James Dorson

Counternarrative Possibilities

Virgin Land, Homeland, and Cormac McCarthy's Westerns

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For my parents

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Preface

"All is telling. Do not doubt it."
—Cormac McCarthy, *The Crossing* (1995, 155)

This book is concerned mainly with two things. The first is how to unsettle the power of narrative. When a narrative determines our field of vision, the range of our knowledge, our beliefs and expectations, and even shapes our affective ties, how is it possible to detach oneself from it? How do we call attention to the narrative lenses through which we perceive the world? For several modern critical traditions, from Russian formalism and New Criticism to critical theory and poststructuralism, literature has played a key role in exposing the constructedness of our worlds. The novel in particular gives readers access to an infinite number of worlds that have been created in ways that resemble our own narrative constructions of reality, and thus possesses the unique power of calling those constructions into question. Yet novels are not frontal assaults on our precarious sense of reality. When directly faced with the fact that our perception of the world is just that, a perception, we tend to become defensive. Casting doubt on our narratives threatens the integrity of our worlds. But set apart as fiction, the power of novels is by definition more subtle, more circuitous than other forms of communication. This is both their weakness and their strength. As we usually read novels for pleasure and not to have our beliefs shattered, novels, when we least expect it, may insinuate that something is wrong, that the world is not quite as we thought, that there are rifts in its otherwise seamless surface that cannot be accounted for. Once touched by this doubt, the ground beneath us becomes shaky, the givenness of the world less given.

The second concern of this book is what happens next? How does one move from disorientation to reorientation? How are we ever to inhabit another world after our faith in the first has been shaken? Literature may be capable of inspiring a "negative capability," John Keats's memorable phrase for "when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (2000, 889). Yet the irritable reaching after certainty persists. For good reason, too,

because the attempt to know the world is not only a bulwark against existential despair, but a condition for acting in it. Can art, then, also inspire a positive capability? Can it inspire a negative and positive capability at one and the same time? If art stirs up a storm in the waters of knowledge, is it also able to calm those waters again without returning to the murky metaphysics of narrative closure? Is it possible to settle the waters of knowledge, so that its texture and depths remain visible, so that all the fearsome underwater creatures of politics and power, history and habit, fear and desire may still be discerned beneath its scintillating surface, together with all the dreadful crags and inscrutable fissures that we tend to avert our gaze from? Or, once settled, will those waters again become the dazzling surface they were before, a surface that blinds us and conceals its secret motivations and machinations?

Infusing our narratives with doubt will always be an important function of literature, but as the disaffection with postmodern fiction that has made narrative disruption its primary business grows, the question of narrative resumption is gaining in pitch and resonance. In recent years, a number of scholars have identified a cultural push to move beyond the disruptive capabilities of postmodern fiction, and toward what critics awkwardly refer to as 'post-postmodernism.' In *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature* (2013), Mary K. Holland argues that we are not witnessing the end of postmodernism, but that millennial fiction has successfully combined a poststructuralist skepticism of language and narrative with a renewed interest in humanist concerns with truth and ethics.[1] While Holland is mostly interested in postmodern aesthetics, thus following Linda Hutcheon's reading of postmodernism in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988) as culturally instead of historically specific, Jeffrey T. Nealon's *Post-Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (2012) follows Fredric Jameson's view of postmodernism as a historical period determined by the structures of late capitalism. As these structures have only been intensified in the three decades since Jameson's diagnosis, Nealon suggests that the additional prefix of 'post' to postmodernism is the appropriate marker of its intensification rather than its demise. If postmodernism for neither Holland nor Nealon may be said to have 'ended,' whether as an aesthetic practice or historical period, they

1 Holland's book also provides a useful survey of recent studies that examine the 'end of postmodernism' (2013, 11–17).

both identify a development within postmodernism that has made it "something recognizably different in its contours and workings" (Nealon 2012, ix).

Both the idea of post-postmodernism as a paradoxical return to narrative through a style that questions it, and as marking the intensification of capitalism, are relevant to this book. Rather than being unrelated definitions, however, I argue that it is precisely the latter development that underlies the urgency of the former; that the intensification of capitalism makes a revival of narrative as crucial as ever. One of the key contributions of Jameson's analysis is to show how cultural and aesthetic transgressions in postmodernism have lost their radical potential, that they "are not only received with the greatest complacency but have themselves become institutionalized and are at one with the official or public culture of Western society" (1997, 4). If the misbehavior of art still poses a threat to conservative values and norms, its misbehavior is dwarfed next to what we have come to expect from capitalism. While we have known since Marx that capitalism melts everything solid into air, it is only in its more intensified form that it has become clear that capitalism is not merely disruptive, but that its legitimacy today depends upon its own self-understanding as a cultural rebel.[2] In light of this development, any oppositional desire we may harbor for art could not content itself with the transgressive power of art, but would have to examine how art functions to remobilize the power of narrative at a time when questioning narrative meaning has become second nature to us. As much popular discontent is channeled into the quick narrative fixes of nativism and nationalism, the narrative skepticism that literature can instill continues to serve an important role. Yet the question of how the power of narrative might recover from our postmodern incredulity is just as crucial to any theory or movement that aims to challenge our present cultural and economic structures.

Thus, while this book probes art's negative capability, my aim is also to examine how literary narratives today might help organize a growing discontent with the present state of our world. My position here is that any viable cultural or political narrative must strike a balance between narrative skepticism and faith. This is what I would like to express with the term

2 On the 'rebellious' spirit of capitalism, see Thomas Frank's *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (1997), Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999), and Jim McGuigan's *Cool Capitalism* (2009).

'counternarrative.' As I define my use of the term in chapter two of this book, a counternarrative simultaneously narrates and disrupts narration. A counternarrative is a story that succeeds as a narrative at the same time as it reveals how it succeeds. In this sense, regardless of the specific content of a counternarrative, the first thing that it counters is depoliticization. Depoliticization, as Wendy Brown writes,

> involves removing a political phenomenon from comprehension of its historical emergence and from a recognition of the powers that produce and contour it. No matter its particular form and mechanics, depoliticization always eschews power and history in the representation of its subject. When these two constitutive sources of social relations and political conflict are elided, an ontological naturalness or essentialism almost inevitably takes up residence in our understandings and explanations. (2006, 15)

It is the nature of narratives to obfuscate their own power and history. At the same time, there is no better way to disclose the operations of power and history than to make stories about them. The idea of the counternarrative as I use it here is meant to address this paradox. If we desire the emergence of new narratives that contest the 'end of history,' it is imperative that those narratives do not mystify the conditions of their own making. How the idea of the counternarrative may contribute to such a reflexive repoliticization of the social is the underlying question of the pages that follow.

This is also where Cormac McCarthy comes in. As I provide a general introduction to his work in the second part of this book, let me here only explain my choice of reading McCarthy's Westerns as counternarratives. My pick of McCarthy may appear counterintuitive. Unlike other writers of his generation, such as Thomas Pynchon or Don DeLillo, who for decades have provided us with stories that probe the cultural depths of capitalist society, McCarthy's fiction appears to be only obliquely, if at all, interested in the market forces that shape our lives. His focus is on those left behind in the modern world rather than those who shape it. Yet by focusing on the people and communities trampled by the processes of modernity, his fiction is able to call those processes into question. Without exception, his novels deal with either the foundation or dissolution of social order. In his early Appalachian work, *The Orchard Keeper* (1965) and *Suttree* (1979) both address an encroaching modern order uprooting older communities, while *Outer Dark* (1968) and *Child of God* (1973) revolve around themes of incest, cannibalism, and necrophilia, some of the foundational taboos of society.

His two most recent novels, *No Country for Old Men* (2005) and *The Road* (2006), both deal with the fragility of order and collapse of civilization. But it was with McCarthy's turn to the Western in *Blood Meridian* (1985) and the Border Trilogy—comprised of *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994), and *Cities of the Plain* (1998)—that his interest in the foundations of law and order culminated. The Western has long been the preeminent genre in American culture for exploring the laying down of law, which made it a natural choice for a writer otherwise distinguished by his literariness. While *Blood Meridian* uses the Western to explore the violent origins of modern society, the Border Trilogy uses it to recuperate the affective power contained within its familiar plots. If the master narratives of the past and present have lead us into violent and desolate places, as McCarthy's novels suggest, the reinscription of powerful cultural narratives in his Westerns, rather than simply their subversion, raises the specter of changing the doom-bound course his novels envision.

It is the dual performance in McCarthy's Westerns of both the dangers of narrative and its social and existential necessity that make his work a model for renewed narrative agency in the twenty-first century. While McCarthy in many ways appears to be out of tune with his times—with his archaic vocabulary and syntax, and his serious exploration of outmoded passions and values—his work nevertheless struck a cultural nerve in the 1990s. Since then his popularity has only surged, making him one of the most influential writers today. Although critics have meticulously traced his literary debts to writers such as William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor, and have practically exhausted every reference or possible connection they might find, only recently have critics begun to explore McCarthy's impact on a younger generation of writers.[3] Particularly the turn to genre fiction by a writer of McCarthy's stature helped precipitate the blurring of literary and genre fiction that has characterized some of the most ambitious literature in the past couple of decades. McCarthy might not only be read as part of this development, but as its pioneer—*The Road* only cementing his leading position in the literary field that his Westerns paved the way for. Indeed, there is a fine line between not belonging to ones times and being

3 Lucas Thompson's essay "'Books Are Made out of Books:' David Foster Wallace and Cormac McCarthy" (2015) is the first to trace McCarthy's influence on David Foster Wallace. Linda Woodson's "Mapping *The Road* in Post-Postmodernism" (2008) reads McCarthy in the context of post-postmodernism, but not in relation to other writers.

ahead of them. One of the reasons for McCarthy's rise to fame may well have been the cultural exhaustion of ironic metafiction as it went mainstream in the 1990s. To be sure, McCarthy's Westerns are reflexive of their own narratives, but their reflexivity is a result of allegory instead of irony; typically the effect of parables told by characters, not the authorial undercutting of the story. Only the black humor and outlandish similes alleviate the high seriousness of McCarthy's authorial voice. If nothing else, the fact that his stories have become as popular as they have in an age as ironically reflexive as ours is an indication that the times are changing.

The book is divided into two parts. The first focuses on the cultural power of narrative (chapter one) and the prospects of both disrupting that power and constructing new narratives that are at once reflexive and compelling (chapter two). McCarthy is by no means a political writer, if we understand by that a writer who takes sides in partisan debates. The human pessimism that runs through his stories makes them as unpalatable to liberal tastes as his challenge to American exceptionalism is to conservative ones. That said, his Westerns take up two highly charged narratives in U.S. culture: the notorious virgin land myth, and its post-Cold War conversion into what could be called 'the homeland myth.' To grasp the counternarrative possibilities of McCarthy's Westerns, we must first understand the cultural narratives they counter. This will be the task of chapters three and four. The analysis of these narratives is vital for my broader purposes here, because national narratives function as a repository for longing, which channels discontent away from transformative political narratives into reactionary cultural ones. An analysis of national narratives also compels me to ask difficult questions about methods in American Studies. From its postwar beginning, the field has been closely involved in shaping and reshaping the stories that the nation tells about itself. My aim is not to take part in this ongoing project, but to show why the narratives in American Studies often fall short of their radical goals. The second part of this book then reads Cormac McCarthy's Westerns as counternarratives in both the sense of disrupting hegemonic narratives and performing as a model for renewed narrative meaning. As I will argue here, McCarthy's Westerns are exemplary counternarratives in their subversive appropriation of national myth (chapter five), their reflexive concern with narrativity (chapters six and seven), and their unleashing of desires submerged in romance and genre fiction that beckons new narrative possibilities (chapters eight and nine).

Part I Narratives and Counternarratives

1 The Power of Narrative

"The social structure seems to us as natural as nature, even though it is only held together by magic. Is it not, in reality, an edifice built of spells, this system which is based on writings, on words obeyed, on promises kept, on effectual images, on observed habits and conventions,—all of which are pure fiction?"
—Paul Valéry, *Selected Writings* (1964, 209)

All fields of knowledge production today are haunted by the specter of 'narrative.' Beginning with mid-twentieth-century structuralism, the term has spread like a new faith through the academic disciplines to our culture at large. But when we say 'narrative,' we mean the opposite of faith: a type of linguistic skepticism and reflection on the production of meaning. To talk about narratives implies that our relationship to knowledge has changed, that it no longer resides in the fortress of Truth but has become a dweller in the house of Contingency. In the humanities as well as in the social and even natural sciences, researchers explicitly call attention to their narratives, thereby implying that other narratives might have been told, that their data could have been assembled in different ways. To be sure, this is a welcome development as it fosters critical self-awareness and is conducive to debate. But that is not always how it works. As often as not, we do little more than pay lip service to the term. The invocation of narrative has not only become a perfunctory ritual, it can even be used preemptively against those who would call the bluff on Truth, as if to say, "we are all aware that this is a narrative, but the *truth* is…." This is a way of circumventing and containing the productive doubt that a reflection on narrativity brings to knowledge. To avoid this slippage back into incontestable truths, an awareness of the narrative production of meaning has to be more than a gesture: it has to manifest itself in the practice of narrating, not merely in name but in its very structure. In other words, it is not enough that a narrator calls attention to the narrative production of meaning; a narrative has to call attention to itself through its form. This chapter and the next aim to address this problem—*how can narrative form qualify the truth-claim inherent to it?*—first by addressing the narrative structure of meaning, then by exploring the possibilities of a narrative form structurally incapable of falling back on the transcendental legitimation that mystifies its cultural origins, as narratives are wont to do.

Connect the Dots

"We live entirely," Joan Didion writes, "by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the 'ideas' with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience" (1979, 11). This reflection addresses one of the greatest questions of all times: how to make sense of the infinite mass of sensations that are pressed upon us by the world. From the formation of the ego in what Jacques Lacan called the 'mirror stage' of infancy, where we are first set apart from the world, we are engaged in a prolonged struggle to sort out the chaos facing us. For mere survival, we struggle to understand the relationship between ourselves and the world. We process our chaotic impressions of the world in numerous ways: we select, we filter, we store, we repress, we embrace, we transform, we abstract, we are overwhelmed, we panic. These reactions are not only implicated in the formation of the ego, but in the formation of society. In *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Freud argued that the origin of civilization is to be found in the way "primitive man transposed the structural conditions of his own mind into the external world" (1975, 91). For Freud, our earliest magic rituals indicated this need to exercise control over the shapeless world: "There is an intellectual function in us which demands unity, connection and intelligibility from any material, whether of perception or thought, that comes within its grasp" (ibid., 95). This function establishes meaning and coherency where there is none. It works as a defense against what for many is the most incomprehensible event in our lives: death. Telling stories that allow us to 'grasp' the world, in the dual sense of understanding and taking into possession, is the magic that we wield against the unknown. A narrative is a projection of our desire for meaning onto the world, meaning that "promises to bring with it the advantage of mental relief" (ibid., 92). Only by weaving a narrative web around the world are we able to make the 'shifting phantasmagoria' of reality comprehensible. A narrative provides us with a ground and vantage point from which to order and comprehend what happens to us—including past and future events. The way we see the world and ourselves is inseparable from the way we understand it, and how we understand it depends upon what stories we tell ourselves.

"Like life itself," Roland Barthes writes about narrative, "it is there, international, transhistorical, transcultural" (1975a, 237). The ubiquity of the narrative form, however, only makes it all the more difficult to see. The

process of narrativizing our sense-impressions is so habitual that we rarely reflect on it. Like fish without a conception of water, most of us have little awareness of the narrative constructions that determine how we think and act. Even though the analysis of narrative today is a well-established field, and much of what this chapter covers has become orthodoxy, it is important to keep the basic construction and function of narratives in mind. To bring these constructions into focus, it is helpful to begin at their most basic level. Here two comparisons will prove useful, both of which build on Roman Jakobson's nexus of paradigmatic 'selection' and syntagmatic 'combination.'[4]

First, a narrative may be compared to a connect-the-dots puzzle. In order for a recognizable shape to emerge from the collection of dots, one has to draw lines between them. On their own the dots make no sense, yet when they are connected properly a familiar image appears. Meaning does not reside in the dots, but only in the lines drawn between them. In the narrative production of meaning, we similarly connect the disparate 'dots' of our sensations with the 'lines' of cognition that we use to order them into a distinct shape. What occurs in the world has no inherent meaning to us. It is only through the act of connecting these occurrences that what we think of as meaning begins to arise. In *Another Way of Telling* (1982), John Berger uses another fitting metaphor to explain this basic narrative structure: "One can lie on the ground and look up at the almost infinite number of stars in the night sky, but in order to tell stories about those stars they need to be seen as constellations, the invisible lines which can connect them need to be assumed" (1982, 284).

Yet we should remember that the stars forming constellations are ones that we have selected for that specific purpose from millions of other stars in the sky. The same goes for a connect-the-dots puzzle, where the dots have already been selected and prearranged for us with numbers that determine the lines we draw. It follows that the number and shape of the configurations that can be generated are limited by their prefiguration. They have been selected in a way that is conducive to certain images and mean-

4 In his essay "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances" (1956), Jakobson argues that "speech implies a selection of certain linguistic entities and their combination into linguistic units of a higher degree of complexity" (1998, 117). Selection is the paradigmatic axis of language, where a word is picked from the "filing cabinet of *prefabricated* representations," while combination is the syntagmatic axis, where these "prefabricated representations" are ordered into a coherent whole (ibid., 117).

ings, while adverse to others. Similarly, narratives are not made from the raw material of the world, but from the world filtered through language. Just as the picture is inherent in the arrangement of dots, narrative meaning is latent in the linguistic systems that mediate our experiences. In *Metahistory* (1973), Hayden White makes this point with recourse to Kenneth Burke's four literary master tropes of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony, of which he argues all historical narratives are composed (1987, 33). One may disagree with his reductive schema of four master tropes, but the lesson he draws from bringing the analysis of figural language to bear upon historiography is significant. Through language, he writes, "the historian both creates his object of analysis and predetermines the modality of the conceptual strategies he will use to explain it" (ibid., 31). Before something can be given narrative shape it must first be converted into words in a process that simultaneously identifies and constitutes the object. This is not to mean that there is no preconceptual or prelinguistic reality, but that our relationship to the world is always shaped by the language we use to describe it. It is only possible to 'decode' the world in narratives after it first has been 'encoded' in language.

The spatial metaphor of the connect-the-dots puzzle exemplifies the centrality of selection and combination for the constitution of narrative meaning. But it leaves out the question of temporality. The linguistic building blocks of a narrative are not only combined to create a familiar constellation, but also to set that constellation into motion over time. In another essay, White defines a narrative as "the syntagmatic dispersion of events across a temporal series presented as a prose discourse, in such a way as to display their progressive elaboration as a comprehensible form" (1978, 96). The 'dots' of impressions or events in narratives are not merely drawn together as in the example of connect-the-dots, but are also shown to develop in a linear sequence. The temporal aspect of a narrative could be compared with the arrangement of snapshots in a photo album. Here visual fragments of a lifetime are organized in a way that conveys a meaningful development. By themselves, each picture only describes a particular moment frozen in time. Although a photograph always carries the intent of the photographer who selects and frames the represented object, it still retains an element of indeterminacy in its suspended isolation; at least until meaning is imposed by a beholder, who aligns the image with previous experiences and preconceptions. Berger makes this link between time and meaning clear: "An instant photographed can only acquire meaning insofar

as the viewer can read into it a duration extending beyond itself. When we find a photograph meaningful, we are lending it a past and a future" (1982, 89). But when single photographs are collected, as in an album, giving each snapshot a past and future through their (usually chronological) arrangement, they assume a narrative quality that intimates an entire lifespan. Like the meaning bestowed on a life contained within a photo album, the combination of impressions and events that make up a narrative responds to our expectations and need for coherence.

In the course of selecting and combining the prefabricated blocks of the world, casting it in the mold of language and making it meaningful through development, we may begin to see narrativity as a process of both conscious and unconscious choices that enable certain meanings while invalidating others that might have been equally plausible, depending on the 'raw material' of the world from which the 'data' was produced.[5] This inclusion and exclusion of meaning in the narrativizing process reveals a

5 By 'raw material,' I mean the prelinguistic reality that can neither be known nor dismissed. To take an example: nobody would deny that there has been a car crash if confronted with an automobile smashed against a tree and with dead people inside. What can be doubted is the *meaning* of the wreck, how the accident happened, why it happened, if it even was an accident, and so on. What could also be questioned is the appropriateness of the term 'car crash' to denote the event; whether it would be more fitting to call it a tragedy, disaster, murder, or an interesting case, depending on the motive, context, and emotions of those referring to it. But the destroyed motor vehicle, the dent in the tree, the skid marks on the road, and the bloodied corpses are indisputable facts that may be documented and turned into historical 'data,' even if the language or images in which they are enshrined is open to dispute. Thus, the materiality of the world does have a say in the narratives that give it meaning, but only as that which *instigates* the meaning-making process, not what *determines* it. When this argument is transposed to something as historically sensitive as the Holocaust, we see that calling attention to the narrative fabrication of the past has nothing to do with denying that certain events took place. What is called into question is the *meaning* of the fact, not the fact itself. As Amos Funkenstein in *Perceptions of Jewish History* (1993) is at pains to show, it is possible to lose "contact with reality," which he describes as "the involuntary constraint which enables the effective manipulations of our world" (1993, 48). Although Funkenstein chides Hayden White for providing "no criterion by which to discern a true from a false narrative, or a precise from a sloppy one," White makes a similar point in regards to the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the account of which he argues it would be inexcusable for historians to plot as comedy (ibid., 32). Such a narrative would "misfire," White writes, as comedy ends with a reconciliation that the fact of Kennedy's death belies, even if the question is still wide open whether the murder then should be plotted as romance, tragedy, or satire (1978, 84).

function that exceeds the merely psychological significance of narrative. The choices made and conclusions drawn in the construction of narrative meaning have implications far beyond the individual desire for coherence. It makes as little sense to try to understand narrativity solely in psychological terms as it does to analyze the ego without taking its environment into account. Narrative meaning is always psychosocial; our desires influence society, just as society influences our desires. Every narrative is located in the junction between existential necessity and ideological possibility. No matter how personal or political, a narrative will have consequences that bridge the ostensible gap between the two. In the preface to *The Content of the Form* (1987), White notes that "narrative is not merely a neutral discursive form that may or may not be used to represent real events in their aspect as developmental processes but rather entails ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications" (1990, ix). As such, we see that neither the spatial metaphor of the connect-the-dots puzzle nor the temporal one of the photo album adequately convey the social function of narrative meaning. White's important point is that it is not only the content of a narrative that determines its values and norms, but that these are integral to narrative form. In order to understand how the form of narratives has a content of its own, we need to deal with two further concepts that White uses to illuminate the narrative production of meaning.

Closure and Emplotment

The chronological order of events does not rule out conflicting interpretations of them. Only when two sharp incisions are made into the natural flow of events is it possible to contain their indeterminacy. These artificial breaks mark a beginning and an end. In *The Sense of an Ending* (1966), Frank Kermode illustrates the meaning produced by such fictional cuts with reference to the time of the clock, where "the interval between *tock* and *tick* represents purely successive, disorganized time of the sort that we need to humanize" (1973, 45). The purpose of narrative meaning is thus

> to defeat the tendency of the interval between *tick* and *tock* to empty itself; to maintain within that interval following *tick* a lively expectation of *tock*, and a sense that however remote *tock* may be, all that happens happens as if *tock* were certainly

following. All such plotting presupposes and requires that an end will bestow upon the whole duration and meaning. To put it another way, the interval must be purged of simple chronicity, of the emptiness of *tock-tick*, humanly uninteresting successiveness. (ibid., 46)

In "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality" (1980), White similarly argues that for narrative meaning to emerge, even more important than a beginning there has to be a conclusion. This conclusion must not just be a termination of the account, but the imposition of a moral judgment on all of the preceding events in the narrative, which White refers to as their "closure" (1990, 21). Because the closure of a narrative works as the final knot that ties up all the threads of the narrated elements—i.e., the anticipated 'tock' of events—it follows that it is the closure of a narrative that not only fixes its meaning, but which allows for the construction of meaning in the first place. Closure thus makes narrative a system of knowledge closed upon itself, neatly encased between the implied tick and tock.

It is no surprise, then, that the term 'closure' is derived from the Latin *clausura*, meaning 'fortress,' as closure at once fortifies and imprisons meaning. The significance of this is even greater when we take into account that, as Wendy Brown writes about walls, "enclosure brings the sacred into being, marking it off from the common or the ordinary" (2010, 46). The form of knowledge produced by narrative (en)closure is 'sacred' in the sense that it is incontestable and sharply demarcated from the chaos that surrounds it.[6] This disambiguation gives rise to a total meaning, where all the elements of a narrative are made complicit in the inevitable movement toward its end. Everything that is drawn into a narrative bears the imprint of its closure. Once such a narrative framework is in place, new events do little to unsettle it, as they are accommodated to its preestablished logic. Without this totalizing quality, White argues that a narrative account of reality would fall back into the form of annals or chronicle that were discredited with the advent of historiography in the nineteenth century (1990, 21). Neither of these forms are organized by meaning, but by calendar years and chronology, respectively. In making this contrast, White shows how narrative form is predicated upon a moral principle that authorizes its choice of subject, as well as the beginning and end that cuts into the flow

6 As Cornelius Castoriadis writes, "[c]losure means that what is thought cannot be put into question in its essential features" (1997, 265).

of time. The teleological effect of narrative closure means that everything represented anticipates its consummation. The implicit telos in narratives generates a powerful sense of the inevitable, one that easily serves to legitimate specific ends. As such, every narrative contains within its form a measure of the sanctioning power of the master narratives that contributed to the major social upheavals of the last two centuries.

Another concept that is key to understanding the power of narrative is that of 'emplotment.' By emplotment is meant the inscription of a plot structure upon events that in themselves are plotless. Emplotment gives life deeper meaning. It is used in order to "familiarize the unfamiliar" immediacy of events (White 1978, 86). Without this ability to make the world familiar, we would find ourselves in a state of constant wonder, not to say madness. As Kermode puts it: "To see everything as out of mere succession is to behave like a man drugged or insane" (1973, 57). A plot is already implied in the choice of words used for describing events—different words being conducive to different plots—but the emplotment of events further operates as a filter on the world that teaches us to only register what accords with it. We are all blinded to certain aspects of reality that clash with our preconceived narratives of it. In *Invisible Man* (1952), Ralph Ellison brilliantly shows how the racial emplotment of reality blinds us to what we are not prepared to see. As the narrator explains, "[t]hat invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality" (1995, 3). It is these "inner eyes" that are determined by our emplotment of reality.

Emplotment makes our vision highly selective and hierarchical after a principle that by nature is ideological. The mental process of familiarization is as determined by culture as it is by language. Emplotment conforms the raw material of the world "to an *icon* of a comprehensible finished process, a plot structure with which [the reader] is familiar as a part of his cultural endowment" (White 1978, 86). There is no narrative that does not contain the suggestion of a plot, because the narrativizing act of selection and combination implies a hierarchical structure. In this way, the emplotment of events is didactic by nature. A plot conveys tacit knowledge that educates us in the norms and values of the culture that authorizes it. Plots delineate the boundaries of the permissible, and show us by example what consequences must be suffered when we break or bend the rules of society. As

such, plots are maps by which we navigate the complexities of the social system. In *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), Jean-François Lyotard argued that popular stories "recount what could be called positive and negative apprenticeships," because they "allow the society in which they are told, on the one hand, to define its criteria of competence and, on the other, to evaluate according to those criteria what is performed or can be performed within it" (1984, 19–20). The emplotment of events is therefore as morally charged as the closure brought to bear on them.

Another way that emplotment corresponds to closure is how, as the anxious narrator of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) puts it, "all plots tend to move deathward" (1986, 26). If one elementary function of closure and plot is to protect us from the prospect of a meaningless death, it is ironic that a narrative wraps everything in the shroud of telos, the figural death of foregone conclusions. Emplotment is contingent upon closure, because without the implicit judgment of closure no movement toward an end would be possible, and the account would remain as plotless as annals or chronicles. White defines plot as "a structure of relationships by which the events contained in the account are endowed with a meaning by being identified as parts of an integrated whole" (1990, 9). The integrated whole that emplotment produces is the same as the total meaning of closure. Here we also see that closure and emplotment both depend on identification. For the particular to be dissolved into the general, the integrated whole or total meaning, it must first be separated out from the mishmash of our experiences and identified as such.

In *Negative Dialectics* (1966), Theodor Adorno describes identity thinking as that which "says what something comes under, what it exemplifies or represents, and what, accordingly, it is not itself" (1990, 149). This is the process of thought at work in the translation of the world into words and events into narratives. For something to be abstracted into form, to be pigeonholed and placed into categories, the elusive raw material of the world must first be captured and identified by thought. The unfamiliar immediacy of the world is replaced with concepts familiar to us, prompting Adorno to reflect on the paradox that the "more relentlessly our identitarian thinking besets its object, the farther it will take us from the identity of the object" (ibid., 149). For Adorno, identity thinking is what gives rise to the abstractions that defend us against death, but also what infuses every element of our lives with the semblance of death.

Narrative, Legitimacy, Force

The trouble with narrativity is not so much that it does violence to the material world, since the violence of the interpretive act is hardly one we can avoid. The trouble is that narratives hide this fact. Narrative meaning thrives in the shadows; as soon as it is revealed as a construction, it loses some of its authority. Its power relies on its ability to disguise itself as reality, to close the gap between the account of the world and the world itself. In spite of the impact that theories of narrative since the 1980s have had on contemporary discourse, few cultural or political narratives call attention to their status as "verbal artifacts" (White 1978, 94). By eclipsing rival narratives and projecting a telos upon events caught in its web of meaning, narrative power is easily translated into social power. When a narrative tells us what something means, it also tells us how to react to it. If it tells us that a certain event constitutes a declaration of war, our reaction to the event will be to follow the cultural script of how to respond in such a situation (i.e., to prepare for a counterstrike). This is why narrativity, for White, is inextricable from "the topics of law, legality, legitimacy, or, more generally, authority" (1990, 13). Without the sanctioning power of narrative meaning, social power appears as the coercive force that it is. One of the most vital functions of society—to distinguish between right and wrong—is thus buried under a thick layer of 'common sense,' where an essentially ideological distinction is turned into a natural one.[7] And since narrative power is proportional to the mystification of its cultural origins, it is not surprising that narratives aim for exactly this.

The other reason that narrativity is connected to law and moral authority is the somewhat paradoxical one that narratives depend on the social order they sanction. The existence of a system of values and norms is a prerequisite for closure and emplotment. Without such a normative ground, it would be impossible to choose a narrative focus and bring

7 That social values claim extrasocial origin is no coincidence. As Christopher Prendergast writes in *The Economy of Mimesis* (1986), "the profoundest operation of the tacit ideology of a society lies not in instituting a set of moral values as such, but in masking the origins of prescriptive sanctions, by rerouting the terms of the moral order into the circuit of another order of discourse: that of casual statements and logical predictions […] The major ideological move in achieving this result is to identify the moral order with that of 'common sense,' itself identified as corresponding to the 'natural' order of things" (1986, 53).

events to a conclusion. For White, a narrative is thus dependent on the "fixed reference point" of a social order, "by which the flow of ephemeral events can be endowed with specifically moral meaning" (ibid., 22). Any given social order serves as a point of orientation in the world and allows us to narrativize it. In this way, the relationship between narrativity and authority is one of mutual affirmation, one being the condition of the other. As Lyotard writes, this means that narratives "are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do" (1998, 23). Narratives legitimate the authority that enables them. But this also means that authority can only be legitimated *ex post facto*. If a narrative is authorized by the social order that it legitimates, then it takes an original act to set this process in motion.

This description of the connection between narrative, legitimacy, and force recalls the definition of myth that Roland Barthes offers in "Myth Today," his closing essay in *Mythologies* (1957). A myth could be understood as a particular kind of narrative that works especially well to mystify politics and history. A myth for Barthes is "depoliticized speech," which is "constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they once were made" (2000, 142). Myth is gifted in the art of silencing argument, because it gives everything "a natural and eternal justification […] a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact" (ibid., 143). Although this is also the work of narrativity, a myth differs from a narrative by its atemporality. While everything that is narrativized is locked into a linear development pointing to its future closure, everything that is mythologized is frozen in time. If the narrative act is violent, in the sense that it harnesses events to its telos, mythopoeia is violent in the way it wrests from the world an image that is impervious to change. Like narrative meaning, mythic meaning is tautological, forever circling around the orbit of its own power. As with narratives, this quality also makes myth impossible to contest, since it has recourse to what Barthes calls the "argument of authority:" "that's how it is" (ibid., 153).[8] But the timelessness of myth makes it an even more formidable instrument

8 Slavoj Žižek makes a similar point in *Violence* (2008) when, drawing on Lacan, he writes: "every concrete, 'really existing' space of discourse is ultimately grounded in a violent imposition of a Master-Signifier which is *stricto sensu* 'irrational': it cannot be further grounded in reasons. It is the point at which one can only say that 'the buck stops here'; a point at which, in order to stop the endless regress, somebody has to say, 'It is so because I say it is so!'" (2008b, 53). This is how every narrative ultimately refers back to the force of the law that enables it.