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The Ways of Plotting Plots

THE VARIETIES OF PLOT design have always been difficult to classify, not least because our conceptions of plot tend, like those of genre, to straddle the divide of form from content. At the most abstract and diagrammatic end of the continuum, such treatises as Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* and Frank Kermode's *Sense of an Ending* have used absolute paradigms to explain (rather than classify) some of plot's structural allotropes; while at the other—the point where the minutiae of plot-as-content come to the fore—stories have been organized by their most distinctive embodiments, as witness such remarks as "*Mansfield Park*, with the appeal of its Cinderella motive, is a good story."[1]

At a point less abstract still—the point where the form/content confusion becomes most acute—commentators render plot into précis ('content' in its most literal meaning), and, almost in the same breath, equate that summary with narrative form, for, as Edwin Muir has pointed out, "plot designates for everyone, not merely for the critic, the chain of events in a story and the principle which knits it together."[2] The novel of adventure tends most often to receive this kind of summary treatment—'summary' in both senses of the word—and so too does the detective story. Indeed the latter can be viewed as a narrative changing room in which the reader hangs successive *prêt a porter* plots on the facts of a 'case.' A detec-

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[1] Muriel Masefield, *Women Novelists from Fanny Burney to George Eliot* (London: Ivor Nicholson and Watson, 1934) 64.

[2] Quoted in Elizabeth Dipple, *Plot* (London: Methuen, 1970) 25. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page reference.

tive, doing just that, is described as scintillating "with good plots"[3] in *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*. James Brabazon has even called another Sayers novel a "'pure puzzle' type of detective story,"[4] which implies a plot of encrypted information not unlike a join-the-dot puzzle—the sort of plot, indeed, that Henry James defines as subsisting chiefly in "incident and movement," and which invites us to "jump ahead, to see who was the mysterious stranger, and if the stolen will was ever found," undistracted "from this pleasure by any tiresome analysis or 'description.'"[5]

"Jumping ahead" often makes for jumpiness, and 'puzzle plots,' no less than numerical dot-joining, often seem rather angular, leading some practitioners of the 'tec' to disguise their gauntness by colouring in the outlines, rather as children colour the jerky shapes that the dots, once connected, have inscribed upon the page. Hence Brabazon's sense that, in the later fiction of Dorothy Sayers, the puzzle-plot précis gives way to something more textural and ample:

> A look at the bookshelf reveals the most obvious result of this change. *Have His Carcase* and the books that come after it are considerably fatter than the earlier ones. Dorothy is not restricting herself to plot, she is spreading herself; the bony structure of the murder mystery is still there, but (like Dorothy's own frame) it is increasingly covered, not to say smothered, by warm and sometimes unruly flesh. (149)

To speak of 'smothering' is to imply excess in the opposite direction, as though a plot (conceived as an anatomical spine of incidents) were capable of sinking beneath the comparatively static and irrelevant weight of narrative 'fat.'

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[3] Dorothy L Sayers, *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* (1921; rpt. London: New English Library, 1968) 130.

[4] James Brabazon, *Dorothy L. Sayers: The Life of a Courageous Woman* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1981) 148. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page reference.

[5] Henry James, *The Art of Fiction* in *Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. Morris Shapira, intro. F. R. Leavis (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968) 82. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page reference.

No wonder, then, that Elizabeth Dipple should have apologized for the blank reductions and summaries to which the discourse on plot has often tended:

> In some ways plot projects an almost industrial idea, in that it has affinities with the graph, the blueprint and all of the stalest, least interesting diagrams of human order of one sort or another. Almost everything from statistical analyses of the stock market to the Genesis account of God's six days of creation can be graphed, plotted, seen as part of an orderly plan and superficially understood in this way. (2)

In popular fiction, and in the popular films that came to rival it, plot (conceived in these diagrammatic, detachable terms) has enjoyed primacy above almost everything else. It, and it alone, provides the motor impulse of the 'page-turner.' However, since plot exists not only in inventing and connecting episodes but also in the general overview of a narrative, it would make more sense to compound these metaphors of bones and flesh in the idea of *mythopsis*, portmanteauing Aristotle's separate conceptions of plot and spectacle. For, by taking *opsis* as the ancillary, and, in a sense, the conjoined twin of *mythos*, we can rationalize the form/content confusion, given the fact that *opsis* can mean 'conspectus' as well as 'spectacle.' *Mythopsis* would thus characterize plot both as an incident-chain and as a pattern, rather as the Newtonian theory of waves and the Goethian one of corpuscles validly, and at the same time, account for the nature of light. This essay will scan the ways in which *mythos* and *opsis* have been invoked (and confused) in an effort to get a handle on the almost infinite varieties of plot design, and then consider some ways of grouping them. There are obviously many options to cover, from the absolute austerity of the 'form plotters'—Frye's seasonal flow-charts and Kermode's "radical fiction"[6] of the apocalypse—and the 'content plotters' who deal in narrative minutiae, and who, to describe (say) a new situation comedy, will invoke an 'x meets y' formula, x and y being the plot

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[6] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (London: Oxford UP, 1966) 28.

situations of the two precedent sitcoms compounded by the work in hand.

By writing the antecedent sentence in that way, I have used the most abstract kind of plot-plotting there is—a mathematical notation that all but empties plots of content, and uses symbols to differentiate their parts. At the comparable moment of fine art criticism, the commentator would identify those deep-structural geometric figures (squares, circles and triangles) otherwise obscured or refracted by the picture surface; while, at a corresponding stage in musical analysis, the critic would refer to binary and ternary forms as 'AB' and 'ABA.' In the notation of literary plots, Aristotle could be said to have approximated such austere, all-encompassing abstractions:

> 'Whole' is that which has beginning, middle, and end. A 'beginning' is that which does not itself necessarily follow something else, but after which something else naturally exists or happens; an 'end,' the other way round, is that which itself naturally exists after another thing, either of necessity, or as a general rule, but not something after it; a 'middle' is that which follows another thing and has something else following it. Therefore well-composed plots should neither begin at an accidental point nor end at an accidental point, but follow the lines we have indicated.[7]

This is profoundly true, of course, but its mathematical abstraction covers such a multitude of divisions and nuances that it could best be compared to that division (far up in the Linnaean scheme of things) that separates animals with a primitive proto-spine (the notochord that flags the phylum Chordata) from those that don't. Northrop Frye's scheme of ultimate myths also has a touch of Aristotle's formal algebra about it, summarizing all narrative options in a flow chart of circulation and translocation:

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[7] Gerald F. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1967) 282.

> We may apply this construct to our principle that
> there are two fundamental movements in narra-
> tive: a cyclical movement within the order of na-
> ture, and a dialectical movement from that order
> into the apocalyptic world above. (The movement
> to the demonic world below is very rare, because
> a constant rotation within the order of nature is
> demonic in itself.)[8]

That binary opposition, like Aristotle's, blankets a range of subtypes, for Frye points out how "our seven categories of images may also be seen as different forms of rotary or cyclical movement" (158). But both here and in the case of the antimeric up and down and cross-over arrows, the critic's abstractions are not as absolute as they at first seem. Phrases such as "an apocalyptic world above" and "the order of nature" show that he is thinking in topographic rather than geometric terms, and prove that the discussion of plot readily slides from dissection of its component parts to ideological contexts for those parts.

This is no less true of Aristotle's postulate. Beginnings, middles and ends imply a spinal coherence in the artefact, a coherence evident also in Aristotle's conception of the natural world. Stephen Halliwell has observed that

> From all the material bearing on this point it
> emerges that what *techné* and nature have in com-
> mon is *teleology*: both, as Aristotle would say, con-
> trol processes for bringing things into being, and
> both are guided, and in one sense determined, by
> the ends or purposes towards whose fulfilment
> they move. It is presupposed in this theory that
> *techné* and nature both have a similar tendency to
> aim at the best, to effect the finest or most suc-
> cessful organisation of their material.[9]

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[8] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1957) 161–62. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page reference

[9] Stephen Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics* (London: Duckworth, 1986) 48.

The trouble is that natural history, post Darwin, doesn't support any hypotheses predicated on aims and achievements. As Richard Dawkins observes,

> Natural selection, the blind, unconscious, automatic process which Darwin discovered, and which we now know is the explanation for the existence and apparently purposeful form of all life, has no purpose in mind. It has no mind and no mind's eye. It does not plan for the future.[10]

Notwithstanding that fact, however, humankind had always detected patterns in the Rorschach Blot of chance and happenstance. Aristotle's conception of plot represents one such effort. Its chief difficulty, however, centres on the application, on filling in the plot 'quantities' implied by ABC. In telling a story, for example, it's hard to come by an opening event that "does not itself necessarily follow something else." Only the Big Bang can meet this stringent requirement, along with the comparable big bangs of sonata form, where the exposition is much more purely 'initial' than the equivalent moment in narrative. The opening chords of Beethoven's "Eroica" flash out of the ether like Minerva from the head of Jupiter; nowhere in the classical symphony do we find those unmeaning accidentals that Valéry scorned in "The Marquise went out at five o' clock" (see Kermode 22). Just as "five o'clock" trails the idea of sequence in its wake, and leads us to wonder what happened at four, so too does "out" evoke the contrary "in," and a Marquise the presence or meaningful absence of a Marquis. This static of associations would crackle less obviously in a painting of the same moment, the instantaneity of non-verbal arts having largely effaced those pentimenti of space, time and relation that narrative brings with it. Largely, but not wholly. Kenneth Clarke suggests that

> We must also grant that Degas retained from his Impressionist period something which was contrary to the principles of classic: the element of

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[10] Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991) 5.

surprise. Photographs and Japanese prints are said
to have revealed to him how this quality could be
achieved.[11]

Nor are photographs alone responsible for that idea of moments
arrested and detached from the sequence that gave them birth.
Analysing Francisque Millet's *Mountain Landscape*, executed in
the seventeenth century, Michael Wilson has pointed out how the
"river flows in at the bottom left corner of the picture and the lake
continues out of sight on the right, giving a sense that this is really
just a glimpse of an extensive panorama, caught for us by the
artist."[12] Even so, wordlessness necessarily simplifies both time and
space, and arts that embrace it—even narrative arts like ballet—
make do with the simplest kinds of plot. As George Balanchine has
pointed out, ballet has no mothers-in-law. And because absolute
music dispenses with the human figure altogether, it can, if it so
chooses, function without a narrative context. Thus, even though
the traditional proem of fable—'Once upon a time'—might try to
compete with the out-of-the-ether summons at the start of the Eroica,
the data of the story soon drive the formula's indefinite article
toward a feudal specificity of princesses, princes and peasants.

In other words, whereas the exposition of a classical sym-
phony centres wholly in the here and now, the plot patterns of
mimetic narrative can't. Even those as self-contained as the birth-
to-maturity graphs of the *Bildungsroman* come into focus from
continua that remain beyond the narrator's reach and silently make
their presence felt: "My first most vivid and broad impression of
the identity of things, seems to me to have been gained on a memo-
rable raw afternoon towards evening."[13] Or, again: "To begin my
life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I
have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve o' clock at
night."[14] Notwithstanding his admission that part of the narrative

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[11] Kenneth Clarke, *The Nude: A Study of Ideal Art* (1956; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960) 212.

[12] Michael Wilson, *French Painting Before 1800* (London: William Collins, 1985) 72.

[13] Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. Angus Calder (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) 35.

[14] Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, ed. Trevor Blount (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966) 49.

has been sourced from outside of his experience, David Copperfield sets up a crisp homology between his life and the plot that embodies it, testimony to that Aristotelian belief, implicit also in Dickens's novels (except, perhaps, *Hard Times*), that life itself has an immanent design, which the novelist has simply to disclose.

Hence, in *Little Dorrit*, the sense of 'appointment,' of an intentionality beyond the random comings and goings of its characters: "The day passed on; and again the wide stare stared itself out; and the hot night was on Marseilles; and through it the caravan of the morning, all dispersed, went their appointed ways."[15] Here time registers as an objective, discretely mapped sequence, that, as purposefully, maps the lives that it measures. Aristotle had something similar in mind when he spoke of a beginning, middle and end, for his idea of *mythos* centres more on the act of *selecting* (rather than constructing) an action. In fact, it would not be misleading to call his conception of plot a prototypic *tranche de vie*, excised at such nodes and junctures that make for a tidy shape.

'Shape' is the crucial word here, for one wonders whether, by talking in terms of beginnings, middles and ends, Aristotle can be said to have defined plot as we now understand it, or whether he was rather isolating the formal coherence for which we all thirst as human beings. Any narrative, even the most shapeless, will reveal his three components, for linearity unavoidably confers them, whether a story start without ceremony (cf. J.M. Coetzee's *Dusklands*—"My name is Eugene Dawn. I cannot help that. Here goes"[16]) or whether it conclude as irresolutely and unomnisciently as Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady*, which hints the future through an open-ended image: "She had not known where to turn; but she knew now. There was a very straight path."[17]

To write the first sentence and last of a book is, inescapably, to begin and to end—and whatever comes between will de facto form a middle. But if plot is to signify something beyond that bracketed (but indeterminate) midriff, it needs to register an informing sense of purpose. Thomas Rymer, following Aristotle, speaks of "the *Fable* or *Plot*, which all conclude to be the *Soul* of a *Tragedy*;

[15] Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, ed. John Holloway (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967) 67.

[16] J.M. Coetzee, *Dusklands* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1974) 1.

[17] Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963) 591.

which, with the *Ancients*, is always found to be a *reasonable Soul*; but *with us*, for the most part a *brutish*, and often worse than *brutish*."[18] If, therefore, we conceive plot in terms more advanced than the three données of sequence, it won't simply slice and serve up a narrative; it will animate it with illusory coherence. Viewed thus, it anticipates the project of Sartre's Existentialism by imposing significance on the chance-driven drift of life:

> The truth of human freedom ... is to turn sponta-
> neity into project, to accept contingency and ride
> it, as it were, rather as one might ride a wave. It is
> in effect to choose the contingency one is with its
> various possibilities.[19]

Sartre's *Nausea* distinguishes between the inertness of linear exist-
ence and the willed and redemptive infusion of thought:

> The body lives all by itself, once it has started. But
> when it comes to thought, it is I who continue it, I
> who unwind it. I exist. I think I exist. Oh, how
> long and serpentine this feeling of existing is—
> and I unwind it slowly.... If only I could prevent
> myself from thinking![20]

In just this way, plot might be defined as an 'unwinding,' the will-
ing of form upon passive linearity. Serpents, after all, have heads
and tails, and, in earlier quests for form, were made to swallow
their tails in the motif of the ouroboros. This cyclical conception of
pattern revokes the unsignifying sequence of Macbeth's "To-mor-
row, and to-morrow, and to-morrow / Creeps in this petty pace
from day to day" (5.5.19–20), and shapes 'facticity' into the order of
"En ma fin est mon commencement."[21]

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[18] Thomas Rymer, *Tragedies of the Last Age* in *The Critical Works of Thomas Rymer*, ed. Curt A. Zimansky (1956; rpt. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1971) 18. Here-after cited parenthetically in the text by page reference.

[19] Peter Caws, *Sartre* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979) 117.

[20] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Robert Baldick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) 145.

[21] Quoted in James Johnson Sweeney, "East Coker: A Reading," *T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets: A Casebook*, ed. Bernard Bergonzi (London: Macmillan, 1969) 40.

As so often in discussions of plot, where the form/content duality leads to slippages and diversions of this kind, I have taken several paragraphs to show that an 'algebraic' classification of design, even if Aristotle's neutral abstractions of sequence or Frye's seasonal flow charts seem to meet it, isn't really feasible. At the same time, the detour has shown how writers' visions blur into their very ideas of plot, and how easily they shift from a purely structural to an ideological perspective. Since a neutral discussion of linear narrative has led us—almost unavoidably—to the Existentialists' take on *Cogito ergo sum*, it's clear that ideology should create the first major branch in our stemma of plot kinds.

The reason for this is not hard sought. Because of mimesis, narrative plot can't be emptied of its specifying content—or, at least, not to a point where notations of the ABC (or, better, the alpha/lambda/omega) kind become viable. Even so, although literary structure and meaning don't equate as seamlessly as their musical counterparts do, plots can be slotted into two ideological 'phyla.' Aristotle's prescription feeds our rage for order, for his idea of plot, reduced to an abstract ternary form, speaks to what Frank Kermode has called "an irreducible minimum of geometry—of humanly needed shape or structure—which finally limits our ability to accept the mimesis of pure contingency" (132).

But even as, over time, this "geometry" imposed its patterns on plot construction—all the time with our willing collusion—contingency lapped at the edges, and eventually broke a few dykes during the rise of realism. Indeed, George Eliot argued in *The Lifted Veil* that a "humanly needed shape or structure" is to some extent counterpointed, and perhaps even countervailed, by a human thirst for unpredictability:

> So absolute is our soul's need of something hidden and uncertain for the maintenance of that doubt and hope and effort which are the breath of its life, that if the whole future were laid bare to us beyond today, the interest of all mankind would be bent on the hours the lie between; we should pant after the uncertainties of our one morning and our one afternoon; we should rush fiercely to the Exchange for our last possibility of speculation, of success, of disappointment: we should have

a glut of political prophets foretelling a crisis or a
no-crisis within the only twenty-four hours left open
to prophecy.[22]

Even before the late nineteenth century, indeed, such works as
Gargantua and Pantagruel and *Tristram Shandy* had rebelled
against too tendentious plots, the tailoring of which eventually fell
into disfavour. Henry James, aware that traditional closure betrayed
the flux of experience, spoke of provisional circles, spotlit, as it
were, in continua that they couldn't hope to encompass:

> Really, universally, relations stop nowhere,
> and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally
> but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle
> within which they shall happily *appear* to be so.
> He is in the perpetual predicament that the conti-
> nuity of things is the whole matter, for him, of
> comedy and tragedy; that this continuity is never
> ... broken, and that, to do anything at all, he has
> at once intensely to consult and intensely to ig-
> nore it.[23]

A far cry, this, from the linearity of Aristotle's beginning, middle
and end. James's "circle" creates only the semblance of plot unity,
and indeed his syntax is so vague that we are left in doubt about
the complement of "appear to be"—appear to be *what*?

Circularity, while it offers impenetrable seamlessness as an
alternative to Aristotle's linear segments, is a halfway house in the
drive toward a conception of plot more attuned to ideas of chance.
This reaches its climax in Sartre's *Nausea* and in the *romans
nouveaux* that followed. However, even the father of Existential-
ism came to acknowledge the irresistible pressure of determinacy,
and therefore a discernible *given* form in life itself: "In a certain
sense, all our lives are predestined from the moment we are born.
We are destined for a certain type of action from the beginning by

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[22] George Eliot, *The Lifted Veil* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996) 37.
[23] Henry James, Preface to *Roderick Hudson*, intro. Leon Edel (New York: Harper, 1960) 8–9.

the situation of the family and the society at any given moment."[24] And since even this most impassioned champion of freedom is forced in the last resort to acknowledge the shaping force of genes and environment, the first task of the plot-plotter must be to set up a phylum of chordate plots. Notwithstanding their other differences, the irregular dramas of Shakespeare, the neo-classically exact productions of Racine and Addison, Scribe's *pièces bien faites*, and Oscar Wilde's comedies of manners all ultimately share a pattern of exposition, development and resolution—or, to use the language of the New Comedy, protasis, epitasis and catastrophe. The template derives as much from the syllogism and Hegelian dialectic as from the seasonal matrix set up by Northrop Frye or the apocalyptic pattern upon which Frank Kermode has based the primary mechanism of plot. To assume the possibility of plot—of inserting a notochord into the flux of experience—is to acknowledge a teleology either in the data it processes (as in Dickens's theistic sense of an "appointed" history) or, from a humanist point of view, in the time-redemptive act of making form.

And any phylum of 'chordate' plots must have an answering category of inchordate ones, home to all floutings of a *formal* beginning, middle and end. In opposition to Aristotle's dominant ternary pattern, some writers, as often prompted by temperament as ideology, have adduced the antitype of improvisation. Indeed, plot was a secondary growth upon the spontaneous dithyrambs out of which Greek tragedy emerged, for, as Leo Aylen points out, "once a chorus starts performing the element of improvisation will diminish, since choruses must work together."[25] One obvious product of narratives delivered from hand to mouth (in opposition to those integrated by authorial foresight) was the "stories" that E.M. Forster has differentiated from "plots." Paraphrasing Aristotle, who observed that it "makes a great difference [to a plot] whether these events are a result of those others or merely follow them" (338), he defines stories in terms of temporal sequence and plots by a causal nexus:

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[24] Jean-Paul Sartre, "On *The Idiot of the Family*," in *Life/Situations: Essays Written and Spoken*, trans. Paul Auster and Lydia Davis (New York: Pantheon, 1977) 116.
[25] Leo Aylen, *Greek Tragedy and the Modern World* (London: Methuen, 1964) 28.

> We have defined a story as a narrative of events
> arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is a narra-
> tive of events, the emphasis falling on causality.
> 'The king died and then the queen died,' is a story.
> 'The king died, and then the queen died of grief',
> is a plot.[26]

In improvised "stories"—plots conceived as events that have been loosened from the grip of causation—the accent will fall on midriff rather than termini, and those same termini will often prove to have been roughly sketched or cavalierly abandoned. Improvisation is the structural enactment of *carpe diem*, and its commitment to the present moment will loosen up and syncopate the quick march of the 'puzzle' plots located at the other end of the spectrum. The results of this option will range from the jovial *lances saturae* of Rabelais and the satirists who preceded him—brimming plates with perimeters, the rough-edged prototypes of Jamesian "circles"—to the bleaker vehicles of Existentialism, since, as Kermode points out, "A truly Sartrean novel would be nothing but a discontinuous unorganized middle" (140). By the same token, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the very antithesis of the *pièce bien faite*, derives its structure from the aggregates of the Music Hall, where one act is glued randomly to the next, and any sense of pattern deferred to the joke of the moment. At a middle point along this continuum of invertebrate plots, taking courage from the disorderly cornucopias of Sterne and Rabelais, and foreshadowing the Sartrean project of self-fashioned meanings, we could locate the efforts of Lord Byron and Alfred de Musset.

These two Romantic sensibilities took an explicit stand against the exigencies of a beginning, middle and end, improvising their satiric plots on the run, and letting the stream of consciousness channel its own wilful course. Byron claims that there's "Nothing so difficult as a beginning / In poesy, unless perhaps the end," and that, far from having the purpose his enemies have attributed to him, he has forsworn design to live from moment to moment:

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[26] E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (1927; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962) 93. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page reference.

> Some have accused me of a strange design
>> Against the creed and morals of the land,
> And trace it in this poem every line:
>> I don't pretend that I quite understand
> My own meaning, when I would be *very* fine;
>> But the fact is, that I have nothing plann'd
> Unless it were to be moment merry,
> A novel word in my vocabulary.[27]

And in much the same way, Musset claims in *Namouna* to have sacrificed consecutive narration to the 'unprogrammed' responsiveness of pen to subject, allowing "le plan" (and all the other narrative components of his poem) to embody the triple 'virtues' of being too long, too short and generally disordered:

> Je jure devant Dieu que mon unique envie
> Était de raconter une histoire suivie.
> Le sujet de ce conte avait quelque douceur,
> Et mon héros peut-être eût su plaire au lecture.
> J'ai laissé s'envoler ma plume avec sa vie,
> En voulant prendre au vol les rêves de son coeur.
>
> Je reconnais bien là ma tactique admirable.
> Dans tout ce que je fais j'ai la triple vertue.
> D'être à la fois trop court, trop long, et décousu.
> La poème et le plan, les héros et la fable,
> Tout s'en va de travers, comme sur une table
> Un plat cuit d'un coté, pendant que l'autre cest cru.[28]

To allow the pen to enwreathe itself with the subject's life, as Musset claims his does, is to forswear the tendentious plotting connected with Dipple's graphs, blueprints, diagrams, and other "industrial" formulae.

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[27] *The Poetical Works of Lord Byron Reprinted from the Original Editions with Life, Explanatory Notes &c.* (London: Frederick Warne, n.d.) 583.

[28] Alfred de Musset, *Poésies complètes*, ed. Maurice Allem (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1957) 268.

Even though the exact etymology of 'plot' has not been ascertained, two elements of the projected explanation indicate something simplified ('plat' as diagram), and something tweaked by a presence offstage ('complot' as conspiracy). And indeed the *pièce bien faite* is open to both these charges. Since plotlessness (or, better, anarchic plotting) presents itself as the ideologically charged renunciation of events that enact an ideology, the next level of classification should centre on the kinds of plot dictated by *specific* value systems. It is a classification half-shadowed by another semi-ideological element, namely genre, and, with that, the central divide between tragedy and comedy. Generic constraints centre the tragic plot on the decline and death of an individual, and the comic on the rise and fulfilment of two lovers or more. Choosing either is to some extent a function of ideology, but in ways that are hard to systematize. The structural consequences are more easily charted, however. Tragic or comic plots will tend to align themselves with the axes of the chordate and inchordate, for tragedy will, on the whole, drive toward a causally narrowed conclusion while—at least in Aristophanes, at the start of the comic line—its antitype embraces an inclusive, invertebrate kind of organization. If death is the tragic terminus, and marriage the comic, then the comic ending will seldom seem very terminal, even if it tries to be. Forster has observed that if "it was not for death and marriage I do not know how the average novelist would conclude" (102), because:

> Death and marriage are almost his only connexion
> between his characters and his plot, and the reader
> is more ready to meet him here, and take a book-
> ish view of them, provided they occur later on in
> the book: the writer, poor fellow, must be allowed
> to finish up somehow, he has his living to get like
> any one else, so no wonder that nothing is heard
> but hammering and screwing. (103)

While we can rely on death to make a fairly decisive end, the procreative couplings of the comic finale recall the irresolute da capo of 'happily ever after.' Ends effected by procreative rituals are only provisionally terminal, and offer us not so much a cadence as the repetitive fade-out we hear in pop songs. George Orwell, for one, deplored these cosy pullulations: "the Victorian happy ending—a vision of a huge, loving family of three or four generations,

all crammed together in the same house and constantly multiply-
ing, like a bed of oysters."[29]

Henry James also had misgivings about slicing into the theo-
retically endless continuum of birth, copulation and death with "a
distribution at the last of prizes, pension, husbands, wives, babies,
millions, appended paragraphs, and cheerful remarks" (*The Art of
Fiction* 82). The archetype for narrative prize-givings is lodged in
Christian eschatology, with its comedy of redemption ("Well done,
thou good and faithful servant") and corresponding tragedy of per-
dition: "God wyll saye, '*Ite, maledicti, in ignem eternum.*'"[30] Both
those options impact the shape of their vector plots, not only with
regard to their ends, but also, up to a point, with regard to their
middles. Redemption forgives all antecedent failures, and makes
provision for repeated falls. No surprise, therefore, that whereas
tragedy typically narrows its focus, comedy enlarges it. The narra-
tive translation of these options, almost identical to the Forsterian
"plot" and "story," can be found in the integral narrative and in the
picaresque respectively. An integral narrative will more often than
not require the machinery of causation to work at full speed, often
to a point of audible grinding. Which is why Orwell deplored

> the needless ramifications of Dickens's novels, the
> awful Victorian 'plot'. It is true that not all his nov-
> els are alike in this.... But the typical Dickens novel,
> *Nicholas Nickleby, Oliver Twist, Martin Chuzzlewit,
> Our Mutual Friend,* always exists round a frame-
> work of melodrama.... Consequently his greatest
> success is *The Pickwick Papers,* which is not a story
> at all, merely a series of sketches; there is little
> attempt at development—the characters simply go
> on and on, behaving like idiots, in a kind of eter-
> nity. As soon as he tries to bring his characters
> into action, the melodrama begins. He cannot make
> the action revolve round their ordinary occupa-
> tions; hence the crossword puzzle of coincidences,

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[29] George Orwell, "Charles Dickens," in *Charles Dickens: A Critical Anthology*, ed.
Stephen Wall (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970) 305. Hereafter cited parenthetically
in the text by page reference.
[30] *Everyman*, ed. A.C. Cawley (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1961) 27.

> intrigues, murders, disguises, buried wills, long-
> lost brothers, etc. etc. (102)

Melodrama is the illegitimate child of opera—a form in which music, by often obscuring the verbal mechanism of plot (as in the notorious instance of Verdi's *Trovatore*) jumpily foreshortens the action. But in melodrama, the relationship of melody and text is reversed, so that characters are simplified by the motifs that subtend their appearances (an *andante semplice* for the heroine; diminished seventh tremolos for the villain), while the plot machinery is amplified (or, to use Orwell's term, ramified) in compensation.

The root of 'ramification' lies in branches, which image the netted shapes of causal plots. Their thetic, antithetic and synthetic incidents, while all originating from a 'trunk' narrative, subdivide with increasing complexity before being lopped by a "distribution at the last of prizes." We could therefore superimpose upon the chordate/inchordate plot category a further division of melodrama's ramose plots from the 'phyllotactic' plots of comedy. Phyllotaxis is

> the study of the distribution of leaves upon the
> stem and of the laws which govern it. The general
> conclusion reached is, that leaves are distributed
> in a manner to economize space and have good
> exposure to light, &c., and that this economy on
> the whole results from the formation of leaves in
> the bud over the widest intervals between the
> leaves next below.[31]

A phyllotactic plot would define the leisurely, sequential organization of the picaresque, or, to borrow Orwell's description, novels conceived as "a series of sketches." In such plots, the 'stem' equates with continuity through time, and the leaves with the 'sketches' (self-contained incidents) disposed along it. To a limited extent,

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[31] A. Gray, *Structural Botany or Organography on the Basis of Morphology to Which is Added the Principles of Taxonomy and Phytography and a Glossary of Botanical Terms* (New York: Ivison, Blakeman, Taylor & Co., 1879) 119. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page reference.

the ramose/phyllotactic criterion also duplicates the tragic/comic one, given the narrative tightness of tragedy (where plot is the cause-driven vehicle of fate), and the looseness and improvisatory drift of (Aristophanic) comedy—which shows once again how pentimenti and superimpositions spring from the form/content ambiguity at the heart of plot. In fact, the organization of plot kinds calls for the overlap of Venn diagrams rather than a system of exclusionary opposites.

To view plots in 'physiognomic' terms (which is to say, by reference to the ramose and the phyllotactic) is to account for the trimness of a 'well-made play' on the one hand (as Aristotle conceived it and as Scribe brought it to industrial mass production), and, on the other, to explain the avowed discontinuity and digressiveness of a Rabelais, Byron or Musset. Forster saw the amplitude of the novel (as opposed to the compacture of a play) as a way of humouring impulse at the expense of prudence:

> And now we must ask ourselves whether the frame-
> work thus produced is the best possible for a novel.
> After all, why has a novel to be planned? Cannot it
> grow? Why need it close, as a play closes? Cannot
> it open out? (103–4)

As we have already seen, anything on paper will close (no matter how irresolute and uncadenced the effect) when the paper runs out. But while real organic 'growing' is technically impossible in verbal fictions, the *illusion* of growth isn't. In a way of grading the extent to which the illusion asserts itself, phyllotactic plots could be sorted by another division, namely, the whorled or spiral disposition of their incidents:

> Leaves are arranged in a considerable variety of
> ways, which all fall under two modes, the *Verticil-*
> *late* and the *Alternate*, but which may also be
> termed the *Cyclical* and the *Spiral.* (Gray 119)

In 'ramose' plotting, the graphs, blueprints, diagrams and ramifications that Orwell and Dipple deplore are all functions of a fore-knowledge that the satiric plots of Byron and Musset try to efface with effects of randomness. An 'improvised' plot would be exemplified by the consecutive, nodular attachment of incident to stem

(the "verticillate"), whereas a novel that tried to marry mere sequence with climactic momentum might be said to have a "spiral" story.

In talking about 'ramose' plots and the kind of foreknowledge that their trimness imposes upon experience, we again come up against ideological assumptions about literature. Does it idealize and pattern the contingency it processes ("[Nature's] world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden"[32]); or does it simply transcribe what it finds? The *locus classicus* of this debate is Aristotle's exaltation of drama above history: "for poetry tells us rather the universals, history the particulars" (*Poetics* 301). By thus distinguishing design from reportage, he seems to oppose plots that, in the words of Keats, proceed from the "virtuous philosp[h]er" against those that issue from the "camelion Poet."[33] Keats's "negative capability" (43) would match the Jamesian avoidance of prizes and pensions. Its opposing state, an "irritable reaching after fact & reason" (43), would represent the tendentiousness of allegory, where incidents index dogmatic particles, and plot is another name for their expository linkage.

Plots that advertise authorial foreknowledge tend, like Calvinism, to convert wilful beings to passive counters. From a purely formal point of view, one might expect an overlap between the ramose plot option and the narrowed, specifying structure of allegory, but this is not the case. Fully fledged allegories such as *The Faerie Queene*, and loose approximations such as *Moby Dick*, have a structural plenitude (and sometimes even an air of disorder) that sorts ill with the notion of a diagram. Because the coherence exists at a level beyond plot, and subordinates the pattern of the narrative to itself, the event-chain of an allegory will often seem as ill-sorted and disjunct as the visual elements of an emblem, which ultimately depend for their integration on the accompanying motto. But allegory is only one of many manifestations of doctrinaire plotting. The less thorough-going mode of the parable, which turns on a looser, illustrative relation between dogma and narrative (rather

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[32] Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry* in *English Critical Texts: 16th Century to 20th Century*, ed. D.J. Enright and Ernst de Chickera (London: Oxford UP, 1962) 8.

[33] *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (London: Oxford UP, 1970) 157. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page reference.

than on one-to-one equations), will, even so, subordinate the plot to its ideological thrust. It is paradoxical, therefore, that ideologies in total opposition to each other will often issue in similar kinds of plotting, or, rather, similar kinds of didactic inevitability. While the Calvinism of John Bunyan foreordains the redemptive plot-line of *The Pilgrim's Progress,* so, just as obviously, does the necessitarianism behind *Tess of the D'Urbervilles,* which Arnold Kettle has described as the embodiment of a "pessimistic and determinist view of the world in which man (and, even more, woman) is at the mercy of an unyielding outside Fate."[34] Forster has likewise suggested that Hardy's "characters are involved in various snares, they are finally bound hand and foot, there is ceaseless emphasis on fate, and yet, for all the sacrifices made to it, we never see the action as a living thing" (101).

In Hardy, no less than in Bunyan, plot elides with doctrine, a scheme of poetic *in*justice exactly comparable to Thomas Rymer's 'poetic justice':

> These were for teaching by *examples,* in a graver way, yet extremely *pleasant* and *delightful.* And, finding in History, the same *end* happen to the *righteous* and to the *unjust, vertue,* often opprest, and *wickedness* on the Throne: they saw these particular *yesterday-truths* were imperfect and unproper to illustrate the *universal* and *eternal truths* by them intended. Finding also that this *unequal* distributions of rewards and punishments did perplex the *wisest,* and by the *Atheist* was made a scandal to the *Divine Providence.* They concluded, that a *Poet* must of necessity see *justice* exactly administered, if he intended to please. For, said they, if the World can scarce be satisfi'd with God Almighty, whose holy will and purposes are not to be *comprehended*; a *Poet* (in these matters) shall never be pardon'd, who (they are sure) is not *incomprehensible*; whose *ways* and *walks* may, without impiety, be penetrated and examin'd. (*Tragedies of the Last Age* 22)

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[34] Arnold Kettle, *An Introduction to the English Novel* (London: Hutchinson, 1953) 2:52.

A detailed ideological schema of plots would therefore range from the necessary optimism of the Christian psychomachia to the necessary pessimism of its Hardian antitype. Necessity, indeed, is the key to ramose plotting. In any *pièce bien faite*, the formal pressure of coincidence, whether benign or malevolent, will have the effect of Calvinizing the plot, and the more complex and decisive its machinations, the more tendentious its resolution will seem. In his *Preface to Rapin*, Rymer pointed out that biblical matter disqualifies itself for tragedy precisely because a divine super-plot disables the freewill of the protagonists: "And since many particulars in Sacred Story are neither *Heroick*, nor indeed consistent with common principles of Morality, but of a singular, extraordinary, and unaccountable dispensation; and since in the principal actions all is carried on by *Machine*; how can these examples be propos'd for great persons to imitate?" (8). This anticipates, from an entirely different angle, Sartre's attacks on Mauriac, which, as Kermode observes, were

> founded upon a conviction that they are dishonestly determinate. The characters in a Christian novel, he says ought surely to be 'centres of indeterminacy' and not the slaves of some fake omniscience. It is by the negation of such formalism that we may make literature a liberating force. (141)

Another function of Calvinized plotting is a formulaic tidiness, the result of experience cut into the tidy wedges deplored by Henry James in *The Art of Fiction*:

> What kind of experience is intended, and where does it begin and end? Experience is never limited, and is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. (85–86)

Like the narrative "circles" that, in the Preface to *Roderick Hudson* had adumbrated "relations [that] stop nowhere," the spider-web images circumference rather than unravelled linearity, and has no

official point of entry. Spiders, furthermore, construct their webs in the passive expectation of contingencies. *Tranche-de-vie* realism, because it acknowledges the arbitrariness of a start and a finish, practises a more ragged mode of slicing than Aristotle had enjoined upon the plot-finder/mythographer. For, as Dipple has pointed out, classical Greek tragedy invested plot with an architectural function, whereas realists argued that "life is multiform and must be rendered not singly but in its puzzling multiplicity" (5). This displaced Aristotle's rectilinear shapes with less decided alternatives, so that, in a sense, plot became ever less predictable as it evolved, not only because mythographers devised increasingly unusual alternatives to established story grooves, but also because the causal plot was dissolved in the course of time, first by the realists of the late nineteenth century, and then, more radically, by such impressionists as Virginia Woolf.

For as long as plot kinds enjoyed an institutional status akin to that of genres, they broke down into recognizable topoi. A particular plot would specify particular characters and incidents and sequences, too complex to be tabulated here. Let us take, for example, the agelast who blocked the advancement of love in the New Comedy, and who was often, to notch down the level of abstraction, a *geron* or old man, whose repressiveness, a function of his age, opposed the modern values of the lovers. The agelast also recurred in European folklore, in avatars that included witch, siren and stepmother. These and other typal characters, shuffled with equally standard sequences and topoi, form plots that can be docketed more specifically—at which point structural blueprints and ideological patterns dissolve into minutiae, and stories get tagged (and semi-classified) by the distinctive myths or romances that they recapitulate. If Aristotle's pronouncement about beginnings, middles and ends fails, in its generality, to convey the complexities of *mythopsis*, neither does the *un*systematic talk of Oedipus plots or Cinderella motifs, for such labels are often arbitrary. Before giving Cinderella a template status, the taxonomist should have remembered that *Cendrillon* itself reworks aspects of the Psyche inset in Apuleius' *Golden Ass* (hostile sisters, magical ennoblement, trial), and that it also foreshadows the plot of La Chaussée's *Amour par Amour*, which we have come to call "Beauty and the Beast," and which goes back in turn to Straparola's *Piacevoli notti* (1550), a

story "of great antiquity."[35] To speak of the Cinderella motif on the one hand, and the Griselda topos on the other, and then to invoke the Pamela plot, and, with that the whole tradition of the *serva padrona*, is to differentiate quite arbitrarily between similar and overlapping plot designs. By the same token, the plot of Perrault's *La Belle au bois dormant*, derived from the legend of the Seven Sleepers, also provides a basis for the *Rip Van Winkle* story. There is no rationale for making definitive the eighteenth-century avatar of an antique tale. Because plots, viewed up close, bear the same relation to their component elements that genres bear to their topoi, many reduplicate the outlines of others or make only small adjustments to them. It all depends on the particular topoi isolated and focused in the tagging, a focus very much prone to chance.

To sum up, then, plot (as much as plotlessness) is a function of ideology, whether it be suspended or scrambled by anarchical temperaments like Byron's and Musset's, or conceived in terms of the 'Newtonian' laws that Aristotle and Northrop Frye have brought to the universe of narrative. It is there that a coherent taxonomy of the various kinds is likely to find purchase. There is room, too, for a structural taxonomy based upon the building styles that chordate/inchordate options allow. However, any attempt at bringing order to the classification based on topoi or definitive avatars is neither feasible nor even desirable. One can't help thinking, even as one surveys the chaos, that, as in a scholar's disorderly study— if not a Beetonian kitchen—there is a place for everything, even if everything is not in its place.

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[35] *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, rev. Ivor H. Evans (London: Cassell, 1981) 96.