced to *The Nature of Narrative* in my own brash youth: in 1969 in a required course for sophomore English majors at Boston College taught by Robert E. Reiter. I then studied the book more carefully in 1976 when I put it on the reading list for my Ph.D. special field exam on "Theories of Narrative" supervised by Sheldon Sacks at the University of Chicago. In the years since, I have had occasion to consult it and recommend it to others, but I was never expecting Bob Scholes's kind invitation to contribute "a section on developments in the study of narrative" to a new edition. Being asked to contribute to a book that has been part of one's formative experience is a surreal experience. If I were a novelist, I imagine I'd feel the same way if, say, Henry James or Virginia Woolf invited me to write a concluding chapter for a new edition of *The Ambassadors* or *Mrs. Dalloway*. Of course you feel flattered and say yes. Of course you also feel terrified and inadequate. But then you go and make some decisions about how to do the job and then, when they turn to be obviously the wrong ones, you make some new ones, and you keep going like that until you get something you can live with.

Of the many decisions I have made, there are three that I want to highlight here. First, I retain Scholes and Kellogg's focus on literary narrative because I believe that is the best way to underline the continuity between their work and developments over the last forty

years. At the same time, I point out that narrative theory has expanded its scope to include nonliterary narratives of all kinds and that this expansion has consequences for work on literary narrative. Second, I hew closely to Scholes's request for a discussion of "developments in the study of narrative." What this means, in practical terms, is that rather than tracing the history of narrative since 1966 (post-modern experimentation, the emergence of digital narrative, the memoir boom, and so on), I offer a narrative about narrative theory, and I punctuate that narrative with examples from both pre-1966 and post-1966 literary narrative. Proceeding this way, I hope, will allow the reader to see more connections between the theoretical parts of Scholes and Kellogg's work and more recent advances and proposals, even as it gives me more space to present those developments.

Third, I steer a middle course between presenting the developments totally on their own terms and offering my version of a Grand Unified Field Theory of Narrative (GUFTON). To do the first would be to adopt a false and, I suspect, unsustainable pose of objectivity; to do the second would be to exhibit a misguided narrowness of vision about the field and of rhetorical purpose on this occasion. Contemporary narrative theory is too diverse for "a section on developments in the field" since 1966 to become the presentation of a GUFTON. But the very diversity of the field also means that any narrative of its evolution over the last forty years must involve a large degree of selection. That selection in turn must inevitably reflect the storyteller's view of the field, including how different aspects of it relate to each other. Consequently, while I have reached the point where I can live with my decisions and selections, I am acutely aware that my narrative is not the only plausible one that could be written, and I think it would be healthy for my readers to have a similar awareness.

I am grateful to David Herman, Brian McHale, Peter J. Rabinowitz, and Bob Scholes for their helpful comments on my narrative. I am also grateful to Elizabeth Marsch for her eagle-eyed copyediting and her diligent assistance with the Works Cited. Above all, I am deeply

grateful to Bob Scholes for making the leap of faith that led him to invite me to contribute to his and Robert Kellogg's landmark book.

A few pages of my contribution have previously appeared in my entry on "Rhetorical Approaches to Narrative" in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (pp. 500–504), edited by David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan (London: Routledge, 2005) and in my entry on "Plot" in the *Encyclopedia of the Novel* (pp. 1008–1011), edited by Paul Schellinger (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998). I am grateful to both publishers for permission to reprint those pages.

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The Nature of Narrative

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1

The Narrative Tradition

For the past two centuries the dominant form of narrative literature in the West has been the novel. In writing about the Western narrative tradition we will in one sense, therefore, necessarily be describing the heritage of the novel. But it will not be our intention to view the novel as the final product of an ameliorative evolution, as the perfected form which earlier kinds of narrative — sacred myth, folktale, epic, romance, legend, allegory, confession, satire — were all striving, with varying degrees of success, to become. Instead, our intention will be almost the opposite. We hope to put the novel in its place, to view the nature of narrative and the Western narrative tradition whole, seeing the novel as only one of a number of narrative possibilities. In order to attempt this it has been necessary to take long views, to rush into literary areas where we can claim some interest and competence but not the deep knowledge of the specialist, and perhaps to generalize overmuch in proportion to the evidence we present. For these and other excesses and exuberances, we apologize, hoping only that the result will justify our temerity in having undertaken such an elaborate project.

The object of this study of narrative art is not to set a new vogue, in either literature or criticism, but to provide an antidote to all narrow views of literature, ancient or modern. In any age in

which criticism flourishes, and ours is certainly such an age, a conflict between broad and narrow approaches to literary art is sure to arise. An age of criticism is a self-conscious age. Its tendency is to formulate rules, to attempt the reduction of art to science, to classify, to categorize, and finally to prescribe and proscribe. Theoretical criticism of this sort is usually based on the practice of certain authors, whose works become classics in the worst sense of the word: models of approved and proper literary performance. This kind of narrowing down of the literature of the past to a few "classic" models amounts to the construction of an artificial literary tradition. Our purpose in this work is to present an alternative to narrowly conceived views of one major kind of literature — which we have called narrative.

By narrative we mean all those literary works which are distinguished by two characteristics: the presence of a story and a story-teller. A drama is a story without a story-teller; in it characters act out directly what Aristotle called an "imitation" of such action as we find in life. A lyric, like a drama, is a direct presentation, in which a single actor, the poet or his surrogate, sings, or muses, or speaks for us to hear or overhear. Add a second speaker, as Robert Frost does in "The Death of the Hired Man," and we move toward drama. Let the speaker begin to tell of an event, as Frost does in "The Vanishing Red," and we move toward narrative. For writing to be narrative no more and no less than a teller and a tale are required.

There is a real tradition of narrative literature in the Western world. All art is traditional in that artists learn their craft from their predecessors to a great extent. They begin by conceiving of the possibilities open to them in terms of the achievements they are acquainted with. They may add to the tradition, opening up new possibilities for their successors, but they begin, inevitably, within a tradition. The more aware we are — as readers, critics, or artists — of the fullness and breadth of the narrative tradition, the freer and the sounder will be the critical or artistic choices we make. For mid-twentieth-century readers a specific problem must

be overcome before a balanced view of the narrative tradition becomes attainable. Something must be done about our veneration of the novel as a literary form.

With Joyce, Proust, Mann, Lawrence, and Faulkner, the narrative literature of the twentieth century has begun the gradual break with the narrative literature of the immediate past that characterizes all living literary traditions. Specifically, twentieth-century narrative has begun to break away from the aims, attitudes, and techniques of realism. The implications of this break are still being explored, developed, and projected by many of the most interesting living writers of narrative literature in Europe and America. But, by and large, our reviewers are hostile to this new literature and our critics are unprepared for it, for literary criticism is also influenced by its conception of tradition.

Rather than pick out one or a dozen reviewers to exemplify the hostility of contemporary criticism to much that is best in contemporary narrative art, we can take as an example a great scholar and critic, whose views are now acknowledged to be among the most influential in our graduate schools of literature (where the teachers, critics, and even the reviewers of the future are being developed) and whose attitude toward modern literature, for all the learning and sensitivity with which he presents it, is surprisingly similar to that of the most philistine weekly reviews. This scholar-critic is Erich Auerbach, whose book *Mimesis,* in its paperback, English language version, is one of the two or three most widely read and currently influential books in its field. And its field is a broad one: Western narrative literature. It is a great book, but Auerbach's single-minded devotion to realistic principles leaves him unwilling or unable to come to terms with twentieth-century fiction, and especially with such writers as Virginia Woolf, Proust, and Joyce. He finds *Ulysses* a "hodgepodge," characterized by "its blatant and painful cynicism, and its uninterpretable symbolism," and he asserts that along with it, "most of the other novels which employ multiple reflection of consciousness also leave the reader with an impression of hopelessness.

There is often something confusing, something hazy about them, something hostile to the reality which they represent."

Auerbach's dissatisfaction with post-realistic fiction is echoed by the dissatisfactions of lesser men, which we meet on nearly every page of current literary reviews and journals, where much of the best contemporary writing is treated with hostility or indifference. And current attitudes toward contemporary literature also carry over into current attitudes toward the literature of the past. The tendency to apply the standards of nineteenth-century realism to all fiction naturally has disadvantages for our understanding of every other kind of narrative. Spenser, Chaucer, and Wolfram von Eschenbach suffer from the "novelistic" approach as much as Proust, Joyce, Durrell, and Beckett do. In order to provide a broader alternative to the novelistic approach to narrative, we must break down many of the chronological, linguistic, and narrowly conceived generic categories frequently employed in the discussion of narrative. We must consider the elements common to all narrative forms — oral and written, verse and prose, factual and fictional — as these forms actually developed in the Western world. While fairly rare, an undertaking of this sort is not without precedent.

Such, in fact, was the aim of the first book in English wholly devoted to the study of the narrative tradition, Clara Reeve's *The Progress of Romance through Times, Countries, and Manners,* which was published in 1785. Clara Reeve, confronted by the common eighteenth-century prejudice against romance, endeavored to provide a pedigree for the form, to show especially that "the ancients" employed it, and to distinguish it from its follower, the novel, without prejudice to either form. Her distinction, indeed, is the one preserved in our dictionaries today, and it is still employed by critics who make any pretensions to discriminating among narrative forms:

> I will attempt this distinction, and I presume if it is properly done it will be followed, — if not, you are but where you were before. The Romance is an heroic fable, which treats of fabulous persons and things.

— The Novel is a picture of real life and manners, and of the times in which it is written. The Romance in lofty and elevated language, describes what never happened nor is likely to happen. — The Novel gives a familiar relation of such things, as pass every day before our eyes, such as may happen to our friend, or to ourselves; and the perfection of it, is to represent every scene, in so easy and natural a manner, and to make them appear so probable, as to deceive us into a persuasion (at least while we are reading) that all is real, until we are affected by the joys or distresses of the persons in the story, as if they were our own.

Along with this clear and useful formulation, Reeve made half-hearted attempts at some other categories: a miscellaneous group of "original or uncommon" stories, which included such "modern" works as *Gulliver's Travels, Robinson Crusoe, Tristram Shandy,* and *The Castle of Otranto*; and another class of "tales and fables," which included everything from fairy tales to *Rasselas*. She also struggled with the problem of separating the Epic from the Romance, tackling such formidable considerations as the Osianic question. (She hesitated, saying *Fingal* was "an Epic, but not a Poem" and finally located Ossian with the romances.) She made it clear throughout that a romance might be in either verse or prose, but felt that an epic must be poetical. She was also disposed to think of epic as a term of praise, so that a really fine poetic romance such as Chaucer's Knight's Tale (the example is hers) would deserve the title of epic.

For her time, and considering the limits of her education, Clara Reeve was astonishingly well informed and free from prejudice. Her veneration for "the ancients" and her moralistic approach to literary achievement were shared by greater minds than her own. Until quite recently, in fact, very few attempts to deal with narrative literature in her comprehensive way have been made; and her knowledge, balance, and good sense would benefit many a modern book reviewer, could he attain them. Still, the difficulties Clara Reeve encountered in 1785 may be instructive for us in the present. After novel and romance she had trouble reducing other

narrative forms to order—and so have modern critics. But even more troublesome is her tendency to attach a value judgement to a descriptive term like "epic." One of the greatest difficulties arising in modern criticism stems from a tendency to confuse descriptive and evaluative terminology. "Tragic" and "realistic," for example, are normally applied to literary works as terms of praise. Such usage can be found in the book and theater review pages of nearly any of our periodicals. A serious drama can be damned for its failure to be "tragic." A narrative can be damned as "unrealistic." But the greatest obstacle to an understanding of narrative literature in our day is the way notions of value have clustered around the word "novel" itself. One reason Clara Reeve could see the progress of romance with such a relatively unprejudiced eye was the fact that she lived before the great century of the realistic novel, the nineteenth.

But now, in the middle of the twentieth century, our view of narrative literature is almost hopelessly novel-centered. The expectations which readers bring to narrative literary works are based on their experience with the novel. Their assumptions about what a narrative should be are derived from their understanding of the novel. The very word "novel" has become a term of praise when applied to earlier narratives. We are told on dust-jackets and paperback covers that such diverse works as Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, and Homer's *Odyssey* are "the first novel." But if we take these designations seriously, we are bound to be disappointed. Judged as a "novelist" even Homer must be found wanting.

The novel-centered view of narrative literature is an unfortunate one for two important reasons. First, it cuts us off from the narrative literature of the past and the culture of the past. Second, it cuts us off from the literature of the future and even from the advance guard of our own day. To recapture the past and to accept the future we must, literally, put the novel into its place. To

do this we need not part with any of our appreciation of realistic fiction. When the novel is in its place the achievements of such as Balzac, Flaubert, Turgenev, Tolstoy, and George Eliot will not lose any of their luster. They may even shine more brightly.

The novel, let us remember, represents only a couple of centuries in the continuous narrative tradition of the Western world which can be traced back five thousand years. Two hundred years of considerable achievement, of course; modern Europe has nothing to be ashamed of where its production of narrative literature is concerned, whatever its failings in other spheres; but still, only two hundred years out of five thousand. The purpose of this study is to examine some of the lines of continuity in this five-thousand-year tradition by considering some of the varieties of narrative literature, by discerning patterns in the historical development of narrative forms, and by examining continuing or recurring elements in narrative art. Our task is incomparably easier than Clara Reeve's. Though the need for a broad approach to narrative art is as pressing now as it was in 1785, the intellectual developments of the intervening years have brought many more of the necessary tools to hand.

From various sources we have learned more in the last hundred years about the pre-history of literature and about pre-modern literature than was ever known before. Vital information that was simply not available to the literary historians and critics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is now available to us. The anthropologists, beginning with Frazer in *The Golden Bough,* have given us priceless information about the relationship between literature and culture in primitive society, opening the way to such literary studies as Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance.* The psychologists — Jung even more than Freud — have given us equally important insights into the ways in which literature is related to an individual's mental processes, making possible a new and fruitful school (despite some excesses) of literary studies — archetypal criticism. The students of oral literature, such as Parry

and Lord, have enabled us for the first time to perceive how written and oral literatures are differentiated and what the oral heritage of written narrative actually is. Literary scholars like the classicists Murray and Cornford and the Hebraist Theodore Gaster have shown ways in which some of the new extra-literary knowledge can enhance our understanding of literature. Historians of art and literature, such as Erwin Panofsky and D. W. Robertson, Jr., have made the attitudes and world view of our cultural ancestors more intelligible to us than ever before. And such a brilliant critical synthesizer as Northrop Frye has shown us how it is possible to unite cultural and literary study in such a way as to approach closer to a complete theory of literature than ever before.

Deriving what we could from the example as well as from the techniques and discoveries of such scholars as these, we have attempted to formulate a theory which would, as clearly and economically as possible, account for the varieties of narrative form and the processes that produce them and govern their interrelationships. Faced with the facts of history, with the various kinds of narrative which have been recognized and classified — often according to different and conflicting systems — and with the "influences," affinities, and correspondences which have been observed, we have tried to do justice to both the intractabilities of fact and the mind's lust for system and order. Our results, with their full and proper range of illustrations and qualifications, are developed in the following chapters. In the remainder of this chapter, we offer a kind of "argument" or gloss for the more elaborate exposition to come. It is a minimal, stripped-down version of our view of the narrative tradition, representing not *a priori* convictions which have shaped our study but rather a pattern we found emerging in the course of it.

The evolution of forms within the narrative tradition is a process analogous in some ways to biological evolution. Human beings, considering themselves the end of an evolutionary process, naturally see evolu-

tion as a struggle toward perfection. The dinosaur, could he speak, might have another opinion. Similarly, a contemporary novelist can see himself as the culmination of an ameliorative evolution; but Homer, could he speak, might disagree. Yet the epic poem is as dead as the dinosaur. We can put together a synthetic epic with a superficial resemblance to the originals, just as we can fabricate a museum dinosaur; but the conditions which produced the originals have passed. Nature will never recover that lost innocence which she displayed in the creation of those beautiful monsters, nor will narrative artists ever again be able to combine so innocently materials drawn from myth and history, from experience and imagination.

Of course, the evolutionary analogy breaks down. The *Iliad* is as great a wonder as a live dinosaur would be. Individual literary works do not always die off, though their forms may cease to be viable. Nor is their reproduction a matter of natural selection. Literary evolution is in some ways more complex than biological evolution. It is a kind of cross between a biological and a dialectical process, in which different species sometimes combine to produce new hybrids, which can in turn combine with other old or new forms; and in which one type will beget its antitype, which in turn may combine with other forms or synthesize with its antitypical originator.

To find a satisfactory means of ordering and presenting the complex processes at work in the evolution of narrative forms is a difficult task. The solution here presented is a compromise between the chaotic and the schematic. It is not offered as a simulacrum of the actual conscious or unconscious mental processes of narrative artists but as a handy way of reducing such processes to manageable terms. Its main purpose is to reveal, by clarifying them, the principal relationships which do exist and have existed historically among the major forms of narrative literature.

Written narrative literature tends to make its appearance throughout the Western world under similar conditions. It emerges

from an oral tradition, maintaining many of the characteristics of oral narrative for some time. It often takes that form of heroic, poetic narrative which we call epic. Behind the epic lie a variety of narrative forms, such as sacred myth, quasi-historical legend, and fictional folktale, which have coalesced into a traditional narrative which is an amalgam of myth, history, and fiction. For us, the most important aspect of early written narrative is the fact of the tradition itself. The epic story-teller is telling a traditional story. The primary impulse which moves him is not a historical one, nor a creative one; it is *re*-creative. He is retelling a traditional story, and therefore his primary allegiance is not to fact, not to truth, not to entertainment, but to the *mythos* itself — the story as preserved in the tradition which the epic story-teller is re-creating. The word *mythos* meant precisely this in ancient Greece: a traditional story.

In the transmission of traditional narrative it is of necessity the outline of events, the plot, which is transmitted. Plot is, in every sense of the word, the articulation of the skeleton of narrative. A myth, then, is a traditional plot which can be transmitted. Aristotle saw plot (*mythos* is his word) as the soul of any literary work that was an imitation of an action. Sacred myth, a narrative form associated with religious ritual, is one kind of mythic narrative; but legend and folktale are also mythic in the sense of traditional, and so is the oral epic poem. One of the great developmental processes that is unmistakable in the history of written narrative has been the gradual movement away from narratives dominated by the mythic impulse to tell a story with a traditional plot. In Western literature we can trace this movement twice: once in the classical languages and again in the vernacular languages. In the course of this evolutionary process narrative literature tends to develop in two antithetical directions. A proper understanding of the growth of the two great branches of narrative which emerge as the traditional impulse declines in power is essential to a true appreciation of the evolution of narrative forms. To understand this development properly we must

take into account both the nature of the separation between the two great branches of narrative and the interaction and recombination of the two.

The two antithetical types of narrative which emerge from the epic synthesis may be labeled the *empirical* and the *fictional.* Both can be seen as ways of avoiding the tyranny of the traditional in story-telling. Empirical narrative replaces allegiance to the *mythos* with allegiance to reality. We can subdivide the impulse toward empirical narrative into two main components: the *historical* and the *mimetic.* The historical component owes its allegiance specifically to truth of fact and to the actual past rather than to a traditional version of the past. It requires for its development means of accurate measurement in time and space, and concepts of causality referable to human and natural rather than to supernatural agencies. In the ancient world empirical narrative manifests itself first through its historical component as writers like Herodotus and Thucydides carefully distinguish their work from Homeric epic. The mimetic component owes its allegiance not to truth of fact but to truth of sensation and environment, depending on observation of the present rather than investigation of the past. It requires for its development sociological and psychological concepts of behavior and mental process, such as those which inform the characterization of the Alexandrian Mime. Mimetic forms are the slowest of narrative forms to develop. In the ancient world we find the strongest mimetic elements in the Theophrastian Character (a narrative counterpart of the dramatic Mime), in such a realistic "idyll" as Theocritus' *Adoniazusae* (No. 15), and in such a passage as the Dinner at Trimalchio's in Petronius. Mimetic narrative is the antithesis of mythic in that it tends toward plotlessness. Its ultimate form is the "slice of life." Biography and autobiography are both empirical forms of narrative. In biography, which is developed first, the historical impulse dominates; in autobiography, the mimetic.

The *fictional* branch of narrative replaces allegiance to the *mythos* with allegiance to the ideal. We can subdivide the im-

pulse toward fictional narrative into two main components also: the *romantic* and the *didactic*. The writer of fiction is set free from the bonds of tradition and the bonds of empiricism as well. His eye is not on the external world but on the audience, which he hopes to delight or instruct, giving it either what it wants or what he thinks it needs. While empirical narrative aims at one or another kind of truth, fictional narrative aims at either beauty or goodness. The world of romance is the ideal world, in which poetic justice prevails and all the arts and adornments of language are used to embellish the narrative. Where mimetic narrative aims at a psychological reproduction of mental process, romantic narrative presents thought in the form of rhetoric. As the general titles of the two great branches of narrative imply (empirical and fictional) they represent, within the world of narrative literature, an opposition akin to the scientific and the artistic approaches to ultimate truth. In the ancient world, Greek romance, with its alliance between the rhetorical and the erotic, typifies romantic narrative. In the movement from the *Odyssey* to the *Argonautica* we can see the epic becoming more literary and fictional, moving toward such pure romance as the *Aethiopica*. In a modern language such a progression as the *Chanson de Roland*, Chrétien's *Perceval*, and the *Grand Cyrus* reveals the same pattern of evolution.

The didactic subdivision of fiction we may call *fable*, a form which is ruled by an intellectual and moral impulse as romance is ruled by an esthetic one. The human intellect being what it is, fable tends toward brevity in narrative, and is inclined to lean heavily on romance for narrative articulation if the narrative artist has anything like a sustained flight in mind. Aesop's fables are typical of the form, but in its usual combination with romance Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* and the narrative allegories of the Middle Ages and Renaissance are major examples. So-called Menippean satire is fable combined with anti-romance, Lucian's *True History* beginning as a parody of Odysseus' adventures. Literary epic moves from romantic to didactic narrative in Vergil, who did not

become Dante's guide in the *Commedia* by accident. Didactic and romantic narrative seek one another out for mutual support and for justification in the face of attacks such as Plato's attack on poetry in the *Republic*. Sidney's *Defense* of literature is made from the fictional side of the great division we have been considering. He defends literature as presenting an ideal, or "golden," world and as instructing through delight. But Fielding's account of his practice in his Preface to *Joseph Andrews* and elsewhere is made from the empirical side of the line, on the basis of his work's truth to general human nature, though he certainly intended to provide delight and instruction as well.

We have been considering the breakdown of the epic synthesis into two antithetical components. We must now consider briefly the new synthesis in narrative which has been the main development in post-Renaissance narrative literature. This was a gradual process, beginning at least as early as Boccaccio, but it is most obviously discernible in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The new synthesis can be seen clearly in a writer like Cervantes, whose great work is an attempt to reconcile powerful empirical and fictional impulses. From the synthesis he effected, the novel emerges as a literary form. The novel is not the opposite of romance, as is usually maintained, but a product of the reunion of the empirical and fictional elements in narrative literature. Mimesis (which tends to short forms like the Character and "slice of life") and history (which can become too scientific and cease to be literature) combine in the novel with romance and fable, even as primitive legend, folktale, and sacred myth originally combined in the epic, to produce a great and synthetic literary form. There are signs that in the twentieth century the grand dialectic is about to begin again, and that the novel must yield its place to new forms just as the epic did in ancient times, for it is an unstable compound, inclining always to break down into its constituent elements. The disintegration of the novel is much too complicated to consider here in detail, but we can note that it is reflected in the extreme measures

taken by such as Joyce and Proust to counteract it, in the return to romance of Isak Dinesen and Lawrence Durrell, in the reduction of naturalism to absurdity by Samuel Beckett, in the rise of science fiction and the nightmare novels of Céline and Hawkes, and even in the best-seller list, which tends to fragment into sociological narrative and spy-adventure tales, Mary McCarthy and Ian Fleming inevitably reminding us of fiction's ancient heritage from Theophrastian Character and Greek romance.

In its instability the novel partakes of the general nature of narrative. Poised between the direct speaker or singer of lyric and the direct presentation of action in drama; between allegiance to reality and to the ideal; it is capable of greater extremes than other forms of literary art, but pays the price for this capability in its capacity for imperfection. The least formal of disciplines, it offers a domain too broad for any single work to conquer, and it continually provokes literary compromise and subterfuge. The greatest narratives are inevitably those in which the most is attempted. Narrative literature provides, as William Faulkner observed, opportunities for cautious success or glorious failure. It has been, historically, the most various and changeable of literary disciplines, which means that it has been the most alive. For all its imperfections it has been — from the epic to the novel — the most popular and influential kind of literature, seeking the widest audience in its culture and being more responsive to extraliterary influences than other kinds of literature. It is this various, complex, and often contradictory nature of narrative art which we shall be exploring in the following chapters.

2

The Oral Heritage of Written Narrative

No one knows how long man has had speech. Language is probably even older than man himself, having been invented by some "missing link," a creature in the phylogenetic chain somewhere between man and the gibbon. It may have been as many as a million years ago that man first repeated an utterance which had given pleasure to himself or to someone else and thereby invented literature. In a sense, that was the beginning of Western narrative art. But we shall avoid tracing our subject to its origins. None of the assumptions that one is trained to bring to the study of narrative since Homer would be relevant to the appreciation of primitive literature. Even if the language should be intelligible, the works themselves, often concerned with the doings of only vaguely anthropomorphic creatures, produce bafflement or disgust in the untrained audience. Inevitably the critic seeks to impose such familiar categories as myth, legend, and folktale on a body of texts which defies classification in such terms.

In the strict etymological sense of the word, literature does not occur without writing. It is by definition the art of letters. Our ancestors used to proceed on the assumption that the fortuitous distinction between "written verbal art" and "oral verbal art," which is implied by the word *literature,* resulted in a useful separation of civilized, and therefore intelligible, narrative from prim-

itive, and therefore unintelligible, narrative. In recent years we have learned differently. Oral and written narrative are formally distinct, and profoundly so, but they are not culturally distinct in any meaningful way. Milman Parry, one of the greatest authorities on orally composed heroic poetry, wrote, "Literature falls into two great parts not so much because there are two kinds of culture, but because there are two kinds of *form: one part of literature is oral, the other written.*" It will be our concern in this chapter to consider the heritage of written narrative in the orally composed narrative of ancient Greece and Northern Europe, emphasizing particularly the influence of oral narrative poetry on subsequent forms of written narrative. We shall examine some of the formal distinctions between oral and written narrative, insisting at every opportunity that these are formal literary distinctions rather than criteria for distinguishing between primitive and civilized cultures. We shall therefore use the word *literature* in a broad sense, without regard to its etymology, to mean all verbal art, both oral and written.

In an age such as ours, when the ability to read and write is common and the illiterate are the culturally and economically deprived, experience would seem to confirm an association of illiteracy with cultural impoverishment. But to generalize solely from our modern experience, to imagine that all unlettered individuals have in every age been the culturally deprived, is illogical and untrue. Our peculiar modern form of nearly universal literacy, which accounts for the opprobrium attached to the word *illiterate* as well as a goodly share of misinformation about the nature of language, is a product of the cultural and technological revolution of the Renaissance. Literate, a human being needs neither priest nor teacher. Books and the ability to read are gateways through which oppressed generations have found their freedom. In an age of literacy such as ours, books become symbols of freedom and truth. To burn or ban a book is to commit a sacrilege against humanity. It is a gesture hostile not only, or even mainly, to property, but rather to a symbol of the human spirit.

But not every age has thus idealized the inked shapes of the scribe's and the compositor's craft. In the *Phaedrus,* Socrates tells a story about the Egyptian god Thoth, who invented writing. Desiring to share his invention with the people, Thoth went before the god Thamus, the ruler over all Egypt. When he showed his letters to the King, claiming that they would increase both the memory and the wisdom of the Egyptians, Thamus replied:

> O most ingenious Thoth, one man has the ability to develop a new skill, but another to judge whether it will be a curse or a blessing to its users. Now you, the father of letters, through your affection see in them the opposite of their true power. For this invention will cause those who use it to lose the learning in their minds by neglecting their memories; since, through this reliance on letters which are external and alien to the mind, they will lose their ability to recall things within themselves. You have invented not a medicine to strengthen memory but an inferior substitute for it. You are providing your students with a way of seeming wise without true wisdom; for they will appear to have learned without instruction; they will seem to know a good deal while they are really ignorant of many things; and they will become public nuisances, these men who look wise but lack wisdom.

The sanctity of the printed word in our culture has at times allowed the worst of Socrates' fears to be realized. Words in their printed forms have become more real for us than either the sounds on the lips of living men or the concepts they represent. Books as mere physical objects sometimes surpass wisdom in the world's esteem. Any lie or outrage which takes on the dignity of print becomes a thousandfold more menacing. And forgetfulness within themselves has robbed literate people of the ability even to conceive of the production of great literature by unlettered poets and story-tellers. It is inconceivable to us that the ancient Greeks would have permitted a writing system such as the Minoan Linear B, found in the ruins of the royal palace at Knossos and at Pylos, to remain the monopoly of servants and bookkeepers, scorned by poets and teachers alike. But the evidence seems to indicate that Linear B, antedating the composition of the Homeric epics by at least five hundred years, played no part in the literary or educa-

tional life of the Mycenean Greeks, a fact which accounts in part for its eventual abandonment by them. The introduction, again by clerks, of the Phoenician alphabet onto the mainland of Greece is usually dated in the eighth century. Although it had seemed inconceivable until it was conclusively demonstrated by Milman Parry, we now know that the composition of the Homeric epics occurred long before the widespread use of writing in Greece for anything like its modern purposes.

Parry's demonstration of the oral composition of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* consisted of two parts, both confirming the hypothesis that orally composed literature is distinguishable from written literature on the basis of its form rather than its content. Starting with the written texts of the Homeric poems as they have come down to us, Parry noticed that the traditional epithets and locutions, which have to a minor extent always constituted an element of the "epic style" in subsequent Western tradition, were invariably used by Homer in the same metrical and semantic situations. These traditional elements of the Homeric diction, in quantity and quality vastly richer than in the works of later poets, he called formulas. He defined the formula as "a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea." Such fixed epithets as "son of Atreus" and "king of men" for Agamemnon, or "of the glancing helmet" for Hector, or "wine-dark," "loudly resounding," and "echoing" for the sea, have always been recognized as characteristic of Homer's style, and their effect has been imitated by writers of literary epics from Apollonius onward. However, not until Parry discovered that the whole Homeric corpus, about 27,000 hexameter lines, was entirely formulaic did critics realize that what had all along appeared to be only a superficial stylistic feature was in fact inescapable evidence that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were orally composed. Ninety per cent of the first fifteen lines of the *Iliad*, for example, is demonstrably formulaic; that is, investigators have matched it with identical groups of words in the same metrical environments elsewhere in the Homeric corpus. As far as we know, the percentage for any given passage of Homer will be

about the same. In the writings of no known literary poet is the percentage of verbatim repeats even in this vicinity. Quite the contrary: literary poets strive to make each line unique, reserving repeated phrases for very special rhetorical effects.

The second part of Parry's demonstration was in some ways even more fruitful than the first. In order to prove the converse of his first proposition, that a highly formulaic poetic diction is evidence of oral composition, he set about showing that oral poets do not compose except with formulas. They improvise, using the conventional formulas in their poetic tradition as a basis for forming metrically and semantically appropriate lines. In a study of present-day South Slavic oral epic in Yugoslavia, he found both Christian and Moslem singers who, to the accompaniment of a one-stringed musical instrument called the *gusle*, could compose epic poems approaching the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in length, complexity, and literary interest. The singers themselves think that they are capable of repeating a whole epic verbatim, and take pride in their memory of what they must conceive to be a kind of fixed "oral text." When Parry took down the same song twice from the same singer, however, he discovered that exact correspondences between two performances were rare. Individual lines and episodes were composed differently in the two versions, but they both used the same formulas. On the level of line formation, the presence of traditional formulas, not line-for-line similarity between two texts, invariably identified an oral composition.

While Parry's discoveries do provide a much firmer basis for making educated guesses, they cannot give final answers to all of our questions about Homer. From his investigations in Yugoslavia and from reports of orally composed epic in other parts of the world we are able to reformulate the question of Homer's identity, for example, though we can still not answer it with certainty. The individual singers in a tradition of oral poetic narrative are as important as the individual poets in a tradition of written narrative, but the role of the singer is vastly different from that of the poet.

The singer is utterly dependent upon his tradition. The plots

that he learns, the various episodes with which he elaborates them, and even the phrases out of which he constructs his lines are traditional, and in the broadest sense "formulaic." He neither composes nor memorizes a fixed text. Each performance is a separate act of creation. Until he actually sings a narrative, that song does not exist, except as a potential song among infinitely many others in the abstract apparatus of the singer's tradition. Conversely, when the song is over it has ceased to exist. Only to the extent that the singer himself or some member of his audience learns something new about the tradition during the course of a performance can that individual song affect the tradition and thereby take on a slight aspect of permanence in the memories of those who heard it.

Probably because they are manifestations of a tradition rather than the inventions of an individual brain, most of the orally composed narrative poems that have been preserved in written texts have not, even traditionally, been associated with the names of individual poets. The attribution of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* to Homer, or of the Old Icelandic *Poetic Edda* to Sæmundur the Wise, much as it must now be qualified by our knowledge of oral tradition, is exceptional. The runic signatures of Cynewulf, integrally worked into the texts of apparently oral Anglo-Saxon narratives, provide an especially knotty problem for scholars. They should probably be taken as the sign either of a scribe or of an oral poet who was familiar with both writing and the bookish attitudes toward authorship which come so naturally to literate men but which must be quite incomprehensible to oral poets. The fact remains that the Cynewulfian narratives, whatever the origin of the signatures may be, are as highly formulaic and traditional in their rhetoric as *Beowulf*. Whoever Cynewulf may have been, the poems associated with his name were composed out of the common Anglo-Saxon oral tradition and cannot represent the work of an individual poet in anything like the modern sense. Therefore, whether for convenience, as in the case of Homer and Cynewulf, or out of respect for tradition, as in the case of *Sæmundar*

Edda, we use the name of an individual poet to designate the authorship of an orally composed narrative, we should conceive of his role as singer or performer as coming closer than the modern concept of "authorship" to describing the man behind the poem.

The idea that a poetic narrative could have been "corrupted" in the process of oral transmission is based on a common misconception of the workings of oral tradition. If an orally composed poem such as the Old Icelandic *Völuspá* is obscure, the difficulty must be attributed either to an inferior performance or, what is more likely, to corruption in the process of manuscript transmission. An oral performance may be indifferent, but it will not be obscure or "textually corrupt." On the other hand, a great singer, one who has spent many years in perfecting his art, can surpass any performance he has ever heard. Even if he learns a story through an inferior performance, he can bring his mastery of the tradition to the singing of a song many times longer and more skillfully wrought than the one from which he learned the basic plot and the names of the characters. In this case, we should say that a poem had been "perfected" in the process of oral transmission if such a statement were not just as erroneous as the idea of textual corruption. It would imply that an entity, a song, had been transmitted, and such is not the case in an oral tradition. We can speak of the elements of the song — the plot, the episodes, the conception of character, the knowledge of historical events, the traditional motifs, the diction — as being transmitted, but we cannot speak of the oral transmission of the song itself.

We shall perhaps come closest to the usual conception of the identity of Homer, while doing the least violence to the facts of oral composition, if we think of him as being the greatest of many generations of Greek epic singers, a master of his art who in the nature of things could not surpass his tradition, but who created the best performances of which his tradition was capable. The greatness of Homer is the greatness of his tradition. The breadth of his knowledge and sympathy, the objectivity and accuracy of

his representation of actual men and events, the sureness of both his piety and his satire are the achievements of an ancient Greek epic tradition named "Homer," not of a single poet limited to his own observation and memory. The oral poet's rapport with his literary culture is total. Opportunities for the kind of originality and individual expression sought in written literature are minimal. The oral singer illustrates the extremest form of the individual talent at the service of the tradition, also perhaps the extremest form of the tradition at the service of the individual talent. The two are simply aspects of the same entity. Without songs the tradition would die; without the tradition there would be no songs.

And yet, the tradition can change. It can accommodate itself — slowly, to be sure — to changes in the external cultural and physical world which its songs represent and even to changes in the linguistic forms of which its songs are made. The mixture of archaisms and regional dialect forms in the basically Ionic Homeric texts is a compromise between the most archaic Arcadian-Cypriot and Ionic forms, which the tradition could not completely dispense with in its movement to mainland Greece, and later Attic forms, which the tradition employed in an effort to remain contemporary and readily intelligible. A parallel linguistic mixture characterizes the text of *Beowulf*, an orally composed Old English epic whose tradition looks back to the cultural ascendency of Mercia, though the basic linguistic matrix of the poem is later West Saxon.

In addition to the gradual substitution, where it is possible, of new linguistic forms for older ones, an oral poetic tradition is also capable of generating new formulas by analogy with older ones. For example, an Anglo-Saxon half-line formula used to describe "the joy of noble retainers" is *eorla dream*. With the gradual accommodation to Christian themes and stories, the tradition could generate the new formula *engla dream*, "the joy of angels," on the pattern of the old one. In the somewhat technical language used by investigators of the diction of orally composed poetry, the two formulas *eorla dream* and *engla dream* are said to con-