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Freud's Masterplot

As if they would confine th' Interminable,
And tie him to his own prescript.

In one of his best essays in "narratology," where he is working toward a greater formalization of principles advanced by Vladimir Propp and Viktor Shklovsky, Tzvetan Todorov elaborates a model of narrative transformation whereby narrative plot (*le récit*) is constituted in the tension of two formal categories, difference and resemblance.¹ Transformation—a change in a predicate term common to beginning and end—represents a synthesis of difference and resemblance; it is, we might say, the same-but-different. Now "the same-but-different" is a common (and if inadequate, not altogether false) definition of metaphor. If Aristotle affirmed that the master of metaphor must have an eye for resemblances, modern treatments of the subject have affirmed equally the importance of difference included within the operation of resemblance, the chief value of the metaphor residing in its "tension." Narrative operates as metaphor in its affirmation of resemblance, in that it brings into relation different actions, combines them through perceived similarities (Todorov's common predicate term), appropriates them to a common plot, which implies the rejection of merely contingent (or unassimilable) incident or action. The plotting of meaning cannot do without metaphor, for meaning in plot is the structure of action

¹ Tzvetan Todorov, "Les Transformations narratives," in *Poétique de la prose* (Paris: Seuil, 1971), p. 240. Todorov's terms *récit* and *histoire* correspond to the Russian Formalist distinction between *sjuzet* and *fabula*. In English, we might use with the same sense of distinctions: narrative *plot* and *story*.

I wish at the outset of this essay to express my debt to two colleagues whose thinking has helped to clarify my own: Andrea Bertolini and David A. Miller. It is to the latter that I owe the term "the narratable."

in closed and legible wholes. Metaphor is in this sense totalizing. Yet it is equally apparent that the key figure of narrative must in some sense be not metaphor but metonymy: the figure of contiguity and combination, the figure of syntagmatic relations.² The description of narrative needs metonymy as the figure of movement, of linkage in the signifying chain, of the slippage of the signified under the signifier. That Jacques Lacan has equated metonymy and desire is of the utmost pertinence, since desire must be considered the very motor of narrative, its dynamic principle.

The problem with “the same-but-different” as a definition of narrative would be the implication of simultaneity and stasis in the formulation. The postulation of a static model indeed is the central deficiency of most formalist and structuralist work on narrative, which has sought to make manifest the structures of narrative in spatial and atemporal terms, as versions of Lévi-Strauss’ “atemporal matrix structure.”³ Todorov is an exception in that, faithful to Propp, he recognizes the need to consider sequence and succession as well as the paradigmatic matrix. He supplements his definition with the remark: “Rather than a ‘coin with two faces,’ [transformation] is an operation in two directions: it affirms at once resemblance and difference; it puts time into motion and suspends it, in a single movement; it allows discourse to acquire a meaning without this meaning becoming pure information; in a word, it makes narrative possible and reveals its very definition.”⁴ The image

² See Roman Jakobson, “Two Types of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances,” in Jakobson and Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1956). Todorov in a later article adds to “transformation” the term “succession,” and sees the pair as definitional of narrative. He discusses the possible equation of these terms with Jakobson’s “metaphor” and “metonymy,” to conclude that “the connection is possible but does not seem necessary.” (Todorov, “The Two Principles of Narrative,” *Diacritics*, Fall, 1971, p. 42.) But there seem to be good reasons to maintain Jakobson’s terms as “master tropes” referring to two aspects of virtually any text.

³ See Claude Lévi-Strauss, “La Structure et la forme,” *Cahiers de l’Institut de science économique appliquée*, 99, série M, no. 7 (1960), p. 29. This term is cited with approval by A. J. Greimas in *Sémantique structurale* (Paris: Larousse, 1966) and Roland Barthes, in “Introduction à l’analyse structurale des récits,” *Communications* 8 (1966).

⁴ Todorov, “Les Transformations narratives,” *Poétique de la prose*, p. 240. Translations from the French, here and elsewhere, are my own.

of a double operation upon time has the value of returning us to the evident but frequently eluded fact that narrative meanings are developed in time, that any narrative partakes more or less of what Proust called “un jeu formidable . . . avec le Temps,” and that this game of time is not merely in the world of reference (or in the *fabula*) but as well in the narrative, in the *sjuzet*, be it only that the meanings developed by narrative *take time*: the time of reading.⁵ If at the end of a narrative we can suspend time in a moment where past and present hold together in a metaphor which may be the very recognition which, said Aristotle, every good plot should bring, that moment does not abolish the movement, the slidings, the errors and partial recognitions of the middle. As Roland Barthes points out, in what so far must be counted our most satisfactory dynamic analysis of plot, the proairetic and hermeneutic codes—code of actions, code of enigmas and answers—are irreversible: their interpretation is determined linearly, in sequence, in one direction.⁶

Ultimately—Barthes writes elsewhere—the passion that animates us as readers of narrative is the passion for (of) meaning.⁷ Since for Barthes meaning (in the “classical” or “readable” text) resides in full predication, completion of the codes in a “plenitude” of signification, this passion appears to be finally a desire for the end. It is at the end—for Barthes as for Aristotle—that recognition brings its illumination, which then can shed retrospective light. The function of the end, whether considered syntactically (as in Todorov and Barthes) or ethically (as in Aristotle) or as formal or cosmological closure (as in Barbara H. Smith or Frank Kermode) continues to fascinate and to baffle. One of the strongest statements of its determinative position in narrative plots comes in a passage from Sartre’s *La Nausée* which bears quotation once again. Roquentin is reflecting on the meaning of “adventure” and the difference be-

⁵ Proust’s phrase is cited by Gerard Genette in “Discours du récit,” *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), p. 182. Whereas Barthes maintains in “Introduction à l’analyse structurale des récits” that time belongs only to the referent of narrative, Genette gives attention to the time of reading and its necessary linearity. See pp. 77-78.

⁶ See Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), p. 37.

⁷ “Introduction à l’analyse structurale des récits,” p. 27.

tween living and narrating. When you narrate, you appear to start with a beginning. You say, "It was a fine autumn evening in 1922. I was a notary's clerk in Marommès." But, says Roquentin:

In reality you have started at the end. It was there, invisible and present, it is what gives these few words the pomp and value of a beginning. "I was out walking, I had left the town without realizing it, I was thinking about my money troubles." This sentence, taken simply for what it is, means that the man was absorbed, morose, a hundred miles from an adventure, exactly in a mood to let things happen without noticing them. But the end is there, transforming everything. For us, the man is already the hero of the story. His moroseness, his money troubles are much more precious than ours, they are all gilded by the light of future passions. And the story goes on in the reverse: instants have stopped piling themselves up in a haphazard way one on another, they are caught up by the end of the story which draws them and each one in its turn draws the instant preceding it: "It was night, the street was deserted." The sentence is thrown out negligently, it seems superfluous; but we don't let ourselves be duped, we put it aside: this is a piece of information whose value we will understand later on. And we feel that the hero has lived all the details of this night as annunciations, as promises, or even that he has lived only those that were promises, blind and deaf to all that did not herald adventure. We forget that the future wasn't yet there; the man was walking in a night without premonitions, which offered him in disorderly fashion its monotonous riches, and he did not choose.⁸

The beginning in fact presupposes the end. The very possibility of meaning plotted through time depends on the anticipated structuring force of the ending: the interminable would be the meaningless. We read the incidents of narration as "promises and annunciations" of final coherence: the metaphor reached through the chain of metonymies. As Roquentin further suggests, we read only those incidents and signs which can be construed as promise and annunciation, enchainé toward a construction of significance—those signs which, as in the detective story, appear to be *clues* to the underlying intentionality of event.

The sense of beginning, then, is determined by the sense of an ending. And if we inquire further into the nature of the ending, we no doubt find that it eventually has to do with the human end, with

⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Nausée* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1957), pp. 62-63.

death. In *Les Mots*, Sartre pushes further his reflection on ends. He describes how in order to escape contingency and the sense of being unjustified he had to imagine himself as one of the children in *L'Enfance des hommes illustres*, determined, as promise and annunciation, by what he would become for posterity. He began to live his life retrospectively, in terms of the death that alone would confer meaning and necessity on existence. As he succinctly puts it, "I became my own obituary."⁹ All narration is obituary in that life acquires definable meaning only at, and through, death. In an independent but convergent argument, Walter Benjamin has claimed that life assumes transmissible form only at the moment of death. For Benjamin, this death is the very "authority" of narrative: we seek in fictions the knowledge of death, which in our own lives is denied to us. Death—which may be figural but in the classic instances of the genre is so often literal—quicken meaning: it is the "flame," says Benjamin, at which we warm our "shivering" lives.¹⁰

We need to know more about this death-like ending which is nonetheless animating of meaning in relation to initiatory desire, and about how the interrelationship of the two determines, shapes, necessitates the middle—Barthes' "dilatatory space" of retard, postponement—and the kinds of vacillation between illumination and blindness that we find there. If the end is recognition which retrospectively illuminates beginning and middle, it is not the exclusive truth of the text, which must include the processes along the way—the processes of "transformation"—in their metonymical complexity. If beginning is desire, and is ultimately desire for the end, between lies a process we feel to be necessary (plots, Aristotle tells us, must be of "a certain length") but whose relation to originating desire and to end remains problematic. It is here that Freud's most ambitious investigation of ends in relation to begin-

⁹ Sartre, *Les Mots* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), p. 171.

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 101.

nings may be of help—and may suggest a contribution to a properly dynamic model of plot.

We undertake, then, to read *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as an essay about the dynamic interrelationship of ends and beginnings, and the kind of processes that constitute the middle. The enterprise may find a general sort of legitimation in the fact that *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is in some sense Freud's own masterplot, the text in which he most fully lays out a total scheme of how life proceeds from beginning to end, and how each individual life in its own way repeats the masterplot. Of Freud's various intentions in this text, the boldest—and most mysterious—may be to provide a theory of comprehension of the dynamic of the life-span, its necessary duration and its necessary end, hence, implicitly, a theory of the very narratability of life. In his pursuit of his "beyond," Freud is forced to follow the implications of argument—"to throw oneself into a line of thought and follow it wherever it leads," as he says late in the essay—to ends that he had not originally or consciously conceived.¹¹ *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* shows the very plotting of a masterplot made necessary by the structural demands of Freud's thought, and it is in this sense that we shall attempt to read it as a model for narrative plot.

Narrative always makes the implicit claim to be in a state of repetition, as a going over again of a ground already covered: a *sjužet* repeating the *fabula*, as the detective retraces the tracks of the criminal.¹² This claim to an act of repetition—"I sing," "I tell"—appears to be initiatory of narrative. It is equally initiatory of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*; it is the first problem and clue that Freud confronts. Evidence of a "beyond" that does not fit neatly into the functioning of the pleasure principle comes first in

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 18, 59. Subsequent page references will be given between parentheses in the text.

¹² J. Hillis Miller, in "Ariadne's Web" (unpublished manuscript), notes that the term *diegesis* suggests that narrative is a retracing of a journey already made. On the detective story, see Tzvetan Todorov, "Typologie du roman policier," *Poétique de la prose*, pp. 58-59.

the dreams of patients suffering from war neuroses, or from the traumatic neuroses of peace: dreams which return to the moment of trauma, to relive its pain in apparent contradiction of the wish-fulfillment theory of dreams. This “dark and dismal” example is superseded by an example from “normal” life, and we have the celebrated moment of child’s play: the toy thrown away, the reel on the string thrown out of the crib and pulled back, to the alternate exclamation of *fort* and *da*. When he has established the equivalence between making the toy disappear and the child’s mother’s disappearance, Freud is faced with a set of possible interpretations. Why does the child repeat an unpleasurable experience? It may be answered that by staging his mother’s disappearance and return, the child is compensating for his instinctual renunciation. Yet the child has also staged disappearance alone, without reappearance, as a game. This may make one want to argue that the essential experience involved is the movement from a passive to an active role in regard to his mother’s disappearance, claiming mastery in a situation which he has been compelled to submit to.

Repetition as the movement from passivity to mastery reminds us of “The Theme of the Three Caskets,” where Freud, considering Bassanio’s choice of the lead casket in *The Merchant of Venice*—the correct choice in the suit of Portia—decides that the choice of the right maiden in man’s literary play is also the choice of death; by this choice, he asserts an active mastery of what he must in fact endure. “Choice stands in the place of necessity, of destiny. In this way man overcomes death, which he has recognized intellectually.”¹³ If repetition is mastery, movement from the passive to the active; and if mastery is an assertion of control over what man must in fact submit to—choice, we might say, of an imposed end—we have already a suggestive comment on the grammar of plot, where repetition, taking us back again over the same ground, could have to do with the choice of ends.

¹³ Freud, “The Theme of the Three Caskets” (1913), *Standard Edition*, 12, 299.

But other possibilities suggest themselves to Freud at this point. The repetition of unpleasant experience—the mother’s disappearance—might be explained by the motive of revenge, which would yield its own pleasure. The uncertainty which Freud faces here is whether repetition can be considered a primary event, independent of the pleasure principle, or whether there is always some direct yield of pleasure of another sort involved. The pursuit of this doubt takes Freud into the analytic experience, to his discovery of patients’ need to repeat, rather than simply remember, repressed material: the need to reproduce and to “work through” painful material from the past as if it were present. The analyst can detect a “compulsion to repeat,” ascribed to the unconscious repressed, particularly discernable in the transference, where it can take “ingenious” forms. The compulsion to repeat gives patients a sense of being fatefully subject to a “perpetual recurrence of the same thing”; it suggests to them pursuit by a daemonic power. We know also, from Freud’s essay on “The Uncanny,” that this feeling of the daemonic, arising from involuntary repetition, is a particular attribute of the literature of the uncanny.¹⁴

Thus in analytic work (as also in literary texts) there is slim but real evidence of a compulsion to repeat which can over-ride the pleasure principle, and which seems “more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it overrides” (23). We might note at this point that the transference itself is a metaphor, a substitutive relationship for the patient’s infantile experiences, and thus approximates the status of a text. Now repetition is so basic to our experience of literary texts that one is simultaneously tempted to say all and to say nothing on the subject. To state the matter baldly: rhyme, alliteration, assonance, meter, refrain, all the mnemonic elements of fictions and indeed most of its tropes are in some manner repetitions which take us back in the text, which allow the ear, the eye, the mind to make connections between different textual moments, to see past and

¹⁴ See Freud, “The Uncanny” (*Das Unheimliche*) (1919), in *Standard Edition*, 17, 219-52.

present as related and as establishing a future which will be noticeable as some variation in the pattern. Todorov's "same but different" depends on repetition. If we think of the trebling characteristic of the folk tale, and of all formulaic literature, we may consider that the repetition by three constitutes the minimal repetition to the perception of series, which would make it the minimal intentional structure of action, the minimum plot. Narrative must ever present itself as a repetition of events that have already happened, and within this postulate of a generalized repetition it must make use of specific, perceptible repetitions in order to create plot, that is, to show us a significant interconnection of events. Event gains meaning by repeating (with variation) other events. Repetition is a *return* in the text, a doubling back. We cannot say whether this return is a return *to* or a return *of*: for instance, a return to origins or a return of the repressed. Repetition through this ambiguity appears to suspend temporal process, or rather, to subject it to an indeterminate shuttling or oscillation which binds different moments together as a middle which might turn forward or back. This inescapable middle is suggestive of the daemonic. The relation of narrative plot to story may indeed appear to partake of the daemonic, as a kind of tantalizing play with the primitive and the instinctual, the magic and the curse of reproduction or "representation." But in order to know more precisely the operations of repetition, we need to read further in Freud's text.

"What follows is speculation" (24). With this gesture, Freud, in the manner of Rousseau's dismissal of the facts in the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, begins the fourth chapter and his sketch of the economic and energetic model of the mental apparatus: the system Pcpt-Cs and Ucs, the role of the outer layer as shield against excitations, and the definition of trauma as the breaching of the shield, producing a flood of stimuli which knocks the pleasure principle out of operation. Given this situation, the repetition of traumatic experiences in the dreams of neurotics can be seen to have the function of seeking retrospectively to master the flood of stimuli, to perform a mastery or binding of mobile

energy through developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis. Thus the repetition compulsion is carrying out a task that must be accomplished *before* the dominance of the pleasure principle can begin. Repetition is hence a primary event, independent of the pleasure principle and more primitive. Freud now moves into an exploration of the theory of the instincts.¹⁵ The instinctual is the realm of freely mobile, “unbound” energy: the “primary process,” where energy seeks immediate discharge, where no postponement of gratification is tolerated. It appears that it must be “the task of the higher strata of the mental apparatus to bind the instinctual excitation reaching the primary process” before the pleasure principle can assert its dominance over the psychic economy (34-35). We may say that at this point in the essay we have moved from a postulate of repetition as the assertion of mastery (as in the passage from passivity to activity in the child’s game) to a conception whereby repetition works as a process of *binding* toward the creation of an energetic constant-state situation which will permit the emergence of mastery, and the possibility of postponement.

That Freud at this point evokes once again the daemonic and the uncanny nature of repetition, and refers us not only to children’s play but as well to their demand for exact repetition in storytelling, points our way back to literature. Repetition in all its literary manifestations may in fact work as a “binding,” a binding of textual energies that allows them to be mastered by putting them into serviceable form within the energetic economy of the narrative. Serviceable form must in this case mean perceptible form: repetition, repeat, recall, symmetry, all these journeys back in the text, returns to and returns of, that allow us to bind one textual moment to another in terms of similarity or substitution rather than mere

¹⁵ I shall use the term “instinct” since it is the translation of *Trieb* given throughout the Standard Edition. But we should realize that “instinct” is inadequate and somewhat misleading, since it loses the sense of “drive” associated with the word *Trieb*. The currently accepted French translation, *pulsion*, is more to our purposes: the model that interests me here might indeed be called “pulsional.”

contiguity. Textual energy, all that is aroused into expectancy and possibility in a text—the term will need more definition, but corresponds well enough to our experience of reading—can become usable by plot only when it has been bound or formalized. It cannot otherwise be plotted in a course to significant discharge, which is what the pleasure principle is charged with doing. To speak of “binding” in a literary text is thus to speak of any of the formalizations (which, like binding, may be painful, retarding) that force us to recognize sameness within difference, or the very emergence of a *sjužet* from the material of *fabula*.

We need at present to follow Freud into his closer inquiry concerning the relation between the compulsion to repeat and the instinctual. The answer lies in “a universal attribute of instincts and perhaps of organic life in general,” that “*an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things*” (36). Instincts, which we tend to think of as a drive toward change, may rather be an expression of “the conservative nature of living things.” The organism has no wish to change; if its conditions remained the same, it would constantly repeat the very same course of life. Modifications are the effect of external stimuli, and these modifications are in turn stored up for further repetition, so that, while the instincts may give the appearance of tending toward change, they “are merely seeking to reach an ancient goal by paths alike old and new” (38). Hence Freud is able to proffer, with a certain bravado, the formulation: “*the aim of all life is death.*” We are given an evolutionary image of the organism in which the tension created by external influences has forced living substance to “diverge ever more widely from its original course of life and to make ever more complicated *détours* before reaching its aim of death” (38-49). In this view, the self-preservative instincts function to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death, to ward off any ways of returning to the inorganic which are not immanent to the organism itself. In other words, “the organism wishes to die only in its own fashion.” It must struggle against

events (dangers) which would help it to achieve its goal too rapidly —by a kind of short-circuit.

We are here somewhere near the heart of Freud's masterplot for organic life, and it generates a certain analytic force in its superimposition on fictional plots. What operates in the text through repetition is the death instinct, the drive toward the end. Beyond and under the domination of the pleasure principle is this baseline of plot, its basic "pulsation," sensible or audible through the repetitions which take us back in the text. Repetition can take us both backwards and forwards because these terms have become reversible: the end is a time before the beginning. Between these two moments of quiescence, plot itself stands as a kind of divergence or deviance, a postponement in the discharge which leads back to the inanimate. For plot starts (must give the illusion of starting) from that moment at which story, or "life," is stimulated from quiescence into a state of narratability, into a tension, a kind of irritation, which demands narration. Any reflection on novelistic beginnings shows the beginning as an awakening, an arousal, the birth of an appetency, ambition, desire or intention.¹⁶ To say this is of course to say—perhaps more pertinently—that beginnings are the arousal of an intention in reading, stimulation into a tension. (The specifically erotic nature of the tension of writing and its rehearsal in reading could be demonstrated through a number of exemplary texts, notably Rousseau's account, in *The Confessions*, of how his novel *La Nouvelle Héloïse* was born of a masturbatory reverie and its necessary fictions, or the very similar opening of Jean Genet's *Notre-Dame des fleurs*; but of course the sublimated forms of the tension are just as pertinent.) The ensuing narrative—the Aristotelean "middle"—is maintained in a state of tension, as a prolonged deviance from the quiescence of the "normal"—which is to say, the unnarratable—until it reaches the terminal quiescence of the end. The development of a narrative shows that the tension is

¹⁶ On the beginning as intention, see Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1975). It occurs to me that the exemplary narrative beginning might be that of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*: waking up to find oneself transformed into a monstrous vermin.

maintained as an ever more complicated postponement or *détour* leading back to the goal of quiescence. As Sartre and Benjamin compellingly argued, the narrative must tend toward its end, seek illumination in its own death. Yet this must be the right death, the correct end. The complication of the *détour* is related to the danger of short-circuit: the danger of reaching the end too quickly, of achieving the im-proper death. The improper end indeed lurks throughout narrative, frequently as the wrong choice: choice of the wrong casket, misapprehension of the magical agent, false erotic object-choice. The development of the subplot in the classical novel usually suggests (as William Empson has intimated) a different solution to the problems worked through by the main plot, and often illustrates the danger of short-circuit.¹⁷ The subplot stands as one means of warding off the danger of short-circuit, assuring that the main plot will continue through to the right end. The desire of the text (the desire of reading) is hence desire for the end, but desire for the end reached only through the at least minimally complicated *détour*, the intentional deviance, in tension, which is the plot of narrative.

Deviance, *détour*, an intention which is irritation: these are characteristics of the narratable, of "life" as it is the material of narrative, of *fabula* become *sjuzet*. Plot is a kind of arabesque or squiggle toward the end. It is like Corporal Trim's arabesque with his stick, in *Tristram Shandy*, retraced by Balzac at the start of *La Peau de chagrin* to indicate the arbitrary, transgressive, gratuitous line of narrative, its deviance from the straight line, the shortest distance between beginning and end—which would be the collapse of one into the other, of life into immediate death. Freud's text will in a moment take us closer to understanding of the formal organization of this deviance toward the end. But it also at this point offers further suggestions about the beginning. For when he has identified both the death instincts and the life (sexual) instincts as conservative, tending toward the restoration of an earlier state of things,

¹⁷ See William Empson, "Double Plots," in *Some Versions of Pastoral* (New York: New Directions, 1960), pp. 25-84.

Freud feels obliged to deconstruct the will to believe in a human drive toward perfection, an impulsion forward and upward: a force which—he here quotes *Faust* as the classic text of man's forward striving—"ungebündigt immer vorwärts dringt." The illusion of the striving toward perfection is to be explained by instinctual repression and the persisting tension of the repressed instinct, and the resulting difference between the pleasure of satisfaction *demandé* and that which is *achieved*, a difference which "provides the driving factor which will permit of no halting at any position attained" (36). This process of subtraction reappears in modified form in the work of Lacan, where it is the difference between *need* (the infant's need for the breast) and *demand* (which is always demand for recognition) that gives as its result *desire*, which is precisely the driving power, of plot certainly, since desire for Lacan is a metonymy, the forward movement of the signifying chain. If Roman Jakobson is able, in his celebrated essay, to associate the metonymic pole with prose fiction (particularly the nineteenth-century novel)—as the metaphoric pole is associated with lyric poetry—it would seem to be because the meanings peculiar to narrative inhere (or, as Lacan would say, "insist") in the metonymic chain, in the drive of desire toward meaning in time.¹⁸

The next-to-last chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* cannot here be rehearsed in detail. In brief, it leads Freud twice into the findings of biology, first on the track of the origins of death, to find out whether it is a necessary or merely a contingent alternative to interminability, then in pursuit of the origins of sexuality, to see whether it satisfies the description of the instinctual as conservative. Biology can offer no sure answer to either investigation, but it offers at least metaphorical confirmation of the necessary dualism of Freud's thought, and encouragement to reformulate his earlier opposition of ego instincts to sexual instincts as one between life instincts and death instincts, a shift in the grouping of oppositional

¹⁸ See Jakobson, "Two Types of Language...". See, in Lacan's work, especially "Le Stade du miroir" and "L'Instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient," in *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966).

forces which then allows him to reformulate the libidinal instincts themselves as the Eros “of the poets and philosophers” which holds all living things together, and which seeks to combine things in ever greater living wholes. Desire would then seem to be totalizing in intent, a process tending toward combination in new unities: metonymy in the search to become metaphor. But for the symmetry of Freud’s opposition to be complete, he needs to be able to ascribe to Eros, as to the death instinct, the characteristic of a need to restore an earlier state of things. Since biology will not answer, Freud, in a remarkable gesture, turns toward myth, to come up with Plato’s Androgyne, which precisely ascribes Eros to a search to recover a lost primal unity which was split asunder. Freud’s apologetic tone in this last twist to his argument is partly disingenuous, for we detect a contentment to have formulated the forces of the human masterplot as “philosopher and poet.” The apology is coupled with a reflection that much of the obscurity of the processes Freud has been considering “is merely due to our being obliged to operate with the scientific terms, that is to say with the figurative language, peculiar to psychology” (60). *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, we are to understand, is not merely metapsychology, it is also mythopoesis, necessarily resembling “an equation with two unknown quantities” (57), or, we might say, a formal dynamic the terms of which are not substantial but purely relational. We perceive that *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is itself a plot which has formulated that dynamic necessary to its own *détour*.

The last chapter of Freud’s text recapitulates, but not without difference. He returns to the problem of the relationship between the instinctual processes of repetition and the dominance of the pleasure principle. One of the earliest and most important functions of the mental apparatus is to bind the instinctual impulses which impinge upon it, to convert freely mobile energy into a quiescent cathexis. This is a preparatory act on behalf of the pleasure principle, which permits its dominance. Sharpening his distinction between a *function* and a *tendency*, Freud argues that the pleasure principle is a “tendency operating in the service of a function whose

business it is to free the mental apparatus entirely from excitation or to keep the amount of excitation in it constant or to keep it as low as possible" (62). This function is concerned "with the most universal endeavour of all living substance—namely to return to the quiescence of the inorganic world." Hence one can consider "binding" to be a preliminary function which prepares the excitation for its final elimination in the pleasure of discharge. In this manner, we could say that the repetition compulsion and the death instinct serve the pleasure principle; in a larger sense, the pleasure principle, keeping watch on the invasion of stimuli from without and especially from within, seeking their discharge, serves the death instinct, making sure that the organism is permitted to return to quiescence. The whole evolution of the mental apparatus appears as a taming of the instincts so that the pleasure principle—itsself tamed, displaced—can appear to dominate in the complicated *détour* called life which leads back to death. In fact, Freud seems here at the very end to imply that the two antagonistic instincts serve one another in a dynamic interaction which is a perfect and self-regulatory economy which makes both end and *détour* perfectly necessary and interdependent. The organism must live in order to die in the proper manner, to die the right death. We must have the arabesque of plot in order to reach the end. We must have metonymy in order to reach metaphor.

We emerge from reading *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* with a dynamic model which effectively structures ends (death, quiescence, non-narratability) against beginnings (Eros, stimulation into tension, the desire of narrative) in a manner that necessitates the middle as *détour*, as struggle toward the end under the compulsion of imposed delay, as arabesque in the dilatory space of the text. We detect some illumination of the necessary distance between beginning and end, the drives which connect them but which prevent the one collapsing back into the other: the way in which metonymy and metaphor serve one another, the necessary temporality of the same-but-different which to Todorov constitutes the narrative transformation. The model suggests further that along the way of the

path from beginning to end—in the middle—we have repetitions serving to bind the energy of the text in order to make its final discharge more effective. In fictional plots, these bindings are a system of repetitions which are returns to and returns of, confounding the movement forward to the end with a movement back to origins, reversing meaning within forward-moving time, serving to formalize the system of textual energies, offering the possibility (or the illusion) of “meaning” wrested from “life.”

As a dynamic-energetic model of narrative plot, then, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* gives an image of how “life,” or the *fabula*, is stimulated into the condition of narrative, becomes *sjužet*: enters into a state of deviance and *détour* (ambition, quest, the pose of a mask) in which it is maintained for a certain time, through an at least minimally complex extravagance, before returning to the quiescence of the non-narratable. The energy generated by deviance, extravagance, excess—an energy which belongs to the textual hero’s career and to the readers’ expectation, his desire of and for the text—maintains the plot in its movement through the vacillating play of the middle, where repetition as binding works toward the generation of significance, toward recognition and the retrospective illumination which will allow us to grasp the text as total metaphor, but not therefore to discount the metonymies that have led to it. The desire of the text is ultimately the desire for the end, for that recognition which is the moment of the death of the reader in the text. Yet recognition cannot abolish textuality, does not annul the middle which, in its oscillation between blindness and recognition, between origin and endings, is the truth of the narrative text.

It is characteristic of textual energy in narrative that it should always be on the verge of premature discharge, of short-circuit. The reader experiences the fear—and excitation—of the improper end, which is symmetrical to—but far more immediate and present than—the fear of endlessness. The possibility of short-circuit can of course be represented in all manner of threats to the protagonist or to any of the functional logics which demand completion; it

most commonly takes the form of temptation to the mistaken erotic object choice, who may be of the “Belle Dame sans merci” variety, or may be the too-perfect and hence annihilatory bride. Throughout the Romantic tradition, it is perhaps most notably the image of incest (of the fraternal-sororal variety) which hovers as the sign of a passion interdicted because its fulfillment would be too perfect, a discharge indistinguishable from death, the very cessation of narrative movement. Narrative is in a state of temptation to oversameness, and where we have no literal threat of incest (as in Chateaubriand, or Faulkner), lovers choose to turn the beloved into a soul-sister so that possession will be either impossible or mortal: Werther and Lotte, for instance, or, at the inception of the tradition, Rousseau’s *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, where Saint-Preux’s letter to Julie following their night of love begins: “Mourons, ô ma douce amie.” Incest is only the exemplary version of a temptation of short-circuit from which the protagonist and the text must be led away, into *détour*, into the cure which prolongs narrative.

It may finally be in the logic of our argument that repetition speaks in the text of a return which ultimately subverts the very notion of beginning and end, suggesting that the idea of beginning presupposes the end, that the end is a time before the beginning, and hence that the interminable never can be finally bound in a plot. Analysis, Freud would eventually discover, is inherently interminable, since the dynamics of resistance and the transference can always generate new beginnings in relation to any possible end.¹⁹ It is the role of fictional plots to impose an end which yet suggests a return, a new beginning: a rereading. A narrative, that is, wants at its end to refer us back to its middle, to the web of the text: to recapture us in its doomed energies.

One ought at this point to make a new beginning, and to sketch the possible operation of the model in the study of the plot of a fiction. One could, for instance, take Dickens’ *Great Expectations*. One would have to show how the energy released in the text by

¹⁹ See Freud, “Analysis Terminable and Interminable” (1937), in *Standard Edition*, 23, 216-53.

its liminary “primal scene”—Pip’s terrifying meeting with Magwitch in the graveyard—is subsequently bound in a number of desired but unsatisfactory ways (including Pip’s “being bound” as apprentice, the “dream” plot of Satis House, the apparent intent of the “expectations”), and simultaneously in censored but ultimately more satisfying ways (through all the returns of the repressed identification of Pip and his convict). The most salient device of this novel’s “middle” is literally the journey back—from London to Pip’s home town—a repeated return to apparent origins which is also a return of the repressed, of what Pip calls “that old spell of my childhood.” It would be interesting to demonstrate that each of Pip’s choices in the novel, while consciously life-furthering, forward oriented, in fact leads back, to the insoluble question of origins, to the palindrome of his name, so that the end of the narrative—its “discharge”—appears as the image of a “life” cured of “plot,” as celibate clerk for Clarrikers.

Pip’s story, while ostensibly the search for progress, ascension, and metamorphosis, may after all be the narrative of an attempted homecoming: of the effort to reach an assertion of origin through ending, to find the same in the different, the time before in the time after. Most of the great nineteenth-century novels tell this same tale. Georg Lukács has called the novel “the literary form of the transcendent homelessness of the idea,” and argued that it is in the discrepancy between idea and the organic that time, the process of duration, becomes constitutive of the novel as of no other genre:

Only in the novel, whose very matter is seeking and failing to find the essence, is time posited together with the form: time is the resistance of the organic—which possesses a mere semblance of life—to the present meaning, the will of life to remain within its own completely enclosed immanence. . . . In the novel, meaning is separated from life, and hence the essential from the temporal; we might almost say that the entire inner action of the novel is nothing but a struggle against the power of time.²⁰

²⁰ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), p. 122.

The understanding of time, says Lukács, the transformation of the struggle against time into a process full of interest, is the work of memory—or more precisely, we could say with Freud, of “remembering, repeating, working through.” Repetition, remembering, re-enactment are the ways in which we replay time, so that it may not be lost. We are thus always trying to work back through time to that transcendent home, knowing of course that we cannot. All we can do is subvert or, perhaps better, pervert time: which is what narrative does.²¹

To forgo any true demonstration on a novel, and to bring a semblance of conclusion, we may return to the assertion, by Barthes and Todorov, that narrative is essentially the articulation of a set of verbs. These verbs are no doubt ultimately all versions of desire. Desire is the wish for the end, for fulfillment, but fulfillment delayed so that we can understand it in relation to origin, and to desire itself. The story of Scheherazade is doubtless the story of stories. This suggests that the tale as read is inhabited by the reader's desire, and that further analysis should be directed to that desire, not (in the manner of Norman Holland) his individual desire and its origins in his own personality, but his transindividual and intertextually determined desire as a reader. Because it concerns ends in relation to beginnings and the forces that animate the middle in between, Freud's model is suggestive of what a reader engages when he responds to plot. It images that engagement as essentially dynamic, an interaction with a system of energy which the reader activates. This in turn suggests why we can read *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as a text concerning textuality, and conceive that there can be a psychoanalytic criticism of the text itself that does not become—as has usually been the case—a study of the psychogenesis of the text (the author's unconscious), the dynamics of literary response (the reader's unconscious), or the occult motivations of the characters (postulating an “unconscious” for them). It is rather

²¹ Genette discusses Proust's “perversion” of time in “Discours du récit,” p. 182. “Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through” (*Erinnern, Wiederholen und Durcharbeiten*) (1914) is the subject of one of Freud's papers on technique. See *Standard Edition*, 12, 145-56.

the superimposition of the model of the functioning of the mental apparatus on the functioning of the text that offers the possibility of a psychoanalytic criticism. And here the superimposition of Freud's psychic masterplot on the plots of fiction seems a valid and useful maneuver. Plot mediates meanings with the contradictory human world of the eternal and the mortal. Freud's masterplot speaks of the temporality of desire, and speaks to our very desire for fictional plots.