

# THE SOCIAL SEMIOTIC OF NARRATIVE EXCHANGES

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‘In other words, you lack theory’,  
he said, ‘you have no coherent critique...  
Your behaviour is purely interaction.’  
‘The oracular story’, p.111

‘The essential feature of the text ... is  
that it is interaction ... It is perhaps  
the most highly coded form of the gift.’  
*Language as social semiotic*, p.139

‘His story he gives me is an impossible  
object ... each detail is persuasive,  
representational, but as one’s eyes  
focus back to see the whole construct,  
the pulsing, shifting alternating  
impossibilities are apparent.’  
‘The nembatal story’, p.48

Before looking at particular features of a couple of texts, I should offer briefly some broad working definitions and propositions. First, those Siamese twins in whose joint names we are conferring here: I take ‘Language’ in a Hallidayan sense to consist of the verbal exchange of meanings in interpersonal contexts, and I take ‘Ideology, as a semiotically constructed set of representations that purport to govern social

processes and positions. To consider the mutual intrication of language and ideology is to recognise that meanings are framed by power relations. Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty, in an often cited passage, expressed his awareness of this:

'When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean —neither more nor less.'

'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you *can* make words mean different things.'

'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master —that's all.' (Lewis Carroll 1958;220)

Mastery is an inescapable issue in any discourse analysis because semantic exchanges cannot be perfectly even-handed or politically neutral. Indeed this is true not only of communication but also of any other social process. For exchange, as Jean Baudrillard remarks, 'does not operate according to principles of equivalence'(1975); rather, as Peter Blau puts it in his pioneering study of *Exchange and power and social life*, (1964;26) 'there is a strain towards imbalance as well as towards reciprocity.'

Therefore it seems necessary to sharpen the usual definitions of 'text'. Instead of seeing this term as referring innocently to 'any passage that forms a unified whole' (I quote from *Cohesion in English* by Halliday and Hasan 1976;1), where the verb 'forms' could, deceptively, be taken to imply an autotelic process and a virtual absence of human agency, it may prove more useful to us to think of a text as *being formed* in such a way that it has an *ostensible unity*, whose function is to control meaning. As a preliminary gloss on that last clause, here are some remarks from the book *Language and Control*, (1979;63) by Fowler, Hedge, Kress and Trew.

All language is addressed to someone, and involves an addressee as well as an addresser; it is relational. We suggest that communicative relationships are generally asymmetrical, in the sense that one participant has more authority than the other(s); that differences of class or status are at issue in discourse; the relationship is more or less competitive, a negotiation for power.

In *written* language, especially fictive texts, this negotiatory process is likely to be mediated in complex ways. Without a direct speaker/listener relationship, surrogates intervene.

In those written fictions whose form we regard as narrative, the imprint of authority tends to be most potent — but also, often, most at

risk, most open to scrutiny — in two areas of selection: (1) whose side of the story is given; (2) how and where the story moves and stops. I shall be arguing that narrative texts tend to complicate the basic kind of semantic exchange between interlocutors by indicating two other kinds of change, quite distinct, each of which is associated with one of those areas of selection just mentioned and each of which can contribute to a renegotiation of semantic control: *displacement* and *substitution*. Whereas 'exchange' indicated a mutual giving-and-taking of signs by two or more parties, 'displacement' will refer to an altering of the relative positions of the parties themselves and 'substitution' will refer to an altering of the rhetorical disposition of the signs themselves.

Before illustrating each of these, it is convenient at this point to adduce Halliday's triad of variables that shape the register of any language situation: field, tenor and mode. (Halliday, 1978;31; and 1980. Cf also Joia and Stenton, 1980;116-117). 'Field, refers to the particular set of actions into which a given text is being inserted (e.g. an academic conference on semiotics). 'Tenor' refers to the roles of participants in this textual exchange (e.g. paper-giver to audience of peers — though in some such cases more specific differentials may be relevant, such as privileges linked to gender or professional status). 'Mode' refers to the rhetorical organisation of the text (e.g. conference paper A may be primarily didactic, conference paper B primarily entertaining, conference paper C primarily investigative ... and lexical and syntactical features will vary accordingly: a salience of interrogatives in one case, a preference for the aphoristic rather than the analytic in another case, and so on). In brief, then, the three semiotic structures that constitute a discursive transaction are indicated by the questions: What is going on? (field), Who is taking part? (tenor), and What stylistic options are being chosen? (mode).

The utility of this tripartite schema is not in doubt. But while it may be applied neatly in studies of (e.g.) oral language development, of routine conversations, or of writing that is fairly limited in scope, it needs a more subtle inflexion to deal with the way literary texts (i.e., those read as literary) often complicate their situational structure. For instance, with regard to *tenor*, one has to recognise that the readability of narrative fictions depends, as Ross Chambers has argued, on a presupposition 'that a given segment of text, in specular relationship with another such segment or with the text as a whole, can be conceived as a 'model' of the text, or text segment, to which it is compared.(1984;29) Among the various textual devices that propose guidance to the reader is a form of embedding or *mise-on-abyme*, which 'implies the representation, internally to the fictional framework, of a situation involving the major components of a communicational act (emitter-discourse-recipient)

— and very frequently the mirroring within a story of the storytelling relationship itself: narrator-narration-narratee.’(Chambers, 1984;33)<sup>1</sup> An example given by Chambers is the embedded narrational situation in Balzac’s *Sarrasine*, in which ‘a narrator with specific qualities (e.g. maleness) is using his storytelling as a means of influencing (specifically, seducing) a narratee, also endowed with specific qualities (e.g. femaleness) — an act whose performance and outcome are determined by the precise relationship of power, knowledge, and desire distributed between the two.’(1984;34)

Now it is plain that a function of these embeddings of ‘tenor’ is to curtail a reader’s interpretive freedom; but it is equally plain that they cannot be guaranteed to do so with complete efficacy. For the reader must decide, as Chambers remarks, ‘whether a specific embedded feature is a model or an antimodel of the text in question, or something in between’ (1984;35) — and furthermore *may* decide to reject the implied how-to-read directive anyway. In the very act of proposing an appropriate ‘tenor’ — by allocating, for instance, a particular set of satisfyingly differential roles for narrator and narratee within an embedded storytelling situation — a text runs the risk of revealing how the confidence trick is performed, letting us see how arbitrary is the conferral of dominant storytelling rights, how much it requires a relinquishment or suppression of alternative sides of the story, and hence how adjustable or even reversible the balance of narrative power might be. The counterpart in written narration to those paratextual auxiliary signals by which the teller of an oral story may try overtly to make the telling more telling, such as intonation and gesture, must be less directly interpersonal. The governance of meaning is therefore less secure in writing, more liable to interpretive variation; and any would-be reinforcement of the narrating position can have a recoil effect. That is, the desire to authorise pre-emptively one kind of tenor relation rather than another may induce resistance by drawing attention to what it wishes to overrule. Apart from the recent work by Ross Chambers to which I have just referred and shall refer again, proper consideration of this means by which texts implicitly propose plausible positions for transacting their semantic business has hardly begun to appear in literary theory. There is much still to be formulated about the inscription of narrative contracts and the room they may allow for *displacements or positional shifts* between narrator and narratee. (The writings of Wolfgang Iser, particularly 1979, are relevant to a consideration of the implicitly contractual nature of narration, but do not directly investigate the political ramifications or the question of displacement.)

With regard to *mode*, also, the interpretability of literary texts tends to be less stable than in most other language situations. As far as stories

are concerned, my contention is this: to the extent that we read them as literary fictions, they become disengageable from any 'succession of events' (Rimmon-Kenan's definition of what narrative fiction 'represents' 1983;2) and tend to be more fully legible in terms of figurative motion. This is to reject what has been presented as axiomatic in almost every discussion from Aristotle's *Poetics* to modern manuals such as those by Chatman and Rimmon-Kenan: the banal notion that structure rests on an underlying sequence of actions; instead, it is to regard certain features of the text's mode as the source of narrative momentum itself. The concept of transformation, confined by structuralist narratology to plot, needs enlarging to include *substitutive series of rhetorical figures*. This kind of modal transformation, like the potential redistribution of semiotic controls through embedded displacements, runs counter to any desire for a neat, summative exchange of meanings, counter to any attempt to fix significance within a unifying frame. For the nature of figurative substitution, as we shall see, is to be differential — and therefore resistant to that 'intent at totality' which, as Jonathan Culler remarks, commonly characterises the interpretive process. (Culler, 1975;174)

Discourse analysts use the term 'substitution' for a particular form of cohesive relation between linguistic items, where one expression may simply replace another in a sequence. What I am calling 'substitution' is much more extensive and variable than that; indeed it exceeds all that Halliday and Hasan call 'cohesion'. It can figure in any or all of the three functions that Fowler identifies as constituting textual structure: cohesion, progression and localisation (1981;chapter 4). 'Cohesive' features are those by which a text seems to hang together, achieving consistency among its lexico-grammatical components; 'progressive' features lead the reader onwards, for instance by adverbial means or by tense markers; and 'localising' features depart in a marked way from the ongoing textual norm, arresting the reader's attention by some device that draws attention to itself, such as repetition. These functions can overlap, and when they do they are likely to produce the transformational effect that I call substitution, an effect which contributes more importantly to narrative structure, in my view, than does any interlinking of events.



Here is a short simple example:

The hotel was shoulder to shoulder. I was shoulder to shoulder with Hestia in the square-shaped bar which we stood around and which read, left to right: the shoulder chains and leather of the greasy bikeheads; shoulder to shoulder with the pale turtle necks of the camp bikeheads; the starch of the blue psychiatric nurses; the hunch of domino players; the semi-non-conformist middle class with red and blue dot peasant neckerchiefs, some daring to wear beads; radicals in battle dress, back (or shoulder) to Hestia and me, shoulder to shoulder. We are as much our fringe as our core.

Perhaps.

We also stand shoulder to shoulder within ourselves.

'He wiped his feet on me and then broke my back', she said.

The localising device, a tenfold repetition of 'shoulder' in the first five sentences, is obvious enough. Also involved is a metonymic progression, a reading of the bar from left to right, from shoulder to shoulder. Cohesion, too, is at work, tying sentences together by such relations as pronouns, both anaphoric (we, she) and cataphoric (he). But it is interesting to note that the first-person plural pronouns are not stable in reference. The 'we' in 'the square-shaped bar which we stood around' is more particular than in 'We also stand shoulder to shoulder within ourselves'; the latter has a generic (i.e. purportedly universalising) quality, emphasised by the shift from past to present tense, and moreover its predicate is metaphorical, like the gnomic utterance about fringe and core. There is, then, in that pronominal slide and that troping movement of 'shoulder', a process of change under way, something not explicable by a straightforward linguistic account of co-reference, nor for that matter by any sequence of events. In terms of orthodox literary analysis we could only say lamely that this is a passage of description or exposition, a setting of the scene. But already the text is developing its structure and its ideology, generating an illusion of motion by substituting one figure for another, *seriatim*.

It is this modally produced illusion, not any plottable action, that gives space for the story to occur. I assert, though I cannot demonstrate here, that there is something of this in any mobile narrative trajectory, which can accordingly be seen as analogous to the paradoxical flight of Zeno's arrow, neatly summarised in deconstructive terms by Jonathan Culler:

At any given time the arrow is at a particular spot ... The motion of

the arrow is never given as something simple and present which could be grasped in itself; it is always already complex and differential, involving traces of the not-now in the now. (Culler, 1979;162-3)

But meanwhile, back at the hotel, what of Hestia?

The passage quoted above comes from the beginning of a text entitled 'The oracular story'. Here is the rest of the first page:

'He wiped his feet on me and then broke my back,' she said.

'You've done that to others.'

'That doesn't help, saying that.'

'I thought you were beyond emotional attack.'

'Oh yeah, I forgot,' she said.

She was crying. I placed a hand on her black denim shirt, 'Hey come on — they love dancing well who dance among the thorns.'

'That sort of dance isn't my style anymore,' she said, 'or the thorns.'

'Love is ...lawless?'

'He said to me — let's have a little predictability in our life. Keep away from the whirlpools. Have a few people to dinner. Milton wanted to try another way of living. He wanted to try open fires and classical music.'

'A nice brochure.'

'That's why you had to leave the Big House.'

'Oh — is that why.'

'But he's still your friend.'

'And now he's thrown you out,' I said. 'Young cocks ... love no coops?'

One *could* attempt to summarise the rest of the story as a sequence of events. If so, it would go something like this: after further pub talk, Hestia swallows a fistful of nembatal tablets; the narrator takes her home, by which time she is apparently asleep; he strips her, puts her to bed, and after becoming aroused at the thought of Milton's previous access to her, rapes her while she sleeps; a few days later he is at her place when Milton arrives and a hostile conversation occurs during which Hestia laughingly tells Milton what the narrator had done while she was unconscious; the narrator then suggests to Hestia that she take some more tablets and go to bed with him again; time elapses, and he next reports bits of a conversation with Hestia as they swim in a lake, have breakfast in a secluded cottage, ride motorbikes along bush trails, make love while both conscious, and talk some more.



Such a summary, abstracting a set of successive happenings, tells us very little about the motor on which this text runs, very little about the way it operates as a transaction. What semantic exchange is being constituted? Within what ideational context is it to be placed (what is its field?), between whom does it take place (what is the tenor?), and by what rhetorical means is it being conveyed (what is its mode?)?

About the *field* one can say only, initially, that this item of text is a story surrounded by other stories, most immediately (though not only) in a book called *Tales of mystery and romance* by Frank Moorhouse, published in Sydney in 1977 and bearing in its material presentation all the conventional signs of fictionality. It might seem, then, that the *tenor* of this exchange can be described simply in terms of 'author' and 'reader' roles, the former being in this case identifiable with a certain Moorhouse who writes and does certain other things. But the announced fictive status of the text requires us to understand its tenor a little more carefully. It would be just as incautious to assume that the narrating 'I' is directly equivalent to the personal 'self', a single and putatively unified subject, who is designated by that authorial name on the book's cover, as it would be to assume that the signature Frank Moorhouse plays no part in the exchange. What occurs between author and reader in a case like this must occur through textual intermediaries, and the precise angle of refraction will be indeterminable.

As for the *mode*, it is explicitly indicated by the story's title: 'oracular', in that it consists very largely of portentous pronouncements by the narrator. Yet these are mostly embedded within dialogue, and the sense in which we take them has to be gauged with an eye to the rhetorical particulars of those reported conversational exchanges. Much of the dialogue, especially towards the end, is taken up with stooze questions from Hestia and authoritative-sounding answers from the unnamed narrator. His statements tend to be abstract and sententious, with an almost catechismic quality, as if he were glibly quoting. The characters are hardly having any informative interaction at the verbal level; one oracular phrase follows another not in a personal exchange of meanings so much as in a chain of fictitious substitutions.

'I do have answers', the narrator tells Hestia — and what he adds next, by way of advice to her, could as well comment on his own discursive procedure: 'Make an arbitrary decision. Respond then to the challenges set in motion by the arbitrary decision.' He answers *per se* don't matter, as he later admits in his final one; they merely bespeak his arrogation of authority.

The rhetorical device by which the story concludes is a sudden switch from the succession of questions and answers to a final imperative. Hestia is speaking:

'Where do you get your new certainty, your new answers?'  
 'I'm tired of people who pretend *not* to have all the answers.'  
 'Do the answers matter?'  
 'No.'  
 'Fuck me,' she said, 'fuck me you oracular bastard.'

This does not mark a new active role for Hestia; all she demands is that he do *to* her what he is obviously intent on doing, and the transitive direction of the verb maintains her in a passively compliant position. There is an ideological dimension to this arrangement of language. As represented, her closing line is not in any substantial sense an answer to his answers, not a resolution of any of the human conundrums broached in the story and not a sign of resistance to the narrator's demands — as it would have been if she had retorted 'Fuck you...'. She merely yields to him, orifice to oracle; and this makes it uncomfortable for us that the title shyly asserts an analogy between the narrator's dealings with Hestia and the story's dealings with a reader.

To clarify what such an analogy involves, we can usefully turn again to the new and important book by Ross Chambers, *Story and situation: Narrative seduction and the Power of fiction*. Without attempting to compress the range of its sophisticated argument into a summary, I shall merely quote one of Chambers' own formulations of some ideas that pervade the complexities of his study:

To tell a story is to exercise power ..., and 'authorship' is cognate with 'authority'. But, in this instance as in all others, authority is not an absolute, something inherent in an individual or in that individual's discourse; it is relational, the result of an act of authorisation on the part of those subject to the power, and hence something to be earned ...

Consequently, there is a sense in which the maintenance of narrative authority implies an act of seduction ... This is never more the case than when the narrative content is acknowledged to be fictional, that is, non-informative (in the conventional sense of the term) : the 'point' of the narration can only lie then in its obtaining from the narratee a specific type of attention (to which the information divulged may certainly be germane but cannot be essential) (1984;50-1).

He proceeds to show, through a series of brilliant readings of nineteenth and twentieth-century French and English stories, that narration is frequently and variously thematised within texts as a seductive act, strategically duplicitous, not least in the ways that it may

disclaim any such intent.

Chambers' insights are plainly pertinent to our consideration of 'The oracular story', in which seductive moves are of several sorts. We might read it as a tale of the progressive capitulation of Hestia to the narrator, through the stages of being involuntarily subjected to his will, subjecting herself voluntarily, and asking to be subjected. But there is more to it than that, because both sexual exchange and narrative exchange are triangulated in this story. Milton, the third party, is the obscure object of desire for the narrator as well as for Hestia. If the narrator's utterances to Hestia have the instrumental function of gaining him access to her body, that physical access in turn has the instrumental function of gaining him vicarious contact with Milton. As he grotesquely puts it when speaking to her, 'You are the vessel from which we (Milton and I) both drink.' Furthermore, Milton is a sort of oblique narratee; and indeed, if among potential readers of 'The oracular story' there is someone who may see himself as corresponding to the fictive Milton, the exchange has another dimension, its account of sordid seduction serving as a piquant ploy in a kind of semantic contest with private overtones.

This would be idle conjecture were there not, in fact, a published story by another hand in which Milton materialises as narrator to attempt a reshuffle of registers, a usurpation of the teller's authority. Here is the first paragraph of 'The nembatal story', published in Michael Wilding's *The Phallic Forest* (1978), a book that is dedicated to Frank Moorhouse<sup>2</sup>:

Reading his story the incident of the nembatal she swallowed in the pub seemed indisputable. It was as he had told me it had been, some years ago now, three years back, and the other people who had been there weren't in his story, but the incident itself, the swilling down the handful of tablets and the attempt to swallow another ten or so at a second gulp, this was as he had told me. What he hadn't told me at the time was that he had taken her back home, undressed her, put her to bed, lubricated her cunt with KY jelly and fucked her while she was unconscious. Had I simply read that page, not knowing there was any incident it was based on, I would have thought it just another of his decreasingly pleasant stories, with their fading distinction between fictional creation and compulsive fantasy. His need to fuck someone unconscious displayed there, convincingly displayed; and I might have wondered if he had done that. Knowing there was a basic incident, my feelings were somewhat more complex. Though it is another girl he's been having a scene with who the fucking while unconscious definitely happened to, that was the time Henry Bosco raped me

was how she put it as we lay there, and she asked me not to tell anyone about the rape, which she couldn't substantiate anyway, particularly not to tell him whom she had never told. And now perhaps one sees why, suspecting perhaps his fascination with such a possibility, wanting to get her to lace her drink and fuck her when she passed out, that after all was what he put in Part II of the story he gave me to read, suggesting to Wesley she swallowed some nembutal and gin and they did it again, And what's in it for me? I think he had her say.

The 'Nembutal' narrator makes male manipulation and rivalry the acknowledged field of these textual exchanges. He tries to achieve ascendancy over the 'oracular' narrator by three methods: seeking greater complicity with readers by use of an intimate monologue uninterrupted by dramatised dialogue; introducing a more complicated and puzzling sexual geometry with the references to the unnamed 'new girl', to 'Henry Bosco' (an anglicised form of the name of a French regional writer), and later to others; and problematising more radically questions of reliability, ascertainability, authorised versions, and the like.

Even from such a brief sample as the quoted opening paragraph, it is apparent that this story will not purport to divulge what 'really' happened. Rather its procedure is to suggest that fact and fiction always commingle inextricably, making it impossible to retrieve even what it teasingly calls 'the basic incident'; and that any exchange of meanings will involve a struggle for control over what it being transacted. There is hardly anything in this story that recounts a palpable action, even in passing. Instead it dwells speculatively on the elusiveness of any secure knowledge of events.

This is underlined by certain discrepancies at the textual level between 'The oracular story' and the story to which 'The nembutal story' refers. A reader who can see that Wilding's text has some dependence on Moorhouse's text may well think it odd that 'Hestia' has become 'Wesley' and that the later story talks about 'Part 2' of the earlier story — which has no such division into parts; or that, further on, the narrator says: 'In his story she is unhappy because a character called Milton has fucked her brother' — yet 'The oracular story' mentions no such brother.

As one might guess, these incongruous details are historically explicable. There was an earlier version of Moorhouse's text. It differed in several details and was segmented into three short parts under the general heading of 'The oracular stories', which circulated as part of a booklet called *The Illegal Relatives*, written by Moorhouse and produced,

with obscene graphics, by an underground publisher. Wilding's text refers to that version. A yet more complicated textual history is traceable for this pair of stories, taking into account their circulation in manuscript, their public readings, their links with other stories (for instance with 'Wesley's brother at the wake for Jack Kerouac', which appeared in the anthology *Coast to coast*, edited by Moorhouse), their appearance in periodicals and books (for instance in *The 'Tabloid story' pocketbook*, edited by Wilding). (Cf. Gillard, 1981:167-74) But these details would not fundamentally alter the problematic of their interrelation. For, regardless of origins and recensions, those discrepant elements noted above can serve to illustrate the point that any textual unity is unstable in its extent. The visible, tangible limits of its embodiment in a particular instance, say a certain cluster of pages, do not mark a story's boundaries. It can never be more than provisionally complete, since 'there is an unlimited number of other narratives that can be *constructed in response to it or perceived as related to it.*' (Smith;1980:221)

Moreover this point is fortified both by the cunning way 'The nembutal story' moves along and by the playful way it blows the gaff on its own narratorial credentials. Much of the momentum comes from quick shifts, often in mid-sentence, as one half-told incident or half-glimpsed character gives way abruptly to another. These function as unstable ironies; each successive mention, on that first page or so, of the 'incident', or of what has been 'told' about it, moves us nearer to a *mise-en-abyme*. The regression accelerates in the dizzying substitutions of that single sentence in which we learn of an apparent replica of the rape, said to have 'definitely happened' in this case yet to be unsubstantiated, involving another (unnamed) woman and another (improbably named) man, as well as the same two men (that is, the sexual and narratorial rivals, Milton and 'him'), featuring narrative prohibitions (broken here in the act of being reported during a more literal kind of embedding). No plot emerges from 'The nembutal story'. Rather, resorting again to Fowler's terms, we can note that one of the main 'progressive' (i.e., story-forwarding) elements in the narration is a 'localising' (i.e., attention-focussing) effect of deviations from normal 'cohesive' usage. The first couple of sentences exemplify this, with their awkward juxtapositions of references to 'his' (the Oracular narrator's) oral and written versions of 'the incident', made even more productively awkward by that irregular grammar at the very start: 'Reading his story the incident of the nembutal she swallowed in the pub seemed indisputable.' Other syntactical slippages, as the story continues, tend even more to let one part of an utterance slide away from another, making readers increasingly dependent on the teller at the same time that he disarmingly casts doubt on his own authority to tell. Unlike the

Oracular narrator, this one acknowledges that he is unreliable — and thus ingratiates himself with us, appearing to be, as candid parasite, more trustworthy than the narrator of the host text.

By foregrounding in this fashion the inescapably substitutive nature of narration and the specious nature of narratorial authority even when displaced, this text poses a direct challenge to some tenets of discourse analysis. It is quite true, as Ruqaiya Hasan declares, that ‘the central notion in the definition of the text is that of unity’; (1980;75) but in practice, linguists have seldom placed due emphasis on the problematic nature of this notion and on its ideological aspect in particular. In the pair of stories discussed here, questions of unity turn out to be questions of exchange control. Narratorial control may be exerted either by rhetorical closure (as in ‘The oracular story’, which is rounded off with an air of finality) or, less palpably and perhaps more shrewdly, by an illusion of textual freeplay (as in ‘The nembutal story’, which appears to open itself to a virtual semantic infinitude through the *mise-en-abyme* of references to suspect gifts such as the Trojan horse and (syn)optic illusions such as Escher’s graphics).

Whether seemingly closed or open, however, a story establishes its particular brand of narratorial authority only by suppressing, more or less tacitly, alternative reading positions. Female acquiescence or even silence is a precondition in these cases for what the male narrators tell. Hestia/Wesley is a drug-subdued decoy in a male game, or a vessel from which each narrator drinks, having filled her with their own words. ‘I cannot deal with her emotions’, says the nembutal narrator defensively, ‘they are for her to write about, that option is always open to her’. But of course it isn’t, since she is only a character inscribed by males.

Yet control may be usurped; those suppressed reading positions, once located, are convertible into new narrating positions. ‘What of politics?’ Hestia asks the Oracular narrator. ‘For people like us’, he replies, ‘no person can represent us. The only electorate is the electorate of personal activity. Nothing guarantees freedom.’

‘Are you therefore unrepresented in the power arrangements?’

‘There is a para-government.’

If the text is parapolitical, by the same token its particular strategy for governing semantic exchange may be alternatively parapoliticised in its turn. By observing precisely how a text proposes to work on us, we can put it to work again. By pinpointing the kind of elision that shapes it, we can recirculate it in a modified, differently selective form. By moving a story on further, we can reactivate and extend its substitutive position. Textual analysis contributes to this cycle of retellings. My own paper has offered, after all, one such narrative exchange — and is therefore not above suspicion.<sup>3</sup>

### FOOTNOTES

- 1 Applications of the term *mise-en-abyme*, drawn from Gide, have been most amply developed by Lucien Dallenbach, *Le recit speculaire* (Paris, Seuil, 1977).
- 2 The dedication includes the words 'For those days' — a reminiscence of this statement by the narrator of 'The nembatal story': 'his account recalled to me those days...' Any reader who is thus tempted to identify authors with narrators note, however, that the narrator then says of those days: 'Dim though they are too'.
- 3 Some acknowledgements are due. Although I take responsibility for formulating the argument of this paper, it has benefited from discussions within the Narrative Research Group at Deakin University (as part of a project funded by the Australian Research Grant Scheme) and owes a particular debt to my former colleagues Anna Gibbs and Garry Gillard. Jenna Mead made useful comments on an earlier version and sharpened my perception of the meaning/power nexus.

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