

# Narrative Identity

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It is no surprise that the question of narrative identity generates so much polemical discussion, so high are its intellectual stakes. Consider firstly the current academic environment in which certain departments see themselves as defending political causes (emancipation of women, promotion of ethnic minorities, the care of the infirm or the protection of victims of violence), usually via a virulent critique of Western philosophical thought, or more precisely of the philosophies of the subject whose common origin has traditionally been the Cogito of Descartes. The critique involves the overturning of all philosophical systems, or at least the canonical ones, which it sees as nothing more than the instruments of patriarchal authority wishing to preserve its stranglehold over the silent, oppressed masses. In doing so it aims to create a space in which previously oppressed voices are able to find expression and claim their due. Such politically oriented academics find a convenient ally in Postmodernism, which one can depict as a more technically sophisticated version of the philosophy of suspicion inaugurated by Nietzsche. This is certainly a curious affiliation. For despite its energetic denunciation of solidly anchored regimes of thought, and despite its well-honed moves aiming to de-pose the Cogito and de-centre the subject, Postmodernism does not provide an alternative process for conceiving the subject. Without such a process, how can it, one might ask, provide a positive basis for working towards equality and justice and for asserting the imprescriptibility of human rights? A subject devoid of intellectual foundation, indeed a subject built around the refusal to admit of such foundation, offers no grounds for mounting political campaigns, of whatever type, whether they be on behalf of individuals, ethnic or minority groups or social classes. It is certainly the case that such groups as feminists are willing to, as they say, *use* Postmodernism as an analytical and political tool to dislodge an unfair system, but this only muddies their philosophical position, putting them at a further remove from establishing a clear ontological basis for the definition of the person as the subject of claims to justice and opportunity.

The awareness of the limitations of Postmodernism has led to it being dismissed as little more than a caricature of philosophical thought. This is because the paradox in which it operates, that is, the

curious coupling of the promotion of humane ideals with a deep suspicion of all unitary models of the subject, has overshadowed its whole intellectual enterprise. It is patently obvious that instead of dismissing the subject altogether as a rationalist humanist invention, it is necessary to develop a new way of defining the subject, one which would enable the notions of respect, justice and tolerance to be, as it were, worked into the equation. For this to take place, it is critical to restore to the subject the sense of continuity in time and space which Postmodernism denied it. Hence, the idea of identity, which implies just such a continuity in being. This does not mean, however, that one should return to what has been termed the hyperbolic subject emerging out of the Cartesian Cogito.<sup>1</sup> The certainty which comes to characterise the 'I' of the formula 'I think therefore I am', and the sense of invulnerability which accompanies it in its task of ordering the world, are no longer defensible because they imply an inflation of the human subject to the point of confusing it with the idea of God. The 'hyperbolic' ego which informed Romantic and Modernist ideals is rightly shunned by recent thinkers because it does not admit of the transfer of power or knowledge from the self to the other, from the I to the you, a transfer which would seem to be at the heart of a philosophy of human rights. This is where the idea of narrative identity appears as an alternative to the Cartesian Cogito, offering a model which ensures a different kind of continuity in the subject, one which incorporates a dramatic equilibrium between loss and acquisition, certainty and doubt. In this respect, narrative, as the discursive material out of which identity is constructed, provides a more fertile ground for reconstructing the subject than the type of speculative thought which has given us the Cogito.

Having shown that the problematic of narrative identity arises from the need to formulate a theory of the subject which avoids the extremes of a radically fragmented self (Nietzsche) and an over-inflated one (Descartes),<sup>2</sup> it will be the task of this paper to examine closely the internal functioning of narrative in order to show how it is productive of identity. How can it be that the activities of recounting, witnessing, confessing, attesting or corroborating—all discursive activities structured along the lines of narrative—provide a basis for identity, both in its individual and collective guises? The answer involves, of course, accounting for the recent increase in the number of theories of text, discourse and language, as well as venturing into several disciplines concerned with language generally and narrative in particular. The Aristotelian theory of narrative is indispensable in such an enterprise,

as are the numerous narratological theories which have made their mark during the latter half of the century, thanks mainly to the work of the Russian Formalists such as Vladimir Propp and the French Structuralists such as Gérard Genette and Roland Barthes. The long detour via theory of narrative is necessary in order to give whatever ontological value can be attached to narrative identity its proper basis in language. It must be said that one of the principles which guide this discussion is that identity is a *derivative* of narrative form, and not a self-sufficient entity affirming itself unconditionally. It is crucial, therefore, that the peculiarly narrative logic which informs identity be established before making claims regarding its ontological significance.

The discussion will deal with three different aspects of narrative, each bringing with it a different disciplinary perspective. These will be named story, utterance and reading, to be defined as follows. Story is the aspect of narrative which involves characters and events, realistically portrayed and arranged in a self-contained plot; utterance is the function which enables narrative to communicate a story, in the context of an exchange between someone who tells (a narrator) and someone who listens (a narratee); and reading is the effort of understanding required so that it is possible to extract from the narrative a set of values, an attitude or even a moral prescription which can be considered relevant to the reader's life experience. These three aspects of narrative, story, utterance and reading, will be dealt with separately and in that order, the aim being, in each case, to distinguish the formal features which signal the production of identity. As the analysis unfolds, it will occasionally refer to passages taken from Samuel Beckett's text, *Company*, chosen here partly because of the way it thematises the different aspects of narrative mentioned above, and partly because, as a modern narrative sharing common traits with the texts of Joyce, Kafka and Proust, it offers a limiting case with respect to the question of narrative identity. This text is compelling in that it underlines the precarious nature of the acting, speaking and understanding *I*, while at the same time marking its persistence in time, as it appears in its various guises. In this way, it establishes through the development of the narrative a dialectic of insecurity and permanence from which identity can be generated.

## 1. Story

Story can be defined as the sequence of events or actions, usually recounted in the past tense and the third person by a narrator who is

absent from the scene. But one also comes across many stories which are told by eye-witnesses who are close to the events or even by one or more of the protagonists themselves. Regardless of who recounts the events, it is true that when we speak of story we usually refer to the events themselves, in the particular sequence (usually linear) in which we understand them. Story is the sequence of events observed and understood by readers who follow them as if they are true, conveniently forgetting the processes of mediation in the exhilaration of 'living out' the events portrayed. Story is for all intents and purposes the content of narrative, the object of what is undoubtedly a powerful form of representation.

The problem of identity is posed as soon as the question 'who?' is asked in relation to the actions. All actions have agents, real or presumed, so it is the case that with every action represented there could be ascribed to it an agent. This relationship between action and agent in narrative discourse is at the very heart of Aristotle's brief but insightful treatise on storytelling, the *Poetics*. At the very start, Aristotle defines the essence of story in terms of the process of representation (*mimesis*), which he says is above all a representation of action. '[Story] is a representation of an action, and for the sake of the action above all [a representation] of the people who are acting'.<sup>3</sup> It is worthwhile dwelling on Aristotle's view of action in its connection with character, for we find here a strong hierarchical relationship giving the former clear precedence over the latter. [Story] is a representation not of human beings but of action and life. Happiness and unhappiness lie in action, and the end [of life] is a sort of action, not a quality ... So [the actors] do not act to represent the characters, but they include the characters for the sake of their actions.'<sup>4</sup> Although Aristotle concedes that characters are crucial to a story, for they always deliberate and make decisions affecting their lives and those of others, he insists that these deliberations and decisions have no sense apart from the actions they are supposed to lead to. For example, Antigone's actions in defiantly burying her brother are in themselves the driving force of the tragedy, and therefore must be considered over and above the particular psychological profile one might attribute to the heroine.

Given the hierarchical relationship which Aristotle posits between action and character, how might one formulate the question of narrative identity? How is one to frame the question 'Who?' which supports and sustains identity in story? Aristotle warns firstly against the temptation to establish a one to one relationship between an action and an individual. The actions of one person, he asserts, 'are many, but do not

turn into a single action'.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the unity of action is in no way determined by whether it can be imputed to one person, to the individual who performs it, but is to be understood rather in terms of the principle underlying the action. This is not to say, however, that characters are completely superfluous. One needs only recall Aristotle's formulation that story is the representation of an action and, *through that action*, that of a character, character being that which is necessarily attained through action. Another reason why it is impossible to ignore character is to be found in Aristotle's division of genres, which surprisingly enough rests on the status of the characters. The main difference between the genres of tragedy and comedy, for example, lies in the moral standing of the characters, for tragedy is the representation of actions performed by characters better than us, the public, and comedy the representation of actions performed by characters who are, to quote Aristotle, 'rather inferior'.<sup>6</sup> If the status of character is to be considered a determining factor in the division of genres, why does Aristotle insist on relativising its importance? Why the repeated assertion that character only plays a secondary role in respect to action? There is a rich overlay of arguments here, which can only be unravelled by delving deeper into the peculiar logic which informs Aristotle's theory. For it is here that the question of narrative identity is resolved.

It should be remembered that the key to Aristotle's *Poetics* is the concept of representation. Aristotle stresses that the representation cannot be of real actions occurring in the present or having occurred at some time in the past, neither can it be of real people. Rather, representation concerns 'things that may happen, i.e. that are possible in accordance with probability or necessity'.<sup>7</sup> As representations, the actions and the characters belong to a universe which can only be constructed through imagination, with enough likeness to reality to be considered possible future occurrences.

There are two things one might say about this kind of poetic representation. Firstly, it places the reader or the listener in a state of anticipation, in the sense that he or she finds the represented object believable enough to be able to situate it in a near future, possibly his or her own near future. This discrepancy between the seeing now, before one's eyes, and the anticipation of a likely future event, introduces a tension in the story which Paul Ricoeur would see as marking the essentially temporal quality of representation. Through its particular mode of representation, story straddles time in such a way as to place character on an extendable temporal axis, from which there emerges

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not a 'person' situated at a point in time or space but the possibility of a person projected indefinitely into the future.

The second point that can be made with respect to representation is that it involves a form of reasoning which, as Aristotle puts it, concerns universals. This is a function of the unity which is so crucial to a story, that is, the idea that an individual action must fit into a sequence of actions, and is indeed such a necessary component of the story that if it were left out the whole edifice would crumble. It would seem that if action in story must display an overall unity, the same should be said to apply to the characters who effect the action. Certainly, it is this unity of the character which, as has been pointed out, enables it to become the key element in the classification of the genres of tragedy and comedy. Character possesses universality to the extent that all its properties are considered necessary to its functioning as the agent of actions. Aristotle explains it succinctly: 'A universal is the sort of thing that a certain kind of person may well say or do in accordance with probability or necessity—this is what poetry aims at ...'<sup>8</sup> One can interpret this statement as meaning that characters appear as a set of characteristics which may be inferred from the action of a story. They are in essence the types of individuals whom one might expect to perform particular types of actions, or, put differently, the living depositaries of the general laws of human behaviour. What should be underlined, first and foremost, is the rational nature of this process. Characters, as Aristotle understands them in his *Poetics*, are ultimately rational constructs which come into being only on satisfying certain conditions, the most important of which are coherence (in terms of rule of unity of action) and probability (in terms of their likeness to reality).

In the *Poetics*, the unity of character is dependent upon the unity of action. In the first instance, it is a result of the temporal dimension of the story, in the sense that the representation offers the possibility of imagining an individual who might one day be the main actor in a similar story. Secondly, the individual is the object of an inference, in that the characteristics which are associated with an action are assembled to form a *type* (for example a virtuous man or woman), a sort of identikit, in other words, of the kind of individual who could at any time become the protagonist of the represented action. Character, then, is the result of both the imaginary projection in time and the universalising function of reason, a combination which is not so distant from what the ancient Greeks called *praxis*.

In Samuel Beckett's *Company*, the main character is never represented directly; it is never named and never described in terms of

its physical or moral attributes. Despite being invisible, it is identified as the hero of the piece for one is always aware of its presence, its actions, its perspective on the world and its feelings. The following passage is a good sample of the type of narrative we are dealing with.

You are alone in the garden. Your mother is in the kitchen making ready for afternoon tea with Mrs Cootie ... From behind the bush you watch Mrs Cootie arrive. A small thin sour woman. Your mother answers her saying, He is playing in the garden. You climb to near the top of a great fir. You sit a little listening to all the sounds. Then throw yourself off. The great boughs break your fall. The needles. You lie a little with your face to the ground. Then climb the tree again. Your mother answers Mrs Cootie again saying, He has been a very naughty boy.<sup>9</sup>

The use of the second person *you* to designate the hero serves to keep to a minimum the descriptions of his physical, psychological and moral make-up; nonetheless his presence is asserted strongly in every sentence. Most sentences begin with *you*, and even when they do not it is possible to add *you* in front of every sentence without changing the meaning. Thus, one might rewrite the passage by adding to the beginnings of sentences the second person singular pronoun: You are ..., Your mother ..., you watch ..., (you see) ..., Your mother ..., You climb ..., You sit ..., you throw yourself ..., your fall ..., (you feel) ..., You lie ..., You climb ..., Your mother .... Notice that the verbs are all active verbs, denoting physical actions in a chronological and logical order. We have here a simple narrative configuration, consisting of a series of actions which are attributed to a character about whom virtually no information is given. Interestingly, substance is given to the character on two occasions. The first is the comment made by the mother to Mrs Cootie. 'Your mother answers her saying, He is playing in the garden'. Here, the second person becomes the third person, thereby indicating the presence of a young boy playing in the garden. Now, if the text reveals at this point the identity of the hero, it does so in an extremely minimal fashion, that is, through the semantic grouping of the individual actions 'you watch' and 'you hide behind a bush', under a *type* of action 'He is playing'. One finds here, in lieu of traditional forms of characterisation, the inference of a type of action, 'playing', from what were up to that point fragmented instances of behaviour. The second stage of characterisation occurs at the end of the passage where, after several more actions all performed by an unspecified *you*, the mother makes a comment about the behaviour of the boy. 'Your mother answers Mrs Cootie again saying, He has been a

very naughty boy'. Again, and in the continued absence of descriptive discourse, characterisation is attained indirectly through the simple epithet 'naughty boy'. From the reader's point of view, the trait of naughtiness caps off the actions 'you climb', 'you throw yourself off', 'you lie', 'you climb again', giving meaning to those actions by indicating the type of individual who would be likely to perform them, that is, a naughty boy. This passage enacts precisely what Aristotle says about character being derived from actions, on the basis of the temporal configuration of story and the form of reasoning which proceeds from the particular to the universal.

The point of all this, it must be recalled, is to examine the implications of the temporal and the universalising functions of representation for the question of narrative identity. Certainly, the discussion has ventured a long way from common sense notions of identity, according to which an individual is recognised as one and indivisible throughout his or her existence, and whose actions are thought to express this very individuality. In its narrative configuration, personal identity is shown to be an imaginary and rational construct, not a permanent given. Because it is conditioned by actions which are multiple and sequential, narrative identity is not vested with the quality of sameness, in the sense of a person being the same throughout his or her life, as might be shown in a passport photo, in a name, or in a set of fingerprints. However, if narrative identity does not admit of the idea of one-and-sameness, it nevertheless possesses a set of stable qualities which it acquires through its direct link with action. Of these qualities, which are many, it is worth citing in particular those of initiative, aptitude and coherence: initiative because in its narrative manifestation, the more a character acts or the more spectacularly it acts, the more it affirms its presence; aptitude in the sense of the confidence one has that the character is *able* to perform certain actions now or at some future time; and coherence in the sense of the correlation that can be made between the unity of the actions and the lasting characteristics of the individual performing them.

One might ask at this point what becomes of the question of identity if the narrative is devoid of action, or if, as is the case with modern novels such as those of Proust or Joyce, representation itself undergoes a radical mutation. One expects, moreover, that in novels where action is replaced by long passages of dialogue or even extended interior monologue, the narrative will retain its full impact in terms of its capacity to construct identity. For example, Proust's monumentally introspective work, *Remembrance of Things Past*, deals very profoundly

with the question of identity, as its narrator proceeds to reinvent himself by carefully registering the events, impressions and conversations which affect his perception of time. All this tells us that Aristotle's *Poetics* is not the only path to narrative identity. That there must be grounds of identity other than action leads us to examine closely the theory of utterance.

## 2. Utterance

The question of utterance does not remove us entirely from the sphere of action, but rather confronts us with actions of different kind. For utterance is nothing if not an act, an act of language. The theory of Speech Acts, developed first by J. L. Austin then by J. R. Searle, depicts language as a communicative activity in which the emphasis is placed on the intentions of the speaker and the effects that the language produces on the listener. We shall leave aside for the moment the formal features of such utterances (which are not exclusive to narrative since they can be applied to the whole range of language uses) in order to concentrate instead on the properties which relate them specifically to the field of action.

Again, Aristotle serves as our initial guide, for in the *Poetics* there is to be found a quite potent theory of utterance as it applies to the production of narrative discourse. Narrative is to be understood, as the word *poiesis* suggests, as something one does. It is a form of doing which involves not the characters as such but the figure of the composer or the teller of the story. Aristotle suggests this from the outset by stating that his *Poetics* is addressed to the makers of stories, with the aim of showing them 'how plots should be constructed' and what is required for the plot 'to turn out well'.<sup>10</sup> The action in question is the construction and delivery of stories, and as with any action it has a public face, for it is subject to the judgment of others as to whether it succeeds or not, whether it is good and obeys the rules or not.

So, one might ask, what does the act of narration entail? It consists simply in following the rules Aristotle lays down for the production of stories, namely, the imperative to represent a 'whole action', whose unity is contained in the sequence of 'a beginning, a middle and a conclusion', as well the restriction of the story to a particular 'magnitude and order' while paying due regard to the criteria of 'probability or necessity'.<sup>11</sup> Now, instead of looking at these properties as pertaining exclusively to the action represented *in* the story, we must also consider them from the point of view of the act of production *of* the story and of

the language which conveys it. Once we accept the co-existence of these two forms of action, we find ourselves much closer to determining the essentially ethical nature of all narrative. Paul Ricoeur does precisely this in his *Time and Narrative*, by noting that both 'narrative acts' are situated within the sphere of human action since that they are both liable to be 'judged according to a scale of moral preferences'.<sup>12</sup> Because of their capacity to elicit judgments of a moral kind, neither the acts performed by characters nor the act of telling the story by the narrator can be considered ethically neutral: 'there is no action that does not give rise to approbation or reprobation, to however small a degree, as a function of a hierarchy for which goodness and wickedness are the poles'.<sup>13</sup> Aristotle, of course, had already had a glimpse of the ethical question, by simply observing that one can praise or criticise a writer's organisation of a plot, just as one can blame or praise a character for his or her actions on the stage. Ricoeur's discussion is an attempt to draw out fully the ethical implications of his predecessor's claims.

It is impossible, of course, to incorporate the saying and the doing in one overarching theory of action without first saying something about how human activity in general engenders meaning. It is here that one must recognise that action, whatever its nature, is symbolically mediated. There is a 'thickness' of meaning, to borrow a term from the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, in the art of story-telling which is not dissimilar to the 'thickness' one finds in ritual behaviour in religious or festive ceremonies.<sup>14</sup> In these contexts, the value system on which such symbolically charged activity rests is not directly enacted, but must be apprehended through the agency of the objects, the words and the forms of behaviour which are employed during these privileged moments. Sacred objects *stand for* social and moral values of the society, just as the gestures and movements called for in artistic and religious activity *attest to* the moral judgments and prescriptions which dominate life in society. Verbal art falls within the domain of such symbolically charged activity endowed with such a force of prescription for all members of a society.

The close relationship which exists between action *as* representation and action *as* utterance seems to be of special significance for the question of narrative identity. Indeed, there is no reason why the process of inference mentioned earlier in relation to story could not now be applied to utterance. Just as the actions represented in the story lead back to the character who is responsible for them, so too the act of recounting the story leads, by inference, to the person who composes

and delivers it. Inference is at work, then, at the level of utterance, so that it is possible to construct a picture of the composer and teller without the benefit of any explicit reference to his or her person. This is done by drawing on the types of choices made in the composition, the feelings expressed with regard to the narrated events, or the mode of delivery which may be more or less authoritative, more or less indifferent. It is clear that this process, by enabling us to determine the attitude which informs the production of narrative, can lead, as we have seen earlier with Paul Ricoeur, to an appreciation of its ethical import. But it should also be kept in mind that inference is possible only within the formal constraints to which narrative necessarily submits. Inference occurs only to the extent that it is conditioned by the properties of narrative as a specific kind of act, a speech act with a specific kind of accountability, very different to that which is required of physical action. Hence the importance of examining the formal features of utterance before any further claims can be made regarding the way in which it engenders identity.

The French linguist Emile Benveniste, in his work *Problems in General Linguistics*, proposes a very succinct formal definition of utterance. Utterance, or to use the French word *énonciation*, is the 'activation of language by its use in a particular context'.<sup>15</sup> One of the most striking features of this process of activation of language is to be found in the vocal peculiarities of speech, or in what Roland Barthes calls 'the grain of the voice'.<sup>16</sup> This covers such properties as intonation and rhythm, but is determined also by choice of vocabulary and subject matter. Although the type of identification that ensues is often immediate and non-critical (as when a dog responds to the voice of its master), it tends to be more problematic in narrative discourse where one comes across narrators who are more difficult to pin down, as they alter their delivery style according to their position, or borrow forms of elocution and types of vocabulary from different registers or genres. Whether one takes the speaker at face value, or whether his or her position requires some detection, the building up of the physiognomy of the utterer through the linguistic features of his or her speech remains an important factor in the construction of narrative identity.

Another feature of utterance is its tendency to convey a certain attitude with respect to its subject matter. Sometimes the attitude of the speaker is revealed in the forms of language used, as is the case with such figures of speech as irony, apology, denunciation or justification, to quote just four of the rhetorical devices traditionally deployed by writers of poetry and prose. Sometimes the attitude is discernable in

the choice of literary genres, for example, lyric poetry for the conveying of sense impressions or realist narratives for demonstrating the virtues of a particular ideology. But one might also cite, in more mundane contexts, the choice of editorial supports such as promotional tracts, individual submissions or newspaper articles etc. which serve a particular purpose, express an individual or collective need, fulfil an ambition or defend a cause. Because utterance implies the existence of a need, a desire or simply an attitude, it can be regarded as an instrument for impinging in some way on the world.

Finally, by virtue of the fact that for every speaker there is a listener, real or imaginary, it is considered a necessary feature of utterances to imply the existence of the Other, an opposite number to the utterer, an equal partner in a transaction which cannot be completed without his or her cooperation. As Benveniste, following many other linguists, points out, the *I* implies a *you* in a perfectly reciprocal relationship of which the situation of dialogue is the common paradigm.<sup>17</sup> The *I* addresses itself to a *you* in the knowledge that the *you* is a potential *I* for future exchanges in dialogue situations.

Drawing together all the aforementioned properties of utterance, it is possible to define it as the individual act of language whereby a speaker transmits a message to a listener, who in turn is capable of responding in kind. Now the point of this theory, as Benveniste presents it, is that the three poles of the speech act, the *I*, the *you* and the *message*, do not have any clear ontological status apart from the utterance which informs them. The *I*, the *you* and the *message* are three different functions of language, and as such are to be examined in respect of the semantic and syntactical structures which configure them: the first, second and third persons establish the status of the acting, thinking and feeling person; the adverbs of time and place indicate the respective positions of speaker and hearer; and the tenses and the moods of verbs serve to colour in a particular way the reality referred to. That the identities of the speaker and the listener are in essence semantic derivations of the grammatical functions of language is the central premise of Benveniste's work. Hence his strong contention that 'it is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a *subject*'.<sup>18</sup>

Following Benveniste's theory of utterance, one has no difficulty recasting the question of identity in the context of narrative discourse in particular. Identity can be defined according to the verbal characteristics of narrative (its voice or register), the attitude which is expressed towards the fictional world (denunciation, justification or

just simple registering of reality), and finally the type of rapport established with the reader (the mode or genre adopted). In narrative as utterance, identity may be defined as that part of discourse which indicates the positions in space and time of the speaker and listener (I, so and so, speaking from this place at this time, affirm this or that about the world, as I address myself to you who are listening to me and may at some point answer me). This paradigm generally connects the ensuing narrative to a consciousness which tends to remain at the centre of the work, whether it be the omniscient narrator in Zola's works, or the first-person narrator in Proust whose delving into his personal world takes on epic proportions. But not all narratives develop around the one overarching consciousness. Some take the option of boldly problematising the status of the narrator and his or her relationship with the narratee or with the world generally. It is such limiting cases of narrative identity which interest us here.

Samuel Beckett's text, *Company*, shows in clear, concise terms how language can produce its own speaker and listener, just as it produces a situation, a setting or a decor where some sort of exchange is carried out. *Company* is interesting, moreover, in that it describes an exchange of an interlocutory nature at the same time as it attempts as far as possible to minimise the human setting of the exchange. It dramatises the persistence of 'company' in an environment devoid of all human support, the only reality being the constant progression of words. The following passage is a particularly enlightening one:

Mental activity of a low order. Rare flickers of reasoning of no avail. Hope and despair and suchlike barely felt. How current situation arrived at unclear. No that then to compare to this now. Only eyelids move. When for relief from outer and inner dark they close and open respectively. Other small local movements eventually within moderation not to be despaired of. But no improvement by means of such achieved so far. Or on a higher plane by such addition to company as a movement of sustained sorrow or desire or remorse or curiosity or anger and so on. Or by some successful act of intellection as were he to think to himself referring to himself, Since he cannot think he will give up trying. Is there anything to add to this esquisse?<sup>19</sup>

The passage contains an enumeration of elementary conscious activity such as emotions, reflex movements and thoughts, all mentioned rather whimsically as missing ingredients in a scenario which falls well short of expectations. All the sentences develop from the negative: No memories, no feelings, no movements and no ideas issue forth here, nor is there any hope of finding the merest sign of human presence. To

be more exact, some feelings, movements and ideas are perceived, but only very slightly, as the words 'low order', 'rare', 'barely' and 'unclear' suggest in the passage. Moreover, starting from a barely perceptible level these manifestations are said to show 'no improvement'. The feeble traces of human presence are not located in any individual consciousness, but seem to float freely over the text, forming the dimmest outline of humanity against persistent rhythm of the sentences. What does appear quite clearly, however, is the situation of interlocution which takes the form of a question posed at the very end, addressed to a possible accomplice in the construction of this pitiful portrait. It is asked of someone: 'Is there anything to add to this esquisse?' The *I/you* relationship, although never made explicit, emerges strongly in this interrogative sentence in such a way as to frame the previously anonymous registering of non-movement within a dialogue situation (that is, one expects an answer). It now incorporates the notions of complicity, collaboration and enquiry, all very active human endeavours which were absent from the discourse of paralysis developed earlier in the passage.

It is noteworthy that identity is constructed here from a situation devoid of consciousness, and in which the human subject is reduced to the bare mechanical movements of the body and mind. Identity emerges strongly at the end of the passage, as the discourse of death and decay gives way to the figure of an imaginary 'creator' working in concert with an accomplice to develop his hapless creature. The explanation for the whole enterprise appears a little further on in the text, when one finds: 'Devised deviser devising it all for company'.<sup>20</sup> Given that the end result of the process of de-animation is 'company', the text invites a second reading in which the whole sad affair appears as an exercise in mutual recognition involving two parties. In this way, the narrative confirms itself as a process of identity construction.

The theoretical question that needs to be posed here is how utterance can be productive of identity in the absence of a clearly designated character, and where there exists only the slightest trace of an organising consciousness. If identity in the sense of the self-declared existence of the *I* is no longer viable, from what angle are we to approach the question of narrative identity? It is useful at this point to return to Ricoeur's all-important insight into this question. Certainly, writes Ricoeur, narrative is remarkable for its tendency to split utterance (*énonciation*) and statement (*énoncé*), but it is crucial to understand how they are connected, both in logical and experiential terms, and more particularly by the particular temporality which informs all

narrative.<sup>21</sup> For the notion of *voice* is not an expression of the act of uttering divorced from its content, but issues from a process of 'grasping together' by which the first enters into a particular temporal relation with the second. This temporal relation consists more precisely in a return to the utterer via an investment into the message uttered, so that the content appears as a necessary detour by which one returns to the narrator's position in time, exposing it again and again as the narrative shifts from representation to utterance, from action to speech.

Another way of saying this is that there exists in narrative an interplay of reference and self-reference, that is, an ability to reveal its internal, subjective principle at the same time as it points to a state of affairs outside itself (as in referential discourse). Narrative, says Paul Ricoeur, is a far from innocent use of language in that the objective world it presents is a means to highlight the situation of the speaker and the listener, the narrator and the narratee. A consequence of this reflective turn in narrative is, to follow Ricoeur further, that identity is no longer a question of *sameness* in the sense of the speaker of one sentence being identical to the speaker of another sentence. Rather, the core of identity is now *selfness*, in other words the recognition of one's position relative to the actions one performs and the words one speaks. Through the necessary affirmation of self in narrative, story always discloses itself as somebody's story—mine, yours, ours or theirs.

In addition, if all narratives have the capacity to make someone own up to them, they also imply that the addressee of the narrative is capable, in his or her turn, of owning up to future narratives. Identity is also, says Ricoeur, the recognition '... by one speaker of the capacity of his/her addressee to designate himself/herself as the origin of his/her discourse'.<sup>22</sup> It is this identity, one of *selfness* rather than *sameness*, which emerges from the theory of utterance and of speech acts, thus providing the core concept around which the discussion of narrative identity can proceed. Having reached this point, it is now proposed to pursue the question of narrative identity by introducing a third dimension, that of reading, defined here rather loosely as the interpretative process to which narrative gives rise and in which it finds its significance and relevance.

### 3. Reading

Reading has recently become a major issue in literary studies thanks to the emergence of theories of reception, notably in the works of the German scholars Wolfgang Iser and Hans-Robert Jauss. These theories

have sought to broaden the limits of the study of narrative to include, in addition to text bound narratives, the discourses which arise as a result of the reception of such texts, that is, discourses which serve to replicate, promote, interpret or evaluate known texts. These may take the form of critical reviews or papers written by scholars, imitations or pastiches produced by other writers, or even conversations around the dinner table. In all of these circumstances, one notes the power of narrative to generate not only meaning but also new discourses. The point is to show that narrative is not limited in space and time, nor is it bounded by the covers of an edited text, but extends to the responses it elicits in the reading public whose diverse reactions, added to those of previous readers, form through a process of sedimentation the peculiarly narrative tradition of which all readers are part.

All this poses a challenge to our attempts to delineate the concept of narrative identity. It would seem that the best way to approach the question of a *readerly* identity is to return to the paradigm of human action which was applied earlier to the contexts of story and utterance. It could thus be posited that reading is a form of action necessarily appropriated by an autonomous individual, that it carries, in other words, all the hallmarks of an individual act to which, in the various types of articulation it admits, one could ascribe an agent simply by asking the fundamental question 'who reads?'. But this is not obvious. For whereas identity in story is derived from the physical actions of the protagonists, and identity in utterance from the verbal acts of the speaker, identity constructed through the process of reading cannot be traced to any singular agent, nor does it share the sense of locatedness which is a strong feature of both story and utterance.

There is a need, then, to effect a qualitative jump in our understanding of action as we move from represented acts to verbal acts to acts of cognition. Is this not stretching the idea of action beyond breaking point? Two very illuminating examples given by Paul Ricoeur in his *Time and Narrative*<sup>23</sup> show that this is not the case. The first refers to the context of the psychoanalytic cure, where the patient painstakingly works through memories of childhood experiences, weaving them into a narrative which assembles the fragments of the past into some intelligible pattern. The constant reshaping of the narrative of the past constitutes the remaking of a life, with the aim of making it more coherent and intelligible to the patient who, as a result of this process, regains the power to make decisions and change the direction of his life. As the narrative finds its formal unity, so too does the patient's sense of self, and with it his ability to take control of his own life. In

this exercise of reconstruction of one's identity, the patient does not terminate the treatment, is not cured, in other words, until he reaches a point where identity, which in this case is none other than a narrative identity, is fully re-established. The second example concerns the creation of a collective identity, achieved through the recounting of the origins of a people. Ricoeur refers here to the Jewish community in particular. Biblical Israel on which the present-day community is founded, is a series of 'patriarchal narratives' including those of the Exodus, the settlement in Canaan, the Davidic monarchies, the exile and return to the promised land. The strong and even passionate sense of identity which Ricoeur observes is characteristic of modern Jews, is the result of the continued retelling of the foundational narrative, so that with each retelling the sense of awareness of the place the community currently occupies in history is strengthened. This strong collective identity is intimately tied to the narrative which connects each and every individual belonging to the modern Jewish state to the founding fathers of the Davidic tribes. Both of these examples of narrative identity, one individual and the other collective, highlight the importance of the continuous reworking of narrative, an on-going process which involves the reception of previous stories as well as the continuous effort to produce new ones. To the extent that reading brings about self-understanding, not in the sense of a repeated affirmation of one's identity but in the sense of a constant re-evaluation of the self and its position in the world, it constitutes a form reflexion that recalls the *praxis* of the ancient Greeks. Reading, then, shows itself to be firmly entrenched in the philosophy of action.

Beckett's text, *Company*, offers an interesting account of the interweaving of reading and action by placing it, most interestingly, in a completely dehumanized context. Towards the end of the text the two separate activities attributed to the subject, the simple physical movements of the arms and the legs and the articulation of words, lose their distinctiveness with the result that the words become substitutes for movements and the movements substitutes for words.

The arms unclasp the knees. The head lifts. The legs start to straighten. The trunk tilts backward. And together these and countless others continue on their respective ways till they can go no further and together come to rest. Supine now you resume your fable where the act of lying cut it short. And persist till the converse operation cuts it short again.<sup>24</sup>

Action is reduced to the barest of corporal movements, which themselves are reduced to the most elementary of body positions, that of supineness, until 'supineness becomes habitual and finally the rule'.<sup>25</sup> As physical

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movement decreases the words spring forth to fill the void. The text continues:

You now on your back in the dark shall not rise again to clasp your legs in your arms and bow down your head till it can bow down no further. But with face upturned for good labour in vain at your fable. Till finally you hear how words are coming to an end. With every inane word a little nearer to the last. And how the fable too. The fable of one with you in the dark. The fable of one fabling of one with you in the dark.<sup>26</sup>

Words replace actions when the latter lose their vitality, having been relegated to mere memories of him who lies forever still, 'face upturned for good'. In this climate of general paralysis, words continue to flow despite the knowledge that they too will dry up after a period of vainly attempting to prolong the agony. But at the same time words produce 'fable', which even though it proceeds 'in vain' succeeds nevertheless in telling the story of the end in such a way as to defy the end. The fable, which is an accepted synonym of narrative, continues, in a sense, to populate the reduced world of the nameless, friendless, motionless man. Despite being spun in silence and solitude, the fable creates 'company' by virtue of the fact that it doubles life, with the result that it is always about something or someone, and is addressed to someone else whom one supposes makes an attempt at comprehension. These extensions of narrative become, curiously, the sole inhabitants of a universe. They are sure to collapse into nothingness were the fable to cease. Fable is all, and even thrives in the ambient emptiness, as is borne out by the increasing complexity of the sentences: 'The fable of one with you in the dark. The fable of one fabling of one with you in the dark'. If the mere trace of a fable is sufficient to produce a subject matter (however reduced) and a hearer (however degenerate), it then becomes capable of constituting a self-sufficient system where consciousness is not only made possible, but also developed to such a degree that there emerges an inhabitable world where human destiny can be fully played out. It is important to note that such a fabling process is an essentially reflective one. For speakers and listeners double each other, feed off each other in a series of amplifications and multiplications. As narrative is produced and received, one senses the emergence of a powerful and independent mechanism for creating more narrative, along with its associated spin-offs for identity.

As Reception Theory widens its scope, embracing in its stride not only the endless production of narrative but also the whole of tradition, it becomes totally bound up with the ancient discipline of hermeneutics.

Initially an art in translating and otherwise making intelligible to the masses legal or religious texts, hermeneutics has enjoyed since the Romantic period a new lease of life, principally in its application to the study of literary texts and other cultural forms. Literary hermeneutics attempts to uncover what texts mean for readers who, regardless of how much they know about the author or his social background, seek to extract from their reading a message which is relevant to their own lives, and which may alter their understanding of their world and their place in it. The threefold hermeneutic method proposed by Jauss is based upon the practices developed in ancient times for the purposes of biblical and juridical exegeses: it involves the three moments of understanding (*intellegere*), interpretation (*interpretare*) and application (*applicare*).<sup>27</sup> Jauss details the three successive stages of reading as follows: in *understanding* the reader builds up gradually an overall picture of the text, taking into account as he or she progresses the aesthetic qualities of the text; in *interpretation* the overall picture has been attained, and it is now a question of reviewing the text so as to fit its successive parts into the whole, reassessing them in terms of their role in conveying the overall message; and finally in *application*, the text is reconsidered in the broader framework of the reader's life experience, and its relevance assessed in terms of the reader's day to day preoccupations.<sup>28</sup> *Application* is thus the stage where one might consider the reader to be in some way transformed as a result of the experience of reading. In the progressive assimilation of the literary text into the reader's horizon of experience, the reader retrieves his or her own world as well as attaining a new understanding of his or her place in it. This retrieval involves not only a rediscovery of one's world, but an opening up, through the experience of reading, of possibilities of thinking and feeling and acting which appear as imaginative variations of that world. Reading, then, is the domain of alternating passive and active subjects, in the sense that it implies a potential for action conditional upon the reader losing himself, so to speak, in the fictional universe before rediscovering himself in a reconstituted world, a world, moreover, which is 'purged' or 'clarified' through the cathartic effects produced by reading. Through *catharsis* which, it should be mentioned, is given ample treatment in Aristotle's *Poetics*, narrative emerges as a powerful action performed on the reader, transforming him in such a way as to make him 'fit' for the undertaking of meaningful action.

Identity may be understood here as a consequence of the reflective process inherent in reading, by virtue of which the perception of the

singular world of the text leads necessarily to the reassessment of the reader's own world. According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, it is impossible to interpret in a fashion which leaves us indifferent to the text, for we can only interpret it 'in its relevance to our own situation'.<sup>29</sup> The very idea of participation in meaning as opposed to the objective task of its formal articulation, places hermeneutics within the ambit of a so-called practical philosophy which, from Aristotle to Kant, is concerned with the question of how one should live and act in the circumstances which prevail in one's life. The reflective element is constant throughout this practical philosophy which, following the Socratic principle, merges at all points knowledge and self-knowledge. Identity, then, is the *self* of self-knowledge acquired through reading, which, far from being the simple image of the reader reflected in the text, involves the complex process of the loss of the first-person *me* as a prelude to the discovery of a *self*, a *self* which is ultimately transpersonal.

The introduction of the problematic of reading has seen us cross the boundaries of discourse theory into the realm of hermeneutic philosophy. This is perhaps not surprising considering that, throughout the discussion of the three aspects of narrative, namely story, utterance and reading, our arguments have constantly been presented against the background of the philosophy of action. The trials and tribulations of the characters in the story, the verbal acts of the narrator, and the interpretative work of the reader are all forms of action, and as such share the common traits of intentionality and responsibility. Story, utterance and reading also share the common feature of necessarily positing an agent of action, in the sense that they carry with them the possibility of ascription to a free and independent individual. For at each stage meaning is conferred by virtue of answering the question 'who?'. This is where narrative identity asserts itself as an essential ingredient in meaning construction, a fact borne out by observing children as they discover for the first time the story of origins: who made the birds and the animals? who made the world? who made me?

## Conclusion

In conclusion, let us return to question the significance of this enquiry into narrative identity. Recall that narrative identity was introduced as a working concept in answer to the *aporia* which has afflicted in recent times the philosophy of the subject. It is certainly true that the latter has held itself uncomfortably between the refusal to return to the certainties of the Cogito and the awareness of the inability of Postmodernism to

provide a philosophical account of the subject as person, whose legitimate claims for justice, equality and respect are fast gathering momentum. How can the fragmentation of the subject sit with the attempt to defend its fundamental rights? Narrative identity offers a solution to the *aporia*, by enabling the subject to establish its existence in time, for it is only in time that the subject can claim its due as well as acquit itself of its responsibilities. What narrative brings to identity, as Ricoeur has shown, is recognition of the temporal dimension which is absent in the philosophy of the Ego as it is in the radical philosophy of suspicion which strives to counteract it. Ricoeur's thesis, which this paper strongly echoes, is that narrative as an articulation of the experience of time provides a theory of identity adequate to the needs of the politics of human rights. It is because of its temporal organisation that narrative is able to produce an interweaving of permanence and change in the context of a life story. Here, the subject is constituted through the dramatic processes of Reversal, Recognition and Suffering as Aristotle lists them, or through narrative strategies such as Suspense, Amplification and Distancing which have appeared in more recent narrative theory, so that what emerges is a figured subject which finds its unity in a particular dialectic of permanence and change. The figuration of the subject gives it a symbolic power and presence, whose status is not that of a fixed image of something supernatural or sacred as religion would have it, but rather that of an extended *dramatis personae* subjected to alternative states of activity and passivity. To put it another way, the temporal extension of narrative identity consists of the conflation of the *I am* and the *I can*, so that the *I* affirmed in an actual present is overlaid by a interpersonal *self* extending into the future. The immediate *I* then becomes a capable *self*. Ricoeur's paradigm of the promise, of *keeping one's word*, is an illustration of this temporal extension, with the *self*, enlarged through self-knowledge, encompassing the domain of the present *I*. The overlaying of the *I* by the *self* is the key to new directions opened up in philosophical inquiry in its endeavour to clarify the position of the subject. To this end, the contribution of narrative theory to the debate has proved to be most fruitful.

## Notes

- 1 Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, Chicago and London, 1992.
- 2 'The style specific to the hermeneutics of the self is best understood if one has first had a chance to take stock of the amazing oscillations that the philosophies of the subject appear to present, as though the cogito out of

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- which they arise were unavoidably caught up in an alternating sequence of overevaluation and underevaluation.' Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, p.4.
- 3 Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated by Richard Janko, Indianapolis, 1987, p.9 (50b 3, 4). Although almost all the examples given by Aristotle are taken from works of Tragedy, the tenor of his remarks applies also to the genre of Epic which, as Aristotle defines it, is a narrativised version of Tragedy. This justifies the broadening of the scope of Aristotle's *Poetics* to cover all narratives, including the narrative genres which have appeared in recent times, such as tales, short stories, the realist novel, autobiography and biography. For this reason the word Story is preferable to Tragedy.
  - 4 *Poetics*, p.9 (50a 15 to 22).
  - 5 *Poetics*, p.11 (51a 18 to 19).
  - 6 *Poetics*, p.11 (49a 33 to 34).
  - 7 *Poetics*, p.12 (51a 38 to 39).
  - 8 *Poetics*, p.12 (51b 8 to 10).
  - 9 Samuel Beckett, *Company*, London, 1980, p.28.
  - 10 *Poetics*, p.1 (48a 10 to 11).
  - 11 *Poetics*, see pp.10, 11.
  - 12 Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, Chicago and London, 1984, p.58.
  - 13 Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, p.59.
  - 14 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York, 1973.
  - 15 Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, Florida, 1971. This definition is to found in the French original, *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, vol. 2, Paris, 1974. The French text (p.80) reads: 'L'énonciation est cette mise en fonctionnement de la langue par un acte individuel d'utilisation.'
  - 16 See Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice*, New York, 1985.
  - 17 Benveniste, p.199.
  - 18 Benveniste, p.224.
  - 19 Beckett, pp.62, 63.
  - 20 Beckett, p.64.
  - 21 Account must be taken of 'the interplay between the various temporal levels stemming from the reflexivity of the configuring act itself'. *Time and Narrative*, vol. 2, p.2.
  - 22 Paul Ricoeur, 'Self as ipse', in Barbara Johnson, ed., *Freedom and Interpretation: the Oxford Amnesty Lectures 1992*, New York, 1993, p.112.
  - 23 Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. III, Chicago, 1988, see pp.247, 248.
  - 24 Beckett, p.87.
  - 25 Beckett, p.88.
  - 26 Beckett, pp.88, 89.
  - 27 Hans-Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, Minneapolis, 1982, p.139.

28 Jauss, p.143.

28 Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*,  
Cambridge, 1987, p.68.

29 Ricoeur, 'Self as ipse', p.105.