

Finding the Plot

Finding the Plot:
Storytelling in Popular Fictions

Edited by

Diana Holmes, David Platten,
Loïc Artiaga and Jacques Migozzi

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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PREFACE

The starting point for this book was a three-day conference **Finding the Plot: On the Importance of Storytelling in Popular Fictions**, co-organised in April 2010 at the University of Leeds by the *Popular Cultures Research Network* and the *Centre de Recherches sur les Littératures Populaires et les Cultures Médiatiques*, and supported by the British Academy, the French Embassy, Society for French Studies, Association for the Study of Modern and Contemporary France, and the universities of Leeds and Limoges.

The conference itself developed out of a programme of collaboration between the two research networks that included exchange visits. Jacques Migozzi and Loïc Artiaga were speakers at two seminar/workshops in Leeds in March 2009: *Copernican Revolutions - Storytelling: le prêt-à-penser et le plaisir romanesque* and *Generic Pleasures: re-thinking genre in popular fiction*, which then gave rise to a special issue of *French Cultural Studies* on this theme in November 2010 (21/4). Diana Holmes and David Platten presented and discussed their research at LPCM seminars in Limoges in September 2009. The project of a conference on *Finding the Plot* produced a strong response, and the papers selected brought together an international group of early-career and established researchers from the existing membership of PCRN and LPCM and from well beyond. The present volume represents not a simple proceedings of the conference, but a selected and augmented series of chapters shaped to address the central issues that arose from the papers presented and, above all, from discussion.

The decision to publish the book in French and English echoes the fully bilingual nature of the conference itself. We hope that our readership will encompass the large French Studies community in the Anglophone world, and also appeal to scholars and students of literature and popular culture whose first language is French, but who also, as is increasingly the case, have a good command of English. Stories circulate across cultures and languages – *Finding the Plot*, we hope, will also connect readers and scholars from different academic traditions who share a passion for stories.

—The Editors

INTRODUCTION

DIANA HOLMES AND DAVID PLATTEN

1. Good storytelling means the narrative sequencing of imaginary or real events to provoke in the audience a sense of anticipation, absorption, and a desire to follow the plot that tussles pleasurably with reluctance to reach its end. Stories provide the pleasure of imaginary travel to an elsewhere, and may even, through the coherence of narrative, enhance understanding of readers' own lives, both personal and collective. Thus effective plotting, or the skilful structuring of story into narrative, has been central to literature from (we can at least surmise) the days of oral culture, and the urgent desire to know "what happens next" has driven (and still drives) the success of the novel as a cultural form. And yet in the modern - and certainly the postmodern - era, plot has become, in Peter Brooks' words: "the element of narrative that least sets off and designs high art" (Brooks 1984, 4). What is more highly valued in the *literary* novel is formal experimentation, thematic resonance, often a self-reflexivity that interrogates the very nature of language and fiction. Plot has become associated rather with "low" or popular culture, for bestselling page-turners are acknowledged to owe their success to the craft of story-telling. In a neat and influential formulation, Barthes opposed the mere "plaisir" of consuming an accessible narrative to the "jouissance" (an untranslatable term connoting cerebral pleasure of orgasmic intensity) of engagement with the fully literary text. In France more than in Anglophone cultures, where the impact of Cultural Studies has been much greater, the hegemonic attitude to "mass" literature in general and story in particular has been one of disdain for the "easy" pleasures provided by popular fictions.

However, in France as in the international field of Franco-centric literary studies, there has been a resurgence of interest in the nature and significance of story. This has partly taken the form of renewed suspicion of storytelling as a process that subordinates and seduces the (passive) reader: Christian Salmon's forceful essay *Storytelling: La Machine à fabriquer des histoires et à formater les esprits* (2008) – translated as *Storytelling: Bewitching the Modern Mind* (2010) - defines storytelling as

a manipulative strategy increasingly deployed by business and the military, among others, to sell products, ideas or a total worldview. At the same time a more positive and celebratory resurgence of interest in story has been evident in the literary world. The 2007 manifesto and subsequent book *Pour une littérature-monde* argued primarily for a polycentric vision of literature in French, rather than a binary model that divided metropolitan from "francophone" writing, but this appeal to expand the scope and readership of a national literature that (the signatories argued) had shrunk to a state of sclerotic formalism also included a call to revive the mimetic and storytelling power of the novel form, via its narrative and social engagement with "the world". Two polemical books published within a year of the manifesto, by Tzvetan Todorov and Nancy Huston (the latter a *Littérature-Monde* signatory), also defended and celebrated the novel's capacity to "represent the common world", in Todorov's words (Todorov 2007, 64), and to transport the reader, through storytelling, to a fictional universe at once reflective of and exceeding that of lived experience. In an essay which is all the more significant for its author's previous association with the structuralist and poststructuralist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, Todorov explicitly attacks the distinction (particularly powerful in France) between literature considered "high" culture and those popular fictions, such as Dumas's *The Three Musketeers* and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, that absorb "ordinary" readers; the latter, he argued, are equally able to provide their readers with an "élargissement intérieur (...) l'inclusion dans notre conscience de nouvelles manières d'être" (Todorov 2007, 77). Novelist Nancy Huston, in her essay *L'Espèce fabulatrice* (2008), made the reader's suspension of disbelief, procured through effective storytelling, central to the ethics of the novel genre: "Le roman, c'est ce qui célèbre cette reconnaissance des autres en soi, et de soi dans les autres. C'est le genre humain par excellence." (186).

Meanwhile, in a more academic context, some French literary historians and theorists were already addressing the importance of story, and of its capacity to absorb the reader in imaginary worlds. Work on the nineteenth-century novel had already opened the way to reflection on those dimensions of the genre that could federate social classes and even the starkly dichotomized sexes in desire for the next episode of the *roman-feuilleton*: from text-based studies such as Québécois Marc Angenot's *Le Roman populaire. Recherches en littérature* (1975) or Michel Nathan's *Splendeurs & misères du roman populaire* (1991), to Anne-Marie Thiesse's splendid study of books and readers at the fin-de-siècle: *Le Roman du quotidien. Lecteurs et lectures populaires à la Belle Époque*

(1984). The research group *Littératures Populaires et Culture Médiaque* (LPCM), originally founded in 1997 and based at the University of Limoges, began to bring under a single umbrella much of the most interesting work on popular fictions being pursued in a francophone context, with a series of conferences and publications that united a large scale agenda of empirical research (for the popular had not hitherto excited the attention of many literary historians in France) with theoretical reflection on text, genre and reception. Exploring paths traced by, for example, Pierre Bourdieu (on the relationship between social hierarchies and cultural taste), Paul Ricoeur (on narrative identities), Michel de Certeau (on the active, participative role of the reader/spectator), and feminist theorists of the romance (on the ideological complexity of narrative pleasure), the LPCM project has shown how popular narratives encapsulate many different aspects of human interactions, interrogate relations between the real and the imaginary, and illustrate how the most straightforwardly plot-driven narratives may instigate a complex negotiation between reader and text. Recognition of the convergence between this agenda, and work on popular fiction being pursued within the Popular Cultures Research Network based in Modern Languages at the University of Leeds, led to the collaborative project from which this book emerges.

Assumptions on the distinction between "serious" and "popular" art swirl around all academic debate on artistic form, not least because, as Bourdieu's research convincingly shows, the articulation of cultural distinctions conflates taste with competence and thus has repercussions in the social and political spheres. In this regard Marc Fumaroli's despair (in *L'Etat culturel*, 1991) at the sight of young people, headphones clamped to skull, wandering around the Musée d'Orsay epitomises the prevailing attitudes towards French culture that held sway during most of the past century and persist into this. The cause of cultural conservatism in France today has been much helped by its association not just with a predictably reactionary Right, but also – and arguably still more strongly – with ardent republicanism and even the revolutionary Left. Some of the fiercest opposition to the increasing ubiquity of popular (or what the French term rather "mass") culture has come from intellectuals committed to the secular republican values of liberty and equality, such as Alain Finkielkraut and Régis Debray, and with the possible exception of the surrealists, revolutionary artists and theorists have also tended to eschew popular culture as a mere "bread and circuses" strategy that distracts the masses from recognition of their true condition. This contrasts strongly with that current in the anglophone Left that we can broadly characterize as "Cultural Studies", and that has sought to define the functions and uses

of popular cultural forms starting from the premise that, to put it simply, "popular" consumers are not merely passive victims of the merchants of culture but exercise agency like their "high culture" equivalents. Popular literature has come to be taken seriously more recently in France than in the UK or the US, and the hierarchical model of culture, still strongly present but pervasively contested in the anglophone world, continues to dominate. In *La Défaite de la pensée* (1987), Finkelkraut painted a picture of genuinely intellectual French cultural values assailed from all sides by the malign forces of an international, relativist postmodernism that seeks to equate Bob Marley with Beethoven. However, the reality in the world of books and literature is that publishers, university scholars and general readers mostly subscribe, albeit tacitly in many cases, to the existence of an hegemony of literary tastes. Significantly, those who either support the intellectual validity of these hegemonic divisions or who simply perceive them as the most efficient way to market and sell new books both rely on the notion of genre, which serves to quarantine creativity and artistic endeavour so that, for example, the imaginative subterfuge of a graphic novel, which may include a significant degree of formal experimentation, is deemed worthy *within* the culture of the *bande dessinée*, but has much less of an impact beyond the confines of the genre. Sainte-Beuve's nineteenth-century appellation of "la littérature industrielle" as inimical to the creation of great art survives in this distinction of high art on the one hand and the popular genres on the other. Moreover, beyond the academy it retains a subliminal potency; crime novelist Jean-Patrick Manchette, who has been feted posthumously as a significant influence over crime and latterly literary fiction more generally, would frequently rail against reviewers who would praise "ce bon polar".

The obduracy of the serious-popular distinction has been reflected in the marked separation in French literary scholarship between the study of literature "proper" and that of what has variously been termed mass, popular, or "para" literature. The latter represents vital work, because of the scant attention paid over all to so much of the fiction absorbed and engaged with by millions of readers since the advent of mass literacy, and because the specific qualities that make a fiction popular are more than worthy of critical analysis and theorization. However, the discrete study of popular texts and genres can also paradoxically reinforce familiar hegemonic divisions in literary tastes, and thus inhibit the development of a more inclusive and nuanced perspective on a contemporary literary scene in reality characterised, in France as elsewhere, by its eclecticism. In this book, we aim to re-situate popular genres and texts not within their own distinct sphere, but as part of a literary continuum connected by the

irresistible pull of being told a story. Plotting is a means of making provisional, uncertain but necessary sense of the world: here we pay due attention to the most popular of genres and texts, from the *polar* and historical romance to James Bond and the *Twilight* series, but do so alongside studies of that most apparently esoteric of literary projects, the Symbolist novel, and the fictions of acclaimed contemporary novelist Danièle Sallenave – as well as investigating how the narrative structuring of experience connects literary fiction to other modes of cultural creation such as song and gossip journalism. This decompartmentalisation (the French *décloisonnement* is neater) is echoed in the book's fusion of "French" and "English" modes of analysis – neither of these watertight, and a matter of emphasis rather than radical difference, but corresponding broadly to, on the one hand, a narratological and rigorously theoretical approach to texts and the psychology of reading (French) and, on the other, a concern with the socio-ideological implications of texts and their impact on readers (English- or at least "Cultural Studies" English). In fact the international collaboration that underpins this study is based on the substantial overlap between our practices as literary critics, but the difference of emphasis is nonetheless real, and fruitful.

There are further perspectives on popular fiction that are evoked here but not (yet) fully realized. A thorough consideration of which fictions (and which types of plot) exercise the most appeal to readers would require study of the bestseller listings. It would require a deeper understanding of how books are manufactured and promoted; there is currently a paucity of research into subjects such as the criteria observed by publishers when they make decisions on manuscripts, the politics of annual literary prizes that can transform writers' public profiles, the impact of digital tablets and the anticipated decline of paper books, and the increasingly important trend in online self-publishing. A more inclusive conception of popular literature might also challenge received ideas on what many perceive to be the primary vectors of reading pleasure, notably storytelling, verisimilitude, and empathetic characterisation. The mix of ludism, fantasy and pastiche in bestselling and durably popular novels such as Boris Vian's *L'Écume des jours* and Raymond Queneau's *Zazie dans le métro* provide a different, though not necessarily contradictory, set of reading stimuli. Different again, in the contemporary era, would be the attractions to a mass readership of the prolific Amélie Nothomb's auto-fictional tales or Michel Houellebecq's literary polemics. Our contention here though is that plot, or the absorption of the reader into an imaginary world through narrative tension and the patterning of story, is crucial to the abiding appeal of narrative fiction.

2. The book is organised into four sections. It opens with "Theory and Story", in which six scholars writing against the grain of a strong French critical tendency to deplore popular fictions' formal conservatism, ideological blandness and narcotic effect on readers address the nature of story and plot. Raphaël Baroni theorises how plots work from the perspective of a first reading, as opposed to the critical re-reading that more commonly forms the basis of scholarly analysis. A first reading means a sense of tension rather than a recognition of inevitable causality; we live the story forwards as in life, without knowing the *dénouement*, and this also offers a sense of all the potential stories evoked but whose tracks are not followed as the plot takes shape. Baroni traces the way in which the once valued "art de créer un monde et d'intéresser le lecteur" lost its "lettres de noblesse", and argues strongly for the human value of strong narratives. Jacques Migozzi sees in the recent characterisation of "storytelling" as a sinister strategy a return to paternalist assumptions about the passively manipulated reader. He argues for a model of the reader as story *player*, hence as active accomplice rather than duped victim of the author; the effects of the fictional plot and the imaginary world that the reader colludes in creating are at once cognitive, affective and ethical. Lise Dumasy, arguing from the basis of her own intense pleasure in both "literary" reading *and* the page-turning, unputdownable narratives of the late nineteenth century, disputes Barthes' stark distinction between "plaisir" and "jouissance", as she traces the continuity of a critical disparagement of popular stories based on mistrust of their power to distract, seduce and threaten a rational and productive social order. She returns, however, to the subtlety of Barthes' wider take on narrative and its pleasures. Paul Bleton interrogates what plot means from the point of view of the reader – not only the connected sequence of fictional events, but also other "distracting" but essential elements of context such as place, time, the "surface" of language. He argues that what holds together all the constitutive elements is plot, and illustrates this through analysis of a playful *roman policier*. Plot is seen as the co-creation of reader and author. The structures and techniques of storytelling, however, extend well beyond the domain of literary fiction, and Marc Lits' chapter shows how the celebrity press (in French the "presse people") has recast political leaders as protagonists in popular dramas, depicting their attributes and actions according to a logic of narrative coherence and emotional impact, rather than in terms of political debates. Popular storytelling requires a cast of rapidly identifiable characters capable of provoking an emotional response: the discourse of the celebrity press resituates politicians within this semiotic and narrative framework. David Platten closes this section

with the argument that, like more "literary" texts, popular crime novels can play on the distinction between plot and narrative to elicit the creative participation of their readers. Taking as his focus Pierre Signac's 1960 *Monsieur Cauchemar*, with its unexpected fracture of the fictional illusion, he demonstrates the significance of this "landmark" text for the aesthetics of the whole genre of contemporary crime fiction.

The second section, "Story/History", illuminates the significance of plots and emplotment to period dramas and fictional settings, taking seriously the nature of readerly pleasure in stories that stage the past, whether distant or recent. Marc Guillaumie analyses the appeal of the prehistoric novel, popular since scientific exploration in the nineteenth century began to uncover evidence of a history that (by definition) left no written traces. A chain of such stories loops through different media and national cultures up to the present day, offering the emotionally resonant image of islands of human community surrounded by dark mysterious forests and terrifying monsters, and plots that often draw on powerful myths of human origins and progress. The prehistoric novel, and its cinematic avatars, offer the pleasure of fear buttressed by the reassurance of a teleological plot; they invite the reader to enjoy his or her distance from humanity's primitive origins, whilst also relishing identification with passions unconstrained by centuries of civilisation; they wear a gratifyingly educational air of being based on scientific research, but in fact, Guillaumie shows, consistently subordinate history to the narrative and ideological needs of the moment. Tim Farrant's subject is the short story and in particular the late nineteenth-century stories of Alphonse Daudet, which initially gained their popularity through a play on the folk sense of "popular", bringing tales of rural life to an increasingly urbanised audience, but then with the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 became stories of siege and suffering. In both the rural and the urban tales, an emphasis on the shared banality of the everyday overrides any concern for dramatic plot – but Farrant shows how the emphasis on the quotidian, on the plotlessness of the ordinary, carries undercurrents of anxiety that often erupted into a sharp *dénouement*, and paradoxically produced some of the popular "grand narratives" of the Third Republic. Brenda Hollweg also deals with the place of stories in the late nineteenth-century transition to the modern age, taking the Chicago Exposition of 1893 as a case study of the role of fictional narratives in shaping and widening the impact of great public events. The many, generically varied popular fictions that grew up around the Exposition offered vicarious experience of its excitement and newness, and also provided, both for contemporaries and for posterity, memorable narrative forms for the complex cognitive and emotional

experience of this sudden encounter with multicultural, high-tech modernity. Diana Holmes pursues the theme of narrative fiction as a pleasurable structuring of historical moments. Identifying strong similarities between three bestselling historical epics published in France since World War 2 (Anne Golon's *Angélique* saga, begun in 1956, Jacques Laurent's *Caroline Chérie* [1958], and Régine Deforges' *La Bicyclette bleue* [1981]) , she argues that their mass appeal is produced by a picaresque narrative structure, by the enjoyable mix of empathy and censure provoked in (particularly female) readers by their roguish heroines, and by the pleasures of imaginary time-travel to iconic periods of history particularly well suited to the years in which each novel was published. Susan Bainbrigge shows how the collective historical traumas of a generation can be addressed through personal stories, so that a novel that tackles the putatively unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust – Philippe Grimbert's 2004 *Un secret* – could become a bestseller by offering a painful yet finally cathartic narrativisation of the central protagonist's search for an almost intolerable truth. The novel also offers a *mise en abyme* of its own project, for it is through storytelling, through *finding the plot* of his family's life, that the narrator reaches a degree of reconciliation with the past.

Section 3, "Bending genres", looks at the nature and significance of storytelling within different genres, from the *roman noir* to the highly literary Symbolist novel, and the popular songs of Edith Piaf - for narrative plays a crucial role in media other than the literary. Natacha Levet examines the pleasures of detective stories or *polars*, the genre that proclaims its allegiance to the "lowbrow" qualities of suspenseful storytelling and violent emotion. She demonstrates the centrality to the genre of Aristotelian tragic pleasure, composed of fear and pity: the sense of reconciliation associated with popular genres operates here only in the sense of the satisfaction of curiosity, for happy endings are largely withheld, and it is the darkness of the world that is satisfyingly echoed in *noir* plots. Loïc Artiaga shows how almost from their inception, James Bond stories were received by the public (and acknowledged by their author) to be trans-media texts, at once written and cinematic – though early critical work on Bond (for example that of Umberto Eco) remained firmly focussed on the written text. Artiaga sets both the narrative form and the reception of the Bond texts in the context of an increasingly consumerist and "Pop" culture, demonstrating a homology between textual aesthetics and social change. With Matthieu Letourneux's chapter, the relationship between medium, genre and plot structure is explored in the mass-produced and hugely popular serialised adventure stories for children

that proliferated in early twentieth-century France. Necessarily repetitive due to the sheer scale of their production, their profuse narrative structure and cyclical rhythm determined by the generic needs of the serialised form as much as by authorial invention, these stories nonetheless clearly offered considerable reading pleasure, the nature of which Letourneux explores and defines. Richard Hibbitt turns to a genre strongly associated with "high" literature to pose a question central to this book's concerns: is it possible to read any narrative text without reconstituting a plot? Taking the apparently extreme example of a Symbolist novel, he establishes the unavoidable linearity of narrative form even in the most experimental and anti-realist of texts. Moreover, he attributes the relative popularity of his chosen example, Georges Rodenbach's 1892 *Bruges-la-morte*, to its hybridity that allows at once for a poetic, polyvalent reading and for a "realist" interpretation based on suspense and causality. David Looseley finds plot to be a structuring element of popular song – potentially of most pop songs, but strongly present and foregrounded in the French chanson, and exemplified here through the early songs of Edith Piaf. In Piaf's period of French stardom, before she achieved international fame, the constraints of the three-minute record become a virtue: Looseley shows how spare, economical plots are evoked and still allow for complex modes of address, characterisation and storytelling. The songs draw on popular narrative genres such as the romance and the roman noir, communicating mood and other narrative elements through melody, voice and performance as well as through the lyrics. Finally in this section, Imogen Long examines the case of the same story told in two different ways, the one in "high", avant-garde mode and the other closer to the popular genre of romance. The plot of Danièle Sallenave's 1977 novel *Le Voyage d'Amsterdam* was reworked by the author in 1986 in more "popular" form to produce *La Vie fantôme*, providing a case study in generic differences and consistencies between different 'levels' of literature and their uses of plot.

And finally "In a Spin: Storytelling in the Postmodern Era", deals with the most contemporary of popular narrative forms: globalised, cross-media texts that (possibly) elicit new forms of engagement from their readers. Anne Besson contrasts what can broadly be defined as the anglophone Cultural Studies approach, with its positive evaluation of the Internet's empowering effects on consumers of culture, with the European, and certainly French, tendency to see new media as intensifying the manipulative strategies of a consumerist culture. Agreeing with the latter camp's thesis that the current era has seen a massive return to storytelling, Besson refutes their assumption that this is a top-down, alienating

phenomenon, identifying rather many signs of active, inventive consumption and creativity among fans and readers. Marc Atallah applies to the genre of contemporary science-fiction a formal, narratological analysis of the sort more commonly reserved for "high" literary forms, arguing that "critical" sci-fi's particular modes of storytelling set up for the reader a moving as well as suspenseful relationship between the hi-tech reality of 21st century living, and the futurist fictional worlds they imagine. Through a case-study analysis of Andreas Eschbach's 2003 *Le Dernier de son espèce*, Atallah shows how the science fiction genre can use stories of scientific experimentation and its effects to explore the limits of the human condition. With Malin Isaksson's chapter, the book turns to the contemporary phenomenon of fan fiction. Some readers have always taken their favourite stories as points of departure for personal invention, but new media facilitate the passage from consumer to producer of fictions, making possible the wide, free circulation of fans' own variations on or sequels to the popular canon. Malin Isaksson addresses the specific case of "femslash" or lesbian rewritings of Stephenie Meyer's internationally successful *Twilight* fictions (which comprise novels, films and on-line texts), showing how fan authors exploit the gaps or openings in the original texts to fashion alternative narratives, and asking to what extent these constitute *new* stories, not only in relation to Meyer's "canon", but also in the way that they work with and on the heteronormative genre of romance. Alexandra Ivanovitch closes this section with a richly theorised analysis of that "bestseller of bestsellers", Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* (2004), seeking the reasons for its massive, global popularity not in those extra-literary contextual factors (a zeitgeist of anti-Catholicism and eclectic New Age spirituality) to which many critics have turned, but rather in the text itself. The story that Dan Brown tells, she argues, follows not only the logic of the thriller, but also that of the Grail narrative, offering its readers the revelation of a fundamental narrative (that of the love between Jesus and Mary Magdalene) that works as a code to illuminate the whole of culture from high to low. One of the most popular and most critically derided novels of the contemporary era thus places the finding of the (true) plot at the heart of reading pleasure. The book closes with a brief synoptic conclusion and postscript by Jacques Migozzi, director of the LPCM and one of the French theorists who have worked to reinstate popular fiction as central to the history of French literature.

3. Our focus here on plots and plotting arises from an awareness that while the plot is a constituent element of all prose fiction, in much literary criticism and theory it tends to pass beneath the critical radar. On the other hand, storytelling and emplotment animate a wide variety of popular forms

to such a degree that they carry a magnetic charge for the reader, as Kingsley Amis, author of *Lucky Jim*, one of the great, English, middle-brow novels, and unabashed admirer of James Bond, discovered:

Fiction written and read primarily for escape isn't necessarily devoid of the virtues in which primarily enlightening fiction is rich, and escape fiction can have virtues much of its own as well. There's not a lot of suspense in the classics. (Amis 1965, 149).

Whether or not the classics are suspenseful, the basic question underpinning this book is: what makes us turn the page? All the contributors strive in their different ways to, in the words of Raphaël Baroni, "exhumer la force de l'intrigue" ("exhume the power of the plot") to look carefully at the "not quite yet" as well as the "now" of narrative fiction.

Critical disregard of skilful plotting as a literary quality depends in part on the belief that plot is a conservative structure, that narrative's imperative towards coherence, closure and a satisfying unknottting ("dénouement") of whatever the story has entangled make for the reader's reassurance rather than their enlightenment. The chapters here refute the notion of plot as inherently cosy, as a device that lures the reader into desire for and belief in a secure and comprehensible reality. Raphaël Baroni in his book *La Tension narrative*, as well as in this volume, argues that the experience of becoming absorbed in a suspenseful plot works not so much to divert us from existential anxiety as to intensify a sense of the random contingency of experience, "la sous-détermination du devenir et du monde" (Baroni 2007, 158), and then vicariously and provisionally to allay it. Drawing the reader into the process of literary creation, a well-crafted plot conjures up not only its own compelling thread of events, but also what Baroni terms a "network of potential stories that extends beyond textual structures" ("réseau des histoires potentielles qui s'étend au-delà des structures textuelles"). Through the experience of fictional suspense and narrative tension we play out deeper anxieties, and if these are granted imaginary resolution as the plot closes, this does not simply erase what has gone before. Moreover, as several chapters demonstrate, not all popular plots offer the security of a neatly ends-tied closure. Indeed, the commercial imperative to leave the way open to sequels, allied with a more or less conscious sense that readers desire disruption and transgression as much as they desire order, frequently leads to popular plotting that avoids any definitive resolution. And the model of "the reader" that underpins this book also contests any sense of "plot" as conspiracy, as a deliberate trick enacted on the reader by a plotting author.

Rather, the reader moves between voluntary and pleasurable immersion in the fictional world and its compelling sequencing of events, and continuing awareness of life outside, in a process that Marie-Laure Ryan nicely captures as "amphibian" (Ryan) and Ross Chambers, in his book of that name, celebrates as *Loiterature*. Plot here figures more as an appealingly mapped terrain offered for willing exploration than as a "complot" or "intrigue".

What underlies the diverse studies gathered here is the belief that today the reader is king or queen; she or he has little in common with what Jacques Migozzi terms, in the postface to this book, the "lecteur modèle" ("model reader"), the image of the reader conceived by author and/or critic. As Migozzi suggests, we might do better to refer to "reader" in the plural, to the infinite variety of human beings captured in his notion of the "lecteur ordinaire", a person who may want to leave the page to loiter for a while but will invariably return, to continue his or her journey to the centre of another's world.

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PART 1:
THEORY AND STORY

CHAPTER ONE

PUISSANCE DE L'INTRIGUE

RAPHAEL BARONI

L'intrigue en puissance

L'intrigue est à la fois une forme, qui inscrit l'histoire racontée dans une configuration poétique organisée par un auteur ou un narrateur, et une indétermination de cette forme, dont dépend la force de l'intrigue, son intérêt pour le lecteur qui s'aventure dans le récit. Produire cette indétermination exige de l'auteur ou du narrateur un effort aussi important que celui qui consiste à configurer l'histoire; et pour exhumer la force de l'intrigue, qui se loge au cœur de la forme, il est nécessaire de se pencher sur la source de l'énergie du récit, sur ce qui le met en mouvement et qui permet à la configuration narrative de s'ouvrir et de se déborder. Dans la physique newtonienne, il existe deux types d'énergies fondamentales: l'énergie cinétique et l'énergie potentielle. De manière similaire, on pourrait affirmer que la force de l'intrigue consiste en la conversion de l'énergie potentielle de l'histoire, en l'énergie cinétique de la lecture, qui fait advenir cette histoire possible, qui trace une voie tortueuse parmi un réseau d'histoires alternatives. Pour dresser l'équation et mesurer la force de l'intrigue, il importerait donc de replacer au cœur de l'analyse ces deux facteurs essentiels: d'une part, le mouvement de la lecture, c'est-à-dire la progression dans le texte, et d'autre part, ce qui demeure *en puissance* dans le récit, c'est-à-dire les virtualités de l'intrigue, le réseau des histoires potentielles qui s'étend au-delà des structures textuelles. Or, pendant longtemps, ces questions ont constitué des points aveugles de la narratologie formaliste, parce que l'esthétique valorisée par la critique était celle de la relecture et que le travail de la poétique consistait à décrire les structures actualisées par les textes, et non leurs structures possibles. Ce qui intéressait les narratologues, c'était la manière dont les événements racontés se moulaient dans un inventaire de formes répertoriées, ou la façon dont le dénouement semblait inscrire la contingence des événements dans la nécessité poétique de l'intrigue.

Certes, la critique du structuralisme est périmée, mais il semble que de nombreuses approches contemporaines continuent, pour reprendre les mots de Derrida, de “faire taire la force sous la forme” de l'intrigue (1967, 44). Dans le prolongement des travaux de Paul Ricœur, il n'est pas rare que les critiques insistent sur la fonction “configurante” des récits, sans se donner la peine de mentionner leur fonction “intrigante”¹, comme si l'intrigue devait d'abord être le lieu du triomphe de la “concordance” poétique sur la “discordance” de l'événement. Par ailleurs, la linguistique textuelle en France continue de promouvoir un modèle séquentiel qui semble réduire l'intrigue à une structure prototypique de l'histoire, dans laquelle nœud et dénouement se répondent symétriquement, l'intrigue y étant définie comme l'établissement d'une chronologie et d'une causalité, alors que les rapports de tension et de successivité entre les différentes phases du récit demeurent largement sous-théorisés.

Il ne faudrait pas conclure de ce qui précède qu'une conception dynamique de l'intrigue n'aurait jamais été élaborée, ni même qu'elle aurait été entièrement occultée par la narratologie structuraliste, seulement elle a trop souvent été marginalisée, comme s'il s'agissait d'un aspect honteux de la narrativité, d'une scorie “populaire” qu'une poétique sérieuse et digne de ce nom ne serait pas autorisée à placer au cœur de ses investigations. Certes, il y eut d'heureuses exceptions, à commencer par Aristote, dont la défense des arts mimétiques passait par la valorisation de la *catharsis*, impliquant le jeu des péripéties et la production de différents effets de *pathos*: crainte, espoir, pitié, surprises liées aux brusques renversements de fortune. Claude Bremond (1973), dans sa logique du récit envisageait également les alternatives qui se présentent lorsqu'on lit le conte à l'endroit: la possibilité qu'une provocation reste sans effet ou qu'une entreprise échoue au lieu de réussir. Plus près de nous, Meir Sternberg (1978) défend depuis plus de trente ans une narratologie fonctionnaliste dont le fondement est l'analyse du suspense, de la curiosité et de la surprise, ces intérêts narratifs dont il est allé jusqu'à faire le fondement de la narrativité (1992). On peut aussi mentionner Peter Brooks qui, en associant le jeu de la tension narrative et de sa résolution avec l'approche pulsionnelle de Freud, a contribué à éclairer la fonction psychique de la mise en intrigue. Brooks affirme ainsi que l'engagement d'un lecteur qui “répond à l'intrigue” est de “nature essentiellement dynamique, comme une interaction avec un système d'énergie que le lecteur active” (1984, 111-112, m.t.²). James Phelan (1989), dans le

¹ Sur cette question, je me permets de renvoyer à Baroni (2009; 2010).

² m.t. = ma traduction (traduction de l'auteur).

prolongement de l'approche rhétorique initiée par Wayne C. Booth, a également défendu une définition de l'intrigue reposant sur l'analyse de "l'intérêt des lecteurs envers le récit", et il a montré que cet intérêt dépendait de la "progression" dans le texte et de la "manière dont un auteur introduit, complique et résout (ou ne parvient pas à résoudre) certaines instabilités" (Phelan 1989, 15, m.t.).

D'une manière générale, on observe par ailleurs, dans le prolongement des théories de la réception, un regain d'intérêt pour des approches qui permettent de décrire non seulement les structures cognitives qui permettent de comprendre et de mémoriser des histoires, mais également celles qui permettent d'envisager différents scénarios³ possibles qui n'ont pas encore, et qui ne seront peut-être jamais racontés. Ainsi, Marie-Laure Ryan a-t-elle montré que la "racontabilité" des histoires dépendait de la complexité de leurs intrigues, qui dépend elle-même de l'éventail des "récits purement virtuels" qui sont "enchâssés" dans le récit effectif (Ryan 1991, 156, m.t.). Dans le prolongement de ces travaux, Jean-Marie Schaeffer souligne pour sa part que:

La compréhension narrative apparaît ainsi comme une négociation permanente entre d'un côté des mémorisations partielles et des projections ou attentes extrapolées à partir de ces mémorisations, de l'autre le traitement d'informations nouvelles dont l'intérêt narratif dépend largement de leur déviation partielle des attentes fondées sur la mémorisation des séquences précédentes. (Schaeffer 2010, 28)

Même la sémiotique post-greimasienne a fini par se recentrer sur la question des passions et des liens entre tension et signification (Fontanille et Zilberberg 1998). Face à ces travaux convergents, comment expliquer que l'occultation de la *puissance* de l'intrigue demeure aussi tenace ? Pour éclairer ce point, il est nécessaire de souligner qu'il existe au moins deux définitions de l'intrigue, pratiquement opposées: la première, formaliste, insiste sur la création poétique d'une configuration narrative, qui inscrit l'histoire dans une totalité compréhensible; la seconde, fonctionnaliste, met l'accent sur la dynamique de la lecture intriguée et sur les dispositifs narratifs qui la sous-tendent. Force est de constater que ces deux définitions, concurrentes et partiellement contradictoires, continuent à circuler largement, au point que dans la récente *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, Hilary Dannenberg affirme que:

³ Evidemment, sur ce point, je renvoie aux travaux pionniers d'Umberto Eco (1985), qui préfigurent en grande partie les approches cognitives contemporaines.

Malgré l'apparente simplicité de l'objet auquel elle se réfère, l'intrigue (*plot*) est l'un des termes les plus insaisissables de la théorie du récit. Les narratologues l'utilisent pour se référer à une variété de phénomènes différents. La plupart des définitions de base du récit buttent sur la question de la séquentialité, et les tentatives répétées de redéfinir les paramètres de l'intrigue reflètent à la fois la centralité et la complexité de la dimension temporelle du récit. (Dannenberg 2005, 435, m.t.)

Il ne s'agit pas de trancher entre des usages divergents d'un même terme, mais de constater l'existence d'un cas de polysémie engendrant de nombreux malentendus et conditionnant la portée opératoire d'un concept pourtant central pour la théorie du récit. Après avoir exposé aussi clairement que possible ces deux façons d'envisager l'intrigue, j'exposerai rapidement les raisons de la relative marginalisation de la définition fonctionnelle de l'intrigue, puis j'évoquerai quelques avantages que l'on peut malgré tout en attendre pour l'analyse des récits et pour les études littéraires.

Définitions formelles de l'intrigue

Dans la définition formelle de l'intrigue, l'accent est mis sur la logique de l'histoire racontée. La mise en intrigue dépendrait de l'agencement des éléments de l'histoire dans une totalité: les événements racontés ne se contenteraient pas de se succéder en suivant une chronologie, mais ils s'inscriraient dans une nécessité causale ou poétique qui permettrait de les lire en sens inverse. En effet, si la chronologie des événements (ou celle de la lecture) est orientée selon un vecteur allant de l'avant en direction de l'après, en revanche, la nécessité causale ou poétique est de nature rétrograde: l'après justifie l'avant comme la fin justifie les moyens, et si tel événement est raconté, c'est *pour que* tel autre puisse advenir. Dans un univers entièrement régi par la nécessité, le temps devient ainsi une variable secondaire.

Il faut préciser qu'il peut exister différentes formes de nécessité dans l'élaboration d'une intrigue: cela peut aller de la simple relation causale jusqu'à l'élaboration d'un dispositif complexe visant la création d'un effet déterminé, en passant par la contrainte formelle imposée par un genre littéraire. Par exemple, la mort du protagoniste peut être nécessaire dans un contexte tragique alors qu'au contraire, sa survie sera attendue dans un roman d'aventure ou dans un conte merveilleux. En ce qui concerne la causalité narrative, c'est Forster qui a introduit dans *Aspects du roman*, en 1928, une différence fondamentale entre ce qu'il appelle une "histoire" (*story*) et ce qu'il désigne comme une "intrigue" (*plot*):

A) Histoire: “Le roi est mort et puis la reine est morte.”

B) Intrigue: “Le roi est mort et puis la reine est morte de chagrin.”

Pour Forster, dans le cas d’une simple histoire, le récit répondra à la question “et alors ?”, tandis que dans le cas d’une intrigue, le récit répondra au “pourquoi ?”. Ainsi que l’affirme Forster, lorsqu’une intrigue se forme, la séquence temporelle est préservée, mais elle est comme recouverte et, en quelque sorte, “occultée” (*overshadowed*) par la logique de la causalité.

Cette définition formelle de l’intrigue circule encore très largement parmi différentes communautés de chercheurs, notamment dans le monde anglo-saxon. Elle a permis à certains critiques⁴ de rapprocher le travail des historiens de celui des auteurs de fiction, en soulignant que l’intelligence narrative des événements exige une forme de segmentation et de “mise en intrigue” du passé. Dans le prolongement de ces travaux, Paul Ricœur (1983) a popularisé l’idée que le rôle central de la “mise en intrigue” serait de “configurer” la temporalité, de surmonter les “discordances” de l’expérience par la création poétique d’une “concordance” racontée. Par cette opération, Ricœur affirme que la mise en intrigue inscrit l’histoire dans une totalité intelligible.⁵

Cette conception est relativement proche d’une tradition formaliste initiée par le chercheur russe Vladimir Propp en 1928. Ce dernier a cherché à abstraire les éléments invariants des contes russes, de manière à dégager une séquence de “fonctions” dont l’ordre semblait relativement prévisible, fixé par les conventions du genre. C’est en se fondant sur cette approche que les sémioticiens structuralistes, Greimas en tête, finiront par élaborer une “grammaire narrative” élémentaire, apte à décrire n’importe quel genre de récit. S’inspirant de Propp, de Greimas et de la logique narrative de Bremond, Paul Larivaille finira par donner sa forme classique au “schéma quinaire”:

⁴ Notamment Hayden White, Louis O. Mink et Paul Veyne.

⁵ Dans un article récent (Baroni 2010), j’ai critiqué cette conception de la “mise en intrigue” en montrant que Ricœur lui-même a beaucoup nuancé cette thèse dans le troisième tome de *Temps et récit*.

I AVANT Etat initial Equilibre 1	II PENDANT Transformation (agie ou subie) Processus dynamique			III APRÈS Etat final Equilibre 5
	2 Provocation	3 Action	4 Sanction	

(Larivaille 1974, 387)

Si ce schéma est aujourd'hui encore aussi populaire, au moins dans la communauté francophone, c'est parce que la linguistique textuelle (Adam 1997, 54) l'a adopté pour en faire l'une des séquences prototypiques élémentaires organisant la textualité au-delà des limites de la phrase. Par ailleurs, la linguistique textuelle a fait converger ce schéma avec la réflexion sur la "causalité narrative" que l'on doit, entre autres, à Forster et à Ricœur. Jean-Michel Adam affirme ainsi que la mise en intrigue consiste en un double débordement de la chronologie par la "logique singulière du récit": d'une part à travers l'introduction d'une "problématisation par le biais de deux macro-propositions narratives – Pn2 et Pn4 – extrêmement importantes, insérées entre la situation initiale et le début du procès (Pn1) et entre le procès et la situation finale (Pn5)" (1997, 50), et d'autre part, à travers l'établissement d'une "causalité narrative", qui apparaît comme l'un des attributs essentiels de la narrativité (Adam 1997, 51-56). J.-M. Adam conclut que l'"écrasement de la logique et de la temporalité est, avant tout, réalisée par la 'logique' macro-propositionnelle de la mise en intrigue dont rend compte le schéma quinaire [...] qui hiérarchise les relations, autrement simplement chronologiques et linéaires, entre cinq moments (m) de tout procès à l'intérieur d'une séquence (ou d'un texte entier)" (Adam 1997, 54).

L'opérativité du schéma quinaire et de la réflexion sur la causalité narrative n'est plus à démontrer. D'une part, cette approche permet de distinguer les *récits* proprement dits, non seulement d'autres types de séquences telles que la *description* ou l'*argumentation*, mais également de textes d'action plus élémentaires, par exemple les *relations* ou les *chroniques* (Revaz 2009, 101-137). D'autre part, ce schéma est adaptable à une grande variété de contextes, et il permet de mettre en évidence la manière dont des séquences narratives sont insérées dans des formes de textualité hétérogènes, par exemple dans des argumentations ou des

explications. Enfin, cette réflexion met en évidence le rôle du discours narratif dans l'organisation logique et formelle de l'histoire racontée, c'est-à-dire dans la transformation de l'événement brut, qui devient signifiant et compréhensible lorsqu'il fait l'objet d'une "narrativisation". Cette approche renvoie ainsi à une épistémologie constructiviste visant à remettre en question le caractère mimétique de la narrativité.

Il faut toutefois noter que cette perspective engendre de nombreux angles-morts lorsqu'il s'agit de réfléchir sur le phénomène de l'intrigue tel qu'il se manifeste concrètement, c'est-à-dire sur la manière dont un lecteur empirique peut *faire l'expérience* d'une intrigue, qui se noue au cours de sa lecture et qui se dénouera, peut-être, à la fin du récit. Premièrement, l'accent est clairement mis sur le *travail poétique* de la mise en forme de l'histoire, et non sur l'*effet esthétique* visé par cette mise en intrigue⁶. Le cas d'E. A. Poe est exemplaire sur ce point: pour lui, "intrigue" est synonyme de "planification": "S'il est une chose évidente, c'est qu'un plan quelconque, digne du nom de plan, doit avoir été soigneusement préparé en vue du dénouement, avant que la plume attaque le papier" (Poe 1978, 268). Si l'intrigue est vue sur un plan rétrograde, et non progressif, c'est parce qu'il arrive que l'auteur⁷ arrange son récit en fonction d'une fin planifiée à l'avance. Pareillement, Forster était d'abord un romancier et un nouvelliste avant d'être un poéticien, ce qui explique que la causalité était pour lui un travail de mise en forme narrative, et non une opération de pensée qui aurait permis à n'importe quel lecteur de combler les lacunes du récit le plus déficient. Quant aux travaux qui rapprochaient mise en intrigue et historiographie, et qui se centraient sur la segmentation et l'arrangement créatif des événements du passé, ils portaient clairement sur l'*écriture de l'histoire*, et non sur sa *lecture*. Il s'ensuit que l'intrigue, en tant que phénomène qui dépend d'un acte de lecture progressant dans le récit, n'est tout simplement pas traitée. Peut-être que certains auteurs (mais

⁶ Dans un article à paraître, James Morgan propose de clarifier le sens de l'intrigue en distinguant les concepts d'"emplotment", de "plot" et d'"exploitment". La définition formelle de l'intrigue relèverait ainsi de l'"emplotment", du travail poétique de "mise en intrigue" des événements par un auteur ou un historien, alors que la définition fonctionnelle de l'intrigue, qui correspondrait au "plot", décrit l'intrigue du point de vue du lecteur.

⁷ Ainsi que l'a montré récemment Marc Escola (2010), le caractère planifié de l'intrigue convient peut-être au genre de la nouvelle que pratique Poe, mais il est moins évident dans les romans du XVIII^e siècle. D'ailleurs, dans les séries télévisées contemporaines, des équipes de scénaristes travaillent à l'élaboration d'une histoire dont le développement demeure en grande partie imprévisible, puisqu'il dépend du succès de la fiction et des attentes des spectateurs.